

Ghana Policy Report Summary



InterMedia conducted in-depth interviews with 15 senior Ghanaian policy actors, comprising mostly senior politicians and bureaucrats, as well as a few influential figures outside government. The interviews focused on how the policy actors gather, assess, share and disseminate information critical to development policy work. The aim was to understand how external stakeholders, particularly members of the

international development community, can most effectively engage and assist these policymakers.

The policy actors showed substantial overlap in information source preferences and media use habits, as well as in the ways they share information with fellow policy actors. They highlighted several actions that development organizations could take to improve the policy information environment. They also described many challenges in communicating with the public about development issues, as well as offering some creative solution.

Habits of Gathering Information

The policy actors rely heavily on Ghanaian radio “news headline” programs, newspapers and radio call-in shows to inform policy priorities and set agendas, even though they are frustrated with a perceived lack of accuracy and objectivity of local media. All policy actors said they compare multiple news sources to balance political biases of various outlets and to confirm the accuracy of reports. For coverage of world news, policy actors tend to favor a few prominent global channels such as CNN and BBC, and to a lesser extent Al Jazeera.

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information needs. For example, they tend to use the internet as a one-stop source for current news (GhanaWeb, and to a lesser extent MyJoyOnline, were cited as favored destinations) and as a resource for answering specific questions.

They use email and mobile phones to communicate more rapidly with colleagues and stakeholders. However, **respondents reported scant use of news and information services delivered by third parties via email or SMS.**

Policy actors monitor public opinion in their constituencies through frequent mobile phone calls from and to constituents, periodic visits to the constituency, and reports about the “word on the street” from informal contact networks.

High value is placed on examples or case studies based on the experiences of other governments and international development organizations to inform the Ghanaian policy design and implementation process. Such examples typically are found via the internet or through workshops and briefings with global partners.

Formal institutional channels for gathering policy information are generally considered slow, prompting many policymakers to rely mostly on informal networks to access policy-relevant statistics, publications and other official input.

Although policy actors see strong informational value in the many policy-oriented gatherings they must attend (e.g., workshops, seminars and stakeholder consultations), they complained that these formats are costly—both in time and money—and suggested that ICT solutions might allow them to get similar information at lower cost.

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The Role of Global Development Partners

Perceptions of the role of international development organizations in the domestic policy process vary widely, from primarily technical resources, to advocacy roles, to policy implementers, to simply sources of requests for country information. Similarly, descriptions of information sharing with such organizations ranged from regular formal consultations to sporadic ad hoc discussions.

Some policy actors expressed frustration that development organizations tend to devote more time to identifying problems or policy shortcomings than going to the next step and offering a menu of constructive solutions.

Recommendations to Development Partners for Reaching Out to Policymakers

The interviews yielded a number of observations about how global development organizations can improve their outreach efforts. Most important was to understand the political culture, notably the important role of personal contacts as opposed to formal networks, and the oft-expressed need to cross-check and verify information.

- Ally with respected local groups who can both support and corroborate arguments and information presented to policymakers. In particular, Ghanaian policy actors say they tend to pay more attention to a certain view if it has the backing of well-represented national organizations (of citizens, businesses, local citizens, etc).

- As mentioned above, Ghanaian policymakers are hungry for instructive examples of policy experiences from other countries and settings. Development groups should make such information readily available, and make sure this information relates to local circumstances.
- Recognize the importance of, and try to work with or through, media conduits of policy information that tend to catch policy actors' attention. Notably, policy actors stressed that Ghanaian radio stations and newspapers play a major role in setting the agenda and are thus a central part of the domestic political debate.
- Use formats for presenting information that policy actors tend to prefer—especially concise, written (or text) briefs that summarize key points, supplemented by regular face-to-face meetings. Lengthy workshops or conferences were viewed as less efficient modes of information exchange.
- Contribute information at the right time, particularly at the earliest possible time—policymakers say that the earlier input is received, the more it influences policy. It is therefore incumbent upon development organizations and other interested parties (such as research institutions) to stay abreast of the Ghanaian political calendar as well as the course of events with respect to particular regulations, legislation or public initiatives.
- Help connect on-the-ground implementers and high-level policymakers wherever possible, to improve the flow of evidence-based development information upward from the grassroots and enhance the “street credibility” of proposed policies. This will also help to allay policy actors' concerns that less-represented groups will be left out of the policy process. *One suggestion for doing so: sponsor local focus groups on particular policy issues or initiatives and make the results available to policy actors.*

Recommendations for Helping Policymakers Get the Information They Need

Many of the policymakers and influencers noted that improving the flow of policy information is worth only as much as the quality of the information made available. Interviewees also described an information paradox: although they would like more of certain types of information (including more hard data about the country and its inhabitants, more timely reports of activities, broader input from stakeholders), they also feel overwhelmed by the volume of information coming in and their limited capacity to sort through it to find the most relevant and important elements. They urged development organizations to help in the following ways:

- Bridge the development data gap to facilitate more informed decisions.

- Improve information management systems and organizational capacity, and invest in supporting infrastructure.
- Devise methods to help government officials retain institutional knowledge, especially during periods of political transition when the policy baton is often dropped.
- Support the training of skilled, impartial journalists who are capable of both judging the importance of various development issues and turning stories about these issues into compelling content for general readerships.

Information Exchanges with the Public and Other Stakeholders

- The main challenges cited by policy actors in disseminating policy information to the public were illiteracy, multilingualism, lack of interest in development policy issues and the limited capacity or willingness of local media to accurately disseminate such information.
- Rather than try to spread policy information through the media, some policy actors suggested direct methods work better. These include buying radio airtime for direct access to the audience and arranging policymakers' appearances on radio call-in shows.
- They consider it neither particularly efficient nor effective at this stage to use newer ICTs (email, cell phones, SMS) to

disseminate information to the public and many other domestic stakeholders.

- Creative strategies for reaching illiterate and/or disinterested members of the public—such as using local dialects when delivering messages, holding large public events, and creating awareness of development issues through drama or music—were encouraged by several interviewees. Policy actors said traditional authorities, such as chiefs or queen mothers, are important for reaching out to the public on certain family- or property-focused issues.
- Although policy actors rely on organized interest groups for policy input, some also voiced doubt about the utility of widely used stakeholder consultations that feature such groups. They feared that relatively unorganized but nevertheless important stakeholders (such as youth or those with HIV/AIDS) would typically be left out.
- Feedback from the public and other domestic stakeholders on implemented policies was described as more forthcoming than input into policy design; alongside organized forums, individuals said they use a number of informal channels to make their concerns heard.

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