

# Report



## CHALLENGES TO CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN GHANA: THE CASE OF LAWRA MUNICIPAL

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# CHALLENGES TO CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN GHANA: **THE CASE OF LAWRA MUNICIPAL**

*A publication produced under the project “Enhancing public participation and demand for accountability in local governance in Ghana” being implemented in eight municipalities and districts across four (4) regions in Ghana*

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# Introduction

In Ghana, citizens' right to access information, participate in, and demand for transparency and accountability in the provision of goods and services are largely guaranteed under the 1992 constitution. When the country adopted the decentralised system of governance, it was to ensure that more citizens participate and be actively involved in the governance processes.

*"The main objective of the Act is to enable as many Ghanaians as possible to participate in decision making processes which affect their daily lives from the village to the national level and to bring government closer to the doorsteps of the people."* (Local Government Law, Act 462, 1993).

The philosophy of the local governance system is that local participation is key in ensuring sustainable development as a result of ownership of development initiatives. Thus the Local Government Act (Act 963) affirms the importance of local governance for Ghana's development and accordingly established the District, Municipal and Metropolitan Assemblies (MMDAs) as the highest political and administrative authorities at community level.

Over the years, the decentralisation and local governance system has been known to be effective in mobilising indigenous efforts and support for greater impacts of development. The local governance system also creates awareness, and provides relevant policies that directly address the specific needs of members of a specific community.

However, despite the various efforts by Ghana to establish the decentralised system, executive structures and processes, and fiscal support systems, the local government system has not been as effective as it was hoped to be as citizens' participation in local governance processes has remained largely low in many Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs) across the country. The local government system still lags in citizens' participation, access to information and transparency and accountability.

It is regrettable to add that the limited participation of citizens in local governance processes has persisted despite the *Modalities and platforms stipulated in the Local Governance Act 936 of 2016* to improve the situation. Such *Modalities and platforms* include a number of information communication technology-based platforms; town hall meetings; Budget preparation and validation fora; <sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub> notice boards announcing jobs, appointments, procurement awards and other important announcements of public interest; visits to development project sites; and other avenues for the participation of the people. <sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub>

This baseline study highlights the challenges/barriers to citizens' participation in local governance in Ghana, the specific case of the Lawra Municipal and recommendations in addressing the challenges. It forms part of activities by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) under its project **"Enhancing public participation and demand for accountability in local governance in Ghana"**. The project is being implemented in eight municipalities and districts across four (4) regions in Ghana namely; Lawra Municipal, Wa West District, Wa East District, Wa Municipal and Sissala East Municipal (Upper West Region); West Mamprusi District (Northern Region), Ellembele District (Western Region) and Twifo Atti-Mokwa (Central Region).

The project seeks to strengthen the capacity of target MMDAs on public and media engagement on governance issues. Local assemblies are also supported to develop media and communication strategies for effective communication outreach with their constituents; deploy District Facebook pages that have been created under previous projects as effective tools for public outreach and engagement with both resident and non-resident citizens on governance issues. The project also provides traditional media platforms especially radio to enhance interaction between citizens and local authorities in eight districts across the country (live broadcast town hall meetings and interactive regular radio programmes).

*The project is supported by STAR-Ghana.*

## **The Local Government System in Ghana**

The constitution of Ghana establishes the local system as “measures to ensure administrative and financial decentralisation and to give opportunities to people to participate in decision-making at every level in national life and government.” (Article 35, clause 6d). It also established the District Assemblies’ Common Fund (DACF) which receives 10% of total government revenues for the effective running of the system.

### **Structure of the Local Government**

The assemblies which are the highest units of local government are in three types namely the Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs). Currently in Ghana, there are six Metropolitan, 56 Municipal and 154 District Assemblies in Ghana. There are also sub-district political and administrative structures which are subordinate bodies of the Assemblies. These include sub-metropolitan, district, urban, town, zonal and area councils, and unit committees.

The metropolitan assemblies cover urban areas with populations of over 250,000 whereas Municipal Assemblies are single-town councils with populations of 95,000 or more. The District Assemblies cover a wider geographical area combining rural areas and small towns. The metropolitan structure is four-tiered while the municipal and district assemblies have a three-tiered system. The lower tiers are called sub-structures and comprise town, area, zone and units.

### **The Assemblies System in Ghana**

Despite having different tiers, the metropolitan, municipal and district Assemblies all have the same internal political structures. The political/administrative head in each MMDA is the Metropolitan/Municipal/District Chief Executive (MCE/DCE). The MCE/DCE is responsible for the executive and administrative functions of the Assembly. He/she is also the chief representative of the national government in the district.

Seventy percent of the members of MMDAs are elected by the citizens or members of the community whilst 30% are appointed by the president on the basis of their experience and specialised expertise.

The Members of Parliament representing constituencies in each MMDA are ex-officio members of the Assembly. The Assembly is required to meet at least three times each year. The meetings are led by an executive committee comprising not more than one-third of all assembly members, which reports to the assembly.

The executive committee has a number of sub-committees which makes recommendations to it. Some of the committees include the development planning, social services, works, justice and

security and finance. All assembly members must sit on at least one sub-committee, with the exception of the Chairperson.

## **The Sub-Structures of the Assembly**

The Sub-structures of Assemblies comprise the town council, area council, zonal council and unit committees. These committees and councils do not hold any legislative or rating powers. The town, area, zonal councils are composed of five representatives of the district assembly, ten representatives of unit committees in the area and five persons appointed by the government. They are delegated tasks by the assemblies. The intermediate-tier councils and unit committees are composed of representatives of the district assemblies.

Also, the unit committee which is the lowest level of the structure have both elected and appointed members. There are around 16,000 unit committees countrywide.

## Profile of Lawra Municipal Assembly

The Lawra Municipal is one of the eleven districts in the Upper West Region and was created by L.I. 1434 of 1988 (PNDCL 207, Act 462). Lawra is the Municipal capital. It lies in the north-western corner of the Upper West Region and shares boundaries with Nandom District on the north, Lambussie-Karni District on the east and to the southwest and west by the Republic of Burkina Faso. It lies between latitudes 10°20' N and 11°00' N and longitudes 2°25' W and 2°45' W. It has a total area of 527.37Km<sup>2</sup> which is approximately 2.8% of the Region's total land area of 18,476 Km<sup>2</sup>. The district has over 80.0% of its inhabitants living in the rural areas. The population density of the district is 104.1/ Km<sup>2</sup> (GSS, 2010).

## Demographics

The total population of the Municipality as recorded in the 2010 Population and Housing Census (PHC) is 54,889, about 7.8% of the population of the Upper West Region (GSS, 2010). It has more females (52.0%) than males (48.0%). Out of its overall population, 48,397, representing 88.2% are rural dwellers while the remaining 6,492 (11.8%) are urban dwellers. The spatial distribution of the population is a proof that Lawra District is predominantly rural. This is slightly higher than the proportion (83.7%) of the entire region.

The pattern of age distribution in the district is quite consistent with the national pattern where a significant proportion is below 15 years and a small proportion of elderly persons aged 65 years and older. It is expedient to note that the youthfulness of every population has certain accompanying burden on it. In the Lawra Municipal, children aged less than five years constitute 13.0% of the total population and those aged constitute less than 15 years representing 41.0%. In addition, inhabitants aged between 15 and 39 years constitute 34.5% while senior citizens (65+) constitute a mere 7.4% of the district's population.

Agriculture is the major economic activity, employing about 78.0% of the working population. About 80.0% of the farmers are engaged in subsistence agriculture, producing mainly maize, millet, groundnuts, soya bean and cowpea. Animal husbandry is a major agricultural activity undertaken to diversify their sources of income.

Residents of Lawra Municipal also yearn for education. Even though insignificant, 19,878 persons aged three years and older are either currently in school or have been to school in the past. Out of this number, more than one-half (53.7%) have primary education, followed by junior high school (19.5%) and nursery (10.6%). Less than one percent (0.6%), of the people in the district have ever attended vocational, technical or commercial school while 0.4% and 0.6% attended post middle/secondary and tertiary levels of education respectively.

On communication needs, 19.3% of 12-year-olds and older (66.7%), own mobile phones. This is slightly less than the regional proportion of 21.7%. More than one-quarter (27.7%) of males aged 12 years and older own mobile phones compared to 12.2% of female.



## Political Administration

The Lawra Municipal Assembly, just like any other assembly, is the recognised highest political and administrative body in the district and responsible for making decisions. It is made up of forty-four (44) members out of which twenty-nine (29) are elected and thirteen (13) are appointees. One out of the 29 elected members is a female (3.5%) and out of the 13 appointees, five are females (38.5%). The MCE and the Member of Parliament (MP) add up to the number 44.

It is bound by law to be the initiator and implementer of all major projects within its jurisdiction. Section 10 of the Local Government Act enjoins the assembly to exercise deliberative, legislative and executive functions as may be necessary for the survival of the district. Thus, as succinctly stated above, it is the authority responsible for the overall development of the district through the formulation and implementation of development plans, programmes and projects. The district administrative system comprises the Municipal Assembly, Secretariat, Departments of the Municipal Assembly, four sub-districts (Lawra Town Council, Babile, Zambo and Eremon Area Councils) and the Unit Committees. Traditional administration is under the Lawra Traditional Council.

# Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted to identify the challenges to citizens' participation in local governance. The qualitative research strategy was chosen because it afforded much flexibility in assessing the subject matter from different experiences, nuances and subjective views of the respondents.

Data was collected using in-depth interviews. Key informant interviews were conducted with individuals and groups of people who by virtue of their positions and roles in the communities are deemed to have a depth of understanding of activities in the community and its people.

Also, the study adopted a purposive sampling method in choosing the respondents. This is because the researcher aimed at collecting information from respondents who were well-informed and understood the terrain, the practices, the history and background on citizen's participation in local governance in Lawra Municipal Assembly.

The researcher interviewed key stakeholders in the local governance system in the municipality. They include:

The Assemblies

Civil Society Organisations/Community-Based Organisations

Citizens

Local-based Media

In total, nine key informants were interviewed in the Lawra Municipal. The following were the key informants who were interviewed.

Key Informant	Position
D1	District Chief Executive
D2	District Coordinating Director
D3	Information Officer
A1	Assemblyman, Touri Electoral Area
K1	Opinion Leader in Community
K2	Opinion Leader in Community
K3	Opinion Leader in Community
C1	Officer of Community-based Organisation
R1	General Manager of Community Radio

## KEY FINDINGS

### a) Extreme Partisanship of the Municipal Assembly

Despite the local government system being established to be a non-partisan decentralised form of government to the local community members, the study realised the extreme form of partisanship among the structures of the district assembly. The partisanship, some key informant maintained, sometimes begins from the office of the Municipal Chief Executive (MCE) who has been appointed by his party, the ruling government, and hence owns certain deep-seated loyalty to members of the party rather than to every citizen in the district.

*“The moment a DCE or MCE is appointed he sees himself that he has been given a job by his party, so that immediately kick-starts partisanship instead of popular participation. So, he begins to liaise with the citizens based on the colours they are linked to not based on the generality of the people he’s supposed to serve. And that’s what I have realised across this municipality and many others in this area.” C1*

The District Coordination Director also indicated that the partisanship is prevalent among the community members of the districts who pledge support and participation to the activities of the districts based on their political affiliation.

*“Most of them take issues on political basis. So, when you call them those who are not with the incumbent government feels it’s for those within. We are doing our best to sensitise them for them to really know that when we are engaging them for some of these processes it’s purely for the development agenda of the municipality.” D2*

### b) Expensive Engagement Due to NGOs Activities

There are many NGOs and civil society organisations operating in the Lawra Municipality and the Upper West Region in general. The NGOs who are donor funded often offer community members tokens of cash or kind when they hold meetings with them. This has become a standard expectation for many citizens and therefore they expect the district assemblies to do same during their meetings. This has made meetings of engagement with the communities expensive for the municipal assemblies. In many cases the assembly have not been able meet expectations; this has resulted in low interest and participation.

*“In the north there are NGOs who also organise meetings. Any meeting they hold, community members are given some snippets [money]; for ours it is not there so when you call a meeting and they come and you give them nothing, the next time when you call, they won’t come.” D1*

This was further re-echoed by an assemblyman in one of the electoral areas in Lawra, the district capital.

*“At times when you call for a meeting they won’t come. Their reason being that, when they come they expect that you give them water or even food.” A1*

### c) Low Enthusiasm of Municipal Assembly’s Activities among Citizens owing to Undelivered Promises

The respondents indicate the administration of the District Assemblies of the municipality is fairly responsive to the enquiries and request for information from the citizenry and the media. However, the authorities have failed over the years to deliver many of their development needs making the community less enthusiastic or passionate about their activities.

*“It is not just enough to be responsive in terms of availing yourself. But if we call you to discuss an issue, how responsive are you equally in the deliverables? You give us access to talk to you; to talk to us but the challenges, how are they addressed? That is one of the biggest challenges we have. We want to see ourselves equally achieving some results.” R1*

An opinion leader in the community also shared similar sentiments about the District Assembly, indicating that many of the citizens have withdrawn from the District Assembly activities because they don’t see progress.

*“Well, at times people don’t attend [district assembly meetings] because when you go there and raise an issue they will not take it seriously, that is why people feel reluctant to go and raise issues concerning problems of the community. So they will say they working on it but we don’t see any progress.” K2*

#### **d) Authorities’ High Apprehension of the Media**

Despite being responsive, some of the community radio stations and community indicate that there is some level of apprehension among the department heads of the assembly, and occasionally the MCE, towards the media. Therefore, in situations where the radio stations want to seek information from the authorities acting on the concerns raised by the citizens, they are met with blockades.

*“Authorities are highly apprehensive of the media. Unfortunately, because of the type of political environment we have, it doesn’t matter the genuineness of media to the issue; somebody thinks that somebody want to make political capital out of an issue. So, you go here and you hit back and come.” R1*

## Recommendation

In order to surmount the challenges to improve the citizens' participation in local governance in Lawra Municipality, the following is recommended:

- For the local governance system to be truly effective, the central government of Ghana must ensure a completely independent and autonomous system. This can partly be achieved through the elections of the District Chief Executives by the community members themselves. This will generate internal interest and promote ownership of the District Assemblies among the citizens.
- These proposed elections must be divorced off the usual political or partisanship but promote individuals to sell locally-relevant ideas and policies aimed at seeking development to community members.
- There is the need for proper civic and political rights education among citizens to ensure a better understanding of the process, the mandate and even the challenges of the local governance system as this will inform their expectations and support for the system and not consider it as another activity of an NGO that must provide them with financial tokens.
- The role of the media, especially the community-based radio stations, must be properly appreciated among the leadership of the Assemblies as key partners to the development of the district. The leadership of the District Assembly must be trained on how to engage the media and provide information to the public.
- There is also the need to build the capacity of the journalists on professional means to acquiring from authorities and disseminating same to the expectant audience.

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