

REPORT

Improving public service delivery in Uganda through Behavioural Science research

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Introduction

The provision of public services is an important factor that shapes perceptions of citizens on its government.

Uganda is no different. Evidence does show that access to basic needs provided by the government, e.g. health, education and water, do influence citizens' perceptions of government in Uganda ([Marshak et al., 2017](#)). For instance, there are low perceptions of police services in Uganda since citizens often assume that seeking redress through the police institutions will prove prohibitively expensive or futile, and that they will be subjected to corruption and abuse ([Blair et al., 2020](#)). Perceptions therefore seem to be shaped by both access to and satisfaction of the service, such that perceptions may vary if there is access but no satisfaction, depending on individual preferences.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an additional effect on public service provision and perceptions. In Uganda, access to public services during the dawn of the pandemic was a major issue as the government implemented early on a nationwide lockdown to slow down the spread of the virus. According to an online survey conducted by SEMA during this period, the majority of Ugandans needed the government to remain accessible during such a crisis - whether on phone, online, or in person. Ugandans also want the services to be helpful and with a faster response than usual. If such needs are not met, they are likely to lead to an even more negative perception of the government. For instance, the response of the toll-free line of the Ugandan Ministry of Health was reported negatively in the survey, due to a majority of callers feeling they were not helped ([SEMA Covid-19 report, 2020](#)).

Because of citizens' preferences, and an increasing appetite for quality service provision (thanks to improving customer experience at the hands of private-sector organizations), it's quite difficult for governments alone to effectively provide quality services without the support of partners. This is because, governments, unlike private-sector organizations, face certain unique challenges:



A monopolistic mindset

When citizens don't have a choice of where to access public services (and government agencies know this), it dramatically removes a major incentive for governments to innovate and improve service.



One-size-fits-all service

Unlike private-sector organisations, government agencies must aim to serve everyone within their mandated mission, and can't ignore certain citizen segments. This makes it hard to adequately meet the needs of all types of citizens.



Lack of adequate capacity

Governments often lack the capabilities needed to assess and address gaps in citizens' experiences e.g by deploying data analytics and human centered design.



Insufficient data

Feedback data collected and used by government offices is often incomplete and insufficient to capture citizens' overall experience during public service provision.

Due to the above challenges, we are seeing the emergence of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) that are using innovative solutions to help governments address some of the above-mentioned challenges, with an end-goal of improving public service provision.

One of these CSOs is SEMA, a Kampala-based civic tech organization seeking to improve public service delivery through using technology to collect, synthesize and report on citizen feedback on public services received from government agencies such as police stations, courts, hospitals and the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA). Over 80,000 citizens in Uganda have so far rated public services through SEMA's custom-made feedback devices (Appendix A), automated voice, WhatsApp and USSD feedback lines, and a network of trained student surveyors.



Civic tech organisations like SEMA have however had their fair share of challenges, including limited engagement of citizens and public officers with the feedback mechanisms. A programme that supported civic tech interventions to improve public service delivery implemented in many countries in the Global South showed that the impact of citizen feedback tools is often overestimated ([MAVC, 2018](#)). Only where citizens are willing and able to give voice, where government willingness to respond already exists, and where the social and institutional design of both the citizen-voice and government-response mechanisms match, improvements to public services are likely to take effect ([Herringshaw, 2018](#)).

Inspired by these findings, SEMA set out to measure the impact of citizen feedback on the improvement of public services where new tools or mechanisms were deployed ([SEMA's Data-to-Action Report, 2018](#)). According to SEMA's impact data, about 67% of offices where citizen feedback was collected and reported improved their satisfaction in their first year, which was promising. However, there was a further interest to find out how this percentage can be maintained or further increased, as well as how citizen engagement with feedback tools can be improved.

To find an answer to this question, the Busara Center for Behavioral Economics partnered with SEMA to apply rigorous research methods, behavioral insights, and testing mechanisms to study and improve the quality and frequency of citizen feedback captured at government offices, as well as the reporting of this feedback back to public offices.

This research sought to answer the following key research questions:

How can civic-tech organizations such as SEMA improve the quality of the data collected by the feedback tools?

How can these organisations effectively influence positive behavior change among public servants and improve the quality of service delivery through citizen feedback data?

What's the ideal content and delivery strategy for reports detailing feedback on public services from citizens?



Research Design

This research project was carried out in two phases, i.e. a qualitative research phase and an intervention design and testing phase.



Qualitative Research Phase

The purpose of this phase was to build a holistic view of people's experiences engaging with SEMA's feedback mechanisms and reporting structures across different key stakeholders. It was conducted in February 2020. General citizens were targeted, citizen feedback data collectors and public officers. Through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, 51 respondents (19 female and 32 male) were interviewed. Across the 3 target groups, basic demographic data were captured as well as responses with regards to topics such as barriers and levers to giving feedback and enacting change and perceptions and experiences with feedback tools and reports.



Intervention Design & Testing Phase

This phase was conducted in August 2020 with the aim of experimentally evaluating the impact of a police champion on improving public service delivery. The intervention involved having a police officer acting as a champion by pushing for an increased use of feedback tools within their police station. The champion was trained on using the SEMA feedback device and then mandated with sharing knowledge to his fellow police officers on how to use the device. Through this, we hypothesized that by training and incentivizing selected champions to share knowledge about the usage of the feedback device, it will increase knowledge of police officers on how to use such tools, thereby leading to the awareness and acceptance of civic tech organisations such as SEMA, and eventually increasing the issuance of valid feedback delivered by citizens through feedback devices.



UGANDA POLICE
CENTRAL POLICE
STATION - KAMPALA

The testing phase targeted 4 police stations in Kampala, i.e. Central Police Station, Kiira Road Police Station, Katwe Police Station and Wandegaya Police Station, with a total of 88 police officers.

We randomized these 4 police stations into either a treatment group or control group, with Central Police Station and Katwe Police Station being in the treatment group, and the rest in the control group. A total of 38 police officers were in the treatment group and 50 police officers in the control group. We observed the intervention for two weeks, before deploying phone surveys with police officers to capture our outcomes of interest.

What did we find?

There were many interesting outcomes from both the qualitative and the intervention research done in 2020. We only share the most important findings with you here.

In Uganda, there are several barriers limiting citizens from providing feedback to public servants.

Mistrust of public offices: Citizens believe that their welfare is not a priority for public offices. This not only demotivates citizens from giving feedback on the services provided but also from accessing these services in the first place.

Fear of repercussions: Citizens have an instilled fear of consequences from raising any concerns on public services. This is more so when the citizens are not assured of their anonymity when they give feedback at a public office.

Corruption/ Demand for bribes: Rather than make the effort to seek better services, some citizens would consider paying a bribe to hasten the process.

Inaccessible options for feedback: There is little consideration for language barriers and for people living with disabilities, who are mostly not considered in the available options of giving feedback.

Barriers do also exist as public officers try to enact change based on citizen feedback

Public offices face some challenges that hinder them from acting on the recommendations proposed by citizens. They include:

Lack of systematic feedback mechanisms: Public offices do not have clear systems or structures to encourage citizen feedback on their services. New tools like SEMA's are therefore needed.

Feedback is not processed properly: This research showed that officers at different levels of rank are interested in hearing what citizens have to say. However, feedback doesn't always reach all officers, and there are varied levels of engagement with feedback reports like SEMA's. The format of how feedback is presented, to whom it is presented and how often, can have a big impact on the reaction of public servants.

Lack of resources: This cuts across budget constraints and understaffed offices both of which limit the extent to which a public office can implement some of the recommendations stated in citizen feedback reports.

Bureaucracy: There is little decentralization in the public sector resulting in long unstructured processes to approve even small budgets and initiatives. Multiple requests stream upwards to senior management (sometimes beyond the institution itself) for consideration causing long avoidable delays. Such bureaucracy easily leads to the collapse of initiatives proposed in citizen feedback reports.

Most police officers have positive attitudes towards improving public service delivery through citizen feedback

Generally, the attitudes of public officers towards SEMA and other like minded organizations seem to be positive. This could be out of previous positive engagements that some of the officers have had with SEMA, in addition to a genuine feeling that officers value the work of SEMA-like organisations to help them improve the quality of their service. When exploring the 'drivers' for public officers to enact change, it was found that rewarding mechanisms that leverage on a competitive spirit of civil servants to give good services may be an effective avenue to increase public service improvements.

Public service champions can increase the issuance of feedback at public offices

From the champion intervention, stations with a champion had more valid feedback when compared to stations without a champion. This shows that when given knowledge on the usage of a feedback tool or device, as well as equipping specific individuals within civil services with a 'feedback championing role', this may lead to an increase in the uptake of citizen feedback at public offices. However, having a champion does not prevent the misuse of feedback mechanisms (i.e. fraudulent use of feedback tools, such as having officers giving themselves positive feedback).

Public officers in Uganda have certain preferences for public service champions

This research found that public officers prefer being encouraged to offer better public services by an external person, rather than a fellow public officer. At the same time, public officers prefer being reminded regularly to provide better public services. This means there's a real need for CSOs to maintain regular contact with public officers, reminding them of the importance of good public service delivery. The role of civic tech organisations in encouraging both citizens to give feedback on public services, as well as civil servants to provide good services, remains important.

Where to From Here?

There are different mechanisms that can help improve service delivery through citizen feedback tools.

The research highlighted important intervention areas for (especially) Civil Society Organisations or civic tech enterprises that could be worthy testing to improve service delivery through feedback provision. They include:

Prioritize rewarding and recognition of public officers:

It would be useful to test interventions that target the competitive spirit of public officers to encourage the provision of better public services through gamification techniques. Non financial incentives such as trophies and certificates could be considered due to the cash-constrained environment of CSOs.

Expand channels of dissemination of relevant feedback reports to public officers:

Beyond feedback reports being shared in public offices, CSOs should explore other channels such as social media or radio to share their progress with the public, and not only with public officers. However, there's a need for research to explore channels used among public officers where citizen feedback could be effectively disseminated to reach those in a position to improve public services.

Consider using a public office champion to push for


increased feedback on public services: Due to the inconsistent interaction with feedback tools by citizens, regaining their trust that their feedback can really make a difference requires new approaches. We recommend appointing a champion who will serve as a point of contact for all things regarding effective public service provision within an institution.

Behavioral Science approaches can lead the way in revolutionising customer feedback initiatives

The provision of public services alone by governments is not enough. Effective feedback mechanisms are needed to achieve accountability of service delivery and improved public service provision. Civic technology companies like SEMA aim to create such accountability by allowing citizens to give feedback instantly after using a public service, and delivering feedback reports to public servants to see how and where to improve their services.

However, the feedback tool providers' efforts also face challenges of their own including barriers that limit citizens from giving feedback. At the same time, barriers also exist for public officers to enact improvements based on citizen feedback. These barriers need to be addressed through innovative, behavioural science approaches that can influence the relationship between citizens and civil servants at service delivery points. Such approaches can include gamification (creating competition among public services), the delivery of visualised citizen data reports through new channels, and the appointment of champions within public offices. We learned that appointing police champions at police stations in Uganda can have a positive effect on the use of feedback tools, but may not replace the efforts that are needed by CSOs and civic tech companies to deploy user-friendly feedback tools, deliver user-friendly data reports, and sensitize citizens and officers about their use.





We see a need therefore to support more civic tech or citizen engagement CSOs in not only addressing the barriers that prevent citizens from giving feedback or public officers from improving their services based on such feedback, but also in providing additional learnings on what works and what doesn't with regards to their initiatives in improving public service delivery.

In particular, the effectiveness of new intervention models that include behavioural science approaches to influence the relationship between civil servants and citizens, should be further researched. Furthermore, research on the effect of citizen feedback tools and reports on the perceptions of citizens on public service delivery, as well as what influences increased trust in public service providers, is needed. Without these necessary insights on how we can improve public services through civic technology and new citizen accountability initiatives, a revolution on customer feedback inclusion in the provision of public services may be far away.

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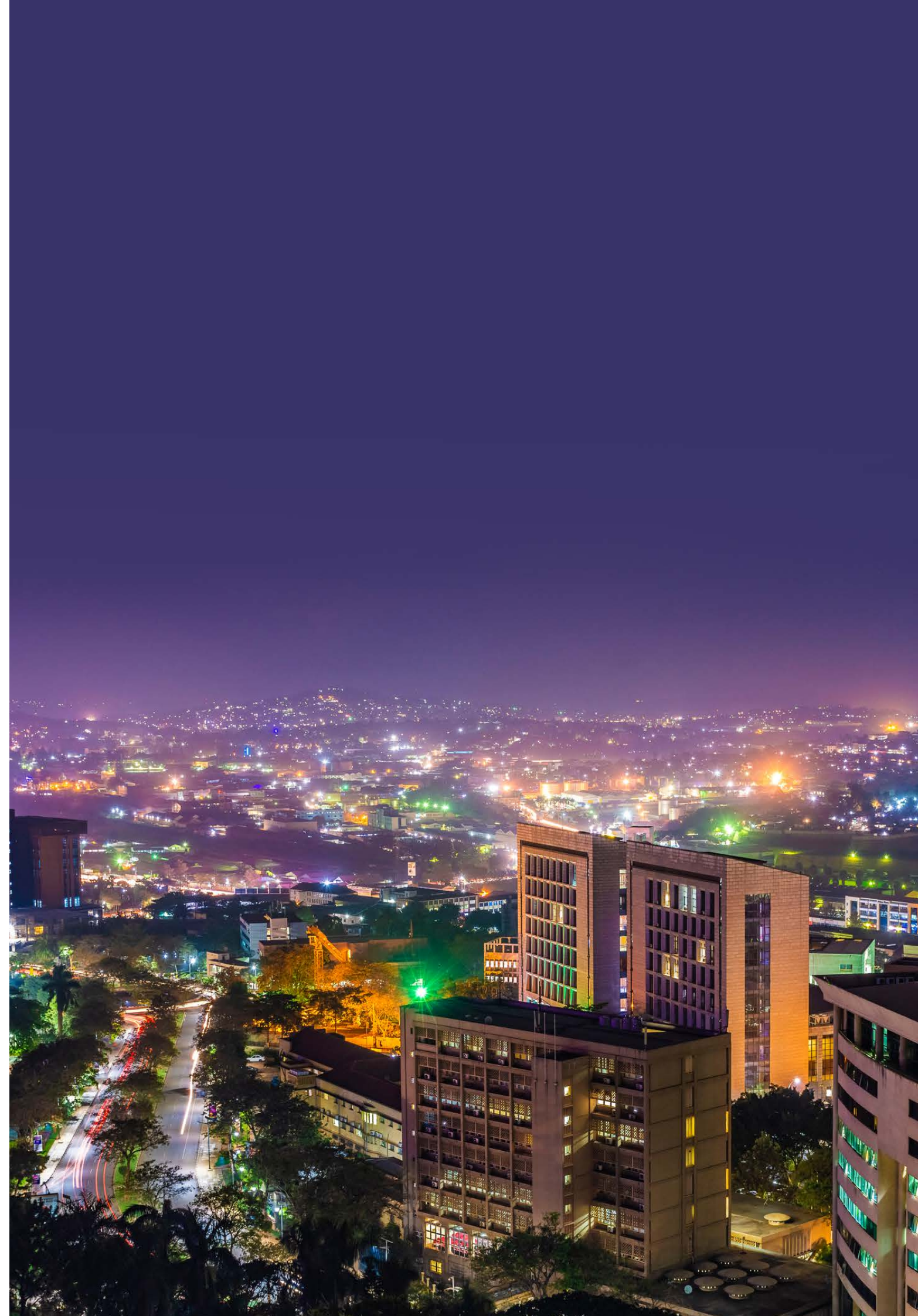
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Appendix

Appendix A: SEMA's custom made feedback device

The SEMA feedback device is designed to collect real-time data that is keyed in by citizens right after receiving service from a public office, to express their satisfaction of the service given to them. It has 5 buttons (very bad, bad, okay, good, very good), and the citizen is required to press one of these buttons to express how they feel about the service just given. The moment a button is pressed a beep sound comes out of it and/or you see a light flickering. This is to indicate that the data is sent to SEMA's server. All presses are sent to SEMA's server in real-time. In the backend SEMA can see which data is coming in, and an automatic filtering is done on: (a) multiple presses within 10 seconds (ballot stuffing), and (b) presses between 10pm and 6am (fraud counts). The data is also shared with the Ugandan Police Force headquarters for action. Below are images of the feedback device.





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