



## Pathways to Citizens' Engagement in Local Governance in Ghana:

*Perspectives of Metropolitan, Municipal & District Chief Executives (MMDCEs)*



*Group photograph of some Municipal / District Chief Executives, Local Government Ministry Officials, CSOs and MFWA*

### Key Recommendations:

*Locals Assemblies Authorities must stop making Unrealistic Promises and overly politicising Activities. The Information Desks/Complaints/Public Relations Units should be resourced to function more effectively*

*Local-Based media must Prioritise Public Discourse on Local Developmental Issues; Refrain from focusing heavily on the publication of negative Stories/Fake news; and Endeavour to do proper fact-checking before publications*

*Experience Sharing Forum with Metropolitan, Municipal and District Chief Executives in Ghana*

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# Pathways to Citizens' Engagement in Local Governance in Ghana:

*Perspectives of Metropolitan, Municipal, District Chief Executives (MMDCEs)*

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# Introduction

When citizens have the opportunities – legal, environmental, infrastructural - to access information, demand responses on governance issues, and participate in the governance processes especially at local level, trust is increased, tension between authorities and citizens is reduced; citizen apathy is reduced and community ownership of development is engendered.

Citizens' engagement and participation in governance, particularly at the local level, is no doubt considered critical to promoting transparency and accountability in governance and strengthening democratic systems. This argument is given a furthered by the SDG 16:10 which provides key indicators to governments to ensure optimum information disclosure and citizens' access to timely, relevant information on developments in their countries.

In Ghana, two key provisions, the 1992 Constitution and the Local Governance Act 1993/2016, lend optimum credence to citizens' engagement and participation in local governance. These provisions hinge 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 ensure sustainability of development. There is no doubt that framers of these provisions sought to ensure that power is indeed in the hands of the people.

Article 240 of the 1992 Constitution mandates Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs - a very important actor in the local governance chain) to plan, initiate, manage and execute policies regarding matters affecting the people within their areas of jurisdiction. MMDAs in the quest to fulfill this mandate and to ensure the general development of their districts, have over the years exercised political and administrative authority and also performed deliberative, legislative and executive functions.

The MMDAs are headed by Chief Executive Officers (MMDCs), who serve as the political heads; and lead the pack of local government authorities to be accountable to the citizens in the allocation, management and utilisation of public resources at the local level.

Unfortunately, one major challenge faced by MMDAs is apathy or lack of interest in governance processes by citizens who have high expectations of their leaders.

Several studies suggest high illiteracy rate, bureaucracy and over politicisation of projects at the grass-root level as causes of this disinterest in MMDA activities and local development issues.

There is also evidence to suggest information disclosure by local government authorities and access to information by citizens continues to remain low with factors accounting for this including 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).

Given that the MMDCEs are most influential at the local level and constitute a key actor in the local governance space in Ghana, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) sought to find out their perspectives on why citizens' engagement, participation and access to information in local governance in Ghana is low and what can be improved.

This publication documents the perspectives/rich insights and ideas of MMDCEs on their continuing effort and struggle for improved information disclosure as well as citizens' engagement and participation in local governance in Ghana. It draws on the input of 50 local government practitioners made up of MMDCEs drawn from across the country, Public Relations Officers (PROs), Coordinating directors, officials of the Social Accountability Unit of Ghana's Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, Local Government Secretariat (LGS) and key civil society organizations at an Experience-Sharing forum facilitated by the Media Foundation for West Africa and the DW Akademie in Accra.



*A cross-section of participants at the forum*

## Three key questions formed the fulcrum of the discussions:

- 1) *What are the key challenges/ barriers to citizens' engagement and participation in governance processes at the local level?*
- 2) *How should local-based media support in promoting citizens' engagement and participation in governance processes at the local level?*
- 3) *How can citizens' engagement and participation in the governance process at the local level be improved?*

## 1. Key Challenges to Citizens' Engagement & Participation in Local Governance in Ghana:

A notable observation from the discussions was the fact that challenges / barriers to citizens' engagement and participation in local governance processes, differed slightly from district to district. Again, there were significant variations regarding the size, location, how long an MMDA has existed since its creation among others. Per Ghana's Local Governance Act 936 (1993:2016), a Metropolitan Assembly should have a population size of over 250,000, a Municipal over 95,000 while a district has over 75,000.

This notwithstanding, there were common challenges that resonated across the various MMDAs.

### a) **Limited Knowledge on Local Governance among Citizens**

It was apparent from the discussions that the varying degree of literacy at the local level tends to affect how citizens understand and appreciate the assembly and its activities or work. Majority of the citizens have little knowledge on local governance issues which impacts their levels of engagement and participation in governance processes at the local level.

- *Limited Knowledge on Local Governance among Citizens*
- *Disregarding the Concerns of Citizens on Issues of Local Development*
- *Poor Functioning Public Relations Units at the Assemblies*
- *Less Equipped Local Assembly Sub-Structures*
- *Lack of Transparency and inability to fulfill promises*
- *Politicisation of Activities and Policies*

*“For some, it is about the DCE or assembly man only giving them money for food or to pay their kid school fees. They see you as the big man in the district; they flood your house for help; and sometimes by the time you get to the office another batch is sitting there waiting. The challenge is that you attend to them – others are totally disengaged; they feel they do not see what the assembly does for them so no matter you provide them, they still don’t appreciate it,”*  
- an MCE.

### **b) Disregarding the Concerns of Citizens on Issues of Local Development**

Another concern raised was the fact that some local assembly officials do not prioritise or appreciate the feedback and contributions of citizens towards the development of the local assembly. Opinions and suggestions of citizens, when given, are often disregarded or rebuffed. With time, citizens become hesitant in sharing their views and participating in assembly activities.

*“Community people really feel bad and disengaged when they share their ideas and thoughts and they don’t see that they are implemented. Later when you invite them for public hearings or forums they hesitate to come” - a DCE.*

### **c) Poor Functioning Public Relations Units at the Assemblies**

A significant number of MMDCEs expressed worry that their public relations units, which are crucial in keeping publics informed, are less functioning due to lack of resources.

Again, there have been little or no efforts to deploy the compliments of modern day communication platforms like social media. Some assembly officials also do not have adequate public outreach or media engagement skills. This is also coupled with low internet connectivity in some of the districts making it even more difficult to deploy the advantages of social media in their public outreach efforts. As a result, communication and information disclosure is limited contributing to the misconceptions local populations have about their local authorities.

### **d) Less Equipped Local Assembly Sub-Structures**

Ideally, Assembly Members at the Area Council and Unit Committee levels are to engage their community members and apprise them on the goings on of the Assembly. This is to ensure that community members are at all times correctly represented and accounted to. Unfortunately, such consultations by Assembly Members have been inadequate. Though these sub-structures of the District Assemblies were set up to facilitate the decentralisation objective, mobilise the local community and make local development plans, they have largely been dormant and ineffective. Poorly motivated officials coupled with apathy among the local populace turn these normatively important structures into mere shadows of themselves.

### **e) Lack of Transparency and inability to fulfill promises**

A significant number of the MMDCEs admitted that the instances of failed

promises around service delivery makes citizens disenchanted and lose interest in the local assembly.

*“The medium term development plans capture the plans around provision of certain services to communities; sometimes once you tell them, they expect that is delivered right away; the reality however is that there are funding challenges, sometimes DACF are in arrears for several quarters while IGF is meager” you fail to deliver on the promise and then they lose confidence in you”*  
- an MCE

Another DCE also had this to say:



Mr. Kwasi Bonzob, DCE of Ellembele, making a point at the forum

## f) Politicisation of Activities and Policies

It was also apparent from the discussions that because the sitting president of the country appoints MMDCEs who belong to the ruling political party of the day, citizens of other political parties feel they do not have a role to play in the governance process. This is sometimes also as a result of the politicisation of activities and policies by the assemblies and MMDCEs. This does not encourage contributions from, and participation of members of the public who may not belong to the party in power or are not politically aligned to any party.

## 2) The Role of the Local Media in Promoting Citizens' Engagement and Participation in Governance Processes in Local Governance

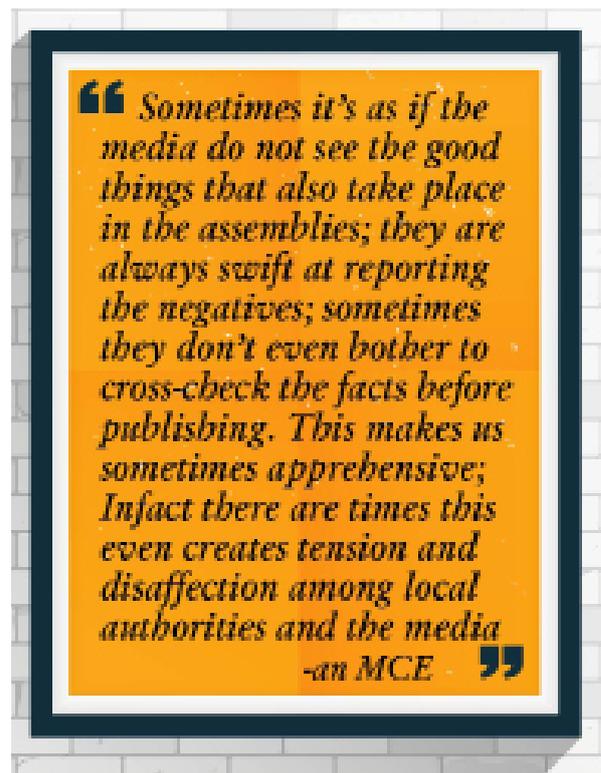
Participants at the forum acknowledged the important role the media continues to play in the development of the country. The MMDCEs highly view the media as partners in development especially at the local level. They maintained that the media has been active in informing,

sensitising and educating citizens on their role in governance and the responsibility of government and local assemblies. This, they asserted, engenders some participation from citizens and helps in holding public officers accountable.

In spite of this, participants, especially MMDCEs, revealed their frustrations in closely working with the media, particularly, local/community-based media in their communication and public outreach efforts

#### a) **Heavy Focus on the Negative Stories; Poor Fact Checking & False Publications**

Participants, especially MMDCEs, decried the tendency of the media to report only negative stories rather than the many developmental projects being implemented within the local assemblies. This often results in negative and skewed reports, which usually do not have the views of the subject of the stories. Citizens who read or see these reports however accept them as the truth as they emanate from the media. No opportunity is given to MMDCE's on subject matters of stories to correct the misinformation. Instances where there are, no difference is made as opinions had already been formed by citizens regarding the matter.



The MMDCEs also indicated that journalists often publish or broadcast false information about them and/or the assembly. They said the media sometimes launch personal attacks on Chief Executives without any provocation *"Sometimes I look in the mirror and ask myself, 'are they talking about me?'"* exclaimed one DCE.

This often tarnishes the reputation of the people involved and creates misconceptions, which eventually leads to disinterest and apathy from the public

## b) Unwillingness to Cover Events or Programs of Assemblies Unless Paid

The MMDCEs expressed worry that some journalists or media practitioners blatantly refuse to cover events/ programs organised by local assemblies especially when such events do not come with financial rewards. Because local assemblies are often unable to pay journalists to report on their work, a number of events/ programmes of assemblies go unpublicised by the media. This limits the visibility and publicity around the positive developments within the assemblies.

*“...the sad part of it is that some of these journalists report false news about us (MMDCEs) when local assemblies do not offer monetary rewards or pay them (journalists) for publishing stories about the assemblies”*

## 3. Key Recommendations to Improving Citizens' Engagement and Participation in Governance Processes at the Local Level

At the Experience- Sharing Forum several recommendations were noted helping to promote citizens' engagement and participation in local governance in Ghana. These recommendations were specifically targeted to key stakeholders – media and local assemblies:

## Local Assemblies

### • Refrain From Unrealistic Promises; Politicisation of Activities

For the local governance system to be truly effective and deliver the promise of development for all persons, local assemblies and their leaders (Chief Executive Officers) should desist from politicising developments at the local level. The utilisation of public resources and the allocation of public resources should be even to benefit all citizens. Again, political heads/ MMDCEs must desist from making lofty and unrealistic promises. The local governance act clearly spells out the mandate of the MMDAs including activities and project that are within their purview as either Metropolitan, Municipal or District. This should strictly guide local assembly officials in the promises they make

### • Equip the Information Desks/ Complaints Units/Public Relations Units to Function Effectively

Information disclosure and communication is key for promoting transparency, accountability and citizens participation in governance processes at the local level. Within the assembly structure, information desks, complaints and public units serve as the interface between the citizens and local government authorities either on updates from the assembly or citizens have complaints to lodge. It is therefore recommended that local assemblies should prioritise and make a conscious effort to allocate resources to ensure that these units function effectively . It is also recommended for local assemblies to

develop strategies around their public outreach, communication and information disclosure efforts. Such strategies will spell out the different communication platforms that can be deployed such as local media, social media (website, Facebook pages), use of the information vans, correspondents of national level media, as well as the specific tools to deploy for the various platforms. A good communication strategy will also spell out timelines and will be accompanied by sense of how much is required to implement it. An M&E plan will also help to monitor the performance of the assembly in terms of how well they are doing with their public outreach efforts.

- **Increase Orientation of Assembly Staff, Capacity for Effective Citizens' Engagement**

Local government officials should be given some more education and re-orientation on the role of the citizens in the local governance process and the importance of information disclosure to citizens. This will also enable them to appreciate and prioritise the feedback

and contributions of citizens towards the development of the local assembly. It is refreshing to note that local government authorities view the media especially the local based /community-based radio stations as key partners in development. The leadership of the district assembly must be trained on how to engage the media and provide information to the public.

### Local-Based Media

- **Be Ethical/Professional**

As watchdog of society and the disseminators of information, journalists must be guided by the ethics of the profession and ensure that their stories/reportage are accurate, balanced and true.

- **Prioritise Public Discourse on Local Developmental Issues**

Local based media must prioritise and support developments within the local assemblies. They must consciously provide local authorities the necessary platforms and space on-air to engage their constituents. MMDCEs observed that local-based radio stations, for example, tend to focus and dedicate substantial amount of



*Evelyn Ama Kumi-Richardson, MCE Sunyani Municipal Assembly in an interview with the media*

airtime to national level issues to the detriment of local developments. The local/community-based radio stations must focus on producing more stories that tackle developmental issues of their immediate environment.

- **Improve Professional Capacity; Increase Sensitisation on Local Governance**

As gatekeepers and educators, journalists must also apprise themselves and increase their knowledge of local governance in Ghana. With this, they will be able to effectively educate and increasingly sensitise local citizens on the local governance processes and what is expected of them. While at it, the media in the communities must also upgrade their practice to the professional standards of the field expounded by media regulatory bodies.



Media Foundation for West Africa

30 Duade Street, Kokomlemle,

Telephone: +233 (0) 302 2424 70

Twitter: @TheMFWA

Facebook: Media Foundation for West Africa

[info@mfw.org](mailto:info@mfw.org)

[www.mfw.org](http://www.mfw.org)