

**PROMOTING EFFECTIVE LOCAL PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL DECISION-MAKING
PROCESSES: PERSPECTIVES FROM SUB-DISTRICT STRUCTURES IN KARAGA DISTRICT,
GHANA**

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ABSTRACT

The aims of decentralisation in Ghana are consistent with views that decentralisation promotes good governance, increases community participation, and enhances local development. Consequently, decentralisation is purposed to stimulate meaningful local engagement in needs-based government development agenda-making at the local level. This notwithstanding, local communities' involvement in local government decision-making remains marginal. This paper examined the space for community participation in decision-making within the Karaga District of Ghana. The results of concurrent mixed methods in a cross-sectional study, show that non-functional local structures, inadequate staff, and inadequate logistics critically challenged local community involvement in decision-making. The study recommends an essential rethinking of this process in ways that offer opportunities for a deliberate strengthening of the capacities of local structures to undertake their responsibilities. Appropriate strengthening strategies and logistics are required to build capacities for effective performance. Raising local inhabitants' awareness of the relevance of public policy for communal development would also help prevent parochial partisan considerations from working against overall community aspirations.

Keywords: Community, decentralisation, development, participation, Ghana

INTRODUCTION

Decentralised local governance continues to attract attention within international development and policy analysis (Awortwi, 2016; Faguet, 2014), based particularly on concepts around bottom-up approaches to development (Chambers, 2014). Arguably, this fits well with the assumption by many in the development sector that decentralised processes can stimulate local democracy and, almost by definition, promote the inclusivity of local voices in local development processes (e.g. Binswanger-Mkhize, de Regt, & Spector, 2010; Grindle, 2007; Ishii, Hossain, & Rees, 2007). There is some evidence that effective decentralised local governance enhances service delivery, reduces corruption and poverty, and prevents autocracy (Priyadarshee & Hossain, 2013).

Within this context, Community-Driven Development (CDD) has been favoured over the years, believing that it will give local people greater control over development projects (Smoke, 2015; Wong & Guggenheim, 2018). However, achieving this goal requires decentralised contexts that are functional and without impediments to provide the environment CDD programmes need to flourish (Adusei-Asante, 2012). Ghana is one such country that has been nudged by global change agencies and supporters of CDD to promote local governance (Bonye, Thaddeus, & Owusu-Sekyere, 2013; Dafflon & Madiès, 2013; Dickovick, 2014; Wong & Guggenheim, 2018). Ghana's decentralisation efforts appear laudable. It has achieved something of a 'development celebrity' label within the sub-Saharan African region because it is viewed as a model of good governance and decentralisation, that others should emulate (Mansuri & Rao, 2012).

However, according to Sanyare (2013), Ghana's experimentation with decentralised local governance has a long and circuitous history. Like other African contemporaries, Ghana's practice of one form or the other of decentralisation, pre-dates colonisation (Olowu and Wunsch 2004). However, the colonisers in Ghana are said to have popularised the practice of some form of decentralisation when they relied upon local institutions and chiefdoms to execute colonial policy. Since then, the practice of decentralisation has dramatically evolved. The contemporary form of decentralisation was introduced in the latter part of the 1980s. As Osei-Yeboah and Awortwi, (2021), point out, an overarching policy framework on which Ghana's new decentralisation practice oscillates was instituted in 1988, among others, to bring government closer to the people and specifically hand down local government development activities via promoting effective, local citizens' participation. Researchers have emphasized that although local government authorities have assumed an ever-notable presence and are active within local jurisdictions, institutional and participatory weaknesses have conspired to derail the achievement of expected outcomes such as effective, efficient, and responsive service delivery (Osei-Yeboah & Awortwi, 2021). Further studies emphasise that Ghana's local governance system is replete with citizens' participation deficits, owing, among others, to information gaps among citizens, political and structural challenges, and limited mobilisation capacities within the local government (Dzakaklo Hlovor & Dah,

2023). Yet it is the citizen's participation that is the central fulcrum of the new decentralized policy framework of Ghana.

The strategic importance of a participatory local development process cannot be overemphasised. Participation, at the least, provides sufficient scaffolds for policy decisions and helps progress the general self-worth of policy. Often, political participation, where the citizen is engaged via the processes of politics, that is, voting, campaigning, and activism, is seen as primary to citizen participation. However, this approach is limited and unrepresentative of the comprehensive dynamism of community needs (Sanyare 2013). Sanyare, however, provides that the required form of participation that responds to community needs in development occurs when local people are active in all aspects of the development process, from conception through to implementation, evaluation, and closure. Others, for instance, Loh and Shear (2015), support this view, pointing out that the ultimate end to local community participation is that development is truly transformative. Citizen's voice, and influence rather than development agents' voice, is not only noticeable but is also the preferred approach in the case of active participation. This compares to situations where citizen participation is limited to providing some form of support or resource during implementation.

As Botchie (2000) observed, an effective and collaborative process involving multiple stakeholders is critical in the context of local development planning. However, there is evidence that challenges to active citizen participation exist across the decentralised system (Ahwoi, 2010b), and the situation is most acute within the local-level sub-structures (Ahwoi, 2010a; Sanyare, 2013). For this reason, this paper investigates the local people's involvement in local development decision-making processes in the Karaga District of Northern Ghana. Specifically, it examines how the Karaga community participates in the planning and implementation of development programmes and projects and assesses the factors that impede effective community participation in local governance at the sub-structure level.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES

The concept of decentralisation

The concept of decentralisation is definitionally diverse and means different things in the development discourse. This is likely informed by the different perspectives from which decentralisation is conceived. Classic views, for instance, by Hope and Chikulo (2000) and Rondinelli et al. (1983) proffer that, while those of the political economist perspective look at decentralisation as a process of shifting power from the centre to lower levels of government, their counterparts from political science stance look more to the matter of how market mechanisms settle the provision of public goods and services in response to individual citizen's tastes and preferences. A gradually expanded perspective however is offered by Prud'homme (2003) and developed further by Crawford and Hartmann (2008). For them, it is about a transfer of some sort of power, resources, and responsibility, as well as the freedom on the part of

local actors to take action that meets the development needs of local people. This way decentralisation is said to be complete and impactful.

Aside from the conceptual perspectives, decentralisation has also been categorized into different types, each having a different effect on local development. For instance, in the early 1980s, Rondinelli et al. (1983) categorised decentralisation as the dispersal of power along institutions of the same level of government on one hand and delegation of power to lower levels on the other. Other categories are de-concentration, fiscal decentralisation, and administrative decentralisation. Each of the categories implemented on its own appears weak according to Crawford and Hartmann (2008). On his part Crawford (2008), drawing on earlier views, suggests devolution as the most comprehensive form of decentralisation that all polity should aim for. This is because, in devolution, local-level governments are given control and freedom to utilise resources that meets their local needs. Further administrative and political autonomy is granted to the local government without restriction. It is within the context of this kind of decentralisation that full and meaningful participation of citizens in matters of their development is realised.

Community participation and development

The literature on community participation and local development is extensive. A useful position for our discussion is ensuring vibrant local participation is inalienably linked to social, economic, and, more recently, environmental justice (Ledwith, 2005). When local participation works, community development can be truly transformative (Loh & Shear, 2015). However, this transformation relies on effective and inclusive decentralisation, and commentators have offered a range of definitions regarding what constitutes decentralisation. For example, Jütting et al. (2005) argue that decentralisation represents some form of transfer of power and resources to lower tiers of government, while Johnson (2001) emphasises its democratic value, which is perceived to make governance and administration accessible and accountable to the local citizenry. Johnson (2001), further maintains that it is in devolution that more power is given to local folks to engage in the local governance decisions that directly touch their lives. However, evidence from many countries suggests that participation often goes no further than merely electoral participation (Ahenkan, Bawole, & Domfeh, 2013; Devas & Grant, 2003).

Others argue further that citizens' ability to participate actively, even when decentralisation is a national policy, has often been rather limited because governments pretend to decentralise yet effectively erect barriers to citizens' effective engagement (Abdulai & Crawford, 2010; Ahenkan et al., 2013). This, however, has not prevented citizens' participation from assuming pride of place in local development debates. It is thus highlighted that, for decentralised reforms to be relevant and effective, they must include and actively give voice to local people. People's capacity to influence their future lies in part in their involvement in the planning related to their development needs. Almost three and half decades ago, the World Bank pioneered the idea that through participation, stakeholders should influence and co-control development initiatives and decisions which directly affect their lives (Kuruville & Sathyamurthy, 2015; Litvack, Ahmad, & Bird, 1998). This

approach is often termed 'participatory planning', which process at the decentralised level is seen as a vital tool, given its acknowledged validity in facilitating lasting progress and good governance (Chisinga, 2003).

However, opinions differ widely on the meaning and purpose of participation (Barnes, Newman, & Sullivan, 2007; New South Wales Council of Social Service (NCOSS), 2014). This is partly because the concept of 'participation' developed out of several different fields (Bishop & Davis, 2002). That said, academics and practitioners tend to agree that *information-giving* or *consultation* falls short of the full definition of participation. For them, participation must include the ability of citizens to affect decision-making at some level of government (Barnes et al., 2007; Meagher, 2006; Michels & De Graaf, 2010). Yet parallel literature claims that achieving this kind of citizen influence in government decision-making processes is impractical or at the least elusive (Evans & Reid, 2013; Fung, 2006; Gains, Greasley, John, & Stoker, 2009). In this regard that a distinction is established between 'participation' and 'active participation'. Active participation is seen as featuring an equal partnership between government and citizens in determining the process and content of policy-making (New South Wales Council of Social Service (NCOSS), 2014). This implies that citizens play a direct role in shaping what happens in their communities (Aulich, 2009). However, differing levels of citizen participation are acknowledged. In some circumstances, such as in technical decision-making processes, some consider that governments should not be obliged to accept the non-technical views of ordinary citizens (Michels & De Graaf, 2017).

This notwithstanding, governments are under pressure to provide a semblance of opportunity that ensures that people's perspectives are effectively contemplated and included in the local decision scheme, even if these views do not ultimately determine the outcome. Desirable participation engages citizens in ways that uplift their living standards. In this type of participation, citizens are involved in all aspects of the project cycle, from the development of programmes and projects to evaluation and termination (Amponsah & Bofo-Arthur, 2003). Local people's involvement in the decision of their community's progress depends on the motivation of the people. Motivation is a significant determinant of how and to what extent people participate in local development activities (Jaafar, Md Noor, Mohamad, Jalali, & Hashim, 2020; Latip, Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, Marzuki, & Umar, 2018). Apart from monetary and intrinsic motives, the belief in self or collective satisfaction by citizens is crucial in sustaining active participation even in the face of challenges (Talsma & Molenbroek, 2012; Voorberg, Bekkers, & Tummers, 2015). Within the context of the decentralised sub-structure levels, local representatives' and people's involvement in action planning is hinged on the expected tangible and intangible benefits to be derived or benefits derived from previous participation in previous local action planning.

Participation is categorized by qualifiers like *community*, *citizen*, *popular*, *civic*, *political*, *public*, etc., contingent on different contexts of use. This tendency to gloss over the definition often gives rise to ambiguity over the rationale for participation in a particular development project. Participation may be viewed as both a means as

well as an end to development (Kugonza & Mukobi, 2015; Podger, Wanna, Chan, Ma, & Su, 2012). A key aspect of this perspective of participation relates to dual key notions: is that is 'community' and 'power' (Fagence, 2014). Participation viewed from the means-ends perspective implies operationalizing the effect that participation has on the community members where participation as a means relates to efficiency gains. That is, participation becomes “a tool for achieving better projects”; conversely, participation as an end implies it becomes a process where marginalized community members' capacities are improved for them to enhance their own lives (see: Cleaver, 1999; Imms et al., 2017). Coming from the side of development processes that seek and involve the engagement of people, 'community' connotes the recipients of development actions. However, as Berner (2010) reminds us, the term 'community' is deeply problematic conceptually. This complexity compounds the ambiguity associated with community participation.

For this paper, we define 'community' as a jurisdiction of the locale as opposed to the administrative connotation of the word. Often, this is an amalgamation of different sorts of people bound together for the purposes of local governance. Community participation, as discussed in previous work, “gives local people or communities central roles in the control of services delivery, resources management and most importantly significant influence over decision-making process” (Sanyare, 2013, p. 52). In this way, citizens' influence is felt in the choice and trajectory of local projects and in managing the execution in ways that contribute to their personal growth and overall well-being. This highlights a position of great influence for local people regarding the trajectory of developments that impact them, consequently projecting the 'end' side of participation.

Community participation seen as a means is more complex in that it merges the different facets of the community and, seen from this perspective, potentially distorts the reality of power relations, as well as acting as a barrier to a critical examination of the interplay of local power systems and relations (Prabhakaran, Nair, & Ramachandran, 2014). These barriers will inevitably exclude some segments of the community. On the contrary, the end perspective to community participation is encompassing as it recognises extant differences and focuses on potential community variations, groups, and dynamics to be inclusive in engaging all. From this perspective, community participation is seen not only as a tool for reaching specific goals of development but rather viewed as encapsulating development in its own right (Parfitt, 2007; Trevor, 2004).

These approaches have important implications for how community participation connects to influence the different 'means-end' definitions. Perceived as a *means*, the outcome of participation showcases the existence and use of power or its variances amongst local people seen as beneficiary groups vis-à-vis agencies of development where they are left untreated. The *end* view projects a brighter contrast, where participation is transformative of the superior, subjective power interactions within development agencies and the local community. Communities are hence perceived as unshackled from developmental clientelism (Parfitt, 2007, p. 539). In sum, organising and supporting the prearranged intentions of development

agencies represents participation as a *means*, whereas a broader process which is empowering and more involving of people in the process and activities of development projects is participation as an *end* (Parfitt 2004; Partiff 2007). Perceiving the 'means-end' argument over participation in development gives the mainstay of critical involvements of participation in the development literature.

The context of community participation in Ghana

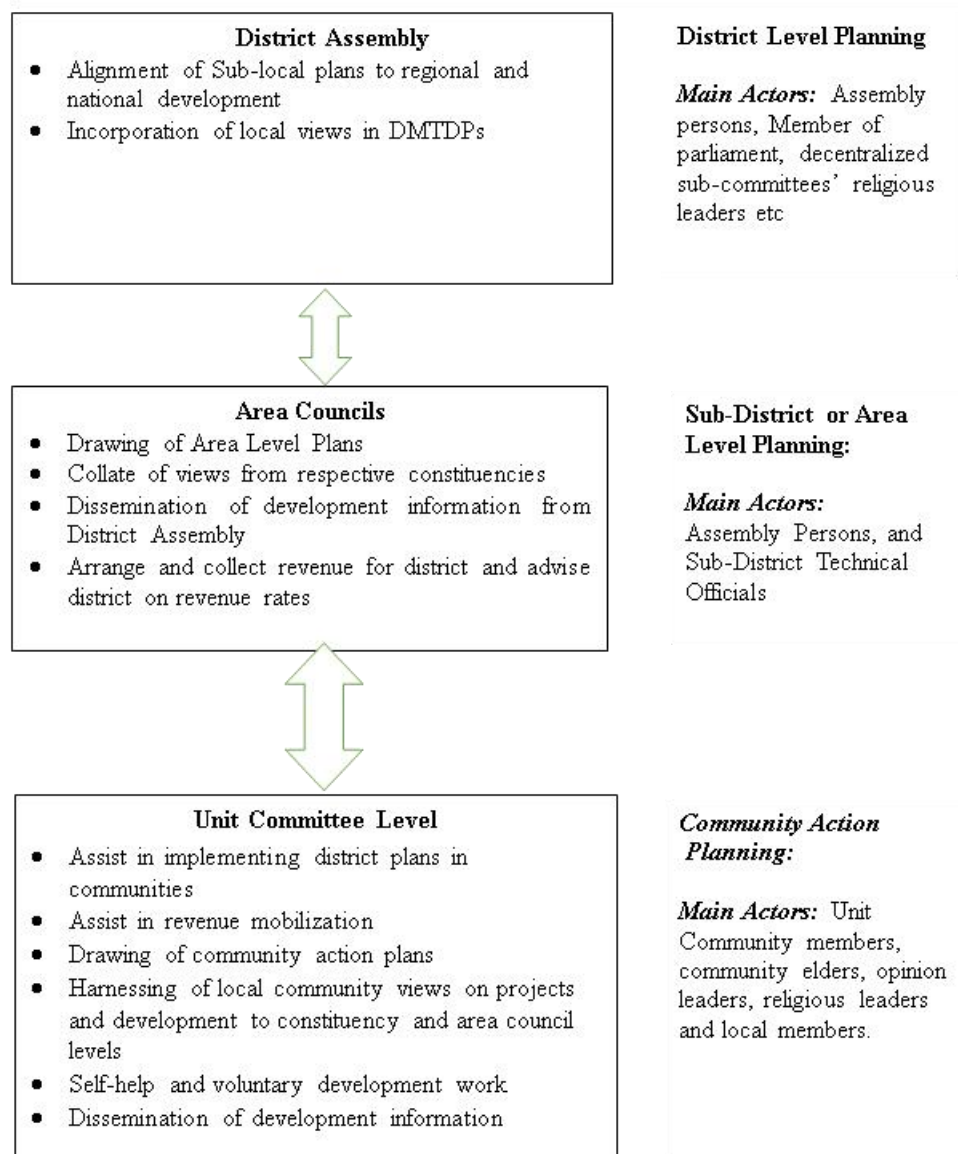
In Ghana, local community challenges, desires, and ambitions represent inputs for district plan formulation. These plans are formulated within the local government structure. The Government structure in Ghana is in two spheres: the national and the local government, which has a three-tier structure. In the first tier are *metropolitan* and *municipal councils* along with the *district assemblies* (MMDAs); while the *urban, zonal, and town or area councils* make up the second tier; and at the third community level, there are *unit committees* (Sanyare, 2013, p. 71). The country's sub-district councils and unit councils represent the decentralized mechanisms for local development and together with elected councilors should work to generate, collect, and collate local-level priorities for developing an area's district medium-term development plan (Institute of Local Government Studies, 2006). The process is as follows: Community Action Plans (CAPs) result from data on community-level needs and aspirations while Area Level Plans (ALPs) at the sub-district councils are a culmination of the CAPs. These are then pulled together to feed into the district's medium-term development plan put before each District Assembly (DA) (Bandie, 2007). ALPs can be developed and owned by local communities through a participatory process (Bandie 2007).

Under the decentralisation policy guidelines, the CAPs should be prepared through participatory processes, which include the poor, the marginalised, and the excluded in each community, as well as those at risk of slipping into chronic poverty (National Development Planning Commission, 2006). The ALPs seek to harmonise the CAPs for all communities within the sub-district councils of a given area. The sub-district development plans or local action plans (LAPs), which are also supposed to be prepared through participatory processes, should represent the community perspective on current needs and aspirations at the sub-district level. However, as the involvement of local people is often only during the implementation stage where labour and other resources are required, these plans are rarely produced in a participatory way (Bandie, 2007). Planning at the local level is often perceived as the preserve of local government representatives or leadership, as well as administrative and technocratic elites. As a result, meaningful participation of local citizens in identifying development needs and priorities for action is often lacking (Blake et al., 1997). Not surprisingly, therefore, community ownership of the plans is often questionable.

Limited community participation in decentralised development planning and implementation in Ghana stems from several constraints (Abdul-Rahaman & Adusah-Karikari, 2019; Sulemana & Amakye, 2019). Research has suggested that central among the constraints to community participation in decentralised processes are financial resource availability, and its control (Sanyare, Hossain, & Rees, 2016).

Another constraint, in the view of Botes and Van Rensburg (2000), is a lack of interest among community members in participating in decision-making processes, possibly as a result of past experiences of involvement when their expectations were not fulfilled. Close to over three decades of practice of decentralisation in Ghana, the challenges mentioned above to local community participation in planning and decision-making leave much to be desired (Inkoom, 2011). This paper seeks to provide a modest contribution that helps to expand our understanding of experiences of contextual factors from within the Karaga District of Northern Ghana that impinge on local people's involvement in local development decision-making processes. Specifically, the paper examines how local people participate in decentralised structures. Figure 1 is an illustration of the decentralised structure of Ghana.

Figure 1: Decentralized planning structure



STUDY AREA AND METHODS

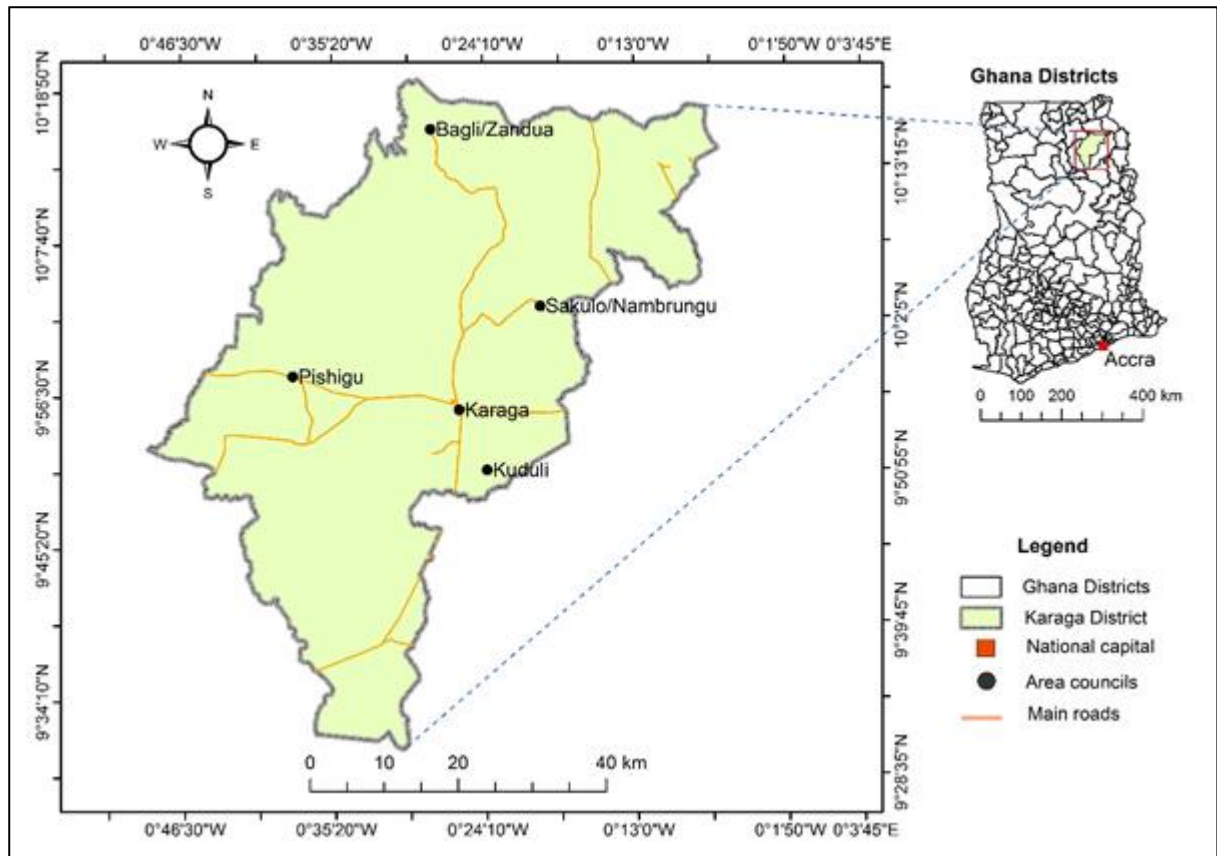
Study area

The study was conducted in Karaga District in the Northern Region of Ghana. It is typically a rural district carved out of the then Gushegu-Karaga District in 2004 by Legislative Instrument (LI) 17871. The district is predominantly rural, with farming and small-scale agribusinesses being the main occupation. Apart from Karaga town, which has a population of 114,225 and is therefore classified as an urban centre, the rest of the communities are rural, with Pishigu being the second largest community. The district was chosen because of its rurality and distance from the regional capital and its youthful population and illiteracy rates. These characteristics are pertinent in evaluating the participatory planning process in Ghana. The 2021 Ghana Population and Housing Census records a population of 153,965 persons with a sex composition of 51% female and 49% male. Regarding population distribution, 20% of the population is located in Karaga, the district capital with the rest of the population scattered among communities with less than 2000 persons.

Regarding decentralised sub-structures, the Karaga district has five area councils, thirty-three electoral areas, and 165 Unit committees. Each electoral area has five elected unit committee members who serve as the grassroots representatives. These unit committee members are to collate the local community's views, design local action plans that would feed into their respective Area Council Plans, and further culminate in the district-level plans. These are mainly responsible for community sensitisation, mobilisation for self-help activities, and revenue mobilisation. They are also tasked to collect and collate local needs emanating from the Unit committees and to prepare an Area Development Plan, which constitutes the CAPs and the ALPs, for consideration by the District Assembly to prepare DMTDPs.

Figure 1: Map of Karaga District showing local areas

¹ Data for this paper is drawn from a larger study that formed the basis of an MPhil in Development Studies from the University of Development Studies, Tamale. Data was collected in 2019.



Study design

Since the study was to understand the issue of effective decentralized planning at the zonal levels, the main research approach adopted a cross-sectional mixed research design based on the philosophy of pragmatism (Burke & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Using the embedded cross-sectional method, data was collected from the population using simultaneous mixed methods. This involved collecting both qualitative and quantitative data in the same research session. Data collected included knowledge of the roles of district sub-structures, citizens' participation and willingness to participate in sub-district level activities as well as the challenges that arise from these activities.

Sampling, data collection, and analyses

The study purposively sampled former and serving assembly persons, unit committee members, and community leaders in selected communities for in-depth interviews and focus group discussions because of their roles in actively participating in decentralized planning processes. In studying the nuances and complexities of decentralized planning in the Karaga District, they are key in providing both relevant in-depth and context-specific data from lived experiences, hence their selection for this study (Margaret, 2016). In each area council, two focus group discussions were held: One with former and serving Assembly persons on one hand and the other with Unit committee heads. Additionally, in-depth interviews were held with the longest-serving Assembly person or Unit Committee person, as well as an Official of the Karaga District Planning Unit (DPU). A structured interview guide was carefully developed from the interviews and discussions to help ascertain a broader viewpoint

of issues took place in the district (Patton, 2002). A sample size of 369 households was obtained from a sample population of 9640 households of the DPCU's 2018 Projection using the Yamane (1967) formula, $n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$. The 369-population sample size was further distributed proportionally among the five district area councils according to the number of electoral areas in each area council as shown in Table 1.

Table1: Sample size distribution in electoral areas

Area Council	Number of Electoral Areas	Sampled Population
Karaga	5	56
Pishigu	8	89
Kuduli	4	45
Bagli/Zandua	4	45
Sakulo/Nambrungu	12	134
Total	33	369

Respondents in each electoral area were randomly selected household heads who had stayed in the electoral area for at least four years. The assumption is that, with effective decentralised planning, these household heads would have known or participated in local action plans in one way or another. As such, carefully planned structured interview sessions were held with them individually. Data was collected from these household heads using structured questionnaires generated from literature and a preliminary study of the topic. Data from the structured questionnaires were coded and analysed by Microsoft Excel software and expressed as simple percentages. Qualitative data were transcribed and categorised into the main themes of the study.

FINDINGS

First, the findings are reported under two broad themes and three sub-themes identified from the data section. Next, the findings are reported around issues of participants: a) knowledge and understanding of development projects and programs and b) obstacles that hinder their participation in such projects and programmes.

Community knowledge about development projects and programmes

Even though DAs as corporate bodies are accountable to the community people, it is the central roles of two units, the assembly member and unit committee members, to connect with community members directly to the centre to ensure that constituents are kept informed and through that process to participate in the decisions that matter in addressing lived community problems. This role is mandated

by law as contained in the Local Government Act 1993 (Act 462), as amended into the Local Governance Act of 2016 (Act 936). It requires assembly members to keep in close contact with their constituents, including by giving them information concerning development programmes and projects to be undertaken in the various communities within the electoral area. The purpose here is to offer opportunities for local community members to actively participate both in the planning and implementation processes of activities that ensure their development. As a basis for enquiring about community participation in local action planning at the Area Council levels, the study first sought to know about the community's awareness of some basic functions of the Area Councils as sub-structures of the District Assembly, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Knowledge and Awareness of Area Council Roles

Knowledge area	Level of Awareness	
	Aware (%)	Not Aware (%)
Existence of Area Council	89	11
Community Mobilisation Role of Area Council	68	32
Community Action Planning Role of Area Council	49	51
Development Information dissemination	62	38
Monitoring of community projects	66	44
Revenue Mobilisation Role	68	32
Development monitoring roles	61	39
Average (%)	66	34

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Out of 369 sampled respondents, 329 (89%) indicated their awareness of their respective Area Councils as a sub-structure of the District Assembly. They know that the District Assembly located at Karaga should work through these area councils to the local communities and the people. This was followed by the community mobilisation and revenue mobilisation roles of the area councils. This was noted by 68% of respondents, and 62% were aware that the area councils disseminate development information to local communities. However, 37% of respondents indicated knowledge of the Area Council as playing local community action planning roles. They indicated they needed to learn that area councils could develop and have their area plans to be fed into the district plan.

Community participation and preparedness to participate in local action planning

The study sought to assess respondents' participation in local-level planning in the last three years. The results indicate that only 42% (155) of the sampled respondents indicated that they have ever participated in local action planning or any local community activity in the last four years, and 58% either did not participate or were not sure they participated in Assembly initiated local planning. The 42% who said they had participated indicated that their participation was in the form of Assembly persons and Unit committee members soliciting their views, informing and complaining to representatives about the community's problems and preferences, and being briefed by local representatives about decisions by the Assembly. This is summarised in Table 3. They, however, did not know whether these consultations in which they participated formed part of the District Assembly's medium-term plan or composite budgeting process.

Table 3: Participation in decentralized planning in the last 4 years

Participation	Number (%)	Ways of Participation
Ever Participated	155 (42%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debriefing by Assembly and Unit Committee Members • Voting in local-level elections • Meetings with DA representatives • Contributed to some community development projects by Assembly
Somehow Participated	48 (13%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attended some community development project meetings • Heard of some development initiatives by the Assembly on the radio and from other sources
Do not Know	41 (11%)	-
Did not participate	125(34%)	-
Total	369 (100)	

Some Assembly members noted that local-level action planning processes were subsumed into the district-wide planning process, and therefore, may not stand out as local area actions. In an in-depth interview, an Assembly person iterated:

"...the fact that we have no action plan for the constituency [local community - -unit area] or even the area council does not mean local views and opinions are not incorporated in the Assembly's plan. I, for instance, know the area's problems and aspirations, and I espoused them at the Assembly. But I do not have a constituency or area plan for our area council". Rsp 3: 2019.

Community willingness and motivation to participate in decentralized planning

The study found that about 339 (92%) of respondents indicated their preparedness to actively participate in the local action planning process in their locality. In an in-depth interview, a community leader noted:

“...it is about our land, and welfare issues and we need to be keen in developing it whilst asking for support. We are ready to participate if it would yield results” RSP 6:2019.

The 8% who indicated their unwillingness to participate cited manipulation by the state, breeding of local conflicts, and mistrust as the reasons for their choice. They have, therefore, lost trust that their efforts would be appreciated. However, about 92% of household heads and community members are willing and prepared to contribute actively to decentralized planning for the reasons summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: Motivation to participate in decentralized planning

Motivational Factors to Participate		
	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Concern about ‘our local’ area development	131	29
Know and feel Community development problems better	117	25
Working together for the common good keeps us together	81	18
Need to support Government development activities	62	13
Civic Responsibility	67	15
Total	458**	100

** Total exceeded 382 because of multiple responses

Source: Field Survey, 2019

The top two reasons for participating in community action planning are that community people are concerned about their localities' development and often ‘Know and feel’ the Community development problems better. They are, therefore, motivated to participate in local community action planning because they know that they benefit the most. The idea that participation in community action planning would increasingly bring understanding, peace, and unity in the area was mentioned 81 times out of the 458 reasons mentioned. The least among the motivating factors were the need to support government projects and civic responsibility, which were mentioned 62 times (13 percent) and 67 times (15 percent), respectively. These two reasons were summarized by an in-depth interviewee as follows:

“...we must demonstrate that we are interested in development to be helped. The government is so engrossed with development issues to the extent that we must demonstrate an interest in wooing and receiving state development projects. We stretch out our hands to receive” Rsp 15:2019.

Effect of the current participation in local area planning

The study also sought to find out respondents’ views on the effects of their current level of participation in local action planning. It was noted that 17 percent of respondents indicated that their poor participation in local action planning does not have any significant effect on the development of their localities. As an in-depth interview noted:

“The government would always find ways to do what they want to do and not necessarily what the people want. We can have all the lofty plans, but the government would only choose what they want to implement, and we have no choice but to respect their views because we do not have funds on our own” Rsp 9:2019.

Other reasons for the need not to participate include fear of elite capture of development by some families or sections leading to conflicts, the poor resource base of the local areas, and the limited expertise of the staff posted there. They therefore conclude that local participation is duplicative and unnecessary.

Contrary to these views, 83% of respondents indicate that poor participation of local people in local development planning has adverse local development implications. These reasons include the poor incorporation of local community knowledge and views in district planning, poor local community knowledge of their fair share of community projects, as well as the citing of inappropriate or untimely projects in some communities. It also contributes to local members losing the sense of pride, ownership, and responsibility in some community projects. These views are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5: Effect of Poor Community Participation in Area Council Planning

Effect	Frequency	Percent (%)
Poor incorporation of local views in community projects	185	49
Poor knowledge of the Assembly’s activities in the Community	88	21
Some projects are inappropriate and /or untimely	63	15
Many do not feel responsible for the projects given	54	13
Low morale in participating in District Assembly’s activities	22	5

	412**	
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**Total exceeded 382 because of multiple responses

Challenges of participation in local area development planning

The study determined that low participation in the local area development planning was multi-pronged. In-depth interviews with Assembly persons and Unit Committee members point to the poor resource base of the Area Councils and the need for more expertise of staff posted there. Assembly persons noted that with no financial support they are expected to harness local community needs and aspirations into plans of the area councils and ladder into the district council. A participant made the following observation in an FGD:

“...Assembly members know they are to mobilise community members but cannot do so because they lack the resources to do so. They are not on salary and have no offices, laptops, printers, or means of transport to do their work. Currently, an assembly member is paid not more than 70 Ghana cedis² (GHS70.00) and 15 Ghana cedis (GHS 15) as sitting allowance, and transport reimbursement respectively daily during Assembly sittings. Such a paltry amount is not enough for an assembly person to meet their core obligation to avail themselves and participate in assembly meetings, talk less of fulfilling their community mobilisation, sensitisation, information gathering and feedback roles after the meetings, even though motorbikes are provided for them. FGD, 5:2019.

Focus group discussants noted that assembly persons and unity committee members have no budget allocations to mobilize local communities for community development initiatives such as community action plans and monitoring of local community projects. This makes elected representatives unenthusiastic about carrying out their constitutional mandate resulting in poor community participation in local development initiatives by the district. Community members' views on the poor community participation in local area planning are summarised in Table 6.

Table 6: Challenges of Local Participation in Local Area Planning

Challenges of community action planning	Frequency	Percentage
Overriding of community interests by District and/or state	102	22
The poor resource base of area councils	89	19
Poor Motivation of Assembly and Unit Committee Members	86	18

² 1USD = 5.67 GHS as of December, 2019

Lack of trust that local inputs will be considered	71	15
Assembly rushing to get local inputs	42	9
Poor civic education on the importance of local participation	38	8
Poor mobilisation skills of District Assembly and Unit Committee Members	34	7
Total	468**	

** Total exceeded 382 because of multiple responses

DISCUSSION

Decentralisation provides space for the participation of citizens and, if well explored could lead to effective local-level decision-making, planning and community transformation (Loh and Shear 2015; Ledwith, 2016). Ghana's decentralisation structure emphasizes a bottom-up local planning process from the grassroots through the area councils to the Assembly level up to the national level (Ahwoi, 2010). The findings indicate that, while there exists a semblance of local participation in the local development planning process, structural, resources and capacity constraints restrict the achievement of effective local participation in development planning especially at the five area councils. As the elected sub-structural representatives, the Unit Committee and Assembly persons are mandated to engage with community members to plan community and area-specific local plans that could be incorporated into the district-wide development plans but seldom do so. This reinforces the means-end proponents of decentralisation who opine that in many cases decentralisation is a mere political process, embedded with partisanship and mere electoral units (Ahenkan, 2013; Abdulai and Crawford, 2010; Bergh, 2004). Again, this further highlights the issues of motivation-to participate as highlighted in the literature. The findings confirm the view that people are motivated to participate given some monetary or intrinsic inducement. Again, we learn that a key driver to local people's involvement in action planning is their expectation of tangible and intangible benefits from their present and previous experiences (Talsma & Molenbroek, 2012; Voorberg et al., 2015). It would appear that such benefits are limited and that local actors do not perceive collective citizens' satisfaction owing in part to fear of elite capture hence active participation is curtailed. Theoretically, it would appear that participation at the local level is merely a matter of placation or at least information giving (Dzakaklo, et al., 2023).

The overriding interests and lack of confidence by the local community that their views would be incorporated into the Assembly's plans are replete in the literature. However, Der Bebelleh and Nobabumah (2013) reiterate that citizens' ability not only to contribute but also influence the local development agenda is the core spirit and pointer of success in Ghana's decentralisation programme. Article 240 of Ghana's 1992 Republican Constitution mandates that respect for matters affecting

local people should be of central focus in the planning, coordination and execution of policies. However, almost four decades after the implementation of Ghana's decentralisation programme, decentralized planning at the sub-district level is still an illusion as most sub-districts are mere units for revenue mobilisation at local markets. Decentralised structures for local level participation are present but local participation in these decentralised structures is nearly absent. This was summarized by a key informant in Karaga as follows:

“The Assembly exists to enable us to participate in plans and decisions that affect us; but as it is now, many of us do not really take part in local decision-making for many reasons, therefore the Assembly makes some consultations and plans for us” Rsp 12:2019.

The poor functioning of the district sub-structures also makes community-driven development an illusion as District Medium Term Development Plans (DMTDPs) are not derived from local action plans but are drawn by experts with little consultation of local people. As such local communities lose control of service delivery, resource management and most importantly significant influence over the decision-making process by the District Assembly which is the main reason for the participatory process (Sanyare, 2013). This gives space to the district assembly to subtly make the local community accept their plans. As such, until citizens can influence district plans concerning them, participation in the current decentralized dispensation remains a top-down rather than the anticipated bottom-up process. This confirms perspectives that people's participation in the development process is a 'new tyranny'(see e.g. Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Mosse, 2001), possibly a form of placation which limits local people's capacity and ability to participate actively. Barriers to Ghana's local governance system need to be overcome to enable it to benefit from community-driven development. These barriers may include, poor participation of citizens in local development planning; the poor education and/or literacy levels of citizenry; unclear expected benefits of their participation and poor coordination (Ahenkan et al., 2013; Chifamba, 2013; Van Breugel, 2013). Citizens will be eager to participate if they experience the positive effects of their efforts. In the Karaga District, citizens lack the trust that their community action plans will be accepted at all hence the poor motivation to participate. The Karaga District needs to build the trust and capacity of local representatives and community members regarding the benefits of participation.

The issue of motivation was very keenly felt, and people suggested many strategies (remuneration of Assembly members, provision of training, and logistics) to promote participation, especially for the motivation of assembly and unit committee members. They also cited several other priorities: ensuring a functional unit committee system; promoting comprehensive and accessible formal education to all; effective sensitisation of the citizenry on the functions of town and area councils; affording effective and better opportunities of regular interfacing on the assembly's activities; and making the position of district chief executive an elected, not an appointed one. To achieve these, a strong policy framework and expansion of necessary funding is required from the central government.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study sought to contextually provide a modest contribution that helps to expand understanding of experiences of factors from within the Karaga District of the Northern Region that impinge on local people's involvement in local development decision-making processes and to look into how local people participate in the decentralized structures. Using mixed methods of data collection and analyses, the study concludes that the roles of decentralized structures need to be improved considerably. Key among the factors responsible is that Assembly persons and unit committee members are poorly remunerated to perform the daunting tasks of collating local community views, designing local community action plans and monitoring community projects. We recommend among others that to achieve the lofty objectives of local government, the decentralised sub-structures and representatives such as the Unit Committee members need to be enabled to be more assertive in community and area-level community planning, monitoring and implementation. Second, citizens need to be more interested in their local development initiatives. Community Action Plans may not only feed into the district plans but could also be used as documents for sourcing funds from Non-Governmental Organisations as well as enhancing the local mobilisation capacities of local leaders and assessing community strengths and weaknesses.

Further, there is a need to improve financial and administrative resources at the sub-district levels to improve participation. While the central government allocates financial resources and experts to plan at the district level, no such funds are extended to the sub-districts, thus making mobilisation at the sub-local level difficult. Assigning planning officers with the oversight responsibility of supporting sub-district representatives to mobilize local people and resources for local community development and planning will boost the trust of local people. This will bridge the gap between commitment and sincerity from members of the Assembly and the local community. It will further require that members of the local communities become more interested in what their DAs do and regularly demand that the DAs report to them on the resources available to the district and how they are used. A need for vibrant civil society organisations that would engage with DAs to ensure the participation of local people is also paramount.

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