The Level of Stakeholders' Participation in the District Education Strategic Planning Towards Quality Basic Education: The Case of Salaga Town Council of Ghana

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Abstract

The District Education Strategic Plan initiative adopted within the Education sector in Ghana emphasises on the need for stakeholders' participation in education planning process at the local or community level. The rationale behind this initiative was to cultivate and ensure stakeholders' involvement and commitment in the management of education at local level to improve quality and standards. This study aims at assessing the stakeholders' level of participation in the District Education Strategic Plan (DESP) development and implementation process. Qualitative approach was adopted in the study with survey strategy. Primary data was collected through in-depth interview and analysed qualitatively using deductions and inferences approach. The paper revealed low level of stakeholders' knowledge and involvement in the DESP development process within Salaga town Council. It is recommended that District Education Officers should collaborate with all stakeholders in the planning and implementation of the DESP to improve the quality of education within Salaga town Council.

Keywords: District Education Strategic Planning, Stakeholders participation, Stakeholders knowledge Level, Quality Basic Education, Salaga Town Council.

1. Introduction

The major responsibility of the Ministry of Education is to promote quality education delivery in Ghana. This requires adequate resources for the provision of physical facilities, equipment, teaching and learning materials (TLMs), adequate number of trained teachers, and promotion of gender equity in enrolment and retention among others. The Ministry of Education in 2003 adopted the Education Strategic Plan (ESP), which is a Sector Wide Approach to development assistance, in its quest to ensure an effective use of resources at the national level. Consequently, District Education Offices were directed to develop their District Education Strategic Plan (DESP) in line with the ESP (Ministry of Education, 2003).

The ESP (2003-2015) initiative is a result-based sector-wide plan which covered all levels and aspects of education such as; Pre-school, Primary, Junior High, Senior High, Teacher education, Special education, Technical/Vocational education and Tertiary education. The thematic areas of the ESP (2003-2015) are; Equitable Access to Education, Quality of Education, Educational Planning and Management, and Science, Technology and Technical Vocational Education and Training (Ministry of Education 2003).

At the District level, the ESP (2003-2015), is operationalised into three (3) distinct plans such as; the DESP, which is a five (5) year plan; Annual District Education Operational Plan (ADEOP), which is a three (3) year-rolling plan; and Annual Education Activity Plan (ADEAP) which is a one (1) year plan. These plans though distinct, were inter-related and inter-dependent. The ADEAP contained issues from the ADEOP which also contained issues from the DESP (Ministry of Education, 2003).

In line with Ghana's decentralisation process, the Education for All/Fast Track Initiative and the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the participatory approach was recommended for education planning at the various levels. Therefore stakeholders such as Community Based Organisations (CBOs), School Management Committees/Parent Teacher Associations (SMC/PTAs), District Assembly (DA), District Education Office (DEO) and Community and Religious Leaders (CRLs) were to be part of the planning and implementation of the various plans (Ministry of Education, 2003). The DESP, which is a Sector Wide Approach to planning, was introduced in the mid 1990s because of the disappointment and disenchantment with the traditional planning method. (Addae-Boahene, 2007).

However, it appears that stakeholders' involvement and participation level in the Education Strategic Plan process in the Salaga town-council of the Gonja East District is low and has led to low level of support from the stakeholders. Consequently, academic activities appeared slow as most children of school age abandon school for farm and menial jobs, a situation contributing to the low academic standards in the district and child labour. This study aims at assessing the level of stakeholder participation in the Education Strategic Plan in the Salaga town-council of the Gonja East District and come out with suggestions that will guide policy decision towards ensuring effective Education Strategic Plan which is the main instrument of the Sector Wide Approach to Development Assistance (Addae-Boahene, 2007) and more importantly to help improve the quality of education within the District.

2. Related Studies

There are a wide range of definitions and interpretations of participation. These include;

- sensitizing people to make them more responsive to development programmes and encouraging local initiatives and self-help;
- actively involving people in the decision-making process with regards to their development;
- organizing group action to give hitherto excluded disadvantaged people, control over resources, access to services and/or bargaining power;
- promoting the involvement of people in the planning and implementation of development efforts as well as the sharing of their benefits; and
- in more general descriptive terms; "the involvement of a significant number of persons in situations or actions which enhanced their well-being, such as their income, security or self-esteem (Uphoff, 1979; International Association for Public Participation, 2006; Mosse, 2001; Mansuri and Rao, 2004; Heck, 2003).

There are many theories of participation and empowerment such as Freire's Transformative Learning, Chambers' Participatory Rural Appraisal, Mansuri and Rao's Community Based Development and the Sector Wide Approach to development assistance. Freire's thesis, "humans are subjects in and with the world" was the starting point of his work on pedagogic defiance, "educate in order to transform". The theory of transformative learning otherwise referred to as conscientization, or consciousness-raising, became the basis of both education and development, and a very practical method of getting groups actively involved, breaking through apathy and developing critical awareness about the causes of problems (Fritze, 2005; Hope and Timmel, 2004). According to Hope and Timmel (2004), Freire's key principles to transformative learning include: no education is ever neutral, issue(s) must be relevant to participants, problem-posing, dialogue, reflection and action (praxis) and radical transformation of life in local communities and the whole society. Freire emphasised that people will act on issues they have strong feelings because there was a direct link between emotions and motivation to act. Therefore all education and development projects should be based on generative themes or start with the identification of issues which local people speak about with excitement, fear, hope, anxiety or anger (Fritze, 2005). The Ministry of Education, Ghana, as part of its efforts at decentralisation and effective utilisation of resources especially foreign aid, adopted Sector-Wide Approach (SWAp) to planning. This ensured that resources were tied or linked to specific activities to produce specific results.

Therefore, Education Strategic Plan is an initiative that links the Ministry of Education (central government) and district (local government) specific activities related to Equitable and Quality Education, Educational Planning and Management, Science and Technology and Technical Vocational Education and Training to the education sector budget. Under the initiative, all the stakeholders at the local level were to be actively involved in the planning process of the education system to ensure that outcome of educational programmes covered the needs of the people (Ministry of Education, 2003).

Capacity building ensures that stakeholders are abreast with policy development and programme status. Furthermore, it ensures that reviews are made in the implementation approaches and training requirements thereby avoiding duplication of efforts. However, capacity building is a time consuming activity in terms of uplifting stakeholders' level of knowledge to own and manage their own services (Baku and Agyeman, 2002; Barnes and Sekpey, 2006).

Olivier (2006) opines that knowledge exchange was essential for establishing fair, mutually acceptable trade-offs. Community participation projects required complex multi-directional exchange of information to achieve a balance between large and often diverse range of user groups. The root sources of the origins of public participation within the local government sphere could be traced to reasons such as good development project practice (Olivier, 2006). The outcome of every education and development are based on the radical transformation of life and the people. Peoples' involvement is an important factor in achieving such transformation. Therefore effective participation of people is paramount if learning should be transformative or bring about liberation (Freire, 1970). Chambers (1994) indicates that the key concepts which influenced the growth and spread of participatory strategies were decentralisation and empowerment. Decentralisation was a way of devolving resources and discretion to the grass root or local people. Empowerment was a situation where the people took control over their lives and secured ownership and control of productive assets. Rapid Rural Appraisal, (RRA), which is employed to involve rural people in the examination of their own problems, setting their own goals, and monitoring their own achievements, is an initiative established to building long-term sustainable local action and institutional capacity. RRA employs a wide range of approaches and methods which enable local people to express, enhance, share, and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, as well as to plan and act. It is also an initiative intended to enhance people's analytical capacity knowledge, and promote local ownership (Chambers, 1983; Chambers, 1995).

Participatory methods should be used to facilitate investigations, analysis and planning by rural people. For local people to confidently and competently express their own knowledge, conduct their own analysis and declare their own priorities, outsiders should step off their pedestals, sit down, "hand over the stick," and listen and learn (Narayan and Katrinka, 2002; Stiftel, 2000; Chambers, 1994; Project Management Body of Knowledge, 2009; World Bank, 2006).

2.1 Community Based Development

Community Based Development (CBD) is an umbrella term that refers to projects which actively include beneficiaries in their design and management. Community Driven Development is a term, originally coined by the World Bank, which refers to Community-Based Development projects where communities have direct control over key project decisions as well as the management of investment funds (Mansuri and Rao, 2003).

The main tenets of CBD include: sustainability, efficiency and effectiveness, poverty reduction, inclusion, empowerment, and good governance. The CBD tenets are achieved by social planners and potential beneficiaries eliciting development priorities directly from target communities, channelling resources available to the poor through credit, social funds, capacity building and occupational training and strengthening civic capacities of communities and organisations which represent them for collective action (Mansuri and Rao, 2003).

In 'The Varied Paths to Socialism,' Nyerere indicates the danger of a situation that lacks the participation of the people as:

> *If the people are not involved in public ownership, and cannot control the policies followed, the public ownership can lead to fascism not socialism […] socialism is only possible if the people as a whole are involved in the government of their political and economic affairs* (Nyerere, 1968).

The statement by Nyerere draws attention to the importance of local community participation in the development of their locality.

Participation level ranges from low to high level stakeholder participation depending on their interest in the benefits to be derived and how much participation in terms of their involvement. These participation levels include: inform, consult, collaborate/partner, and empower/control. Consult level provide stakeholders with balanced and objective information to understanding the problem, alternatives and/or solution; consult, to obtain stakeholder feedback on analysis, alternatives or decisions. Collaborate/partner refers to working in partnership with other stakeholders on each aspect of the decision, developing alternatives and identifying solutions. Empower/control is the process of building stakeholders' capacity to make informed decisions and take responsibility (The Zambian Department of Water and Forestry, 2005 cited Barnes and Sekpey, 2006; Mannheim 1940, cited in Stiftel, 2000).

On the other hand Wilcox (2002) proposed a five-rung ladder of participation to include Information (merely telling people what was planned); Consultation (offering some options, listening to feedback, but not allowing new ideas); deciding together (encouraging additional options and ideas, and providing opportunities for joint decision–making), acting together (different interest groups deciding together on what was best, form partnership to carry out decisions); and supporting independent community interests (where local groups or organisations are offered funds, advice or other support to develop their own agendas within guidelines).

Where local people are involved in decision-making during all stages of the project cycle, participation is at higher-levels and the best results follow and the reverse is the case and also evident. Thus, where local people are only involved in information sharing and consultation, project outcomes are much poorer (Mosse, 2001; Project Management Body of Knowledge, 2009).

Most of the basic schools in Ghana are initiated by communities, which willingly recruit teachers and provided places of learning for their children. Most of these schools are later absorbed into the public system and the management and control of these schools shift to central government authorities with minimum community participation. The shift in the management and control of education delivery tend to have adverse effect on local community commitment and involvement in quality basic education delivery. As part of government's effort at strengthening community participation structures, various community structures such as SMCs/PTAs, DEOC, DEPT, circuits, zones, area councils, were established. For example the SMC has a legal backing based on GES Act, 1995 (Addae-Boahene, 2007).

Also, community participation in education delivery in Ghana is traditionally limited to the provision of school infrastructure. The 1987 Education Reform went beyond this traditional role of communities to community ownership of basic schools within a locality. It recognised provision of basic education as a joint venture between government and the communities, and their roles are defined in official policy documents. Government provides curriculum materials, equipment, teachers, supervision and management. However, participation comes to communities as responsibilities assigned to them in policy statements by government without consultations and regard on their capacity to execute or perform (Agyeman and Baku, 2002; Addae-Boahene, 2007).

However, Berends (2009) concludes that the results-based evidence for the promotion of lower or higher level of local participation remains inconclusive, contrary to Chambers (1995 and 2005)'s claim that increased amounts of local participation in projects bring empowerment and transformation to the poor and marginalised (Mosse, 2001).

2.2 Academic Performance within the Salaga Town Council in the East Gonja District

In spite of efforts at ensuring decentralisation and aid effectiveness in Ghana through the Education Strategic Plan /District Education Strategic Plan, academic performance, especially at the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) results, a major indicator of quality basic education delivery have persistently been poor. For instance, at the national level the BECE League table indicated that sixty-two Percent (62%), fifty percent (50%) and forty-nine percent (49%) of the students qualified for placement into Senior High School in 2008, 2009 and 2010 respectively (GES 2009; GES 2010). At the district level the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) League table indicated that the number of students who qualified for placement into Senior High School in East Gonja district were 42%, 31% and 28% for 2008, 2009 and 2010 respectively. A breakdown of the results according to area councils and circuits indicated that the number of pupils who qualified for placement into Senior High School within Salaga town council were 37.1%, 25.58% and 20.19 % for 2008, 2009 and 2010 respectively (Ghana Education Service 2010; BECE League Table.GES, Accra (East Gonja District Education Office, 2010).

This downward trend in academic performance at the BECE level has became a matter of concern to stakeholders in education such as the District Assembly(DA), District Education Office (DEO), School Management Committees (SMC)/Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), CBOs, Christian Religious Leaders (CRL), teachers, and pupils within the Salaga Town Council, and Social Statistics.

2.3 Study Setting and Methods

Salaga town council is one of the six (6) area councils in the East Gonja District. There were three main religious groupings in Salaga town council namely; Islam, Christianity and Traditional religion. Salaga is the administrative capital of the East Gonja District with twenty-four (24) sections or suburbs. There are five (5) electoral areas within the Salaga town council namely; Dagomba line, Lampor, Machera, Mfabaso and Ngua Alhaji. Salaga Town Council had a long tradition of Islamic schools, with Islamic scholars mentoring a large number of students from across West Africa and the Sahel.

Formal education is gradually gaining patronage because people who in the past refused to enrol their children into formal schools had now established English and Arabic schools and enrolled their children. There are two (2) circuits within Salaga Town Council namely; Urban 'A' and Urban 'B'. There are public and private schools in Salaga Town Council. The public schools are twelve (12) Primary Schools, eight (8) Junior High Schools and two (2) Senior High Schools. The private schools are four (4) primary schools (East Gonja District Education Office, 2010).

3. Methodology

Both deductive and inductive approach, which Perry (1998) refers to as abductive approach, was adopted for the study although the emphasis was more on deductive. The study used qualitative method with case study strategy, dwelling mainly on primary data. Though this study is a social survey type, it was also cross-sectional as it considered study participants at one time. Therefore data collected is applicable to that time frame. The target population of the study comprised of CBOs, SMCs/PTAs, CRLs, teachers, pupils', Assembly persons, and Circuit Supervisors within Salaga Town Council and the staff of East Gonja District Assembly. These constitute the major stakeholders of education within the district. Five (5) representatives from each stakeholder group, including the leaders were purposively selected for the study. The selection was based on the experience and knowledge level of participants to be able to provide relevant information. The assessment was based on:

- the knowledge level of stakeholders in respect of DESP
- the level of involvement of stakeholders in the DESP
- training on DESP and
- the level of information sharing/level of communication with the stakeholders.

The data was collected through field survey using in-depth interview instrument. The data collected was analysed and deductions and inferences made.

4.0 Results and Discussions

4.1 Stakeholders/Participants Level of Knowledge about the District Education Strategic Planning

Under the District Education Strategic Plan Development policy, the District Education Office (DEO) and the District Assemblies have joint responsibility to inform and educate all stakeholders in order to make informed contribution to the of District Education Strategic Plan Development process. Responses from the various stakeholders indicated their low level of knowledge about District Education Strategic Plan Development. Interestingly, most of the stakeholders had not even head of District Education Strategic Plan. For example, most of the members of School Management Committee (SMC), the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), the Student/Pupils representatives as well as the Assembly Members within the District appeared to have very little or no knowledge at all about the District Education Strategic Plan Development. This means that the contributions from these stakeholders, if any, would have little or no impact on the District Education Strategic Plan Development Process within the District. Thus the level of stakeholders' knowledge about of District Education Strategic Plan Development Process towards Quality Basic Education appeared low.

4.2 Stakeholders' Level of Involvement in the District Education Strategic Plan Development Process

The District Education Strategic Plan Development is (supposedly) a shared responsibility of all the stakeholders within the district.

However, the results from the interview session with the stakeholders showed contrary as most of them indicated that the District Education Office never involved them in the District Education Strategic Plan Development process. There was an indication that the DEO failed to use its field staff or structures and other community level structures such as Circuit Supervisors, SMCs/PTAs, proprietors of mission schools, chiefs and elders, circuits and cluster schools effectively. Also circuit supervisors who linked the DEO and school-communities were not actively involved in the DESPD process.

Although the Education Act 2008, Act 177 and Act 462 of Ghana's Republican Constitution (1992) give the District Assemblies (DA) absolute control over decentralised departments including the District Education Offices (DEO), there seemed to be power struggles between the two units within the district. It was strange that the DA did not know the process of developing the DESP. This was what a representative of the DA said to support this claim:

> *Let me find out from my deputy if he has an idea what the District Education Strategic Plan is about because honestly I have no idea. The Education Office is still not decentralised as many people think. They do their own things and where they need our support they come begging. That is the problem. When it suits them they are not part of the decentralised departments but when they are handicapped, they are a decentralised department. I think something has to be done to resolve this issue of decentralised departments once and for all.*

Furthermore, most of the stakeholders complained that the DEO never involved them in their meetings, nor did it provide them with the outcome of decisions taken except when they needed support. These statements give a gloomy picture about low level of involvement of the various stakeholders in the District Education Strategic Plan Development process or lack of it.

4.3 Building Capacity of Stakeholders

Building the capacity of various stakeholders to enable them play their various roles under the District Education Strategic Plan Development process is of paramount importance. However, from the interview held with the stakeholders, not a single training initiative on the District Education Strategic Plan Development process had been organised for the stakeholders. It was inferred from the interview that the DEO had consistently failed to follow the directives from the Ministry of Education through the Ghana Education Service on providing training on DESP to enable it share information on the policy with staff and other stakeholders in order to play their roles effectively. Most of the respondents attributed this to lack of resource availability.

Others were of the view that it was due to the poor collaboration between the DA and the DEO. Whichever reason assigned, the fact is, the stakeholders of education within Salaga District had not received any training regarding the District Education Strategic Plan Development process. This might have contributed to their limited knowledge about this policy and perhaps low level of commitment towards improving the quality of education within the district.

4.4 Level of Communication/Information Sharing

Communication and information sharing is equally important in achieving the objectives if the District Education Strategic Plan Development process. Respondents were asked to give their perceptions on the level of communication and information sharing under the District Education Strategic Plan Development initiative. It was deduced from the responses that the level of communication and information sharing appeared low. The DEO failed to follow the directive on the DESP by the Ministry of Education in terms of sharing information on the policy with stakeholders.

The DESP is supposed to be the mechanism used to feed the District Director of Education, Regional Director of Education, Director General of Education and the Minister of Education with facts and figures for central government budgeting and also negotiations with development partners for support. Information flow about the DESP planning process from the DEO to the other stakeholders appeared poor within the district. Thus, the level of information flow was too low to enhance community participation in the DESP. This communication gap seemed to have contributed to the low commitment of the stakeholders in term of their contributions towards ensuring quality basic education within the district.

5. Conclusion

This study was undertaken to examine the relationship between the DESP and community participation level towards quality basic education delivery in Salaga Town Council. The study specifically aimed at assessing the stakeholders' level of participation in the District Education Strategic Plan (DESP) development/and implementation process in Salaga Town Council. It was evident from the findings that the stakeholders, including some of the members of the DEO, did not know the DESP planning process. In fact most of the stakeholders did not know the strategic intent of the District Directorate of Education and the components of DESP and so were unable to make an informed input in the planning process.

It was also found out that the DEO did not involve other stakeholders in the planning of the DESP within Salaga Town Council. The other stakeholders such as SMCs/PTAs, CBOs and CRLs did not participate in the planning of the DESP. Not a single strategic planning activity (question-and-answer, education forum, town meeting, public hearing, community drama, etc) was organised to seek stakeholders' input into the development of the DESP. All stakeholders except the District Education Office did not have copies of the DESP. Thus the majority of the stakeholders' level of knowledge about DESP planning process was weak. With regards to the stakeholders' level of participation in the planning of DESP, it was revealed that the stakeholders' level of participation in the planning of DESP was also weak as the majority of the stakeholders were not involved in the DESP process. This has contributed to the low commitment level of the stakeholders towards improving the quality of Basic Education within the district.

Again the structures of engagement for effective community participation were either ineffective or not used in the development and implementation of the DESP. It appeared that the stakeholders did not understand the concept of sector wide approach to planning. The seemingly power struggle among stakeholders was a threat to ensuring all inclusive leadership and planning system within the district.

6. Recommendation

In order to improve on the stakeholder participation in the District Education Strategic Development Planning process towards quality basic education delivery in Salaga Town Council the following recommendations are made:

1. The DEO should collaborate with the District Information Service to create awareness on the DESP through public fora and the use of mobile van for film shows and information sharing activities.
2. The Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Service should develop brochures and other documents indicating a clear definition, the rationale, components, stakeholders' roles, and benefits of the DESP.
3. The Ministry of Education should develop participatory approach training courses and manuals for DEO staff and other stakeholders to provide a better understanding of DESP planning and implementation.
4. The DEO should organise fora such as town meetings, question-and-answer sessions, public hearings on draft DESP, community drama and education related programs among others at the school-community, cluster centre, circuit and area council levels to ensure effective community participation in educational planning.
5. The DEO should provide district level stakeholders such as the DA and other decentralised departments, and community level stakeholders such as SMCs/PTAs, CBOs and CRLs among others with copies of the DESP, ADEOP and ADEAP.

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