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THE COMPETING INTERESTS OF LOCAL POLITICAL ACTORS IN THE MAKING OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN GHANA

Matthew Sabbi

Abstract: There have been enormous institutional reforms in the Ghanaian local public administration with the stated aim of the active participation of local actors in the development of decision-making. Yet the institution-building discourse and practice do not often emphasize the role of local political actors in the institution-building and development processes. Indeed, the roles played by these local political actors, viz. assembly members, who shape and negotiate the institutional reform processes have not been properly explained and our understanding on how they influence the task of the local administration remains limited. This paper analyzes the roles played by these actors and the extent to which they shape the local public administration and its institution-building processes. Empirical data from two local government structures in Ghana show how these local political actors, straddling between the twilight of their private-political interests and the local administrative structures, exert pressure, lobby but also contest bureaucrats who perform the everyday tasks of their local governments. This complex interaction of actors and their interests makes the tasks of the local public administration difficult and the very idea of institutional change remains increasingly problematic.

Keywords: *Local political actors; bureaucrats; local government; institutional reforms; competing interests*

1. Introduction

Institution-building in developing countries constitutes an important agenda in contemporary development policy (Johnson 2001; Smoke 2003; Romeo 2003).¹ In Ghana as elsewhere in Africa, reforms in

1 An earlier version of this article was presented at the Conference of the African Studies Association in Germany (VAD) on Future Africa in June, 2014 in Bayreuth, Germany. I am

local public administration were framed within the international discourse on good governance and participatory development following the crises of state over-centralization in the 1980s (see Thomi 1999, 2000b). Subsequently, these reforms have been substantial (Gilbert, Hugounenq and Vaillancourt 2013) and are intended to enhance the participation of local level actors in development decision-making. While the promise of participatory development is becoming increasingly difficult to keep (Crook 2003; Crawford 2008; Awortwi 2011), different actor groups exploit opportunities and ambiguities in the structure as alternative modes of participation in various ways. Therefore the norms in form are very different from those in operation (Lowndes and Leach 2004) for the local public administration. Public administration is used here to describe the ability of the local state bureaucracy to employ available resources to meet the needs of local residents.² In Ghana, the local public administration comprises admixtures of bureaucrats and local political actors (e.g. assembly members and unit committees) and although the latter shape and negotiate the reform processes in myriad ways, their influence has largely been obscured and less explained. Their influence is expressed, for instance, in their persistent rejection of presidential nominees as heads of their respective district assemblies (DAs) as well as the constant strife between the DAs and their executive units throughout the country.³ These behaviors are competing because they challenge and sometimes subvert the local administrations in the performance of their everyday tasks. Against that backdrop, this paper elaborates on the roles played by these ‘semi-periphery actors’⁴ and the extent to which they contest and shape the content of the local administration and its institutional reforms. The paper proceeds with a discussion on changes in the local government system and situates them within

grateful for the helpful comments by panelists on the Competing Development Paradigms and the Future of Good Governance in Africa.

- 2 Nicholas Henry’s (1975) article on the complexity of defining the subject within the domains of administrative sciences, political sciences, and public administration is very informative.
- 3 Between 2013 and 2014, the local media carried information on the practices of the local political actors across the country: “Kassena-Nankana assembly rejects president’s nominee for DCE,” 2013; “Upper Denkyira West assembly rejects DCE,” 2013; Zoure 2014; “Wa East district assembly fails to confirm DCE,” 2014; “Dormaa East assembly fails to confirm chief executive,” 2014) as well as tensions between assembly members and DCEs or local government ministers (see e.g. Freiku 2013).
- 4 Following closely Lund’s (2006) concept of twilight institutions, we use semi-periphery actors to describe these local political actors to the extent that they straddle between the twilight of formal institutions and informal norms in pursuit of their personal-political interests.

an institutional frame of reference. After briefly describing the data and methods, the roles and competing interests of the political actors vis-à-vis bureaucrats in the daily routines of the local administration are examined. Some perceptions of the public regarding the local government system conclude the discussion.

2. The Local Public Administration and Institutional Reforms

Local government and decentralization are concepts that have been used interchangeably but in this paper, we distinguish the two to reflect local government as the structure that defines the roles and expectations of participants in local public administration while decentralization simply put is the policy that gives political and administrative authority for managing the activities of the former (see Olsen 2007). Indeed, local governments thrive, to a large extent, on the amount of deconcentrated and devolved authority assigned to them (Johnson 2001). Local governance in Ghana could be traced to the colonial system which organized it around chiefdoms (Gilbert et al. 2013) but its modern character emerged only in the post-independence era when successive governments made efforts to devolve authority to sub-national and local units. Even so, the programs involved highly centralized devolution at regional and district levels to the neglect of communal participation. Local government took on a new look only in 1988 when the government embarked on a comprehensive policy to decentralize with the enactment of the Local Government Law, 1988 (PNDCL 207), Local Government Act, 1993 (Act 462) and supported by other laws and legislation instruments (LIs).⁵ The policy sought to devolve power, competence and resources to local units while the local government ministry exercises a supervisory role (Thomi 1999; Kumi-Kyereme, Yankson and Thomi 2006). However, there has since been an unending cycle of reforms in the local government setup and a few examples will suffice to highlight this point. In 2003, the Local Government Service Act (Act 656) separated the local government setup from the core civil service. In 2004, the Local Government (Establishment) (Amendment) Instruments sought to re-organize

5 Supporting legislations were the 1992 Constitution, such as the Civil Service Law, 1994 (PNDCL 327), the National Development Commission Act of 1994 (Act 479), the National Development Planning Systems Act, 1994 (Act 480), and the District Assemblies Common Fund Act, 1993 (Act 327).

the sub-district structures in three metropolitan assemblies with LI 1804; LI 1805; LI 1806 for Accra, Kumasi and Takoradi respectively. In 2009, the Local Government (Department of District Assemblies) (Commencement) Instrument (LI 1961) sought to bring all decentralized departments in a district under the authority of the DA. In 2010, the Local Government Creation of New Districts Instrument (LI 1983) sought modalities to carve out new districts from existing ones. Although the DAs and their institutional reforms were initially received with enthusiasm, the development and poverty reduction hopes have remained far-fetched (see Crook 2003; Crawford 2008).

2.1 The Local Government and Participatory Development

The DAs are the main arena for devolved authority and thus the focus of local government analysis. Within the regions, the local government structure comprises three main institutions namely the regional coordinating council (RCC) at the apex on the regional level, the district assembly at the intermediate level, and sub-district structures of sub-metropolitan district councils, town-zonal-urban-area councils and the unit committees (see Figure 1).⁶

6 The regional coordinating councils are at the apex of the local government structure but they only have supervisory roles; the districts assemblies are the only bodies with mandate to make autonomous and decentralized policies for the local administration.

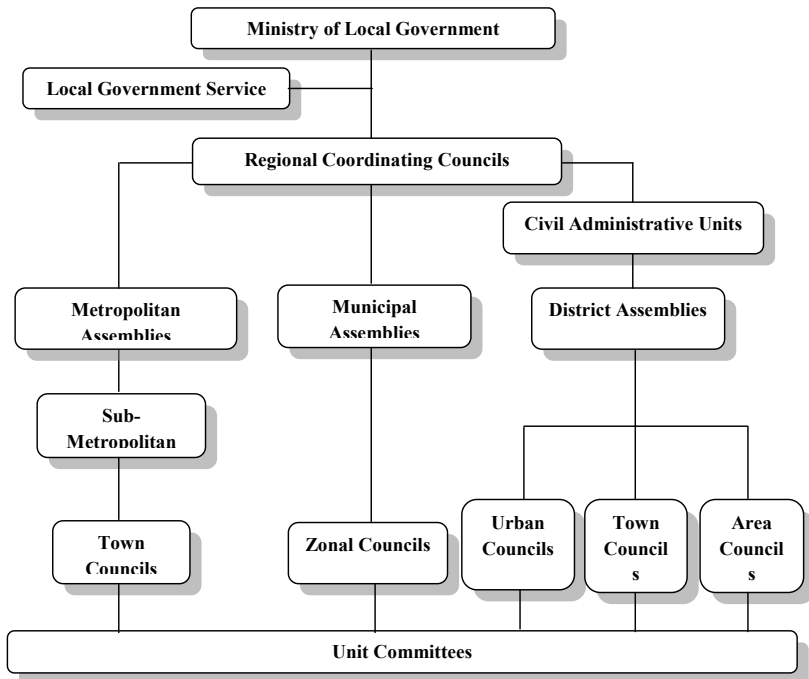


Figure 1: Structure of Local Government in Ghana

Source: Author’s construct based on legislations in use since 2012

Participatory development and poverty reduction remain central to the creation and reforms of the local governments. The legislation establishing the local government (Act 462) empowers the DAs as the principal entities responsible for development planning, regulation of infrastructure, local economic activities, sanitation issues and general delivery of local public goods and service. Development plans (including those of the sub-district structures) and budgets of the district are prepared in collaboration with the RCC and approved by central ministries and their agencies. The DAs receive remittances from the central government (i.e. the district assemblies’ common fund) but their ability to generate local revenue to finance their development plans and the needs of local residents is central to their existence. Act 462 again enjoins the DAs where appropriate, to delegate any of its functions to the substructures namely sub-metro district council,

town, area, zonal or urban council or unit committee or any other body or person determined by the DA. Yet the same Act allows the DAs to inhibit the participatory functions of their substructures because the latter, on the one hand, are supposed to be the local arena for popular participation in development decision-making. They are to identify taxable individuals and items in their locality, raise voluntary contributions for development and make local action plans for inclusion in their DA's development plan. However, they have no independent legal status (Ayee 2000; Crawford 2008) and their functions are based on the prerogative of the DAs. The substructures are thus often reduced to revenue collection units for their respective local governments.

2.2 The District Assembly and its Composition

The term 'district' designates a geographic precinct over which a DA exercises its jurisdiction (see Act 462). Three classifications of DAs are made based on their demography and degree of urbanization and they are presently composed as: a four-tier metropolitan assembly (6) with a population of more than 250,000; a three-tier municipal (56) and district assembly (154) with populations of more than 95,000 and up to 75,000 respectively. Taken together therefore, there are 216 DAs and thus depicting a dramatic increase from 110 in 1993, 139 in 2004 and 170 in 2008. The sub-district structures viz. sub-metropolitan district council (only in the metropolitan assembly); town-zonal-urban-area councils; and unit committees are mainly administrative sub-divisions without an independent legal status (Ayee 2000) to make binding decisions which have implications for their functions relative to the DAs. The local government structure has two strands of authority namely the general assembly and the district administration. The general assembly is semi-elected and composed mostly of elected representatives (70%) and the rest (30%) is appointed by the president.⁷ DA elections are held every four years and a presiding member (PM) is elected for a two-year (re-renewable) term from among the members of the DA. Apart from presiding over the general assembly, the PM's functions are largely honorary and ceremonial (Gilbert et al. 2013).

7 The appointees were supposed to be professionals, e.g. educationists, lawyers, engineers, etc. whose expertise would complement the local development policy making of the DAs. The current practice often involves the appointment of followers and sympathizers of the incumbent government who have little or no professional skills (see Gyimah-Boadi and Prempeh 2007).

2.2.1 The District Administration

Within each DA, the executive and administrative functions are performed by an executive committee whose members (composed of up to one-third of the total number of assembly members, excluding its chair person) are elected by the DA members. The executive committee is chaired by the district chief executive (DCE)⁸ with the district coordinating director (head of the public servants) as secretary. The DCE is appointed for four years by the president (i.e. a central government representative) and approved by two-thirds of the DAs' voting members. The executive committee coordinates the work of the various subcommittees of the assembly e.g. development planning, works, security, finance and general administration. It also executes the decisions made by the general assembly, supervises the running of district services, and executes the development plans of the substructures. As the chair of the executive committee and the political head of the district, the DCE wields considerable power in the assembly. The full-time status of the administration (and the executive committee) and the honorary, part-time status of the DAs breed a sense of domination of the later by the former (Thomi 2000a). This complexity is a major source of tension within the local government structure and reinforces the perception of its ineptitude. Indeed, reforms in 2009 (LI 1961) attempting to re-organize all decentralized departments from central government ministries to the DA have been resisted by some professional groups. Many of the departments in practice continue to operate as deconcentrated departments sharing much of their responsibilities with their parent ministries and regional directorates⁹.

2.3 Assembly Members and Participatory Development

The general assembly of the DA has two categories of assembly members: elected and appointed members. Elected members serve a four-year term and are eligible for re-election for as long as they wish. The assembly members, as liaison officers between the electoral area and the DA report the needs, aspirations and grievances of the elector-

8 This title designates the executive head of a district; metropolitan and municipal chief executives are eponyms for heads of metropolitan and municipal assemblies respectively.

9 Attempts at integrating the deconcentrated departments into the local government structure have been met with fierce resistance by professional groups such as teachers, medical doctors, forestry officials, etc.

ates to the assembly. They, in turn, communicate the decisions of the DA to the electorates through meeting forums with productive and economic groups in their electoral areas. They are supposed to organize and participate in communal and development activities in their electoral areas. Assembly members are legally entitled to serve on the sub-committees of their DA. Starting from 1988 six district level elections have been held: 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, and 2010. To strengthen their participatory development functions, reforms in 2010 (LI 1983) sought to streamline local political actors (e.g. assembly members and their unit committees) to participate actively at the substructures. However, the reforms have often lacked clarity especially with regards to the composition of the sub-metro district councils and the tenets of popular participation means in development decisions they have largely been obscured. The promise of participatory development thus remains only remotely plausible (Crook 2003). Indeed, with most of the sub-metros dominated by political appointees, the rationale for these appointments as professional with specific expertise seems to have been systematically abused; a trend labelled the 'appointment of party foot-soldiers' (Gyimah-Boadi and Prempeh 2007). Given that the DAs are the arena for devolved policy making, it is important to understand how these shifts in authority affect the interaction between the bureaucracy and elected officials in the local administration.

3. Analyzing Institutional Reforms in Local Public Administrations

Discussions on local government institution-building are often premised on making the institutions perform better but this is not always the case. The factors that inhibit change lie much outside as within the local political setting. Institutional change is particularly difficult because institutional actors have the ability to enact and exploit ambiguities in their own favour; institutions thus rather stay somewhat the same (Lowndes 2005; Lowndes and Leach 2004). From neo-institutional arguments, institutional reform ideas and change processes in developing countries spread through the global world culture but their adoption is not meant for efficiency and effectiveness as often conceived (see Meyer and Rowan 1991). The institutional ideas are rather adopted for achieving more legitimacy in their institutional environment. However, incoherencies between the daily routines

and the adopted ideas result in decoupling of the change models i.e. adopting the new reforms but deliberately keeping them from their action-structure so the reforms do not affect their decision-making. Decoupling is seen as endemic (DiMaggio and Powell 1991) in world society (Meyer 2010) especially in developing countries because they adopt complicated reforms that they are unable to implement (Brunsson 1989, 2006; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Christensen, Lægreid, Roness, and Røvik 2007). A complex interaction between actors that shapes the change processes and enhances decoupling is rather explicated by the actor-centered institutionalism. This approach posits that institutional actors have varied self-interests which are tied to specific behavior strategies based on expected outcomes (Scharpf 1997, 2008). Actors may opt for outcomes that address their self-interests when faced with constraints of choosing between optimal organizational outcomes and individual interests. This tendency on the part of institutional actors mean institutional change processes could only yield sub-optimum outcomes (Scharpf 2008; Lowndes 2005). The institutional approach is used to analyze the complexity of change in the Ghanaian local administration with multiple institutional actors who pursue different interests.

4. Methods and Data

The study used multi-sited and multi-level approaches to gather data in two administrative regions in Ghana namely Ashanti and Upper West. This selection was informed by their location and experience with local administration (Aye 1996) and focused on two local government structures: Kumasi metropolitan assembly (KMA) and Wa municipal assembly (WMA) (details in Table 1). The Ashanti region, located in the middle belt of Ghana has a long-standing experience of civil administration which dates back to the colonial period compared with its Upper West counterpart, a relatively young region in the northern belt created in 1983¹⁰. An extensive fieldwork project was conducted from June to October, 2013 and August to October, 2014 and employed multiple methods including in-depth interviews to understand the

10 The main study from which this paper is derived compares the regions' experiences in the implementation of administrative reforms. The focal organizations include the regional coordinating councils, decentralized directorates of agriculture and health, the local government ministry and the local government service secretariat. However, only views from the political actors and bureaucrats within the DA structures are discussed here.

interface between reforms, actors’ interests and the tasks of the local governments from well-informed actors. Again, actors in the sub-metropolitan district councils, zonal councils, town councils and unit committees from the two assemblies were interviewed.

Table 1: Summary Information on the Local Administration Structures

Local Government Structure		
District Characteristics	Kumasi	Wa
Region	Ashanti	Upper West
District Population*	2,396,458	127,284
District Type	Metropolitan	Municipal
Substructures	9 Sub-Metro Councils	1 Urban Council
	21 Town Councils	6 Zonal Councils
	92 Unit Committees	72 Unit Cttees

Source: Field Research, 2013/14 [* figures based on 2013 estimates]

In general, the opinions of 73 well-informed actors in the two local governments are analyzed in this paper. They include 58 (79.5%) from the KMA and 15 (20.5%) from the WMA. The actors comprised 52 (71.2%) local political actors (i.e. assembly members and unit committee members) and 21 (28.8%) bureaucrats (and or technical personnel¹¹) who implement the day-to-day tasks of the local administrations. Of the 52 local political actors, 41 (78.8%) were elected to

11 Technical personnel or technocrats are civil servants with specific technical skills and expertise such as engineers, spatial planners, etc unlike the traditional conception of administrators or bureaucrats.

their position while the remaining 11 (21.2%) were appointed by the president. In addition to the data from in-depth interviews, data from existing documents on the institutional reforms, voting patterns of constituents in the study DAs in district level elections, and newspaper publications on the conduct of the local political actors in the DAs were analyzed. Furthermore, a period of internship and participation in seminars and workshops in the two DAs provided insights into how reforms and local administrative tasks are organized.¹²

5. The Local Government as an Arena for Contestation

5.1 Competing Authority Claims and Interests

The everyday task of the local administration is performed by the bureaucrats (or technocrats) who are civil servants working within the administrative structure. Nonetheless, their attempts to implement decisions locally are met with competing authority claims from assembly members over space and content of the projects being implemented that strain relations in the already politically-charged assembly structure:¹³

The bureaucrats or technocrats do not want the system to work; even in the sub-metro, we are the political leaders and they are supposed to inform us about what is going on but they don't. (...) sometimes they see the assembly members as inferior; some think they have higher education and are not willing to submit to assemblymen. They don't even inform us about the projects going on in the sub-metro because of the mischief and their personal interests in the projects [interview with an assemblyman, Suame Sub-metro, Kumasi, 19.08.2013].

These claims often center on the perceived disregard of the assembly members by the bureaucrats until something goes wrong in the implementation of the projects and also the inherent distrust that the

12 This three-month research internship was participatory mainly in the activities of the two district assemblies and the two regional coordinating councils including budget reviews, fee-fixing, mid-year reviews, etc. organized by the local governments.

13 These claims should be situated within the context of increasing involvement of public servants in partisan politics (see Ayea 2013) and thus raising doubts about their neutrality in delivering public goods.

administrative strand has an interest in sending specific projects to certain areas.

One source of these competing claims is informed by the prejudice around the caliber of persons who formed the local governments during the reforms in 1988. There was a widely held notion that the position of an assembly member was unattractive and somewhat reserved for low status individuals. They were considered 'less intelligent' at the time and some assembly members believe the bureaucrats still hold such stereotypes and do not take the assembly members seriously. But the current crop of assembly members is very mixed with some highly educated and established individuals who want to reassert and correct that erroneous impression about their position:

You see, when we mention the assembly system, technocrats are at the bottom they are like our subordinates; assembly members take decisions. The problem is that because assembly members are not paid salaries and that some are illiterates they are not aware of their roles; some assembly members cannot even read the laws and the LIs. If the technocrats realize that the assembly members do not know the rules and the LIs, they take them for a ride and decide for them [interview with an assemblyman, Suame Sub-metro, Kumasi, 20.08.2013].

Some of the assembly members have become vocal against the 'dis-respect' from the bureaucrats. They argue that although the assembly system began with pensioners and less 'educated individuals', most people still hold that impression. At the moment, however, many of them are rather young and highly educated with university degrees. But these tensions over status would likely persist because there is no required educational qualification for contesting that position and some of the assembly members have no formal literacy skills; people contest based on their popularity in their electoral areas. However, bureaucrats do not just reject those claims but rebuke assembly members for using such claims to seek their own interests. Some even believe the claim is insincere because it is rather the assembly members who abuse the law and the processes because they need to appease voters and thus support and encourage unlawful practices in the communities:

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Sometimes some of these assembly members could direct some residents to place containers and other structures at undesignated places. When technocrats then carry out their lawful duties, the assemblymen will now confront us. The assembly members make the policies of the assembly so they think they have 'posts' (power). Once I went to an electoral area to distribute letters to some rate defaulters and the assemblyman came that I should have contacted him before doing that. But I have never seen any regulation saying the administrator should consult the assembly member before doing his lawful duty [interview with an administrative official, Suame Sub-metro, Kumasi, 19.08.2013].

The observation points to the fact that some of the assembly members harbour personal political interest and quite often, they attempt to project themselves as being in control within their electoral territory. They often use personal aggrandizement rhetoric; promising voters more support than could be delivered and resorting to whatever means available to win more votes, placing them between the twilight of local legislators and project implementers. These competing claims have long been a source of conflict over domination; the technocrats, as professional, full time public (civil) servants believe they could not be controlled by part-time honorary political actors (see Thomi 2000a) and these contestations become the basis for the various sources of distrust from the assembly members.

5.2 Distrust of the Formal Bureaucracy

Trust among members remains a prerequisite in the conduct of the local administration tasks but a tense situation of distrust rather pervades assembly members' suspicion and perception of being dominated by the administration and the executive in particular. Indeed, any undertaking by the administration without the assembly's involvement is perceived as dubious, corrupt, and intended to meet the former's personal interests and gains. Some assembly members have lost trust in the formal structures to the extent that some described the bureaucracy as a façade:

The technocrats seem to know the concepts very well but they don't follow it to the letter. I sent my project requests to the planning department only for a colleague assembly member to tell me if I had copies of my letter, he could take it to the executive committee so that the projects would be

considered. I was very surprised (...) why did they ask us to send the letters to the planning unit? That means some people who accessed the planning unit will not get any projects; so you don't get projects if you do not belong to their side [interview with an assemblyman, Asokwa Sub-metro, Kumasi, 20.08.2013].

This distrust is well known by the bureaucrats who attempt to circumvent it by engaging the local political actors in several ways. Some of the bureaucrats revealed that it becomes easier for the conveners of the sub-committees who are assembly members to present decisions and plans to the executive committee and the general assembly because it is easily accepted by their colleagues than when bureaucrats have to do that. The assembly members felt more convinced than when technocrats had to do that presentation and sometimes the former doubted whether the latter were even telling the truth. In avoidance of doubts, the conveners are groomed to make a presentation at the executive committee.

The distrust of the executive and administration obtains at two levels. First, one observes distrust in instances whereby activities are thought to be dubious because the administration does not follow the procedure and they do so to meet their personal interests. Some assembly members argued that people blame politicians instead of the technocrats but it is the latter that connives with people such as developers to put up unauthorized structures at night and also over the weekend. A corollary to the above is when perceived dubious and corrupt practices are not intended for immediate monetary gains but rather for some personal interest such as streets constructed to their residential areas, etc. The distrust deepens when the perceived gains are skewed in the favour of the bureaucrats:

Once at assembly meeting, one member talked harshly to a bureaucrat and we were all annoyed for the disparaging remarks about the bureaucrats accusing him of corrupt practices. Sometimes the assembly members are part of the problem but some of the bureaucrats also benefit from the projects and if the assembly member thinks they have been overlooked (in terms of benefits) then they become very angry [interview with an assemblywoman, Oforikrom Sub-metro, Kumasi, 20.08.2013].

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The other source of distrust is where the head of the executive committee attempts to use the appointed assembly members as patronage networks to check the influence of the elected members. Some members see this as a genuine attempt to create confusion within a group that otherwise has good interpersonal relationships:

The executive tries to force that tension on the assembly when it does not exist because the appointed and elected members are always together. What happens rather is management always does everything possible to put a 'crack' between the assembly members. They always want to divide and think they can pass it through the appointed members because they have control over them. Sometimes at meetings, management will call the appointed members and try to convince them so that they will get the appointed members' support [interview with an assemblyman, Wa Urban Council, 28.08.2013].

That the political appointments are largely used for patronage purposes is not far-fetched in terms of policy decision-making processes of the DAs. The appointed assembly members held loyalty and commitments values towards the governing party and the DCEs during negotiations on local policies and projects. Indeed, most of the appointed members were unambiguous on the issue that they try to reciprocate their appointments by being loyal to the government and the DCE who appointed them:

We were appointed by the MCE on behalf of the president (...) so we are there to support the government and its policies. If we have to vote on certain issues, we side with the government's position (...) [interview with an appointed assemblywoman, Wa Municipal Assembly, 18.09.2014].

In Metropolitan assemblies with sub-metro district councils (e.g. the KMA), the distrust is further deepened by perceptions that the chairpersons of the councils use their influence to sustain patronage networks in the sub-metros. Indeed, institutional reforms in the sub-metros have been the bone of contention between the main assembly and the local administration.

Table 2: Composition of Selected Sub-Metros in the Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly

Council Composition					
Sub-metro Council	Current (LI 1614)		Probable (LI 1805)		
	Elect (%)	Appoint. (%)	Elect. (%)	UC (%)	Appoint. (%)
Asokwa	12 (40.0)	18 (60.0)	12 (40.0)	10 (33.3)	8 (26.7)
Bantama	8 (26.7)	22 (73.3)	8 (26.7)	10 (33.3)	12 (40.0)
Kwadaso	9 (30.0)	21 (70.0)	9 (30.0)	10 (33.3)	11 (36.7)
Manhyia	13 (43.3)	17 (56.7)	13 (43.3)	10 (33.3)	7 (23.3)
Oforikrom	15 (50.0)	15 (50.0)	15 (50.0)	10 (33.3)	5 (16.7)
Suame	9 (30.0)	21 (70.0)	9 (30.0)	10 (33.3)	11 (36.7)

Source: Author’s computation based on information from the secretariats of the sub-metros Note: Elect=elected members; Appoint=appointed members; UC=unit committee members.

With most of the sub-metros dominated by political appointees (see Table 2), the assembly members often argue that the bureaucrats play to the tune of the executive and are unable to implement reforms:

There is a problem with the sub-metro structure but the appointed NDC are resisting any solution. Thirty percent of the council is to be appointed by the government but this is not followed because there is a problem with the two LIs, 1614 and 1805. The 1805 does not favour them so they have gone for the old one, 1614. At Bantama, elected members are eight and the appointed members are 22 making up the 30 members so if we go there, we the elected members are ‘nothing’; definitely, a party man will become

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the sub-metro chair and they use that place as the party office and it cuts across; most of the chairmen (of the sub-metros) are NDC constituency chairpersons who use the sub-metro (secretariats) as their offices [interview with an assemblyman, Bantama Sub-metro, Kumasi, 18.09.2013].

That most of the sub-metro councils are dominated by political appointees chaired by party constituency chair persons is a fact (The Ghanaian Chronicle 2011) but the issues regarding the composition of these councils are quite complicated and involve local government reforms in 2004 (LI 1805 for KMA) under the NPP government.¹⁴ The new LI 1805 meant for 10 sub-metros was strongly castigated by the opposition NDC at the time for its lack of clarity (see Ahwoi 2007) and it became obvious that any changes in government would imply major changes or total rejection of that legislation. Such ambiguities allow central government politicians and bureaucrats to dominate the local government system (Wunsch 2001; Awortwi 2011). The ambiguities are designed on purpose for exploitation by whichever regime is in power (Crawford 2008) but they also reflect the principles upon which the local governments were founded. The structures, as Crook (1999) observes were carved in a populist, non-partisan framework which allowed the central government to have a firm hold of them. In the current multi-party setting, such virtues are remotely possible and the incumbent governments exploit all possible ambiguities to dominate the DAs. The general suspicion of domination that engenders the distrust in the DAs is not new and could be traced to the reforms in 1988 subsumed the hitherto purely bureaucratic entity under an elected authority (Crook 1994; Thomi 2000a). The impact was felt on the formal structures as bureaucrats had to either report to or work in sub-committees with elected officials (Crook 1994). However, the impact has been exacerbated by factors such as the numerous reforms, the assembly members' clamour for their own interests and their attempts to exploit the administrative structures to achieve those interests.

14 National Democratic Congress (NDC) and New Patriotic Party (NPP) are major political parties in Ghana. In 2007, Kwamena Ahwoi, a former minister of local government in the NDC heavily criticized the LI 1805 enacted for 10 sub-metros and it was obvious the system would be thrown into confusion once the NDC government came back to power. This was spurred further by the elevation of one of the 10 sub-metro district councils to a municipal status.

5.3 *Self Aggrandizement and Communal Expectations*

Assembly members quite often project an image of themselves as being the most important actors in the local administration setting. These self-aggrandizing tendencies to enhance their reputation but also exaggerate their self-worth reflected in statements such as: 'we are the board of directors' and 'we make laws for the technocrats to implement' by, some of these local political actors. Some of them even compared their worth to members of parliament:

We are the real agents of development for the communities because we campaigned based on our individual achievements not on inanimate objects. We did not use party symbols to campaign. I used my name to campaign so people respect us more than the MP because even if I have a criminal record and contest in the strong hold of a party, I am certain they will vote for me [interview with an assemblyman, Kwadaso Sub-metro, Kumasi, 12.09.2013].

This sense of self-worth influences their promises when seeking political authority from their constituents. They spend lots of money and resources on expensive campaigns and advertisements (mirroring national election practices) for an honorary position that comes with no salary but meeting allowance. With their aggrandizing rhetoric, they show why their communities matter and make promises of getting development projects to these communities.¹⁵ Projects such as roads, public toilets, schools, job opportunities, etc are promised against the backdrop of knowledge that the DAs could not offer and that the rhetoric is empty. Most of the interviewees pointed out that the promises are the only ways to win elections being well aware that they could offer very little in terms of development projects:

The assembly member's position is honorary; some people think it is very lucrative but that is false; it depends on what we promise during campaigns; you know that it is not possible to do all that not even a quarter but we say all those things [interview with an assemblyman, Wa Urban Council, 19.09.2014].

15 See Adema (2009) for a discussion on how individuals use personal and communal aggrandizement to show the worth of their communities. The second phase of the field research coincided with preparations for nominations towards the 2014 local government elections. However, some aspiring and incumbent assembly members had already launched their campaigns.

The reason for self-aggrandizement by these local political actors is intriguing. Ordinarily, they would point to an altruistic desire to serve their communities given that their position is not full-time. Further probing reveals private-political interests more than their civic altruistic values to serve their communities. Most of them harboured higher political ambitions and they use the DAs as the 'launch pad' for such career dreams. It was even compelling that some of them have been sponsored by major political parties to 'test the water' to see how those parties would fare in national elections. Nonetheless, these personal attributes and self-worth heightens further the expectations from their electorates who seek development projects (and not necessary policy making). Most of the assembly members thought that the electorates see them as truly elected representatives only when 'you strive to bring development to your electoral area'. The aggrandizing image of these local political actors is reminiscent of the 'Big Man' phenomenon in African politics (Nugent 1995; Utas 2012).¹⁶ However, only a few influential assemblymen with connections to those in higher positions could succeed in getting these patronage resources to their areas (Crook 1994). Within the constraints of resource and realizing they are likely to disappoint, they move behind the formal bureaucracy to backstage activities and lobbying for a share of the patronage resources. This is in reaction to their promise of bringing development projects to the communities and the fear of losing out in future elections should they contest.

5.4 Backstage Activities: Cutting Corners and Maneuvering

Community members believe a true assembly member is 'one who brings projects to their communities' as was pointed out by some of the informants. However, the precarious nature of available resources and the numerous demands placed on the DAs mean most expectations cannot be realized at least from the formal bureaucracy. To meet their demands, influential actors (e.g. assembly members) resort to techniques to get

¹⁶ The aggrandizing rhetoric of the elected assembly members mirrors Nugent's (1995) discussion of the Big Men phenomenon in Ghanaian politics. The Big Man, often a political figure with opulence was accorded such status on their ability to occupy Big Man role set by some social criteria. The Big Men sought political favour with the promise of letting part of whatever wealth they made trickle down to their electors. In contrast to national politicians, local political actors, though behaving as Big Men, often lack the patronage resources to meet their promises. For a detailed case study description of the Big Man phenomenon in African politics and particularly in post-conflict contexts see Utas (2012).

development projects to their electoral areas through a backstage approach termed ‘cutting corners’ in local administrative parlance. This approach is even popular with bureaucrats at the substructures. Informants pointed out that not every decision from the sub-metro councils are implemented so they have to negotiate both the administrator and the assembly members concerned. They have to ‘cut corners’ by writing letters, doing follow ups, and lobbying; ‘one has to weave their way through’. It is even more prevalent among assembly members:

One cannot rely on the formal structure because the MCE, the administration, and the technocrats could not be trusted. The bureaucrats connive with the MCE to delay and blur things so there is no transparency; one cannot depend solely on the administration. For my electricity project, I had a friend who connected me directly to the one in charge at the electricity company. I did not go to the MCE for streetlights. If I need something and I pass it through the sub-metro to the KMA, I know they will abandon it so I make sure I go there directly to the appropriate officer and get the things done [interview with an assembly member, Kwadaso sub-metro, Kumasi, 13.09.13].

This idea of “cutting corners” or “backdoor” (i.e. using unofficial channels) somewhat yields results but it also provides a telling example of how these semi-periphery actors create and reinforce their description of the bureaucracy as a façade. The lobbying of specific bureaucrats comes with costs; assembly members have to give some ‘tips’ (tokens) to public officials to get projects to their electoral areas. It is not surprising that some of these political actors compete with bureaucrats in the implementation of projects and apparently to get “tips” from contractors in order to defray their campaign costs and meet the demands they imposed on themselves. This practice, however, dissipates the trust people have in public organizations to wit the fact that the structures are there for other purposes instead of public interest. It also reflects the general institutional practices in Ghanaian public bureaucracies.

5.5 Perception of the Local Public Administration

Although the central government is viewed with some skepticism, the general apathy towards the local governments is enormous and in fact well-known by local government actors. While the euphoria that

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followed the introduction of the district assemblies was high (Crook 1994), that seems to have waned over the years considering the level of participation in local government activities such as voting/elections (see Table 3).

Residents accessing the DAs' services quite often find out that the structures cannot help them and they become disillusioned with the DAs structures. This provides the basis for dis-interest in the services and activities of the DAs (Thomi 2000a) as was expressed by some senior bureaucrats:

Sometimes people come with genuine issues but the sub-metro cannot take decisions and if you refer them to the main assembly, the issue is no longer pursued and the people become frustrated. If you should organize a durbar, it will surprise you nobody will turn up especially in urban centers. People think that the assembly does not care about them and they are developing resistance to certain things like property rates because they do not benefit from it; they tell you that they will not pay and you can take them to court. Some community members mock the secretariat by asking what we do here [interview with an administrative official, Manhyia Sub-metro, Kumasi, 19.09.2013].

Table 3: Voter Turnout in National and Local Government Elections, 1992–2012

National Election (Year)	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012
Voter Turnout (%)	50.2	78.2	60.4	81.5	69.5	80.2
Local Government Election (Year)	1988/89	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010/11
Voter Turn-out (%)	59.3	29.3	41.6	32.8	44.0	35.3

Source: Author's compilation based on multiple sources [Electoral Commission; Crook 1999; Awortwi 2011; Obeng-Odoom 2013]

The disenchantment with the DAs finds expression in many dimensions that relate to the local government system. It is even more compelling when applied to election trends in DAs compared with national trends which clearly elucidate this disillusion as shown in Table 3. Indeed, whereas voters’ enthusiasm seems to surge with national elections, the opposite is true for the local government counterpart especially in the two study areas (see Table 4) despite the numerous institutional reforms to involve more local actors in pursuit of locally relevant development programs. That lack of interest in the DAs goes to express residents’ disappointment with the sort of development taking place in their localities (Crook 2003).

Table 4: Participation in Local Government Elections in the Study Areas, 2006 and 2010

Classification	Location	Election Year/Turnout (%)	
		2006	2010
Region	Ashanti	39.5	36.1
	Upper West	51.7	51.7
Local Government	Kumasi Metropolis	24.3	21.9
	Wa Municipal	38.2	45.7

Source: Author’s compilation based on information from the Electoral Commission, Ghana

6. Concluding Comments

The foregoing analysis has shown the complex interaction and suspicion that penetrates through a group that otherwise should work in harmony to bring development to their local communities. The fact that assembly members do not trust the bureaucracy that serves the local political structure which they (assembly members) belong as well as the public’s disinterest in the activities of the local administra-

tion raises questions about the DAs' promise of good governance and participatory development in local settings. It suggests also that the tenets of good governance within the local government institution-building process are untenable and consistent with Cook (2003) and Crawford (2008), the local people are not happy with the momentum with which the local political administration approaches and pursues development in their communities. It is however pertinent to note that the factors that inhibit the local administration in delivering a good service to the local public lie much outside as they are within the local setting. More importantly, the very idea of institution-building in the local government setup must be situated within the international development system in which institutional ideas spread to local settings. Yet institutional actors at both the national and local levels are capable of manipulation and exploiting the institutional change ideas in their own favour which makes institutional change highly difficult (Lowndes 2005). The discussion in this paper therefore highlights the inherent myths in the debate that local governance leads to participatory development. Although the pros and cons of this debate are not new (Thomi 2000a), there is evidence to indicate that attempts to reduce the complexity in these institutional structures has rather created more complexities (Kühl 1998). The pursuit of individual interests in conflict with formal institutional rules is properly explicated from an institutional perspective. Indeed, local political actors whose activities straddle between the formal bureaucracy as representatives and their private-political interests, under the guise of institutional reforms, produce consequences that affect the bureaucracy itself as well as the local political structure. Motivated by their individual and political interests, the elected assembly members in particular, project a 'Big Man' image of themselves (Nugent 1995) despite the mismatch between their rhetoric and their resources to fulfill that status. Their subsequent actions tend to stand in the way of an already complex, centrally-dominated and precarious bureaucracy of the local state. These features of contemporary institutional reforms in the local government system are difficult to evade but they account for the discrepancy between the promise and reality of participatory development. Consequently, they make local residents lose interest in the very idea of local government, its reform as well as its products.

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