

# Development process in an era of sudden disruption: Unmasking the impacts of Covid-19 in Ghana

Generally, most studies and policy discussions related to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic prioritize the effects on development outcomes such as human well-being, sanitation, food security, and the profitability of small- and medium-sized enterprises. However, there is limited information and policy dialogue on how the pandemic and its control measures are affecting the process that leads to some of the desired development outcomes stated above. In this brief, the *Resilience Against Climate Change - Social Transformation Research and Policy Advocacy* (REACH-STR) project, implemented by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), aims to examine how the advent of Covid-19 is disrupting development planning and implementation in Ghana.

From a qualitative case study conducted involving development planning officers of the national, regional and local governance systems, it was evident that the development system is not resilient to sudden disruption. In particular, the closure of markets, social distancing and restrictions on large gatherings are affecting the development process in many ways. These include the inability of planning officers to conduct participatory performance reviews and community needs assessments to set an inclusive development agenda for formulating sustainable strategies. The implementation of education, poverty reduction, agricultural extension and community livelihood projects has been halted, as funds allocated for such activities are channeled to emergency interventions to control the spread of Covid-19.



Meeting with members of Kaarasung Farmers' Cooperative Union, Loggu, Upper West Region, Ghana (photo: Charity Osei-Amponsah).

The capacity of local coordinating development planning units should be strengthened to support the formulation and implementation of responsive and flexible Covid-19 recovery plans through the following: providing adequate funds toward improving office infrastructure and equipment (such as laptops and high-speed internet connectivity modems) to enhance work productivity; building stronger partnerships between public policy makers, research organizations, development partners and community members that create less rigid and efficient institutional structures at all governing levels; and building effective coordination and harmonization systems to ensure better understanding and planning for emerging challenges towards inclusive and sustainable rural transformation.

## Introduction

The advent of the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) has led to systemic challenges, affecting health, economic and broad social aspects of development (UNDP 2020a). It has also revealed institutional gaps and the unsustainability of current development pathways in effectively handling sudden disruptions (Haas et al. 2020). It is evident that the direction of development planning has to change. The situation is not different in Ghana. If nothing is done immediately, the Covid-19 pandemic will worsen preexisting inequalities and deepen the plight of vulnerable households, which will in turn increase the impacts of the pandemic (Hodey and Dzanku 2020). Urgent action toward recovery from the pandemic and resilience building are, therefore, needed to ensure that Ghana does not risk losing the developmental progress already made.

In March 2020, when Ghana's first case of Covid-19 was announced, the government immediately put in place measures to respond to the disease and help minimize its spread. These included, but were not limited to, partial lockdowns in some cities (Greater Accra and Kumasi), closure of schools and some markets, restriction on movement and large gatherings, and social distancing. Although these measures helped to manage and control the spread of the disease, it has also resulted in practical challenges for development planning and implementation.



Domestic water source and uses, Nandom, Upper West Region, Ghana (photo: Esther Wahabu).

The governance system in Ghana has a strong focus on consultations, partnerships, and responsive and participatory decision-making processes (Dokuwile 2017). Therefore, community participation now forms an important part of strategic development planning. In line with this, the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC) operates a decentralized development planning system, which enforces consultative and participatory planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E). This system ensures that specific decentralized contexts and circumstances are analyzed to identify community needs and aspirations, which are then harmonized with the core themes of a national development policy framework. For instance, several actors at the community level actively participate in needs assessment meetings, public hearings, reviews of implemented interventions, and district medium-term development and local action plans. This decentralized community development approach is promoted through the institutional framework of Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), Regional Coordinating Councils (RCCs), Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs), zonal councils and unit committees. Development partners, community-based organizations (CBOs), faith-based organizations (FBOs), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and private individuals also undertake several development projects to complement what is done by the government.

Measures to curb the spread of Covid-19, especially social distancing, mean that the participatory development process is likely to be disrupted, particularly activities that require interactions between a large number of stakeholders. Meanwhile, it is critical that the development process is rolled out effectively in the period during and after the pandemic, in order to support interventions that promote inclusive social and economic recoveries. Formulating the interventions also requires research insights on the situation that will inform adjustments in existing plans and the formation of future plans, in order to reflect emergency responses that can address the impacts of the pandemic on distinctive health, economic and social conditions (UNDP 2020b). However, there is inadequate information on the impact of the pandemic on development processes, and lack of a clear road map on what needs to be done in decision-making and how.

So far, most policy discussions have largely paid attention to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on development outcomes, such as agriculture and food security, vulnerable households, and small- and medium-sized enterprises, and the support measures needed. However, little attention has been given to the development processes that lead to these desired outcomes. In this brief, the *Resilience Against Climate Change - Social Transformation Research and Policy Advocacy (REACH-STR)* project, implemented by IWMI, aims to bridge this gap in information by unraveling how the pandemic and the planned mitigation measures are affecting development planning and implementation in Ghana, with particular reference to the Upper West Region. The insights are needed to provide a better understanding of the current challenges and set the tone for further discussions on strategies for effective pre- and post-pandemic socioeconomic recovery planning.



## Study context and approach

### Development processes in Ghana

The NDPC provides guidelines to facilitate the preparation of development plans by MMDAs and MDAs in alignment with the medium-term national development policy framework (MTNDPF) (NDPC 2020). The main actors in the development process are shown in Figure 1.

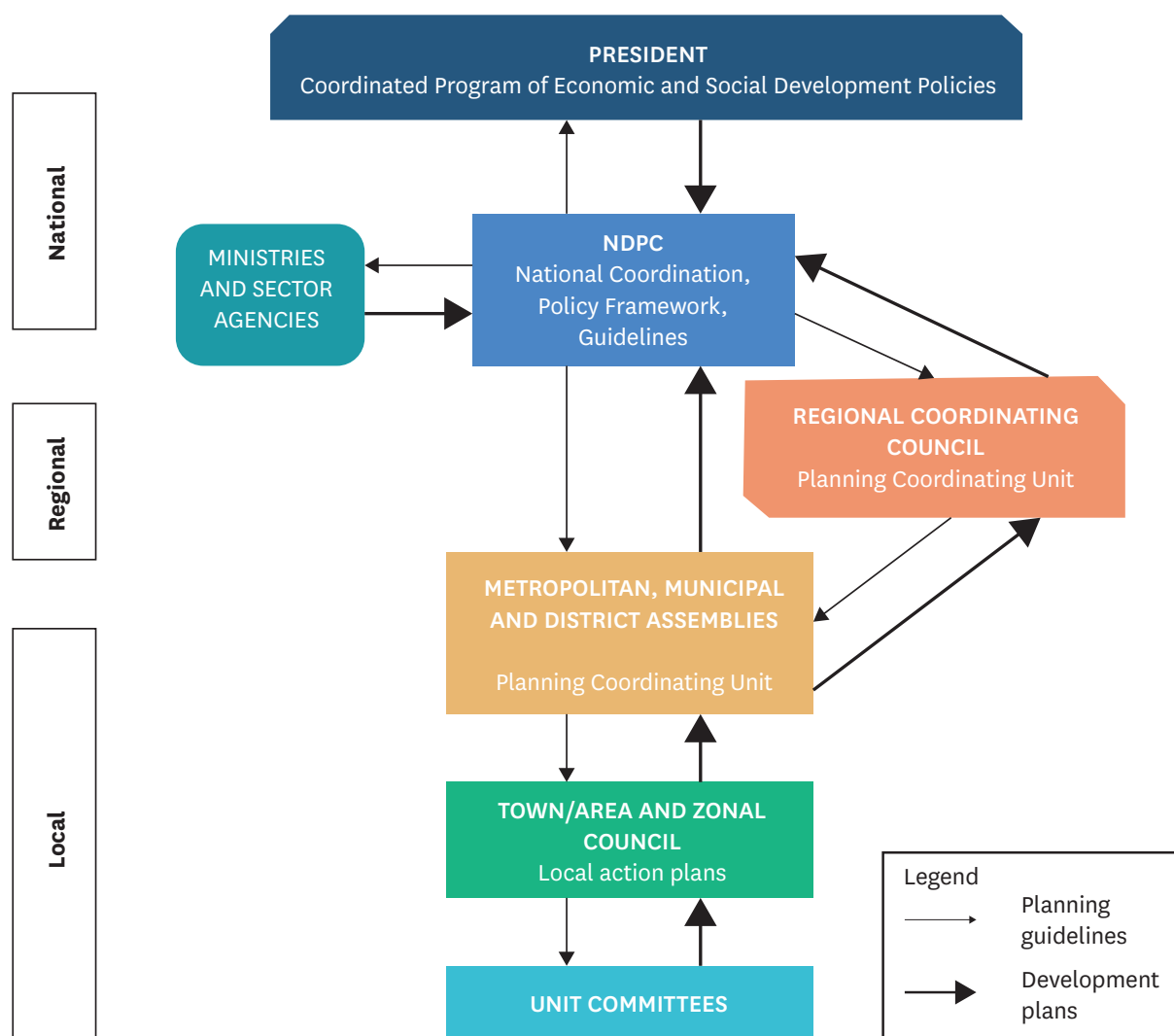
Annual action plans and budgets are then prepared by the Planning Coordinating Unit of the MMDAs in line with their development plans. The Planning Coordinating Unit of RCC has to coordinate, harmonize, monitor and evaluate the development plans according to the NDPC guidelines.

### Analytical approach

The development process is analytically framed based on planning and implementation activities executed at different time periods in

an annual development cycle (Figure 2). The **planning activities** usually start in June and are completed by the end of October. These activities involve mid-year performance reviews of ongoing annual action plans and the review of plans for subsequent years. These reviews are carried out through an analysis and profiling of existing situations; discussion on community needs and aspirations; preparation of community action and area plans; and harmonization and prioritization of issues in line with the development objectives of the MTNDPF. The planning phase also entails formulating strategies or interventions drafting an M&E plan and indicative budgets for implementation; validation of plans by stakeholders; and review and approval of the plan by a General Assembly and Executive Committee and final acceptance by NDPC. The **implementation activities** entail the actual execution of planned interventions and M&E.

This analytical approach helps us understand which periods of the annual development cycle coincided with the advent of Covid-19, and how the enforcement of mitigation measures affects projected activities in specific time periods.



**Figure 1.** Process of development planning in Ghana.

Source: Adapted from NDPC 2002.



**Figure 2.** Analytical approach and timeline of the annual development cycle.

Note: DPCU - District planning and coordinating unit; DMTDP - District medium-term development plan.

## Method

Data were collected through phone interviews conducted with 26 stakeholders comprising development planning and gender desk officers, agriculture directors, and coordinating council officers at national, regional and municipal/district governing levels. The interviews, which lasted between 9 and 35 minutes, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Coding was done using ATLAS.ti (version 8). The report generated was analyzed along content core themes of pre-Covid-19 planned activities, impacts of the pandemic on the planning and implementation of activities, challenges and proposed solutions.

## Findings and discussion

All officers interviewed were aware of Covid-19 and the mitigation measures introduced by the government to reduce spread of the disease. The first case of Covid-19 in Ghana was recorded on March 12, 2020. Subsequently, the government announced partial lockdowns in some cities (Greater Accra and Kumasi), closure of schools and some markets, restriction on movement and large gatherings, and social distancing. The advent of the pandemic and the period of strict enforcement of mitigation measures coincided with planning and implementation activities of the annual development cycle. Using the analytical approach (Figure 2), the planned activities, and how the mitigation measures are disrupting planning and implementation activities are presented and discussed.

### Impacts of Covid-19 on implementation activities

The interventions outlined in annual action plans prepared by the planning coordinating units of the MMDAs are implemented throughout the year by relevant departments, agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)/CBOs, FBOs, development partners and the private sector. The interview data indicated that annual work plans and budgets had been approved for implementation activities in 2020, but there was

no contingency plan and budget for sudden disruptions such as Covid-19. The implementation of interventions started in January 2020 for all MMDAs in the Upper West Region. Most of the interventions centered on adolescent reproductive health training, agricultural productivity, climate change and food and nutrition security initiatives, and livelihood empowerment projects. The strict enforcement of the mitigation measures from March to mid-May affected the implementation of these interventions, because development partners, NGOs/CBOs and project managers facilitating and/or providing technical backstopping stopped all field activities completely, and in some cases, vacated their offices to work at home.

All the officers interviewed indicated that the implementation of interventions that involve physical presence and interaction between community members were halted at the peak of the restrictions introduced by the government. For example, the Productive Safety Net project, which uses a community labor-intensive approach (instead of machinery) for public works to create youth employment, was disrupted. The construction of a primary school block in the Sawla-Tuna-Kalba district had to be stopped to prevent the spread of the virus, as the work required laborers to interact closely with each other. Later, when the restrictions were relaxed slightly, work efficiency was still affected as the laborers were organized to work in two shifts to reduce the number of people working together at a particular time.

In Nadowli, Ghana Education Trust Fund (GETFund) projects on the construction of school infrastructure and a neonatal unit at the district hospital, as well as the fixing of hand pumps on drilled boreholes were all put on hold. This is because a new plan had to be made to fit in Covid-19-related activities, and due to limited funds, implementation of some ongoing interventions had to be stopped. Health and sanitation issues are now priority for the MMDAs, and funds received largely went into the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), soap, sanitizer, Veronica buckets, and face masks to

protect the populace from the pandemic. A planning officer at the district level explained that, *“At a point, we had to stop everything and just focus on Covid-19.”* In Jirapa, under the District Development Facility project, funds were allocated and work plans were submitted. With the advent of Covid-19, the work plans had to be reviewed to incorporate prioritized Covid-19-related responses instead of the planned agriculture and education project interventions.

Implementation of agricultural interventions has also been affected. For instance, due to social distancing, extension agents cannot receive the usual technical backstopping from the district office where they normally gather for training. The number of times such ‘beef up’ meetings are held has been reduced from four times to once a month. It is also not possible for the extension agents to meet with a large number of farmers due to pandemic restrictions. Therefore, the use of radio broadcasting is being explored to reach out to farmers. Again, this was not foreseen and budgeted for, putting a hold on extension service delivery, which will eventually affect agricultural productivity.

Revenue mobilization through internally generated funds (IGF) for the implementation of development projects by MMDAs is also affected. The restrictions on large gatherings and market operations mean that many sellers cannot be in the markets, and as a result, the payment of daily tolls to the MMDAs is reduced. Carrying out a ‘tethering census’ – a census of cattle herds feeding in designated grasslands – to bill the Fulani herdsman (generates about 40-50% of IGF) was not effectively done because of the mobility restriction and the fear of transmission of the virus from the cattle to census staff. An officer from a district coordinating unit explained, *“Activities captured in the annual plan to be funded by IGF, such as the provision of classroom desks and tables, were not implemented ... although they are still in the plan, I am not sure we will be able to implement this as scheduled.”*

### Impacts of Covid-19 on planning activities

The NDPC guidelines outline the need for MMDAs to conduct a public hearing on their medium-term development plans before they are adopted for use. The planning coordinating units also require subdistrict structures (town/area and zonal councils and unit committees) to prepare local action plans, which must be subjected to public hearing before adoption. The public hearings are to identify the outputs needed, activities to be carried out or postponed, and to fine-tune development plans.

Planning at the MMDAs starts with consultative mid-year reviews of ongoing activities and plans for the subsequent year between June and July. The assessment of performance through the review process relates to the extent of implementation of planned interventions. Discussions are also held with community members to understand their developmental needs, and solicit ideas on what interventions and activities should be included in the next annual action plan. Planning activities, which also require meetings with several stakeholders, continues from August to October. The planning officers interviewed indicated that the restrictions on large gatherings and social distancing affected the mid-year performance reviews. This is because

the reviews involve large numbers of stakeholders from the regional, municipal, district and subdistrict levels, making it impracticable to organize such events. A planner emphasized that, *“We wanted to start from the area council level and build up to the district level, but because of the Covid-19 restrictions, we could not start that process and up until now (August), we have not even initiated it yet. So, we are now thinking that going forward, this month, instead of starting from the community level, we will bring the key stakeholders from the community and the heads of the departments in the district and conduct a review”.* Review of the plans for 2021 requires that planning officers go into communities and conduct public hearings to generate inputs for drafting the annual plans. Such hearings are organized as open sessions, and people willing to participate can come and provide input. It involves a broad spectrum of citizens, including political, administrative and planning officers, traditional authorities, NGOs/CBOs, civil society organizations (CSOs), private entrepreneurs, business associations, public agencies, corporate bodies, religious organizations, youth and women’s groups, opinion leaders, political parties and all other interested persons. Due to the pandemic restrictions, more than 100 people cannot attend, mainly because social distancing requires a larger space to host many people. To conduct the hearing will imply hosting four different meetings to cover the expected large numbers, but the unit only planned with a budget for one meeting. So, the public hearing could not be carried out by all planning units involved in conducting the interviews. The disruption to the participatory planning process needs to be addressed to enhance integration of the needs, values and aspirations of all communities and individuals to ensure inclusive and sustainable development (Anyanwu 1992).



Male community meeting on rural transformation before Covid-19, Tanina, Upper West Region, Ghana (photo: Charity Osei-Amponsah).



The situation presented by the pandemic led to emergency planning. Planning officers were able to virtually review the activities planned for the year, instead of the usual physical team meetings. It was explained that, *“Other issues that were not part of the plan had to be considered. Initially, this isolation center was not budgeted for in the 2020 plan, but due to Covid-19, we had to incorporate it and try and review the plan, and carry out real-time planning to suit the situation and current circumstances.”* The restrictions also affect the normal day-to-day work of the development process, because all officers are not able to go to their offices at the same time due to the small office space shared by many officers, who have to subject themselves to social distancing. Monitoring activities, which are carried out quarterly by the district planning and coordinating units in consultation with the technical departments, are also disrupted. They re-strategized, and *‘instead of carrying out the monitoring with all the technical department heads, the planning unit staff now had to do it alone’*.

The pandemic and the mitigation measures introduced by the government are also affecting work productivity for most officers at all governing levels. At the peak of the spread of the disease in Ghana, the government issued a directive requesting public officers to take their annual leave if they had not already done so. Thus, there is limited staff present at any point in time to take up the work carried out by colleagues on leave. This is reducing work output levels, as it now takes a longer time to complete a task that was usually done in a few days.

### Emerging opportunities from Covid-19

The pandemic and the mitigation measures have provided opportunities and innovative ideas for alternative means of interaction in the development planning system. Officers have re-strategized and resorted to conducting meetings using information and communication technologies (ICT) such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, *‘which will continue even after Covid-19’*. However, the RCC and some MMDAs do not have

internet connectivity and functional laptops to effectively take advantage of the alternative means of interaction. Given that the pandemic will continue for some time, it is important to provide the relevant technological infrastructure to make the planning units and sector departments more efficient under the Covid-19 restrictive measures. Belesova et al. (2020) emphasized that, while the pandemic is a grave human tragedy, it can be used as an opportunity to implement sustainable recovery policies. An emergency preparedness plan and budget must make provision for ICT to support the existing situation, and strengthen the internal structures and systems at the MMDAs.

The pandemic situation is forcing development implementers to go back to the dissemination of information on adolescent reproductive issues, health and sanitation, and agricultural production techniques through community radios. Most importantly, Covid-19 has revealed that local jobs are more sustainable and robust in terms of sudden disruptions, something that can be used to enhance the development of rural economies. Due to the restrictions in movement, people are forced to look in their locality to find natural resources and food ingredients they can use as food and raw materials for agro-processing. Building on these local resources, the MMDAs can create employment and resilient livelihoods, especially for youth and women. People are already thinking outside the box to take advantage of the opportunities created by the pandemic. For instance, many tailors and seamstresses in the fashion industry have started providing face masks, sanitizers and soaps for handwashing and this is generating a lot of income. It is also directing attention to the provision of water and handwashing facilities at markets, something which did not exist before.

### Challenges in the development process in the face of Covid-19

Information from the interviews indicated that officers involved in the development process are usually straddled with the **unavailability of data for planning**. For example, it was mentioned that, *“Detailed data on the impacts of Covid-19 on socioeconomic activities in the communities are not readily available.”* Such data are not being gathered, because they are not part of the indicators to be assessed according to NDPC guidelines for district medium-term development plans. Currently, the focus of information on Covid-19 is on the number of reported cases and interventions in place to address the situation by the MMDAs.

Another challenge is **funding**. Implementing activities has become expensive, for instance, *‘if three officers have to go out into a community on an assignment, they need two vehicles to ensure social distancing is practiced’*. This implies more fuel, drivers, accommodation, food and snacks. In many cases, funding for the implementation of interventions is delayed. This is affecting several sectors including agriculture, as many of the training sessions on production activities (planting, fertilizer application) are time bound. The increased finance needed to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, along with the decline in revenue, is likely to strain the national budget and have adverse effects on funding for interventions. At the same time, economic activities slowed down at the peak of enforcing the restrictions, and this led to low state revenue and increased expenditure for handling the Covid-19 situation. A gender desk



Youth engaging in dry season vegetable farming, Loggu, Upper West Region, Ghana (photo: Esther Wahabu).

officer expressed her frustration by saying, “Funds have not been released for me to carry out my planned activities. I raised a memo several times, but they have not paid me the money to carry out my activities. The reason is that they have used the funds to address issues arising from the Covid-19 situation, which means that I have to cancel some of my planned activities.”

Other challenges are inadequate office space and facilities, the lack of a stable network for phone calls and internet data, inadequate computers, and low capabilities in the use of emerging online meeting platforms. Interview data showed that, in some units, two or three people use the same ‘one’ desktop computer and other resources. An officer explained that, “We have only one table for four officers ... most of the departments do not have computers and laptops, and those that have do not have the technical know-how to apply some of those emerging online technologies. So, it means we may need capacity building in these areas’.

The use of the radio for disseminating information is now the order of the day, but paying for the airtime is becoming a challenge for the MMDAs. Furthermore, if not well implemented, less-privileged households without radio sets will be excluded from the discussion of community needs for development planning. Also, the use of radio may lead to miscommunication, as people may not be able to ask follow-up questions for clarification.

## Conclusion

The findings indicate that, generally, Covid-19 and the mitigation measures are negatively affecting development planning and implementation activities. Uncertainty in how long it will take to emerge from the pandemic and the large number of stakeholders needed for performance reviews and public hearings have disrupted the work plans for 2021. This will subsequently affect interventions to be implemented. For all the planning units and departments, there are still some activities budgeted for in the work plans for 2020 which need to be completed, but the funds received have been used for providing PPE, sanitizers and soaps, and for other Covid-19-related activities. Thus, the planned activities are halted and will be rolled over to 2021, or just abandoned. At the same time, the coordinating units and the planning officers are faced with inadequate access to data for informed development planning, and lack of funding and capacity to take advantage of emerging opportunities in the development process and the rural economy.

## Implications and policy recommendations

1. **Access to data on Covid-19** is limited, particularly on how it is affecting development processes. It is evident that the impacts of the pandemic cannot be addressed without the relevant data. Policy decisions require data to assess the extent of disruption, what it means for development outcomes and the rural transformations it could trigger. The planning coordinating units at the regional and MMDA levels must be supported to collect, analyze and utilize real-time reliable data on the pandemic and its impacts on development, in order to be able to formulate and implement inclusive recovery interventions.
2. **Partnership building** is important. Development partners and private entrepreneurs need to collaborate with the planning coordinating units to understand the needs of these units and find win-win solutions to the challenges they

face. Already, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is partnering with the NDPC to support selected MMDAs to prepare Covid-19 recovery plans to enhance resilience against local and external shocks. Such initiatives must be mainstreamed across all MDAs and MMDAs for sustainable development planning. This will go a long way to build resilient institutional structures, and provide the relevant evidence to support the government’s response and recovery plans to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic and its control measures.

3. **Capacity building and learning is needed.** The planning coordinating units and officers at the different sector departments need capacity building in data mobilization and analysis, ICT meeting platforms, and in the use of office equipment in an efficient manner. The MMDAs do not have the funding for capacity strengthening, and support is needed from the central government, NGOs and development partners to provide the necessary space and logistics for learning.
4. **Funding for the development process is crucial** for effective participatory consultations and reviews for inclusive planning. Given the proximity of the MMDAs to communities, and their better understanding of the political, socioeconomic and cultural contexts, they are well placed to plan appropriate interventions for development, even in the face of sudden disruptions. Adequate funding for the development planning system will ensure the formulation and implementation of Covid-19 recovery plans that will (i) lead not only to short- and medium-term impacts but also to long-term impacts; and (ii) harness emerging opportunities that lead to job creation and restoration of livelihoods, especially for marginalized groups. The recovery plan must be:
  - responsive and flexible to ensure effective implementation in the face of unpredictable impacts of sudden disruptions on the development process;
  - institutionalized at all levels of the development planning system, with connections to post-Covid-19 recovery strategies of the private sector and development partners; and
  - based on an inclusive, integrated and harmonized recovery framework with detailed short-, medium- and long-term plans for all core thematic areas of the national policy framework agenda.
5. **Improve participation at the grassroots level.** Development is for the people. Therefore, an integrated planning process is needed at all governing levels. Planning coordinating units must be supported to strengthen multi-stakeholder engagements with local research institutes, community members and sector departments to co-create insights on specific development issues.
6. **Effective coordination and harmonization of plans** that center on a multidimensional approach for inclusive and sustainable development. Thus, a coordinated network planning system that brings together all the information from the sector departments/units should be provided. This will ensure effective joint decision-making and inter-sectoral action for obtaining strategic information on all sectors of the economy. This could be useful for a detailed analysis of specific development contexts, and for conducting participatory scenario modelling and forecasting toward evidenced-based policy making and/or programming.

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## Source

This is the first brief in the Policy Insights Series produced as part of the REACH-STR project. It was prepared by Charity Osei-Amponsah and Esther Wahabu (both from the International Water Management Institute [IWMI], Accra, Ghana).

## Project

The *Resilience Against Climate Change - Social Transformation Research and Policy Advocacy* (REACH-STR) project is implemented by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) in collaboration with the Centre for Migration Studies at the University of Ghana, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research - Science and Technology Policy Research Institute (CSIR-STEPRI), and the University for Development Studies, with funding from the European Union under the Ghana Agriculture Programme (EUGAP). The project focuses on providing research insights to assist local, national and regional decision-makers to understand social transformation interventions that promote sustainable and inclusive rural development, and climate change adaptation and mitigation practices. Decision-makers should also be able to apply and implement social transformation analysis in their development planning processes.

## Acknowledgements

The support provided by Diana Suhardiman (IWMI) in reviewing the content of the brief, and Mahen Chandrasoma (IWMI) for editing and proofreading is greatly appreciated. The development planning and implementation officers of the Upper West Region of Ghana are also acknowledged for providing information. This research was funded by the European Union under the Ghana Agriculture Programme (EUGAP), and was carried out as part of the CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) and supported by Funders contributing to the CGIAR Trust Fund (<https://www.cgiar.org/funders/>).

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