BETTER POLICY MAKING THROUGH CITIZEN FEEDBACK

The potential of data dialogues to support police decision makers

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The potential of data dialogues to support police decision makers

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Good police services can positively affect the life of many citizens. It can increase trust in the entire justice sector of a country if police is perceived as supportive, transparent and friendly. Citizen feedback can work as a tool to enhance trust in police services: on the one hand, it allows citizens to share their voice and feel included in holding police accountable, and on the other, it allows police officers and decision makers to see how and where to improve their on-the-ground performance.

Over the years SEMA has developed user-friendly feedback collection tools that allow all citizens to give anonymous, quick and reliable feedback about their experience at police stations. Over 80.000 citizens in Uganda rated services through our custom-made feedback devices, automated voice-, WhatsApp- and USSD feedback lines, and a network of trained student surveyors.

The feedback collected is delivered in easy-to-understand formats to the police stations, which SEMA's previous research has shown creates a watchdog effect as police officers make positive changes to their behaviour because they are aware that they are being evaluated. We also learned that, by presenting the feedback directly to those officers that deliver the services, these local offices get to understand how they are rated and feel empowered to make improvements to their own station and community service.

However, as individual feedback reports across various police stations were delivered and began to mount, SEMA noticed emerging patterns that showed the potential for higher-level improvements that affected top leadership. For some changes, budgets and approval from 'above' was needed to improve the service at a station, or even range of stations. To continue having an impact with citizen feedback data, SEMA began to see it as crucial involve police headquarters and higher ranked officials in the process of improving service delivery.

As a way of experimenting, SEMA created two formats of feedback trend reports (spanning the evaluations of citizens for a range of stations) and began to deliver these to both the leadership of the Uganda Police Force (UPF) and various high-level officers to monitor how such data can support their decision making. At the same time, we tested two new approaches to present citizen feedback data and influence policy improvements by:

1. appointing 'dialogue brokers' to directly engage top officials about the recommendations from the trend reports

2. organizing 'dialogue events' as occasions to discuss the findings and priorities for policy service improvements.

This experiment ran between May and November 2020 and was supported by the Knowledge Platform for Security and Rule of Law. This paper shares the results of- and critical reflections on this experiment and invites justice sector development professionals and researchers to learn from our learning points and challenges.

Police forces around the world need good data on how citizens perceive their services through constructive feedback.

Just like in various sectors of service provision, client feedback is vital to the development and improvement of service delivery within police forces. However, gathering of citizen feedback on service delivery from police stations is not always the norm. In Uganda, evaluations of police happen during annual performance reviews often conducted by the police research department itself. Such self-evaluations carry with them obvious bias risks, as they don't involve the citizen perspective. In other cases, international organisations or NGOs gather country-wide data on perceptions of citizens of police services. Such reports are also often referred to by directorates such as the Justice Law and Order Sector that include the police forces in Uganda. But this data is not always actionable. The first problem is that the timeliness of external reports cannot always be relied upon: reports come out maximum once a year and data is needed more regularly to adapt new policies quicker and for police officials to evaluate new interventions and programmes. Secondly, data coming from external sources or consultants is often based on past experiences of citizens. Retrospective data about citizen's opinions of police services are highly influenced by community perceptions and media outlets, instead of the experience they just had while encountering the police. Positive experiences are often forgotten immediately. In the end, relying on existing citizen feedback data sources often leads to biased, late or ignored responses by the police. This results in the police often providing services without having the interest of citizens in mind.

Citizens rarely give feedback on police services in real-time.

At Ugandan police stations, current forms of feedback mechanisms for citizens on the services they receive are not systematic. Examples include wooden suggestion boxes where citizens can drop their written recommendations, as well as through engaging with individual officers they feel comfortable with. However, feedback collected through suggestion boxes is on average only inspected four times a year (according to SEMA's study on these), which means the feedback given is not evaluated timely. In addition, many citizens either are not aware that they can talk to officers in-charge of police stations in order to give feedback or are hesitant to give feedback because they fear retaliation from the police.

Lastly, although there are existing feedback channels for citizens, Ugandans often perceive that nothing will change because the police are not interested in reform and service improvement, which results in them not providing any feedback at all. Consequently, many voices of citizens about their latest experience with the police that could be geared towards improving these services, go unheard.

Data about citizen experiences with police do not reach those who make decisions.

If any feedback is given at a police station, most of this information stays within these stations. But this feedback often relates to structural deficits within the force, such as the provision of police issued forms or the resources needed to pursue suspected criminals, which are usually in short supply. This, in turn, means that the feedback does not carry much impact, as the officers who receive it do not have the power to enact such improvements to the police station or its service delivery. In such a case, the officers receiving the feedback pick out what they can do something about, while the other information is abandoned. In most cases, the only thing officers on the ground can really change is their own work attitude in relation to customer care: coming to work on time, being friendly to citizens, doing their best to help them.

But at the same time we notice that the structural problems fail to reach those who have the power to solve them. Policy-making officers - who are usually in administrative roles - tend to not often visit these field offices to find out exactly what citizens are saying about their first-hand encounter with the police. We have seen this often in Uganda, and suspect this may be also the case in other countries around the world. We therefore identify a gap between the feedback citizens give after an encounter with the police on the ground, and the decision makers who are in a position of power to change the policies that affect those very services.

Our experiment: dialogue brokers and dialogue events

As much as citizen feedback is relevant to improving policies, reaching out to each and every police officer in the force is not feasible. Therefore, we thought of a way of involving possible decision makers within the Uganda Police Force who would potentially push the agenda of citizen feedback in one space, in order to address:

1. The concerns raised by citizens who accessed police services and shared their feedback immediately after this encounter;

2. How to best utilize this citizen feedback when drafting policies and new programmes for police services;

3. Which policy changes can be made to ensure citizen feedback is considered in the daily provision of police services in Uganda.

Based on SEMA's experience working with the Uganda Police Force, we organized meetings with high ranking officers at the police headquarters in order to present to them the findings found when collecting citizen feedback about police services on the ground. In a selected period of time of about one year, SEMA gathered over 10.000 feedback points from citizens visiting police stations around Kampala. Based on this data (which was already presented in monthly reports to individual police stations over time), two different trend reports were developed that showed the most important commonalities across police services - dissected by station and by department. Our thesis was that by disseminating such reports, engaging 'dialogue brokers'[2] within the police, and organizing 'dialogues' with them and their colleagues about the data, the voices raised by citizens on police services in Uganda would influence policy making at the top. We believed that holding open 'dialogues' between the SEMA staff and 'dialogue brokers' would enable discussion into the reports and yield solutions to the most common citizens' concerns.

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2   A 'dialogue broker' is an identified individual within the police force who feels responsible to share the data with his/her colleagues and actively disseminates and pushes for its agenda to be taken up in action.

Devices	Mobile Surveys	Police Station Interviews
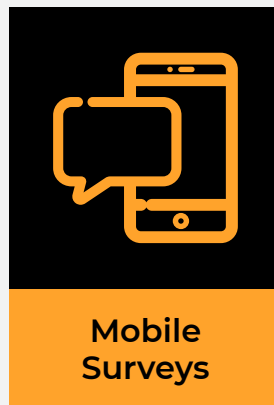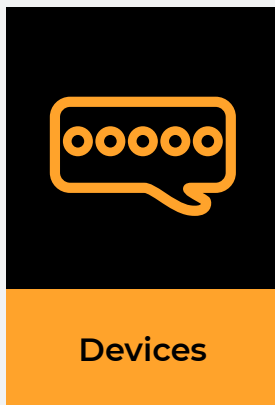
The individuals that we chose to engage were officers within the different departments of the Uganda Police Force who SEMA had worked with on numerous occasions prior to the publishing of the 2020 trend reports, and who are known to have leverage towards their colleagues within the force. Most of these are either police commanders or in director positions, or working with the research department of the police. We tasked the brokers to engage with their colleagues in discussions around the findings stated in the reports and helped to have the recommendations be taken up by the lead decision makers. By going into a dialogue, we were also keen to understand challenges that are faced by the police and hindrances to implementing recommendations from the trend reports.

Through these engagements, we expected to generate lasting solutions to the problem, making citizen feedback an essential part of new policies and programmes.

We learned that our hypothesis was rejected. We share why through these 5 lessons.

1. Citizen feedback does not come to the attention of police decision makers, unless we continuously lobby for meetings to bring this feedback to them.

2. Police ranks influence how data is discussed and challenged during a meeting.

3. The way funds are allocated across the police has a direct impact on which service improvements can be made.

4. Issues around customer care that are raised by citizens 'on the ground' do not always find an 'owner' at the top.

5. There is potential to use citizen feedback data to evaluate both old and new interventions and policies.

1. Citizen feedback does not come to the attention of police decision makers, unless we continuously lobby for meetings to bring this feedback to them.

The mere distribution of trend reports did not work. Citizen feedback is currently not central to policy change in police service delivery in Uganda, placing such data uptake in a low position on the priority list of policy makers at the police. With this in mind, reports that address citizen feedback are often not read by the police officers if they are just delivered to them in hard- or softcopy. For recommendations from the report to be put up for discussion in Uganda, meetings have to be organized with the police officers to go over the report in detail. We found that, of the 10 police officers who received the trend report, only 2 said that they had read the report outside of the meeting setting.

In setting up such meetings it helps when these meetings are organised by the police itself, instead of by the intervening third party (SEMA). By announcing a 'trend report discussion' meeting by the UPF Head of Research, at least 40 high-ranked officers were able to attend the meeting, which was much higher than in earlier attempts to organize such a meeting on SEMA's behalf.

The time allocation for such meetings is usually not enough to hold an in-depth discussion on the different aspects of the report and find ways forward from the report recommendations. This is particularly so since most officers did not read the report ahead of the meeting - as such, the 'dialogue' became a summary of the findings instead of a discussion of the findings. As a consequence, such meetings require follow ups with the police officers after the meeting. Police officers who attended the dialogue meetings were, in addition, asked to share copies of the reports with their colleagues in the field so that more officers would understand the concerns raised by citizens in response to their service delivery. However, from the follow-up phone calls made to these police officers, we found that only 20% of officers who attended our meetings reported that they shared the first trend report with their colleagues.

A helpful outcome of the meetings was that it gave the police the opportunity to share challenges that arise within police service delivery. We also had the chance to understand their operations better. For instance, when discussing the issue of absenteeism, the issue was raised that not all police officers are able to live close to their duty stations and in other cases they are assigned to field activities, not allowing them to be in police stations. Additional meetings with specific police departments (such as HR) to discuss particular issues would have been needed to come to conclusions on how to improve policies.

2. Police ranks influence how data is discussed and challenged during a meeting.

We held meetings with different groups of officers. The first meeting that we held was attended by police officers from the police headquarters as well as police officers from various stations across the Kampala Metropolitan area. Other meetings held were attended only by officers from the police headquarters and only officers from police stations respectively. Through engaging with different ranking officers separately as well as in one group, we found that the lower ranking officers were more interactive in the meetings where their superiors were not present. From this meeting, we found that the lower ranking officer had recommendations of their own that they would want their superiors to address, such as providing accommodation closer to the police stations or providing better trainings to officers. The lack of customer care

trainings was only raised in a context where the highest police commanders were not in the same room. This may point toward a culture of fear of raising feedback or concerns about service delivery structures within the police.

Interesting solutions were generally brought forward by lower ranking officers, such as the setting up of a designated customer care desk at police stations that would handle directing clients, informing them of police procedures such that citizens would then understand the nature of their cases, who they would need to work on the case and what would be needed of them for the system to work smoothly. Engaging with the lower ranking officers in this way was beneficial towards us understanding the problems that are present in the police stations that the police officers could not ably address and would need assistance from their superiors. We voiced the concerns of the lower ranking officers and this in itself acted as a bridge for open communication across the ranks.

From the meeting that had only high ranking officers in attendance, we gained information on the ways various recommendations could be moved forward towards improving services at the police stations - but we were unable to apprehend if these suggestions were being noted, actualised and followed up. Often it was mentioned that the police headquarters was already working on programmes towards changing the way services are delivered at the regional police stations, but how would remain vague.

3. The way funds are allocated across the police has a direct impact on which service improvements can be made.

One of our trend report findings was that smaller police posts perform better than larger police stations, because citizens felt they were helped quicker and friendlier. It was SEMA's recommendation in our reports that such police stations may receive more attention and support, because they lift the image of the entire police force. Yet, at the headquarters level, we found that the concept of having more equipped police posts is not feasible, since the allocation of police resources is done according to the number of police officers who are working at a given station. Since there are on average less than 20 police officers at police posts, properly equipping the many police posts is not part of the current financing strategy of the Uganda Police Force. On the contrary, it would, according to police officials, be more feasible to unite the various police posts within one division to form one divisional police station that can then be properly equipped with the necessary resources. This however, would likely defeat the reason for why citizens rate smaller police posts better in Uganda. The problem then returns to allocation models of police forces: should investments in better service delivery always go according to the ratio of staffing?

According to senior officials, equipping of police departments in Uganda is currently an issue brought about by lack of funds to properly facilitate all the different stations around the country. Much as the stations are given stationary resources on a quarterly basis, often these are not enough, as the number of citizens that the stations serve is more than the resources provided or sometimes do not reach the upcountry statons. This has also led to cases of corruption whereby some police officers use this as an avenue to ask citizens for money aside from that of the police stationary. Funds to facilitate the different police resources are generated from various institutions in and outside of the country. Due to the nature of resource allocation within the police force, changes to the way the police operate cannot directly be worked on by the police as they wait for funds from different partners who earmark specific interventions.

Although we weren't able to find out more about how financing decisions are made within the Uganda Police Force, we do feel this is a very important element to take into account when trying to influence service improvements through citizen feedback. If we do not understand why or how certain activities or units are 'usually' funded within the police, bringing data that shows what improvements are needed may become pointless.

4. Issues around customer care that are raised by citizens 'on the ground' do not always find an 'owner' at the top.

In other words: who is the owner of 'making the police more friendly'? Who is the policy maker for 'reducing waiting times at the police'? Or for 'making the police less corrupt'? There are aspects of customer care that are not directly assigned to specific officers at police headquarters. Therefore, as much as citizen concerns are raised at police headquarters, some concerns can not be addressed until there is an assigned personnel to receive them. This creates the effect of a bureaucracy: if no one feels responsible or empowered to solve a problem, it will continue to exist. Such was the case for issues arising from how citizens were served at different police offices in Kampala, with some citizens stating that the officers who worked on them were rude. This was a concern that was not picked up by any of the senior officials we spoke to at the police headquarters.

Our assumption would be that individual officers could work on this concern by changing their attitude at work. But we found out that even for such behavioural changes, resources programmes are needed. Much as the concern was then directed to the individual station administrators to mentor their staff, if the administration in this case was not a seasoned officer with some experience, then the lower ranked officers would not receive the required 'customer care' training. This is when the solution to the problem will go back to headquarters, since individual stations usually don't have the resources to arrange a customer care training and this will have to be applied for by headquarter staff. At this point the ball gets back into the court of the high-level decision makers who have to feel responsible to sponsor a solution to a problem faced by citizens on the ground. In discussions about the two trend reports many police officials said they feel the need for more customer care trainings for charge-office staff at police stations. But no one at headquarters seemed to have (or take) the mandate to ensure such trainings are budgeted for. Instead, directors of police may feel responsible for their department or region, with cross-cutting issues such as gender, corruption or human rights under their wing. Community liaison department was mentioned a few times as a potential 'candidate' for taking ownership over the issue of customer care. The bottom line is that, if no police policy maker feels responsible for upholding general service delivery standards across the force, we will never find a response to citizens' most frequent concerns.

THE 6 MOST FREQUENT ISSUES FROM THE FIRST TREND REPORT AS RAISED BY CITIZENS

| Citizen waiting time and absenteeism of the police officers | Friendliness of police officers | Likelihood of being sent from office to office | Police officers' level of knowledge while serving citizens | Attempts to charge citizens for free services | The environment of the police station |

5. There is potential to use citizen feedback data to evaluate both old and new interventions and policies.

SEMA was able to collect citizen feedback over time, which allows trends to show when there is a dip in satisfaction or increase in waiting times, among others. One of the advantages of a real-time citizen feedback data flow for policy makers, is that, at any time, new policies and programmes can be evaluated against what was the standard before. Based on our interactions with 'dialogue brokers', and as we observe citizen feedback, issues raised by citizens came up that appeared to be 'new'. For instance, having stable management at local police stations was not an issue in Uganda in previous years. These days, citizens and local officers sometimes complain that the management in charge of a police station was reshuffled, which affected their case and office improvements. Unlike today, whereby police station administration can be transferred within a few months of their stationing, there used to be policies that required any given police station administration to spend a minimum of 3 years at their post before they could be transferred. This allowed time for the administrative officer to understand the region that they would be policing and draw out a plan on how to improve the area during their appointment. Such management could then apply for specific funds to improve its police station from headquarters and policy makers, and improvements at stations would have a lasting effect.

This example was raised by various high-ranked police officers who reflected on the trend report data. What it brought up for us was the confirmation that looking at these trends with policy makers, a true reflection on old and new policies becomes possible. Looking at citizen feedback trends could imply that changes made to old policies have brought about different problems that were not there before. During our engagements with dialogue brokers and at dialogue events, the appreciation for our reports at the Ugandan police headquarters was very big, even if none of the recommendations made by citizens were (yet) picked up by any decision maker. However, the positive collaboration SEMA experienced around the trend reports, as well as the reflection on current processes and policies at the police thanks to such citizen feedback data, re-establishes the potential of such data for future policy making.

There's a long way to go, but citizen feedback continues to be critical to improve police services at the top.

We set out to find out how data can best be presented to high-ranked police officers to influence those in positions of power. We learned that many of our assumptions were wrong as we were trying to navigate a highly bureaucratic, hierarchical and politicized organisation. The lessons shared in this paper may lean towards some negative conclusions about influencing police policies, but there's room to remain hopeful that citizen feedback trends can have a lasting impact on policymakers.

During our experiment with the Uganda Police Force, we presented two different trend reports and engaged 'dialogue brokers' and other (high-ranked) police officials in 'dialogues' for a period of 6 months. By the time we presented our second report, the first one was not yet digested. Policies and budgeting decisions at the highest level are often made only once a year. Due to the different factors affecting the distribution of resources within the police force, changes are often not made interim throughout the year. In case they do, several meetings on procurement and redistribution of resources with leadership figures and funders will have to take place. This is similar at the police station level, as police station administration awaits

resources from headquarters. At police stations in Uganda, the station administration could be changed out while they await resources, which complicates such processes even further. In order to find out whether citizen feedback can have an effect on policy makers at the top, we would have to monitor the use of data reports over time and also continue to follow-up throughout the year by meeting and engaging 'dialogue brokers'.

In addition, we did not exhaust the different aspects of relationship building when presenting data within the police forces. Instead of concluding that police policy makers are perhaps not interested in citizen feedback or data reports to inform new policies, we may not have found the right dialogue brokers or champions within the police to start with. More research is needed to understand what drives policy making at the police, and who can be identified as 'dialogue brokers' at the top. As a partner of the Uganda Police Force, we develop our relationship with the police at various levels of the organisation, but investing in such relationships at all levels takes time and resources. The impact of recommendations from citizen feedback reports can only be achieved when policy makers buy into these recommendations and allocate resources to work on them. The question is whether the type of data SEMA produces can on its own create such leverage. Developing stronger connections and relationships of trust at the highest ranks is perhaps what is more needed.

But the question remains whether an organisation that is focusing on bottom-up service improvements should really spend more resources on such high-level interactions. There are two reasons to doubt this direction: (a) if (positive) behavioural effects can be achieved with monthly police reports for individual stations, this could perhaps have more effect on citizen experiences long-term, even if it means that structural improvements that can only come from above are not being made; and (b) as we are working in an ecosystem of organisations aiming to improve public service delivery, other partners who have already built more knowledge and networks with policy makers could focus on the lobbying. As such, citizen feedback trend reports should perhaps reach police decision makers through lengthier efforts and consortia of partners aiming to improve the police from various angles. As long as better data is needed to improve police policies, we continue to find avenues to bring citizen feedback to those who can make a change, however small it is.

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