Briefing Paper

POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN GHANAIAN SLUMS: EVIDENCE FROM THE GRASSROOTS

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◼ Introduction

More than 5.5 million Ghanaians live in slums.[1] The majority of these people live in the Greater Accra Region. Contrary to popular portrayals of these communities as criminal havens and cut off from the state, slums are important spaces for citizens to interact and engage with the government.[2] Based on one year of fieldwork, this study reveals considerable differences in the levels of political accountability and governance in Ghanaian slums. This research study asks: Why are some communities able to attract and manage state resources to build toilets, construct sewers, pave roads, collect garbage, and provide security while others are unable to attract and manage these same services? In this paper, I suggest three factors that help shape the development of slum communities:

1. Historical conditions and informal institutions
2. State-society linkages, and
3. Political accountability mechanisms

I compare and contrast political dynamics in Old Fadama, Ga Mashie and Ashaiman—all slum areas in Greater Accra Region.[3]

◼ Studying Slum Communities in Greater Accra

The research method used here is participant observation or ethnography, which "involves immersion in the place and lives of people under study."[4] Between September 2011 and July 2012, I visited at least one of the communities every week to participate in community meetings, discuss political challenges, observe political behavior, and gain insights into how "politics work" at the grassroots.[5] This method is particularly useful and necessary in Ghanaian slums because accurate data is unavailable and decision-making happens outside of formal channels. I also conducted focus group interviews in 10 different slum communities to broaden the scope of the study.[6]

◼ A Tale of Two Slums

In February, a drunk driver drove his supply truck into an electricity pole in the Tulako neighborhood of Ashaiman. Because of the dangerous live wire that was now exposed, the Zonal Council chairman notified the Electricity Company of Ghana (ECG) to cut the power so that children would not be harmed. The neighborhood therefore went without power. The Assemblyman quickly rushed to the scene to "calm tempers." A group of inhabitants joined the scene and started arguing. Some of them were close to beating up the driver. They debated whether to send the driver to the police station. Some argued that if he were arrested, he also would not be able to pay for the fixing of the pole. They also believed that the owner of the truck—the man the driver was working for—was a known "big man" in town and residents believed that he had influence over the police.

Everybody agreed that if they filed a formal complaint with ECG the process would take too long. The young men made uncoordinated phone calls to their "friends" at ECG—they tried to save the day. In the end, the owner of the vehicle negotiated and paid most of the costs; community members contributed a small amount. The Assemblyman went to the ECG and demanded they fix the pole as soon as possible. The ECG then upgraded the pole to "high density." The community had electricity that day.

Now consider the alternative scenario. In October, 2011, Accra experienced its annual floods where fourteen people

reportedly died. In response, the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) secured funding to clean the gutters and dredge the Korle Lagoon. In order to complete the project, the AMA claimed they would need to clear all structures in Old Fadama within 100 meters of the lagoon. But the relationship between the AMA and the community is a tense one, illustrated by the AMA's longstanding desire to demolish the slum and the community's strong resistance to it.[7] The AMA reached out to People's Dialogue for Human Settlements (PD) who has a long history of acting as a "broker" between the AMA and Old Fadama.[8] Community leaders and PD worried that the AMA would use the opportunity to demolish more structures than necessary, so they proposed leading the demolition exercise themselves. After a series of negotiations between the AMA and the community leaders, the Task Force for Old Fadama Development Association (OFADA) carried out the demolition exercise on December 21.

But the exercise was problematic. It violated international human rights standards because it did not give proper notice to victims.[9] Several residents were left without relocation options.[10] When a local chief realized that his structure was within the demolition path, he ordered some youth to throw rocks at the bulldozer. The driver and a few others were badly injured and had to go to the hospital. After the exercise, many residents accused their leaders of "selling out the community." Nonetheless, PD and Amnesty International deemed the exercise a success and expressed their satisfaction with it.[11] Today, the lagoon still has not been dredged and structures have been rebuilt in the very space that was demolished in December. Residents distrust the AMA; but perhaps more serious is the residents' distrust of their own leaders. There is still no solution to the government-community deadlock and Old Fadama residents continue to live under the threat of forced eviction.

While these two scenarios are largely descriptive in nature, they expose underlying political arrangements that help explain how "politics works" in these two communities. First, decision-making occurs in the informal realm, outside of formally sanctioned channels. Second, the relationship between leaders and their followers at the community level is crucial for the development of neighborhoods. Pressure for change comes from the grassroots. But the accountability mechanisms are also informal in nature, suggesting the need to examine informal institutions in addition to conventional studies of elections and voting. Third, there is considerable variation between slum communities. Yet scholars and Ghanaians tend to lump these communities together—my focus group discussions reveal the ways that Accra residents are misinformed about other communities. Finally,

communities have different histories, greatly shaping the state-community relations that have developed over time. These differences present varying institutional challenges for each community today.

■ **Historical Conditions and Informal Institutions**

Ga Mashie, Old Fadama, and Ashaiman—and all slum communities—have different histories that affect their political dynamics today. One way to examine the impact of history on contemporary politics is to examine the informal institutions that constrain and enable peoples' behavior over time. Informal institutions are "socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels."[12]

Ga Mashie, which has been at the center of Ga politics since pre-colonial times, is made up of seven quarters, or *akutsei*: Asere, Abola, Gbese, Otublohum, Alata, Sempe, and Akanmaji. In many ways, the institution of family structures politics in Ga Mashie. Political party candidates are often chosen depending on family lines. Residents argue about the lineages of various candidates. Chieftaincy disputes are politicized: politicians publicly acknowledge their support to certain interested parties, contributing to divisions in the community. For example, historian S.S. Quarcoopome documents the way in which a group of people led by some divisional chiefs politicized the proposed Municipal Corporations Ordinance of 1924; they made the ordinance unpopular and then tied its association to the sitting Ga Mantse in order to undermine his popular legitimacy.[13] Disputes over the Gbese Chieftaincy and Ga Mantse continue to divide the community.

Today, development is greatly politicized. Plans to redevelop Bukom Park and Salaga Market have been met with significant resistance because of lack of communication between planners and the community. Residents fear that they will not benefit from proposed changes. Political parties join the fray and instigate fear in the population. Many residents are afraid that they will lose their "homeland" to outsiders. This "indigenous narrative" is especially useful in mobilizing political support and was evident during the biometric voter registration in early 2012.

Ashaiman is one of the oldest squatter settlements in Greater Accra. In 1960 it had only 624 people; it is now a municipality with over 200,000 people and dozens of neighborhoods.[14] The growth of Ashaiman coincided with the growth of Tema; port workers who could not afford living in Tema settled in Ashaiman. Residents would construct makeshift houses with containers from the port. The town grew and became a bustling commercial center.

Local chiefs and opinion leaders held authority in the neighborhoods. Hometown associations, friend clubs, youth groups and mutual aid societies formed. Residents built schools, churches and mosques. Rapid urbanization outpaced the speed of development and public service provision. Most developments were undertaken by the community themselves. In the 1980s, the community came together to demand more services from the Tema Municipality, of which it was a part. The struggle for more autonomy from Tema lasted until 2007.

In 1989, Ashaiman was used as a pilot for the government's newly-implemented decentralization plan. Local leaders who had already established authority and legitimacy stepped into formal positions of power. They served as Assemblymen in their respective communities. Local participation in politics was further bolstered with the support of Nimba Community Support Services and IBIS, two NGOs. In 2003, they established the Ashaiman Governance Forum. This forum brought together residents, leaders and the Assembly to discuss development and community issues. The forums were very vibrant and were used as a mechanism to hold leaders accountable. Leaders would be forced to explain their positions and their actions. After each forum, a Task Force would follow up on the most important issues which arose from the forum. It was from these forums—with support from other organized groups—that a movement emerged demanding municipality status for Ashaiman. After a long and protracted struggle, Ashaiman was granted municipality status in 2007. Ashaiman is now undergoing the process of democratic learning where leaders and residents actively take part in the decision-making process by borrowing strategies from politicians and administrators in other parts of the country.

While Ashaiman fought and won political representation, **Old Fadama** remains unrecognized by the Accra Metropolitan Assembly. The AMA mid-term development plan states, "measures are currently being made to remove the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, a squatter settlement near the project area." It is unclear what measures are in place for the 79,000 residents that live in the community.[15] Nonetheless, the community organized itself: tribal elders and chiefs have been selected as authority figures and local strongmen control land and territory. PD has assisted with formally registering the Old Fadama Development Association (OFADA). But this has also led to the perception that PD controls OFADA and treats it as a "puppet." Personal rivalries and community divisions persist. Community members fight over the limited opportunities and goods that PD and other NGOS like Amnesty International provide: small jobs, travel opportunities, and distribution of small goods. In the face of immediate eviction threats, the community comes together to fight against the authorities—as it did successfully in 2009. But without immediate threats, the leaders are unable to work together for the benefit of the community interest.

While forced evictions have recently gained international attention due to the growth of slums in the developing world, the roots of state-slum community tensions date to colonial times and early periods of African urban development. Indigenous and migrant African communities were kept out of the Accra city planning and largely left unregulated.[16] Africans lived in communities like Nima and New Town that were not regulated formally, and they developed in an unplanned nature. Public services were not provisioned. Colonial authorities used zoning laws and building codes in the attempt to control urban development and strengthen social control over native populations.[17] Urban development that deviated from colonial codes and laws was considered illegal and was not condoned.[18] Colonial urban policy left an important legacy, as Ocheje writes, "The norm of city planning consisted of slum clearance, relocation and redevelopment. For this reason, planners in Africa refuse to accept the notion that unauthorized settlements, no matter how they came about, should be 'regularized', as that would be to condone illegality."[19] Governments use the threat of forced eviction and forceful demolitions to counter the fear that authorities have of poor urban populations. They also do so to counter short-term urban problems like flooding without tackling larger structural problems that contribute to large-scale urban growth.[20]

■ **State-Society Linkages**

Slum communities differ in regards to two major factors: legal recognition and provision of public services. State legal recognition is the formal acknowledgment by government that the community has the right to exist and will be provided public services from the state. Slums that do not have legal recognition are often labeled squatter or informal settlements. The implications are great: residents are labeled as trespassers in the city and frequently labeled criminals. Slums vary in their degree of state legal recognition—some are formally recognized, others are unrecognized, while a third face the threat of eviction. They also vary with regards to public service provision—the distribution by the state *and* the management by the community. Here is a table of ten slum communities in Accra.

Slum	Legal Recognition	Public Service Provision
Old Fadama	Illegal (Eviction Threat)	Low
King Shona	Illegal	Low
Agbogbloshie	Legal	Low
Abuja	Illegal (Eviction Threat)	Low
Ashaiman-Tulako	Legal but Insecure	Medium Provision, Medium Management
Ga Mashie	Legal and Secure (Indigenous)	High Provision, Low Management
Nima	Legal and Secure (Zongo)	Medium Provision, Medium Management
Chorkor	Legal and Secure (Indigenous)	Medium
Ashaiman-Taboo	Legal but Non-demarcated	Medium
Ashaiman-Valco Flat	Legal and Secure	Medium

Residents and groups in communities without state legal recognition, like those in Old Fadama and Abuja, find it difficult to demand public services from the state. Therefore, they are more likely to seek public services from non-state actors like NGOs and private goods from political parties. For example, Old Fadama leadership relies on PD to negotiate with the authorities. This empowers those who work closely with this NGO, but builds resentment among those who do not benefit from the organization. Residents know that they cannot demand public services, but because they are a big vote bank, they demand private benefits from the political parties.

It is important to highlight that several actors and institutions benefit from this informal arrangement, contributing to the persistence of the status quo. Community leaders "cash in" on insecurity (i.e. threats of forced eviction) by benefitting from informal land markets, owning private services like showers and toilets, and consolidating power through access to wealth and patronage networks. Second, political parties and politicians mobilize voters in these communities and use residents as foot soldiers and "clients" to win political support. As one politician told me with regards to Old Fadama, "The political parties find muscle there. We also had our own connections with them." Third, slum rights have become an international human rights concern and NGOs are quick to support this cause. However, the organizations are upwardly accountable to foreign donors, rather than downwardly accountable to slum dwellers themselves. However, most squatters are politically underrepresented and do not have the power to protect their rights. This highlights that the problem facing Old Fadama is political, rather than economic, administrative or cultural.

Indigenous communities, like Ga Mashie and Chorkor, face a very different position toward the Ghanaian state. Members of these communities are overly represented in Accra Metropolitan Assembly. Because of its indigenous status, Ga Mashie has been selected by AMA and UN-HABITAT to benefit from the "Participatory Slum-Upgrading and Prevention" program.[21] While they do not face as many problems with public service provision, they face significant challenges with management. Residents complain that toilets are not neat, gutters are choked, and roads are encroached upon.

Finally, the biggest challenge facing communities like Ashaiman is political interference in Assembly affairs. Residents complain of contracts being awarded to party members, public toilets being managed by party branch leaders, and public service projects being distributed to those with powerful connections to the Chief Executive and other powerful leaders in the governing party.

■ **Accountability Mechanisms**

How do residents in slums hold their leaders to account? Every system of governance needs accountability mechanisms—means and procedures by which citizens can impact governance and sanction leaders appropriately. While most studies of accountability emphasize formal procedures like elections, voting, and transparency,[22] this research has uncovered personal and face-to-face mechanisms that residents use to make sure that those in leadership positions do their jobs. Many of these strategies are historically and culturally rooted. The quality and extent of these mechanisms differs between slums, but there are certain similarities that extend across the Ghanaian context:

1. Shaming: Residents publicly embarrass leaders if they suspect them of wrongdoing. They often do this by taking their case to the radio. They also might organize a group of people and walk directly to the house of the leader.

2. Sharing: Leaders are expected to share goods, especially food. When they do not do so, they lose legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry. This helps explain why leaders are expected to pay for school fees, attend funerals and distribute food.

3. Claim-Making: Residents make citizenship demands on the state, patronage demands on their party, and indigenous claims to land ownership. These claims depend on the level of state legal recognition of particular communities. For example, a community like Old Fadama that is not legally recognized cannot make citizenship demands; therefore they make patronage demands on the political parties.

Elections by themselves do not create accountability in Ghana. This is because elections might simply instigate change, but not improvement. Therefore, improving the existing accountability mechanisms in these communities—shaming, sharing, and claim-making—might improve the quality of democracy in Ghana.

■ **Policy Recommendations**

Slum upgrading and development require political solutions. In today's competitive multi-party environment, leaders make political calculations that privilege short term horizons to win votes over long-term solutions to community problems. These realities must be considered when implementing policy. I suggest three policy prescriptions that will facilitate slum-upgrading and community development:

1. **Strengthening accountability mechanisms:** Throughout Accra's development, change comes from 'pressure' from below. Therefore, strengthening accountability mechanisms at the community level is essential. This requires strengthening the shaming, sharing, and claim-making mechanisms that already exist. This can be done in a few ways:

    a. Community leaders should live in the community. Residents find it much easier to confront their leaders when they can go to their house and speak to them. Leaders are able to respond faster and more efficiently. This also helps build trust between a leader and his or her followers. Leaders will also have the incentive to improve services because he or she personally benefits from the improvements.

    b. Participatory governance forums should be implemented in all communities. These forums give residents the opportunity to air their grievances. But they also allow the leaders the chance to educate and explain how local governance works. Information is shared to members of all political leanings, allowing a space for diverse interests to come together to effect community change.

    c. Sharing of goods, foods and jobs by leaders must be more transparent. They need to be clear how they share their resources. This will prevent rumors from spreading and undermine clientelist behavior. This is especially important at the level of the political party.

2. **Legal recognition and land tenure security:** The non-recognition of slum communities is perhaps the biggest barrier to socio-economic development of slums. Without security of tenure, communities cannot receive public services and residents live in constant fear of forced eviction, making it difficult for them to invest in their neighborhoods. Lack of land security also creates incentives for opportunistic leaders to exploit informality, leading to the persistence of the status quo. All communities need to be incorporated into city planning or presented with relocation options that satisfy international human rights standards. But before any serious upgrading can take place, underlying land tensions and disputes must be settled. Otherwise these problems will be postponed to a later date, as the situation with the Ashaiman Slum-Upgrading Facility demonstrates.[23] This requires political negotiations between communities, city authorities, politicians and traditional authorities. But this also requires making difficult decisions: there will be winners and losers.

3. **Creative solutions to slum-upgrading:** Slum-clearance has been the major strategy to deal with slums since colonial times. This strategy has failed, as the number of people living in slums rise each year. Therefore, a new strategy is in order. Many residents in Old Fadama and other slums have the financial capital to upgrade their community if they are given the green light by city authorities. A recent fire in Old Fadama demonstrates this point: after hundreds of structures burned down, dozens of new structures were immediately built.[24] These structures were a huge upgrade over the wooden structures that were burned down: residents used cement block, iron sheets, and bright paint. These creative solutions should be part of a broader strategy of strengthening decentralization by building the capacity of district assemblies (and sub-metro units) so that they can better negotiate the challenges facing slum communities.

■ **Conclusion**

Evidence from the grassroots suggests that Ghanaian slum dwellers are politically active and engage with the government in important ways. Slum communities have their own strategies of governance depending on their historical conditions and institutionalized state-society linkages. These realities should not be dismissed. Instead, they should be considered when developing long-term plans for slum upgrading. As the rate of urbanization increases, slums will play an increasingly important role in Ghanaian politics and in the deepening of its democracy.

Endnotes

[1] Population Division of the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs' (DESA) report.

[2] In this paper, I use UN-HABITAT'S definition of slum: "a heavily populated urban area characterized by substandard housing and squalor."

[3] Old Fadama is locally nicknamed Sodom and Gomorrah, Ga Mashie comprises Ussher Town and James Town, and the three slum neighborhoods in Ashaiman that I investigate are Tulako, Taboo, and Valco Flat.

[4] Lisa Wedeen, "Reflections on Ethnographic Work in Political Science." *Annual Review of Political Science* (2010). 13:255-72.

[5] The study was funded by the Social Science Research Council's International Dissertation Research Fellowship. A special thanks to Alhassan Ibn Abdallah, Abubakar Addy, Philip Kumah, Innocent Adamadu Onyx, and Nii Addo Quaynor for excellent research assistance.

[6] These communities included Abuja (CMB), Agbogbloshie, Ashaiman-Tulako, Ashaiman-Taboo, Ashaiman-Valco Flat, Chorkor, Ga Mashie, Nima, Old Fadama, James Town Beach (King Shona).

[7] Jean Du Plessis (2005). "The growing problem of forced evictions and the crucial importance of community-based, locally appropriate alternatives." *Environment and Urbanization* 17(1): 123-134. Grant, Richard (2006). "Out of Place? Global Citizens in Local Spaces: A Study of the Informal Settlements in the Korle Lagoon Environs of Accra, Ghana." *Urban Forum* 17(1): 1-24. Afenah, Afia (2010). "(Re)claiming Citizenship Rights in Accra: Community Mobilization against the Illegal Forced Eviction of Residents in the Old Fadama Settlement." From HIC publication "Cities for All: Experiences and Proposals for the Right to the City", Sugranyes A. y Mathivet C., HIC, Santiago, 2010, page 159.

[7] Braimah, Farouk (2010). "A Decade of Struggles and Lessons at Old Fadama." *SDI.net Blog.* Available: http://www.sdinet.org/blog/2011/11/8/old-fadama-decade-struggles-and-lessons/.

[9] A forced eviction is "the involuntary removal of persons from their homes or land, directly or indirectly attributable to the State. It entails the effective elimination of the possibility of an individual or group living in a particular house, residence or place, and the assisted (in the case of resettlement) or unassisted (without resettlement) movement of evicted persons or groups to other areas" (UNHCR 1993). The exercise constituted a forced eviction.

[10] http://philipkumah.wordpress.com/2012/01/05/eviction-day-bulldozers-part-i/.

[11] http://www.sdinet.org/blog/2012/01/23/negotiating-right-stay-community-led-process-old-f/

[12] Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levistsky (2004). "Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda." *Perspectives on Politics* 2 (4): 725-740.

[13] S.S. Quarcoopome (1987). "The rejection of the Municipal Corporations Ordinance of 1924 in Accra: A review of the causes." *Institute of African Studies Research Review*, University of Ghana-Legon.

[14] Thomas Y. Owusu, "The Growth of Ashaiman as a Squatter Settlement in the Tema District of Ghana, 1950-1990." *Arab World Geographer* (1999) 2 (3): 234-249.

[15] This estimated population comes from "Enumeration Report for Old Fadama Community, Accra—2009." *Housing the Masses.*

[16] Njoh, Ambe J. (2006). *Planning Power: Town Planning and Social Control in Colonial Africa.* London, UK: University College of London Press.

[17] Njoh, Ambe J. (July 2009). "Urban planning as a tool of power and social control in colonial Africa." *Planning Perspectives* 24 (3): 301-317.

[18] Ocheje, Paul D. (2007). "'In the Public Interest": Forced Evictions, Land Rights and Human Development in Africa." *Journal of African Law* 51(2): 173-214.

[19] Ocheje (2007), 183.

[20] Obeng-Odoom, Franklin (2010). "An Urban Twist to Politics in Ghana." *Habitat International* 34: 392-299.

[21] http://ama.gov.gh/resources/docs/PSUP%20-%20COMPILED%20DOCUMENTATION%20COMPONENT%20-%20edited%202.pdf. This was confirmed by Nii Tackie Tagoe, the Executive Director of Ga Mashie Development Agency (GAMADA).

[22] Adam Przeworski, Susan C. Stokes, and Bernard Manin, eds. *Democracy, Accountability and Representation.* Cambridge University Press, 1999.

[23] In Tulako-Ashaiman, many residents do not support the UN-HABITAT Slum-Upgrading Project. They have vowed to prevent the project from moving forward. This is because the underlying land issues have not been settled—residents are afraid that they will not benefit from the project and will in turn lose their land.

[24] http://philipkumah.wordpress.com/2012/05/24/resilience-and-rebuilding/

✎ *CDD -Ghana Briefing Papers are generated from commissioned research on topical issues, as well as presentations at round-table discussions at the Center.*

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