

# Access denied: Freedom of information in Africa falls short of public expectations

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 452 | Joseph Asunka and Carolyn Logan

## Summary

The African Platform on Access to Information (2011), adopted a decade ago by a group of leading African media and information stakeholders, recognizes access to information as a fundamental human right. Since endorsed by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (2019) and the Pan-African Parliament (2013), the platform stipulates that "information held by public bodies is public and as such should be subject to disclosure." It further states that "the right of access to information shall be established by law in each African country. Such law shall be binding and enforceable and based on the principle of maximum disclosure. The law shall take precedence over other conflicting laws that limit access to information."

Although the impact of information disclosure or transparency on governance and service-delivery outcomes is an ongoing debate (Gaventa & McGee, 2013; Fox, 2007), researchers and practitioners generally agree that transparency is a necessary condition for responsive and accountable governance (Open Government Partnership, 2018).

While only a handful of countries had access to information (ATI) laws when the African Platform on Access to Information (APAI) was adopted, the efforts of advocacy and watchdog groups in the global Open Government movement<sup>1</sup> have at least partly paid off: ATI laws now cover about half of African countries (African Platform on Access to Information, 2013; Selvick, 2020).

However, this still leaves many prominent countries, including some that have traditionally been regarded as leading democracies, such as Botswana and Senegal, without laws protecting ATI. Moreover, the laws that do exist vary widely in quality (Right to Information, 2020), and enforcement and implementation are mixed at best (Article 19, 2020a). In some cases, contradictory laws that restrict access to information are still on the books as well,<sup>2</sup> and are often given precedence (Asogwa & Ezema, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted these weaknesses in legal protections and implementation of ATI laws. Activists and journalists have been harassed and arrested for releasing government statistics or otherwise reporting on COVID-19 in Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, and elsewhere on the continent (Article 19, 2020b, 2020c; Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020; Amnesty International, 2020). And numerous governments have used concerns about purported sharing of fake news about the pandemic as a pretext to restrict media and information sharing (Budoo-Scholtz, 2020). In short, open government initiatives have made significant progress over the past decade, but still have a long way to go.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example the [Open Government Partnership](#), [Open Budget Surveys](#), [Open Contracting Partnership](#), and [Africa Freedom of Information Centre](#).

<sup>2</sup> See for example "Côte d'Ivoire" at <https://www.disinformationtracker.org/>.

What do Africans think about access to information? Do they believe in their right to information? To what extent can they access information held by local public officials? Does access to information shape Africans' views about their governments?

Data from recent Afrobarometer surveys show that most Africans favour access to public information. Consistent with the provisions of the APAI, Africans broadly reject the notion that public information should be the exclusive preserve of government officials. However, their ability to access public information, especially information held by local officials, remains limited. Majorities believe that it would be difficult to access information about their local school budgets as well as their local government budgets and development plans. The only exception is access to information about how to start a business, where most Africans report greater ease of access.

And there may be some ripple effects. The findings show that those who believe it would be difficult to access school and local government budgets and development plans are also more likely to view key elected national and local government officials as corrupt.

For policy makers and civil society, these findings point to a need to do more on the supply side of access to information, especially at the local level. People experience their governments more intimately at the local level, and their local experiences shape their overall evaluation of government. Opaqueness around local government and school budgets and related development plans not only denies people their fundamental right, it also undermines their assessments of how government officials perform their jobs.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys are currently being completed. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200-2,400 that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This dispatch draws on data from 45,823 interviews completed in 34 countries between September 2016 and September 2018 as part of Afrobarometer Round 7. The countries covered are home to almost 80% of the continent's population. The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country findings such as Africa-wide averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

## Key findings

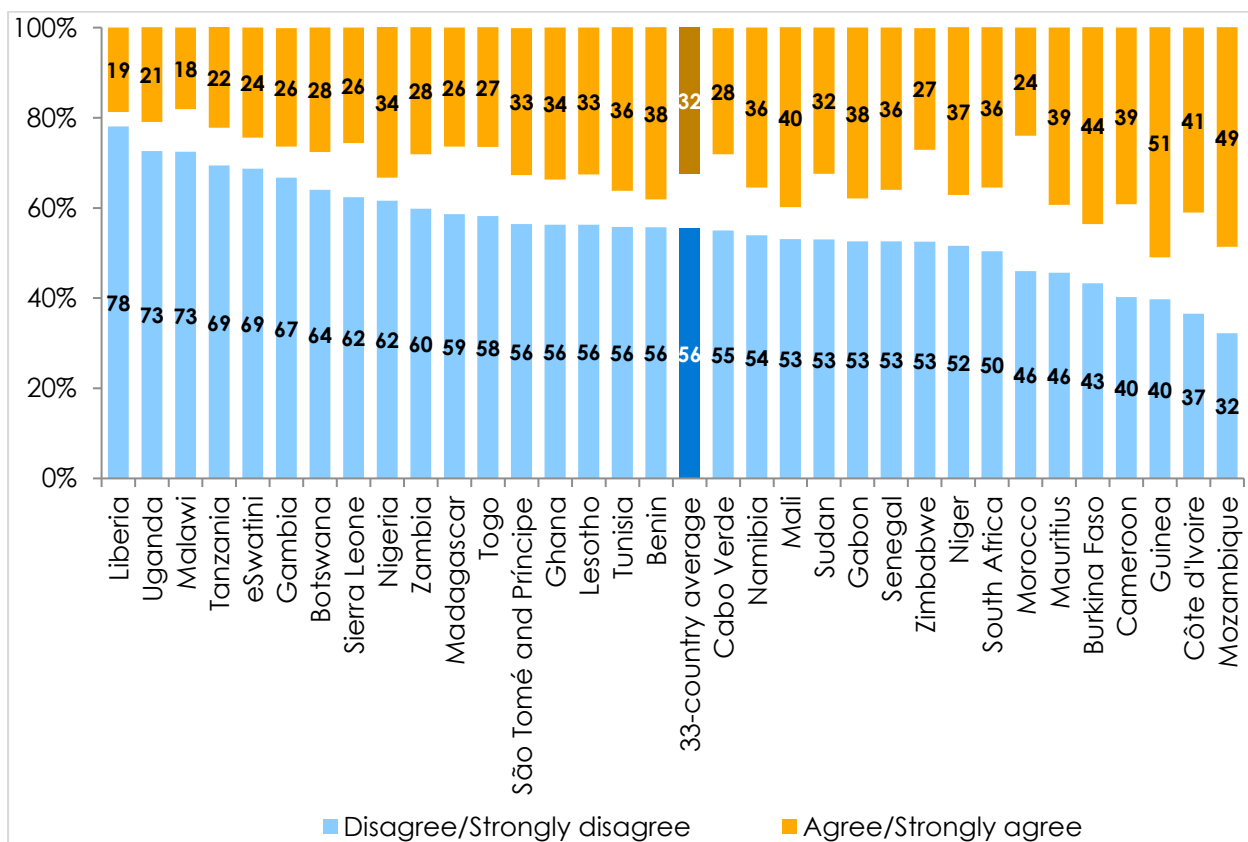
- In principle, Africans support access to information: Across 33 countries, 56% reject the idea that only government officials should be able to use information held by public bodies.
- In practice, however, the public believes access to information is still quite restricted:
  - Information about how to start a business is the easiest to access: A slim majority (54%) think they could get this information, but still, one in three (35%) think it is unlikely.
  - Other types of information, for example about school or local government budgets – information that citizens need to hold their governments accountable – is much less accessible: 55% and 57%, respectively, say it is *unlikely* that they could get this information.

- Lesotho, Cabo Verde, and Tanzania are relatively open with all types of information. Many countries are open with business information but closed with other types of information. By contrast, access to all types of information is limited in Morocco, Sierra Leone, and Namibia.
- As Namibia's presence at the bottom of the list indicates, a country's democratic profile does not appear to be strongly linked to "openness" in terms of access to information. Some of the continent's most democratic countries can be found among both the most open and the most closed countries. But even among the most open, only small majorities are confident they could get information in all situations.
- Associations between access to information and trust are weak, but links to perceptions of corruption are much stronger: Countries where access to information is easier also perceive lower levels of corruption among elected leaders and government officials.

### Access to information in principle

Do Africans think their governments should be required to share information with the public? Across 33 countries (this question was not asked in Kenya, the first country surveyed in Round 7), a majority (56%) reject the proposition that "information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials" (Figure 1). Only 32% agree that governments should not be required to share information with the public.

**Figure 1: Support for public access to information** | 33 countries | 2016/2018

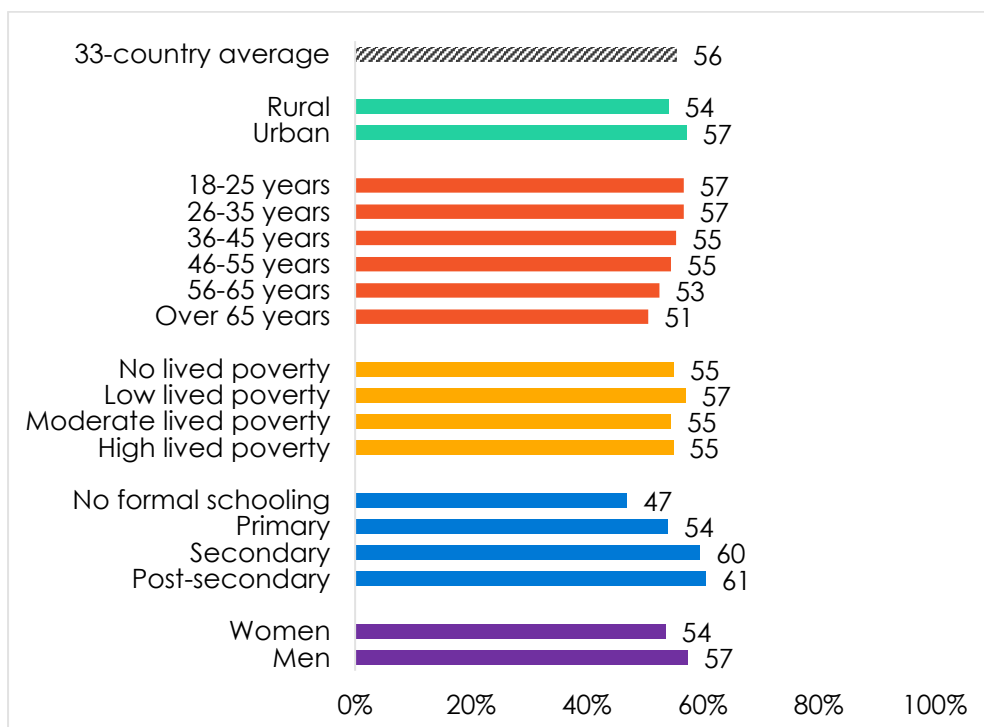


**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials; it should not have to be shared with the public. (Note: Not asked in Kenya.)

Majorities in 26 of the 33 countries favour access to such information, led by Liberians (78%), Ugandans (73%), and Malawians (73%). Only in one country, Guinea, does a majority (51%) believe the government should be able to restrict access to information, and in two others – Mozambique and Côte d'Ivoire – pluralities agree. Burkinabè and Cameroonians are evenly divided on the issue.

Younger and (especially) more educated Africans are more likely to support public access to information. At least six in 10 of those with secondary education or above support information sharing, compared to 47% of those with no formal schooling (Figure 2). And 18- to 35-year-olds are more likely than those over 65 to demand access by a 6-percentage-point margin (57% vs. 51%).

**Figure 2: Support for public access to information** | by demographic group  
 | 33 countries | 2016/2018



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials; it should not have to be shared with the public. (Note: Not asked in Kenya.)

### Access to information in practice

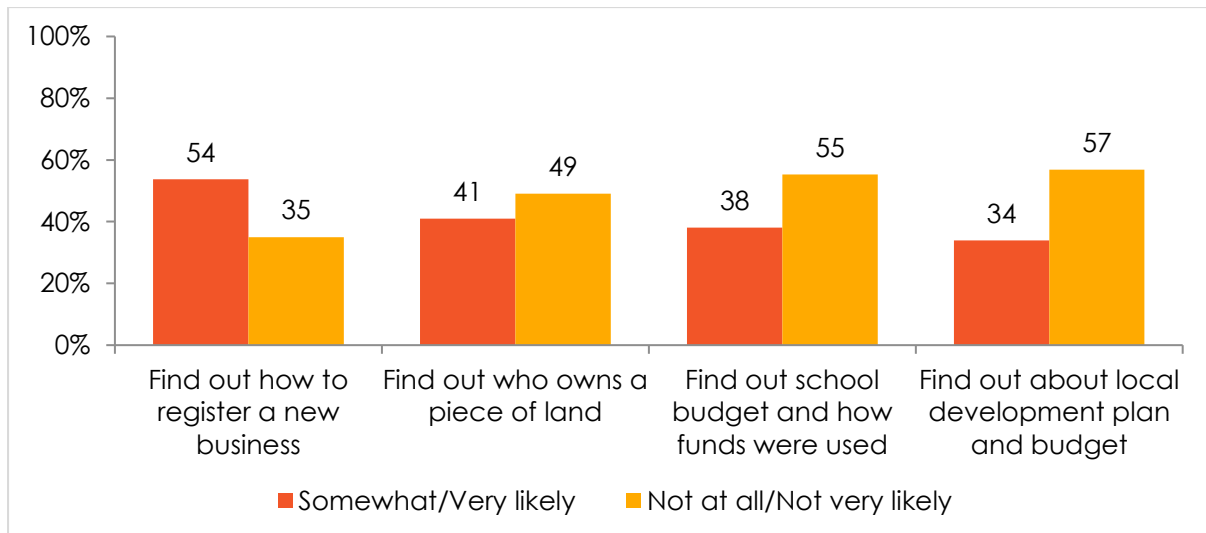
In practice, how accessible is government information to ordinary Africans? We asked respondents how likely it is that they could get four key types of information: about school budgets, land ownership, local government plans and budgets, and business registration.

A narrow majority (54%) think it is “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that they could get information about how to register a business, though one in three (35%) say it would be “not very likely” or “not at all likely” (Figure 3). But the tables are turned when it comes to other types of information, including information on budgets that could be used to hold government officials accountable.

Majorities think it is unlikely they could get information about their local government's development plans and budgets (57%) or a school budget (55%), compared to about one in three who think they would succeed. Access to information on land ownership is modestly

better, but a plurality (49%) still conclude they would be unlikely to get the information, compared to 41% who say they could.

**Figure 3: Access to information** | 34 countries | 2016/2018



**Respondents were asked:** How likely is it that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say:

If you went to the [insert appropriate local government office] to find out how to register a new business in your community?

If you went to the [local lands office] to find out who owns a piece of land in your community?

If you went to the local school to find out what the school's budget is and how the funds have been used?

If you went to the [local government office] to find out about the [district] development plan and budgets?

We see wide cross-country variations in access to information across all four sectors. For example, citizens in São Tomé and Príncipe (78%), eSwatini (78%), and Cabo Verde (73%) think their governments would be generous about providing information on how to launch a business, while only one-third agree in Sierra Leone (33%) and Namibia (30%) (Figure 4).

When it comes to getting information on local government development plans and budgets, majorities are optimistic about getting information in only three countries: Tanzania (59%), Lesotho (51%), and Cabo Verde (50%). Sierra Leone (22%) and Namibia (20%) are again at the bottom of the list, along with Sudan (22%).

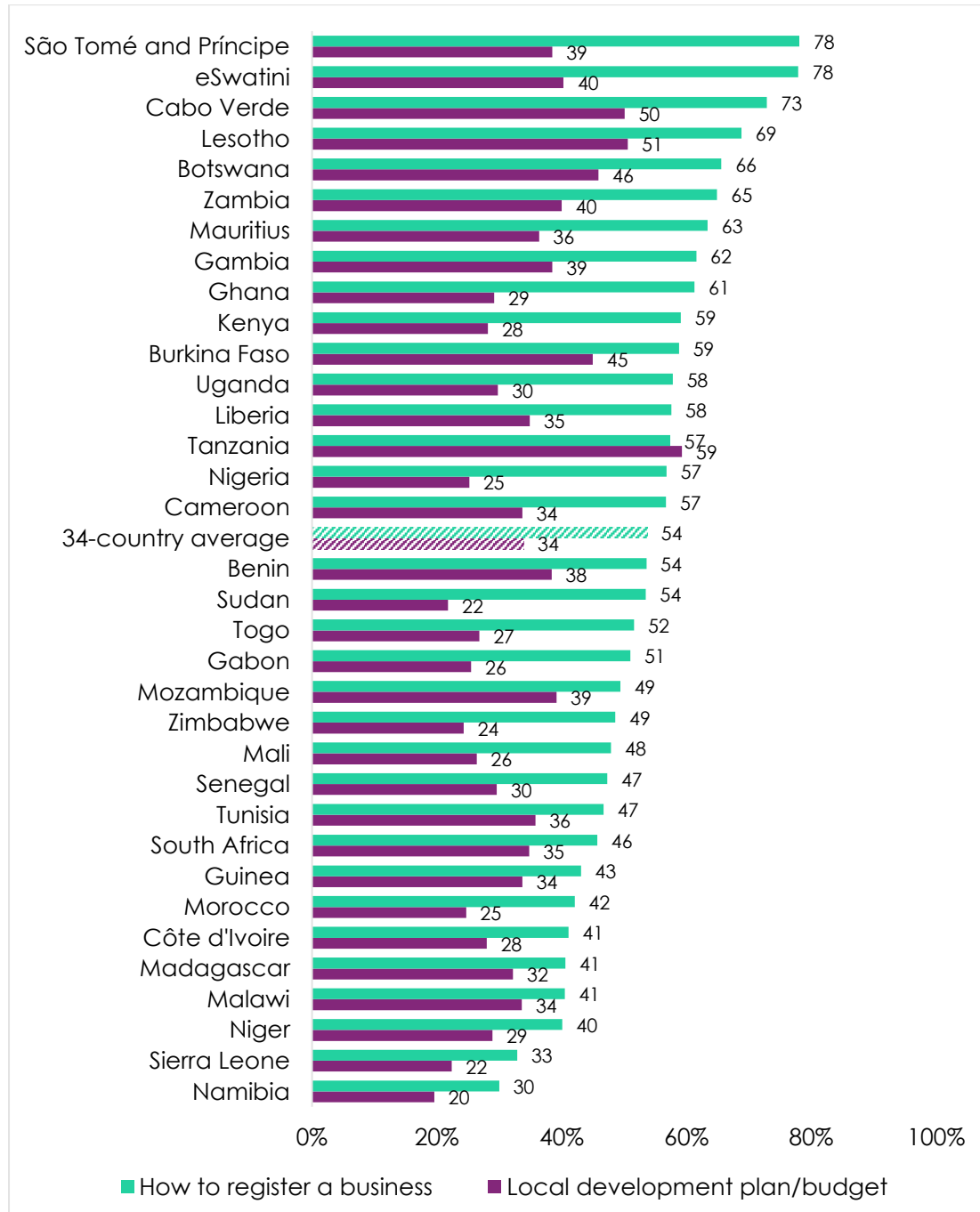
Table 1 summarizes ease of access to information for each country across all four information types, color-coding countries as green if 50% or more think it is likely they could get information and red if fewer than 40% think so. This highlights again the *relative* ease of getting information about starting a business compared to other types of information. But it also reinforces the finding that even when it comes to providing this “unthreatening” type of information, fewer than half of citizens think they would succeed in 14 of 34 countries.

We also note the dearth of green cells in the other three columns – there are very few countries where a majority believe they would be successful in accessing critical social, economic, and development information.

A few countries – particularly Lesotho, Cabo Verde, and Tanzania – stand out as relatively open with all types of information. Others, including São Tomé and Príncipe, Botswana, eSwatini, Gambia, Mauritius, and Ghana, are notably business friendly but appear to otherwise be quite closed.

In stark contrast, Morocco, Sierra Leone, and Namibia are among the countries where citizens believe all types of information are inaccessible.

**Figure 4: Access to information about how to register a business, local development plan and budget | 34 countries | 2016/2018**



**Respondents were asked:** How likely is it that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say:

If you went to the [insert appropriate local government office] to find out how to register a new business in your community?

If you went to the [local government office] to find out about the [district] development plan and budgets?

(% "somewhat likely" or "very likely")

**Table 1: Access to information** | 34 countries | 2016/2018

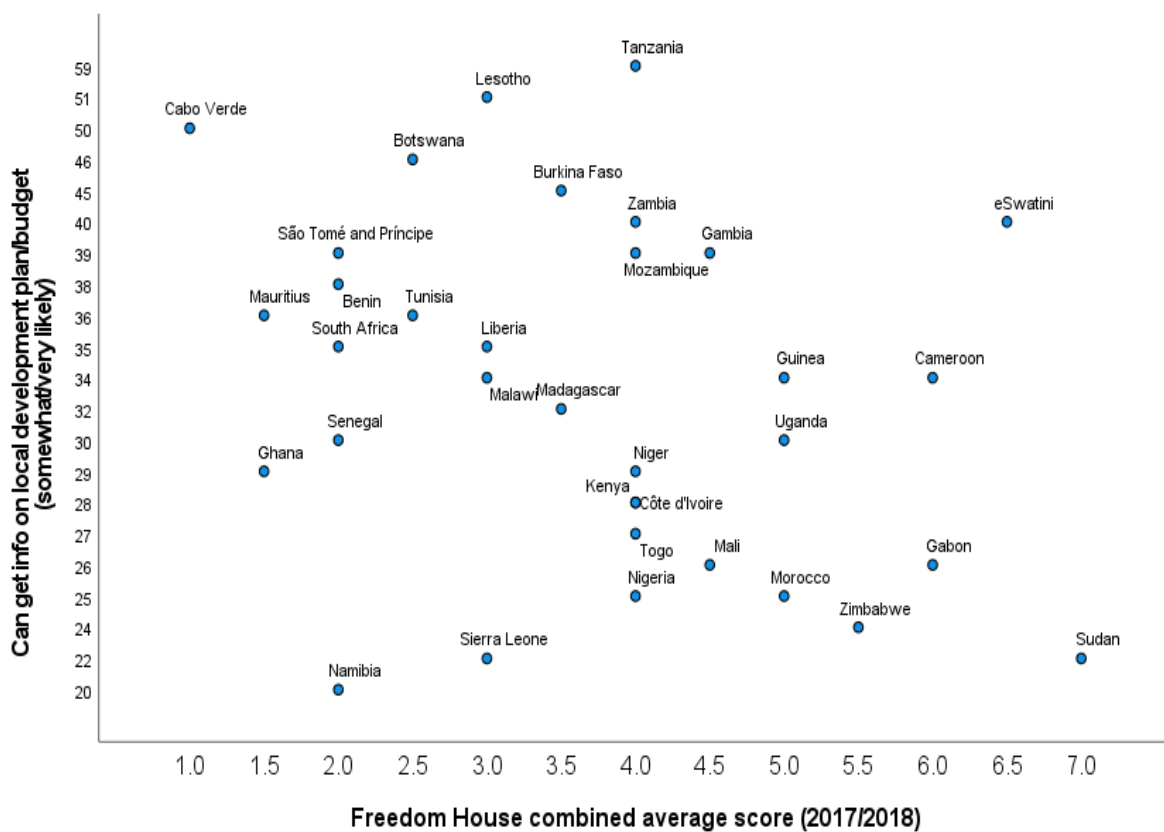
	Find out how to register a new business	Find out who owns a piece of land	Find out school budget and how funds were used	Find out about local development plan and budget
Lesotho	69%	68%	58%	51%
Cabo Verde	73%	58%	55%	50%
Tanzania	57%	49%	57%	59%
São Tomé and Príncipe	78%	43%	39%	39%
Burkina Faso	59%	44%	50%	45%
Zambia	65%	51%	42%	40%
Botswana	66%	42%	40%	46%
eSwatini	78%	41%	33%	40%
Liberia	58%	53%	40%	35%
Gambia	62%	46%	39%	39%
Mauritius	63%	40%	41%	36%
Mozambique	49%	51%	38%	39%
Benin	54%	43%	40%	38%
Kenya	59%	45%	40%	28%
Cameroon	57%	44%	36%	34%
Ghana	61%	46%	34%	29%
Uganda	58%	41%	41%	30%
Madagascar	41%	47%	48%	32%
South Africa	46%	38%	39%	35%
Niger	40%	38%	48%	29%
Guinea	43%	39%	37%	34%
Malawi	41%	39%	40%	34%
Nigeria	57%	38%	29%	25%
Tunisia	47%	39%	27%	36%
Zimbabwe	49%	35%	41%	24%
Togo	52%	37%	32%	27%
Senegal	47%	34%	32%	30%
Gabon	51%	37%	27%	26%
Côte d'Ivoire	41%	34%	34%	28%
Mali	48%	34%	28%	26%
Sudan	54%	28%	33%	22%
Morocco	42%	27%	25%	25%
Sierra Leone	33%	25%	27%	22%
Namibia	30%	23%	24%	20%
<b>34-country average</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>34%</b>
60-70%	50-59%	40-49%	30-39%	20-29%



## Access to information and democracy

One perhaps surprising finding that is evident from Table 1 is that “most democratic” does not necessarily mean “most open.” Namibia, consistently rated as one of the continent’s most democratic countries, solidly occupies the bottom position in terms of perceived openness. In fact, at the country level we find no correlation between extent of democracy (as scored by either Freedom House (2018) or Polity IV (Marshall & Elzinga-Marshall, 2017) and citizen expectations about the accessibility of information (Figure 5). Among the continent’s most democratic countries, Cabo Verde rates as relatively open, Namibia as very closed, and South Africa, Senegal, and Ghana somewhere in between. Meanwhile, much less democratic countries such as Tanzania and Burkina Faso are rated by their citizens as more open. Even eSwatini, one of the least democratic countries on the continent, receives better-than-average ratings from its citizens with respect to access to information.

**Figure 5: Level of democracy and access to information | 34 countries | 2016/2018**



Open-government advocates also debate whether transparency and access to information are associated with greater trust in government or with greater government accountability and lower levels of corruption.

We find some limited evidence of a link between institutional trust and transparency. Greater transparency with regard to school budgets is positively correlated with trust in Parliament and local government councils, although the relationship is not especially strong (Pearson's  $r=.377^*$  and  $.430^*$ , respectively) (Table 2). There is no apparent relationship between transparency about local development plans/budgets and trust in local government, suggesting that overall, the presence or absence of linkages between transparency and trust requires further exploration.



**Table 2: Access to information and trust** | 34 countries | 2016/2018

	Trust (somewhat/a lot)		
	President	Parliament	Local government council
Find out school budget and how funds were used	0.242	.377*	.430*
Find out who owns a piece of land	0.195	0.208	0.175
Find out about local development plan and budget	0.176	0.332	0.257
Find out how to register a business	-0.044	0.059	-0.197

**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

There is stronger evidence, however, of an association between transparency and perceptions of corruption. Higher levels of access to information, both about school budgets and about local government development plans and budgets, are relatively strongly associated with lower levels of perceived corruption among officials in the office of the president, parliamentarians, local government councillors, and government officials (Table 3).

**Table 3: Access to information and perceived corruption** | 34 countries | 2016/2018

	Low corruption (none/some)			
	Office of the president	Members of Parliament	Local government councillors	Government officials
Find out school budget and how funds were used	.547**	.611**	.597**	.555**
Find out who owns a piece of land	0.319	.347*	0.286	0.279
Find out about local development plan and budget	.351*	.513**	.359*	.457**
Find out how to register a business	0.129	0.194	0.073	0.273

**Respondents were asked:** How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).



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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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