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Challenges of Civil Society Networks in Ghana: A Comparative Study of Four Networks

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between all authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Ghana is the first country within Sub-Saharan Africa to become independent from British colonial rule and one of Africa's most promising democracies. Ghana's adoption of the 1992 Constitution and its return to democratic rule in 1993 created a viable political environment for civic groups to freely operate. Article 21(1) of the 1992 Constitution provides considerable space for the growth of participatory civil society and associational life, and Article 37(2) gives enormous powers for the formation and participation of civil society in the process of development. These constitutional provisions, coupled with the Ghanaian culture of self-help and donor-driven programs such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), have improved Civil Society Organizations' (CSOs) participation in both development and decision-making processes. Civil Society Networks serve the purpose of being a unified force for marginalized CSOs thereby consolidating democracy and also holding governments to account.

Yet, some CSO networks in Ghana have not been able to fully utilize the available political opportunity to influence government policies. Notwithstanding this relatively favorable environment for CSO operation, it is still difficult for them to constructively engage government in the policy arena and influence decisions in favor of their constituents. This research, seeks to examine CSO networks in Ghana, specifically to ascertain the challenges they face in their effort to influence government policies as well as the various ways in which the identified challenges can possibly be overcome. It will address the following questions: how do we conceive civil networks in Ghana? What types of networks exist in Ghana and how do they strategically operate? What challenges do they face and what is the way forward?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ghana is the first country within Sub-Saharan Africa to become independent from British colonial rule and one of Africa's most promising democracies. Ghana's adoption of the 1992 Constitution and its return to democratic rule in 1993 created a viable political environment for civic groups to freely operate. For example, Article 21(1) of the 1992 Constitution [1] provides considerable space for the growth of participatory civil society and associational life and Article 37(2) gives enormous powers for the formation and participation of civil society in the process of development. These constitutional provisions, coupled with the Ghanaian culture of self-help and donor-driven programs such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), have improved Civil Society Organizations' (CSOs) participation in both development and decision-making processes.

The word 'network' has not only become a catchphrase in both international development and domestic policy making, but it is also ardently being recognized as an important phenomenon in society (Perkin and Court, 2005) [2]. Networks serve the purpose of being a unified force for marginalized CSOs thereby consolidating democracy and also holding governments to account. Perkin and Court (2005) note that CSO networks may help influence government policy processes by organizing quality evidence for policy makers; reaching consensus on policy issues by overcoming their formal barriers; marshalling resources and expertise for policy making, and broadening the pro-poor effect of policies so formulated. Yet, some CSO networks in Ghana have not been able to fully utilize the available political opportunity to influence government policies. Notwithstanding this relatively favorable environment for CSO operation, it is still difficult for them to constructively engage government in the policy arena and influence decisions in favor of their constituents. This research, seeks to examine CSO networks in Ghana, specifically to ascertain the challenges they face in their effort to influence government policies as well as the various ways in which the identified challenges can possibly be overcome. It will address the following questions: how do we conceive civil networks in Ghana? What types of networks exist in Ghana and how do they strategically operate? What challenges do they face and what is the way forward?

This paper uses two research methods; content analysis and unstructured interviews. Concerning the first method, the following sources of data were considered: published and unpublished research reports; refereed journal articles, books, research and briefing papers, and monographs. These sources constituted the first data bank upon which the literature review was done. Pertinent information concerning the history, types and networking strategies of CSO networks were then collected. Other relevant policy documents such as the revised version (2004) of the Draft National Policy for Strategic Partnership NGO/CSOs; the Ghana Trust NGO/CSO Draft Bill (2006) [3]; sections of the Companies Code and the 1992 Constitution were also reviewed. In relation to the interviews, four CSO networks in Ghana were selected. These are; the Northern Ghana Network for Development (geographically Northern-based and focuses on development); Northern Network for Education and Development (another Northern based network that focuses on development of education in Northern Ghana); the West African Network for Peace building (geographically Southern-based NGO that focuses on peace building), and the Network for Women's Rights (another Southern-based network that focuses on women's rights). Two main criteria informed the selection of these networks. Given that the study seeks to study networks in Ghana at a very limited time, it was imperative to consider geographical

positioning of CSOs as one main criterion in the selection of networks. Majority of CSOs in Ghana are located in the three Northern regions, but in terms of proximity to the centre of decision-making, CSOs based in Accra are more relevant. This therefore informed the selection of two networks each from Northern and Southern Ghana. The second criterion that informed this selection is the issues or interests that entail the network's formation. Majority of networks, besides geography, are issue-based. The selection of networks under the second criterion is to ensure diversity whilst maximizing the different areas of interest of participants. These two criteria are logically assumed to provide a near accurate representation of the CSO network population in Ghana.

A total of fourteen organizations were purposively sampled for the interviews which took place between late June and August 2011. Purposive sample is a type of non-probability sampling technique which targets people with expert knowledge on a particular field of study and who can be logically assumed to be representative of the total population (Battaglia, 2008) [4]. It is used in this research to select a cross-section of CSOs networks in Ghana that could permit a logical generalization and of course a maximum application of the information so gathered to other networks. Program officers, who handle the daily projects of these organizations, were therefore targeted. An unstructured interview provided enough flexibility to the researchers to ask relevant questions about CSO networks, their operation strategies and challenges. Data collection was done in a conversation form where the interviewer and the interviewees openly discussed issues related to the study. Interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed. The most prominent challenge relates to the organization and management of the vast amount of data collected from the interviews. A simple coding technique was used to analyze the data. This involves critically analyzing each interview transcript to determine a pattern of information provided by the respondent based on the recurrence of the idea or information given. The number of times an idea occurs (across the respondents) forms the basis for the generation of its tally. This procedure was then validated using the SPSS software, and Excel was then used to draw the bar and pie charts. Though data from purposive sample cannot be readily subjected to stringent scientific conclusions, this research, however, strictly adhered to the principles and ethics of social science investigations.

2. CONCEPTUALIZING CSO NETWORKS IN GHANA

The term 'network' has not only become ubiquitous but also very expansive. It has assumed many labels in the field of international development including coalitions, alliances, partnerships and consortia (Milward and Provan, 2003) [5]. Networks have been variously defined in the literature according to their purpose, level of collaboration, type of activities they engage in, and the structure of the partnership (Taschereau and Bolger, 2006) [6]. Whereas Plucknett et al. (1990) [7] think of networks as a platform where members contribute resources and participation for their own benefit, Perkin and Court (2005) see networks as the "formal and informal structures that link actors (individuals or organizations) who share a common interest on a specific issue or a general set of values" (p.2). The word 'network' is sometimes used interchangeably with the secretariat of the network making these two terms 'conflated' (Church et al. 2002, p.14) [8]. A network however is not the same as the secretariat. Rather, it includes the individuals and/or organizations that collaborate based on their common interest. The secretariat on the other hand provides services to the network to enable it achieve its specific mandate. Therefore, a network encompasses the functions of the secretariat and its total membership (Church et al. 2002). A network is also different from 'networking'. Far from being a member of a network, networking signifies the process of achieving what Engels (1993) [9] refers to as social synergy. Social synergy is

the outcome of repetitive participation by members in network activities. Networking therefore involves regular membership participation in network activities in order to achieve its desired goals. Networking can lead to the sharing of projects, time, expertise, contacts and information. This generously leads to learning and capacity building of participating members. In a nutshell, a network is more than assembled individuals or organizations with shared interest, but involves the participation of these members in activities geared towards achieving a common objective.

In this paper, networks will be assumed to be formal or informal structures that bring together actors (individuals or organizations) with specific concerned interest, who working together as a group, attempt to achieve their underlying interest. Civil society networks have been categorized differently in the literature based on various criteria. Whereas some networks are grass root or community-based organizations, others are legally registered. In most cases networks are either geographically or issue-based, focusing on a specific environment or theme of grave concern (Liebler and Ferri, 2004) [10]. Most networks in Ghana are issue-based, except in a few cases when networks campaign for the interest of a particular region.¹ Gibson (2001) further distinguished between networks with “strong” and “weak” ties. “Strong tie” networks are defined as “closed social networks” characterized by “emotional intensity and reciprocal services” (p.53). Such networks are described as being “internally homogeneous and cohesive” and prevalent among the Italian mafia families. Access to such networks is restricted to family members and close trustful associates making them less accountable. On the other hand, a “weak tie” network is more likely to have an open membership for various groups and people; thus, making them more answerable and thereby promoting democratic development. This is possible because social interactions outside the purview of the family may lead to an open and honest discussion and “socially engaged attitudes” (Gibson, 2001:53) [11].

Majority of Ghanaian networks tend to be “weak ties”, making access to membership more open. They are reciprocal (in terms of expertise and resource sharing) towards their members and much more likely to cooperate with other networks that operate on the same sector. Networks in Ghana are not “internally homogeneous” as the close ties type; notwithstanding the fact that majority of them recruit their family members as staff. Even in such circumstances, they still remain accountable and allow honest discussions on policy issues. Citizens and civic groups are likely to benefit from relatively weak and permeable networks than closed ones since the former are not only agents for democratic development but also facilitate cooperation among members (Gibson, 2001:54).

Following from the above conceptualization of networks in Ghana, this paper uses the social mobilization theory as a framework to substantiate the findings that follow after the data presentation. Social mobilization theory emerged in the early 1970s within the discipline of sociology and was geared towards the study of social movements. Some of its core assumptions include achieving its sets goals and targets through people and resource mobilization. According to Zald and MacCarthy (1977) [12], the “resource mobilization approach emphasizes both societal support and constraint of social movement phenomena. It examines the variety of resources that must be mobilized, the linkages of social movements to other groups, the dependence of movements upon external support for success, and the tactics used by authorities to control or incorporate movements” (p.1213).

¹ The cases of Northern Ghana Network for Development (NGND) and the Northern Network for Education Development come to mind. These organizations campaign on issues such as education and development for the three Northern Regions of which the difference between the geographical North and South is disproportionately large.

Obviously, the social mobilization theory holds that the success of civil society organizations rest on resources available to them and where resources are very limited, it is optimal to come together in partnership, in order to organize an effective campaign and programs. Contrary to the assumption that resource mobilization emanates from a situation of “social disorganization and strain” (Kumar: n.d.:2) [13] within likeminded civic groups, its foundation is among viable civic organizations that wish to maximize their productivity by sharing resources and ideas. However, not all academics concur that the social mobilization theory is geared purely on resource and human capital maximization to enhance success and efficiency. Benford and Snow (2000) [14] note that the relevance of social mobilization theory and/or collective action vis-à-vis social movements is basically tied to the way it is framed. They note that “framing” denotes “an active, processual phenomenon” involving “the generation of interpretive frames” with the “resultant products of this framing activity are referred to as “collective action frames” (p.614). In a sense, the diction and the process are as central as the goal that civic organizations pursue.

Other scholars critique the resource mobilization theory from the perspective on which its analysis is framed. For instance, Kumar (n.d.) argues that the new social mobilization theory arises from the “intellectual dissatisfaction” of the principally Marxist view of civil society organizations that tend to focus solely on class struggle (Kumar, n.d.). According to the new social mobilization theory, the emergence of the welfare state and the ability of service providing civic groups to bargain collectively as well as other social interventions have made less relevant the Marxist argument of class struggle. Instead, the dominant source of struggle is not class but rather social inequalities, the ever-increasing power of the mass media and other emergent post-industrial capitalist states (Kumar, n.d.). Other academics think the social mobilization theory is not comprehensive enough (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). These varied perspectives strengthen the social mobilization theory as a fantastic framework to appraise the collective action attempts of civic bodies in Ghana.

3. NETWORKING STRATEGIES

UNECA (2011b) [15] identifies two main CSO networking strategies; horizontal networking strategies and vertical networking strategies. In horizontal networking, CSO networks scale up in three dimensions: by increasing membership size to gain numerical strength, by expanding their geographical coverage to achieve greater impact, and by adding complementary services to their main operational focus. Vertical networking on the other hand involves the combination of three important sub-networking strategies (functional, organizational and political) to help expand the objectives and activities of a network. While functional networking seeks to broaden the scope and objectives of networks, organizational networking augments their financial and human resource base to achieve efficient and sustainable services (UNECA, 2011b). CSOs functionally network in two ways: first, by replicating the activities of other organizations, and secondly, by diversifying its sector operations. In the latter case for example, a network specialized in agricultural activities can diversify its operations to embrace issues of health and microcredit (UNECA, 2011b). Uvin (1995, cited in UNECA, 2011b) identifies two strategies used by networks to plan organizationally. These are “integration” and “aggregation.” In integration, an organization allows government or any of its agencies to co-opt its program by fully or jointly funding it. However, in aggregation, an organization coordinates or shares some of its functions with another independent and more financially-resourced organization. Though differently construed in terms of process, both integration and aggregation have the same purpose, that is, to share or reduce the financial burden of the organization. The last networking strategy

under vertical networking is political networking and this involves organizations moving beyond the delivery of services to embrace advocacy work. In general, the rationale behind vertical networking is to strengthen the capacity of CSOs to innovate and enhance their autonomy and independence.

The four networks selected for study in this research have all adopted different networking strategies to help achieve their objectives. First, these networks have used horizontal networking strategies to build up their organizations across the country. They have all quantitatively scaled up their membership and continue to canvass for more members. The NNED begun with a little over 50 members and now has about 111 members across the three Northern Regions.² Similarly, the NGND had about 80 members as at three years ago. However, in an interview with the Programs Officer, it was understood that their current membership stood at about two hundred and fifty. Secondly, they have all expanded their geographical coverage. WANEP and NETRIGHT have their main offices in Accra. However, NETRIGHT has “Regional Focal Points” in the remaining nine regions in the country and WANEP has twelve national chapters in the twelve countries³ within the West African sub-region which are members of the network. The Ghana Network for Peace building (GHANEP) which is the national chapter of WANEP in Ghana is located in Tamale, the Northern regional capital, and has established presence in all the other regional capitals. Similarly, the NNED and NGND have their secretarial offices in Tamale and regional chapters or representations in the other two Northern regions namely the Upper East and West Regions. It means therefore that WANEP and NETRIGHT are geographically more networked, closer to both the centre of decision making, i.e. Accra, and more accessible to its membership than NNED and NGND.

However, the NNED is part of an Accra-based thematic national and sister network called the Ghana National Education Campaign Coalition (GNECC) which represents NNED at the national level.⁴ This therefore implies that in terms of geographical networking, the NGND is the least networked among the four selected organizations. All the networks, with the exception of the NNED, have included complementary services to their core functions. WANEP begun with the core mission of “...promoting cooperative responses to violent conflicts...” (Annual Report 2010:1) [16] yet, as part of this broader mission, it has established different programs including the Women in Peace Program (WPP), which is the gender perspective of peace building, and the West Africa Peace building Institute (WAPI) among others. Similarly, NETRIGHT which aims to promote women’s rights⁵ now have programs related to the country’s oil and gas industry. The NGND which campaigns on the platform of equitable development between geographical North and South of Ghana has now ventured into sanitation, agriculture and health as part of their grand effort to promote development. Apparently, only the NNED still sticks to its core issue of affordable education for people in the three Northern regions.

These four networks have also engaged in some form of vertical networking. The NNED has expanded most of its operations by collaborating with more financially-resourced organizations to conduct research in its core areas of operation aimed at influencing policies. It has worked with the Netherlands Development Organization (SNV) and the Commonwealth Education Fund to conduct research and analysis on the position of girls in

² Interview with John Kumbour (Tamale, July 13th 2011)

³ Benin, Cote D'Ivoire, Cape Verde, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo (one more)

⁴ Interview with John Kumbour (Tamale, July 13th 2011)

⁵ See NETRIGHT's information leaflet

primary education in the Northern Region of Ghana. It has also worked with the Integrated Social Development Centre (ISODEC) and the GNECC to help expand the Education Sector Annual Review to regional and district levels as against the former practice of holding the review only in Accra.⁶ Similarly, some of WANEP's programs have been aggregated by international organizations and governments. Whereas SIDA supports the Human Security, Conflict Prevention and Peace building program, the Early Warning and Response program is supported by the EWARDS grants largely funded by USAID (Annual Report, 2010). The German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) supports the West African Peace building Institute and the MacArthur Foundation funds the Women in Peace building Network (Annual Report, 2010). Notwithstanding this support, it was clear from the interviews that none of these networks has allowed the state or any of its agencies to co-opt a program or sponsor any of their policies for fear of being perceived as indulging in partisan politics. Rather, these networks have resorted to forming alliances and collaborating with other independent organizations to provide them with the necessary support that they would have required from the state or any of its agencies.

4. CHALLENGES OF NETWORKS IN GHANA

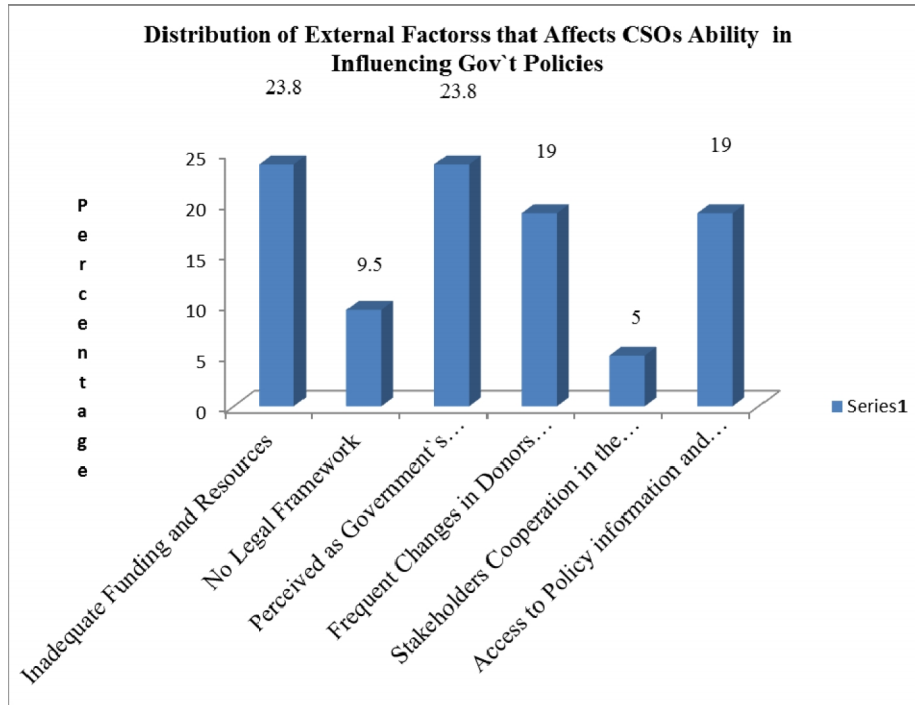
Notwithstanding the favorable legal, cultural and institutional frameworks that enable CSOs to influence policy making in the country, there still remain tensions within the ranks of networks that challenge some of their ambitions. Several reasons have been assigned to the inability of CSOs to influence government policies, these include; geographical coverage (Fisher, 1998) [17], lack of funds (Perkin and Court, 2006) and inadequate capacity (Kornsweig et al. 2006) [18]. However, the most prominent factors discussed in relation to CSOs' ability to influence policy making is categorized into two: the external and the internal factors (Fioramonti and Heinrich, 2007) [19]. External challenges include factors that affect CSOs' ability to influence government policies but which are outside the network's set up. Some of the major challenges cited by the organizations interviewed include; inadequate donor funding and resources, the perception that civil society organizations are enemies to government, and frequent changes in government and sector ministers. Others include donor pressure on CSOs to take certain actions or behave in manners contrary to their working principles, lack of access to government policy information, and the unwillingness of stakeholders to share information with networks.

Whereas these factors are crucial to networks' ability to influence policy making in Ghana, there are equally more significant challenges pertinent to the internal structure and capacity of networks. The following factors stood out from the interviews as internal challenges to network operations; inadequate funds and resources, conflict of interest among network members (i.e., whether members should give their unflinching support to networks or their own organizations), and the lack of credible leadership and transparency.

A close examination of the internal and external challenges reveals that inadequate funding is seen as both an internal and an external problem. Internally, inadequate funding may be construed from the inability of networks to raise or generate funds for their activities including most importantly the low payment of dues from members. Externally, however, inadequate funding is seen from the perspective of low donations from foreign partners or from the government where it is permissible. The impact remains the same in spite of the difference in perspective. Further, most of the internal and external factors, in spite of the distinction, complement and reinforce each other. In the light of this therefore, the two challenges shall

⁶ *Interview with John Kumbour (Tamale, July 13th 2011).*

be examined together and compared to other challenges pertinent to the policy process which were not mentioned by the respondents in the course of the interview process. The figure below Fig. 1 shows the distribution of external factors affecting CSOs ability to influence government policies.

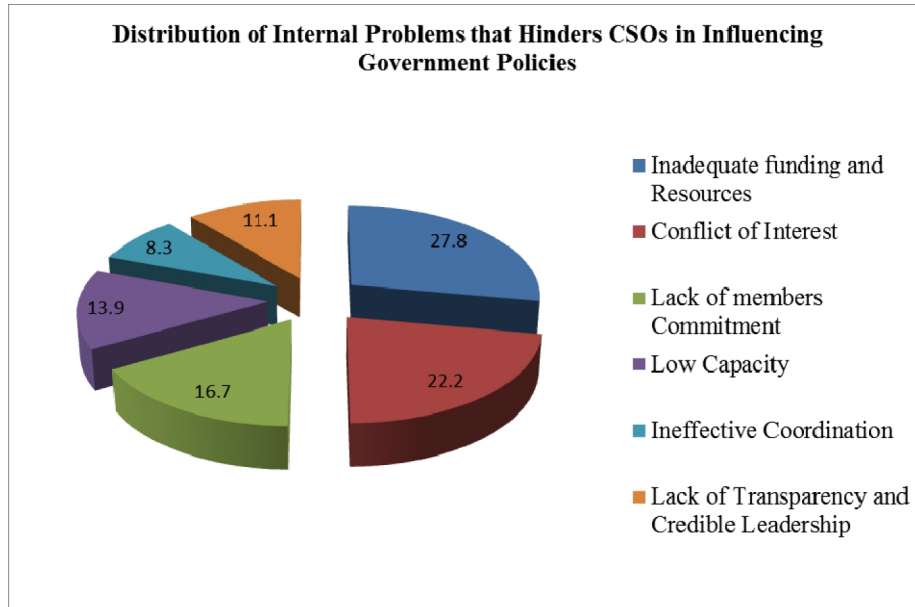


Source: Field Survey, June – August, 2011

Fig. 1. Distribution of external factors that affect CSOs ability to influence government policies in Ghana

First and foremost is the challenge of funding. Most civil society networks rely on donations from foreign organization and governments, and the government of Ghana or both. Each case presents a challenge of its own. CSOs that rely solely on foreign donations either do not get the money on time for their projects or do not get it at all depending on the availability of donor funds. The economic recession in Western Europe and the United States of America has further exacerbated the problem. The implication is that CSOs cannot predict with certainty when funds will be available for their activities. CSOs that rely on funds from the government of Ghana face a different level of challenges. Apart from the delay in releasing funds, they also face the challenge of pulling themselves from the state's control. Gyimah-Boadi (1996) [20] notes that civil society organizations' ability to contribute to democratic development depends on their ability to be independent from the state and the government of the day. When CSOs rely greatly on government funds to be able to run their activities, it invariably reduces them to state institutions since their independence could be compromised. To be able to successfully influence government policies, CSOs need to be completely independent from the government and state vis-à-vis finance and control. Total independence could create the flexibility for efficiency and effectiveness needed to influence policy. Complete dependence on government or donor funds for CSO activities is not a viable option because it may be delayed or in extreme cases become unavailable. Given

this scenario, CSOs activities may have to be suspended and that could affect their ability to influence the policy process.



Source: Field Survey, June – August, 2011

Fig. 2. Distribution of internal factors that affect CSO's ability to influence government policies in Ghana

Related to the problem of inadequate or delayed funds is the change in donor priorities and expectations owing to the shift in policy focus of donor governments. Foreign donors have, on a number of occasions, changed their priority areas from institutional reforms to good governance and democratization or from economic liberalization to civil society empowerment. A shift in donor focus gives rise to a shift in requirements for accessing funds thereby throwing some CSO networks off board for a while. Whilst some CSOs can easily adjust to these changes, others find it too difficult to cope. CSOs' ability to cope depends at times on their versatility which could enable them to veer off their core mandates either temporarily or permanently. All these create uncertainty in the actions and activities of CSOs and go a long way to affect their ability to influence government policies. There seems to be a relationship between lack of funds and resource on one hand and lack of transparency on the other. In the context of dwindling funds and the rapid changes that characterize the CSO funding regime in Ghana, personal linkages to public officials are crucial assets to receiving funding and valuable information leading to same (Fioramonti and Heinrich, 2007). Such a reliance on personal contacts can easily undermine the financial transparency and accountability of CSO networks. The perception of NGOs in Ghana as moneymaking ventures has also exacerbated this problem. Doubts are raised over issues of accountability and credibility when this perception is not translated into action.

Another prominent challenge is governments' perception of CSOs in the country. Governments in Ghana have increasingly perceived some CSOs not completely as partners in development but rather as their "enemies." This challenge relates more to the role of CSOs in keeping government on its toes and also exposing incompetence and corrupt

practices. As a result, governments in the country have taken different measures to contain CSOs including trying to regulate their activities (as demonstrated in the attempt to implement an NGO law in 2005); denying some CSOs funds and relevant information about its activities, and at worst forming or supporting alternative CSOs in the country to either undermine or compete with existing ones. Indeed, both Ninsin (1998) [21] and Draah (2003) [22] have warned against accepting all CSOs in Ghana as agents of democracy and development since some of them are established to further the agenda of governments in power by undermining the activities of genuinely established ones.

Related to this problem is lack of access to government information. Per the work they do, CSOs require a lot of information from sector ministries and also from the government to be able to influence government policies. Inadequate information about government policies affects the ability of CSOs to influence it. In Ghana, governments mostly share information with organizations that sympathize with it and not those that constantly criticize it. Majority of CSOs rely on informal informers within government structures to be able to function well. CSOs with this privilege often have limited access to the information they need. Government's decision to work with some CSOs and not with others based on the perception that they are not sympathetic to them often leads to the politicization of CSOs and their activities in the country. Whilst civil society networks endeavor to be politically neutral in their activities,⁷ some interviewees think certain funding opportunities require them to be tacitly partisan. Organizations working in the health sector argue that majority of funds meant for the treatment of HIV/AIDS is accessed through the Ghana Aids Commission (a state-agency) which requires some form of allegiance to the government.⁸ Indeed, CSO politicization has assumed alarming proportions in recent times. Recently, a Deputy Minister of Finance in the National Democratic Congress government, Fiifi Kwertey, accused three think tanks in the country⁹ as agents of the opposition New Patriotic Party¹⁰ (NPP) following the Institute for Economic Affairs' (IEA) denial and subsequent withdrawal from their website a research report that suggests that the NPP abused state resources in the run up to the 2008 elections. Certainly, Ohemeng (2006) [23] notes that politically-affiliated think tanks find it very difficult to confront government and its policies that affect the people, especially if executives of such think tanks are members of the party in government. He names the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD) and the IEA as examples of such think tanks. Research findings from CSOs are important evidence which could be used to influence government policies and decisions. Therefore, to the extent that such an important finding is kept secret from Ghanaians and allegedly removed from the website of the IEA when reported by the Ghana News Agency goes a long way to indicate the unwillingness of some CSOs to commit themselves to influencing the policies of governments they support (Alidu and Ame, 2012) [24].

5. CHALLENGES PARTICULAR TO THE POLICY PROCESS

Apart from the above challenges, there are equally significant ones that affect CSOs ability to influence policy. These challenges are neither internal nor external but peculiar to the policy process including; agenda setting, policy formulation, policy adoption, policy implementation and policy evaluation. Evidence from research mostly form the basis for CSOs policy influence. However, there are several challenges to using research as basis to

⁷ Interview with Joyce Ababio (a program Officer of NETRIGHT, 16/08/2011)

⁸ Interview with Alima Sagbito Saeed (Executive Director of SIRDA, 29/06/2011)

⁹ The Centre for Democratic Development, the Institute of Economic Affairs, and IMANI-Ghana

¹⁰ Ghana News Agency

influence policy. Gill (1994) [25] argues that politics may affect the ability of research findings to affect policy especially where governments are committed to one based on ideological grounds. Although Ghana practices multi-party democracy, there are two dominant political parties that mirror two contrasting ideologies. The ruling National Democratic Congress party is mainly social democrats and the opposition New Patriotic Party liberal democrats. Government policies in the country are not mostly ideologically-driven; nonetheless, political ideology can affect CSOs ability to influence government policies. Where ideology takes precedence over scientific research findings, CSOs ability to influence government policies may become very difficult in the country.

Further, CSO networks in Ghana have the problem of translating legitimate policy issues into legitimate demands. While agenda setting denotes how policy problems attract the attention of policymakers (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2009) [26], one would expect CSO networks, with their extensive research in several policy areas, to be able to put their issues on the formal agenda, where the main issues the government wants to address through public policy are found (Anderson 2006) [27]. CSO networks prominence in the agenda setting stage of the policy process is seen in the public or national agenda, which involves the issues the general public and the media are discussing (Adolino and Blake, 2007; Kingdon 1995) [28] [29] and not necessarily policy makers. As noted by Dery (2000) [30], putting an issue on the national agenda has no impact on the subsequent treatment of that issue (p.37). Therefore, far from just making public issues agenda issues, CSO networks need to put more efforts in ensuring that those issues end up as policies. Cobb and Ross (1997) [31] were right when they argued that agenda setting is not about 'what issues government chooses to act on, [but] they are also about competing interpretations of political problems and the alternative views that underlie them' (cited in Dery, 2000:38). This suggests that CSO networks under the agenda setting stage need to move beyond just drawing governments' attentions to policy issues in the country but also ensuring that their interpretation of the policy issue stands out. One way of doing this is make sure that issues raised at the agenda stage are pushed further at the policy formulation stage.

In relation to policy formulation, CSOs problem concerns their inability to push their preferred alternative solutions to address the problems identified in the agenda-setting stage of the policy process. Often the party in-charge of the Presidency (which has also had the majority in the Legislature since the emergence of the Fourth Republic 1993) provides the alternative solutions to address the policy problems in the country. This monopolization of policy formulation has led to CSOs not being in a position to tell the impact of their efforts on the policy process. This is against the backdrop of several studies that have concluded that policy formulation needs several actors in most instances to address the policy problems facing countries (Hecl 1978; Jones 1984; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Howlett and Rammesh 2003) [32,33,34,35]. This challenge is aptly captured by Ruth Aba Grant Antwi when she notes that *"at times it is very difficult for us to tell whether our activities helped in influencing policy...we try to propose alternatives...create awareness and punch holes into government policies...but whether the government take it or not, it is up to it."*¹¹ Eric Emmanuel Maasole, program facilitator at IBIS, agrees with Ruth Aba Grant Antwi. He argues that it is very difficult for CSOs to assess their performance when it comes to influencing policies because *"...our achievements are not acknowledged... [and]...we don't get feedback from the government."*¹²

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² *Interviewed on 28/06/2011 at Tamale*

Extending the argument further, the program facilitator for CALID, Sumani Mohammed Awal, clarifies that “it is not easy to tell [whether an organization’s effort has led to policy influence] since policy influence takes time and might not be recognized [by the government].”¹³ Per the adopted definition of a policy in this study, when an activity is pursued continually, it is important to know the factors that both facilitate and retard the process and what account for them. This helps in determining the strategy to employ the next time and where to make amends. However, the one way flow of information (only from CSO networks to the government and not the other way round) presents a challenge on which strategy to use and under what circumstance.

Under the policy implementation stage, CSOs face different challenges in their attempt to influence policy. It is acknowledged that policy implementation success depends on the relationship that exists between the parties working together (O’Toole, 2003) [36]. Generally, public policies are better implemented if cooperation increases among partners working together (Henwood, 2001; cited in Carlsson, 2000) [37]. Partners tend to cooperate better where there is a level of trust between them and this is mostly lacking in the relationship between CSOs and governments in Ghana. This is evidenced by the testimonies of most CSOs. For example, Akiskame Emmanuel, program coordinator for Presbyterian Agricultural Services, argues that the “*governments often perceive CSOs as their enemies*”¹⁴ which affects the trust each has for the other and invariably affect the level of cooperation that exists between them. Although quite a number of the studies on the policy process in general and policy implementation in particular, have acknowledged that implementation is undertaken by bureaucrats under the directives of the elected representatives of the people (Ripley, 1985) [38], the excessive partisanship in public management in Ghana has led to politicians ensuring that bureaucrats implement policies by following the directives of politicians and ignoring interest groups efforts at helping with implementation of public policies.

Melody Asiasim Azinim, the program officer for GHANEP, adds “*we try to be politically neutral... [but] one of the challenges in our work is how the government perceives us.*”¹⁵ Alima Sagbito Saeed, the executive director for the Savannah Integrated Rural Development Aid (SIRDA), concurs that tension exist between CSOs and the government which undermines a successful cooperation.¹⁶ However, she believes that there are also other challenges that affect CSOs ability to help implement government policies including the decision of some network secretariats to assume the role of policy implementation rather than training individual member organizations to do that.¹⁷

The problem of network secretariats assuming the function of policy implementation is enormous. As noted by Mohammed Jabar, the program officer for the NGND, the decision of some network secretariats to implement policies on their own is dangerous in the sense that if network secretariats may be able to regulate the activities of their individual members, who then regulates theirs? He went further to note that Ghana still lacks a purposeful and efficient organization at the national level to coordinate the activities of the numerous networks proliferating in the country.

¹³ *Interviewed on 23/06/2011 at Tamale*

¹⁴ *Interviewed on 24/06/2011 at Tamale*

¹⁵ *Interviewed on 29/07/2011 at Tamale*

¹⁶ *Interviewed on 29/06/2011 at Tamale*

¹⁷ *Ibid*

Norbert, the program officer at ACDEP, agrees with Jabar, noting that networks have “...not been able to set a common agreeable agenda that will accommodate the interests of all shades of members.”¹⁸ And he thinks the way forward is to “establish an apex body or a national coordinating unit to harmonize the activities of all CSO networks.”¹⁹ Ghana Association of Private Voluntary Organizations in Development (GAPVOD) used to serve as the national rallying point for all CSOs and championed their grievances at the national level. Now, majority of CSOs agree that GAPVOD represents just the name and is not up to the task.²⁰ The policy evaluation stage is the last stage of the policy process discussed in this paper. One of the major challenges to successful policy evaluation is the lack of information about those policies. In order to provide good feedback on any policy at the grass root level, CSOs need significant information about the policy, its intended beneficiaries and the cost involved. This information is vital for CSOs to determine the success and impact of a policy they are evaluating. Studies have shown that policy success or failure requires fixed criteria for policy actors and those interested in evaluation of policies to use to assess policies (Bovens and t'Hart 1996, Bovens, t'Hart and Peters 2001) [39,40]. Nonetheless, because government does not have these fixed criteria or is unwilling to make them available to CSOs, CSOs are incapacitated in their ability to evaluate public policies on consistent basis.

Bala Ibrahim, the executive director of Aid for Development (AFORD) points out that their ability to work efficiently as CSOs depends on the level of information they get from the government²¹ which at times is not forthcoming. In the same vein, the executive director of SIRDA notes that it is not only governments that need to share policy information with CSOs but also donor agencies as well. According to her, “too many policies [were] been developed daily by donors and [they] lack information on some [of] them” which affects their ability to participate in or influence them. Even in cases where information freely flows from both sides, CSO networks still think governments may refuse to listen or even hide research evidence that suggests that their policies are not having the desired results.

Construed from the social mobilization perspective, civil society organizations in Ghana have established networks to help galvanize resources, ideas and personnel to enable a smooth navigation through these complex challenges identified and discussed above. However, the free-rider problem coupled with the management of common resource pulled together through network formations have reinforced the challenges identified above as having a drastic effect on networks ability to influence policies in the country. This suggests that even though civil society networks in Ghana have embraced the social mobilization theory as the basis for resource and burden sharing, it is still a huge challenge for them to activate mechanism that could fight the free-rider and common resource management challenges inherent to the theory and also the context-specific challenges that hinder their ability to actually achieve policy influence objectives within Ghana.

6. CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was finding out the challenges civil society networks face in their attempt to influence the policymaking process in Ghana. It finds that CSO networks face both internal and external challenges in their attempt to influence policy in Ghana. Some of the external challenges include inadequate resources and funding, the perception that CSOs

¹⁸ *Interviewed on 22/06/2011 at Tamale*

¹⁹ *Ibid*

²⁰ *Interview with Mohammed Jabar*

²¹ *Interviewed on 22/06/2011 at Tamale*

are enemies of the government, changes in donor objectives, and a lack of access to public information, among others. Besides these internal and external challenges, the study also finds that other barriers inherent in the policymaking process affect networks' ability to influence policy. Some of these include the role of politics and ideology to impacting on credible research findings, the inability of networks to tell the impact of their efforts to the policy process and inadequate information about the policy process, among others. In the light of these challenges, this study seeks to make recommendations that will enable CSO networks to better engage with the government vis-à-vis the policy making process in the country.

In view of the challenges identified, this study suggests enough funds should be provided to CSO networks and also encourage them to generate their own funds, building the capacities of networks to help them stand to the task of engaging their governments, effective collaboration with policy formulators and implementers, instituting capacity building programs for their members, passing the right to information bill to enable CSO networks access to government policy information and CSO networks electing transparent leaders. It must be quickly added that most of the challenges that CSO networks face, though genuinely constricting, are not peculiar to them alone. For instance, individual organizations face challenges such as inadequate funding, frequent changes in donor demands, lack of access to government policy information and the perception that they are enemies of the government. However, the way out of these challenges is not only determination but also unity of purpose. There is a higher possibility that in the face of dwindling donor funding for CSO activities, networks stand the chance of benefiting from the less than individual organizations. The reason has been that a group of hundred organizations can put to better use the few resources available rather than an individual organization. What this suggests is that, both networks and individual organizations face the same challenges, but networks are better positioned to succeed in the midst of these challenges than individual organizations.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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