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**TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE
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**Impact of socio-economic factors on the performance of
small town water systems in the Western Region of Ghana**

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The Western Region of Ghana is one of the country's most deprived yet well-endowed regions. Through a World Bank grant, the Community Water and Sanitation Agency (the body that facilitates the provision of water and sanitation services to rural communities and small towns in Ghana) awarded a 3-year contract for the provision of water and sanitation facilities to 16 towns in the Western Region between 2012 and 2014. This paper captures the internal and external factors that impacted the performance of these communities as part of the software component of the project. Internal factors included comparatively high poverty rates and low-levels of literacy, leadership rifts as well as the heterogeneity of settlements. External factors included communities' geographical location, the pre-selection of communities, low-levels of development and inadequate regional level support. These factors culminated in a complex labyrinth in the drive towards sustainable community ownership and management of the water systems.

Introduction

The Western Region is the fourth largest region in Ghana in terms of land-size. It is bordered to the south by the Gulf of Guinea, to the west by the Republic of Cote d'Ivoire, to the north by the Ashanti and Brong Ahafo Regions, and to the east by the Central Region. Between 2000 and 2010, the population of the region increased by 3.2% with a labour force of about 71.4%. With 22 administrative districts, the region is endowed with enormous resources such as fertile soils, rich forests, mineral deposits, cash crops like cocoa, rubber, palm oil and coconut, rivers (Ankobra, Bia and Pra) and recently oil deposits on the coast (National Population Council Secretariat, 2010).

However, the Western Region is among the poorest in Ghana, and in September 2010, it was reported that despite receiving the highest rainfall rates in Ghana, the region had the lowest water coverage (less than 45%). In the WASH sector, the region has not been a beneficiary of many governmental projects or Development Partners' assistance, except from a World Bank and European Union intervention in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It was against this background that CWSA awarded a contract for the construction of mechanised boreholes in 16 towns targeted at benefitting about 88,000 people in the region. The 16 selected towns were spread across the entire region. The project was made up of three components: hardware (the drilling and construction of the water systems), software (mobilisation of communities and training towards community ownership and a third component that attempted to assist communities to adopt the community-led total sanitation (CLTS) for sanitation improvements. Owing to the peculiar poverty features of the region, a number of internal and external factors impacted on the performance of the 16 communities and could subsequently affect sustainability of the water systems. These are discussed and elaborated upon in the subsequent sections.

Methodology

Aside desk studies, much of the information on the project was gathered through one-on-one interviews with members of the 16 Water and Sanitation Management Teams, community durbars and focus group discussions. A map of the 16 beneficiary small towns in the Western Region is presented in Figure 1 below.

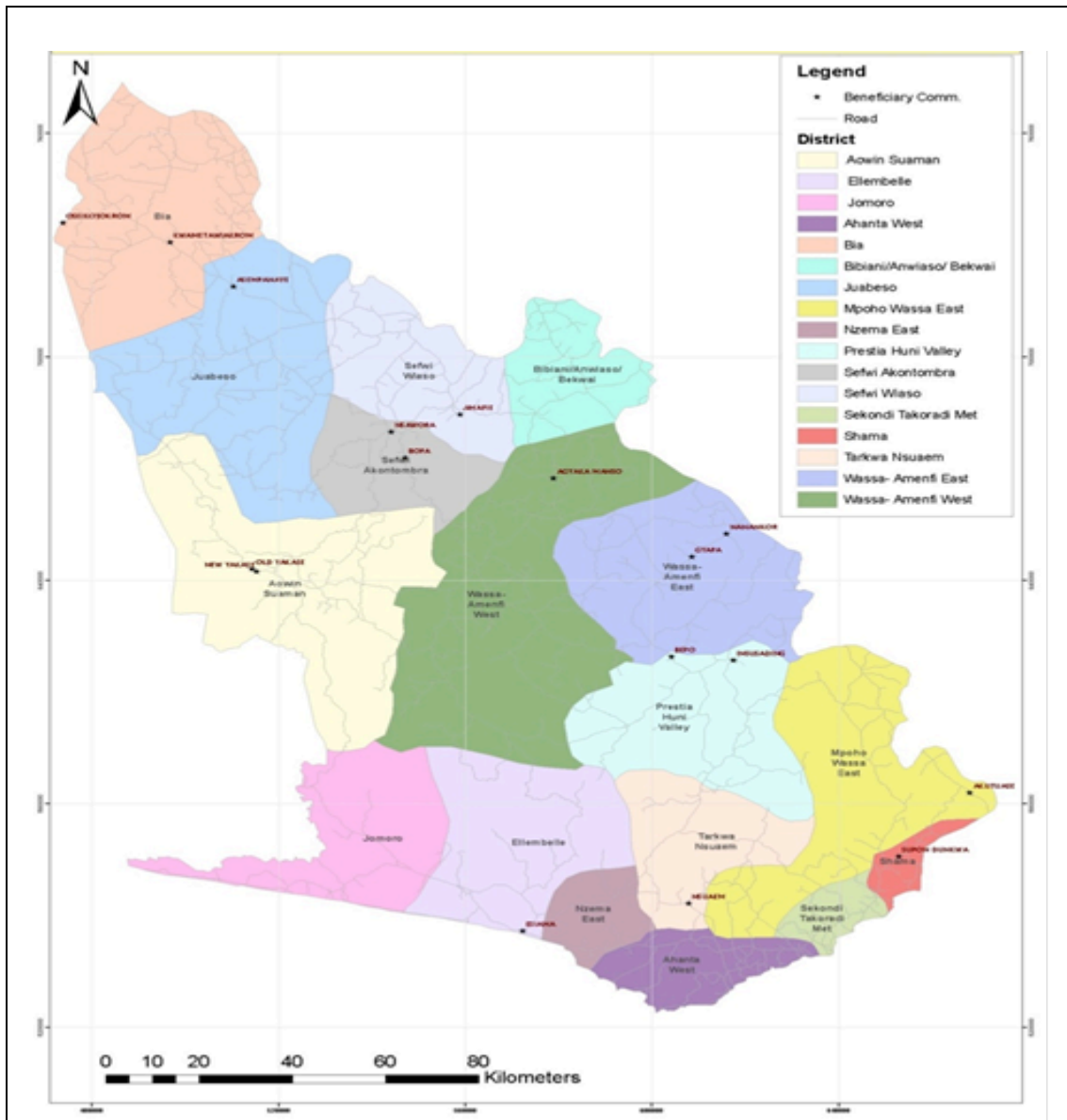


Figure 1. Map of the Western Region of Ghana indicating location of beneficiary communities

Source: Authors Construct, 2016

Socio-economic factors

The socio-economic factors impacting the performance of small town water systems constructed in the Western Region have been identified to be internal and external. These factors are further elaborated below.

Internal factors

These include issues that emanated from within the beneficiary communities with little influence from outside.

Low literacy levels

Even though the Western Region has a literacy level of 56.5%, which is higher than the national average of 53.4% (Ghana- Western Region, 2015, op cit), finding citizens to take up positions on the 12 person community-based Water and Sanitation Management Teams (WSMTs) was difficult because qualification to office-holders required a certain minimum degree of literacy. In some communities, it took over 9

months before community members such as retired civil servants and teachers could take up WSMT positions. About 75% of those who were eventually found were “just average” (beyond middle school level) while the remaining 25% could hardly read and write. This phenomenon made communication even in the local language difficult. Facilitation on topics relating to basic technical, financial management and conceptual issues were therefore difficult to impart to the participants. Another negative impact of this low literacy level was poor record keeping which is key to ensuring the sustainability of water projects.

High poverty levels

A majority of the citizens in the beneficiary communities struggle with basic needs such as owning household latrines, taking three meals a day and having “adequate funds” for educating their children to tertiary levels. Even though misplaced priorities of rural community dwellers play a significant role in expenditure patterns (Dotse and Laryea, 2001), generally many community members were found to be relatively poor. Baseline data gathered during district and community entry indicated that about 80% of residents encountered were involved in small-scale fishing, farming and trading. These are considered “hand-to-mouth” occupations where many were “just-surviving”. Indeed at the start of the project, 30% of the existing 82 boreholes found in the 16 beneficiary communities had broken down without hope of repair because the communities did not have the funds required to purchase replacement parts and pay for the services of mechanics (IGIP, 2012). When communities were asked to indicate whether they could have mobilised adequate funds to pay for the capital cost contribution before the water facilities were to be provided, 75% of them replied in the negative, while the remaining 25% stated that they probably could have paid with some external assistance, an indication of their relative poor financial status¹. The poverty levels implied that beneficiary communities found it difficult to peg water tariffs at their correct levels because it was feared that people may not be able to afford this, and therefore resort to unwholesome water sources with their attendant water and sanitation associated diseases. The other implication of the low fund mobilisation is its impact on operation and maintenance of facilities – a bane of many projects in Developing Countries especially with regard to long-term replacement costs (Lockwood, 2013).

Leadership rifts

In over 50% of the communities, there were conflicts among the top hierarchy that had implications for resource mobilisation, a key requisite to charting a common course towards community ownership and management (COM). While in some communities (about 60%), there were only regents who did not wield much authority over their people, in others, a number of traditional elders regarded themselves as leaders of the communities resulting in divided fronts. Aside from a few communities such as Old/New Yakaase, Agyakaa Manso, Bepoh and Nsawora, almost all of the remaining beneficiary communities were contending with a leadership crisis. In some cases, the leadership crisis centred on which type of leaders should be accorded priority in respect of hierarchy – whether it should be the traditional leader or the governmental sub-structure at the local level represented by the Unit Committee² and/or the Assembly Member for the electoral area. This was amply manifested in areas such as Esiana, Nsuaem, Supomo Dunkwa and Akutuase. In the absence of recognised community leaders, COM was brought under serious threat.

Heterogeneity of settlements

Even though the Western Region has a low-level of development, the region is endowed with many natural resources. This has made it an attractive destination for migrating workers from across Ghana and even beyond. The main ethnic groups in the region are the Wassa, Nzema, Ahanta and Sefwi but many others have trooped in from outside the region e.g. Asante (7.3%), Ewes (6%), Brongs (3.4%) and others from the northern part of Ghana and even Cote d’Ivoire. Communities such as Oseikojokrom, Asempaneye, Abreshia-Nananko, Jappa, Nsuaem, Supomo Dunkwa, Agyakaa-Manso and more are all made up of a mixture of people from different ethnic groups. The implication of this diversity is that since these minority groups often do not perceive the settlements they live in as their own, they are not interested enough in the development of these communities to make meaningful contributions. Additionally, it was not surprising that many of the citizens living in settlements where the water systems were installed were engaged in illegal small-scale mining activities popularly referred to as “galamsey”³. These individuals are not keen on assisting the communities in which they live to properly own and manage the water facilities in spite of the high investment costs of these water systems. When it was time to mobilise communities as part of the water

project for key milestones such as community durbars, training of WSMTs and signing of Facilities Management Plans, turn-out was lethargic and generally apathetic. In many communities, despite earlier appointments with communities regarding appropriate times for meetings, on average it took over 3 hours to get them to gather for meetings.

External factors

These are factors that are considered extraneous to the communities and factors that they have little control over.

Pre-selection of communities

Under the principles governing the National Community Water and Sanitation Programme of Ghana of 1994, rural communities and small towns which expressed interest in owning water facilities were expected to write a letter of intention to its District Assembly (DA). This was to forestall a supply-driven and top-down approach to water provision and prevent a situation arising whereby facilities are not regarded as “felt-needs” of the communities and ultimately ended up becoming white elephants. As part of the demand-responsive approach, communities were to: fill certain sub-project forms that indicated their willingness and preparedness to participate in a water project with the support of the DA; open a bank account; contribute towards the capital cost of the facility; and contribute fully towards the facilities’ operation and maintenance (Water and Sanitation Sector Performance Report, 2009). Critically, in this instance, the 16 beneficiary communities did not seem to have gone through these preliminary activities before being selected to take part in the project. It appeared that the 16 communities had been selected by outside officials with limited involvement from the beneficiaries, even though the District Water and Sanitation Plans of the regional offices of CWSA created the impression that this had been done by the District Assemblies (DAs) (IGIP, 2012). This made animation and community mobilisation towards COM extremely difficult and impacted negatively on community performance.

Low levels of development

As already mentioned, the Western Region is one of the least-developed regions of Ghana. The low development levels is characterised by poor road networks, unfavourable housing conditions, inadequate electric power supply, few educational facilities etc. One of the impacts of the low-level of development is the absence of job avenues. This has in turn led to the out-migration of able-bodied youth. One of the reasons of not finding educated people to take up management positions in many of the communities was the limited avenues; this meant that those who did not want to get engaged in what they felt were unattractive to the youth had left communities and the region to look for work. While unemployment is as low as 10%, it has been remarked recently that “... large number of unemployed but unskilled school leavers drift annually from the rural areas in search of non-existing jobs” (Ghana- Western Region, internet source, 2015). Consequently, citizens who could have stayed behind in the communities as indigenes, and who could be loyal to their roots and contributed to the socio-economic development of their communities including the management of their water systems were simply not available.

Geographical locations

Almost 50% of beneficiary communities were so far away from the district capitals that their location became a disincentive for regular monitoring by District Assemblies. This became worse when the communities had to be visited by the regional teams for monitoring and supervision. Eight (8) of the project’s 16 communities were over eight hours drive from the regional capital even when one drove in durable cross-country vehicles. Even for those that were close enough, it took over 2 hours on average to travel to them. Aside site-meetings, these communities were left on their own as though they had been abandoned. Given the resource constraints the DAs had to grapple with, some communities received few monitoring visits. Regular monitoring visits have been identified as serving a major boost to performance of communities on various projects. Monitoring visits help to provide information that ensures that the beneficiaries know that governance-wise they are important and that their views and opinions are respected, acknowledged and appreciated (Australian Government, 2013). Another implication of the distant communities was that owing to the long distance of the 16 communities from the regional capital, both the regional office of the CWSA as well as the Regional Co-ordinating Council found it difficult to offer them

the requisite support in this geographically large region. In the absence of the regular support, the communities found it difficult to stay on their feet despite regular visits from the software consultants, which could not be adequately augmented by their district and regional colleagues and clients. Regular and sustained support is considered crucial given that in many community-based projects, decentralised capacity has been found to be weak (Lockwood, op cit).

Conclusion

So critical were these internal and external factors to the performance of the 16 communities that as software consultants, one could only make the best out of the situation. Some factors that helped moderate the negative impacts of the challenges enumerated above included the presence and positive influence of some NGOs in the region such as World Vision Ghana, regular regional meetings and informal but harmonious relations among the clients and consultant as well as among software and hardware consultants. Indeed at the tail-end of the project, when the software team was requested to share its opinion based on the performance of the 16 communities to be recommended for COM⁴, we could only propose five (5) communities (about 30%). It would be prudent to consider such internal and external factors in detail before the inception of project activities. This can be done by making resources available for software consultants to confer with local authorities to carry out basic background and baseline socio-economic studies long before actual interventions are made in beneficiary communities. This would assist in helping to select the right beneficiaries as well as ensure people make optimum use of the limited water resources available in a deprived region.

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Notes

1. Capital cost contribution used to be a pre-requisite communities had to pay before commencement and provision of small town schemes in Ghana before 2008. The NDC government cancelled that as one of the key principles of the National Community Water and Sanitation Programme.
2. The Unit Committee is the lowest level within Ghana's four tier system of decentralized governance
3. "Galamsey" is the corrupted form of "gather and sell".
4. Other management options include private-sector management model, temporary arrangements with the private or "other management options may be adopted ..." (CWSA, 2010).

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