

## STAR-GHANA SMS VOICES PLATFORM – ELECTION 2016 CALL

### REPORT

#### Using Mobile Phone /SMS Technology to Enhance Engagement between Citizens and Duty Bearers at all Levels of Governance in Ghana

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#### Background

The STAR-Ghana programme’s goal is to contribute to a vibrant, well informed and assertive civil society, able to contribute to transformational national development for all citizens in an inclusive manner.

The STAR-Ghana ‘SMS Voices’ platform is a digital platform that enables trained representatives (Citizen Rapporteurs) particularly in remote and marginalised communities to open instant dialogues with local government officials and other duty bearers via a short message system (SMS). The ultimate aim is to use the platform as a communications tool to support the achievement of the STAR-Ghana programme objectives by supporting citizens to hold the state accountable and responsive at all levels of governance.

The SMS Voices platform was piloted with the December 2016 presidential and parliamentary elections in Ghana. Representatives of the Electoral Commission (EC), National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE) and the Ghana Police at the district level of Governance were registered onto the platform in six (6) Districts across three (3) regions of Ghana. Citizens – including PWDs, through trained field rapporteurs were also registered on the platform to engage representatives of the state institutions indicated above.

This report focuses on the key contribution of the SMS Voices platform to the successful implementation of the Election 2016 Call as well as key learning observed. Table 1 below presents the implementing partners and the scope of the pilot.

**Table 1: Implementing Partners and scope of pilot phase**

NO	REGION	DISTRICT	GRANT PARTNER (GP)	DUTY BEARER(S)
1	Western	Elembele	UCSOND & Skyy Media	Ghana Police Service (Police), National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE), Electoral Commission (EC)
		Nzema East	UCSOND	
		Wassa East	Skyy Media & GFD	
2	Northern	Gonja Central	NORSAAC	Police, NCCE, EC
3	Greater Accra	Ashaiman Municipal	GFD	Police, NCCE, EC
		Ayawaso Sub Metros		

## **Results Overview**

A total of 49 participants were engaged over the implementation period, comprising 29 citizen representatives (rapporteurs) and 20 representatives of state partners (EC, NCCE, and the Police). 191 issues were reported in total. Rapporteurs were relatively more satisfied (97%) with feedback from state partners compared to state partners' satisfaction (70%) on the relevance of the issues received. Key issues reported by rapporteurs and addressed by state partners included but not limited to the following:

- Voter apathy
- Early warning security threats
- Accessibility of polling stations among PWDs.

Table 2 outlines key areas of attention, discussion of results results and the concomitant learnings observed/recorded.

## **Conclusion**

Promptness of election related issues delayed feedback in some instances. This was anticipated bearing in mind that if it works well with Elections, the platform could be used in other thematic areas where speed or urgency does not override all other factors. That notwithstanding, the platform has proven to be a useful medium for citizens and state partners to engage. Substantial results were achieved under the circumstances explained above.

## **Recommendations**

1. The platform is an appropriate tool for citizen, particularly those in remote and or hard to reach communities and state partners engagement. It should be considered in subsequent Calls of the programme.
2. Identify and establishing partnership with a local IT firm to provide the needed technical backstopping as and when needed would be useful as OOR support to the programme ends in March 2017.
3. For the purposes of prolonged impact and sustainability, it is recommended that a partnership with the Ministry of Local Government be considered.

## **Key Learning Questions Post Pilot**

1. To what extent is SMS technology only, relevant to Citizens and State Partners engagement?
2. What are the factors affecting the use of SMS technology in Citizens and State Partners engagement

**Table 1:**

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	<b>Learning</b>
On Our Radar support	OOR provided the needed backstopping and technical assistance when it became necessary. On Our Radar assisted in troubleshooting poor connectivity between users on MTN and Vodafone mobile networks due to network-level problems between the two companies.	
Training	<p>Training for the SMS Voices participants was held from the 27th to 29th September, 2016 in Tamale. The second training was held from 24th to 26th of October, 2016 in Takoradi whilst the last one was from the 7th to 8th November, 2016 in Accra. Participants were drawn from the Central Gonja District (Northern Region), Nzema East, Wassa East and Ellembele (Western Region) and Ayawaso East sub metro, Ashiaman Municipality (Greater Accra).</p> <p>Representatives of the Ghana Police Service (GP), National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE), the Electoral Commission (EC) participated in the training across all the Districts. A total of thirty (30) state partners and twenty seven (27) rapporteurs comprising five (5) from GFD, five (5) from NORSAAC, Nine (9) from UCSOND and Eight (8) from Skyy Media were trained. Participants were trained on the Relevance of information sharing/Mobile as a reporting tool; Role of rapporteurs and state partners; Core principles of reporting; Micro reporting among others.</p>	<b>Training of Participants</b> - Combining the training of both rapporteurs and state partners was helpful in identifying the need for a common definition of terms for communication. It also promoted trust and established rapport among participants
State Partners	<p>State Partners were very responsive to the issues raised by rapporteurs as rated by rapporteurs (97%). It was observed however, that though state partners were willing to address issues reported by rapporteurs, there were instances where state partners lacked the capacity and ability to address the issues.</p> <p>For example: when an EC officer was informed of two polling stations that were not disability friendly, his feedback was as follows: “I agree with you, but it will be difficult to relocate the centre since that seem to be the available compound for the two centres”.</p>	<b>Representation of State Partners</b> - The EC representative in the Wassa East District was very prompt in her responses. This could be due to the fact that she was not the director in charge of the District and for that matter had relatively more time to respond to the issues compared to that of colleague directors in other districts.

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	<b>Learning</b>
Rapporteurs	<p>Volunteers of GPs exhibited commitment to the whole exercise. GPs provided the needed logistics on the ground to ensure the mobility and safety of rapporteurs though provision was not made for these expenses in the budget of their respective projects.</p> <p>State partners rated their level of satisfaction at 70% with respect to the relevance of the issues received from rapporteurs. Rapporteurs especially displayed a good knowledge of the electoral issues.</p> <p>PWDs in particular expressed a strong understanding of their needs as far as elections are concerned. The timing of the demand for state partners to respond to their needs however, should be improved in future engagements for effective results.</p> <p>There were instances however, where rapporteurs misplaced their reportage. For example, the NCCE representative in Wassa East received a report on the physical assault of two brothers purported to be in the same political party: a report that should have been directed to the Police. The NCCE officer subsequently directed the rapporteur to deliver the report to the Police.</p>	<p><b>Security of Rapporteurs</b> – Rapporteurs were introduced as election observers of GPs to avoid any possible victimization from persons who could be suspicious of rapporteurs or aggrieved about their reportage. This assuaged the security concerns of rapporteurs</p>
Technology	<p>A significant network problem between MTN and Vodafone (with whom the majority of our numbers were hosted - including the reporting number and helpdesk) occurred. A large number of messages sent from Vodafone numbers were not delivered on some MTN SIMs. Though this problem was not with our system, (which is sending the messages correctly), but with the connection between MTN and Vodafone.</p> <p>We could not however, determine if MTN had a temporary problem, or it was a permanent issue between certain MTN and Vodafone sim cards. It must be noted however, that: the MTN and Vodafone SIMs used during the testing of the platform did not record any of such challenges and as such these challenges were not predicted.</p> <p>To overcome the mobile network problems: the dashboard was reviewed to automatically display each user's mobile network when they registered. This was useful in monitoring problems. Moreover, an alternative number was mounted for users on MTN who encountered difficulties because of the network problems between Vodafone and MTN.</p>	<p><b>Use of participants' handsets</b> – Participants use of their own registered SIMs and mobile phones proved to reduce to a large extent network challenges. This was because participants registered SIMs that had reliable network connectivity in their respective geographic locations. Some participants particularly rapporteurs in Central Gonja had defective mobile phones that had limited battery life span.</p>

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	<b>Learning</b>
Key Results	<p>Key issues reported by rapporteurs and addressed by the NCCE centered on voter apathy. The Akutuase Youth Association in Wassa East for example, through the SMS voices platform invited the NCCE to educate the youth in that community on their rights and responsibilities as voters.</p> <p>The Police addressed issues focussed on early warning security threats, pockets of violence and the absence of security personnel at some polling stations. The Police for example deployed two security personnel to the Father Graham polling station in the Nzema East District, after a rapporteur had reported the issue for response.</p> <p>The platform has documentary evidence of the Police in Ashaiman following up and reprimanding a brother of a parliamentary candidate who was reported by a rapporteur for campaigning on election day.</p> <p>The EC addressed issues of accessibility of polling stations among PWDs, missing names in the voters' register especially during special voting, late arrival of voting materials as well as isolated cases of disagreements on the positioning of voting booth/screen boxes. It must be noted however, that there was no report of BVD malfunctioning across all the districts in the pilot study.</p>	<p><b>Timing of Implementation</b> - The platform was ready for use at a time when voter registration and exhibition of voters' register had elapsed. This would have given room for full coverage of the electoral process and for that matter greater impact.</p>