

CITIZENS PARTICIPATION AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR DEMOCRATIC DECISION MAKING AND IMPLEMENTATION

1.0 BACKGROUND

Participating in decision making is a critical entry point in influencing policies and contributes to the socio- economic growth in developing countries. It ensures inclusive governance and enhances transparency and accountability

It provides opportunity for citizens to make inputs into decisions that directly or indirectly affects their socio-economic well-being. Similarly, it allows for citizens and duty bearers to have a common understanding and agree on development priorities. The involvement of citizens in various levels of decision making ensures ownership of development process and improved service delivery.

The Ghanaian Constitution provides an enabling environment for citizens participation in decision making as a necessary prerequisite for a strong democracy

For example Article 35 (d) states that 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 in national life and in government.....

Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies (MMDA) in Ghana are responsible for vital social services such as infrastructure for transportation, education, healthcare, and sanitation therefore by improving the capacity of citizens to work with the MMDAs in the delivery of these services, citizens would have the opportunity to significantly improve their living standards.

2.0 CAPACITY AND PARTICIPATION

Studies conducted by the Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG) reveal that citizens lack the requisite skills to engage in decision making and demand accountability from their duty bearers. Other surveys conducted by the IDEG, Send Ghana and other civil society organizations demonstrate citizens inability to effectively participate in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of economic and social policies and programmes. This is mainly because many civil society organizations pay less attention to mobilizing citizens to participate in public policy processes. The few who get involved have limited capacity in research and advocacy skills, policy knowledge, resource mobilisation and networking with the right institutions for effective collaborations.

To address this gap in citizens participation in governance, IDEG developed the Governance Issues Forum, as a framework for promoting participatory bottom-up democracy in Ghana. The GIF is convened as a mechanism for empowering citizens to participate in the making of public policy decisions at the local level (community, district and region) in Ghana. Since its establishment, the GIF has empowered communities to manage their own political and economic development issues through continuous dialogue on public policies and development programmes.

The GIF has subsequently been applied in 26 districts across the ten regions of Ghana. The next section shares the experience of how the GIF has empowered citizens to influence decision making

and public service delivery in their communities and districts, under the Civic Empowerment of Cocoa Communities Project.

3.0 BUILDING OF CITIZENS CAPACITY THROUGH THE CIVIC EMPOWERMENT OF COCOA COMMUNITIES (CECC) PROJECT

As part of IDEG's Citizens Empowerment and Community Action Programme, the IDEG in partnership with Cocoa life is implementing the **Civic Empowerment of Cocoa Communities(CECC)** project. The project seeks to establish effective mechanisms to improve the mobilization of non-state actors in the rural districts, build their skills and competencies for collective action.

Through the creation of a more conducive and enabling environment the CECC project provides a platform for direct interface between civic groups and local government decision makers. This is crucial in sustaining the growth of strong civic participation, accountability and public service delivery at the sub-national level.

The Institute for Democratic Governance has, since November 2015, been implementing the Civic Empowerment of Cocoa Communities (CECC) Project under the Cocoa Life Program. The Cocoa Life program is being jointly implemented by IDEG in collaboration with World Vision, as Lead Implementing Partner, Abantu for Development, UNDP and the Right to Play in 121 communities spread across five districts namely Bia West District, Juaboso District, Ahafo Ano North District, Sekyere East District and Awutu Senya West.

The Civic Empowerment of Cocoa Communities(CECC) Project uses the Governance Issues Forum (GIF) approach towards achieving project deliverables. GIF is an integrative mechanism for promoting citizens participation in decision-making and development at the local and national level. As an integrative concept, the GIF combines skills upgrading and public policy knowledge building with institutional platforms for effective civic engagement in order to promote inclusive policy dialogue and mutual accountability between state and non-state actors towards poverty reduction, development and good democratic governance. Fundamentally, the GIF translates people's voices, choices and collective decisions into action for development planning and implementation. The GIF works through a network called the Governance Issues Forum Network (GIFNet). Individuals and organizations that have undergone training in the GIF methodology form the GIF Network (GIFNet). IDEG's GIFNets is operational in 26 districts across the 10 regions of Ghana, with phenomenal developmental impact. The GIF Model and the GIFNets have been lauded by external evaluators as an effective methodology for building citizens capacity to influence decision making.

Using the GIF methodology, the Institute has created civic spaces for the GIFNets to engage with duty bearers and demand accountability. To this end Election Platform Meetings were conducted across the project districts of Juaboso, Bia West, Awutu Senya, Ahafo Ano North and Sekyere East, providing the GIFNets the opportunity to interrogate and interact with parliamentary aspirants on their manifesto. This was to ensure that the manifestoes of the various aspirants responded to their development needs.

The project also uses the Districts' Annual Action Plans, planning and budget hearing meetings, and project monitoring visits as entry points for citizens' participation in the local governance

process. Additionally, public spaces such as public forums, tv and radio discussions, and engagement with relevant stakeholders are some of the key interface platforms that the project uses to promote transparency and accountability in the districts

The capacity building trainings and technical expertise provided under the CECC Project has positioned the GIFNets to be active and proactive. GIFNets are currently at the fore front engaging duty bearers on social and development issues. The lobbying and advocacy skills employed by the GIFNets has culminated in the realization of development priorities and improved service delivery.

The active engagement of the GIFNets in decision making process has resulted in the provision of public services such as boreholes, solar electricity, footbridges, roads, chps compounds, nurses' quarters, teachers' quarters and school buildings.

The GIFNets are designed to be self-sustaining after few years of initial support. Similarly, measures are being put in place to ensure that the GIFNets are able to sustain their activities and continue to engage in decision making towards an improved public service delivery in their communities

4.0 CONCLUSION

Citizens participation in decision making is vital for every thriving democracy and must be promoted at all levels of governance. Employing the bottom up approach in decision making as demonstrated by the GIF Methodology contributes to improved public service delivery. In that vein, it is recommended that Institutions like the National Commission for Civic Education and the Information Services Department can contribute to improve civic participation in governance, transparency and accountability by sensitising citizens at the local level on their civic rights and responsibilities, and on projects in their district Annual Actions Plans to enable them monitor such projects

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