

Resourcing local government in Ghana: the potential of volunteering to deliver basic services

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Abstract

Both local and foreign volunteers have been involved in community development activities in Ghana. However, there is a dearth of research on the perceived and real impacts of volunteers in delivering services, reasons for volunteering, the potential of volunteering to supplement the human and financial resources of local governments in Ghana, and the conditions required for more successful outcomes. This qualitative study examined volunteering activities across 15 communities of the Komenda-Edina-Eguafo-Abirem (KEEA) Municipality in Ghana's Central Region. It found that volunteering empowered the people, triggered self-help initiatives and improved local people's knowledge on health and environmental issues. However, there are challenges in finding political and social space for volunteers within the current local government system. The study recommends efforts to address that issue.

Keywords: Volunteering, community development, decentralisation, local government, Ghana

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Introduction – the emerging phenomenon of volunteerism

Volunteering has become a platform that provides people with new sets of skills and experiences while they contribute to finding solutions to society's problems (Morrow-Howell et al. 2009; Butcher 2010; Handy and Mook 2011). As a concept, 'volunteering' is subject to varying public perceptions and different meanings across environments and disciplines (Katz and Rosenberg 2005; Hustinx et al. 2010). However, the core of volunteering activities, as theorised by Callanan and Thomas (2005) is based on individuals offering goodwill services in an effort to improve the lives of communities.

In Africa, the phenomenon of international voluntary service has been growing in the last three decades (Graham et al. 2012), with young volunteers, mainly from developed countries, providing various forms of support and local development service to communities in host countries. Unlike the international inflow of volunteers, internal volunteering activities in African countries have been limited – although the situation has improved in the last ten years with a gradual upsurge across the continent (Hird-Younger and Simpson 2013). Increased attention to volunteering activities in African countries has been attributed to their potential and/or actual contributions to the development of host countries (Graham et al. 2012; Otoo and Amuquandoh 2014a).

Studies on volunteerism in Africa are still limited, but show that it can contribute to community mobilisation, knowledge sharing, and services such as the provision of housing, health, education, water and sanitation (Bargeman et al. 2016). The emerging discourse points to its potential to mobilise human, financial and social capital towards development, where mainstream public and private interventions are lacking or inadequate (Devereux 2008; Kambutu and Nganga 2008; Wu 2011). As a result, the activities and roles of volunteers are gradually being formalised, institutionalised and recognised in many countries around the world (Brown and Green 2015; United Nations Economic and Social Council 2001). The underlying assumption is that volunteering and 'doing good' will at least lead to a positive transformation in the local or host community (Bussell and Forbes 2002; Haddad 2007; Unstead-Joss 2008; Butcher and Smith 2010; McCauley et al. 2021).

Discussion of volunteerism in Ghana has focused on a number of issues: the motivation(s) and constraints of volunteers (Otoo and Amuquandoh 2014b); the role of women and women's groups in volunteering activities in rural Ghana (Hird-Younger and Simpson 2013); local knowledge and engagement with volunteers; and the general impacts of volunteer tourism (Bargeman et al. 2016). Also, in a case study exploring the activities and impacts of volunteers in Tamale in the Northern Region of Ghana, Bargeman et al. (2016) pointed to the role volunteering played in raising standards of basic education, as well as providing childcare support services for selected foster homes and orphanages.

Nevertheless, while the perceived and actual impacts of volunteers and their activities in Ghana have received some attention in local research (Otoo 2014; Otoo and Amuquandoh 2014a, 2014b; Bargeman

et al. 2016), several issues have yet to be thoroughly discussed. These include the reasons behind volunteering, the potential of volunteering to help fill human and financial resource gaps, and conditions for successful volunteering. Many of the services in which volunteers are engaged are the responsibility of Ghana's local government units but are not being provided due to constraints on human and financial resources (Republic of Ghana 2007, 2014a, 2014b). Many studies have explored different ways in which local government authorities might bridge this gap, but the potential of volunteerism to help resource local governments has not been adequately researched to date.

This study contributes to the discourse by exploring the actual and potential benefits of adopting and mainstreaming volunteerism within Ghana's local government system, as a way of boosting human and financial resources to support development efforts. Using a case study carried out in Komenda-Edina-Eguafo-Abirem (KEEA) Municipality, located in Ghana's Central Region, the following questions are addressed:

- (a) What are participants' reasons for volunteering?
- (b) In which specific activities are volunteers engaged?
- (c) In what ways have they made an impact in KEEA Municipality?
- (d) What conditions would make their work more successful?

Drawing on KEEA's experience with volunteering from 2010 to 2021, the study delves into the human and financial resource challenges in the current local government system and analyses the various roles of volunteers, looking mainly at international volunteering that involves young people between the ages of 18 and 35. The authors' objective is to explore the potential of volunteerism to contribute to social provision at the community level – delivering services which would in principle be provided by sub-national structures if they had the resources.

Models of volunteering and their contributions to development

According to GHK (2010, p. 49), *“International and European reports and studies reinforce the concept that volunteering is a matter of individual choice, [and] is done without thought of remuneration or reward and other benefits.”* This concept is echoed by the European Union's commonly used definition, which explains the term volunteering to cover *“all forms of voluntary activity, whether formal or informal ... undertaken of a person's own free will, choice and motivation, and ... without concern for financial gain”*. Due to the dominance of volunteers from the developed world in communities in Ghana, several studies on the phenomenon refer to it as ‘volunteer tourism’ and define it to include various forms of travel such as internships (Bringle and Hatcher 2011), study tours (Heron 2005), student exchange programmes, charity work, medical and educational outreach services, and career break service periods (Lyons and Wearing 2008; Lyons et al. 2012). In any event, regardless of how volunteering is explained in the literature the phenomenon involves an influx of

young foreign nationals into Ghana to serve in various capacities in rural and emerging communities. In the last decade the country has received an annual average of more than 3,500 international volunteers (Boakye 2012).

In this paper we define volunteering as the free-will act of a person or a group, whether Ghanaian or international, who give their time, labour and expertise to provide community service to help improve conditions for people at the local level without receiving remuneration. This accords with the ideas of Callanan and Thomas (2005) and (GHK 2010). It is acknowledged, however, that some volunteers do receive some form of financial support, such as a living allowance, insurance, resettlement allowance, annual leave allowance, settling-in grant or travel expenses (United Nations Volunteers 2015), and that these types of ‘payment’ may create inequalities within volunteering. For example, in their work on Africa and the Middle East examining how the volunteering environment has been altered by increased remuneration, Smith et al. (2020) found hierarchies among volunteers in marginalised communities in the global South.

According to the literature, volunteering can occur under three models: north–south, south–south and volunteer tourism. North–south volunteering is when volunteers from industrialised countries in the global North volunteer in poor or developing countries or communities in the global South. This group of volunteers normally receive a stipend of some sort from their host countries (Caprara et al. 2016).

There is considerable evidence in the literature showing how north–south volunteering has made positive contributions to the lives of recipients. For example, US Government Peace Corps volunteers assist developing countries by applying their skills, education and experience to provide support in education, agriculture, health, trade, technology, environmental protection, women’s economic empowerment and community development, (Ango 2012; Quigley 2013). Similarly, in countries such as Tanzania and Mozambique international volunteers have been used to achieve strategic objectives in the areas of planning, microfinance and HIV-AIDS. Other positive effects are skills transfers (computer skills, research skills, banking skills, planning skills, analytical thinking) and innovation (Perold et al. 2011, pp. 106–107). Graham et al. (2012) found local volunteers performing in different capacities and roles critical to institution building and service provision in poor communities in Tanzania and Mozambique. Volunteering has also been credited with helping to build a confident and democratic Kenya (Wu 2011). And in Nepal, volunteers mobilised to assist existing staff in the field of health, agricultural development and engineering (Howard and Burns 2015).

According to Bussell and Forbes (2002) and Prouteau and Wolff (2008), volunteering helps to cultivate social relationships and can motivate individuals to make contributions that are not only meaningful but align to their own ideas of well-being in societies. In the 2018 edition of the United Nations *State of the World’s Volunteerism* report, volunteering was highlighted as a tool to enhance community resilience, drive social action through the mobilisation of people and organisations, and build trust and promote

social inclusion in the achievement of sustainable development (UNV 2018). This important role is further captured in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2016). In a study of civil society organisations (CSOs) from 70 countries around the world in 2011, it was found that the activities of volunteers contributed immensely to the adoption of the International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness (Gore 2013).

However, for volunteering to have a beneficial impact on programme delivery, a number of conditions need to be met. In a study focusing on Tanzania and Mozambique, Perold et al. (2011, p. 111) list those conditions as follows: involving staff in planning for the volunteer placement; ensuring that the placement matches a staff position that is unfilled; developing productive working relationships between international volunteers and permanent staff; international volunteers having a learning orientation towards the host organisation and respecting local staff rather than seeing themselves as being 'better than' or 'above' them; setting clear deliverables for the international volunteers against which their contributions can be assessed and measured; and ensuring that local staff are in a position to sustain any improvements that international volunteers might have made in the organisation.

Under the south–south model of volunteering one developing country sends volunteers to another (Caprara et al. 2016). According to Caprara et al. (2016, p. 7), organisations such as Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO) and the Southern Africa Trust have achieved positive impacts with this model. The focus of south–south volunteering includes *“building effective working partnerships by pairing young volunteers and linking various civil society organizations in different countries”*. A major condition for this model is the strong commitment to reciprocity by both sending and receiving countries. Evidence shows that southern and eastern African countries have utilised this model to build strong solidarity between them.

The volunteer tourism model as presented by Simpson (2004) focused on British young people between the ages of 18 and 20 who take a gap-year between school and university to travel and volunteer to work in developing countries. Apart from the young British, there are persons or groups of persons of other ages of diverse nationalities who also participate in volunteer tourism (Jamie 2021; Mensah et al. 2021). On the basis of the findings from volunteer tourists' work with children in South America, Simpson (2004, p. 682) made the argument that volunteer tourism has resulted in *“a construction of the world where there are simplistic boundaries between two places (ie that of the north and south) that perpetuates a simplistic ideal of development [that] legitimizes the validity of young unskilled international labour as a development solution.”*

Overall, the literature finds that volunteering is usually a positive phenomenon that can contribute to engendering development, especially in poor countries where capacity and financial resources to design and implement development projects are lacking. However, specific research is needed on how volunteers have made an impact in Ghana, the challenges they face and how volunteering can be

leveraged to resource local governments. The possibilities for volunteerism within Ghana's local government system are therefore discussed next.

The Ghanaian context

Ghana began its current decentralisation reforms in 1988. As at 2021, Ghana has 16 administrative regions with each having a regional coordinating council (RCC) as the highest authority. RCCs are responsible for monitoring, coordinating and evaluating the performance of the administrative districts, of which there are 260. In each administrative district, a district assembly is the main political authority (Republic of Ghana 1992, 1993). Depending on the population, the area is called a district (population of 75,000+), municipality (population of 95,000+), or metropolis (population of 250,000+). Collectively, the three types of assembly are known as 'MMDAs'. They have overall responsibilities for the development of areas under their jurisdiction, including general economic and social development, the construction of basic infrastructure and the provision of municipal works and services (Republic of Ghana 1993).

Ghana's decentralisation reforms have aimed at promoting quality relationships between state structures and citizens, shifting decision-making from the centre to the local level, and strengthening democracy (Ayee 2003; World Bank 2004; Ahmad and Brosio 2009; Binswanger-Mkhize and de Regt 2010). However, the evidence shows that, faced with huge responsibilities, local government authorities experience serious gaps in human and financial resources (Ahwoi 2010).

Adequate human resources are essential for an organisation's performance and efficiency (Elegbe 2010), and municipalities will only succeed in the delivery of services if they are staffed with sufficient and competent personnel (Gumede 2009). Many local governments suffer from inadequate staffing capacity as a result of budget constraints imposed by the central government (Cloete 2016). Studies show that many local government units in Ghana are unable to run their decentralised departments at full strength (Mensah et al. 2015; Sosu 2019). Another challenge is the low level of skills to undertake development activities (Ahwoi 2010; Arthur 2012). This lack of human capacity has led to donors, non-governmental organisations and other development agencies working with central government ministries on projects that might otherwise have been implemented with local resources.

The inadequate financial capacity of MMDAs is a fundamental issue (Mensah 2005; Sosu 2019). Although MMDAs are empowered by the Local Governance Act of 2016 (Act 936) and the 1992 Constitution of Ghana to levy and collect taxes, rates, duties and fees in their catchment area (Republic of Ghana 1992, 2016), weak local staffing capacities and inability to put in place appropriate legal and regulatory structures make it difficult for most of them to generate internal revenues. Again, there are statutory instruments in place to transfer financial resources from central government to local government authorities to help them perform their mandates, but these central government transfers do

not bring in much (Ayee 2003; Ahwoi 2010; Republic of Ghana 2016). The District Assemblies' Common Fund (DACF), now referred to as the District Assembly Common Fund Responsiveness Factor Grant (DACF-RFG), should be released from the central government to MMDAs every quarter (Ahwoi 2010). However, the disbursement of the DACF-RFG to MMDAs faces three main challenges. First, the DACF-RFG is woefully inadequate in the face of the many demands on MMDAs. Second, the monies to be transferred are always in arrears and are reduced by several deductions at source. Third, central government interference in local government decision-making is rife. Anaafo's (2018) review of legislative and administrative arrangements underpinning Ghana's local governance system revealed that local governments lack autonomy due to central government interference in the work of district chief executives (DCEs), as well as the fact that central government appoints 30% of members at each MMDA. As noted by Anaafo (2018), the president may override DCE decisions, and cause a DCE's removal from office or use other discretionary powers to render them powerless.

The potential value of volunteering

In one sense, volunteering has a place at the heart of Ghana's decentralised local government system: elected local government officials, referred to locally as assembly members, are supposed to be volunteers. According to Section 11(2) of the Local Governance Act 2016 (Act 936), assembly members are not paid a salary but only given sitting allowances (Republic of Ghana 2016). Nonetheless, the roles and activities of assembly members have been critical in the implementation and continuing evolution of local government (Adusei-Asante 2012). However, this expands the definition of volunteerism beyond what is discussed in this study.

More broadly, volunteering is already emerging as an important factor in local development and can produce significant benefits for local governments in Ghana, helping to fill gaps in resources and save on labour costs. In the last decade, many local government authorities across the country have received young volunteers, from foreign and local sources, who have provided support in the provision of social services in rural communities. These include volunteering in libraries, as community police, with fire brigades, and as park, arts and tax assistants. Other areas include assisting local government agencies in their daily administration, as well as improving community relations (Choudhury 2010). These volunteers usually work through non-state, not-for-profit, community-based and non-governmental organisations, at no or minimal cost to the communities.

Several areas can be identified where volunteering could play an expanded role. These are:

- 1) Emerging collaborations between local governments and civil society/non-governmental organisations to deliver services.
- 2) The provision of urban planning services at the local government level, an area beset by capacity issues due to a lack of qualified planners (World Bank 2015).

3) Management of local community emergencies like flooding and bushfires, which require large human resources to manage effectively both the emergencies and their aftermath (Henstra 2010). Volunteering can be a particularly useful resource for local governments in emergency management because community volunteers will be local people, quick to arrive at emergency scenes and able to implement locally designed emergency management solutions that meet different local needs.

Sometimes, however, the argument is made that there are possible drawbacks to incorporating volunteering in local government operations. Increased costs associated with recruiting and supporting volunteers can be an issue. Even though volunteers are not paid like regular staff, local governments will have to provide support such as accommodation and training. This would normally require additional paid staff time and resources (Grantmaker Forum on Community and National Service 2003). Conflict between paid staff and volunteers is another concern. Koteen (1989) argues that paid staff may see volunteers as a threat to their job security and authority and therefore may be hostile to them in the work environment. In an era when unemployment is gradually rising in Ghana, some paid staff might feel uncomfortable having an unpaid volunteer performing similar roles but perhaps in a more efficient way than the norm. This might put a strain on relationships and undermine concerted efforts towards achieving organisational goals. There have also been concerns that some volunteers measure their work in communities mostly according to reaching targets and milestones, achieving value for money and accounting to their donor-agencies, rather than on the quality of their engagement with and impact on the people in the communities (Lewis 2006; Haddad et al. 2010).

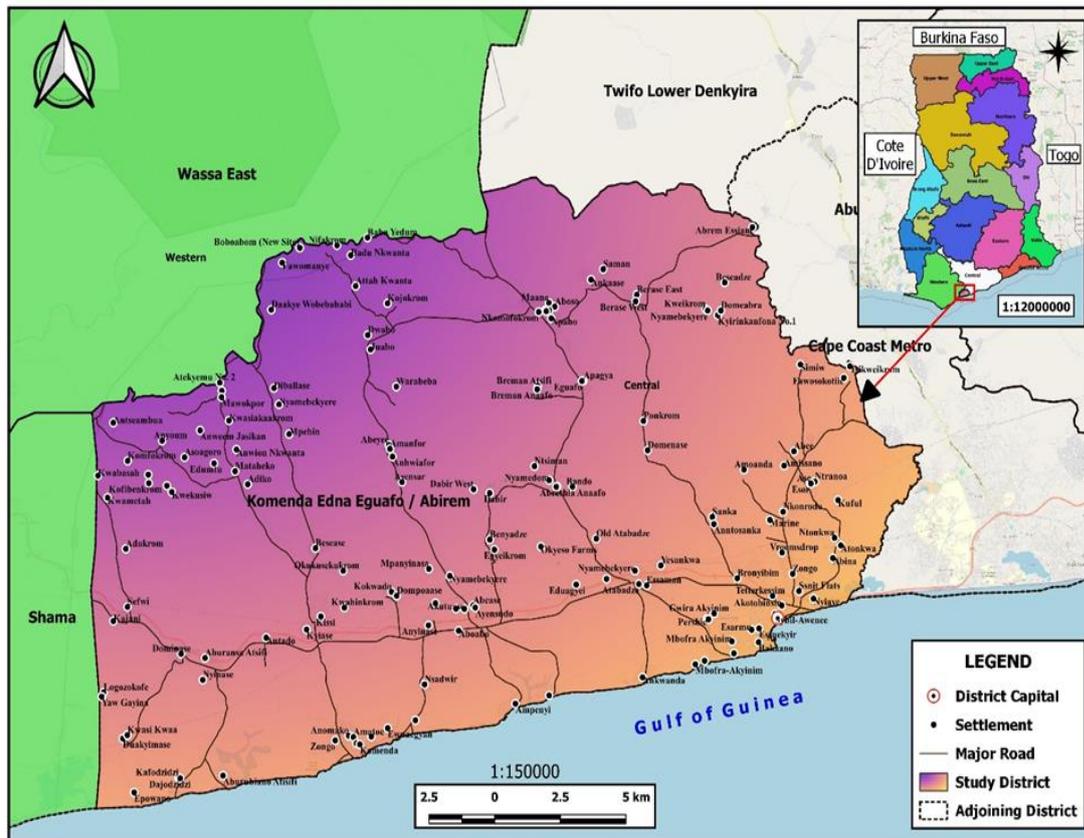
Nevertheless, in spite of these possible drawbacks, volunteers can be key actors in the achievement of many aims which the community development process seeks to realise. Furthermore, volunteering has become one of the main pathways through which the values and principles of local-level development can be made manifest (Lewin et al. 2008; Butcher and Smith 2010; Hope 2012). Research on volunteering supports the assertion that when people are offered opportunities to take up roles and actions which suit their skills and passions, community development becomes successful (Brown and Green 2015). According to Koutrou et al. (2016), the more engaged communities become through volunteering, the healthier and stronger they become both socially and economically.

Methodology

The KEEA Municipality is located in Ghana's Central Region on the Gulf of Guinea coast (see Figure 1). It was selected for this study because it has a long history of volunteers coming to support development in diverse ways (Table 1).

This paper is based on qualitative case study research. Primary data was collected from January to June 2018. At the time there were about 50 Ghanaians and 100 foreign nationals aged between 21 years and 42 years volunteering throughout KEEA.

Figure 1: Location of KEEA Municipal Area



Source: Department of Planning, KNUST (2020)

Table 1: Examples of volunteering organisations working in KEEA

Volunteering organisation	Areas of volunteering
Domestic	
Edward A. Ulzen Memorial Foundation	Established to provide opportunities in higher education for youth from Elmina and the surrounding district. It promotes primary health care and public health initiatives in the KEEA district through international exchanges.
The Ghana Red Cross	Volunteering with community-based expertise to give voice to vulnerable people in KEEA. Working as partners in local development to improve humanitarian standards, respond to disasters, support healthier and safer communities, help reduce vulnerabilities, and promote a culture of peace. They provide clean water by drilling boreholes, undertake clean-up exercises, and plant trees.
Overseas	
Mayo Medical School	Pre-medical students supporting healthcare delivery. They organise free medical screening and treatment
University of Minnesota	Medical students supporting general healthcare delivery. They organise free medical screening and treatment
Florida State University School of Medicine	A chapter of Global Dental Brigades, an international movement of students and medical professionals working with local communities to implement sustainable health systems. Medical students supporting general healthcare delivery in KEEA
University of West Virginia	A chapter of Global Dental Brigades, an international movement of students and medical professionals working with local communities to implement sustainable health systems. There are resident physicians supporting healthcare delivery in KEEA

Source: Authors' fieldwork, KEEA, June 2018; Republic of Ghana (2019); Elwin International Tours (2020); Red Cross (2020)

For the study, a total of 50 volunteers (made up of a mix of Ghanaians and internationals) were purposively selected from 15 communities and individually interviewed. They were made up of 25 females and 25 males. Out of the 25 females, 7 were Ghanaians and 18 were foreign nationals. For the males, 4 were Ghanaians and 21 were foreign nationals.

The study used qualitative data collection methods. Semi-structured questionnaires were used to undertake in-depth interviews of volunteers, as well as five local government officials and five key informants in each community. The data collection focused on the following areas: reasons for volunteering, the specific activities in which volunteers were engaged, ways in which they had made an impact volunteering in the KEAA, and conditions that could make their work more successful. These questions helped the authors to gather in-depth information, and to observe participants' levels of engagement with the community without influencing the process.

In order to validate the evidence gathered from the 50 volunteers interviewed, focus group discussions (FGDs) were subsequently held in each of the selected communities with the following groups: traditional leadership, fisherfolk, women, youth, members of unit committees (the lowest level of sub-district in Ghana's decentralisation system), assembly members, and five different religious organisations. Community and religious leaders and the presiding member of the district assembly helped identify and recruit people willing to take part. The FGDs were guided by a checklist of open-ended questions that gave equal opportunity to all participants to make a contribution. The FGDs also discussed the role of the volunteers in the communities. A total of 165 people (about 45% males and 55% females) were involved in the FGDs in the 15 communities: an average of 11 participants in each group. Answers from the various respondents were recorded using tape recorders and field notebooks, with participants' consent and permission. Recorded interviews were transcribed, coded and interpreted to locate themes, ideas and concepts using the NVIVO 10 software package. This involved content analysis, grouping of related themes, and construction of meanings through descriptive narratives. Some direct quotes from respondents have been presented as data.

Findings and discussion

Reasons for volunteering

The volunteers indicated that they were motivated by two things: the desire to help less privileged communities; and in particular to improve sanitation and health. Their motivations are consistent with the basic principle and spirit of volunteering (GHK 2010; Perold et al. 2011; Caprara et al. 2016). These motivations were corroborated by findings from interviews with local government officials and community leaders, who noted that they were the basis for them welcoming and working with volunteers.

Impacts of volunteering

Our interviews revealed that contributions of this nature by the volunteers triggered a spirit of initiative and empowerment throughout all the communities, again supporting the findings of other research (Devereux 2008; Kambutu and Nganga 2008; Wu 2011; McCauley et al. 2021). This shows that communities can find solutions to their own problems when they are empowered to do so. In an interview with one of the officers at the Education Office of the KEEA Municipal Assembly, it was suggested that the reason why the KEEA Municipal Assembly could not provide such facilities itself was lack of skills to undertake community empowerment.

Another impact of volunteers in the KEEA was improved community knowledge on waste disposal, environmental cleanliness and recycling. For instance, with the support of local school children and school authorities, the volunteers had been able to fix school soccer playing fields and construct goal post nets in 11 communities using recycled water sachets. A community member in one of the FGDs acknowledged the role of the volunteers in this regard and noted that:

Our problem was how to manage the plastic waste and we were just throwing our water sachets away after drinking the water. But the volunteers showed us how to address the waste problem by the use of empty water sachets to make football and volleyball nets for our community park (FGD participant, May 2018).

By engaging and listening to local people in the KEEA, volunteers were able to understand the issues affecting them and found creative ways of supporting them to improve their knowledge. A teacher in one of the communities commented during the FGD that:

For instance, when it comes to handwashing and sanitation issues, we had a lot of problems. The volunteers have taught the people a lot and for now they have been able to raise our standards in terms of sanitation and even handwashing (FGD participant, January 2018).

All the volunteers mentioned that awareness-raising or sensitisation was a key aspect of their activities:

I believe as a group of volunteers we definitely brought some fresh air into the district and made them think about some issues which they had not reflected on in the past. So even though they knew they had health issues, I don't think it was brought up that much or was in the school's teaching framework. We brought those topics up and people started to discuss and to think about them (Volunteer 1A, January 2018).

This assertion was confirmed by one community member who indicated during a FGD that:

Activities in which volunteers were engaged

Volunteers contributed to the development of KEEA in many ways. An important channel through which volunteers made contributions was community mobilisation for action. All 50 volunteers interviewed had performed various activities which could be classified in that way. Volunteers were found to be community educators on issues ranging from positive livelihood practices and public health awareness to community outreach for maternal health and immunisation.

In particular, volunteers were engaged in delivery of three important services: nursery schools; potable water; and waste disposal, environmental cleanliness and recycling. These were key services that the KEEA Municipal Assembly had found difficult to mobilise community members to deliver.

For the nursery schools, all respondents agreed that the presence of the volunteers encouraged communities to raise funds and renovate nursery-school blocks that had been destroyed by rainstorm and floods. In an interview, one of the volunteers noted that:

We were able to raise funds and help with the renovation of nursery-school blocks. We actually raised these funds within the communities to work on the floor of the classrooms and the roofs (Volunteer 1B, January 2018).

This contribution of volunteers towards improved well-being and the provision of such an important item of educational infrastructure raises a number of questions. Would the KEEA Municipal Assembly have been able to mobilise the community if the volunteers had not been around? Would the communities have felt empowered to act to raise funds on their own before volunteers arrived in the municipality? The KEEA study confirms the findings of the 2018 *State of the World's Volunteerism* report (UNV 2018), which acknowledges the critical role volunteers play in the mobilisation of people, building trust and encouraging social inclusion in the achievement of development outcomes, and making communities more resilient.

In the case of potable water provision, volunteers mobilised the communities to raise funds and provide communal labour. In one of the communities where a 15,000-litre water storage facility had been provided, one community member noted in a FGD that:

Before the volunteers installed the water tank, they came around the houses and spoke to us about the water situation. They also asked about our suggestions in overcoming this situation. We recommended a lot of things which included the provision of a large water tank to store water for the community. So we think they listened to us and they helped us a lot (FGD member, February 2018).

Following the installation of the tank, volunteers ensured that it was filled with clean water from a water supplier outside the community. The water was then sold to community members at a subsidised rate of 0.20 pesewas (US\$0.03) per bucket with all proceeds going back to buy more water, as well as basic stationery for schools within the community. One FGD participant added, “*They even employed a person with disability from the community who is paid an allowance from the proceeds that were generated*” (FGD, March 2018).

Their house-to-house engagement on local health issues gave us more insight into specific health issues. For example, I didn't know that it was important for me and my family to take de-worming tablets regularly until they came to teach that. I think they helped me to understand how to treat intestinal worms (FGD participant, January 2018).

Some scholars have raised concerns that having international volunteers could lead to paternalistic behaviour or reinforce a neo-colonialist mindset (Devereux 2008). Findings from this study do not

support this claim. The study rather finds what can be described as innovation and creativity among residents in the KEEA due to the activities of volunteers. The recycling of empty water sachets is a good example. Such knowledge creation and sharing demonstrates how volunteers can become an important asset to a community if their potential is harnessed effectively.

Conditions for successful volunteering

Alongside the potential and actual contributions of volunteers in the KEEA, a number of challenges were identified. Key among these were weak collaboration between volunteers and the local government structure; and lack of sustainability of projects started and implemented through volunteering. According to interviews with senior officials of the assembly, the programmes and details of activities of volunteers working in KEEA communities were not shared with the municipal organisation. This was corroborated by key informants. When this was pointed out to the volunteers, their response was that the structure of the assembly does not provide clear information as to where they should fit in. An officer at the assembly noted that:

Volunteering is helpful to our municipality, and we are happy that they come in. The problem, however, is that the district assembly structure has no space for such important programmes. We may have to look at this as a country. If this is done well it will strengthen the collaboration between us and the volunteers to the benefit of our community members (Assembly official, February 2019).

Even though all the interviewees agreed on the relevance of volunteering work for local communities, there was also a concern among many volunteers that the work was not sustainable. They stressed that community members should also be willing to work with the district assembly after the volunteers had left. As one volunteer commented:

Volunteers can only be in the communities for a limited amount of time. Therefore, it is expected of the communities to also liaise with the municipal assembly for them to take oversight of the projects undertaken by volunteers (Volunteer 2A, June 2018).

Clearly, without a framework to sustain projects initiated and implemented by volunteers, the long-term benefits of their contributions to communities could be lost.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study set out to explore the possibility of adopting volunteering as an intervention to address the inadequate human and financial resources of MMDAs in Ghana. It has confirmed that volunteering continues to emerge as an important local and community development intervention channel in many parts of the country, and that volunteering can add to the human resource capacity of MMDAs.

The study therefore proposes a volunteer empowerment model which posits that volunteers can become a useful resource to empower local communities in achieving their development outcomes. It is recommended that district assemblies in Ghana formally adopt a local volunteer programme that invites and trains people who would like to offer their skills at the local level. The study also recommends that

volunteers and their organisations liaise effectively with the district assemblies before entering local communities under the district's jurisdiction. This will enable stronger collaborations that ensure effective delivery of project activities and their sustainability.

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