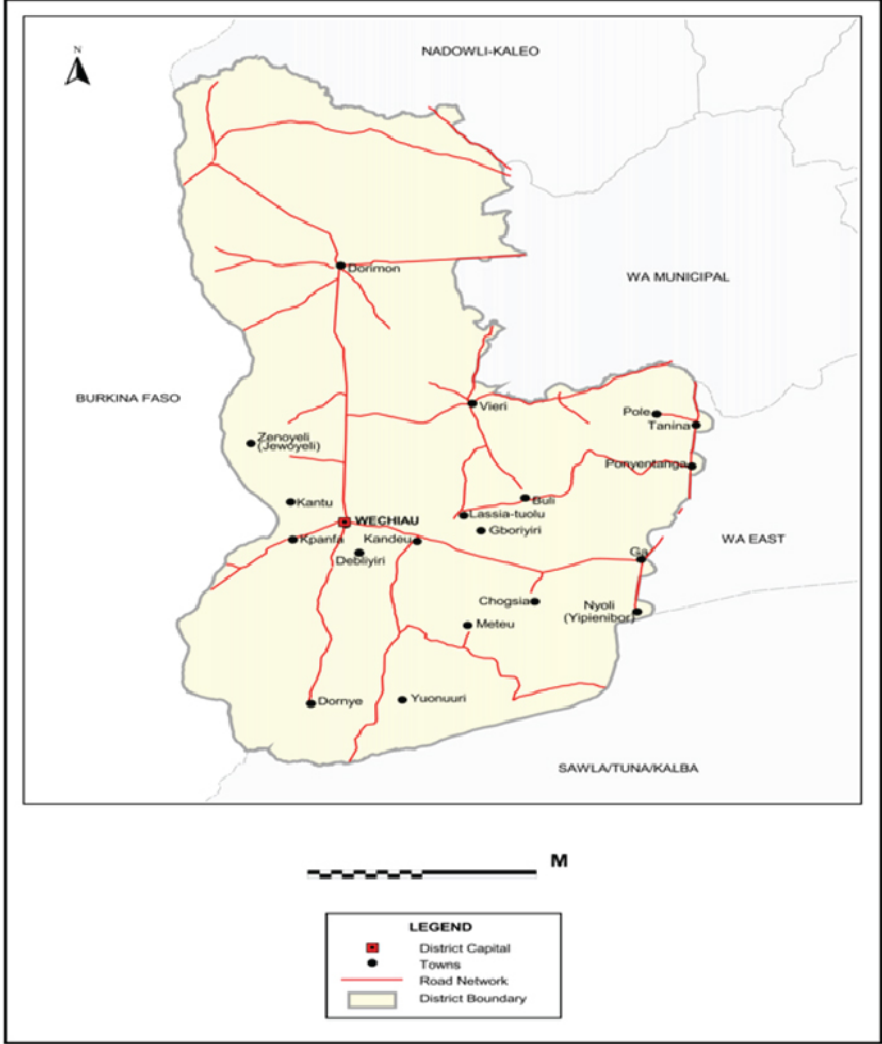


# Report



# CHALLENGES TO CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN GHANA: THE CASE OF WA WEST DISTRICT

Media and Good Governance, February 2019

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**CHALLENGES TO CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN  
LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN GHANA:  
THE CASE OF WA WEST 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; <sup>[11]</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>[11]</sup><sub>SEP</sub>

This baseline study highlights the challenges/barriers to citizens' participation in local governance in Ghana, the specific case of the Wa-West 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 Wa West District Assembly

In 2004, LI 1751, under the Local Government Act 463, 1993, was employed to create the Wa West District with Wechiau as its capital. The District is located in the western part of the Upper West Region, approximately between longitudes 9° 40' N and 10° 10' N and also between latitudes 2° 20' W and 2° 50' W. To the south, it shares boundaries with the Northern Region and Nadawli District to the northwest, on the eastern part, it shares boundaries with Wa Municipality and to the west with Burkina Faso.

It has a total landmass of about 1492.0Km<sup>2</sup>, which represents nearly 10% of the region's total land area. Wechiau is about 150km away from the Wa Municipality. There are twenty-seven (27) electoral areas and five (5) area councils and as demanded by law, is headed by District Chief Executive.

The proximity of Wa West District to Burkina Faso places it in an advantageous location in relation to the Savannah-Sahel Regional Market being promoted by the Northern Development Initiative.

## Demographics

Wa West District has a population of 81,348, representing 11.6% of the region's total population. Males constitute 49.5% and females constitute 50.5%. The district is entirely rural with 14,653 (16.30%) living in urban settlements while the remaining 58,745 (83.7%) live in rural settlements. The district has a youthful (45.5%) population just like the other districts suggesting a broad-base population pyramid that tapers off with a small proportion representing the elderly (5.8%). The age dependency ratio is 105.6 where the age dependency ratio for males is higher (118.2) than that of females (94.6). The sex ratio of the district is 97.8.

Wa West also has a very youthful population with residents aged 5-9 years constituting 16.5%; those in the 0-14-year range constitute 45.5%. The adult (15 to 64 years) population constitutes 48.7% while those aged 65 years and older make 5.8%. The sex ratio is 97.8 which implies that for every 100 females, there are about 98 males.

Agriculture is the mainstay of the district's economy accounting for 86.0%. Crop farming is the major agricultural activity that results in the production of maize, millet, cowpea and groundnuts. Animal husbandry is another source of income for the crop farmers. Additionally, the Black Volta and other water bodies have added inland fishing as an economic activity. The District also has a Hippo Sanctuary in the Wechiau community and generates income to the District. There are eight marketing outlets - Dorimon, Dabo, Taanvare, Wechiau, Vieri, Ponyentanga, Nyoli and Gurungu - in the District.

Out of the district's population, 27,287 are enrolled in school with 16.4% at the pre-primary level while 77.5% are at the basic level - primary (60.3%) and JHS, (17.2%). Approximately 5.19% are in SHS while 0.2% and 0.4% are in Vocational/Technical/Commercial and Post Middle/Secondary institutions respectively. Those in tertiary institutions account for 0.4%.

Out of the 51,205 people aged 12 years and above, 4949 have mobile phones. While 14.4% of males own phones, 5.3% of females own phones.

## **Social and Cultural Structure**

Even though the district has a well-structured decentralized governance mechanism, there exists a traditional system with two opposing sides. As is the case, both the decentralised and the traditional systems have a common goal of improving the life of the people, the traditional system, not friendly with each other, are not able to help. This mainly springs from subtle competition for control of resources between them. The two opposing paramountcy originate from Wechiau and Dorimon and have the titles 'Wechiau Naa' and 'Dorimon Naa' for their leaders respectively. There are also divisional and sub-divisional chiefs who pay homage to the authority of the two paramountcy.

## **Political Administration**

By the Act that establishes the District, its highest body (political and administrative) is in charge of decision-making (deliberative, legislative and executive). There are thirty-five (35) assembly members comprising twenty-seven (27) elected and eight (8) appointees. The appointees represent the traditional authority and various organised economic groupings. The Presiding Member chairs the assembly meetings. There are five area councils made up of Dorimon, Ga, Gurungu, Vieri and Wechiau. To make the assembly a complete and functioning mechanism, there are one hundred and forty (140) Unit Committees.

## 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 used focus group discussions as one of the methods for gathering data to answer the objectives of the study. It is a form of [qualitative research](#) consisting of interviews in which a group of people of similar backgrounds or interest on the subject of enquiry are asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards the subject.

Data was also 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 Wa Municipal Assembly.

The researcher gathered data from key stakeholders in the local governance system process including:

The Assemblies

Civil Society Organisations/Community-Based Organisations

Citizens

Local-based Media

The following were the key informants who were interviewed in the Wa West District.

Key Informant	Position
D1	Wa West District Chief Executive
I1	Information Officer Wa West District Assembly
K1	Opinion Leader in the Community
K2	Opinion Leader in the Community
K3	Assemblyman, Part of Vieri Community
R1	Programmes Manager of Community Radio

The researcher also conducted three focused group discussions with about 25 members of the District. These 25 individuals included 18 men and 7 women. Out of this number, three were persons living with disability.

## KEY FINDINGS

### a) Low Awareness of the Structure, Process and Functions of the District Assembly among Community Members

From interviews conducted there appears to be low awareness or low knowledge about the structure, process and the mandate of the local government structure. Community members do not know the assigned roles, mandate and hierarchy of the local government structure. This makes it difficult for them to effectively engage or participate in the activities of the Assembly as they do not know who exactly to address with what concerns.

*“Many a time all these structures seem not to be well defined to the people to understand their various roles, other than everybody is part of whatever we are doing in the district in terms of the development. But many still don’t know who is the Assembly member, who is the unity committee member, what’s the role of the chief and all the stakeholders that are around.” (D1)*

Feedback from interview suggest that community members do not appreciate or know that the assembly man and area council officers belong to the local government or the District Assembly structure. Informants in one of the communities in the district, for instance, at one end admitted the crucial role the assembly man is playing in engaging community members, keeping them updated with information as well as taking in their concerns. However, they insisted the District Assembly is not working or not engaging them. Thus, they reckon the performance of the District Assembly as far as engaging citizens only lies with the DCE and Officials from the administrative Assembly Office and not the rest of the members of the local government structures.

*“I have never seen the District itself to coming to the community to sensitize them [members] on some of the developmental projects or their role as far as the communities are concerned. I have not seen them. Except the NCCE and the Assemblyman who comes to the community to talk to them often.” (K1)*

### b) Less Effective Engagement Due to Large Number of Communities

The 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 are many and very wide apart making supervision and engagement more difficult. Engaging them in zonal town hall meeting means community members may have to travel long distance, which is 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.” (D1)*

This concern is re-echoed by a media informant who works with a community radio station in the Upper West Region. He explained that the large community size makes it difficult for radio stations to effectively gather the views of the people, especially because they have to travel long distance.

*“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.” (R1)*

Having many communities separated by long distance also means that bringing members from different communities together for town hall meetings. This make the gatherings expensive and weighs 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 Te&T [transportation]. And some of the areas are hard to reach. Communication is confronted with barriers.” (I1)*

### **c) Apathy to the Activities of the District Assemblies Owing to Unfulfilled Promises**

The study also found that many of the community members do not have much interest in the activities of the Assembly. A key informant from one of the community radio stations explained that the officials of the local government have over the years failed to fulfil promises they have made to the citizens on key developmental challenges in the community.

*“The general challenge that we see on the ground as we go about our work is that people who are supposed to be active don’t really care [about the activities of the district]. Sometimes when you talk to them they say these problems have been there for long, we have been speaking about it. We don’t see anything being done to solve it.” (R1)*

### **d) Politicisation of the District Assembly Positions**

It was also realised that during the District Assembly elections, members vying for the positions of assemblymen, unit community members and other offices in the local government structure tend to openly affiliate themselves with the main national political parties

*“Places that I know in Vieri here, during Assembly elections it turns to be politics. People will be attaching themselves to political parties which actually to me was very wrong. Still as I am speaking it is happening.” (K2)*

The effect of the politicisation of the elections is that after the elections, community members also fall in line and provide support to the officers according to their political affiliation. Therefore, for instance, a perceived NPP-affiliated assemblyman would not gain the support of community members who belong to the NDC. This also means there is bound to be a certain level of friction between the officers at the base or sub-structure of the local government structure and politically appointed DCE/MCE if they belong to different political affiliations.

## Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

- There is the need to have more education and sensitisation of the citizens on the role of the District Assembly, the structure of the Assembly and the functions of officers. Citizens must also be made to understand their role in contributing to the development of the communities as well as seeking information and holding officers of the Assembly accountable.
- There is also the need for education and training of officers of the District Assembly on the crucial role they play in the government structure of the Assemblies. They

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