

THE ROLE OF NGOS IN GHANA'S FREE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL POLICY: A MIXED-METHODS EVALUATION OF IMPLEMENTATION DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in implementing Ghana's Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy, introduced in 2017. Using a mixed-methods approach involving questionnaires (n=140), interviews with four NGO leaders, and analysis of NGO databases, the research investigated NGO nature, participation levels, and effectiveness in policy implementation. Results reveal that NGOs demonstrate strong organizational structures and advocacy capabilities, with particularly high effectiveness in capacity-building programs (mean difference = 1.52143, $p < .001$), community engagement (mean difference = 1.37857, $p < .001$), and policy influence (mean difference = 1.47143, $p < .001$). However, collaboration with government agencies showed below-average performance (mean difference = -0.28571, $p < .001$). Correlation analysis indicated significant relationships between NGO participation and policy outcomes, particularly in awareness creation and community feedback mechanisms. The study identifies 50 education-focused NGOs across 16 regions, with 52% concentrated in Greater Accra. Key challenges include funding constraints, infrastructure gaps in rural areas, and inconsistent government collaboration. The findings contribute to understanding NGO-government partnerships in educational policy implementation and provide recommendations for enhancing collaborative effectiveness in achieving equitable education access.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Educational reforms have become central to development strategies globally, with particular emphasis on improving access, quality, and equity in education. Ghana's Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy, introduced in September 2017, represents a landmark initiative designed to enhance secondary education accessibility for all Ghanaian students. This policy, rooted in Article 25(1)(b) of Ghana's 1992 Constitution mandating that secondary education should be made "progressively free," aimed to eliminate

financial barriers by covering tuition fees, examination fees, and providing free textbooks.

The implementation of educational policies in developing countries often requires collaborative efforts between government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Banks et al., 2015). NGOs play crucial roles in bridging gaps in government provision, introducing innovative approaches, and advocating for marginalized communities (Al Mokdad, 2025). In Ghana's context, NGOs have emerged as vital partners in supporting, implementing, and shaping the educational landscape through various domains

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including advocacy, resource provision, and capacity-building efforts (Adu-Baffoe & Bonney, 2021; Okine, 2021).

Despite the significant presence of NGOs in Ghana's education sector, limited research exists on their specific contributions to the FSHS policy implementation (Arhin, 2018). This study addresses this gap by examining the mechanisms of NGO-government collaboration, the challenges faced, and the impact of these interactions on educational outcomes. The research focuses on three primary objectives: analyzing the nature and functions of NGOs in promoting FSHS participation; assessing the level of NGO participation in policy implementation; and evaluating the effectiveness of their involvement (Bebbington et al., 2005).

The study's significance lies in its contribution to understanding civil society's role in educational policy implementation, particularly in developing countries. By examining NGO involvement in the FSHS policy, this research provides insights that can inform future policy development and enhance the effectiveness of NGO-government partnerships in achieving sustainable development goals.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play an essential role in advancing educational reform worldwide by complementing government efforts and addressing persistent inequalities in access and quality (Hoff & Hickling-Hudson, 2011). According to Lewis and Kanji (2009), NGOs bridge gaps in education delivery, particularly in resource-limited contexts. In Ghana, organisations such as the Ghana National Education Campaign Coalition (GNECC) (2020) have been instrumental in shaping inclusive education policies and ensuring that reforms address the needs of marginalized groups (GNECC, 2020). These organisations contribute through advocacy, service provision, and capacity-building initiatives that strengthen educational systems and enhance learning outcomes (Ananga, 2020). Over the past decades, Ghana has introduced several major education reforms aimed at improving access, quality, and accountability, including the Education Strategic Plan (2018–2030) and the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy launched in 2017. NGOs have supported these initiatives through community-based education programs, teacher training, curriculum development, and awareness campaigns that promote inclusion and transparency (Ministry of Education, 2018). However, persistent challenges such as inadequate funding, disparities between urban and rural areas, and weak policy coordination continue to affect the effectiveness of these reforms (UNESCO, 2018; Addae-Mensah, 2017). The flexibility of NGOs enables them to pilot innovative approaches, mobilize communities, and advocate for equity and accountability within the education sector (Salmen, 2018). Their work has been

particularly significant in advancing the goals of the Free SHS policy, as they help ensure that no child is excluded on the basis of socio-economic background. Despite constraints such as limited resources and inconsistent collaboration with government agencies, NGO participation has been shown to enhance transparency, increase enrolment, and foster community participation in educational policy implementation (Gali & Schechter, 2021).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. The research was conducted between April 15 and May 20, 2024, utilizing questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and secondary data analysis to gather comprehensive insights into NGO roles in FSHS policy implementation.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

The study population was derived from the database of registered civil society organizations under the Ministry of Gender and Social Protection in Ghana (2019). From 1,100 registered NGOs, 250 were identified as involved in education programs, and 50 NGOs directly associated with FSHS policy were contacted. Email invitations were sent to all 50 NGOs, with 14 expressing willingness to participate (28%). Given that only 14 of 50 contacted NGOs participated, potential non-response bias cannot be ruled out. Responding organizations may differ systematically from non-respondents in terms of resources or engagement levels. This limitation may constrain the generalisability of the findings beyond the participating NGOs, particularly those located in less accessible regions. From each participating NGO, 10 employees were selected using simple random sampling from eligible staff lists provided by each NGO to minimize selection bias. Since responses were nested within organizations, intra-cluster dependence was considered by averaging item responses within NGOs to check consistency. Results showed minimal intra-group variation (average intra-class correlation coefficient < 0.05), suggesting clustering did not meaningfully inflate significance levels. The study ensured participant anonymity and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and data were used solely for academic purposes.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaire: A structured questionnaire comprising five sections was developed:

- Section A: Demographic information
- Section B: Nature of CSOs (9 items)
- Section C: Functions of CSOs (9 items)
- Section D: Level of participation (9 items)
- Section E: Effectiveness of CSOs (9 items)

A five-point Likert scale was employed (1 = least agreement, 5 = highest agreement). The questionnaire was administered electronically to urban participants and physically to rural participants over one week.

3.4 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews lasting 30-60 minutes were conducted with NGO leaders. An interview guide structured in three sections addressed organizational nature, participation levels, and effectiveness. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent for accurate transcription.

4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics, one-sample t-tests (test value = 3), and Spearman's correlation analysis.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n=140)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	62	44.3
Female	78	55.7
Region of Operation		
Greater Accra	55	39.3
Ashanti	42	30.0
Northern	37	26.4
Other	6	4.3
Level of Education		
Tertiary	45	32.1
SHS	14	10.0
JHS	36	25.7
Primary	28	20.0
TVET	17	12.1
Role in Organization		
Director	35	25.0
Coordinator	42	30.0
Volunteer	37	26.4
Other	26	18.6

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Qualitative interview data were thematically analyzed to complement quantitative findings. Although Likert-type responses are ordinal by design, this study treated the

Table 4. One-Sample t-test Results for Level of Participation (Test Value = 3)

Variable	t	df	Sig.	Mean Difference	95% CI
Awareness creation	1.282	139	0.202	0.086	[-0.047, 0.218]
Government collaboration	-3.898	139	0.000	-0.286	[-0.431, -0.141]
Logistical support	0.515	139	0.607	0.029	[-0.081, 0.138]
Monitoring/evaluation	1.067	139	0.288	0.071	[-0.061, 0.204]
Capacity-building	29.171	139	0.000	1.521	[1.418, 1.625]
Marginalized advocacy	28.301	139	0.000	1.329	[1.236, 1.421]
Community engagement	25.050	139	0.000	1.379	[1.270, 1.487]
Policy influence	27.215	139	0.000	1.471	[1.365, 1.578]
Enrollment impact	21.890	139	0.000	1.400	[1.274, 1.527]

five-point Likert scale data as approximately interval-level measurements to enable parametric analysis, consistent with previous methodological literature (Carifio & Perla, 2008; Norman, 2010). One-sample t-tests were therefore applied to assess whether mean ratings significantly differed from the neutral midpoint (test value = 3).

Table 2. Nature of Civil Society Organizations in Promoting FSHS Participation

Statement	Mean	SD
Well-structured with clear organizational frameworks	4.46	0.63
Prioritize advocacy for equitable access to education	4.07	0.63
Leadership promotes accountability and transparency	3.79	0.92
Demonstrate financial independence from government	3.34	1.20
Activities tailored to local community needs	3.96	0.75
Actively collaborate with stakeholders	4.31	1.00
Employ innovative approaches	3.97	0.99
Consistent in advocacy efforts	4.64	0.71
Significant impact on public opinion	4.20	0.54

Table 3. Functions of CSOs in Promoting FSHS Participation

Statement	Mean	SD
Provide effective advocacy for awareness	3.97	0.89
Engage parents/guardians for enrollment	3.94	0.89
Organize community outreach programs	4.24	0.75
Serve as government-community intermediaries	3.83	0.62
Facilitate access to additional resources	3.79	0.63
Create stakeholder dialogue platforms	3.47	0.85
Empower marginalized groups	3.58	0.73
Monitor and evaluate policy impact	3.61	0.73
Advocate for policy adjustments	3.30	0.66

To ensure robustness, Spearman's rank correlation analysis was also conducted as a non-parametric check, yielding consistent patterns. Although multivariate regression models could control for organizational size and budget, the study focused on descriptive and correlational patterns consistent with its exploratory design.

Table 5. Selected Spearman Correlation Coefficients Between Participation and Effectiveness Variables

Variables	r	p
Awareness creation ↔ Public understanding	0.355**	0.000
Community engagement ↔ Feedback mechanisms	0.492**	0.000
Government collaboration ↔ Challenge addressing	0.410**	0.000
Capacity-building ↔ Resource access	0.497**	0.000
Marginalized advocacy ↔ Policy adjustments	0.249**	0.003
Monitoring/evaluation ↔ Accountability	0.426**	0.000
Policy influence ↔ Transparency	0.253**	0.003

Note: ** = Correlation significant at $p < 0.01$ level

Given the modest sample size ($n = 14$ NGOs, 140 respondents), adding multiple predictors would have reduced statistical power and interpretability. Future research using larger, stratified samples could incorporate multivariate techniques to test causal mechanisms.

Table 1 presents demographic characteristics of respondents ($n=140$). On the table 2 we have nature of civil society organizations in promoting fshs participation. On the table 3 functions of csos in promoting fshs participation are presented. Table 4 presents one-sample t-test results for level of participation (test value = 3). Table 5 presents selected spearman correlation coefficients between participation and effectiveness variables.

5. MAJOR FINDINGS AND OUTCOMES

5.1 Reliability Analysis

The overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.773, indicating good internal consistency. Individual construct reliabilities were: Nature of CSOs ($\alpha = 0.762$), Functions of CSOs ($\alpha = 0.773$), Level of Participation ($\alpha = 0.780$), and Effectiveness of CSOs ($\alpha = 0.775$).

5.2 Participant Demographics

Table 1 presents participant demographics showing relatively balanced gender representation (55.7% female, 44.3% male), with majority operating in Greater Accra (39.3%), Ashanti (30.0%), and Northern (26.4%) regions. Educational backgrounds varied, with 32.1% having tertiary education and 25.7% JHS education.

Organizational roles included coordinators (30.0%), volunteers (26.4%), and directors (25.0%).

5.3 NGO Database Analysis

Analysis of the NGO database revealed geographic concentration patterns, with 52% based in Accra. Budget ranges were predominantly \$100,000-\$300,000 (60%), with staff sizes typically 10-20 members. Primary educational focuses included primary education (20%), secondary education (16%), and vocational training (14%).

5.4 Nature and Functions of NGOs

Table 2 shows high agreement that NGOs are well-structured with clear frameworks ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.63$) and demonstrate consistency in advocacy efforts ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.71$). However, financial independence from government influences showed moderate agreement ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.20$).

Regarding functions (Table 3), NGOs scored highest in organizing community outreach programs ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.75$) and lowest in advocating for policy adjustments ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.66$).

5.5 Level of Participation

One-sample t-test results revealed significant positive participation in capacity-building, advocacy for marginalized groups, community engagement, policy influence, and enrollment impact, but below-average performance in government collaboration. The reported mean difference represents the deviation of the sample mean from the test value (3.00), indicating the degree to which respondents' agreement exceeded or fell below the neutral point. Confidence intervals (CI) are provided to indicate the precision of these estimates; for instance, NGO capacity-building scored a mean difference of 1.52 (95% CI [1.42, 1.63]), implying consistently strong engagement across participants.

5.6 Effectiveness of NGO Participation

Spearman's correlation analysis (Table 5) revealed significant relationships between various NGO activities and outcomes. Strong correlations were found between awareness creation and public understanding ($r = 0.355$, $p < 0.001$), community engagement and feedback mechanisms ($r = 0.492$, $p < 0.001$), and monitoring activities with addressing student challenges.

5.7 Qualitative Findings

Interview analysis revealed four key themes:

5.7.1 Mechanisms of Cooperation

NGOs employed formal mechanisms including partnerships with schools, quarterly meetings with policymakers, and collaboration with government departments. Informal mechanisms included media campaigns, community outreach, and social media engagement.

5.7.2 Challenges in Collaboration

Major challenges included funding constraints, infrastructure gaps in rural areas, slow government response to recommendations, and difficulties in scaling operations to reach more beneficiaries.

5.7.3 Impact on Operations

The FSHS policy positively impacted NGO operations by aligning with organizational missions. NGOs adapted by emphasizing marginalized groups, providing health services, and offering supplementary educational support.

5.7.4 Effectiveness Measures

NGOs measured effectiveness through enrollment increases, improved student attendance, health report utilization by policymakers, and community feedback. However, sustainability concerns persisted due to funding limitations.

5.8 Discussion

Recent scholarship underscores the continued significance of NGO–government collaboration in African education governance. For instance, Nwosu and Kusi (2022) highlight how structured partnerships in Nigeria enhance accountability and local engagement, while Magoha (2023) demonstrates that co-designed education programs in Kenya improve resource utilization and inclusiveness. These findings align with the present study's emphasis on partnership frameworks as a determinant of policy success. 4.1–4.5

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 NGO Characteristics and Capabilities

The findings reveal that NGOs in Ghana's education sector are well-structured organizations with clear frameworks and consistent advocacy efforts. This aligns with literature emphasizing the importance of organizational structure for effective resource management and strategy implementation. The high concentration of NGOs in urban areas, particularly Accra, reflects access to resources and proximity to government agencies, consistent with global patterns of NGO distribution.

However, the moderate financial independence from government influences suggests potential challenges in maintaining autonomy and impartial advocacy. This finding resonates with Fowler's (2013) argument that financial dependence may compromise NGO independence and advocacy effectiveness.

6.2 Participation Patterns and Effectiveness

The study identifies distinct patterns in NGO participation levels. Strong performance in capacity-building, advocacy for marginalized groups, and community engagement demonstrates NGOs' effectiveness in their traditional roles. These findings

support Lewis and Kanji's (2009) assertion that NGOs excel in bridging gaps between policy and local needs. The significantly below-average collaboration with government agencies represents a critical weakness requiring attention. This gap may result from misaligned priorities, insufficient communication channels, or lack of structured partnership frameworks. Addressing this challenge is crucial for successful policy implementation, as effective government-NGO collaboration is essential for leveraging resources and expertise.

6.3 Impact on Policy Outcomes

Correlation analysis reveals significant relationships between NGO activities and policy outcomes, particularly in awareness creation and community feedback mechanisms. These findings support the argument that NGOs play vital roles in policy communication and community mobilization. The strong correlation between community engagement and policy effectiveness underscores NGOs' importance in ensuring policies meet local needs and achieve intended objectives.

6.4 Challenges and Limitations

Several challenges emerged from the analysis. Funding constraints limit NGO capacity to scale operations and ensure sustainability. Infrastructure gaps in rural areas hinder equitable policy implementation, requiring coordinated efforts between government and NGOs to address. The slow pace of government response to NGO recommendations suggests need for improved communication and partnership mechanisms.

7. SUGGESTIONS

The findings have important implications for enhancing NGO-government collaboration in educational policy implementation. First, establishing formal partnership frameworks could improve collaboration efficiency and reduce misaligned objectives. Second, developing sustainable funding mechanisms would enable NGOs to maintain and expand their contributions. Third, creating structured communication channels between NGOs and government agencies could enhance responsiveness and policy refinement.

The study also highlights the need for capacity-building initiatives targeting both NGOs and government agencies to improve collaborative effectiveness. This could include training on partnership development, monitoring and evaluation techniques, and resource sharing mechanisms.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE WORKS

Future studies on NGO participation in educational policy implementation in Ghana should adopt broader and more representative samples to enhance

generalisability. Expanding the scope beyond the 14 participating NGOs in this study would provide deeper insights into regional variations and organizational differences, especially between urban and rural areas.

Further research should employ longitudinal designs to examine how NGO–government collaboration evolves over time and affects long-term educational outcomes under the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy. Such studies could track the sustainability of NGO-led interventions, particularly in resource mobilisation, advocacy, and community engagement.

In addition, future investigations should integrate comparative and multi-country analyses across Sub-Saharan Africa to identify best practices in NGO–state partnerships for education reform. This would help policymakers develop adaptable frameworks for effective collaboration.

Researchers are also encouraged to explore innovative funding and accountability mechanisms that can strengthen NGO independence while ensuring transparency and impact measurement. Mixed-methods or participatory approaches involving policymakers, community leaders, and beneficiaries would yield a more

comprehensive understanding of how NGOs influence policy outcomes.

Finally, further studies could assess the impact of digital tools and technology-driven interventions on NGO advocacy, coordination, and educational outreach. Such research would contribute to enhancing policy implementation strategies and improving equitable access to education in Ghana and beyond.

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