CDD-GHANA

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Fixing the Missing Link in Ghana's Decentralization

The Case for an Independent Devolution Commission

Special Issue on Decentralization and Local Governance

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Executive Summary

Ghana's 1992 Constitution commits the country to decentralization, yet the system still lacks a single independent institution with the authority to design, coordinate, and oversee devolution as a coherent national project. Responsibility is instead dispersed among multiple executive and administrative bodies, resulting in fragmented implementation, uneven local government performance, and recurrent reform drift. As Ghana weighs the recommendations of the Constitutional Review Committee (CRC), this brief argues that an **Independent Devolution Commission** would supply the institutional center needed to rationalize, protect, and advance decentralization in practice.

Background and Policy Context

Ghana's decentralization framework, anchored in Chapter Twenty of the 1992 Constitution, designates the district as the basic unit of political decentralization. It also establishes a network of 261 Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies (MMDAs) as the primary vehicles for local governance and service delivery. In principle, this arrangement was meant to bring governance closer to citizens, improve service delivery, and address local development priorities through responsive district-level institutions.

Despite this formal architecture, constitutional intent has not translated into a coherent system of devolved local governance. The central weakness is the absence of a dedicated, independent institution with authority to drive, coordinate, and monitor decentralization as a unified constitutional mission. As a result, reforms have often been partial, inconsistent, and vulnerable to political and administrative discontinuity.

Responsibility for territorial organization, administration, staffing, financing, and performance management is currently spread across the Ministry responsible for Local Government, the Local Government Service, the Office of the Administrator of the District Assemblies Common Fund (DACF), the Inter-Ministerial Co-ordinating Committee on Decentralization (IMCC), the Electoral Commission, and others.[1] No single institution holds clear, sustained authority or accountability for the coherence of the agenda. In practice, decentralization is managed as a set of disconnected functions rather than a coherent governance system.

Key Challenges

The IMCC, originally conceived as a high-level executive mechanism for cross-government coordination, has not consistently served as an authoritative center for the decentralization agenda. Its placement within the broader ministerial framework has limited its ability to enforce cross-sectoral coherence, particularly where decentralization intersects with finance, staffing, planning, electoral design, and territorial restructuring.

Unlike other areas of public governance that benefit from clearly established, independent national institutions, decentralization lacks a comparable constitutional steward. As the CRC notes, this gap has contributed to uneven implementation, policy reversals, and fragmented accountability. The absence of a single guiding institution has produced four structural weaknesses, set out below.

Uncontrolled District Proliferation

[1] CRC Final Report, para. 7.22. Institutions identified include the Ministry responsible for Local Government, the Local Government Service, the DACF Administrator, the IMCC, the Electoral Commission, and Parliament.

From 110 MMDAs in 1998, Ghana's district count has grown to 261, often driven by short-term political considerations rather than evidence-based territorial planning. Many newly created districts lack population viability, a revenue base, or administrative capacity. City governance is hit hardest: Accra is fragmented across multiple assemblies, each with its own budget and political incentives, making integrated management of transport, waste, and housing extremely difficult.

> **WHY IT MATTERS**
> District creation and boundary changes cannot remain primarily political decisions. A rules-based, technically grounded national body is needed to assess territorial viability, urban functionality, and long-term administrative coherence.

Institutional Capacity Gaps

Capacity-building for MMDAs is often episodic, project-based, and donor-driven, with no institution responsible for regular system-wide needs assessments or a long-term national capacity strategy. The problem is sharper below the district level, where town councils, area councils, and unit committees frequently exist more in law than in practice, with limited staffing, financing, and operational authority.

> **WHY IT MATTERS**
> Closing these gaps requires a permanent mechanism capable of conducting system-wide capability assessments, coordinating sustained capacity development, and setting minimum operational standards for sub-district structures.

Weak Accountability for Performance

No comprehensive, statutory, and publicly accessible national framework exists to measure and compare MMDA effectiveness in a way that supports real accountability. Existing evaluations serve mainly as internal administrative tools rather than as public instruments that Parliament, civil society, citizens, and local stakeholders can use to assess whether assemblies are delivering on their mandates.

> **WHY IT MATTERS**
> A dedicated institution should produce standardized, comparable MMDA assessments that serve Parliament, civil society, and citizens as genuine accountability instruments, driving transparency and institutional improvement.

Fragmented Fiscal Oversight

The DACF Administrator's mandate is largely confined to managing and disbursing the District Assemblies Common Fund and does not extend to coordinating intergovernmental fiscal relations. As a result, transfer predictability, equalization, conditionality, expenditure quality, and local revenue mobilization are handled by different institutions, with no single body aligning them. This weakens the fiscal foundations of devolution.

> **WHY IT MATTERS**
> A single coordinating authority is needed whose mandate extends beyond disbursement to encompass transfer design, equalization, expenditure quality, and revenue mobilization, so that the fiscal architecture is coherent, predictable, and capable of supporting local performance.

Why Existing Arrangements Are Not Enough

Ghana already has institutions involved in local governance, including the Ministry responsible for Local Government, the Local Government Service, the IMCC, the DACF framework, and Parliament. The challenge is not the existence of institutions, but the absence of one constitutionally grounded body with authority to integrate territorial governance, capacity development, fiscal coordination, and performance oversight into a single devolution agenda. Without that anchor, reforms stay fragmented, responsibility stays diffuse, and no institution can be held fully accountable for the overall coherence of decentralization.

Proposed Reform: An Independent Devolution Commission

The 2025 Constitutional Review Committee recommends a constitutionally grounded Independent Devolution Commission (IDC) as the central mechanism for designing, coordinating, overseeing, and sustaining Ghana's decentralization framework. The Commission would be charged to the Consolidated Fund to protect its operational autonomy. If properly constituted, it could provide the continuity, technical authority, and cross-sectoral reach needed to move decentralization from fragmented administration to genuine devolution.

Envisioned as a permanent, independent, and technically specialized body insulated from ministerial turnover and short-term political cycles, the IDC would carry four core mandates:

- **Territorial governance.** Applying objective technical criteria — population thresholds, economic viability, administrative capacity, and service-delivery efficiency — to decisions on creating, merging, upgrading, or redrawing district boundaries, set out in a Constitutional Instrument laid before Parliament, so boundary changes rest on evidence rather than political pressure.
- **Capacity development.** Running regular, system-wide assessments of MMDA administrative and human-resource capacity and designing integrated programs to close identified gaps, replacing ad hoc, donor-dependent support with sustained national planning.
- **Intergovernmental fiscal coordination.** Integrating the DACF Administrator as a specialized arm and overseeing transfer equity, predictability, and local revenue mobilization within a single coherent fiscal framework.
- **Sub-district revitalization.** Developing and gazetting national standards for the establishment, staffing, financing, and minimum operation of town councils, area councils, and unit committees, so the Constitution's promise of participatory governance is reflected in functioning structures.

The case for the IDC is therefore not that Ghana needs another institution for its own sake, but that decentralization requires a durable institutional center. Without one, reform stays vulnerable to fragmentation, duplication, weak follow-through, and shifting political incentives.

Governance and Accountability

Because the Commission would influence politically sensitive areas — district restructuring, local finance, and institutional oversight — its design must balance operational independence with clear democratic accountability. The CRC proposes the following architecture:

- **Appointment.** The Chair and two full-time Vice Chairpersons are nominated by the Council of State following open, competitive recruitment administered by the Public Services Commission, then approved by Parliament before Presidential appointment.

- **Tenure.** A single, non-renewable 10-year term (or until age 65), insulated from electoral cycles.
- **Parliamentary oversight.** Proposals to create, merge, or upgrade districts proceed through a Constitutional Instrument laid before Parliament; the Commission also submits annual reports on the state of decentralization, district performance, and compliance with national standards.
- **Composition.** Up to nine part-time members representing the National Development Planning Commission, NALAG, the National House of Chiefs, the Civil and Local Government Service Staff Association, and the Institute of Local Government Studies.
- **Removal.** The same grounds and procedures apply to the Electoral Commission Chair.

These safeguards matter because any new institution may raise concerns about duplication or politicization. The answer is not to avoid reform but to ensure the new body is independent, technically competent, transparent in its appointments, and accountable to Parliament.

Recommendations

The following recommendations, drawn from the CRC's analysis, are directed at Parliament, the Executive, and key stakeholders.

A. Constitutional and Legislative Actions

- Amend Chapter Twenty of the 1992 Constitution to state explicitly that the goal of decentralization is devolution at the district level, giving all implementing legislation a clear constitutional trajectory.
- Establish the Independent Devolution Commission by constitutional provision, funded from the Consolidated Fund, with the mandate, composition, appointment procedure, and accountability mechanisms above.

B. Institutional Transition and Design

- Merge the Office of the Administrator of the DACF into the IDC as a functional division for intergovernmental fiscal transfers.
- Vest all decisions on district creation, merger, and boundary changes in the IDC, subject to Parliamentary approval and a Constitutional Instrument, removing this power from Executive discretion.

C. Early Operational Priorities

- Mandate the IDC to develop and publish a national MMDA performance framework within two years of establishment, with annual public reporting thereafter.
- Direct the IDC to develop national standards for sub-district structures within 18 months, including minimum staffing, budget allocations, and operational requirements.

References and Further Reading

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About this series
This special issue of the CDD-Ghana Policy Brief series offers accessible, evidence-based analysis of selected constitutional reform proposals and their implications for governance and democratic development in Ghana. The briefs aim to inform public discussion and policy engagement by examining the issues, trade-offs, and potential impacts of key reform recommendations.

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