

Position Paper on Political Decentralisation in Ghana.

1. Introduction

Political decentralisation is a governance strategy that seeks to transfer political power, authority, and decision-making responsibilities from the central government to local government units. In Ghana, political decentralisation has been a key element of public sector reform aimed at promoting grassroots participation, improving public service delivery, and ensuring equitable development. The system is anchored in the 1992 Constitution and further detailed in the Local Governance Act, 2016 (Act 936), which mandates the establishment of a decentralised local government structure.

2. Brief History: From Centralisation to Decentralisation

Historically, Ghana operated a centralised governance system where decisions were made at the national level and imposed on localities with little or no input from citizens. The local government system during colonial times and in the early post-independence era was largely ceremonial and underfunded. The turning point came in 1988 with the implementation of the Local Government Law (PNDCL 207), which laid the groundwork for the modern system of decentralised governance. The 1992 Constitution further entrenched this by establishing the District Assemblies as the highest political authority at the local level. Over the years, successive governments have reaffirmed their commitment to decentralisation through various policy reforms and capacity-building initiatives.

3. Where we were and where we are now

Ghana's political decentralisation journey has seen substantial progress in institutional development. Initially, District Assemblies served more as administrative extensions of the central government. Today, there are 261 MMDAs, each with elected assembly members, a presiding member, and a District Chief Executive (DCE) appointed by the President. However, true political autonomy remains limited. Local governments often rely on centrally appointed officials, and key decisions such as budgeting and personnel deployment are heavily influenced by national-level ministries. Additionally, local elections for assembly members often attract low voter turnout, indicating apathy or limited understanding of local governance's significance.

4. Has Ghana's Political Decentralisation served its purpose?

To a certain extent, political decentralisation has enhanced public participation in local governance and improved awareness of democratic principles. It has also brought governance closer to the people, allowing for more context-specific development planning. However, the overarching objective of empowering local governments to be self-reliant and responsive to citizens' needs has not been fully realised. The continued central control over appointments and budget allocations undermines the authority of local assemblies. Moreover, political interference and lack of transparency continue to affect the credibility of the decentralisation process.

5. Challenges and lessons learned

Several persistent challenges hinder the effectiveness of political decentralisation in Ghana:

- **Central appointments:** The appointment of MMDCEs by the President, subject to approval by the local assembly, creates a situation where local executives may owe allegiance more to the central government than to the local population.
- **Limited fiscal autonomy:** The District Assemblies Common Fund (DACF), the main source of funding for MMDAs, is often delayed and insufficient. This affects timely implementation of development projects.
- **Human resource gaps:** Many districts lack qualified staff and resources to effectively manage public services and development projects.
- **Low civic engagement:** Public participation in local elections and development planning is generally low, often due to limited civic education and public trust.
- **Overlapping responsibilities:** There is often confusion between the roles of traditional authorities, local governments, and regional administrations, leading to inefficiency and conflict.

Lessons learned indicate the need for a more coherent decentralisation policy, better alignment between political and administrative decentralisation, and stronger institutional accountability mechanisms.

6. Reforms needed

A number of reforms are necessary to strengthen political decentralisation in Ghana:

- **Elect MMDCEs:** Amending the Constitution to allow for the direct election of MMDCEs on non political line will improve accountability and deepen democratic governance.
- **Enhance fiscal decentralisation:** Increasing and regularising the disbursement of the DACF, coupled with improved local revenue generation strategies, will empower districts to finance their own development.
- **Capacity building:** Investing in training and logistics for local government staff will enhance institutional efficiency and service delivery.
- **Strengthen civic education:** The National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) must be resourced to educate citizens on the importance of local governance and how to actively participate in it.
- **Clarify roles and responsibilities:** Legislative and policy reforms should clearly delineate the roles of local governments, traditional authorities, and central agencies to avoid duplication and conflict.

7. Conclusion

Political decentralisation remains a cornerstone of Ghana's democratic governance and development strategy. While commendable progress has been made, the current framework is still heavily centralised in practice. For decentralisation to achieve its intended outcomes, reforms must be undertaken to grant greater autonomy to local governments, ensure adequate resourcing, and empower citizens to play an active role in decision-making. A truly decentralised

system will not only foster good governance but also ensure equitable and sustainable development across the country.

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