

Promoting the Participation of Women in Local Governance and Development: The Case of Ghana

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Foreword

The framework for European development cooperation is quickly evolving. In the context of democratisation, liberalisation and state reform, many African governments have launched a new generation of decentralisation programmes.

This new wave of democratic decentralisation will have a direct impact on external assistance that aims to promote development and poverty reduction at the local level. European donors and their partners need to develop new instruments and modes of assistance that can facilitate institutional change and pursue these objectives in a context of transition.

This paper is a contribution to the dialogue on new modes of ACP-EU development cooperation. It was presented at an informal expert seminar on European support to decentralisation and municipal development, organised by ECDPM and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 14-15 June, 2000. The seminar was an opportunity for a structured exchange of experiences on new instruments and modalities of support to decentralisation and municipal development and in particular their relevance for poverty reduction and local development.

In this paper, Esther Ofei-Aboagye, director of the Ghana-based Institute for Local Government Studies (ILGS), focuses on the gender dimension of decentralisation. As the debate at the seminar showed, European donors are giving increasing priority to this dimension and related operational challenges. Based on her expertise as a gender specialist and her experiences in collaborating with different European donors, Mrs. Ofei-Aboagye, identifies a number of concrete options for European support to make a contribution to promoting women's participation in local governance.

ECDPM is grateful to the Swedish government, who co-financed the seminar and this discussion paper. We also express our appreciation to the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung who sponsored this particular contribution to the seminar as part of their collaboration with the Institute of Local Government Studies (ILGS) and their activities in the field of ACP-EU cooperation.

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Summary

This paper describes initiatives in Ghana to promote the participation of women in local governance and the role of European support. Local governance is interpreted as the active involvement of the local population within the territorial boundaries of a local government in ensuring improved quality of service and leadership at the local [government] level. It includes greater participation by civil society in decision-making processes and involves consensus-building and civic awareness. In view of this, the paper focuses on efforts to increase women's participation as councilors and as well as initiatives to enhance the involvement of women and women groups in decision-making, requiring accountability and accessing support from local governments. It also presents interventions promoted through local governments to reduce poverty and promote socio-economic development targeted at women and seeking to bridge gender gaps and the European support in these efforts. Beyond this general support, it also looks at the work of the Institute of Local Government Studies in this area and European involvement in this capacity-building and coordinating institution.

Background

Since independence, Ghana has gone through a number of efforts to decentralise political and administrative authority from the centre to the local level. The latest and most comprehensive effort began in 1988, when extensive powers and competencies were transferred to districts. One hundred and ten (110) district assemblies were created as legislative, executive, planning and rating authorities. The decentralisation effort was undertaken with certain key aspirations in mind:

- to provide more responsive, equitable and participatory development;
- to bring government and decision-making nearer to the people and quicken the processes;
- and to serve as a training ground in political activity.

The system of local government is as follows. District assemblies are headed by district chief executives or mayors nominated by the President of Ghana and endorsed by the assembly. The assembly is composed of representatives of the people in the districts. Two thirds of its members are elected through universal adult suffrage. The other third is appointed by the central government in consultation with traditional authorities and interest groups in the district. The appointed membership is intended to ensure representation of key interest groups and sections of the population and to infuse technical expertise (by appointing some key professionals) into the assembly.

The general assembly meets three to four times in a year. In between, the assembly operates through committees – an executive committee responsible for general policy and development direction of the district and five mandatory sub-committees that work up to it. The assembly is free to appoint more sub-committees as the peculiar geographical, economic and social circumstances and priorities of the people require.

General assemblies are convened and managed by a presiding member, who is the custodian of the good behaviour and financial propriety in the assembly¹. The assembly is supported in its work by a corps of civil servants who provide administrative and technical input. These bureaucrats are managed by a senior civil servant known as the district coordinating director. Some government departments have also been decentralised to the district level and conduct business there as departments of the district assembly.

¹ The presiding member is expected to receive internal audit reports of the assembly, to serve on various committees, such as the tender board, and to chair the poverty alleviation/credit for small enterprises committees.

Other spheres of government in Ghana are the regions and the central government. Each geographic region is made up of a number of districts and there are ten regions in Ghana. Their function is to coordinate and monitor the activities and plans of districts and to ensure that they are in consonance with national aspirations, policy and direction. The region will also undertake larger projects that benefit more than one district. There is a regional coordinating council (RCC) headed by a politically-appointed regional minister. The regional coordinating council is made up of the district chief executives, presiding members of the district assemblies under the region as well as representatives of the traditional authorities. The RCC is serviced by the regional coordinating director and a team of bureaucrats and regional heads of departments. The function of central government in all of this is to provide overall policy direction, and to coordinate, monitor and evaluate development efforts at the national level.

However, two critical aspects of the decentralisation process have not been achieved: fiscal decentralisation and the creation of a local government service. The completion of these aspects would give the district assemblies more control over local economic development.

Decentralisation and Local Development

Extensive efforts have been made to encourage district assemblies to promote local economic development. Current initiatives include encouraging public private partnerships, more efficient revenue generation, institutional and organisational capacity-building, and the building up of planning capacity.

However, poverty in Ghana remains high. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report of 1997 shows Ghana just above the least developed nations of the world with one-third of Ghanaians being classified as “poor” or “hard-core poor”. Studies on poverty in Ghana over the past decade indicated that the poor were found largely amongst the self-employed in agriculture, in particular those without access to additional labour (UNDP, 1997; UNDP, 1998; GLSS, 1999).

Recent assessments also revealed that the incidence and depth of poverty is be greater in the rural areas and disproportionately located in The Northern, Upper East and West Regions. The number and extent of poverty among the poor in the rural areas declined significantly between 1988 and 1992 and proportionate increases in average welfare were larger in rural than in urban areas. Export crop farmers experienced larger reductions in poverty than food crop farmers. Households whose members worked in the informal sector were also likely to be poor. The predominance of women in the informal sector and in food crop farming made them vulnerable to poverty. Over 70% of food crop farmers, and 90% of those in internal agricultural distribution, marketing and processing in Ghana are women. About 80% of Ghanaian women in the labour force are employed in small, semi-formal and informal undertakings.

A fourth round of the Ghana Living Standards Survey is underway. Indications are that while poverty levels in terms of absolutes have decreased, the qualitative gaps between the rich and the poor have widened and that the situation of the categories of poor identified above, is exacerbated.

Women’s lower economic and social status, multiple roles and lack of time all limit their access to formal social services and general advancement. With comparatively little education, poorer state of health and greater food insecurity, women (and young people) especially in the northern parts of the country are particularly vulnerable. Widows, aged, childless and disabled women whose access to labour is limited are also at risk.

Women, Gender and Decentralisation

Various provisions in the design of the decentralisation process should have made the participation of women in public decision-making easier. These provisions include those for a non-partisan local government system, the freedom to use the local language for the business of the assembly and the discretion in creating additional sub-committees. The latter could have provided a sharper focus on responding to the concerns of various sections of the population, including women.

But it did not. The initial participation of women in local government was low and has remained so. In 1994, women made up about 3% of elected members. In 1998, this proportion rose to 5%. This was very interesting given that women constitute just about half of all registered voters.

In 1998, the Government of Ghana gave a directive that reserved 30% of the appointed membership of assemblies for women. Examination of the proportions of appointed members suggests that assemblies selected just around 30%, even though that was supposed to be the minimum. Only 3 of the 110 Presiding Members are women.

Women have been constrained from entering local level politics by the lack of finances for campaigning and time constraints needed to manage domestic responsibilities, income-generation activities and political work. The widely-held perception that political activity is “dirty” and not for decent women is also a barrier. Women have also not been voted for because politics is often viewed as belonging to an arena which is best managed by men. Husbands and families are reluctant to have their women in the public eye. Women lack public arena skills and some complain of intimidation by male opponents.

Inside the assembly, women have yet to make their presence felt. In spite of the increases in their numbers provided for by the government directive, their performance has been muted. This has been attributed to lack of self-confidence, a limited capacity to communicate in English and a lack of understanding of assembly procedures. Other problems include being shouted at in assembly proceedings or being ignored by presiding members when they (women members) want to make interventions. The short notices for meetings and transportation costs incurred during assembly work have also been indicated as constraints for them. Women members employed in the formal sector also identify difficulties in combining assembly responsibilities with their jobs such as getting time off to attend to assembly and community business. Elected women also worry about being able to undertake development activities to justify their selection.

Perhaps part of the difficulty of making women’s presence felt at the district assembly level is the general paucity of women in government administration itself, both as politically appointed heads of districts (mayors) and as administrators and civil servants. Out of 110 district chief executives, only twelve are women (10.9%). The situation is similar for women as civil servants and administrators. Women constitute 32% of the entire civil service and 24% of those in local government with most being in the secretarial and clerical classes. Only 12% of the decision-influencing category – the administrative class – is female. In 1999, there were only 3 women amongst the 110 district coordinating directors (3.6%). This low representation is disturbing given that the district coordinating directors provide technical guidance to the assemblies. They are therefore responsible for providing inputs for planning, ensuring equity in implementation, monitoring for efficiency and effectiveness, and evaluating for impacts.

In summary, while the visibility of women in local government has increased, the numbers are still very low – both as administrators and as assembly members/counselors/ representatives. The issue is not the numbers of women alone, but their self-knowledge, confidence, clarity of purpose, priorities, commitment and ability to skillfully present their perspectives. Their multiple roles as wives, mothers, daughters, community workers and income-generators severely limit their time for community interaction and mobilisation.

Promoting Gender Sensitivity in Local Governance

Two main approaches have been adopted to try and make local government more responsive to women and gender concerns and to help enhance women's participation in governance. The first category has focused on building the capacity of women to aspire to, attain and perform in local government office; and on women's groups to engage local governments. The second has sought to encourage stakeholder institutions such as the district assemblies, training institutions, and agencies providing services and implementing development initiatives to provide appropriate support to women's concerns by targeting, positive action, creating an enabling environment for their participation, advocacy, education and the provision of resources. In both approaches, there has been extensive European support, materially, financial and in the form of technical assistance. Other strategies adopted by European development organisations have aimed to mainstream gender by recognising and providing for gender differences in the design and implementation of programmes and activities.

European support for activities in the first category has consisted of capacity-building for women as assembly members and economic actors as well as for women's groups. Specific interventions in this category include the following:

- The Danish Government, through the Danish Support for District Assemblies (DSDA II) Project, has intervened in seventeen districts in two regions and aims to promote financial management, human resources development and local economic development. The last intervention is targeted at women's groups and female beneficiaries.
- The DSDA Project also provides training for women assembly members and to promote exposure and development opportunities for women civil servants and administrators. Training for women assembly members has focused on their roles and functions, assertiveness and confidence-building training, planning and prioritisation, communication skills, and advocacy.
- A training programme for women assembly members in local government arrangements, the roles of functionaries and on the implementation of affirmative action was organised by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) in collaboration with the Volta Regional Coordinating Council (covering twelve districts) in 1999. There are indications that the experience will be replicated.
- While the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) is not a European institution, its support in this sector is worth mentioning because of the collaboration it enjoys from European local government associations. IULA has assisted the National Association of Local Authorities of Ghana (NALAG) in collaboration with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) to promote gender sensitivity in local governance. The NALAG initiative has developed a draft training handbook for women assembly members. These are currently being tested.

The second set of activities seeks to promote an enabling environment for gender-sensitivity and responsiveness of local authorities to women's needs and concerns. European support for these activities include the following:

- The DSDA II Project referred to earlier also seeks to build the capacity of administrators and civil servants to manage decentralisation and development. It also intends to promote revenue collection and financial management. The project has undertaken a gender analysis of the interventions and has developed a gender strategic framework to facilitate attention to gender throughout the programme. The strategic framework also makes proposals for promoting discussions on gender at policy level through work with the Regional Coordinating Councils and the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, itself.

- Under the Community Water and Sanitation Programme (CWSP), the Danish government has also supported the integration of gender concerns in a variety of ways including requiring local water and sanitation management committees to include women in decision-making capacities;
- The Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV) has undertaken district and regional support interventions in gender, local economic development and decentralisation. In the process, gender awareness-raising sessions have been conducted. Earlier interventions in integrated rural development and legal rights awareness support provided opportunities for SNV to make concerted efforts in two regions to promote women's ability to participate in local governance. SNV is currently commissioning research on women, access to natural resources and natural resources management;
- The NALAG gender initiative has also resulted in proposed gender strategies for NALAG itself and for its member district assemblies. The study also yielded proposals for research in gender for NALAG. NALAG is also being supported under DSDA to undertake research and it is anticipated that the inputs from the IULA-supported initiative will be incorporated into the research programme.

Other gender-related interventions have been sectoral and have involved functionaries of district assemblies. An example is the German Development Service (DED)'s efforts to provide gender training for its partners in the Forestry Department under the Forest Resources Utilisation and Management (FORUM) Project. Other sectoral interventions include education and health supported by the British Department for International Development (DFID) through non-governmental organisations such as Action Aid Ghana (AAG) and Save the Children (SC). All of these initiatives have required gendered data collection, consultation, and the implementation of gender proposals. A spill-over effect has been the increased awareness of gender concerns in district assemblies and communities.

The Role of the ILGS and European Organisations

To sustain and coordinate capacity-building initiatives in this area, the Institute of Local Government Studies (ILGS) was created by the Government of Ghana in May 1999. The Institute's mandate covers all functionaries in local government and institutions that work in partnership with district assemblies. Therefore, it also relates to local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), central government departments and foreign organisations. The Institute works through three main departments: education and training; research, advisory services and consultancy; and information and documentation services.

The Institute started its activities with considerable assistance from the Dutch-funded Capacity Building for Decentralisation in Ghana (CBDG) Project. This project is implemented with two Dutch institutions, the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies in Rotterdam and the Maastricht School of Management.

ILGS has undertaken initiatives in gender in all three sections but most extensively in education and training. The ILGS approach has been to include activities in gender awareness creation in training programmes and these opportunities have been possible largely by the CBDG project. Discussion questions have been raised on planning programmes, case studies used on financial management and budgeting programmes and an awareness-raising session included in human resources development programmes.

Another European partner of the ILGS is the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES). Last year, FES sponsored an ILGS roundtable conference in Southern Ghana to develop a training, education and advocacy agenda for promoting women's participation in local governance. The emerging directions for action from the meeting included:

- Advocacy for the implementation of government's affirmative action commitments; and to support this, continuous efforts in identifying and supporting women to take advantage of affirmative action;
- Promoting cooperation amongst women assembly members across districts and regions;
- Advocacy for the creation of institutional support mechanisms that will promote women's interests and concerns at the district level;
- Organisation of programmes that target spouses of women assembly members;
- Examination of socio-cultural practices that affect women's ability to enter public office;
- Lobbying chiefs and traditional authorities and using the existing structures of influence to promote the cause of women;
- Extensive collaboration with women in the media to break barriers to women in public life;
- Establishment of consultation mechanisms between the Ministry of Local Government and other government departments on gender issues at the district level;
- Incorporation of gender sensitivity sessions on all training programmes of the Institute; and
- Extensive public education and sensitisation in local communities. In this, ILGS should liaise with community-based organisations to facilitate the process.

Other results from the meeting included the identification of possible individual and institutional collaborators in Ghana.

In the area of gender research, the Institute organised a roundtable with academics, researchers and public servants to identify priorities. The submissions for possible research included:

- Gender issues in promoting small scale enterprises by district assemblies; what support mechanisms exist; how effective these support interventions are and how the support is allocated;
- The history of women's engagement of local governments and activism of today versus pre-colonial activism;
- The relationship between market activities of women and revenue generation of assemblies: what are the investments of assemblies in initiatives that benefit women?
- Women's experiences with district assembly participation as a strategy for capacity-building (how has it prepared them as a starting point for developing skills for parliament);
- Best practices in getting women's issues on the local/national agenda;
- Partnerships of district assemblies with NGOs in promoting gender concerns at the local level;
- Gender roles, time use and poverty management and productivity;
- Housing trends, local government responsibility and gender implications.

In addition to these, the meeting recommended that the Institute engage in capacity building of local organisations in gender and local government research and establish a programme to share experiences in district level studies and information on strategies and systems used.

In the area of information and documentation, the Institute has solicited documents and reports from various partners whose publications sometimes include commentaries on gender issues in development. Collaboration with European institutions with this kind of information will be welcome.

Directions for the Future

Ghana's decentralisation arrangements can promote gender equitable local level economic development and reduce poverty. There are opportunities to be exploited in enhancing women's participation in local governance and their access to benefits from local development initiatives. There are also constraints to be managed and addressed. The opportunities include:

- Government's affirmative action policy to reserve 30% of the appointed membership at the district level for women. While this has increased their numbers, they must be assisted to use the opportunity effectively.
- Ghana's development policy framework Vision 2020 requires district assemblies to protect and promote the interests of women, children and the vulnerable, especially in the areas of income-generation, education, nutrition and access to health care. This gives women a legitimate basis to require support from assemblies. It also puts the onus on assemblies to plan how to achieve this in a sustainable manner.
- The presence of many development and non-governmental organisations as well as community-based groups interested in assisting women and active at the district level is valuable for creating rights awareness, undertaking needs identification and implementing development interventions. District assemblies and women groups in the districts must regard these bodies as potential allies.
- The sub-committee system in the assembly facilitates the identification of critical issues. The concerns of women vis a vis men can be carefully identified and channeled through these sub-committees. However, this requires the capacity to undertake careful analysis of facts and figures, presentation, negotiating and advocacy skills.
- There are clear statements in policies for district assembly income-generation and poverty alleviation/credit funds on targeting women's enterprises. These provisions are a basis for advocacy.
- Various gender strategy documents in sectors such as health, education and agriculture have been prepared with the assistance of European partners. Also, legislation in such areas as education and health ensures that in the composition of district oversight committees, provision is made for women's representation. Women, disadvantaged groups and their allies need to examine how to use these commitments to their advantage.

On the other hand, there are constraints that limit the system's ability to respond to gender concerns. The Government of Ghana and its partners, local and European, need to address these hindrances to ensure that local governance and economic development includes and benefits women alongside men. These constraints include:

- Lack of sufficient gender-sensitivity of both assembly members and administrators.
- Lack of expertise on how to do gender analysis and to assess the differential impacts of programmes and policies on men and women (even where there is awareness and acceptance of gender differences). There is also a need for expertise to undertake gender differentiated data-collection, planning, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation.
- Persisting gender stereotypes and social limitations about what women can do and cannot do.

- The inability of womens groups and individual women to engage the assemblies and call them to account on their responsibilities towards women. This to a large extent has been attributed to lack of awareness about the responsibilities of the assemblies, lack of information about opportunities available and not recognising that assemblies are accountable to them as women.

Assisting assemblies to work purposefully towards bridging the gap between men and women is a high priority for the ILGS. The Institute intends to collaborate with development organisations and women's groups to this end. It also intends to contribute to building the capacity of women functionaries in assemblies as well as to undertake the identified research. The latter is critical to identify training and education needs, develop case studies to facilitate training, and generally to identify ways of effective intervention.

The Institute is currently having discussions with various European partners on possible gender training initiatives including the training of trainers in gender planning, and capacity-building for female assembly members. In particular, the accessibility of ongoing initiatives such as the DSDA II Project allows the Institute to follow developments in promoting gender sensitivity at the local level. In all of this, it is hoped that the Institute's work and European support for local level development and democratic decentralisation will contribute to addressing women's concerns both as political and economic actors.

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