



Review of sub-national institutional performance in Ghana

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April 2021

Abstract: While the literature on the measurement, causes, and correlates of variations in sub-national institutional governance is prominent for Europe and other regions, it is less so for sub-Saharan Africa. Emerging literature on the latter region offers scope for improved understanding of the relationship between variations in the quality of sub-national governance and Africa's development. As a preliminary step towards contributing to this literature, this Background Note reviews Ghana's decentralization experience and efforts to assess its outcome. It surveys the literature, including government documents, reports, and technical notes, and attempts to answer the 'what' and 'how' of measuring sub-national institutional performance in one of Africa's shining polities since its decentralization experiment began in 1988.

Key words: sub-national governance, decentralization, governance, institutions, Ghana

Acknowledgements: I wish to thank Kunal Sen, Rachel Gisselquist, and Michael Danquah for their guidance and inputs.

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This note was prepared as part of the UNU-WIDER research initiative on 'Sub-national institutional performance across Ghana's districts and regions: variation and causes', which is a component of the project [The state and statebuilding in the Global South – international and local interactions](#).

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<https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/WBN/2021-1>

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The Institute is funded through income from an endowment fund with additional contributions to its work programme from Finland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom as well as earmarked contributions for specific projects from a variety of donors.

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Introduction

The literature on the concept, measurement, causes, and correlates of sub-national institutional governance is not new—see Chachu et al. (2020) for a recent review of this literature. From the seminal work of Putnam et al. (1993) to recent attempts by Iddawela et al. (2021), several authors have explored untapped spaces that contribute to our understanding of the relationship between sub-national governance and development. Putnam et al. (1993) explore about 20 regional governments in Italy in their attempt to explain the striking sub-national variations in the country’s development. More recently, Iddawela et al. (2021) combine satellites data with the construction of sub-national government quality indices across 356 sub-national governments in 22 African countries to explain variations in regional development in Africa. The latter attempt, perhaps among few others, adds to the dotted landscape of studies that focus on developing regions, such as Africa.

A major challenge for conducting these types of studies relate to the limitations of available data. Developing countries typically lack data that covers a broad range of governance and development indicators at the sub-national level. Such data is needed to conduct research that complement national-level analysis. It is also necessary for understanding the impact of governance reforms and the evaluation of institutional performance at the sub-national level. The slow progress in building such data to advance knowledge is in spite of the fact that many developing countries have laws that define sub-national structures as part of a local government system.

As a first step towards contributing to understanding the causes and correlates on sub-national institutional performance in developing countries, this note examines Ghana’s decentralization experience and efforts to assess its outcomes at the sub-national level. It adopts a case-study approach and constitutes a desk review of the ‘grey and white’ literature—published and unpublished research—on the assessment of sub-national institutional performance in Ghana. Essentially, it draws from various academic and non-academic sources that juxtapose the expectations of the country’s decentralization process with the outcomes, as viewed by key stakeholders including citizens, bureaucrats, academics, and other sections of civil society.

Ghana’s decentralization policy took off in 1988 with the passage of the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) Law 207. The primary aim was to bring development and improved governance to the doorstep of the citizenry (Ayea 2013). A direct product of the policy was the creation of Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs). The manner and pace of the creation of district assemblies reflects how tinkering was innate to the country’s decentralization process. The total number of MMDAs increased from 65 to 110 over the period 1988–89 (Ayea 2013). In 2004, 28 new districts were created. Another 32 new districts were created in 2008. By 2012, the establishment of an additional 46 districts increased the tally to 216. A further 38 new districts were added in March 2018. Six more districts were created in February 2019 (Oxford Policy Management 2019). In 2020, one new district was created, increasing the total number of MMDAs in Ghana to 261.

Some evidence links the creation of new districts to the desire of ruling governments to gain political advantage—see Resnick (2017) and Ayea (2013) for a review of this literature. This view contrasts with the argument that district creation is meant to increase ‘grassroots’ participation in local governance (Ayea 2013). It raises an important question about the degree to which these sub-national institutional structures may have improved governance since their creation.

Assessing sub-national/local government performance since 1988

Evidence provided by Ayee (1996) and Crook (1994) are among the first attempts to assess the performance of newly created districts between 1988–92. Zakaria (2013) notes that no holistic assessment of local government performance existed before then. The key legislations establishing local governments in Ghana (Acts 462, 479, and 480) mandate monitoring and evaluation oversight to be exercised by the Regional Coordinating Councils (RCCs). To this end, the district assemblies are expected to produce and submit annual progress reports to the National Development Planning Commission through the RCCs. Twenty years after the rollout of Ghana's decentralization policy, the Government of Ghana with the support its development partners introduced the District Development Facility (DDF) in 2008 to support an assessment and reward mechanism for local governance. The release of DDF funds is contingent on the performance of local governments through the application of the Functional Organizational Assessment Tool (FOAT). Ten years after the implementation of FOAT, a revised version called the District Assembly Performance Assessment Tool (DPAT) is being rolled out (Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development 2018).

Ayee (1996) assesses local government performance on the basis of the three objectives of the decentralization policy—participation, effectiveness, and accountability. Using the then Ho and Keta district assemblies as case studies, the author finds that delivery of public goods over the four-year period was marginal, but notes signs of increased participation in local governance. Similarly, Crook (1994) engages a two-district case study to assess local government performance on the basis of three indicators: output effectiveness, responsiveness, and acceptability. The paper essentially confirms Ayee (1996) and raises concerns over central government control over key functions at the district assembly level.

Following more than three decades of the implementation of Ghana's decentralization policy, a flurry of evaluations describes Ghana's local government performance as mixed (Ayee 2008: 233–58); Osei-Akoto, Darko, William, George, and Adiah 2007). While a few studies are optimistic (see for example, Egbenya 2010), many others barely stop short of describing Ghana's decentralization experience as a failure, with sub-national government performance viewed as weak on several dimensions, including delivery of social services, such as education, health, and public housing (Frimpong Boamah 2018; Aziabah 2018; Yeboah-Assiamah 2016; Couttolenc 2012). There are also studies that review the methods or frameworks for analysing local government performance in Ghana (see for example Bawole and Ibrahim 2017; Zakaria 2013).¹ They demonstrate a lack of consensus on the 'how' of performance assessments in public sector governance structures, but this has not deterred efforts to make meaning of local government performance in Ghana (Zakaria 2013).

Debrah (2009) assesses the quality of accountability in Ghana's district assemblies and how accountability relationships influence local governance in Ghana. Four districts are selected for case study: Mfantseman East in the Central Region, Ho Central in the Volta Region, Abokobi in the Greater Accra Region, and Gonja East in the Northern regions. The analysis done in the paper is based on a random sample of 150 respondents in the four districts. This number is shared between 'elite respondents' (50 respondents in total) made up of district officials, traditional leaders, and professionals. The rest of the respondents were 'ordinary citizens', characterized by low educational attainment. The primary data was complemented by desk review of reports from

¹ For example, Bawole and Ibrahim (2017) evaluate the Functional Operational Assessment Tool (FOAT) as a means of assessing local government performance, which then becomes the basis for the disbursement of a centralized funding mechanism District Development Facility.

the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, the Electoral Commission and civil society organizations. The concept of accountability as used in the study is measured by 'performance reporting: a periodic account of roles, assignments, targets set at the beginning of the year and attainment of objectives set in prior policy decisions by officials of the District Assemblies' (Debrah 2009: 285). A key finding of the paper is that accountability mechanisms exist only partially and are geared towards meeting the political interests of the central government, rather than the local citizens. There also seem to be more emphasis on processes rather than the outcomes these processes are expected to lead to.

Egbenya (2010) assesses the effectiveness of decentralization policy in Ghana. The study employs a descriptive case study design, with focus on two districts: Komenda Edina Eguafo Abaim (KEEA) and Abura Asebia Kwamankese (AAK) districts, all in the Central Region of Ghana. The author examines policy formulation and implementation and its implications for three key sectors: education, health, and water. Participants in the study included stakeholders working in these sectors both in the Central Region and at the seat of central government in Accra. Those in the latter included the Director General of Ghana Education Service, Deputy Director of Administration at the Ghana Health Service, and the Managing Director of the Community Water and Sanitation Agency. On the whole, respondents were satisfied with the effects of decentralization manifested as the transfer of knowledge and the distribution and delivery of public services.

Akudugu (2013) assesses the central government's use of financial resources to induce local government performance in Ghana. The study adopts a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews and desk reviews of the 2012 Budget Statement of the Bongo District Assembly, the Operational Manual for the Implementation and Administration of the District Development Facility, and the Functional and Organizational Assessment Tool Operational Manual (FOAT). Two sets of indicators outlined in the FOAT manual are used to assess the performance of the district assemblies. These indicators are classified into Minimum Conditions and Performance Measures (Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development 2010). Minimum Conditions cover the themes of functional capacity of the district assembly, budgeting and implementations of plans and programmes, procurement, and financial management and accounting. The indicators under Performance Measures fall under local economic development, environment and climate change, sanitation, monitoring and evaluation, social inclusion, service delivery, and transparency, accountability, and participation. A notable finding of Akudugu (2013) is that, while necessary, the transfer of financial resources to district assemblies is neither a sufficient condition for improving their performance nor for addressing the structural challenges that local governments face.

In his paper 'Looking Back, Moving Forward: Towards Improving Local Governments' Performance in Ghana', Zakaria (2013) explores efforts made by local governments to institutionalize performance management at the organizational level. The desk study approach employs a path-dependent conceptual framework to analyse administrative practices that, as the paper notes, may have some historical antecedents. The paper evaluates District Assembly performance as inspired by the application of the Functional and Organizational Assessment Tool (FOAT) and the disbursement of the accompanying grants including the Urban Development Grant (UDG). Zakaria (2013) argues that the performance assessment of local governments will be more effective when local governments focus on achieving goals which are consistent with the needs of local communities and citizens rather than entrenching upward accountability to the central government. According to him, relying on annual performance assessments designed to ignore the opinions of the citizens will only result in ineffective performance assessments in local governments.

Adu-Gyamfi (2014) investigates the effectiveness of revenue mobilization among local governments in Ghana. The study uses convenient and purposive samplings methods to interview 85 respondents in the Upper Denkyira East Municipal Assembly. The respondents include assembly members, heads of decentralized departments, opinion leaders, and revenue collectors. The author mainly explores various potential avenues for mobilizing revenues for district assemblies, in particular, internal revenue sources to finance their operations. The study finds the primary sources of internal revenue of district assemblies to be from property rates, licenses, market tolls, lorry park fees, and property rates. Key challenges undermining efforts to take advantage of these sources include inadequate data on revenue sources, lack of enforcement of revenue mobilization bylaws, and inadequate, or inadequately trained revenue collectors.

Armah-Attoh (2015) examines the quality of public services as an essential indicator in assessing government service delivery in Ghana. The paper uses a descriptive cross-sectional survey approach, and the data was gathered by interviewing 2,400 adult Ghanaians. It assesses service delivery quality in providing water and sanitation services, improving essential health services, and addressing educational needs. The paper finds that most of those with access to these public services view the quality of services negatively. The proportion of respondents who rate the quality of government services low further increases with adverse conditions surrounding their access, for instance when conditions of access are described as ‘difficult’ or ‘difficult and paid bribe’.

The role of civil society organizations in assessment of local government performance

In addition to academic papers, there are several contributions from civil society organizations (CSOs). Since 1988, these CSOs have contributed technical reports, policy briefs, briefing papers, press statements, and other literature as they engage with the decentralization process in Ghana. The Integrated Social Development Centre (ISODEC) and Send Foundation of West Africa have played particularly prominent roles; ISODEC in assessing the disbursement and use of the District Assembly’s Common Fund across district assemblies and Send Foundation of West Africa in tracking of the use of HIPC funds at the local government level.

There are others, such as the Third World Network (TWN) Africa, Center for Democracy and Development (CDD), Institute of Economics Affairs (IEA), Media Foundation for West Africa, and Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG), who have conducted surveys and produced research articles that evaluate local government performance across various themes—from environmental protection to democratic accountability.² In more recent times, networks and coalitions of existing and new CSOs have emerged. For instance, since 2003, the Local Governance Network—an umbrella of CSOs—has been engaged in research and policy advocacy on local governance. It currently represents the interest of CSOs on the Steering Committee and technical working group of the performance assessment process of the District Assessment Performance Assessment Tool (DPAT).

Another key product of CSO involvement in local governance projects is the District League Tables (DLT) which stem from a long-standing CSO collaborative project entitled ‘I am aware’. Since 2011, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) has served as the lead

² In 2017 for instance, the International Growth Centre commissioned a survey across 216 districts to assess local government tax capacity (Dzansi et al. 2018). Other international CSOs such the German Development Organization (GIZ), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and Ibis continue to play a prominent role in supporting work on local governance.

coordinating unit for the project. A central aim of the project is to harness government data to promote citizens' awareness for social accountability.³

The DLT is an assessment tool for ranking all district assemblies on the basis of their extent of social development. The rankings are based on indicators covering six thematic areas: education, sanitation, rural water, health, security, and governance; see Table 1. Each indicator is scored on a scale of zero to 100. The overall unweighted average across all six indicators and for all districts are featured on a table of rankings and an administrative map of Ghana.

Table 1: Themes and indicators in the first District League Table

Theme	Indicator	Measure	Data source	Ref. year
Education	Basic Education Certificate Examination pass rate	District average of pass rate for four subjects	Education Management Information System (EMIS)	2012
Sanitation	Certification as 'Open Defecation Free' (ODF)	Whether district is classified as ODF or not	Environmental Health and Sanitation, MLGRD	2013
Rural water	Coverage of rural water supply	% of rural population covered by a rural water supply system	Community Water and Sanitation Agency (CWSA)	2013
Health	Skilled attendant at delivery	% of expected deliveries attended by skilled personnel	District Health Management Information System (DHMIS)	2013
Security	Coverage of police services	Number of population per police officer	Ghana Police Service	2013
Governance	Minimum conditions for District Administration	Minimum conditions are fulfilled or unfulfilled	DDF/FOAT	2012

Source: author's adaptation of Table 1 in UNICEF/CDD (2014: 12).

The District League Table rankings in Ghana have seen important changes since they began in 2014. For instance, during preparation of the 2014 report, there were no administrative maps capturing the 216 District Assemblies (UNICEF/CDD 2014). It was also difficult to obtain data for newly created districts. Another challenge was inconsistency in annual sector performance reporting by public sector agencies.

The 2015 DLT rankings retained the methodology and number of districts covered (UNICEF/CDD 2015). In 2016, the FOAT performance score for districts replaced the previous measure of districts' fulfilment of minimum conditions for effective administration (UNICEF/CDD 2016). In 2017, a new indicator, on institutional newborn mortality at facility, was added to the health theme (UNICEF/CDD 2017). The subsequent DLT rankings were combined for 2018–19. In the 2018–19 combined report, two new indicators were added: birth registration rate and net attendance rate at primary level. Furthermore, rural and urban water access were combined. A new method of calculating scores for each district, using factor analysis, was also introduced. As a result, striking differences exist between the 2018–19 rankings and previous rankings (UNICEF/CDD/CSPS 2019). In addition, separate rankings based on sector performance have been introduced. Despite the increase in the number of districts to 260, the 2018–19 rankings only report rankings for 216 of the districts due to difficulty in accessing data for new districts.

³ The Ghana Strengthening Accountability Mechanisms Project is another example of a project that has mobilized civil society organizations including ISODEC, Care International and Oxfam to assess the performance of 50 districts in the implementation of capital projects.

Conclusion

Sub-national institutional performance in Ghana has been assessed in various ways. These cover the range from quantitative and qualitative to mixed methods. The dominant method used relies on qualitative approaches: primarily desk reviews supported by key informant interviews and focus group discussions leading to analyses based on descriptive statistics.

There has so far been very little evaluation of these assessments, how they have been done, and what lessons might assist in developing improved methods that can be used over time. This is an area for further research. Moreover, there is basis for giving more attention to building sub-national databases on governance and development indicators in order to provide wider scope for examining their interrelationship. Nonetheless, the reviewed reports on local government performance in Ghana provide very useful insights into the challenges district assemblies face in fulfilling their mandate.⁴ The articles also provide the contours for sketching out potential determinants of district assembly performance in Ghana.

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⁴ It is important to note that there are dozens of other reports on the assessment of district assembly performance in Ghana that we reviewed. Most of those not captured here are academic theses or articles in journals that were difficult to authenticate. There are however selected academic theses that have been captured in another document (an MS Excel matrix of studies on local government performance in Ghana).

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