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STRENGTHENING STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION IN DECENTRALIZED PLANNING SYSTEMS IN GHANA

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■ Introduction

A major feature of Ghana's decentralization and devolution process is the increased involvement of local communities, the citizenry, either by themselves as individuals or through association, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), peoples' organizations (POs), civil society organizations (CSOs), the private sector, businesses, among others. Indeed, the design of Ghana's decentralization program, with associated structures, such as the Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs), and the prescribed mode of functioning, present various opportunities for popular participation¹. Through available platforms, the planning process provides the major "entry point" for mainstreaming popular and mass participation in the work of the assemblies as it seeks to collate and aggregate citizens' views toward defining an agenda for addressing underdevelopment at the local level. Accordingly, the whole idea of participatory development starts with a robust planning process that is built on effective citizens' participation. In other words, citizens are required to be actively involved and be part of all phases of the planning process.

However, community participation in development planning has historically been problematic for decentralized planning. The major drawbacks of the

planning system are the fact that it had been insensitive to community aspirations and opportunities for local level initiatives and rarely explored the interactive nature of development planning. Therefore, Ghana's local government system has been described as a "decentralized" system in which decision making is locally centralized and ill serves its public (Afrobarometer Dispatch, 2015). Drawing on a study to systematically observe the MMDAs formulation of the 2014-2017 Medium Term Development Plans (MTDPs), this briefing paper discusses the effectiveness of the planning guidelines, with regards to MMDAs compliance, particularly, focusing on the degree of engagements and involvement of citizens and stakeholders who are the primary beneficiaries of the plan.

■ MMDAs Development Planning Process

At the center of Ghana's decentralization program are the principles of transparency and accountability as well as local participation and ownership of the development process. In Ghana, citizen participation in local governance has been enshrined in both the 1992 Constitution and the Local Government Act of 2016, Act 936, and as well reinforced by the National Decentralization Policy Framework and Action Plan (2015-2019) and the National Popular Participation Framework. Various forms and mechanisms for

¹ This includes measures such as election of representatives to the assemblies, the work of the assembly committee system, use of local languages and the more extensive participatory mechanisms within the planning and budgeting process.

consultations and engagement with citizens are elaborated in the enabling frameworks regulating decentralization in Ghana. The preparation of the MTDPs is part of the participatory mechanisms within the local government system in Ghana. It is underpinned by constitutional provisions that provide for a strong legal regime oriented towards a decentralised system of governance and development. Consequently, the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC)² has, since 1996, issued the Planning guidelines to provide focus and direction on national development priorities while enhancing harmonization and rationalization of development programs, projects and activities initiated from the community, district and national levels (NDPC, 2013).

These guidelines are aimed at effectively integrating citizens and stakeholders in development planning in Ghana. The assemblies are required to develop district plans based on development priorities generated from the communities through the sub-structures. To this extent, both the Local Government Act of 2016, Act 936, and the National Development Planning Systems Act of 1994 (Act 480) clearly identify political and bureaucratic bodies and assign them with authority, responsibility and roles to promote partnerships in development planning at the local level in order to ensure sustainable resource development. The laws and regulations governing this activity require the NDPC to issue national development policy frameworks and Planning Guidelines to assist MMDAs in the preparation of the MTDPs. This is to ensure compatibility with stakeholder and public participation in the national development framework. Under the planning systems, all MMDAs are required to have full responsibility through the District Planning Coordinating Unit (DPCU) for developing MTDPs every four years with the technical support of the NDPC.

■ **Studying MMDAs Preparations of the 2014-2017 MTDPs.**

In 2014, a study was conducted to investigate the

extent to which MMDAs complied with the guidelines issued by NDPC³. The study focused on citizens' participation, using the 2014-2017 MTDPs as the case study. The study adopted a mixed method (quantitative and qualitative) of data collection approach, including key stakeholder interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis. A total of forty (40) MMDAs were randomly selected from all the ten regions, comprising Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies in Ghana. A standard checklist was developed and trained observers were deployed to observe and report on the level of compliance by MMDAs to the planning guidelines. A total of 800 people were subsequently interviewed in all forty (40) project districts. These comprised largely of key informants and a few ordinary citizens⁴.

■ **Key Findings from the Study**

- *The set-up of plan preparatory process for the 2014-2017 District Medium Term Development Plan*

According to the 2014-2017 Planning Guidelines, the set-up of the plan preparatory process involves developing a budget, work plan and creating public awareness on the plan preparation and implementation process by MMDAs. The awareness program is expected to generate enthusiasm and positive attitudes among citizens towards the planning process. The study tracked the level of awareness on the commencement of the MTDPs among citizens. Generally, awareness among the public was found to be very low as 8 out of every 10 people interviewed (representing 80% of key stakeholders), including chiefs, media houses, Unit Committee members, Assembly members and opinion leaders, among other stakeholders, indicated not being aware of the commencement of the planning process. In the same context, the respondents indicated they had not heard their Assembly carrying out any event or activity, such as public announcements to sensitize and inform the public on the commencement of the 2014-2017 planning process at the local level. It is significant to

² Article 85(1) of the 1992 Republican constitution provides for the establishment of the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC) with the institution put at the Center of all development policy planning in Ghana.

³ The Planning Guidelines as issued by the NDPC provide for a number of public hearings and the preparation of community action plans as part of the preparation of the MTDPs. The Guidelines further require that a minimum of two public hearings are held in the district whilst Local Action Plans are prepared for not less than 50% of communities in the district.

⁴ Targeted respondents included state and non-state actors, including staff of the assembly, Assembly members, Presiding Members, Unit Committees, Traditional Councils, Opinion leaders, CSOs/CBOs and the media.

note that the creation of public awareness on the commencement of the planning process was expunged from the 2018-2021 Planning Guidelines.

- *The conduct of Public engagement sessions within the plan preparation process - Performance Review (PR) and the Public Hearings (PH)*

One major engagement directly with the public as part of the preparation of the MTDPs is the performance review session. The MMDAs are required to review their performance with information to citizens to indicate the attainment of targets set in the previous medium term development plan, in this instance 2010-2013 Medium Term Development Plan. The study revealed that the performance review sessions were conducted in an overwhelming majority (97.5%) of MMDAs representing 39 out of the 40 MMDAs.

However, this was not the case with the conduct of the public hearing sessions which are critical components of the MTDP preparation. The public hearings are aimed at creating space for citizens to contribute to the MTDPs. Given the significance of public consultations in the planning process, the planning guidelines require that each MMDA organizes at least two (2) major public hearings at the district level during the formulation of the MTDPs. The first public hearing is aimed at sensitizing people on the district as well as soliciting their views and proposals on the strategies, programs and projects needed to address existing problems. This is expected to be organized after data collection and analysis of the current situation and problems. The second public hearing is aimed at discussing the draft development plans - the outcome of this formally concludes the public engagement in the formulation of the plan⁵. The study revealed that out of the 40 MMDAs, 16 of them representing 40% held the first major public hearing while a significant majority (80%) failed to conduct the second public hearing which the technocrats explained was as a result of the lack of funds from the Assembly to implement this activity⁶. Beyond that, none of the districts that held the second major public hearing distributed copies of the draft plan to the public prior to the hearing as required by the planning guidelines. In addition, the observer reports showed that participation of the

marginalized, especially women and Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), were very low among the few districts that held the two public hearing sessions.

- *Sub-district plans/Local Action Plans*

The Planning Systems Act and the Planning Guidelines fully recognize the significance of the substructures in the planning process. For example, section 5(1) of the National Development Planning (System) Act 1994 (Act 480) provides that "a District Planning Authority shall prepare or direct the preparation of local action plans, or sub-district plans as may be required for the implementation of the approved district development plan". The rationale behind this provision is to ensure grassroots participation and local ownership of the preparation of Development Plans (DPs). The study assessed the degree of involvement of the sub structures, particularly the Area Councils and the Unit Committees which are at the base of the local government structures. The study revealed that 19 out of the 40 districts, representing 48%, facilitated the preparation of the sub-district plans or Local Action Plans (LAPs). Moreover, the study revealed that most of the districts observed could not cover more than 25% of the communities in their districts, although the NDPC Planning Guidelines for the 2014-2017 MTDP period required MMDAs to gather data from at least 50% of their communities, using the National Community Development Planning Guidelines. MMDAs explained that unavailability of funds and the very restricted deadlines provided by the NDPC to complete MTDPs made it impossible to meet this target.

- *Capacity of the decentralized planning structures*

The Planning Guidelines provide responsibilities for some core structures at the regional and district level to facilitate the planning process. These structures include the District Planning Coordinating Unit (DPCU), the Sub-District Councils/Structures, and the Regional Planning Coordinating Unit (RPCU). Generally, the study identified severe logistical and resource challenges facing these structures, most importantly, the DPCUs and the RPCUs. In all the 40 MMDAs observed, members of the DPCUs identified the lack of funds to finance the preparation and subsequent public engagement on the approved

⁵ See the NDPC Planning Guidelines for the 2018 – 2021 District Medium Term Development Plans

⁶ We noticed that most of the Assemblies presented the draft MTDPs to Assembly members at a General Assembly meeting as an alternative for the second public hearing.

MTDPs. Also, the “Guidelines for Operationalization of District and Regional Planning Coordinating Units” issued jointly by the NDPC and the Ministry of Local Government & Rural Development (MLG&RD) in May 2004 lacked enforcement at the local level. Among others, the guidelines provide directives for setting-up the District and Regional Planning Coordinating Units, including providing office space, equipment and logistics for use by these units. The guidelines further require that a special bank account is opened into which funds for DPCU operations shall be lodged. The study revealed that none of the DPCUs had any reliable funding mechanisms.

- *Co-opting experts into the DPCU*

The 2014-2017 planning guidelines provide that the DPCU may co-opt other Departments and Agencies responsible for cross-cutting issues like Gender, Green Economy, HIV, Environment, Private Sector Organizations, non-state organized groups, research institutions, youth organizations, academia, land owners and others, relevant to the planning process. It was discovered from the study that the degree of involvement of independent local experts was less satisfactory and underutilized. Very few MMDAs, representing 12.5%, co-opted local experts into the DPCUs. Whereas MMDAs complained of manpower, we found out that MMDAs have failed to utilize this opportunity to tap into the vast knowledge base of development professionals and NGOs and as well failed to strengthen linkages with relevant agencies outside of the District Assembly Structures in the delivery of planning functions at the local level.

- *Late release of the Planning Guidelines*

The MTDPs are prepared and implemented within a 4-year period. The study discovered some institutional deficits with regards to delays in the release of the planning guidelines. A critical observation of the planning cycle revealed that while the implementation of 2010-2013 MTDPs ended in December, 2013, the planning guidelines for the preparations of 2014-2017 MTDPs were issued by the NDPC in 2014. Ideally, the MMDAs should have completed the 2014-2017 MTDPs formulation by the

end of December, 2013 to avoid creating a vacuum in the planning process. The implication of this is that the implementation of the 2014 Annual Action Plans (AAPs) and budgeting were expected to commence while the preparation of the 2014-2017 MTDPs were in progress, and may not have received the approval of the Assemblies. Our study further revealed that the 2014-2017 MTDPs were eventually completed and approved in the first quarter of 2015. According to the NDPC, the late release of the Guidelines resulted from the delay by the Government in issuing the National Medium Term Development Policy Frameworks, in this instance, the Ghana Shared Growth Development Agenda II (GSGDAII)⁷.

- *Dissemination and reporting to citizens on the implementation of the MTDPs*

The Planning Guidelines, generally, require MMDAs to carry out education and sensitization on the final MTDPs. To this extent, MMDAs are required by the Planning Guidelines to establish Development Communication Committees (DCC) and Development Communication Strategy to engage identifiable groups and stakeholders, and as well report to them on the progress of implementation of the MTDPs. The study revealed that, all the 40 MMDAs never constituted this committee in their respective Assemblies. Consequently, citizens lacked the space to engage duty bearers through feedback and dialogue in the post plan implementation period. Indeed, the proposed inspection and visit to project sites to engage communities as beneficiaries of projects rarely take place at the local level.

■ Policy Recommendations

Informed by the findings as stated above, the following policy recommendations are made to enhance the decentralized development planning process in the future:

- The study noted the delay in the passage of the legislative instrument as required under the National Development Planning (System) Act, 1994⁸. Subsequently, in 2016, a legislative instrument (L.I. 2232) was passed to provide mechanisms for the enforcement of the planning regulations and guidelines. We take

⁷ The GSDA II provided the major national development thematic areas for the 2014-2017 planning period and also served as the source document for developing the Planning Guidelines.

⁸ Section 1 (3) of the National Development Planning (system) Act, 1994 (Act 480)

note of this new L.I, which was not in place at the time of the study, and commend the NDPC and government for ensuring this L.I was passed. However, the DPCUs continue to face funding challenges which has implications on the efficacy of the decentralized planning process including stakeholder engagement as part of accountability within the process. Indeed, all the planning regulations including the first schedule to the L.I. 2232 makes it mandatory for the Assembly to finance the preparation of the MTDPs. However, as earlier mentioned in this paper, DPCUs have difficulty with the Assemblies releasing funds to support their activities as most Assemblies have failed to prioritize the work of the DPCUs in their expenditure and budget process. This phenomenon is a perennial problem among majority of Assemblies in Ghana. Based on the lessons from the study, we recommend that some form of sustainable funding mechanisms to the DPCUs is critical for effective preparation of the MTDP as well as post plan engagement, reporting and evaluation with stakeholders and citizens. To this extent, we further propose that the NDPC and the Local Government Service consider the enforcement of the “Guidelines on Operationalization of the District and Regional Planning Coordinating Units” issued jointly by the NDPC and the MLGRD in May 2004. This guidelines make adequate provision for financing the DPCUs.

- Secondly, civil society and the media should engage local authorities and deepen advocacy on the establishment of the DCCs and also the preparation of the District Communication Strategy by MMDAs as required by the Planning Guidelines. This would help strengthen measures aimed at institutionalizing the relevant structures for promoting and sustaining effective stakeholder engagement after the preparation of the MTDPs. MMDAs could align their strategies with the popular participation action plan (P2 Action Plan) required under the National Popular Participation Framework (2016) which seeks to consolidate all citizen participation initiatives and provides guidelines for enforcement.
- Moreover, MMDAs including civil society

should deepen awareness on the public hearings using local radio or newspapers and other innovative mechanisms to enhance public knowledge and participation in these important events within the planning architecture. Beyond this, MMDAs should consider partnering and utilizing the services of the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) to incorporate the development planning process into its civic education and outreach activities to deepen knowledge and stimulate interest among citizens. Also, contrary to the 2014-2017 Planning Guidelines, the new Planning Guidelines, 2018-2021 does not entail the section on *awareness creation* prior to the commencement of the planning process. We recommend that the NDPC brings back this provision as it sets the path for promoting popular participation and cultivating interest through awareness and sensitization among the public in the planning process.

- Finally, we recommend that MMDAs should build strong partnership with non-state actors and civil society in the composition of the DPCUs as required by the L.I 2232. The L.I 2232 makes it mandatory for MMDAs to include these stakeholders in the DPCUs. However, the law failed to mandate MMDAs to include representatives of marginalized groups such as PWDs, women and youth. Evidence from various research surveys shows the huge deficit with regards to representation of these groups in the Assemblies. It is our expectation that the NDPC can explore this opportunity in subsequent policy directives and review of existing regulations.

■ Conclusion

Findings from the study confirm severe deficits with regards to community participation in development planning in Ghana. Indeed, the process of developing MTDPs, as revealed from the study, has excluded key primary stakeholders, comprising rural populations who are the direct beneficiaries of the plan, and as well undermined inclusive and participatory governance at the local level. The findings from the study show that majority of MMDAs failed to conduct the public hearing sessions and to open up the planning process at the local level to citizens. Consequently, the rationale to make citizens the pivot of the MTDPs was undermined in the preparation of the 2014-2017 MTDPs. The notion of making the decentralized planning process participatory and integrative, and to ensure the active involvement of the community and service providers, was not wholly achieved in these 40 MMDAs studied. It is instructive to note that public participation increases transparency in the decision-making process. If

citizens are involved in the policy development, they will be able to make government officials more accountable for their decisions. Citizens' involvement and participation in the decision-making processes and in the development planning process can help create sustainable solutions to developmental challenges. Indeed, service delivery gets better when there are mechanisms for sustaining dialogue between policy makers, service providers and citizens who are users of government projects and services, through user feedback. Also, it would contribute to achieving the commitments under the Open Government Partnership (OGP) initiative, where Ghana has committed to encourage MMDAs to promote extensive participation of civil society in their development planning and budgetary processes. As MMDAs begin another cycle toward the preparations and formulations of 2018-2021 MTDPs, it is hoped that lessons drawn from previous experiences and recommendations suggested in this paper will be considered and factored into the preparations.

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❖ ***CDD-Ghana Briefing Papers are generated from commissioned research on topical issues, as well as presentations at round-table discussions at the Center.***

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