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The Challenges of Integrating Monitoring and Evaluation Functions into the Decentralized Development Processes in Selected District Assemblies in Greater Accra Region of Ghana

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Abstract

Literature suggests that there is limited integration of the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) functions into the policy making process. This is evidenced in policy failure District Assemblies. The results have included an adverse effect on the goals of decentralization and sustainable development in Ghana. This study therefore investigated the challenges that district assemblies face with the M&E function and how these challenges affect the attainment of sustainable development. With respondents purposively selected from the MMDAs in the Greater Accra Region to participate in interviews, the study identified four main challenges: financial constraints; lack of logistics, lack of human capacity and lack of appreciation for M&E. The study concluded that these challenges adversely affect the efficient and effective delivery of services, and negatively affect value for money and good governance at the MMDA

levels. The study therefore recommends that there is an urgent need for those problems to be addressed by the state for the country to achieve the gains it needs to meet its sustainable development targets by the year 2057.

Keywords: *M&E, sustainable development, decentralization, value for money, good governance.*

Introduction

Studies by Ajulor (2020); Hudson et al. (2019) and Leong and Howlett (2022) indicate that policies neither succeed nor fail on their merit; their success or otherwise is dependent upon the process of their formulation and implementation. Successive governments in Ghana since independence have developed and executed policies which aim at accelerating the economic growth of the country and raising their living standards of the citizens (Ajulor, 2018; Bullock & Lavis, 2019; Selepe, 2023). However, there has been sporadic success in terms of implementation as compared to their formulation (Ajulor, 2018; Kabonga, 2019).

This is evidenced in abundance of haphazard, uncompleted or abandoned projects and sometimes projects that do not meet the needs of the citizens in the country (Ackah, 2020; Ayelazuno & Mawuko-Yevugah, 2019). Iyanda and Bello (2016) have also argued that implementation has often turned out to be the graveyard of most of the policies in Nigeria. According to them, to implement public policy successfully is difficult in the developed countries, more difficult in the developing countries and may be most difficult in reform-oriented governments in the world. One of the results of the difficulty in policy implementation is the absence of sustainable development in developing countries (Abdullahi & Othman, 2020; Selepe, 2023).

Strategies are therefore needed to ensure successful translation of policies from conception to implementing them as planned and to meet the intended purpose (Rossi et al., 2004). One such strategy is the integration of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) principles at all the stages of the policy cycle that will assist stakeholders make informed decisions (Amoatey, 2012; Rossi et al., 2004). However, studies by Goldman et al (2018) and Gorgens & Kusek (2019) have suggested that there is a problem of integration of M&E into the policy process in Ghana. This study aims at investigating the challenges that district assemblies face with M&E and how these challenges affect the attainment of sustainable development.

The Research Problem

The central problem of this study is the lack of successful implementation of public policies that will translate into sustainable development in Ghana as has been suggested by Ajulor (2020); Kabonga (2019); Iyanda and Bello (2019). Sustainable development has been an important theme of development globally since its emergence around the 1980s. Ghana's effort to ensure sustainable development is enshrined in the 40-year development plan with the vision of achieving "a just, free and prosperous society" by 2057 (Abubakari et al., 2018). Sustainability in this case demands greater transparency and accountability by various stakeholders hence the need for systems that will bring governance closer to the people. This implies that ordinary citizens are treated as customers and are involved in the decision-making processes where they can hold public officials accountable for their actions based on the information, they are privy to (Mititelu, 2019). However, the ordinary citizen, affected by policies, is mostly unable to hold public officials accountable due to lack of access to relevant and timely information on the policies (Abdulai, 2021; CDD-Ghana and Afrobarometer, 2019). The study envisages that if M&E is integrated at every stage of the policy cycle to generate information, it will assist citizens at the district assemblies to be involved in the policy process.

Municipal, Metropolitan or District Assemblies (MMDAs) as the highest political and administrative authorities at the decentralized district assembly levels have been mandated by the 1992 Constitution to serve as the agents of development in their localities (Adams & Taabazuing, 2015; Ahwoi, 2017; Ayee, 2019). They consciously or unconsciously, have endeavoured to apply Laswell's policy cycle in formulating and executing policies (Filho et al., 2020). This model has evaluation only at the end of the cycle, that is after the implementation stage. The evaluation comes in too late to correct lapses that may ensue in the policy cycle, especially the ones that arise at the early stages of the cycle. The situation is exacerbated because a culture of evaluation rarely exists within the local government system in Ghana (Filho et al., 2020). Over the years, some problems of implementation have emerged as evidenced in abandoned projects, redundant structures, cost overruns and projects that do not meet the needs of the people. This traditional approach has not produced the desired result in Ghana. The problem in part may be derived from how M&E is integrated into the policy cycle to consider the needs of citizens right from the inception stage through to the implementation stage. This study therefore sets out to investigate the challenges that

MMDAs face that make it difficult to integrate M&E at every stage of the policy cycle. The study investigates the challenges of M&E at three selected district assemblies in Greater Accra region of Ghana. It then assesses the effect(s) of the challenges on the attainment of sustainable development at the selected district assemblies.

Review of Some Relevant Literature

This study is anchored in the New Public Management (NPM) framework, good governance principles, principal-agent theory and Systems theory. NPM is connected to the concept of economic rationalism of creating value for money. An attempt to make the public sector more businesslike and to employ private sector ideas to achieve efficiency, effectiveness and economy inspired the NPM movement (Asif & Dawood, 2017; Hood, 1991). It argues that, to ensure efficient and effective public service delivery, there is the need for decentralization and the incorporation of M&E into the policymaking process. Where M&E generates information on performance and the utilization of public resources at the District Assemblies. Even though, according to Pollitt and Bouckaet (2004), NPM cannot be considered as a 'one size fits all' approach to policymaking, Lapuente and de Walles (2020) and Meier and O'Toole (2011) have argued that public management has been influenced by theories and practices of private management which brings greater flexibility in tailoring the organisation to circumstance, instead of necessarily following a rigid Weberian model. Greater attention is now paid to strategic planning and management in the public sector.

Good governance has been identified as a critical tool to achieve sustainable development as it promotes accountability, transparency, efficient resource management and allocation for equitable development guaranteeing participation in decision-making process (Towah, 2019). It is important and central to development as a way of pushing attention to be paid to the institutional aspect of development. It is also a way of addressing sensitive political concerns such as corruption and leadership (Grindle, 2016). The study highlights how the institution of M&E at the District Assemblies brings about transparency, accountability, rule of law, participation and responsiveness in the processes of the officials. The study argues that paying attention to these principles of good governance when formulating and implementing policies at the District Assemblies will contribute to the assurance of sustainable development.

Principal-Agent theory explains the contractual relationship that exists between the government and the public and the need to maximize the interest of both parties. To address the agency problem Alchian and Densetz (1972) proposed a contractual relationship between the principal and the agent, that is, behavior-based and outcome-based contracts. The principal exercises various monitoring activities to assess the behavior and the performance of the agents. This study agrees with Mitnick, Alchian and Densetz that there should be a contractual agreement between the public and the District Assembly bureaucrats to ensure sustainable development at the local level. In addition, there must be appropriate mechanisms to monitor the behavior and the performance of the District Assembly officials. Periodic evaluation of public policies is needed to ensure that the agents do not sway away from the expected outcomes.

Systems theory models of decision-making in human groups and organisations highlight their collaboration with 'outside' actors and organisations that notably affect the consequences of their decision making (Mele et al., 2010). A system is assumed to consist of units or parts that are interrelated. The interrelationship is such that what happens to a unit affects the other components. In public administration, all systems are treated as open systems, which means that they receive input from the environment and emit output back into the environment. Thus, all human systems are open systems. Modern systems are also adaptive systems. If an organization cannot adapt to the environment, it may become extinct. This concept of feedback is relevant to all decision-making processes. A system is hypothesized to be in equilibrium. As the system receives inputs from the environment, the internal processes work to restore a new equilibrium. In this study, the systems theory provides a framework for the description of homeostatic systems, that is systems in which feedback-controlled regulation occurs.

M&E in Sustainable Development

In recent years, there has been an increasing demand for M&E to achieve sustainable development goals (Kanyamuna et al., 2018; 2019) where policymakers as well as practitioners need to measure results to ascertain the consequences of their interventions (Bamberger, 2010; Kanyamuna et al, 2019). Since the early 1970s, consensus has been built on the need to manage and utilize limited resources which has given rise to the concept of sustainable development (Kirsch, 2020). The Stockholm Conference on Human Environment in 1972 and the subsequent publication of the

Brundtland report in 1987 placed environmental issues at the fore for international scrutiny. The report articulated the commonly accepted definition of sustainable development as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs (UN, 1987). The Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 aimed at producing a broad agenda and new blueprint for international action on environmental and development issues concluded that sustainable development was attainable for all people at all levels. In 2015, more than 150 world leaders formally approved the ambitious novel agenda for sustainable development. The agenda sought to find new ways to improve the lives of the people (UN, 2015). Sustainable development is viewed as “an evolving process in which social and political institutions continuously adapt to changes in scientific knowledge, social values and ethical concerns” (Harrison, 2015, p. 8).

Ghana’s long-term development plan ties in with the African Union’s 50-year Agenda 2063 as well as the 15-year Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. The aim is to bring sustained growth at all levels in the country. According to Abubakari et al (2018) the long-term development plan looks beautiful but the critical concern that seems very common to developing countries such as Ghana is the successful implementation of such policies. To ensure the successful implementation of such policies, Abubakari et al (2018) and Doorgapersad and Zwane (2014) have argued that there is the need for assessment mechanisms such as M&E which will give feedback on the performance of the policy as suggested by NPM and systems theory. M&E is needed in development interventions to identify trends, measure changes and capture knowledge to improve performance and increase transparency and accountability aimed at sustainable development (Jeremiah & Kabayi, 2019). Yet Goldman et al (2018); and Gorgens & Kusek (2019) have suggested that there is a problem of integration of M&E into the policy process in Ghana.

Kanyamuna (2021) in ‘Towards Building a Functional Whole-of-Government Monitoring and Evaluation Systems for Zambia’, the study set out to investigate the gap that characterized the public sector for M&E. The study concluded that Zambia’s Whole-of Government M&E System (WoGM&ES) was very weak to demand for M&E. The system also had no unified arrangement to demand and utilize M&E information. Doorgapersad and Zwane (2014) studied monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for Sustainable Development in Sedibeng District Municipality. Their study identified gaps within municipal authorities to assess community needs. It was also revealed

that there was lack of ability in the municipality primary resources, viz financial, technical and human. The study noted that enhancing capabilities requires effective utilization of those resources to reach standards which are acceptable of service delivery to satisfy community needs.

Akotey and Boateng (2021) also studied 'Local Government Public Accountability in Ghana: A Case Study of Selected MMDAs'. The study examined the accountability of some district assembly executives to the assembly members and local stakeholders. It observed that citizen participation was low, there was lack of financial accountability and transparency in procurement and non-compliance in the provision of local governance. It was further established that the accountability gap at the district assemblies is as a result of the capacity deficiencies of the local legislature. Tengan and Aigbavboa (2016) evaluated barriers to effective implementation of project M&E Ghana construction industry. The study sought to evaluate the barriers that projects face in implementing M&E. The study argued that weak institutional capacity, limited resource and budgetary allocation for M&E contributed to the lack of M&E use in Ghana. Though studies have been done on M&E at the district assemblies, only minimal research has been done to identify the challenges that the assemblies face concerning M&E.

Methodology

The study employed qualitative design. The study specifically employed a case study method using a structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews to collect data from three selected MMDAs in Greater Accra Region. A non-probability sampling technique was employed to purposively select 46 interviewees from diverse areas of the assembly. They were selected based on their knowledge of the policy formulation process at the assemblies. Members of staff who were at the level above Deputy Director were selected. Some Assembly members and Unit Committee members were also selected for the study. One of the criteria used to select interviewees was the years of experience. All those who were selected had, at the time of the interview, occupied their respective positions for at least two years and had been involved in policy processes. Opinion leaders who were also well versed in the activities of the assemblies were included as citizens of the study.

Two out of the 46 interviewees interviewed for the study, representing approximately 4% were MMDCEs. Nine representing approximately 18% were Directors and Deputy Directors from the Development Planning Units of the selected District Assemblies who had occupied their respective positions for not less than two years. Two interviewees representing approximately 4% were

Presiding Members; 33% which is the approximation of 16 interviewees were Assembly members, 10 representing approximately 22% were Unit Committee members and 8 representing approximately 19% were citizens of the selected assemblies. The categorical distribution of the interviewees is presented on table 1.1.

Figure 1.1 Carrer Background of Interviewees

Carrer Background	Number	Percentage
MMCEs	2	4
Presiding Members	2	4
Staff	9	20
Assembly Members	16	33
Unit Comm. Members	10	22
Citizens	8	17
Total	46	100

Source: Field Data (2023).

The interviewees outlined several challenges that this section discusses. Prevailing among the problems were financial constraints, lack of logistics, lack of human resources and lack of appreciation for M&E.

Financial Constraints

The interviewees indicated that there is often lack of funds to conduct M&E. The Guidelines by NDPC and other Acts have directed the assemblies to undertake a minimum of quarterly monitoring and report to the general assembly. Responses from many interviewees indicated that the assemblies are unable to meet the obligation of submitting quarterly reports due to inadequate funds. Interviewees indicated that there is always a budgetary allocation for M&E but the money does not get released to the M&E team. Even if it is released, the release is delayed. The release of the District Assembly Common Fund to the assemblies sometimes delays for months which makes it difficult for the monitoring team to embark on monitoring visits.

For example, one interviewee from the Planning Unit noted:

Incorporating M&E into the development policy conversation requires adequate resources at the disposal of the assembly... although the assembly allocates a budget for M&E, the allocation is woefully inadequate... M&E comes with a cost and the assembly is already suffering from lack of funds...(P044, Staff).

The lack of funds challenge was buttressed by another interviewee who thinks that there is adequate budget allocation on paper for M&E yet the allocation is not released to the team for M&E purposes.

He noted:

One of the major challenges is lack of funding for M&E. There is always a budget allocated for M&E on the annual budgets, but it only ends in books. The real funds are hardly released to the team to embark on M&E. If the allocation was released for the purpose, the team would have had quality M&E at the assemblies... (P042, Staff).

Another staff interviewee added:

The challenges are basically the financial challenges. The assembly generally faces the problem of funds. It is either the release of the District Assembly Common Funds delays or the amount released is inadequate (P020, Staff).

It was also noted that that the assemblies are not able to generate enough funds internally that can be used for M&E activities. One of the officers indicated:

...The District Assembly Common Fund is woefully inadequate to take care of the activities of the assembly... The assemblies can run for months before the Common Fund is released to the assemblies... we would have been relying on our Internally Generated Funds (IGF) but that is hardly able to take care of the administration cost of the assembly and as you agree with me, M&E activities are very expensive (P002, MMDCE).

Limited resources and budgetary allocation for M&E is a major challenge in Ghana (Derrick et al., 2021). Most organizations have agreed upon the percentage of programs or projects budget that is expected to be allocated for M&E activities. USAID for instance, devotes approximately 3% of the total cost of the program or project budget to external performance and impact evaluation aside the dedicated resources for monitoring. Usually, the M&E budget forms about 3-10% of the overall budget of the program or the project. One rule of thumb is that 5-10% of the project or program budget must be allocated for M&E (Derrick et al., 2021). In spite of all these directives, there is a common outcry for lack of funding to carry out M&E at the assemblies. As a result, most assemblies lack the physical equipment required to undertake M&E and data-production activities. In fact, according to Derry (2022), M&E expenditure often loses out when budgetary releases are inadequate.

Lack of Logistics

Interviewees made it clear that logistics is one major challenge that runs through all the assemblies, be it a Metropolitan assembly, a Municipal or district assembly is the struggle with logistics. Logistics in this case refers to supply items as well as personnel, durable and non-durable goods, equipment, office supplies and capital goods. The lack of logistics includes big ticket items such as vehicles to even paper for writing M&E reports.

Notable among their submissions appear as follows:

...There is also the problem of lack of logistics. It is most of the time difficult to have a dedicated car for M&E and the budget allocated to M&E is inadequate to acquire a dedicated vehicle for M&E...(P023, Staff).

The problem with logistics was supported by another staff member, who added:

...The main challenge of M&E at this assembly is the lack of logistics. There is no dedicated vehicle for the monitoring team. ...It makes it very difficult for them to embark on regular monitoring. Even when a car is released for them, they can be told there is no fuel for the car...(P042, Staff).

Another remarked:

...this logistics problem sometimes gets embarrassing... Can you believe that the M&E team does not have a dedicated laptop for our activities? ...it gets worse sometimes, there will not be paper to print our reports...The team is most of the time neglected regardless of the important role we play in development ...(P019, Staff).

Considering the role M&E plays in the development discourse it is still unbelievable that the basic necessities of routine office operations should become a challenge to them. There is an urgent need as a country that is a signatory to the SDGs, Agenda 2063, and other development agendas to take a second look at the challenge. Since M&E is an integral part of all of them and the government of Ghana has aligned the country's development blueprint with them (Voluntary National Review, 2019), this pettiness at the district assemblies is unpardonable. It is an indictment on a middle-developed country such as Ghana.

Lack of Human Resources

Information gathered from the field survey also indicated a huge deficit in human capacity to conduct M&E at the district assemblies. The majority of interviewees indicated that there are no persons with the requisite technical expertise to conduct M&E. This has created a huge skills gap. According to some of them, M&E is normally done by people who do not have any technical skill or qualification in M&E which makes the visits to sites, mere formalities to satisfy the requirement of the Acts and the Guidelines by NDPC.

One interviewee indicated:

...There is also lack of trained personnel to undertake M&E. There is lack of human capacity to do professional M&E. ...M&E at the district assembly is carried out by the staff at the Planning Unit who may not have the requisite knowledge and expertise for M&E... (P025, Staff).

Another interviewee, a citizen, noted:

...there is also the problem of qualified personnel for monitoring and evaluation, unlike other areas like Accounting that no one but persons with accounting backgrounds are allowed to venture, with

M&E, it is assumed that anybody at all can do it ... One problem that needs addressing is the lack of M&E as a qualification in our higher education system. As at now, M&E has not been factored as a qualification and as such there is lack of qualified personnel for the job even at the national level ... (P022, Citizen).

A staff member from one of the assemblies further supported this as he noted:

There are a lot of problems when it comes to M&E at the District Assemblies. There is lack of Human resources. I think because as a country we don't place value on M&E, it is reflected on the courses at our higher education. As at now, I have not heard of universities that offer M&E as a course. We don't have people with the requisite knowledge to conduct real time M&E. We normally mistake inspection for M&E (P041, Staff).

M&E in most African countries are in their budding stage which hardly has the capacity to supply relevant information to stakeholders (Akanbang & Abdallah, 2021; Kaufmann et al., 2019). M&E system is always hampered by weak capacity which can result in poor data quality, data gaps and inconsistencies. The limited capacity to undertake M&E activities can compromise the quality of reports produced. This can bring about weak linkages between planning, budgeting and M&E (Abdullahi & Othman, 2020). Between 2017 and 2020 when M&E was a substantive ministry in Ghana, headed by a cabinet minister, the capacity was weak and the story has not changed with time (Akanbang & Abdallah, 2021; Derrick et al., 2021). NDPC as the apex body in charge of national M&E, organizes a two-day training workshop annually for core M&E staff of the MMDAs. The workshop is aimed at enhancing the understanding and capacity of those staff to prepare and implement M&E plans (NDPC, 2021). The training is inadequate to produce professionals for the purpose. The limited resource at the assemblies makes it impossible to build the needed M&E skills within the assemblies.

Lack of Appreciation for M&E

One of the challenges that interviewees identified was the low level of appreciation and wrong perception for M&E. The survey revealed that the M&E exercise has been reduced to compliance instead of doing it for the purpose M&E is expected to be used for. Most of the interviewees bemoaned this state of affairs in the district assemblies.

A well-placed interviewee indicated that:

...There is a lack of interest in M&E reports... It has just become a form of compliance so sometimes, the sites are not really visited but the officials manage to put a report together to avoid sanctions from NDPC and donors... (P002, MMDCE).

A male interviewee who has been a staff and at his position as a planning officer for seven years noted:

...There is lack of national interest in M&E... it is not just at this assembly but even at the national level... at one time it is a Ministry, at another time it is something else... Because there is no national interest, there are no funds dedicated for M&E activities. Even though, there is an allocation of M&E on the budget, it is only on paper and to comply with guidelines... that amount is hardly released to the M&E Team, or it is often than not used for a different purpose... (P042, Staff).

A Unit Committee Member also had her disappointment in the state as she blamed the lack of human capacity on the lack of national interest in M&E by noting:

...There is lack of human resources, that is, qualified persons with the right qualification in M&E at the various assemblies. I think because as a country we don't place value on M&E... our lack of interest in M&E is reflected on the courses at our higher education. As at now, I have not heard of universities that offer M&E as a course, not even at the government owned universities. We don't have persons with the requisite knowledge and qualification to conduct real time M&E. We normally mistake inspection for M&E... (P012, Unit Committee Member).

Another interviewee associated the challenge with lack of political will to make M&E a national policy. According to him, M&E is misconstrued as a form of police on policymakers. He noted:

There is no political will to make M&E a national and a mandatory policy. The problem is not only at this assembly but even at the national level. M&E is seen as a police force that will expose the wrongs and inefficiencies of some public officials. Because there is no national interest, there is no funds dedicated to M&E. Even though, there is an allocation of M&E on the budget, that amount is often than not used for a different purpose (P013, Assembly Member).

The important role that M&E plays in development has been widely established in literature, however, the practice and commitment towards the implementation of functional M&E in Ghana is evidently very low (Kanyamuna et al., 2018). As rightly indicated by the interviewees, as a country, there is very little appreciation for M&E. Though M&E has long been practiced in Ghana and in governance, in the context of disparate approaches and practices, there has never been a standardized national framework to determine value for money for public projects, programs or policies (Derrick et al., 2021; Ferlie et al., 2021). Evaluation in Ghana has mainly been driven by development partners or donors. Implementation of development projects, programs and policies are hardly evaluated to inform decision making (Akanbang & Abdallah, 2021; Manes-Rossi et al., 2023).

Within the current M&E structures are pockets of disjointed M&E systems in the various sectors that oversee the implementation of programs for development (Sinister, 2019). For instance, the Ministry of Finance, in 2010 introduced the Program-Based Budgeting to allow MDAs to adopt a more strategic approach to manage their budget within the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework. At the MMDAs level, there is a Web-based M&E system to track the implementation of development programs. Development partners, NGOs and other Civil Society Organizations

(CSOs) also undertake M&E for programs they implement in the country (Derrick et al., 2021). In 2017, a substantive ministry was set up to initiate strategies, coordinate, monitor and evaluate Government High Priority Programs and Projects (MoME, 2017). Currently, there is the M&E Secretariat, under the Office of the President that coordinates, monitors and evaluates the delivery and impact of government policies, programs and projects aimed at addressing the development challenges and to promote learning, transparency and accountability result (MES, 2024). This is evidenced in poor harmonization of M&E activities and institutional reports which often remain on shelves instead of been shared with the various stakeholders for their proper utilization. Hence, the weak link between policy formulation, implementation and sustainability of development projects in Ghana (Abdullahi & Othman, 2020).

Again, the system of M&E is not backed by strong information system data management. Meanwhile, M&E works with an efficient data collection, data quality assessment storage, retrieval and analysis. In practice, M&E data collection is often not thoroughly assessed for quality before they are analyzed. Reports are delayed even if they are released which makes the reports lose their usefulness (Abdullahi & Othman, 2020). To show appreciation and commitment to M&E, there is the need to have a holistic national framework for M&E as has been done in countries like South Africa, Benin and Uganda (Goldman et al., 2020). In these countries, there are structures for championing M&E that have been established either at the presidency or at the Office of the Prime Minister which makes it easier to oversee sectoral ministries. What Ghana needs is a government-wide mainstreamed M&E within the public sector through transverse policies, systems and coordination mechanisms.

The Effects of M&E Challenges on Sustainable Development

The study further sought to figure out how the lack of the incorporation of M&E into the policy formulation at the district assemblies due to the challenges M&E face would have on sustainable development. The field survey confirmed that the challenges have adverse effects on sustainable development at the various assemblies. They mentioned issues such as inefficiency of cost of projects, truncation of projects, sub-standard projects, delayed projects among others. A male staff indicated that:

...With the problems I have already told you, the assembly is virtually unable to do any meaningful M&E... what we do here is to comply with the guidelines that NDPC has given us so that we can

access funds... this affects the quality of projects and programs that we implement at the assembly... in fact, without any proper monitoring, most of the projects we undertake at the assembly are sub-standard as compared to what we do privately...who ensures the proper thing is done, M&E would have done that... (P020, Staff).

A male citizen supported this as he noted:

This problem affects the policy process. Let's take for example, a contract is given to someone to construct a classroom block within a six-month period using 200 bags of cement. As a result of lack of M&E, the contractor may spend more than 12 months and may use less than the 200 bags of cement. In effect, the contractor may not be effective with time and efficient with resources... Lack of M&E leads to inefficiency in resource utilization, waste of money and time and even sometimes leads to abandoned projects (P035, Citizen).

Another interviewee indicated that because of the challenges, there is limited or no M&E at the district assemblies which result in investment in irrelevant programs and projects. She noted:

... Due to the challenges that have been mentioned, even though, the assembly is expected to have stakeholder consultation and conduct a needs assessment to ascertain the actual needs of the communities, the town hall meetings hardly take place and even if they come on, the outcome hardly influences the policies that are implemented at the assemblies... Lack of M&E means that there is no assessment before the enactment of policies. This means that projects and policies are imposed on us. Whether the project will be beneficial or no, they just dump it on us... sometimes, even though the project may be needed, the place the project may be sited makes it less useful to the citizens... (P037, Assembly Member).

An officer indicated that the challenges which result in a lack of M&E can cause cost overruns of projects, inflated cost, and waste of limited resources at the assembly. She noted:

During the implementation stage, without proper M&E, contractors will do whatever pleases them and not how the assembly has planned it. It allows people to be corrupt as there is no system to check the proper utilization of resources. Without M&E, projects are not assured of effectiveness and efficiency of the implementation of the projects... This often results in a lack of quality work, and the assembly is not able to be prudent with the money that is committed into the program or the project... Mostly this leads to cost overruns in the implementation of policies. Sometimes the project/policy will be done alright but it will not meet the standard that was expected...(P002, MMDCE).

A male assemblyman also asserted that lack of M&E can lead to project delays and possible abandonment of projects. He noted:

The lack of M&E can cause a lot of abandoned projects and overly expensive projects and most of the projects will not meet the needs of the citizens. Take it for instance, the Saglame project which has been abandoned even at the national level, the lack of M&E is a contributing factor even though we can also attribute it to some of them to administrative inefficiencies... During implementation, proper M&E is expected to inform the assembly on the status of work including the amount of money that has been spent on a project and if the progress of work is worth the amount of money that has been spent. Without M&E, this information will not be available (P028, Presiding Member).

Discussions and Implications

Among the interviewees, not even a single person had a differing opinion about the adverse effects that the challenges of M&E at the district assemblies have on the attainment of sustainable development. Right from the time of the Stockholm Conference on Human Environment in 1972, through to the approval of the ambitious novel Agenda 2030, by which sustainable development has become the core value of the world. Coupled with Agenda 2063 where the African continent aspires to see the *Africa we want*, Ghana has been a major player of achieving sustainable development. Ghana has also acknowledged the vital role that M&E plays in its attainment hence the concerted efforts to inculcate M&E into development processes. Despite all the efforts, the field survey suggests that there are still cases of abandoned projects, projects that do not meet the needs of the citizens, overly expensive projects and delayed projects. This study agrees that the challenges faced by M&E processes within district assemblies are not merely operational issues but pose fundamental obstacles to achieving sustainable development. Studies by Van Zanten and Van Tulder (2021) and Zhan and Santos-Paulino (2021) assert that when M&E activities are inadequate or nonexistent in development discourse, the repercussions extend across various dimensions of sustainable development, impacting economic, social, and environmental aspects of society.

The effects of the lack of adequate integration of M&E into the policy formulation extend beyond the immediate project outcomes to broader systemic issues within governance structures. When policies are formulated without adequate M&E integration, it reflects deficiencies in transparency, accountability, citizen participation, efficiency and effectiveness of resource utilization and quality of service delivery. This perpetuates a pattern of lack of sustainable development at the district assemblies (Dick-Sagoe & Andraz, 2020; Leong & Howlett, 2022).

NPM principles advocate for the adoption of market-based mechanisms and performance-oriented approaches in public administration. By aligning policymaking with NPM principles, policymakers will enhance transparency and accountability mechanisms, improve decision-making processes and foster more efficient and effective resource allocation. Integrating M&E into the policy process will ensure good governance principles such as promotion of stakeholder engagement, ensuring transparency in the utilization of public resource, and strengthening institutional capacities for oversight and accountability (Carothers & Brechenmachers, 2023).

This will help policymakers to build public trust, improve service delivery, and promote sustainable development outcomes.

Systems Theory offers a holistic perspective on organizational dynamics, emphasizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of various components within a system. By adopting a system thinking approach, policymakers will be able to identify systemic barriers to effective M&E, streamline communication channels, and enhance collaboration among stakeholders, thereby improving the overall efficiency and effectiveness of development initiatives at the district assemblies. Principal-Agent Theory focuses on the dynamics of delegation and accountability between principals and agents within the district assemblies. Addressing M&E challenges through the lens of Principal-Agent Theory involves aligning incentives, establishing clear performance metrics, and fostering a culture of accountability among stakeholders (Nwajei et al., 2022). By ensuring that agents are motivated to act in the best interests of principals and that performance is objectively measured and evaluated, policymakers will mitigate the risks associated with information asymmetry and moral hazard, thereby improving the effectiveness of policy making processes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that M&E is one of the essential tools to ensure sustainable development. However, M&E face challenges at the assemblies which are not merely operational but pose fundamental obstacles to the attainment of sustainable development.

Recommendations

Based on literature and the analysis of the field survey, the study recommends that there should be regulations to ensure that budgetary allocations for M&E activities are released and released on time for its purpose. M&E has to receive priority in all district assembly budgets. There should also be proper accountability on the utilization of the money released for M&E activities and sanctions meted out for misappropriation of M&E funds. Tertiary institutions need to develop specialized M&E curriculum to train experts that will carry out M&E activities at all levels of governance. Short courses and in-service trainings to train existing staff to undertake M&E activities could be put in place. Again, the demand for M&E reports should be strengthened by the government and its agencies in addition to the Auditor General's Report where public projects that do not meet the target would be sanctioned. And the demand for M&E should not be only donor and development partners driven. The state should have a great interest in demanding M&E reports.

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