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**POPULAR OPINIONS ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN GHANA, 2008**

**Introduction**

Ghana embarked on a comprehensive program of local government decentralization in the late 1980s. The program launched by the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) represents the most comprehensive effort at decentralization in the country's post-colonial era. Proposals launched in 1987 culminated in the introduction of the District Assemblies Law (PNDC Law 207) in 1988. Its provisions for the structure and functions of the District Assemblies (DAs) were subsequently incorporated into the 1992 Republican Constitution.

The main features of the new system of decentralized local government include the Municipal/Metropolitan/District Assemblies (MMDAs) currently numbering 168 and their various substructures (such as sub-metropolitan district councils and unit committees) as the main units of local government, and election on a no-party basis of 70 percent of MMDA membership alongside appointment (by government) of the remaining 30 percent every four years. A government-appointed Metropolitan, Municipal or District Chief Executive (MM/DCE) is the political head and chief representative of the government in the district. The MMDAs derive their revenues from the District Assembly Common Fund (established under the 1992 Constitution, representing not less than 5 percent of annual national revenue and shared among the MMDAs according to a formula devised by cabinet and approved by parliament), ceded revenue (such as taxes from gambling, betting, casinos, advertisement, entertainment duty etc), donor funding (especially micro-finance), and other sources.

After nearly two decades of decentralization reforms, what are the opinions of Ghanaians about local government authority? In this paper, we use Afrobarometer Round 4 data from Ghana to explore for answers to the following set of questions:

1. Do popular understandings of the public service delivery responsibilities of local government authorities converge with the statutory ones?
2. How do Ghanaians rate local government authorities in the performance of their statutory public service responsibilities?
3. What do Ghanaians think about the transparency, accountability and responsiveness of local government bodies and elected representatives?
4. What are the implications, if any, for popular demand for election of MM/D chief executives?

## The Afrobarometer

The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, markets and living conditions. The survey is based on a randomly selected national probability sample of 1,200 respondents representing a cross-section of adult Ghanaians aged 18 years or older, which yields a margin of error of approximately  $\pm 3$  at a 95 percent confidence level. All interviews are conducted face-to-face by trained fieldworkers in the language of the respondent's choice. Fieldwork for Round 4 of the Afrobarometer in Ghana was undertaken between March 4 and 27, 2008. Note that for purposes of cross-national comparison, the questions on the survey will be administered to random national samples in 19 other African countries before the end of 2008; comparative results will be presented in upcoming briefing and working papers from Afrobarometer Round 4.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of sample, Ghana 2008**

	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Percentage/Years</b>
<b>Settlement Location</b>	Urban	45
	Rural	55
<b>Gender</b>	Male	50
	Female	50
<b>Age</b>	Less than 35 years	50
	36 – 55 years	33
	56 years and above	16
	Oldest Respondent	110 years
	Mean Age	39 years
	Median Age	35 years
<b>Education</b>	Primary	37
	Secondary/High School	30
	Tertiary	8
	No Formal Education	25
<b>Religion</b>	Christian	77
	Muslim	16
	Atheist	2
	Traditional	3
<b>Region</b>	Western	10
	Central	9
	Greater Accra	15
	Volta	9
	Eastern	11
	Ashanti	20
	Brong Ahafo	9
	Northern	9
	Upper East	5
Upper West	3	

### **To what extent do Ghanaian understandings of the responsibilities of local authorities correspond with the statutory obligations of the District Assemblies?**

The decentralization reforms shifted a number of responsibilities away from national government to MMDAs. At least on paper, the MMDAs have local authority over 22 central government ministries, departments and agencies such as health, agriculture, education, urban roads, trade and industry, social welfare, community development, etc. Their specific responsibilities cover, among others, the following: formulating and executing plans, programmes and strategies for mobilizing resources needed for the overall development of the district; promoting and supporting productive activities and social development; initiating programmes for the development of basic infrastructure and providing municipal works and services; developing, improving and managing human settlements and the environment; and ensuring security and public safety through the operations of District Security Councils (DISECs) in collaboration with relevant national and local security agencies.<sup>1</sup>

The Afrobarometer survey sets out to ascertain the extent to which popular understandings of local authority responsibilities converge with the statutory ones. It presents respondents with a list of eight tasks, six<sup>2</sup> of which are statutory responsibilities of local government authorities. The respondents are asked, “*who do you think actually has primary responsibility for managing each of the following tasks. Is it the national government, the local government, traditional leaders, or members of your community?*” Fewer than half of Ghanaians correctly hold local government authorities responsible for the six statutory tasks included in the list. In fact, more than half of Ghanaians (57 percent) rather think the central government is responsible for the management of, for example, health clinics. Similarly, majorities of Ghanaians ascribe the responsibility of maintaining of law and order to central government (65 percent) and resolving local disputes to traditional authorities (59 percent) rather than to the DISECs.

Moreover, a majority of Ghanaians (62 percent) thinks it is the responsibility of local people to keep their communities clean, though, in fact, MMDAs bear that statutory responsibility at least in terms of removing solid and liquid waste. Ghanaians seem equally divided on which level of government is responsible for managing schools (central government, 43 percent and local government 41 percent) or protecting rivers and forests (30 percent each for central and local government). Nearly half (49 percent) incorrectly think local government authorities are responsible for collecting income taxes (Table 2). ***Clearly, there is considerable dissonance between Ghanaian understanding of the public service delivery responsibilities of local government authorities and the statutory ones. It appears that popular understandings of local government functions remain steeped in Ghana’s traditions of centralized public administration.***

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<sup>1</sup> See section 10 of the Local Government Act (Act 462) and also *Local Government System in Ghana (2006)*, section 3.

<sup>2</sup> The six tasks fall directly under security and public safety, education, public health, environmental protection and sanitation.

**Table 2: Responsibilities of the local government system (percentages for 2008)**

	Central Government	Local Government	Traditional Leaders	Community Members
Managing health clinics	57	34	2	5
Maintaining law and order	65	17	12	4
Resolving local disputes	12	21	59	5
Keeping community clean	7	22	8	62
Managing schools	43	41	3	11
Protecting rivers and forests	30	30	24	13
Collecting income taxes	39	49	4	3
Allocating land	8	16	69	4

**Question:** Who do you think actually has primary responsibility for managing each of the following tasks. Is it the national government, the local government, traditional leaders, or members of your community?

### How do Ghanaians rate the performance of local government authorities?

More than half of all adult Ghanaians say MMDAs have performed well in keeping communities clean (66 percent), maintaining health standards in public restaurants and food stalls (58 percent), maintaining local roads and local market places (53 percent each) and collecting property rates (51 percent). The only performance rating that fell below the halfway mark is for collecting license fees on bicycles, carts and barrows (48 percent) (Table 3). With the exception of keeping the community clean, remarkable urban-rural differences are noticeable for all other performance variables. In general, large segments of urban population compared to their rural counterparts think the MMDAs have performed well in the discharge of these responsibilities. The urban-rural differences range between a low of 7 percentage points for maintaining local roads to a high of 15 percentage points for collecting rates on privately owned houses.

These positive performance ratings seem to feed directly into approval for elected local representatives' job performance. Close to two-thirds of Ghanaians (63 percent) – compared to 57 percent for MPs – say that they approve of the way their Assembly representatives have performed their jobs over the past twelve months. Indeed, the job approval rating of Assembly representatives improved by 12 percentage points over the 2005 figure of 51 percent. *Perhaps, because the majority of Ghanaians do not assign much responsibility for community development, welfare and services to local government authority, popular assessment of DA performance is fairly generous. To repeat, majorities of Ghanaians generally assessed local government authorities' performance at public service delivery positively.*

**Table 3: Performance ratings of local government system (percentages for 2008)**

	Performed Well	Performed Badly
Keeping community clean (e.g. refuse removal)	66	30
Maintaining health standards in public restaurants and food stalls	58	33
Maintaining local roads	53	44
Maintaining local market places	53	43
Collecting rates on privately owned houses	51	30
Collecting license fees on bicycles, carts and barrows	48	31

**Question:** What about local government? I do not mean the national government. I mean your Metropolitan, Municipal or District Assembly. How well or badly would you say your local government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (percentage saying "Fairly well/Very well" and "Very badly/Fairly badly").

**How do Ghanaians rate local government bodies and representatives in terms of their transparency, accountability and responsiveness?**

The decentralization reforms were also intended to foster popular participation, transparency, responsiveness, and accountability. By law, members of MMDAs are supposed to meet electorates before every meeting of the Assembly. They are also enjoined to consult the electorate on issues to be discussed in the Assembly, and collate their views, opinions, and proposals for submission to the Assembly. In addition MMDAs must provide their constituents with feedback on the general decisions of the Assembly and the actions taken to address their problems or concerns.<sup>3</sup> The popular election on no-party basis of 70 percent of the members of the DAs, who could also be recalled by the same electorate, was at least in theory aimed at promoting grassroots democracy. Indeed, the Local Government Act makes it mandatory for local government bodies to involve local people in development planning, implementation and monitoring at the grassroots level. But what is the popular experience in this area of local governance?

Over half of Ghanaians say their MMDAs have performed badly in making the Assembly’s program of work known to ordinary people (58 percent), providing citizens with information on the Assembly budget (55 percent), and allowing citizens to participate in the decision making process (52 percent).

Similarly, large minorities think their MMDAs have performed badly in providing effective ways to handle complaints against elected local representatives (48 percent), ensuring that local government revenues are not used for private gains (48 percent) and consulting traditional, civic and community leaders before making decisions (45 percent). Indeed, the percentage point differences between the negative and positive ratings are generally quite large (Table 4). Moreover, Assemblymen and women are also perceived by a large majority of Ghanaians (70 percent) to be corrupt. Indeed, perceived corruption among these representatives worsened by 10 percentage points from 2005 to 2008. In fact, both urban and rural populations are unanimous in their opinions regarding the lack of transparency and accountability in operations of the assemblies and their agents.

**Table 4: Transparency and accountability rating of local government system (2008)**

	<b>Handled Badly</b>	<b>Handled Well</b>
Making the Assembly’s program of work known to ordinary people	58	40
Providing citizens with information about the Assembly’s budget (i.e. revenues and expenditures)	55	31
Allowing citizens like yourself to participate in the Assembly’s decisions	52	36
Guaranteeing that local govt. revenues are used for public services and not for private gain	48	36
Providing effective ways to handle complaints about Assembly men/women or local officials	48	37
Consulting others (including traditional, civic and community leaders) before making decisions	45	40

***Question:** How well or badly do you think your Metropolitan, Municipal or District Assembly is practicing the following procedures? Or haven’t you heard enough to have an opinion? (percentage saying “Very badly/Fairly badly” and “Fairly well/Very well”).*

<sup>3</sup> See section 16 *Local Government Act (Act 462)*

A majority of Ghanaians also hold negative opinions of the responsiveness of their local government representatives. More than half of Ghanaians (54 percent) hold the view that Assembly men and women “*never or only sometimes*” listen to what ordinary people like them have to say. In fact, sixty percent of all urban residents – compared to 48 percent of rural population – share this opinion. However, a large minority (41 percent) thinks elected local representatives “*often or always*” listen.

Even though about two-thirds (65 percent) believe their elected Assembly representatives are likely to listen to their concerns on a matter of importance to the community, a sizeable minority (32 percent) disagrees. Again, relatively large proportion of all urban dwellers (57 percent) holds this opinion, compared to 50 percent for all rural settlers. ***These findings point to prevailing gaps in transparency, accountability and responsiveness in the operations of local government bodies and as well as their agents – the Assembly men and women.***

#### **How engaged are citizens in local government activities?**

The survey also indicates weak levels of citizen engagement with the Assemblies. Quite disappointingly, just over a third (36 percent) of all adults report contacting an Assembly man or woman in the previous year to find solutions to local problems or to offer opinions. More disappointing is the fact that only 15 percent contacted their elected national representatives (MPs). Rather, most Ghanaians take their problems to informal leaders (i.e., religious leader, 47 percent; traditional leader, 25 percent and influential person, 20 percent). In addition, only 10 percent of Ghanaians reported filing complains about problems in how local government is ran with the MMDAs or calling a media house about the problem. Large majorities (86 percent each) never engaged in any of these activities. Rather, 4 in every 10 Ghanaians chose instead to discuss the identified problem with other community, religious or traditional leaders (39 percent) or got together with others to address it (43 percent).

In fact, when Ghanaians (i.e. 51 percent) see problems with local government administration their most common response is to discuss these matters with others in the community (Table 5). Indeed, a large minority of Ghanaians (43 percent) believes that ordinary persons cannot do much to correct problems with the way local government is administered in their communities. In general, urban residents do not engage local government bodies and their agents as frequent as their urban counterparts. For Ghanaians living in urban settlements, 68 percent never contact their assembly representative, 63 percent did not discuss problems with other community leaders, 59 percent never joined others to address the problem and 50 percent did not even discuss problems with other members of their communities. The differences between these proportions and those of rural settlers who also did not engage these activities are 9, 11, 11 and 9 percentage points respectively. It is only in the area of writing to a newspaper or calling a radio station and making complaints personally or by a letter to local government officials that no sharp urban-rural differences are recorded. ***Thus, grassroots participation in local governance is generally weak. A majority of Ghanaians seem reluctant or unable to take advantage of whatever opportunities decentralization reforms have created for popular participation.***

Weak citizen engagement with local authorities appears to have informed the level of trust that Ghanaians express for elected local government representatives. Just over half (53 percent) say they trust their assembly representatives “a lot or somewhat.” In fact, trust in assembly representatives has remained fairly stable over time, dropping marginally by only one percentage point in 2008 from the 54 percent reported in 2005.

**Table 5: Frequency of citizen engagement with local government setup (2008)**

	At least once	Never
Contact with an Assembly man and woman in the past year	36	63
Write a letter to a newspaper or call a radio station	10	86
Make a complaint to local government officials personally or by letter	10	86
Discuss the problem with other community, religious or traditional leaders	39	57
Join others in the community to address a problem	43	53
Discuss problem with other people in community	51	45

**Question on contacting:** *During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons (e.g. Assembly man/woman) about some important problem or to give them your views? (percentage saying “Only once/A few times/Often” and “Never”).* **Question for passive forms of engagement:** *If you yourself have seen problems in how local government is run in the past year, how often, if at all, did you do any of the following: (percentage saying “Once/twice/Several times/Many times” and “Never”).*

### Some key implications

The constitutional provision for the president to appoint District, Metropolitan or Municipal Chief Executive (as opposed to their being popularly elected) has been one of the most hotly debated policy issues in Ghana’s Fourth Republic. Afrobarometer Round 4 ascertains popular opinions on the matter by asking respondents to choose between two statements. The first statement is that “*the Metropolitan, Municipal and District Chief Executives (MM/DCE’s) should be elected by voters in the local authority area*” and the second statement is that “*the Metropolitan, Municipal and District Chief Executives (MM/DCE’s) should continue to be appointed by the President with approval by Assembly members.*” Almost two-thirds of Ghanaians (61 percent) agree that MM/D chief executives should be elected by voters in the local authority area. Of this figure, 39 percent agree strongly. Indeed, more than half of Ghanaians resident in both urban and rural localities (65 percent and 57 percent respectively) agree to election of MM/D chief executives. However, urban proportion is considerably higher than the rural proportion by 8 percentage points. Just a little over a fourth (27 percent) want the status quo maintained by which these leaders are centrally appointed.

To what extent therefore are popular perceptions of MMDAs operational records (e.g. public service delivery performance, transparency and accountability and responsiveness) driving the demand for election of MM/DCEs? From the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) estimates depicted in Table 6, disaffection with the current system of appointment of MM/DCEs by the President is largely driven by the operational records of MMDAs. Considering the demand for the election model, we observed that the independent variables have the anticipated impacts and are as well statistically significant. A unit improvement in performance of local government body suppresses demand for election of D/MCEs by -0.077 of a unit. On the other hand, when transparency and accountability deteriorates, it sharply raises demand for election of MM/DCEs by 0.118 of a unit. Also, younger folks are more likely to spearhead demands for election of MM/DCEs given the negative coefficient of the age variable (i.e. -0.077). This finding seems to confirm the real situation on the ground where the youth are often in the forefront of the agitations against the conduct of MM/DCEs and local government bodies.

**Table 6: OLS Estimates of D/MCEs Election Model (2008)**

	<b>Beta</b>
Constant	0.1.051***
Good Performance Index	-0.077*
Poor Accountability & Transparency Index	0.118**
Age	-0.077*
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>0.031</b>
<b>F-statistics</b>	<b>8.261***</b>
<b>Standard Error of the Estimate</b>	<b>0.723</b>

*NB: \*\*\* p-value  $\leq 0.000$ , \*\* p-value  $\leq 0.01$  and \* p-value  $\leq 0.05$  All other coefficients, apart from the constant are the standardized ones (i.e. Beta). Good Performance Index Alpha value = 0.819 and Poor Accountability & Transparency Index Alpha value = 0.917.*

Comparing the strength of impact of each independent variable in the model, it is clear that poor accountability and transparency record is the major driving force behind the demand for election of D/MCEs, followed by public service delivery performance record and age. [As indicated in the footnote under Table 6, all coefficients, are the standardized ones apart from the constant. The claim is therefore premised on the magnitude of the individual standardized coefficients]. *Thus, poor transparency and accountability record of MMDAs calls into question the essence of continuing with the system of appointing MM/DCEs, while positive public service delivery performance enhances holds back demand for election of these local government representatives*

### **Conclusion**

The analysis in this briefing paper shows that Ghanaians perceive deficits in the accountability and transparency of local government administration. These deficits seem to be key drivers for the desire by a large segment of the population for local government chief executives to be elected by voters in the district. Probably, Ghanaians seem to want to use election to exact accountability from MM/DCEs, just as they have been doing with respect to assembly representatives since the commencement of the decentralization reforms.

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