

Media and Local Governance in Ghana

Background

Citizens' participation in local governance is fundamental in promoting development and true democratic values. It is at the local level that fundamental development decisions, resource mobilization and utilization occur. The 1992-Constitution of the Republic of Ghana clearly states that democracy shall be realised through decentralization and *"by affording all possible opportunities to the people to participate in decision-making at every level in national life and in government"* (Article 35).

Despite civic participation in governance being a constitutional right in Ghana, the level of civic participation on particularly on local level remains low. This is manifested in the consistently poor voter turnout in District Assembly Elections and a general public apathy towards community development initiatives.

Various studies, including those conducted by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) have revealed that media, particularly radio stations, are important platforms for civic participation and interaction with local authorities. Furthermore they are vital in disseminating information to the public. Thus, improved and

increased radio advocacy and public education on local governance can be one of the most effective ways of promoting civic participation and promoting accountability and transparency in local governance processes in Ghana.

Findings from a study conducted by the MFWA on *"Radio Coverage of Local Governance Issues in Selected Districts across Ghana"* however 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 democracy.

To improve this situation through a participatory development approach the MFWA, with funding from IBIS-Ghana, convened a National Stakeholders' Forum on May 29, 2014. The Forum brought together stakeholders from the local governance sector, the media and civil society to identify key challenges to effective local governance and decentralization in Ghana, discuss the role of the media in overcoming the identified challenges and make recommendations on how to improve the current situation.

This Media and Local Governance Policy Brief highlights key issues raised at the Forum and recommendations made for ensuring more

effective, participatory and transparent local governance and decentralization in Ghana.

The National Stakeholders Forum

More than 150 representatives from key public and private local governance institutions, leading media houses and civil society organisations participated in the forum.

The following are some of the prominent institutions participating in the Forum and sharing ideas

- The Ministry of Local Governance and Rural Development represented by the Deputy Minister (*Hon. Emmanuel Kwadwo Agyekum*)
- The Local Government Service represented by the Head (*Dr. Callistus Mahama*)
- The National Commission for Civic Education represented by the Chairperson (*Mrs Charlotte Osei*)
- The Institute for Local Government Studies represented by the Director (*Dr. Esther Offei-Aboagye*)
- The Ghana Journalist Association represented by the President (*Dr. Affail Money*)
- The Private Newspaper Publishers Association of Ghana represented by the Executive Secretary (*Mr. Kenteman Nii Laryea Sowah*)
- Metropolitan, Municipal and District Executive Directors from Greater Accra Region
- Civil Society Organizations (such as IDEG, CDD, ABANTU)



Participants listening attentively to a colleague asking a question

The Forum featured the following presentations by some of the most prominent experts within local governance and media in Ghana:

1. **Dr. Callistus Mahama** - Head of Local Government Service whose specific topic was *"Challenges in fostering Citizens' Participation in the Decentralisation process in Ghana"*
2. **Mr. George Kyei Baffour** - Local Government Analyst, who talked about *"The Major Challenges of Ghana's Decentralisation and Local Governance process"*
3. **Mrs. Charlotte Osei**, Chairperson, National Commission for Civic Education on the topic *"Nurturing Active and Patriotic Citizens for effective governance in Ghana – the way forward"*
4. **Prof. Kwame Karikari**, School of Communication Studies, University of Ghana, shared his views on *"The role of the media in fostering Participatory, Accountable and Transparent Local Governance"*



Panellists at the forum from left to right: Hon. Emmanuel Kwadwo Agyekum, Deputy Minister- Ministry of Local Governance and Rural Development; Dr. Esther Offei-Aboagye, Director- Institute for Local Government Studies; Mrs Charlotte Osei, Chairperson, National Commission for Civic Education; Prof. Kwame Karikari, School of Communication Studies, University of Ghana and Mr. George Kyei Baffour, Local Government Analyst.

Identified Key Challenges to Participatory and Accountable Local Governance in Ghana

In the presentations and in plenum discussions the following were identified as the key challenges to participatory and accountable local governance in Ghana:

- Low Citizen Engagement and Ownership of Local Governance Processes:

Civic participation in local governance is generally low and citizens do not feel a strong ownership of local governance and development processes. Consequently, only a small number of Ghanaians take part in important decision-making concerning

community development. There was admission by stakeholders that in the Decentralization Policy Framework from

- Inadequate information and measures for holding assemblies accountable:

Citizens continue to face difficulties accessing information on their local governance structures. Three reasons were assigned for this: Firstly, Assemblies do not proactively provide adequate information as required and demanded by the citizens. Secondly, all local government policy documents and laws are written in technical English language difficult for ordinary citizens to understand. Furthermore, standards for service delivery were only recently introduced. These standards are however not publicly available yet. These three factors, especially the deficit in information, limits the citizens ability to hold authorities accountable.

- Complexity of Ghana's Local Government System:

The local governance structure and system is very complex in a way that limits participation and transparency. The complexity of structures makes tracking of revenue inflows and outflows difficult thus hindering accountability in the local governance system.

- Central Government Level Influence:

Overbearing influence of central government limits the independence of the local governance structures. There is significant administrative influence from central authorities. Examples include employment of staff and budgeting. Furthermore, there is a

2010, *Popular Participation & Accountability* and *Social Agenda* are the two areas which have not been adequately implemented.

political influence: unlike politics at the national level the 1992-Constitution does not permit partisan politics at local level (Article 248). However, MMDCs and 30% of Assembly officials are appointed directly by the president. Also the practice where candidates running for parliamentary seats make promises which fall under the responsibility of the Assemblies tends to make citizens unclear on who bears the responsibility of providing development – the Assemblies or parliament.

- Resource inadequacies in Assemblies:

Assemblies are often faced with financial and human resource constraints. This is a recurrent crippling factor inhibiting the fulfillment of their basic functions. Personnel at the local levels often lack adequate training while some are unfamiliar with the Decentralization Policy Framework which makes service delivery relatively inefficient.

Challenges in Enhancing Participatory and Accountable Local Governance through the Media

The forum identified the following to be key challenges regarding the media's role in promoting participatory and accountable local governance in Ghana.

- Focus on central issues:

Radio stations predominantly focus their broadcasting on national rather than local issues.. Most radio discussions, even on local level, are driven by Accra-based stations and

tend to focus on high-level policy making leaving issues affecting local communities unattended. This practice negatively affect the role radio stations located in the local communities can play in enhancing citizen participation in public discourse regarding local governance issues and their demand for accountability from their Assemblies.

- Low capacity of journalist and lack of interest in local governance programming:

Generally, journalists, especially those working on rural-based media, have limited knowledge and capacity for doing quality local governance reporting. This is combined with a general lack of media interest in local governance reporting. Consequently, the limited reporting produced and broadcasted do not receive maximum attention from community members. The capacity gap also negatively affects journalists' understanding of the complex local governance structure.

- Partisanship:

A number of local radio stations are either owned by politicians or affiliated to a political party which affects their independence and objectivity. Another consequence of the ownership structure is that it negatively influences the credibility of these stations and impact on advocacy work. Furthermore, broadcasting tends to be focused on individuals instead of policy and general issues. This kind of reporting is not likely to contribute to development.

- Citizen journalism:

Citizen input on local governance issues is not extensive and citizen journalism is almost non-existent. In a modern society where social media is a prominent communication channel, critical citizen journalism and civic participation in public discourse through social media platforms is critical for holding authorities accountable and for ensuring transparent governance.



A cross-section of stakeholders at the forum

Recommendations

Based on the identified challenges in the local governance sector and media system, the following recommendations were made by experts and participants at the forum:

Recommendation	Relevant Implementing Body
<i>Regular</i> platforms for engagement between the assembly and communities are needed to increase citizen participation	Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs) Radio Stations Civil Society
The local government system should be simplified	Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development
Partnerships between media and assemblies should be strengthened: Assembly PR-offices should develop medium to long-term Media Relation Plans; Local Assemblies should hold regular press conferences and briefings, give systematic invitations to media to cover assembly events and provide radio stations briefing notes on the work of Assemblies.	MMDAs
Local radio stations should start focusing on local governance and Assembly issues. Stations should introduce systematic programme schedules to provide regular information; make space for local news; produce interactive programmes for assemblies and citizens; organise regular programmes with MMDCEs and give extensive coverage on assembly elections.	Local Radio Stations
Accra-based media should initiate advocacy work on local governance issues because they have a large voice in the public debate	Accra-based stations
Civic education on local governance processes should be increased especially in rural areas	Local Radio Stations The National Commission for Civic Education
Training programmes should be set up targeting journalists who wish to conduct independent and in-depth reporting as freelancers. This enables journalists to do more objective and independent reporting despite the partisan media houses.	MFWA School of Communication Ghana Institute of Journalism

Moving Forward

At the forum some initiatives were mentioned as next steps in ensuring more accountable and participatory local governance in Ghana:

Next Step	Relevant Implementing Body
Production of basic guidelines on central laws and regulation translated into local languages	The National Commission for Civic Education
A publication of standards for service delivery to enable citizens and media to hold politicians accountable	Local Government Service / Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development
Sensitisation on the upcoming referendum on constitutional amendment; there is very limited knowledge about among the general public.	Media Houses National Commission for Civic Education
Increase knowledge in the Assemblies as well as in the public on the 2010 Decentralization Policy Framework.	Local Government Service