



# **POLICY BRIEF**

**December, 2017**

**Promoting Citizens' Participation in Local  
Governance through Increased Access to  
Information**

**No.2**

*Highlights from MFWA's Media and  
Governance Intervention in  
Tema Metropolitan, Wa Municipal,  
Ellembelle and Twifo Atti-Morkwa Districts*

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# INTRODUCTION

**T**he inclusion of citizens in the political process is an essential part of democracy and also critical for sustainable development. Citizens' access to relevant and timely information on the management, utilisation and distribution of public resources help to ensure accountability, transparency and access to improved service delivery. Accordingly, around the world, several strategies and frameworks have been designed to facilitate citizens' participation in governance both at the national and local levels.

In Ghana, Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies (MMDAs) are the major instruments of local governance. District Assemblies perform executive, deliberative and technical support services to transform local aspirations into socio-economic development, all in a participatory manner. They perform these functions through sub-district structures like Urban, Town/Area Councils and Unit Committees.

To ensure that governance at the local level is inclusive and participatory, there exist several platforms to facilitate citizens-authorities engagements. These platforms include citizens' participation in election and referenda, citizens' consultation by Assembly members, participatory planning and budgeting, district assembly public hearing/meetings, public relations and complaints committee.

There is however, evidence to suggest 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).

A 2014 study conducted by the MFWA on the Assessment of the Current level of Citizens'-Local Authorities' Engagement on Revenue Inflow and Expenditure in selected Districts in Northern Ghana, found that radio was the most prevalent and effective platform of engagement between assembly authorities and community members compared to other available channels. The study also indicated that none of the studied assemblies had a blueprint media engagement plan even though they all indicated that the media was helpful and that they engage the media frequently.

Thus, in 2017, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) under its Media and Governance Programme carried out an intervention to help improve citizens-local authorities' engagement on local governance. The project "Promoting Citizens' Participation in Local Governance through Increased Access to Information", was aimed at increasing citizens' access to information and improve information disclosure and responsiveness by local assembly authorities.

Ultimately the project implemented in four districts across Ghana ensured that the public in Wa Municipal (Upper West region), Tema Metropolitan (Greater Accra region), Twifo Atti-Morkwa (Central

region) and Ellembelle districts (Western region) actively sought and received information as well as participated in local governance processes.

This Policy Brief presents highlights of the participatory governance intervention implemented by the MFWA with funding support from the DW Akademie.

Promoting Citizens' Participation in Local Governance through Increased Access to Information.

## **A) Key activities implemented under the Project:**

- Institutionalised Interactive weekly local governance radio programmes which featured assembly officials on air to discuss the work of the assembly, and issues of local development.
- Capacity building workshops for officials of the target district assemblies on how to deal with citizens' requests and also communicate professionally with the media.
- Training of journalists on how to institute special programmes for dialogue, access to information and research on service delivery
- Training of citizen journalists on how to use social and other media platforms to engage local authorities on development issues in their communities.
- District Governance/Town Hall Meetings which provided platforms for the citizens to directly engage their local

- authorities on pressing development issues for immediate response and further action. These forums are carried live on partner radio stations and this allowed for wide coverage of information.

## **B) Key Milestones and Results:**

- Fifty assembly officials received enhanced knowledge and skills to deal with citizens' requests and engage professionally with the media in information disclosure to citizens.
- Fifty journalists received training and have instituted interactive weekly local governance radio programmes, which feature assembly officials on air to discuss the work of the assembly, and issues of local development.
- Forty young and vibrant youth received enhanced skills to engage local authorities on local development issues through the use of social and other media platforms.
- Broadcast of weekly interactive local governance radio programmes that featured assembly officials on air to discuss the work of the assembly and issues of local development.
- Increased coverage of local governance issues by the local-based media - About 200,000 citizens across the project districts received regular information and updates on local development issues through the broadcast of weekly interactive local governance radio programmes that featured assembly officials on air to discuss issues of

local development. The citizens also had the opportunity to question them through phone –ins.

- Increased responsiveness by local assembly officials – some assembly officials established complaint units to deal with queries and questions from citizens. For example, the Ellembelle district assembly has created a separate desk to respond to community citizens’ requests. Twifo Atti-Morkwa has instituted quarterly unit committee level engagement to discuss development needs and prospects
- Project districts were supported to create Facebook pages while some project Districts have also revived theirs.

# HIGHLIGHTS OF THE KEY ACTIVITIES

## A. Building linkages to improve citizens participation in local governance

The MFWA brokered collaboration with key actors in the local governance space in the four project districts. These were the Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies, local-based Radio Stations and Community Based Organisations. Partners demonstrated their commitment to promoting citizens' participation in local governance by signing Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs).



*A group photograph of stakeholders after a meeting at Twifo Atti-Morkwa in the Central region of Ghana*

## B. Training of journalists for effective local governance reporting

Fifty journalists drawn from the project districts received training on effective local governance reporting and how to institute special programmes and research on service delivery. Other areas covered under the training included the role of journalists in a democratic society, media ethics, the journalists' rights, duties and challenges in accessing public information and investigative journalism.



*Some journalists in a mock interview session at the training workshop at Ellebelle in the Western region of Ghana*

## C. Training of District Assembly Officials on skills for effective information disclosure

Fifty officials from the targeted districts received enhanced skills to professionally communicate with the media and community citizens. The training also provided opportunities for the Assembly officials to appreciate the importance of working with the media to make information public and involve the local citizenry in the formulation of policies.



*Some officials of the Wa Municipal Assembly listening to the trainer at the training in Wa in the Upper West District of Ghana*

## D. Training of Citizen Journalists

Forty community citizens across the project districts were trained on how to effectively engage and mobilise community members towards a shared local development agenda. Participants were introduced to the concepts of citizen journalism, communication skills, sources of news, fact-checking, specialized journalistic writing and the use of social media tools to tell impacting stories from the communities.



*Cross-section of citizen journalists at the training in Tema in the Greater Accra region of Ghana*

## E. Governance Forums/Town Hall Meetings

The Governance Forum/Town hall meetings were attended by the local government officials (specifically MMDCEs), traditional authorities, local and community citizens. Hundreds of citizens engaged the local authorities in a face-to-face interaction on community challenges while the authorities provided responses to the several questions asked.



*A market woman asking the local assembly to construct a market for the Busa community in Wa in the Upper West region of Ghana*



*Cross-section of participants at the town hall meeting in Twifo Atti-Morkwa in the Central region of Ghana*

## F. Weekly Interactive Local Governance Radio Programmes

The weekly local governance radio programmes highlighted and discussed issues of local governance, local development including the work of the local assemblies, revenue mobilization, projects and the medium term development plans and other social issues. It featured local assembly officials, opinion leaders, CSOs and citizens. The phone lines are opened during the discussions to allow citizens to call into the programmes to make contributions and/or seek clarification or answers to requests.



*L-R: Mr. James Donkor (PRO) and Mr Abdul Kadir Salam (Coordinating Director) of the Wa Municipal Assembly featuring in one of the local governance radio programme on Radio PROGRESS in Wa in the Upper West region of Ghana*

# CHALLENGES TO CITIZENS' ACCESS TO INFORMATION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

It is often taken for granted that moving government closer to local people will invariably translate into constant and seamless interactions and information flow. However, past experience including those gathered from the Twifo Atti-Morkwa, Ellembelle, Wa and Tema districts show that deep social, economic and political challenges inhibit this process.

**A) Orientation of local Assembly officials:** In spite of the many citizens-engagement platforms provided by the Local Governance Act 936 such as the public relations and complaints committee, a number of local assembly officials still do not appreciate or are reluctant to prioritise the platforms for information disclosure to citizens.

**Inadequate Information and Capacities of District Officials:** The information and requisite skills to facilitate citizens' access to information and participation are limited at the District Assembly level and at both the Area Council and Unit Committee levels. For instance, information about the District Assembly Common Fund (DACF) and competencies in participatory development planning and implementation are not readily available.

**Inadequate Consultation by Assembly Members:** Ideally, Assembly Members are to meet their community members

both before and after Assembly meetings. This is to ensure that community members are at all times correctly represented and accounted to. Unfortunately, most Assembly Members do not perform this function due to budgetary constraints.

**Dormant Area Councils and Unit Committees:** Though these sub-structures of the District Assemblies were set up to facilitate the decentralisation objective of the state, mobilise the local community and make local development plans, they have generally proved ineffective. Poorly motivated and skilled officials coupled with apathy among the local populace turn these normatively important structures into mere shadows of themselves.

**Limited advocacy by the media:** Due to limited knowledge and resources, local media houses (especially, radio stations) are unable to provide strong advocacy and programming on local governance issues. This leaves a wide information and accountability gap between local officials and the communities they serve.

# IMPROVING PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE AND CITIZENS' ACCESS TO INFORMATION

## Key Recommendations:

Government, community citizens, the media and civil society organisations are some of the key stakeholders in local governance who must take action to support citizens' access to information and participation. The following recommendations target these critical groups in the local governance space. It must be emphasised however that in reality, most of the efforts require collaboration to be effective.

## Government

- Government should restructure the participatory planning and budgeting space. Citizens at the grassroots must be informed about the budgetary cycle, their role in it, and be given enough time to contribute to it. Also, the Ministry of Finance should approve funding for local budgets, only after the local authority has shown proof of public consultation.
- The government should accelerate efforts to initiate the election of Metropolitan/Municipal/District Chief Executives. Aside from promoting accountability, the activism and campaigning that usually characterises elections will help increase awareness, knowledge, and enthusiasm in local governance issues among the local populace.
- District Assemblies must consciously develop and own citizens-engagement plans and media engagement

plans. These plans could include the use of mobile information centres; cinema vans; outreaches to schools, farmer based organisations and religious groups; recreational parks with wireless internet and information centres; radio shows; rotation of General Assembly meetings across the District; District Assembly fora at district agricultural fairs and festivals, durbars. While most of these interventions meet the development and social needs of the local people, they also open up and maintain lines of communication between the District Assemblies and the people.

- Both the central government and District assemblies must strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of structures that exist to promote citizens' access to information and local governance participation.

## **Community Citizens**

- Citizens must recognise the importance of local governance activities and patronise them to ensure development plans and projects meet their real needs and priorities.

## **Media**

- The media and citizens must endeavour to mobilise themselves as watchdog groups to demand transparent, responsive and accountable local governance.

## Civil Society Organisations

- Partner District Assemblies and local media to develop and run interactive local governance shows.
- Partner the Electoral Commission, National Commission for Civic Education, and relevant local NGOs to improve citizens' access to information and participation in MMDCE elections.
- Provide training and technical support at the Town/Area Council and Unit Committee level on the drafting of Community Action Plans (CAPs).
- Mobilise local communities to keep the Assemblies and their officials in check.
- Implement programmes specifically targeted at improving access to information and local governance participation among underrepresented groups like women, youth and people with disabilities. Such programmes could include local governance radio shows packaged by these groups to highlight their specific challenges.

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