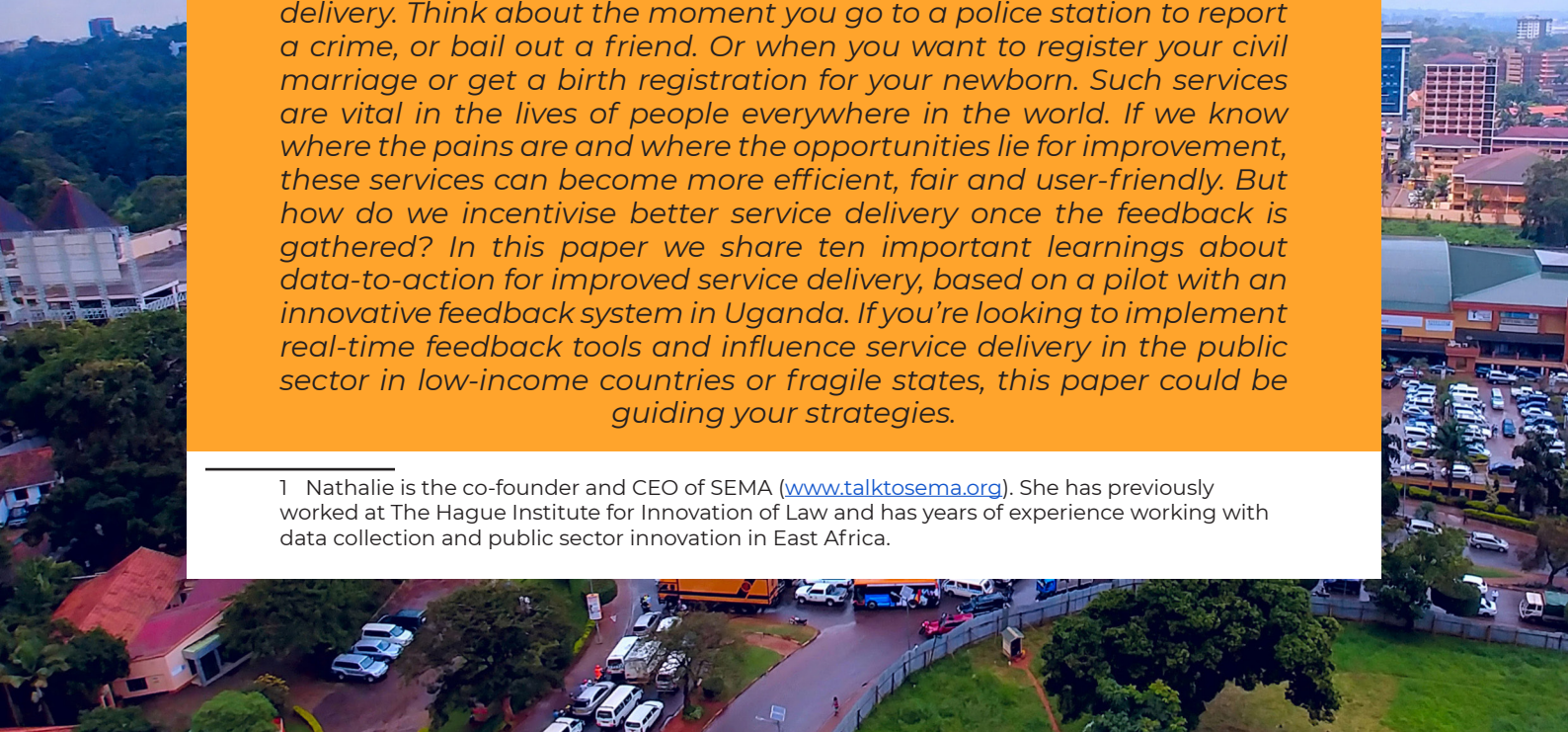
MOVING FROM REAL-TIME FEEDBACK TO BETTER PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY IN EAST AFRICA

A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR DATA-TO-ACTION

By Nathalie EJ Dijkman[1]

Summary. *Citizen feedback is essential in improving public service delivery. Think about the moment you go to a police station to report a crime, or bail out a friend. Or when you want to register your civil marriage or get a birth registration for your newborn. Such services are vital in the lives of people everywhere in the world. If we know where the pains are and where the opportunities lie for improvement, these services can become more efficient, fair and user-friendly. But how do we incentivise better service delivery once the feedback is gathered? In this paper we share ten important learnings about data-to-action for improved service delivery, based on a pilot with an innovative feedback system in Uganda. If you're looking to implement real-time feedback tools and influence service delivery in the public sector in low-income countries or fragile states, this paper could be guiding your strategies.*



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If we're serious about the SDGs, we need to start collecting data about citizen's experiences with public services.

The international community has expressed a need for governments to develop accountable and transparent institutions (SDG 16.6). One of the indicators associated with this target is the 'proportion of the population satisfied with their last experience of public services' (see UNstats for development of this indicator). But many local governments lack the capacity and skills to effectively measure this indicator. Moreover, it's unclear how measuring citizen satisfaction with public services can eventually lead to improved (accountable and transparent) institutions.

Many SDGs are closely tied with a well functioning public sector. For instance, the provision of good health systems, quality education, clean water and energy (SDGs 3, 4, 6, 7) are all dependant on (a partnership with) efficient and well working government services. More importantly, it's important that such primary services are truly benefiting all citizens equally, regardless of gender, income or other discriminatory factors (SDG 5, 10). Committing to these goals means we have to start with deeply listening to the experiences and needs of citizens using public services.

The most commonly used tool for citizens to give feedback at public services in many (fragile) countries, including Uganda, is still a wooden suggestion box.

If we look at the case of Uganda, we see that many public services could greatly benefit from a direct feedback loop. According to data from the 2016 HiiL Justice Needs and Satisfaction in Uganda, many (legal) public service providers are not trusted by citizens, and satisfaction with public entities such as courts is low. At the same time, only minimal concrete solutions for improving trust and efficiency in public services are proposed in the fourth strategic vision for the Justice Law and Order Sector of Uganda (SDP-IV).

If you visit a public office in Uganda, there is no anonymous way in which you could easily share your experience at that office, except for dropping a handwritten note in a wooden suggestion box. Since citizens don't have an independent platform to raise their voice, local governments ignore their needs and can't detect where the problems are. Some Ministries rely on national surveys that are done on average once every three years, a period during which there is no space for testing the effectiveness of short pilots and new interventions. Still, the impact indicators against which the justice sector measures its success include 'increased public satisfaction with its services', as well as increased trust in justice institutions (see SDP-IV).

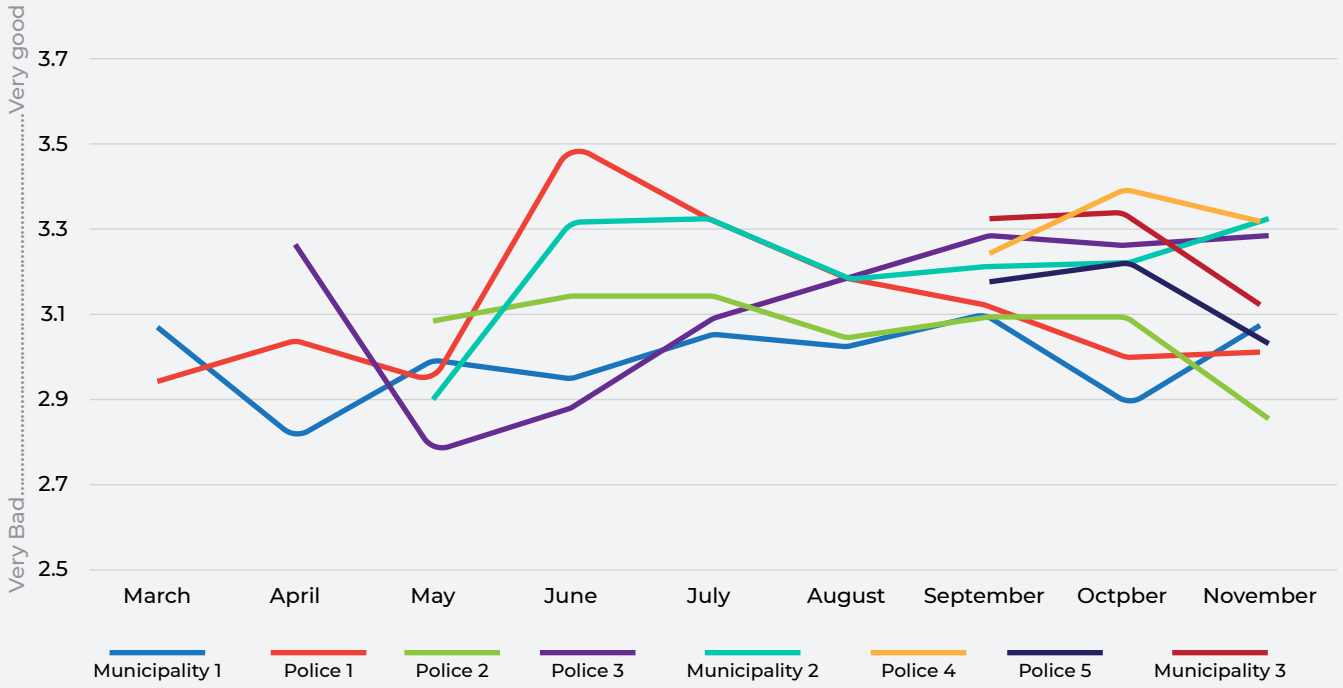
We have tested innovative data collection tools for citizen satisfaction with justice sector services in Uganda, leading to feedback gathered from over 15000 citizens.

SEMA is a social enterprise that was established in early 2018 to improve transparency and accountability of public services through an innovative citizen feedback system. A pilot of SEMA's tools - which include a real-time feedback device, an automated phone line, and in-person surveys - was launched in March 2018 in Kampala, Uganda. This pilot was supported by the Justice Law and Order Sector and the Kampala Capital City Authority. To date, we have been continuously collecting data at 8 public offices around Kampala (5 major police stations and 3 prominent municipality offices), and improving on our methodologies of data collection and data presentation.

Since March 2018 we gathered feedback from over 15.000 citizens in Kampala making use of different public services. This is a very high amount of feedback data compared to other ICT platforms that have been tested to generate citizen participation (see also MAVC findings about ICT platforms for citizen feedback). Reasons for our higher amount of data include

the use technologies that are very low key for citizens to use, and in addition, the active (in-person) engagement of citizens to give feedback.

Graph 1. Citizen satisfaction at different public offices in Kampala, 2018 (N=14933)



New technologies can lead to more data. And complementary data collection streams may be necessary to obtain an overall picture of service quality.

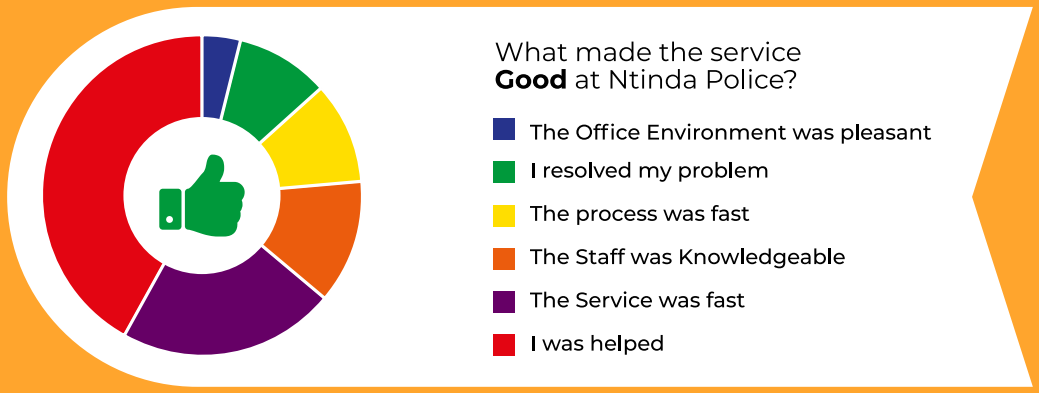
SEMA collects real-time citizen feedback at public institutions through three data collection tools: (1) we introduce hardware polling devices with a rating on a scale from 1-5, where citizens press the button that reflects their experience at that office (a smiley face) (2) we offer a toll-free Interactive Voice Response line where citizens can record their feedback message anonymously (3) we deploy a network of young 'dialogue enablers' who approach citizens at exits of public offices for short qualitative interviews about their experience at that office.

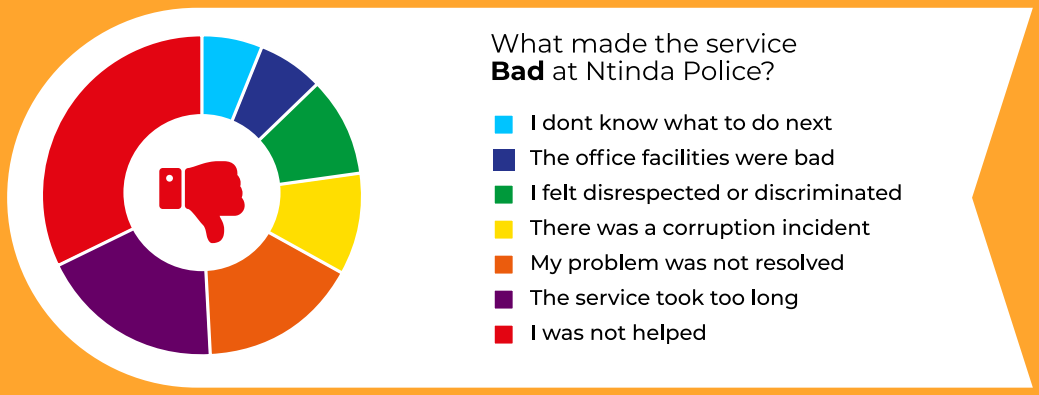
***Imagine** you visit a local police station in Kampala to report a stolen car. You are helped by an officer at the counter, and after you're finished reporting your case and about to leave, the officer asks you to rate the service by pressing one of the buttons at the device behind you. You're moderately satisfied with the services, and since the device has a screen shielding off your choice, you press the 'okay' smiley face in the middle. Once outside, a young man approaches you with a smile and asks you if you're willing to share what made you appreciate or dislike the service today. You say that your case was taken up, but that it took you at least 30 minutes to be helped and the lady didn't really inform you about the next steps. After noting down your thoughts, the young man gives you a card with a number that you can call to share your experience when you visit the station the next time.*

This mix of quantitative and qualitative data forms a rich database of information about how citizens experience services at public offices, over time, and varying from office to office. We found that placing a hardware device (with a real-time quantitative data flow) allows for comparison of data over time and across offices. However, this device data does not sufficiently

help public offices to understand where their services should improve. Some citizens prefer providing additional information about their experience, which they can do through leaving a voice message on the IVR line (free of charge and at their own convenience), or by talking to the SEMA dialogue enablers. The information that is gathered through qualitative interviews allows us to match negative or positive ratings at particular offices with citizen experiences around corruption, waiting times, staff friendliness, the complexity of the process and other factors.

Graph 2. General observations about what citizens thought the public service, Kampala (2018) N=900, includes police and municipality offices.





We developed a few data-to-action strategies, and let go of some on the way.

With the support of the Knowledge Management Fund, we wanted to discover how to translate this citizen-oriented data into better programming and policy of public service delivery in Uganda. In particular, we wanted to answer the following question: **how can citizen feedback be most effectively used to incentivise the justice sector to providing better quality public service delivery?** In the following paragraphs, we discuss the outcomes of our experiments with how data can lead to action.

The data-to-action strategies we tested include:

(a) delivering feedback data to civil servants at the service level
(b) co-organising improvements with public offices
(c) convening stakeholder meetings with policy decision makers around the data
(d) liaising with other CSOs to do follow-up of our work
(e) public (outreach) campaigns online and offline that lead to more accountability
(f) introducing a system of competition, by ranking the best performing offices

During the pilot, apart from testing these data-to-action strategies, we conducted a few impact surveys with civil servants, and a SEMA Advisory Group was set up made up of Ugandan experts. The results of these methods, surveys and meetings are summarized in this paper in order to share our learnings with practitioners and governments who are keen to improve service delivery through citizen feedback (in particular in low-income or fragile states).

In the coming paragraphs we share ten key findings:

1. ***Bringing feedback data directly to those that deliver the services is much needed.***
2. ***Giving citizens a continuous platform to speak up next to where the services take place has a social control effect.***
3. ***If you use hardware for data collection, ensure simplicity and a continuous improvement of its integration in the service location.***
4. ***Some changes to improve public services are easy wins, but others can't be done unless you involve those at the top.***
5. ***In many cases citizen feedback demands from civil servants a mindset change, with a stronger focus on customer care.***
6. ***You need changemakers in every institution you're trying to improve.***
7. ***Over time, data becomes less interesting to some, and perceived as a threat to others.***
8. ***The role of public media announcements of feedback data is precarious.***
9. ***Recognising efforts and, in some cases, rewarding, works better than shaming.***
10. ***If you collect data, your role should stay neutral and independent.***

1. First of all, it's clear that bringing feedback data directly to those that deliver public services is a must.

What do we do with over 15000 citizen feedback reports? We break them down. Each month, each office receives their own, customized, no-nonsense feedback report. Compare it to receiving the outcomes of your school test: a grade, that shows how you did compared to last month, compares you to other 'classmates' and with some explanations of what you did really well, and where you can improve. A one pager, that is easy to understand for even those civil servants that have never finished their secondary school degrees.

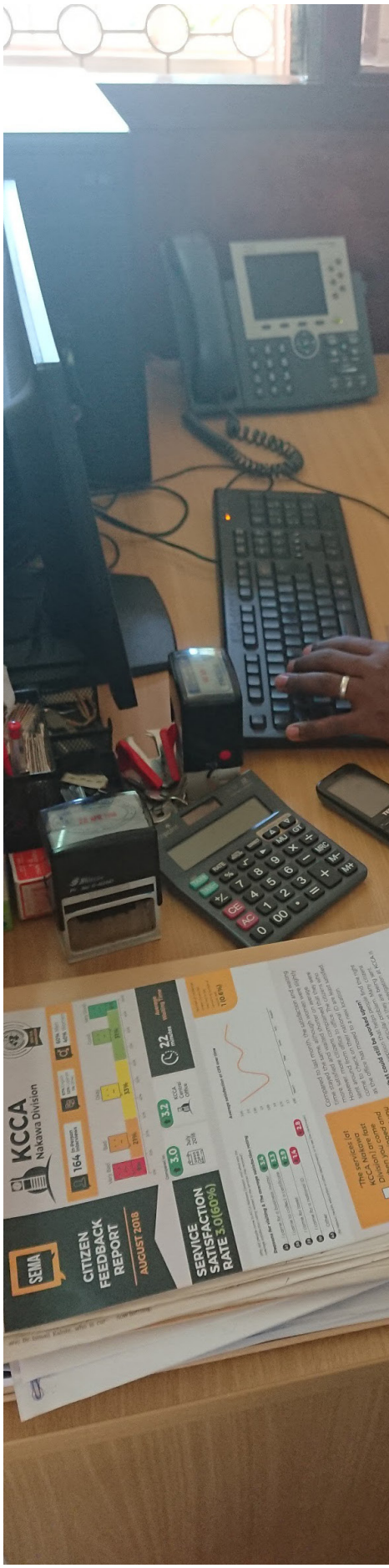
Since March, we delivered 48 such reports for these offices. Some officers are starting to hang them on their public notice boards - so every citizen can see how they scored that month. Others officers have dedicated a 15-minute citizen-feedback-report discussion to their monthly staff meetings, to discuss how and where they should improve. Others call their superiors at the Headquarters to tell them about their performance, or call their peers at other stations to ask for their 'feedback grades'. In sum: these reports have started a new movement of what it means to deliver data where the real action is.

Why? Because most of these public offices have never received individual feedback on how they are doing in particular. Most evaluation studies are run on average every three years and evaluate a whole sector, with conclusions that are along the lines of 'the police is doing x', 'corruption rates are x'. But officers working at these offices do not identify with such studies, because they don't feel it really touches upon them in particular. What we therefore need is a revolution of customized feedback for those who deliver the services.

2. Giving citizens a continuous platform to speak up next to where the services take place has a social control effect.

By being continuously present as a third (independent) party, whether in the form of a device or an interviewer standing outside the premises, SEMA has quickly been branded as a "feedback investigator" by some officials at the public offices where data collection takes place. Police officers at the Kampala Central Police Station, for example, say they "know we are being watched, so we have changed on how we treat clients."

In the beginning, trust had to be built with these offices, and there was definitely some skepticism towards the idea of continuous citizen feedback collection. But this attitude changed over time, after feedback reports arrived in to their offices. "We thought we would never see the outcomes of the research here, or only in a year from now. But only after a few weeks we already received our first



report, and we saw that there were also positive things highlighted. We weren't doing so bad after all" (interview with police officer). Some of them go further to state they appreciate what SEMA is doing, because they feel like these feedback tools are helping them be more accountable to their duties. By now, they no longer may see SEMA as an investigator, but as an entity that is there to help them serve clients better: "You give us morale".

For others, the device (which has a large sign above it reading 'How was the service today at this office?'), helps them to remind them what they are here to do. "I come to office in the morning and read that sign, thinking to myself 'Indeed, today I'm going to do my best to make my clients happy'." Needless to say, introducing a (visible) feedback system that can easily be used by citizens and is manned by a trusted third party, in itself already has an effect on accountability of public services.

3. If you use hardware for data collection, ensure simplicity and a continuous improvement of its integration in the service location.

However positive effect the (physical) presence of a feedback tool may have on a sense of accountability, it's not really a matter of placing the device and leaving. In fact, we noticed time and again that many citizens and civil servants were confused about its use case, and in some cases misused. In some offices, civil servants thought the device was meant for them (to evaluate their own environment/colleagues). In other offices, citizens did not dare to use the device unless a civil servant encouraged them to do so.

Different versions of feedback devices also fit different contexts: you can't deploy the same slick feedback device you use at a bank, to be stationed at rural police station. We therefore started experimenting with different stands, colours and sizes, to find the right version that can easily be adapted to different contexts. Moreover, our team of 'dialogue enablers' were present for each iteration to observe user behaviour and find out what works in terms of location and look-and-feel of the devices. FInally, they helped the local offices and the citizens to understand the use of the device.

After a few weeks, each office had a civil servant assigned to the device as a caretaker: they would place the device outside the office and take it back in at the end of the day, and, more importantly, they would start advising citizens to use the device after they made use of the service at that office. After a while, this snowballed (at some offices) into each officer saying automatically after a serviced citizen: 'please rate your experience by pressing a button outside'.

Regardless, 'suspicious patterns' of multiple positive button presses on regular intervals should be flagged in the dashboard and monitored closely. Such behaviour leads to interesting discussions with public offices about how the device is best put to use.

4. Some changes to improve public services are easy wins, but others can't be done unless you involve those at the top.

A watchdog effect may have its peak at the start of a new programme, but this effect may decline over time. The real impact appears when the recommendations set forth in the monthly reports are actually taken up by each office. When we ask about the changes that have been implemented by the offices following the data reports, we get a few concrete answers, but also a range of excuses on why nothing was done yet.

Based off the feedback of citizens about the processes and client service, quick wins can easily be made and they do have the ability to empower public offices immediately. For instance, at one municipality office, our data showed that citizens were often lost in the building, being sent from one office to another, wasting time asking around for the right person to help them. This station installed navigation signs and set up a reception desk to guide citizens to the right officer to help them with their matter directly.

During staff meetings where the citizen feedback reports are discussed, officers also note that some recommendations need the approval of directors and top management, or require (financial) investments which they can't afford. For instance, repeated complaints about not having access to a copy machine at some offices is mentioned as a nuisance for many citizens who have to travel back and forth from the station to a copyshop to get their case finalised in one day (which also adds to travel expenses for the citizen). However, procuring a copy machine is not something all offices are able to afford.

5. In many cases citizen feedback demands from civil servants a mindset change, with a stronger focus on customer care.

Many issues that define a customer journey arise from their direct interactions with staff members. These issues included timely opening of offices, staff friendliness (or rudeness, for that matter), or the reporting of bribes. One police officer mentioned she started to smile more often at clients ever since their station started receiving monthly satisfaction ratings. "I didn't used to smile that much at clients, but now I heard that friendliness matters and I want us to have a better grade next time."

Although some offices are able to take on the challenge of motivating their staff to improve their attitude in handling clients, others express a feeling of helplessness. "We are severely understaffed," reported one office. "We recognize that some officers are rude or lazy with clients, but they are overworked. During times of riots or heavy workload, the problem is

fatigue, and unless the government recruits more officers, the ones in office will always be tired and hence not give proper services to the people." As a consequence, a need for 'client care' trainings has been expressed by some officers in charge.

At the same time, we learned that commitments are needed from officers in charge, in order to hold them truly accountable to their intentions. Simply dropping a data report and leaving will not lead to enough engagement at each office. In fact, every delivery of a feedback report requires some form of follow-up with the office, to discuss how they decided to take up the recommendations. In some cases these are tied to concrete commitments ("we will hire a receptionist to help more citizens navigate the building/process"), which could be codified and followed up during later engagements. Such commitments can easily lead to quick wins that lead to a better customer experience for citizens at such offices.

6. You need changemakers in every institution you're trying to improve.

A SEMA Advisory Group, consisting of five Ugandan experts, three of which are public servants (at management and office level), one data scientist and one civil society representative, gave extensive guidance on how to identify the right people in the bureaucratic maze of the government. We learned that, for instance, regular stakeholder meetings with civil servants to discuss the feedback data are needed - and they should be led by a champion within each public partner organisation. Champions are defined by persons within government who are in the first place willing and in a position of power to realise public service improvements. It takes time to identify these 'public sector changemakers', but once you have identified them, they help in creating the right mindset across the organisation.

In line with the finding of certain limitations of service improvements at the office level, there continues to be a need to reach out to heads of department, town clerks, supervisors and divisional bosses. While on the one hand they are able to assign budgets to particular improvement strategies, they are also the ones appraising their staff at the office level. Several civil servants at offices have mentioned this as an incentive for them to improve: "if we know that the people at headquarters will see these results, we know that the next time I ask for a promotion, I can refer to this report."

Having an external group of advisors can add a lot of legitimacy to an external (third party) evaluator. Next to being a regular force of feedback, they help with providing introductions and identifying the right changemakers in government.

7. Over time, data becomes less interesting to some, and perceived as a threat to others.

As one of the bigger challenges in our citizen feedback work, we noticed that the first three monthly feedback reports are received with much attention, but interest gradually starts to decline after a few months. This 'habituation' to continuous citizen feedback tools and data streams is a real risk that requires mitigation through some of the methods that were shared earlier. Primarily, this includes the continuous engagement of champions and stakeholders. In addition, real results drives continued attention to data reports. Positive outcomes (such as happier clients, happier headquarters, or funding for office improvements) are also drivers of continued attention.

When we talk about the threat of continuous citizen feedback loops, most people have mentioned the fear of spreading negative outcomes or scandals publicly. The more feedback we gather, the more suspicious looks we receive from some offices, where they started questioning the validity of our data. Let us be clear: it is a continuous effort to build trust

with public offices in order to continue to collect citizen feedback and create incentives for improvements. Such efforts need to come from champions within the government, as well as from the CSOs trying to encourage accountability. But in this sensitive landscape of mutual trust, to what extent can feedback results be shared publicly, and used by citizens in the campaign for accountability?

8. The role of public media announcements is precarious.

Don't take them by surprise. There is a need to first of all establish legitimacy with public partners, before citizen feedback data can be put out in the open. Trust is established among others when it's clear from the feedback reports that not only negative outcomes are highlighted, but also positive examples. Over time, we have become a trusted partner of the offices we work with, because we continuously engage them in the debates about how to improve - whether internal or external.

At a recent UBC talk show (one of the most popular morning television shows in Uganda), we invited one officer in charge from a police station to join the discussion about how SEMA data can help his station. His presence already creates a more balanced image to the people watching the news. The officer was not entirely comfortable with SEMA showing that month's report on air, as he would be afraid it would cause a lot of political questions which he was not in position to answer at the time. What he said before the interview: "whatever I say on this show can either give me a promotion at work or make me lose my job", which illustrates the precarious position of publicly talking about satisfaction ratings of public services in a country where the civic space is shrinking.

This lead us to conclude that not all data needs to be published publicly, as long as it is delivered at the right desks. However, publishing regular results on social media that can lead to public debate, without shaming any particular offices, has proven to have value and lead to many more engagements. As long as we continue a dialogue about which information can be shared publicly or privately, you maintain a relationship of trust and therefore avoid doing harm to those who actually are keen to make a change within their public offices.

9. Recognising efforts and, in some cases, rewarding, works better than shaming.

The idea of rewarding the best performing stations has been brought up a number of times In SEMA's Advisory Group meetings, as well as in discussions with a few funding partners and stakeholders. As we know from other accountability initiatives (such as Integrity Idol, a tv show

for honest government officials), highlighting best performing public service delivery can lead to a more encouraging environment for civil servants and a sense of trust with citizens.

Every feedback report we deliver contains a positive aspect of that station, accompanied by a quote from a happy citizen. We have seen this is encouraging for many civil servants who feel they are not only receiving a bunch of complaints, which is often the case with reporting platforms. As one police officer says: "Initially I thought that SEMA was investigating the police and only looking for the negative parts of the police, but I was surprised when the report came and we saw where our strengths are." Highlighting how offices have improved over time or compared to others also helps in giving local officers the feeling they are actually in control of their own performance.

Moreover, a minimum number of (similar) public offices have to be compared in order to lead to a sense of competition or reward for good behaviour. For instance, the municipality offices (KCCA), when compared to each other in terms of satisfaction ratings, did not lead to much debate. However, once we started showing the satisfaction ratings broken down by type of service (i.e. revenue collection office, physical planning office), the interest came to compare how revenue collection performed across the cities different municipalities.

When ranking police offices each month, we noticed that different civil servants showed much more interest after the bigger offices were added (Central Police Station, Jinja Rd Police Station). For a small police office, 'performing better than CPS' became a moment of pride. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, some officers in charge expressed that their performance compared to other offices would help in them negotiating a better contract or promotion.

In order to drive more continuous engagement with the data and encourage better service delivery, SEMA's next strategy would be to, together with the Justice Law and Order Sector, award (bi-annual) prizes to the best performing offices. The prize would then also include a modest amount of funding that could be used to implement one improvement at that office (for instance, repainting the police office, or installing a new copy machine). We're yet to see the effects of such an initiative, but have received enough endorsement already to test it in 2019. Critically, the funding would come from the Ministry itself, not from SEMA.

10. If you collect data, your role should stay neutral and independent.

We have had recurring discussions about our role in relation to our mission and expertise: are we there to help citizens be voiced, to be a watchdog for better public service delivery and human rights abuses, or to help governments get better insights into their local office performance? We realised that, by positioning ourselves as a data collector, we are able to get access to many public offices. Once we also start finger pointing or developing interventions, we are already moving into a zone of distrust. This can be mitigated by including occasional interviews or focus groups with civil servants with their own perspective on their services and working environment. After all, improving the relationship between citizens and public services is a two-way street and requires input from both 'camps'.

Your position can be jeopardized if you propose or take part in interventions. In the case of one co-organised cleaning session at a police station where citizens complained about bad hygiene, we noticed other stations started asking for similar 'support', or even further forms of support ('can you buy us a copy machine?'). But once you start intervening in such improvements, the ownership shifts from the problem owner (the office/government) to a third party helper - and that's where lasting improvements will not come to effect. Because in the end, the citizen's satisfaction with public services will only increase, if the overall experience at a public service is improved through a customer centred mentality of the officers providing the service.

By giving citizens an anonymous and easy-to-use platform to give their feedback, we can not also raise and follow up on their individual complaints. The need for such platforms exists nevertheless, and we are keen to partner with them in order to serve citizens better. Having a neutral position does not jeopardize our mission to improve public service delivery and to spark a better relationship between citizens and local governments. In fact, such a mission is impossible to achieve through one intervention or organisation. We have to partner with those who are in need of data, and able to intervene in the right way. And so, building strategic partnerships with CSOs and other civic tech initiatives may lead to a concerted effort to improve the dialogue between citizens and civil servants.

Conclusions

Collecting real-time citizen feedback data has a lot of potential to improve public services, both in the short term and the long term. Low-key technologies have proven to work in engaging many citizens to participate in a feedback loop in fragile states or low-income countries such as Uganda. The deployment of such technologies requires a continuous engagement with local offices and building trust with those offices should not be taken for granted.

What we learned from earlier research done with citizen feedback platforms, has been confirmed through our work. 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 (see also Herringshaw, 2018).

Our findings around data-to-action strategies that work in the justice sector all come down to *whom* the data is presented to. Most importantly, presenting feedback data to those who deliver the services is very powerful, although has limitations in terms of what can be done. Therefore, champions at all levels need to be engaged, and encouraged through different rewarding mechanisms.

First positive results of our data collection and follow-up actions show the potential of feedback for a wide range of innovation support services. Continuous data collection allows to track impact over time with a baseline to compare to. This in return creates a valid environment to (iteratively) test new interventions and improvements. It also creates a lower risk for impact investors who are keen to invest in pilots for large-scale public sector improvements.

We are yet to test how building trust and follow-up data discussions can be scaled effectively for national and regional implementations of citizen feedback tools. Our lessons so far have taught us that we have to be smart about how we create an environment of accountability. But creating accountable and transparent institutions at all levels (SDG 16.6) may prove itself to be the cornerstone of achieving other SDGs that rely on quality public services for their effectiveness.

SEMA is a not-for-profit enterprise gathering citizen's voices to improve public services in Uganda.
Do you have questions about this report or our data collection?
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