

Economic empowerment for women through accountability and transparency activities

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Abstract

The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to empower women to demand for accountability and transparency at grass root level has been used to explore avenues for socio-economic empowerment. The study aimed at addressing the following (a) To what extent are citizens in the selected districts participating in planning processes and to what extent are citizens exercising their human rights to demand for accountability and transparency from duty bearers; (b) how responsive are duty bearers' to community concerns over public service delivery; (c) to what extent are ICT being used in the engagement process between duty bearers and citizens; (d) To what extent is the current women's socio-economic capacity impacting on their ability to participate in democratic governance. Through a multi-dimensional mixed research a participatory action research was used through focus group discussions, key informant interviews and survey. A total 162 respondents 108 female (67%) and 54 male (33%): 120 were Voluntary Social Accountability Committees (VSAC) and 30 Bearers (DB) from 12 sub counties across the six districts. For each of the 12 sub-counties, each sub county had a minimum of 12 respondents. A total of 108 female and 54 are men are aware of their human rights where 13% of them engage with duty bearers in procurement process of community projects. However, 24% indicated they participate in monitoring both government and CSOs service delivery projects and only 18% indicated they attend the community Barrazas. There is minimal observance of democratic principles of governance by the duty bearers as indicated by 39% of all respondents who said that duty bearers are not responsive to citizens' concerns. In terms of the socio-economic perspective; males earn three times more than the women whose income is from agricultural produce. 86% of the VSAC depend on their own gardens for food; 21% buy food from the shop, 58% sell food and 50% of the respondents; sell livestock to earn a living. In terms of access to leadership positions and decision making by women, 40% of them are at LC3 level and 90% of them participating in government planning processes compared to 65% of women not holding any leadership positions. At least 69% of both VSAC and duty bearers noted that less citizen participation in the planning processes is due to a number of factors including; failure by leaders to invite or inform the community in time, limited access to information about community programmes, family obligations and work commitments. 80% of the women said there was need to attend to domestic work, 40% limited access to information and distance and 30% needed spouse permission to attend public functions. It was noted that 36% of all respondents owned at least a mobile phone, radio, TV, Computer and camera where 91% of men have more ownership of ICT compared to women at 78%. The ICTs were mainly used to engage others in community meetings (67%), council meetings (45%) and representative meetings (31%). Engagement through ICTs stood at 37% for radio, 37% for cell phones and 16% for print media. It is therefore recommended that;

- Men should participate more in economic activities to clearly appreciate the empowerment of women
- There is need for more awareness activities in the community through partnership with community based organizations like churches, schools as well as government agencies
- The need to design capacity building interventions for duty bearers at all levels in order to enable them appreciate and engage more with empowered citizens
- Various social media platforms like WhatsApp should be considered for more productive engagements.

Key words: *Economic empowerment, Women in development, Uganda*

Introduction and background

Economic empowerment is a foundation of women's equality and a determinant of the effectiveness of existing gender mainstreaming strategies. It is increasingly acknowledged that investing in women is important in the context of the current global financial/economic crises. Women's economic empowerment and women as agents of change through the use of ICT are elements known to create solutions for any crisis. During times of crises, women usually find new ways of supplementing household incomes, but these activities are usually low margin, low status and labour-intensive, (UNIDO; 2010). Women in the long run learn to be accountable and responsible for their actions as well as those of the members of the communities they live in. Accountability is an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility to account for one's actions.

In northern and eastern Uganda, Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) has tried to work with women in the communities on issues related to economic development, accountability and transparency. WOUGNET is a network of women-led member organisations founded in May 2000 registered as a non-governmental organization whose major aim is to develop the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) among women as tools to share information and address issues collectively. WOUGNET promotes access and sharing of information to members and the wider public through the use of ICTs; on governance, human rights, health, agriculture, democracy and other areas that promote sustainable development.

Through a project entitled, "*Strengthening effective and efficient use of ICTs and women socio-economic empowerment to promote accountability and transparency for improved service delivery is being implemented in Eastern and Northern Uganda*", WOUGNET aimed at integrating a number of components into action including using ICT to facilitate sharing of information between citizens and community leaders or duty bearers. The project is premised on the understanding that the integration of ICT improves as well as documents actions and increase availability of information. These can ultimately reduce information hooding, bureaucratic and corruption tendencies among the duty bearers. The project covered six districts of Pallisa, Tororo and Busia in Eastern Uganda; and Amuru. Oyam and Gulu in Northern Uganda. The project empowered the grass root communities to hold duty bearers accountable for their actions. The project further educated the public on human rights, democratic principles as well as building their advocacy capacity.

In addition to the already existing ICTs, the project employed an SMS platform as a medium for exchanging service delivery messages between the community and community leaders or duty bearers to enhance communication and improve service delivery.
Despite the fact that WOUGNET has worked on women empowerment through the use of ICT, a lot needs to be advocated for to ensure more participation of women at village, national and international level.

This article therefore examines the level of use of ICT to empower women to demand for accountability and transparency in their communities.

Problem statement

There is available evidence from literature that, institutional inconsistencies in government characterized by; limited citizenry participation, unchecked bureaucratic, corruption, and information gaps has resulted to inappropriate implementation of national development plans resulting into poor service delivery to the citizens. According to the National Planning Authority (NPA), limited citizen participation at grassroots in planning is one major cause of poor service delivery (NPA, 2015).

The purpose of this study stems from finding out the avenues created by the use of ICT for women to strengthen and efficiently be empowered to promote accountability and transparency for improved service delivery.

Objectives of the study

- Establish the level of duty bearer's engagement with citizen, levels of transparency in government procurement and disclosure of public information to citizens.
- Establish the level of women's awareness and exercising of their human rights in government planning processes
- Find out the level of ICT usage to improve participation in democratic governance, accountability and transparency by duty bearers.

Research approach and methodology

Using a multi-dimensional mixed research approach, all stakeholders were consulted as per given or available time. This yielded more results when the researchers used the participatory action type of research which included the use of a significant social element. The participatory action research methodology is a means to address the gap between researchers and intended beneficiaries of the research (McTaggart, R. (1991).

The approach is cyclical with four inter-related stages (plan, act, observe, and reflect). Adopting this methodology enabled researchers identify the various issues that needed addressing probably by undertaking further studies. To be more explicit, the researchers examined the interactions and relationships in social settings through focus group discussions, key informant interviews and survey questionnaire. The study followed a systematic consultative approach through tool design and data collection, to data analysis, interpretation and presentation phases.

In the understanding phase or plan, the focus was to interpret the needs for the repondents and formulate a general approach to accomplish the assignment. This largely involved assembling the research team to undertake the study, team orientation on methodologies, and review of background documents.

The second stage codenamed "*the design phase or act*" was focused on defining the guiding research questions, development of the overall strategy of assignment implementation, sample space mapping, creation of team coordination and reporting structures and development of research tools. This phase considered issues such as rigor, data sources, sampling, data collection, and data quality control among others. It is during this phase that sources of both primary and secondary data were identified and their validity and reliability evaluated. The schedule of activities was developed and agreed upon with concerned stakeholders.

The third stage focused on data collection and observation, sourcing and reviewing of relevant documents. It also involved collecting primary data through conducting interviews, administering survey questionnaires and conducting focus group discussions.

The last stage "data analysis and reflection", involved data cleaning, analysis, report writing and validation of the findings among selected key stakeholders.

Data collection methods

Since the study is a mixed methods approach, it was grounded on both qualitative and quantitative methodology.

For the qualitative methodology, interviews and focus group discussions were used to capture opinions, reflections and perceptions of respondents of the study. The study also used the documentary review method for collection of secondary data. Some of the secondary data included the Internet and newspapers to supplement the primary data so as to adequately answer the pertinent questions of the study.
The study was conducted in six districts of Pallisa, Tororo and Busia in Eastern Uganda; and Amuru. Oyam and Gulu in Northern Uganda. The study population comprised of 210 respondents as supported by WOUGNET management reports 2017. Out of the 162 respondents, 27 were chosen from each district where 20 were VSAC, 2 WOUGNET staff and 5 duty bearers.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): 6 Focus Group Discussions each group comprising of at least 8 members of VSAC was carried out in each sub-county. The FGDs broadly discussed aspects of women-socio-economic situation, level of community engagement in government planning processes, levels of ICT access and utilization in constructive engagement between citizens and public officials and their opinion on expected outcomes of the WOUGNET project. This explored the respondents opinions, challenges, experiences, successes and recommendations suggested in relation to decision making, land and property ownership, usage and control, incomes and expenditure, leadership, monitoring and reporting service delivery, use, control and ownership of ICTs, citizenry participation among others. A total of 48 people participated in these focus group discussions representing 100% response rate. An interpreter was used in cases where the local language was used and also to manage if any muddled circumstances among the participants. Participants were asked open ended questions to probe and encourage in-depth discussions with participants.

Key Infomart Interviews (KII): KII were used to collect opinions of duty bearers who were both men and women. KII were administered to leaders from each of the 12 sub-counties across the two regions, resulting into 45 respondents for local leaders representing 100% response rate. The responses from key informants were largely used to generate thematic issues in line with the objectives of the study.

For the quantitative methodology, a survey questionnaire was administered. It was the main method for collecting opinions from VSAC members. The questionnaires included well explained questions and instructions with optional answers. The questionnaires were administered through one on one interviews in particular sections or sets to individual respondents. Out of the 112 VSAC members targeted and 111 responded to the questions. This tool was administered to both women and men for the cross-sectional survey and for particular survey on women citizenry participation, socio- economic livelihoods and leadership roles.

To ensure that valid and quality data were collected, the data collection tools were tested for content validity. According to Field (2005), validating the content of a research instrument increases the reliability of results and the response rate of the tool. The instrument validity focused on clarity of statements and relevancy to the research objectives. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (1999), validity refers to the extent to which a research tool measures what it is intended to measure. The study instruments were piloted using three experts who did not participate in the final study to assess the validity of the statements. Questions that were poorly phrased or found irrelevant for the study were corrected or deleted during this exercise, resulting into a valid tool.

Sample size determination
Given the nature of the study, respondents to this study were selected using the purposive sampling technique. A purposive sampling technique is a non-probability technique of mapping a sample space to a given survey. According to Tongco (2007), a purposive sampling technique, also known as judgmental sampling, is the selection of respondents to a study based on their unique qualities that make them likely to provide the desired opinions and experiences about a given phenomenon under investigation.

For example, in this study, VSAC members who included ordinary citizens and their local leaders and duty bearers who include sub-county chiefs/local council leaders were purposively selected. Other factors that the researchers based on to select respondents include: peer recommendation (a form of snow-ball sampling), the individuals participation in human rights advocacy and public accountability related activities, membership to VSAC and willingness to participate in the study.

Discussion of results

The data that was collected was cleaned, coded and analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. SPSS was used to analyse quantitative data and qualitative data was analysed using thematic content analysis largely to improve the researchers understanding of citizens responses. The meanings and implications arising from study participants' responses were then explored and synthesized for presentation.

Establish the level of community leaders/duty bearer's engagement with citizen, levels of transparency in government procurement and disclosure of public information to citizens.

The study found out that all local leaders receive information through sms messages on poor service delivery from the community members mainly on a daily basis. Local leaders were asked what type of messages they receive, they highlighted that 93.5% involve young children below 18 years watching adult movies, 19.4% talked about corruption in the community, 45.2% complaining about theft of school property like doors and 16.1% complained about poor sanitation in their areas. 32.3% complained about poor service delivery in the health and education sectors. This shows that the community is aware of the problems in the community and hope to work with the leaders to solve them.

Local leaders were asked what actions they take after receiving the SMS messages from the community; the following were the responses given. Responses are different for all leaders but it was noted that cameras and telephones are mainly used to communicate as well as fight corruption within the community. 90.5% of the local leaders talk to the community in groups and ask them for ideas on how the problems can be solved, 88.1% follow up on the solutions identified, and 81% report issues to responsible officers or higher authorities where 69% present the issues during the council meetings and 42.9% inform the LC2 and LC3. It was also noted that 16.7%of the local leaders engaged the community and donors to repair the broken and faulty bore holes with the aim of improving sanitation in their areas. It was noted that 45.2% of the local leaders try to always ensure that the activities being implemented are monitored and reports availed to the community through pictures mainly. It is because of the monitoring that 50% of the local leaders believe that service delivery has greatly improved.

Local leaders were asked how often they give feedback to the community after endeavoring to deal with identified issues, 7% said in a quarterly basis, 33% monthly, 9% daily and 2% annually as shown in the figure below. This means there is a high chance that the local leaders work closely with the community to solve issues identified thus the feedback given.

Respondents from Northern Uganda were asked to identify the most commonly used channel of communication while demanding for public service delivery and 24 of them said community meetings. They were also asked how often they are engaged in the community meetings that aim at enhancing public service delivery; they all agreed at least monthly.

In addition, the respondents were asked what decisions have been taken during these meetings to improve service delivery, 53.1% said more meetings, phone calls and SMS messages were initiated and 7 of them said community services especially in schools were highlighted. This means that the project has enlightened all respondents and local leaders about the importance of public service delivery.

All the local leaders were asked if they knew their roles and duties as leaders, all the 45 provided the following as their roles; 97.8% said it is their role to receive issues, work on them and provide feedback, 91.1% said they should be in position to attend all meetings with the communities to plan for activities, 84.4% highlighted that they should be supportive of all government programs, be transparent and plan with all stakeholders. 71.1% of the leaders said it is their job to organize budget conferences at sub-county level.

All the local leaders who took part in the study highlighted that it is their role as leaders to; 97.6% to take issues identified by the community to the council, 90.5% to hold community meetings, identify issues from members and be their voice and 81.0% to hold sensitization workshops. Out of the 45 local leaders, 3 said they address community demands for accountability on an annual basis, 10 said as the need arises, 15 on a monthly basis and 17 on a weekly basis. This means that besides the leaders being aware of their roles in the community, they ensure that the roles are well done thus causing a sense of responsibility, being accountable and transparent.

Establish the level of women's awareness and exercising of their human rights in government planning processes

The study found that local council leaders are engaged in awareness rising and training sessions on the use of ICT and the use of the SMS platform to demand for transparency and accountability within their communities. On average, the training sessions which concentrate on how to use the SMS platform are carried out on a monthly basis. Although the SMS platform is used, the participants expressed challenges in the use of the SMS platform; in Amuru district, one participant from focus group discussion 2 said,"*there is a network problem where sms mesages do not get delivered, some members do not know how to use the SMS platform, others did not have personal phones and others express concerns on the delay in getting feedback from the duty bearers after an issue is reported.*"

Despite the setbacks created by the SMS platform, all respondents agreed that they are more aware of their rights through the platform. A total of 130 citizens have been made aware of their rights through mainly radio as indicated by one participant during the FGD in Amuru. She said that

"*As a woman you spend most of the time working throughout the day, the only channel you can access information through is a radio on your phone when you're working.*"

Not only have women been made aware of their rights, they have been trained in ICT and used their mobile phones to send SMS messages. 97.6% of the women have got training in making liquid soap, 90.5% making bags, 54.8% income generating activities. This means women are given a chance to improve both their social and economic livelihoods.

4 beneficiaries from northern Uganda highlighted that they had been trained on farming, fishing and poultry while 21 of them trained on socio-economic empowerment activities. Based on the trainings, 31 beneficiaries from Northern Uganda belong to a group formed out of the trainings and hold a position where 13 are members, 1 is a treasurer, 2 are advisors, 9 are secretaries and 6 are chair persons or vice chair persons. A total of 65% have been a part of projects on socio-economic empowerment and 21% on ICT as shown in the figure below. This means that beneficiaries have developed more than one skill they can use to improve their social and economic status within the community.

From Northern Uganda, a total of 29 respondents belong to the VASCs and 23 of them work together to monitor the different activities. Although all the 31 respondents are aware of the different government projects in their areas, 24 of them say their local leaders are not cooperative enough to work on the projects and ensure proper service delivery. Despite the local leaders' behaviour, 22 of the respondents

said they have at least been involved in a partnership to support project implementation of government projects. 93.5% of the respondents have networked on health project for the government that deal with malaria, measles and polio. This means that even though the project elapses its activities, the respondents are able to work with other projects to provide the skills they got from the current project.

The respondents were asked how the activities they have been involved in have promoted participation, 78.1% said that when they are involved at the planning stage, in meetings and during monitoring, they understand the project aims better and ensure value for money is done. This has made 68.8% of them know their rights, roles and responsibilities and understand gender equality more.

The findings from the focus group discussions revealed that although not adequate, the skills trainings were conducted for VSACs in the two regions of northern and eastern Uganda in making paper beads, bags, necklaces, wrist bangles, weaving, processing bar and herbal soap, and jelly, baking mandazi. To date some women have picked on the business ideas and put in the skills acquired during the trainings. For instance the consultant observed that a number of women in Gulu have made bags and sold them to improve their household incomes. Others have been involved in a number of skills initiatives that are outside the trainings the project gave. Women have shown great interest in the project activities and confidently used the skills given to generate incomes. This shows that to some extent, the project some evident activities that are sustainable beyond the project life cycle.

Find out the level of ICT usage to improve participation in democratic governance, accountability and transparency by duty bearers.

The study found out that after the training sessions they hold on average on a monthly basis, they also participate in civic activities through community engagement meetings. Through the meetings, citizen participation increases by community engaging in decision making at community level. A total of 91 agreed, 17 of them strongly agreed and 3 strongly disagreed as shown in the figure below.

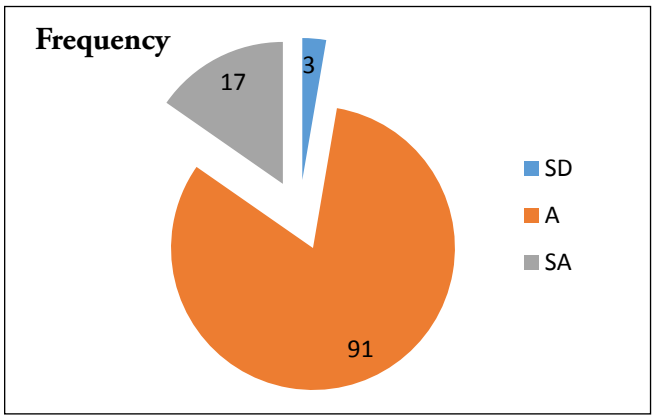


***Figure 1**: Involvement of respondents in community decision making*

At least 62 beneficiaries have used the SMS platform to report cases of accountability, governance and transparency amongst themselves and the local leaders. This is shown in the figure below. 88.4% have increased sensitization of the community, 69.8% have taught members how to report and demand feedback as well as 51.2% tasked the local leaders to provide services to the community. This means if more beneficiaries are permitted to use the SMS platform, transparency and accountability will be presumed to improve communities and beyond.

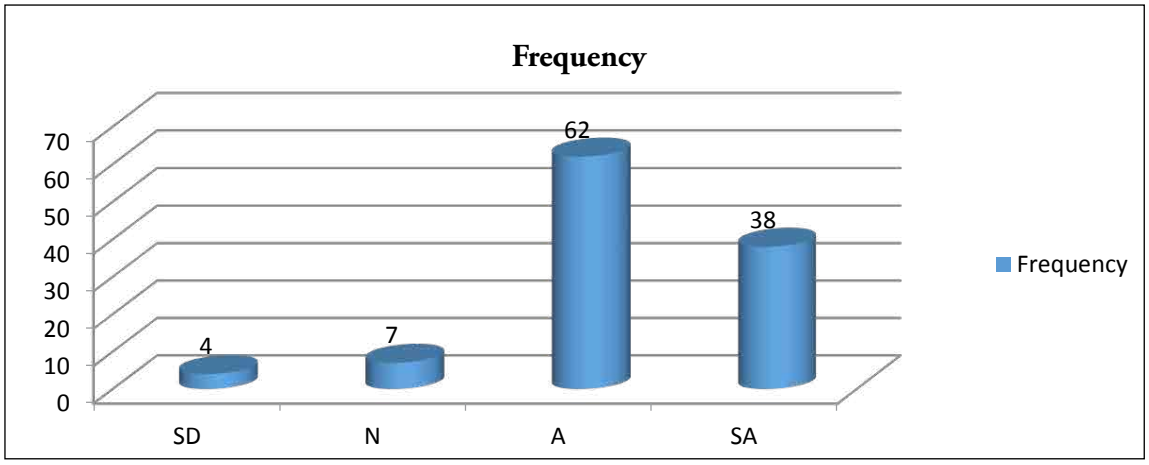


***Figure 2**: Reporting cases of poor governance, accountability and transparency*

The findings from focus group discussions in all districts revealed that although quite inadequate, there had been capacity building in a number of areas which included the use the SMS platform, social media platforms and other ICTs. Six (6) ICT trainings were conducted in total across the 6 districts in the past year. The participants were able to get skills and knowledge on the use of ICTs which they used in monitoring, documenting and reporting issues of poor service delivery. The participants were able to appreciate the efficiency and effectiveness in using ICTs especially the SMS platform to improve service delivery by sharing information with duty bearers on the same. There has been improved access of information on poor service delivery issues and bad governance by the community who have used the SMS platform to raise a number of concerns to the duty bearers. There is improved monitoring and reporting of poor service delivery issues by the community.

The participants noted that there was the formation of the VSACs in all the 6 districts. These VSACs were comprising of local leaders from the Parish Councillors (LC3 Councillors), Water User Committee, Village Health Team, Women Groups, PWDs, People Living Positively with HIV/AIDS (PLWAs), Parish Agricultural and Education representative, LC1 Chairpersons, Parish Development committees, the Elderly, Child Protection Volunteers and Parish Chiefs.

VSACs meetings are conducted quarterly in all the 6 districts to discuss challenges faced by VSACs while monitoring and reporting service delivery issues; and also on the use of the SMS platform. During the VSAC meetings it was indicated that trainings on the use of the SMS platform are conducted; on the use of the mobile phone functions; like sending messages, taking photographs, taking video shots and audio recording; while supporting more VSACs to register and send messages through the platform.

The participants also revealed that radio talk shows have been conducted in the two regions and due to this there has been a significant improvement on the vigilance among the communities on issues of governance, transparency, accountability and service delivery.

Participants also confirmed that community engagement meetings have been conducted in their region involving local leaders and as a result there has been improved communication by the community to the duty bearers; who had earlier complained of the fear and intimidation from leaders. Local leaders now attend engagement meetings from organisations like WOUGNET and are more receptive to project workers. There is improved vigilance by the local leaders or duty bearers who have picked interest; and attend the WOUGNET meetings even when invited.

Through the meetings, it was noted that 21 respondents from Northern Uganda have been able to present issues related to corruption while 11 have not. This means that there is a high possibility that respondents are more aware of how to handle issues related to corruption and can demand for justice.

Participants from the focus group discussions highlighted that out of the meetings, decisions are made to monitor service delivery within their respective communities. It was noted that there is improved monitoring and reporting of service delivery issues by the community. This has enabled increased access to information by leaders and positive response to address the different community concerns resulting from use of ICTs especially the SMS Platform. VSACs now visit the sites identified through the platform, document and report to the SMS platform. In addition, during VSACs/ community and wider stakeholders' meetings, the community members also share all that is entailed with the councillors. This is indicated by several messages sent through the SMS platform. There is improved monitoring and reporting of service delivery issues by the community. This has enabled increased access to information by leaders and positive response to address the different community concerns resulting from the use of ICTs especially the SMS Platform

Conclusions

Establish the level of duty bearer's engagement with citizen, levels of transparency in government procurement and disclosure of public information to citizens.
Although the study found out that on average the community is engaged and participates in civic activities, they are not as often as they should be to cause a bigger outcome or impact. However, citizen participation has improved quite well although the community needs to own the project to ensure sustainability of the project.

Respondents participate more in the decision making processes where they come up with ways of demanding for accountability and transparency with in their communities and from their local leaders. Respondents are now more involved in the decision making processes at community level through attending engagement meetings

Duty bearers or local leaders receive concerns at least daily and monthly from the community through the platform requesting to be addressed. Concerns are received through SMS, phone calls, photos and radio talk shows.

Duty bearers or local leaders are cooperative when it comes to responding to the concerns of the community by referring the matter to the responsible person or they handle the matter themselves. The leaders ensure that feedback is provided to those who expressed interest in solving the issue through reports and radio talk shows mainly. This is aimed at improving public service delivery. Feedback is provided through scheduled meetings and sensitization workshops thus being responsible, transparent and accountable.
Although meetings are called for, some community members do not attend them because they are not provided with incentives in terms of transport refund. This is also a problem with the WOUGNET staff who may not have enough facilitation to mobilize people from all corners of all communities. However for those who attend, a public address system is used in communal areas to invite members.

Establish the level of women's awareness and exercising of their human rights in government planning processes
Findings show that WOUGNET staff and the local leaders in the project areas have tried to create awareness on human rights through the SMS platform commonly known as M-omulimisa. Not only do participants use SMS to ensure rights are realized, the radio talk shows are another medium as well as cameras.

Almost all respondents and project beneficiaries have been trained on the use of ICT and the SMS platform which have improved the communication between the local leaders, the community and WOUGNET staff. Trainings on use of the platform are moderately done at least every quarter. This has still increased awareness on the access to information in regards to the project objectives and outcomes.
The project beneficiaries have expressed the need to engage more onto the platform but the poor service network, the lack of cameras for some respondents have reduced the frequency of members exchanging information, messages and issues.

A number of trainings have been carried out on socio-economic empowerment for both beneficiaries and local leaders. Trainings ranged from IGAs, making bags, necklaces and beads and liquid soap. More trainings include farming, fishing and poultry. On a bi-annual basis, WOUGNET ensures that socio-economic empowerment of beneficiaries is done where beneficiaries are encouraged to hold at least a position in a group. Positions held ranged from treasurer, advisor, secretary, vice chair persons and chairpersons. Through these positions, the community has been able to network through different government projects that deal with malaria, measles and polio. Community members have been more exposed to monitoring, being responsible and participating more in such projects that ensure service delivery in the community.

Find out the level of ICT usage to improve participation in democratic governance, accountability and transparency by duty bearers.
The study revealed that there is indeed increased access and use of ICT in the project intervention areas by both the citizens and duty bearers. About 36% (58) of all respondents including VSAC and DB owned an assortment of basic ICT tools which include; Mobile phones, radio, TV, Computer and camera. In terms of ownership and access to ICT 91% (49) of men owned an ICT tool compared to 78% (84) of the women. But the use of SMS which is constrained in the number of character to facilitate engagement might not be appropriate. Such a project needs a more interactive application like a mobile application linked to a dashboard of the webserver application. The study results show that respondents are aware of human rights (nearly 86% (129) of both VSAC and DB) with 91% (98) of women who participated in the study indicating they are aware compared to 82% (44) of the men.

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