



## **“BE CITIZENS NOT SPECTATORS”**

### **A BUBBLE UP APPROACH TO LOCAL GOVERNANCE REFORMS IN GHANA**

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:

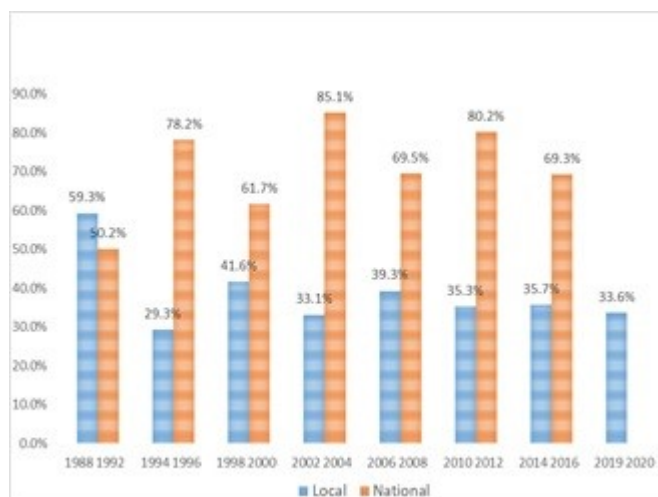
Thirty years ago, citizens' participation in national and local elections was about equal. Since then participation in national elections had had nearly double the participation of local polls (average 72 per cent versus 37 per cent). Clearly, voters recognize that their democratic voice is overwhelmingly 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 citizens' participation in other countries where devolution 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 governments 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 that citizens find LGs unattractive to invest their time and resources, or is there some other anomaly in culture or structure of citizens to behave as spectators in local governance?

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 Ray of Hope to Introduce Democratic 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. Citizens at the local level have not had the opportunity to directly elect their Mayors.



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 that has made the citizens mere spectators of local governance. 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 some 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 (2020-2024) proposes a transformative framework to build a national consensus to deepen local democracy and governance.

### **A Bubble up Approach to Local Governance Reforms**

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 local governance practitioners in alliance with key stakeholders. 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.

A bubble-up approach is civic actions by a coalition of local institutions and actors that advocate for reforms in line with areas that promote local governance, local transformation and local development.

The bubble-up involves negotiating with the central government on varied fronts (fiscal, political, economic, administrative, leadership and accountability) in terms that favour LGs. Each of the reform areas and the institutions involved represents a bubble that coalesces upwards and becomes large and formidable to be ignored by the centre in the negotiation for centre-local government reforms and further prevents recentralization.

Now the Institute of Local Government Studies (ILGS) with the support of Inter-Ministerial Coordinating Committee on Decentralisation (IMCC), Dutch Knowledge Platform on Inclusive Development (INCLUDE), STAR Ghana and other development partners is hosting a local governance practitioners forum to use research and practice evidence to kick-start a bubble-up approach 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 local governance reforms 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 LGPF Platform**

The competitive nature of politics in Ghana suggests that a buy-in of LGPF 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 LGPF.

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 LGPF 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 government, and promote effective programme implementation and sustainability. Its agenda have to be transformative:

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### Agenda for Local Governance Practitioners Forum

1. Establish a LGPF for formal and informal networks and information-sharing opportunities with members and key policy actors.
2. Provide research evidence on democratic decentralisation or devolution.
3. Organise knowledge brokering dialogue and engagement on democratic local governance with and between high-level government, local government practitioners, citizens and private sector entrepreneurs.
4. Facilitate translation of research and practice knowledge (feedback) on democratic decentralisation.
5. 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 Local Governance Practitioners' Forum (LGPF) in Ghana (Draft Report).

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LGPF 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.

**INCLUDE**

