

# Policy Brief

Media and Good Governance, February 2019

## CHALLENGES TO CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN GHANA: THE CASE OF EIGHT DISTRICTS



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# Table of Content

Introduction .....	3
Background .....	5
The Study Approach .....	6
Key Findings .....	7
Key Recommendations .....	14

# Introduction

Governance may have different definitions and conceptualisations. However, fundamental to every form of governance is the will of the people and the management of their resources.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), defines governance as the *“exercise of authority and consensus-building in pursuit of a society’s present and future welfare. The normative understanding of what constitutes good or sound governance is based on the following principles: full respect for human rights; the rule of law; effective participation, multi actor partnerships; political pluralism; transparency and accountable processes and institutions, an efficient and effective public sector, legitimacy, access to knowledge, information and education; political empowerment of people; equity; sustainability; and attitudes and values that foster responsibility, solidarity and tolerance”* – (UN, 2007).

Thus, principles on effective participation, political empowerment of people, transparency and accountable processes remain key in every form of governance. In Ghana, citizens’ participation in governance is recognized as a right and this is elaborated in the constitution of Ghana which 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). When Ghana adopted the decentralised system of governance, it was to ensure more participation of citizens and their active involvement in the governance processes. The philosophy of the local governance system in Ghana is that local participation is key in ensuring sustainable development as a result of ownership of development initiatives. Community participation is also required as an essential and integral part of the democratisation of the planning process.

*“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).

So far, despite calls for several reforms within the country’s decentralisation system, the system has largely 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.

## 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 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.

The citizens or members of the community elect 70% of the members of MMDAs whilst the president on the basis of their experience and specialised expertise appoints 30%. 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. An executive committee comprising not more than one-third of all assembly members, which reports to the assembly, leads the meetings.

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 the Assemblies comprise the town council, area council, zonal council and unit committee. 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.

Despite the various efforts by Ghana to establish the decentralised system through legislation (the Local Governance Act), executive structures and processes, and fiscal support systems, the local government system has not been as effective as it was hoped to. There is evidence to suggest that largely, citizens' participation in local governance processes has remained low in many MMDAs across the country. Information disclosure by local governance authorities, citizens' access to information, transparency and accountability still remains a struggle.

## Background

As part of efforts to address the challenges identified above, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) is implementing a project aimed at enhancing public participation and demand for accountability in local governance in Ghana.

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).

This policy brief highlights the challenges/barriers to citizens' participation in local governance in Ghana using the eight project districts as a case study. Eight municipalities and districts across four (4) regions in Ghana were studied namely; Lawra Municipal, Wa West District, Wa East District, Wa Municipal and Sissala East Municipal (Upper West Region); West Mamprusi District (Northern Region), Ellembelle District (Western Region) and Twiffo Atti-Mokwa (Central Region).

## The Study Approach

The study identified some stakeholders in the districts including District Assemblies, citizens, Civil Society Organizations, and local Media to assess challenges to citizens' participation in local governance in the project Districts. The methodology employed for this study was deductive and inductive qualitative research. The qualitative methodology was adopted to produce a non-quantitative, detailed and interpretative account on the challenges to citizens' participation in local governance

The study used key informant interviews for the data gathering. Key informant interviews were in-depth interviews with people who are well-informed on what is going on in the community. The purpose of key informant interviews was to collect information from a wide range of people—including community leaders, professionals, or residents—who have first-hand knowledge about the community.

The study also used focus group discussions (FGD). A guide with about seven semi-structured questions was used to steer the conversation in the focus group discussion while a similar interview guide with more structured questions was used for the key informant interviews.

A purposive sampling method was adopted in a study aimed at gathering data from certain key stakeholders who play various roles in popular participation in the local governance system in Ghana and understand the critical context and nuance of participation in the district. These stakeholders included:

1. The District Assembly
2. The Media
3. Citizens
4. Community-Based Organisations (CBOs)/Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

There was conscious effort to engage men and women, youth and People Living with Disability (PWDs) in the research process.

## Key Findings

The study found cross-cutting issues in all the eight Municipal and District Assemblies albeit some peculiar challenges to the different districts owing to factors such as location, economic activity, how long the district has existed; number of communities, population size etc. Overall, key cross-cutting issues found included the following:

- a) Limited Understanding and Awareness of District Assembly activities among citizens
- b) Apathy, Low Enthusiasm among Citizens owing to Undelivered Promises
- c) Weak and Ineffective Structures of the District Assemblies Owing to Lack of Resources
- d) Extremely Large Number of Communities Constraining Effective Engagement
- e) Extreme Politicisation of the District Assembly Activities and the Culture of Partisanship in the Assembly System
- f) Bureaucracy, Undue Centralisation of the District Assembly System at the Secretariat and too much emphasis on Vertical Approach to citizens Engagement
- g) Expensive Engagement due to Non-Governmental Organisations' (NGOs) Activities
- h) Local Authorities' high apprehension of the Media

### A) Limited Understanding and Awareness of District Assembly Activities among Citizens

This was perhaps the most pervasive challenge across all eight districts. Some of the respondents interviewed indicated that there was low visibility of the local Assembly activities, which led to very low engagement and understanding of the District Assembly structures.

*"Only few people understand the system; a lot of them do not at all. In percentage wise I will say 20 out of 100(understand the structure of the district assembly)."*

For example, in the Twiffo Atti-Mokwa district, some key informant interviewees said the citizens do not understand the structure of the Assembly and sometimes misconstrue the roles of the authorities.

*"There are certain things the community people do not know. In terms of finance they think the money is just in the DCE's office when they want the money they just go and spend and come put the rest back. They don't know they pass through a long system."* Community-Based Organization, Twiffo Atti-Mokwa.

Particularly for the communities that are distant from the capital, Wa, and its suburbs, many residents have little or no idea who their assemblymen and unit committee members are or what role they play specifically.

*"People don't even know who to address what, who to go to when you need what. For instance, in some of these communities they don't know who a presiding member is or what the person is meant to do. And they don't even know the responsibilities of the Assemblyman...If it's a health issue, they don't know where to go. If it's an environmental issue, they don't know there are structures."* (Programmes Manager, Community Radio, Wa Municipal)

## **B) Apathy, Low Enthusiasm among Citizens owing to Undelivered Promises**

Some respondents indicated that the administration of the District Assemblies of the municipality was fairly responsive to the enquiries and mostly request for information from the citizenry and the media. However, the authorities fail over the years to deliver many of their development needs making the community members 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.”* General Manager, Community Radio, Lawra Municipal

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.”* Opinion Leader in Community, Lawra Municipal

In a focus group discussion of the community youth group in Ellembelle district some respondents indicated that a portion of the youth in the assembly have developed mistrust for the leadership of the district assembly due to issues of unemployment and perceived corruption.

## **C) Weak and Ineffective Structures of the District Assemblies Owing to Lack of Resources**

The sub-structures for any district must remain the livewire for citizens' participation, access to information and inclusion. However, the administration of the assembly is such that it cannot be regularly present in the many communities, the unit committee members, council members and the assemblymen must be the appropriate and assured means of ensuring participation in the many communities. This, the study found, is not the case as there are little or no resources for the proper functioning of the sub-structures of the assembly. Assembly members, for instance, were not able to organise the local meetings to keep community members informed.

For instance, one of the respondents from the focus group discussions in the Twifo Atti-Morkwa District Assembly indicated that the assemblymen were failing on their responsibility of keeping their community members informed.

*“...The assembly structures are there but the functioning is the problem. When the Assembly members come for general assembly meetings, whatever transpired over here, it is their duty to go back and relay it to the community people. But there is a challenge over here. They don't do it. The people don't know what happens at the assembly over here.”* Community Member, Twifo Atti-Morkwa

Again, there appeared to be an outright botched system of the structures of the local governance system in the Sissala-East Municipality. Almost all respondents agreed 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 they noted was the administration or the secretariat, which was 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 the developmental gaps, information flow setbacks and promises that authorities have failed to deliver. The officers of the sub-structures on the other hand were 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.

*“...The assemblymen, when you confront them and you want to know why they are not performing [relaying information] such activities, all that they talk about is finance...We don't give them monthly allowance. Even the motor bikes they are supposed to have is [are] not there for them...So it is always about money” - A respondent from the administration of the Twifo Atti-Mokwa District Assembly.*

#### **D) Extremely Large Number of Communities Constraining Effective Engagement**

The District Assemblies despite using representative systems of relying on the electoral areas are still unable to effectively engage all of these communities. They are unable to organise town hall meetings, forums and other mandated engagements in the local governance act in the various communities. The challenge is further worsened by the problem of poor feeder roads in the Districts, as movement to these communities is very difficult.

For example, the Twifo Atti-Morkwa District is made up of about 850 communities. Although many of these communities are villages, cottages, hamlets and small abodes of people, every community which is separated from another by distance and has a number of residents who demand a form of attention in terms of participation, access to information and development needs.

Also, Wa West District has 235 communities, a number which is quite large to allow effective engagement with citizens. Even though they are zoned into area councils, the large number makes it difficult for the officials of the Assembly to coordinate. The study realised that despite the communities being relatively smaller than communities in other districts, they were many and very wide apart, making supervision and engagement the more difficult. Engaging them in zonal town hall meeting meant community members may have to travel long distances, which was a disincentive for many.

*“Wa West for instance, we have about 235 communities...Once the communities are many, some aspects of the districts maybe left out simply because you can only be at one area at a time, and because of the vast nature of the district you are unable to effectively engage with all of them.” (Wa West District Chief Executive)*

A media informant who works with a community radio station in the District echoed this concern. He explained that the large community size made it difficult for radio stations to effectively gather the views of the people, especially because they have to travel long distances.

*“The district is very wide. This particular district has about 230 communities, how do you go to such areas? So we are forced to do pick and choose, and we prioritise. Which one comes first, which one comes second, in that order. Every community has similar problems, can you do one and leave the other? These are some of the challenges.” (Programmes Manager, Community Radio, Wa West District)*

Having many communities separated by long distance also meant that bringing members from different communities together for town hall meetings would be more expensive and weigh on the budget of the District Assembly.

*“Organising a meeting or bringing citizens together in order to give them a platform to participate is mostly very expensive in terms of reaching out to them, financing the meetings...when you invite them to a meeting, you have to feed them, you have to give them a token for T&T [transportation]. And some of the areas are hard to reach. Communication is confronted with barriers.” (Information Officer, Wa West District Assembly)*

### **E) Extreme Politicisation of the District Assembly and the Culture of Partisanship in the Assembly System**

There were indications that many community members approached the activities of the Assembly with very partisan perspectives. They considered the District Assembly as 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 the party members.” Assistant Programmes Manager of Community Radio, Sissala East*

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.

Some respondents interviewed were of the view that the activities of the District Assembly have been too politicised that it has become difficult to ensure partisan-free participation in the activities. An opinion leader indicated that the politicisation problem runs deep into the consciousness of the citizens and even the officials from the District Assembly. This has resulted in a divided or a polarised engagement with very essential activities that should generally benefit every member in the district.

*“They have clothed themselves with politics. So they try to affiliate everything to politics meanwhile that is not how it is supposed to be. So even if the thing is working [moving] at the right dimension, they rather look at the dimension of politics instead of facing the facts on the ground.” Opinion Leader in Community, Ellembelle District*

The sentiment by the opinion leader was supported by a station manager and host of a programme on a community radio station. He indicated that phone-ins by audience on critical issues of development in the community always toe the lines of partisanship.

*“At times when you open the phone lines on radio programmes talking about issues on ground they rather turn it to politics and people will say issues they are not supposed to say” Programme Host, Community Radio*

## **F) Bureaucracy, Undue Centralisation of the District Assembly System at the Secretariat and Too Much Emphasis on Vertical Approach to Citizens Engagement**

The study found that the approach to citizen's participation in the local government is largely lopsided towards vertical or top-to-down style of engagement. The focus of the Municipal Assembly is principally on how the administration of the DA can disseminate information to the community members relegating the other possible means of down-to-top approach.

Some stakeholders of the District Assembly interviewed shared the view that the district assembly system has been overly centralised at the district secretariat or administration. There is little or no focus on ensuring effective operation of the other lower or sub-structures of the system. The respondents painted a picture of the neglected or malfunctioning sub-district structures of the Assembly.

A host of a morning show of a community radio, for instance, explained that in some two communities the assemblymen had passed on but there had been no attempt by the District Assembly to begin the process that will ensure the Electoral Commission holds another election. Some key informants at the District Assembly secretariat also confirmed that there were limited permanent staff at council levels which meant that every issue of the District Assembly was left with the secretariat.

*“For the system to run well we need to put permanent staff at the council level, but as at now we cannot pay for those staff from the central government, level we can't pay them.”* District Coordinating Director, Ellembele District

*“Some of the issues if we had very good systems in place, like Director said, it wouldn't have even come up here. Some of them are minor issues that could have been managed at that level but because we don't have the structures well established, you know, we all have to get into it and it brings a lot of pressure to the top hierarchy.”* Information officer, Ellembele District

The above statement indicates that participation and engagement will be continuously compromised or constrained in the communities since the sub-district structures which deal directly with the residents are not functioning well.

It appeared the District Assembly is much concerned on following the Article 42 of the Local Governance Act 2016 but are unable to organise town-hall meetings, budget preparation and validation fora, notice boards announcement etc. Therefore, there is little information flow from the sub-structures (unit committee, assemblymen, town councils etc.) to the top of the assembly, where the citizens could actually voice their concerns out and share the issues.

*“The sub structures like the zonal councils and the town councils, that's where we have problems. We don't have a problem here at the administration of the Assembly. But sending and receiving information to the unit committee who form the area council. They are supposed to engage themselves and disseminate information, but there's a hitch. They are not always able to do that. As a result of that, information is not readily available.”* (Municipal Chief Executive, Wa Municipal)

*“There is not a well-structured system where from an electoral area or from a community level a citizen can follow to request for information from the Assembly. That one the system is not there.”* (Opinion Leader in the Community, Wa Municipal)

What this means is that there is no proper or effective engagement as far as the citizenry are concerned, especially for the communities who are not closer to the capital. The most probable means of engagement for the remote communities is through the town councils, unit committee meetings, but in the case where they are not able to meet, many of them may be side-lined when it comes to engagement, except when the MCE is organising a town hall meeting.

While radio remains a major source of information and platform for which citizen's in the Municipality engage with authorities as well as ensure accountability, it was realised that community radio stations faced many setbacks in reaching officials. Informants with the radio stations indicated that there existed a bureaucratic order that journalists and radio presenters have to track in order to get officials to respond to issues raised by citizens or provide answers to critical matters the radio stations have observed. Technocrats or the heads of departments at the Assembly despite having the expertise to educate the citizenry often times would defer to political heads or wait till they are given the nod.

*“They have not been responsive and that is killing the spirit. The departmental heads are not able to speak or are not willing to speak to you without political consent. For instance, you want to talk about education and the regional minister must approve for you to speak to a district director; not even the regional director of education, the regional minister. So you have to write to the regional minister who will also have to minute and send to that district or maybe the DCE who will also forward it to the departmental head before they can speak to you.”* (Programmes Manager, Community Radio, Wa Municipal)

Another respondent in the focus group discussion at the Wa Na's palace alluded to the inherent bureaucracy in the District Assembly system with regards to responding to the citizen's requisition of information or attempts at seeking assistance for challenges in the society.

*“There's a docile plant which is supposed to pump water to tanks here. The network that is supposed to be done in the various houses or communities [to allow the flow of the water] is not done. When you go to tell them [Assembly], they say they are waiting on the water sewage to go and do the layout. You go to water and sewage, they will tell you they are waiting for funds to go and do the layout. You wouldn't be able to apportion the blame on the Assembly. But the water and sewage has representation.*

## **G) Expensive Engagement Due to NGOs Activities**

There are many NGOs and civil society organisations operating in 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 engagements with the communities expensive for the local 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.”* **District Chief Executive, Lawra municipal.**

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.”* **Assembly, Electoral Area, Lawra municipal.**

#### **H) Local Authorities’ High Apprehension of the Media**

Despite being responsive, some of the community radio stations and communities indicated that there is some level of apprehension among the departmental 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 were 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.”* General Manager, Community Radio, Lawra Municipal.

## Key Recommendation

Following the cross-cutting findings outlined above, the study makes the following recommendations towards improving citizens' participation and engagement in local governance.

- a) The local governance act makes little provision for the sustainability and effective running of the sub-structures of the district. The legislature must make legal provisions that would ensure proper remuneration system and allocation of resources.
- b) There must also be a civic and political rights sensitisation among the citizens in the district to understand the significance of the local governance system and their role in making it successful.
- c) District-wide sensitisation programmes should be commenced to educate the community members on the District Assembly system and the role citizens must play in the development process. This sensitisation exercise must employ both radio programming and interpersonal engagement with citizens.
- d) The central government must also reconsider the demarcation and constitution of communities into districts to allow effective engagement. Having about 850 communities in one district is certainly not suitable for effective engagement.
- e) The sub-district structures must be provided with institutional capacity and mechanisms that will ensure its effective operation.
- f) There is the need for an overall revamping of the assembly structure 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.
- g) The local assemblies are clearly challenged or have huge developmental setbacks which constraint engagement even when the officers of the Assemblies are willing to facilitate. The poor feeder roads, for instance, are 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 Assemblies in order to facilitate easy movement for effective citizens-authorities' engagement.



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