

Case Study

# Aspect

**Placing people  
at the heart of public  
service delivery**

2021





### **Venture**

SEMA



### **Social science discipline**

Human Rights



### **Aspect Members**

London School of  
Economics and Political  
Science (LSE)



### **Sector**

Government &  
Public Services



### **Route-to-market**

Social Enterprise

# An award winning start-up social enterprise in Uganda is gathering real-time citizen feedback, leading to the improvement of public services

People regularly share experiences of public services but these are rarely heard by the decision makers in public institutions. As a result, governments often lack the data required to enhance their services.



LSE alumni Nathalie Dijkman co-developed an innovative solution with friends Timothy Kakuru, a Ugandan lawyer, and Connor Stately, a US entrepreneur, which would solve this issue, achieve social impact and transform how public services are delivered in East Africa.

Together they co-founded SEMA ('speak!', in Swahili), a not-for-profit social enterprise, which aims to improve the accountability of public institutions, improve public services and have people's voices heard. With core values of integrity, dialogue and excellence, SEMA advocates evidence-based action, applying social science research to the existing challenge in order to create actual change on a local level.

The data-focused project is underpinned by sociological and human rights research and effectively captures citizens' opinions on their last experience at a public office through the 'SEMA System' – a platform which gathers real time feedback via a range of methods:

- a hardware feedback terminal which collects basic, 1-5 satisfaction ratings corresponding with smiley face buttons;;
- a USSD code and a toll free telephone line that citizens can dial from any place of their convenience to give feedback about public service delivery; and
- face to face interviews – providing an added layer of depth and unlocking user stories that drive public service improvements.

Once collated, SEMA provides a data analysis service which informs insightful (monthly) data reports and recommendations to public partners including municipal councils, health centres and police stations to enable them to facilitate improvement.



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**We have seen positive changes at all the stations where SEMA has been working. We would like to see SEMA at many more police stations in Uganda**

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Ochom Edward, Assistant Inspector General of Police, Uganda Police Force



# The impact



- Since its incorporation in February 2018, over 90,000 members of the public have provided their feedback, 26 public offices have been actively engaged and over 192 data reports have been released. Average citizen satisfaction has improved in 67% of the public offices SEMA operates in, and at 80% of offices waiting times have been reduced.
- Receiving funding from the government of Uganda has been a big milestone for the start-up. A government of a low-income country trusting and valuing the services of such a young organisation, and paying for them, is exceptional in the sector. They are also the youngest organisation to win the Anti-Corruption Excellent Award, awarded by the President of Rwanda and the Emir of Qatar in 2018.
- Partnering with both government and private entities has resulted (through procurement and sales) in revenue of 100k EUR; added to grants from donors, SEMA has raised about 350k EUR since it started.

# The start-up journey: key learnings



Nathalie credits being part of LSE Generate which gave the start-up much-needed exposure including the support of LSE Generate mentor, Jacques Steffens, an experienced businessman and a great source of information and valuable advice. In addition to this, Nathalie won the LSE Generate competition and the 2019 Entrepreneur of the Year Award which meant a huge boost towards scaling the social start-up. Using LSE's prize funding to develop a new version of their feedback device, they were able to push for their first sales in the public sector and grow the SEMA team.

Nathalie says:

“

**I have been able to participate in other programmes and activities organised by Generate, such as the female founders' retreat. Transitioning from consultant to entrepreneur can be difficult, and the retreat gave me the opportunity to meet and connect with other female social entrepreneurs, share the challenges we face and celebrate all that is positive. LSE Generate has helped us immensely and I am very grateful to them.”**

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## Key advice:

- Always be open to new experiences, don't be rigid, the next big idea may come from places or situations you never expected.
- Continue to be critical of your own invention: you made a lot of assumptions while building it, and you should be open to the fact that many clients may not want it the way you imagined it. Be open to critique and feedback, and use it to become better.
- Leverage the networks that you have, not only for opportunities but for guidance and advice.

*“An early stage start-up working with government is unique and needed a strong mix of business development skills to secure contracts. We faced a couple of challenges including our lack of knowledge plus Nathalie was often working out of wifi range – not being based in London took some organisation and time management to secure meetings to support the development of the start-up. However, Nathalie was always really efficient which helped with the whole process.*

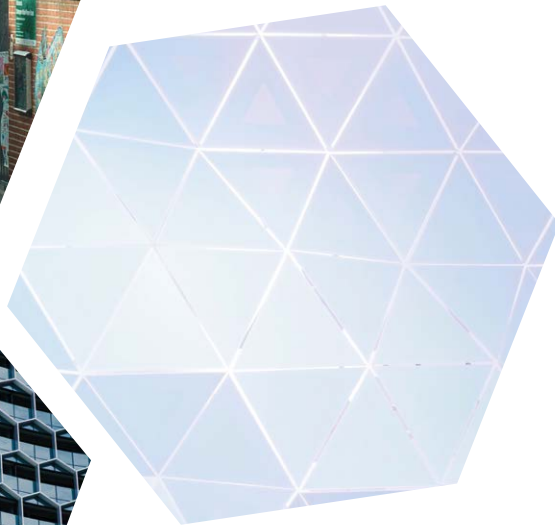
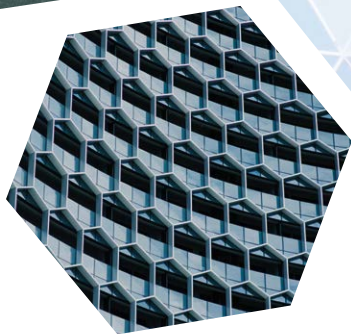
**Later we provided our advice and expertise on the transition from the public sector to the private sector as it is a totally different ballgame so we helped SEMA gauge to what extent this had actually been validated as part of their plan.**

*Nathalie as a founder is such a strong asset, she is very passionate and knows her material, and is definitely the right person to be spearheading this social mission. It is no surprise that she became our EOY in 2019, and she has been so inspiring as an entrepreneur and supporter to new innovators on the LSE entrepreneurship scene.”*

LJ Silverman, Head of LSE Generate,  
LSE Research & Innovation



# What's next for SEMA?



The aim is for all public institutions in East Africa to be using citizen feedback to improve their service delivery by 2030, so that all citizens are treated quickly and fairly. Nathalie recently hired a new Country Director for SEMA in Uganda, which allowed her to take on a part-time role in the management of SEMA. Nathalie is also hoping to apply her experience with SEMA to develop new initiatives in the field of human rights in her home Amsterdam, where she has recently set up the Amsterdam Law Hub – a centre for justice innovation and entrepreneurship at the Amsterdam Law School (University of Amsterdam).

SEMA is looking at a future where citizens believe their feedback can make a change and where governments use citizen feedback to make policy decisions. They recently brought 20 civic leaders together to

discuss ways SEMA can bridge the gap between citizens and the government to improve public service delivery in times of crisis. All these findings and trends have been published in various reports and can be found on their website [www.talktosema.org](http://www.talktosema.org)

They are currently working with a local hardware company to manufacture their feedback devices with recycled plastics. This is also helping to create a sustainable product that is environmentally friendly and creates employment opportunities for youth in East Africa.

SEMA is also preparing to expand their services to other regions of Uganda and the East African region (Kenya, Rwanda) to improve service delivery using a citizen-based approach.



# Background Information



## Nathalie Dijkman



### Role

Chief Executive Officer



### Degree

MSc Human Rights,  
London School of Economics

Nathalie is a social entrepreneur with a background in human rights and development and a passion for creativity in the civic space. She is also Director of the Amsterdam Law Hub.



### Contact

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## Case Study

### Aspect

Transforming Society Through  
Social Science Innovation

Aspect (A Social sciences Platform for Entrepreneurship, Commercialisation and Transformation) is a network for organisations looking to make the most of commercial and business opportunities from social sciences research.

Supported by Research England's Connecting Capability Fund, Aspect members sit at the epicentre of discovery, imagination and progress in the social sciences. We draw together pioneering academics with innovative industry leaders to tackle the most complex societal challenges of our time.



Aspect is funded by Research England's Connecting Capability Fund