



# Fostering Local Governance and Social Cohesion in Northern Ghana: Challenges, Opportunities, and the Way Forward

## SOCO Project Component 3 Research Report, 2025

### 1. Introduction

Local governance is characterized by the involvement of representatives from the public, private, voluntary, and community sectors in the policy decision-making process (Guarneros-Meza & Geddes, 2010). (Guarneros-Meza & Geddes, 2010; Ndreu, 2016) defines local governance as the management of public affairs and decision-making processes at the local level, typically involving local authorities and elected representatives. Often, local governance is stretched into the realm of good governance, which features accountability, transparency, efficiency and effectiveness, responsiveness, forward vision, rule of law and quality of governance (Taylor, 2016).

Social cohesion, often associated with social capital and justice, involves a sense of belonging and collaboration within a community (Arts and Culture Department, 2012). (Ritzen & Woolcock, 2000) define social cohesion as "a state of affairs in which a group of people demonstrate an aptitude for collaboration that produces a climate for change." It emphasizes social capital, including norms, networks, and connections, with particular importance placed on linking diverse socio-economic groups.

Local governance plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion by promoting inclusive participation and addressing challenges that inhibit community harmony. Decentralization can enhance engagement and create avenues for community involvement (Khaile et al., 2021; Scott, 2009). However, ineffective political institutions and resource constraints can weaken social cohesion (United Nations, 2016).

## 2. The Role of Women and Youth in Social Cohesion

Women and Youth play a vital role in fostering social cohesion within communities. By involving young people in particular, in decision-making processes, local governance can promote innovation, build trust, and create social networks that bridge generational and societal divides (Titigah et al., 2023). Their participation in local forums enhances consensus-building efforts and ensures that governance initiatives address the diverse needs of all community members.

Youth engagement also facilitates skill development and empowers young people to take ownership of community development initiatives. This involvement not only strengthens the social fabric but also builds the capacity of the next generation of leaders to maintain and enhance social cohesion.

## 3. Challenges to Social Cohesion

Several challenges impede local governance's ability to promote social cohesion. These include limited municipal resources, lack of clear guidelines, and tensions between traditional and formal governance structures. Additionally, marginalized groups often face barriers to engagement, which exacerbates social divisions (Khaile et al., 2021; Sackey, 2012). Challenges such as limited opportunities for youth participation and inadequate representation in governance structures often hinder their contributions. Addressing these barriers through targeted programmes, inclusive policies, and youth-centric initiatives is crucial for achieving sustainable social cohesion (Titigah et al., 2023).

Local governance and social cohesion are critical pillars of Ghana's development. As decentralized governance systems bring decision-making closer to the people, they play a pivotal role in fostering inclusion, equity, and accountability. Meanwhile, social cohesion ensures that diverse groups coexist harmoniously, enabling collective action for sustainable development. In Northern Ghana, where historical inequalities, resource conflicts, and marginalization are prevalent, the interaction between governance and cohesion is particularly significant.

This article explores the relationship between local governance and social cohesion in Ghana. It integrates findings from survey data, legal frameworks, and policy discussions to highlight key trends, challenges, and opportunities. It examines how governance practices affect community trust, participation, and resource distribution while analyzing the roles of women, youth, and persons with disabilities in promoting governance and cohesion.

## 4. The Legal and Policy Context for Local Governance and Social Cohesion in Ghana

Ghana's legal and policy frameworks provide a robust foundation for local governance and social cohesion. Key instruments include:

- **1992 Constitution :** Establishes decentralization and inclusivity as core principles.
- **Local Governance Act, 2016 (Act 936) :** Details the roles of Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies (MMDAs) in promoting participatory governance.
- **National Development Planning (System) Act, 1994 (Act 480) :** Guides equitable development planning.
- **Vision 2057 :** A strategic document emphasizing equity and social harmony.

## 5. Key Aspects of Local Governance and Social Cohesion

Local governance involves decentralized administration and decision-making processes at the sub-national level, emphasizing accountability, inclusivity, and responsiveness. Social cohesion, by contrast, reflects the strength of relationships and unity within communities, fostering peaceful coexistence and collaboration.

**Both are interconnected through:**

### 1 Equitable Resource Distribution:

Local governance systems ensure fair resource allocation, reducing tensions and fostering trust.

### 2 Inclusive Participation:

Platforms for civic engagement enable diverse groups, including marginalized populations, to contribute to decision-making.

### 3 Conflict Resolution:

Effective governance structures mediate disputes, addressing fragility and promoting reconciliation.

## 6. Methodology

The study utilized a mixed-methods approach to investigate the relationship between local governance and social cohesion in Northern Ghana. Quantitative data was sourced from two surveys conducted by the **National Development Planning Commission (NDPC)** in **September and October 2024**. These surveys targeted six regions—**Northern, North East, Savannah, Upper East, Upper West, and Oti**—to assess governance practices and social cohesion dynamics.

A stratified sampling approach ensured that the perspectives of diverse demographics—including women, youth, and persons with disabilities—were captured. Analytical methods included descriptive analysis to identify patterns, correlation analysis to assess relationships between governance and cohesion variables, and comparative analysis to explore regional disparities.

## 7. Results

### 7.1. Demographic Insights

The demographic distribution of respondents revealed critical trends. Fewer females (37.44% (158 individuals), were available and willing to grant interviews, often opting for a male member 62.56% of the respondents (264 individuals) of the household to respond to the interview. The skewed gender distribution, with men significantly outnumbering women, may stem from cultural norms, or accessibility challenges. This imbalance risks underrepresenting women's perspectives, potentially leading to biased policies and missed opportunities for inclusive development.

Middle-aged individuals, particularly those between **36-45 years**, were the most engaged demographic, underscoring their active involvement in governance and community-building efforts. Younger groups, especially those aged **26-30**, also participated significantly, highlighting a foundation for future workforce development. However, persons with disabilities were underrepresented, with only **5%** of respondents reporting disabilities. This may reflect either the demographic realities of the surveyed regions or underreporting influenced by stigma or access challenges. Occupational data showed that farming dominated in regions like Upper East and Savannah, while teaching and trade were more prominent in districts like North-East Gonja.

## 7.2. Local Governance and Its Impact on Social Cohesion in Ghana

Ghana's local governance system is underpinned by legislative frameworks such as the Local Governance Act, 2016 (Act 936). While these frameworks emphasize inclusivity, accountability, and equity, implementation challenges persist. Issues such as corruption, political patronage, and weak institutional capacity undermine governance effectiveness. Social cohesion, meanwhile, is shaped by economic disparities, ethnic diversity, and historical grievances, requiring governance systems to prioritize reconciliation and equitable resource allocation.

## 7.3. Challenges and Opportunities for Governance and Cohesion in Northern Ghana

In Northern Ghana, historical inequalities, limited service access, and resource competition exacerbate fragility. Governance systems face challenges in addressing these issues due to inadequate resources and weak institutional capacity. At the same time, social cohesion is strained by ethnic tensions and unresolved disputes. However, the integration of traditional authorities into governance processes has shown promise in mediating conflicts and fostering reconciliation in the region.

## 7.4. Governance and Cohesion: Correlations and Patterns

The analysis revealed strong relationships between governance and social cohesion. Trust in local assemblies was strongly correlated with perceptions of transparency and responsiveness ( $r > 0.5$ ). Assemblies seen as transparent were also perceived as trustworthy and effective in addressing community needs. Responsiveness, measured as the ability of assemblies to meet local priorities, showed a high correlation with governance effectiveness ( $r = 0.62$ ).

Resource competition emerged as a significant factor in fragility, with regions experiencing high land and water disputes reporting lower cohesion.

Additionally, disparities in governance effectiveness and cohesion indicators across districts highlighted inequities in resource distribution and service delivery.

## 7.5. Discussions

The results underscore the critical interplay between governance practices and social cohesion. The survey findings reveal that governance factors such as transparency and responsiveness build trust, which, in turn, strengthens social cohesion. Assemblies perceived as trustworthy were more effective in addressing community needs, demonstrating the link between institutional credibility and cohesive societies.

However, the weak correlations between governance and fragility indicators suggest that governance alone cannot address systemic challenges like resource competition or historical grievances. This finding highlights the need for governance interventions to be complemented by tailored strategies addressing resource scarcity and inter-group relations.

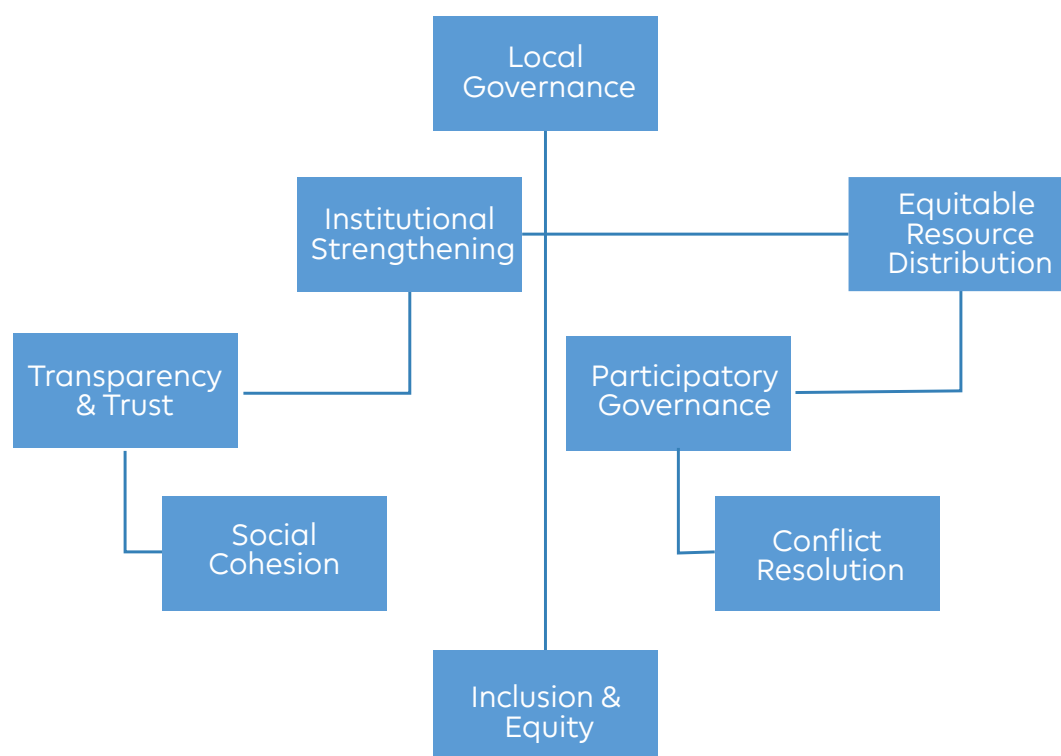
Inclusivity remains a crucial aspect of fostering cohesion. The underrepresentation of marginalized groups, particularly persons with disabilities, signals systemic barriers that must be dismantled to achieve equitable governance. Policies that prioritize representation and empower these groups can bolster governance legitimacy while enhancing social harmony.

## 8. Proposed Framework for Integration

### 8.1. Components of the Framework

- 1. Institutional Strengthening:** Build the capacity of MMDAs for effective service delivery and conflict mediation. Establish robust accountability mechanisms to combat corruption and increase trust.
- 2. Inclusive and Participatory Governance:** 2.Promote equitable representation of marginalized groups in governance structures. Encourage participatory budgeting and public consultations to involve diverse community members in decision-making.
- 3. Equitable Development and Conflict Resolution:** Implement targeted development programmes to address regional disparities and foster reconciliation by leveraging traditional authorities.

**Figure 1: Interconnectedness of Key Issues of Social Cohesion and Local Governance**



Source: Authors' Construct 20255

## 9. Recommendations

From the analysis, the following recommendations are tailored to different governance levels, emphasizing actions for policymakers, local governance bodies, civil society, and communities:

### 9.1. National Level

#### 1. Strengthen Legal Frameworks:

- Ensure the enforcement of existing laws, such as the **Persons with Disabilities Act, 2006 (Act 715)**, while aligning governance practices with inclusivity and equity objectives.
- Integrate social cohesion into local governance policies, guidelines and frameworks, setting explicit targets for inclusion and equity.

## 2. Monitor and Evaluate Reforms

- Establish mechanisms to regularly monitor and evaluate governance reforms, focusing on addressing corruption, inefficiencies, and barriers to inclusivity.

### 9.2. Regional Level

#### 1. Capacity Building for MMDAs

- Provide training and resources to MMDAs to enhance their capacity for managing resource conflicts, promoting participatory governance, and improving service delivery.

#### 2. Align Regional Initiatives with Local Needs

- Ensure that regional development programmes are tailored to the specific socio-economic and cultural needs of local communities.

### 9.3. District Level

#### 1. Leverage Traditional Leadership

- Collaborate with traditional authorities to mediate disputes, foster reconciliation, and promote cultural preservation.

#### 2. Community-Driven Development

- Design and implement community-led projects to enhance participation, ownership, and alignment with local priorities.

### 9.4. Community Level

#### 1. Foster Dialogue and Reconciliation

- Establish platforms for dialogue and collaboration, especially in conflict-prone areas, to address grievances and build trust between diverse groups.

#### 2. Empower Marginalized Groups:

- Support initiatives that empower women, youth, and persons with disabilities, ensuring their active participation in decision-making processes.



### 3. Promote Solidarity

- Encourage inter-group activities, such as cultural exchanges and joint economic ventures, to strengthen relationships and reduce tensions.

## 9.5. For Civil Society and Development Partners

### 1. Support Capacity Building

- Provide resources and training for MMDAs, youth groups, and women's organizations to enhance their roles in governance and cohesion.

### 2. Collaborative Interventions

- Work with local communities to design and implement solutions that address both governance and social cohesion challenges

## 10. Conclusion

Local governance and social cohesion are mutually reinforcing. Addressing governance challenges, fostering inclusivity, and implementing tailored interventions are pivotal for a cohesive and resilient society in Ghana. A collaborative approach involving policymakers, civil society, and traditional authorities can build sustainable governance systems that promote social harmony.

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