

My tax, my development

Case studies from the Action for Local Employment, Accountability and Resource Mobilisation (LEARN) Project. Implemented by Christian Aid, Institute for Democratic Governance, and Ghana Integrity Initiative.



Sulemana Zainabu, a seamstress from Salaga, East Gonja, and a beneficiary of the LEARN project, with two of her apprentices.

At first glance, Salaga appears to be a shadow of its former self. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was a cosmopolitan market town, well known as the headquarters of the regional slave trade; today, a few Baobab trees, dotted along the dusty roads, lead into the town.

But Salaga is home to more than 25,000 people – many of whom are working hard to improve their lives and to make their families more comfortable. It is located in the Gonja District of the Northern Region, around 120 kilometres south-west of regional capital of Tamale. Many residents are struggling to stay afloat, as the region is one of the poorest in Ghana.

Local people have, however, benefited from the EU-funded Action for Local Employment, Accountability and Resource Mobilisation (LEARN) project, implemented by Christian Aid and its partners Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG) and Ghana Integrity Initiative (GII) from 2011-2014. It has sought

to promote an inclusive and empowered Ghana, and has trained citizens across 18 districts of the country to exercise increased influence over local government policies, particularly around taxation and employment generation. It was surmised that if citizens understand why they pay taxes, and the need to comply with taxation, they would help to ensure policies are pro-poor, transparent and accountable.

In practical terms, it has enabled two-way interaction with local authorities, so that local people learn more about taxation, and influence how money collected is spent, develop new skills – for example, in lobbying and negotiation – and enhance their businesses. It also helps authorities understand the priorities of local people, when making decisions about tax spending.

Giving local people a voice

Interviews with local people show that the initiative has turned around lives: for example, 42-year-old Sulemana Zainabu, a seamstress living in the heart of Salaga, has managed to expand her business as a result of the scheme, employing 15 apprentices, and has bought herself a motorbike to help her run her business efficiently.

'I have benefited a lot. I have learned about lobbying'

She says: 'I have benefited a lot. I have learned about lobbying. I have lobbying skills. 'At first I thought I needed cash before I could do things. But now I know how to negotiate. I pay tax too and the assembly helps us.'

As a result, Sulemana, who is married with a 15-year-old son, has become more confident that she will be able to make her son's dreams of training as a doctor a reality.

Abdul-Razak Habiba, a 28-year-old seamstress, also based in Salaga, was excited that she, and the members of the dressmakers' association to which she belongs, were given the power to negotiate and tender for special projects. For instance, after being empowered by the LEARN project, the association bid for the contract to sew all the district's free school uniforms, under the government's free school uniform programme.

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'We have been able to make a lot of money,' says Abdul-Razak. 'We've taken on a lot of apprentices. We were able to furnish our stores. If you are not getting money, you will be compelled to lock your office if you see the tax officers coming, because you have not worked.'

Two-way interaction

There is evidence that the LEARN project has bridged the huge chasm between tax-collecting authorities and residents who live within local government jurisdictions. Just as local people are able to understand more about the benefits of taxation, local authorities gain insights into local needs.

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Dr Margaret Kweku, Municipal Chief Executive (MCE) of the Hohoe District says: 'It has played a very big role in my success as an MCE. We started thinking of what to do at community level to generate revenue so that we could send development to that area.'



'LEARN gave me information about what the community wants from the assembly, like the zebra crossing in town; it was through their (Government Issues Forum Network) recommendation when they met the community, and everybody was happy because vehicles stopped knocking people over.'

Improving amenities

Across the 18 districts, a total of 3,600 people have been educated about the importance of paying taxes. Under the guidance of the Governance Issues Forum Network (GIFNet), citizens have been mobilised around issues of public services and taxation and increasingly demand transparency and accountability in these areas. Local people are now able to demand that government authorities use the taxes collected to provide social amenities that will benefit them and their communities.

For instance, in the Ashaiman municipality, community members such as traders advocated for the building of a new school block for their children because the existing building was becoming dilapidated. The school's population was also out-growing the old block. Eventually, the new school block was built and the children are studying in more comfortable surroundings.



The old school block of the Ashaiman No. 2 Basic School.



The newly built Ashaiman No. 2 Basic School block.

Identifying local priorities

During a public meeting to discuss local issues, known as a community durbar, the GIFNets identified youth unemployment and poor access to water as major problems in the district. The community interest groups, now with a deeper understanding of needs, pushed for the construction of a dam and provision of drinking water for the community. The World Bank funded the project but the groups lobbied the assembly for the contract to construct a locally built dam and water pumps, thereby boosting local employment.



Alhassan Amdalla, an 18-year-old resident of Salaga, East Gonja District, was able to find local employment thanks to the LEARN project.

Many young people from the area, who had migrated to Kumasi in the Ashanti Region to become head porters (kayayoo), returned to the community to work as labourers to construct the dam. Most earned a substantial amount of money which could be invested in other things. For example, 18-year-old Alhassan Amdalla used the money she earned to set up a small business at home and has abandoned the 'kayayoo' business. 'I sell phone credit, biscuit and toffees,' she explains. 'I also rear animals. Currently I am picking shea nuts.'



Shea nuts, often collected by girls and women, can be processed by crushing and grinding to yield shea butter, used in soap and cosmetics. It is also edible, and the shell of the nut is said to repel mosquitoes. Around 1 Ghana cedi is earned for every kilo, which is the equivalent of 30p.

Outcomes

The overall objective of LEARN – to promote an inclusive and empowered Ghana by supporting citizens in Ghana, across 18 districts, to influence local government policy, particularly around taxation – was achieved to a large extent and saw:

- citizens mobilising around issues of public services and taxation
- citizens engaged in regular and successful interaction with their local authorities
- collaboration between 18 GIFNets and local authorities to define and deliver tax and employment policies through an action-orientated research process.

The primary finding for LEARN is that tax education goes a long way – it is an efficient intervention. When local governments use taxes to improve public services, interaction with the citizenry is enhanced.

