



CHALLENGES TO CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN GHANA:

THE CASE OF ELLEMBELLE DISTRICT

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; ^[11]_{SEP} 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. ^[11]_{SEP}

This baseline study highlights the challenges/barriers to citizens' participation in local governance in Ghana, the specific case of the Ellembelle District 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), Ellembelle 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 Ellembelle District

Ellembelle is among the twenty-two (22) districts in the Western Region of Ghana and was carved from Nzema East District in December 2007 by LI 1918. It was officially declared on 29th February, 2008, with its capital at Nkroful, the birthplace of the first President of the Republic of Ghana, Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. It has a total area of 995.8Km², constituting roughly 10% of the landmass of the region. It has one constituency, the Ellembelle Constituency, with seven (7) area councils and thirty-one (31) electoral areas. It is located at the southern part of the region between longitudes 2° 05” W and 2° 35” W, and latitude 4° 40” N and 5° 20” N. It shares boundaries with the Jomoro District to the west, Wassa Amenfi West District to the north, Nzema East Municipal to the southeast, Tarkwa-Nsuaem Municipal to the east, and to the south, there is a 70km of sandy beach along the Atlantic Ocean.

Demographics

In the 2010 Population and Housing Census (PHC), the district recorded 87,501 people that constitutes 3.7% of the total population of the Western Region. Of this number, males represented 48.4% and females represented 51.6%. About 79.4% of the population reside in the rural and 20.6% in the urban areas. The district has a sex ratio of 93.7%. The population of the district is largely youthful with a small number of elderly persons. The age dependency ratio for the district is 82.2%, the age dependency ratio for males is lower (40.5%) than that of females (42.3%).

About 59% of the population aged 15 years and older are economically active while 41% are inactive. Of those that are economically active, 94.8% are employed while 5.2% are unemployed. For those who are economically inactive, a larger percentage of them are students (46.1%), 24.6% perform household duties and 5.2% are disabled or too sick to work. Nearly six out of ten (61.1%) of the unemployed persons are seeking work for the first time.

A little over one-thirds (35.2%) of the employed population are skilled agricultural (forestry and fishery) workers 22.5% in the service and sales work and 18% are in craft and related trades. While females are more likely than males to be engaged in service and sales work (35.7%), males are more likely than females to be engaged as skilled agricultural (forestry and fishery) workers (39.1%). About 69% of the workforce are self-employed with no employees.

Social and Cultural Structure

The number of educational facilities in the District indicates that inhabitants are not lagging behind in education even though compared to other Districts, a lot needs to be done. With regard to communication, the District is connected by the three network service providers – MTN, AirtelTigo and Vodafone.

Political Administration

The Ellebelle District Assembly is the highest political and administrative authority in the district headed by the District Chief Executive (DCE). There are fifty-four (54) assembly members, thirty-six (36) of which are elected and eighteen (18) are government appointees. The DCE chairs the Executive Committee while the Presiding Member (PM) chairs assembly meetings. The district has one constituency, the 'Ellebelle Constituency, with a total of seven area councils and thirty-one (31) electoral areas. The Assembly has seven sub-committees some of which are Finance and Administration, Development Planning, Social Services, Mines and Environment. The District Co-ordinating Director (DCD) performs the administrative role of coordinating the activities of all the eleven (11) decentralized departments (created by LI 1961) in the District.

Methodology

The study adopted both inductive and deductive qualitative approach to addressing the objective of study. 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 as the research method for the data gathering. Key informant interviews are in-depth interviews with people who are well-informed on what is going on in the community. The purpose of key informant interviews is 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) as a method to gather data. Focus group discussions are used to gather information on a topic from people with similar background by grouping them together in a conversation.

A guide with about seven semi-structured questions were used to steer the conversation in the focus group discussion while a similar interview guide with more structure questions were used for the key informant interviews.

A purposive sampling method was adopted because the study aimed at gathering data from certain key stakeholders who play various roles in popular participation in the local governance system in Twiffo-Atti-Morkwa District 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

The study conducted at Ellembele interviewed eight key informants with interviews made up of the following:

Key Informant	Position
D1	District Coordinating Director
D2	Information Officer
H1	Human Resource Officer
K1	Opinion Leader
K2	Opinion Leader
R1	Programme Host, Community Radio Station
R2	Station Manager, Community Radio
C1	Programmes Officer, Community-Based Organisation

The study also had the focus group discussions with three different groups of people.

Group	Number of Participants
Community Youth Group	11
PWD	7
Women's Group	10

The researcher used a recording application on a phone to record the conversations for both the key informant interviews and focus group discussions. They were transcribed for analysis. The researcher used thematic analysis to examine the data in answering the objectives of the study.

Key Findings

a) Extreme Politicisation of the District Assembly Activities

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)

The sentiment by the opinion leader was supported by a station manager and host of a programme on 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 on 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 Station

b) Apathy, Low Understanding and Awareness of District Assembly Activities Among citizens

There appears to be very low awareness and understanding of the activities of the District Assemblies. Some of the respondents interviewed indicated that there is low visibility of the activities which leads 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).”

The respondents in the focus group discussion of the community youth group 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. The Ellembele District has many mining communities where the youth feel a certain form of entitlement in doing small scale mining. The mining concessions have however been given to multinational mining companies. This has made the youth unhappy and suspect the authorities benefit from the mining companies. The youth are therefore not much interested in the activities of the District Assembly.

c) Undue Centralisation of the District Assembly System at the Secretariat

The stakeholders of the District Assembly interviewed share 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 has been no attempt by the District Assembly to begin a process that will ensure the Electoral Commission holds another election. Some key informants at the District Assembly secretariat also confirmed that there are limited permanent staff at council levels and this has meant that every issue of the District Assembly is 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

“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)

The above statement indicate 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.

Recommendation

In order to improve participation and engagement in the District Assembly systems;

- A comprehensive mechanism must be established to ensure functioning of the sub-structures of the District Assembly.
- 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.
- 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.

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