Effective local governance is an essential precondition for quality public service delivery and better development outcomes. In the same vein, a culture of evaluation is equally essential for local government authorities to execute their development planning and administrative functions effectively, efficiently and sustainably while promoting accountability and learning. That said, a culture of evaluation rarely exists within Ghana’s local government system. Several factors, including limited financial and technical capacities, continue to hinder the promotion of a culture of evaluation amongst metropolitan, municipal and district assemblies. Thus, for Ghana’s local governance system, just designing monitoring and evaluation plans for District Medium-Term Development Plans is not enough. Well-resourced evaluation units coupled with a strong partnership and institutional orientation as well as platforms of exchange are crucial to building a culture of evaluation. This is even more crucial in a time when development partners including multilateral development banks are looking to engage more sub-nationally.
Beyond Monitoring and Evaluation Plans: Towards an evaluation culture in Ghanaian Local Government

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Key Messages

- Promoting a strong evaluation culture is as important for local government authorities as it is for central governments, and win-win for national development priorities as well as the Sustainable Development Goals.

- There appears to be little evidence of a widespread evaluative culture within the Ghanaian local government. At best, what exists could be likened to a monitoring culture.

- Promoting an evaluation culture amongst local governments goes beyond just designing monitoring and evaluation plans. The enabling environment for implementing these plans – including financial and technical capacities as well as the right institutional frameworks – should be created.

- Periodic performance assessment tools can be useful in promoting an evaluation culture at the local government level on two fronts. First, they can help highlight key governance lapses and needs, including monitoring and evaluation, which local governments will have to leverage to improve their delivery. Second, such tools have the potential to create greater demand for accountability from civil society.

- National evaluation associations, research institutions and civil society organizations have an important role to play in instilling a culture of evaluation.

Introduction

With the rise in demand for greater accountability and the quest for evidenced-based policies, governments across the world are stepping up efforts regarding monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of policies, programmes and projects. In Africa, M&E practice has undergone significant changes since the turn of the millennium, with a gradual shift towards greater country-owned M&E systems (Basheka, 2015; Mofolo, Mkuyane & Skade 2014). Today, countries like South Africa, Benin and Uganda have relatively advanced national M&E systems, and they continue to exchange and learn from each other (Goldman et al., 2018). Others, like Botswana and Ethiopia, have developed national policy frameworks to guide public sector monitoring and evaluation. The Government of Ghana, following in the footsteps of countries like Benin, established a ministry solely dedicated to monitoring and evaluation of government interventions in 2017, as did Gabon two years later.

This growing prominence of M&E practice in Africa’s public sector stems from not only the need to assure accountability and learning but also due to the “...political recognition of the utility of evaluation to good governance” (Basheka, 2015:77). In other words, there is an intrinsic relationship between M&E and good governance, be it at the national or local level. That said, the evaluation component in M&E is still lagging in practice when it comes to the African public sector (Goldman et al., 2018). Even at the local government level, a similar phenomenon exists. Although M&E practices are becoming popular...
FUFULSO-SAWLA ROAD PROJECT
JONOKOPONTO PRIMARY SCHOOL

INTERVENTIONS:
School Building
Teacher’s Bungalows

Water Facilities
Sanitation Facilities

Sola Power
School Furniture

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amongst local governments across the continent, subnational M&E systems and plans turn out to be all about monitoring and no or little evaluation, a situation that signals a weak evaluation culture at the local level.

In Ghana, while nearly all Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs) prepare M&E plans to accompany their Medium-Term Development Plans as enshrined in the National M&E Manual and District M&E Guidelines, the component of evaluation is rarely practiced. Meanwhile, like monitoring, evaluation is valuable for accountability and evidence-based policy making (Mackey, 2008).

This article therefore draws mainly on existing literature including M&E plans developed for MMDAs as well as annual progress reports to assess the state of evaluation culture in Ghana's local government system. The article also examines current efforts and tools aimed at promoting a culture of evaluation and proffers recommendations towards an improved evaluation culture amongst Ghana's MMDAs.

Ghana's local government system and the role of M&E

Admittedly, the local government system has grown to become an important structure in the governance of development globally. By moving away from a state-centric development administration to a local-level system of development planning and administration, local governance has the power to fast-track a country's development as it guarantees ownership, leverages local resources and improves local participation. To this end, local governance can be viewed as indispensable to society's development (Institute of Local Government Studies & Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2016). In essence, local governments play a critical role in not just public service delivery but are also seen as vehicles for bringing development to people.

Over the past three decades, Ghana's local governance system has evolved following the 1988 legislative reforms and was subsequently reinforced by provisions such as the Local Government Act of 1993 and the Local Government ACT, 2010, (ACT 462). As of 2019, there are a total of 260 administrative districts. These districts are the prime administrative, planning, development, budgeting, and rating authorities in their areas of jurisdiction.

In performing these functions, MMDAs, working through District Planning and Coordination Units, develop District Medium Term Plans that are normally four years long and cover a wide range of interventions including construction of school blocks, health centers, and market centers. In doing this, the District Planning and Coordination Units work with other decentralized agencies such as the Ghana Education Service, the Ghana Health Service and the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, amongst others.

The enormity and complexity of the planning, execution, coordination as well as administrative functions of local governments requires the establishment of a system to consistently monitor and measure these efforts and promote organizational learning. It is for this reason that there is a growing need to strengthen M&E capacities at the local level amongst governments, donors and development partners alike (Le Bay & Loquai, 2008).

According to the National M&E Manual, "M&E is the main instrument for assessing the extent to which the government has done what it pledged to do in its national policy statements and development plans." At the district level, the concept of M&E is becoming popular. Today, all MMDAs are required to prepare M&E plans for their respective District Medium-Term Development.
Plans as stipulated in the National M&E Manual. This plan, which is directly developed by the District Planning and Coordination Unit under the leadership of the District Coordinating Director, has as one of its objectives to capture lessons from the implementation of plans, projects and programmes (see Box 1).

Similar to central government, Ghana’s MMDAs also adopt M&E as part of their governance processes. However, this adoption should not stop with development of plans and the organization of quarterly performance review meetings. Realising the full benefits of such plans while improving development outcomes at the local level will require a strong culture of evaluation.

The State of Evaluation Culture at the MMDA Level

Even though evaluating the effectiveness of government interventions yields several benefits, the absence of a strong evaluation culture – commitment to initiating and utilizing findings of evaluations – is likely to thwart these benefits. Thus, evaluation culture is a critical precondition for evaluation use and utilization (Sandison, 2006).

Within Ghana’s local government system, MMDAs’ evaluation culture can be characterized via multiple lenses. Specific to this review, four main strands are explored.

Legislative and policy environment: At the heart of the quest to promoting a culture of evaluation amongst MMDAs lies the need to create the enabling environment in terms policy and institutional arrangements. While the National M&E Manual provides overall direction for developing sector and MMDA M&E plans, District M&E Guidelines – which are developed and periodically revised by the National Development Planning Commission – serve as the main reference document for the preparation of MMDAs’ M&E plans. The 2014-2017 District M&E Guidelines, for example, detail the institutional arrangements for decentralized M&E, present the sequence of activities for preparing the plan and offer modalities for preparing the plans in a participatory manner.

Within the same guidelines, a specific section is dedicated to development evaluation, where the role of evaluation, its core values, the different types as well as the steps to be followed in conducting one are tersely presented. This information also includes a sample

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<th>BOX 1. RATIONALE FOR DEVELOPING M&amp;E PLANS AT THE MMDA LEVEL</th>
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<tr>
<td>❚ Assess whether the DMTDP targets were being met</td>
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<td>❚ Identify achievements, constraints and failures so that improvements can be made to the DMTDP and project designs to achieve better impact</td>
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<td>❚ Identify the appropriate interventions that will increase the responsiveness of targeted beneficiaries</td>
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<td>❚ Provide information for effective coordination of district development at the regional level</td>
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<tr>
<td>❚ Document lessons learned from the implementation of programmes and projects</td>
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<td>❚ Improve service delivery and influence allocation of resources in the districts</td>
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<tr>
<td>❚ Demonstrate results to stakeholders as part of accountability and transparency</td>
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<tr>
<td>❚ Reinforce ownership of the DMTDP and build M&amp;E capacity within each District.</td>
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Source: Guidelines for the Preparation of the District Monitoring and Evaluation Plan Under
While these provisions are important, their practical application remains a significant challenge. A cursory glance at these District M&E Plans and some annual progress reports reveals a large gap in terms of how evaluations are captured. Except in a few instances where mention is made of mid-term evaluation of the DMTDPs, most of the M&E activities captured in these plans are mainly monitoring in nature. This bias partly explains the limited nature of the evaluation provisions in the guidelines and how this needs to change, not just at MMDA level but even at the national level. Currently, Ghana’s national evaluation system appears weak and this obviously cascades into the kind of evaluation culture that exists at the MMDA level.

**Technical and financial capacity:** Technical and financial capacities are fundamental for effective evaluations (Adrien & Denis, 2008). Following this, promoting and sustaining a culture of evaluation at the MMDA level would require that the necessary technical and financial capacities are in place. For many MMDAs, this is a major hurdle to promoting a culture of evaluation. Evaluation capacity amongst Ghana’s Ministries, Departments, Agencies as well as MMDAs remain limited (Twende Mbele, 2018; UNDP, 2015; Dery, 2013). Indeed, these challenges are clearly enumerated in some M&E plans themselves.

In particular, the context in which the term ‘evaluation’ is used in most M&E plans and annual progress reports is in itself problematic and at times confusing. A review at some of these documents reveals that the concepts of ‘monitoring’ and ‘evaluation’ are used almost interchangeably. For example, in some M&E plans, the term ‘evaluation’ has been used in the context of undertaking activities such as field visits. Even in situations where an evaluation matrix is presented in the plan, the wrong methodologies have been indicated, including site visits and meetings. This further adds to the point on the mixed understanding and use of the two terms. It also points to a pattern of non-compliance owing to limited technical capacity (Dery, 2013).

**Utilization:** This is an indispensable part of the evaluation cycle and certainly critical to a sustained evaluation culture. Sadly, given that real time evaluation of interventions is rarely conducted at the MMDA level except for mid-term reviews of the DMTDPs, little evidence exists to validate whether both monitoring and evaluation findings feed back into improving local governance practices and development planning processes. Even for emerging performance assessment tools such as the District League Table where dissemination workshops are organized to share findings with key stakeholders, the decision of MMDAs to take up issues identified from the assessment lies with them.

**Participation and partnerships:** Recognizing the value of evaluation and the consequent demand that comes with it is equally fundamental to a strong evaluation culture. For governments, one effective way of achieving this is by encouraging greater participation and building strong partnerships with stakeholders. At the MMDA level, this can happen in two ways: in the process leading up to generating the M&E plans and during the actual implementation of the plans including dissemination of results.

At the design phase, M&E plans report conducting stakeholder analysis as part of their engagement processes as stipulated in the guidelines. These stakeholders range from non-governmental organizations to community-based organizations. In addition, the M&E guidelines encourage the use of participatory M&E tools such as Participatory Rural Appraisal, Citizen Report Card, Community Score Card, and Participatory Expenditure Tracking Surveys.
Another important area that underpins the participation and partnership strand stems from partnerships with civil society organizations in promoting a culture of evaluation. Already, some of these collaborative efforts are taking place – for example, the Ghana M&E Forum is working with Twende Mbele and CLEAR-AA to strengthen government-civil society organization collaboration in M&E for the sanitation sector – but they normally tend to be nationally oriented rather than local. Obviously a good example that can be explored at the MMDA level.

The role of tools in promoting a culture of evaluation amongst MMDAs

Besides the traditional M&E guidelines and their accompanying plans that are meant to mainstream an M&E culture amongst MMDAs, there a couple of performance assessment tools that have the potential to complement MMDAs in reflecting on their administrative and planning processes and assure good governance and accountability in the long run. Two of these tools are discussed below.

District Assemblies Performance Assessment Tool: This is a tool which serves two main purposes: first, to assess the performance of MMDAs based on a wide range of indicators and second, to serve as a basis appropriating the allocation of District Assemblies Common Fund responsiveness factor grant to MMDAs (Government of Ghana, 2018). Management, coordination and M&E forms one of the ten main indicators used for computing this assessment. While an important tool for incentivizing MMDAs to do better as well as provide general performance feedback, it cannot replace a functional evaluation system. For example, the kind of issues the assessment captures in the area of Management, Coordination and M&E is too limited to provide meaningful lessons regarding project- and programme-specific implementation issues concerning what works and what does not.

Ghana’s District League Table: Since 2014, the District League Table – jointly designed by the Center for Democratic Development and UNICEF Ghana in collaboration with the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development – has served as an important social accountability tool for measuring how the country’s MMDAs are faring in terms of development and delivery of basic services on an annual basis. Its main aim is to promote social accountability and can be used for programme planning (Center for Democratic Development & UNICEF, 2015). The assessment is based on six key sectors: health, education, sanitation, water, security and governance. Thus, it has the potential to create demand for monitoring and evaluation by civil society in particular. However, this tool does not adequately highlight some of the governance lapses at the local level that ought to be taken up especially in the areas of M&E. In a few cases, monitoring and supervision have been flagged in the District League Table reports.

Instilling an evaluation culture in Ghana’s Local Government System

Despite the fact that the development of M&E plans is a critical feature within Ghana’s local governance system, it tends to be biased towards monitoring. Simply put, what really exists is a culture of monitoring and not evaluation. As this article has shown, the evaluation ecosystem at the local level appears weak. Thus, specific to Ghana, the following recommendations are essential in promoting a culture of evaluation amongst MMDAs.

Reorient M&E systems to adequately feature evaluation: A first step to building a culture of evaluation
within Ghana’s local government is to reorient the M&E system to adequately feature evaluations. This will entail putting in place a fully entrenched national evaluation system that cascades down to the district level. Also, intensifying evaluation education including building staff capacity to conduct evaluations while ensuring acceptable levels of rigor, credibility and independence is critical. Moreover, the templates used for developing these district M&E plans will need some improvements to appropriately capture evaluations. This will require the joint collaboration of the ministries of M&E and Local Government and Rural Development together with the National Development Planning Commission as well as development partners.

"Despite the fact that the development of M&E plans is a critical feature within Ghana’s local governance system,... what really exists is a culture of monitoring and not evaluation."

Establish results sharing platforms:
Having a dedicated platform for showcasing experiences in relation to M&E is important. In fact, the M&E Ministry launched the maiden Ghana Results Fair in January 2020. This saw various Ministries, Departments and Agencies showcasing their results. Such a platform can target MMDAs too, whereby MMDAs in respective regions get the opportunity to share their results. Having such a platform brings with it multiple benefits. First, it is an opportunity for peer-learning amongst district assemblies on their M&E practices and engagements. Secondly, it could be a useful tool for disseminating information to their constituents, which in turn will encourage them to demand more results.

Strengthen partnerships with research centres and national evaluation associations: Given that national evaluation associations are a vital force in promoting evaluation culture, strengthening partnerships with such actors including the Ghana M&E Forum is an important starting point. Since budgets are a major constraint to creating functional M&E within the public sector, partnering with research institutions and national evaluation associations to support evaluation capacity building initiatives, exchange programmes as well as joint evaluations becomes imperative.

Develop evaluation-specific accountability and learning tools:
As mentioned earlier, tools such as the District League Table are useful even though they may have their own limitations. For the next District League Table report in particular, Center for Democratic Development and UNICEF may consider giving a spotlight on M&E besides ranking MMDAs on their development performance. This should allow for in-depth understanding of the M&E challenge and its imperatives for development outcomes. In addition, the M&E Ministry can partner with, for example, the Ghana M&E Forum to develop a M&E specific tool that can serve as a diagnostic tool itself by tracking how MMDAs are executing their M&E functions while identifying M&E champions amongst MMDAs. Here, independent development evaluation units of development partners including multilateral development banks can leverage their vast technical capacity to collaborate with national
evaluation associations and MMDAs in developing such tools.

- **Incentive and recognition:** Recognizing the best MMDAs through some form of an awards scheme is one pathway to encouraging a culture of evaluation. For example, the proposal to develop a tool can serve as a basis for incentivizing and encouraging MMDAs to build their evaluations culture. Ghana M&E Forum’s evaluation awards, which normally recognize institutions and individuals contributing to M&E in the country, is a good starting point. Perhaps, having a dedicated scheme which specifically targets MMDAs should bring more visibility to how they mainstream M&E in their operations.

Besides these recommendations, this review also offers some lessons when it comes promoting a culture of evaluation amongst local governments.

- Promoting an evaluation culture amongst local governments goes beyond just designing M&E plans. The enabling environment for actualizing these plans – including financial and technical capacities as well as the right institutional frameworks – should be created.

- Periodic performance assessment tools such as the District Assemblies Performance Assessment Tool and District League Table in the case of Ghana can be useful in promoting an evaluation culture at the local government level on two fronts. First, they can help highlight key governance lapses and needs including M&E for which local governments will have to leverage to improve their delivery. Second, such tools have the potential to create greater demand for accountability from communities and civil society.

- Curtailing the financial challenge that comes with mainstreaming evaluation at the local government calls for the development of evaluation tools that rely intensively on participatory approaches with the contributions of local communities.

- The roles of national evaluation associations, research institutions and civil society organizations in general are important for instilling a culture of evaluation.

- Mainstreaming evaluation at the local level could be a win-win for improving outcomes for national development priorities and the global goals – the sustainable development goals. This is crucial at a time when multilateral development banks are looking to engage more sub-nationally.

**Conclusion**

Effective local governance is an essential precondition for quality public service delivery and better development outcomes. A culture of evaluation is equally essential for local government authorities to execute their development planning and administrative functions effectively, efficiently and sustainably while promoting accountability and learning. However, a mixed-bag of factors, including financial, technical and institutional capacities as well as adequate monitoring, are crucial to promoting an evaluation culture amongst Ghana’s MMDAs. It is hoped that the upcoming M&E policy document that specifically target MMDAs will adequately address some of these concerns regarding evaluations.
References


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