

Briefing Paper

Disincentives of civil servants in Northern Ghana

Civil servants in Northern Ghana are often accused of lacking ambition, and having alternative motives to serving their districts including corruption. While it can't be argued that civil servants include a range of characters, and that corruption should not be excused, observations at the district show that the context in which civil servants work is one that is particularly lacking incentives to perform. This paper will describe this environment, particularly from the perspective of a District Planning Officer (planner). It will first look at the disincentives and then at the lack of incentives that exist for the planner to perform. The examples given are real, taken from studies in two districts.

Disincentives to Perform

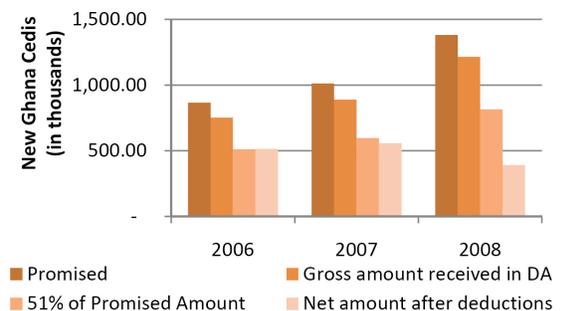
A planner's job is to create plans for the district's development, monitor and evaluate the implementation of those plans, and act as the information center for the District Assembly (DA). Plans are usually made in accordance to the needs of the population and the financial resources available to serve them. In the context of district assemblies in Northern Ghana, a planner's first challenge is dealing with the unpredictable flux of financial resources that make accurate planning a near impossible job.

The unpredictability of funds comes from two sources. The first is from donors whose contribution is uncertain in amounts, and varying in process. Since donor funding is tied to specific areas (water, education, etc.), it becomes effective to create catch-all plans that capture all donors focuses as district priorities.

The second source of unpredictability comes from the District Assembly Common Fund (DACF). In one district over the last three years, the DACF received by the DA has consistently been less than promised at the beginning of the year. Typically what is received is about 51% of the original sum. DAs readily prepare for this, as the Guidelines for Utilization of DACF states that 49% of the DACF can be deducted at source¹. However, when the DACF comes to the district, deductions typically range from 49% to 70%. With a budget that varies so greatly (about 20% variability), it makes it extremely challenging to create any kind of plan that with which to be held accountable to. From a planner's perspective, the variability of the DACF is the most frustrating since it represents the largest amount of

discretionary funding. Plans that are created in these circumstances are near useless so district staff often respond to immediate emergencies as opposed to following to a strategic district development plan.

DACF Disbursement



In the year of 2008 in Saboba District, the supplementary budget included a plan to purchase low tension electricity poles for 25,000GH¢. In each of the first 3 installments of common fund, 30,000GH¢, 36,000GH¢, and 36,000GH¢ was deducted at source for low tension electricity poles. Without knowing the unit price of an electricity pole, it was impossible to know how many to expect. In the end a total of 650 came to the district.

The second disincentive to planning comes into play when looking at the implementation of plans. The power structure at the DA is such that the District Chief Executive (DCE) and District Coordinating Director (DCD) have the power to change any of the MTDP and AAP at any time before and during the implementation phase. Consider the following from a district: out of 38 programme activities planned in the MTDP 2006-2009², only 10 were carried out to completion, 15 got started, and 13 were left untouched³. While it is undeniable that unforeseen emergencies can arise, and that money flows are unpredictable, they do not

² Anonymous District Assembly Medium Term Development Plan (MTDP) 2006-2009

³ In an anonymous district in Northern Region there were 71 programme activities in the 2006-2009 MTDP. This analysis is based on 38 programme activities because the remaining 31 had no data stated on their status, or reports were not available.

account for the 50% discrepancy observed. Under these conditions, why should a planner invest time and energy to create quality plans?

Lack of incentives to plan

On top of these disincentives is a lack of incentives to motivate the planner to excel. This can be traced to a number of factors, beginning with the most obvious: their salary. The average planner in the Northern Region receives 300GH¢⁴ monthly, depending on their rank in the civil service. When compared to a district resource personnel hired by various donors, the disparity is disheartening. Consider that the district resource personnel for the UNICEF I-WASH projects receive on average 700GH¢ monthly. It isn't hard to imagine what it feels like when an employee with similar qualifications to a planner's is sent to a district to assist them (though with only one project set of responsibilities), but is paid almost twice as much. There are some donors, however, such as EU Micro Projects Program that will top up a planner's salary by approximately 48GH¢ per month, which considered a fair method of compensation.

The lack of motivation associated with this situation not only affects the planners directly, but it also affects the rest of the district staff who are also looking for opportunities to supplement their salaries with any means possible. The first is donor activities. It is thus not surprising that

Note: As a basis for comparison, EWB employees are paid about 330GH¢ (+medical insurance) per month. We know from experience that this is barely sufficient to pay for rent, electricity, water, food, communications, basic transportation and clothing. The main difference here is that planners typically have many more dependants than EWB employees.

district employees will readily participate in (and compete for) workshops that double their daily income, even though they will admit to their impertinence and repetition. The situation also does little to deter an underlying degree of corruption.

Moving past the base salary, the next set of incentives is typically promotions. The process through which a planner can be promoted is almost entirely dependent

⁴ Out of 12 planners in Northern Region there are 6 'Assistant Planners', and 6 'Senior Planners'; making 280GH¢ and 575GH¢ Gross monthly (approximately 300GH¢ net income)

on seniority and not performance. Every 3 years, an officer is eligible for an appraisal, followed by an interview done by the District Coordinating Director (DCD) and co-signed by the Regional Economic Planning Officer. In the last 5 years no one has been denied a promotion once the appraisal has gone through. The implication of this process is a shift in the incentives from being results-based performance to that of tenure.

Within this promotion scheme, the planner's prospects are further confined. There are two classes of employees within which one can evolve: the administrative class and the technical class. The administrative class consists of the District Coordinating Directors (DCD) and Deputy DCDs. The technical class consists of all other employees – including the planning officer (which is already at one of the highest ranks). The implication of this categorization is that a planner can never be promoted to a new position with more responsibilities and increased opportunities for growth, unless they change classes to join the administrative class. While this issue is addressed under the new Local Government Service Law, historically this transition has been very difficult to come by. In this context, it is not uncommon for planners to see new DCDs or deputy DCDs come into superior positions with less experience and qualifications, which can be very un motivating.

Conclusion

While it is easy to blame the lack of performance at the district level on the skill level of civil servants, to effectively address the situation requires looking at the incentive and disincentive structure they are working under. Improving the predictability and flexibility of donor funding, and offering salary top-ups and performance-based incentives could do much to provide a more enabling environment. With the enactment of the Local Government Service Law, particular attention should be given to making transparent the DACF deductions, and to facilitating the transition to a new career progression of civil servants. Finally, district assemblies should be held accountable to create evidence-based plans, and for following them, as a prerequisite to proposing projects that meet donor requirements.



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