# EXPLORING THE RELEVANCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND MEDIA PARTNERSHIP FOR PROMOTING SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN UPPER WEST REGION, GHANA

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## Abstract

Despite the importance of community participation in local governance, the inputs of community members on issues of local governance seem little in district assemblies in the Upper West Region of Ghana. Social accountability is not a privilege for civil society organisations and citizens, but it is their right as tax-payers and citizens to actively participate in development decisions that affect them. This paper argues that such rights can be better actualised through innovative social interventions of civil society organisations (CSOs) and stakeholders in local governance. The study assumes that until district assemblies and development partners collaboratively work with communities to create a sense of inclusiveness in local governance, the implementation of development projects would hardly be beneficial. It employed a qualitative research approach. Data was sourced from in-depth interview of implementers of a novel social intervention project and review of write-ups of journalists on development issues in the Upper West Region. Content analysis was employed to analyse thirteen sampled articles of journalists to identify issues of social accountability. Through analysis of an innovative social intervention project of Action for Sustainable Development collaboratively carried out with the media in the Upper West Region, the paper gives some insights on emerging issues about CSOs' innovative social intervention in local governance in the Upper West Region of Ghana.

**Keywords:** *social innovation interventions, community development, media network, social accountability, participation.*

## Introduction

Despite civil society efforts to increase citizens' knowledge and skills to participate in local governance and demand accountability from public officials, there are functional deficits in the mechanisms to make public office holders accountable for their stewardship. The mechanisms provided under the Local Governance Act, 2016 (Act 936) to promote participatory and accountable governance though explicit and almost exhaustive, most citizens at the local level are oblivious of the happenings within the District Assemblies (DAs). This can be attributed to the insufficient and erratic demand for accountability and good governance coupled with the issue of citizens shying away from their civic duties. Most duty-bearers are unwilling to open up for scrutiny. Citizens equally exhibit apathy in organising themselves and spending time on social accountability processes without financial and material gains as opposed

to the general benefits of social progress. Another challenge is the difficulty in accessing public information and where it is provided, it seems incomprehensible to the average citizen especially on financial matters.

The need to find innovative and sustainable ways of whipping up citizens' consciousness of local governance issues and how they affect their lives should engage the attention of development partners, especially CSOs. The media is an important institution, which by the nature of its function in society as the watchdog of private and public organisations, can partner with other CSOs, concerned citizens and duty-bearers to enhance social accountability. It is in pursuance of the objective of whipping up citizen's interests and action on how to ensure transparency and accountability in development governance at the decentralised level of governance (District Assembly), that some non-governmental organisation such as ASUDEV finds it relevant to collaborate with media organisations in the Upper West Region in particular and beyond to initiate the Citizens Action for Accountable Governance (CAAG) project.

## Profile of ASUDEV and its Core Activities in Wa and Sissala East Municipalities

ASUDEV is based in the Upper West Region of Ghana. Its core approach to development has been the human rights-based approach through which the capacities of citizens are built as well as facilitating advocacy and engagement with duty-bearers and development partners for effective delivery of social services, fulfilment of fundamental rights and promoting social accountability. The Citizens Action for Accountable Governance (CAAG) project is an initiative coming on the heels of the Social Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability (SPEFA) project which was implemented by ASUDEV within the Wa Municipality under the SNV/CSO consortium between 2014 and 2017. The CAAG project was supported by STAR Ghana with funding from UK aid, European Union and Danida. The one-year project was implemented in Wa and Sissala East Municipalities.

The Sissala East Municipality is beset with development problems such as poor road network, making access to social services a challenge. It is common for teachers not to be able to go to school because they cannot cross a broken bridge or inability to transport a woman in labour to the nearest health centre during the rainy season. Farm produce cannot reach market centres at the right time and some get spoiled in the process. Any effort to get roads fixed will be a catalyst for the sustainable development of the Municipality. Other problems include post-harvest losses, which affects farm productivity. The Sissala East Municipality is a major maize producer in the region. Unfavourable and unstable pricing of agricultural commodities is a major development challenge. Even though the farmers produce a lot of maize and other crops, access to markets is a challenge. Market queens from southern Ghana take advantage of the situation by offering low prices for the farm produce. The income of the farmers is, therefore, not maximised. In the Wa Municipality, under ASUDEV implemented the SEPFA project to improve citizens' perceptions of urban management and increase their engagement with urban assemblies, and to increase citizens' knowledge and understanding on local governance processes so as to enable them constructively engage and demand for accountable and transparent delivery of public services.

About 240 citizen forum members' knowledge and awareness of development processes in the Sissala East and Wa Municipal Assemblies increased. Different citizen forum members – 120 each from the Sissala East and Wa Municipal assemblies, which participated in fora organised by ASUDEV included Association of Tractor owners, Pensioners Association, Market Women Association, Parent Teachers Association and Traditional Authorities. Issues of public concern the members deliberated upon included: Stalled toilet projects at Kanton Senior High School and Tumu Senior High Technical School and ban on harvesting of rose wood and yet vehicles still loading rose wood. According to a Programme Officer of ASUDEV citizen forum members' participation in budget hearing and planning meetings had improved. The project enhanced the capacity of citizens groups to advocate for reforms to improve security and some infrastructure in the Wa Municipality (ASUDEV, 2017). Other benefits of the citizen fora were: feedback was received and actions taken on issues raised at Town Hall Meetings and relationship between citizens forum members and duty bearers strengthened.

Effective resource governance requires responsible and accountable actions from stakeholders to ensure that people derive maximum benefits from them. In this regard, citizens' vigilance and efforts

of CSOs aimed at demanding social accountability on local governance in the DAs is crucial. The contribution of other CSOs towards the institutionalisation of the concept of social accountability in the local governance system of Ghana led the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) to collaboratively initiate a project with three local-based radio stations in the Upper West Region. The aim of the collaboration was to bring down the microphone to people at the grassroots to air their views on pertinent issues of development. Community radio plays an important role in the lives of rural communities as it creates, provides information and education and improves the process of accountability (Ugboajah, 1985: 165-176). Local governance fora held from August 2-5, 2016 in the Sissala East, Nandom and Wa Municipalities offered opportunities for citizens to engage their local authorities on pertinent governance and pressing local development issues. Duty-bearers including local assembly authorities responded to questions and concerns raised by community members on the day-to-day running of the assemblies. Issues such as roads, water, sanitation, tolls, markets, local development projects, planning, budgeting and Common Fund allocations were the main topics for discussion. The sessions were broadcast live on partner radio stations – Radford FM, Radio Progress and radio Freed. The assemblies and CSOs, which collaborated with MFWA (see MFWA, 2016) on the project were:

a) In Sissala-East Municipality, Radford FM and Action for Sustainable Development (ASUDEV)
b) In Nandom Municipality, Radio Freed and Partnership for Rural Development Action (PRUDA)
c) In Wa Municipality, Radio Progress and Centre for the Alleviation of Poverty, the Environment and Child Support (CAPECS).

The growing interest in good governance, especially at DA level has been given further boost with the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) and Star Ghana's enhanced media and CSOs partnership project. The collaboration is expected to contribute to enrich citizen's access to quality information through structured media platforms and CSOs outlets (Hope, 2019). The expectations that people have of their DAs is that they address their development problems and create an enabling environment for citizen participation. Indeed, the DAs are the supply side of the transparency and accountability equation. However, the reality on the ground seems to paint a different picture, which triggered two main questions for the study:

a) How relevant are innovative social intervention projects in strengthening accountability in local governance?
b) How can CSOs collaborate with the media to implement innovative social intervention projects to support social accountability in local governance?

## Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study

Two theories which guide the study were the Media Advocacy and Empowerment theories. The choice of these theoretical frameworks is informed by the fact that one of the key objectives of ASUDEV's project was to promote media attention on social accountability in local governance and citizen participation in community development. Since its inception in Ghana in 1987, the decentralisation process as an offshoot of Ghana's democracy, has witnessed growth. Currently, the total number of MMDAs in Ghana is 168. The creation of new DAs, especially in remote communities in Ghana is a positive move in the sense that not only has it brought governance closer to the people, but more importantly, it signposts the fact that Ghana is committed to the implementation of core principles of governance such as inclusiveness and participation. It implies that by this current arrangement of governance in Ghana, communities in the various DAs have become stakeholders in the implantation, nurturing and strengthening of the MMDAs.

But the question is: How deep and meaningful is peoples' participation in the decentralised governance system, taking into account their awareness, knowledge on processes and resource availability and efficient utilisation, and their ability to demand accountability from duty-bearers? Deficits in community members' awareness, knowledge on processes and resource availability and efficient utilisation suggest that there is need for community sensitisation on their rights and responsibilities towards effective operationalisation of the DA concept. Apart from that, it is imperative

that given the demands of social accountability, all stakeholders are empowered to actively participate in local governance.

## Social Accountability

In the literature, there are different perspectives on the concept of social accountability. Generally, it can be defined as answerability on the part of public officials through citizens' engagement to explain what they have done or failed to do with public resources entrusted to them to judiciously utilise to yield positive results. The concept can be defined as an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e., whereby ordinary citizens and/or CSOs participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability (Melana et al., 2004). Emphasis of this definition is on a set of mechanisms needed for exacting accountability from duty-bearers. Such mechanisms, which are very often demand-driven, can make meaningful impacts if operated from bottom-up.

Notable among the bouquet of mechanisms needed for strengthening Ghana's decentralised development administration is social accountability. The World Bank (2006) defined social accountability as: "the broad range of actions and mechanisms (beyond voting) that citizens can use to hold the state into account, as well as actions on the part of government, civil society, media and other social actors that promote or facilitate these efforts" (2006: 3). The application of the concept requires some key pillars, which Melana enumerates as follows:

a)  Building coalitions to initiate collective action;
b)  Identifying an entry point such as involving people in meetings to obtain their views on development plans;
c)  Building an evidence base through compiling relevant public information, which can either be supply-side government data or demand side users' data;
d)  Public dissemination of findings through public meetings, events or the media; and
e)  Advocacy with public officials to bring change.

In the disbursement and management of Public Funds to MMDAs, the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development views social accountability as a vehicle through which people who are affected by planned interventions have the right and capacity to demand accountability and transparency from local politicians and administrators. Braimah et al. (2013: 65) observe that for effective poverty and inequality reduction, active civic engagement in development planning plays a kingpin role in sustainable public financial management. Reports (UNDP, 2018) on poverty situation in northern Ghana point to the need for collective and sustained efforts by citizens and development partners to tackle the issue. The relevance of using media for social innovation cannot be over-emphasised. According to Podkslicka & Rennie (2018: 4), scholars of digital media - Mirek Filiciak and Piotr Toczyski (2012), describe it as a progressive effort to use media to extend civic participation and literacy to a group normally excluded from the public sphere, offering them concrete opportunities for cross-cultural debate and learning. In fact, citizens have a right to voice their needs, opinions, and concerns to help public officials and government to better understand their (citizen's) priorities and how to better serve the people (ASUDEV, 2017:19).

## Media Advocacy and Local Governance

Media advocacy in support of local governance in Ghana seems low. A number of factors account for this situation. One of the factors is the gap between the media and CSOs as a result of inadequate policy literacy and capacity among journalists, civil society actors and citizens, particularly at the local government level (Zephaniah, 2019). When used effectively, media advocacy is one of the powerful platforms, which can influence decision makers, public officials and local politicians to be more responsible and transparent in their respective duties. Wallack and Dorfman (1996:283) define media advocacy to mean: "the strategic use of media to advance public policy initiatives." The underlying assumption of the theory is that the mass media to a large extent shape public debate, and consequently political and social interventions.

Dzisah (2019: 95) documents that a key factor in its arsenal is that it has the ability to shift focus from the personal to the social, from the individual to the political, from the behaviour or practice

to the policy or environment. Reliance on media advocacy theory seems to suggest that the media is capable of persuading people to support development initiatives and policies, especially when the benefits are demonstrable. For example, through media advocacy, people can be informed and educated about why they should participate and contribute in meetings and development discourses in the DAs. It can be stated that dependence on the media and its advocacy power could lead to framing of socio-economic and political problems of development of the DAs. Entman's (1993) perspective of framing linked the framing theory to agenda setting theory because it gives reference to salience of issues. Framing theory further states that media can influence public opinion by overemphasing issues over others through framing (Scheufele, 2000; Molloy, 2015:481; Mathes, 2009: 85). Advocacy for the well-being of people is the heart of the work of rights-based CSOs. The media plays an important role by acting as an advocate, a facilitator and a watchdog over governance processes in the DAs to ensure efficiency and effectiveness of the work of the DAs.

## Empowering People for Development

Community development demands active participation of all interested parties to make it a reality. Active and meaningful participation of youth, women, local farmers, persons with disabilities and other excluded groups of people in governance is very critical if human development is to be equitable and sustainable (UNDP, 2013). Tackling issues of local governance such as increasing local authorities' awareness of local development and improved revenue mobilsation require that CSOs engage in series of dialogues using various modes of communication, especially the mass media to reach out to a lot of people. Impactful communication within an integrated communication framework capabl of empowering people to take charge of processes and manage resources well in their communities should strategically employ a mixture of traditional forms of communication mostly used by community-based organisations (CBOs) and modern means of social communication such as community radio and participatory videos.

Scholars (see White, 2008; Waisbord, 2001 & Melkote et al., 2002) have argued that the use of such an integrated model of communication can create an enabling context for dialogue among stakeholders on problems of development and how to find solutions to them. This implies that onboarding people in the programmes, policies and development activities of DAs requires active participation of people. The central point of argument of empowerment scholars (see Gready & Ensor, 2004; Melkote et al., 2001) is that participation in development should enable people to gain control over their lives, their environment and their socio-economic conditions so as to enjoy an improved quality of life. The emphasis is that the efforts of development must be focused on different forms of empowerment of the popular classes:

a) The central notion of empowerment is to recognise the human dignity of all and enable all to assume active roles in the national-global development process
b) Personal empowerment, consciousness-raising processes in which the poor and excluded (such as women) overcome the imposed ideology that they are incapable of governing
c) Organisational empowerment, the formation of organisations to represent them and obtain resources for their development efforts
d) Political empowerment, that is, to understand how the political system works in order to get resources for the people.
e) Communication empowerment, to organise their own popular media and control it for their own education and to strengthen their own organisations.

The 1992 Fourth Republican Constitution of Ghana sets the grounds for the right of communities and local people to participate in local matters. Chapter 20, clause 240, 2(e) states: "to ensure the accountability of local authority, people in particular, local government areas shall be afforded the opportunity to participate effectively in their governance." Per bottom-up planning process of the National Development Planning System (ACT 480, 1994), local communities are expected to participate in the preparation of district or local plans through public hearing sessions, where the views expressed are taken into consideration in the planning process.

However, in the 2014 NGHDR Survey with the exception of voting during elections, participation was found to be generally low (UNDP, 2018: 131). The tendency to underestimate the knowledge and contributions of people from the grassroots as relevant inputs into the process of implementation of DAs' programmes and polices such as the disbursement of the Assemblies Common Fund is yet to be overcome. Azeem et al. (2010: 87) note: "It is still the case that people most affected by the outcome are left out of discussions on policy development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Every effort must be made to change this situation." Therefore, there is the need for more action to enable people actively participate in the development agenda of DAs. Therefore, the shift from tokenistic form of participation (see Gaber, 2019) to empowered participation, which requires lots of effort, cooperation and time should be embraced by all development partners in the DAs as the most plausible approach to mobilizing and convincing people to commit themselves to the task of development is in the right direction. Indeed, empowered participation (see Mefelopulos, 2008) is manifested when relevant stakeholders take part throughout the whole cycle of development initiative and have an influence on the decision-making process. A democratic-participant model of communication can guide the DAs and citizens dialogues on issues of development. Some principles underlying this model of communication is that communication is too important to be left in the hands of professionals, and that individuals and minorities must be able to claim right of access to the media and have their rights served by the media (Oosthuizen, 2002).

Participation and monitoring mechanisms situated within the local development administrative system can increase transparency and reduce corruption. Participatory communication is one of the key driving forces, which can be employed to achieve accountability and responsiveness in DAs. Establishing a dynamic link between communication, media and good governance has been found to be useful (World Bank, n.d). Demonstrably, analysed media reports (Kuorsoh, 2019; MFWA, 2016) indicated that this form of participation is beginning to take shape in some communities in the Sissala East and Wa Municipalities. Asuman (2019:24) observes that the appropriate end point for analysing empowerment is an increase in control over community resources, or a positive change in the socio-economic environment plus a sense of belonging.

## Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach. Specifically, 13 out of 39 write-ups of journalists (participants of ASUDEV training on Social Accountability) on development issues in the Wa and Sissala East Municipalities were purposefully sampled. The purposive sampling technique was used because the main criterion for sampling the 13 stories for assessment for the Media Award was that the write-ups should be about development issues in the districts in 2019. The study adopted content analysis approach to examine these 13 stories to see whether they dealt with variables such as corruption, accountability and inclusiveness. As a message-centred methodology, content analysis is an established research methodology particularly in quantitative research, which has been applied in other content analysis studies (see Neuendorf, 2002; Riffe et al., 1993, 2005). Data was obtained from in-depth interviews of one of the Lead Programme Officers of ASUDEV on implemented projects on social accountability in local governance in the study area. The data gathered was subjected to thematic analyses to demonstrate that the social innovative project of ASUDEV, and media partnership on facilitation of citizens participation in social accountability in local governance system can empower people.

## Findings and Discussion

### Contributions of ASUDEV to Social Accountability in Local Governance

ASUDEV's attempts at initiating social accountability in the Sissala East Municipality was informed and built on the SPEFA Project, which ASUDEV had implemented in the Wa Municipality. The project on social accountability in local governance in the Sissala East was a scaled-up effort to afford citizens of the area development programmes and projects of their assembly. Over 240 citizens in the Sissala East and Wa municipalities had their capacities enhanced to be able to demand their rights to participate

effectively in local governance. More importantly vulnerable groups such Persons with Disability, and hard to reach communities - Gbenebiesi, Bawiesibelle, Santijan, Wuru, Katinia and Sentie were included in the citizen fora. Their inclusion in decision-making and development planning and implementation in the two municipalities is a remarkable shift from what pertains in the past.

Through citizen's demand for social accountability in local governance some benefits have accrued to citizens including improvement in sanitary conditions at the Wa Lorry Station, distribution of waste bins in Sissala East, enforcement of sanitation bye-laws through sanitation guards in Sissala East. Others included closing of a timber factory in Tumu, thereby safeguarding the environment, enhancement of some feeder roads in the Sissala East, which has eased travelling from various communities to the Municipal capital, Tumu.

The Sissala East Municipal Assembly and the Wa Municipal Assembly, the two main duty-bearers under the project have become more accountable to the citizenry through the organisation of town hall meetings and dissemination of financial information to the people as well as an improved sense of consciousness to enable people participate in the activities of the DA. As indicated, some citizen groups have had interactions with service providers such as private health facilities in the Sissala East on some issues of public concern. Such civic-minded efforts to some extent, keep service providers on their toes to deliver quality services.

The project kept on reminding the district assemblies of their mandate to publish the Financial Templates and organise town hall meetings annually as stipulated in the Local Governance ACT, 2016 (936). Duty- bearers have become careful about making promises since they know individuals and the media will hold them accountable if they do not deliver. Through the intervention of the project the two municipal assemblies now invite citizens groups to participate in their meetings and key development processes; assembly sessions, budget hearings and reviews of fee-fixing resolutions.

On the other hand, the citizenry in the two municipal assemblies have been empowered to become more aware of their rights to participate and to know what is happening so that they can hold duty bearers accountable for their actions. Citizens have become more conscious about the assembly and its activities especially in areas of revenue collection and utilisation, contract execution by contractors. Finance and financial management information of the two municipal assemblies have become more available and accessible to citizens using the Public Financial Management Templates, which used not to be the case. Revenue mobilization billboards located at the Municipal assemblies are now constantly updated as a result of citizen demands for accountability from the Sissala East Municipal assembly.

## Leveraging Media Support on Social Accountability Issues in Local Governance

One of the key objectives of ASUDEV's project was to promote media attention on social accountability and citizen participation in local development. This requires that the various media houses be targeted with interventions towards the achievement of this goal. The Upper West Media Network for Social Accountability is a well-organised association of media organisations, and a product of the erstwhile SPEFA Project. The ASUDEV project therefore targets them to lead the process of achieving the goal of media attention to citizen participation. The function of the media as a mobiliser of people to take part in activities to enable them improve on the quality of their lives in society contributes towards making people become active citizens.

In fact, the notion of "democratic citizens" confers on members of the public the right and duty to be well-informed of, and actively participate in decisions and actions that can lead to enhancement in their standards of living. The citizens can only be well-formed if the media provides a credible platform and set the agenda for public discourse of development issues in the districts. By this intervention, the lessons from the project implementation would have a multiplier effect. The project had made some gains in enhancing media attention to social accountability issues through the introduction of the media in social accountability award. The emerging interest of the media on social accountability is seen in the content of radio programming (see World Bank, 2003).

Thirteen journalists in the Upper West Region were trained on media and social accountability. Issues of accountability and transparency in governance in the DA is vital to ensuring efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources. Using a Social Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability

training manual for CSOs, which was originally developed by the SNV -Netherlands Development Organisation under the SPEFA Project and adopted/reproduced under STAR Ghana Funded CAAG project with express consent from the SNV as a resource material, ASUDEV trained the journalists to have a firm grasp of the Local Government System, roles of citizens in social accountability, tools and techniques for social accountability and the media and social accountability. The training was done against the background of the fact that information dissemination and utilization in the implementation of development projects can engender trust among various stakeholders of DA. CAAG's involvement of the media is viewed along the lines of how the media can report on social accountability and citizen's participation in development at the grassroots level. The onboarding of the media to give practical approach to "social accountability" resulted in increased attention by media houses on development problems in order to elicit needed responses from DAs and development partners to address them.

After the training, the journalists went to the field to practice what they learnt over a period of time, with ASUDEV monitoring the extent to which they prioritised social accountability issues. As a means of assessing the impact of the training on the work of journalists, ASUDEV organised a Media Awards Competition for members of Upper West Media Network for Social Accountability. The awards programme was aimed at recognising excellence in social accountability reporting and encouraging media personnel to make social accountability a headline issue. The 13 sampled headline stories, which, journalists presented as entries for the Maiden 2019 Media Awards Competition on Social Accountability in local governance in the Upper West Region included:

a) Furniture shortage compel Bosuoyir primary pupils in the Wa Municipality to learn on bare ground
b) Wa: Pupils saved from studying on bare floor by Humu Foundation
c) Citizens in the Lawra DA urged to seek information to demand accountability from duty bearers
d) Four NGOs unveil project to support MMDAs revenue generation in the Upper West Region
e) Don't leave social accountability issues to CSOs alone
f) Sissala East MCE accounts to constituents on ongoing development activities in the Municipality
g) Sissala West disburses GHC 1,636,836.00 (An equivalent of 278,916.04 US dollars) to LEAP beneficiaries
h) USAID lauded for deepening accountability in agriculture governance
i) Wa Municipal seeks views on preparation of development plans
j) Report corrupt cases, public urged
k) ASUDEV launches Social Accountability Media Awards
l) No beds at Upper West Regional Hospital as children receive treatment on the floor
m) NDC women group in Wa Central donates to Wa Regional Hospital
n) Illegal mining in Wa East District of the Upper West Region.

In accessing the relevance and impact of the stories which were entered for the competition, the judges looked out for articles which exposed corruption, abuse of power and encouraged accountability or transparency in governance. They also prioritised stories that urged active citizens participation or inclusiveness in the decision-making process, as well as the responsiveness of duty bearers to issues affecting the citizenry. A content analysis of the stories revealed that three stories advocated citizens' participation in social accountability. The Ghana News Agency (GNA) appeared to be at the forefront of advocacy for citizens' participation in social accountability. In a story titled, "Citizens in Lawra DA urged to seek information to demand accountability from duty bearers", GNA reported of a social accountability forum which was organized in Lawra during which the Lawra District Assembly encouraged ordinary residents of the district to demand accountability from the Assembly. Similarly, "Don't leave social accountability issues to CSOs alone" and "Report corrupt cases, public urged" are GNA stories which reported that the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) and the Advocacy and Legal Advice Centre (ALAC) exhorted citizens of Kassana in the Sissala East Municipality of the Upper West Region and Salaga in the Northern Region respectively, to join CSOs in fighting corruption.

Some stories also alluded to corruption, maladministration and the shirking of responsibilities by district assemblies, resulting in the denial of communities of some basic facilities. The GNA and Joy

Online reported of furniture shortages at Bosuoyir M/A Primary School which led to 107 pupils sitting on filthy bare floors to learn. The story is titled "Furniture shortage compels Bosuoyir primary pupils in the Wa Municipality to learn on bare ground". Similarly, a Home Radio report highlighted the plight of patients at the Upper West Regional Hospital who received treatment on the floor owing to inadequate beds in the Hospital. The story was captioned, "No beds at Upper West Regional Hospital as children receive treatment on the floor". Another criterion for judging stories which were entered for the competition was responsiveness. The judges looked out for stories which showed that state and non-state actors had responded to pressing development challenges of communities or showed accountability to the people. The media presented stories with headlines such as, "Wa: Pupils saved from studying on bare floor by Humu Foundation" and "NDC women group in Wa Central donates to Wa Regional Hospital". Similarly, some stories brought to light social accountability initiatives by local government agencies, state institutions and CSOs. Such positive coverage was meant to encourage institutions, which showed good examples in being accountable to their constituents. Examples of such stories are, "Wa Municipal seeks views on preparation of development plans" (GNA), "Sissala East MCE accounts to constituents on ongoing development activities in the Municipality" (Joy Online), "Sissala West disburses GHC 1,636,836.00 to LEAP beneficiaries" (GNA). "ASUDEV launches Social Accountability Media Awards" (GNA) and "USAID lauded for deepening accountability in agriculture governance" (GNA).

The award-winning story for the competition was an investigative piece that exposed the corrupt actions of state security agencies who brutalised ordinary residents of Wa East Municipality in order to protect the interest of Azumah Resources Ltd. The story, titled: "Illegal mining in Wa East Municipality of the Upper West Region" was produced by Radio Progress. The feature story detailed how Azumah Resources Ltd. employed the services of the military to seize farm lands which the company used for illegal mining purposes. The soldiers were alleged to have committed various human rights abuses including seizure of residents' motorbikes, raping women and physically assaulting young men in the communities.

The quality of stories which were presented for the competition testified to the fact that the ASUDEV project training had improved the knowledge of journalists on social accountability. To a large extent, the stories which were presented for the competition addressed critical social accountability issues. However, as the Chief Judge of the Awards programme observed, journalists needed to improve upon the content of their stories since majority of the articles lacked depth of coverage. Majority of the stories were straight news stories covering planned events, whereas feature stories produced through research would have delved deeper into the social accountability issues. Only the award-winning Radio Progress story was an investigative piece meant to uncover the abuse of power by state actors. Social accountability would be given a boost if journalists within the Upper West Region are trained to research into abuses of state power and expose acts of malfeasance in governance.

Given that in the Upper West Region, citizens participation in social accountability was still low, the role of the media in sensitising the public to understand the importance of social accountability cannot be over-emphasised (Kuorsoh, 2019). Training of journalists to project social accountability in local governance can awaken their interest and desire to frame stories on development problems and issues of collective interest in the districts. Stevenson & Dryzek's (2014) observed that in citizen fora the framing shifts from individual interest to the collective interest. The pioneering work of ASUDEV in honouring deserving media houses and journalists in the Upper West Region for their works in promoting social accountability, is a major social innovative initiative in Ghana. However, in an interview with a Programme Officer of ASUDEV, he noted that their attempts at institutionalising the concept of social accountability is weakened by funding challenges. Braimah et al. (2013) had noted the weakness of CSOs to drive the social accountability concept in rural communities in Ghana. In Ghana, and other African countries the media are financially constrained. As a result, media reportage is more often than not overly sourced from officialdom to the neglect of rural communities. This phenomenon tends to water down the core roles of journalists in society - adversarial, interpretative, populist mobiliser and dissemination of news, which should be executed in a fair, equitable and balanced manner (see Wahl and Hanitzsch's, 2009). As regards these roles of the media, the adversarial and populist mobiliser duties of the media are hardly accorded attention so far as development communication in local governance is concerned.

Until development communication becomes a core aspect of the work of civil society organisations, including the media through a conscious, well-planned and integrated process, which offer platforms for citizens and duty-bearers to dialogue on resources management and utilisation in DAs as done by ASUDEV and its partner agency – Star Ghana Foundation and the media, targets 6 and 7 of the Sustainable Development Goals can hardly be achieved. The functions of the District Assembly member as stipulated by the Local Governance ACT 2016 (ACT 936) include consulting the community members on their development problems and tabling them at sessions of the district assembly meetings for the needed attention. It is clear that the assembly member's role makes demands on his/her communication competence.

However, within the local governance system, there are missing links in information dissemination and effective communication regarding the ability of the assembly man to be at the forefront of leading, and sharing useful information in order to mobilise community members to take active interest in social accountability issues. Naaikuur (2020) reports the difficulty of assembly men to regularly visit people in the district. Financial constraints seem to be one of the leading factors, which disenable assembly men to regularly meet and share information with people. According to Azeem et al. (2010: 87) it is the case that people most affected by the outcome are left out of discussions on policy development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Another issue of concern as reported by Fosu et al. (2013: 28) is that "If revenues available to the assemblies are collected from the local people then it is logical that the people should know how the revenues so generated are used." It is therefore imperative that attempts by CSOs in partnership with the media to focus their searchlights on these concerns is strengthened and sustained.

## Conclusion

Decentralisation has extended local governance to many communities in Ghana. This development is gradually heightening people's interest in how public resources allocated to various district assemblies are utilised to the benefit of people. Duty-bearers in charge of managing the local administrative system of government are required by law to account periodically for the resources disbursed for the development of the DAs. The execution of various development programmes and projects in the DAs can be realised if there is effective collaboration between duty-bearers in DAs and other stakeholders. Such an effort implies that executing the development agenda of the DAs needs to be done in a participatory, responsive, equitable, transparent and accountable manner in accordance with good governance principles.

This study has demonstrated how social accountability mechanisms in the Sissala East and Wa municipalities can be used to facilitate improved governance. Even though, the innovative social intervention project of ASUDEV is beset with some teething challenges, it is yielding some positive results. Media and CSO partnership in promoting social accountability in local governance in the Upper West Region of Ghana is proving to be a vital social innovative platform. Under the umbrella of media partnership for social accountability in local governance initiated by ASUDEV, people's voices in demanding accountability from duty-bearers on the use of public resources is being amplified and given salience.

It is important to note that in view of resource constraints, the sustainability of such laudable social intervention projects of CSOs is problematic. It is recommended that local and international funding agencies establish a favorable, flexible and sustained policy toward funding such projects, particularly in DAs in which people are less empowered to actively participate in local governance. In view of the importance of media and CSOs partnership in tackling issues of local governance and the interest such an endeavour is generating, the study recommends a nuanced baseline research on the impact of media reportage on social accountability in local governance on people in DAs. This could provide some pointers to factors, which account for the weakness of CSOs to contribute towards effective institutionalisation of the social accountability concept within the local governance system in Ghana.

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## Legislations

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