

What Can People Know in Tanzania?

Findings of a National Opinion Poll

This brief is a summary of the 2006 research report, "What Can People Know? Access to Information in Tanzania," (ISBN 9987-423-31-0) produced by HakiElimu and Research and Education for Democracy (REDET) of the University of Dar es Salaam.

Why this study?

Public opinion is crucial to development and democracy. It can influence government policy, increase government accountability, and instigate positive change in society. However, in order to make knowledgeable choices and provide useful commentary, citizens need access to relevant and timely information. This requires government to provide access to information, and the public to exercise their right to be informed.

With these factors in mind, REDET and HakiElimu conducted a nationwide opinion poll on the accessibility of information in Tanzania, looking specifically at the extent to which Tanzanians are informed of, and involved in, the policies, practices and programs that affect their daily lives. The poll also sought to gather public opinion on the value of introducing a law in Tanzania that would require government institutions to make information public.

Methods

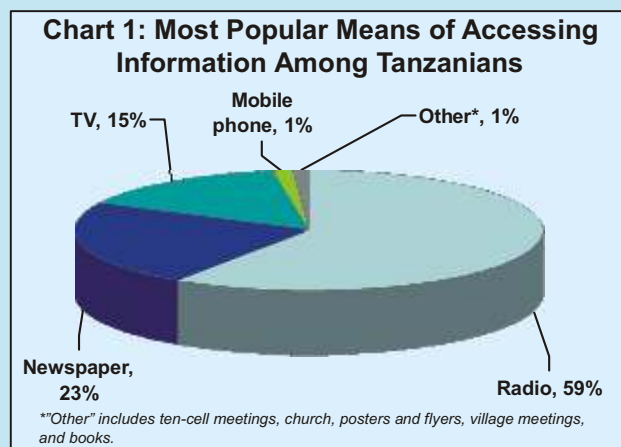
The poll, conducted in Kiswahili, was carried out in September 2005 and covered 21 districts – one from each region on the Tanzanian mainland. The respondent sample, which totaled 1,050 people, was equally divided between males and females. Over half (55%) of the respondents were between the ages of 26 and 45. The majority (63%) had attained a primary education, and two-thirds reported living on less than one dollar per day. All respondents were guaranteed anonymity.

Key Findings

General Access: The great majority of respondents (79%) said they have some means of accessing information, although there were gaps between men and women (81% and 76% respectively) and urban versus rural areas (90% and 79% respectively). The 21% who reported not having

access to information were members of populations with fewer opportunities and lower access to public information and services: 57% were women, 83% were rural inhabitants, and 94% had a low level of education (primary education and below).

Compared to previous years, however, access to mass media (particularly radio) has increased significantly and is now the most important medium by which people access information, as shown in Chart 1.



The use of mobile phones is also growing and increasing the public's access to information. In contrast, the Internet has yet to have much effect on the population as a whole.

Type of Information: Significantly, 55% of the respondents reported that they knew of an office or specific place to obtain information on government laws, policies and programs. Of these, over half cited accessible village or neighborhood government offices and 18% mentioned the Ward Executive office. Others mentioned the District Commissioner's Office, the CCM Office, Courts and the Police.

By implication, civil society organizations (CSOs) and other non-governmental sources do not seem

to play an important role in providing the public with information. In fact, one-third of respondents said that, from their experience, it was very difficult to gain information from NGOs, religious organizations and the private sector.

Right to Information: Overall, most people seemed to know where to access information and to value that right. An overwhelming majority (84%) of respondents supported introducing a law that would induce government officials to release information to the public. Those who did not support such a law said they felt that public information does not concern them and belongs to the government, that publishing it would not help or change anything, or that it is not important to make government information public.

Experience of Accessing Information: Despite the demonstrated appreciation for being able to access information, many Tanzanians are not actively exercising their right to do so. Only 14% of the respondents said they had sought information from a government office in the last year, 19% reported seeking information from NGOs, and 86% had not requested any information at all. Reasons for not seeking information from government offices are reported in Table 1

Table 1: Reasons for not Seeking Information from Government Offices		
Reasons	Respondents	%
Prefer not to	247	28.3%
Don't know where to ask	232	26.5%
Didn't have a problem	165	18.9%
Know I will not get it	98	11.2%
Other reasons	57	6.5%
No reason	40	4.6%
I am too busy	35	4.0%
Total	874	100%

The most commonly sought information had to do with village development, health, and human and civil rights issues. Of these, 85% reported being successful in their endeavors.

Most people do not appear to be particularly well informed about financial transfers at the local level. Nearly three-quarters of respondents were unaware that the government releases quarterly funds to local councils for maintaining public services, despite the fact that data about these fund transfers is featured in several newspapers and public circulars. Even in regular village/mtaa assembly meetings, which the poll showed to be an important venue for sharing information, there are mixed opinions about releasing information on village government revenue and expenditure. At village meetings where this was discussed, two-thirds found it useful but one third of found it not useful at all.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The poll results suggest that many Tanzanians are not aware of the policies, laws and practices that affect their daily lives. On the other hand, the public seems to adhere to a sense that certain information should remain government "property". Thus, while there is a need to strengthen the supply side of access to information, the greater challenge is to understand and deepen public demand for information.

The following initiatives may be worthwhile:

- A participatory Government-led review and revision of its information and communication policies, which will consider introduction of progressive access to information law
- Strengthening the role and capacity of village/mtaa governments in providing information
- Greater use of radio in sharing public information
- Development of a CSO code of conduct to foster transparency and information sharing.

This brief was prepared by Katherine Manchester and Ruth Carlitz, and edited by Rakesh Rajani.