

Akudugu, Jonas Ayaribilla; Laube, Wolfram

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Implementing local economic development in Ghana: Multiple actors and rationalities

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JONAS AYARIBILLA AKUDUGU AND WOLFRAM LAUBE

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Authors' addresses

Jonas Ayaribilla Akudugu
Center for Development Research (ZEF)
University of Bonn
Walter-Flex-Str. 3
53113 Bonn, Germany
Tel: 0049-(0)228-734980 Fax: 0049-(0)228-731972
Email: akujonaya@yahoo.com

Dr. Wolfram Laube
Center for Development Research (ZEF)
University of Bonn
Walter-Flex-Str. 3
53113 Bonn, Germany
Tel: 0049-(0)228-734914 Fax: 0049-(0)228-731972
Email: wlaube@uni-bonn.de

www.zef.de

Implementing Local Economic Development in Ghana: Multiple Actors and Rationalities

Jonas Ayaribilla Akudugu and Wolfram Laube

Abstract

International development agencies continue to influence the development agenda of many developing countries. One of the latest development strategies being promoted by these bodies is local economic development (LED). The introduction of contemporary LED practice, where local stakeholders and authorities, in partnership with national planning agencies and international donors, jointly identify, design, and implement initiatives aimed at stimulating the local economy, is supposed to mark a paradigm shift from top-down approaches to bottom-up approaches of local development. Through this approach, development actors operating at the sub-national level are expected to mobilize local resources to implement LED initiatives, thus reducing reliance on central government and donor funds. This LED approach, in the estimation of international development agencies, eventually promotes subsidiarity and self-reliance at the district level. However, in Ghana, soon after the introduction of this presumably promising development strategy, it became clear that LED approaches are only partially adopted in local development planning and are hardly implemented, as they do not match the strategies and rationalities of key actors planning and implementing local development initiatives. While national- and district-level planning agencies remain devoted to top-down development planning, local stakeholders are instead interested in infrastructure development and the direct transfer of funds, rather than participatory planning exercises meant to enhance local economic dynamics and competitiveness. This paper shows how LED as an externally introduced development strategy that does not fit well into the technical, social, economic, and political rationalities of local actors and as such is bound to fail, irrespective of its theoretical potential and the external support provided for its implementation. This paper explores the structural environment as well as multiple rationalities and interests that seem to impede the implementation of LED in Ghana.

Key Words: Development intervention, local economic development, actors, rationalities, policy implementation.

1 Introduction

LED is gaining ground fast as a regional or territorial development strategy in many parts of the developing world. Its practice in the South is however limited as compared to the North (Nel 2001: 1003). The origin of the LED concept can be traced to North America and Western Europe, where it is widely practiced in various countries or cities (Blakely 1989; Nel 2001; Rodriguez-Pose and Tijmastra 2005; Blakely 2009). Nonetheless, the LED concept is now being introduced gradually into developing countries as an alternative or complementary development strategy (Maharaj and Ramballi 1998; Rodriguez-Pose and Tijmastra 2005). In recent times, we have witnessed efforts by international development and donor agencies, such as the World Bank, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) among others, to transfer LED approaches to the South.

Blakely (1989) traces the emergence of the LED concept in the United States of America as far back as the Great Depression in the 1930s, when local communities explored options for creating job opportunities in response to the closure of factories or the reduction of workforces. The World Bank (2006: 1) sees the early 1970s, when LED became an important policy response to municipal governments realizing that businesses and capital were moving between locations for competitive advantage, as the time when the LED paradigm emerged. This competition for investors and investments greatly intensified and geographically expanded with globalization. The fast development of financial and banking systems, as well as innovation in telecommunications and in the area of transport and logistics, allowed investors much more flexibility with regard to the choice of the location of their investment, which subsequently prompted cities to reposition themselves, not only to attract much needed investment, but also to enable them to be competitive in their own right. According to Blakely and Leigh (2010: 1), “cities, towns, countries and all local entities in a global economy have the challenge and opportunity of crafting their own economic destinies.” Globalization therefore has not only brought about an unprecedented level of competition among businesses, but it also threatens the welfare of many, presumably uncompetitive, local economies. Global competition is thus forcing people, places, and businesses to reassess their status and to develop new plans for the future, in order to create competitive advantage and to enhance their visibility and chances of economic success in the global economy. The shift from ‘business as usual’ to a stage at which localities have to position themselves in the global economy finds expression in the concept of LED – an approach to local development that seeks to mobilize actors and resources to initiate actions jointly that will stimulate the local economy and make it competitive.

With respect to Africa, the adoption of neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s served as fertile ground for private sector development, which is the focus of LED intervention. Helmsing (2001: 60) points out that the forces that brought about the change in the context of LED are “structural adjustment and liberalization policies; ideological disenchantment with the state and state-led development; as well as aid fatigue and decline of Overseas Development Assistance.”

Prior to the adoption of neoliberal economic policies and the implementation of decentralization reforms, central governments, often assisted by (international) donor agencies, were the main actors promoting economic development. Around the world, especially in the developing world, central governments set up agencies and designed and implemented policies to promote economic development across their respective countries. But most of these state-led, top-down interventions, designed and implemented at the national level, have proven ineffective in tackling developmental challenges in the targeted localities (Rodriguez-Pose and Tijmastra 2009: 6). The same is true for many donor-funded projects, which at times had limited success but were seldom continued after donor funding stopped. The failure of governments and donors to address and effectively promote (local)

economic development in many developing countries called for a rethinking and re-fashioning of development strategies. The emergence of LED as an alternative development strategy can thus be seen as a response to the failure of top-down development programs promoting economic development on the local level.

Interestingly, LED approaches became more widely promoted in the developing world as earlier development discourses and policies became increasingly criticized after the 1980s and 1990s. While post-development scholars critiqued the hegemonic nature and exploitative consequences of modern mainstream development efforts since World War II (e.g.: Esteva 1985; Escobar 1988), neo-liberalists identified the intervention of states and governments in economic affairs as the main pitfall of failed development efforts (e.g.. De Soto 1989 ; Williamson 1993). LED approaches paradoxically married the formers' concern for local development initiatives and civil society with the latter's concern for competitive capitalist economic development and international market integration. However, focusing mainly on economic development, LED approaches remain largely within the ideological framework of development economics and pay little attention to alternative development pathways.

The obvious "need for an alternative or complement to traditional development strategies has become more evident and LED strategies are increasingly regarded as a valid and viable way to overcome the development problems of territories around the world, regardless of their level of development or institutional conditions" (Rodriguez-Pose and Tijmastra 2009: 6). In Africa, increasing private sector development and the promotion of decentralized local government systems have created the basis for the introduction of contemporary LED strategies. LED is supposed to mark a shift from nationally or internationally owned top-down development programs to participatory bottom-up development processes that are locally owned. LED is also supposed to be propelled by local resources and actors, who identify, design and implement the LED strategies.

Thus, the prospects for and promises of LED seem to be huge. Although attempts have been made to appraise LED implementation in Sub-Saharan Africa (Helmsing 2001; Rodriguez-Pose and Tijmastra 2005; Hindson 2007), these efforts are very limited and often focus on only the South African experience (Maharaj and Ramballi 1998; Rogerson 1999; Davis 2006; Brennan, Flint et al. 2009). In view of the expansion of LED practices beyond South Africa to other parts of the continent in recent times (Rogerson and Rogerson 2010) there is the need to appraise LED efforts in those areas to better understand their experiences and challenges. As Meyer-Stamer (2003: 2) points out, it remains unclear whether "the popularity" of LED is arising out of "desperation" or from the evidence of success stories in areas where it has been practiced for some time. So far, is not fully clear how far the supposed advantages of LED can be fully realized, or whether LED constitutes just another development discourse that masks inherently teleological and hegemonic development practices adhered to by governments and donor agencies throughout the developing world. Rogerson and Rogerson (2010) who recently undertook a comprehensive review of LED practice and research in Africa, emphasized the need to broaden LED research to better capture the "role of international development agencies as key actors shaping and reshaping LED practice in Africa." As can be seen, the discourse on LED is dominated by international development agencies.

In Ghana, although the LED experiences of the GIZ and ILO at the district level have not been evaluated fully, the UNDP is striving to take LED discourse and practice further, and efforts are being made to scale up and institutionalize LED as a national development blueprint. However, while the policy process that started in 2009 has proven to be lengthy and slow, the local implementation of LED is also proving difficult. As the examples from the Bongo District detailed here will show, LED is far from being a dominant, let alone hegemonic, discourse, as little momentum is generated by local actors to support the process. In light of this observation, and in order to gain a better grasp of the role of LED in

development practice, this paper assesses the conceptualization and implementation of LED as an alternative development strategy in Ghana. Furthermore, it critically examines the structural environment and different rationalities and interests that affect the implementation of LED initiatives in Ghana.

2 Local Economic Development: The discourse

LED has become a promotional 'commodity' of international donor agencies in the 'development market', and it is being promoted as an alternative development strategy for the developing world by international development agencies such as the ILO, UNDP, UNCDF, GIZ, DFID World Bank and UN-HABITAT among others. At the same time, the concept is garnering attention in development theory (Rueker and Trah. 2007: 11). Nonetheless, despite the prominence given to the concept by researchers and development agencies, the term 'local economic development' is still imprecise, ill-defined, and open to multiple interpretations. At the local level in Ghana, for instance, people have their own generic understanding of 'local economic development', which is different from the contemporary LED discourse. It is common to hear people in the districts where LED policies were (supposed to be) implemented say: "We have been practicing local economic development all the time." District assemblies point to their support for the local agricultural sector and assistance given to local micro- and small-scale enterprises through entrepreneurship and management training programs as local economic development. However, according to the definitions of international development agencies and Western scholars, mere support for agriculture and micro- and small-scale enterprises by local government authorities does not necessarily constitute LED. International development agencies and Western scholars distinguish between the traditional and contemporary approaches of LED. Traditional LED approaches, which are still employed by many local government authorities in developing countries, consist of efforts by local authorities or municipalities to attract firms to a specific locality through subsidies, infrastructure, and tax reduction and by providing support for existing enterprises (Tassonyi 2005: 5). Contemporary LED, on the other hand, is seen as a process in which multiple actors, working in concert, devise and implement initiatives to stimulate or revamp the local economy and create local prosperity. Blakely (1989: 58), who perhaps set the tone for the contemporary discourse on LED, defined it as "a process by which local governments and/or community-based groups manage their existing resources and enter into new partnership arrangements with the private sector and/or each other to create new jobs and stimulate economic activity in a well-defined zone." Blakely's definition of LED is no different to those proffered by international development agencies in recent times. The World Bank (2006: 1), for instance, defines it as "a process by which public, business, and non-governmental sector partners work collectively to create better conditions for economic growth and employment generation." Similarly, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), which has been particularly active in LED promotion in Africa, views the concept as "an on-going process by which key stakeholders and institutions from all spheres of society, the public and private sector as well as civil society, work jointly to create a unique advantage for the locality and its firms, tackle market failures, remove bureaucratic obstacles for local businesses, and strengthen the competitiveness of local firms" (Rueker and Trah. 2007: 15). LED in its contemporary definition is not just an economic output or an outcome, it is—and importantly so—a process to which the building of partnerships and the joint promotion of economic activity by multiple actors is key. Thus, the success of LED is not measured solely in terms of its output or outcomes in the form of enhanced economic activities and jobs created in a given territory, but may instead, for instance, lie in the generation of a strong stakeholder partnership arrangement in which government agencies, local businesspeople, and other civil society actors negotiate best ways to promote (local) economic development.

The target areas of LED interventions continue to evolve over time. Helmsing (2001: 64) distinguished between three main categories of LED initiatives: community-based economic development, business or enterprise development, and locality development. The choice of focal area(s) for LED initiatives is usually influenced by the considerations of the local government or the donor agencies promoting it. In certain areas, private sector actors have an influence over the choice of focal area(s), while in other cases, it is a collective decision taken by all key actors. Reviewing the evolution of LED practices around the world over time, Rücker and Trah (2007: 13) note that the current focus of its initiatives is on “providing a competitive local business environment, encouraging and supporting networking and collaboration between businesses and public/private and community partnerships, facilitating workforce development and education, focusing on inward investment to support cluster growth and supporting quality of life improvements.” In many areas, micro-, small-, and medium-scale enterprises are emerging as prime targets of LED interventions, due to their potential and actual contribution to the development of local economies.

3 Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach, the choice of which was informed by the objective of our research—to understand who is setting the LED agenda, how LED approaches are implemented locally, whose interests are touched and promoted and how different actors negotiate their diverse interests in the LED implementation process. In order to gain insights into these issues, close contact and good rapport with different actors was paramount. To collect the relevant information, we held unstructured and semi-structured interviews with businesspeople, NGO representatives, and core staff from the district assemblies responsible for promoting LED. Furthermore, key informant interviews were conducted with officials from the Ministry for Local Government and Rural Development and some donor agencies in the national capital, Accra. Participation in LED planning workshops and field observations complemented the study. Secondary information, such as the medium-term development plans of district assemblies and international development agency reports, provided more information. Information was collected during a ten-month field research in the Berekum and Bongo districts and Ghana’s capital, Accra. However, material presented in this article largely reflects the research results from Bongo District and at the national level.

The Bongo District was carved out of Bolgatanga District in 1988. According to the 2000 Population and Housing Census Report, the Bongo District has an estimated population of 77,885 people, with a population density of 169 persons per km². The district’s population is estimated to be growing annually at a rate of 2.8% (Bongo District Assembly 2010), and it was chosen as a field site for several reasons. First, at the time of its creation in 1988, it was the poorest district in Ghana, which made it a target for many pilot development programs aiming to improve the socio-economic well-being of the local population. However, the pilot schemes implemented in Bongo were barely investigated. This notwithstanding, the Bongo District continues to attract international donors, NGOs, and governmental development projects due to persisting poverty. In 2009, it was chosen together with six other districts in Ghana to implement LED as a national pilot project that would run from 2010-2013. Focusing our study on a poor district that is in dire need of additional economic development and employment opportunities was meant to enable us better understand how much devotion local actors would have for the new LED program, but the selection of the research site was also taken for pragmatic reasons. During preliminary field visits, Bongo’s District Planning Officer was regarded as a highly commendable person who seemed to be very committed to the implementation of LED strategies and showed interest in our research, which meant that we would be assured good access to a key person with in-depth

knowledge on LED and the dynamics of its implementation in the district. Furthermore, our decision was also influenced by the fact that the Bongo District Assembly had already agreed on the economic areas on which it wanted to focus, namely basket weaving, shea butter processing, and guinea fowl rearing. Since baskets and shea butter from the Bongo District are commodities exported worldwide, this added another interesting dimension to the research.

4 Drivers of LED in Ghana

There are a number of actors involved in the promotion of LED in Ghana, but the LED process in the country is driven largely by international development agencies. The introduction and promotion of the concept in Ghana is being spearheaded by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The ILO first introduced the approach through two projects in the Awutu-Efutu-Senya and the Ajumako-Enyan-Essiam districts in the Central Region. The projects were the Ghana Decent Work Pilot Programme (2002-2005) and the Ghana Working out of Poverty Project (2004-2006). The ILO's LED approach focused on strengthening the capacity of micro- and small-scale enterprises as a means of expanding job opportunities in the informal economy, as the creation of decent job opportunities is at the heart of its policy. As pointed out by Rodriguez-Pose (2002: 11), LED approaches can generate a number of benefits that are related closely to the "primary goal and mandate of the ILO," such as "empowering local societies and generating local dialogue, as well as seeking to embed economic activity in a territory." In order to promote the development of micro- and small-scale enterprises, the ILO created structures intended to facilitate social dialogue among the key actors. This brought about the formation of Sub-Committees on Productive and Gainful Employment (SPGE) to provide "leadership and a collective sense of purpose in identifying local economic potential and effectively harness that potential for the benefit of their district" (International Labour Organisation 2004: 4). The sub-committee served as a district platform for meetings and discussions in which public and private sector actors would try to design and implement LED initiatives.

The GIZ's version of LED, known as local and regional economic development (LRED), was first introduced into selected districts in the Brong Ahafo, Ashanti, and northern regions of Ghana. The introduction of the LRED approach was preceded by the GIZ's Rural Trade and Industry Promotion Project (RUTIP), which like the LRED project is also a component of the GIZ's Program for Sustainable Economic Development (PSED). The application of LED tools during the RUTIP project prepared the grounds for the introduction of the LRED approach. The actual implementation of LED initiatives by GIZ in Ghana started in the Brong Ahafo region, and the main aim of GIZ at the time was to design and implement a promotion concept and strategy for local economic development. The GIZ's LED approach is business- and market-oriented, (Hindson 2007: 8), which involves the use of a mix of LED tools such as the Participatory Appraisal for Competitive Advantage (PACA), participatory planning for local and regional economic development (rapid economic appraisal), local business climate surveys, and business information seminars among others. In line with the principles of the LED approach, the GIZ also set up regional economic round tables and district-level local economic development platforms to bring relevant actors together to deliberate and take decisions regarding the development of local enterprises and the local/district economies. In some of the districts, the GIZ helped in setting up light industrial zones—special areas earmarked and upgraded for industrial activities. The idea of setting up light industrial zones is to provide a convenient working environment for micro- and small- scale enterprises, and they are also intended to provide a place with common services for a set of enterprises with complementary activities or infrastructural needs. The creation of light industrial zones is also seen as a

response to the congestion and environmental problems caused by enterprises, such as welders, car repairers, and wood processors, in the central business districts of the cities. In cities like Berekum, for instance, in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana, this idea of upgrading a special area for industrial activities won the interest of businesspeople who, through dialogue, willingly agreed and moved out of the central business district of the city. Thus, the establishment of light industrial zones similar to the Berekum industrial zone became the most successful LED interventions in Ghana and demonstrated the ability of various actors to work together at the sub-national level to promote economic development. However, the successful creation of these zones is attributed largely to the key role played by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) in the entire process. The GIZ was not only the convener of meetings, but it also engaged experts to facilitate the LED process. In some cases, the organization funded part of the interventions, such as the provision of an electricity transformer during the establishment of the Berekum light industrial zone in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana. However, this created problems of sustainability, as can be seen in Berekum, where all LED activities became dormant after the GIZ pulled out.

The ILO and GIZ have worked directly with selected district assemblies in Ghana since 2003 to implement LED initiatives. Currently, LED is gaining national prominence. For instance, the ILO, apart from its district activities, has brought together the Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare, the Ghana Employers Association, and the Trades Union Congress with the aim of “building consensus towards mainstreaming decent work programs in the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy” (International Labour Organisation 2004: 2). This was intended to encourage and promote national support for LED initiatives. Similarly, since 2009, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has mobilized various actors, mainly at the national level, to start the process of making LED part of the national development agenda. The UNDP seeks to encourage and shape LED practice in Ghana through the development of a national LED policy framework. Currently, the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, the National Development Planning Commission, the Local Government Service, and the Institute of Local Government Studies—among other national agencies—are working to institutionalize LED practices in the country. As part of national efforts toward the scaling up of the LED approach in Ghana, a pilot scheme is being run currently under the supervision of the National Development Planning Commission in seven districts, including Bongo, which is the focus of our research.

5 A disabling environment? The local implementation of LED strategies

Our research focused on the Bongo district in the Upper East region, one of the seven UNDP-pilot districts mentioned above. Here, the LED planning experiences of the district, as well the implementation challenges that the district assembly faced, were studied intensively. Nevertheless, in order to understand the context of the LED implementation process in general, one needs to take a broader look at Ghana’s system of decentralized governance and the procedures for and responsibilities of local development (planning) in Ghana in general. Local government authorities—district, municipal, or metropolitan assemblies—are key actors in the promotion of LED in Ghana. The implementation of a comprehensive decentralization program in 1988 resulted in the creation of district assemblies as sub-national government entities. The creation of these bodies was part of efforts aimed at promoting participatory governance and promoting broad-based development in the country. In line with this objective, district assemblies, which are the highest political authorities at the sub-national level (districts), are constitutionally empowered to exercise deliberative, legislative, executive, and

administrative powers (Ahwoi 2010: 46). The specific functions of district assemblies in Ghana, as provided for in the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana (Article 245), include:

- formulating and executing plans, programs and strategies for the effective mobilization and utilization of human, physical, and financial resources of the district;
- promoting and supporting productive activity and social development in the district;
- initiating programs for the development of basic infrastructure;
- developing, improving, and managing human settlements and the environment;
- coordinating, integrating, and harmonizing the execution of programs and projects under approved development plans for the district and other development programs promoted or carried out by ministries, departments, public corporations, other statutory bodies, and NGOs in the district;
- guiding, encouraging and supporting sub-district political bodies, public agencies, and local communities to exercise their roles in the execution of approved development plans.

However, although district assemblies in Ghana have been created with a clear mandate to promote broad-based local development, they have not been able to carry out this mandate effectively. Local residents in particular have expressed disappointment at the slow pace of development taking place in the hinterlands, despite the existence of district assemblies at the sub-national level of government. Concerns have been raised by local residents and researchers over the inability of local government authorities in Africa to promote meaningful socio-economic development, because few governments are ready to really devolve power, necessary funding is often withheld, and local power structures and the elite capture of resources often obstruct the effective, transparent, and accountable implementation of local development initiatives (for good reviews see Ribot 2002; Crawford and Hartmann 2008). Though local government authorities in Ghana have achieved modest gains in enhancing participatory governance, the same cannot be said in the area of promoting the economic well-being of their citizens (Crook 2003: 79). As pointed out, local residents expect more from the district assemblies in terms of economic development, and enhancing participatory political decision making is “necessary but not sufficient condition for greater responsiveness” (Crook 2003: 79). In acknowledgement of this notion, the government of Ghana, at least officially, has embraced the LED approach as part of efforts to re-orient the district assemblies towards their neglected economic role. However, while conducting research at Bongo, and also during shorter research excursions to the Kassena Nankana East district and the Tamale Metropolis, which are also piloting the LED implementation, it could be observed that LED planning largely follows the same old structures and patterns that have been established for development planning at the district level.

The planning authorities playing key roles in the LED planning process are the district assemblies and the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC), the former of which are responsible for overall planning at the district level, including the formulation of district medium-term development plans (Kokor 2001: 32). However, the NDPC as the highest national planning authority has the mandate to formulate guidelines for the preparation of these plans. Under the current national development framework, Ghana’s Shared Growth and Development Agenda (2010-2013) provision has been introduced to focus on enhancing the competitiveness of the private sector in the district medium-term development plans (NDPC, 2010: 22). The NDPC also has the mandate to coordinate and harmonize district development plans with those of other sector agencies, in order to form a comprehensive national development plan (Diaw 1997: 6; Kokor 2001: 32). Given this structure, it is clear that the ability of the district assemblies to design and implement local development initiatives independently is

seriously curtailed by the power of the NDPC. This power relation remains intact in the process of planning and implementing LED initiatives in the districts.

In the specific case regarding LED planning in the seven pilot districts, the NDPC even went beyond the traditional role of issuing guidelines in the pre-planning phase. NDPC officials themselves started the LED process in the pilot districts by reviewing the past medium-term development plans of the selected districts. This was intended to assess the economic potential of the pilot districts and to see the extent to which economic development had been prioritized in their past medium-term development plans. In this exercise the NDPC officials observed that the promotion of economic development was not given enough impetus, so this alleged failure on the part of the district assemblies to promote economic development prompted the NDPC to include a component on private sector development in the guidelines for the preparation of the current district medium term development plans, which also set the tone for LED planning in the districts. The review also allowed the National Development Planning Commission to keep abreast with the current (economic) development status of the pilot districts, so that the potential impact of LED could be evaluated later. The hierarchical mode of the initial review process set the tone for future engagement between the NDPC and the districts. The adoption of LED policies was thus prescribed in a top-down manner for the pilot districts. Nonetheless, the district assemblies were tasked with the responsibility of mobilizing stakeholders, conducting a participatory diagnosis of the local economy, identifying areas of intervention, and designing and implementing appropriate local economic development strategies. LED planning in the national pilot districts continued to be undertaken within the district development planning framework, carried out by the planning sub-committees of the district assemblies, under the coordination of the District Planning and Coordinating Unit (DPCU).

In Bongo it was the District Planning Sub-committee, comprising the District Planning Officer, District Coordinating Director, and representatives from the Department of Community Development, Department of Co-operative, Civic Union, and the National Board for Small-Scale Industries, which after an economic review selected the priority economic areas mentioned previously (shea butter processing, basket weaving, and guinea fowl rearing). It was only after this crucial decision had been taken that the planning sub-committee, in a bid to give itself an image of a local economic development agency (LEDA), was expanded to include private sector representatives such as market women and a representative of the Bongo Rural Bank, as well as representatives of the three priority economic areas and from traditional authorities. This expanded group now serves as the district LED platform, for the organization of LED in Bongo . The selection of the priority economic areas was then followed by an LED planning session undertaken by the District LED Platform. The ideas developed in that participatory forum were then formulated into a LED plan covering the three economic priorities alongside the normal district medium-term development plan by the District Planning and Coordinating Unit. The District Planning and Coordinating Unit of the district assembly did not merely facilitate the LED planning processes, as it should have done, but also dominated it. The actual formulation of LED action plans for Bongo was undertaken by the District Planning and Coordinating Unit. The dominance of the DPCU in the LED planning process reflects the perception that planning is a technical exercise that has to be handled by technocrats, especially as it also entails a 'logical' sequencing and costing of activities.

The draft LED plan of Bongo's district assembly was then sent to the NDPC for review, which was intended to ensure that the district was charting the right path in the pilot phase. The Commission reviewed the draft LED plan again and suggested the addition of a fourth economic activity—fish farming. This was recommended because Bongo District houses one of the few large-scale irrigation schemes in the country, the Vea Irrigation Scheme, where there is potential for fish farming and agro-fishery. This recommendation by the NDPC was however not accepted by the Bongo District LED

platform, which insisted on focusing on just the three economic priority areas for the time being. The selection of the priority area paved the way for the Planning Sub-committee and the Planning and Coordinating Unit to design action plans for the promotion of three economic activities in the district. When the plan was drafted, the assembly then organized a public hearing, where it presented the district medium-term development plan, including the LED action plans, to the general public for their comments or inputs. These public hearings were public gatherings organized to highlight what the district assembly had planned. This form of consultation is intended to engage the public in the planning process, but not to change radically the action plans based on public input, i.e. it is not a forum where the participants can vote for or against plans. The public hearing was followed by the finalization of the plan, which was subsequently presented to the assembly for approval and paved the way for its implementation.

As can be seen, the initial experience with LED implementation in Bongo—as well as in other LED pilot districts—does not vary greatly from the usual top-down development planning seen throughout Ghana. Following the new LED development discourse, the general policy had already been agreed upon between international development agencies (in this case the ILO and especially the UNDP) and government institutions (here the NDPC). The engagement of NDPC officers with the pilot district from the onset, and the inclusion of LED in the guidelines for the Medium-Term District Development Plans, documents not only the special attention but also the political pressure that accompanied the implementation of the LED pilots. Given that the NDPC is a powerful—and for districts extremely important—body, it would have been difficult for Bongo and other districts to avoid implementing LED.

Despite the fact that the vital role played by the private sector is now being recognized by government authorities, the private sector at the district level has not been able to play an active role in the organization of LED, in which the private sector is usually expected to play an active role in mobilizing funds, influencing the fee-fixing resolutions of the district assemblies, and participating in processes leading to the preparation of LED action plans among other things. However, the district assemblies and the private sector have not collaborated effectively to promote the district development agenda.

In general, the lack of influence of the private sector and local businessmen and -women in LED decision making seems problematic. While development officers, despite the LED rhetoric, see development planning as a technical process enshrined in clearly defined, top-down procedures, the private sector in Bongo is not that organized and strong enough to embark on meaningful advocacy to promote its interests. Currently, there exist only small activity-based business associations. These include a tailor and dressmakers' association, a hairdressers' association, guinea fowl farmers' associations, basket weavers' associations, and so on. In Bongo District, associations such as dressmakers and hairdressers are found in the Bongo Township, while associations of basket weavers, shea butter processors and guinea fowl farmers are found in almost all the rural communities. Apart from the weak and divided nature of business organizations, the distrust of local businesspeople makes cooperation difficult. Although the current LED approach comes with demands for private sector participation and contributions, it has not effectively enhanced businesspeople's influence over development plans, let alone offered them traceable infrastructural or financial benefits. During our field research, some private operators complained about what they termed the 'promise and fail' attitude of the district assembly, and during a group discussion with guinea fowl farmers (one of the economic activities considered for LED), in Namoo in the Bongo District, one of them lamented about the slow implementation of proposed LED interventions by the Bongo District Assembly:

“They called us for a meeting in Bongo and promised that they were going to introduce a program that will support our economic activities. But it has been more than a year now, and nothing has happened. The paramount chief of Bongo was at that meeting... if they

were deceiving us, what about our paramount chief; were they deceiving our paramount chief, too?" (A.A. group discussion with guinea fowl farmers in Bongo District, 15.10.2011).

This complaint was not necessarily out of hand, because despite the fact that LED plans were drafted according to official requirements, they were yet to be implemented.

While LED plans were drafted according to official requirements, their real implementation faced severe obstacles and local resistance. Although action plans had been finally produced, they were barely implemented, at least during the first two years of the implementation period. Between 2010 and 2011, the Bongo District Assembly, for instance, had actually not been able to implement any of its LED action plans. This observation not only holds true for the Bongo District Assembly, either. Interviews held at other LED pilot districts, such as the Tamale Metropolitan Assembly and the Kassena Nankani East district, showed the same reluctance towards implementation, and in Bongo it was actually obvious that there were no plans to implement any of the LED plans in the remaining two years (2012-2013) of the medium-term planning period, although other development initiatives outlined in the medium-term development plans were being implemented. While frustration with inadequate human and financial resource capacity may have played some role, other factors we termed local actors' 'multiple rationalities' also played a role.

6 Issues of Capacity and Staff Management

During the research it became clear that the districts do not have adequate capacity to design and implement LED initiatives effectively. District Planning Officers are the main technical experts responsible for the formulation and implementation of district medium-term development plans, including LED strategies, but they are not sufficiently trained in LED planning. Though they have played lead roles in the formulation of district development plans over the years, they do not have experience in local economic development planning, which is business-oriented and more strategic in nature.

District assemblies in Ghana have focused over the years largely on the planning and provision of social infrastructure. As such, the economic development focus of the assemblies did not go beyond support for agricultural production and the provision of small loans for small-scale enterprise operators. However, the contemporary form of LED planning differs from the development planning approach used by District Planning Officers in the formulation of district medium-term development plans. LED planning is strategic in nature and is aimed at promoting the competitiveness of localities and economic ventures or enterprises. LED planning requires a firm understanding of the economic potential of locals and how to situate them in the global economic landscape. It requires skills to carve a clear vision, design strategies, and adopt a mix of tools to make localities and local economic ventures/enterprises competitive on a national and global scale. Such competencies are lacking in the districts, at least for now.

Another human resource-related problem involves the frequent transfer of technical staff from the districts, particularly Planning Officers. In the course of our research we realized that the transfer of technical and administrative staff was a common phenomenon in the district assembly system and that it has important implications for LED planning. In Ghana, District Development Planning Officers are transferred at will by the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, mostly without recourse to their performance or contribution to planning practice in their assigned districts. This frequent transfer has a negative impact on LED planning in the districts. For instance, an officer at a post in Bongo as at May 2011, when this research commenced, was transferred to the Northern Regional Economic Planning Office before the end of the same year. This planning officer, who actually attended

the special LED workshops in Accra, and who worked with great zeal to promote LED planning and LED promotion in Bongo, was transferred at the time the plan was being finalized and implementation was meant to start. The discontinuity that the poor timing of the transfer of technical officers causes certainly impacts negatively on the implementation of LED activities, as new staff need to first understand the LED plan, and then more importantly build relationships with the various actors involved in LED promotion in the district before the LED process can be continued.

7 Funding LED

The success of local development is dependent to a large extent on the availability of financial resources, as the design and implementation of local development projects by local government authorities requires money. As Ahwoi (2010: 165) points out, the capacity of local government authorities to deliver timely and quality services is determined by the stock of financial resources available to them, which explains why fiscal decentralization has become an integral component of the entire decentralization process across the world. In Ghana, the decentralization process was given impetus following the introduction of the District Assembly Common Fund (DACF), the establishment of which was provided for by Article 252 of the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana. This Article provides that a minimum of 5% of total national revenue is allocated annually to this fund. The DACF, whose share of the national revenue had risen to 7.5 % in 2007 (Arthur 2012: 210), is intended to provide financial resources to enable assemblies to carry out their constitutional functions. The DACF is still the main source of funding for district assemblies.

Nonetheless, despite the existence of this fund, the financing of local development initiatives remains a big problem for district assemblies in Ghana, as the funding provided by the DACF is just inadequate. As shown in Table 1, in 2010 for instance, the entire Upper East region, with its almost two million inhabitants, was allocated a total amount of GH¢7,414,273.00—about 5.2 million USD (OANDA 2012)—from the DACF. Shared among nine district assemblies, this money had to be spent on a wide range of activities such as economic development, social service provision, administration, environment, and the financing of Member of Parliaments’ development projects.

Table 1: Sectoral Expenditure of the DACF in the Upper East region, 2010 (in Ghana Cedis)

	Economic Ventures	Social Services	Administration	Environment	Constituency Labour Project (MPs)	Total
Upper East	1,532,253.00	1,093,177.00	3,442,823.00	788,178.00	557,842.00	7,414,273.00
Percentage (%)	15.18	27.43	42.80	9.86	4.73	100

Source: DACF Administrator, 2010

As (Ahwoi 2010: 165) points out, the funds made available to district assemblies do not often match the wide area of mandates and responsibilities with which they have to deal. Moreover, district assemblies cannot spend funds according to their own preferences, since the utilization of the DACF is regulated through the approved guidelines of the Administrator of the District Assembly Common Fund that detail the percentage share that can be spent on each budget line (see Table 1). Thus, district assemblies do not have much influence over decisions regarding the kind of projects or investments they would like to take up with the DACF. Paradoxically, although they are now being encouraged by the NDPC to focus on LED, the district assemblies are not allowed to change the pattern of the DACF expenditure predefined by the Administrator of the District Assembly Common Fund, which also has the approval of the Parliament of the Republic of Ghana, while the district assemblies continue to spend as much as 42% on administration and they spend only 15% of their share of the DACF on economic ventures (see Table 1).

The inadequate financial resources available to the Bongo District Assembly and the absence of a special fund to finance LED initiatives are thus a source of concern. Local government authorities like the Bongo District Assembly are encouraged to design and implement LED, but this requires financial resources that are often not readily available (Canzanelli 2001: 39). In a discussion with officials from some of the pilot district assemblies, it became clear that they see the introduction of the LED approach as an additional responsibility. As such, and in order to enable them to carry out their additional mandate, they were expecting—at the very least—additional funding from the central government and/or donor agencies. As Bongo's District Planning Officer (Interview, September, 2011) put it:

“We thought they were going to give us funds to implement our LED action plans, but they told us to use our existing financial resources. This is a problem. You know in Bongo District our internally generated fund is nothing to write home about. Funding is really a problem to us.”

The quotation above clearly describes the ‘development mentality’ that has been created by top-down approaches to development promotion. The thinking that the central government is the provider of development is widespread and is limited not solely to local people alone, as local bureaucrats also expect central government to initiate development projects in their localities, such as roads, hospitals, electricity, water supply, and so on. The quotation above also refers to a potential funding alternative. District assemblies in Ghana are constitutionally empowered and officially encouraged (Diaw, 1994; Ahwoi 2010: 173) to generate their own internally generated funds, which could be, for instance, created by the collection of market tolls, property rates, and so on. However, Bongo District's assembly, like many other local government bodies in Ghana and Africa as a whole (World Bank 2003: 8), lacks the capacity to raise resources internally/locally, because while some of the districts have limited taxable economic activities, others perform poorly in revenue mobilization as a result of the use of poor strategies and low commitment to the entire process. Bongo District, which is recognized nationally as a poor district, certainly has difficulty in raising taxes from its limited and poorly developed economic activities. As Ahwoi (2010: 167) clearly points out, “the taxpayers in the local government areas, being mainly the poor, are often too poor to be taxed.” During the 2012 budget hearing of the Bongo district assembly, held on 13.10.2011 at the assembly's conference hall, it was revealed that the assembly's internally generated funds were not even enough to finance its day-to-day administrative expenses (recurrent expenditure). This means that there is no possibility that it could rely on its internally generated fund to finance its LED initiatives.

Because funds from DACF are inadequate and generally earmarked, coupled with the inability of the Bongo assembly to generate sufficient funds internally, local authorities looked towards agencies promoting LED, particularly the UNDP, to make additional funds available for implementing their LED initiatives. Nonetheless, contrary to the expectation of the LED pilot district assemblies, no specific fund

has been set aside for the implementation of LED initiatives. While the district assemblies are expecting additional financial resources from central government or the UNDP, the latter expects district assemblies to use part of their existing revenues in this respect. This 'stand-off' has contributed to the delay in the implementation of LED initiatives in the pilot districts, which was supposed to launch in 2010. The current subtle top-down approach of development planning in Ghana, combined with inadequate and often earmarked funds, makes the implementation of LED plans in pilot districts such as Bongo difficult. However, it is not only the problem of funding per se, but also the perspective of local actors who expect the development process to be initiated and financed from outside sources. This mentality runs counter to the concept of LED, which is a bottom-up development process driven by local actors, but local actors and their apparent misunderstanding of the LED approach are causing delays in applying the initiatives.

The introduction of the LED approach by international development agencies thus raises the question of ownership. District assemblies do not identify fully with the LED pilot. On the one hand, they are unwilling to take responsibility, since the whole LED discourse is externally introduced, while on the other hand, the role of international development agencies has raised financial expectations among the district assemblies. Interviews in some of the districts currently practicing the LED approach reveal that they all have high hopes of receiving additional financial resources from international development agencies. They clearly see the LED concept as a discourse/practice driven by international development agencies, and they certainly expect these agencies to at least release funds to enable them to implement their action plans. In general, there is a clear discrepancy in understanding the LED process between donors and central government on the one side and local actors on the other side. While the former see LED as a bottom-up process that should be owned and financed locally, the latter see it as just another externally-driven development discourse that will be only put into practice if it is supported financially.

8 Varying Rationalities and Interests

Different actors, such as donor agencies, national governments, local government bodies, and private sector operators involved in LED processes, have differing rationalities and interests with regard to LED. On a general level, Cunningham and Meyer-Stamer (2005: 4) observed that it is usually pursued for one or more of the following reasons:

- Local decision makers try to promote economic development to raise their legitimacy with the local electorate, and possibly to improve the income stream for local government;
- National and provincial governments encourage local initiatives, since they have neither the information nor the skills and funds to promote active economic development initiatives;
- In some countries, LED has become a mandatory task of local government as part of an extensive decentralization effort;
- From the perspective of foreign donor organizations, LED is an established practice with a long tradition in their home countries, and there is no doubt that LED is one of the more important tasks of local government.

The rationale behind donor agencies implementing LED strategies in Ghana can be seen as part of the more general process of promoting them as a replacement/complement to macro-level, market-oriented economic and democratic reform programs, which have largely failed to transform the economic well-being and political participation of local and poor people in Africa. This is alluded to by

Rücker and Trah (2007: 11) regarding the rationality of GIZ's LRED interventions in South Africa and other parts of the world:

“Both internationally and in South Africa, there have been vigorous debates as to how best to promote local and regional economies as a way to fight poverty. [...] The increased focus on LRED [the GIZ version of LED] is to a large extent the result of the growing globalization of our economies. [...] This development has brought both risks and opportunities to local economies: it increases pressure on local economies to compete internationally and adapt to global economic forces. At the same time, it opens opportunities to attract new markets and investors. [...]. While the integration into external markets is an important driving force, [...] LRED's popularity as an approach to economic development coincides also with the global trend of decentralizing power from national to local government.”

Nevertheless, while donor agencies continue to experiment, in order to find new development prescriptions that will allow them to stay within their market-liberal and democratic normative framework, this is apparently noticed by local actors. An interview with an official from the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, in Accra, highlighted that he is clearly aware of the fact that donor agencies often use developing countries as testing grounds for new prescriptions and approaches:

“You know these people [from international development agencies], they once again have a model to test on us; but I think the LED concept is a good idea. If we are able to do it well, it will help us” (Interview with an official from the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, Accra, October, 2011).

It must also be pointed out that local actors react (positively or negatively) to the actions of donor agencies based on their own knowledge, worldviews, rationalities, and interests. Therefore, the success or failure of development interventions such as LED cannot be explained by technical reasons alone, but need to be understood within the context of the diverse interests and values of the various actors involved in the process. The action of actors involved in any development intervention is driven by interests, which is evident in the ongoing design and implementation of LED initiatives in selected Ghanaian districts. The LED approach is yet to receive full acceptance by local governments in Ghana, for a number of reasons. The successful implementation of LED initiatives in the districts is hampered by the assemblies' focus on the provision of physical and social infrastructure, which is often supported by the projects and funding lines offered by national governments and international development agencies. Infrastructure development makes sense to local actors, since, especially in poor and remote communities, there is the clear need to provide social infrastructure and services in order to reduce illiteracy rates, improve healthcare delivery, and to provide communities with sufficient access to roads, electricity, and safe water supplies. Therefore, the focus of contemporary LED planning—making local economies and enterprises competitive—has no importance in the development agenda of most district assemblies, at least for now. While the focus on infrastructure may have drawn attention away from economic development and created an infrastructure-mindedness, there appear to be other reasons for the infrastructure orientation of the district assemblies.

Local governments' concentration on infrastructure is also the result of their conviction that physical infrastructure has a great deal of political appeal for the electorate. In the context of a local political system earmarked by networks of patronage (Bayart 1993; Schatzberg 1993) power is legitimized through the provision of services rendered to constituencies of politicians. Therefore, the infrastructure-mindedness of local governments can also be explained partly by the desire of local politicians to boast about the number of roads, schools, clinics, or health centers they have been able to provide for their constituents. Furthermore, infrastructure contracts can be awarded to party loyalists and supporters. Additionally, financial rewards that politicians and officials obtain from the award of construction and

service contracts are widely believed to be another reason for the focus on providing infrastructure. In Ghana it is widely believed that top government officials, including those of the district assemblies, often receive bribes or kick-back payments for awarding construction contracts. These kick-back payments are seen as a show of appreciation by the contractors for the effort of government officials in awarding them contracts. Data from a national survey on corruption carried out by the local wing of Transparency International (Ghana Integrity Initiative 2011: 16) in Ghana supports this view: “In a multiple answer question, where [a number of 2096] respondents were asked to choose as many answers as possible on the factors that influence the award of contracts, 70% of the respondents scored party loyalty first as the factor most influencing the award of contracts. Furthermore, 52.7% of the respondents reported that bribes influenced awards, while ethnicity/nepotism followed closely with 52.6% of the respondents. 43.7% of the respondents identified kickbacks.” If this is anything to go by, it means that officials in government agencies, including district assemblies, may have hidden motivations in the promotion of infrastructure projects. Given the high cost associated with the construction of infrastructure, the award of contracts has become a brisk business to some politicians and government officials. The role of infrastructure development and the awarding of contracts in the political process, as well as rent-seeking by politicians and bureaucrats, partially explain the reluctance of local elites to shift the development focus of local governments away from infrastructure development and more towards local economic development.

9 Conclusion

This paper set out to show how LED approaches have become a new and important development paradigm promoted by international development agencies worldwide. LEDs can be seen as a convenient response to both the neoliberal as well as post-development critiques of the mainstream development approaches promoted, often without much success, after World War II. Based on structural adjustment policies and political decentralization, the LED paradigm, at least rhetorically, marries neoliberal concerns for capitalist development and the integration of competitive international markets with arguments for local development initiatives and the important role of civil society. While the term LED remains blurred and ill-defined, development agencies have designed comprehensive LED packages that are meant to be adopted and implemented in the developing world in order to spark local pro-poor economic growth based on the comparative advantages and interests of specific localities. These packages include measures such as providing a competitive local business environment, networking and collaboration between businesses, public institutions and civil society, workforce development and education, as well as (industrial) cluster development, especially targeting micro-, small-, and medium-scale enterprises, with special potential for the development of local economies.

However, while LED concepts are portrayed as the new way forward in local pro-poor economic development, little evidence exists about the actual performance of LED projects and the overall success of related strategies in the developing world. Therefore, the paper reviews the evidence from a qualitative Ghanaian case study in order to provide some insights into the performance of LED approaches in the context of an African country. What becomes clear is that, despite official adoption and rhetoric support, the implementation of LED approaches in Ghana has a long way to go. In certain communities, such as Berekum, especially where international development agencies were willing to fund concrete LED projects (such as industrial clusters with reliable infrastructure), initial initiatives seemed to work—at least during project engagement. However, after financial support ended, LED initiatives became dormant. Less concrete LED initiatives, implemented through local government structures (district assemblies) in Ghana, seemed to be even less successful. While they foresaw the

engagement of local businesspeople and civil society in the development of the economic components of district medium-term development plans and the expansion of district-level LED platforms, planning continued to be enshrined in the old, rather technocratic and top-down procedures of the Ghanaian development planning bureaucracy, which gave little room for local inputs into planning. Furthermore, LED approaches did not match the interests and strategies of local actors. While local planning bureaucrats often lack the capacity and will to implement participatory business development processes, the local population is also less interested in business platforms; rather, they expect the government to invest in deficient infrastructure such as roads, electricity supplies, schools, and clinics. In this light, businesspeople and the local population per se view inclusive development planning efforts that come without concrete funding and tangible infrastructure development as futile. The 'infrastructure-mindedness' of the population finds its analogue in the strategies of local bureaucrats and politicians. While LED platforms may enhance the transparency and the inclusion of local interests in planning processes, they create neither income nor votes. Infrastructure projects create the opportunity for bribes and kick-back payments for bureaucrats and politicians and can be used to provide party loyalists and supporters with concrete, tangible rewards for their political services. Consequently, as LED approaches offer little opportunity to gain (political) currency, they are often neglected in the local political sphere.

Thus, even if the commitment and capacity of Ghanaian planning institutions for LED implementation could be elevated, given the current rationalities and interests of local actors, there is little hope that these approaches will become important development instruments in the future, and only if married with funding opportunities for concrete infrastructure development projects will local interest in LED implementation improve. However, this would need innovative ideas on how the initial LED dynamic can be sustained locally—and financially. Looking at the problems faced by local governments and communities with regard to the creation of sufficient internally generated funds—not only in Africa and other parts of the developing world, but also in the so-called developed world—it remains unclear as to how this goal can be achieved. Therefore, unless the rationalities and interests of local actors change drastically, the chances are that LED will become just another teleological development discourse with little beneficial impact on local development.

In order to spark local economic development it therefore seems more important for governments to create an enabling intellectual and infrastructural environment that allows locals to develop their (economic) potential, rather than to create artificial partnerships that match nobody's interests. Further research is needed in order to understand how, maybe in successful LED initiatives, local rationalities can be changed and communal dynamics for the betterment of local living conditions can be pursued.

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Authors: Jonas Ayaribilla Akudugu and Wolfram Laube

Contact: akujonaya@yahoo.com, wlaube@uni-bonn.de

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