

# Briefing Paper

## District Planning and Coordinating in Ghana's Northern Region

This brief attempts to paint a picture of field realities as seen from the perspective of District Planning and Coordinating Units (DPCUs) in Ghana's Northern Region. It highlights areas of donor programmes which still need to be coordinated to help districts manage their development effectively and to prevent the waste of resources. The observations are categorized in the areas of programme planning, implementation and evaluation. It closes with some recommendations when determining the way forward.

### Key Insights:

- Donor conditions on district assemblies cause much inefficiency in the use of scarce resources (time, people, money).
- Donor conditions on districts engender a project-centric accountability structure as opposed to a functional or systems-based structure which would foster a more holistic approach to the development of the district.

### Key Areas of Consideration:

- Take immediate first steps to facilitate local ownership and increase DPCU and RPCU-lead coordination between donors to reduce these inefficiencies.
- Accelerate the process towards discretionary funding.

### Best Practice:

Recently UNICEF approached the RPCU for input into a DPCU mentorship programme designed to provide technical assistance to the more challenged DPCUs in the region in the preparation of their next Medium Term Development Plans. This action not only allows the RPCU more ownership and insight into programmes, but also provides the on-the-job training component that is typically missing in so many approaches.

DISCAP and TSPS-II both included small discretionary funds for the DPCUs and RPCU to overcome unanticipated challenges during implementation fostering management initiative and a problem solving approach rather than a dependency on donors to approve every transaction.

### Planning

Most donor<sup>1</sup> programmes come with their own priority areas (water, agriculture, roads, etc.) set in response to meeting Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets. While this can respond to the needs of the poor, it inadvertently provides a disincentive for DPCUs to try and understand their district's priority needs. As admitted by a District Planning Officer:

*"To some extent, donors allow districts to make their own activity choices on projects because they believe in decentralization. But every donor comes with their own priorities, policies, and guidelines."*

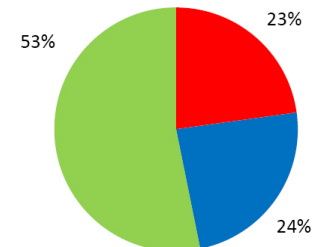
He was supported in this claim by his District Coordinating Director:

*"The implementation of boreholes verses small town water systems has come up many times. We realize we don't have technical experience, but we do have local knowledge. We know the history of unsuccessful attempts of drilling in the district. Our knowledge can compliment expertise. For the I-WASH project, we were asked to submit a list of 10 communities for boreholes and some for hand dug wells, even though we know these approaches don't work in all cases."*

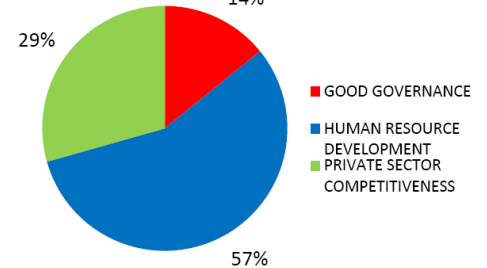
The influence of donor priorities on District Assembly planning is also brought into question with a study of the last round of District Medium Term Development Plans for 2006-2009. The graphs below show that a majority of districts had prioritised "private sector competitiveness" issues in their districts, yet a majority of the strategies (or solutions) ended up being in the category of "human resources development". The sectors included under human resources development are health, education, and water and sanitation; all of which are sectors that donors favour based on their essential role achieving MDG targets. While further investigation is required, the influence donors can have on district priorities is a constant force to be balanced by local ownership, and can become starkly evident in an analysis of these plans.

1 In alphabetical order: Canadian International Development Agency (with CIFS, DWAP and NORST), Danish International Development Agency (with TSPS II), European Union (with EU-Micro-Projects), HIPC funds, International Fund for Agricultural Development (with NORPREP), UNICEF (with I-WASH), World Bank (with CBRDP).

Regional Distribution of Issues by Thematic Area 2006-09



Regional Distribution of Strategies by Thematic Area 2006-09



These graphs represent the identified issues and strategies planned in District Medium Term Development Plans for the 2006-2009 period. They are categorized under three thematic areas from GPRS-II. Good Governance includes general government service delivery, enforcement of law and regulations, women's rights, etc., Human Resource Development refers to the health, education and water and sanitation sectors, and Private Sector Competitiveness refers to access to credit, laws to support private business, modernization of agriculture, etc.

### Implementation

Without debating whether it is appropriate or not, the conditions for donor funding prompt accountability to a number of different "bosses" with separate reporting and monitoring requirements. The presence of multiple donors also demands a lot of time and resources from the same key officers in the DPCU (District Coordinating Director, District Planning Officer, District Budget Officer, and District Engineer). These demands

are not only in fulfilling the project management requirements, but also in the plethora of training workshops and reviews throughout the life of the programme. A survey<sup>2</sup> of DPCUs produced the following:

Capacity Development	Per Project	Cumulative Count
Average number of donor funded projects in a district	-	7
Average M&E reporting requirement per year per project	4	28
Average financial and activity reporting requirement per project per year	12	84
Average days to write a high quality report	1	7
Average number of days in a given workshop	2.5	17.5
Average number of key DPCU staff* at workshops	2	14
Average number of staff days required to prepare for field monitoring from Accra delegations	2	14
Average number of staff days required to host field monitoring from Accra delegations	2	14
Average number of visits from Accra delegations per year	2	14

\* District Coordinating Director, District Planning Officer, District Budget Officer, and District Engineer

Taken alone, each of these project numbers don't add up to much: about 42 employee days per project per year (which don't include workshops organised by MLGRD, NDPC and other organizations delivering services in the district). However, when one considers that districts are under-resourced in terms of competent staff, and that each district is partnered to about 7 donors, the numbers quickly become unmanageable. In fact, one of the sampled DPCUs reported being in Tamale for various donor requirements an average of 8 days per month, which equates to about 40% of an officer's workdays.

The time outside of the district for training is made even less efficient by the typical content and delivery of the workshops. Trainings are either project specific and limited in their scope (for example on a specific reporting format), or too general to fit the specific needs of a district (for example computer training) to easily adopt into regular routine. Rarely is there a follow-up or on-the-job training component that would allow the officers to integrate their new skills into their daily routines. Compounding this, there is often much overlap between donor trainings as described by this district planning officer:

*“Learnings are applied during activity-based workshops, like the NDPC MTDP workshops, where you are expected to perform a district activity. But there is a lot of repetition and many are a waste of time. We had a series of Community Action Plan workshops from UNICEF, CBRDP, and NORPREP which were not coordinated.”*

<sup>2</sup> These numbers are collected from interviews with DPCU officers in Central Gonja, Saboba, and the RPCU.

The lack of coordination also inhibits individual and institutional skill building in the way that many donors require that a focal person be chosen amongst the few competent employees. While the focal person does allow for increased accountability, when combined with the project committee assignments donors end up encouraging the adoption of a project-centric focus. Alternatively, building district systems that cater to a holistic vision of the development of the district would also facilitate specialization and skill building amongst the other officers and from the DPCUs and RPCU as a whole.

On top of the administration and training, there is also the monitoring component. In this case, the challenge comes from funding being tied to monitoring specific donor projects. These projects are often spread throughout the district so DPCUs and particularly the RPCU<sup>3</sup>, in an effort to conserve resources (fuel, vehicle wear and time), have a hard time meeting a donor condition that prevents them from monitoring all the projects from different donors in a particular area.

### Evaluation

Region-wide project reviews tend to focus most of their time on audit findings and project outputs. Any attempt to assess higher-level outcomes is only superficial, as identified and discussed during numerous project reviews facilitated by the RPCU. This is partly a product of a lack of skills in the area of measuring outcomes and impacts, and also a product of a project-centric accountability structure. Furthermore, from the issues that are raised during reviews, the opportunities to problem solve and commit to operational changes on the part of the donor or MLGRD is not taken advantage of in a transparent way. DPCU and RPCU input is sought, but these inputs are taken far away from the field to be considered. This behaviour limits the opportunities for DPCUs and the RPCU to participate in and learn from the higher level decision making processes in programme management.

### Conclusion

This paper shared a number of the challenges district assemblies face when having to deal with many donors and their respective conditions. This inadequate coordination creates much inefficiency in the use of scarce resources at the DPCU, on top of engendering a project-centric structure that inhibits skill building and specialisation. As such, it is highly recommended that donors start asking themselves what first steps they can engage in to reduce these inefficiencies.

<sup>3</sup> In this document, “RPCU” refers to the RPCU Secretariat in Northern Region, it does not include the members of the expanded RPCU.



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