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MITGOV/LAB

Testing Access to Information in Tanzania with Mystery Shoppers

Accessing public information, like government plans, budgets, and activities, is an important mechanism through which citizens can hold government accountable for providing basic services. From accessing water and medical care to starting a business or enrolling in school, citizens need open and public information to make day-to-day decisions about their lives.

Access to information is enshrined in the Tanzanian Constitution and in the 2016 *Access to Information Act*. Yet even with laws and principles on paper, an active culture of freedom of information has been slow to develop. Two years after passing the Act, the government released regulations and must now work to implement the rules across different offices and districts. In 2017, Twaweza data showed that 86% of Tanzanian citizens believed that information held by public authorities is a public resource and 13% had contacted a local government office to ask for information, yet only 5% had heard of the Access to Information Act in 2017.

In this context, MIT GOV/LAB and Twaweza partnered on a "mystery shopper" experiment in early 2016, to assess how citizens' information requests were received and processed at the local level before the law was passed (the law was tabled in mid-2015 but its passage was widely expected in 2016). The goal of this research was to create a baseline assessment of government transparency, which can enhance implementation of the law and help measure progress in the future.

This research brief provides a summary of MIT GOV/LAB research results for practitioner and policy audiences. Results have been internally replicated, but may undergo further revisions. MIT GOV/LAB reserves all rights over data, methods, and results for publication.

Key Takeaways

The mystery shopper experiment indicates that in 2016 there was significant variation in how government offices responded to information requests overall. Moreover, the information requested was released in just one out of three instances.

- Tanzanian researchers made information requests at 131 offices in 26 randomly sampled districts (of 169 total districts in the country) to get a nationally-representative baseline assessment of current government practices.
- Of those requests, 33% were either fully or partially fulfilled, while 67% were denied.
- Requests were most frequently fulfilled on paper (44%), as opposed to verbally or online.
- When requests were fulfilled, 67% were provided in Kiswahili.
- Government officials responded to 37% of requests on the same day, though 13% of requests took 4 days to receive a reply. Fulfilled requests were processed nearly one day earlier than denied requests.
- The Department of Public Works fulfilled the most requests (10 out of 21) while the District Executive Directors' (DED) Offices fulfilled the fewest (2 out of 25).

Research Process

What is a mystery shopper? Companies often use "mystery shoppers" to test brand consistency and to control the quality of chain locations and products around the world. The concept is simple: a 'mystery shopper' tests service delivery and quality by acting as a real customer and rating the experience. Applying this methodology to test government transparency, MIT GOV/LAB, in partnership with Twaweza East Africa, trained 'mystery shoppers' to make information requests at local offices across a random sample of 26 nationally representative districts.

Using a step-by-step protocol, each researcher requested 2-3 pieces of information from each of the six district offices responsible for a variety of public services, including education, health, water, and infrastructure. The researchers then assessed the response rate and overall experience through a survey with closed and open-ended questions. The protocol was piloted in Dar es Salaam and a 'trainer-of-trainers' model was employed to train researchers across the districts. Field work took place in January and February of 2016.

The mystery shoppers approached local government offices and requested specific pieces of information (e.g. annual plans and budgets, audited financials, lists of water, road, and other development projects, and high-level government statistics). They were trained not to reveal their affiliation with Twaweza or GOV/LAB nor to reveal that they were working as part of a research study, and they were selected from the districts in which the research took place. The goal was to replicate the situation that an average citizen searching for information would experience.

If necessary, the mystery shoppers would return to the office up to three times after the initial visit to follow up on or repeat their request. Follow-up visits were included in the research protocol to better understand the process of how local government handled information requests. Researchers filled out a paper survey for each visit. If a request was neither granted nor directly denied after the fourth visit, it was coded as "indirectly denied". We ultimately combined indirect and direct denials into a single "denied request" category.

MIT GOV/LAB conducted the 'mystery shopper' research with Twaweza in Tanzania and later adapted the experiment to Kenya.[1]
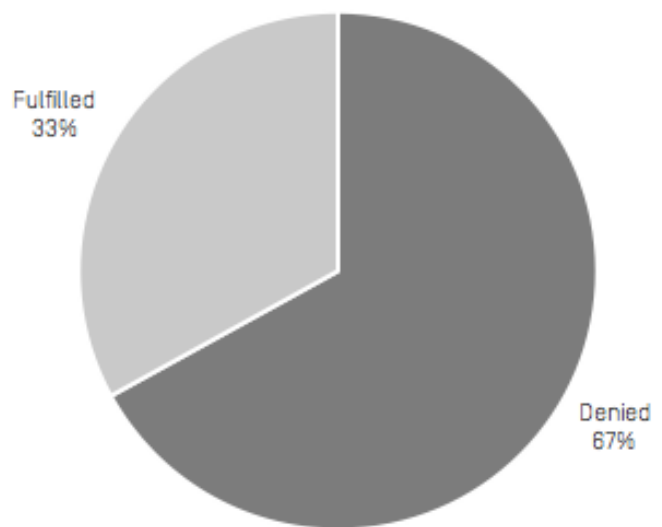
High-Level Findings

The 2016 *Access to Information Act*[2] helps to enact rights stipulated in the Tanzanian Constitution. Article 18 of the Constitution states: "Every citizen has the right to be informed at all times of various events in the country and in the world at large which are of importance to the lives and activities of the people and also of issues of importance to society."[3] The Act includes details on the procedure for requesting information as well as how information should be provided and how long a response should take.

Below we report our findings:

- **Access to information is poor.** A majority of information requests (67% of all requests) were denied. Researchers reported that when their requests were

denied, offices rarely provided "true and valid" justifications or recourse options.

Figure 1: What percentage of information requests were fulfilled?

- **Information was provided mostly in Swahili and on paper.** Information for 67% of fulfilled requests was provided in Swahili. Information was most frequently provided on paper (44%).

- **Requests were often answered on the same day, though denials took longer.** Many requests, whether fulfilled or denied, received a response on the same day they were submitted (37%). However, 13% of requests were not answered until the fourth and final day in the protocol. A fulfilled request tended to get a response nearly a day sooner than denied requests.

- **Responses varied by office.** The District Executive Director's Offices fulfilled only

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[1] For Kenya research results, see: MIT GOV/LAB Research Brief. 2018. "Testing Access to Information in Kenya with Mystery Shoppers." Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Governance Lab.

[2] The Access to Information Act, 2016. The United Republic of Tanzania. Available online: https://www.twaweza.org/uploads/files/1480402363-SHERIA%206-THE%20ACCESS%20TO%20INFORMATION%20ACT.pdf/.

[3] Twaweza's 2017 analysis on The Access to Information Act is available online: http://www.twaweza.org/go/analysis-on-ati.

2 of 25 requests—the lowest response rate among all the offices surveyed. The Education Offices fulfilled 5 of 21 requests. Health Offices fulfilled 8 of 22 requests, Land Offices and Planning Offices both fulfilled 9 of 21 requests, and Public Works Offices fulfilled 10 of 21 requests.

- **The reason for the request did not significantly influence whether it was fulfilled.** We randomly assigned mystery shoppers in half of the districts to use a legal approach, citing their rights as citizens. The other half presented a personal rationale for needing the information. Anecdotal evidence had suggested that citizens must either know someone in the administration or must have a believable story in order to get information. In practice, however, the justification for the request did not seem to impact whether or not the request was fulfilled. In future research, it would be worth examining other factors that might make a difference in
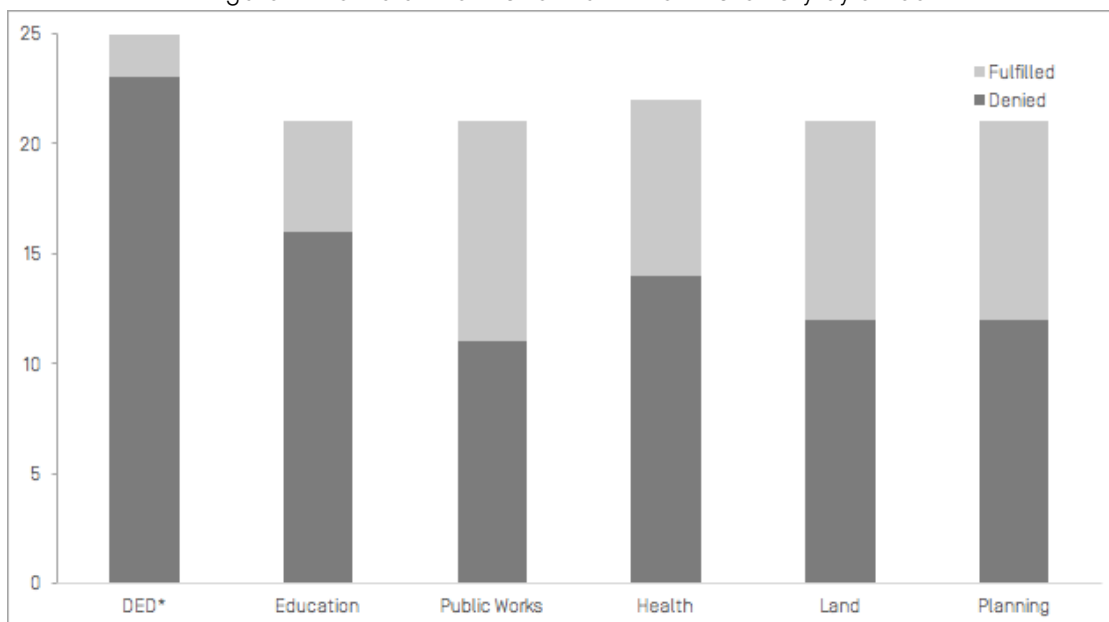
whether information is provided or denied, for example age, gender, tribe, or ethnicity.

Improving Access to Information Practices

The data indicates significant barriers to citizen access to information in Tanzania at the district level prior to the implementation of the Act. The first barrier is the high denial rate for requesting basic public information. When the information is given, the format in which it is given is a further barrier to its use.

While most of it was in Swahili (though in 23% of cases it was in English, and the remainder in difficult to understand Swahili), in more than half of the cases the information was not in a format which can either be taken from the office or referred to or verified later (i.e., 44% of respondents were given a paper copy of the information requested). In other words, fully realized "access" to information must include provisions for the information to be kept by the

Figure 2. How did information fulfillment rate vary by office?

* DED = District Executive Director

requester for further reference, sharing with others, and use in future dialogue with the state.

The aim of this research was to provide a baseline of access to information to help inform implementation of the 2016 *Access to Information Act*. In 2017, however, the Tanzanian Government pulled out of the Open Government Partnership, signaling a step away from international best practices on open government and transparency. Though the government pledged to instead report its efforts in good governance to the African Peer Review Mechanism, commentators have observed a pull back from transparency and accountability in recent years.

As GOV/LAB continues to adapt the 'mystery shopper' methodology to test access to information in other countries, another emerging area of our research focuses on bureaucratic culture related to open government and transparency.

To this end, we are developing research collaborations to better understand the motivations, incentives, and sanctions that influence the daily behavior of local officials. By exploring both the experience of citizens requesting information and the government officials who respond, our research aims to learn from their interactions to improve citizen engagement and government responsiveness.

Featured research project: Tsai, Lily L. and Alisa Zomer. "Evaluating public information provision and government transparency using a mystery shopper methodology." *Work in progress.*

Partner: This research collaboration was undertaken with **Twaweza**, a civil society organization that works on enabling children to learn, citizens to exercise agency and governments to be more open and responsive in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda [www.twaweza.org]. For the report cited in the introduction, please refer to: Twaweza. "Not to that extent? Tanzanians' views on information and public debate." *Sauti za Wananchi*, Brief No. 46, March 2018.

For more on the research partnership and process see: "**MIT GOV/LAB Learning Case. 2018. "Navigating Access to Information with Twaweza and MIT GOV/LAB."** Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Governance Lab.

The MIT Governance Lab [GOV/LAB] is a group of political scientists focusing on innovation in citizen engagement and government responsiveness.

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