The state of Ghana's local government system: the case of Assembly Members

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International development organisations have, for a long time, presented Ghana as having a highly functional inter-government system or decentralisation. While this projection is far from the country's grounded reality, Ghana continues to benefit from the 'misrepresentation' as one of the preferred destinations in the sub-Saharan region for foreign aid and development assistance. This paper discusses some of the weaknesses inherent in Ghana's local government system. Specifically, it unravels the issues affecting the operations of Assembly Members, who are key facilitators of developments at the local level. The paper is based on the ethnographic study of the World Bank-funded Community-Based Rural Development Projects (CBRDP) implemented in Ghana between 2005-2011. The analysis of the empirical data collected in 2010/2011 from nine localities in the Eastern, Greater Accra and Volta Regions indicates that Assembly Members are faced with many challenges, some of which would require national civic education and constitutional amendments to address. The paper seeks to show the complex factors that impact on decentralisation and local government systems.

Introduction

Decentralisation continues to gain prominence in international development discourse and policy analysis, with a significant body of literature devoted to it. The interest in the subject stems from the belief that so-called bottom-up approaches achieve better development outcomes (Chambers1983, Crook & Manor1998). Decentralisation is also believed to promote democracy through the inclusion of local voices in development processes (World Bank 2004, Binswanger, de Regt & Spector 2010). If effective, decentralisation is also believed to enhance service delivery, reduce corruption, reduce poverty and prevent autocracy (Ahmed & Brosio 2009, Zhou 2009). Given these advantages, since 2000 the World Bank has been promoting Community-Driven Development (CDD) programs[2], an approach that is believed to give local people total control over development projects (Mansuri & Rao 2004, World Bank 2010)[3]. Because CDD programs are believed to work better in highly functional decentralisation contexts[4]; the World Bank and many proponents of the approach seem to be encouraging developing countries to step up their decentralisation efforts (Dongier, Van Domelen, Ostrom, Ryan, Wakeman, Bebbington, Alkire, Esmail, & Polsky, 2003, Mansuri & Rao 2004, Binswanger *et al.* 2010, World Bank 2010).

At the same time, some international development agencies have resorted to what we refer to as 'development celebrity labelling' by projecting some countries as models of good governance and decentralisation, whom others must 'emulate'. Within the sub-Saharan African region, Ghana is one of such countries enjoying the development celebrity label (see Whitfield 2008, Woll 2008, *http://www.dfid.gov.uk/ghana*,; Binswanger *et al.* 2010).

This paper argues that the substructures of Ghana's local government machinery are weak, making the country barely worthy of the development 'celebrity' projection. The paper focuses on the operations of Assembly Members, who are key stakeholders of Ghana's local government system. Although there is evidence that Ghana's decentralisation has stagnated and needs an overhaul (see Constitutional Review Committee Report 2011, Ahwoi 2005 & 2010, Tettey 2006, Gyimah-Boadi 2009, Ofie-Aboagye 2009, Antwi-Boasiako 2010), the focus on the realities impacting on the work of Assembly Members seems to be lacking. By pointing out some of the constitutional provisions and cultural issues affecting the functions of Ghanaian Assembly Members, we seek to show the complex factors that impact on decentralisation and local government systems. In this regard, the paper attempts to answer the Research Question: What are the factors that impact on the operations of Ghanaian Assembly Members?

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2. Ghana's Community–Based Rural Development Project (CBRDP) was designed as a CDD program. The overall objective of the project was to empower rural populations to participate actively in issues affecting their lives, while supporting Ghana's decentralisation process, particularly the Area Councils (see CBRDP Implementation Manual 2006, Yaron 2008).
3. Since 2000, the World Bank Group has invested nearly 2000 in CDD programs (see Wong & Guggenheim 2005, Binswanger *et al.* 2010).
4. This theory has been challenged (see Adusei-Asante & Hancock 2012).

The paper is based on the case study of Ghana's Community-Based Rural Development Projects (CBRDP). The CBRDP aimed to contribute to the overall 'empowerment' of the rural population, while simultaneously strengthening the country's decentralisation system (CBRDP Implementation Manual 2006). By providing fixed amounts to beneficiary localities to implement projects of their choice from predetermined categories, the CBRDP sought to bridge the gap of uneven distribution across socio-economic groups and geographical locations (CBRDP Implementation Manual 2006). The project also aimed to strengthen Ghana's local government substructures (Assembly Members, Area Councils and Unit Committees) as planners and implementers of development initiatives at the local level. The CBRDP was implemented under the supervision of the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD) and the Regional Coordinating Units (RICUs) in conjunction with an independent CBRDP secretariat. The project was piloted between 2005 and 2011 in all ten regions (CBRDP Implementation Manual 2006, Binswanger *et al.* 2010).

Methodology

The findings presented in this paper were extracted from a PhD dissertation written by this author[5], which explored how arguable decentralisation theories and the application of complex concepts such as 'community' and 'empowerment' affected Ghana's Community-Based Rural Development Projects (CBRDP). The data was drawn from the review and analysis of relevant academic literature and qualitative data collected during a seven-month fieldwork period (2010/2011) in nine localities from three regions of Ghana: Eastern, Greater Accra and Volta. The qualitative data was generated from participant-observation, focus group discussions and individual (semi-structured) interviews with Assembly Members, Unit Committees, Traditional Chiefs, CBRDP Managers and other key informants. Fifty individual interviews and ten focus group discussions were conducted. Twenty-five questionnaires were distributed in each of the nine CBRDP beneficiary localities researched. They were administered randomly, but purposely to residents who had intimate knowledge of the work of Assembly Members and on the implementation of the CBRDP in their respective localities.

A total of nine male Assembly Members were interviewed; the oldest was over sixty and the youngest was in his 'mid–thirties'. They all listed their main occupation as either civil servant or self-employed being a part-time Assembly Member. Eight of the Assembly Members had at least completed basic education and could read, write and speak English with varied fluency[6]. Almost all the Assembly Members interviewed were married with children; some with two or more wives. While most of them lived in the localities they served, two lived and worked elsewhere and visited their Electoral Areas occasionally. Two of the Assembly Members had served only once and were seeking re-election, while the others were stepping down voluntarily, for reasons discussed subsequently in this paper.

Background

The 1988 Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) Local Government Law 207, Legislative Instrument 1589 was the landmark legislation that provided the legal framework for a decentralised local government system in Ghana. The PNDC Law 207 has been strengthened as an entrenched provision in Chapter Twenty of the current Constitution (Ahwoi 2010). Article 240 provides the framework for the country's decentralisation system although other relevant laws have been passed to augment it.[7]

Ghana's local government structure is made up of Regional Coordinating Councils and a four-tier and three-tier Municipal/District Assembly system (see Figure 1). Given their constitutionally mandated political and administrative authority at the local level, Municipal/District Assemblies (MDAs) are very 'powerful' in the country's decentralisation system (Gyimah-Boadi 2009, Ahwoi 2010). Municipal/District Assemblies coordinate and supervise all programs by Government Ministries and Departments and non-governmental organisations (Section 10 (5), Local Government Act 462). Municipal/District Assemblies also have responsibility for eighty-six functions; sole control over certain public services; and the prerogative to make decisions regarding some executive and policy issues (Tettey 2006, Gyimah-Boadi 2009, Ofie-Aboagye 2009, Ahwoi 2010).

However, the operations of MDAs allow many loopholes for political manoeuvring, which has a trickle-down effect on Assembly Members (Crawford 2004; Sumberg & Okali 2006; Antwi-Boasiako 2010). While Article 248 (2) of the Constitution does not allow MDAs to be partisan, the opposite seems to be the reality (Tettey 2006, Gyimah-Boadi 2009). According to Ahwoi (2010: 62) the politicisation of the MDAs is due to the modelling of the country's local

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5. Adusei-A., K (2013). "Towards Aid Effectiveness: Contested Theories and Concepts, A Case Study of the World Bank's Community-Based Rural Development Projects in Ghana". Unpublished PhD Dissertation: Edith Cowan University, Australia.
6. Others could only manage 'broken' English or could not express themselves in English at all.
7. These include, but are not limited to: the Local Government Act, 1993 (Act 462); the Local Government Service Act 2003 (Act 656); the District Assemblies Common Fund Act 455, the National Development Planning Systems Act 480; and the Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies Standing Orders (Constitution of the Republic of Ghana 1992; Kyei-Baffour 2009; Antwi-Boasiako 2010; Ahwoi 2010).

government structure on that of Canada, which has a 'partisan central government superimposed on a non-partisan local government system'. There appears to be a stronger leaning towards the argument which blames the politicisation of the MDAs on Article 243 (2) that allows the President to appoint Municipal/District Chief Executives[8] (DCEs) rather than their being elected (Tettey 2006, Antwi-Boasiako 2010). As the chief representative and the principal executor of the central government's programs in the district, DCEs run the day-to-day functions of the MDAs. DCEs are appointed for two terms of four years only, but have to be nominated by the President and approved by two–thirds of the Assembly Members present and voting (ILGS & MLGDE 2006, Tettey 2006, Ahwoi 2010, Antwi-Boasiako 2010).
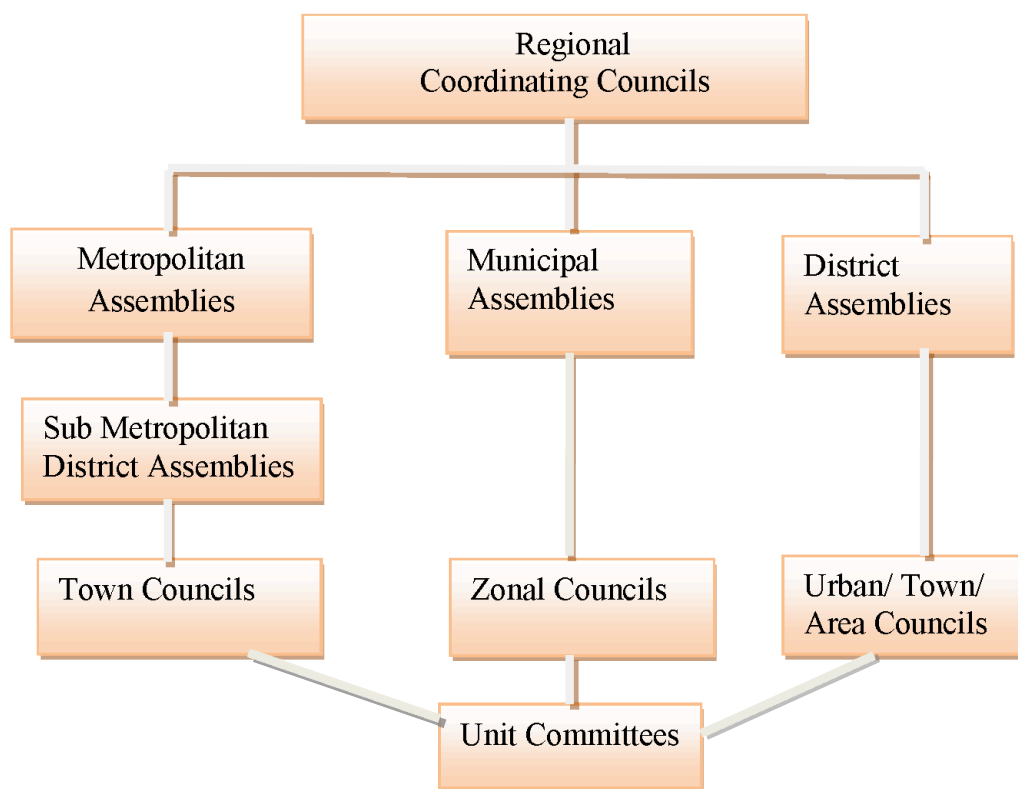
Source: Adapted from Ahwoi (2010

Figure 1 Structure of Ghana's Local Government system in the fourth republic

Some local scholars have suggested that the constitutional provision allowing for the appointment of DCEs should be amended to enable their election through popular votes (see Tettey 2006, Gyimah-Boadi 2009, Antwi-Boasiako 2010).[9] It is the view of such scholars that revising that constitutional provision will make DCEs accountable to the local people, as the status quo seems to promote DCEs default allegiance to the President rather than the local people. However, Ahwoi (2010) challenges that suggestion and asserts that the election of DCEs would result in the politicisation of the entire local government system. Although the country's politicians have promised to amend that constitutional provision (Article 243 (2)), it has remained lip service only (see New Patriotic Party Manifesto 2008; National Democratic Congress Manifesto 2008; Ex-President J.E.A. Mills First Sectional Address, cited in Asante 2009); many believe that the status quo offers the country's politicians an opportunity for controlling operations at the MDAs (Crawford 2004, Sumberg & Okali 2006, Tettey 2006, Gyimah-Boadi 2009, Kyei-Baffour 2009, Antwi-Boasiako 2010). This notwithstanding, analysis of the data presented below suggests that the election of DCEs would not necessarily depoliticise the system, although there is evidence that the status quo subjects Assembly Members to pander to the whims of DCEs.

8. DCEs will be used through out this paper.
9. The immeditae past Minister of Local Government and Rural Development and Environment also supports the idea *(http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=244165, retrieved 10 July 2009).*

The plight of assembly members in Ghana

Assembly Members are key facilitators of developments at the local level in Ghana. They are elected for four-year re-electable twice terms (twelve years in all), and are not to be identified with any political party. They do not receive salaries, but receive transport allowances when they attend the Municipal/District Assembly (MDA) meetings (ILGS & MLGDE 2006). While the current government has promised to pay all Assembly Members, this payment has not yet materialised (NDC 2008 Manifesto: 86). Because of the dearth of empirical research on the functions of Assembly Members in Ghana, many challenges and issues they face appear to be unknown. These include, but are not limited to: 1) Non-payment of salaries; 2) Relating to partisan M/DCEs; 3) Working with weak Unit Committees; and 4) Relating to Traditional Chiefs.

I Non-payment of salaries

Various reasons, which are categorized into political ambitions, volunteerism and family/friends' pressures, have influenced Assembly Members to take up the role. Those with political ambitions explained that the role was a first step into public service. Although the underlying principle was to serve the people, they considered it a foundation upon which they would build their political careers. The analysis revealed that sixty percent of the Assembly Members interviewed considered the position a stepping-stone into a political career. As Kofi Dogbe, a 35 year-old Assembly Member from the Volta Region put it, "It's hard to rise into the political limelight overnight. You need a reference and starting point." Interestingly, while some of these prospective politicians claimed to have no political affiliations, others indicated their leanings.

Nearly twenty percent of the Assembly Members had also taken up the role voluntarily as an act of service to the local people. Such Assembly Members claimed to have no political affiliations or ambitions, and that they were in the role to serve their people. The final category of Assembly Members interviewed consisted of those whose friends or family members asked or influenced them to take up the job. One of them stated that: When your people recognise that you can represent them in the District Assembly, it's an honour. If you say no, it will create displeasure and disappointment and may even be interpreted to mean disrespecting them. You need to honour the recognition given to you … after all, some of them contributed to your education.

The Assembly Members interviewed were on average in charge of twenty or more localities, some several kilometers away and accessible only by footpaths and bicycles. Interestingly, Section 16 of the Local Government Act, 1993, Act 462 (see ILGS & MLGRD 2006) expects an Assembly Member to:

a)   Maintain close contact with his Electoral Area, consult his/her people on issues to be discussed in the District Assembly and collate their views, opinions and proposals;
b   Present the views, opinions and proposals to the District Assembly;
c   Attend meetings of the District Assembly and meetings of the sub-committees of which he is a member;
d   Meet his/her electorates before each meeting of the Assembly;
e   Report to his electorate the general decisions of the Assembly and its Executive Committee and the actions s/he has taken to solve the problems raised by residents in his Electoral Area;
f   Draw attention in general debate to national policies which are relevant to the subject under discussion;
g   Actively participate in the work of the sub-committees of the Executive Committee [of the District Assembly];
h   Bring to bear on any discussion in the Assembly the benefit of his skill, profession, experience or specialised knowledge;
i   Maintain frequent liaison with productive economic groupings and other persons in the District;
j   Take part in communal and development activities in the district.

Confronted with such a realistically impossible task in an unpaid job, most Assembly Members seemed frustrated. Asked how they managed the situation, five explained that they visited each of the localities in their jurisdiction once a month, while others did so only when an emergency ensued. Assembly Members who lived outside their localities explained that their Unit Committee Members visited in their stead and attended to urgent issues in their absence. Almost all the Assembly Members interviewed were not worried only about being unpaid, but about the fact that their electorates expected so much from them.

The expectation of many local people from their Assembly Members seemed utopian. Some expected them to pay school fees, provide business capital, and initiate income-generating or employment-oriented projects. Thus, while a greater percentage of questionnaire respondents admitted knowing their Assembly Members, they always remarked, "I know him … but he does nothing for me". The high expectations confronting Assembly Members may be attributable to

the general high poverty levels across the country; the lack of public education on local government functions; and particularly, the many election campaign promises of the Assembly Members.

Because the position of an Assembly Member is electable, candidates are expected to visit their Electoral Areas individually to canvass for votes. During these campaigning times, many of them tend to raise the hopes of the people by promising things they cannot deliver. During the fieldwork, which coincided with the Ghana's 2010 local government elections, we encountered many potential Assembly Members who were promising to construct bridges, roads and schools. Tellingly, many Assembly Members disposed redeemable tokens, and doing favours or handing out gifts in electorates to win the constituents' votes. Some revealed that they spent almost 5000 GHC[10] on their campaigns. One was asked why such a huge amount of money was spent to get into an unpaid job. He replied:

> This is Ghana. Money is powerful. You can have a great vision or a manifesto; if it is not backed with 'action' [cash, gifts] people will not have confidence in you. For me it's not a big deal because I'm preparing myself for a bigger political future and there I will recoup all my investment.

Another explained:

> It is very difficult to win elections in this place empty-handed. It is a survival of the rich or the one who can pay more. Here, votes are for sale … even if you don't want to do it, you will be compelled to do the same, as your opponents will be doing it.

The fact that Assembly Members are not paid, but expected to do so much, has led to the misappropriation of funds earmarked for local development, one instance being the Community-Based Rural Development Projects (CBRDP). Because of the 'investment' some Assembly Members made to their work, they tended to see the CBRDP as an opportunity to recoup dividends. As a result, in some localities, the Area Council Chairmen and project officials disclosed that some Assembly Members awarded the procurement of the project's materials to themselves and/or inflated the prices.

II Relating to 'Partisan' Municipal/District Chief Executives

As briefly explained earlier, the Community-Based Rural Development Project (CBRDP) was designed to strengthen the country's local government sub-structures; ultimately, the Area Councils.[11] Although the Area Councils were expected to be the implementers of CBRDP, they relied heavily on the MDAs, as they lacked the technical capacities required. Given that constitutionally DCEs are the most powerful figures at the MDA level, they supervised the selection of the beneficiary Area Councils. DCEs also oversaw the MDAs facilitation of the projects, particularly the technical aspects: planning, engineering, and accounting, among others. It is therefore important to explain briefly how the politicisation of the operations of MDAs in Ghana impacted on the CBRDPs; this will clarify the context for understanding how the 'power' of DCEs affected Assembly Members.

As DCEs determined which Area Council would benefit from the CBRDP, we found that some of the projects were politicised and given to unqualified localities.[12] In Ghana, DCEs are eligible to contest parliamentary elections. As a result, some of them used the CBRDPs as political machines to launch their campaigns or win favours for votes. Whitfield (2008) attests to this practice, observing that some Ghanaian politicians streamline aid-funded projects so as to get themselves elected or for fulfilling their election promises in locations where there is no need. Therefore, while the CBRDP required that the projects be implemented in Area Councils having functioning offices, we found that some had no offices, although they had been given projects. Many sources reported that, whereas the projects were supposed to be managed by the Area Councils under the facilitation of professionals at the respective Municipal/District Assemblies' engineers, planning officers and accountants, DCEs who were aspiring to be elected as parliamentarians, aberrantly became the managers of the projects as a ploy to win political favour from the electorates. An Assembly Member whose locality benefitted from the project observed:

> Although I was the Presiding Member and was supposed to be in charge of the project, the DCE sidelined me and took charge, working with his party cronies. He did this because he labelled me as a member of the

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10. Almost USD 4000.

11. This consists of Assembly Members, Unit Committee Member and Government Appointees.

12. The CBRDP secretariat relied on the DAs to choose deserving Area Councils to pilot the projects.

opposition party and was also contesting one of the parliamentary seats in the district … I'm happy he lost.

An Area Council Chairman from the Eastern Region also related:

> The only project our Area Council got under my chairmanship was the public toilet facility the CBRDP brought. But the DCE had a political agenda … but I was powerless and could not challenge him. According to the CBRDP officials, we were supposed to build a sixteen-seater toilet facility, but the DCE divided the project sum of GHC15 000 and took part to another locality without consulting us.

Because DCEs wield so much power in determining which locality does or does not get projects, Assembly Members are forced to be obsequious at all cost, including lobbying them. According to the *Collins Concise Dictionary* (2001), lobbying is "an attempt to influence [mainly politicians] on behalf of a particular interest". Therefore lobbying involves putting forward arguments in support of a notion; however, 'lobbying' DCEs as used by Assembly Members presents interesting points for discussion. While each Assembly Member admitted that lobbying was a necessary skill required for success, they all had different ways of getting into the hearts of their respective DCEs or other influential officials at the DAs. This ranged from using gifts to providing party political contacts. In a discussion with the author, an Assembly Member revealed his manner of lobbying:

> Assembly Member: Lobbying depends on so many factors. For example if I need something like a local school … I will contact the one in charge of education at the District Assembly. Sometimes, I will bring them here to see things for themselves … But you don't bring down 'big men' just like that. You need to give them something or foodstuff … so that s/he can push your agenda.

> Author: Why do you have to do this? The person is doing his job. Is this not bribery?
> Assembly Member: My brother, this is Ghana … wheels must always be put under files so they move faster.

An Assembly Member from the Eastern Region presented another angle to the lobbying discourse. He pontificated:

> Assembly Member: When I was at … Electoral Area I was able to lobby for the District Assembly to build a public toilet for the Zongo community. Also the road between … was a big problem for the people so I was able to lobby to get the road constructed before my term of office ended. Through my lobbying abilities, I was able to provide streetlight for the people of ... and also extend electricity to Yabre.

After commending him for his achievements, we enquired of his lobbying skills that enabled him to attain all these projects for his Electoral Area. He said:

> As an Assembly Member you need to play your cards well to win projects to meet the needs of your community. Although the [District] Assemblies are supposed to be non-partisan, they are in disguise ... In the last eight years my government has been in office and that has helped me because the DCE knows that we belong to 'one family' [political party]. Because the DCE is my man he helps me to win projects for my communities as I have listed. Although some Assembly Members would claim that they do not belong to any political party, we know each other's political leanings. Political climates change so I try to convince the DCE to help some of my opposition Assembly Members friends with projects also so that when their government comes into office they can also help me if I'm still in office.

We asked him how he manages to convince the DCE, as there are obviously other Assembly Members who may belong to the same political party. He answered with an Akan proverb interpreted as: "if you don't help others to achieve their dreams you cannot see your dream come true". The DCE in question was in a contest to be a parliamentarian in a constituency that included the Electoral Area of the Assembly Member. Thus there was a certain understanding of reciprocity between the two men. This implied that the DCE sent projects (including the CBRDP) to that Electoral Area so that the Assembly Member could cite them as evidence of the DCE's generosity and therefore competence as a prospective parliamentarian.

However, not all Assembly Members had good relations with the DCEs. This meant that those Assembly Members were denied such development projects as CBRDP. The causes of the strained relations ranged from political rivalry to

personality clashes. The situation could be so bad that DCEs curse Assembly Members, evidenced in the November 13, 2011 headline of the Ghanaian Chronicle newspaper: "Antoa Nyamaa"[13] Will Kill You … District Chief Executive Invokes Local Deity on Assembly Members". We also encountered some Assembly Members whose perceived affinity with the opposition party meant that their Electoral Areas received no projects during the eight years rule of the opposition New Patriotic Party. One of them shared his experiences in the Volta Region:

> I have really suffered under the New Patriotic Party. The DCE perceived me to be a member of the opposition [National Democratic Congress]. For eight years I only had one project for my Electoral Area. We got that project because it was so crucial that he could not overlook it. During the implementation of that project he relied on his party faithful and neglected me. Because of this hurdle I have lost favour with my electorate and doubt if they would vote for me again if I contested.

III Working with weak Unit Committees

Unit Committees form the base of Ghana's local government structure. A Unit consists of settlements with a population of between five hundred and one thousand of ten elected persons in the Unit and not more than five other persons resident in the Unit to be nominated by the District Chief Executive. Following criticisms of there being too many Unit Committees in the country[14], that the membership of fifteen (15) was considered too large, and the general lack of interest in them, the membership has been reduced to five (5) elected persons who hold office for four years (L.I. 1967, section 24(1) 2010; Ahwoi, 2010).

Unit Committees represent their respective Electoral Areas in the Town/Area Council (see Figure 1). They are also expected to work closely with the Assembly Members so as to be in touch with the people; play important roles in public education; organising communal labour; raising revenue; ensuring environmental cleanliness; registering births and deaths; enforcing settlement planning; laying out and supervising District Assembly by-laws; implementing taxation; and monitoring of self-help or community-based projects (Local Government Act, 1993, Act 462, Section 24 (1). Consequently, if the Unit Committee of an Electoral Area were weak, the work of the respective Assembly Member would be very daunting.

Nationally, there seems to be a strong case in favour of the abolition of Unit Committees, as they appear to be dysfunctional, in spite of their election processes being expensive (Ahwoi 2010). In all nine localities researched, almost 85% of respondents to the questionnaires indicated they did not know who their Unit Committee Members were and what their functions were. Explaining why the Unit Committees are weak, Ahwoi (2010) argues that there is a perception among Ghanaians that, considering the numbers involved, the cost of Unit Committee elections do not justify the doubtful benefits derived from them. He argues further in favour of the suggestion that the country should save on costs by revisiting the original plan of holding Unit Committee elections by show of hands, as established under the Electoral Commission's Public Elections Regulations, 1995 Constitutional Instrument 10, paragraph 6 (1).[15] Another explanation for their ineffectiveness is that Unit Committees are not allowed to perform their decentralised functions. For instance, while there have been five Unit Committee elections conducted so far during the era of the Fourth Republic (1992, 1996, 2000, 2004 and 2008), Kyei-Baffour (2009) and Ahwoi (2010) argue that these Committees have never performed any visible functions. While legitimate, the weaknesses of the Unit Committees go beyond the explanations already given. In fact they are weak because: 1) Partisan politics interfere with their roles; 2) Their members are not paid a salary; and 3) Some members do not understand their role.

Most of the Unit Committee Members interviewed expressed frustration about the interference of party politics in their work. Unit Committees form an integral part of Area Councils, which also consist of Assembly Members, ordinary residents appointed by the District Assemblies and the Government Appointees. Interestingly, in some of the CBRDP beneficiary localities researched, Government Appointees were found to be either constituency members or local executives of the then ruling political party, the New Political Party (NPP). Referred to as 'foot–soldiers'[16] in the media,

13. A dreaded local deity

14. 16,000

15. Ahwoi (2010) explains that because the Constitutional Instrument 10 contradicted Article 49 (1) of the 1992 Constitution, which requires all public elections to be by secret ballot, it was never implemented.

16. All political parties in Ghana have 'foot soldiers'. 'Foot-soldiers' supposedly are the men and women who work hard for their political party at the grassroots level to win elections. There are always stories in the local media on the threats disgruntled 'foot-soldiers' issue to their National Party Executive if their demands are met. They are able to seize government properties or even demand the dismissal of Ministers of State and Members of Parliament (see *http://elections.peacefmonline.com/politics; http://www.moderng-hana.com/news* retrieved November 25, 2011).

the Government Appointees and other political party faithful tended to hijack the CBRDP: literally demanding the sole right to supply project materials, thus compromising the tender process and in some cases inflating the prices of the project materials. As one Unit Committee Member put it:

> We were elected for nothing. Government Appointees, many of who are staunch members of the NPP government, control virtually everything in the Area Council. It looks like we are only ceremonial officials. It is very frustrating when the Constitution, which spells out our roles, is set aside for partisan politics machinations.

Some Unit Committee Members were also disappointed that, while the role is demanding, they received no salary. Some explained that, because they were in public life, people perceived them as receiving some salary or making a lot of money from implementing projects. This perception, they contended, brought pressure on them as people flooded them with requests for financial assistance. These requests were complicated by the condition that if they did not meet these needs they would not receive constituents' votes at the next elections. Many of these Unit Committee Members, who were either petty traders or unemployed, had hoped that the role would come with respect and some financial benefits. When they realised that the role did not meet their expectations and would even be a drain on their limited resources, many became disillusioned and retreated from the position.

Some Unit Committee Members did not know what the role entailed, although they had received the constituents' votes. Some had contested the position because their friends and families had asked them to do so; others stood because there was not much competition. When asked what their roles entailed, some of these Unit Committee Members managed to state that their essential responsibility was to assist the Assembly Member. Apparently ignorant of their roles when elected, and realising how demanding were the tasks, many would not resign, but gave excuses for non-performance. Almost 90% of Assembly Members interviewed explained that their Unit Committee Members were inactive, thus giving no support in organising local initiatives. Interestingly, because Local Government Act 462 does not bind Unit Committee Members with any oath to remain active, it is easy for them to relinquish their roles without fear of any consequence.

The only Unit Committee Member who appeared to be enjoying the role was a 40 year old lady from the Volta Region. "Action Woman", as she was popularly called in the locality, considered herself the future Assembly Member of her Electoral Area. Thus, while supporting her Assembly Member who did not reside in the locality, the lady regarded the role as a marketing strategy for her political ambition. Asked if she was not bothered about the sacrificial nature of the job, "Action Woman" remarked that "no sweat no gain ... those who take up this role must be aware of the consequences."

During the fieldwork, we observed that because "Action Woman" and her colleague Unit Committees Members were comparatively active, efforts were being made to maintain the Community-Based Rural Development Projects (CBRDP); however, not without challenges. The Assembly Member of the Electoral Area remarked: "Because I'm do not reside here ... most of the time my Unit Committee Members do the job in my absence and send me verbal reports and feedback." Apart from this Assembly Member, the others described their Unit Committees Members variously as being 'dormant, useless, lazy, unhelpful and betrayers'.

IV Relating to Traditional Chiefs

Ghana's local government system is such that Assembly Members would not succeed if they were not in league with the Traditional Chiefs of the Electoral Areas they serve. The influence of Ghanaian Traditional Chiefs and how this influence impacted on the outcomes of the CBRDP has been extensively discussed elsewhere (see Adusei-Asante & Hancock 2013). Analysis of the two case studies presented in the paper shows that, because Ghanaian Traditional Chiefs are constitutionally recognised as the custodians of all lands in the country, they tend to demand right of control over development projects that fall within their traditional areas. Many of the Traditional Chiefs interviewed asserted, "The Assembly Member does not own the gong-gong of this village … I do!" This meant that as long as the Assembly Member did not submit to the Chiefs' whims, they could not organise anything successfully in the locality.

Relative to the CBRDP, some Traditional Chiefs in the localities researched felt sidelined and clashed with Assembly Members, resulting in protracted legal battles and abandonment of the projects. This happened because those who designed the CBRDP failed to inform the chiefs clearly about the project's intention to strengthen the local government structures – Assembly Members and Area Councils. Frustrated by having to act in accordance with the bidding of Traditional Chiefs, some Assembly Members indicated that they were voluntarily stepping down and would not encourage others to challenge for the position.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper set out to examine the factors that impact on the operations of Assembly Members, key facilitators of development and local governance in Ghana. It was found that Assembly Members are challenged by non-payment of salaries, working with partisan DCEs, weak Unit Committees and Traditional Chiefs. The paper revealed that while they do not receive any salaries, Assembly Members are constitutionally required to initiate and take part in communal and development activities, maintain frequent liaison with their electorates, some in distant localities, while representing same in the Municipal/District Assembly. The paper also revealed that the work of Assembly Members is hampered by the politicisation of Ghana's local government system, which by default subjects them to the whims of DCEs. The situation was blamed on the constitutional provision that allows the President to appoint DCEs instead of their being elected by popular votes. Additionally, the operation of Assembly Members is hampered by weak Unit Committees, whom the paper portrayed to be challenged by non-payment of salaries, partisan politics and conflicts with Traditional Chiefs.

There are two points for discussion. First, the case of Ghanaian Assembly Members presented in this paper has revealed the extent to which constitutional provisions can impact on the efficiency of local government structures. Although there are constitutional provisions for the establishment of local governance in Ghana, the same statutes appear to promote certain centralising tendencies, which frustrate the realisation of true decentralisation. Thus, while the office of Assembly Members are catered for in the Local Government Act, 1993, Act 462, the constitution of the country grants so much power to DCEs that the former can only pander to the caprices of the latter to succeed. While Assembly Members have found "ways" to handle DCEs, the seeming constitutional asymmetries appear to breed corruption and impede the progress of Ghana's decentralisation process. As appointees of the President, DCEs also take advantage of the situation to advance their personal political ambitions and the agendas of their political parties. Given this evidence, it is crucial that constitutional provisions that establish local governance are properly aligned to ensure balance of power within the system. Relative to Ghana, the time may be right for the country to consider making the position of DCEs electable by popular vote, reducing their powers and making them ineligible to contest parliamentary elections while in office. This may considerably reduce the politicisation of the local government system.

Second, the paper has underscored the complex factors that impact on the achievement of an effective decentralisation system. It has emerged that financial reward for local government officials would motivate them to give of their best, rather than working as volunteers. Furthermore, civic education of prospective local government representatives (Assembly Members and Unit Committees) and the community is crucial for a better understanding of how local government systems work. Although decentralisation ultimately aims to promote democracy at the grassroots, it has emerged that some local government representatives, members of their communities and Traditional Chiefs appear not to appreciate the demands and sacrificial realities inherent in local government systems. The paper has shown that where such education on decentralisation is lacking: 1) Local government workers become frustrated and abdicate their posts; 2) The community tends to make unrealistic demands from their local government representatives; and 3) Traditional Chiefs tend to regard the system as a challenge to their authority, leading to tensions between themselves and local government officials. Since all these convoluted factors do impact on the efficient running of local government systems, it is crucial that civic education becomes an integral part of local government systems.

In sum, the paper has underscored the complex factors that influence the workings of local government systems at the grassroots. It has been argued that constitutional provisions, financial motivations, cultural expectations and traditional institutions inherently influence the efficiency of local government systems. Given this evidence, development stakeholders may have to continue supporting local institutions of developing countries to address the complex factors outlined above. This may be effective than the tendency to label some developing countries (such as Ghana) as 'development celebrities', although the empirical basis for such an accolade is lacking.

Acknowledgement

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