

# **Getting Your Slice of the Pie**

## **“Community” Interest Representation in Ghana’s Local Government System**

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**Master Thesis (June 2014)**

**Master Cultural Anthropology & Development Sociology**

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**Word Count (excl. references): 26.466**

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# **Chapter 1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Yizegu: A Story of Access?**

If one wants to travel from Savelugu to Kumbungu, the shortest option is a 15 kilometer long gravel road, full of bumps and holes. This rough terrain discourages many regular taxi-drivers from taking the route, leaving the option of hopping on the back of one of the blue motorcycle-taxis. The rough ride to which this amounts, sets the scenery for the ethnography provided below, for it tells us a story about development in general and that of one small farmers community in particular.

### *A Trip Down Development Lane*

After having left the paved and comfortable main road of Savelugu, the first building one sees is that of the District Assembly of the Savelugu-Nanton Municipality, the main development planning authority of the region. A few hundred meters onwards, one passes the office of the Lands Commission, which is located right next to regional head office of World-Vision, one of the biggest development organizations active in Ghana. The dusty road accordingly takes us further into the rural area that comprises most of the Northern Region and occasionally passes one of the small farmers villages, scattered all over the land. More strikingly, both sides of the road are strewn with NGO-signs indicating what development projects have been undertaken there, some of which are still active today. For instance, Libga – a village located on the Savelugu-end of the road - profits considerably from a dam-project to which they are assigned custody; the irrigation fields that have sprung from it provide a steady source of income throughout much of the year. Also, zonal capital Moglaa hosts a clinic that provides basic medical services, while the neighboring Tarikpaa is home to a number of schools sponsored by several donor agencies.

Moving further along the Savelugu-Kumbungu road, however, one cannot help but notice that, in terms of general development, the prosperity of the villages located there, seems rather varied. One of the villages that seems to have fallen behind in this regard, is that of Yizegu, painstakingly symbolized by the relatively small number of NGO-signs commemorating its undertaken projects<sup>1</sup>. When considering the extensive NGO-activity undertaken in the area, this village has apparently failed in directing development policy in

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<sup>1</sup> Two, as opposed to the seven signs for the neighboring Tarikpaa, of which the contrast can be directly observed at the crossroad that connects both villages.

their favor. In that sense, the story of Yizegu is perhaps that of a lack of access: to “the development pie” provided by the dozens of developmental NGOs active in the region; and, more particularly, to the District Assembly, the local government institution that holds the knife to cut this pie and hands out the slices.

### *Getting Your Slice of the Pie*

A possible explanation for this observed exclusion can then be found in the process of interest representation. The degree to which ‘your voice is heard’ – and thus the capability of making it heard – will determine the degree to which development policy is directed in your favor. Obviously, not every community will be equally capable of doing so and the benefits of development will accordingly not be equally distributed amongst its ‘beneficiaries’. This might be problematic as this equality is the very basis on which the notion of ‘bottom-up’ participation is based. Perhaps, rather than viewing it as an instrumental means of empowerment, the notion of participation itself requires a more critical approach. What exactly does it mean to be at ‘the bottom’? And when ‘looking up’, what is it you see? When communicating your interest at the lowest level, what happens to it in face of the wide variety of other actors present in the same political arena? Issues of politics and power seem inevitably wound up in this process of interest representation and should take centre stage in any analysis concerned with ‘participation’. This is exactly what the provided ethnography of Yizegu aims to do.

### *Motivation for the Research*

But then why an ethnography? The main motivation for this choice lies in the researcher’s own background in the field of Public Administration and Political Science. The analytical approaches in these disciplines rarely move beyond institutions as such, let alone attempt to open up the black boxes of what constitutes them. For me, personally, this left an uncomfortable blind spot. Rather than sitting at one’s desk, the appropriate thing to do was then to go out in the field and getting one’s hands dirty. An ethnography accordingly provided the appropriate means to continue where the institutional approaches had stopped. In that sense, this thesis tries to add the social and cultural dynamics to an institutional approach, in that way moving *beyond* institutions and filling the gaps in my knowledge. By moving across the analytical borders and limitations of various disciplines, this thesis hopes to present a more complete and accurate picture of social reality as it is.

## 1.2 A Short Theoretical Formulation

A to ensure that both the reader and writer speak the same (conceptual) language, a short theoretical formulation will serve to straighten out the concepts central to the research of this thesis. For now, a general overview is given, although each respective chapter accordingly zooms in on what is theoretically relevant to the case at hand. Each chapter will thus also have a separate theoretical framework in which elements found in this section are provided with some elaboration and depth. Note that theoretical overlaps between the chapters will be found. For the sake clarity, however, some elements will be repeated.

### *The Participatory Discourse*

There is a wide belief that the success of development policy is determined by the construction of an adequate institutional boilerplate that maximizes accountability to its users (Brett, 2003: 1-2). One way for NGOs – and governments - to establish this “downward accountability”<sup>2</sup> is through the means of *participation*. The rationale behind this particular mechanism is that by giving the intended beneficiaries of development projects a ‘voice’ in the policy-formulation phase, the eventually implemented policy will better reflect their interests. Moreover, by having beneficiaries *participate*, implementers obtain feedback through a continuous dialogue on how the policy is doing and what should be done to change it. In that sense participation is different from other accountability mechanisms, such as evaluations or reports, as it refers to a *process* rather than a *tool* (Ebrahim, 2003: 817). The modes and levels of participation can vary considerably though, ranging from information provision and public meetings, to actual partaking in negotiation and bargaining in decision-making processes by the intended beneficiaries (Adnan, 1992: 111; Ebrahim 2003: 817).

We should note that in practice this process of participation by no means guarantees the actual inclusion of beneficiaries’ interests in the eventual policy outcome. Like most popular and politicized buzzwords of development, accountability and participation are given different meanings by different actors. Often, policies stressing participation will move little beyond rhetorical flourish, rather than formulating actual or actualisable goals (Fisher, 1997: 455). Moreover, even if their<sup>3</sup> ‘voices are heard’, they will merely be an additional interest to a political arena in which a wide variety of interests is already present. Being able to represent

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<sup>2</sup> Besides “upward” accountability referring to relationships with donors, foundations, and government, and “internal” accountability, where NGOs declare responsibility to their mission and staff (see Ebrahim, 2003: 814-815).

<sup>3</sup> “Intended Beneficiaries”

your interest - or having it represented by someone else – does not strip the process of interest representation from the politics and contestation inherent to it. Diverging parties will try to take control of the scarce resources divided in development. In that sense, development and politics seem inseparably woven together. Conflict and the reproduction of power-relations should be central focus in this regard.

In addition, the category of ‘intended beneficiaries’ itself might prove to be problematic. After all, it implies a unitary group or community and thus annuls much of the variation and divisions to be found at this local level. Development policy is implemented among *diverse* beneficiaries with *diverse* interests. Results of development policy will then emerge from locally inflected contestations over the meanings and practices of development and politics (Moore, 1999: 673). The struggle involved in this process will produce ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. Although some will view participation possibilities as instruments of empowerment, others might experience them as instruments of authority and control (Li 2007). Obscuring these dynamics, by viewing development in strict instrumentalist terms, may then distort our image of reality. The process of interest representation is bound to have specific cultural elements to it, and it is an empirical question whether the “downward” accountability mechanism of participation reflects this. To better understand the ways in which participation instruments work out ‘on the ground’, ethnographic research should then be conducted to capture the social meanings attributed to them.

#### *Development and Participation as Politics and Contestation*

The institutional practice of development policy is complex and guided by a diversity of interests and perspectives (Mosse, 2004: 644). The *politics of participation* should thus not be obscured if an accurate image of reality is to be obtained. Similarly, Moore (1999: 675) believes that we should not see development as determined by a monolithic and stable discursive formation that forecloses inevitable outcomes, but in terms of *a politics of contingency and contestation*. By applying the concept of *cultural politics* to the state-administered Zimbabwean resettlement scheme, he provides insight into how issues and conflicts over tradition, legitimate authority, and political rights problematize policy implementation and can elucidate the apparent gap between policy and practice (Moore, 1999: 675). Development and politics are woven together in particular localities, differentially deployed, and given form and substance through cultural practices (ibid.). As stated, results of

development policy will then emerge from locally inflected contestations over the meanings and practices of development and politics (Moore, 1999: 673).

In that sense, development can perhaps best be understood as an arena of conflict where diverging parties try to establish political security, control over resources, as well as ideological justifications for their actions (Bähre, 2007: 99). Based on his fieldwork experiences in townships and squatter camps of Cape Town, Bähre demonstrates how conflict and violence are at the heart of these processes and largely determine the relative success or failure of development projects (2007: 81). The nexus of development, community, and state is characterized by ambiguity, ambivalence, and a fragmented nature (Bähre and Lecocq, 2007: 5). This consideration should take centre stage in any analysis of development aid policy.

This logic can also be applied to the process of participation. Schroeder (1999: 3) demonstrates how the promotion of Gambian community resource management was not merely a popular gesture inviting more ‘local’ participation, but rather part of a deliberate financial strategy to decentralize project costs by the Gambian Forestry Department. Moreover, through the use of formal contracts and conditionality, project managers were able to devolve responsibility for many of the tasks associated with forest management, without forfeiting managerial control (ibid.). In that sense, ‘participation’ had the community commit itself to a broad set of interactions with project staff, and opening itself up to inspection and monitoring at the government’s discretion (Schroeder, 1999: 16). Rather than producing greater participation of groups normally disenfranchised from the decision-making process, community-based development had thus been converted into a tool of structural adjustment (Schroeder, 1999: 18).

### *The Power of De-Politicization*

But in what way does the “instrumentalist-perspective” towards participation ‘strip the process of interest representation from the politics and contestation inherent to it’? Firstly, it is important to note that the agendas of ‘empowerment’, ‘participation’, and ‘consensus’ are not set in the places in which they are implemented. As Kothari (2001: 143) has argued, programmes designed to bring in the excluded, often result in forms of control that are more difficult to challenge, as they reduce spaces of conflict and are of a relatively benign and liberal nature. Emphasizing notions of “the local”, “the community”, and consensus - as many of these participatory approaches do - often comes at the expense of the wider power

structures, dissent and confrontational politics by which they are embedded (Bühler, 2002: 4). By valorising the personal, the local and the community, the process of participation is de-politicized as it neglects to analyze and challenge the power structure that suffuse/permeate it (Bühler, 2002: 2). It is in this light, that Hailey (2001: 99) posed the question of “how much participative development owes its genesis to attempts by Western governments, and (...) Northern aid donors to limit the power and influence of political dissidents, freedom-fighters, or radical Marxists”. Although the latter groups’ approaches of marginalization and exclusion hardly provide an attractive alternative, its patterns of power and communication should not be concealed.

Besides moving past the de-politicized nature of participation, one should also ask the question of what interests this ‘non-politics’ serves, and what interests it may be suppressing (White, 1996: 14). Conflict and the reproduction of power-relations should be central focus in this regard. How does *de-politicization* manifest itself at the local level in its relation to models of participation? What interest does it serve in terms of NGO policy and how do the interests of the ‘intended beneficiaries’ fare under this condition of ‘non-politics’? Exposing dynamics within the category of ‘intended beneficiaries’ itself, allows us to focus our attention on the politics inevitably involved in the process of interest representation and enables us to elucidate the gap between development policy and practice. In this light, it is also important to underline the consequences of using the concept of ‘community’ in participatory approaches to development.

### *Problematizing ‘The Community’*

As Agrawal and Gibson (1999: 633) note, a community is often simplistically assumed to be based in one small spatial unit, sharing norms and built up from a homogeneous social structure. The group that is defined as ‘a community’, however, may in fact be highly diverse. As Li (1996: 510) has shown, it can be politically fractured and socially differentiated along multiple factors. Moreover, rather than being static, divisions within a group or community are also changeable. Although, the community may present itself as a unified front to perceived threats from the outside; internal struggles over land and resources may divide and re-divide the community (Vihemaki 2009: 32).

In assertions on the role of communities as agents of decentralization, participation, and collective action, the heterogeneity of actors within the community is often overlooked (Nygren 2005). In that sense, the assumed boundaries between the community and its counter-



forces – e.g. states and markets – may be overstated (Li 2001). Population units can be “embedded” in the state, for instance by being historically created by the state and/or through the administrative ties (Li, 2001: 164-165). Being blind to these possibilities may lead to the available resources in development projects being ‘captured’ by local elites (Shackleton et al. 2002). Kumar (2002) points to distinctions between gender, wealth, or status that ensure that the distribution of benefits will strengthen local elites while excluding most of the poor. Moreover, not all individuals in the community will have the needed resources and time for taking part in such ‘participation’ activities (Cleaver 2002). In that sense, public participation may reinforce existing privileges and discourage an articulation of subordinate perspectives (Mosse, 2001: 19)

### **1.3 Ethnographic Introduction: Zooming in on Yizegu**

Despite Ghana’s apparent macroeconomic success – with a sustained economic growth averaging four to five percent per annum (Aryeteey & Harrigan 2000) – elaborate reforms<sup>4</sup> have generated growing disparities between elites and the working class, between the rural and the urban (Chalfin, 2008: 534). An according renewed dependence on the world market for basic goods, and failing access to basic services such as health and education (Yeboah 2003), has ensured Ghana’s inclusion in the World Bank’s Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) program and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Initiative (Whitfield 2005). Although Ghana is thus not an LDC, it is still subjected to high concentrations of development assistance, even scoring in the top 10 of highest level of ODA received (OECD 2011). Moreover, Agyemang et al. (2009: 9) note that there is a wide diversity of INGOs and local NGOs operating in Ghana, covering several areas such as health, education, agriculture, forestry, and poverty reduction programmes such as micro-credit.

Particularly in the Northern region, where 60 percent of the people live below the national poverty level as compared to the 29 percent of the national average, considerable NGO activity is undertaken (Ghana Statistical Service 2008). This intense NGO activity is mainly centred around Tamale, the capital city of the northern region. It is often labelled as the ‘NGO capital of Ghana’, given the large number of International NGOs operating from there (Agyemang et al. 2012: 18). Moreover, as Tamale is also believed to possess “the last ‘decent’ hotel”, it has become a veritable frontier town for the development industry (Mohan, 2002: 140). Given the range of development issues requiring attention and a clustering of a

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<sup>4</sup> Dubbed by some as “neo-liberal”.

diverse number of development INGOs and local NGDOs in the area (Agyemang et al. 2012: 18), the Northern region provides an excellent field-study site to examine the issue of interest representation and participation/ in development policy.

Within this Northern Region, the Savelugu/Nanton Municipal<sup>5</sup> collects a large portion of the externally funded development assistance. The Municipal Capital Savelugu - 25 kilometers up north from Tamale on the Bolgatanga road - even accommodates several (international) NGO head offices and is conveniently located right next to the Tamale airport. Similar to Tamale, Savelugu is expanding rapidly, evinced by its 52 percent population increase (over 10 years) documented by the most recent population and housing census (2010). However, despite having been upgraded from a district to a municipality in 2012<sup>6</sup>, Savelugu/Nanton is still a primarily rural area. The agricultural sector drives the economy and employs 97 percent of the labor force. The core production in this sector consists of staple crops and is done at the subsistence level through traditional methods on a small-scale basis. Much of this activity is concentrated in the 149 communities of which the municipality is built up, of which Yizegu is just one.

At the south-western border of the district, about 10 kilometers into the poorly maintained Savelugu-Kumbungu connecting road, lies the small village of Yizegu; home to a farming community of about 500 people scattered over the roughly 40 compounds that comprise it. The majority of Yizegu's population is of the Islamic faith, although Christianity (Assembly of God) is also actively practiced by some. As most communities in the Northern Region, Yizegu is also part of the Dagomba Kingdom, accordingly falling under the sub-paramouncy of the neighboring Zugu. Its traditional authority is represented by a village Chief, who is supported by a group of companions, i.e. the heads of the different families. However, besides this more traditional form of administration, Yizegu is also a recognized 'unit' in the Savelugu/Nanton Municipality, the smallest component of the decentralized administrative setup in Ghana's local government system. Accordingly, two levels exist between this unit-level and the municipal-level of Savelugu/Nanton: (1) the Tarikpaa electoral area in which Yizegu takes part with three other villages, and (2) the Moglaa Zonal Council, in which it is represented along with 9 other villages from three electoral areas.

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<sup>5</sup> Savelugu/Nanton was upgraded in status - from a District to a Municipal - under the Legislative Instrument (LI) 2071 in 2012. It has population of 139,283 (2010 Census).

Families in Yizegu support themselves by smallholder farming. The purpose of this farming is predominantly subsistence, although some villagers are able to sell surplus yield is sold to return a profit (cash-crop). The Savannah climate in which this farming activity takes place has a distinct raining season, running from May to October. In the long dry-season to which this amounts, some villagers seek alternative (economic) activities (i.e. scraps-dealing, foodstuff trading), although many are condemned to do little else than hang around all-day (very high unemployment), in anticipation of the single rainfall season to return. Moreover, due to the conditions of the land and inadequate access to farm inputs, many farmers struggle to harvest enough yield to support their families throughout the dry-season, making March and April<sup>7</sup> the hardest months of the year, not least so because they are also the hottest. Many villagers of Yizegu, particularly those unable to find an alternative means of income during the dry-season, live in relative poverty.

#### **1.4 Ethnographic Setup and Outline**

The fieldwork of this thesis was undertaken over a 2-month period (January – March) in the village of Yizegu, located in the Northern Region of Ghana. Important to note is that the period of research was in the middle of the dry-season that runs from November to April. Although this meant that the farmers thus had plenty of time to talk to me, I did not see them “in action”, so to speak. The Chief assigned me to the family of the assistant-chief, which caringly hosted me for the length of my stay. In line with tradition, I tried to reciprocate through gifts accordingly through (for instance) bags of maize, a used bicycle, soap, locally made wooden benches, etc. As the majority of the community only speaks *Dagbani*, I was forced to rely on a translator who was also assigned to me by the Chief. Automatically, this individual became my first informant, although the spectrum of informants quickly widened in the first weeks of my stay. I usually did fieldwork for ten consecutive days after which I would head back to Tamale for additional interviews with NGOs and local government actors. A bicycle provided me the needed mobility to also visit other villages in the area, which helped in cross-validating some of the gathered data and information.

##### *A Note on Methodology*

*Participant observation* was the primary method of data collection and analysis during the fieldwork. The first month was mostly about establishing rapport and learning how to act

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<sup>7</sup> In May, many farmers already harvest yams, although these are primarily meant for sales-purposes.

so that people went about their business as usual when I showed up. I tried to do this by participating in community-activities as much as possible. For instance, the workplace of the ‘fitter’ (bicycle repairman) was a popular hang-out for the men of the village. Every day, I would spend about an hour just sitting there. Although the first week this meant that conversations were mainly about me, attention for my presence soon diminished, having the men seemingly go about their business “as usual”. Moreover, one of the main social activities for the men was peeling groundnuts. I quickly acquired this skill which allowed me to join different groups in conversation. Also, by making my intentions clear to as many different people as possible, the question of “what is he doing here” became less relevant as time went on, making my presence more unnoticed and in a sense even normal. A good indicator in this regard, was the contrast of the surprised reactions to my presence of those visiting the village<sup>8</sup> and the eventual lack of response by normal villagers after a month or so.

For me, the participant observation method tackled the problem of reactivity and enhanced reliability of observations and collected data (Bernard, 2006: 355). By having the research subjects become more accustomed to my *being with them*, they also became less self-conscious. This provided the most reliable information on the actual community situation and clarified what issues had to be examined in greater detail. This helped me to develop an intuitive understanding that gave meaning to my observations, and lowered the risks of being seen as an outsider that is distrusted and perhaps even boycotted (Bernard, 2006: 356; Berreman 2012). Moreover, through participant observation, key informants were identified and the quality of data collected through other methods was cross-validated. Attending conversations of different groups in the community, gave me an idea of which individuals were willing to talk or had interesting opinions on the topics of my interest. Widening the spectrum of key-informants was important, as my first informant and translator was assigned to me be the Chief. It quickly became apparent to me that he was directing me to people *he* found interesting and important (mostly his friends and family). Therefore, I needed informants that would also point me in other directions, as to get a more complete idea of the setup of the community in general.

In a sense, the *participant-observation* method thus helped me to “open things up” (Bernard, 2006: 354). The information gathered in this phase accordingly functioned as a foundation on which interview questions – that are sensible to the research subjects (Bernard, 2006: 355) – could be based. I quickly noticed that a too direct style of asking question with

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<sup>8</sup> What is a “saleminga” (white man) doing here?

regard to the notion of development often resulted in superficial answers. Moreover, I had to abandon much of the ‘development jargon’ used in the research proposal. Talk of ‘external actors’ and ‘accountability mechanisms’ did not really strike a chord with the majority of the villagers. It took a long time to figure out what the most effective means of acquiring information was. Usually this meant a rather indirect style of interviewing, having my respondents express themselves in their own terms, at their own pace (Bernard, 2006: 211)<sup>9</sup>. A systematic record of observations, conversations, and informal interviews was kept through daily field notes.

The field-work period of two months on the same location, enabled me to interview people on many separate occasions. By initially keeping these interviews *open-ended*, I was able to develop a broad understanding of relevant topics and terminology (ibid.). Moreover, it placed me in a better position to ask the right questions in later (analytical) phases of research. However, as this luxury of time was not always present – particularly when interviewing elite members of the community or organization – I also used *semi-structured* interviews in which I could exercise a bit more control towards people’s responses (ibid.). An open-ended design of these semi-structured interviews allowed for minimum control of informants’ responses, yet because the same questions are asked, comparison across informants is possible (Bernard 2006). This was particularly useful for respondents who held a similar position, albeit from different perspectives (i.e. chairmen of different political parties). The interviewing method was primarily used for identifying recurrent themes and the interviews conducted thus initially had an exploratory aim.

### *Entering the Field*

Considering the relatively small size of the village in which I did my research, my entry did not go unnoticed. I chose to take the local means of transportation, i.e. the three-wheeled motorcycle-taxi. The main consideration for this was to show to the villagers that I was different from the government officials and NGO-personnel they usually see driving around in 4x4s. Upon entering the community, I tried to keep up with local traditions as much as possible. I thus requested to be brought to the Chief before talking to anyone else. Here I

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<sup>9</sup> This last point was also the main consideration for dropping the pile-sorting method. Being part of the community and the informal relationships I had developed with some of the villagers, allowed me to get a lot of valuable information merely through everyday conversation. I believe that a formal method of data collection (i.e. pile-sorting) would have disturbed this relationship and perhaps re-established my status as an outsider. In that sense, “it did not feel right”. Moreover, as I was already getting the information I needed, it also seemed unnecessary.

explained my intentions and handed him some ritual gifts<sup>10</sup>. Through a translator - a young man from the village who was summoned by the chief - I told him what the research was about (“development policy and the way they, as a community, collaborate with NGOs and local government actors”) and why I needed to be in this particular village (“the only way to get the answers was to actually stay there and see how it really is”). Although the Chief seemed satisfied with these answers it was apparently custom that a group of elderly men was consulted before he made his final decision. During this meeting I got a tour of the village, after which the council also wanted to ask me some questions. The main question I got – and that kept returning throughout the fieldwork - was whether I would bring “development” to the village. As a reply, I underlined that I did not have the resources of an NGO or a government institution; “I am a student and the only thing I can do is tell their story as it is”. After this, they granted me permission and told me I could come back in two days while they would prepare accommodation. I was accordingly assigned to the family and compound of the Assistant-Chief.

### **1.5 Thesis Structure and Build-Up**

This thesis is divided in three analytical chapters. Each chapter will focus on one element of “the Development Triangle”, consisting of the local government, the community, and NGOs. Although these three categories are not uniform actors that can be strictly separated, this setup was chosen as to provide some structure to the processed data below. This also entails that each chapter will not solely focus on a single node of the triad, but is more interested in the relationship between them (and particularly the relationship with Yizegu). Also, we should emphasize that in each chapter, focus will return to the community of Yizegu. The point of dedicating chapters to local government structures and NGOs as well, is that object of study (i.e. “the community” of Yizegu) cannot be analysed in isolation<sup>11</sup>.

In terms of the analytical section of the thesis, chapter 2 focuses on the local governance structure of decentralization that runs all the way down to the community of Yizegu. For this we will take up an analytical framework that combines the perspective of democratic decentralization with many of the (participation) concepts identified above. Then we will make a case out of Ghana’s decentralized governance system and accordingly assess

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<sup>10</sup> Kola nuts and money: “Those who bring Kola, bring light”.

<sup>11</sup> After all, we do not want to fall into the trap of a form of “localism” (see Chapter 2; Mohan & Stokke 2000).

how it works out on “the ground” in Yizegu itself. In Chapter 3 we problematize the notion of “community-based development” and illustrate this by exposing the social and cultural dynamics of Yizegu. This chapter is of a rather descriptive nature as it identifies the different groups within a supposedly unified community. One of the focal points in this regard, is the traditional authority associated with the Dagbon Kingdom, although other groups are also identified. In chapter 4, we will complete the development triangle by shifting focus to the work of NGOs. Here, a theoretical framework will be set up on the accountability relations and NGO-employees get the chance to expound their own perspectives. Then we will again move to the local level and assess how several development projects have worked out in Yizegu. The focus here is on projects concerned with rural development and agriculture. Finally, Chapter 5 will serve to (re-)formulate our central arguments, draw according conclusions, and frame a discussion.

## **Chapter 2. Decentralization and Interest Representation**

In this chapter, we will focus on the system of decentralized government that was set up in Ghana's '92 constitution. To do so, we will firstly provide some theoretical context on the concept of democratic decentralization by explaining the perceived benefits and pitfalls. Accordingly, we will take up an analytical framework that underlines the notions of actors, powers, and accountability. Important to note is that the latter notion is conceptualized in relational terms. Then follows a descriptive section in which we elaborate on the specifics of Ghana's system of local governance. Here, the separate levels and the way they relate to each other will be explained all the way down the hierarchy, which eventually brings us to the local community level. This takes us back to the field-work site of Yizegu, where we elaborate on how the decentralized government system has worked out "on the ground". We will focus on the function of the Unit Committee Chairman and his relation to the Assembly-Man. Also, we will specify their relationship with the community and how its interests are practically represented. In a concluding section, we will accordingly combine all three sections and make our argument with regard to Ghana's decentralized governance system.

### **2.1 Analytical Framework: Democratic Decentralization**

Democratic decentralization refers to the process in which representative local authorities are entrusted with significant powers (Ribot, 2001). In theory, this transfer of powers towards the local levels will improve the efficiency and equity of local decision-making as the presence of democratic processes encourages local authorities to serve the needs and desires of its constituents (Agrawal & Ribot 1999; Ribot 2002). By bringing government decision-making closer to its citizens, (democratic) decentralization increases public-sector accountability and facilitates a strategy of governance that gives powers to those most affected by the exercise of these powers (Agrawal & Ribot 1999). Moreover, as an institutionalized form of popular participation, decentralization tries to set up a governance infrastructure that can harness the abilities, knowledge, and incentives of rural people (Benjamin 2008: 2255).

#### *Tempering Euphoria*

Ever since the 1980s, decentralization and the means of popular participation have been promoted almost as a panacea to the many problems of administration and governance constraining local and national development, as well as a means of improving performance in



poverty reduction (Manor 1999; Blair 2000; Francis & James 2003). In that sense, many of these (development) reforms have tried to remedy the negative consequences of the post-colonial centralized state (Benjamin, 2008: 2255). However, the empirical evidence that decentralization has actually improved governance, remains rather inconclusive and the conventional view defending its merits has often been challenged (ibid.). Several concerns can be raised with regard to the viability of encouraging rural poverty reduction through democratic decentralization (Johnson, 2001: 241).

Firstly, in practice, democratic decentralization has trouble overcoming existing political and economic disparities, both within and among regions (Johnson, 2001: 521). For instance, development programs can be highly subject to regional biases in favor of relatively affluent and well-developed areas. Rural areas are particularly vulnerable in this regard, mainly due to their limited possibilities of raising public revenue (ibid.). Also, political disparities will often favor regions where local actors are exceptionally important and/or influential. In that sense, the distribution of development policy outcomes can be highly unequal. Moreover, we should note that decentralization is about devolving powers to local authorities; a practice that can be deeply threatening to national elites<sup>12</sup> (Moore & Putzel 1999). In that sense, it seems likely that even if central government allows the establishment of local autonomous authorities, substantial control may still be exercised through the means of performance targets, budget requirements, reporting mechanisms and the like (Manor 1999: 60-61; Johnson 2001). As Wardell and Lund (2006: 1899-1900) observe, “contemporary decentralization is accompanied by increasing central government and line ministerial control, hollowing out local people’s participation and control”.

Secondly, poverty may have a debilitating effect on people’s ability to engage in political processes (ibid.). For instance, as Dreze and Sen (1996) have argued and illustrated, the extent to which one is capable of obtaining and understanding information on laws, policies, and the rights to which one entitled is heavily dependable on the ability to read. Illiteracy will then keep many individuals from being informed about party-platforms, government policies, and the rights these may provide. This will seriously hamper their ability to participate in democratic processes and thus the degree to which the poor and powerless are represented therein. Besides literacy and information, a lack of other ‘political tools’, such as

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<sup>12</sup> After all, it is to the detriment of their own powers.

money and power, will have a similar effect, excluding large groups from the popular participation in (decentralized) decision-making<sup>13</sup>.

Thirdly, when introducing decentralization into a political environment characterized by *clientage*, one runs the risk of strengthening ties of patronage and further entrenching local elites (Francis & James, 2003: 327). In that sense, many decentralization efforts face a problem of (local) ‘elite capture’, perpetuating existing poverty and inequality (Johnson, 2001: 525). A mere introduction of democratic principles without sensitivity to the cultural and historical context in which they are ‘implemented’, may lead to unintended and unexpected outcomes, particularly in rural areas where great numbers of people are often dependent on small numbers of local, powerful elites (Luckham et al. 2000; Johnson; *ibid.*). As Mandani (1996) observes, the African patrimonial state may then perpetuate rule *over* subject, rather than rule *by* citizens. In such an environment, decentralization runs more risk of bringing “repression closer to the people” rather than anything else (Cross & Kutengule, 2001: 6).

#### *Taking up an Analytical Framework*

Following Agrawal and Ribot (1999), three dimensions seem to underlie all acts of decentralization: actors, powers, and accountability. If one wants to analyze the extent to which meaningful decentralization has taken place, one will have to have some understanding of the powers of various actors, the domains in which they exercise their powers, and to whom and how they are accountable (*ibid.*). After all, each actor<sup>14</sup> will have certain *types* of powers and will be located in particular relations of accountability (Agrawal & Ribot, 1999: 476). To determine, however, *in what way* these actors are related to each other and what position they accordingly take, one will have to understand how their powers are historically, socially, and politically constituted. In decentralization, exercising these powers will take place at different levels of political authorities. The nature of decentralization will accordingly depend on *who* gets to exercise power and the accountability relations to which they are subject (*ibid.*)

But what *types* of powers are we talking about here? Agrawal and Ribot (1999: 477) distinguish four: the power (1) to create rules or modify old ones; (2) make decisions about

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<sup>13</sup> or any meaningful political action for that matter, as even attending a political rally can be a costly endeavor (e.g. transport costs, communication backlash) (see Moore & Putzel 1999).

<sup>14</sup> When talking about *actors*, we can include appointed or elected officials, NGOs, Chiefs, powerful individuals, or corporate bodies, such as communities, committees, and cooperatives (see Agrawal & Ribot, 1999: 476 for an overview).

how a particular opportunity or resource is to be used; (3) implement and insure compliance to the new or altered rules; and (4) adjudicate disputes that arise in the effort to create rules and ensure compliance<sup>15</sup>. Decentralization is then constituted by the enlarged powers of decision-making at the lower levels of the political-administrative hierarchy in relation to any of these four categories (ibid.). The effectiveness of this decentralization, however, will rather depend on the third dimension identified by Agrawal and Ribot (1999: 478); namely, that of accountability. The central premise here, is that whenever actors are not accountable to their constituents, but rather to themselves or superiors within the structure of government, decentralization will not meet its stated objectives.

For analytical purposes, it is important to emphasize at this point that accountability has a relational nature (ibid.). A central challenge is then identifying the actors among whom relations of accountability exist and analyzing the mechanisms through which “counterpowers” are exercised by those subject to actors holding decentralized powers. In that sense, rather than being in a position of exteriority of power, accountability depends on the exercise of a counterpower to balance arbitrary action (cf. Foucault). As mentioned earlier, the distinction between downward and upward accountability is crucially important in this regard. Here, we are more interested in the former, however, i.e. the exercise of accountability by constituents as important countervailing power to those that receive powers from the state on behalf of them. This “exercise of accountability” manifests itself in many different forms, varying from elections and referenda, to participation and information provision. Doing this effectively, can broaden participation of local populations and enhance responsiveness of empowered actors (Agrawal & Ribot, 1999: 479).

## **2.2 A System of Local Governance: The Case of Ghana**

### *A System of Local Governance*

The decentralization policy implemented in Ghana, resonates with a wider (international) agenda of good governance and participatory democracy (Ayee 2003). By ensuring popular citizen participation and ownership at the local level, governments all over the world have tried to make the public sector more efficient, accountable, and responsive to the (local) needs of its citizens (Ahoi 2001). For the Ghanaian context, Offei-Oboagye (2004: 2) sees how the Ghanaian government has aspired to (1) provide more responsive, equitable,

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<sup>15</sup> i.e. legislative (1), executive (2 & 3), and judicial (4) powers.

and participatory development, (2) bring government and decision-making nearer to the people as well as quickening the process of decision-making, and (3) establish a training ground for political activity. Or, as stated in the Constitution of 1992, the Local Government Act would make “democracy a reality by decentralizing the administrative and financial machinery of government to the regions and districts and by affording all possible opportunities to the people to participate in decision-making at every level in national life and in government” (Ghana 1992).

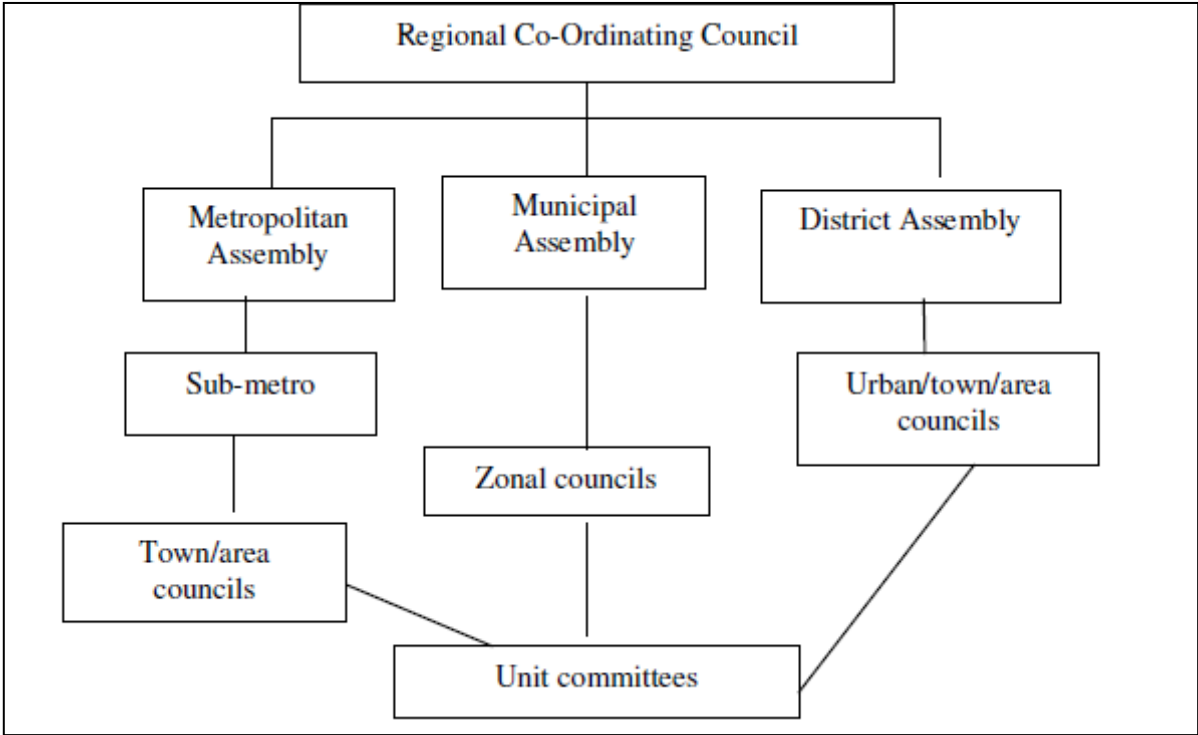
Under the Local Government Act of 1993 (462), Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies were instituted as the local development planning authority, responsible for the overall development of the District. As stated in section 10 of this act, “an assembly shall exercise political and administrative authority in the District, provide guidance, give direction to and supervise all other administrative authorities”. For these purposes, it exercises deliberative, legislative, and executive functions. Moreover, the assembly should act in cooperation with ‘appropriate public cooperation, statutory body, or NGO’, while such public cooperation, statutory body, or organization has the duty to co-operate with the Assembly. In terms of development, all actors - including NGOs - are thus supposed to work *through* the assembly, making it the main initiator, facilitator, and executioner of development activities in their respective districts (Der Bebelleh & Nobabumah, 2013: 12). The local government act includes a list of 86 specific responsibilities assigned to them, ranging from provision of basic services in education, health, water supply, and sanitation to public safety and revenue collection (Ayee, 2008: 241).

The District Assembly works through committees, of which the Executive Committee (Section 19) is most important. This committee is ‘responsible for the performance of the executive and administrative functions of the District Assembly (19). The Chairman of the Executive Committee is the District Chief Executive who presides the meetings and ‘is responsible for the day-to-day performance of the executive and administrative functions of the assembly (20). This individual is nominated by central government and elected by a two-thirds majority of assembly members present and voting. He is eventually appointed by the President, making him/her the chief the main representative of central government at the district level.

A District is divided is into a number of electoral areas that hold (nonpartisan) elections for determining the individual that represents them in the assembly. These chosen

assembly-members (70 percent of total number of seats) are complemented by individuals appointed by the President. These appointments mainly serve the purpose of affirmative action and the infusion of special skills, experience, and knowledge into the assembly (Der Bebelleh & Nobabumah, 2013: 16). Members of the assembly partake in meetings of the committees to which they are assigned, and vote and debate in the general meeting of the District Assembly where the main policy-decisions are made. To do this properly, an assembly member is expected to ‘maintain close contact with, and consult the people of the electoral area on issues to be discussed in the District Assembly and collate their views, opinions and proposals’ (16). They are accordingly expected to present these views, opinions, and proposal to the Assembly, as to ensure that the community’s interests are taken into account in the eventual decision-making process.

**Figure 1. Local Governance Structure**



*Source: Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), 2007.*

As seen in figure 1, there are also sub-district structures present in Ghana’s Local Governance system. These sub-structures do not have legislative or rating powers, but function on the basis of powers delegated to them by the District Assembly. Firstly, there are town, area or zonal councils, with the given name dependent on the settlement size (Crawford, 2004: 13). These are not elective bodies, but are composed of representative from institutions

above and below it, i.e. the District Assembly and Unit Committees, as well as government appointees selected by the DCE and approved by the President (ibid.). Ayee (2000: 17) describes their role as a “rallying point of local enthusiasm in support of the development objectives of the DAs”. According to Crawford (2004: 13), these councils are essentially implementing agencies. Then at the lowest level of the local governance structure, you have the Unit Committees that cover the smaller settlements. These units consist of both elected members and government appointees, although a recent modification has reduced their size from 15 to 5. The UCs are essentially the most decentralized implementing agencies of the system, performing administrative functions such as births and deaths registration, public education campaigns, revenue raising, and the organization of communal labour for local projects (Ayee, 2000: 18; Crawford, 2004: 13).

Although, the different levels seem to fit nicely and seems to provide a (legislative) structure for effective community interest representation, question remains in what ways this Local Governance structure *actually* given the local citizenry the opportunity to participate in development activities. This is assessed by using Yizegu – a recognized unit – as a case.

### **2.3 Representing Your Interest**

In Ghana’s decentralized local government system, Yizegu is a recognized unit. The main face of this institution is the Unit Committee Chairman. For Yizegu, this function is fulfilled by Laseroms, a man in his 40s who is also the ‘fitter’<sup>16</sup> of the village. Although, an election is to be held every 4 years, Laseroms’ election was already 20 years ago and no-one has felt the need to call a new one ever since. As he claims, “I guess everybody is pretty happy, no-one wants to challenge me”. At face-value, Laseroms seems to be an appropriate choice. As the fitter he is almost always at the workshop, which also happens to be one of the more important social hubs of the village. All day, men from all over the village drop by and hang out. Even people from other villages that are merely passing by, feel the need to stop and greet everyone who is present. At the end of the afternoon, the zest is at its height when up to 20 men sit around, lively discussing various topics, ranging from football to politics. By actively partaking in these discussions, Laseroms automatically keeps himself informed and informs the others, whether it his intention or not.

Laseroms describes his function as being the “the head of the community. If there are any problems, or things have to be done with relation to development, people come to me”. In

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<sup>16</sup> Bike’s repair man

terms of accordingly communicating these problems “upwards”, the Unit Committee first takes its issues to the Zonal Council in Moglaa, where they decide whether their issues are severe enough to take them to the District. In that sense, Laseroms seems well informed about the proceedings as specified in the Local Government Act. Also, he works a lot with the Assembly-Man, who represents a total of 4 villages (Tarikpaa Electoral Area). In consultation with Laseroms and the three other chairmen, the Assembly-Man – who is from Langa – sends a letter to the District Chief Executive every two weeks. They can then do little else than await a response on what can be done, although the most common response is that “they will do something when they have money”.

Important to note, is that the position of the UC-chairman is not party-politically affiliated. Laseroms is held to be neutral in this regard as he was elected on the basis of individuality. The types of problems he has recently been involved with were about getting electricity for the entire village and getting connected to the water pipelines. There have also been some issues concerning the land, particularly on “who gets to farm where”. This is also why they want to take a petition to the Chief of Zugu so they can settle this issue once and for all. Interestingly enough, the land of Zugu is divided over two districts: 6 villages fall under the Kumbungu District, while 2 villages – including Yizegu – fall within the jurisdiction of the Savelugu-Nanton District. In that sense, the Unit-Committee officer is forced to work outside government channels, as the DA has no authority in the matter. In that sense, the administrative boundaries do not seem to coincide with actual settlement patterns. Laseroms, however, did not believe this misfit to be problematic: “The Chief of Zugu is about the land. Everybody knows it is his, also in the District”. In terms of further communication with the Traditional Authority, the Unit Committee Chairman tells me that “the Chief doesn’t really care. Sometimes we get his blessing if we have big plans, but besides that he doesn’t mind if we don’t consult him”<sup>17</sup>.

So in what forms have I seen Laseroms in action? In the period that I was there, I have seen him check damaged roofs after families had complained that they did not have the money to fix it. Unfortunately, there was little Laseroms could do. Also whenever the electricity broke down Laseroms usually notified the “people from Savelugu” who would then come by to fix it. I have also seen him perform some tax collecting duties, although this does not really come close to the professional standards as specified by the Local Government Act.

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<sup>17</sup> The Chief *did* actually care: he felt disrespected but was too proud to say anything about it (see chapter 3).

For instance, the water pump often needs maintenance and all families pay a small amount of tax to create a financial buffer. However, Laseroms cannot write and has no staff to do it for him. That is why he would usually dictate the names of the families to one of the younger boys, who would write it down in his school notebook<sup>18</sup>. In this somewhat comical fashion, he thus kept track of how much money he needed to collect from each family: it was not really a matter of serious accounting. In that sense, material support (i.e. staff, office supplies) for properly fulfilling his functions seems rather low. You can, however, hardly blame Laseroms for conducting his affairs in this fashion. After all, being a Unit Committee Chairman in a rural village is basically voluntary work; there is no financial or material compensation what so ever.

With regard to the composition of the rest of the unit committee, something strange has happened. The Local Government Act (462) originally designated that each unit would have 15 members, of which 10 would be elected and 5 appointed by the District Chief Executive. As one of my key informant explains, “all political parties, religions, the women, the chiefs, were represented here. When someone comes to the village they do the talking”<sup>19</sup>. In other words, a body in which all interests are represented. However, later desk-research revealed that in 2010 an Established Legal Instrument of Local Government has dictated that the unit committee size was to be reduced from 15 to 5 and that the designated electoral areas became the basic unit for the unit committees. Apparently, the shift to the electoral area was implement correctly, as Laseroms also claims to represent Yizegu in an electoral area committee on which he was rather vague. However, the old structure in which Laseroms is the chairman of the Yizegu unit and the committee has 14 other members seems to have remained intact. All villagers seem unaware that in the new setup, the Unit as they perceive it (i.e. 15 members representing their own village) formally no longer exists.

### *The Assembly-Man*

Enoch, who is one of the more well-off villagers and a good friend of Laseroms, was an assembly-man for 8 years. In several talks, he fills me in on what the function entails and what its relationship is to that of the unit committee chairman. As opposed to Laseroms, who

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<sup>18</sup> In the meantime he was still fixing a bike.

<sup>19</sup> Although one of my key informants also claims that a groups five often act as representative of the village, for instance in talks with NGOs. The five individuals are: Laseroms (Unit Committee), Enoch (former assembly Man, the respective chairmen of the NDC and NPP, and a Women’s Representative.



only speaks Dagbani, Enoch's masters the English language fairly well, making interviewing considerably easier.

In 2003, Enoch was elected as the assembly-man for the Tarikpaa Electoral area. Besides Yizegu, he thus also represented the villages of Langa, Jirikpani, and Tarikpaa. To enter the election he had "to fill in a few forms and a photo. I also needed signatures of 12 people that could vouch for me. Then the campaigning starts and I won two times". Enoch explains to me that formally party-politics are kept out of the elections, although informally they are definitely involved: "They will try push their preferred candidates, especially in important areas. The Chiefs do the same by supporting their personal favourite or giving them funds for campaigning". Particularly this last point seems rather important as getting elected apparently can be a rather costly endeavour. For instance, if you want to get elected for the Tarikpaa Electoral Area, you not only have to win over your own village, but also the at least one of the others. Although the public debates that are organized around this time draw a lot of attention, the key is also in satisfying the village elites. This is usually done through gifts, i.e. cattle, crops, or money. Although the elections are thus open, not many villagers have the resources to seriously enter them. In fact, the number of people that would have the financial means to pull it off in Yizegu amounts to only a handful.

In terms of representing the community's interest, Enoch explains that he usually tried to forward his problems in the committees in which he worked at the District level (see section on Ghana's decentralized government system above). Everything that could not be discussed there, he tried to "squeeze in his speaking time at the general assembly meeting". In that sense, assembly men are basically lobbying for their community's needs. Whatever is discussed and decided in the assembly, he feeds to the unit committee chairmen with which he was concerned at the electoral level. If the issue was of a specific village's concern, he would talk to the committee chairmen on an individual basis, "otherwise I would just call them all together in a general meeting. With the Unit Committee Chairmen you have to be a real team". Then they would take up their issues to the Area Council Meeting after which the outcome of all these meetings would be reported back to the District Assembly. In that sense, the interest and preferences of a community pass a few stations before it arrives in the (local) central decision-making arena.

The former assembly-man also explains that the districts work with short-, medium-, and long-term plans. These are constituted by the data collected from peer-ranking of

problems within the community themselves. Each year the community gets to make a list of the ten development priorities they have. The District collects the lists of all units in their jurisdiction and accordingly develop the plans that are the guidelines for general development policy in the region<sup>20</sup>. According to Enoch, “everybody needs to stick to these plans, including the NGOs”. We should note, however, that the plans of the district are accordingly harmonized at the regional level, after which the central government sets up a Development Policy Framework to which all districts and regions have to be accountable. As interviews with local government employees later revealed, this is done through extensive budgets<sup>21</sup> and policy plans.

### *Communicating it to the Rest of Community*

In terms of communicating with the community, Zachary – a politically active NDC member and the younger brother of Enoch - explains that ‘each villager can take his problems to Laseroms. A small boy will then beat the drum to summon everyone to the Chief’s palace and here they discuss what can be done. The assembly-man will usually also be present at these meetings so can take it up to the area council or the District Chief if necessary’. If they have a very big issue, like building a clinic or school, the community will try to go straight to the District Chief Executive. They will then bring along “a goat, guineafowls, and some yams to satisfy him”. The DCE then gives his advise and if the issue is important enough he promises to send a letter to central government. A public meeting of the kind described by Zachary, however, did not take place during my time with the community. Apparently there was not much to discuss.

Also, as Enoch has already explained, each year the community gathers to formulate their top 10 priorities in terms of development. This meeting is presided by the Unit Chairman and the Assembly-man will also be there. The list then gets send up to the District-level but apparently the villagers do not really get much response. Although, it is turned into a “Medium-Term Development” plan, none of the villagers really have an idea of what is in this plan. Access to information is severely lacking. The way in which information usually flows back to the village is in a rather informal manner (cf. Laseroms hanging out at his workshop). As Enoch explains, “Laseroms tells something to me, I tell it to Nathaniel, and he tells it to

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<sup>20</sup> However, all these plans have to be compatible to the plan higher up the hierarchy: i.e. the districts medium-term development plan will have to be in accordance with the region’s plans accordingly have to fit into that of the state.

<sup>21</sup> Also because the District receive financing from central government, on which they have to specify exactly what is done with the money. This budget has to be approved by the ministry of finance.

five others people and this goes on till the whole village knows. That is how we communicate here”. In terms of getting information from the District, I also get the feeling that it is a big difference whether the Assembly-man is from your village, as was the case with Enoch, or whether he is from Langa, which is the case now. In the current situation, Laseroms is the only person who regularly sees him as he does not visit the village very often<sup>22</sup>. At least Enoch would come hang out the at the workplace. With regard to the District Chief Executive contact frequencies are even more rare. As Zachary explains, “the previous DC rarely visited, nor did his staff. The new one has only just been appointed, but we have not seen him yet”.

### *Getting your Slice of the Pie*

Although the bodies of the decentralized governance system are recognized in the village, it seems that not a lot gets done through these official government channels. Interests are represented, be it through talking about the top ten development priorities of the village or telling your problems to Laseroms who accordingly has the Assembly-man send a letter to the District Chief Executive. There is little response however. Oddly enough, much of the anger is directed towards the President, who – as fierce campaigning had them believe - “would make things better”. Many villagers, however, seem unaware that in the Decentralized Government System, much of the responsibility is with themselves. They have to articulate their problems, mobilize and organize themselves. A majority of the villagers, however, patiently wait for “them” to come to us. Then again, the ones that *do* act usually do so through rather informal channels.

An illustrating story in this regard, is the way in which the village eventually was connected to the electricity grid in 2007. Although it was not yet their turn, Yizegu was slid in front of several other villages on the waiting list, because, as Kassim. and Nathaniel<sup>23</sup> claim “the old DC really likes this village”. Especially Nathaniel, who operates as an “area connector”<sup>24</sup> and is a well-respected NPP-member, could mobilize his connections to get things done in this regard. During this time, they were able to communicate directly with the DC, “who is from this region”. Some describe him as “a friend of the village” and as his term was coming to an end “he wanted to give us something to remember him by”. In this fashion, some people from Yizegu were able to direct a considerable degree of development policy in their favour. According to the Kassim, these were better times for the village in terms of

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<sup>22</sup> In the two months I was there, I haven't seen him once.

<sup>23</sup> Two active NPP members: Kassim is the founder of the local division (and also the assistant-chief), Nathaniel the “area connector”.

<sup>24</sup> Meaning that he brings together the local chairmen of the region, whenever there is a problem.

development; because of the good connections within the NPP, the District Chief was more easily approachable. This advantage, however, has faded since the NDC has come to power. According to Kassim and Nathaniel, the DC that recently stepped down “did nothing for the village. He doesn’t care. He never even visited the village. The guys from the NDC don’t have the same connections we had”.

In terms of coming into contact with NGOs, the village also rely on these types of “personal connections”. Although in the local government system, as Enoch explains, “the village itself does not really talk to NGOs as this is mostly done at the District-level”, many villagers take matters into their own hands. For instance, their participation in one of the financial NGOs supplying farm inputs was initially established through “a friend from Savelugu” who had connections in both the village and NGO. Similarly, a former assemblyman in Kumbungu who had some friends in the village set them up with a micro-credit programme. Even in my time with the village, similar cases could be seen. For instance, a brother of the Assistant-Chief was coming back from Togo and had started an NGO that was interested in building a school. Kassim accordingly convinced his brother that he should do it in Yizegu. Whether these sort of programmes are eventually beneficial and sustainable to the community remains to be seen<sup>25</sup>. However, it seems clear that a lack of results coming from the District, forces them to work outside of official government channels in order to improve their own situation.

### *The Local Government Level*

Talks with these “official channels” eventually revealed that it are exactly these sorts of informal means of getting your “slice of the cake” that the Local Government Act wants to eradicate. After all, as the Director of the Institute of Local Governance Studies put it, it “hampers their ability coordinate and facilitate sustainable development policy” (see chapter 4 as well). Sometimes, the NGOs themselves also go directly to the communities, while everything should be channelled through the District. As the Coordinating Director of the Savelugu-Nanton District explains, “we are the first point of entry. NGOs come to us, and we will ask them why they are here, what they want. If it fits within our development plans, we will accordingly tell them were to go. We will identify what communities need the aid the most. Then we refer them to the zonal councils and we do the monitoring and coordinating at the district level”.

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<sup>25</sup> A lot of them pull out at the last moment.

In an interview, the same Coordinating Director further clarifies the local government setup. Ideally, the Unit Committee is responsible for the actual implementation, while the Zonal Areas and District Assemblies are there to monitor and supervise. The Local Government Act specifies that Unit Committee take their problems to the Zonal Areas and that they try to solve it from there. If necessary the Zonal Area can then take its problems to the District and then can see what can be done to solve them. In practice, however, the Zonal Area is completely surpassed. Unit Committees and Assemblyman often take their problems straight to the District Chief Executive, while it is actually the Zonal Head that should communicate with the DC. This is predominantly because the Zonal Areas lack the resources and institutional capacity to fulfil its duties properly. This is particularly the case for the Moglaa Zonal Area of which Yizegu is part. As the CD explains, “they cannot recruit any staff because there is no money. They rarely hold meetings while the law dictates that should do so at least four times a year. These should be organized, recorded, and documented by the core staff. However, there is no core staff. A big indicator that the local government system is not functioning properly, is the fact that village just come marching into our office to talk to the DCE. The assembly-men should know better”. The Coordinating Director believes that “the laws are there, but there are no adequate structures or competent personnel”.

## **2.4 Concluding Remarks**

So, what have we seen in terms of democratic decentralization and interest representation? In terms of legislation, the Local Government Act provides an elaborate framework. All institutions and sub-structures (District Assemblies, Zonal Areas, Unit Committees) are ascribed with a number of functions and powers that should allow them to fulfil their duties properly. However, just because the laws are there, does not mean everything functions properly. For this you need enforcement and institutionalization. So, has this been the case? Do the structures allow a small community like Yizegu to represent its interests and to have a say in – or at least inform - the District’s decision-making and policy? In other words, are they able to get their slice of the pie?

The first thing to note is that our analytical framework made a strict distinction between actors holding decentralized power and the constituents. The degree to which the latter group could exercise “counterpowers” towards the former, would accordingly determine the degree to which decentralization was successful in terms responsiveness and efficiency. However, if one were to apply this analytical categorization to Laseroms (as a unit committee

chairman) and the community, one will start seeing things that just are not there. Partly, this has to do with the degree to which the unit committee is institutionalized; rather than a professional implementing agency, we are talking about the local fitter that goes to “a meeting” once every few weeks. The rest of his time, he is just as much a part of the community as everyone else. Although this informal and cordial relationship will probably keep him accountable to the community - after all, he could show his face if he were not – the question is whether it really matters. Will the District - as the local development planning authority that actually formulates policy - feel a similar a pressure that forces them to be accountable and align their policy with its constituents’ interests?

Here, things get more problematic. This primarily has to do with the fact that the Zonal Areas lacks the institutional capacity and resources to properly fulfill its functions. Although the unit committee members occasionally see each other at the zonal area platform, this interaction is more of an informal nature, rather than an institutionalized decision-making body, i.e. it does not live up to its specified form in the Local Government Act. Therefore, communities and assemblymen often choose to represent their interests separately and directly, leading to frustration at the District itself and undermining the potential power of zonal areas to exercise accountability towards the District. After all, the many voices of all units in the District will drown each other out, making it difficult for the District to formulate any meaningful policy.

Moreover, when looking at the setup of the decentralized government system in relation to national policy, one gets the feeling that the ‘downward accountability’ propagated in decentralized government, is severely hampered by increasing central government controls. For instance, although the Community gets to formulate its top ten priorities, these interests are accordingly mashed together at the District Level in the District’s Short/Medium/Long Term Development Plan. All district’s plans are then harmonized at the regional level and forwarded to the National Development Planning Commission which formulates a Development Policy Framework. This document is leading for all development policy in Ghana and all districts have to responsible to it. Obviously, this looks nice on paper; whether it really constitutes “downward accountability” is to be questioned however. For instance, the Districts are highly dependent on central government’s financing. For this they have to be accountable through elaborate budget documents that have to approved by the respective national ministries. As Wardell and Lund (2006: 1899-1900) already observed, this may hollow out local people’s participation and control.

However, even if the policy formulation phase is successful and communities can effectively represent their interests, the capacity to implement these policies and strategies effectively and sustainably will determine whether the constituents will actually notice a difference. Here, the prospects are grim. One need only a glance into the District's budget to see that there is not really any money to implement any serious policy what so ever. The promised funds from central government often come late (or not at all) and are incomplete. The internal revenue is less than 1 cedi per civilian<sup>26</sup>, while 80 percent of the budget comes from external funding. Seventy per cent of the budget is accordingly taken up by salaries. In other words, the District as the main governmental actor responsible for implementing and coordinating development policy has neither the means nor the institutional capacity to bring about any noticeable change for its constituents.

As mentioned, each year the community is allowed to give a list with their top 10 priorities in terms of developmental goals. They send this list to the district but nothing really ever gets done about it. To the village this is a sign of corrupt politicians, assembly-men who do not listen, and NGOs that won't help them. However, the financial and material constraints of the District make sure their hands are tied as well. In that sense, having the community participate gets their hopes up initially, but only leads to more disappointment in the long run. This dissatisfaction has the community take matters into their own hands, often leading to success (e.g. getting connected to the electricity grid and securing development projects). However, this strategy seriously hampers the coordinating capacity of the district and will not make for effective and sustainable development policy.

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<sup>26</sup> About 30 euro-cent

## **Chapter 3. Taking the Unit out of Community**

In our short theoretical framework (see introduction) we have already problematized, the notion of community to some extent. In the last chapter, however, we have mainly stuck to the institutional build-up as expounded in the decentralized governance system. In that sense, we have treated the community almost as a uniform actor (i.e. constituents.). However, as Li (1996: 510) has shown, a community can be politically fractured and socially differentiated along multiple factors. In this chapter, we attempt to expose this complexity by adding social and cultural dynamics. In that sense, we will take the unit out of *community*. To do so, we first set up a (short) theoretical framework that continues where the introduction has left off. Here we will criticize an analytical position that Mohan and Stokke (2000) refer to as “localism”. Then follows a rather descriptive section in which we intend to expose the heterogeneity of actors within the community itself. A first emphasis here is on traditional authority in the Dagbon context, after which we consecutively elaborate on other relevant groups and dimensions in Yizegu’s community. A concluding section then serves to assess what consequences this heterogeneity has for the issues of interest representation and participation, with which we have dealt earlier.

### **3.1 Analytical Framework: Problematizing “the Community”**

When talking about community-based development, development policies often rely “on *communities* to use their *social capital* to organize themselves and *participate* in development processes” (Mansuri & Rao, 2004: 6, *italics mine*). This leaves us with ambiguous concepts such as participation, communities and social capital. As participation has already been dealt with to a considerable degree and an elaborate treatment of the notion of social capital exceeds the scope of this paper, both will remain in the background throughout the rest of this section. Here, we will mainly focus on the notion of the “community” by highlighting its problematic nature.

#### *Problematizing the Community*

Development projects are typically implemented in a unit referred to as a community (Mansuri & Rao, 2004: 8). When talking about the notion of *the community*, literature on development policy generally seems to refer to “a culturally and politically homogeneous social system or one that at least implicitly is internally cohesive and more or less harmonious, such as an administratively defined locale (tribal area or neighbourhood) or a common interest



group (community of weavers or potters)” (ibid.). However, as we have already argued in the introduction, this simplistic conception may severely distort our image of reality; the composition of “communities” can be highly diverse and is far from static (cf. Agrawal & Gibson 1999; Li 2001).

Analytically, Mansuri and Rao (2004: 8) see how the conventional notion of “the community” is problematic on at least two levels. Firstly, it is rather difficult to straightforwardly define the geographical and conceptual boundaries of a community as such. Administrative boundaries may not coincide with actual settlement patterns<sup>27</sup>, which may render them meaningless. Moreover, increasing mobility and temporary migration may constantly alter what is understood as “the community”. In that sense, we are dealing with something fluent rather than static. On top of this, factional, ethnical, and religious identities will further complicate the picture (ibid.). In that sense, the heterogeneity of actors within a community is often overlooked (Nygren 2005), while the assumed boundaries between the community and its counter-forces – e.g. states and markets – are perhaps overstated (Li 2001).

Secondly, an unqualified use of “community” may obscure local structures of economic and social power that are likely to strongly influence policy outcomes (ibid.). For instance, Kumar (2002) points to distinctions between gender, wealth, or status that ensure that the distribution of benefits of these policies will strengthen local elites while excluding most of the poor. We should note that “community” is a concept often used by state and other organizations, rather than the people itself, and may then carry connotations of consensus and needs determined within parameters set by outsiders (Nelson & Wright 1995). Its existence is then perhaps more a ‘construction’ rather than an organic form (Mansuri & Rao, 2004: 8). Moreover, when considering that this *construction* has strong resonances with the ideology and system of shared values of many NGOs (Blaikie 2000: 1046), we should note that embracing its one-sided conceptualization might conceal conflict and powerful interests expected to be present at the intra-community level.

### *Beyond Localism*

It should by now be clear that a community is not a site of unpenetrated, local and authentic alterity and cultural difference (ibid.). Rather than taking up a form of “localism” that essentializes the local as a discrete and bounded places that host relatively homogeneous

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<sup>27</sup> As we have seen in the case of Yizegu, i.e. the borders of the Zugu traditional authority vs. the borders of the Tarikpaa Elecotral Area.

communities, we should opt for a global sense of place (Mohan & Stokke 2000) As to restore the role of the national and the global (for understanding the local), it is then perhaps better to understand communities in line with recent understandings of *place* within human geography. From this perspective, “places are held to be constituted by social, economic, political, and cultural relations, and flows of commodities, information and people that extend far beyond a given locality” (Mohan & Stokke, 2000: 263). The point is then not that the local should be rejected as a basis for empowerment, but rather that we should move past analytical dichotomies - like state/society and local/global - if our analyses are to have any relevance (cf. Tsing 2000).

### **3.2 The Importance of Traditional Authority**

The elephant in the room, with regard to the social and cultural context of our present case is the traditional authority that plays an important role in the everyday life of the villagers. Yizegu falls under the Kingdom of Dagbon, established around 1600 by a group of migrant cavalymen imposing themselves on stateless people<sup>28</sup> (Staniland 1975; Pellow 2011). The Kingdom is located in the Northern Region of Ghana and is about 9,611 square miles in surface. The Dagbon-people call themselves Dagbamba (anglicized as Dagomba), although other ethnic groups - such as Konkomba, Anufo, Basari, etc. - also inhabit the region. In that sense, Dagbon is a multi-ethnic society with a population of more than 1 million inhabitants<sup>29</sup> (Tonah, 2012: 5). Although the area is mostly rural, it has several urban settlements, of which Tamale, Yendi, and Savelugu are most well known. The population is overwhelmingly Muslim (76 percent) with ancestor worship common amongst the rural population (GSS 2002, Tonah, *ibid.*).

Dagbon is a centralized, hierarchical state under the leadership of the Ya-Na, who resides in Yendi (Tonah, 2012: 6). Despite the entrenchment of democratic rule and the expansion of state powers, particularly since the return to civilian rule in 1992, the importance of the chieftaincy institution has remained in the Northern Region (Tonah, 2012: 1). The state is built up of several levels of authority, each administered by a kingship-, paramount-, divisional- or settlement-Chief. Chiefs at one level of the political hierarchy owe allegiance to the appointing Chief, one level above them (*ibid.*). The Ya-Na also appoints royal members to administer the main settlements under his direct authority. Despite being accountable to those

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<sup>28</sup> Note that some scholars go as far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> and even the 14<sup>th</sup> century (McGaffey 2006; Tonah, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> An estimate based on a 2010 census, in which the Northern Region population was established at 2,468,557. The Dagomba constitute about 41% of this population.

that appoint them, Chiefs at each level have considerable autonomy in administering the area under their control (Staniland 1975; Anamzoya 2008).

Chiefs are chosen from members of the royal group, in a political system described by Bukrum (2004) as a “rotating chieftaincy”. This means that Chiefs that are initially appointed to the settlement and divisional levels will always aspire to a higher paramouncy position. Chieftaincies are ranked, and Chiefly progression is channelled more and more narrowly as one rises to “the Skin” of Yendi (Pellow, 2011: 135). Besides being a prestigious position demanding respect amongst their subjects, Chiefs also have access to considerable resources including the labour of their subjects, land<sup>30</sup>, livestock, minerals, water, and trees of economic value (Tonah, 2011: 1). This makes the contest for Chieftaincy titles highly competitive. Becoming a Chief is “not merely a contest between individual members of the royal group but involves the contestants’ families, lineages and clans as well as their friends and support” (Hagan, 2006; Tonah, 2011: 1).

It is important to note that the tribe can be divided into two clans; the Abudu and Andani, each an offshoot of one of the two sons of Ya-Na Yakubu, who died in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Staniland 1975; Pellow, 2011: 135). Succession over this paramount position has since then always led to tension, sometimes lapsing into violence. The most recent example is the bloody murder of the Ya-Na Yakubu Andani II and 28 of his followers in 2002 (see Mahama 2009a). The conflict on who has the legitimate claim to install the Ya-Na seems to resurface with each change of government, as the feuding clans jockey for support among the ruling elites and political parties (Tonah, 2011: 1). The entanglement of the two main political parties with the two factions in the conflict, is also seen as one of the main instigators of the dramatic events in 2002 (Mahama 2009a).

### *Indirect Rule*

In this light, an essential consideration is the institution of Indirect Rule, established by the Brits during the colonial period. Their stated aim was to preserve the North from ‘disruptive’ outside influences and ‘to foster traditional values and institutions’ (Bukrum 2004). Kingdoms such as that of Dagbon were ‘restored’ and incorporated in the government of the colony (McGaffey 2006: 81). The state of authority and administrative efficiency that had almost ceased to exist at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was restored and codified into a

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<sup>30</sup> Although all land is vested in the government, the Chiefs act as custodians. Everything that is thus undertaken within the borders of their lands, has to be channelled through the Traditional Authority; their authorisation is required.

written constitution at one of the many conference held in the 1930s (see Staniland 1975). In this fashion, the British government used Chiefs as pawns to ensure direct control over their subjects (Asiedu 2008). However, this meddling in the traditional chieftaincy institution was not without consequences. The colonial government imposed traditional leaders favorable to them on the people, and disposed the chiefs considered to be unfriendly or adversarial (Albert 2008; Asiedu 2008). This subordination of traditional leaders was accordingly continued by the post-independence governments who continued to manipulate through ‘appoint, discipline, and reward the Chiefs’ (Albert, 2008: 49). According to Albert (2008), herein lies the intractability and partisan nature of the disputes and conflicts that have plagued the Dagbon kingdom ever since.

### *Chiefs as Agents of Development*

When reading the literature on the roles of Chiefs and traditional authority, many ascribe them with a role in development (see Mahama 2009b). The Chief is supposed to help “fulfill the hopes and aspirations of the community” (Dankwa III 2004). These ‘hopes and aspirations’ are often defined in terms of development and according to Oomen (2005) the Chiefs are not rarely judged on their ability to bring development to the region. Apparently, the community expect him to be an ‘agent of development’ (Mahama, 2009b: 11-12).

Having said that, the role of traditional authority in modern government remains rather ill-defined. Despite being ascribed with similar agendas – i.e. local community development and poverty reduction at large - the relationship between traditional authorities and the DA has not been very well specified. There is no formal partnership nor any institutional representation (ibid.). The traditional authorities are just one the many interest groups to be consulted by the District Assembly. This can have several negative consequences. As Ayee (2006) observes, “the lack of institutional representation of chiefs in the District Assemblies and the sub-district structures has led to not only misgivings by most chiefs on the operations and performance of the District Assemblies but also a position of non-cooperation adopted by either some chiefs or some officials of the District Assemblies especially the District Chief Executive”.

These unintended consequences could seriously hamper the overall development of the community. After all, they are the leaders of the community and can in that role be the key to the success or failure of any development project. They can fulfil a role in mobilizing human and material resources and are an important factor in ensuring peace and tranquillity in

their area (Mahama 2009b: 12). It seems a fair point that without peace and order there cannot be development. Moreover, chiefs act as an important mediating link between the government and his people, acting as channels of communication and disseminating government policies and decision (ibid.).

### **3.3 Traditional Authority in Practice**

As noted, Yizegu is part of the Dagomba-Kingdom. Traditional authority is thus also represented in the community. At the top of this hierarchy is the village-Chief; a man in his 40s, originally from the neighboring Tarikpaa, but appointed to Yizegu by the Chief of Zugu in 2009. He is assisted – and often accompanied - by a group of predominantly unschooled elderly men (non-English speaking), who typically act as landlords of their respective families. The Chief has named some of these family-heads as his “companions” (9 or 10 for Yizegu, including the Assistant-Chief, Imam, and Assistant-Imam) and this position entitles one to a piece of land on which to farm. In an interview, the Assistant Chief<sup>31</sup> points to a hierarchy in this process of land-distribution by claiming that his position entitles him “the second pick” after the Chief. Payment is done through commission, i.e. the companions do not pay for the land in cash but give some of their harvest to the Chief, who in turn gives some bags of maize to the Chief of Zugu<sup>32</sup>, the overall land-owner and head of the region. In this fashion, each family in the community and region has access to land for farming and is able to sustain itself.

Besides the issue of land-distribution, this group of “village elites” also meets up twice a week (Mondays and Fridays) to greet the Chief and “discuss problems” of the community. They thus seem engaged with the everyday administration of the Yizegu community<sup>33</sup>, although none of the interviewees (from the tradition authority itself) seems able to substantiate the different aspects of this function. The notion of “solving problems” remains rather vague on initial inquiry and my requests for more concrete examples often remain unfulfilled. According to the Assistant Chief, “most problems have to do with land. So, outside the farming season there is not much to discuss as there is not really anything going on. Problems arise when people start farming again”. When asked what they discuss in the weekly meetings, the Chief himself explains that “for instance if there are promising kids that

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<sup>31</sup> The second most important in the Traditional Authority

<sup>32</sup> Although not mandatory, this is seen as the appropriate thing to do.

<sup>33</sup> Later interviews with the more “active” community member made me reject this claim rather confidently for Yizegu itself. However, this need not be the case for Chiefs of villages that are higher up the hierarchy and have more (social) capital to mobilize resources (cf. Chief of Tolon).

do not want to go to school, we go talk to the family. If there are people that mess up their jobs, they come here to explain why and we see what we can do”. In terms of development, however, none of the traditional “village elites” seem to have an interesting or original vision on the biggest problems facing the community and what can be done to solve them. The diagnosed problem is usually that “we have no money and there is nothing we can do. We are dependent on whoever comes to help us”. Apparently, this is not a very fruitful strategy because, as the Chief explains, “the District and NGOs only talk to the paramounts. They don’t really care about us. The paramount chiefs do not inform us either”. In that sense, the traditional authority in Yizegu takes a rather passive position vis-à-vis other development actors, such as NGOs and local government. The often ascribed role of Chiefs as “development agents” (see Awedoba 2006; 2009) does not really seem to apply for the Yizegu-context

### *Perspectives from Villagers*

In inquiring about the role of the Chief in daily life of Yizegu, I uncovered a few anecdotes that may offer some clarification. For instance, the region has had a lot of turmoil surrounding the issue of pig-holding, as the majority of the Northern Region are of the Muslim faith. The surrounding villages that allowed pig-holding had already seen some tensions and that is why the Yizegu-chief decided that this activity would be prohibited for all. As to keep the peace, he did so in consultation with representatives of both religions. Another instance of the Chief’s authority is an issued directive that all farmers should not pay more than the agreed upon amount for ploughing, as to improve the community’s bargaining position towards the service provider. This directive failed, however, as one farmer - who no longer lived in the village but was still using the farmlands – paid the higher price demanded by the ploughing “company”, that accordingly asked the same price for all farmers. Note that the individual that broke the agreement, had lost the previous “succession-bidding” for the open Chieftaincy position. He was thus holding some grudge towards the current Chief and saw this as an excellent opportunity to undermine his authority. Other informal talks with villagers also uncovered that the traditional authority in Yizegu primarily deals with family-issues (if the family-head can’t solve them) or feuds between families that affect the entire village. These issues can vary from marriage-problems to land-disputes. Moreover, they also seem concerned with individuals causing nuisance (“annoying women”) or those who are suspected of juju (witchcraft).

Another instance in which the Chief exerted authority, is found in the context of the increasing demand for land, in face of the expected development to arise as a consequences of the construction of an international airport in close proximity to the village<sup>34</sup>. The frantic house-building on the other side of the road arose from the Chief's announcement that he will soon start selling the land to third party bidders, who are anticipating to the increase of land-value after the construction of the airport has been finished. The demand has thus increased significantly. However, as to ensure that the growing families in the community have a place to stay in the future, the Chief has given the villagers the opportunity to mark some of the land as their territory by allowing them to build houses there. As to guarantee the continuity of the community's existence, he has decided to give them this land for free<sup>35</sup>. For whoever comes around when the land-bidding starts, these building structures will then provide material proof as to who owns the place.

With regard to development in general, the Unit Committee Chairman (Laseroms) told me that "the Chief doesn't really care. Sometimes we get his blessing if we have big plans, but besides that he doesn't mind if we don't consult him"<sup>36</sup>. In the last interview I had with the Chief, however, it turned out that he was actually highly offended by the fact that he was not really involved in the work of the Unit Committee and Assembly-Man. Remarkably, in the three years the assembly-men from Langa has been elected, "he has never come by to greet me or discuss issues on development". Then again the Chief had also not invited him, but according to him, this was not his responsibility. Apparently, he was too proud to make the first step. This inertia of the traditional authority in terms of development, was occasionally criticized by some. As Nathaniel - one of the more politically active and articulate villagers - stated, "never in my life have I seen a Chief call up a meeting with the community to discuss what can be done in terms of development: they don't care". This opinion was shared by some of the younger men in the village, who observed that the traditional authority "is all about power and status. Normal people don't benefit. They all want to be a Chief. It only creates trouble".

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<sup>34</sup> In fact, part of the runway would cut through some of the community's farmlands. Specifics, however, remained unclear and construction has been postponed several times. Other than "the promise of development", the villagers have not been reimbursed, although it is likely that the issue has been dealt with at the paramount level.

<sup>35</sup> The Chief has also been getting requests from former community-members, who have been travelling for a long time and all of a sudden want a piece of land, so they can sell it later on when the value has increased. To those people the Chief does not give anything, only if they will actually live there.

<sup>36</sup> Direct quote from chapter 2.

Particularly this latter point requires some elaboration. As stated, the contest for Chieftaincy titles can be highly competitive. For instance, when a position opens up, the appointing Chief who decides on the successor will often be overloaded with gifts and it is not unusual that the Chieftaincy position goes to the highest bidder. According to many villagers, this was the case in the appointment of the new Langa Chief, who was sponsored by his son, a wealthy businessman from Accra. Rumours were going around in the region that he had paid thousands of cedi's<sup>37</sup>, an astonishing and frustrating amount for many of the villagers, who already have very little to spend<sup>38</sup>. In the case of Jirikpani, a village low in the hierarchy, this "bidding up" even led to the strange situation in which the last 12 months had seen three different Chiefs. The Divisional Chief of Zugu kept appointing elderly men who were not in the best of health and therefore did not last very long. One of them even died the same night he was appointed. In the ceremony I witnessed, the new Chief was not even physically able to stand up by himself to put on the ceremonial robe.

*Unity of Traditional Authority: An Illustrating Anecdote*

In the beginning of January, the Assistant-Chief of Yizegu asked me to tag along to a meeting in Zugu in preparation for the yearly Damba-festival<sup>39</sup>. Here I was introduced to the paramount chief of the Region, who was presiding a meeting of all assistant-chiefs of the villages under his authority, including Yizegu. Each of them handed over some money to cover the costs for organizing the festival and gave their respective blessings. The meeting was held in Dagbani, although the only person speaking English could sometimes translate. The Chief of Zugu accordingly asked me some questions on why I was staying in Yizegu and what my intentions were. He mockingly stated that I was staying with the wrong community as according to him, "everything happens in Zugu". A question of one of the assistant-chiefs was whether I would bring development to the region<sup>40</sup>, to which I again replied that I had neither the means nor resources to do so. After all, "I am only a student". I was accordingly invited to partake in the actual Damba-festival, which would take place the next two days.

So far, nothing unusual. Together with the Assistant-Chief, I took the 20 minute bicycle-ride back to the village. Upon arrival, however, it was made clear to me that I had to

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<sup>37</sup> Estimations by one of my key informant came to 300.000 Ghana Cedi, although this seems an unlikely amount. Due to high inflations, there are two ratings going around; one that talks in millions and one that deals with hundreds. Most people still think in the old and have difficulty converting to the new.

<sup>38</sup> For many villagers, five cedi is already seen as a lot of money.

<sup>39</sup> Which celebrates the birth and naming of the prophet Mohammed.

<sup>40</sup> The most frequently asked question in my time with the community, particularly in the first month.



go see the Chief. At his palace he was already in discussion with a younger man who was initially appointed as my personal assistant and usually accompanied me wherever I went. In travelling to Zugu, however, I had not informed him and this clearly upset the Chief, who was scared that I “would share secrets with the other villages”. Apparently, these other villages were not to be trusted. Therefore, I had to reconstruct the meeting and tell him *exactly* what I told the Chief of Zugu. When finished, the Assistant-Chief was also brought in for interrogation; apparently the trust relationship between the two men occupying the highest positions in Yizegu’s traditional authority was not a very strong one. Later inquiry revealed that the Assistant-Chief has always been after the Chief-position and me visiting the (Paramount) Chief of Zugu<sup>41</sup> with “his biggest rival”, had made the Chief rather suspicious. Even within the same village, members of the traditional authority are not as unified as I had initially thought. To the other villages, they evoke the image of being a unified front – e.g. the way each village presents itself at ceremonies; internally, however, divisions and competition seem closer to reality.

### *Ceremonial Role*

In addition to interviewing the majority of those representing the traditional authority in Yizegu, I also attended a number of traditional festivals and ceremonies in some of the neighboring villages. The rituals performed during these ceremonies seem important in terms of confirming the position of the traditional authority itself; particularly by demarcating those who constitute the “traditional elite” from the “commoners”. The drummers have a central role in these ceremonies, citing the names of those eligible for the throne and specifying who is qualified to participate in what ceremony. Members of the “royal family” perform traditional dances wearing smocks, during which they pay the drummers for their service; an opportunity many of the younger men and future heirs use to show off not only their dancing, but also their wallets. For some, however, these ceremonial commitments are not always easy to live up to. For instance, the assistant-chief of my village was more concerned with spending his money on ceremonial rituals – like paying the drummers – rather than using it to pay off the school fees to keep his children in school.

Considering the central and eminent position of the Chiefs in these proceedings, the ceremonies also seem to play an important role in legitimating their rule. Particularly during the Damba-festival - which in my region was hosted by the paramouncy of Zugu - the

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<sup>41</sup> Who appoints Chiefs.

paramount chief is the celebrated man, as all subordinate villages send their representatives to pay their respect, literally.

### **3.4 Local Politics in Yizegu**

Another aspect that adds some dynamics to “the community” is the issue of politics. Although Ghana has a multi-party system, two parties have dominated Ghanaian politics in recent decades. In the current situation, the NDC has been in power since the Presidential election of 2008, which ended the 8-year reign of the current opposition party: the NPP. Focus will accordingly be on these two parties and their manifestations at the local level of Yizegu.

In Yizegu, almost all men being a member of one of the political parties, all four parties (NPP, NDC, PPP, CPP) have a local chairman who communicates with the higher ranks of the party. About the organization of the NDC, their Chairman tells me that if “any of the villages has problems, they consult each other about what can be done to solve them. They accordingly communicate these problems to the “strong men” in Savelugu who pose them to the District Chief Executive”. The NDC thus also has several seats in the District Assembly that guard the interest of the political party. As a chairman, he is “the main guy who NDC-members in Yizegu talk to with their issues about electricity, education, or pipelines”. He accordingly informs the assemblyman who poses his concerns in the district and the chairman himself also takes the issues up to the Head office in Savelugu. In that sense, he thus works through both the local government channel (represented by the assemblyman) *and* the channel of his political party.

For the NPP, the big opposition party, the situation is rather different. As the NPP-chairman explains, “since the NDC is in government, we have been stripped of all our powers. There is no longer a place for us in the assembly and we are facing a heavy minority. When you are in the opposition there is really nothing you can do”. Still, they try to remain active. If there is a problem, the area connector (Nathaniel) brings all regional chairmen together for a meeting. The fact that they are not represented in the assembly, forces them to work outside official governmental channels. As a political party, they have their own projects and NGOs. Considering that the assembly is the main local development planning authority, these side activities might hamper their coordinating capabilities, particularly in terms of duplication and the uneven distribution of development outcomes (i.e. being beneficial to party-members only).

When asked what differentiates the two parties, members of the NDC often point to their peace-loving nature. As Zachary explains, “we are about freedom for everyone. We don’t want fighting, just peace. The other parties only cause trouble”. A big event in this regard is the murder of the Chief of Yendi in 2002. According to one NDC-member, “the NPP let it happen by not intervening. Everyone could see it coming”. Similarly, the NDC-chairman believes that “the NDC is for the community, they want peace in the country. That’s the main difference”. Although this may sound like empty rhetoric, intertwining of politics with the Ya-Na murder in specific and traditional authority in general, requires some elaboration. As the NPP-chairman explains, “although the traditional authority is not part of politics, the Abudu and Adanis-families are both associated with different political parties. All Abudus vote NPP and all Adanis vote NDC<sup>42</sup>. Although the Ghanaian constitution states that traditional authority and politics should be kept separate, in practice things often turn out differently. According to one politically active NPP member, Chiefs usually make sure that there some voting discipline with regard to this system, i.e. “we are Adanis, so we vote NDC”.

In terms of policy, the NPP-chairman does not believe the two parties to be that different. As he explains, “we all want development for the region. There is not really a discussion of what needs to be done. Everyone can see”. He does blame the NDC, however, for not “finishing our work. In the years that they have been in power, they have not created jobs and threw away our health insurance program”. For the village in particular some promises have been broken as well: “they said they would do something about the road and the electricity-network. Nothing has been done however”. In that sense, broken promises are his biggest critique on the NDC. The NDC-chairman is also critical in this regard, particularly to the District Chief Executive (an NDC-appointment) and the promises made during the election period. As an example, he names the promise of school-fees that would be taken care of. Nothing has happened however: “all they have to do is make sure we can farm properly. Then the school fees problem will also be solved. Now both issues are not being tackled”.

These broken promises have also disappointed many of the villagers and have called up an overall sense of distrust with regard to politicians and government officials. As Nathaniel explains, “they come here with all these promises, but when they get to power they immediately forget you. Once they have your votes, you’re worth nothing to them anymore”. Once elections start, big 4x4s will drive around the region with people shouting insults and

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<sup>42</sup> Considering that the district has more members of the Adanis clan, the NDC is typically in the majority in Savelugu-Nanton.

making promises through megaphones. For Yizegu, the bad condition of the road has always been an issue and “for 25 years politicians have promised they would make it better. It doesn’t matter who you vote for, however, nothing ever happens about it”. Still, some see one big advantage of politicians as opposed to NGOs. As the Assistant-Imam and founder of the local NPP-division explains, “for political parties we have something to offer, namely our votes. Especially in election time, they will come around to look at our problems, and occasionally we get things done this way. With NGOs it is different, however. They are in no way dependable on us. We then have little access to these organizations. At least the politicians need something from us”.

### **3.5 The Woman’s Perspective**

Women in Yizegu typically rise earliest (around five) and do most of the work in keeping up the household. This means – inter alia - cooking for the family, chopping wood for making fire, doing the laundry, and fetching water. During the farming season, many of them also help out on the land. However, as the men typically hold control over the farm income, this seemingly leaves with little financial independence. Some try to start up a trading business, while others try to add value to their raw products by making snacks and selling them at the market. This allows them to cover the costs of managing the household, i.e. buying ingredients for foods, clothing their children, and paying school fees. However, the double burden of both supporting the household financially and the challenges of taking care of their children, weighs heavy on many young women’s shoulders.

In terms of interest representation, there are some politically active women in the village. For instance, both political parties have a “women’s representative” and there is even a general representative that had a seat in the Unit Committee<sup>43</sup>. The filling in of these functions may vary, but Ida (NDC Representative and wife of Laseroms) describes hers as “going to the women and see what the party can do for them”. Whatever she finds, she communicates to the NDC-Chairman of the village who has a direct line higher up the party’s hierarchy. She got the task because her predecessor was too old and quit. As she was already somewhat politically active, people thought she should fill in the vacancy. The biggest problem women have in this community, according to her, is that there is no money to start a business as a trader. The little money they have goes into cooking and school fees. “The ones

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<sup>43</sup> Due to circumstances I only got to speak to the NDC “women’s representation”. The other two representatives were away on family business.

who good are constantly busy buying and selling rice. However, you need some starting money to do this. Many women don't have it". Via the district and the party they almost got an NGO who was willing to invest. At the last moment, however, they backed out for unspecified reasons. The NGO that is already active in the community dates back from the NPP-era. Therefore, they only give loans to NPP-members. For the NDC-members there is currently nothing going on. According to Ida, women are not that active in decision-making; access is very hard. This is – she believes - primarily due to the fact that all strong members are men. Women's participation is dependent on the party-elite; however, there are little women to be found there.

Fusina is one of the women participating in the “politicized” micro-credit program by a local investment bank. From these loans, she tries to set up a trading business. By taking in rice, sheabutters, and groundnuts for low prices, she can sell them with a profit. This is often done by adding value to the raw products by preparing and selling them as snacks at the weekly markets or during events and ceremonies. So far she is doing well, predominantly because the conditions of the credit-loans are not that demanding. She has 12 months to pay back the loans and so far she has always succeeded in doing so. Another advantage she names is that this also allows her to use the loans for other expenses, such as sending her children to school. Obviously, she has to balance her trading activities with managing the household. This is hard work but with the help she gets from the other women in the family she manages to get by. In the rain-season she also helps out on the land, and even does some farming for herself. The trading business is then put on the back burner.

A former women's community representative – who has retired because of old age - diagnoses that one of the major problems of the women in the community is that there is too little communication among them. Women typically only work with the other women on the compound (i.e. other wives or daughters) and there is little connection with the women from other compounds/families. When asked about the issue of interest representation, all women attending the interview become rather critical. As the daughter of the former representative angrily stated, “they are not sending it”. Interestingly enough, a small boy attending the interview states that “speaking English will help”. A lot of women, however, have not mastered this language, as the young girls are usually the first to be pulled of school if the family can no longer pay the fees. In that sense, women find themselves in a vulnerable position in a rural community such as Yizegu. This point is illustrated by an anecdote in which the former assembly man had asked each woman 8 cedi with the promise that an NGO

would accordingly invest. This never happened, however, and no-one has seen their money back. None of the women dare to make a stand. In recent years, their situation has not changed much. According to the representative's daughter, "we are too busy with other things".

### **3.6 Other Groups in Yizegu**

#### ***Religion***

Religion also plays an important role in the community. Although the majority of the villagers is of the Islam faith, there is a Christian church with a well-attended Sunday morning service. Still, the Muslim faith dominates and is also heavily intertwined with traditional authority. The Imam does not leave Chief's side and all traditional ceremonies I have witnessed were very centred around (Muslim) prayers and blessings. The assistant-imam confirms the importance of their role in stating that "the Chief often asks me for advice from the Quran. Also, I open all our meetings with a prayer. Especially when it is time for farming, the Chief will ask me to pray for rain". In that sense, the Islam seems an important source of wisdom and support for the Chieftaincy. This also seems to apply to the rest of the village. Almost all men and women pray (although separately) five times a day and the Assistant-Imam often visits families that have problems of a religious nature, i.e. problems with marriage

Both religions are also organized in a platform that brings together the different villages in the area. As the Assistant-Imam explains, "the different Imams will often ask advice from each other. The different villages need to help each other". The platform also helps them to organize things that require more resources. For instance, Umar – the secretary of the Muslim platform – explains that "we make sure there is money so children can have Islam-classes. Also, whenever a promising Muslim-student cannot go to school because of the fees we see what we can do". The Christians are also organized in a likewise manner, which comes in handy whenever – for instance – the Church needs maintenance. Besides this internal organization, both religions have cordial relationship with each other as well. As the Assistant-Imam explains, "we often work together and ask each other for advice. There are no problems between us".

### ***Youth and Youth Chief***

An interesting category to acknowledge, is that of the Youth. Although Western association would have us think this a category of 15-25, it actually stretches from the ages 18-60. This is further illustrated in an interview with the Yizegu Youth Chief, who reveals that he is about 50 years old. He describes his function as being a sort of ‘peacekeeper in fighting matters. Whenever they are making problems I tell them that they should not do it’. He also keeps in touch with the youth of the village and communicates their problems to the Chief. The Chief will then give advice on what to do or, if necessary, take action himself. The Youth Chief describes the biggest problem in the fact ‘many of the younger men do not really have anything to do. They do not have jobs, they get bored and then they will cause trouble’.

We should note that this is a group with considerable power. There was an instance in Kumbungu in which several youth associations did not agree with who was appointed as the new District Chief Executive. Apparently, he had not done a very good job in other District and various youth had threatened to beat up any assembly-member who would vote him in. According to Nathaniel, who had visited the city just the other day, the main argument for the dissatisfaction was that people believed that the proposed DCE “did not care about development. That is why nobody wants him. But he is a friend of the president”<sup>44</sup>. When asking Nathaniel for other instances in which the Youth has shown such a violent nature, he states that “they will wait outside ballot-boxes and ask people what they have voted. If the answer is wrong they will beat you up”. The tension in Kumbungu was eventually by controlled by the military police.

### ***A Telling Anecdote: Keeping Everyone Satisfied***

On leaving the community, I tried to reciprocate through gifts as much as possible. As I had mostly drained the resources of the families of the Assistant-Chief and Assistant-Imam, I felt obliged to reimburse with bags of maize. To my surprise this called up some discomfort with both men. My personal translator advised me to do give these bags in secrecy because otherwise “people will start talking”. It quickly became clear to me that giving gifts to men in such a position, would mean they would have to account for them to “their bosses”, i.e. the Imam and Chief. Therefore I also had to give these men a considerable gift “so they would not get jealous”, as Umar, my “personal assistant” explained. However, when the Chief found

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<sup>44</sup> Although the sources of these allegations were questionable, it seems rather telling that immediately a sentiment of political distrust resurfaces.

out that I had given gifts to representatives of the Islam faith, he urged me to also reimburse the Christian in one way or the other. After all “he did not want trouble”. This was also the reason why I had to do the same for the Youth Chief, “so all groups in the community would be satisfied”. It thus seemed that these were the four main groups that kept the community balance (Islam, Christians, Youth, and the Traditional Authority). Apparently, matters were rather sensitive and the Chief safeguarded the situation.

### **3.7 Concluding Remarks**

Although this chapter has primarily been concerned with mapping out the different groups and interests that exist within in the community, what can this lengthy description tell us with regard to the issues of interest representation and participation? When studying a community that falls under the influence the Dagbon Kingdom, it is inevitable to talk about traditional authority. In Yizegu, this group consists of 10 to 15 unschooled elderly men that hold a respectful position in the community<sup>45</sup>. The importance of this group is mainly found in the land-rights the chief and his companions hold. Thus, if an outsider wants undertake something (from development projects to ethnographic fieldwork) in the community, permission of the Chief and Village elders must be granted. The Chief’s permission is then a sign to the community that everything is in order, accordingly aligning the community with whatever is undertaken – for instance – in terms of policy. In that sense, the traditional authority can have an important function in mobilizing support and is thus the appropriate point of entry for everything that is undertaken in terms of development. This point was perhaps underestimated by the Unit Committee Chairman, who believed that “the Chief doesn’t mind”. However, the Chief was in fact highly offended that he was kept out of development issues by the UCC and Assembly-Man, although he was too proud to do anything about it. Still, when looking at the passive position the traditional authority takes vis-à-vis other development actors, such as NGOs and local government, the typology of “agents of development” does not really apply for the Yizegu context.

The traditional authority also revealed severe tension, both within and between Chieftaincies. In that sense, the unity of traditional authority is somewhat overestimated. Chiefs do not really communicate with their subordinates, while many NGOs and government talk to the paramounts under the assumption that they will spread the word. For them this counts as having informed the traditional authority as a stakeholder in development, however,

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<sup>45</sup> For instance, evinced by the humbly kneeling by the normal villagers upon greeting members of the traditional authority.



the centralized, hierarchical nature of the Dagbon authority limits the spread of information severely. The smaller and less prestigious communities are left out. This often had the Yizegu Chief complaining about the fact that “they only inform the paramounts”. Instances of this problem were found in negotiations on the construction of the airport and leadership training by NGOs to the higher levels of authority (see also chapter 4). Part of the problem lies in the Dagbon Kingdom’s nature of succession. This makes the relationship between the Chiefs highly competitive as each one tries to get higher up the ladder. For instance, when I travelled to a neighbouring village to attend a festival, the Yizegu Chief wanted to know exactly with whom I talked. I later found out that he was afraid that I would share secrets with the other Chief. Even the fact that I was accompanied by the Assistant-Chief was not enough, as apparently no-one was to be trusted, not even his own subordinates.

Politics has also made a severe impact on the community. All political parties have a local division and almost all villagers are a member of either the NDC (governing party) or NPP (opposition). Through the party-channel, the villagers occasionally get things done, although this can sometimes have perverse consequences. For instance, NGO-projects run the risk of becoming politicized, exclusively falling benefit to members of a particular party. Development actors and policy-makers will thus have to be aware of the political context in which their policy is implemented, as even in a small village like Yizegu; political disparity is to be found. In that sense, the severe national tensions between the two main political parties is also found at the local level. The hostile nature of political campaigning, has had its effects on the community’s overall position towards government and the opposing political party in particular. The big promises made during elections and the meagre results that have come from it, have called up an overall sense of distrust towards politicians and government officials in general. For instance, NPP-Members structurally blame the current government for almost everything (even the weather), while NDC-members blame the NPP for the misgovernment in their last term and the according mess their party has to clean up. Although ideologically the two parties do not seem that different<sup>46</sup>, the grudges they hold towards each other should not be underestimated, particularly in the context of the Dagbon Dispute in 2002 (see section 3.2).

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<sup>46</sup> After all, everybody wants development and clearly sees what needs to be done.

Obviously, women are also part of the Yizegu community. However, they remain a vulnerable group. The multitude of function they fulfil – not only in the household – makes them the busiest group of the community, but perhaps also the most underappreciated. From a young age, girls take part in household activities and they are first ones to be dropped out of school if the family can no longer pay the school fees of all children. Although some women do well in the trading business, as *a group* they are lacking behind, particularly in terms interest representation. There is little organized communication between them and they have a hard time getting into political positions that allow for making a difference. Moreover, as one of the women stated, “we are just too busy”. In that sense they lack the ‘political tools’ to get involved in politics and participation, making them a vulnerable group that often fails to speak up whenever their interests are under threat.

In conclusion, in light of the above described diversity, the image of a “culturally and politically homogeneous social system” (Mansuri & Rao, 2004: 8) does not seem to hold. As we have seen, the composition of Yizegu’s “community” is rather diverse. If one then wants to obtain an accurate image of reality one need decompose a community along political, social, and cultural relations that comprise it. Otherwise one runs the risk of obscuring local structures of economic and social power. This can strongly influence policy outcomes, for instance by strengthening local elites to the detriment of more vulnerable groups. Therefore, it is necessary to move away from a “localism” that essentializes the local as a discrete and bounded places that host relatively homogeneous communities (see Mohan & Stokke 2000). The community is far from static and are highly subject to influences from the outside<sup>47</sup>. Taking these complexities into account will make for more efficient and sustainable development policy.

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<sup>47</sup> e.g. young boys going to school in Tamale.

## **Chapter 4. Stuck in the Middle: NGOs and Development**

So far, we have focused on the State and the Community. In this chapter we complete the “development triad” by shifting our attention to NGOs. Again, we are working with a severely underspecified category as the NGO-label hides an extremely diverse set of organizations; ranging from small, informal, community-based organizations to large, high-profile international NGOs working through local partners across the developing world (Banks & Hulme, 2012: 3). Some NGOs seek partnerships as to make use of the qualities at both ends of the spectrum; i.e. complementing finance and resources (international NGOs) with grass-roots knowledge. Due to the classificatory difficulties to be found in the NGO-sector, this section will mainly focus on how we can understand their position in terms of accountability relations to other actors, i.e. communities, local government and donors. The analytical framework will focus on accountability relations and, in particular, the tensions that exist between the ‘upward’ and ‘downward’ forms (see 4.1). Then we will present the perspectives of NGO-employees on their place in Ghana’s decentralized local government system. With this in my mind, we will then return to the local community level and see how different forms of development policy have worked “out on the ground”. In a concluding section, we will accordingly make an argument on how these findings can be related to the arguments expounded in the theoretical section below.

### **4.1 Analytical Framework: NGOs and Accountability**

#### *An Appropriate Position?*

It is difficult to take up a straightforward position on the work of NGOs. Fisher (1997: 442-443) notes how the appropriate role for NGOs in development mainly depends on the critical stance one takes towards the development industry. Those, who believe contemporary development processes to be flawed but basically positive and inevitable, see how NGOs can mitigate some of the weaknesses of the development process. Others, however, see a fundamental flaw in the dominant development paradigm and its implementation. In this perspective, development is considered to be a historically produced discourse “which created a space in which only certain things could be said and even imagined” (Escobar, 1995: 39). Although NGOs may be held to facilitate participation and empowerment by critics from both camps, the meanings attached to them will differ greatly (Fisher, 1997: 443).

Critics reasoning from the first perspective perceive NGOs mainly in *instrumentalist* terms, regarding them as apolitical tools that can be wielded to further a variety of slightly modified development goals (Fisher, 1997: 444). NGOs are praised for their flexibility and innovativeness, effectively implementing development efforts, while responding to the grass-roots needs of local communities (ibid.). To the second set of development critics, however, this instrumentalist conceptualization largely ignores the political role that NGOs can play (Fisher, 1997: 446). Politics - taken to refer to power-structured relationships maintained by techniques of control (Fischer, 1997: 446; Foucault cited in Burchell et al. 1991) – pervades every aspect of life and the “antipolitics” described by the former perspective merely serves to obscure inherent power relations (cf. Ferguson 1990).

There is thus an academic debate between ‘those who argue that new or alternative means are needed to reach the goals of development and those who argue for a reconception of the ends of development and an acknowledgement that the means by which we strive for or make decisions about those ends matter as much as the ends themselves’ (Fisher, 1997; 446; Ferguson 1990; Escobar 1995). However, rather than settling this debate and actively choosing position, this section tries to incorporate both perspectives and often finds itself right in the middle. Although this may seem untidy and ambiguous, the different questions the perspectives and tools have to offer can add to the analysis presented below. Therefore, we firstly we take up the instrumental tool of accountability in order to analyze the position in which NGOs find themselves. Later on we then move to the more to the political side of the spectrum in analyzing how these accountability mechanisms work out “on the ground”.

### *Upwards and Downwards Accountability*

At the most general level, the concept of accountability seems concerned with ‘the process of holding actors responsible for their actions’ (Fox & Brown, 1998: 12). It is essentially an attribute of a relationship between two actors, which is described by Edwards and Hulme (1996) as “the means by which individuals and organizations report to a recognized authority, or authorities, and are held responsible for their actions”. For NGOs, accountability works towards three sets of actors (Edwards & Hulme, 1996: 967; Ebrahim, 2003). Firstly, they are concerned with “upward” accountability referring to relationships with donors, foundations and governments (Ebrahim, 2003: 814). Secondly, NGOs are held accountable “downwards”, to the groups to whom they provide services, i.e. “the intended

beneficiaries” (ibid.). Lastly, they are concerned with “internal” accountability, where NGOs declare responsibility to their mission and staff (Ebrahim, 2003: 815).

Obviously, there is a tension between these three types of accountability. Particularly when focussing on the upward and downward modes of accountability, we can see how NGOs are stuck right in the middle. This intermediary position means they will have to deal with conflicting demands. The big problem, however, is that typically actors higher up the chain – i.e. donors – control the allocation of funds and can thus exert power over those lower down the chain. In that sense, the accountability demands that come from above will weigh heavier than those coming from below. Powerful actors can easily require accountability from the less powerful, while demands coming from the other way will be more easily rejected. After all, establishing “downward” accountability requires that actors higher up the chain let go of some of their powers, a concession they are often reluctant to make. In that sense, the balance is likely to shift in favour of upward-accountability mechanisms, i.e. performance indicators, budget reports and the like. This is problematic as (downward) accountability mechanisms are primarily there to ensure that funds flow down the aid chain to ‘intended beneficiaries’. In practice, however, this might not always be the case.

NGOs thus find themselves in a difficult position. They act as a mediator between two camps that often have contradicting demands. This creates tensions. But what sort of tensions are we talking about here? Ebrahim (2003) and Wallace et al. (2007) have described extensively how these accountability demands can have an effect on field staff’s priorities, usually to the detriment of exploring local social dynamics that should inform their work. Moreover, if upward accountability mechanisms weigh too heavily, the pressure might result in unreliable reports moving up the aid chain<sup>48</sup>. The work of David Mosse (2004; 2005) has been particularly enlightening on how this gap between rhetoric and reality is build up. Sometimes policy does not produce practice, but it is rather the other way around. Sometimes actors in development are merely concerned with maintaining coherent representations, regardless of events.

One of the main problems is that, in light of results-based management, project-management is often a top priority for management (Jacobs & Wilford, date unknown). Such systems are often rather inflexible in bureaucratic processes. However, fieldwork requires

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<sup>48</sup> E.g. “juking the stats”: “Making robberies into larcenies. Making rapes disappear. You juke the stats, and majors become colonels” (The Wire, 4.9).

flexibility as to quickly respond to changing realities on the ground (Wallace et al. 2007: 165). Moreover, predetermined plans reduce beneficiaries to mere actors in NGO-activities rather than authors of their own. This inhibits them from taking ownership in project activities and partaking in political processes. Although planning and budgeting is necessary, it should be constantly informed by locals and their perspectives and priorities. Therefore, downward accountability has to come first. In the current situation, however, it is often the other way around.

## **4.2 The NGO-Perspective**

### *Relationship with Local Government*

Formally, all development aid is channelled through the District Assembly. According to a DMR<sup>49</sup>-employee, “they know about the communities, what needs to happen and who needs the help most”. The NGOs thus negotiate with the District Chief Executive to see if there is a fit between what the NGO has to offer and what the District needs. If this is the case, the District will select several communities the NGOs accordingly pays a visit for a consultation-meeting. This meeting is usually with the “village elites”. Dependent on what specialization the NGO has, the District will also link them to the relevant government department/agency. In that sense, many NGOs work in close cooperation with local government and name the DA as their “point of entry”. Moreover, many NGOs see the necessity of this “state consent”: as the reasoning goes, they have the capability of coordinating and monitoring the overall development policy. In this fashion, issues like “duplication of policy” can be averted.

However, in practice this system does not always function up to standards. As a JUNO-employer explains “most of the planning administrators do is desk-planning. They lack the institutional capacity for any serious implementation, particularly at the sub-district level. They are writing a lot of nice rapports and proposals in order to secure financing. However, the money is often spend on other things”. He mainly believes that this malfunction also has to do with the fact that the decentralization is not yet complete. As the budgets confirm, the District is very limited in its funding and has great difficulty in generating internal revenue. A lot of money is spend on salaries, meaning there is little left for actually implementing policy. Moreover, the financing that comes from central government is often too late and incomplete. In that sense, “you can write a nice plan, but there is not really any money to make it happen.

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<sup>49</sup> All NGO-names are given synonyms

There are no resources to address development priorities. The overall setup is good, but the district cannot and does not deliver”.

This is also the reason why many NGOs have chosen to focus on giving technical and financial support, i.e. a move from direct service delivery to advocacy. As the director of CLOUDS explains, “the circumstances have changed. When we started in ’93, poverty was so severe that we had to focus on delivering basic needs. After all, when people are hungry they don’t care about basic rights. Nowadays, however, we do more about raising the level of awareness with regard to basic rights and the democratic process; everybody has a stake in the national cake”. This means that they have to collaborate closely with the community and governmental actors. The JUNO-employee agrees; “without a government system, development aid is unworkable. NGOs should be temporarily, the state is there forever. That’s why the focus should be on improving them”. Eventually, they have to deliver the service. In the current form, however, NGOs often have to “fill the gaps that the government leaves”. Almost all interviewed employees agree that this is not the way it is supposed to be; “NGOs should produce development outcomes alongside government actors rather than doing it for them”.

#### *Taking the Social and Cultural Contexts into Account*

Many NGOs take into account the context in which much of the development policy is delivered. Firstly, they have to deal with the fierce political competition that takes place, also at the local level. For instance, the CLOUDS-director names an example of a perfectly working grinding mill that would benefit the whole community, but was only used by members of a particular political party. According to him, “if development aid gets intertwined with politics, its produced outcomes will often be distributed unequally”. Instances of this politicization were also found in Yizegu, where the problem manifested itself in a micro-financing programme that only benefited members of the NPP. That is why many NGOs find it important to emphasize their political neutrality, especially in election periods. For instance, CLOUDS wants “nothing to do with anyone that has a party-political affiliation. They should stay away from anything that can be associated with our organization. If our employees want to be in politics they will have to quit their jobs or take a lengthy leave”. Staying out of politics is a challenge, however, because politicians will always want to claim positive developments as their merit.

With regard to the Traditional Authority, many NGOs are in concordance on their perceived role in development. Several NGO-employees see it as the “proper entry” into the community. In a sense, they are the leaders of the community and should therefore be included in the development process; “they have to carry the development projects once the NGO is gone”. As one DARE-international employee named it, “they are the pivots of mobilizing community resources”. Their well-respected status in the community can make them a real factor of influence. Moreover, Chiefs are “the custodians of the land” and if you want to undertake something in a community, you have to inform them. Still, some NGOs emphasize that the role and functions Chiefs fulfil, will depend highly on their personal characteristics. Not all chiefs have the same degree of skill in mobilizing resources, or the same level in involvement for that matter. Sometimes it has to come from both sides.

Although, the NGOs thus very much take into account the needs and roles of the traditional authority, some faulty assumptions also seem to guide their work, particularly when taking the situation of Yizegu into consideration. For instance, a training given by one of the NGOs merely focused on the paramount Chiefs, under the assumption that “they will inform the others”. As seen in many instances, however, the communication between divisional, local and paramount-chiefs is very weak, as the higher ranks do not feel the need to visit or inform their subordinates: they would rather see it the other way around. Moreover, some NGOs rather work with the Unit Committee Chairman than traditional authority institutions. However, as we saw with the Chief of Yizegu, surpassing him was a severe sign of disrespect, although he was too proud to say anything about it. Leaving him out of the communication process, made sure he could not fulfil his role in mobilizing the community and that way gathering the needed support for the intended policy. The Director of the Institute of Local Governance believes that this problem often lies “at the basis of much of the development failures that have been going on at the local level”.

### *Problems with Accountability*

With regard to the difficult situation in which many NGOs find themselves in terms of accountability, some employees were rather critical towards the functioning of their own organization. Some even talked about the “screwed up mechanisms of the development industry”. As the Director of CARD explains, “the NGOs report upwards. How do they get the money? Not by doing good things for the community. They make sure the donors are happy when they come visit. Just stick them in a nice hotel and you will be fine”. An



employee of DARE-international even calls the concept of “downward-accountability” an illusion. “There are a lot of reports written in which everyone presents good performances and nice indicators. That needs to be done because that is how the financing works”. However, this is often to detriment of the work done in the communities. The Directors of CARD agrees, “the reality of development cannot be captured by an indicator. NGOs are very good at writing reports. However the community is often forgotten”. His accusations go even further when stating that “in development the sequence is as follows: first NGOs take care of themselves, then of the Donors that come. What remains goes to the communities”.<sup>50</sup>

### **4.3. Development Projects in Yizegu**

Although the NGO-perspective gives us a broad overview of how they work with the local government structure with which they are presented, it might also be enlightening to map out the community’s experiences with NGOs. A focus here is on rural development and the various financing schemes in which many of the villagers have participated. For an accurate assessment, however, some context is required.

#### *Farming Life in Yizegu*

The people of Yizegu are mostly smallholder farmers whose farming is predominantly subsistence. Each compound has a landlord – the landowner - who is responsible for feeding the people living there. The farming activity takes place during the rain-season which lasts from May till October. In March, some farmers will already start planting yams. In May they plant the granats (peanuts), and in June the rice and maize. A typical day for those farming, starts between 5 and 6, early in the morning. Most farmers partly work on the land of the landlord and use the rest of their day to farm their own land. The crops vary from tomatoes, peppers, cowpea, and rice to beans, granats, and maize. Families live of the harvest of last year’s farming season. Some years are better than others, although one problem keeps surfacing each season: a lack of fertilizer. Because of this, most families barely have enough yield to feed their families. Almost nothing remains for them to sell at the week-markets of Savelugu or Kumbungu. Moreover, there is barely any money to invest in farm-inputs in preparation of next year’s farming season. One of the younger man, who farms for the assistant-Imam, described the situation in which many of the Yizegu farmers find themselves as a downward cycle, in which “each year gets worse”.

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<sup>50</sup> A cautionary note should be made that these observations are by no means generalizable. Although the accusations are severe and might hold some truths, I must emphasize that I was very much impressed by the work and perspectives of many of the NGOs that I talked to.

This year has been particularly hard because large parts of last year's harvest failed due to sustained drought and a fire that destroyed much of the crops. Many farmers then do not have the money to buy the needed fertilizer for harvesting their main crops, i.e. maize and rice. A possible outcome is to participate in a financing project of one of the NGOs that supply farming inputs and ask a (predetermined) share of the farmer's yield in return. These farming inputs include seeds, fertilizer, agrochemicals, ploughing services, transportation possibilities, storages and marketing. By using these farming inputs "correctly", or so the ideal scenario tells us, the farmers will get a high enough yield from their crops to not only pay back the lender and feed their families, but also to sell some goods at the market in order to set up a business. However, this scheme is not without risk. Even if the yield is disappointing, the farmers are still stuck to the contract that demands that they hand over the agreed upon bags of maize in exchange for the loans. Some of the farmers may then find themselves in a choice between defaulting the loan or feeding their families. It should come as no surprise that almost all of villagers prefer the latter option.

One of the farmers in the village has worked closely with one of these "financial NGOs" (CARD) and states the specifics of the contracts that many farmers have signed in the past farming season. "The deal was that the farmers would get the "adequate" farming inputs for 5 bags of maize per acre. However, it quickly became clear that many would not get that high a yield out of their soils. Some got 2, others 4, some 7, and some 5". Many farmers were thus not able to pay off their debts, and many of those that could, simply refused. Because of the many defaults, the NGO accordingly threatened to bring in the police and have them pay their debts "in one way or the other". He believes that they will probably not come back this year, meaning that many farmers relying on these loans will be in trouble. Those who can, try to benefit from the lower prices and are already stocking up on fertilizer. Others are using their cattle to produce natural fertilizer. Farmers that do not have these possibilities, however, have a difficult time ahead of them.

The strict conditions of the contracts and bad experiences in the past, were also reason enough for many farmers to not partake in these types of "development projects" at all. As Mohammed, a young farmer, explains, "they ask too much. You can't keep anything for yourself. At least now, everything I farm is for me. If I get one bag of rice, I can sell it, otherwise I would have to give it to CARD. They'll take the crops and it won't be profitable". Moreover, according to Zachary, a farmer who was closely involved with another financing project (AGRA), the support they were getting was getting less and less anyway. As he

explains, “the first year, I got fertilizer for 5 acres. I paid back the loans on time, but next year I only got enough for two acres. They didn’t even tell me why”. This year, he will not be participating at all, because he does not want to “owe anything to anyone”. Perhaps if they can get better conditions on the loans, he will think about it, but this depends on what the District Chief Executive can get out of the negotiation. They themselves do not really have a say in it. Apparently, “each year a guy comes with a list and collects the names of those that want the loans”. The loans they are getting is more deal of “take it or leave it”.

Another option for the villagers, is to obtain a piece of land from the irrigation fields of Libga, another large-scale development project in the region. Some villagers have the resources to do so and explain how it works. “If you give a sum of money to the Libga-chief or one of his companions, they will rent you the land”. However, the ground is a bit more expensive because the people from Libga according have to pay the Ghanaian government for using the dam. You thus need a considerable amount of money to begin with. The big advantage, however, is that the irrigation allows them to also farm in the dry-season. Some of the crops they farm are peppers, African spinach, and ocru. Irrigation farming is intensive though, and you are still highly dependable on the weather. If it is very hot, then business goes well and they make some money from selling their products at the markets. This money is accordingly used to buy farm inputs to prepare for farming in the rain-season. The majority of the farmers in Yizegu, however, are not wealthy enough to make use of these irrigation facilities.

#### *Other Instances of Development Projects In Yizegu*

Enoch, the man who has served as an assembly-man for eight years, provided some other example of problems they have had with development organization. For instance, Yizegu and the neighboring village of Tarikpaa do their farming on different soils (gravel vs. sand). This also means that they have different farm cycles and “while the people in Yizegu might still be relaxing, the farmers of Tarikpaa are already working hard”. However, because they fall under the same electoral area, they also fall under the same development policy. NGOs thus supply them farm-inputs (at a loan) at the same time, while one of the villages does not actually need it yet. This mistiming of aid often leads to a lower yield and a default of the loan. Frustrated NGOs accordingly blame the community for a lack of knowledge and

stop the program, while a better communication could have saved a lot of trouble<sup>51</sup>. A similar diagnostic is applicable to much of the microcredit provided by NGOs. This is often done in the dry-season when supply of goods is low, and prices are thus high. If this microcredit would have been given just after harvest, however, women could invest it way better due to the high supply and accordingly low prices. This would lead to a lot less loan-defaults and thus a lot less frustration for all. More informed policy – for instance through the means of participation – would have helped a great deal in this regard. Perhaps this also the reason why projects that require a bit more delicacy due to their complexity – e.g. agriculture - often fail. More straightforward NGO-projects in the areas of water, sanitation and education, for instance, have helped the community considerably.

#### **4.4 Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has set out to complete the “Development Triad” by adding the NGOs as third actor in the process. In the analytical framework we accordingly conceptualized their position in terms of accountability relations. The according argument that flowed out of the intermediary position in which NGOs find themselves, is that the different and contradictory demands they face from donors and ‘intended beneficiaries’ (i.e. upward and downward accountability) places them in a difficult position. As the literature argued, the Donors would often get privileged in the subsequent trade-off. To put these claims to the test we accordingly confronted NGO employees themselves.

When working in Ghana, one is inevitably confronted with an elaborate local government system which requires them – by law – to work through the District Assembly. Most interviewed NGOs were fully aware of this obligation and acknowledged the importance of an adequate governance system as such. Most negotiation and bargaining is thus done with the District Chief Executive, who will accordingly tell them were to go. However, the perceived effectiveness of this system is based on the assumption that the District will actually know where to go. As Johnson (2001) observed in chapter 2, development programs can be highly subject to regional biases. Chances then are that the District will send the NGOs to relatively affluent areas or communities with considerable local power. This might result in an unequal distribution of development outcomes. The

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<sup>51</sup> We should note that sometimes no-one is to blame for development failure. As one farmer noted, “last year everything was on time, they even gave us money for ploughing. However, the drought and lack of rain ruined everything”. The fact that the NGO accordingly stated they wouldn’t be back next year because of the according default can be morally questioned however.

varying numbers of development projects to which each community lays claim, seems to support this line of reasoning (see introduction).

With regard to taking into account the social and cultural context in which development policy is implemented, most NGOs are very careful in their proceedings. Many believe that the Chief is the appropriate ‘point of entry’ in a community, although some prefer to work through the Unit Committee Officer. As chapter 2 illustrated, this can have negative consequences with regard to the potential role of chiefs in development. Also many NGOs seem to overestimate the unity of Traditional Authority, as we had already concluded in Chapter 3. The assumption that information or policy outputs will just trickle down the hierarchical of the Dagbon traditional authority does not hold and merely leads to elites capturing the available resources of development projects.

The position in which NGOs find themselves in terms of accountability was also critically analyzed by some of the interviewed personnel. The concerns with regard to results-based management as found in the literature, were confirmed in talks with several NGOs. Sometimes, getting the budgets and performance indicators right is more important than assessing how the actual policy works out “on the ground”. In that sense, goal-displacement seems prevalent in the NGO-sector, where outputs are favored over outcomes. In this process, communities are often forgotten. After all, showing the results in actual numbers is more likely to get your projects financed than pointing to the complex social and cultural dynamics that have to be taken into account for “the slow and delicate process of development”. One interviewee even went so far as to call “downward” accountability an illusion. In safeguarding the financing, the power of Donors simply weighs too heavily on the NGO’s shoulders, who are – as an organization – also concerned with their own survival.

But then what have we seen of development policy in practice? For Yizegu, there are two sides to the story. Some projects have been relatively successful, such as the installed water pumps and a planted forest that provides the village with wood for all sorts of purposes. In terms of rural development, however, the community has not seen much success. We have seen instances in which simple communication and information provision could have saved a lot of trouble. However, we have also seen instances in which the demands of contract-farming turned out to be unreasonable to almost the entire community. Negotiation on the terms could have helped a lot in this regard, but was perhaps already done at the District Level. In that sense, local beneficiaries should have been placed in a better position to make

their priorities and preferences known. A position which Ghana's local government system apparently did not provide.

## **5. Conclusion**

### **5.1 The Story of Yizegu?**

We started out with a village that, in terms of general development, had clearly fallen behind compared to the other villages in its surroundings. The story of this ethnography thus became that of a small farming community struggling to make its voice heard in an attempt to direct development policy in its favour. Therefore, the focus was initially on the process of interest representation as a possible explanation for the observed exclusion. This choice, however, forced us to widen our scope, quickly dragging local government structures and NGOs into the analysis. The story of Yizegu thus quickly changed into that of a recognized unit in Ghana's local government system. Their interests had to be communicated all the way up to the level of the District Assembly, the political arena in which the development cake is divided and NGOs are brought into contact with communities. So, in the context of this governance system, what exactly does it mean to be at 'the bottom'? And when 'looking up', what is it you see? Moreover, when communicating your interest at the lowest level, what happens to it in face of the wide variety of other actors present in the same political arena? And is this 'interest' really as straightforward and unified as the local government setup would have us believe? The fieldwork and according analyses have tried to give an answer to these types of questions. Three analytical chapters were written, of which the conclusions will be briefly summarized. After this, an overall conclusion is drawn that brings together the separate findings and tells us the (ethnographer's subjective) 'story of Yizegu'.

Chapter 2 introduced Ghana's local government system, in a context of democratic decentralization. Here we saw the contrast of an elaborate Local Government Act, full of professional implementing and monitoring agencies, and the comical sight of Laseroms - the Unit Committee Chairman - dictating the names of families to a schoolboy acting as a stand-in accountant. This image illustrates exactly what is wrong with the current setup of the governance system: all the laws are in place but without the institutional capacity and resources to make it work, the intended goals of democratic decentralization are still far out of reach. This 'incomplete decentralization' is also an important source of frustration for many villagers. Although they get the feeling they are allowed to 'participate' - for instance through the unit committee or the yearly meeting in which they list their top 10 priorities - nothing really happens eventually. To the village this is a sign of corrupt politicians, assembly-men who do not listen, and NGOs that won't help them. However, the financial and material

constraints of the District make sure their hands are tied as well. In that sense, having the community participate gets their hopes up initially, but only leads to more disappointment in the long run.

In chapter 3, we mapped out the different groups and interests that exist within in the community. Rather than viewing the community as unified actor in the development triad, social and cultural dynamics were added to the equation, subsequently dismantling the image of the community as a “culturally and politically homogeneous social system” (Mansuri & Rao, 2004: 8). By decomposing the community and describing the political, social, and cultural relations that constitute it, the notion of community-based development is problematized. Different groups exist within the community and not taking the observed heterogeneity in the account can lead to all sort of intended consequences and perverse effects of development policy. For instance, when entering a community one needs to acknowledge the Chief’s position as the leader of the community. Failing to do so can be counterproductive in terms gaining support for development policy. Also, not acknowledging the political context might lead to development benefits being captured by particular interests, e.g. members of a certain political party. A similar caution is needed in the participation of women. Their subordinate position in a patriarchal society, makes them a vulnerable group whose voices can be easily drowned out by their dominant husbands. These consideration and complexities have to be taken into account in studies of interest representation. After all, as this chapter demonstrates, whose interest is actually represented in name of “the community” is not as straightforward as instrumental views on participation and interest representation would have us believe.

Chapter 4 completed the “Development Triad” by shifting the focus to the work of NGOs. Here it was revealed that NGOs primarily do their communication with the local level at the District, under the assumptions that the District Assembly will know where to go. However, considering the already highlighted problems of the incomplete Local Government System, some possible negative consequences should be noted. For instance, as Johnson (2001) observed, development programs can be highly subject to regional biases. Chances then are that the District will send the NGOs to already relatively affluent areas (that thus have something to offer) or those communities with considerable local powers (e.g. prestigious Chieftaincies). This might result in an unequal distribution of development outcomes, of which Yizegu may have been victim. Moreover, communication done at this level might overlook valuable information and nuance to be found at the community-level, As



seen with the wrong timing of farm-input delivery, these miscommunications often form the basis of many of Yizegu's past development failures. Lastly, although overall NGOs seem considerably sensitive to the social and cultural contexts in which their projects are implemented, other problems were found in overestimating the unity of traditional authority. Here, it was often assumed that policy benefits and information given to paramounts would trickle down the hierarchical ladder accordingly. The competitive and authoritative nature of the Dagbon Kingdom, however, proved this assumption to be false.

From all this we make up that three categories are involved in producing development outcomes: local government actors, NGOs, and "the community". While an instrumental perspective would have us over-essentialize these categories by presenting them as separately defined, unified actors, the analysis presented above has proven this image to be unfeasible. Not only do all three "actors" seriously overlap and mutually influence each other, their compositions also vary considerably, as evinced by the multitude of organizational forms that carry the NGO label, or the social, political, and cultural divisions that make up "the community of Yizegu". Moreover, this "development triad" is embedded by a national and even global context, that resonates all the way down to the locality, i.e. Yizegu (cf. Tsing 2000). After all, when looking at the local government system, we see how it echoes a once dominant global development discourse of participatory development. We also see a District Assembly that is severely influenced by central government and line ministerial controls, hollowing out local people's (i.e. Yizegu's) participation and control (see Wardell & Lund 2006). Moreover, when looking at the NGO-sector, we see organizations struggling for survival (i.e. financing) in the face of a global system that forces them to be accountable to donors rather than communities (i.e. Yizegu). One can even go so far as to conclude that we see communities torn up by the initiation of traditional authority structures that date back to British colonialism. In that sense, Mohan and Stokke (2000: 263) seem correct in their assertion that places "are constituted by social, economic, political, and cultural relations, and flows of commodities, information and people that extend far beyond a given locality".

So where does this leave Yizegu? Obviously, their story is one of a lack of access. Although the Assembly building is only 10 kilometres away, to many of the villagers, what happens behind these doors remains a mystery. However, one also needs to ask the question of whether this 'access' really provides an outcome. After all, we should seriously consider the possibility that the chosen metaphor of getting your slice of the pie is misguided. What if the slices have already been taken, leaving only the crumbs to divide. A glance at the

depressing state of the District's budget seems to support this line of reasoning. In that sense, the story of Yizegu perhaps becomes a rather tragic one. It becomes a story of an unschooled Chief that patiently waits for government and NGOs to come help him, while perhaps he should be a bit more concerned about what he himself can do for his community to make things better. It becomes a story of frustrated young men, who have finished their school but are stuck in the village because jobs are not up for the taking. It becomes a story of sons who see their fathers and uncles more concerned with saving face in traditional ceremonies, rather than paying for their school fees to continue education. A story of women struggling to balance their roles as mothers, traders, farmers, and wives. But above all, it becomes a story of people doing the best they can to cope with the limitations with which they are confronted and the unfortunate situation in which they find themselves.

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