

Issue No.1 March 2020

A BUBBLE UP APPROACH TO LOCAL GOVERNANCE REFORMS IN GHANA

Mapping Key Agents for Change

Ghana's declared intention to devolve more power, resources and service functions to local governments has failed to earn public confidence – for three consecutive decades. The key indicator of public opinion on this is stark:

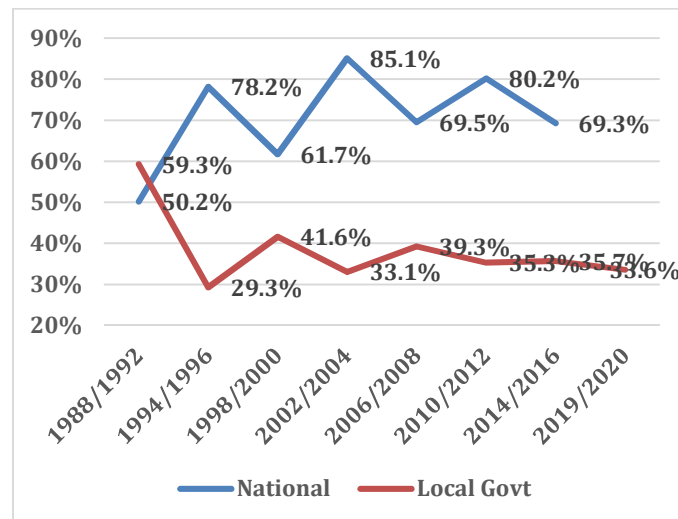
Thirty years ago, voter turn-out for national and local elections was about equal. Since then national elections have had nearly double the participation of local polls (average 72 per cent versus 37 per cent). Clearly, voters recognize that their democratic voice is overwhelmingly dependent on central government.

Any attempt to understand and remedy this position must establish “Why” this is such a strong public perception. Comparative studies of turn-outs in other countries where decentralization has been more effectively achieved is revealing. Globally, more people participate in national elections than local government elections but the margin between the two in Ghana is among the worst in the world.

Has Ghana's local government performance been so poor that the electorate is disenchanted with it, or has central government kept too tight a hold on the reins and resources, or is there some other anomaly in culture or structure?

The graph below (Fig 1) does more than just give precise data. The peaks and troughs of both national and local elections are, graphically, mirror images of each other. This would suggest that the trends are a significant indicator of public (dis)interest and/or (mis)trust in the decentralized system.

Fig.1: Citizen participation in central and local government elections (%)



The system has neither delivered local democracy nor brought services closer to the people. Local governance of even basic services like sanitation and solid waste collection has been woefully disappointing, let alone the promotion of local economic growth, employment creation and social protection. The chaotic manner in which the central government distributed hot meals and other food items to the needy and vulnerable residents in the municipalities during Covid-19 amplifies the need to pay attention to a dysfunctional sub-national governance structures.

Issue No.1 March 2020

The Ray of Hope to Introduce Democratic Developmental Local Governance in Ghana?

Since Ghana's independence in 1957, central government politicians and bureaucrats have controlled local development processes. There have been several decentralisation policies but even these have remained subject to central control.

With the hope of making employment creation a priority in Ghana's transformative and inclusive growth agenda, in 2017, the government introduced an industrial policy to promote local industrialisation. The "One District One Factory" initiative was an echo of the "One Village, One Product" in Oita prefecture in Japan and "One Tambon One Product" in Thailand.

However, the success of such a transformative industrial policy for local economic development requires an appropriate governance system, enabling a strategic and democratic relationship between the central and local governments on one hand, and between local government and private enterprises on the other.

In 2019 the government planned a referendum on amendments to the national Constitution to pave the way for democratic decentralization. The aims of the proposed Constitutional amendments were to deepen local democracy and downward accountability which precedent suggests is often the hardest but most essential ingredient of any truly democratic decentralisation. It might have been the beginning of a game changer in fixing some of the broken local governance system. Unfortunately, implementation of that audacious attempt collapsed. Amid inadequate education, betrayal of support from both opposition political parties and within the ruling party, inadequate elite consensus, misinformation and apprehension, the President aborted the national referendum and suggested further discussions.

The aborted referendum is ample testimony that national politicians and bureaucrats are unwilling to shift authority from themselves to their counterparts at the local level.

The subsequent National Decentralisation Policy and Strategy (2020-24) proposes a transformative framework to build a national consensus to deepen local democracy and governance.

Thus the quest for local governance reforms lies not only in a top-down elite consensus at the national level but also a bubble-up approach by key stakeholders to push for reforms. Elite consensus from central government can go only as far as elite interests would want. But co-ordinated grassroots actions could oblige the centre to devolve power and other means needed for local transformation.

Now the Institute of Local Government Studies (ILGS) is hosting a platform to use research and practice evidence to kick-start a bubble-up in local governance reforms. The approach would involve diverse actors (researchers, central and local policy makers, local governments, private sector enterprises, bureaucrats, civil society organisations, development partners, politicians and political parties, and the media) to share research and experience to inform the design and effective implementation of "democratic developmental local governance (DDLG)" in Ghana. It plans to bring both intellectual and research evidence to bear on policy discussions, promote new elite and grassroots consensus and build policy dialogue to make implementation effective.

Mapping and Selecting Members of the DDLG Platform

The competitive electoral politics in Ghana suggests that a buy-in of DDLG will require a broad-based policy and practice community for negotiated policy consensus and action.

The mapping study applied political economy, power, and institutional analyses to identify a distinct set of stakeholders (institutions and actors) in DDLG. It identified:



- Central and local government agencies including the Office of the President, Parliamentary Select Committee of LG, Ministries, Departments and Agencies, and the 260 metropolitan, municipal and district Assemblies.
- Donor agencies that work in decentralization and the local governance sector.
- Private enterprises that work at the local government level to promote local economic transformation.
- Traditional authorities (national and regional house of chiefs)
- Civil society organisations (think tanks, advocacy organization, NGOs, CBOs)
- Public intellectuals, opinion leaders and activists/influencers in related fields.

The DDLG platform needs to be an authoritative 'Think and Do Tank' to support the Ministry of Local Government, the Inter-Ministerial Coordinating Committee on Decentralisation (IMCCoD) and Development Partners. It could help steer informed policy debate on local governance and local economic transformation, contribute to the design and operationalisation of policy frameworks for mission-driven, citizen-orientated, community-owned, competitive and entrepreneurial local governance, and promote effective programme implementation and sustainability. Its agenda have to be transformative:

Agenda for Local Governance Transformation

1. Establish a DDLG platform for formal and informal networks and information-sharing opportunities with members and key policy actors.
2. Provide research evidence on industrial policy for local economic transformation to key policy makers at all levels.
3. Organise knowledge brokering dialogue and engagement on democratic local governance with and between high-level government and private sector entrepreneurs.
4. Facilitate translation of research and practice knowledge (feedback) on industrial policy for local economic transformation.
5. Facilitate design of a local industrial policy framework.
6. Support the establishment of local economic transformation units in local government.
7. Facilitate translation of research and practice knowledge on devolution into key policy decisions and programme implementation.

Key Reference

Awortwi, N. & Osei-Wusu, D. (2019) Mapping of Key Stakeholders to Constitute the Membership of Democratic Developmental Local Governance Platform in Ghana (Draft Report).

Author: Nicholas Awortwi (PhD), Director of the Institute of Local Government Studies, Ghana.

Contact: awortwi@ilgs-edu.org; awortwi@gmail.com

DDLG Policy and Practice Briefs are published by the Institute of Local Government Studies and aim to provide high quality analysis and practical recommendations for varied policy actors on decentralization, local governance and development issues.

ADDRESS:

P.O BOX LG 549
LEGON, ACCRA.

DIGITAL ADDRESS:

GM-039-7946

Web: www.ilgs-edu.org

Email: info@ilgs-edu.org

#NDI G

