

**GULF OF GUINEA NORTHERN REGIONS SOCIAL
COHESION (SOCO) PROJECT**

**Strengthening Local Governance in
Northern Ghana Policy Brief**

**Title: Closing the Trust Gap in Local Government:
Strengthening Assemblies and Citizen Participation in
Northern Ghana**



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Executive Summary

Northern Ghana sits at the frontline of Ghana's poverty, inequality, and fragility challenge, yet the local governance system meant to tackle these problems is underfunded, over-centralised, and weakly connected to citizens. The SOCO Local Governance Study across 48 districts in six northern regions, based on 413 respondents, shows that participation is skewed to communal labour (35%), while only 6% of citizens engage in fee-fixing, 11% in revenue collection, and 0% in policy fairs, precisely where decisions on money and priorities are made. Nearly half (48%) cite "lack of information" as the main barrier to participation, and citizens rank trust (21%) and effectiveness (18%) as their top performance criteria for assemblies, signalling a trust and accountability gap.

On the financing side, Parliament approved GHS 4.56 billion for the District Assemblies Common Fund (DACF) in 2023,

but no transfers were made, crippling the assemblies'—especially in poorer northern districts'—ability to implement their development plans. In 2024, the statutory allocation increased to GHS 5.76 billion, but predictability, equity, and utilisation remain core risks. Women's voice is sharply limited: in the 2023 District Level Elections, only 4.1% of elected assembly members were women, despite the subsequent passage of the Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act, 2024.

This Policy Brief argues for a Citizen-Centred Governance Compact in Northern Ghana: combining predictable, equitable transfers; elected and accountable local leadership; and structured citizen engagement and information systems as the fastest route to restoring trust, reducing poverty, and unlocking shared prosperity in Ghana's most vulnerable regions.



1. The Development Challenge

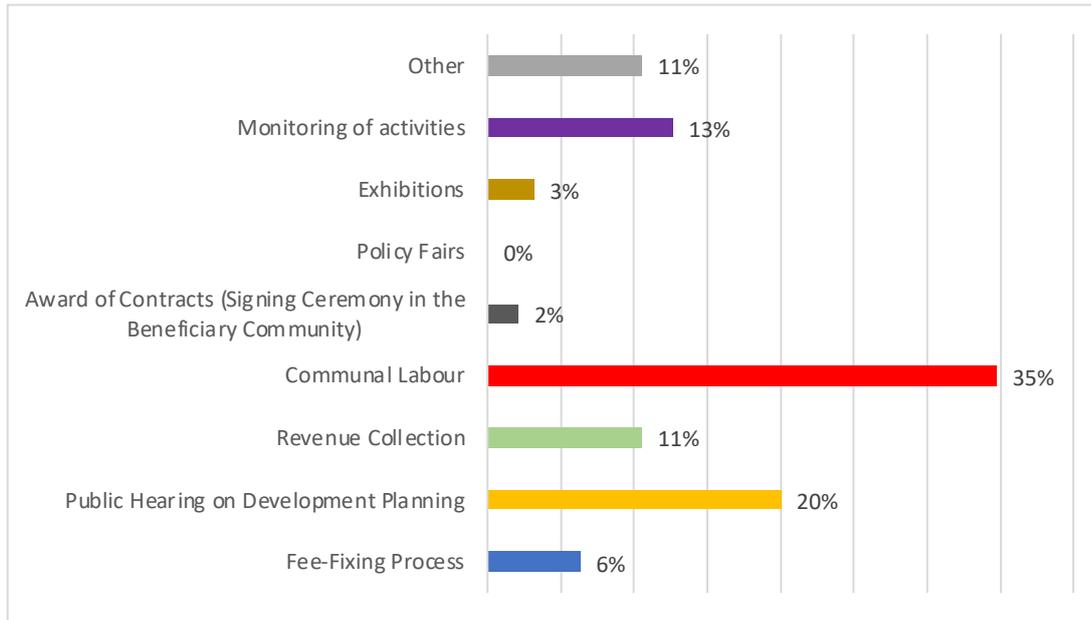
Northern Ghana faces a widening poverty and inequality gap relative to the south, driven by conflict spillovers from the Sahel, climate vulnerability, social exclusion, and weak governance—now worsened by COVID-19 shocks. Local governments are legally responsible for planning and delivering development, yet they are constrained by irregular central transfers, low internally generated funds, and limited citizen participation in core fiscal and planning decisions. In 2023, no DACF transfers were made to district assemblies despite a statutory approval of GHS 4.56 billion, forcing MMDAs to shelve or delay planned investments in services and local infrastructure. This is not just a cash-flow issue; it means stalled projects, declining service quality, and lost confidence in state institutions, especially in regions already exposed to food insecurity, joblessness, and security threats. At the same time, youth constitute around 70% of the population, and women and other vulnerable groups remain poorly represented in decision-making, with only 4.1% of elected district assembly members being women in the 2023 elections. The cost of inaction is clear: continued under-investment in basic services and local infrastructure; persistent mistrust and low participation; and rising fragility in a region where the World Bank's twin goals, ending extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity, are most at risk.

2. Key Findings from the SOCO Local Governance Study

1. **Citizen participation is sharply skewed towards physical contributions rather than fiscal decision-making; while communal labour accounts for 35% of engagement, involvement in the mechanisms that move money is critically low, evidenced by participation rates of just 11% in revenue collection, 6% in fee-fixing, and a negligible 0% in policy fairs.**



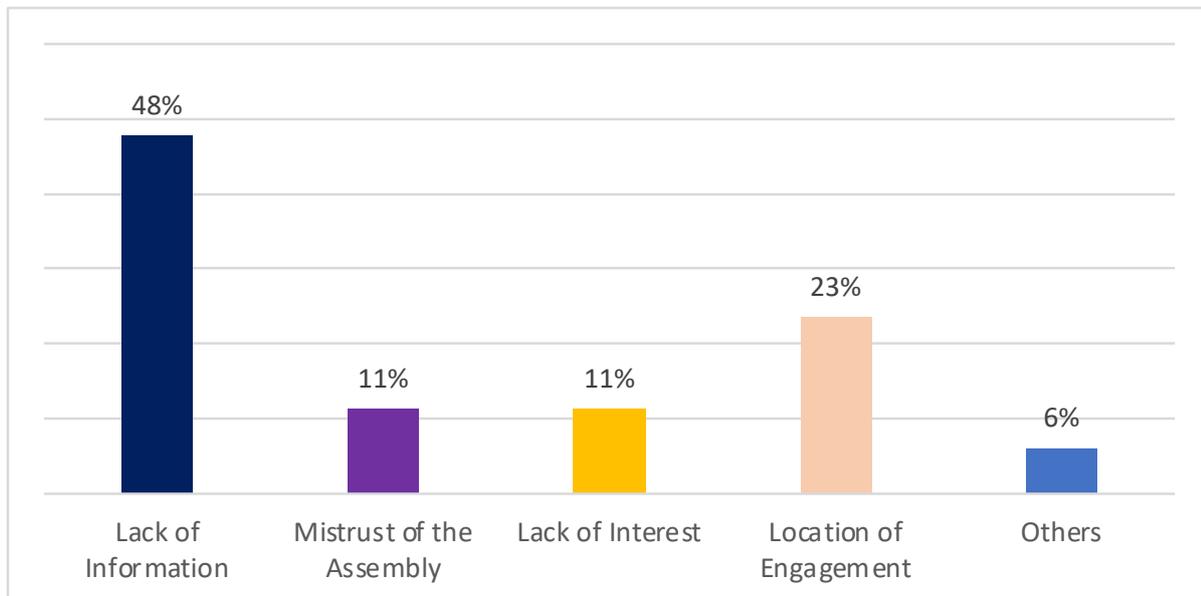
Figure 1: Distribution of citizen participation across local governance activities



Source: SoCo Project Local Governance Study, 2024

2. Information and access represent the dominant barriers to participation, with lack of information alone accounting for 48% of obstacles, while the location of engagement (23%), mistrust of the assembly (11%), and lack of interest (11%) also significantly limit involvement.

Figure 2: Barriers to citizen participation in local governance

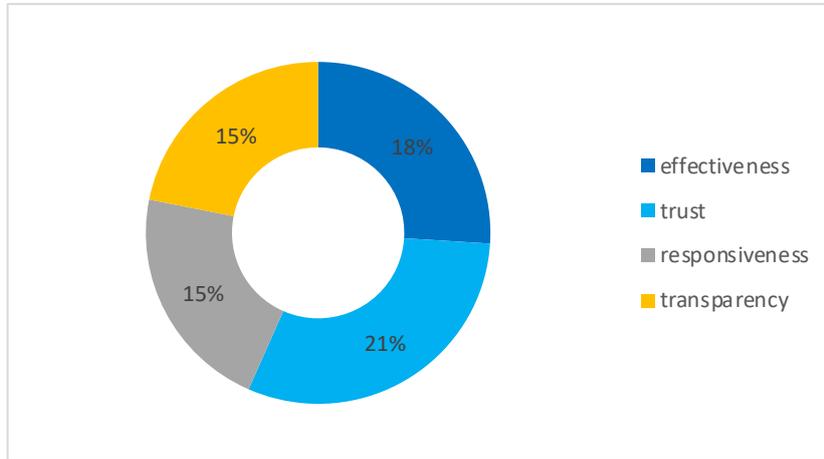


Source: SOCO Project Local Governance Study, 2024.



3. Trust and performance are central to citizens' judgment of assemblies, with citizens ranking **trust** (21%) as the most important criterion for assessment, closely followed by effectiveness (18%), responsiveness (15%), and transparency (15%), which together indicate a strong demand for accountable, result-oriented local institutions

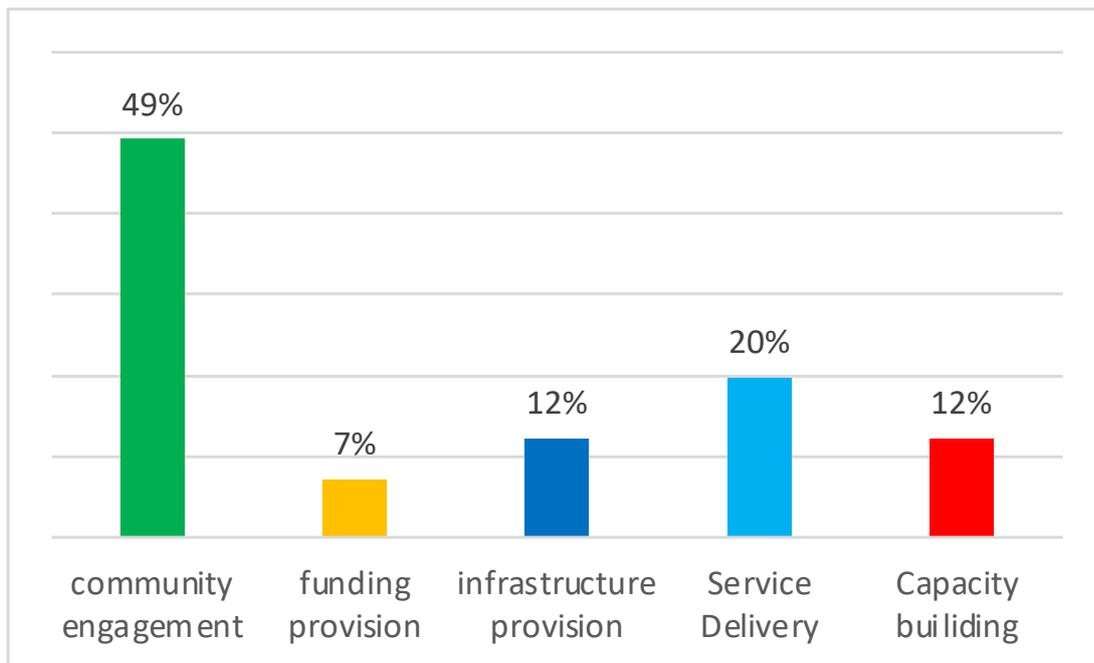
Figure 3: Citizen criteria for ranking assembly performance



Source: SoCo Project Local Governance Study, 2024

4. Community engagement is widely regarded as the main lever for better governance, with 49% of respondents prioritising it as a strategy to improve local institutions, significantly ahead of service delivery (20%), infrastructure (12%), capacity building (12%), and funding (7%).

Figure 4: Priority strategies for improving local governance and community development



Source: SoCo Project Local Governance Study, 2024



5. **Decentralisation remains both politically centralised and gender-imbalanced**, undermining local accountability and representation. This centralisation is evident as the President appoints MMDCEs and 30% of assembly members, raising concerns about politicisation at the local level, while the severe gender imbalance is highlighted by the fact that 95.9% of elected assembly members in the 2023 district elections were men, despite Ghana's commitments under regional and global gender protocols and the new Affirmative Action Act.

 6. **Financing is statutory on paper but unpredictable in practice**, as the Constitution mandates that not less than 7.5% of total revenues be transferred to the District Assemblies Common Fund (DACF), yet 2023 saw no DACF transfers despite approved allocations, severely undermining planning and service delivery in districts, especially in the north.
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3. Policy Options

3.1. Scenario A: Status Quo (Centralised Appointments, Unpredictable Transfers, Low Participation)

In scenario (a), Local governance continues with presidentially appointed MMDCEs and 30% government-appointed assembly members; DACF allocations remain prone to delays and arrears, while citizen engagement is mainly felt through communal labour, with little voice in budgets or priorities setting, monitoring and evaluation.

The consequences for contending with the status is that District assemblies, particularly

in Northern Ghana, will continue to operate with uncertain resources, which necessitates ad-hoc cuts to vital development projects and ultimately undermines consistent service delivery, while citizens view local government as distant and politicized, deepening existing mistrust and disengagement, thereby exacerbating the persistence of poverty and spatial inequality, leaving the north structurally behind the rest of the country.

3.2. Scenario B: Incremental Change (Better Communication and Training, but same rules)

Government and partners expand information campaigns, hold more public hearings, and provide training for assembly staff and community members, but the core rules of the game remain unchanged: MMDCEs are appointed, DACF releases remain irregular, and participation mechanisms are not institutionalised, with sanctions and rewards.

The outcomes of adopting this scenario include citizens becoming better informed about opportunities, and some participation indicators improving. However, without predictable



financing and stronger accountability mechanisms, service delivery remains uneven, and trust only improves marginally. Overall, the benefits will be modest and fragile, as any improvements depend heavily on project funding and committed individuals rather than on sustained system change.

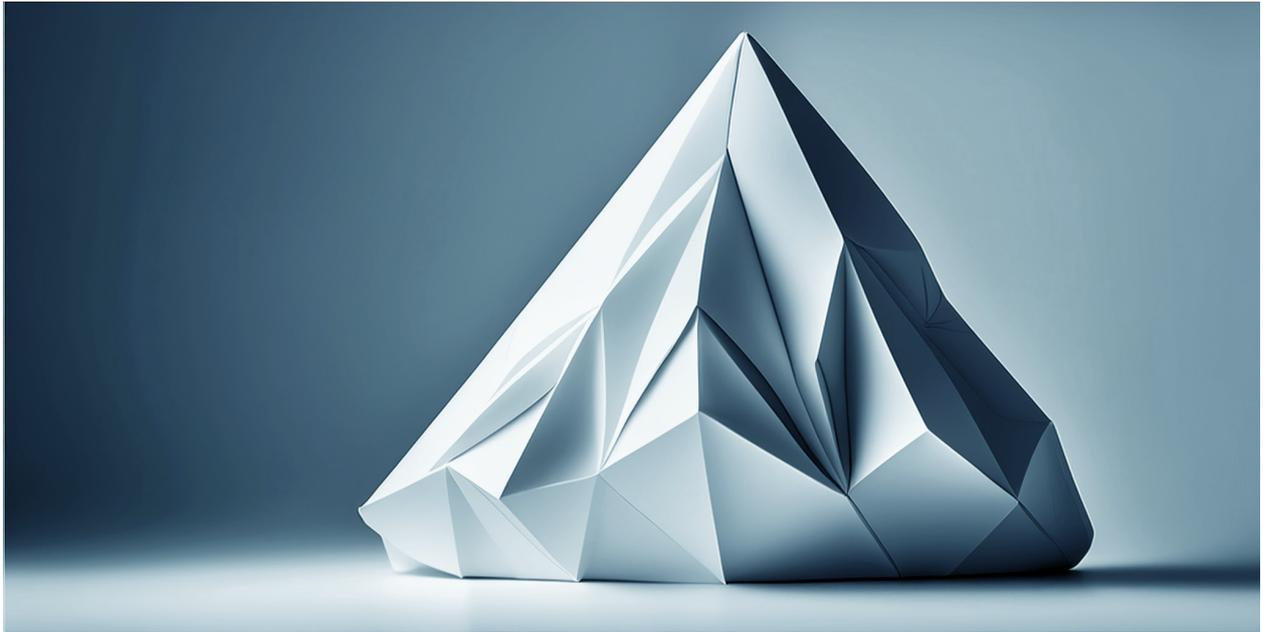
3.3. Scenario C: Recommended Innovation (A Citizen-Centred Governance Compact for Northern Ghana)

This scenario builds a coherent “Governance Compact” anchored in: (i) accountable and representative local leadership; (ii) predictable and equitable financing; and (iii) institutionalised citizen participation and information access.

Key elements:

- **Institutionalise accountable leadership at the Sub-National Level** by amending relevant constitutional provisions to allow for the election of MMDCEs and all assembly members by universal suffrage, while operationalising the Affirmative Action Act to enforce targets for women’s representation in northern assemblies.
- **Favour a predictable, equitable financing mechanism** by automating and enforcing the statutory DACF transfers on time, with a formula that favours less endowed northern districts, while building MMDA capacity (skills, staffing, and technology) to raise and transparently manage IGF, including property taxes.
- **Institutionalise citizen engagement:** Make information and participation “default” by ensuring the preparation of citizen-friendly budgets, decentralised engagement venues, regular public hearings, participatory monitoring, and community scorecards targeting youth and women in line with Sections 40 – 48 of the Local Governance Act, 2016 (Act 936), the National Development Planning (System) Act, 1994 (Act 480) and the National Development Planning System Regulations, 2016 (L.I. 2232) which reinforce public consultations in preparing national and district plans.

If implemented to the latter, the outcomes to be generated by this scenario are that higher trust and participation, particularly among youth and women, would strengthen the social contract and reduce fragility risks, while more predictable and better-managed resources would translate directly into improved services and local infrastructure, helping to reduce poverty and spatial inequalities in the north.



4. Recommendations

1. Parliament and the Ministry of Local Government, Chieftaincy and Religious (MLGCRA) should legislate for accountable and inclusive local leadership

Parliament, in collaboration with MLGCRA, should prioritise constitutional and legal reforms to:

- Allow for the election of MMDCEs and all assembly members by universal suffrage, strengthening downward accountability to citizens.
- Fully apply the Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act, 2024 to district assemblies, setting and monitoring minimum quotas for women's representation, especially in northern regions.

2. Ministry of Finance, the Administrator of the DACF and NDPC restore predictability and equity in local financing

The Ministry of Finance, working with the Administrator of the DACF and NDPC, should:

- Ensure timely, full release of DACF allocations in line with constitutional requirements, ending the practice of zero transfers as occurred in 2023.
- Refine the DACF formula to prioritise less endowed northern districts and ring-fence



a share for community engagement, information systems, and social accountability mechanisms.

- Support MMDAs to adopt digital tools for revenue administration and property tax collection, linking improved IGF performance to additional matching funds.

3. NDPC, RCCs, and MMDAs (with SOCO and Development Partners) should encourage citizen-centred Governance Practices.

NDPC and RCCs, in partnership with the SOCO Project and development partners, should:

- Establish and resource structured participation platforms at district and sub-district levels (town/area councils and unit committees), with clear commitments on frequency, inclusiveness, and feedback loops.
- Develop citizen-friendly information products (simplified plans and budgets, local language summaries, radio/community dialogues) to tackle the 48% “lack of information” barrier and make engagement locations more accessible.
- Integrate citizen-based indicators of trust, responsiveness, transparency, and effectiveness into MMDA performance assessments and incentives.

5. Conclusion

If Ghana invests now in a Citizen-Centred Governance Compact for Northern Ghana—combining accountable local leadership, predictable financing, and an authentic voice for citizens, the returns will be measured in higher trust, better services, and faster poverty reduction where it is needed most. The alternative is to keep paying the rising price of under-governed regions: stalled development, persistent fragility, and a missed opportunity for shared prosperity.

