



Barriers to Citizens' Engagement & Participation in Governance in Ghana: *The Critical Role of the Media*

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1.0 Introduction

The 1992 Constitution underscores the freedom of citizens to mobilize, partake in demonstrations and to form or join any association (e.g. trade unions or other national and international groups) for the protection of their interest. It further grants citizens the right and freedom to form or be part of a political party and to participate in political activities subject to laws of the country. These forms of freedom are intended to further extend the frontiers of citizens' involvement in the democratic process. The Constitution further provides for an elaborate system of local government and decentralized administration. The rationale behind the decentralization efforts in Ghana is to bring governance to the doorstep of the people. Citizens' participation therefore is not limited to the local government level but also covers national level institutions as well as Parliament.

Drawing on available secondary data and literature, this paper begins with an introduction on the governance context in Ghana and explains why participation is critical to enhancing development outcomes for citizens. It further discusses the barriers, opportunities and limitations on popular participation in Ghana and makes key recommendations on how participatory governance can be improved. The paper argues that the practice of democracy in Ghana does not appear to have progressed far beyond the formal forms of participation through the right to vote in elections. Thus, most Ghanaians have remained inactive in the period between elections and are not ready to exercise the right to embark on demonstration or protest marches.

The paper further highlights the disparity between policies on participatory governance and its practical implementation in Ghana. Thus, the lack of enforcement of legislative and institutional frameworks and applications of sanctions against public officials and institutions have contributed to undermine the ability of citizens to effectively participate in governance especially at the local level, where the state has developed very elaborate participatory frameworks through the practice of decentralization.

On access to information, the paper notes that it is essential in promoting citizens' participation, accountability and the fight against corruption. Hence, this paper acknowledges the passage of the Right to Information Act which will enhance citizens' access to information and enhance their participatory rights as citizens but then, most public

agencies and institutions over the years have failed to invest in the necessary infrastructure (including internet and intranet connectivity), personnel, and logistics to improve information management and accessibility by citizens. Hopefully, the law is expected to rectify these challenges.

The paper also reveals the relatively high cost of politics in Ghana which has the ability to undermine citizens' participation in the process, making it the reserve of the elite and the wealthy class particularly for aspiring parliamentary candidates. Elections is a critical tool for citizens to exact accountability and participate in the democratic process.

In its conclusion, the paper recommends to Parliament to regulate the increasing cost and monetization of elections in Ghana which is inimical to the participation of citizens in the electoral process. Also, government should resource the National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE) to deepen public education on issues of citizenship rights and responsibilities to reduce apathy and promote patriotism among citizens. In the same vein, MMDAs should be resourced to implement the various reforms on popular participation and accountability in local governance in Ghana. Likewise, the National Media Commission should be resourced to enable it effectively monitor the activities of the several media platforms dotted across the country and also provide regular in-service training and capacity-building workshops to promote media integrity, ethics and professionalism among media personnel in Ghana. This would contribute to enhancing the capacity of the media as a critical voice and tool for citizens to engage with government.

2.0 Context: Democracy and Governance in Ghana

Ghana has since 1992 continuously pursued a path of sustained political liberalization and democratization. A liberal democratic constitution promulgated in 1992 provides a framework for the people to commit themselves to democratic principles. Democratic governance continues to serve as an effective framework for safeguarding the peace, stability and development of the country. Since Ghana returned to democratic governance in 1992, the country has organized seven successful presidential and parliamentary elections, and has witnessed three changes in power between the two dominant parties. Also, the balance of power between the three arms of Govern-

ment (the Executive, the Judiciary and the Legislature) remains uneven, while the capacity of governance institutions (including the security agencies, ministries, departments and agencies) remains relatively weak. The institution of Parliament, besides its law-making functions, performs oversight, financial, socio-economic and other regulatory functions, which aim to deepen, consolidate and enhance good governance. The annual public hearings of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of Parliament on the Auditor-General's reports are geared towards ensuring public accountability by public institutions. However, the hybrid system has compromised the exercise of an effective checks and balance system, which is notable in the executive presidential system of government. The subordination of Parliament to the executive has undermined the value of countervailing power, which is the foundation of the executive presidential system and constitutionalism.

Moreover, Government has introduced systems and structures to improve transparency and accountability in the management of public funds. The passage of the Public Financial Management Act 2016 (Act 921) and the Public Procurement (Amendment) Act, 2016 (Act 914) provide additional instruments to ensure financial integrity in the system. Also, in 2018, the Fiscal Responsibility Act was passed to enhance prudent macroeconomic management and debt sustainability.

As part of the public administrative architecture, Ghana practices a system of decentralization as enshrined in the Constitution and the Local Governance Act (Act 936) of 2016. The Local Government Act designates District Assemblies as the highest political, legislative, budgeting and planning authority at the local level. The system has a four-tier metropolitan Assembly and a three-tier Municipal and District Assemblies.

Existing Legal Frameworks & Policies

- i. 1992 Constitution*
- ii. Elaborate system of local government and decentralized administration*
- iii. The Local Governance Act (Act 936) of 2016*
- iv. Public Financial Management Act 2016 (Act 921)*
- v. Public Procurement (Amendment) Act, 2016 (Act 914)*
- vi. The District Assembly Performance Assessment Tool (DPAT)*
- vii. The National Popular Participation Framework*

2.1 Why Citizens' Participation Matters

Participatory governance has a long history in development tracing from the post-colonial era after the abolition of the slave trade through the 1970s when the Bretton wood institutions began to recognize the involvement of beneficiaries in the design and implementation of its projects and programs. The World Bank defines Participation as a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions and resources which affect them. Rietbergen-McCracken and Narayan also define 'participation' as 'ranging from information-sharing and consultation methods, to mechanisms for collaboration and empowerment that give stakeholders more influence and control' (Rietbergen-McCracken & Narayan, 1998).

As part of the benefits of participation, the World Bank found that projects stood a better chance of success if people were involved. By 2004, the bank began to advocate for 'community-driven development' and 'empowerment'. Improving on citizen centric policy deliberation and service delivery and ensuring that citizens' voices can be heard are ways for governments to improve service delivery and build public trust in state institutions. Citizen engagement also allows us to broaden the development dialogue to include the views and perspectives of traditionally marginalized groups, leading to more inclusive institutions—governments, development organizations, and donor agencies alike. This can strengthen public consensus for important reforms, and provide the broad political support and public ownership necessary to sustain them.

3.0 Participatory and Accountability Mechanisms for Citizens including the role of the media

In Ghana, various accountability and participatory mechanisms exist at the national and local level for citizens. These include engagement in collective action and the right of citizens to participate in elections. Other mechanisms include the role of the media and the right to information law in promoting civic engagement, and the existing local government development planning and consultation frameworks.

i. Engagement in collective action

The 1992 Constitution of Ghana guarantees that every person in Ghana, irrespective of race, place of origin, political opinions, colour, religion, creed or gender shall be entitled to all the fundamental human rights and freedoms, subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and for the public interest. Specifically, all persons are entitled to the right of free speech and expression (including freedom of the press/media, freedom of thought, conscience and belief) and freedom of association, which includes the freedom to form or join trade unions and other associations

ii. Participation in Elections

This include the right of citizens to vote, campaign and join political parties of their choice. Every adult who per the constitution is qualified to vote has both the right and opportunity to vote in both local and national elections as well as in referenda. Ghanaians generally consider the exercise of this franchise, particularly in national elections, as an important civic responsibility. National elections are held every four years to elect a president and representatives to the national assembly or parliament. Similarly, local level elections are also held in all metropolitan, municipal and district authority areas to elect local councilors every four years and reforms have been initiated to introduce multi-party democracy at the local level.

Participation & Accountability Mechanisms

- i. Engagement in collective action.*
- ii. Participation in elections*
- iii. Local government development planning and consultations on policy frameworks*
- iv. Right to Information Law*
- v. the Mass Media (including social media)*

iii. Local government development planning and consultations on policy frameworks

The 1992 Constitution makes provision for the practice of decentralization and local governance in Ghana. At the local level, participatory governance is anchored by the Local Government Act, 2016 (Act 936) Sections 40-48 of the Act provides for participatory governance at the local level which includes the right of citizens to participate in District Assembly processes including **by-laws and fee-fixing resolutions**. It further provides the modalities and platforms for citizens' participation which also include the use of information and communication technology based-platform, among others. The Act further provides for other participatory mechanisms for citizens such as the right of stakeholders to petition

on any matter which the Assembly is responsible and to establish mechanisms to facilitate public communication and access to information including the use of television stations, information centers, websites, community radio and public meetings. In addition, the Act empowers every resident in a district to have access on request to information held by a District Assembly or a department of the District Assembly subject to limitations imposed by law. Also, under the planning systems and regulations, citizens have the right to participate in the formulation and execution of the local development plans and budgets of the Assembly.

iv. Right to Information Law

Another significant intervention in the Ghanaian democratic landscape expected to empower citizens and enhance participatory governance is the passage of the Right to Information Law. The Act seeks to enhance the flow of information from government to citizens. Information is critical tool for empowering citizens as active participants in a democracy.

v. The Mass Media (including social media)

In all the discussion, the role of the media cannot be overlooked as a critical institution in promoting citizens voice and accountability. The media in Ghana have always played a significant role in socio-political change and development in the country. As an institution, they are one of the pillars of accountability, with the structural rights that enable them to act as checks on power.

4.0 The critical role of the media in promoting citizens' participation and accountability in Ghana

First, it has been argued that access to mass media is a pre-condition for participation in a modern society (Lerner & Schramm). Schramm argues that, no nation has been able to develop or modernize itself without a developed mass media. This is because the media provides the easiest and most efficient means by which governments communicate with their citizens, and by which information flows among different strata and sections of society. The media also provide an enabling form and space for citizens to provide unrestrained feedback to government on national issues.

Secondly, the media contribute to transparency and accountability by providing information about what government is doing and by exposing wrongdoing to citizens. Information acts as the fuel that propels citizens to participate more meaningfully in the process of governance. In this challenging information environment, the Ghanaian media have been relatively successful in obtaining some information regarding issues and policies and have put them out in the public domain to enhance debate and analysis by citizens.

This has triggered citizens' mobilization and action in many ways. An example is the advocacy by Occupy Ghana, a civil society group in Ghana that engaged the Auditor General to take action on "Surcharges and Disallowance" following successive media reports on financial irregularities that had characterized the Auditor General Report over the years in Ghana. Thus, the media's role in teaming up with citizens to induce responsiveness from government on issues that are raised in the public domain is not in doubt. Unlike unconstitutional governments, democratic governments are guided by public opinion, and public opinion is often gauged and reflected through the media, citizens are thus able to attract the attention of government when very critical and salient issues are brought to the public through the mass media.

Moreover, the media has facilitated citizens' participation in the work of parliament, which is a very critical organ for accountability in a democracy. Thus, the media has provided coverage for parliamentary debates and has made it possible for citizens to better understand the democratic process and how laws governing them are made. More importantly, information from the media have alerted the public about impending bills that they may want to lobby parliament about.

According to *Internet World Stats*, a global digital and population data website, as at the end of March, 2019, 10.1million people, which is 33.6 percent of Ghanaians, had access to the internet with 4.9million on Facebook. Twitter is not doing badly either. The social media platform in Ghana has no doubt facilitated citizens' participation in governance processes. There is the constant demand for social justice, improvement in service delivery, social accountability and human rights fight corruption and increasing inclusiveness in public discourse. Citizens have used social media to mobilise protests etc.

Political actors or players in the country have also used social media significantly in their engagements with their constitu-

Challenges/Barriers

- i. Relatively high cost of elections in Ghana*
- ii. Apathy*
- iii. Lack of enforcement and sanctions on existing policy frameworks on citizens' participation*
- iv. Access to information*
- v. Illiteracy and Poverty*
- vi. Fragmented, Polarised & unprofessional media*

ents, elections campaign as well as sharing their thoughts on political discourse. It also been great platform for gauging public opinion. For instance the president of the Republic has an active twitter handle; Former President John Mahama also has an active twitter handle. Whether managed by themselves or their handlers, the move has been to share information, announcements, intervene in online conversations of what is going on in the country. Several political parties are also actively participating in these spaces to engage with their followers on national issues.

5.0 Challenges to citizens' participation and accountability in governance in Ghana

Although there is a strong case for popular participation and accountability in the democratic and governance space in Ghana, there are major limitations to this process. This section discusses some of the barriers and limitations that undermine effective citizens' participation and accountability in governance in Ghana.

i. Relatively high cost of elections in Ghana

Although, elections provide opportunities for citizens to participate in the democratic process and exact accountability, some challenges exist with the process. For instance, the filing fees charged by the Electoral Commission (EC) and the political parties for aspiring presidential and parliamentary candidates have become inimical to public participation in elections. For instance, a study conducted by CDD-Ghana and the Webminister Foundation after the 2016 elections on the Cost of Politics in Ghana indicated that candidates needed to raise GH389,803 (approx. US\$85,000) to secure the party primary nomination and compete in the parliamentary elections in their constituency¹. If the cost of politics rises to unaffordable levels the danger is that politics becomes the domain of the elite and wealthy.

1 www.wfd.org

ii. Apathy

Though there is freedom of expression and association in the political environment, most Ghanaians do not take advantage of these fundamental rights². Quite alarming, most Ghanaians are not ready to exercise the right to embark on demonstration or protest marches. The overwhelming majority of Ghanaians (95 percent) have not participated in protest marches for a period of twelve (12) months, according to an Afrobarometer report released in 2014. This figure included 84 percent who say they will never do such a thing. Only 4 percent of Ghanaians have engaged in this kind of collective action “once/twice”, “several times” or “often” in the past year.

Similar to the low ratings for engagement in collective action and participation in a political party, and working for a party/candidate and attending campaign rally, Ghanaians have low contact rates with both formal and informal leaders. According to the Afrobarometer Report, 2014³, the low levels of contact with formal and informal leaders may be explained by Ghanaians’ perception of leaders’ responsiveness to citizen engagement. Evidence from the report further indicates that over half of Ghanaians think Members of Parliament (63 percent) and local government councilors (53 percent) never listen to what ordinary citizens have to say. Thus, there is a growing sub-culture of **voice without accountability between citizens and governments contributing to the relatively low level of interest among citizens in the governance process.**

iii. Lack of enforcement and sanctions on existing policy frameworks on citizens’ participation

Ghana abounds with a number of policies and regulations aimed at enhancing citizen’s participation in governance at all levels. As mentioned, participation is an inalienable right under the 1992 Constitution, the Local Government Act (Act 936) and most recently, the Right to Information Act. These notwithstanding, implementation of the Local Government Act shows severe deficits with regards to citizens’ participation and engagement. Whilst there are forums for consultation, they seem to be poorly supported or inactive.

2 63 percent of Ghanaians (including 26 percent who would never) never engaged in collective action by joining with others in the past year to raise an issue. A little over a third (37 percent), however, did so either “once/twice”, “several times” or “often”. (Afrobarometer Report, 2014)

3 See Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 137, “The Practice of Democracy in Ghana: Beyond the Formal Framework” by Daniel Armah-Attoh and Anna Robertson, March 2014

Thus, MMDAs hardly prioritize citizens' participation in their operations including the local budget. For example, the conduct of public hearing as required under the planning systems and regulations as part of the preparation of the Medium Term Development Plans (MTDPs) for MMDAs rarely takes place at the local level⁴. Quite understandably, the political actors appear to be more interested and focused on the implementation of physical projects for purpose of electoral campaign and responding to manifesto promises. Some District Assemblies are also not economically viable to raise enough from the internally generated funds to finance its program aimed at engaging the citizens at the local level.

Evidence from a study conducted by the *Wits School of Governance in 2017*⁵ confirms the above assertion. The study notes that appropriate measures to promote citizens' participation suffer some weaknesses as a little over half of respondents interviewed suggest that only partial commitment has been made towards the provision of structures at the local government level to aid effective local participation. The paper further suggests that, there seems to be a gradual weakening of local government due to the creeping phenomenon of elite capture, whereby attempts have been made by the central government to whittle down the impact of citizens' participation through recentralization of decentralized structures.

Also related to enforcement is the sanctions and incentives for and against popular participation, particularly in promoting civic engagement within the local governance system which is anchored on the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process towards sustaining development outcomes at the local level. The District Assembly Performance Assessment Tool (DPAT) outlines the core indicators for the Assessment of MMDAs performance including popular participation and citizens' engagement. The DPAT is mainstreamed into the District Assemblies Common Fund (DACF) through the *responsive factor*. Indeed, most of the interventions and reforms introduced to enhance popular participation under the National Popular Participation Framework are not featured in the indicators for assessment under the DPAT particularly on popular participation and accountability. Hence, the sanctions against MMDAs for defaulting in the implementation of the NPPF remains weak within the local governance framework.

4 See <https://www.cddgh.org/vol-16-no-1-strengthening-stakeholder-participation-in-de-centralized-planning-systems-in-ghana-by-dr-franklin-oduro-paul-osei-kuffour/>

5 See Civil Society Perspectives on African Union Member State Commitments to Democratic Governance compiled by the WITS School of Governance, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, June 2017. (www.wits.ac.za/wsg)

iv. Access to information

Information is very essential to the effective participation of citizens in any democracy. Under the Open Government Partnership OGP, Government is committed to improving records management by providing a framework for all public institutions to manage information so that they can efficiently provide information to operationalize the RTI law after its passage. However, the Ghana Open Data Policy is currently not finalized. In addition, not all MDAs and MMDAs have the necessary infrastructure (including internet and intranet connectivity), personnel, and logistics to improve information management.

v. Illiteracy and Poverty

To be able to build a strong movement of citizens and enhance coalitions around accountability and participation requires having citizens who are knowledgeable and well informed on their rights and responsibilities and are able to demand for them. Unfortunately, Ghana's relatively high level of illiteracy and poverty is a disincentive to participatory and accountable governance as majority of the people are not well informed and empowered to be able to engage constructively with the government, especially at the local and sub-national level.

vi. Fragmented, Polarised and Unprofessional media

The challenges with the role of the media include the fact that many of the country's radio stations are in urban areas to the disadvantage of rural communities. Also, there are challenges with professionalism and polarization of the media along deep political divisions undermining its neutrality and objectivity in shaping public opinions and engagement with government. Moreover, findings from a [study](#) conducted by the MFWA on "Radio Coverage of Local Governance Issues in Selected Districts across Ghana" showed that radio stations only give little attention to local governance issues and rarely live up to their full potential in increasing participatory and accountable democracy⁶.

Social media contributes significantly to citizens' participation in public discourse and governance, However, existing limitations - social political economic, political, technological - prevent citizens from accessing the full potential of the internet and the opportunities/ spaces it provides. These include access to the internet and high internet costs, ability to

6 <file:///C:/Users/CODEO1/Desktop/Programs/2019/MFWA/Policy-Brief-Media-and-Local-Governance-in-Ghana.pdf>

effectively use diverse media tools, security issues and citizens' knowledge of how best to use the mediums, online harassment for people who tend to be very vocal and active in the spaces.

6.0 Conclusion

Efforts aimed at consolidating participatory governance in Ghana is a mixture of successes and failures. Indeed, citizens' right to participation is firmly rooted in the country's political structure and that Universal suffrage is guaranteed and citizens get the opportunity to elect their local and national representatives periodically in open, free and fair elections. Most people also believe in the efficacy of elections in the country. Furthermore, freedom of expression (including media freedoms) and freedom of association are firmly guaranteed by the constitution. Ghana has pluralistic media landscape, with considerable success in press freedom. The media continue to play their watchdog role over the executive, legislature, and judiciary. This freedom and respect for rights and rule of law have emboldened citizens to participate more effectively in development discourse and demand accountability from public office holders.

However, the extent to which civil society engages with the current state of democracy in Ghana is quite challenging. Ghana may be among those countries where government-citizen dialogue on salient policy issues has not taken root and have been described mainly as partial. Also, nearly all the measures that indicate the existence of a participatory democracy, namely engagement in collective action, attending campaign rally, and most importantly engagement with formal and informal leaders lag far behind the formal indicators of democracy.

Moreover, key reforms and policy frameworks promulgated to advance participatory governance appears to remain on paper. This is a situation that has serious implications for the country's democratic development in the years ahead. As the country continues to deepen democratic governance and fight corruption, citizen engagement, access to information and participatory governance will remain an important asset in ensuring inclusiveness and ownership of the development process.

7.0 Recommendations

- a. Parliament is encouraged to pass legislations to regulate the increasing cost of elections which as explained above is a disincentive to the participation of citizens in elections. Most importantly, Parliament should engage relevant stakeholders to build consensus and identifying mechanisms towards legislating against the increasing monetization of elections in Ghana to make it accessible for the poor and ordinary Ghanaian to contest for political office in Ghana. This would also contribute towards promoting inclusive governance and reduce the widening inequality in Ghana.
- b. Secondly, government should resource the National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE) to deepen public education on issues of citizenship rights and responsibilities and how these could be exercised to deepen good governance and democracy in Ghana. This education should involve the participation of Civil Society Organizations and in partnership with the media.
- c. Thirdly, MMDAs should be resourced to implement the various reforms introduced to promote popular participation and accountability in local governance in Ghana. This include the National Popular Participation Framework and the provisions on participatory governance under the Local Government Act passed in 2016. In the same vein, efforts towards promoting multi-party democracy at the local level should be strongly enforced and government must work in close partnership with the various political parties to achieve this objective. Introduction of multi-party democracy at the local level is expected to promote activism, reduce apathy and enhance accountability in local governance.
- d. Moreover, the National Media Commission should be resourced to enable it effectively monitor the activities of the numerous media platforms available in the country and provide regular in-service training and capacity-building workshops to promote media integrity, ethics and professionalism among media personnel in Ghana. Also, Civil Society Organizations and the media coalition on the Right to Information law in Ghana should deepen monitoring and advocacy for the effective operationalization of the law to ensure government does not renege on its responsibilities towards providing resources to make the implementation of the law a

reality in all Ministries, Departments and Agencies and MMDAs in Ghana. This would contribute to enhancing the capacity of the media as a critical voice and tool for citizens to engage with government.

Again, while social media is very crucial to citizens' participation in public discourse and governance, challenges such as high internet cost, internet shutdown attempts, limited or lack of knowledge and the know-how in effectively utilising social media, security issues, online harassment needs to be addresses in order to sustain civic participation, transparency and efficient public service delivery via the social media.

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