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Citizen Access to Information

Emerging trends from the developing world

The *Global Monitoring Report on Education for All 2010* and *Reaching the Marginalised*, both published by UNESCO, report shocking figures about the state of education in the developing world. Less than 55% of school-age children in developing countries attend secondary school, seventy-two million children are still out of school and if current trends continue, there will still be 50 million out of school by 2015.

On another front, across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, there is a profound transformation in the way people are gaining access to information. Rapid media liberalization and the increasing availability – and sometimes ubiquity – of new technologies (particularly mobile telephony) are combining with broader political and social changes to bring about this transformation (West, 2008). Global mobile phone subscriptions are expected to reach 7.9% during the period 2007-2012, boosting the number of global mobile phone subscribers to 4.5 billion in 2012, with a penetration rate hitting 64.7 %, up from 46.8% in 2007.

Most of that increase is happening in developing countries in which it is having a transformative effect. Since 2000, mobile ownership has grown by 70 % every year across the 50 poorest countries of the world. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) (2009) reported that mobile phone subscriptions have increased dramatically in Africa from around 4% to 28% of the total population in the period from 2002 to 2007.¹ According to ITU's 2010 report, the global mobile cellular subscription already reached an estimated 4.6 billion by the end of 2009, corresponding to a penetration of 67 per 100 inhabitants globally.

We know that investment in education produces significant returns in poverty reduction, economic growth, child survival and democracy. We also

know that there is huge potential for mobile platforms to meet the information needs of people living in poverty. However, the extent to which the benefits of the increased access to information and communication technologies will be shared equitably among citizens of developing countries has been challenged (Etzo & Collender, 2010). In September 2010, a conference was held at the UN headquarters in New York to discuss the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and to review progress to date, with five years left to the 2015 deadline. The conference finished with the adoption of a global action plan to achieve the eight anti-poverty goals by their 2015 target date.

Progress on the MDGs is reliant upon populations in developing countries understanding and acting upon MDG-relevant information. The World Bank (2003) believes that "When the crucial information and communication needs of the poor go unmet, quality of life may significantly degrade, resulting in social exclusion, marginalization, isolation, alienation and humiliation" (pg 36). Similarly Wilson, Warnock and Schoemaker (2004) argue that "Reaching the MDGs in 2015 will require a belated recognition that communication is a prerequisite and central to all aspects of sustainable development" (pg 4). However, despite a growing consensus that information provision is important and that, for example, ICTs can improve the delivery of services and facilitate management and transfer of knowledge, the role of information has largely been left off the MDG agenda.

We believe that information is not only imperative, but also that "Citizen Access to Information" is a catalyst to achieving the MDGs across a broad range of development indicators and that tracking citizen access to information over time would aid in resource allocation efforts to support all of the MDG objectives.

To obtain sufficient understanding of citizen's access needs in relation to development outcomes

¹ ITU, *Measuring the Information Society, ICT Development Index*, 2009, p.4.

it is crucial to understand that the availability of information and access to different technology platforms in countries in development varies significantly across different population sub-groups; men and women, among educated and uneducated and between those living in rural and urban areas. For example, while 82% of all adults living in urban areas in Ghana own a mobile phone, the share of mobile owners in rural areas is much lower, namely 65%. In Zambia the gap is even wider: 81% of adult residents of urban areas own a mobile phone in comparison with only 53% in rural areas.

To address these issues, InterMedia has developed a citizen-centred research framework Citizen Access to Information MDG Tracker™, that identifies which population sub-groups lack what information and provides direction on where the gaps need to be filled.

Information access & the MDGs

The MDGs are eight international development goals that all 192 United Nations member states and at least 23 international organizations have agreed to achieve by the year 2015. They include targets on poverty, education, gender equality, child health, maternal health, HIV/AIDS and other diseases, environment and global partnerships for development.

However, reference to information provision on any of these topics are largely missing in the MDGs. Information and communication are in fact mentioned only twice, once as one of the targets within Goal 8 and once as one of the indicators for measuring progress within Goal 6:

- » **Goal 8:** Develop a global partnership for development. Target 8.F: In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications (UN Official List of MDG Indicators 2008).
- » **Goal 6:** Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. Indicator for monitoring progress 6.3: Proportion of population aged 15-24 years with comprehensive correct knowledge of HIV/AIDS (UN Official List of MDG Indicators 2008).

Likewise, the public debate around information provision and its relevance to the achievement of MDGs (as well as development issues in general) has so far been limited. When this debate has taken place, it has been largely focussed on

connectivity issues and the digital divide, rather than on access to the relevant content and its quality.

While access to different media and technology platforms or sources is certainly important, it alone does not guarantee access to information, nor does it warrant access to quality information that is relevant to people's day-to-day lives. In addition to measuring citizen's access to various platforms it is thus imperative to understand who is using which platforms, what is the purpose of use, how often do they use them and what content is being consumed.

To capture this more holistic definition of access to information we propose to expand the definition of access to information to include five dimensions and related sub-dimensions. We employ the term ICM - Information, Communication and Media resources, which incorporates both traditional mass media (radio, television and print) and newer platforms (internet and mobile) as well as informal resources such as "word of mouth".

Our approach: 5 dimensions of access to information

Our approach is based on an understanding of access to information as a composite measure of access to source/s or platform, exposure, evaluation, content and self-reported differences in citizens' reporting of the impact of their use of ICM resources (Power, Khatun and Debeljak 2011). The data that were used to test this approach were collected within InterMedia's *AudienceScapes* research initiative, which was co-funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and aimed to improve development outcomes through knowledge sharing and dissemination of research and analysis in a user-friendly format (see www.audiencescapes.org).

Within the initiative, InterMedia conducted nationally representative surveys in Kenya, Ghana, Zambia and Tanzania, which focused on how the general population in all four countries obtains, shares and uses information on development related issues. The analysis provided insights into understanding citizen's access to information in a number of key development areas, such as education, health, governance, agriculture and personal finance, and enabled the InterMedia team to examine our approach to ICM resources and the five dimensions of "Citizen Access to Information", discussed here.

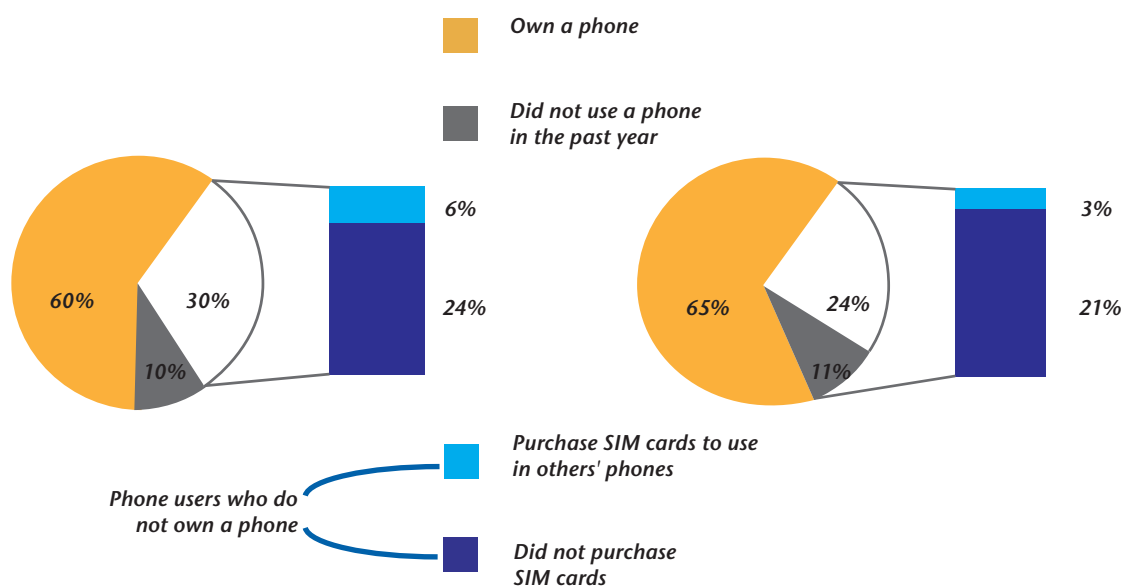


Figure 1 Kenya: Types of Mobile Phone Access AudienceScapes National Survey of Kenya, July 2009 (N=2000 adults 15+)

Figure 2 Ghana: Types of Mobile Phone Access AudienceScapes National Survey of Ghana, July 2009 (N=2051 adults 15+)

In this article we use examples from these four studies to demonstrate the variation in citizen access to information in developing countries, and illustrate the proposed dimensions and sub-dimensions of our approach.

Dimension 1: Access to source

The first dimension, access to a source, is a precondition to access to information and also a basic criterion for the other four dimensions proposed in our model. These sources include traditional media, i.e. television, radio and print media, newer platforms (mobile phones and internet), as well as non-media sources, such as "word of mouth". When assessing citizen's access to individual sources, particularly to traditional media and newer platforms, it is however important not only to measure their overall access to these sources and platforms, but also to distinguish between those who have access and those who own the technology.

The AudienceScapes research, for example, illustrates that while the overall access to mobile phones in Kenya is almost universal (90% of all adults say they have used a mobile phone in the past year), a wide gap exists between those who personally own a mobile phone (60%) and those who borrow mobile phones from others (30%). A similar pattern also emerged in Ghana (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Citizen's consumption of information is also influenced by the place where they access various sources, and it is thus crucial to understand whether this access occurs in a public or a private space. For example, content on HIV/AIDS and reproductive health may be

more comfortably consumed by young people in the privacy of their home than in the internet cafe. Further, in a world of growing convergence between platforms it is necessary to accurately identify the medium of access. This can be particularly challenging in the case of mobile phones, which are now used not only for making calls and sending short messages, but also to listen to the radio, watch television or access the internet.

Furthermore, mobile phones have in recent years become an increasingly important platform for sharing development focused content and even play a growing role in the delivery of various development services. For instance, in 2007 Safaricom launched a mobile money service M-Pesa, which over the past few years enabled millions of previously unbanked people to have access to financial services without needing to visit a bank branch (CGAP 2009). In November 2010, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation announced several grants to scientists who are pioneering the use of mobile phones to improve health care in poorer communities. Among others, grants were given to scientists who aim to develop a disposable malaria biosensor based on a SIM card platform, which will make diagnostic testing more widely available in remote areas. A grant was also given to a project aiming to develop a mobile-phone based tool which will quickly identify women at risk during labour and delivery and assist with emergency transfer to a hospital, thereby reducing maternal and infant mortality rates (Gates 2010).

Finally, we need to take into account possible elements which may restrict access to sources and platforms at certain times, such as electricity cuts

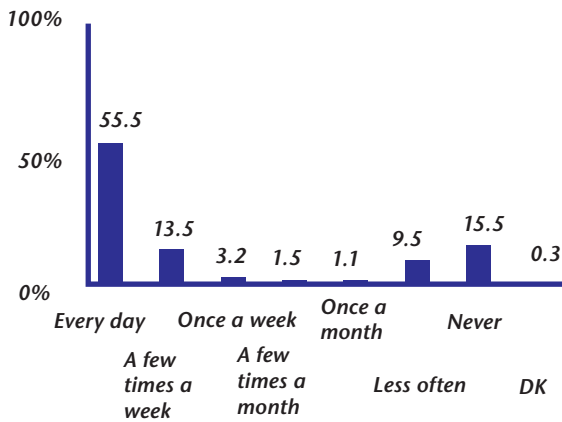


Figure 3 Zambia: Frequency of radio use AudienceScapes National Survey of Zambia, 2010 (N=2000 adults 15+)

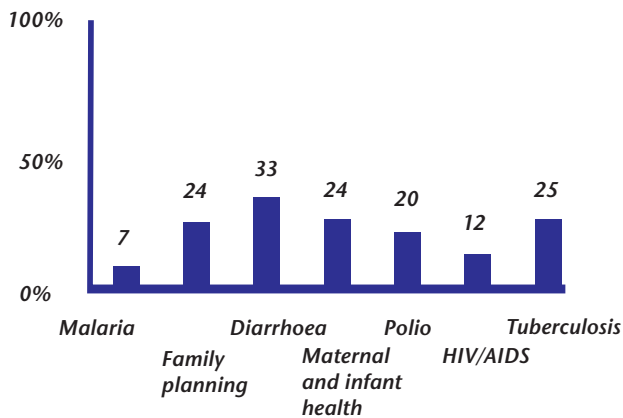


Figure 4 % who never received information on health topics or received it more than 12 months ago in Ghana AudienceScapes National Survey of Ghana, 2009 (N=2051 adults 15+)

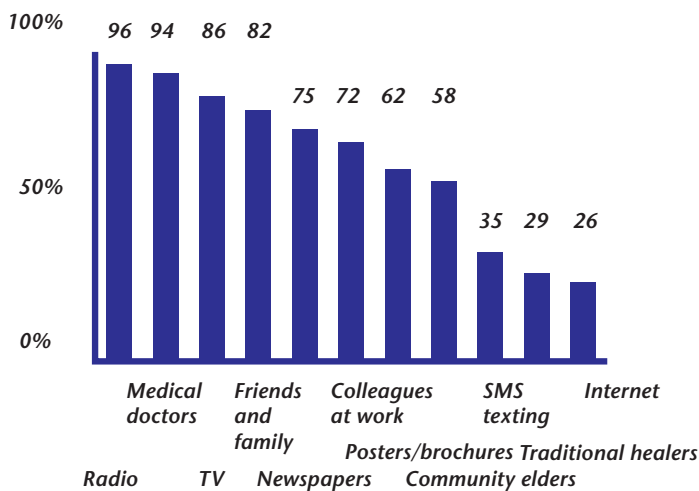


Figure 5 % who find the source at least somewhat trustworthy for information on health issues in Kenya AudienceScapes National Survey of Kenya, 2009 (N=2000 adults 15+)

or weak signals, which may result in the content being incomprehensible. For example, 24% of all Zambian adults who said they do not listen to the radio quoted the lack of radio signals as the main reason, while 27% cited problems with power.

Dimension 2: Exposure to Content

As mentioned, access to a medium or technology alone does not imply access to information. In the case of Zambia, about three quarters (73%) of all adults confirmed that they have a working radio in their household, yet considerably less, 56% reported listening to the radio every day (see Figure 3). Four percent of those who do have a working radio in their household on the other hand said they never listen to it. Establishing the frequency of exposure (i.e. how often a person is consuming content), the amount of time exposed, the recency of exposure and the criteria for confirming accurate recall of the content and specific format is therefore critical in understanding how exposure to content relates to development outcomes.

Dimension 3: Content

Nevertheless, exposure to content does not guarantee that the content provided will be of specific value or interest to the citizen. To make sure that citizens' needs are met, a high level of specificity is required and it is imperative to identify the precise attributes of the content consumed by the citizens, namely a specific source, date, genre and

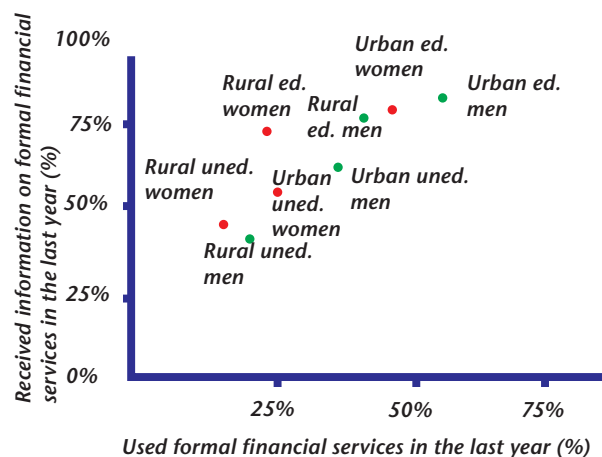


Figure 6 Ghana: Access to information services and access to formal financial services AudienceScapes National Survey in Ghana, 2009 (N=2051 adults 15+)

the sub-topic. For example, instead of asking the respondents about “health content” they might have heard on the radio, it is critical to, ask about information on acute respiratory infection (ARI) which was provided during the programme for young mothers on Channel 4 on Friday at 6pm.

The importance of specificity is illustrated by an example from our *AudienceScapes* research in Ghana, which explored citizen’s access to information on various health sub-topics. As Figure 4 shows, more than a third of all adults in Ghana never received any information on diarrhoea, or received it more than a year ago, a shocking result for a disease that still kills 1.5 million children under five every year and accounts for 16% of child deaths worldwide (UNICEF/WHO, 2009). On the other hand, Ghanaian citizens appear much better informed particularly about malaria, with only 7% claiming they never received any information on malaria, or received it more than a year ago. If respondents had been asked about the information they received about health topics in general, the results would in no doubt be different, and the level of specificity, which enables an actionable response and filling the gaps where needed, would be significantly reduced.

Dimension 4: Evaluation of Content

To understand the potential of received information to effect individual and social change, it is necessary to establish measures of quality of the content according to the citizen. How appealing does the citizen consider the content? How interesting, trustworthy, objective, diverse and relevant to them? *AudienceScapes* research in all four countries revealed that different types of sources enjoy different levels of trustworthiness for different topics. For example, in Kenya radio is perceived as the most trustworthy source of information on health issues, followed by medical doctors; health information obtained from these sources is trusted by more than nine in ten Kenyan adults. At the other end of the spectrum are traditional leaders and the internet, which are seen as trustworthy sources of health information by less than a third of all adult Kenyans (Figure 5).

Dimension 5: Self-Reported Response

The final dimension of our model builds on the previous four dimensions and explores the relationship between reception of information on individual topics, and self-reported behaviour. For example, to what extent do citizens identify that

their knowledge levels, attitudes or self-reported decision-making or behaviour can be attributed to information they received from a particular source? Are those, who are well informed about a specific topic, also more likely to act on this information?

The *AudienceScapes* data on citizen’s information and the use of formal financial services in Ghana for example show a positive correlation between the amount of information on formal financial services received by the citizens and their actual use of these services. In addition, the data also reveal large variations between different population sub-groups, in terms of the amount of information they received, as well as their self-reported behaviour. Gender, location (urban/rural) and

Table 1 (Source: Power, Khatun and Debeljak, 2011)

FIVE DIMENSIONS OF CITIZEN ACCESS TO INFORMATION	
Dimension 1: Source or platform	Access v Ownership Public v Private Restricted Access: Time, Electricity, Signal Medium
Dimension 2: Exposure to content	Frequency Amount of Time Recency Recall-format specific Indexing-Dose Effect
Dimension 3: Content	Named Source Genre Topic v Subtopic Date
Dimension 4: Evaluation of content	Appeal Interest Trust Diversity Relevance Objectivity
Dimension 5: Self-reported response	Self-report: Political participation, Health, Education, Gender, Livelihoods

level of education all play an important role in defining the amount of information different citizen groups have on formal financial services, and how likely they are to use them. Knowing these variations is crucial as it provides a more nuanced understanding of where the information gaps are, and where information resources need to be strengthened.

Access to information

The goal of the research program proposed here is to provide a framework that employs citizens' access to information as the lens to understand the relationship between ICM resources and the development outcomes, particularly in achieving the MDGs.

The five-dimensional index described above (Table 1) is designed to capture the complexity of citizen access to information in developing countries and provide policy makers and other development actors with a detailed understanding of the information gaps and needs among different populations sub-groups.

It facilitates input of the research findings into information dissemination campaigns, establishes clear benchmarks and tracks progress over time. It also enables a tailoring of communication activities to the information needs of specific population sub-groups, and by increasing efficiency of these policy interventions, positively contributes to development outcomes, and the progress on the MDGs.

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