

Decentralization in Practice: A Comparative Study of Three District Assemblies in Ghana

Martin Kudwo Akotey

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Department of Development Studies, Valley View University, Oyibi, Accra.



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Corresponding Author:

Martin Kudwo Akotey

Abstract: This study critically explores the realities of administrative decentralization in Ghana through a comparative analysis of three District Assemblies: Tema Metropolitan, Yilo Krobo Municipal, and Gomoa West District. Guided by a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm and a multi-level governance framework, it examines how decentralization policies are interpreted, adapted, and practiced at the local level. Using a qualitative multiple-case study approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, direct observation, and document analysis. The findings reveal that while Ghana's decentralization policy rests on a strong legal foundation, its actual implementation is constrained by persistent central control over personnel, finance, and decision-making. All three Assemblies exhibited limited administrative autonomy, weak substructures, and low citizen accountability—although differences in institutional capacity and development outcomes were evident. Tema, with greater administrative and fiscal resources, outperformed Yilo Krobo and Gomoa West. The study concludes that decentralization in Ghana remains largely symbolic, with political and structural barriers limiting genuine administrative devolution. It recommends reforms to strengthen local autonomy, empower sub-district institutions, and recalibrate central-local relations. By offering grounded, district-level evidence, this research advances the literature on decentralization-in-practice in sub-Saharan Africa and deepens understanding of intra-country governance variation.

Keywords: Decentralization, Administrative Autonomy, Local Governance, Ghana, District Assemblies, Multi-Level Governance, Case Study.

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Introduction

Context and Background

Decentralization has emerged as a key governance reform across much of the developing world—especially in Africa, where highly centralized systems have historically dominated public administration. The reform is driven by the belief that transferring authority, responsibilities, and resources from central to local governments can improve service delivery, expand democratic participation, and promote more responsive, accountable leadership.

In Ghana, decentralization has been central to governance reforms since the early 1980s. The process was first institutionalized under the Local Government Law of 1988 (PNDC Law 207) and later reinforced by the 1992 Constitution and the Local Governance Act, 2016 (Act 936). These frameworks aim to promote grassroots participation, empower local governments, and advance socio-economic development through District Assemblies, which are tasked with planning, budgeting, and implementing local development initiatives.

While Ghana's legal and institutional framework is robust, questions remain about how effective these reforms have been in practice. Persistent challenges—such as inadequate funding,

political interference, limited capacity, and weak citizen engagement—continue to undermine the goals of efficiency, accountability, and equitable development.

To understand decentralization's actual impact, it is essential to move beyond national policy discussions and examine how it operates on the ground. This study takes that approach, focusing on three contrasting District Assemblies to explore how administrative decentralization unfolds in different local contexts, the factors that shape its effectiveness, and the variations in governance outcomes.

Problem Statement

Although Ghana's decentralization policy is widely praised for its comprehensive legal framework and political longevity, its implementation at the district level remains problematic. District Assemblies often lack the autonomy, resources, and institutional strength needed to meet their mandates. Central government agencies continue to control key decisions on staffing, finances, and priorities—undermining local self-governance.

Performance varies greatly between Assemblies: some demonstrate relative efficiency and transparency, while others are marked by inefficiency, weak participation, and poor development results. This variation raises important questions about why differences persist under the same national framework.

Much of the existing research on Ghanaian decentralization focuses on national policy or single-case studies, leaving a gap in understanding how district-level realities—such as leadership quality, administrative capacity, political alignment, and community engagement—shape outcomes.

This study addresses that gap by comparing the institutional arrangements, administrative practices, and development outcomes of three District Assemblies, uncovering both shared and context-specific challenges.

Objectives of the Study

The main goal is to critically examine the implementation of administrative decentralization in Ghana through a comparative analysis of three District Assemblies.

Specific objectives are to:

1. Assess the institutional structures and administrative capacities of the selected Assemblies.
2. Examine the degree of autonomy and decision-making power they exercise.
3. Analyze the effectiveness of local participation and accountability mechanisms.
4. Identify key challenges—financial, human resource, and political—affecting decentralization implementation.
5. Compare governance practices and performance across the three cases to reveal both unique and shared patterns.

Significance of the Study

Understanding decentralization at the local level is vital for evaluating the real-world impact of Ghana's governance reforms.

The study is significant because it:

- **Bridges policy and practice** by grounding analysis in real district-level experiences.
- **Provides comparative insights** that highlight both common challenges and context-specific variations.
- **Informs reform efforts** by pinpointing practical bottlenecks and capacity needs.
- **Contributes to scholarship** on decentralization in Africa with detailed, case-based evidence.
- **Amplifies local perspectives** that are often missing in policy debates.

Literature Review

Concept and Dimensions

Decentralization involves transferring authority, responsibility, and resources from central government to lower levels. It typically has three interconnected dimensions: administrative, fiscal, and political (Rondinelli et al., 1983; Smoke, 2003; Faguet, 2014). Effective decentralization requires coordination across all three.

Rationale in Development Contexts

Proponents argue decentralization improves service delivery, deepens democracy, and enhances equity (World Bank, 2000; Bardhan, 2002; Boone, 2003). Critics, however, warn it can

entrench local elites and deepen inequalities if poorly designed (Conyers, 2007; Ribot et al., 2006).

African Experiences

Many African countries have adopted decentralization, but outcomes are mixed. Common problems include incomplete devolution, weak fiscal autonomy, and limited local capacity (Ahmad & Brosio, 2009; Wunsch, 2013).

The Ghanaian Experience

Ghana's hybrid model blends administrative deconcentrating with political devolution. While its legal framework is strong, real decision-making power—particularly over finances and personnel—remains centralized (Aye, 2008; Abdulai & Crawford, 2010). Substructures are often inactive, and citizen engagement is shallow (Badu & Stephen, 2021).

Gaps in Research

Few comparative district-level studies examine variations within Ghana. This study fills that gap by analyzing how three different Assemblies operate under the same national framework but with differing results.

Theoretical Framework

The study combines:

- **Multi-Level Governance (MLG)** to understand vertical and horizontal power relationships.
- **World Bank Decentralization Framework** to assess authority, autonomy, accountability, and capacity.
- **Institutional Theory and Path Dependency** to explain how historical and structural factors shape district-level governance.

This blend allows for both structural and agency-focused analysis.

Methodology

Research Philosophy

Adopting a constructivist–interpretivist approach, the study treats decentralization as a lived, evolving process shaped by context and interpretation.

Research Design

A qualitative multiple-case study design (Yin, 2003) was used to examine:

- **Tema Metropolitan Assembly (urban)**
- **Yilo Krobo Municipal Assembly (semi-urban)**
- **Gomoa West District Assembly (rural)**

These were chosen for diversity in context and performance.

Units of Analysis

Both central Assembly structures and substructures (Urban/Town Councils, Unit Committees) were studied, alongside decentralized departments.

Data Collection

Methods included 70+ semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observation of meetings, and document analysis. Field notes—not recordings—were used to ensure candor.

Data Analysis

Following grounded theory techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), data were coded, categorized, and interpreted around key themes.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was strengthened through triangulation, an audit trail, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, and ethical safeguards.

Results and Discussion

Administrative Capacity across the Assemblies

A comparative assessment of the three Assemblies revealed marked disparities in their administrative capacities. **Tema Metropolitan Assembly (TMA)** had relatively well-established bureaucratic structures and access to skilled personnel. In contrast, **Yilo Krobo Municipal Assembly (YKMA)** and **Gomoa West District Assembly (GWDA)** faced significant human resource gaps, often relying on national service personnel or unqualified staff for critical roles.

Assembly	Staffing Strength	Key Challenges Identified
Tema	High	Bureaucratic delays; interdepartmental coordination
Yilo Krobo	Moderate	Staff turnover; lack of planning officers
Gomoa West	Low	Severe understaffing; no dedicated works/planning unit

This variation reinforces the argument by Smoke (2003) and Faguet (2014) that **local governance success hinges more on institutional capacity than on formal mandates**.

Personnel Management and Local Discretion

Despite Ghana's decentralization laws, **local control over human resources was minimal**. Core staff (Coordinating Directors, Finance Officers, Department Heads) were centrally appointed. Assemblies lacked authority to recruit, promote, or discipline employees, leading to weak accountability and mismatched local needs.

Function	Exercised by Assemblies?
Recruitment	✗ (Central Government)
Disciplinary Authority	✗ (Limited influence)
Deployment of Staff	✗ (Centrally controlled)

Internal Performance Appraisal ✓ (but rarely enforced)

This situation demonstrates a persistent **deconcentration model**, rather than full devolution, in line with critiques from Ahwoi (2010) and Wunsch (2008).

Financial Autonomy and Budget Implementation

All three Assemblies suffered from **low fiscal autonomy**. While TMA had a broader IGF base, it still struggled with budget

predictability and autonomy due to **central interference in procurement and deductions from DACF allocations**.

Assembly	IGF Dependence	Key Financial Challenges
Tema	55%	Central deductions; delayed DACF releases
Yilo Krobo	25%	Narrow tax base; dependence on DACF
Gomoa West	<15%	Extremely low IGF; no fiscal room for development projects

Central government's unsolicited procurement decisions further eroded the Assemblies' financial planning capacities, reflecting findings by Yilmaz et al. (2008) and Abdulai & Crawford (2010).

Planning, Budgeting, and Implementation

While all Assemblies had **approved Medium-Term Development Plans (MTDPs)** and Composite Budgets, the execution rate varied. TMA implemented 65% of planned projects; YKMA achieved roughly 45%, and GWDA fewer than 30%.

Assembly	Plan Execution Rate	Impediments
Tema	65%	Delays in funds; political redirection of projects
Yilo Krobo	45%	Weak supervision; limited capacity
Gomoa West	<30%	Project abandonment; lack of funds and personnel

Projects were often overridden by **centrally imposed priorities**, weakening participatory governance and local ownership—echoing critiques in Crawford (2009) and Boex & Yilmaz (2010).

Functionality of Substructures

Only two sub-metropolitan structures in TMA showed partial functionality. In all other cases—including urban, town, and unit committees—**substructures were either inactive or non-existent** due to lack of budgets, staff, and logistical support.

Substructure	TMA	YKMA	GWDA
Urban/Town Councils	Partially active	Dormant	Dormant
Unit Committees	Weak presence	Non-functional	Non-functional

The dormancy of substructures directly contradicts Ghana's decentralization framework, which mandates these units as grassroots governance bodies (MLGRD, 2010).

Accountability and Citizen Participation

Though mechanisms such as Audit Committees and Public Relations & Complaints Committees existed on paper, their functionality was often compromised. **Downward accountability to citizens was weak across all Assemblies**, with major decisions made by Executive Committees and elite groups.

Dimension	Observed Reality
Citizen Participation	Limited to consultation; no deliberative input
Audit Oversight	Irregular and weak enforcement
Feedback Mechanisms	Absent or underutilized
Transparency in Procurement	Poor in GWDA and YKMA; moderate in TMA

This finding aligns with Yeboah-Assiamah et al. (2016), who argue that **accountability in Ghana's decentralization is mostly upward**, compromising the democratic promise of local governance.

Synthesis: Patterns and Divergence

The table below summarizes performance across key administrative decentralization dimensions:

Dimension	Tema	Yilo Krobo	Gomoa West
Administrative Capacity	Strong	Moderate	Weak
Personnel Autonomy	Low	Low	Low
Financial Autonomy	Moderate	Low	Very low
Planning & Execution	Moderate	Limited	Poor
Substructure Functionality	Partial	Weak	Inactive
Downward Accountability	Weak	Weak	Very weak

These cross-case insights reinforce the study's theoretical proposition: **while Ghana's policy environment supports decentralization in form, actual practice reveals persistent centralized control and uneven institutional realities at the district level**.

Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how administrative decentralization is actually working in Ghana, using the experiences of three District Assemblies—Tema Metropolitan, Yilo Krobo Municipal, and Gomoa West District—as a lens.

Although Ghana has an impressive legal and policy framework for decentralization, what happens in practice tells a different story. The evidence shows a clear gap between what the policies promise and how things operate on the ground.

In all three Assemblies, decentralization is more of a political slogan than an everyday reality. Critical governance functions—such as managing staff, controlling finances, implementing projects, and ensuring accountability—are still tightly controlled by the central government. This lack of administrative freedom, especially in staffing and procurement, limits the Assemblies'

ability to be effective, responsive, and trusted by their communities.

Structures meant to bring governance closer to the people, like Town and Area Councils or Unit Committees, are largely inactive, underfunded, or missing altogether. As a result, decision-making is often concentrated in the hands of a few local elites, many of whom are closely connected to central political interests.

Tema performed better than the other two districts, largely because of its stronger economic base and more developed institutions. However, the difficulties facing Yilo Krobo—and especially Gomoa West—highlight the deep inequalities in resources and capacity across Ghana's local governments.

The overall picture is clear: administrative decentralization in Ghana is incomplete, inconsistent, and heavily influenced by politics. To turn the rhetoric of decentralization into genuine, functioning local governance, significant reforms are needed.

Policy Recommendations

Drawing from the study's findings, the following measures could help make decentralization in Ghana more meaningful:

1. Reform How MMDCEs Are Chosen

Amend the 1992 Constitution so that Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Chief Executives (MMDCEs) are directly elected by the people. This would improve local accountability and reduce central political interference.

2. Give Districts Control Over Their Staff

Amend the Local Government Service Act so Assemblies can hire, promote, and discipline their own staff. Greater control over personnel will help tailor human resources to local needs.

3. Increase Financial Autonomy

Ensure District Assemblies receive timely and transparent transfers from the District Assemblies Common Fund (DACF), without unexpected deductions from the central government. Help Assemblies grow their own revenue by modernizing tax systems and supporting local economic development.

4. Revive Local Substructures

Provide specific budgets and staff to reactivate Town, Area, and Zonal Councils, as well as Unit Committees. Give these bodies the authority to plan, monitor, and engage with citizens, as outlined in the Local Government Act.

5. Strengthen Accountability

Make it mandatory for Audit Report Implementation Committees (ARICs) and Public Relations and Complaints Committees (PRCCs) to function effectively in every Assembly. Hold annual public meetings where officials present reports on budgets and projects directly to citizens.

6. Reward Good Performance

Introduce a grant system that gives extra resources to Assemblies that show good financial management, strong citizen engagement, and effective service delivery.

7. Invest in Capacity Building

Train and retain skilled staff—especially in planning, finance, and engineering—and encourage districts to learn from one another through mentorship and knowledge-sharing

If these steps are taken, Ghana could move from a decentralization system that exists mostly on paper to one that genuinely empowers local governments, makes them more accountable, and drives real development.

Contribution to Knowledge

This research adds to the growing body of work on decentralization in Africa by offering detailed, evidence-based insights into how it works—or doesn’t work—at the district level in Ghana. Instead of looking at decentralization from the top down, this study examines three very different districts to reveal the everyday realities, challenges, and inequalities that shape local governance.

By applying a constructivist, multi-level governance approach, the study shows how national rules interact with local realities, and why there’s often a gap between decentralization “on paper” and “in practice.” The findings highlight that effective local governance depends less on what the law says and more on the combination of local capacity, leadership independence, and the nature of the relationship between central and local authorities.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of using multiple case studies to uncover differences within a single country—differences that broad, national-level assessments often overlook. The lessons drawn here are not only relevant for Ghana but also for other countries facing the same challenge: turning decentralization from an idea into a working reality.

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