

Deepening Social Accountability: How local media are facilitating dialogues for improved authorities' responsiveness and service delivery

The case of 5 Districts in the Upper West Region of Ghana

Summary

An informed citizen is an empowered citizen. Citizens' access to information is critical to promoting transparency and accountability in governance and strengthening democratic systems.

Given the critical role of the media as agenda setters and framers of public discourse, the MFWA in 2017 brokered collaborations and empowered local-based radio stations, Community Based Organisations (CBOS) and Municipal/ District Assemblies in five districts in the Upper West region of Ghana towards information disclosure by local authorities, citizens access to information and improved authorities responsiveness to the development challenges facing local citizens.

The result has been the institutionalization of radio platforms for citizens-authorities engagement, improved proactive information disclosure by local assembly authorities, increased citizens' demand for information, and significant actions by government to resolving specific needs of citizens.

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Hon. Issahaku Moomin, MCE of Wa Municipal Assembly, addressing a community forum at Busa

Project:

Enhancing Public Participation and Demand for Accountability in Local Governance in Ghana

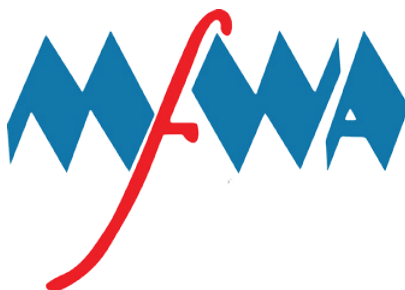
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by



Media Foundation for West Africa

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Introduction

Globally, participatory governance is acknowledged as key for the attainment of sustainable development. In Ghana, citizens' participation in governance, and demand for transparency and accountability are constitutional requirements.

Such constitutional provisions are anchored on the principle that decentralisation and civic participation in governance, particularly at the local levels, help to empower citizens to be part of governance, to demand accountability and engender community ownership and sustainability of development.

In fulfilment of these constitutional provisions, Ghana's Local Governance Act 2016, Act 936 outlines a number of modalities and platforms for citizens' participation in governance at the local level. These include the use of

Information Communication Technology - based platforms, town hall meetings, and Budget preparation/validation fora.

Others are notice boards announcing jobs, appointments, procurement awards and important announcements of public interest, and visits to development project sites. (LG Act of Ghana 2016;1993 <http://lgs.gov.gh/index.php/localgovernance-act-of-2016-act-936/>)

There is evidence to suggest however, that, despite the existence of these platforms, information disclosure by local government authorities and access to information by citizens continue to remain low.

Factors that account for this include illiteracy, inadequate consultation by assembly members, inadequate capacity of district assembly officials to engage community members, dormant area councils and unit committees, and limited advocacy by local-based media (especially radio).



Hon. Saabo Laabir of Wa West District addressing a community forum at Wechau

The media's role in promoting citizens' access to information

A growing body of literature has established the impact of the media on participation, transparency, and ultimately accountability. The media as a result of its agenda setting capability has a key role to play in informing citizens, providing an inclusive and critical platform for public dialogue and debate, stimulating interpersonal communication, and eventually impacting policy-making that benefits a greater number of people.

Social accountability emerges through actions by citizens and civil society organisations, and aims at holding the state to account. The media and its support for citizens' access to information therefore continues to make it (media) one of the most appropriate tools or mechanisms to enhance social accountability.

The media's efforts coupled with that of other actors (CSOs, private sector, donors etc) provide extra efforts of checks and balances on the state in the public interest and helps to, among others, expose instances of corruption, negligence, misapplication and misappropriation of public funds.



Ghana has a vibrant and pluralistic media environment, which when fully utilised can help engender greater citizens' participation and accountability by bridging the gap between local government authorities and their local citizens. The media can provide platforms for community members to question local decision makers and offer their suggestions for local development.

However, the effective utilization of the media as a social accountability tool in promoting the understanding and participation of citizens in governance at the local level is still a critical missing link

Factors accounting for this include the following:

- limited advocacy/public education on the need for citizens to participate in the governance processes and how they can do that;
- limited information about the goings-on in the Assemblies either due to deliberate acts on the part of local leaders or due to limited opportunities for information sharing; limited knowledge and capacity among local-media for effective local governance programming.

This policy brief highlights how local media, with training and support, are facilitating media dialogues for citizens' access to information on governance issues, improved authorities responsiveness and service delivery.

The initiative forms part of the project ***“Enhancing Public Participation and Demand for Accountability in Local Governance in Ghana”*** implemented by the MFWA in five (5) selected districts/

Municipalities - Wa Municipal, Lawra Municipal, Sissala-East Municipal and Wa East, Wa West, Districts in the Upper West region of Ghana with funding support from OSIWA.

The Project Approach

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) brokered collaboration between five (5) local-based radio stations, Municipal/District Assemblies and Community Based Organisations (CBOs), to work together towards enhancing citizens' participation in governance processes and demand accountability from duty bearers at the local level.

The Interactive weekly Radio Programmes

The local-based radio stations - Radio Waa, Radio Upper West, West link Radio, Radio Progress and Radford FM - were trained on how to do effective reporting on local governance.

Subsequent to the training, each partner radio station holds weekly interactive radio programmes of not less than one hour.

Key Project Activities

- *Interactive weekly local governance radio programmes*
- *Quarterly State of the District Radio Broadcasts*
- *Live Broadcast Community Forums Forums*
- *Creation of Facebook pages for local Assemblies*

The programmes feature citizens, Community Based organisations and District Assembly officials to discuss a wide range of issues including sanitation, education and health.

“ Kalsagre CHPS compound has now been connected to the national grid; the ambulance at Dowine which was broken down for some time and posed threats to citizens during emergency situations has been moved for repairs. This is as a result of a sustained campaign we did on these issues on our local governance radio programmes”
- Station manager, West Link FM 88.1, Lawra Municipal Assembly- Philip Bagyo. ”



Assembly Officials in an interactive discussion on Radio Progress

The Quarterly State of the District Radio Broadcasts

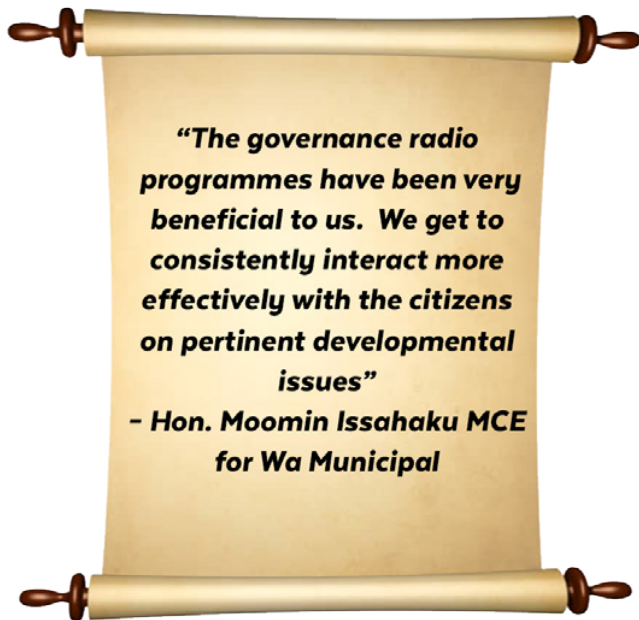
The Municipal/District Chief Executives (MDCEs) get invited to the radio station quarterly for the State of the District Radio Broadcasts. This affords them the opportunity to tell the people what has happened within the Assembly over the quarter.

They get to talk about development projects, funding, disbursements and challenges. Citizens get the opportunity to interact with them through the phone-in segment with questions, concerns and clarification requests moderated by the host of the radio programme.

Before the programme, the radio station researches on pressing issues in the district, and also collates most pressing questions from the people for responses from the MDCE.



Hon. Jotie Moses, DCE of Wa East, giving the state of the district address on Radio Wa



on key developmental issues confronting the district or that specific community in which the town hall meeting is been held.

Local government authorities often leverage on the platforms and the forums to address citizens on developmental projects being undertaken under their stewardship and respond to concerns raised by the citizens. The interactivity between local authorities and citizens at these forums is amplified through a radio broadcast. This helps others to also tune and follow the converstations.

The Live Broadcast Community Forums

The Community Forums draw large crowds of community people – men, women, PWDs, youth etc. The Municipal/District Chief Executive (MCEs or DCEs) as much as possible participates with their team of technocrats, community heads and assemblymen.

The forums also bring together traditional and opinion leaders, women, youth groups, and local government officials to deliberate

“At the community forum in Kowie in the Sissala-East District, the market women requested a market shed. The DCE asked us to submit a budget so I subsequently submitted a budget of GHC4,000 to the DCE. He has approved it for work to start soon. We are happy that RADFORD FM brought the forum to our community”
Assemblyman for Kowie



Mr. Cletus Chevuwe, Assistant District Director of Lawra Municipality, addressing a community forum at kalsagri

Interactive District Facebook Pages

In order to reach out to a wider population including indigenes living outside the district's geographical area, the District/Municipal Assemblies were oriented on the need to include social media in their audience engagement drive and were supported to create official Facebook pages.

Organic likes are building up as partner local assemblies are using the Facebook pages to showcase the various developmental projects being undertaken in the districts/ Municipalities to the citizens within and beyond the district while presenting themselves for questions and clarifications.



Official Facebook page of Lawra Municipal Assembly

Key Milestones

- Institutionalised radio platforms “Time with the Assembly” for consistent engagements with local citizens;
- The institutionalized radio engagement platforms, and District Facebook pages, continue to challenge old attitudes of local authorities that view proactive information disclosure as burdensome and financially constraining on local assemblies;
- Local radio has also amplified and strengthened citizens’ voices on local development issues.

Conclusion

Citizen-authority engagements are key in the democratic processes. The platforms that facilitate these engagement processes need to be strengthened to facilitate dialogue, citizens’ access to information, accountability and transparency.

This policy brief therefore makes the following recommendations for enhancing public participation in governance at the local level in Ghana.

Recommendations

a) Development and Effective Utilization of Inclusive Communication strategies/plans

It was evident from the MFWA’s engagement with the project Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies, the non-existence of a properly documented communication strategy, media-engagement plan or citizen-engagement plan to guide communication and information disclosure within the local assemblies.

The implication is that information disclosure by local authorities often becomes more reactive than proactive.

It is recommended therefore that MMDCEs will develop and implement effective communication strategies that incorporate proper media engagement or citizens-engagement plans in fulfillment of the revised Local Governance Act of 2016.

b) Training for local assembly officials on effective media and citizens-engagement skills

It is also recommended that officials of Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs) be trained and equipped with effective media engagement skills to improve information disclosure and citizens' access to information.

The training should target key officials such as the chief executives, public relations/information officers, and assemblymen who deal directly with citizens.

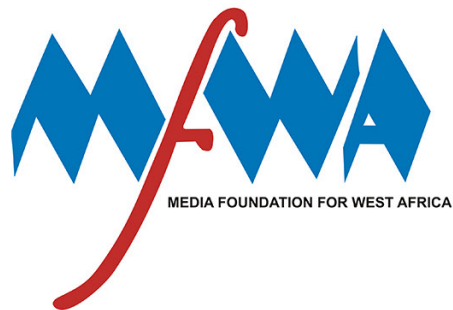
The training should re-orient officials on the need to be more responsive; how to utilize digital platforms like Facebook, handle media interviews and requests,

and citizens' queries on the management and utilisation of public resources within the local assemblies.

c) Capacity building for citizens on effective ways of social media engagements

Given the prospects the District/Municipal Facebook pages can have and recent global online trends in citizens - authorities engagements, it is recommended that citizens are trained on how to use social media platforms as tools for advocacy, authority engagements and dialogue.

Such training should emphasize how to use Facebook posts (text and photos) Facebook live, tags, shares, and other features on the social platform to attract the attention of local authorities.



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