

The place of social transformation in district-level development plans in northwest Ghana

Historically, Ghana has relied on development planning to bring about transformation at both national and local levels. However, notwithstanding the many years of development planning, the attainment of development goals, especially in northern Ghana, has fallen below expectations. One possible reason for this underperformance is that planners are unable to keep up with the persistent structural changes taking place in the economic and social relations that surround individuals, households and communities when drafting development plans. A social transformation approach to development planning would appropriately capture these changes, leading to more robust development plans. Yet, there is little information on the extent to which social

transformation can be captured within development planning in Ghana.

This brief presents the findings of a study on the process of development planning. The study was conducted under the Resilience Against Climate Change – Social Transformation Research and Policy Advocacy (REACH-STR) project, implemented by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), to understand how Ghana's development plans capture the continuous societal changes. The study analyzed seven district-level medium-term development plans (MTDPs) from the Upper West and Savannah regions of Ghana, involving analysis of statements describing characteristics of the districts sampled.



Researchers and development workers from northwest Ghana discussing social transformation analyses (photo: Esther Wahabu).

The study revealed that social transformation was not adequately captured in the district-level MTDPs assessed. The MTDPs mainly discussed political, demographic and economic aspects, with scarce mention of the technological and cultural dimensions of these societies. Most of the characteristics described in the MTDPs were discussed in a current static manner, with only a few stated as changing over time, and fewer still mentioning future scenarios. The low capacity of development officers to capture the dynamics of transformation, the unavailability of data and rigid development planning guidelines provided by the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC) are some of the reasons perceived for the low integration of the social transformation approach in the MTDPs. Given that NDPC drives the entire development process in the country, their acceptance of a social transformation approach would lead to faster results. This is mainly because the NDPC guidelines must be strictly followed in the planning frameworks, monitoring, data collection and capacity building of development planners.

Introduction

This brief seeks to contribute to the topical discussion on the need for policymakers to recognize and align development action with social transformations. While change is inevitable, the transformation that society continuously undergoes leaves behind consequences, some of which are negative (Akujobi and Jack 2017). Policymakers and development workers, therefore, have a twofold challenge - to be able to create and sustain desired social transformation, while responding appropriately to its outcomes at the same time.

Historically, one of the mechanisms through which policymakers have attempted to confront this two-pronged challenge is development planning (Ejumudo 2013). For instance, Chimhowu et al. (2019) highlighted that in the wake of the African independence movements of the 1950s, newly independent states used national development plans as the principal tool for coordinating national efforts towards achieving desired economic outcomes. Since the 1970s, sub-Saharan African countries that employ the development planning strategy have seen their plans continuously failing to achieve their stated goals and objectives (Ejumudo 2013; Appiah 2016; Chimhowu et al. 2019). This failure has been attributed to gaps in institutional capacity to develop workable plans or a lack of political will to implement them (Faber and Seers 1972). Yet, some aspects of the literature have explained that development plans failed because policymakers did not apply holistic approaches when creating them. For example, Caiden and Wildavsky (1974) observed that these earlier national development plans focused more on capital investments while ignoring cost implications. Similarly, Agarwala (1983) suggested that improving the efficiency of market mechanisms was sought after by these development plans with little regard to failing state structures (Bauer 1981).

Zoomers (2006) suggested that development plans tend to fail because they are not designed to fit changing local contexts. In other words, development plans will work better if they incorporate the transformation society is undergoing. In the case of Ghana, the claims of Zoomers (2006) have not been verified. No studies have been conducted on Ghana's development plans to verify the extent to which the written content clearly captures transformations in society. So far,

the discussion on development planning focuses on reviewing the principles and approaches used in their drafting (Botchie 2000), guidelines for their preparation (Diko et al. 2021), challenges with the planning process (Alhassan 2016), and the successes and failures of their implementation (Akudugu and Laube 2013).

Therefore, in this brief, we raise a number of questions - What elements of society are described in Ghana's development plans? Does the description of these societal elements capture the types of transformation they have been through? What types of changes in the elements are captured in Ghana's development plans? This brief addresses these issues by analyzing the content of selected MTDPs in the Upper West and Savannah regions of Ghana. This analysis is needed not only to contribute to the discussion on social transformation, but also to create relevant information that can be used in building the capacity of development planning officers, enrich the development planning process, and consequently lead to more robust and responsive development plans.

Analytical approach

Social transformation involves a fundamental change in the way society is organized. Shove et al. (2012) identified five interrelated dimensions of social transformation:

1. **Political** - defined as the organized control over people.
2. **Economic** - defined as the accumulation and use of land, labor and capital in the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services.
3. **Technological** - defined as the application of knowledge through the deployment of procedures, skills and techniques.
4. **Demographic** - defined as the structure and spatial distribution of populations.
5. **Cultural** - defined as the beliefs, values, norms and customs shared by groups of people.

The systems perspective on social transformation proposes that it is the structure of society that changes from one state to another (Teune and Mlinar 1978). From this perspective, society is broken down into its building blocks comprising components and subcomponents, elements or variables, their interrelations, and the environment within which they function (Sztompka 1993). Society is said to be transforming when its characteristics change from one state to another over time (Feola 2015). These changes occur as a result of alterations in the individual elements and their interrelations (Khondker and Schuerkens 2014). Two mechanisms of social transformation are proposed. First, transformation occurs when elements of a system or social structure either integrate with (or disintegrate from) each other. Second, transformation occurs when new elements are introduced into the system or some old elements are removed.

Four types of change in social structure over time have been mentioned by different authors:

1. *The pace of social transformation* introduces the element of time and describes how fast society moves from one state to another. For example, de la Sablonnière (2017) described social transformation along a scale of stability, inertia, and incremental and dramatic social change.



A district planner from northwest Ghana contributing to the discussion on social transformation (photo: Sandra Hyde).

2. *Direction of social transformation* indicates whether the characteristic of the social structure is moving towards the desired direction. Sztompka (1993) mentioned both directional and nondirectional transformations.
3. *The extent of social transformation* refers to the weight attached to the social transformation process. Todd (2005), for instance, made reference to partial or complete changes.
4. *Pattern of social transformation* describes the nature of movement of the social structure. De la Sablonnière (2017) referred to evolution theory, which suggests that society moves in a linear direction from a simple to a more complex structure.

Methodology

This study focused on the implementation area identified by the European Union-funded Resilience Against Climate Change – Social Transformation Research and Policy Advocacy (REACH-STR) project. Among other objectives, the REACH-STR project aims to unpack the concept of social transformation and use the gathered knowledge to build the capacity of development workers in the Upper West Region (UWR) and Sawla-Tuna-Kalba (STK) district of the Savannah region, with a view to promoting more inclusive and sustainable socioeconomic growth policies, strategies and programming approaches by 2025. For this study, six of the twelve districts in UWR were randomly selected in addition to STK in the Savannah region through simple random techniques, making a total of seven districts. The selected districts included Sawla-Tuna-Kalba, Nandom, Wa East, Sissala East, Wa West, Sissala West, and Lawra.

The unit of assessment for this study was the Medium-Term Development Plan (2018–2021) for each of the seven districts

that were selected for analysis in this brief - Sawla-Tuna-Kalba (Government of Ghana 2018a), Nandom (Government of Ghana 2018b), Wa East (Government of Ghana 2018c), Sissala East (Government of Ghana 2018d), Wa West (Government of Ghana 2018e), Sissala West (Government of Ghana 2018f), and Lawra (Government of Ghana 2018g). For each of the MTDP documents sampled, the study focused on the chapter that described the profile characteristics of a district. Based on the theoretical approach discussed earlier, each district was considered as a social structure or a social system, and the different characteristics described as the elements of this structure. For each characteristic mentioned, we analyzed how they were described (by substantively assessing the sentences referring to them) to identify the extent to which district characteristics are captured as transforming over time. A common theme in social transformation literature is that transformation involves change. We, therefore, expected that a district development plan that incorporates transformations in society will capture how the district’s characteristics are changing over time.

Our analysis involved two steps. In the first step, we extracted the sentences to be analyzed. Here, to help identify the specific district profiles to analyze, researchers developed a simple nomenclature based on common themes of characteristics running through all the seven MTDPs sampled. Our nomenclature distinguished between categories, subcategories and elements of characteristics. Here, “Categories” refer to a broad group of related district characteristics, e.g., “social services”, “economy”, and “industry”, etc. Subcategories break the categories down into more closely related characteristics. Therefore, education, health, water, sanitation, etc., would come under the social services category. Elements are the individual units of characteristics or variables within the

categories or subcategories. For example, elements such as the number of schools, literacy rate, enrollment levels, etc., will be the specific characteristics to be analyzed under the education subcategory of the social services category.

The National Development Planning Commission (NDPC) provides districts with a guideline that gives suggestions for categories, and sometimes subcategories and elements. Individual districts maintain some autonomy by selecting elements of interest that best describe the NDPC category requirement. We listed all the categories and subcategories described in the sampled MTDPs. All elements under each subcategory were identified. Then, we proceeded with the extraction of sentences that described the elements for further analysis.

In the second step, each extracted sentence was analyzed, based on how it was constructed and the tense used, to identify how it addresses the following four questions:

1. *What dimension of social transformation does the element described come under?* Five dimensions of social transformation were adopted from de Haas et al. (2020) – political, economic, technological, demographic and cultural. After analyzing the description of each element, they were placed under the best-fit dimension, taking into account that an element may come under more than one dimension.
2. *Does the sentence describe a change in the element over time?* A simple statement mentioning that an element is changing without any further explanation was considered sufficient to answer this question.
3. *What type of change in the element does the sentence describe?* Each description of a change in an element was judged, based on the four typologies of social transformation – pace, direction, extent and pattern.
4. *Does the sentence describing a change in the element also make a projection about its possible state in the future?* For example, ‘the current estimated population growth rate of 1.7% will remain constant over the plan period’.

A panel consisting of two researchers judged each of the sentences describing elements and agreed on the answers to the four questions above. The data collected from sentence analysis was entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to aid with further descriptive statistics. Further information was sought from key informant interviews conducted with selected district planning officers, and a workshop was organized for development workers in the study area. The results from the analysis are explained in the next section.

Results

Dimensions of social transformation described in the MTDPs

If a district is considered as a social structure, it would be expected that the specific chapter in the seven sampled MTDPs dedicated to describing the district characteristics to holistically discuss all aspects of society. Our first observation was a lack of uniformity in the district characteristics described in the sampled MTDPs. The analyses gleaned 45–128 unique district characteristics captured in the sampled MTDPs, depending on how strictly the district planning officers followed the guidelines given to them by NDPC.



Participants of the 2022 Knowledge and Learning Event with development practitioners in Wa, Ghana (photo: Sandra Hyde).

Further, the researchers expected that, as far as possible, the description of each of the elements mentioned would come under at least one of the five dimensions of social transformation outlined by de Haas et al. (2020). The analysis showed that across all the seven MTDPs assessed, the elements in the district profile chapters were mainly discussed from the political, economic and demographic points of view with little information on technological and cultural aspects, as illustrated in Figure 1. This finding is in line with the assertion of Zoomers (2006) that African development plans are often not comprehensive in capturing certain aspects of society.

Further probing among district development officers revealed that the district characteristics in the MTDPs were described from a political viewpoint. This is because MTDPs are politically motivated documents that seek to produce the economic changes that promote political authorities within their respective districts. Appointed or elected political authorities of districts tend to have a strong influence on the content of the MTDPs.

Extent to which MTDPs incorporate changes within their respective districts

A development plan which recognizes social transformation is expected to outline how the characteristics of the district or society it focuses on have changed over time, the nature or type of change, and the possible state of these characteristics in the future. The proportion of district profile elements that

are described as evolving is presented in Figure 2. Contrary to expectations, the study found that in the narration of the district profiles, most of the elements mentioned (more than 55%) were described in their current state. For example, in the MTDP of Sawla-Tuna-Kalba (Government of Ghana 2018a), the prevalence of HIV/AIDS was described in its current state as follows:

“The district has a cumulative case of 65 of which seven (7) of them are male and fifty-eight (58) are female.” (page 72)

However, it was observed that some elements (less than 45%) were described as evolving. The population size for Nandom district was described in its MTDP (Government of Ghana 2018b) as follows:

“The 2010 National Population and Housing Census results put the district’s population at 46,040 with a growth rate of 1.9%...” (page 16)

This description clearly shows that the population of Nandom district keeps changing (increasing) at the stated rate over time. Further, Figure 2 reveals a wide proportional variation in the elements described as evolving among the districts. This suggests that there is an uneven understanding among district planning officers regarding how to profile these district characteristics and why it is necessary, despite the guidelines provided by NDPC.

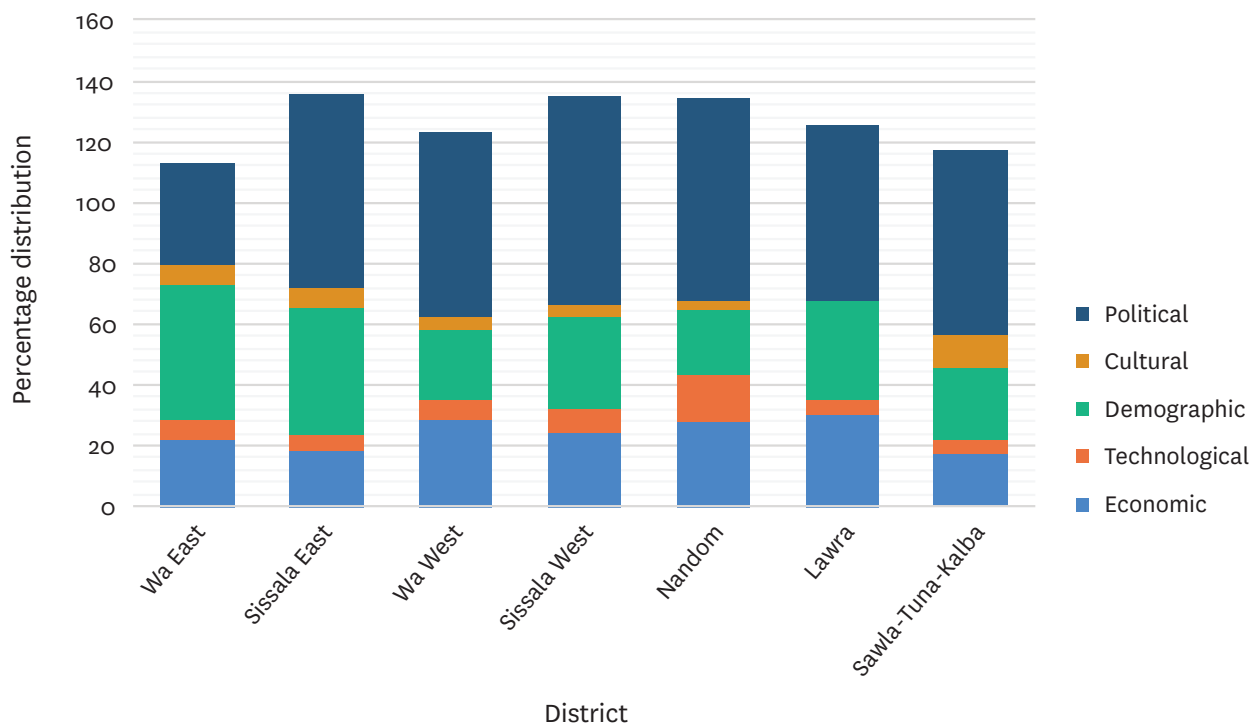


Figure 1. Dimensions of social transformation described in the MTDPs for the seven study districts.



Dr. William Quarmine (IWMI, Accra, Ghana) making a presentation about how to improve district-level development work with the social transformation approach in Wa, Ghana (photo: Sandra Hyde).

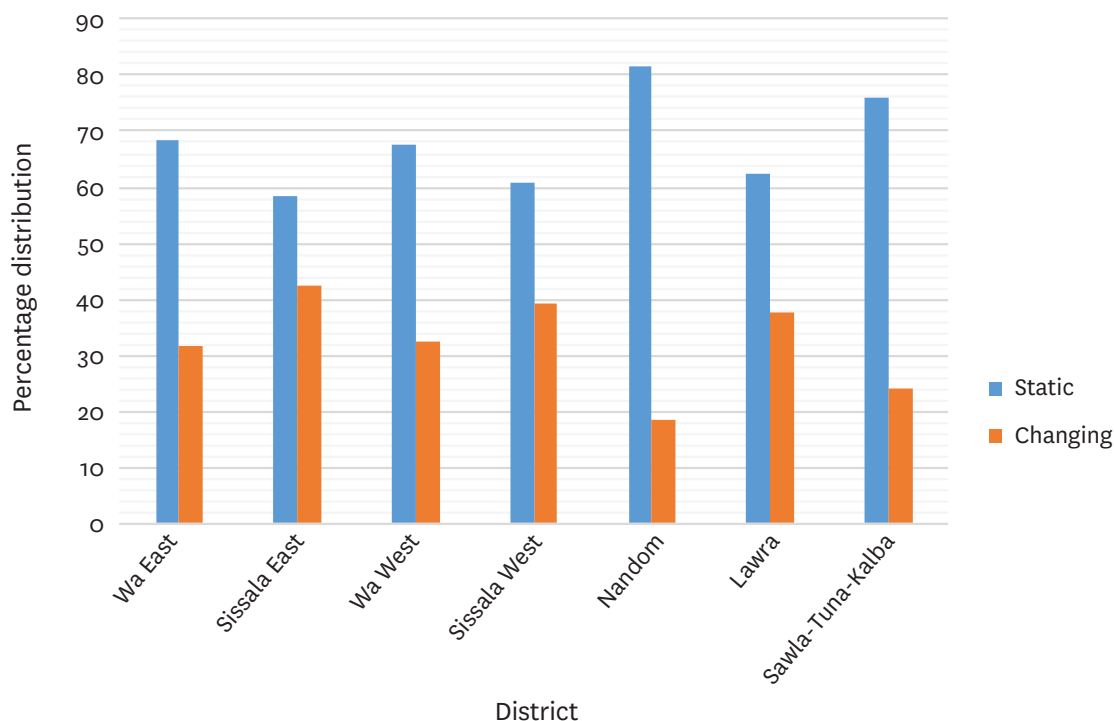


Figure 2. The proportion of district profile elements described as static or changing in the MTDPs for the seven study districts.

For almost all the elements in the district profiles that were mentioned as changing over time, only the pattern and direction of social transformation were described. The pace and extent of transformation received little attention, as depicted in Figure 3. This observation was consistent across all districts. With regard to the direction of social transformation, the MTDPs reported either an improvement or a decline (a rise or a fall) of the district profile elements. For example, in describing how livestock and poultry production has changed over time in the district, the Wa East MTDP (Government of Ghana 2018c) states the following:

“The production of these animals and birds has seen an improvement over the years.” (page 51)

Similarly, in describing the direction of change in community-based management of acute malnutrition (CMAM) coverage over the years, the Sissala East MTDP (Government of Ghana 2018d) states the following:

“The Municipality had a coverage of 24.2% in 2017, 55.1% for 2016 as against 55.2% in 2015 which shows a continuous decline in case detection.” (page 103)

In terms of the pattern of social transformation, the district profile characteristics were observed in the MTDPs in either a linear or a non-linear sense. For example, while the Wa East MTDP (Government of Ghana 2018c) does not directly state that there is a linear transformation in teacher attendance from 2015 to 2017, it presents statistics to that effect. The following is stated in the Wa East MTDP (Government of Ghana 2018c):

“Teacher attendance has improved from 64.50% in 2015/16 first Term to 75.40% in 2016/17 third Term.” (page 69)

In addition, the change in the prevalence of leprosy in the Wa West MTDP (Government of Ghana 2018e) was presented in a manner that suggests a non-linear (oscillating or a rise and fall) pattern. The MTDP stated the following:

“Eleven new cases were recorded in 2013, 2012 recorded zero cases while 2011 registered 13 patients...” (page 109)

The proportion of district profile elements with future projections is presented in Figure 4. Once again, the findings indicate that, for the majority (over 75%) of the elements discussed in the profile chapter of the MTDPs, there were no statements predicting or projecting the future state of the profile elements.

Reasons for inadequate incorporation of social transformation in district-level MTDPs

Discussions with development workers (i.e., development planners, agricultural officers, gender desk officers and other officials) during this study revealed several reasons for the low incorporation of social transformation in the MTDPs. District development officers highlighted the weak institutional capacity to adequately capture social transformation in their districts when preparing MTDPs. In instances when there is sufficient institutional capacity to prepare these MTDPs covering social transformation, development planners are confronted with the unavailability of data. The Ghana Statistical Service has developed local and national data collection systems with modules that capture social variables. However, these systems have not been designed to purposively capture the transformations in society, resulting in the absence of important variables. Meanwhile, metropolitan, municipal and district assemblies (MMDAs) lack the necessary logistics to design and capture these social transformation data on their own. District development officers who were interviewed during this study further highlighted that they developed the MTDPs

within the strict limits imposed under the guidelines provided by NDPC. According to these officers, the NDPC guidelines do

not consider a social transformation approach and is hence not incorporated in the MTDPs.

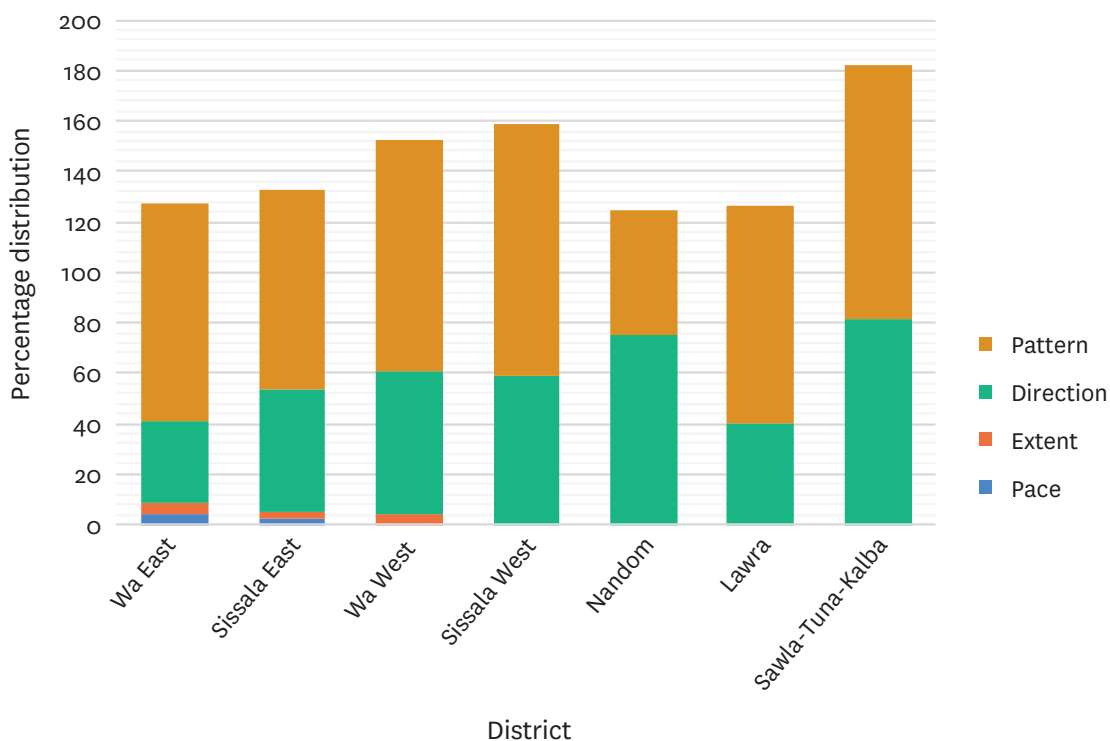


Figure 3. Dimensions of social transformation described in the MTDPs for the seven study districts.

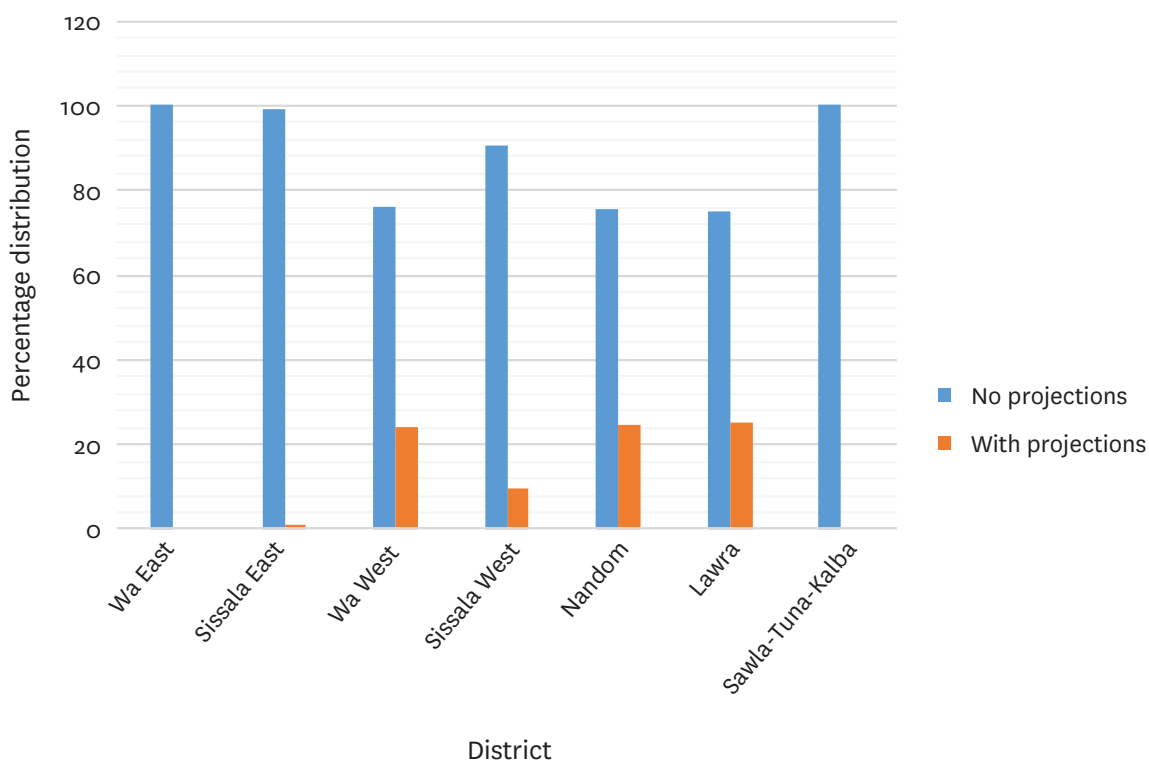


Figure 4. Proportion of profile elements which had projections in the MTDPs for the seven study districts.



Participants of a capacity building workshop held with development officers in the Upper West Region of Ghana (photo: Esther Wahabu).

Conclusion

This brief describes how and why development plans in northwest Ghana are unable to respond to and drive planned social transformation. It further reveals that the district-level MTDPs in this region capture very little of the ongoing social transformation taking place in their respective districts. When social transformation is captured, the focus is on political, economic and demographic characteristics, while other important dimensions of social transformation such as technological and cultural factors remain unexplored. In addition, the MTDPs fail to mention how many of the district profile characteristics have changed over time, and they do not provide adequate information about their assessment of how these characteristics will evolve in the future. The inadequate incorporation of social transformation into MTDPs could be attributed to the rigidity of the NDPC guidelines, an uneven understanding of how to profile the districts to capture social transformation and inadequate institutional capacity.

Implications for policy and recommendations

1. Planning for a society without acknowledging the dynamics in its characteristics over time and probable future scenarios is a recipe for failure. The social transformation approach to development planning, proposed by the European Union-funded REACH-STR project, is a potentially effective means of ensuring that development officers can capture and respond appropriately to changes in society and is, therefore, strongly recommended.
2. For the social transformation approach to be effectively mainstreamed, further studies are needed to gain better insights and to develop a collective understanding of the methods and tools that can be used to capture changes in a transforming society. Clearer insights on how to capture social transformation will not only be important for district planning officers (or policymakers, in general), but also for scientific and development practitioners. One of the outputs of these studies will include training tools such as participatory scenario mapping guidelines, which will be beneficial in building the capacity of district planning officers.
3. Given that the development planning process in Ghana is strictly guided by NDPC, their acceptance of a social transformation approach and willingness to incorporate it into national planning systems will lead to the development of a more robust planning framework that will guide the drafting of MTDPs to accommodate and respond to social transformation appropriately.
4. Strategic partnerships between NDPC and other institutions, such as academic institutions, the Ghana Statistical Service and the donor community, are essential to develop social transformation data tracking modules that are either stand-alone or built into existing data collection systems such as the Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS).



A development officer discussing plans with a farmer in the Bangkpama community in the Upper West Region of Ghana (photo: Sandra Hyde).

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Active discussions during the 2021 Knowledge and Learning Event with development practitioners in Wa, Ghana (photo: Esther Wahabu).

Source

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Project

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