Using ICTs to enhance duty bearer accountability and transparency to citizens in Eastern and Northern Uganda

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Abstract: This article explores the use of ICTs to enhance engagement between citizens and leaders in Eastern and Northern Uganda. It highlights how ICT empowers citizens to demand accountability and transparency from leaders. The key objective was to establish the extent to which the use of ICT promoted leaders responsiveness to citizens' concerns about accountability and transparency. A participatory action research was used through key informant interviews, focus group discussions and survey targeting 180 citizens and leaders. Findings show that nearly 83.1% of the citizens (108 of the 120 who responded to the question) do use ICT to engage duty bearers on government programmes and accountability issues and the most commonly used ICTs by citizens to engage with leaders are mobiles phones (about 83.1%) and radios (64.6%). It was clear that use of ICT does indeed improve leader responsiveness to citizen concerns.

Keywords: ICT; e-democracy; social media; accountability; transparency; duty bearer.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Mirembe, D.P., Lubega, J.T. and Kibukamusoke, M. (2019) 'Using ICTs to enhance duty bearer accountability and transparency to citizens in Eastern and Northern Uganda', *Int. J. Information Technology, Communications and Convergence*, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp.228–243.

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1 Introduction

Many countries using SMS, social media and the internet for democratic practices and good governance have contributed to globalisation through 'cloud communication'. People use ICT to network with each other to solve problems. This article discusses the link between ICT usage and its ability to contribute to engagement between leaders/duty bearers and citizens in Northern and Eastern Uganda. It explores various ICT avenues used to empower and promote accountability and transparency for improved service delivery. The study was guided by two research questions; to what extent does the use of ICT promote leaders' responsiveness to citizens' concerns about accountability and transparency? What is the level of engagement among citizens and leaders in budgeting and planning processes using ICT? Furthermore, factors which facilitated or constrained the use ICT were determined and contextualised.

A participatory action research (McTaggart, 1991) examined the interactions and relationships in the social setting through key informant interviews, focus group discussions and survey targeting 180 citizens and leaders. The findings show that mobile phones, radios, computers and cameras are used to share information that leaders use for transparency and accountability at grass root level. Respondents participate in the budgeting, planning and procurement processes although restrained by the inability of their leaders to inform or invite them to access the information. The study recommends

that leaders engage more with citizens and encourage more awareness by inviting members to radio talk shows, communicating through WhatsApp instead of only through SMS.

The article contains the background of the study, methodology, results, discussion of the findings and conclusions.

2 Background and context

Information communication technologies (ICT) have transformed the way we live and work. ICT enabled services are being consumed in all aspects of life to enable service providers to effectively and efficiently deliver the service (Misuraca et al., 2017). Among the many areas that have seen rapid adoption of ICT are; democracy and governance, finance, health, agriculture, education and several other societal issues that are meant to improve and reduce costs (Misuraca et al., 2017). The integration of ICT in service delivery is often referred to e-service (Misuraca et al., 2017). Advancement in ICT has further propelled the rise of several ideas that the community can use in undertaking numerous services. The rapid adoption of ICT is largely attributed to the technologies' ability to connect people, organisations and businesses across social and cultural barriers in ways that would not be possible through the traditional systems.

The use of ICT to improve duty bearer accountability is not new. In 2001 and 2003, Kent and Facer (2004) conducted a study among over 1,800 students in South West England. The study was finding out the use of ICT mainly computers at home and at school to enhance learning. It was revealed that the boundaries between home and school are less distinct in terms of student's ICT usage. This is done through the production of virtual social networks through the use of instant messenger that seem to mirror young people's social school contexts. The study also highlighted the need to have and adopt an effective link between home and school to ensure learning takes place. If students have access to appropriate ICT and use it for learning, they can actually use it solve problems, demand accountability, and ensure transparency from their leaders. Chadwick and May (2003) state that the USA, Britain and the European Union focused on developing policy statements that would guide community leaders to use technologies to interact with their communities especially the marginalised ones. The managerial model of interaction was used to ensure active participation and consultation of everyone.

KyeogngNam et al. (2016) noted that among the most frequently used and accessed ICTs, the internet holds the first place in sharing and learning. Usage and ownership go a long way where those who own mobile phones share information faster online in comparison to those who do not own (KyeogngNam et al., 2016). Many studies continue to show that, sharing information with the community influences behaviour in that community (KyeogngNam et al., 2016).

In many countries, ICT's have been integrated by governments in a number of business processes which have led to the new sphere of ICT usage called e-governance (Pearson, 2015). E-governance has largely focused on the use of ICT's to deliver a number of services by governance agencies such as access to budgets, application for services and access to information (Basu, 2004). The rapid adaption of e-governance in

both developed and developing countries is largely aided by technological advances and increasing affordability of technology. Furthermore, the growing levels of literacy on a global and national perspective are increasing the individual interest in governance issues and the demand of social accountability by leaders (Pearson, 2015). Given the fact that ICT's have lowered the barriers of accessing leaders (duty bearers), this has resulted into ordinary citizens using ICT's especially on social media platforms to seek information and demand accountability from their leaders.

ICT's like Twitter, Skype and other social media platforms have enabled citizens to dialogue with duty bearers and promote their ideas (Wairagala and Åke, 2015). Duty bearers at all levels of leadership provide timely feedback to the citizens hence reducing the information gap which is often associated with the classical methods of social accountability. The implementation of e-governance services enables governments and authorities to provide access to public databases on transparency and accountability of public officers. Citizens can therefore seek accountability from public officers thus improved service delivery (Wairagala and Åke, 2015).

While ICTs have been and are being used to enable the engagement between citizens and leaders in Uganda, the effect and impact may be difficult to quantify. Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) implemented a pilot project on use of ICT's to improve engagement between leaders and citizens covering six (6) districts in Northern and Eastern Uganda. The project aimed at 'Strengthening effective and efficient use of ICTs to promote accountability and transparency for improved service delivery'. The project was premised on the understanding that the integration of ICT in accountability processes reduces the barriers of access to information. It also empowers citizens to speak out on issues that they may feel intimidated to speak out in the presence of duty bearers. The project has also enabled documentation of evidence of service delivery. Inherently, the use of ICTs in accountability processes ultimately reduces information hooding and flattens the bureaucratic tendencies of duty bearer's enabling corrupt practices (Wairagala and Åke, 2015).

The project was inspired by the growing incidents of corruption in Uganda where nearly 500 million dollars of public funds in Uganda are lost due to corruption every now and then (Wairagala and Åke, 2015). Furthermore, a number of studies confirm that there is limited engagement between duty bearers and citizens especially the national leaders. This limits citizen participation on policies and programmes. This therefore results in the inappropriate development agenda for various communities (Wairagala and Åke, 2015). During the implementation of the project, WOUGNET empowered the grass root communities (citizens) to hold duty bearers accountable for their actions. This was done by creating citizen awareness on human rights, democratic principles and advocating for their rights. WOUGNET also employed an SMS platform as a medium for exchanging messages on service delivery. This platform aimed at merging the communication gap between the community and community leaders or duty bearers with the aim of improving service delivery.

WOUGNET largely works with women in the communities on issues related to accountability and transparency of community leaders at all levels. WOUGNET is a network of women-led member organisations founded in May 2000 registered as a non-governmental organisation whose major aim is to develop the use of information and

communication technologies (ICTs) among women as tools to share information and address issues collectively (WOUGNET, 2017). During the implementation of the project, WOUGNET mobilised and strengthened the Voluntary Social Accountability Committees (VSAC) at each sub-county in six districts. These VSACs were the spring boards of community empowerment in the areas of rights and seeking accountability. WOUGNET also empowered the duty bearers by way of training and advocacy to enable them engage with citizens.

The work of WOUGNET is linked to the Government of Uganda Development Agenda (NPA, 2015), which has positioned ICT as one the strategic pillars of social transformation into a middle income knowledge-based economy. A number of initiatives which are promoting the use of ICT exist (WOUGNET, 2017). However, there is limited research on how ICT's have been used to influence service delivery for accountability. Therefore, this article was aimed at studying how the communities in northern and eastern Uganda empowered by WOUGNET utilised ICT to demand for accountability and transparency from their leaders. Also the study sought to establish how duty bearers (leaders) responded to citizen's demands using ICTs. The article also sought to establish factors that facilitated or constrained the use of ICT in the engagement between leaders and citizens.

This article analyses the relationship between ICT and democracy across different contexts at; global, regional and local context on e-democracy. Section 4 describes the methodology which was used to analyse communities in northern and eastern Uganda. Section 5 presents and discusses the results of the study. Section 6 presents the discussion of findings, recommendations and conclusions.

3 E-democracy context

To understand a democratic process, one has to understand the concept of democracy which is a form of government legitimised by the citizens it governs (Honorata, 2017). Citizens can use democracy to achieve a number of goals such as; respect and demand for their rights and ensuring freedom and equality for all. Citizens can also use democracy to distinctively create peace amongst societies, countries and regions worldwide (Honorata, 2017). The foundation of world peace can be stemmed from how citizens work together and participate to solve conflict (Galtung, 1996).

One of the ways through which citizens can work together can be through the use of ICT to ensure the democratic process is realised in their areas. This can be termed as e-democracy which is a means of disseminating political information to enhance communication and participation to transform the political debate (Coleman and Donald, 2005). Communication between the government and the citizens currently termed as 'the government–citizen relationship' explores the creation of participatory internet practices and social media and how it can be used to interface with the government even at grass root level (Honorata, 2017). Government representatives (leaders) are forced to account to the citizens. Some of the ways leaders account to the citizen include; e-participation and digital democracy, openness and engagement with citizens by their government representatives (Honorata, 2017). A number of governments across the world are

adopting the use of internet and associated technologies to deliver a computer-mediated transparency to the citizens (Von, 2017). The use of ICT's like the Internet and social media have increased citizen participation in governance processes for accountability and transparency (Fox, 2007).

Wong and Welch (2014) noted that corruption among government officials is attributed to the limited use of ICTs. Bonsón et al. (2012) observed that most governments around the world have limited presence on common social media networks where only 32% use Twitter, 16% Facebook, 12% LinkedIn and 29.3% YouTube to engage and discuss government transparency and accountability issues with their citizens. The very low usage of social media is often attributed to threats the technologies pose to democracy. It is noted that, the use of these social media platforms has led to increased demand for rights and democracy in many countries. (Renata and Francesca, 2012) Notes that social media platforms can improve government accountability if well integrate in the government communication strategy.

For e-democracy to work, there must be exclusive dependency on cyber space (E-Governance Academy, 2017; Mwangi et al., 2013). In Africa and Uganda, the cyber space is under developed and constrained by limited liberties of freedom of expression (E-Governance Academy, 2017). These hindrances limit communities from mobilising and managing transparency and accountability issues (Eshetu and Jibrin, 1995).

Although it is expected of citizens to easily and fully participate in democratic and political activities using different forms of ICT, it has been a great setback for African countries especially Uganda's rural communities. Uganda's National Planning Authority asserts that the government of Uganda has had inconsistencies in the level of citizen participation, corruption and information gaps. This has caused communities to lag behind in demanding for accountability and transparency among duty bearers (NPA, 2015). The reason behind the slow response among citizens is the lack of awareness on how the use of ICT can be used for ensuring demands are met and the level of responsiveness by the leaders on issues faced by citizens is raised.

4 Methodology

The article employed a mixed research methods approach which included the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The researchers reviewed relevant literature on e-democracy and use of ICT in the governance sphere from both referenced and grey materials. The literature review was intended to provide a ground context into the subject matter. Given the nature of the study, sources for primary data were purposively selected. According to Tongco (2007), a purposive sampling technique also known as judgemental sampling, is the selection of respondents based on their unique qualities that make them likely to provide the desired opinions and experiences about a given phenomenon under investigation. For this article, citizens and leaders who were beneficiaries of the WOUGNET project in northern and eastern Uganda took part in the study. A total of 180 respondents were targeted for the study from which 30 respondents were chosen per district. The study covered two sub-counties in each district with average of 15 respondents targeted per sub-county. The respondents included 12 citizens who were

members of VSAC and three duty bearers. Out of the 180 targeted respondents, a total of 142 (~79%) responded to the study; a response rate which was considered sufficient to represent opinions of the wider community of stakeholders. The data collection process deployed both qualitative and quantitative methods as shown in Table 1. Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents per district. The districts included Oyam, Gulu, Amuru, Pallisa, Busia and Tororo.

Table 1 Distribution of the respondents according to the different data collection methods

	Respondents	*Individual survey questionnaire*	*Key informant interviews*	*Focus group discussions*
Target	180	144	24	84
Actual	142	130	24	98

Table 2 Distribution of respondents per district

		Frequency	*Percent*	*Valid percent*	*Cumulative percent*
Valid	Oyam	14	12.5	12.6	12.6
	Gulu	32	22.3	22.5	35.1
	Amuru	25	13.4	13.5	48.6
	Pallisa	19	17.0	17.1	65.8
	Busia	32	22.3	22.5	88.3
	Tororo	19	11.6	11.7	100.0
	Total	141	99.1	100.0	
Missing	System	1	.9		
Total		142	100.0		

The semi structured survey protocols were used to capture the respondent's background and opinions on several thematic issues such as use of ICTs and citizenry engagement in democratic governance. The survey questionnaires were administered through a one on one engagement with the respondents and out of the 144 citizens (12 per sub-county) targeted, 130 responded to study. Key informant interviews (KII) were used to collect opinions from duty bearers and were administered to at least two (2) leaders from each of the 12 sub-counties across the two regions. This totalled to 26 who responded representing 72% response rate.

Specific focus group discussions (FGDs) were carried out at district and community level with political and community leaders. The FGDs were used to generate qualitative data that would enable a richer understanding of the contextual factors driving the success of the interventions. The use of FGDs allowed for probing and greater insight to various issues that the survey questionnaire may not have captured.

One FGD comprising of at least seven members of VSAC was carried out in each sub-county. The FGDs broadly discussed aspects of respondents' socio-economic situation, level of community engagement in government planning processes, levels of ICT access and utilisation in constructive engagement between citizens and public officials and respondents' opinion on expected outcomes of the WOUGNET project. This

explored the respondents opinions, challenges, experiences, successes and recommendations suggested in relation to decision making, land and property ownership, usage and control, income and expenditure, leadership, monitoring and reporting service delivery, use, control and ownership of ICTs, citizenry participation among others. A total of 98 people participated in these focus group discussions compared to the 84 people targeted. This represented 116% response rate.

Some of the questions asked included the following; what activities do you participate in the most to ensure information is sent through to the platform? What is the most commonly used channel of engagement between the local communities and their leaders? What decisions have been taken due to the improved channels of communication? What challenges have you faced in promoting socio-economic empowerment of women in your region?

In order to undertake the analysis, the collected data was first cleaned and coded. The data was then analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. A spreadsheet software was used to analyse quantitative data and qualitative data was analysed using thematic content analysis approach. The qualitative data was analysed using thematic content analysis. This was largely to improve the researchers understanding of citizens responses. The meanings and implications arising from study participants' responses were then explored and synthesised for presentation.

5 Results

The results concerning the study are presented in form of thematic issues of interest in terms of use of ICT for democratic purposes.

5.1 Use of ICT to promote duty bearer responsiveness to citizen concerns on accountability and transparency

In order to understand how citizens and duty bearers (DB) are using ICT to enhance their engagement, it was important to understand the level of ICT availability and accessibility in the districts of operation. The findings revealed that all citizens in the six districts have access to at least one of following ICTs:

1 mobile phone

2 radio

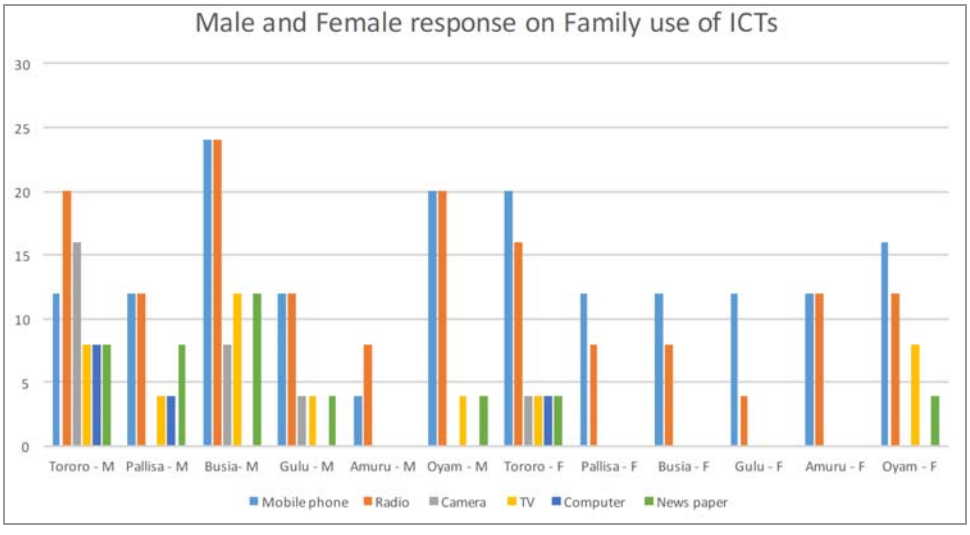
3 TV

4 computer.

Nearly 89.2% (116) of citizens sampled had access to a mobile and about 55.4% (72) had access to the radio. The least accessible ICTs by citizens in the six districts were televisions (TV) and Computers. All duty bearers sampled during the study indicated they had access to both mobile phones and radios. The study also revealed that most of the common ICT (mobile phones, radios and TV) were mostly owned by men. While the

ownership and accessibility to camera was low, more women owned cameras compared to men. This might be explained by the fact that the females are emotional beings and desire to capture memories and reflect on them in detail at a later stage and hence the high use of the camera among women compared to men. It was noted that; Tororo, Busia and Oyam had a higher ownership of common ICTs than Gulu, Pallisa and Amuru. Another interesting result was the very low ownership of radios among women in Gulu – F and Amuru – F. Figure 1 describes citizen responses on family ownership of ICT where M represents male and F represents female on each district name.

Figure 1 Male and female response on family use of ICT (see online version for colours)



When the respondents were further probed on who owned the ICTs that were being using within the family. It was evident that some of the ICTs were only owned by one gender in some of the districts. The results showed 63% of males owned mobile phones as compared to the 27% females. Further still, 88% males owned radios as compared to the 12% females. It should also be noted that possession of a camera within the sampled population indicated that 33% of the males had cameras as compared to the 67% females.

Findings show that accessibility to ICTs within a family is highest among men as compared to women. Men tend to own and control ICTs such as phones and radios. This implies that for women to effectively engage duty bearers using ICTs, they have to be economically empowered to own and control some ICTs. From these results presented its necessary to sensitise men on benefits of allowing women in their families to access some of the ICT's like mobile phones and radios. This is key to enable them access key development information and people in charge such as Duty Bearers. These observations were confirmed by the key informant interviews with duty bearers who noted that "men own and control access to ICT by their wives as a strategy of asserting their control over

the family affairs". This is also linked to the cultural setting within the communities investigated. The communities believe that men are superior to women. Figure 2 describes how citizens owned ICTs within the families where M represents male and F represents female on each district name.

Figure 2 Comparison of male and female responses on family ownership of ICT (see online version for colours)

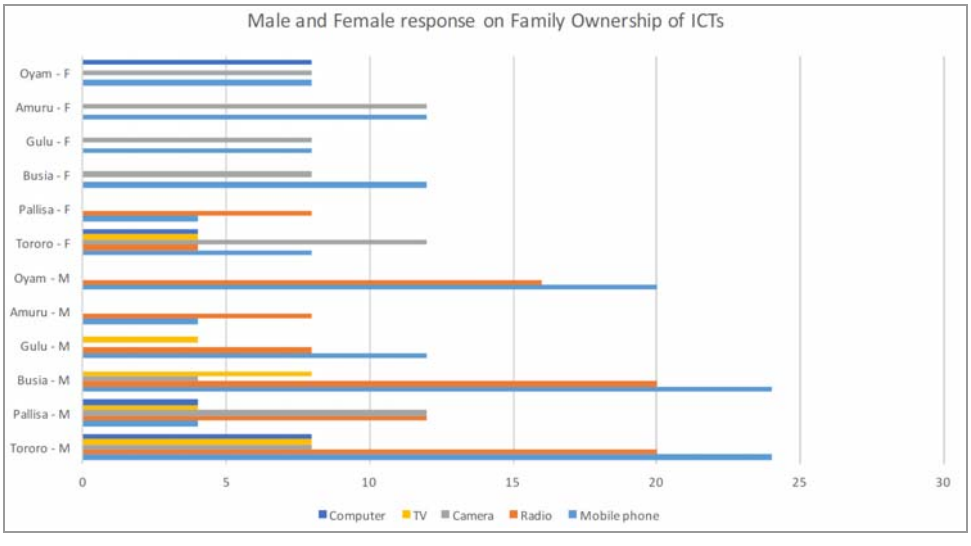
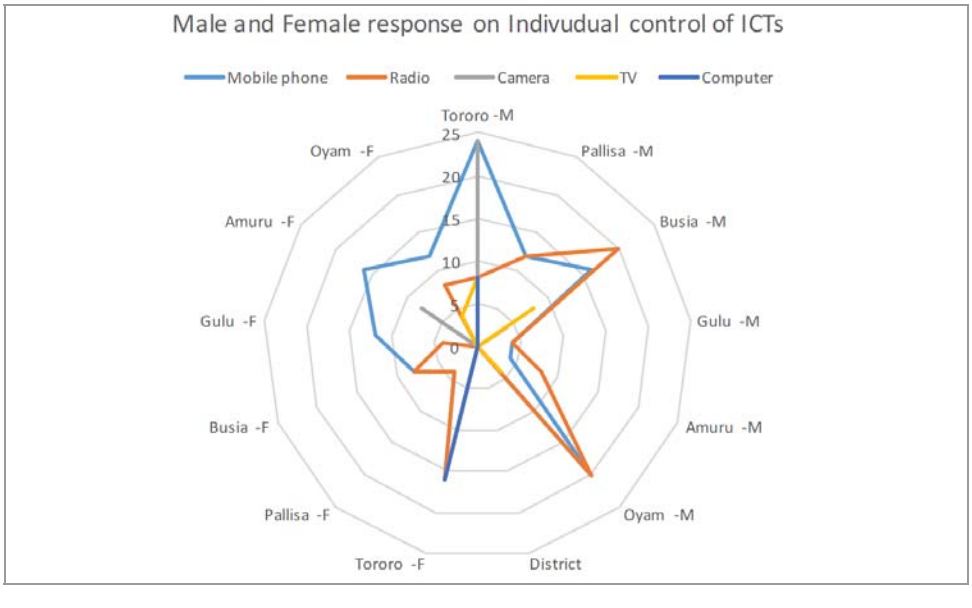


Figure 3 Individual control of ICTs (see online version for colours)



In order to perform routine tasks using the ICTs, it was important to understand if sampled population had control of the ICTs they had with them. It was noted that they almost controlled the mobile phones equally with 54.1% for males and 45.9% for females respectively. The results also showed that 72% of the radios were controlled by males as compared to the 28% females. Access to information through the remote recommended avenue (radio) is still a challenge for the females within the communities since majority of the radios were owned by males who tend to monopolise their use. Also 33.3% of the computers were controlled by males as compared to the 66.7% females. Figure 3 describes the individual control of ICTs where M represents male and F represents female on each district name.

5.2 Use of ICT in engagement between citizen and duty bearers

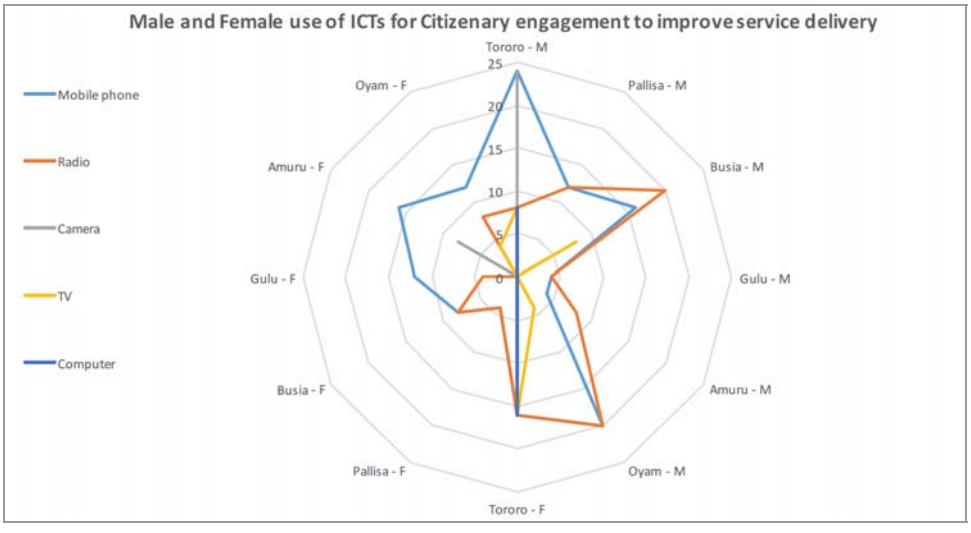
The study sought to ascertain the extent to which citizens and duty bearers use ICT in the engagement process between citizens and their leaders (duty bearers). The interviews with duty bearers revealed that they actually engage with citizens on issues to do with service delivery via ICTs. The majority of duty bearers who were interviewed revealed that they use radio to communicate government programmes to community members and a number of citizens do call them on their mobile phones with inquiries about government programmes. However, most duty bearers that were sampled found the act of citizens directly calling them at any time disruptive of their work and would desire to use a platform which can receive citizen issues and channel them to responsible officers of government. As highlighted by one leader in Tororo, “such an ICT platform will not only provide a record of citizens concerns, it would enable duty bearers to research on issues raised and provide citizens with appropriate responses”. It was clear from some duty bearers that they had created social media platforms to enable them collect citizen issues and respond on them via radios.

Results of citizens’ use of ICTs in engagement with duty bearers revealed that nearly 83.1% (108 of the 120 who responded to the question) do use ICT to engage duty bearers on government programmes and accountability issues. The most commonly used ICTs by citizens to engage with leaders are mobiles phones (about 83.1%) and radios (64.6%). It was apparent from the results that the respondents preferred more to use mobile phones for citizenry engagement with 53.3% of the women and 46.7% men using them.

Despite the fact that the men possessed more mobile phones, they used them less for citizenry engagements as compared to women. Tororo and Pallisa had a highest level of radio and mobile phone usage in engagement with leaders and Gulu district had the least use of ICT by citizens to engage with leaders. Analysing the use of radio for citizenry engagements indicated that 56.5% (women) and 43.5% (men) used the radio. Despite men possessing more of the radios, their usage for citizenry engagements is lower than that of women. Generally, in all six districts women prefer to use ICT to engage with their leaders than men. Computers were least used by the citizens to engage with the duty bearers. This might be explained by the limited accessibility to computers by the citizens most especially the women. Therefore, it is very clear from the results of this article that mobile phones and radios should be considered as the main tools used in the engagement

between citizens and leaders. Further still the women should be supported in accessing the ICTs since they tend to use them for citizenry engagements. Figure 4 describes the extent to which various ICTs are being used by citizens on the scale of 1 to 16 with 16 being the highest to engage with duty bearers; where M represents male and F represents female on each district name.

Figure 4 ICT used for citizenry engagement (see online version for colours)



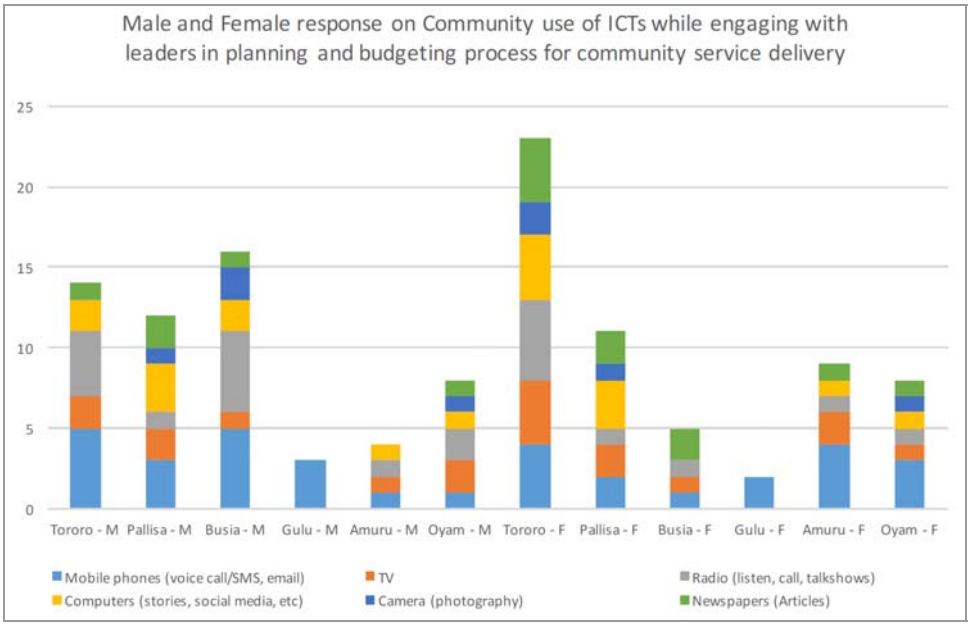
5.3 Use of ICT in engagement during budgeting and planning processes

The article also sought to find out how ICTs promote government budgeting and planning processes to enhance citizen-leader engagement. Accordingly, the study sought to establish the extent to which ICT's are being used by citizens and duty bearers to engage during the planning and budgeting processes. At total of 136 citizens responded to this question of which 50.4% are women and 49.6% men. Results show that the most used ICTs in the budgeting and planning process was mobile phones (52.94%) for the males and 47.1% for the females. The mobile phones were followed by the Radio with 59.1% for males and 40.9 for the females. The Cameras were the least used by citizens and there was a balance in the use of computers to promote government budgeting and planning.

Citizens in the districts of Tororo and Pallisa reported the highest level of ICT usage through radios in engaging with their leaders during the budgeting and planning processes. The results revealed that more females responded to using ICTs for engaging duty bearers during the budgeting and planning processes as compared to men. It was revealed by the respondents that Gulu district used ICTs less to engage with duty bearers during the budgeting and planning processes. The women in Amuru are twice likely to engage leaders using ICT during budgeting and planning processes as compared to men.

These results collaborate well with facts in literature and findings from interviews with duty bearers which show that; mobile phones, radio, TV and social media are very critical for the community participation in the budgeting and planning processes. Therefore, the project implementation should focus on promoting these platforms of engagement to get the desired impact. Figure 5 shows how the different ICTs were used during the budgeting and planning by citizens to engage with duty bearers, where M represents male and F represents female on each district name.

Figure 5 ICTs used in budgeting and planning processes (see online version for colours)



6 Discussions, conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

It was clear that the article was anchored on the use of ICT to empower citizens to exercise their democratic rights of demanding accountability and transparency from duty bearers. Indeed, other studies have shown that appropriate application of ICT's can improve democratic processes as ICT generally improve transparency through documentation of processes, easy access to information, improving visualisation of information for different stakeholders and lowering of barriers of engagement between duty bearers and citizens.

The study revealed that there is indeed increased access and use of ICT in the community intervention areas by both the citizens and duty bearers. About 89.2% of all respondents including VSAC and DB owned an assortment of basic ICT tools which include; Mobile phones, radio, TV, Computer and camera. In terms of ownership and

access to ICT 63% of men owned an ICT tool compared to 27% of the women. This is a clear sign that there is still an ICT gap between males and females in terms of ownership and use. This imbalance affects greatly the communities in terms of service delivery and therefore more work should be done in reducing this gap.

Despite the high awareness about citizens' human rights and high access to ICT, the study findings reveal that citizenry participation and engagement with duty bearers is generally still low at about 29% as reported by both VSAC and duty bearers. Duty bearer's responsiveness is still 50.4% for men and 49.6% for women as reported by VSAC. These results indicate that almost men and women are more likely to engage in government planning and programmes.

Majority of respondents (69%) both citizens and duty bearers noted that the citizen participation in planning processes was constrained by a number of factors which included failure by leaders to invite or inform the community in time, limited access to information about community programmes, family obligations and work commitments.

6.2 Recommendations

The opportunities pointed out in this research should be explored and further assessed for their effectiveness in enabling the use of ICTs to promote citizenry engagements and socio-economic empowerment to improve service delivery. In light of the observation from the research a number of recommendations are suggested. There is need to engage further duty bearers at all levels to take part in engagement with empowered citizens through the use of ICTs and most especially the mobile phones and Radios.

Since mobile phones and radios were seen to be the most used ICTs among the respondents, their adoption should be more encouraged. The use of mobile phones for engaging with duty bearers is dependent on the SMS which becomes expensive to sustain and conserve.

It is cheaper and more effective for communities to use WhatsApp groups than the SMS given the fact that internet connection has become cheaper and affordable. It should also be noted that connectivity for the country is already beyond 95% and hence could be tapped into to engage with duty bearers. Furthermore, it was noted that Radios were commonly used for engaging and reaching out to the community members. Therefore, these should be encouraged further for educating, engaging and communicating any relevant information to the community members. The communities should also think about owning community-based radios since they are able to communicate out information more ably than almost all ICTs considered during the research.

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