

# The Impact of a Text Messaging Platform on Government Services in Uganda



Citizens in low-income countries are often unable to hold their government representatives accountable for the effective delivery of social services such as education and healthcare. Increases in mobile phone access present new opportunities for direct communication between citizens and government officials that may help governments respond to citizens' needs more effectively. In Uganda, researchers evaluated the impact on service delivery of a text messaging platform that allows citizens to contact local government officials who oversee service providers. Results suggest that while enthusiasm for the program was high among both citizens and government officials, messages containing specific, actionable information were relatively rare, and users were often discouraged by officials' responses. Impacts on service provision were mixed: delivery of education and water services temporarily improved, but health services did not improve.

## Policy Issue

Governments in low-income countries often struggle to provide essential services like education and healthcare to their citizens, particularly in rural settings. In addition to constraints on resources, many local governments lack the ability and/or will to monitor service providers such as teachers and health workers. As a result, programs that aim to improve accountability often circumvent governments entirely and instead focus on community monitoring of service providers.<sup>[1]</sup> However, programs encouraging citizens to hold service providers directly to account have yielded mixed results and may not be sustainable.<sup>[2]</sup> Researchers and policymakers remain interested in programs that can improve public services by involving government officials. Yet recent evidence suggests that platforms improving communication between citizens and elected leaders are often ineffective because politicians, unlike bureaucrats, lack the knowledge and capacity to improve social services.<sup>[3]</sup> This research examines a program that takes a new approach: instead of connecting citizens to politicians, the platform connects citizens with both politicians and civil service officials who oversee service providers directly.

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### COUNTRY

Uganda

### PARTNER

### PROGRAM AREAS

Education, Governance, Health

### TOPICS

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### TIMELINE

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## Evaluation Context

Uganda has a decentralized local government system, where district level governments distribute resources to and monitor government service providers, such as government schools and health facilities. However, despite the decentralization of Uganda's government, citizens rarely engage with local officials, and traditional methods of contacting government officials are quite costly as they usually involve physically traveling to government offices.<sup>[4]</sup>

New information and communication technologies (ICTs) may enable efficient, low-cost lines of direct communication between citizens and government workers. In recent years, mobile phone access in Sub-Saharan Africa has increased dramatically: in 2015, over half of Uganda's population had a cellular subscription, compared with less than 20 percent in 2005.<sup>[5]</sup> With this in mind, the USAID-funded Governance, Accountability, Participation and Performance (GAPP) program designed a platform, U-Bridge, that allows citizens to send free and anonymous text messages directly to local government officials to report service delivery problems.

## Details of the Intervention

Researchers working with Innovations for Poverty Action evaluated the impact of U-Bridge, a platform for SMS messaging between citizens and government officials, in Uganda's Arua district. The study examined the platform's impact on local government's monitoring of health, education, and water facilities, effort levels by workers at those facilities, and the resources provided to facilities.

The evaluation included groups of villages clustered around each of Arua's 48 mid-level government health centers. The 48 centers were randomly assigned to either receive the U-Bridge Service or serve as a comparison group. Each cluster consisted of about 4-5 villages that were served by the same public health center and at least one local public primary school. All of the villages in a cluster were assigned to the same treatment group. In the villages that received the program, community meetings to publicize the technology were held and a door-to-door registration exercise was conducted. All district residents could potentially contact Arua local district government via U-Bridge, but only the 24 villages selected by the research team were encouraged and informed how to use the ICT platform.

Researchers conducted unannounced audits of schools and health facilities and collected administrative data over a two-year period to measure impacts on monitoring of facilities, effort levels and inputs.

## Results and Policy Lessons

The study finds that enthusiasm for the program was high among both citizens and district officials. However, messages containing specific, actionable information were rare, and users were often discouraged by officials' responses. Interviews and qualitative analysis of messages revealed clear success stories in specific instances, but systematic impacts on service provision were mixed: initial positive effects on education and water service delivery later disappeared, and there was no impact on health services.

*Impacts on service delivery:*

- The program had positive impacts on the number of village-level requests for water parts and services and the delivery of the equipment.
- In the first year, school inputs improved significantly, with smaller improvements in effort and monitoring. The effects from the first year were not sustained in the second year of the evaluation.
- There were no significant changes on health monitoring, effort, or inputs at any point studied during either of the years.

*Uptake:* Uptake of U-Bridge was high compared with other similar programs.<sup>[6]</sup> Citizens sent over 11,000 messages through the program between August 2014 and November 2015. However, this enthusiasm was uneven, with some villages sending many messages and others sending few or none. Further research could help to illuminate why some seemingly similar communities take more advantage of community reporting platforms than others.

Use of the platform also declined over time. There was a large drop in usage of U-Bridge between the beginning of the evaluation and its conclusion. It is possible that relatively low publicity surrounding the program, combined with a disillusioned base of initially active users, limited the platform's sustainability.

*Content of messages:* Only about a quarter of messages from citizens to officials were directly relevant to service delivery, and citizens were often unsatisfied with the responses they received from district officials. Low satisfaction may have resulted in part from a mismatch in expectations about what constituted a useful and appropriate response to problems reported. Trainings for citizen users and better explanations of the platform's capabilities may be necessary.

## Sources

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