

CITIZENS SPEAK! PUBLIC SERVICE NEEDS DURING LOCKDOWN IN UGANDA

A collaborative research paper between SEMA and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung

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Introduction

As a global pandemic of COVID19 is threatening our lives and economies, our relationship towards government is starting to change. With over 2.5 million confirmed infections worldwide, Uganda has so far been spared with only 61 confirmed cases and no deaths. On 31st March, a 14-day lockdown was imposed on the country, which was extended for another 21 days on the 14th of April. The effects of this lockdown on the virus, as well as economic and social life, are yet to be seen. What is certain is that many Ugandans, sitting at home in self-isolation, are talking about their needs during the pandemic and openly sharing their anxieties about the future through WhatsApp groups and social media platforms.

During a pandemic and country-wide lockdown, citizens continue to rely on the government for essential services, such as health care, water and power, education, business regulation, security and, in some cases, even food. It would be a mistake not to consider input from the communities that the government is trying to serve, when determining how they should be supported through this crisis. In devastating, rapidly changing crises such as this one, we can't afford not to listen to communities when determining our response.

During the first two weeks of a lockdown in Uganda following a COVID19 outbreak, SEMA has conducted an online survey to find out what citizen's needs are during this time. In this report we address three main topics: which services are most needed, how should the government improve accessibility to those services, and what can citizens do to support the government and their community to overcome the crisis. We close with 6 main recommendations, urging the government and community to listen to each other. Only then can we respond to this crisis effectively, and with care for everyone's voice.



Methodology and sample

An online survey was prepared by SEMA with the input of external research experts, soon after the first lockdown measures were announced in Uganda. In order to receive more responses, the survey was designed to be anonymous, short and easy to fill out on smartphones, with only 10 questions, of which 8 were multiple choice. The survey was made through GoogleForms and received responses between 1 April and 18 April 2020. On 1 April, Uganda had 44 confirmed COVID19 cases, which grew to 55 by 18 april.

The survey was spread actively through SEMA's networks and following via newsletters and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. We learned that WhatsApp was the most effective medium to spread the survey online, as many Ugandans are part of neighbourhood/community WhatsApp groups that sometimes count hundreds of members. However, we note that by using an online survey format, the most vulnerable populations in Uganda, including those without access to a smartphone, computer or internet bundles, were left out of this sample.

201 persons filled out the survey

75% < 30 years

16% 30-40 years

9% > 40 years



52% male



48% female

78% residents of Kampala and Wakiso

A total of 201 persons filled out the online survey. The sample consisted of 105 (52%) male and 96 female respondents living in Uganda at the time of the lockdown. Out of all respondents, 74% was between 20-30 years of age. This is not a bias, seeing the fact that it is estimated that 75% of Uganda's population is below 30 years of age. The rest of the respondents were mostly between 30-40 years (16%) or older (9%). Unsurprisingly, most respondents of the survey live in Kampala, including Wakiso (78%), which makes the data heavily skewed towards urban residents.

1.

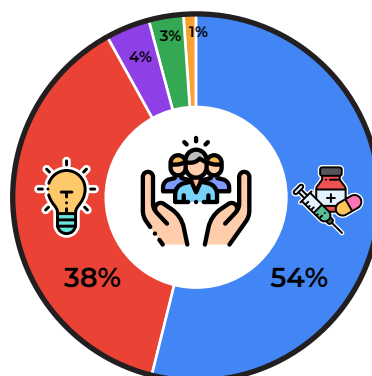
Public service needs during the first two weeks of a lockdown

Health

We asked citizens which services they need most at this moment, and more than half answered that health services were their number one need. This was followed by more than one third needing access to basic infrastructural utilities, such as water and electricity. The need for such utilities is even higher now that the main directive of the Ugandan government is to 'stay at home'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, women find access to health services more important than men, while men seem to find utilities more important than women. When it came to the importance of medical services, several citizens mentioned the request to government to also support mental- and psychological counseling, as many people are dealing with fear and social-economical consequences of the lockdown.



Which public service do you need the most?



Health Services

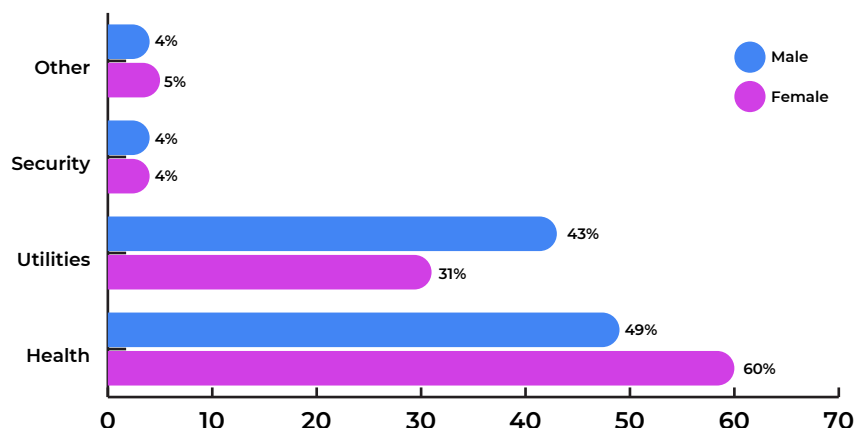
Utilities (water & electricity)

Security (Police)

Food, rent, mobile money

Business and immigration services

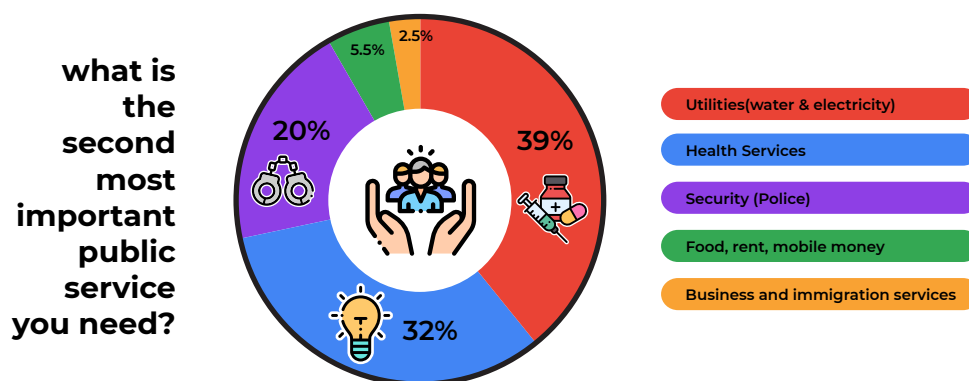
Which public service are most needed according to men and women



Utilities

The need for utilities was mentioned as the second most important service by most people, and also consistently mentioned as a key responsibility of the government, even if these services are provided by parastatals. While frequent hand washing is a required measure for everyone, people feel they can't afford the water bills anymore. In some cases, citizens even mentioned that provisions such as food, house essentials and rent should be taken care of by the government, as one citizen writes: "they need to ensure that utilities are continuously provided and allowances for purchase of necessary items is provided." Citizens in rural areas seemed more often concerned about food supplies and utilities than citizens living in Kampala.

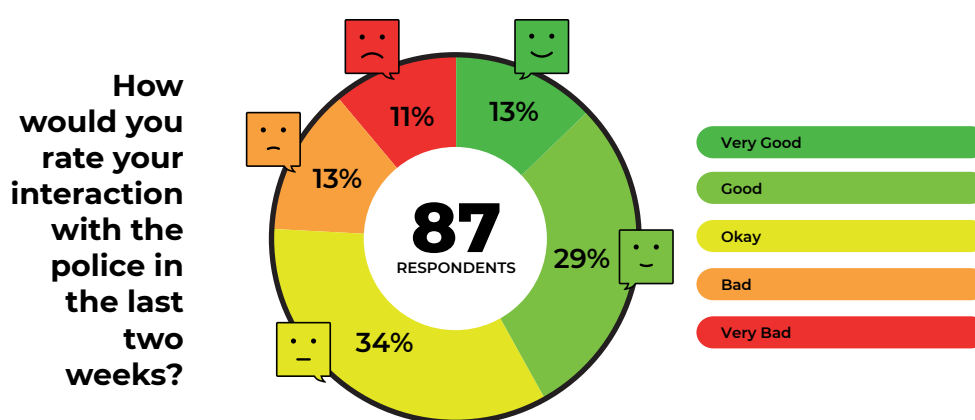
One out of ten citizens (11%) demands that the government should be providing free or reduced access to water and electricity during the lockdown



Security

When asking Ugandans about the second most important public service during COVID19, apart from mentioning health and utilities, people mentioned the need for effective and timely security services (20%). We noticed that more citizens felt the need for security services in poorer city neighbourhoods and rural areas, As shared by one citizen: "I think we need more intelligence, especially in the slums and places where low income earners live. There is a high marginal propensity for thuggery and house breaking in these villages, instead of the roads where police are patrolling." Although security concerns may have been mentioned due to the overall perception of crime rates to rise, this did not happen in the first two weeks of lockdown. In fact, crime rates dropped significantly according to local officers in charge consulted by SEMA, although home wrangles and domestic violence increased. When we compare citizen needs trends between the first week of lockdown to the second week of lockdown, the demand for security services decreases significantly over time.

However, many citizens had interactions with the police during the lockdown as they are actively enforcing the President's directives of the lockdown. From our survey 44% of citizens had interacted with the police in the last two weeks, which seems to be higher than usual. Almost a quarter of citizens who had interacted with the police had a bad experience. Some Ugandans raised concerns of police brutality, even if they had not interacted themselves with the police. Ugandans living outside of Kampala tended to have more often bad police experiences than those living in the capital.



Other government services

Based on the survey, no one mentioned the need for (online) educational services or court (dispute resolution) services, which are usually seen as important government services. This is likely due to the fact that the survey only covered the first two weeks of the lockdown, a phase in which most people are focusing on access to basic public services. Business registration and ID type of services were only mentioned by 1% (most important) and 2.5% (second most important) of people.

2.

Access to public services during lockdown

As citizens are obliged to stay at home according to the COVID19 directives of the government, and all public- and private transport has been banned during the lockdown, this creates new challenges in accessing (essential) public services.

“Well the biggest issue right now is accessibility. Corona is a contact disease and therefore if I could access services online, or any other method without necessarily moving out of home, that would be helpful.”

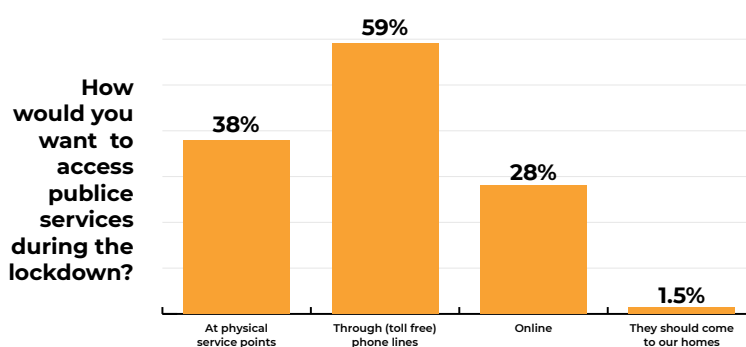
Ease transport for essential medical services

An issue that was mentioned numerous times related to medical emergencies that require people to take transport in order to reach a medical centre. According to the President's directives, a person in need would have to contact their Regional District Commander (RDC) to get permission to drive, or to call an ambulance. At least 20% of citizens raised this as a serious concern, most of them women. As one woman wrote: “Transport should be made available for people who must go for routine medical visits, people with chronic illnesses, or it should be made a little easier for the responsible persons or caretakers to drive the patients to respective hospitals. E.g sickle cell anemia crises have no time to wait or give warnings.”

20% of Ugandans are asking for access to transport for medical purposes.

Phone and online access

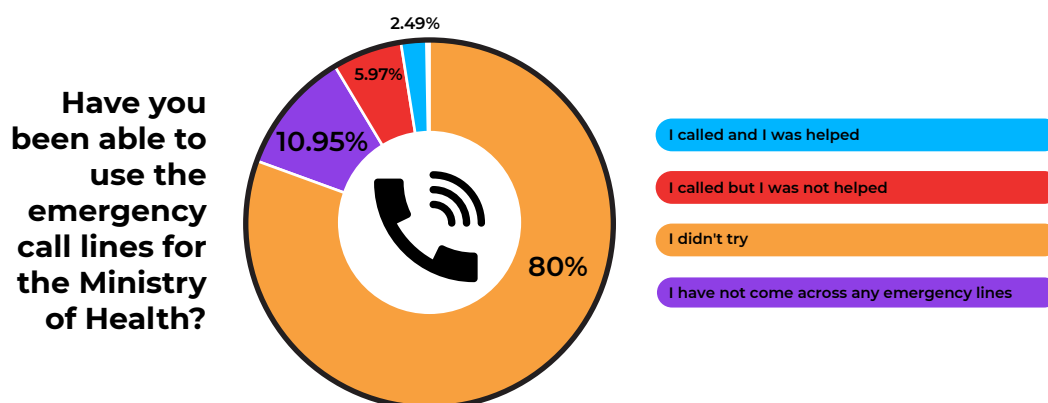
When asking citizens how they would like to access public services, the great majority (59%) answered that they wanted the government to be available via phone. Despite the lockdown, many citizens still want to access services at physical offices (38%). This is likely due to the fact that most people are



most in need of health services, which are largely dependent on in-person diagnosis and treatment. Another 28% of people felt services should be provided online, mostly men, and in fact, a few citizens urged public offices to improve on their online service offering. Seeing the survey for this report was conducted online, this is a reflection of the Ugandan population who already have access to the internet and are mostly urban residents

Faster and better response

With regards to the response of public services after accessing them through mobile or online means, a number of citizens mentioned the need to have them 'readily available' and with a faster response than usual: "React faster to people's concerns, public officials still think they can use the same pace they have used even where the pandemic has not been upon us." The response of the toll-free line of the Ministry of Health, which is meant to report COVID19 cases but also provide support for other medical issues, was rated rather negatively. About 11% of citizens had never come across any of the Ministry of Health emergency lines, which is high seeing the sample of our research covered people who have access to online means and mostly residents of Kampala. Moreover, out of those citizens who called the line (17 in our sample), more than two thirds (70%) did not feel they were helped.



Equality and transparency

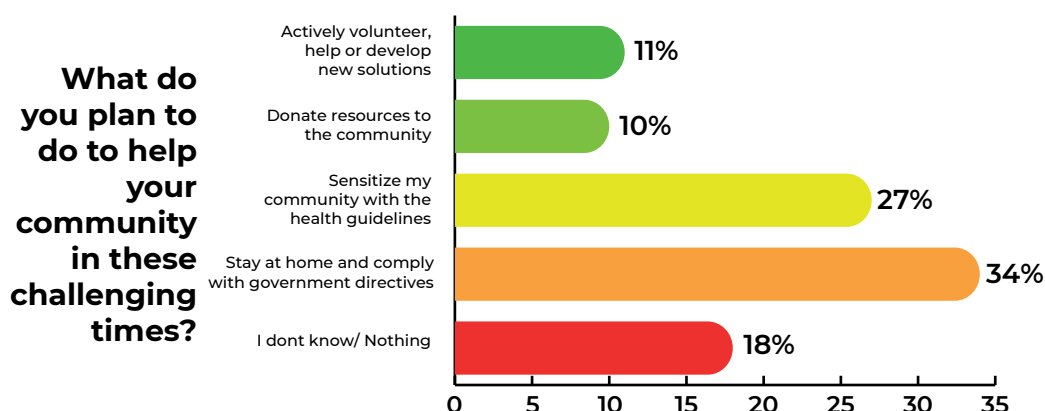
Finally, issues of inequality in accessing public services were mentioned, in particular with regards to those Ugandans who live in rural areas and those who cannot afford to pay bribes in the current circumstances. As one citizen says: "Once called upon, the officers responsible should give a listening ear regardless of the person." Concerns around bribery and misappropriation of public funds during the COVID19 crisis were mentioned by several citizens. In addition, a few people raised that COVID19 measures and services should be communicated in more languages, as currently all communication is in English or Luganda.



3.

What can citizens do back?

Apart from asking what citizens feel about public services in the first period of COVID19 lockdown in Uganda, we also wanted to know what responsibility they take to support the current fight against the corona virus. This brought some interesting insights about the approach taken by people, which can be broadly categorized into those who don't know what to do or do nothing (18%), those who actively comply and stay at home (34%), those who 'sensitize' or raise awareness about corona and the health directives in their direct surroundings (27%), those who donate resources to their community leaders or neighbours (10%), and those who undertake their own actions or initiatives to support the community ('activists', 11%). While women tend to donate resources and food more often to their community members, men tend to be more active in raising awareness and volunteering and developing solutions.



The activists

The fact that so many people are actively supporting their neighbours and community through awareness raising, donations and volunteering within the first week of the country's lockdown, exemplifies the resilience and community support structures that exist within Ugandan communities, even if government support is not (always) available. Some of the solutions or support structures set up by activists include "I set up a medical camp together with the medical or health workers to help the patients with covid in our community", "I put up a water point and soap for those coming into the neighborhood", "(I am) trying to provide the services that people are looking for online so that they don't move around", "(I am) using social media to run campaigns in local languages about the virus", and "(I) offer psychosocial services for the affected".

(I am) using social media to run campaigns in local languages about the virus

Sensitising with sense

The big number of citizens who are trying to raise awareness or sensitize their communities about the virus and health guidelines shows the strong involvement of everyone in the fight against corona, but may also be a cause of concern if false information is circulating in communities. Therefore, it is important that the government continues to regularly communicate the latest health guidelines and correct information about the COVID19 virus, so that community sensitisation efforts are having the right impact.

Recommendations for the Ugandan Government in providing public services during the lockdown

As public services are becoming harder to access and the government is developing new strategies to support the community in fighting COVID19 and overcoming the lockdown measures, the voice of citizens should not be left out. It may be easier for the public sector to turn inwards for solutions on how to respond effectively to the pandemic, and with a heightened sense of urgency decisions have to be made quickly. But without listening to the needs of citizens, such decisions and solutions may even lead to the opposite impact that the government is trying to achieve.

Based on the voice of 200 Ugandans in the first two weeks of the country-wide lockdown due to COVID19 in Uganda, we urge the Ugandan Government to consider the following recommendations:

1. Lower costs of living for people by reducing costs of utilities (water, electricity) and taxes.
2. Provide transport and ease access for those in need of essential health services.
3. Ensure mobile and online access to all public services, and make them easier to use from home.
4. Act faster in response to calls and online requests from citizens, and ensure a better response time on emergency toll-free lines.
5. Urge public servants not to take bribes for providing public services and appropriate public funds in a transparent and accountable way.
6. Make sure directives and information about public services are correct and reach all people, including those in rural areas and speaking other languages.

Because the COVID19 outbreak and effects of the lockdown were very new during the time of this research, we expect that the needs and concerns of citizens may be different now than they may be at a later time in the year, when prolonged measures and other effects of the crisis may start to affect people's lives. Therefore, SEMA intends to run additional surveys in the coming months and continue to inform the relevant Government bodies and CSOs about the voice of citizens in accessing public services.

Think about omuntu wawansi a lot more.

SEMA is a social enterprise aiming to increase transparency and accountability of public services, by listening to citizen feedback. We collect feedback from citizens about their most recent experience with a public office, and present this feedback in actionable formats to those in government and at public offices providing the service. SEMA has experimented with innovative ways of collecting and delivering such feedback. Our current data collection methods include hardware feedback devices, interactive voice response (IVR) and USSD surveys, online WhatsApp surveys, and in-person customer satisfaction surveys. Although we operate as an independent research organisation, we are working in formal partnership with the Ministry of ICT, the Kampala Capital City Authority, the Justice Law and Order Sector and the Uganda Police Force. This report was developed with the support of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

For more information, please visit www.talktosema.org.

