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# Promoting gender sensitivity in local governance in Ghana

*Esther Ofei-Aboagye*

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## Background: the Ghanaian local government system

Decentralisation of political and administrative power to local authorities has gained considerable support over the last decade as a way of achieving participatory, accountable, and responsive development (Rondinelli and Nellis 1986; Hessling 1994; Crook and Manor 1998; De Jong et al. 1999; Moore 2001). Gender equity and gender sensitivity have also been regarded as prerequisites of sustainable development. Increasing the participation of women in political and public office as well as promoting routine attention to women's concerns alongside men's have therefore been advocated by multiple sectors of the development community since the late 1980s.

Ghana's decentralisation process and local government system are intended to give ordinary people the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Section 35 Clause 5 (d) of the Ghanaian Fourth Republican Constitution (ROG 1992) enjoins the state to make democracy a reality at all levels, through decentralisation. In Chapter 5 of the same section, the state is required to promote reasonable regional and gender balance in recruitment and appointment to public office.

The district assembly system of local government was initiated in 1988 and consolidated in the 1992 Constitution. As the level of government closest to the people, assemblies have become increasingly important as the arena in which sustainable development is discussed and implemented. For the past 16 years, Ghana has had 110 local authorities or assemblies and is in the process of increasing these to 138. These are the highest political, administrative, and planning authorities at the local level with executive and legislative powers. Assemblies can also set levies and fines.

Assemblies are composed of representatives of the people in the districts, and 70 per cent of them are elected through universal adult suffrage. The remaining 30 per cent are appointed by the country's president in consultation with traditional authorities and civil society groups in the district. The rationale for appointed memberships is to ensure representation of key sections of the population (such as women) and to harness the social and technical expertise of particular individuals. Local government elections are held every four years.

Assemblies are headed by chief executives or mayors nominated by the president and endorsed by the assemblies. A corps of civil servants and functionaries in decentralised departments provides the administrative and technical support that the assembly needs to implement its plans, programmes, and decisions.

Since the assembly system has been in place from the early 1990s, increasing reference has been made to the participation of interest groups and citizens in local governance by development

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agencies, local civil society, and the Ghanaian government. Participatory local governance is believed to promote more effective service delivery, greater transparency, better accountability, and more people-centred policies. It is expected to restrain the excesses of government and to promote civic awareness and better joint management of concerns (Smith 1998; Thomas 2000). As a result, such ideas as partnerships, collaboration, and civil society monitoring of poverty-reduction interventions have gained ground in the dealings of development agencies with assemblies.

### Promoting women's interests and gender equity in local governance

Two main influences have spurred the concern with promoting women's interests and gender equity in local governance in Ghana. First, the design of the assembly system, which includes features such as appointed memberships, the use of local languages (in addition to English for business for official purposes), the use of subcommittees, and the non-partisan status of the assemblies, has been thought to have considerable potential for enhancing the effective involvement of women in local development (Issaka 1994). Second, Ghana has committed itself to such international requirements as the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the 1998 International Union of Local Authorities (IULA)'s Declaration on Women. Therefore, action is required.

#### *Increasing the presence of women in the assembly*

Various strategies have been adopted by government agencies, donors, development organisations (both national and international), and civil society to enhance the participation of women in local governance. The most visible effort supported by all of these parties has been to increase the presence of women as assembly members, both through elections and by appointment.

In the last local government elections (2002), the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs (MOWAC) made a concerted effort to increase women's interest in voting and participating in government. Development organisations and NGOs such as the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA-Ghana), Action Aid Ghana, IBIS Ghana, and the Christian Mothers' Association also sponsored campaign skills-building programmes.

In part as a result of these public education and advocacy efforts, the performance of women in the elections improved significantly between 1994 and 2002. While in 1994 women constituted 2.9 per cent of elected assembly members and in 1998, that figure had risen to just about 5 per cent, by 2002, and 981 women stood for elections as compared to 547 in 1998—an increase of 79 per cent. Of these, 341 won seats, representing an increase of 73 per cent compared to 1998 figures. On the other hand, the number of men being elected dropped by 10.3 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding appointed memberships, in 1988 the government introduced a quota allotting 30 per cent of those seats to women, and in 2002 the quota was increased to 50 per cent. However, adherence to the quota directives varied considerably from district to district. In 1998 the National Association of Local Authorities of Ghana (NALAG) estimated that about 40 out of the 110 districts did not meet the standard. In 2002, women constituted approximately 35.5 per cent of appointed members in 97 out of the 110 districts—a figure that fell considerably short of the 50 per cent target set by the Ministry of Local Government. In all, only six districts managed to meet the quota, with district assemblies attributing their inability to reach the 50 per cent mark to the paucity of women qualified or willing to make themselves available. During the 1998–2000 period the highest number of women district chief executives (DCEs)

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was 11 out of the 110. Between 2001 and 2004 there were seven female DCEs. These low levels of appointment have been attributed to women's unwillingness to put themselves forward for appointment, though some civil society organisations (CSOs) have disputed this.

Thus, while the effort to increase women's presence, visibility, and influence over the business of local authorities has met with some success, much remains to be done. Among the obstacles that need to be overcome for women's participation and performance in the assemblies to become more substantial are low levels of literacy, time constraints, and problems related to socialisation.

*Promoting women's rights at the district level*

The other approach to fostering the participation of women at the local level has been to promote women's interests and gender considerations systematically in district-level activities. Here, too, a range of strategies has been pursued by government organisations, development partners and agencies, and local NGOs.<sup>2</sup> The efforts so far have focused on creating awareness of the importance of gender sensitivity among key functionaries and on developing analytical and planning skills as well as strategic guidelines to mainstream gender into development projects. Other noteworthy interventions include rewarding districts that have shown innovative support of women in the attempt to bridge the gender gap.

Box 1 summarises some of the approaches indicated above, as well as other efforts that are worth highlighting.

**Sustaining gender initiatives: focal persons and teams**

Questions about systematic monitoring of commitments, supporting the momentum, and building on the progress made have come up in many of the efforts undertaken to promote gender equity in local government structures. These have been linked to 'local ownership' and sustainability after the withdrawal of the external agent—be it the government, an international development agency, or a local NGO.

Government agencies and development organisations in partnership programmes with assemblies have promoted the idea of focal persons, or teams/core groups to push forward the plans or initiatives, thus becoming the key change agents and points of contact for monitoring a programme, updating on its achievements, and providing further support. Those that have been established vary widely in terms of mandate, expected responsibilities, credibility with the assemblies, technical capacities, and access to resources to carry out their work properly. What they have in common is the intention to identify local champions for promoting gender equity. The MOWAC has made an effort since 2002 to locate gender focal persons within the district assemblies as part of its larger plan to mainstream gender in the government machinery. The Ministry of Education's District Girl Child Education Officers (DGEOs) also serve as focal persons at the local level—but specifically for girls' education.

Inconclusive evidence suggests that the MOWAC focal persons have been rather ineffective for a variety of reasons. Their mandate within the assemblies has not been clear and they are not sufficiently experienced nor placed in sufficiently high positions to be influential. It is also not clear whether they are going to stay in the districts beyond their two-year period of service (ILGS 2003). The DGEOs, on the other hand, are trained teachers and have a clearer mandate deriving from their parent ministries. The extent to which extenuating factors within their working environment have hindered or facilitated their work is the subject of ongoing research at the Institute of Local Government Studies in Legon (ILGS) and the Girls' Education Unit of the Ministry (GEU), with support from UNIFEM.

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**Box 1:** Some interventions to promote women's participation and attention to gender concerns in local-level development

- Between 1995 and 1998: efforts by the local NGO, the Centre for Development of People (CEDEP), to create gender awareness among service providers in district assemblies in the Ashanti Region. This was one of the earliest local initiatives of its kind and later attracted financing support from partners in the UK.
- Quota of 30 per cent for women in appointed memberships of assemblies introduced in 1998 and increased to 50 per cent in 2002.
- Legal provision for women's inclusion on key decision-making bodies in local-level service delivery such as the District Education Oversight Committees (Education Service Law, Act 506).
- Policy provisions for women's inclusion on key committees allocating resources such as the Credit Approval Committee of the District Assemblies Common Fund (DACF) and Water and Sanitation Committees.
- Appointment of District Girl Child Education Officers by the Ministry of Education to promote girls' education.
- Establishment of scholarship schemes by assemblies for 'brilliant but needy' children, including girls.
- Creation of women's and children's subcommittees by some assemblies to promote their concerns on a more systematic basis in assembly business.
- The development of a handbook on gender and local governance by the National Association of Local Authorities of Ghana (NALAG) under the Association's Capacity Building Project with support from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM).
- Increased gender training by NGOs for district assembly staff, local civil society, and women's groups. The efforts of Action Aid Ghana and the local Integrated Social Development Centre (ISODEC) are especially noteworthy.
- Support of women's candidacy in the 2002 local government elections provided by both governmental and non-governmental organisations.
- Award scheme for the most gender-sensitive district assemblies introduced by NALAG in collaboration with the Dutch and German development organisations SNV and GTZ in 2002.

The experiences of gender focal teams or core groups that have emanated from collaborative projects and initiatives between development organisations and district assemblies provide other insights. Three such experiences are explored in this paper. They include (a) the Danish Support for District Assemblies (DSDA II) Project with 17 districts in the Upper West and Volta Regions; (b) the German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTZ)/Programme for Rural Action (PRA) collaboration with the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD) in the Brong Ahafo and Ashanti Regions; and (c) the 'Government Accountability Improves Trust' (GAIT) Programme implemented by the US NGO Cooperatives League of the United States of America (CLUSA) in collaboration with 20 districts selected from all the regions in the country.

#### *The Danish Support for District Assemblies (DSDA II) Project*

I have described the gender support provided under the DSDA II at some length in an earlier paper (Ofei-Aboagye 2000), but here I highlight some of its main components. The project consists of:

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- gender strategy guidelines into which stakeholders in the partner districts incorporated their input;
- gender training for representatives of the partner districts; and
- women's leadership training for groups of three from each district (with one coming from the assembly, another from civil society, and the third from a decentralised governmental department) intended to constitute a core group that promotes activities that are of priority to women in the programme. These potential core groups were exposed to gender-awareness training and analysis, women's participation in the local government system, and women's involvement in advocacy and self-development skills. Each district team prepared a gender action plan with inputs from their planning officers.

Several aspects of the DSDA II Project are yet to be assessed. However, a number of events may have had a negative impact on its success. In the course of the programme, an Economic Development Fund originally considered for women's initiatives was turned into a sub-district development fund for community projects. In addition, the DCEs who were in office at the inception of the project in 1999 (and were expected to play key roles in the promotion of these interventions) were removed from office in the first quarter of 2001. A number of appointed assembly members and civil servants who were familiar with the gender framework also moved on. The DSDA II was thus robbed of important financial and human resources, calling into question the feasibility of its continued implementation.

*The GTZ/PRA Programme*

The PRA was a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development in Ghana and GTZ undertaken between 1988 and 2003. It involved building the capacity of actors in the decentralisation process in district assemblies, local government substructures, and CSOs in six districts—four in the Brong Ahafo Region and one each in the Ashanti and Volta Regions. The PRA worked on three principles: (a) recognising gender concerns as critical to equitable development; (b) facilitating local-level action through good governance; and (c) combating poverty by enhancing access to resources and services among the poor.

As part of its capacity-building agenda, the programme organised workshops in four districts aimed at making the Medium Term District Development Plan (2002–2005) more gender aware. The workshops explored gender concepts and tools and the links between poverty reduction and gender awareness. Participants included assembly persons, chairs of sub-local government structures (urban and town councils), members of civil society, and administrative staff. They were asked to identify some of the most pressing gender concerns and to discuss the gaps in the respective districts. The workshops also invited interventions to enhance development plans at the district level. These workshops resulted in the formation of core gender groups to promote the implementation of their recommendations and monitor their progress.

However, it was recognised that the core groups needed technical strengthening as well as resourcing. A follow-up, inter-district workshop was organised to explore the kind of support that could be provided. This workshop was recognised as an opportunity to generate feedback on the training that had been received; to discuss what the core groups had achieved; to harmonise the expectations of the core groups from the different districts; and to develop a strategy for how best to implement the activities of the core groups. Finally, the workshop also provided a platform for sharing information on key national gender initiatives such as the award scheme run by the National Association of Local Authorities of Ghana and the Domestic Violence Bill.



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Participants concluded that core group members needed data collection and research skills as well as techniques in advocacy and lobbying. They recommended revisiting key gender tools and applications, as well as required information on existing laws, policies, and decrees affecting women. However, in recognition of their limitations, participants observed that the core groups needed to be given a clear and formal mandate. In other words, ways had to be found to commit the assembly to recognising and supporting the core group's work. Their proposals included requiring the assemblies to sign a memorandum of understanding with the GTZ/PRA to that end.

While the GTZ/PRA programme was originally expected to explore proposals for supporting gender core groups, the PRA itself was transformed into a Local Government Poverty Reduction Support Programme in 2003. It is hoped that the work of the core groups will be taken into account in this new approach, but it is not yet clear what is going to happen.

### *The GAIT Programme*

The GAIT Programme implemented by CLUSA between 2001 and 2004 aimed at increasing the capacity of local CSOs to achieve their objectives and to lobby for the interests of their members with local government. The Programme also sought to increase local government responsiveness, promote accountability and transparency, and reduce corruption in the local environment. Part of the approach was to stimulate unions of CSOs in partner districts. These civic unions also had women's sections made up of women's organisations.

As part of its agenda, the GAIT Programme organised programmes to build women's leadership capacity as both civic union representatives and female assembly members. In December 2002, 60 women from ten of the partner districts benefited from the programme. Leadership skills were provided and action plans for promoting women-based initiatives were developed. In April 2004, GAIT organised a follow-up workshop to review the efficacy of the leadership course and the extent of implementation of the action plans.

There was another dimension to the programme. National presidential and parliamentary elections had been scheduled for December 2004 and many development organisations had focused on promoting women candidates through advocacy and skills building. GAIT adopted a different approach by devoting some of the workshop time to equipping the women leaders to engage political aspirants. The idea was to encourage them and their followers to make more informed choices about those who would seek their vote. Participants also reviewed a draft national women's manifesto compiled under the auspices of another NGO, the London-based Abantu for Development. Participants were encouraged to develop district-level manifestos.

The GAIT initiative offers multiple lessons for promoting gender sensitivity in local governance. Effectively, these women leaders became custodians of women's interests through the development of the 2002 action plans and the district women's manifestos. Given their locations—in civil society and in the assembly—these joint exercises built a bridge along which women could collaborate.

The GAIT review indicated that the implementation of many of their action plans was hampered by lack of funds as well as a certain degree of apathy. Despite the relationship between the GAIT Programme and their assemblies, local authorities were not as helpful in providing logistical support as the women had expected. On the other hand, they conceded that the women's civic unions had benefited extensively from networking and partnerships with microfinance institutions, other membership groups, NGOs, and government departments. However, it had taken a lot of commitment and time on the part of the women leaders. The participants suggested that it would have been useful for the GAIT Programme to consider

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advocacy with the DCEs, assembly officials, and traditional authorities to support the women's initiatives more proactively, especially by recognising their efforts in district initiatives.

The district gender manifestos indicated that each district had peculiar concerns, some of which were related to women's health, access to resources and infrastructure, enterprises, and the need to address inimical socio-cultural practices. Some of the required actions could be addressed by women's groups. Others were directed towards the local governments.

Participants identified training areas that their women's leadership roles required, including conflict management and resolution, group dynamics and mobilisation, information technology, and negotiation skills. They also suggested that training in specific entrepreneurial and productive skills for onward transmission to women's groups would be useful.

## Conclusion

Since Ghana's decentralisation process began in the early 1990s, government organisations, international aid agencies, and NGOs have engaged in efforts to enhance attention to women's concerns and improve gender sensitivity in development processes at the local level. An important approach has been to sustain gender-sensitive initiatives through focal persons or core teams or groups. However, the mandates, levels of influence, modes of operation, logistical base, and levels of acceptance of these 'agents' have varied widely.

It is too early to reach firm conclusions about what works and what does not, and why. However, some ideas can be floated. Those appointed to promote gender at the local level need to have clear mandates and authority or legitimacy through official positions located in the assembly structure. Where they are accepted, measures must be taken to ensure that the responsibility for women's issues is not theirs alone. The issue of mandate and sustainability also applies to the gender focal teams/groups that emerge from collaborative development programmes. Because it appears that their continued existence is tied to the programmes that gave birth to them, the programmes' demise puts the teams/groups in danger.

Gender focal persons and teams/groups require clear support and ownership by the local authorities and the communities. Apart from official recognition of their work, they need logistical support and skills building to back up the relevant activities that they identify. While the resources of the assemblies are limited, local authorities do have the capacity to assist such initiatives to their mutual benefit and towards the achievement of responsive and equitable local level development.

## Note

1. These data were generated with information from Ghana's Electoral Commission. For more information, visit [www.ec.gov.gh](http://www.ec.gov.gh)
2. The support provided by European international organisations for increasing gender sensitivity in local development has been examined elsewhere. See Ofei-Aboagye (2000).

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