
INGSA CASE STUDIES

NJAGALA: YOUTH AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Written by the INGS Africa Steering Committee 2019



NJAGALA

YOUTH AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Background and context

Njagala is a middle-income country in sub-Saharan Africa with an estimated population of 50 million people and GNI per capita of US\$ 3000. The average age of its population is 15.5 years. Its major sources of income are agriculture (bananas and cocoa), mining (diamonds and copper), and tourism (safaris). There is a fast growing IT industry as well with the recent introduction of mobile communication and digital TV in the country. It is a landlocked country that enjoys friendly diplomatic relations with its neighbours, especially those with sea ports.

A recent World Bank study found that over 90% of those who graduated from Njagala's universities with first degrees were unemployed in any of its formal sectors. However, online betting, get-rich-quick schemes, and untaxed online trading were thriving areas of the informal economy that absorbed most of these graduates and other young people. Given that over 95% of the population in Njagala owns a smartphone and that data to access the internet is cheap, most of this kind of trading occurs over social media platforms.

Additionally, there is a presidential and parliamentary election scheduled for September 2019 to choose a new president and members of parliament. The current president, who has ruled the country for the last 32 years and overseen its transition from a low-income country to a lower middle-income country, is aware that his sole opponent is using these same social media platforms to launch an effective campaign against him. That campaign is touching the youthful population in unprecedented way, leading to high youth participation in this and other political processes that had largely been left to older people in the past.

Moreover, with this access to social media, some online schools have opened in the country in order to teach those who cannot afford to physically attend university. These online universities operate with licenses issued in other countries that allow for such education models. Njagala does not issue licenses to online academic institutions although its laws are silent on the validity of academic credentials acquired from online academic institutions. In fact, many cabinet members have earned their advanced degrees from these very institutions and see no reason to revisit that law. Many of those graduating from these online institutions are seen as better placed to take on jobs in the growing IT sector. Those graduates are also challenging other candidates for positions in other practical fields such as agriculture and mining because the online education requires them to complete some practical field work before they are granted their degrees. This practical aspect is not required in Njagala's universities since graduates have always been able to learn on the job after graduation. That education model is now being challenged.

The dilemma

The Government: The President has instituted a 20% Over The Top (OTT) tax on those using social media platforms effective immediately. Other uses of the internet (e.g. email) are not

subject to this tax. The stated reason for this new tax is to increase the amount of domestic tax collected in the country so that it can be invested in the education sector. This move has been welcomed by many business leaders whose market share has been undermined by the informal online trading via social media.

Recent Graduates: A section of vocal recent graduates of Njagala's universities has lodged a legal case against the government for not safeguarding the few jobs available to them upon graduation. They assert that government's silence on the validity of online credentials undermines their ability to get gainful employment in their own country after undertaking the rigorous undergraduate training in their own country's institutions.

Informal Business Leaders: These leaders, who claim to employ the majority of the country's youth, have called upon the government to revisit its position. They have also called upon the population to boycott OTT tax and those businesses that support the government's position. Initially thought of as a publicity stand by the government, the influence of these informal business leaders has been felt in the formal sector as detailed in their projected losses for this fiscal year. Those losses have been attributed to a drastic fall in domestic sales.

The Moralists: There is a powerful lobby that wants to maintain the purity and uprightness of the youth. This group wants all social media platforms to be banned in the country. They claim that beyond betting, social media also promoted prostitution, pornography, the spread of misinformation, and promotes laziness since the youth spend more time on their phones than in other areas.

The Opposition: The opposition candidate and his allies claim that the government's recent move will only last until the end of the election since the youth are now effectively cut off from the political process. All other claims about morality and developing education in the country are fabrications of the government to further disempower the youth.

The Economists: These learned members of the society claim that the economy will suffer dearly in the coming months because of the lost revenue in the formal sector combined with the loss in revenue generated by all the trade in the informal economy. As informal is it is, the production in the informal economy generates income that is channeled back into the formal economy (e.g. through the purchase of airtime and data from cellular companies).

With increasing international attention on Njagala, the negative impact of prolonged legal processes, and credible reports of planned mass protests across the country due to this situation, the President has called upon his independent science advisors to present a viable way forward backed by credible evidence so that his government can formulate a policy to address this matter.

The role of scientific advice

The President has managed to secure an agreement from all the conflicting parties to give one month to these science advisors to formulate their advice. The following questions must be answered in that time:

1. What ethical and moral considerations should be taken into account if a country chooses to allow the use of social media within its borders?

2. How much misinformation is spread through social media and how can that practice be curbed?
3. What are the economic benefits of social media to Njagala?
4. What is the value—in theory and practice—of online education within the context of our country?
5. What legal and regulatory aspects must our country take into consideration with regard to social media?

How should the science advisors go about assembling sound evidence to answer these questions within the timeframe given? You have budget constraints and the number of scientists willing to give vital testimonies to help address these questions are few given the charged political situation in the country.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What principles and guidelines of science advice should be applied in considering this case?
2. What issues should the scientists consider in preparing a report for the President?
3. What perspectives and considerations should be reflected in any advice given? (including steps taken to build evidence)
4. What is the role of the national academy, the science advisor, research institutes, think tanks, civil society, lobbyists, and other interest groups?
5. What might be the limits to the science advisors' role in this case?



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INGSA provides a forum for policy makers, practitioners, academics, and academics to share experience, build capacity and develop theoretical and practical approaches to the use of scientific evidence in informing policy at all levels of government.

INGSA's primary focus is on the place of science in public policy formation, rather than advice on the structure and governance of public science and innovation systems. It operates through:

- Exchanging lessons, evidence and new concepts through conferences, workshops and a website;
- Collaborating with other organisations where there are common or overlapping interests;
- Assisting the development of advisory systems through capacity-building workshops;
- Producing articles and discussion papers based on comparative research into the science and art of scientific advice.

Anyone with an interest in sharing professional experience, building capacity and developing theoretical and practical approaches to government science advice is welcome to join INGSA.

By signing up to the INGSA Network you will receive updates about our news and events and learn of opportunities to get involved in collaborative projects.

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