

# Report



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

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# CHALLENGES TO CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN GHANA: **THE CASE OF SISSALA EAST 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 Sissala East 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 Sissale East Municipal

The Sissala-East Municipal Assembly was created as a District by LI 1766 in 2004 with Tumu as the then District capital. The district is located in the north-eastern part of the Upper West Region and It lies between longitudes 1°.30" W and latitude 10°00" N and 11°00" N. It shares a boundary on the north with Burkina Faso, on the east with Kassena Nankana West and Builsa Districts, to the southeast with West Mamprusi District, southwest with Wa East and Daffiama-Bussie-Issah Districts and to the west by Sissala-West District. Sissala-East Municipal has a total land size of 5,092.8Km<sup>2</sup> representing 26.7% of the total landmass of the Upper West region.

## Demographics

Sissala East Municipal has a population of 56,528 representing 8.1% of the region's total population. Males constitute 48.7% and females constitute 51.3%. Majority (81.2%) of the population are rural dwellers while the remaining 18.8% are urban dwellers. This confirms that the Municipality is predominantly rural. The total age dependency ratio for the District is 87.3, the dependency ratios for urban and rural are 65.2 and 93.2 respectively. There is a sex ratio of 94.8, indicating that for every 100 females in the district, there are approximately 95 males. This figure is a little above the regional sex ratio of 94.5. The 5-9-year age group has the highest population representing 15.2% and age group 80-84 year group constitutes the least population of 0.8%.

The Municipality has 32,892 of its entire population aged 15 and above who are also considered able to engage in economic activities. Out of this figure, 74.2% are economically active, with 77.5% for male and 71.4% for females. Out of the total economically active population, 98.0% are employed. Agriculture is the major occupation in the district with forestry and fishery constituting a whopping 83.5%. The proportion of inhabitants engaged in service and sales is just 5.3% and 0.8% are into managerial roles.

Sissala East Municipal has more than half (52.6%) receiving primary education of its entire population and 17.9% receiving junior high school education. In addition, 19.7% are in pre-school (nursery and kindergarten) and 1.8% are in tertiary institutions. There is, however, no significant difference between the sexes at the various levels of education except those in vocational/technical and tertiary institutions where the proportions of females slightly outweigh those of the males.

Mobile phone ownership and Internet usage among inhabitants aged 12 years and above is not encouraging as 21.0% of the target population own mobile phones in the district.

## Social and Cultural Structure

The people in the Sissala East District hold on to a dynamic culture. By their culture, they aim at establishing linkages with their history and present life. Naaba Gbiele is an annual festival celebrated by the people. It is one of the positive practices they are proud of.

Also, a number of tourism potentials have been discovered. Some are the Slave Market at Kasena; the Wotuomo Cave located between Dangi and Lilixia; the Mysterious Rocks at Pieng; the Hunter's Footprints found at Dolibizon; the Mysterious River at Nmanduanu. There are two



chieftaincy divisions in the district - Tumu and Wellembele. For harmony, the two divisions have had to collaborate for the initiation and implementation of developments. They have also merged the two divisions into Sissala East Traditional Council. Consequently, this has resulted in a cordial relationship with the district assembly.

## **Political Administration**

The assembly is the political and administrative head of the Municipality. Thus, by the power vested in it, it is the highest decision-making body and formulates all policies and programmes of the Municipality. It consists of the Municipal Assembly and its Secretariat, departments, one Town Council (in Tumu), four Area Councils (Wellembele, Bujan, Sakai and Nabulo). In addition to these are twenty-one (21) Unit Committees. The Assembly is manned by twenty-five (25) Assemblymen and seven (seven) Assemblywomen.

# 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.

The study adopted focus group discussion as a method for gathering data. A focus group is a gathering of deliberately selected people with similar background or interest who participate in a planned discussion that is intended to elicit [perceptions](#) about a particular topic or area of interest in an environment.

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 Sissala-East Municipal Assembly.

The researcher gathered information from 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 for Sissala-East Municipal, 5 key informants were interviewed. The following were the key informants who were interviewed.

Key Informant	Position
D6	Officer at the Assembly
K1	Opinion Leader in Community
K2	Opinion Leader in Community
C1	Officer of Community-based Organisation
R1	Assistant Programmes Manager of Community Radio

The focus group discussion was held among groups of women in the communities and key personalities from the Municipal Assembly including the Municipal Chief Executive, Municipal Coordinating Director, Information Officer, Head of Agricultural Department and Head of Human Resource Department.

<b>Group</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Personalities of the Municipal Assembly	10
Women Group	12

The researcher together with an assistant recorded interviews with the key informants and the discussions of the focus groups on a digital recorder. The conversations were later transcribed and analysed. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from the interviews—tracing themes, patterns and structures which were merged into categories of similar content that responded to the objective of the study.

# KEY FINDINGS

## **a) Weak and Ineffective Structures of the District Assemblies**

There appears to be an outright botched system of the structures of the local governance in the Sissala-East Municipality. Almost all respondents agree to a malfunctioning system saddled with problems of absent mechanisms that support the structures, weak sub-structures of the local government, problems associated with human resource, lack of logistics and resources for the officers to operate with. The only functioning body of the Assembly is the administration or the secretariat which is stationed in Tumu, the Municipal capital.

Opinion leaders across many of the communities complained of an almost non-existing assemblymen/assemblywomen and unit committee members. Community members also bemoaned of developmental gaps, information flow setbacks and promises that authorities have failed to deliver. The officers of the sub-structures on the other hand are volunteers working with the local government in their spare time with no support. Thus, when they get occupied with their own work, they neglect the work of the Assembly.

## **b) Low Level of Participation Due to Status Differences**

There are high levels of poverty and inequality among citizens in the Sissala-East Municipal Assembly. Thus, there is a gaping difference in status between an officer from the Municipal Assembly office and an average community member. This means that on the few occasions when the MCE or officers of the Assembly visit the communities, citizens out of deference, respect the status difference and do not openly engage with the authorities despite having very pressing concerns.

*“You call people and tell them you want to get their views about whatever you are going to do and you will think that instantly they will be able to contribute. So, they will come and sit. Any question? You won’t get a positive response. But at the end of the day when they get up you would realise that what has been presented is has not gone down well with the people,”* one of the personalities in the municipal assembly focus group discussion said.

## **c) Poor Road Networks Prevents Accessibility**

Poor and non-motorable roads are a major development gap in the Assembly. Movement across the Assembly is therefore extremely difficult also particularly because communities are wide apart. The effect of this for citizens’ participation is that many communities are side-lined by authorities due to the difficulty in accessing them. The MCE of the assembly intimated that indeed there are some communities that are ostracised.

*“The road network is very bad. As we speak some of the communities you cannot get access to them...some of the communities whether you like it or not naturally they are cut off.”*

#### **d) Politicisation of the Municipal Assembly Activity/Projects**

Also, many community members approach the activities of the assembly with very partisan perspectives. They consider the district assembly an extension of party politics so when the MCE does not belong to their political party, they will not participate or provide support for projects of the assembly.

*“Sissala East has been swallowed in politics and some people think that my party won and your party lost some of them find it difficult to meet [engage] with the MCE. Even when the MP is around it will take a few people who will have that bold step to meet the MP or MCE. They think that it is this party so he is working with that party members.” R1*

At best the only form of participation for members who do not belong to the same party with the MCE is calling or contributing on issues of the assembly on community radio stations with so much antagonism and dissent that gives a bad image of the MCE.

## Recommendations

The study makes the following recommendations to the observed challenges to citizens' participation in the local governance in the Sissala East municipal assembly:

1. There is the need for an overall revamping of the assembly structure in the Sissala-East Assembly as the structures merely exist in name and not for the purpose it was established to achieve. There must be capacity building, education and training of all members or officials of the local governance system, beginning from the office of the MCE to the Unit Committee officers on their roles, mandates and how to effectively use their offices to ensure citizens' participation.
2. Also, it is recommended a wide sensitisation exercise is organised across all the communities in the Assembly in educating the citizens of the rationale of the local governance system, its significance and roles they have to play to ensure its success.
3. The municipal assembly is clearly challenged or have huge developmental setbacks which constraint engagement even when the officers of the assembly are willing to facilitate. The poor feeder roads of the municipal, for instance, is a major impediment to any form of effective engagement. Unfortunately, the revenue allocated to the assembly and their own Internally Generated Funds (IGF) are not enough to solve these problems. It is recommended therefore that the central government focuses on fixing the road systems of the assembly to the point that facilitates easy movement for effective citizens-authority engagement.

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