

Local Government and Community Participation; Prospect of the Unit Committee Model in Ghana's Decentralization Program

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Abstract: The unit committee model representing the basic structure of Ghana's decentralization and local government program plays a crucial role in grassroots mobilization and community participation in the decision-making and implementation process. This paper reviews the prospects of the unit committee models as a unique feature of Ghana's decentralization and local government policy for promoting participation at the local level. Data for the study was obtained through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, focused group discussions, documents, and material culture analysis. The study was conducted within the Nsawam-Adoagyiri and Suhum Municipalities in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The study revealed that local expectation from the unit committee members is inconsistent with their formal role as the basic structure of the decentralization and local government policy in Ghana. Unrealistic public expectations coupled with inadequate financial resources have resulted in total disregard for the functioning of the unit committee system. This makes the unit committee model seem to exist only by name since its impact is not so much felt at the local level making the position of the members who are elected and partly appointed a mere formality. This study recommends effective public education and institutional mechanisms to enhance the functioning of the unit committee model for members to effectively commit to their role to achieve the purpose for which the system was instituted.

Keywords: Decentralization, Participation, community, Local government, unit committee.

I. INTRODUCTION

Decentralization and local government policy, in general, has the basic objective of devolving power, resources, and responsibility from the central government to the district level of administration [1]–[3]. The policy is strategic in promoting participatory democracy by establishing structures and procedures that aim at bringing governance to the doorstep of the people. Several studies [4]–[6] maintain that citizens' participation in decision-making and implementation is vital to inclusive and sustainable development. Thus, the active involvement of the people in the decision-making and implementation process is key to the development of the local governance system.

The 1992 constitution of the Republic of Ghana, Article 25 makes provision for the creation of local government systems to ensure the devolution of central government powers and function to the local level of administration. Subsequently, the

local government act of 1993 (ACT 462) instituted the unit committee model with essential roles and responsibilities aimed at ensuring an effective local government system. The members of a unit committee operate primarily as representatives of the district assemblies at the grassroots level bringing governance to the doorstep of the people. The unit committee model is the central focal point for the discussion of all local community problems and is channeled through the Zonal, Town, or Urban council to the district assemblies.

[7] claim that considerable efforts were made in the 1960s, to promote grassroots participation in local governance thereby giving much attention to the practice. The government at that time in its quest to enhance public participation in governance enhanced the local government law. Consequently, Ghana's decentralization and local governance policy fully commenced in 1980, with the basic objective of devolving power, resources, and responsibility from the central government to the local level to enhance participation in the decision-making and implementation process. The policy also granted authority to local administrators to control a certain portion of revenue mobilization and create access to communal participation of the local resources [8]–[10].

Unfortunately, over a decade since the implementation of the decentralization and local government system not much has been achieved from the unit committee model. The unit committee which forms the basis of the local government system is not able to address local expectations due to financial constraints and power dynamics. There seem to be delusions about the mandate of the locally elected official leading to conflict with the community members. There are reports of a power struggle between the unit committee members, assemblymen, and traditional authorities in the local communities making it untenable to work together. It is also observed that the unit committee members who are accorded insignificant recognition are less motivated at the local level to perform their duties though they are elected by the people (USAID, 2003). Considering this, the former minister of local government Ofose Ampofo advocated for financial and material support to enable the unit committee members to discharge their duties effectively (Modern Ghana, 2011).

Since 2010, the membership of the unit committee has been reduced to five (5) from fifteen (15) which does not correspond to the size of their jurisdiction making it difficult to reach out proportionally to the people. Bringing government closer to the people through the unit committee model, local government is expected to provide the avenue to ensure even distribution of resources, local participation in decision making and implementation, and effectiveness in service delivery [11].

The key point at issue this study seeks to examine is to examine if the unit committee system outlived its usefulness. The study, therefore, is set to scrutinize the unit committee model in the decentralization and local government system. It examines the composition, functions, and expectations of the local people from the unit committee members and what accounts for the sudden rise in the expectation and hostility between the community members and the locally elected representatives.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted within the Nsawam/Adoagyiri and Suhum municipalities in the Eastern region of Ghana. Findings were derived from data collected for a Ph.D. dissertation of the author which scrutinized the functioning of MMDAs and community-based civil society organizations in addressing the development needs and aspirations of the people at the local level. As a qualitative case study [12], [13] data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, focused group discussions, documents review, and material culture analysis. Respondents were purposefully selected from the municipal assembly structures, opinion leaders, community, and unit committee members. In all, twenty respondents were purposefully sampled from ten communities within the Nsawam-Adoagyiri and Suhum municipalities. The interview which was recorded and transcribed for data analysis was conducted partly in the local language (Akan) and partly in English. The author's familiarity with the local language and have stayed and worked in the municipality as a public servant enabled him to gather relevant information as a participant-observer. Secondary data was drawn from document analysis from online publications, legislation, and local government policy documents.

III. FUNDAMENTAL LEGAL BASIS OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONCEPT IN GHANA

The political ideology that initiated the process for the current decentralization and local government policy emanated from the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) government in 1988 seeking to promote democratic participation and self-helped initiatives at all levels. According to [9], through the local government policy, the PNDC regime sought to devolve power, functions, and responsibility to the local people to promote effective participation in the decision-making and implementation of development programs. Consequently, the Provisional

National Defense Council (PNDC) law 207 was passed in 1988 with Legislative Instrument (LI) 1589 provided the first legal background for the current decentralization and local government policy in the fourth republic of Ghana. The PNDC law 207 was later given credence by the 1992 constitution underpinning political, administrative, and fiscal decentralization as a means of promoting popular participation and consolidating the country's young democracy.

To demonstrate Ghana's commitment to decentralization and local government, the entire chapter 20 of the fourth republican constitution is devoted to the policy with guidelines on the institutional arrangements, allocation of resources, roles, and responsibilities of key actors in the policy structure. Explicitly, Article 240 clause (1)(a) of the 1992 constitution provides for the devolution of powers, functions, and responsibility for service from the central government to the local government units to make participation in the decision-making process mandatory for all manner of persons in the community. Clause (2)(a) of Article 240 of the 1992 constitution of Ghana provides that.

"Parliament shall enact appropriate laws to ensure that functions, powers, responsibilities, and resources are at all times transferred from the central government to local government units in a coordinated manner". 2(e) stipulates further that; "to ensure the accountability of local government authorities, people in particular local government areas shall, as far as practicable, be allowed to participate effectively in their governance".

Again, Article 34(5d) of the fourth republican constitution of [14] mandates governments to make democracy a reality by decentralizing the administrative and financial machinery of government to the regions and districts and by affording all possible opportunities to the people to participate in decision-making at every level of life and government.

In furtherance of the constitutional provisions, a Local Government Act, 1993 (Act 462) was passed to repeal the PNDC Law 207 of 1988. The local government act provided for the creation of regional coordinating councils (RCC), Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies (MMDAs) together with sub-metropolitan, urban, town, area councils, and unit committees with well-defined statutory functions and responsibilities of key officials.

Expressly, the main objectives of Ghana's decentralization and local government policy are outlined in a draft decentralization policy framework in 2010. These includes:

- The transfer of functions, powers, responsibilities, and resources from the center to local government
- Measures to build the capacity of local authorities to plan, initiate, coordinate, manage and execute policies
- Vest control of persons in the service of local governments in local authorities, as far as possible

- Create opportunities for people to participate effectively in governance to ensure the accountability of local authorities

3.1 Structure of the Local Government System

The local governance system in Ghana was given a great impetus by the 1992 constitution through Article 35 Subsection (6) which outlined its fundamental aims and objectives as pillars for promoting democracy through devolving the administrative and financial power of the central government to the district assemblies. On this background, other enactments such as the Local Government Act, 1993 (Act 462) which was promulgated together with the Local Government Establishment Instrument (1994), District Assemblies Common Fund Act 2003 (Act435), Civil Service Act 1993(PNDC Law 327), Local Government Service Act 2003 (Act 656) and National Development Planning Act 1994(480) have been instituted.

For instance, the local government Act, 1993 (Act 462) and its amendment Act, 2016 (Act 936) empower the president of the republic to upgrade the status of a settlement following changes in population and demographic features. Consequently, the status of many districts has changed since the commencement of the decentralization and local government concept in 1988 with the creation and upgrade of more districts in Ghana. In this regard, 45 new districts were created in 1988, to increase the number of districts from 65 to 110 before the first local-level election under the new system was conducted. Later in 2003, 28 more districts were created by the government to increase the number from 110 to 138. Similarly, in 2007, the number was increased from 138 to 170 after 32 more districts were created. Furthermore, in 2012, 46 more additions and expansions were made which brought the total number of districts to 216 and in 2017, after 6 more regions were carved out of the existing ten, 32 more districts were created to increase the number from 216 to 254. Again, in 2018, 6 more districts were crafted out of the existing ones bringing the total number of districts to 260 for the 2019 district assembly elections.

The local government structure in Ghana is made up of the regional coordinating council (RCC), a four-tier Metropolitan assembly, a three-tier Municipal assembly, an urban/ town /area, or Zonal Council (UTZC), and a Unit Committee.

- Metropolitan Assemblies are communities with a population of over 250,000 people while a Municipality is a one-town assembly with up to 95,000 people. A Sub-metropolitan district council falls under Metropolitan District Assemblies and hence carries out tasks assigned to them by the Metropolitan Assemblies.
- Urban councils fall under the ordinary district assemblies which have a population of 7500 or more and are created for settlements with a population not exceeding 15,000 and are cosmopolitan. Besides, the settlements may have problems with urbanization

and a management that is lower than the metropolitan assembly.

- Zonal councils are created by the Municipal Assembly in towns that face problems with the establishment of Area or Town councils. In a town, each Zonal council may contain 3,000 people who share similar interests, landmarks, and facilities.
- Town or area councils are sub-governing structures created in metropolitan and District Assemblies. A metropolitan assembly establishes town councils for towns with a population of over 50,000 people. The District Assemblies also set up town councils in settlements having a population of between 5,000 and 15,000 people.
- Area councils are established for several settlements that are joined together, each of which contains less than 5,000 people. A Unit is the basic and last structure of the local government system in Ghana.

The regional coordinating council (RCC) is the highest political authority located in each of the sixteen regions of the country. The composition of the RCC according to local government Act 462 is the regional minister and his deputies, presiding members of each assembly within the region, and the district chief executive of each district within the region. Underneath the RCC is the Metropolitan, municipal district assemblies (MMDAs) that exercise deliberative, legislative, and executive functions within the district. Each MMDA is headed by a chief executive (MMDCE) as the second level of administrative sub-division beneath the regional level.

The chief executive is appointed by the president in a process of nomination with prior approval by a two-thirds majority of assembly members present through voting. Section 20 of the local government Act, 2016 Act 936 specifies the role of the Chief executive as a representative of the central government responsible for the day-to-day administration of the district.

Even though the president of the republic control one-third of members of the district assembly through appointments, there are several situations where the person nominated by the president has been rejected by the assembly resulting in the MMDA operating without an MMDCE. Notwithstanding, MMDCE is more accountable to the president than the assembly or the constituents. As a result, there has been a call for MMDCEs to be elected through universal adult suffrage for them to be more accountable to the people [15]–[17]. On the contrary, another school of thought has it that, the election of MMDCEs will lead to the politicization of the local government concept and therefore the status quo must be maintained for the president to exercise control at the local level.

Assembly members also constitute key officials of the local government concept. Major decisions taken by the MMDAs need prior approval of the assembly members responsible directly to the people. The assembly members are either

appointed (30%) or elected (70%) to perform legislative, deliberative, and executive functions. The assembly members represent the interest of the people they represent and advocate for their development.

3.2 *Strategies to promote community participation in local governance*

According to Ahwoi (2010), one of the strategies adopted by the government to address poverty in rural communities is creating an avenue for local participation. As a result, Sub-district structures were created to bring governance to the community level. The Sub-district structures provided for by Act 462 are the sub-metropolitan district council, urban or zonal council, Town or Area council, and unit committee. These structures are put in place for grassroots mobilization and support for district development initiatives.

The sub-metropolitan district is located in a metropolitan assembly with suburbanization and management problems. Town and urban councils are established from sub-metropolitan and district assemblies respectively which are cosmopolitan. They are established for settlements with a population exceeding 15,000 in a metropolis and between 5,000 and 15,000 people in a district.

An area council is established for a group of settlements or villages with a population not exceeding 5,000 whilst a zonal council is located in a one-town municipal assembly with a population of 3,000 people. A unit committee is established for a rural settlement with a population between 500 and 1000 or 1,500 and over for an urban area. An urban, Town, Area, or zonal council (UTAZ) is made up of not less than 10 and not more than 15 members. Up to five members are elected from the assembly and not more than 10 representatives of unit committee members with the area of authority.

3.3 *The unit committee model for grassroots participation*

The local government provides the avenue for grassroots participation at the community level through the unit committee model. The unit committee model is the bedrock of the local government concept and is defined within the concept of the local government system which is determined by the structure, functions, responsibilities, and relationship to the community.

A unit committee forms the fundamental structure of local government in Ghana and as such considered the foundation upon which district assembly is built. The implication is that the operative unit committee structure has the potential of building an effective local government system. Therefore, to strengthen their effectiveness the local government Act, 1993 (Act 462) which was amended and replaced by the local government Act, 2016 (Act 936) provides legal backing to the operations of the unit committee members and means of equipping them to perform their functions effectively.

The unit committee as the lowest and most basic level of the local government structure is constituted mostly in rural

communities within groups of settlements with a population between 5,000 and 1,000 or 1,500 in urban centers. The composition of the unit committee is made up of five (5) persons elected in an election conducted by the electoral commission for a four-year mandate with the eligibility for second-term re-election. The initial 15-member composition was reduced to five (5) through a legislative instrument (LI 1867) section 24 (1) in 2010.

Currently, a unit committee is made up of not more than five people elected by universal adult suffrage for the mandate. The unit committee provides the underlying mechanism for local representation and participation through a bottom-up approach. The unit committee assists the assemblymen in performing their functions at the local level. They organize communal labor and assist in revenue collection. They also provide avenues for discussing local issues and make recommendations and proposals to the assembly regarding revenue collections assistance for programs and projects.

Being closer to the people, the unit committee's core mandate is the enforcement of by-laws and mobilization of local resources for development. With this mandate, the unit committee model depicts a bottom-up approach to structural representation from the grassroots level.

The unit committee meets once a month or such times as the one who presides over their meetings may determine. The one who presides over their meetings is elected from among the members of the committee. A member of the committee may be removed if pronounced guilty by a court of competent jurisdiction to have committed an act that is incompatible with their mandate or that brought disrepute to the unit. In such a case, the member is removed by a two-thirds majority of registered voters within the unit in an election conducted by the electoral commission for that purpose. To ensure the effectiveness of their functions, unit committee members are expected to develop good working and inter-personal relationships not only with the community members but with key actors as well as stakeholders in local government such as the municipal chief executive (MCE), Members of Parliament, Assembly members, traditional authorities, civil society organizations, and community members.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 *Expected Functions of the Unit Committee members*

Taking governance to the grassroots through the unit committee model provides the avenue for the citizens to present their needs and aspirations through the local representatives to the district assembly. The expected role of the unit committee members is provided by the local government Act 1993 (Act 462) and 2016 (Act 936) to include aiding the district assembly through the Urban, Town, or Zonal councils in bringing governance to the doorstep of the people. They do this by keeping records on properties and

assisting the assembly in revenue mobilization through rates and register of birth and deaths at the local.

Accordingly, members of the committee help in mobilizing the local people to embark on communal, voluntary, self-help, or development projects. They keep track of such projects and provide progress reports or otherwise to the assembly. They are responsible for bringing the people together so that each member of the community will feel like being part of the national discourse in fighting poverty, diseases, and inequality and making sure development is brought to the doorstep of the people.

Again, the committee educates members of the local community on their rights, privileges, and responsibilities. Being closer to the people, they are the focal point in discussing problems and issues confronting the community which, when brought to the forefront are immediately addressed by the assembly through the urban, zonal, or town council.

Also, the district assembly may assign to the unit committee in its area of jurisdiction the authority to implement by-laws. They do this by assisting personnel from the urban town and zonal councils to take necessary steps to keep law and order in the community.

Not these alone, the unit committee members perform other functions that may be delegated to them by the assembly or the urban, town, area, or zonal council.

4.2 Public expectations from the unit committee members

Even though functions of the unit committee were elaborated by the local government Act 1993 (Act 462) and 2016 (Act 936), it was observed that people's expectations of the local representatives are not in consonant with their expected role. The local people expect the elected representatives to be actively involved in addressing key issues confronting the local communities such as unemployment, lack of credit facilities, public service delivery, provision of infrastructure, and other responsibilities that are sometimes not even known to the unit committee members or simply beyond their mandate. This is what one respondent had to say.

"I lost my job about a year years ago. I informed the government people here (referring to the unit committee and assembly members) but they have not done anything about it. I told the man who lives there (pointing to the house of a unit committee member) to inform the government that I needed a credit facility to start my own business to be able to take care of my wife and four children, but he has not done anything about it why should we continue to vote for them".

Inadequate public education on the expected role of the unit committee members has created misconceptions leading to mistrust and lack of confidence in members making people feel they have outlived their usefulness. It was observed that the unit committee members when canvassing for votes make certain Pledges to the electorate which contravenes their

mandate. Assurances such as secured employment, construction of bridges and link roads, and provision of infrastructures such as schools and clinics are sometimes made by prospective unit committee members which are eventually not fulfilled. A unit committee member in an interview admitted that:

"The campaign for our elections was very tight. My competitors were sharing money and goodies. I didn't have money to share with the people, and I didn't have anything to give to the people to induce them to vote for me so I promised them that if they vote for me, I will build a school and community center in the big villages here. I also promised some people scholarships to attend school in the city. Immediately I won the elections they came to my house and asked me to fulfill the promises I made to them. When I told them to wait, they got angry and threatened me".

4.3 Condition of service of the Unit Committee Members

To enable the committee to perform its functions effectively as a link between the people at the grassroots and the district assembly and to promote active participation and accountability at the community level, the local government Act of 1993(Act 462) which was amended in 2016(Act 936) specify the need for the unit committees to be well equipped in terms of personnel, finances, and logistics.

The study also discovered that the lack of financial incentives for unit committee members was a hindrance to the effective execution of their roles and responsibilities. Even though the government spends money and resources to conduct unit committee elections, no form of financial support is given to the elected members to aid their operations. This is what one unit committee member has to say.

"We are not on the government payroll. We use our own pocket money and resources for our operations. When we attend committee meetings, they say we are entitled to sitting and transport allowance, but I am yet to receive mine since I assumed office about two years ago".

The unit committee members are elected for a four-year term and are eligible for reelection. Since the introduction of the local government concept, assembly members are prohibited from identifying with a political party. This put the onerous responsibility on the potential unit committee member throughout the electioneering process. A unit committee member remarked.

"Can you imagine I spend so much money in campaigning for this position? During my campaign process, I organized rallies and several programs to get the people to come out in their numbers to vote and of course vote for me. I did all this from my resources."

Various reasons account for why people are still interested in contesting for the unit committee position even though they know there is no compensation attached to it. When asked for

his motivation for contesting for the position, a 34-year-old unit committee member had this to say.

“I want to build my political carrier from the local level. This position will allow me to gain more experience and learn on the job.”

Others claim they contested the position even though they are aware it comes without remuneration to provide voluntary service to the community. Yet a unit committee member in Suhum claimed he was influenced by friends and family to contest for the position which he eventually won.

The main source of finance for the local government is the district assembly common fund (DACF). This fund is determined annually by parliament with an allocation of not less than five percent of central government revenue (Article 252 of the 1992 constitution) which is set aside and allocated to the various district assemblies based on the revenue sharing formula approved by parliament.

People have expressed disappointment in the situation where assembly members receive ex-gratia and nothing of the sort is given to unit committee members who work together at the local level. The unit committee members are not entitled to a sitting allowance and other benefits to serve as a motivation in carrying out their duties. The situation has discouraged more elites and highly qualified professionals to contest that position.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The issue at stake is whether the unit committee model has outlived its usefulness which raises the question as to what is next after unit committee elections. This question arises from the fact that a substantial amount of money is used to conduct the district level and the unit committee elections nationwide in fulfillment of sections 2 and 6 of the local government Act 2016 (Act 936) in consonant with Article 246 clause (1) of the 1992 constitution. In furtherance of this, Article 240 (1) provides for the devolution of power, responsibilities for service and resources from the central government to the local government units. The effectiveness of local government according to [10] is necessitated by the presence of unit committee members as locally elected representatives who are directly responsible to the people at the grass-root level.

Despite the enormous role and responsibility expected of the unit committee members, they are undaunted by low motivation in terms of remuneration and logistics to enable them to perform their functions effectively. There is also an issue of relationship challenges with assemblymen and traditional authorities in the local community which serve as a barrier to the effective operations of the committee. While the assembly members see the complementing role of the unit committee as taking over their responsibilities the traditional authorities see them as political cohorts doing the bidding of the government.

There has been a call to abolish the unit committee model with the claim that, they have outlived their usefulness. Proponents for the abolishing of the unit committee model such as [9] claim that, a huge amount of money is spent to organize the unit committee elections considering their numbers and whose role does not justify their usefulness. He argues that unit committee members only play an interrelated role as the assemblyman in the local community.

It is also argued that since the inception of the unit committee model and subsequent election of members in 1992, there has not been concrete evidence to prove their worthiness. [16] claim that the unit committee, model has not lived up to its core mandate of bringing governance to the door sept of the people.

It was noted during field studies that; several community members did personally neither know their unit committee members nor their functions. Perhaps the weakness of the unit committee model goes beyond the reasons above.

Interference with behind-the-scenes partisan politics in the unit committee elections and lack of remuneration is crippling the main objective of the model. This makes the unit committee model seem to exist only by name as their impact is not so much felt at the grassroots making their position on the local government structure a mere formality.

Based on the results, this study recommends an institutional framework and government endeavor to strengthen grassroots participation through the unit committee model by including salaries and remuneration for the unit committee members if not then the model should be scrapped and concentrate on the assemblymen and women who play a parallel role with the unit committee members. Alternatively, effective monitoring and evaluation of the operations of the unit committee model should be ensured. There is also the need to intensify public education on the expected role and responsibilities of the unit committee members to obtain full support at the local level.

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