

INFLUENCE OF SERVICE AVAILABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY ON PUBLIC TRUST IN GHANA'S DISTRICT ASSEMBLIES

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Accepted: April 28, 2025

ABSTRACT

Availability and accessibility are important features of public services because they influence how citizens interact with and benefit from government actions. Availability refers to the presence and sufficiency of services to meet public demands, whereas accessibility refers to how easily citizens can access and use these services. Understanding these concepts is critical for investigating how public services influence governance outcomes. One such governance outcome has been identified as public trust. This study, therefore, explored the influence of service availability and accessibility on public trust in Ghana's district assemblies. The study was based on the social exchange theory and the agency theory. The study conducted fourteen interviews in the Ga West Municipal Assembly and the Accra Metropolitan Assembly to gather qualitative data. The data was analysed using deductive thematic summary analysis, reinforced with some direct quotations from the study participants. The study found that there were low levels of trust among citizens towards the district assemblies. The poor state of service indicators in terms of availability and accessibility was attributed to erosion of public trust. The study concludes that if the services provided by district assemblies are available and accessible, then the levels of public trust will increase. District assembly officials are encouraged to create mechanisms for engaging the public on service availability and accessibility and acting on feedback. The district assemblies should also invest in expanding online services and consider introducing mobile services to enhance the availability and accessibility of their services.

Key Words: *Service Delivery, Public Trust, Ghana, Public Service*

CITATION: Scott, G. K. (2025). Influence of service availability and accessibility on public trust in Ghana's District Assemblies. *Reviewed International Journal of Political Science & Public Administration*, 6 (1), 199 – 208.

INTRODUCTION

The public sector's *raison d'être* is fundamentally based on service delivery. Service delivery, though being the 'face' of public administration, has not had a precise definition. In its simplicity lies the complexity. Broadly, service delivery refers to the mechanisms, processes, and institutions through which public services are provided to citizens. Grindle and Hilderbrand (1995) define it as the way governments deliver essential services, such as education, health care, and water, to meet the needs of their populations. The World Bank (2004) describes service delivery as the execution of government policies through the actual provision of services, highlighting the importance of accountability and responsiveness. Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg (2013) further emphasize that service delivery reflects the interaction between the state and its citizens, shaping public perceptions of governance and legitimacy. These definitions show that while the concept appears straightforward, its implementation is often shaped by broader political, institutional, and social dynamics.

Scholarly and practitioner discourses have also identified availability and accessibility as key indicators of service delivery. Availability refers to the presence or existence of public services within a given area, ensuring that essential services are made physically or structurally present for use (Scott, 2020). Accessibility, on the other hand, speaks to the ease with which citizens can reach and make use of these services, taking into account factors such as distance, cost, infrastructure, and social inclusion (Majumder, Roy, Bose & Chowdhury, 2023). These two indicators help illuminate how effectively a government can reach its citizens through service delivery.

Decentralised government structures have been implemented to avail services closer to people, tailoring solutions to local needs, and increasing overall service efficiency and responsiveness. In decentralised systems, the central government and the decentralised units share the service delivery functions (Mudalige, 2019). In Ghana, the decentralised government units are known as district assemblies. According to Act 462 of 1993, the district assemblies are responsible for services including the management of primary health care facilities, infrastructure development, early education, water and sanitation, transportation, public safety, and disaster management. Since their inception, district assemblies have received praise as well as criticism for their service delivery efforts to address local needs equitably (Scott, 2020). This brings into perspective the issue of public trust.

Public trust is widely regarded as a critical factor in promoting good governance in any political system. This is because public trust is a feedback mechanism from the citizens on how the government agencies and officials are performing their duties. Trust allows governments to make decisions without using coercion or force (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003). However, just like service delivery, public trust as used in academic and popular discourses is plagued by conceptual vagueness (PytlikZillig & Kimbrough, 2016). Public trust has been measured through surveys that pose questions to the public about their attitudes towards the conduct of public officials and institutions. Since 1999, Afrobarometer has conducted public surveys in Ghana, providing valuable insights into the public's perceptions of government performance based on public trust indicators. Gaitho (2018) found that the public expresses trust or distrust through voting, strikes, boycotts, and social media posts. The key issue in these public trust indicative mechanisms is usually service delivery and the performance of public officials and agencies. It is from this perspective that the study was designed to explore how two service indicators (availability and accessibility) relate to public trust.

Problem Analysis

Availability and accessibility of services in the context of district assemblies reveal a complex landscape. First, even though district assemblies were created to bring services closer to the people, there is still significant evidence of the unavailability and inaccessibility of numerous services. The dilemma of biased contrasting perceptions on service availability and accessibility by citizens and public servants is also a pressing concern. This was evidenced by Scott and Enu-Kwesi's (2018) study findings that, while citizens

indicated services in Ghana district assemblies were inadequate, the district assembly officials had a contrary view. The findings from the Afrobarometer (2014; 2022) found that Ghanaians have little or no trust in public institutions and officials, highlighting the existing significant trust deficit and dissatisfaction with service provision. It is from this perspective that the study was undertaken to further the debate and help better understand the influence of the availability and accessibility of services offered by district assemblies and public trust.

Theoretical Framework

The study was based on the agency theory and the Social Exchange Theory (SET). The agency theory focuses on agency relationships where one party, known as the principal, delegates work to another party, known as the agent, who then carries out the work (Eisenhardt, 1989). The agency theory provided valuable insights in studying the influence of availability and accessibility of services on public trust. In particular, agency theory addresses issues that determine the extent of trust citizens, as principals, place in public officials, who act as agents mandated to deliver public services. This manifests as public officials are accused of misappropriating resources supposed to ensure the availability and accessibility of services for citizens.

The Social Exchange Theory (SET) was proposed by George C. Homans in 1958 and further refined by Peter M. Blau in 1964. The theory explains social behaviour as a series of exchanges in which individuals seek to maximise rewards and minimise costs. Homans identified reward, cost, value, and reinforcement as core principles that explain the motivations behind individuals' engagement in or withdrawal from social interactions, whereas Blau emphasised structural power, norms of reciprocity, and equity as vital for sustaining social relationships. Mishra and Mund (2024) synthesised five decades of research on SET, reaffirming reciprocity and equity as fundamental principles while identifying emerging themes like collaborative consumption. Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2012) applied Social Exchange Theory to community support, illustrating how power dynamics and perceived benefits influence trust in local governance contexts.

Social Exchange Theory offers a comprehensive framework for examining the influence of service availability and accessibility on public trust in Ghana's District Assemblies, conceptualising service delivery as a benefit–cost exchange between citizens and assembly officials. Within this framework, the availability of essential services, such as water and sanitation, constitutes tangible rewards. Concurrently, accessibility - characterised by ease of use and minimal travel or fees - diminishes perceived costs for citizens, thereby enhancing positive reciprocity and fostering increased trust (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Ohemeng, Obuobisa Darko, and Amoako-Asiedu (2020) illustrated the applicability of Social Exchange Theory in Ghana's public sector by connecting bureaucratic leadership and trust development to service exchanges. SET's proposition that trust emerges organically through repeated exchanges and shared expectations is an appropriate anchor in this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study reviewed the literature on the availability and accessibility of services and public trust. The available studies have taken varied conceptual, theoretical, and methodological perspectives. Emphasising the importance of public trust in the quest for political stability in modern society, Berro (2021) argues that improved public trust allows the government to have full control and function effectively in service delivery. Berro based his argument on a research study conducted by the Ministry of Education in Lebanon. The study investigated the link between the performance of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in Lebanon and the level of trust among citizens. The findings indicate that there is a low level of citizen trust based on the low levels of availability and accessibility of educational services.

Van de Walle and Bouckaert (2003) explored the difficulty of linking satisfaction with public services and trust, emphasising that this difficulty stems from a lack of clear trust measures. Van de Walle and Bouckaert further noted that trust is an emotion based on how well a government functions and the optimism it inspires

in the people. Regarding the relationship to service delivery, the study posited that fostering high levels of public trust is challenging, as citizens' deeply ingrained distrust of government stems from the contrasting nature of interactions and expectations. The study noted the dilemma that, whereas governments expect citizens to pay taxes and obey the laws, citizens expect services and accountability.

Kampen, De Walle, and Bouckaert (2006) conducted a study on how public availability and accessibility impact trust in service delivery in public agencies. The study's basic assumption was that we cannot fully analyse the causal relationship between accessibility and trust unless we control the basic measures based on a common component, namely the public's predisposition towards the levels of service accessibility and availability. The findings indicated that the unavailability and inaccessibility of services have a negative impact on public trust, while availability and accessibility pose a positive impact. In a related study conducted in the Ashanti region of Ghana, Ashiagbor, Ofori-Asenso, Forkuo, and Agyei-Frimpong (2020) found that accessibility to healthcare was relatively high in urban areas.

Mohamed, Vishanth, and Weifeng (2018) researched to establish the influence of e-governance on citizen trust in Bahrain. The study noted that the introduction of e-government systems aimed at altering how government institutions interact with citizens. The primary goal of these new technological systems was to enhance the accessibility of public services. The findings of the study indicated that improved accessibility resulted in high trust levels among the public. Therefore, this is a clear indication that there exists a relationship between accessibility and public trust. The study concluded that improved accessibility, facilitated by the use of technology, was the main determinant of increased public trust.

The past studies reviewed provided a solid theoretical and conceptual foundation for this study by highlighting the complex interplay between service delivery indicators and public trust. The studies show that when essential public services such as healthcare, education, or licensing are unavailable or difficult to access, citizens tend to lose trust in the public institutions and officials mandated to deliver them. These insights informed the development of the study's conceptual framework (Figure 1), which posits a sequential relationship: service availability and accessibility shape levels of public trust. This framework captures how the presence of services (availability) must be accompanied by the ability of citizens to use them (accessibility) for trust in local government institutions, such as Ghana's District Assemblies, to be built and sustained. The conceptual framework is anchored on Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Agency Theory. These theories explain the trust-building processes and the principal-agent dynamics that affect how service availability and accessibility of services are perceived and experienced by citizens.

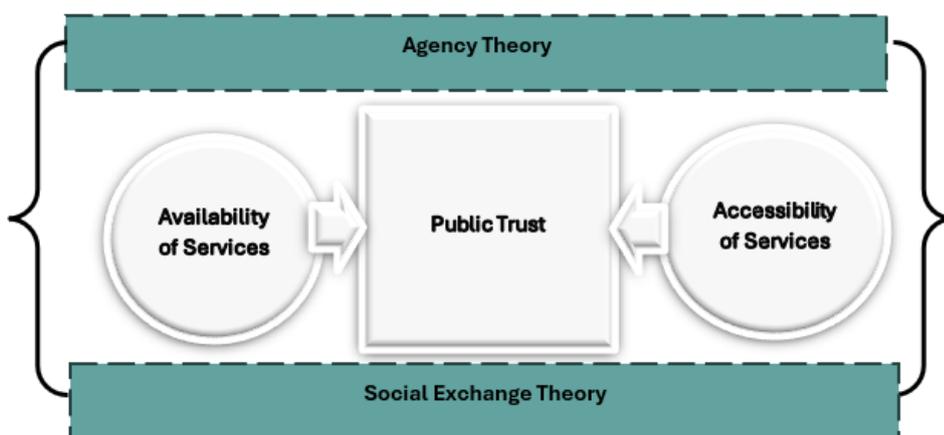


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Scott (2025)

The past studies reviewed also revealed the need for continued scholarly and practitioners' discourse on the influence of the availability and accessibility of services on public trust, especially in the broader African and specific Ghanaian contexts.

METHODOLOGY

The study used deductive qualitative analysis as proposed by Fife and Gossner (2024). The study focused on the influence of availability and accessibility of service on public trust for consideration. An interview guide was developed to gather information on service delivery indicators and public trust in the context of the district assemblies in Ghana. Face-to-face interviews were then conducted with fourteen key interview informants drawn from the Accra Metropolitan Assembly and Ga West Municipal Assembly. Accra Metropolitan Assembly oversees the densely populated urban core of Ghana's capital city, while Ga West Municipal Assembly is a peri-urban district on Accra's outskirts. The data was transcribed and coded using Atlas.ti for analysis using thematic deductive analysis. Deductive thematic analysis offers a structured approach to analysing data by applying prior identified themes or concepts from existing theories or prior research. The three key themes that formed the basis of this analysis were availability of services, accessibility of services, and public trust.

FINDINGS

The main objective of the research was to establish the influence of the availability and accessibility of services on public trust in Ghana's District Assemblies. The data was collected through interviews and discussion groups and was focused on the services meant to be provided by District Assemblies that include trade licences, basic education, health, sanitation, bus stops, security promotion, and access to justice. The key themes in the study were public trust, availability, and accessibility of services, with a focus on Ghana District Assemblies.

Public Trust in the District Assemblies

Public trust was one of the main themes in the research and was determined by the perceptions of trust as indicated by the key interview informants. Based on a range of issues, the study participants expressed a lack of trust in the Ga West Municipal Assembly and the Accra Metropolitan Assembly. One participant, KII1, expressed frustration with the amount of time it takes to receive services in the Accra Metropolitan Assembly. They highlighted the following concerns:

I have little trust because of my previous dealings with a lot of DA departments in the sense that the bureaucratic situation in these offices is just hectic. A process that would have ordinarily taken a week to do can take you over three weeks just because you haven't dropped an envelope for a bribe (KII1).

There are some departments in the DAs that have a high level of trust as compared to others. KII3 noted that:

The level of trust in some departments depends on the kind of services they are rendering towards the people. For example, when I take the police as a practical instance, you realise that a lot of people don't have trust in them because of high levels of bribery and corruption. But when you come to the health care sector, some of the doctors and nurses are really doing well. Therefore, when it comes to the level of trust, it depends on the kind of services that they are rendering to the public (KII3).

The marginally higher **level of trust** in some departments is based on the services offered and the level of transparency in the department. The level of trust is based on the feeling that the employees of a given department are working in the best interest of the public in fulfilling their responsibilities openly and transparently. Bribery levels act as the main determinants of the level of trust given to a particular department. This was the reason why the most corrupt departments had little or no trust from the locals as compared to the least corrupt departments.

The ambiguity with regard to the concept of public trust also emerged from the interviews, as captured in the sentiments by KII8:

I'm not sure about that because I can't really say I work in the district assembly, but from what I've seen so far, there is not much development compared to their roles and the things they are supposed to do. I'm not seeing much development, and the things they need to do for the fulfilment of the people in the community. So, I can't really say they have trust (KII8).

The comment reflects the ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding public trust in the District Assemblies. The interviewee expresses doubt and a lack of clear opinion regarding the trustworthiness of the DAs. They note that there has been little visible development compared to what the DAs are supposed to accomplish, which contributes to their uncertainty and lack of trust:

Service Availability and Public Trust in the District Assemblies

The study also sought to deepen the understanding of the availability of services in the district assemblies and how this is linked to public trust. There was divided opinion with regard to the availability of services in the two district assemblies, as indicated by the views below:

I think some are available, like the electricity company comes around when there is a power outage or there is a fault; they come, they will take time, but they come. The fire service is available, so you see you cannot say all is bad, but as and when you need them to do something, they come (KII7).

Some of their services are not available to the public. For instance, let's take this disaster management. When let's say there is chaos or a natural disaster somewhere. And if they have to distribute relief supplies, you realise that some of the leaders, if they are supposed to give out 10 items, they will end up keeping four. And they will distribute six (KII3).

I remember that last time I wanted to do a small event in Accra, I needed a permit so that I could block half of the road. Yeah, how they were tossing me around, go here go there, it was so hard to get the permit (KII9).

Corruption was the primary reason the services were considered unavailable. KII9 painted a picture in which the officials created the impression that they were overwhelmed by their job, but in reality, they needed bribes to provide the services.

I do not know whether they (district assembly officials) are overwhelmed by the position they are in, or what I don't know. I just can't pinpoint what at all is wrong with this individual that if I go to him, he would have to stress me ... oh, you need to put something down for the process to run faster (KII9).

KII6 further illustrated the complicated nature of service availability in the district assemblies due to corruption:

Some time ago, we were having a funeral for a very good friend who had passed away. We went to the district assembly to inform them that we needed to use the local football field. They agreed, and we paid the stated charges. The funeral nearly degenerated into chaos as the officials had taken money from the team, as well as other parties who needed to use the field on the same date. The was saved by the fact that the dead was also a footballer (KII6).

Regarding the link between availability and public trust, the informants indicated that the availability of services can really make an individual have little or no trust and confidence in the DAs. KII8 noted that the main reason most people have little trust in the district assembly services is the failure to perform their responsibilities effectively and in a timely manner. KII2 was emphatic that:

The district assembly are not performing to their maximum capacity. Sometimes you might need help and you will go there and they are unable to help you. They will tell you to go and come and at the end of the day, but no better results will come out of what you are looking for (KII2).

This is an indication that services are available for the locals and they acknowledge these services. However, the service providers do not take their duties as a responsibility to the locals in service provision, and this is the reason the level of trust in the district assembly is minimal.

Further, citizens' frustrations when seeking business permits lead to low confidence in both the office providing these services and the DA leadership. KII2 underscored that a deficiency in confidence leads citizens to lose hope in pursuing the service again, potentially turning to private entities, particularly for services like health care. However, only the DAs have the mandate to provide services like business licensing, which forces citizens to reluctantly return to these offices in the future (KIII).

Services Accessibility and Public Trust in the District Assemblies

There also emerged the issue of accessibility of services such as health care and trade licences, which were deemed to vary even within the District Assembly depending on respective departments. A comparison of responses on accessibility of health care services and licences revealed that health care services were deemed to be more accessible than business licences. This is noted by KII8, who stated that;

Health accessibility is high. This is because in some parts of the hospital need for experts to save human life, so it's a kind of personal dedication as well as ethical standards for all healthcare providers (KII8).

Nonetheless, while healthcare was generally regarded as more accessible, KII3 highlighted critical gaps that prevent full access.

“When it comes to a health centre like this, you know, as much as you have the National Health Insurance card, there are certain diseases that you can't use that card to get help. So, some of the services are accessible. Some are not accessible” (KII3).

The interviewees further indicated that the DAs have integrated technology in the provision of services such as the issuance of driving licences, as well as birth and death certificates. However, the acquisition of a birth certificate can be cumbersome without technology. KII6 notes that:

So, going through the process, you go into the reception to inquire about the section that you're supposed to go into. For instance, if I am going to get my birth certificate, I am supposed to go to the birth and death registrar. So, going to that side means that I would have to go and talk to an officer. However, there sometimes you get to the office and the officer in charge is absent, meaning you have to go home and come back another day. At times, you can find an officer who will tell you that there's a whole lot of work on him or her, so unless you go and come back again or part with a bribe. Yet this can be solved easily if the services were accessible online (KII6).

Therefore, the process of accessing these services is made more difficult to access because of the distance, associated costs, and bureaucratic processes involved.

However, the informants argued that some district assembly services, such as schools and hospitals, can help increase public confidence and faith in the districts if their accessibility is improved. This is because the services offered by the districts are less costly as compared to similar services offered by the private sector.

SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

The findings demonstrated that there was a low level of trust by citizens towards the district assemblies in Ghana. The citizens' sentiments portrayed a situation where district assemblies' officials and departments do not inspire confidence among the public with regard to their service delivery expectations. The findings portray a situation where Ghanaian district assemblies appear to have inherited citizens' distrust of the national

government, which had grown over time due to poor services, reinforcing the arguments by Van de Walle and Bouckaert (2003). The lack of accountability and alternatives in the private sector has exacerbated the situation among the district assemblies since their establishment.

Public confidence in the district assemblies has been further eroded by the perceived lack of accountability among DA leaders and officials, who are often seen as immune to prosecution. However, it emerged that some departments in the District Assemblies had marginally higher ratings than others. It is also noteworthy that the recent district-level elections reflect a public desire for more accountable and effective leadership, which is in line with Gaitho's (2018) proposition on the role of the vote as a tool to show public trust. The rise of social media as a platform for public complaints has not effectively resulted in improvements in service delivery or accountability, instilling a sense of apathy among the public, who believe that complaining about the DAs' service delivery will result in no meaningful change. Comparatively, national government institutions and the church enjoy higher levels of trust than the DAs, highlighting a significant trust deficit at the local government level.

Some services, such as schools and health, were rated as more readily available and accessible, unlike disaster management, relief, permits, and licenses. The findings on availability and accessibility of health services are consistent with findings by Ashiagbor et al. (2020) that accessibility of health services is relatively higher in urban areas. Corruption and bureaucratic inefficiencies are the primary barriers to the availability and accessibility of services provided by Ghana's district assemblies. Bribes are frequently required to expedite service delivery processes, giving the impression that services are not readily accessible to citizens. This results in frustration and low public trust. Furthermore, while some services, such as healthcare, are more easily accessible, others, such as business licences, are hampered by lengthy processes and inaccessibility. Despite some technological advances, inconsistencies in service accessibility persist, undermining public trust in the DAs.

In line with the social exchange theory, it is evident that the availability and accessibility are intertwined with public trust in the district assemblies as part of the social contract between citizens and public officials. The findings painted a picture of disquiet among citizens towards the availability and accessibility of the services offered by the district assemblies, which was linked to low levels of public trust reported.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings highlight the need for systemic reforms to improve the availability and accessibility of services provided by the DAs, given that they are currently eroding public trust in the district assemblies. There is a need to establish regular forums for community feedback on service delivery and use this feedback to make continuous improvements. The district assemblies should invest heavily in the expansion of digital platforms for service applications, renewals, and payments to reduce direct interactions with officials and seal corruption opportunities. The district assemblies should consider mobile units to provide services such as health and licensing in remote areas to reduce travel distances for citizens. By addressing these areas, the DAs can improve the availability and accessibility of the services provided, thereby rebuilding public trust and enhancing the effectiveness of local governance in Ghana.

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