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# IMPROVING PARTICIPATORY WATER GOVERNANCE IN ACCRA, GHANA

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## KEY POINTS

- As with many cities of the developing world, Accra faces challenges in providing adequate potable water to its citizens due to rapid population growth (particularly in informal settlements), poverty and other governance challenges.
- Local water boards (LWBs) and "water dialogues" offer ways to involve residents of impoverished communities in making decisions regarding water access and affordability. It is important to consider whether these institutions and mechanisms could be replicated in other communities across Accra.
- If carried out with sensitivity to local concerns, community engagement offers a pathway to promote more equitable and sustainable water governance. Such engagement mechanisms must be designed in a way that ensures citizens' voices are represented.

## INTRODUCTION: PARTICIPATORY WATER GOVERNANCE AND LOCAL WATER BOARDS

The international community has highlighted the need for participatory environmental governance for more than two decades with efforts such as the Dublin Principles (1992) and the Aarhus Convention on Participatory Management for Environmental Matters (1998). This policy brief is concerned with participatory water governance in Accra, Ghana, particularly in its densely populated slums (also referred to here as "informal settlements," although ownership may be formally recognized). Lack of access to clean, affordable potable water is an important concern for many residents of Accra. Although Ghana as a whole is generally

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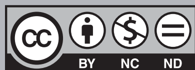

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not considered to be water stressed in a biophysical sense (Lundehn and Morrison, 2007), water-related infrastructure and services in metropolitan Accra fall short of international goals with respect to access, quality and affordability, as defined in the 2010 UN statement on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation.

The research informing this brief assessed participatory water governance in several informal settlements in Accra with a focus on LWBs, the first of which were established in 2007. In addition to responsibilities related to water distribution and payment collection, LWBs could be described as citizens' associations to promote community engagement; indeed, the research found that the boards do enable a certain level of citizen engagement. Nonetheless, this brief also provides recommendations on how the boards and participatory water governance more generally could be enhanced. The study methodology involved interviews in Accra in 2011, follow-up community feedback sessions in 2012 and a comparative survey of communities in Accra and Cape Town, South Africa in early 2012. This brief focusses on the lessons from Accra, where 243 residents were surveyed across two communities: Teshie and Ashaiman. The research also draws on key informant and resident interviews conducted in Ayidiki-New Town, Nima, Sukura and Teshie.

## WHY PARTICIPATORY WATER GOVERNANCE?

An increasing international consensus recognizes that governance policies relating to water use and access should be developed on the basis of consultations with local residents, including direct engagement with the poor on their water priorities and needs (Ahmad, 2003; Goldin, 2013). It is argued, for instance, that participation will improve outcomes by taking into account local

knowledge and will lead to more effective monitoring when communities are directly involved (Ostrom, 1990). While participation is likely to be beneficial on many levels, there is a need for caution. When not coupled with capacity or resources, for instance, participation can represent a downloading of responsibility to communities or certain segments of the population, such as women or the poor (Harris, 2009). Furthermore, devolution of governance responsibility to local communities can also involve the capture of resources by local elites ("elite capture") or participation that is not meaningful, for example, attending meetings but not being able to contribute effectively ("participatory exclusions"), which entrenches power dynamics and further marginalizes vulnerable community members (Kesby, 2005; Agarwal, 2001; Harris, 2005; 2009; Ribot, 2002; Walker, 1999). Ideally, participatory water governance should foster meaningful participation among all citizens — a goal that has repeatedly proven to be very difficult to actualize.

The issue of participation in water governance in Accra is of particular interest due to ongoing concerns about the lack of water access and affordability. Concerns have also been raised regarding democracy and sovereignty, given that the privatization of Accra's water sector system was required through loan conditions established by the international financial institutions (Yeboah, 2006; Whitfield, 2006; Amenga-Etego and Grusky, 2005).

## SETTING THE CONTEXT

The Greater Accra Metropolitan Area is a fast-growing urban area facing considerable planning challenges. Its population — estimated at 3.5 million in 2010 — is expected to double by 2030 (Government of Ghana, 2011; Adank et al., 2011). Metropolitan Accra is considered to be one of the most ethnically diverse areas of the country, with all of Ghana's major ethnic groups among its residents. Accra's neighbourhoods are marked by economic and ethnic segregation as a result of migration patterns to the capital city (Agyei-Mensah and Owusu, 2010). Consequently, social, spatial and economic segregation are important to any consideration of service and infrastructure disparities across the city (Lundehn and Morrison, 2007). This study included the five communities listed above to get a clear picture across Accra.

Ghana recently declared success in halving the proportion of its population without access to improved water sources, in advance of the 2015 Millennium Development Goal target date. Yet, as of 2008, only 59 percent of Accra's residents were estimated to have access to "improved" drinking water, as defined by the Joint Monitoring Program (JMP) of the World Health Organization (Ghana News Agency cited in Ainuson, 2010: 59). "Improved" drinking water implies that the water is more likely to be safe than water from "unimproved" sources, although this is not assured. "Improved" sources include public taps, standpipe or rainwater sources, while "unimproved" sources include tanker trucks, surface water or unprotected dug wells (JMP, 2012).

## SOURCES OF WATER IN ACCRA

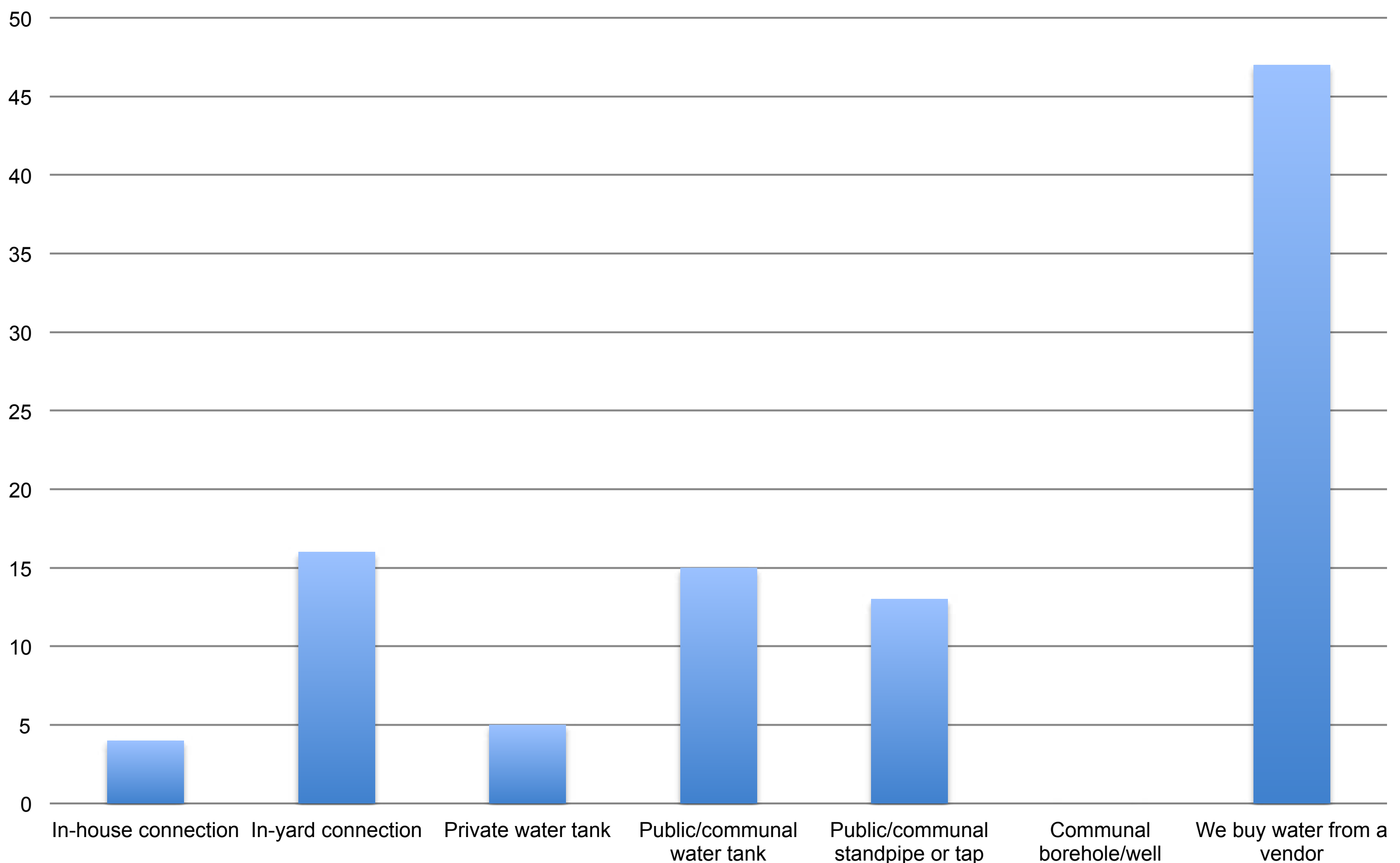
Identifying the sources of water is key to understanding the possible benefits of participatory governance. Among survey respondents in Teshie and Ashaiman, the majority (47 percent) reported buying water from vendors. This includes accessing water from tanker services or carrying buckets from a vendor's standpipe (Figure 1). Only four percent reported having an in-home connection, while 16 percent reported accessing water from an in-yard connection. Several of these modes of access, such as public or private water storage tanks ("polytanks") may be managed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or community entities, including LWBs. Further, 63 percent of

the Accra survey respondents indicated that water is "not easy to access."

Accra's municipal drinking water system is run by the Ghana Water Company Limited (GWCL). The current water distribution system reportedly fails to meet the demand for water, with estimates that supply only met 71 to 81 percent of the demand in 2007 (Adank et al., 2011). It is estimated that the piped network reaches approximately half of Accra's residents (Ainuson, 2010) and there is a high rate (60 percent) of "non-revenue water" (Fichtner, HYSTA and Watertech, 2010).[1]

1 Non-revenue water refers to water for which the utility does not receive any income, either due to leaks, theft or meter inaccuracies.

#### FIGURE 1: SOURCES OF WATER FOR HOUSEHOLDS, GHANA SURVEY DATA




Source: Harris et al., 2012.

## WATER ISSUES AND PARTICIPATION IN ACCRA

The survey data clearly suggests that there is considerable disagreement related to water issues in metropolitan Accra, with 38 percent reporting that they have disagreements over water either "sometimes" (25 percent) or "often" (13 percent). Perhaps related to conflict regarding water, 57 percent of respondents "strongly agreed" that "the community talks a lot about water-related issues."

Both survey sites suggest that residents are generally not aware of water-related meetings (90 percent in the target communities of metropolitan Accra responded that they are "not aware," or that they "don't know"). Similarly, a strong majority (90 percent) in Accra said they "do not" participate in consultations with government officials related to water (92 percent of respondents in Ashaiman and 82 percent in Teshie). Overall, 84 percent of those surveyed in Accra responded that they "do not participate in water-related committees" (compared, for instance, with 71 percent who do participate in faith-based or church activities).

When the handful of residents who participate in community meetings related to water were asked whether or not they consider this participation to be important, there were clear differences across the sites. For instance, nearly half of respondents in Teshie either "agree" or "strongly agree" that their participation is important, however, none of the respondents in Ashaiman in Accra either "strongly agree" or "agree" with this statement. Instead, 73 percent said it was "not applicable," suggesting that they do not participate or no such opportunities exist.

It is also noteworthy that 67 percent of respondents suggested that they feel they could make a contribution to water governance-related decisions. Fifty-six percent said they "wish they could participate more in community meetings," and 95 percent suggested that they "would feel comfortable talking with government officials about water issues" — all suggesting potential for enhanced engagement.

## A POTENTIAL MODEL? THE OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITS OF ACCRA'S LWBs

In 2007, LWBs were established in several of Accra's communities; the first LWB was established in Teshie by the GWCL. Boards are comprised of between 10 and 15 elected members. Additional boards have been established by NGOs, such as Cooperative Housing Foundation International (CHF-Ghana), a US-based NGO with offices in Accra (CHF-Ghana, 2012). Given the different actors involved, as well as other local variations, the boards differ across the city in terms of their makeup and function. Nonetheless, given some overriding characteristics of the boards, this policy brief considers what LWBs offer with respect to participatory water governance.

Three of the communities studied had operational LWBs: Teshie, Nima and Ayidiki. Teshie's water board was the first one to be established by the GWCL in 2007. LWBs were later established in several other communities of Accra, including Nima in 2008 and Ayidiki in 2010. While a primary goal of the LWBs is to promote local participation, the boards are also responsible for some water provision. For instance, the LWB in Teshie is responsible for the administration of a tanker as well as several water kiosks.

Despite the important role that boards play in supplying water in metropolitan Accra, it should be emphasized that not all water access is mediated by the LWBs. Those individuals or households who are connected directly to the piped network are not reliant on the extensions provided by the board, and many other private vendors also operate throughout these communities.

The research found that LWBs make the following contributions to participatory governance:

- For some community members, the boards have become a go-to organization when water issues arise. LWBs could thus contribute to trust-building and accountability on water-related concerns, both within the community and between it and the utility provider. Not all community members, however, are aware of functions and opportunities provided by the board.
- It is clear that the boards offer a channel for communication between residents and the GWCL, a function that is critical, given the limited presence of the utility provider in some communities. There are, however, clear limitations to the fulfillment of this role. In Teshie, for example, despite an operational LWB, people surveyed did not suggest a clear pathway of where to go when there they experience water-related concerns (with many saying they would "speak to friends and family" or "do nothing") and many others suggesting that they are "not aware of water related entities or meetings in their communities."
- Regarding non-revenue water (such as non-payment of bills or illegal connections), the LWBs offer an effective means to collect payment for water up front. This, again, has both positive and negative implications, as it does not help to alleviate the affordability challenges that are paramount in these communities.
- LWBs provide a mechanism whereby the price of water is agreed upon before sale (typically by the board, the utility provider and the Public Utility Regulatory Commission). This is a considerable benefit, rather than having prices determined ad hoc by the vendor or haggled on a case-by-case basis. Other research has suggested that these negotiations (e.g., haggling) can be a significant source of everyday stress (Wutich and Ragsdale, 2008).
- The boards also offer a recognized space for residents to discuss water questions and governance at the community level, although again, some of the survey data indicates that not all community members are aware of the existence of the LWBs and their associated activities.

Alongside these contributions, (and some limitations for participatory governance), several additional limitations deserve mention:

- Regarding accountability and a clear path for recourse when there is a water-related concern, only 22 percent of survey respondents in Teshie said they would go to a local councillor (likely including LWB members or others involved in similar roles). A further 41 percent of respondents said they would "speak about it to family and friends," and 18 percent that they would "do nothing." Evidently, even with an active LWB (in Teshie), there are still issues of responsibility, accountability and transparency.
- The boards' primary reliance on voluntary labour is also a clear limitation in the sense that, without payment for labour to operate the board, there are sustainability challenges (i.e., if at any point members are no longer willing or able to volunteer their labour, the governance and operations of the board may break down). While, in theory, board members might benefit if profit is generated through the sale of water, this is unlikely to occur. With any participatory governance regime, there are concerns if responsibility falls to certain community members, particularly those who might have other community or familial responsibilities, or when little resources and capacity are available to support the effort.

- While the LWBs help to mediate relations between the community and the utility provider, the process involved to obtain a new water connection or to acquire a permit to build a latrine remains onerous. For instance, these processes might involve negotiations between the community member, the LWB, an NGO, a micro-finance organization, the utility and the sub-metropolitan governance units — a very complex undertaking.[2]
- Finally, there is concern that all the LWBs studied were established by agencies external to the communities (either the GWCL or an NGO). This represents both clear opportunities and limits, given potential resources available that can be engaged and the possibility of disconnects between the priorities of external agencies and local needs.

## CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Participation in water governance initiatives offers a valuable pathway to move toward more equitable and sustainable water governance, now and into the future. As cities, including Accra, face rapid population growth and uncertainty about how climate change is affecting their water supplies, it is critical that their citizens have opportunities to engage more effectively in water governance. This study revealed positive elements and reasons for caution with respect to LWBs as the current dominant (albeit limited) mode of citizen engagement in contemporary Accra. Based on an assessment of the limits and opportunities provided by the boards from a participatory governance perspective, the following recommendations are proposed:

2 There are currently 13 sub-metropolitan governance units in Accra, which together make up the Accra Metropolitan Assembly, the entity responsible for approving construction, including digging of new water or sewage infrastructure.

**Support community dialogues to consider the establishment of LWBs in additional communities of Accra.**

Accra's LWBs represent the most visible mechanisms to promote participatory water governance. The boards, which are still in an early stage and are only present in several communities of the city, provide some opportunity for community engagement. Efforts should be undertaken to consider establishing boards in communities where they currently do not exist.

**Engage in efforts to improve the function and role of the boards.**

- The role of external actors should be carefully considered, with perhaps more effort to enable grassroots or bottom-up communication with residents, particularly to support communities as they consider whether to establish boards or to pursue other participatory mechanisms. Community dialogues, such as the "water dialogues" model, could be initiated in all communities to assess community needs, with options presented regarding the types of community engagement mechanisms that might be fostered with the assistance of the GWCL or local NGOs.
- Community members should be made more aware of the water boards' role, as well as opportunities for them to engage with the LWBs. The survey data shows that even in communities where the boards exist, many remain unaware of their activities and relatively few residents are engaged.
- Caution about the ways any participatory mechanisms affect different community members is also advisable. For instance, there might be concerns related to the reliance on volunteer labour, as this might present difficulties for broad engagement of women and other segments of the population (Harris, 2009).

Furthermore, survey results highlighted the need for a greater focus on the affordability of water. The boards currently function in a way that enables GWCL to deal more effectively with non-revenue water through pre-payment. However, this effort is somewhat in tension with affordability concerns that should be more considered more centrally in policy deliberations related to water access in Accra.

**Strengthen participatory mechanisms to ensure that citizens' voices are represented in LWB activities.**

A majority of those surveyed in Accra wished to participate more in water-related community meetings and a striking 95 percent suggested that they would, at least in theory, feel comfortable talking with government officials about water issues. These numbers are encouraging. Participatory mechanisms should be strengthened in ways that ensure that citizens feel as though their opinions are heard. At the same time, it is essential to be mindful that there is a risk that residents may feel as though their knowledge and contributions are sidelined. This can occur during community meetings when officials use technical language or invoke notions of "expertise," which may result in community disengagement (Harris, 2009; Goldin, Rutherford and Schoch, 2008; Goldin, 2010). While more engagement among broader subsections of Accra's residents should be encouraged, there must be continued vigilance to ensure that when people do participate, they feel that their voices are heard and their participation is meaningful (ibid.).

**Share best practices with other urban areas experiencing similar challenges.**

The study suggests that there are opportunities for sharing best practices among communities dealing with similar water-related challenges. For instance, despite imperfections, it is clear from the comparative research that residents in Cape Town's informal settlements are relatively content with their water situation — even if there is room for improvement with respect to time spent accessing water, the smell of the water or participatory governance possibilities in that context as well. This suggests that policies such as the Free Basic Water allocation and the Human Right to Water (both in South Africa) may play an important role in making progress with respect to water-related inequalities in impoverished communities. Similarly, from the Ghana case, LWBs may offer a model for other locales seeking institutional mechanisms to promote citizen engagement. While there are contextual factors of obvious importance, there are opportunities for policy makers or communities to learn from each other. The authors thus endorse efforts underway to promote dialogue, such as ongoing efforts to bring water ministers together as part of the African Ministers' Council on Water. Similarly, the authors suggest that bringing members of water boards from communities to compare notes and share experiences with communities facing similar challenges in other contexts may provide fruitful learning experiences for all involved.

There is hope regarding the benefits of participation offered by LWBs in the context of urban Accra. Given that boards of this type are only operational in several of Accra's communities, steps to make such participatory mechanisms more widespread may be beneficial. However, the boards have clear limitations, so any move in this direction will only be a partial step towards achieving more participatory water governance. Some of the lessons from the first five years of the operation of the boards should help pave the way for stronger and more effective participatory governance mechanisms into the future.

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