

Assessing the Unit Committee Model in the Decentralization Programme of Ghana: The Case of the Eastern Region

by

Patrick Mahama

patrick.mahama@upsamail.edu.gh,

patrick.mahama@upsa.edu.gh

Lecturer & Faculty Research Officer

University of Professional Studies, Accra, Ghana

&

Evans Agalega

eaggale@yahoo.com

Koforidua Technical University, Koforidua, Ghana

Abstract

This paper sets out to assess the Unit Committee Model in the Eastern Region of Ghana under Ghana's decentralization programme. It contends that the Unit Committee Model, which is a unique feature of Ghana's decentralization programme, provides an enormous opportunity for grassroots mobilization for participation, representation and accountability of local and central government, which are the key factors of the decentralization programme. The methodology adopted combined interviews with documentary analysis to seek an explanation and in-depth understanding of why the model has not been successful in its areas of responsibility as stipulated in the local government Act 1993 (Act 462). Through interviews of key stakeholders, it was found that the unit committees exist only by name and that their effectiveness at the grassroots level is a little more than mere formality in the structure of Ghana's decentralization programme.

Key Words: unit committee model, decentralization, local government, eastern region, Ghana

Introduction

The effectiveness of grassroots participation and hence, Ghana's decentralization programme arguably hinges on the unit committee model, which by design is meant to ensure grassroots participation in many aspects of the decentralization programme. Article 25 of the 1992 constitution of Ghana provides for the creation of the local government system to ensure the decentralization of government functions and authority to the local level of administration. The local government Act 1993 (Act 462) provides for the unit committee model with a profound role aimed at ensuring the effectiveness of the decentralization programme.

Some of its main functions include to supervise the staff of the District assembly in performing duties in its area of authority, assist the assembly in revenue collection, organize communal labour and voluntary work, educate the people on their rights, privileges, obligations and responsibilities, provide focal points for discussion of local matters and make recommendations to the assembly, monitor the implementation of self help and development projects, assist in enumerating and keeping records of all taxable persons and properties, make proposals to the assembly regarding levying and collection of rates for projects and programmes. However, despite the elaborate role of unit committees in Ghana, it is common knowledge that since its inception in 1988, Ghana's decentralization programme has suffered several drawbacks in its developmental and participatory roles especially with the operation of the unit committees, which came into being through the local government act of 1993.

Research Questions

In a qualitative study, researchers state research questions rather than objectives or hypothesis (Creswell, 2014). In this regard, the research questions here seek to address Unit Committees under Ghana's decentralization programme created to perform the functions of: supervising the staff of the District Assembly in performing duties in its area of authority; assisting the Assembly in revenue collection; organizing communal labour and voluntary work; educating people of their rights, privileges, obligations and responsibilities; providing focal points for discussion of local matters and make recommendations to the Assembly; monitoring the implementation of self help and development projects; assist in enumerating and keeping records of all taxable persons and properties; and in making proposals to the Assembly regarding levying and collection of rates for projects and programmes (ILGS, 2010).

Hence, are the unit committees in Ghana able to perform these functions effectively to merit their continued existence? a question that leads to other sub-questions, such as: (Constitution) to what extent are unit committees able to perform their functions as prescribed in the local government Act 1993 (Act 462) effectively?; (Constitution) what are some of the underpinning circumstances that inhibit the performance of unit committees at the grassroots level?;

(3) how effectively can unit committees be deployed to ensure effective participation at the grassroots level?, and (5), what can be done at the policy and administrative fronts to ensure the effectiveness of unit committees under Ghana's decentralization programme?

Legal Framework

Ghana's current programme of decentralization was initiated prior to the national democratic transition in the early 1990s. In 1988, the PNDC government introduced a major piece of legislative reform, the Local Government Law (Dotse, 1990). This created 110 designated districts within Ghana's ten regions, with non-partisan District Assembly (DA) elections held initially in 1988-1989 and subsequently every four years (1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010, and 2015). There was a delay in the last District Assembly Elections due to some legal challenges. In addition to the two-thirds of DA members elected on an individual, non-party basis, one-third were appointed by the central government, along with a chief executive for each district (Pinkney, 1997). The stated aim of the 1988 Local Government Law was "to promote popular participation and ownership of the machinery of government... by devolving power, competence and resource/means to the district level" (Map Consult, 2002:35). Interestingly, the language of 'participation' and 'ownership' anticipated the 'donor speak' of the 1990s, though it also had some resonance with the revolutionary rhetoric of popular participation of the earlier PNDC period. Oquaye (2001) suggests that this decentralization exercise was "largely introduced to satisfy donor demands", but Ayee, (1994) imputes different, self-serving motives. In his view, the real reason for the PNDC's decentralization policy was an attempt to increase their legitimacy and simultaneously to rid themselves of political problems.

Constitutional Provisions

The 1992 Constitution, which marked the transition to multi-party democracy at the national level, endorsed the 1988 reforms. It consolidated the aim of decentralization within the overall context of a liberal democratic constitution, yet essential democratic elements remained compromised, especially through the retention of presidential appointments. Non-partisan local elections, which has been the procedure for recruitment to Ghana's local government institutions has come under severe debate in recent discourse on decentralization, particularly of devolution in Ghana. While some think that there is still universal adult suffrage, and hence democratic enough, others think that the constitution should be amended to allow political parties to present candidates for elections into the District Assemblies. The objective of decentralization, however, was laid out unambiguously in Chapter 20, entitled 'Decentralization and Local Government' which state that "Local government and administration ... shall ... be decentralized" (Article 240[1]), and that the "functions, powers, responsibilities and resources should be transferred from the Central Government to local government units" (Article 240[2]).

The autonomous role of local government with discretionary powers at the local level, was inferred by the provision that:

“measures should be taken [by Parliament] to enhance the capacity of local government authorities to plan, initiate, co-ordinate, manage and execute policies in respect of matters affecting local people” (Article 240[2][b]); and the principles of participation in local government and downward accountability to the populace is emphasized to ensure the accountability of local government authorities. People in particular local government areas shall, as far as practicable, be afforded the opportunity to participate effectively in their governance” Article 240[2][e].

Indeed, the democratic intent in the decentralization provisions were made explicit in the 1992 Constitution which states that,

“the state shall take appropriate measures 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 national life and in government” Article 35[6][d]).

This is somewhat contradicted, however, by the retention from the PNDC 1988 reforms of non-partisan local elections and presidential powers of appointment. Thus, District Assemblies are composed of 70 per cent elected members, with candidates standing as individuals and political parties banned, and 30 per cent of members appointed by the President, formally “in consultation with traditional authorities and other interest groups in the district” (Article 242[d]). Additionally, the appointment of the Metropolitan, Municipal and District Chief Executive (MMDCE) by the President was retained, though with the approval needed of two-thirds of District Assembly members (Article 243[1]). The MMDCE is the political head of the local administration, centrally involved in decision-making, with a District Co-ordinating Director (DCD) as the highest ranking civil servant.

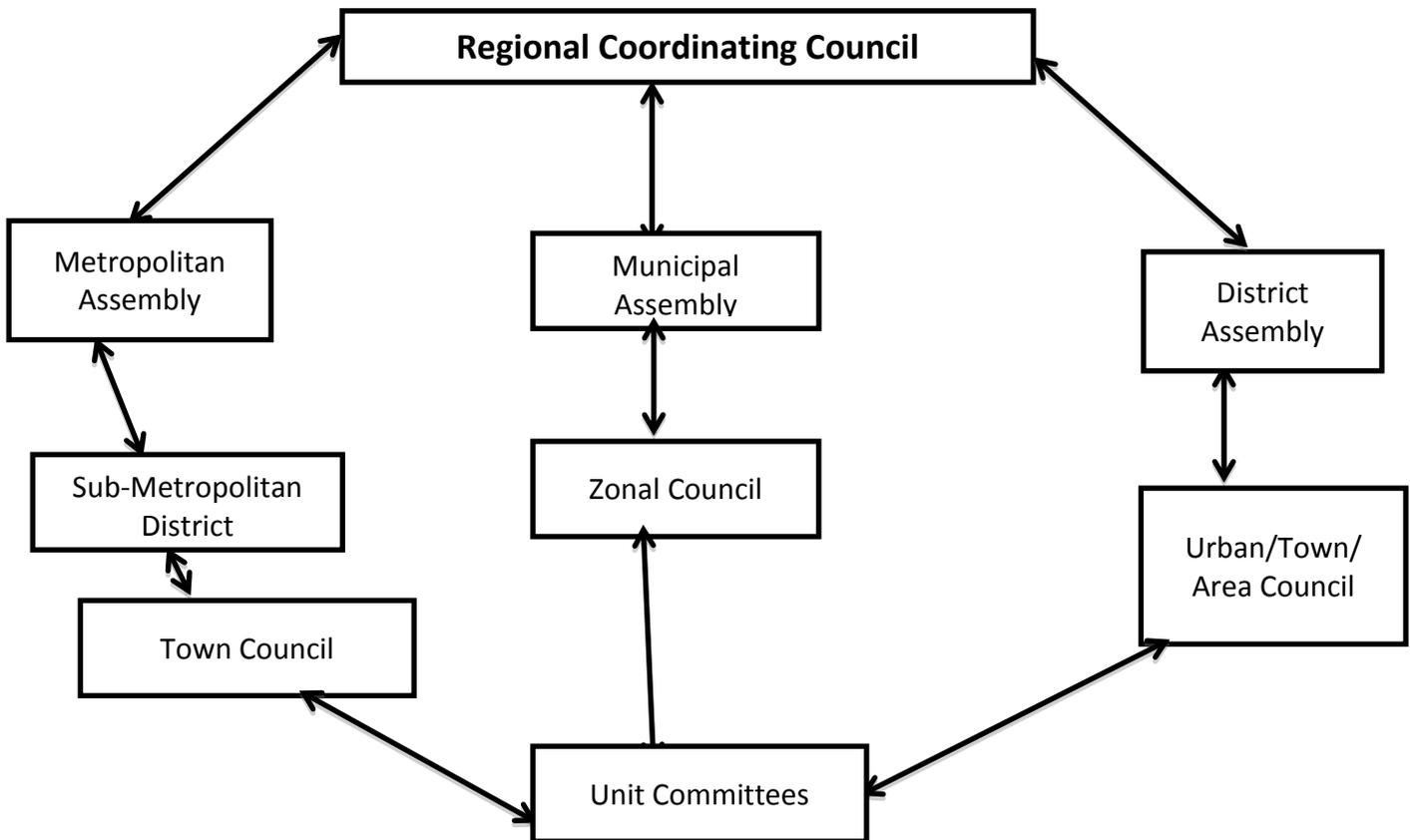
As regards the financing of local government, the Constitution makes clear that the DAs “should have sound financial bases with adequate and reliable sources of revenue” [Article 240(Constitution)], with an attempt to secure this through the establishment of the District Assembly Common Fund (DACF). This is determined annually by Parliament, but with allocations “not less than five per cent of the total revenues of Ghana” [Article 252(Constitution)]. The proceeds of the DACF are then allocated between DAs on the basis of a revenue sharing formula approved by Parliament.

Sub-National Government Structures

A three-tier structure of sub-national government was created by the 1992 Constitution (or Local Government Act of 1993) at regional, district and sub-district levels. This comprises Regional Co-ordinating Councils (10), District Assemblies originally (110), but now 216 with the creation of additional 28 districts in 2006, 32 created with some upgrades to municipal assemblies in 2008 and 46 new districts created in June 2012.

The others are urban, zonal, town and area councils (1300), plus unit committees (16,000) (Nkrumah 2000). It is important to note that Ghana's decentralization programme also has a four-tier metropolitan and a three-tier municipal/District Assembly structure. The District Assembly remains the key institution, however, and its role is discussed next after the Regional Coordinating Council (RCC). Additionally, the national level institutions responsible for operationalizing decentralization are briefly outlined.

Structure and Composition of Ghana's Local Government System



Source: (LGS, 2014)

The Regional Coordinating Councils represent the highest level of Local Government in Ghana and are established in each of the 10 regions of the country (Thomi, Yankson, & Zanu, 2000). The RCC consists of the Regional Minister, his deputies, the Presiding Member of each District Assembly, and the Chief Executive of each district in the region, as well as two chiefs from the regional house of chiefs and the regional heads of decentralised departments, who have no voting rights (Local Government Act 462 of 1993).

Below the Regional Coordinating Council is the District Assembly, variously called the Metropolitan, Municipal or District Assemblies. The Local Government Act of 1993, Act 462 empowers district assemblies in Ghana as the fulcrum of local governance. On the basis of demographic conditions and settlement characteristics, local authorities are distinguished between Metropolitan, Municipal or District Assemblies.

The Sub-district structures constitute the last tier of Ghana's Local Government system. Thomi et al. (2000) describe these structures as subordinate bodies of the District Assemblies. They are constituted by the Sub-metropolitan District Councils, Urban or Town or Zonal or Area Councils, and Unit Committees. The components of the Sub-district structures as discussed by Act 462, thus: the Sub-metropolitan District Councils are structures immediately below the Metropolitan Assemblies, their conception is based on the principle of subsidiarity and in recognition of the large size of the metropolitan local authorities that enables the city administrators to become more effective. Also, the Sub-metropolitan Councils, which are divided into electoral areas, consist of not less than 25 and not more than 30 members, made up of all elected members of the Assembly in that Sub-metropolitan District, and as such, other persons resident in the Sub-metropolitan District are appointed by the President.

Next, Urban Councils were created for settlements with populations above 15,000 that consist of not less than 25 and not more than 30 members made up of not more than 8 persons elected from among the members of the relevant DA. Hence, not more than 12 representatives from the Unit Committee in the area of authority of the Urban Council and not more than 10 persons ordinarily resident in the urban area. Thomi et al. (2000) put forward that such settlements are usually cosmopolitan in character, with urbanization and management problems, though not of the same scale associated with the metropolis. And worth noting, the problem with this nomenclature is that it blurs the lines in defining what is urban and what is not.

Continuing, Zonal Councils were established for settlements with population of 3,000. Thomi et al. (2000) adds that they are based on the Electoral Commission's criteria of commonality of interest which include population of 3,000 and identifiable streets, landmarks, as boundaries that consists of not less than 15 and not more than 20 members made up of not more than 5 persons elected from among the members of the relevant Municipal Assembly, yet, not more than 10 representatives from the Unit Committees and not more than 5 persons ordinarily resident in the zone (Thomi et al., 2000).

In the District Assemblies, Town Councils are established for settlements with populations between 5,000 and 15,000, and Area Councils exist for a number of settlements or villages which are grouped together but whose individual settlements have populations of less than 5,000 that cover areas with predominantly rural populations and in some cases can be identified with spheres of influence of a particular traditional authority. They are essentially rallying points of local enthusiasm in support of a new Local Government system.

And last, the Unit Committees are at the lowest level and form the basic unit of the Local Government structure, hence, normally a settlement or a group of settlements with a population between 500 and 1,000 in the rural areas and a higher population (1,500) for the urban areas. Unit Committees play important roles for enforcement and mobilization matters since they are closer to the people, and in theory, they provide structured mechanisms of representation, participation and accountability from village levels upwards (Thomi et al., 2000). Thus, the Unit Committee consists of not more than 15 persons made up of 10 elected persons ordinarily resident in the unit and not more than 5 other persons resident in the unit, nominated by the District Chief Executive, acting on behalf of the President.

Literature Review

Decentralization has become an increasingly widespread and significant aspect of political and administrative reform of many developing countries since the late 1980s. Some of the countries that are known in Africa for their decentralization programmes apart from Ghana, include South Africa, Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and Nigeria (Bahru & Pausewang, 2002; Saito, 2000; Stewart, Klugman, & Helmsing, 1994). As already explained, decentralization in Ghana dates as far back as the period of the introduction of the indirect rule system in 1878 until 1951 (J. Ayee, 2000). The nature of decentralization during this period depicted the situation where the colonial authority ruled through the traditional authorities and this was similar if not the same in many West African countries that came under the indirect rule system and other African countries that once experienced colonial rule.

In the post independence era, however, i.e. from 1957 onwards, local government was subject to the centralization of power which was typical of the post colonial state in Ghana and Africa for that matter (Tordoff, 2002). The dynamic for post-Apartheid South Africa in terms of strong central control of local government was not different (Times, 2015). However, the structure of these decentralization programmes appears dissimilar. For the South African model, which is said to be the most robust in Africa, has a three-tier made up of the National government, the provincial government and local government. The Ugandan model which is said to be next after South Africa in terms of robustness and success has the village councils at the lowest of its structure (Agencies, 2011). A survey of decentralization programmes in Europe also shows the apparent absence a model typical of the unit committee model as practiced in Ghana (Agencies, 2011). The Unit committee model, thus, does not appear to be a consistent feature of decentralization across other jurisdictions.

The unit committee model as practiced in Ghana is undoubtedly robust with a wide range of functions which if deployed effectively, would not only ensure effective grassroots participation in local government, but can help as a medium of community empowerment and its revenue mobilization function could help ameliorate the financial bottlenecks of district assemblies within their jurisdictions. The importance of the model therefore, to the success of Ghana's decentralization, democracy and development cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, Aye (2000) has noted that Ghana cannot move forward without decentralization and also without the effective participation of traditional authorities and people of the grassroots for that matter. However, for decentralization to work effectively it must be functioning well at every structural level and since Ghana's decentralization is a four-tier Metropolitan and a three tier municipal/District Assembly structure, effectiveness at every tier and unit committee level, which is expected to mobilize local support, is key.

The Principal-Agent Dilemma

During the 1960s and early 1970s, economists explored risk sharing among individuals or groups (Arrow, 1974; Wilson, 1968). This literature described the risk-sharing problem as one that arises when cooperating parties have different attitudes toward risk. Agency theory broadened this risk-sharing literature to include the so-called agency problem that occurs when cooperating parties have different goals and division of labour (Jensen & Meckling, 1979; Ross, 2000).

Agency theory, also known as the principal agent or principal agency theory/model describes the relationship between two or more parties, in which one party, designated as the principal, engages another party, designated as the agent, to perform some task on behalf of the principal (Day & Wendler, 1998; Jensen & Meckling, 1979; Moe, 1984; Ross, 2000).

The theory assumes that once principals delegate authority to agents, they often have problems controlling them, because agents' goals often differ from their own, and because agents often have better information about their capacity and activities than do principals. Agency theory focuses on the ways principals try to mitigate this control problem by selecting certain types of agents and certain forms of monitoring their actions, and by economic incentives (Kiser, 1999).

The strengths of the agency theory is seen in situations where there is informational asymmetries and goal conflicts. Both of these conditions appear to be relevant to the examination of the relationship between community members at the local government level and unit committees who are constituted to serve as the link between the communities and Metropolitan, Municipal or District Assemblies (MMDAs). The agency problem offers a rich variety of insights on issues that are related to established agency relationships and it allows the conceptualizing and operationalizing of possible forms of unit committees opportunism.

In addition, the agency theory can cause attention to be focused on the productivity effects of opportunistic behavior by offering alternative explanations for non-performance of unit committees under Ghana's decentralization programme.

Agency theory, like all other theories has its weaknesses and some of these weaknesses are relevant in the context of unit committee analysis under Ghana's decentralization programme. Agency theory has been criticized mostly because of the behavioural assumptions it makes concerning human motivation and behaviour. The critics of agency theory argue that the theory presents too narrow a model of human motivation and that it makes unnecessary negative and cynical moral evaluations about people. According to critics, focusing on self-interested and opportunistic behaviour makes it possible to ignore a wider range of human motives, including altruism, trust, respect and intrinsic motivation of an inherently satisfying task. This criticism also has validity when agency theory is utilized for analyzing the unit committee model.

Method and Material

The data gathered for this paper combines unstructured and panel interviews with documentary analysis of secondary data. Interviews (Unstructured) are deemed appropriate because the research aims to provide participants (officers of the District Assembly, Unit committee members, Assembly Members and Community members) the opportunity to express their views freely on the unit committee model as this would be more informative for an in-depth understanding of the effectiveness of the model in Ghana's decentralization programme. In all, participants including some officers of the District Assembly (DA) assemblymen, unit committee members (UCM) and community members (CM) were interviewed in randomly chosen electoral areas in the Eastern Region.

The electoral areas were randomly chosen to see if the views were representative of the general situation in the electoral areas in that region. Purposive sampling technique was however used to select assembly members and unit committee members. The purposive sampling technique helped us identify specific assembly members as well as unit committee members who could provide relevant information about the workings and effectiveness of the unit committee model. The following was the distribution of respondents.

Electoral Area/Community	Number of Interviewees
Afiduase	1 Assemblyman, two unit committee members & 10 community members (one-on-one in-depth Interview).
Adweso Estate	1 Assemblyman, 3 unit committee members & 5 community members (One-on-one in-depth Interview).
New Juabeng	One Panel interview (1 UCM, 2 officers of the DA & 4 Community Members)
Akwadum	1 in-depth interview and one Panel Interview (2 UCMs, 1 officer of the DA & 3 Community members)

Documentary analysis helped to clarify some of the issues that were raised in the interviews and also supplement the information from the interviews. Information obtained from these sources provided insight into Ghana's decentralization programme but specifically on the workings of the unit committee model in the Eastern region. Selected books in the area of Ghana's decentralization were reviewed to provide an in-depth understanding of the workings of Ghana's unit committee model under its decentralization programme and its implications for grassroots participation in local development.

Findings

The empirical investigations conducted through unstructured interviews came out with the findings listed below.

Research Question (RQ)

RQ1: Are the unit committees in the Eastern Region able to perform these functions effectively to merit their continued existence?

Evidence from the purposive interviews suggests that unit committees in the study area are not able to perform their lawfully mandated duties successfully. The Assembly member of Afiduase in the Eastern Region had this to say; in terms of revenue collection, it is the unit committees that are supposed to assist the assembly for revenue collection at their electoral area. But the reality is that sometimes the district assembly is engaged in revenue mobilization activities that neither the assembly member nor the unit committee members are aware of. So in terms of revenue collection, the unit committees are not doing anything much.

There are many things prescribed on paper for the unit committees to do, but in practice, it is not being done. There was also no good working relationship between the assembly member and the unit committee members. I am not sure if there is a unit committee in Ghana today that is working since the district assembly elections; yet, the unit committees have still not been inaugurated to date (In-depth one-on-one Interview).

RQ2: To what extent are the unit committees able to perform their functions as prescribed in the local government Act 1993 (Act 462) effectively?

Some unit committee members do not seem to have a full appreciation of their functions and this works against their effectiveness. According to an assembly member;

I remember a small workshop was organized for the previous unit committee after which they were inaugurated, but since this unit committee was elected, there has been no workshop or any programme to educate members on their functions. So since I have been working with the assembly and knowing what some of their duties are, I took it upon myself to meet the five members of the unit committee in my electoral area and then I took them through what is required of them as unit committee members. Therefore, as an individual, I have been able to do that for the unit committee members in my electoral area. But those assembly members who do not have the same capacity to do that for their unit committee members, I do not believe since the elections to date even the assembly or anybody else has called them or mentioned them for anything. On that basis, I think the unit committee is not functioning well at the moment (In-depth one-on-one interview).

RQ3: What are some of the underpinning circumstances that inhibit the performance of unit committees at the grassroots level?

This question was asked in order to unearth some of the challenges that hinder the work of the unit committees at the grassroots. The picture was clear from the panel and one-on-one interviews but this is how one assembly member captured it, thus;

The biggest challenge is lack of motivation. Even if they (Unit Committees) want to organize communal labour, the tools to do that are not there. If unit committees want to mobilize people, they would need to make announcements and often, they would have to sponsor those announcements with their own resources because there are no funds coming from anywhere.

So some have suggested that an electoral area common fund just like the DACF be created for annual disbursements so that the assembly member and unit committee members can carry out their functions (In-depth one-on-one Interview).

RQ4: How effectively can unit committees be deployed to ensure effective participation at the grassroots level?

This question was asked in order to find out what can be done to motivate unit committee members to discharge their functions satisfactorily. It was evident through the interviews that they are not paid workers yet they are required to carry out their duties. This is because they do not get paid for the work they do. According to one assemblyman; “although the assembly members are not paid, they only get sitting allowances, which is Ghc 100 no matter how many number of hours the meeting lasts. Only Unit committee members who are at the zonal council get some sitting allowance which is only Ghc 50”.

RQ5. What can be done at the policy and administrative fronts to ensure the effectiveness of unit committees under Ghana’s decentralization programme?

This question was asked to enable respondents make suggestions in the policy arena towards improvement of the work of unit committee members. According to one Assemblyman;

Government should come out with a policy document that would make provision for some allowances even if quarterly to unit committee members to enable them carry out their functions. There should also be a provision for a means of transport such as bicycles for unit committee members to enable them travel around the electoral area to attend to the needs of the community members. That is what I am proposing. Unit Committee members should also be paid just like the presiding members and the Municipal Chief Executive/ District Chief Executive as an encouragement for the work they do (In-depth one-on-one Interview).

The Unit Committee Model and Ghana’s Decentralization Programme

The importance of the unit committee model to ensuring effective grassroots participation and ultimately, to realize the objectives of decentralization in Ghana cannot be overemphasized. The role of the district assembly of providing structured mechanisms of representation, participation and accountability from village levels upwards (Thomi et al., 2000), cannot be realized without the effective deployment and workings of the unit committees at the grassroots level.

The unit committee members visit the electoral area to find out what issues are there to be addressed, and reports to the assembly person who then reports to the assembly or the Municipal Chief Executive. They also prepare the grounds for every meeting in the electoral area. When it comes to communal labour, it is these five unit committee members that I work with who organize it and they are prompt and hardworking. So the unit committee members are those who assist the assembly person to effectively carry out his work at the electoral area. What they need is motivation because it becomes difficult for them to work effectively because they are not paid (In-depth interview).

A community member at Akwadum observed that lack of education is also affecting the work of some unit committee members. According to him; somebody who don't have much education background don't have much knowledge that would help bring out the policies that would help the community. So I think education is part of their problem. If they had competent people who would come out with policies that would help the community, that one too would be very good.

The unit committee model, thus, provides an amazing opportunity for interests articulation at the grassroots, effective grassroots participation in revenue mobilization to deal with the issue of inadequate revenue base that constantly cripple the activities of local government at the MMDAs. However, closer examination of the activities of the unit committees at the grassroots as evidenced in the findings, presents a number of paradoxical perspectives of a model that is so well designed and well purposed and intentioned, yet so poorly utilized and deplored for local government administration. The functions of unit committees as spelled out in the local government Act 1993, (Act 462), thus, to supervise the staff of the District assembly in performing duties in its area of authority as explained elsewhere in this paper are elaborate enough to ensure a well functioning local government system that will deliver development to its people. There is no gainsaying however, that grassroots participation in local government as revealed in the study is virtually non-existent. Effective mobilization and participation for communal labour for example would have yielded dividends to dealing with the filth and by extension, its health implications in the communities. Again, the chronic lack of adequate financial resources for development in the areas of transportation, road infrastructure, development of education and the health delivery system, to mention only few, could have been remedied if unit committees were effectively engaged in the identification of revenue opportunities and actual involvement in the planning process for revenue collection as well as ensuring that there is proper accountability from revenue collectors and administrators. The relationship between unit committees and other stakeholders at the MMDAs is crucial in the developmental puzzle at the local government level.

To be effective, these other stakeholders, who include the Municipal Chief Executive or the District Chief Executive, the assembly members, traditional authorities and the members of the various communities should reflect cordiality and cooperation with mutual recognition of the roles that each of them plays or at least mandated to play in the development effort of local government. If their role of educating the people on their rights, privileges, obligations and responsibilities is effectively carried out, people within these communities would be able to demand from their representatives what is due them and this could engender checks and balances that may inure to the benefit of these communities and by extension, ensure effectiveness in local government. While the unit committee model presents enormous opportunity for the success of Ghana's decentralization programme, it is equally bedeviled by so numerous challenges that render it ineffective, and hence, local government's inability to deliver development to the people as evidenced in Ghana since 1988.

An assembly member at New Juaben in the Eastern Region noted, “since unit committee elections were conducted over a year ago, there has been no inauguration of unit committees, so I do not know if there are unit committees in Ghana... there is also no motivation for the work they do.” This encapsulates the state of unit committees in the Eastern Region and their role to fulfilling the objectives of decentralization in Ghana.

Unit Committees and Grassroots Representation: Participation and Accountability

Ghana’s decentralization programme is based on the realization of the key indicators of representation, participation, and accountability (Ayee, 1996). Any literature on decentralization would talk about some combination of participation, accountability, representation, efficiency, development and democratization. Decentralization in South Africa for example, aims to achieve democracy, efficiency and development (Wittenberg, 2003), with the issue of accountability silently embedded. The Ugandan decentralization programme, like many others, emphasizes accountability (Saito, 2000). In Ghana, the Unit committee model has an enormous opportunity through its prescribed functions for providing opportunities for representation at the grassroots, ensuring that government is held accountable by educating the community members on their rights and privileges, as well as providing avenues for grassroots participation in local governance. Unfortunately, the unit committee model has not been able to shine in this direction. A statement by Okatakya Amanfi VII, Omanhene of the Asebu Traditional Council and Vice President of the Central Regional House of Chiefs, called for the abolition of the Unit Committee model, saying the abolition was necessary because the committees were “impotent, ineffective and irrelevant” and did not achieve the goals for which they were formed (Times, 2015).

Similar calls have been made by many other personalities including the Deputy Northern Regional Minister (Modernghana.com,) and the District Chief Executive of Ashaiman (the chronicle.com.gh) calling for strengthening of local councils and unit committees and asking them to take their roles seriously among others. All the stakeholders who were interviewed shared their views widely including some of the many challenges that render unit committees ineffective in providing effective representation and galvanizing people in their electoral areas for community work and also for participation in other activities for community development. For example, one Assembly member said “... since this unit committee was elected, there has been no workshop or any programme to educate members on their functions...”. This points to the fact that the unit committee model need to be given the necessary training and education on their functions to make them more effective. Some of these views are corroborated by the interviews that were conducted.

While some assembly members and unit committee members underscored the fact that unit committees face a number of challenges, such as low motivation in terms of remuneration, logistics for effective delivery of their functions, relationship challenges with some assembly members and the district assembly itself that render their work ineffective, they mentioned some activities they have been carrying out nonetheless such as organizing community talk on health and mobilizing community members for communal work. It was however discovered that some of the unit community members as well as community members did not have a full appreciation of the range of their functions. For example, a unit committee member said that “unit committees have no revenue collection roles”, which appears contrary to their functions spelled out in the local government Act 1993 (Act 462). Therefore, in terms of representation, participation and accountability, Ghana’s unit committee model need to be relooked with the sole aim of empowering members to effectively perform their functions as stipulated in the local government Act 1993 (Act 462), the fulfillment of which would vicariously satisfy conditions for representation and participation as well as enabling community members to hold government and local government officers accountable for their policies and programmes to the communities at the grassroots.

The Unit Committee Model: Way Forward

The question of whether Ghana’s decentralization programme still needs the unit committees to fulfill its grassroots mobilization for development objective remains a thorny one that requires deep assessment of the effectiveness of unit committees in the development objective of local government. Thus, the intent and appropriateness of the idea of decentralization and the unit committee model for harnessing grassroots potential for local development still remains integral aspect for the success of local government in Ghana.

In the face of palpable inabilities in the implementation of the model, government commitment towards strengthening the unit committees by including their salaries and emoluments in the national budgets at least at the initial stages of the creation of districts would be just one important milestone in the drive towards building a model whose members would be committed to their work. Effective monitoring and supervision is another measure that would ensure local level commitment to objectives toward fulfilling the development objective of local government. However, interacting with interviewees especially unit committee members and community members reveals a non-performing model whose members exist in many cases not beyond the nomenclature. To enhance the performance of unit committees, the model has to be given a certain level of recognition from central government that would enable it attract a certain caliber of people to contest unit committee elections. This together with relevant workshops and refresher courses would go a long way to address the human power issues that bedevil the model.

It would also be worthwhile educating community members on the functions of unit committees and how they can be held accountable for the work they do. Streamlining their functions through education and their relationship with assembly members and the district assemblies, emphasizing their collegiality and distinctive roles towards the achievement of the purpose of decentralization and not to be seen as competitors, is necessary for the effective functioning of the unit committee model and decentralization as a whole as these issues appeared frequently during the interviews.

Conclusion

This paper began by asking certain fundamental questions, which underpinned the discussion of the assessment of unit committee model in the Eastern Region under Ghana's decentralization programme. The key question, which the study sort to find answers to is whether the unit committees are able to perform their functions effectively as specified in the local government Act 1993 (Act 462) under Ghana's decentralization programme. Then interviews were conducted and also an extensive documentary analysis was made in an effort to find answers to this key question and the other sub-questions. It became clear that even though units committees are a strategic aspect of the decentralization programme, they are incapacitated in many ways when it comes to effective performance of their functions. Palpable challenges such as non-remuneration of unit committee members, lack of recognition, inadequate, weak or poor human resource personnel, lack of resources for community mobilization, relationship challenges among the unit committee members and assembly members, on the one hand, and between unit committee and their district assembly on the other, lack of understanding of functions due to lack of education and training on their duties and responsibilities, among many others.

Policy Recommendations

In order to make unit committees more effective to be able to perform their functions leading to the realization of the decentralization programme in the Eastern Region, there is the need for relevant refresher courses on their functions as well as human resource empowerment workshops while including the remuneration of unit committee members and other budgetary needs on the national budget and provision of logistics to serve as key motivators to enhance their work. On the broader picture of decentralization and unit committee performance at the local level, there is the need for a rethink of the unit committee model through a broader stakeholder consultation aimed at the effective and best ways of deploying the model including a streamlining of the roles of unit committee members, assembly members and the district assembly alike, to avoid competition and conflict, on the one hand, and provide machinery for motivation of these personnel on the other.

References

- Agencies, A. O. L. D. (2011). Decentralization and Local Governance in South Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus. *Council of Europe*, 01-52.
- Arrow, K. J. (1974). Essays in the theory of risk-bearing.
- Ayee, J. (2000). Decentralization and good governance in Ghana. *Unpublished paper of May*.
- Ayee, J. R. (1994a). An anatomy of public policy implementation. *The case of decentralisation policies in Ghana. Aldershot: Avebury*.
- Ayee, J. R. (1994b). *An anatomy of public policy implementation: The case of decentralization policies in Ghana: Avebury*.
- Ayee, J. R. (1996). The measurement of decentralization: the Ghanaian experience, 1988-92. *African Affairs*, 31-50.
- Bahru, Z., & Pausewang, S. (2002). *Ethiopia: the challenge of democracy from below*.
- Constitution. (1992). *Constitution of the Republic of Ghana*.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*: Sage publications.
- Day, J. D., & Wendler, J. C. (1998). The new economics of organization. *The McKinsey Quarterly*(1), 4.
- Dotse, M. (1990). *PNDC Law 207: Institutional Constraints to Implementation*. Paper presented at the Ghana's Local Government Law: Issues of Implementation. A Report on the 4th Annual Workshop on Decentralization in Ghana. Legon: School of Administration, University of Ghana.
- ILGS. (2010). A Guide to District Assemblies in Ghana. 29(3-4), 465-481.
- Jensen, M. C., & Meckling, W. H. (1979). Theory of the firm: Managerial behavior, agency costs, and ownership structure *Economics Social Institutions* (pp. 163-231): Springer.
- Kiser, E. (1999). Comparing varieties of agency theory in economics, political science, and sociology: An illustration from state policy implementation. *Sociological Theory*, 17(2), 146-170.

- LGS. (2014). *Service Delivery Standards for Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs)*.
- Moe, T. M. (1984). The new economics of organization. *American Journal of Political Science*, 739-777.
- Oquaye, M. (2001). *Government and politics in contemporary Ghana (1992-1999): a study* (Vol. 1): African Governance Institute.
- Pinkney, R. (1997). *Democracy and dictatorship in Ghana and Tanzania*: Macmillan.
- Ross, S. A. (2000). The Economic Theory of Agency: The Principals Problem. *The Theory of the Firm: Critical Perspectives on Business and Management*, 2, 81.
- Saito, F. (2000). Decentralization in Uganda: Towards a positive-sum solution. *Ryukoku University, Japan*. Available at www.world.ryukoku.ac.jp/~fumisait/en/publication.html.
- Stewart, F., Klugman, J., & Helmsing, A. (1994). Decentralization in Zimbabwe. *UNDP Human Development Report Office Paper* (15).
- Thomi, W., Yankson, P., & Zanu, S. (2000). A decade of decentralization in Ghana: retrospect and prospects. *Accra: Endogenous Potential and Decentralisation Research Project/Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development*.
- Times, T. G. (2015). : Africa <http://www.ghanaiantimes.com.gh/abolish-unit-committees/-25-11-2014>
- Tordoff, W. (2002). *Government and politics in Africa*: Indiana University Press.
- Wilson, R. (1968). The theory of syndicates. *Econometrica: journal of the Econometric Society*, 119-132.
- Wittenberg, M. (2003). *Decentralisation in South Africa*: Econometric Research Southern Africa.

Interviews

1. Assemblyman, Adweso Estate
2. Assemblyman, Afeduase
3. Eight (8) Unit committee members
4. Twenty two (22) Community members
5. One (1) District Assembly Officer