



Leveraging the localization of sustainable development goals through community radio to promote the participation of marginalized citizens in Ghana's local governance elections

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ABSTRACT

There seems to be limited knowledge on how Community Radio stations (CRs) facilitate the participation of marginalized groups in local government elections in Ghana. Guided by the civic forum's theory of the media governance role, this study set out to explore the role of CR in promoting the participation of youth, women, and persons with disabilities (PWDs) in the 2023 District Level Election (DLE) in Ghana. Five purposively selected CRs within the Ghana Community Radio Network (GCRN) are used as case studies. Adopting a qualitative case study design, data collection methods include semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis, guided by the study's objectives. The study has found that CRs in Ghana have consistently championed local governance issues with a special interest in strengthening grassroots involvement in local elections. With a focus on the 2023 district level election, the stations have contributed to the electoral successes of women, youth and PWDs by using a key strategy to link the election to the localization of the sustainability of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, limited resources on the part of the radio stations, coupled with their use of volunteer workers, whose enthusiasm to continue effectively carrying out the radio education, waned during the project, a situation that has tended to slightly limit the impact of the project. The study recommends that government agencies, civil society organizations, and donors should support CR in Ghana with funding, training, and resources to enhance their civic education programs for future local government elections.

Keywords: Community Radio, Local Elections, Localization, Marginalized Citizens, Participation, Sustainable Development Goals

I. INTRODUCTION

Localization of governance emerged during the 1990s as a key policy reform towards promoting grassroots participation in democratic processes in developing countries. The reforms undertaken aimed to ensure that communities assumed central roles in managing their affairs. Indeed, in local governance, citizens, including the marginalized, have their rights to participate in policy decisions, legally guaranteed (Crook & Manor, 1998; Oluwu & Wusch, 2004; Oxhorn et al, 2004). As a central thesis within the above cited scholarship, citizens' rights to participate in decision making include the election of community level representatives to local government councils. Elected representatives become agents, mandated to ensure that the needs of their electorates are reflected in development policy-making processes (Crook & Manor, 1998; Oxhorn et al., 2004; Olowu & Wusch, 2004; Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006). Oluwu and Wusch (2004) argue that the quality of representation in local government councils very much determines the quality of contribution to development policy formulation. This will in turn influence communities' access to basic services as local governance councils constitute the focal units for development. Competitive local government elections provide a seedbed for the promotion of good local governance for development. The importance of a well nurtured local democracy in promoting national democratic good governance, cannot be emphasized; it provides a platform for educating citizens on democratic norms, electoral policies and practices as well as offering a training ground for effective participation in national level democracy (Crook & Manor, 1998; Oxhorn et al., 2004).

Ghana's local governance system provides a viable institutional framework for the promotion of effective citizen participation. The 1992 Constitution and the Local Government Law (1993) articulate the main purpose of the country's local governance programme as the involvement of grass-roots people in the affairs of governance. Chapter 20, Article (2) of the Constitution states "... people in particular local government areas shall, as far as practicable, be afforded the opportunity to participate effectively in their governance". These legal provisions have been put in place to create genuine spaces for citizens' participation in the country's local governance. At the practical level, civic participation relates to the election of people's representatives to the district, municipal and metropolitan assemblies



(MMDAs). In accordance with Section 6 (1&2) of Act 936 of the Constitution, district level elections (DLEs) are held every four years.

Scholars in communication and governance for development, including Servaes (2009) posit that effective communication on local governance is vital for catalyzing citizens' participation in the democratic processes including the enhancement of the ability of civic groups to influence the delivery of services to local citizens and the management of the most pressing questions of local development. Independent media which are widely recognized to play a crucial role in democratic systems can provide effective platforms for the local governance engagements by fostering a civic forum for public engagement on democracy, equipping voters with information about political candidates, policies, and governance issues, which can lead to informed electoral choices (Norris, 2006; Odugbemi & Norris, 2010). Naaikuur (2020), argues that in the context of developing countries, the media can play an even greater role in the development of local governance than at the national because with the local being much smaller and more specific, independent and robust local media can more easily mobilize local communities and take up a central role in providing them with the information they need to participate effectively in consultative processes.

White (2008) has, however, criticized the media in developing countries for giving inadequate attention to local governance issues. Accordingly, while the national media located in the national capitals are holding central government accountable, facilitating policy debates and citizens active involvements in democratic process, this searchlight on the local level does not exist. Hyden et al. (2002) and Nyamnjor (2005) have asserted that the catalytic role of the media in fostering viable democracy depends on the prevailing media systems in countries. The authors have observed that in Africa, despite public service media being legally insulated from governmental controls to serve the public interests, they are often susceptible to governmental controls. The authors have agreed that private commercial media, particularly broadcasting, seem to lean towards pursuing economic and political interests their often politically aligned owners. Drawing on these arguments, Naaikuur (2020) has found that in Ghana, the ability of the two categories of media to pursue the public interests, including the promoting of local governance, has often been compromised.

The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, known in French as the Association Mondiale des Radiodiffuseurs Communautaires (AMARC, 2007), the World Bank (2012) and Naaikuur (2020) have identified CR for lending itself as the linchpin for promoting democratic local governance amongst grassroots, marginalized and poor societies. This is due to its pro-poor, development-oriented, participatory philosophy as well as its prioritization of the voices and concerns of grassroots communities. The two organizations have noted how CRs in developing countries are thus being increasingly recognized as an important tool for promoting democracy and decentralization in many developing countries and being sought after to play crucial roles in communicating information between politicians and voters, and among citizens.

The present study seeks to explore how community radio (CR) in Ghana is promoting local democracy. A special focus relates to understanding strategies that have been employed by community radio stations CRs in leveraging the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to influence the election of women, youth and PWDs to MMDAs during the 2023 DLEs.

At this stage it is important to provide a background to the SDGs localization and the 2023 DLE discourse being advanced. CRs under the Ghana Community Radio Network (GCRN) umbrella organization of CRs in Ghana, have over the past few years, undertaken to support the localization of the SDGs in their communities through sustained radio programming. The campaign has basically aimed to raise awareness and enhance local knowledge on the SDGs. Diedong and Naaikuur (2023) in a study on the impact of the CRs-SDGs localization, found ample evidence to support local communities' enhanced knowledge and use of the SDGs for local development purposes. Marginalized communities are being heard articulating their SDGs aspirations on GCRN stations across Ghana, enabling hitherto silent voices in the development discourses, to now increasingly express their needs to local authorities and service providers.

To further advance local SDGs localization, between 2022 and 2024, the GCRN-member stations have partnered with Crossing Borders (CB), a Danish non-profit civil society organization committed to localizing the SDGs across developing countries on the SDGs localization (CRN-Crossing Borders Evaluation Report on *Anchoring a Civil Society Model towards Localizing the SDGs in Ghana* (2024). The 22 member stations located across the country supported the localization drive.

Moving beyond the initial phases of the projects with the overarching approach of awareness creation amongst communities and encouraging them to have a sense of ownership of the SDGs, the activities were stepped up to include the promotion of DLEs with a special focus on enhancing the representation of women, youth and PWDs in the 2023 Election. It is important to note that whilst the initial phases of the project had received financial support through the Crossing Borders, the DLE one, being an initiative of the GCRN, had no such support.



1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the legal provisions guaranteeing vigorous civic participation in Ghana's local governance, concerns have been expressed about ineffective citizens' involvement around several areas. A key one relates to the DLEs which have witnessed consistent apathy, characterized by low voter turnouts in elections held since the inception of current local governance system in 1988. Each of the DLEs from 1988/1989, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2015, 2019 to 2023, has recorded far below 50 percent voter turnouts (Ayee, 2004; ILGS, 2023). Major reasons adduced to the situation include citizens' perceived poor performance by the MMDAs (Ayee, 2004; Ofei-Aboagye, 2008; ILGS, 2023), unsatisfactory representation by elected members at the MMDAs (MWFA, 2015) and citizens limited access to information on the DLEs (Faisal, 2023).

Representation of women and persons with disabilities (PWDs) in the DLEs on the 2023 Election, the Chairperson of the Electoral Commission (EC) Jean Mensah revealed that 95.9 percent of the 6,243 persons elected as assembly members were males, while females constituted 4.1 percent. On PWDs, 73 persons comprising 55 males and 18 females, won the elections (ILGS, 2023). For Jean Mensah, the situation has prevailed because traditionally, women, the youth and PWDs, have been subjected to political discrimination and marginalization. A major consequence of the situation is a seeming threat posed to the attainment of the objectives of Ghana's Affirmative Action Law of 2024 and SDGs goal 5. As the Law and the SDG highlight the importance of gender equity in governance and support Ghana's obligations under international frameworks for gender equality, there is a justifiable fear that if drastic measures are not taken towards stemming the tide of the low representation of women in Ghana's local governance system, their attainment would be far-fetched.

The Ghanaian media holds an enormous power to advocate improved civic participation in the DLEs and the equal rights for political participation by the marginalized sectors of the society. However, the mainstream media, particularly radio, have been found to be paying inadequate attention to local governance issues and cannot be relied upon for the advocacy (MFWA, 2015; Naaikuur, 2020; Naaikuur et al, 2022). These findings point to the need to examine whether CR in Ghana can make a difference in the advocacy.

1.2 Research Questions

- i. How are community CRs in Ghana promoting citizens participation in DLEs?
- ii. What strategies have CRs in Ghana adopted through the localization of the SDGs to promote the election of women, youth and PWDs to the MMDAs during the 2023 DLEs?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Clarifications

2.1.1. Civic Participation in Local Governance

The term political participation has been variously defined. It involves "... the process of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies. To Kpentey, (2019), political participation refers to the active engagement of people or groups in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. It involves institutional mechanisms that enable individuals to express their voice and vote in policy decisions, leading to tangible changes in governance and service provision (Hyden et al., 2002). The most direct conceptualization of the term to this study can be said to be the one by Crook and Manor (1998), which see political participation as referring to collective actions that include election related activities such as voting and campaigning that are oriented towards influencing the representatives in government.

Similarly, there is no single conceptualization of local governance participation. Gaventa and Valderrama (1999) refer to the involvement of community members in decision-making processes at the grassroots level. Kpentey (2019) sees it as a movement to foster grassroots participation that allows citizens to influence policies and decisions that shape their lives and communities. Participation in local government processes aims to enable citizens, including the marginalized and the poor to be directly linked to institutions and structures of local government systems within which their rights to participation are legally guaranteed. Sianes (2017) add that through participation, local people can contribute their capacities in deliberative decision-making about how economic and social resources are being allocated, delivered, used, and maintained.

As this study focuses on local democratic elections, the view of Crook and Manor (1998) which touches on voter education and electoral debates that are geared towards influencing citizens' representation in local governance, is most applicable.

2.1.2 Sustainable Development Goals and its Localization

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a global initiative that evolved from earlier efforts, notably the Millennium Agenda, which aimed at combating poverty and its severe effects (Marten, 2019). Launched in 2000,



the Millennium Agenda encouraged wealthier Global North Countries to support the development of poorer Global South Nations through Official Development Assistance (ODA). The target was to commit 0.7% of donor countries' gross domestic product (GDP) to reduce poverty by half by 2015 (Clemens & Moss, 2007).

Despite its ambitions, the Millennium Agenda made limited success in achieving its goals (Sianes, 2017). This shortfall prompted calls for a reformed global development strategy as 2015 approached. In response, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) officially adopted the document titled "Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", which later became known as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, popularly referred to as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This agenda introduced a comprehensive and inclusive strategy aimed at addressing a wide range of global challenges, including climate change, labour markets, urbanization, and health (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2015). The core commitment of the 2030 Agenda is to "leave no one behind," a goal that depends on unprecedented cooperation and dedication from the international community as well as local support.

One key element of the 2030 Agenda is the localization of the SDGs. Localizing the SDGs refers to the role of regional and local governments in executing the 17 global goals (Marten, 2019). Specifically, it recognizes sub-national contexts in achieving the 2030 Agenda by setting goals, determining methods of implementation, and using indicators to assess and track progress. Localization should be viewed holistically, extending beyond local government institutions to encompass all local stakeholders, including civil society, traditional authorities, religious organizations, academia, the private sector, and other key players actively engaged in development efforts (UNDP, 2015). Localization offers a more accurate reflection of local communities' progress, giving a clearer overall picture of achievements at the local level (Naaikuur et al., 2022).

The Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments in 2018 emphasized that localization involves more than adapting global goals to local contexts. It requires political will, collaboration with local communities, and the identification of solutions that address both local and global challenges. The localization process is seen as critical for the success of the SDGs, as it ensures full community, city, and regional ownership of the goals.

As the SDGs focus on human well-being, environmental sustainability, and inclusivity, their successful implementation depends on active participation at the community level. Local communities must take centre stage in realizing these goals, with each nation working to improve the quality of life for citizens, particularly those in remote areas (Diedong & Naaikuur, 2023). In other words, the success of the localization of the SDGs depends on active participation from local communities. In this regard, the media and especially local media can play a crucial role in the SDGs localization in the developing countries, Ghana included.

2.2 Theoretical Review: Media as Civic Forum for Political Participation

Media and political participation can be linked to the civic-forum function of the media, according to Norris (2006), who has been credited with providing a conceptual framework for definite definitions of the media's role in democracy. Norris (2006); Norris & Odugbemi, 2010) argues that the media provides a forum for political debate and facilitates electoral choices and actions. The author maintains that free media can promote free elections by guaranteeing access to the airwaves for campaigns by opposition parties. The information provided to citizens can enable them compare and evaluate the retrospective record, prospective policies and leadership characteristics of parties and candidates (Odugbemi & Norris, 2010). This implies that when media are controlled by a certain interest, they will tend to favour certain political parties and those of their controllers at the expense of the principle of equal access to all political interests (Naaikuur, 2020).

This study adopts this theory to investigate the role CRs in Ghana play in the democratic governance of the country, particularly in promoting the DEL in 2023 through the localization of the SDGs. Therefore, data analysis will be guided by the facilitative role of the radio stations in civic and political education in ways that link the elections to the SDGs-aspirations of local communities aimed to improve voter turnouts and in advocating the rights of women, youth and PWDs to put up themselves to be elected to the MMDAs. Also, the theory will guide in assessing how the CRs provided opportunities for on-air debates amongst the candidates using the SDGs to influence electoral choices by local voters.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study is grounded in the interpretivist research paradigm. The study adopts a qualitative research methodological approach to explore the role of CR facilitating DLEs in rural communities in Ghana. Utilizing a case study design, the study focuses on selected CR stations which were involved localizing the SDGs under the auspices of the GCR and the Crossing Borders project to link the SDGs to 2023 DLEs. By focusing on selected CR stations, it



facilitates a detailed understanding of their unique contributions and methods, as well as the complex interactions between CR programming in facilitating district-level election (Stake, 2010).

3.2 Sampling Strategy

Five GCRN-member stations were purposively chosen based on their active engagement in foregrounding the SDGs in Ghana through leveraging the district-level elections and the relative successes of their activities. To ensure geographic representation in the selection of the CRs, the country was divided into two clusters, namely, Northern and Southern. Radio Guruni and Radio Bongo, located in the Upper East Region and Radio Lom, in the North-east Region were selected to form the Northern-sector cluster. Royals FM and Radio Ada located in the Bono-East and Greater Accra Regions respectively, were chosen to represent the Southern cluster.

The study respondents were also purposely sampled. At the radio stations' level, two key informants for the interviews. These were the Heads of the Stations and Project Focal Persons (PFPs) who played key roles in the project. A community within the broadcast zone of each of the CRs was selected. From them, eight members from groups known as the Community Youth Task Teams (CYTTs) that had been purposely formed to actively leverage the DLEs the project activities in the local communities were also selected. These, who constituted the study Focus Group Participants (FGP) were made up of 4 males and 4 females. They were those who actively leveraged the DLEs to foreground the SDG localization in their communities.

The selection targeted communities in which women, youth and PWDs either stood for the 2023 Election or those in which community engagements or interfaces were held for the election campaigns based on the SDGs.

At the GCRN level, the GCRN-Crossing Borders Project Focal Person was also selected for the study.

3.3 Unit of Analysis

The individual CRs and the other study participants were the unit of analysis focusing on strategies adopted in leveraging the localization of the SDGs to encourage the participation of women, youth and PWDs in the 2023 Election and the impact.

3.4 Data collection

Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were used in collecting the data. The FGDs were organized to harvest collective insights from community members on the SDGs-DLE activities. This method was selected for its ability to generate interactive discussions and capture diverse viewpoints (Hennink, 2007), especially regarding the impact of linking the SDGs to the Election. Thus, the approach was employed to capture insights from those directly involved in the projects. The FGPs were grouped based on gender to ensure balanced and inclusive representation of views.

In total, 6 key informant interviews were conducted at the radio stations' level using interview guides whilst 5 FGDs comprising 40 participants were organized involving the CYTTs. Each FGD session was moderated using a guide with open-ended questions to encourage free-flowing dialogue.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis, guided by the study's objectives. The data was categorized according to patterned responses related to the research objective, with responses analyzed and organized under themes that emerged in the course of the study. This approach provided both a broad view of the data and detailed insights into key aspects relevant to the study's aims (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Study participants were informed about the study's goals, their rights, and the voluntary nature of participation. By this the researcher aimed to obtain their informed permission. Transcripts and reports were cleared of any personal information. All documentation used pseudonyms. During interviews and observations, local norms and power structures were followed, particularly when interacting with queen mothers and chiefs. Participants were guaranteed the freedom to leave at any moment without facing any repercussions.

3.7 Validation Strategies

Several validation techniques were used to increase the study's credibility and dependability. Through cross-checking, the researcher confirmed the accuracy of all the data sources gathered from observations, interviews, and focus group discussions. This made it possible to draw stronger conclusions. To evaluate logic, coherence, and alignment with the research objectives, participants were given the chance to review and validate their interview transcripts, preliminary interpretations, preliminary findings, and themes. This process, known as member checking, also included



peer debriefing. To document positionality, biases, and new interpretations during fieldwork, the researcher kept a reflective journal (Stake, 2010). These strategies made sure that the study's conclusions were ethically sound, believable, and culturally anchored.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 CR as a Platform for Civic Education in the 2023 District-level Elections

A key finding of the study points to a central role of the CRs in setting an agenda for undertaking a vigorous civic education on the 2023 DLEs. This aimed to address voter apathy, grounding the election on communities' SDGs-aspirations and empowering marginalized women, youth and PWDs to put themselves up for the election. A communication strategy was designed in a participatory way involving all the participating GCRN-stations in the project. Led by the GCRN, a guide for a collaborative approach involving key stakeholders and for local specific content design particularly in linking the SDGs to the 2023 Election, amongst other key elements, were agreed upon in a workshop. The approach was to achieve a level of standardization amongst the stations for the achievement of effectiveness and efficiency (GCRN Project Focal Person, May, 2024).

For the implementation of the strategy, the civic education was based on collaborations between the GCRN-member stations and local offices of the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE), and the Electoral Commission (EC), two key stakeholders in electioneering in the country. It also involved the District Gender Officers responsible for promoting inclusivity in local governance issues. The NCCE, EC and the Gender Desk personnel were equipped with knowledge on the SDGs to enable them effectively make the linkages to the 2023 Election. The radio stations provided airtime and mobilized community engagements, whilst the three partner organizations provided relevant expertise in serving as resource persons. The radio stations were also responsible for facilitating the programmes production (Radio level Key Informant, May 2025).

According to the Key Informants at the radio stations, three common approaches were adopted in rolling out the educational content. To tackle the canker of electoral apathy, the programmes highlighted the importance of the DLEs and citizens' rights and responsibilities to vote. The second approach strategically linked the elections to the SDGs, conscientizing local communities to the effect that the realization of their SDGs-aspirations in terms of meeting their basic needs depending on their participation in the polls and their electoral choices in the crucial elections. From interviews and FGs, the SDGs-aspirations expressed in rural communities, centered on the lack of access to potable water, quality education, general impoverishment, gender inequalities, amongst others. Radio programmes built around the SDGs guided the audiences to discern candidates who demonstrated passion to champion their communities' specific SDGs-needs as articulated in the campaign messages. The main formats of the radio programmes were drama, interviews, quizzes, panel discussions, debates amongst the contending candidates, and phone-in sessions.

Added to the radio broadcast were direct community engagements. Teams of radio producers, the NCCE, EC and Gender Desk officers visited selected communities for face-to-face interactions. These were follow-ups to the radio programmes meant to deepen the on-air discussions. The durbars offered important opportunities, particularly for people who could not phone into the radio programmes to actively participate in the communication processes in the elections.

The campaign reportedly brought about increased voter turnouts in the 2023 Election over previous ones in many of the study sites. Participants expressed that the SDGs-based aspect of the education provided special motivation for voters. A key Informant at Royals FM indicated: "Voters in the 2023 DLE found new reasons to participate in MMDAs elections because of the SDGs" ... it was even nicknamed SDGs-voting' (Key Informant, May 2025). At a Focus Group Discussion at the Lomobiawe Electoral, Big Ada's District, where Radio Ada is located, participants agreed: "We came out in numbers to vote because we saw that if we failed to vote in this crucial election, we would be denying ourselves our SDGs-benefits" (FGD Participant, May 2025).

Although figures on the increased turnouts could not readily be obtained, there were stories of communities which had vowed not to vote in the election due to poor performance of assembly members. However, owing to the intensive education by their CRs, voter turnouts rather leaped. For instance, a Key Informant at Radio Lom estimated an increase of about 48% turnout as against turn out below 20% in previous elections.

4.1.2 The Impact of SDG-Focused Election Campaigns on Electoral Outcomes

Among the overarching themes coming out of the research is the strong influence of CR-led, SDG-focused election campaigns on outcomes in the 2023 Elections. The findings indicate that the CRs actively encouraged aspirants to align their manifestos with community SDG aspirations, ensuring that candidates prioritized community development goals over personal or parochial interests. Across the radio station-levels interviews, it was gathered that based on the two-pronged approach that combined the on-air broadcast with community engagements described under the previous



section, the CRs allocated free airtime to feature candidates on their airwaves. They were asked questions on the SDGs to test their knowledge and for them to demonstrate how they would achieve the SDG-aspirations of their communities once they voted into the various MMDAs. Phone-in sessions followed for on-air interactions between the candidates and the listening public. This approach compelled the candidates to get thoroughly familiar with the Goals SDGs before appearing on air. One Focus Participant joked that ‘those candidates who showed no or little knowledge of the SDGs were embarrassed on air’ (FGP at Radio Lomo, May 2025).

The data from the Key Informants at the radio stations showed that for community engagement, the Community Youth Task Teams (CYTTs) organized the durbars for communities to further engage candidates on the SDGs. In each of the sessions, the candidates were made to present their election manifestoes. After that the communities scrutinized the presentations by challenging how the strategies outlined would ensure the attainment of their SDGs-aspirations for the improvements of their living conditions. The study shows that the SDG-focused campaign agenda provided unique platforms for communities to examine developmental issues in their areas in the context of the 2023 DLE. The electorates had the capacity to make informed choices by electing candidates in terms of whom they thought were more committed to addressing the developmental needs of their community.

Both FGDs and key informant interviews across the study sites lauded the impact of CR's SDG-focused election campaigns on the 2023 DLE. The participants reported that the campaigns influenced both candidates and voters to prioritize their communities' SDG goals, eventually influencing the electoral outcomes. In a FGD at Nanyiar community under the broadcast area of Radio Lom, participants confirmed that the SDGs-centered campaigning helped aspirants recognize community development challenges related to the SDGs and aligned their campaign messages accordingly. As a result, some the youth, who took this approach seriously, won the elections. Similarly, FGD participants at the Kalbeo, a Radio Guruni's community, explained that: “The aspiring Assembly woman won the elections through the presentation of her election manifesto-reading forum during the community engagement. The way the aspirant engaged in a question-and-answer session focused on our community SDG-aspirations, we had no option than to vote for here.” (FGD, May 2025).

4.1.3 Enhancing Youth, Women, and PWD Participation in District-level Elections

The 2023 SDGs-DLEs paid a special attention to, and offered special opportunities to female, youth and PWDs candidates. This was to ensure the GCRN's deliberate policy to support female candidates to help attain gender parity in the MMDAs and to give practical meaning to the concept of CR privileging the marginalized, was brought to reality (GCRN-CBs Project Focal Person, May 2025).

The CRs-level participants explained that the civic education focused on espousing the rights of women, youth and PWDs to fully participate in all political processes in Ghana, particularly the DLEs as enshrined in the 1992 Constitution of the country and the Universal Declarations on Human Rights. By the approach, all forms of discrimination against the participation of these marginalized people in all life's spheres, were denounced. The station-level interviewees further expressed the belief that by adopting these broad strategies, the hitherto excluded and discriminated against categories of people, were made to discover their dignity and to engage in the election.

In addition to the general airtime for all candidates, the women, youth and PWDs candidates were given special airtime for their campaigning. The findings indicate that the special support provided by CR stations to the female, youth and PWDs was key to ensuring that for the first time in the history of some communities covered by GCRNs-member stations, a number of youths, women, and visually impaired persons were elected as assembly members. Notably, two women won in the Wenchi Municipal Electoral Area where Royals FM is located, and 1 at Anafobisi Electoral Area in Bongo District, part of the broadcast areas of Radio Guruni. A Key Informant at Royals FM revealed that the only Assembly female candidate who contested at the Akete-Wurompo Electoral Area “beat her male contenders miserably because she impressed on the electorates with her knowledge on the SDGs issues and could relate the SDGs to the community priorities needs, health, water, education, etc.” (Key Informant, May 2025). For the PWDs category, a visually impaired person won in the Lomobiase Electoral Area in Big Ada District, Radio Ada's broadcast area. The youth category saw a significant number of them winning the elections. For instance, a Key Informant at Royals FM shared that: “All elected leaders in the 2023 District-Level Elections in the Akete-Wurompo Electoral Area are youthful, aging between 22 and 24, each being younger than any member in history of the Assemblies” (Key Informant Interview, May 2025). In a FGD at the Akete-Wurompo Electoral Area, a participant somewhat jubilated: “Now, the Akete-Wurompo District Assembly is full of young people. No more old people. We have come to realize that the old aren't vibrant enough to pursue our SDG aspirations” (FGD, May 2025).

4.2 Discussion

The study provides significant insights into the role of CR in addressing some of the key challenges associated with participatory local governance in Ghana. The civic education campaign presents a model of creativity on how CR



can leverage the SDGs to tackle the challenges of electoral apathy (Ayee, 2004; ILG, 2023). The higher voter turn outs reported across the communities of the CRs, are indicative of the ability of CRs to gradually change the narrative of the voter apathy. Besides, although CR in Ghana has maintained a long tradition of contributing both to national and local level elections through regular civic education programme (Naaikuur (2020); Faisal, 2023), the 2023 Election- SDGs localization linkages has stepped up the awareness of local communities on the SDGs to their ability to use the knowledge to demand good local governance for development. The strategy can be said to have produced a combined effect of enhancing citizen participation in the 2023 Election and promoting governance accountability to local people. The element of accountability is evident in sitting members of the Assemblies in some communities reportedly losing in their positions in Election because they had failed to demonstrate ample knowledge in the SDGs during the campaigns. Many study participants expressed the expectation that the MMDAs were now to intentionally factor the SDGs-aspirations into their development plans towards improving the living standards of local people.

The study has also shown that CR in Ghana presents a viable force in confronting the marginalization of vulnerable sectors of the Ghanaian society in the DLEs. This is evidenced in the historic electoral victories in the 2023 DLE across communities by some women, youth and PWDs. By empowering these hitherto political and socially least-voiced and marginalized, CRs in Ghana can be said to be bringing to reality their role of promoting the rights of these people to communicate and participate in public decision making (Fraser & Estrada, 2001); Gumucio-Dagron 2001). Particularly, the increasing representation of women in Ghana's local governance, has positive implications on the attainments of the goals of the Affirmative Action Law and SDG 5 both of which broadly seek to address systemic gender disparities and enhance female representation in governance. Furthermore, local governance is expected to be more responsive to the needs of women, youth and PWDs because their elected representatives would be minded to influence policy formulation to that effect.

It is important to bring attention to two key operational principles of CR that have enabled the CRs in Ghana to promote local governance in ways better than the commercial broadcasters in the country. Particularly relating to the 2023 Election, perhaps the greatest strength of the CRs rests in the participatory approach adopted in planning and implementing the activities on the Election. Involving the radio stations, the NCEE, EC and Gender Desk Officers at the MMDAs that are key stakeholders in the electioneering process in the country, ensured goodwill, support, and the pooling of expertise to deliver credible education on the DLE and the SDGs linkages. The approach also ensured participation through the on-air phone-in programmes and the community face-to-face engagements. The strategy reflects the participatory ethos of CR as espoused by scholars (see e.g. Gumucio-Dagron, 2001, Fraser & Estrada, 2001; Buckley et al; 2008; Bosch, 2014) all of which are pointing to CR as a tool capable of mobilizing its community to deliberate on and find solutions to their most pressing developmental challenges.

The second principle relates to CR's not-for-profit orientation that sets it apart from its commercial counterparts. Rather than the profit-making focus of commercial broadcasting, the non-profit stations of CR safeguards it from getting overwhelmed with commercial imperatives and losing its community-service purpose (Fraser & Estrada, 2001; Buckley et al.; 2007; Bosch 2014). The non-profit imperative has been a significant influencer of the attitude of CRs in Ghana towards the promotion of the country's local governance (Naaikuur, 2020). Their prioritization of local governance issues, including the provision of free airtime is a clear testimony of the CRs adherence to the non-profit ethos. As commercial radio stations typically design their programmes to attract advertising (Alumuku, 2007), Naaikuur (2020); Naaikuur & Diedong 2021; Naaikuur et al., 2022) found that in Ghana, they have often shown limited interest compared to those of CRs in the pursuit of local governance issues. Unlike CRs largely subordinating commercial interests in favour of their dedication to public service during DLEs, commercial radio stations have often regarded such seasons as what they term 'money harvesting time' seen in the exorbitant selling of airtime.

However, the study found a key challenge in the execution of activities related to the SDGs-DLEs. This relates mainly to the reliance on volunteer radio producers, a move occasioned by the fact stated earlier that the SDGs-DLEs component was not funded by the Crossing Border's project. Safe financial stipends for transportation for them, there was virtually no compensation for the long hours spent on the production of programmes and on the community engagements. All the radio station level respondents reported a general waning of interest amongst the volunteers over time. Consequently, many volunteers often missed their on-air and community interface schedules so that the number of planned community visits had to be cut down to only one or two communities for each station. Given the widely spread geographical electoral areas, the impact of the campaign was relatively limited.

The challenges associated with volunteerism and their impact on CR's sustainability come into a sharp focus here. As a cardinal global principle, CRs use volunteers for a wide range of activities, including programme production. This gives a sense of community participation but also seeks to ensure operational sustainability given the financial difficulties that characterize CR (Fraser & Estrada, 2001; Buckley et al., 2007; Jallof, 2012; Bosch, 2014). However, this reliance on volunteerism has presented one of the thorniest issues associated with CR. A central issue in Africa, including Ghana, is that most volunteers are unemployed school leavers who come to CRs with often hidden and



unrealistic financial and employment motives (Atutiga, 2020). Pretending they are genuinely seeking to contribute to community development through the radio, once their objectives are not being met, typically, their continual services cannot be guaranteed (Diedong & Naaikur, 2023).

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study set out on two objectives, namely, to find out how CRs in Ghana are promoting citizens' participation in DLEs and what strategies have adopted through the localization of the SDGs to promote the election of women, youth and PWDs to the MMDAs during the 2023 DLEs.

Based on the findings, the study concludes that CR in Ghana has been at the forefront of shaping DLEs in the country. The evidence shows that the over years, GCRN-stations in fulfillment of the non-profit ethos of CR had been contributing to the local and national elections through donation of free air-time for the campaigns, which have benefited female candidates.

On the 2023 Election, linking it to the localization of the SDGs added a new impetus to CRs contribution to that election. Through a well-orchestrated, participatory and inclusive approach involving participating radio stations and local level governmental stakeholders, a vigorous civic education combining on-air broadcast and community engagements were undertaken to galvanize communities for higher voter turnouts and particularly to encourage voters to vote based on their SDGs-aspirations. The results of the education was significantly higher voter turnouts in CRs communities and the election of some women, youth and PWDs into MMDAs across the broadcasting areas of GCRN-stations.

However, it also emerged that the volunteer workers at the radio stations were slacking into apathy in fulfilling their on-air and off-air schedules as their enthusiasm waned due to the lack of financial rewards, a situation that went to limit the impact of the activities a little.

5.2 Recommendations

It is clear from the volunteer related challenges discussed above that there is a need for financial resources to support the efforts of CR in Ghana in sustaining their activities to promote local governance in general and DLEs in particular. Therefore, a call can be made to government agencies, civil society organizations, and donors for the support CR, which should be channeled into civic education programs for future district-level elections. Also, future DLEs should emphasize SDGs-based local governance, with CR stations playing a lead role in educating candidates and voters on community development priorities alignment with the SDGs.

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