Enhancing Dialogue between Communities and their Leaders to Improve Service Delivery

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Improving Service Delivery.. *Credit: RTI GAPP Program.*

What is the general context in which the story takes place?

Uganda has been operating in a decentralized system of governance since 1992. Under this system, resources and services are extended to communities through local governments, as opposed to getting them from the central government. The local government structures are at various levels, the lowest being the village level and the highest the district level. The key intention of the decentralized system is to ensure that social services reach people living at lowest governance level: the village

At each level of local government, there are leaders—duty bearers—whose sole responsibility is to ensure that services do reach communities and people are able to live decent lives. For this to happen, it is increasingly important for communities to

engage with their leaders. Indeed, Uganda's Constitution makes room for people to participate in development initiatives/activities.

To facilitate this process of engagement, the Governance, Accountability, Participation, and Performance (GAPP) program initiated a platform that allowed communities to communicate with their leaders about different aspects of service delivery. The platform was named UBridge, bridging the communication gap.

What was the main challenge or opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

The main challenge addressed by the UBridge platform was the lack of communication between communities and their leaders. This lack of communication was a result of a number of factors, including apathy on both sides (i.e., the community and its leaders), communities' and leaders' ignorance of rights and obligations, communities' ignorance of government services and projects/programs, and lack of knowledge of how and where to address particular concerns.

In many cases, the communities did not know that services could be improved. They complained among themselves about the lack of health facilities, poor road networks, poor education infrastructure, and similar shortcomings. There was no clear way of holding their leaders (i.e., the duty bearers) responsible for the poor state of affairs.

The few people who attended community meetings went only to hear from their leaders, not to engage with them. When a meeting was called, the people gathered, listened to a leader or groups of leaders, and left. There was no participation—just one-way communication from the leader to the people.

There was dire need to create a platform for participation, one through which the leaders could talk and leave space for the communities to respond or give feedback. The communities also needed to be organized and empowered to respond to their leaders, through seeking clarity, asking questions, and/or making proposals for development. The communities needed to engage with their leaders so that they move together for the development of a particular community. Both leaders and communities appreciated the need for this platform because they were isolated from each other, yet the development initiatives were meant for all.

Mobile phones were an available opportunity that could address the communication and participation gap. At the village level, three out of five households had a mobile phone; the trick was how to get this tool to go beyond communities communicating among themselves to communicating with their leaders on issues that could improve service delivery.

Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.

The UBridge platform is meant to serve as an instant communication link between the district officials and the citizens on issues of service delivery, especially in the education, health, and production sectors. The platform was designed in a way that communities were able to monitor government services and report cases of compromised service delivery. The leaders, on the other hand, would be able respond to each issue that was reported. The desired response was to address the issue that was raised. Two strategies were used to achieve this:

In the initial strategy, named Olutindo, the leaders were given tablets by the then-current program, Strengthening Democratic Linkages in Uganda, or LINKAGES. On a regular basis, the leaders were facilitated with internet connectivity. The communities used their personal mobile phones to send short text messages using the short messaging service (SMS) to a specified number of leaders who had tablets. The community members were not charged any money for sending the messages. This cost was met by the program.

Radio programs were also conducted to address the issues raised through the text messages. The district leadership would go to a selected radio station and elaborate on the issues. This was a phone-in program where communities could make direct calls and make their contributions. The program covered the costs for the radio talk-shows.

Through the SMS system and radio programs, the engagement between communities and their leaders was commendable. In Kayunga district, these activities did result in the improvement of some services.

GAPP improved this approach. After analyzing what was going on in Kayunga district, one thing was clear: With an available platform, it was possible to improve service delivery through enhancing communication between communities and their leaders. The challenge, however, was that it was not readily financially sustainable. Maintaining the toll-free line through which communities could send messages to their leaders was costly. Regularly paying for internet connectivity for the leaders' tablets was also costly, as was Web hosting to channel the messages to the different tablets.

A new approach was designed that involved partnering with an organization that was using a similar platform, and using it to enhance this community engagement with leaders.

The GAPP program entered into an agreement with UNICEF to use its countrywide U-Report platform to accommodate the new UBridge approach. This platform was being implemented in Arua district, not in Kayunga district.

Under UBridge, some slight adjustments were made on the U-Report platform, allowing SMS texts from the community to be sent to one number, 8500. In this system, the messages first go to a central location, then are routed to a specific leader, depending on the subject matter. When the leader gets the message, he/she makes a response, which is routed to the SMS sender.

The message sender must be registered on the platform. (This was not the case previously.) As such, it was difficult to disaggregate the data on the community participating in the dialogue. The new approach provides details, including the sender's location, sex, and age. This information is important in disaggregating the data to determine levels of participation vis-à-vis some variables.

In addition, UBridge conducted community dialogues in which the communities would interface with their leaders to address some of the raised issues in detail. This is important in clarifying issues for which the text message space may have been limiting. It also allows many more people to engage than text messaging.

As such, the learnings and/or gaps from Olutindo were adapted to the UBridge approach, encompassing UNICEF as a new and strategic collaboration. This approach, which is ongoing, has been shared; currently, there are plans to adapt it in Senegal.

Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources, implementation challenges or obstacles, and enabling factors)?

One factor that helped make this approach successful was the fact that there was in-house memory to ease adaptation. When Olutindo was implemented in Kayunga district, it was under a different governance program, implemented by RTI International. The designers of the GAPP program included aspects of Olutindo in the program's design, also implemented by RTI International. As such, there was no need to "re-invent the wheel." There was a lot of readily available ground work, and the real task was to improve on it to make it more sustainable because it had already proved that it could deliver the desired results.

The other factor was the availability of a similar platform that addressed the same cause, though with a different target. UNICEF's U-Report platform was designed to provide a platform for youths to share events in their communities. The model was more community-specific, including youths communicating with their leaders about service delivery issues. The availability of this platform was key.

UBridge also answered questions about sustainability, disaggregated data, enhanced communication, and improved service delivery, which the original Olutindo platform did not fully address. Olutindo was not unsuccessful, but it was more expensive and difficult to sustain. It did, however, achieve its targets.

Two tools were pertinent in both cases: a mobile phone and a tablet connected to internet. For UBridge, an additional tool was the platform for routing messages. This was not necessary for Olutindo. What is equally important to note is that UBridge rode on the UNICEF platform, so all the costs and technicalities involved in running/maintaining it were met by UNICEF.

The GAPP program incurred costs for purchasing the tablets for the leaders, identification and training of community facilitators to work with the communities on how to engage with their leaders, conducting community dialogues, and hiring a staff to oversee the entire project.

With your initial challenge/opportunity in mind, what have been the most significant outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

The most significant outcome from the UBridge approach is the improvement in service delivery. We have been able to track this through monitoring the conversations between leaders and communities, and in some cases physical changes that depict massive improvement in service delivery. We have seen boreholes constructed in response to community outcry about lack of water; roads have been improved to increase access to markets for agricultural productivity; bridges have been mended to ease general transport; and schools have been de-congested, either by constructing new classroom blocks or creating learning space.

If your project or activity is in the development phase or just recently underway (less than 1 year into implementation), how do you intend to track results and impact? What outcomes do you anticipate?

The project is being concluded, with a possibility of adapting it to another district.

What were the most important lessons learned?

1) Collaboration does not always have to be with like-minded organizations. Projects should look at the infrastructure and see ways of tapping into it to meet objectives. In this case, UNICEF was known to be a child-centered organization, while GAPP looks at creating an enabling environment for improved service delivery. However, the infrastructure that UNICEF had in place to increase youth engagements was exactly what GAPP needed to foster engagements between communities and their leaders.

2) One of the ways of promoting community participation is through providing platforms for engagement. It is not enough to give communities information: They need to be provided with the means to use information to improve their standards. The communities in Kayunga (previous approach) and Arua (improved approach) did not have to be coached; they had most of the information and only needed a platform to use it well.

3) Government programs aimed at service delivery can be successful only if communities are involved. Government does not have the resources and manpower to monitor all of its services. But communities, which are the end users of these services, can easily monitor them and inform their leaders when things are not going right. Experience has shown that interventions can be made to rectify situations before they get out of hand. The most reliable monitor is a community member.