

## No funds for Community Service Committees - PURC

Although the Act that established the Public Utilities Regulatory Commission (PURC), enjoins it to establish Community Service Committees (CSCs) across the country, only three have been established to date. The three are in Wa, Obuasi and Takoradi. The committees are intended to assist community members as well as the commission, in having issues regarding service provision by utility providers addressed efficiently and quickly.

In 2002, the Consumer Service Committee Regulations, LI 1704A, was created by the Public Utilities Regulatory Commission (PURC) to establish regulations to direct CSCs. According to the Legislative Instrument (LI) 1704A titled Consumer Service Committee, "In exercise of the powers conferred on the Public Utilities Regulatory Commission under section 31 of the Public Utilities Regulatory Commission Act, 1997 (Act 538) these Regulations are made this 29th day of April 2002."

### Budgetary constraints

But the Director for Water at the PURC, Mr Emmanuel Fiati, cites the lack of funds as reason for the inability of the commission to execute their mandate of establishing CSCs in districts across the country since 1997.

Speaking at the 43rd edition of the National Level Learning Alliance Platform (NLLAP) organised by Resources Centre Network (RCN) on Thursday (today), he said "The other militating thing is the budget constraints and it's not only the CSCs. Even at the national level of PURC we have constraints.

"We started from the head office and we started establishing ourselves in the regional offices Up till now we have not established ourselves in the 10 regional offices of Ghana. The same way, with the CSCs, we have established three and we will be establishing more," he assured.

Mr Fiati however cautioned; "But we have to go gradually because of the budget constraints. If we establish them and we cannot finance them it would be a disincentive to economics."

### Research Findings

The PURC Water Director's statements were in reaction to the presentation of findings from a research conducted by a Fulbright Scholar, Ms Chelsea Hodgkins on "Community participation in WASH Governance – Impact Assessment of Consumer Service Committees: A Case Study of Consumer Perspectives in Obuasi" at the forum of stakeholders in Ghana's water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector.

According to the nine-month long research, some of the challenges identified were inadequate funding for activities; lack of money for daily operational expenses, committee members reportedly using personal funds and the incidence of reimbursement discrepancies. Also identified were frequent fluctuations in the supply of electricity as well as high bills, as top complaints of consumers.

The study found that there was a higher preference of 40 per cent to channel complaints directly to the Ghana Water Company Limited (GWCL), as against a 20 per cent preference for the CSC. Among key recommendations of the research were enlarging of the present five-member CSCs to 14, with the argument that "increasing membership numbers and drawing from various sectors would ensure all relevant stakeholders have a voice in the process and would better facilitate the process of complaint resolution and utility regulation." Ms Hodgkins also suggested an increase in dialogue between the relevant stakeholders, specifically, coordinating offices in the PURC at the national and regional levels, utility providers and members of the Consumer Service Committees.

### The value of the CSCs

On behalf of the civil society, the Executive Secretary of the Coalition of NGOs in Water and Sanitation, Mr Benjamin Arthur, said although for over ten years the number of CSCs had not been scaled up, "in the area of governance and accountability that structure could be very useful because people face problems with utilities."

He said the rationale behind the CSCs was that PURC could not be everywhere and therefore, community-based structures which could feed back into the regional and national level PURC were required to provide that service.

To address the inability of the PURC to set up CSCs due to budget constraints, participants recommended that the commission trains already existing WASH groups in communities, “rather than they going out there and establishing new parallel structures to provide some of these services.”