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Center of Excellence on Democracy,
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SMS for Better Service Provision in Uganda

Background

This evaluation contributes to a growing body of academic and policy work exploring whether the rapid penetration of mobile technology in low-income countries can be harnessed to improve governance outcomes. Against a backdrop of poor local government service provision and limited accountability to citizens, this evaluation asks if technological innovations can improve political communication, increase government engagement, and improve public services.

The Intervention

The U-Bridge initiative, a part of USAID/Uganda's and RTI International's Governance, Accountability, Participation and Performance (GAPP) project, is an SMS-based service request system that allows for two-way communication between citizens and local government officials. Registered users in Uganda's Arua District can send free, anonymous messages to local officials and/or respond to SMS polls on service delivery topics. For example, users can inform district health officials that a local health clinic was closed when it should have been open. This lowers the costs of communication, increases information flows, and can potentially improve accountability.

Evaluation Design

The centerpiece of this evaluation is a randomized controlled trial designed to test the effectiveness of U-Bridge on governance outcomes by comparing education, health, and water service delivery across 48 communities randomized into treatment and comparison groups. Service delivery monitoring, inputs, and efforts were measured using audits of health clinics and schools combined with administrative data. In addition, the evaluation benefited from a survey of 3,000 residents in 16 treatment communities, extensive qualitative data collection with district offi-

cial, community leaders, and users of the system, village level data, telephone polling of individuals registered in the U-Bridge platform, and data generated by the U-Bridge system.



Citizen Engagement Outcomes

An analysis of over 10,000 U-Bridge SMS messages sent over a 14-month period estimated that around 3,000 messages were relevant and 700 were actionable. There were approximately one relevant message per eight adult villagers. This uptake rate was much higher than a national-level SMS project, which generated one message per 30,000 citizens. Additionally 13% of surveyed villagers who were aware of U-Bridge reported that they had used the service at least once in the past 12 months. Aspects of U-Bridge that contributed to the high uptake rate include:

- Convenience and no financial cost to users
- Anonymity, which prevented any retribution for negative feedback
- Automated voice calls that reminded users to continue sending SMS messages
- Targeted communication to district officials directly responsible for local service issues

Differential Uptake

While uptake of U-Bridge was relatively high, it was not uniform across localities or demographic groups. The communities with the highest usage rates were those where door-to-door registration campaign occurred. An analysis of other potential village-level predictors of usage, including ethnic diversity, types of employment, average levels of education, and distance to Arua found that only average levels of education predicted user uptake.



At the individual level, a network survey of 3,000 respondents across 16 villages explains why some individuals were more likely to use the platform. Diffusion and use of the platform are influenced by personal networks. If an individual's personal network included someone aware of the U-Bridge platform, that individual was 20% more likely to know about the platform and 36% more likely to use it.

In addition, younger residents, the better educated, those with access to a phone, and those reporting higher levels of political engagement were all more likely to have heard of and to have used the system than those without each of these characteristics. Males were approximately 60% more likely to have heard of the platform than females, and they were also more likely to use it. This and other evidence suggests that U-Bridge did not flatten access to marginalized populations, who traditionally have less of a voice in governance.

Government Engagement Outcomes

District officials were very supportive of the program. In interviews and focus groups, they contended that they were reading the messages, extracting valuable information, and using it to inform their actions. The household surveys confirm this. Sixty-two percent of those that used the system said they usually or always heard back from the district official, and 60 percent said they saw

some or much improvement on the issues they raised in messages. Nonetheless, there are still unmet citizen expectations. Only 38% of users were satisfied with the response, citing insufficient government engagement.

Impact on Service Delivery

Despite the positive uptake and evidence of some specific improvements, the randomized controlled trial of the U-Bridge program found no statistically significant improvements in public service delivery between control and treatment communities. The evaluation team used unannounced audits of schools and health clinics and district-level administrative data to test the effect of the program on indicators of public service monitoring, effort, and inputs across service delivery of water, education and health. The subsequent analysis did not identify any statistically significant differences in the outcomes measured between the treatment and control areas. In summary, although specific improvements were reported via interviews in response to messages, the number of such improvements and their dispersion across the sectors was insufficient to reveal an impact on the overall quality of service.

Select recommendations

- Future ICT programs require door-to-door registration, ongoing communication and encouragement (potential via text-reminders and robocalls), education on roles and responsibilities of different levels of government, and training to send actionable messages.
- Implementers should make greater efforts to understand why women and marginalized groups do not use services like U-Bridge at similar rates to men and target outreach to groups that have less voice.
- District officials require a means to filter out non-relevant messages and they should treat actionable messages like cases to be followed until the case can be closed. These responses should then be communicated back to residents.



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