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## **Chapter 2**

# **Local Perceptions of Development and Change in Northern Ghana**

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### **Introduction: The PADev project**

Northern Ghana is often portrayed as being a poor, underdeveloped, food-insecure, risk-prone and conflict-ridden area, especially when contrasted with southern Ghana. The authors of this chapter do not deny that the north is lagging behind the south in terms of economic development. Nor do they deny that the gap between the north and the south is widening, as is evidenced by Ghana's Living Standard Surveys (GSS 2007). However, the findings presented in this chapter show that, in the eyes of northern Ghanaians, much has improved over the past twenty to thirty years.

This chapter reports the findings of the Participatory Assessment of Development (PADev) project, which aimed to design a participatory and holistic method for evaluating development interventions. Northern Ghana and southern Burkina Faso were chosen as research areas because of the long tradition of foreign development cooperation there. Building on the first development activities of Catholic missionaries in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christian NGOs have been active in northern Ghana for over half a century. In addition, donor money from foreign governments to Ghanaian state agencies has been used to promote development in the region, and secular (and some Islamic) NGOs as well as private business development-oriented initiatives have come on to the scene in the last two decades.

Individual development projects have occasionally been evaluated but little is known about the overall impact of development initiatives in northern Ghana, and even less about how the local population perceives the effects of the wide range of projects on their way of life and their livelihood opportunities. Many development initiatives in this area have been funded by development agencies from the Netherlands over the past fifty years but growing

scepticism in Dutch development circles and public opinion about the relevance of (continued) aid has provoked a variety of evaluation efforts aimed at assessing the impact of this assistance. Many of these evaluations are econometric and sociometric exercises, using methods that are nowadays referred to as the 'golden standard of evaluation': randomized control trials (e.g. Banerjee & Duflo 2011). Such evaluations are useful but do not tell the full story. In 2007, three Dutch development agencies<sup>1</sup> decided to support a methodological experiment, which was initiated by the main author of this paper, to complement these more econometric evaluation techniques. This experiment, called Participatory Assessment of Development (PADev), has looked at local people's perceptions of development in a more holistic and participatory way. Inspired by the work of Robert Chambers (1997), the PADev method has elicited local development histories through the eyes of local people in an attempt to assess what they regard as 'good' and 'bad' development and change.

## Methods

The findings presented in this chapter are based on 35 focus-group discussions about change in northern Ghana, in which a total of 327 northern Ghanaians participated. There were separate groups for older men, older women, younger men and younger women. In addition, each workshop had a group of 'officials' or 'opinion leaders' who were kept separate from the rest to avoid them dominating the discussions and to make sure each participant had a voice. For the same reason, men were separated from women and the elderly from the young. An additional advantage of separating these groups was that it enabled a gender-and-age-differentiated assessment of perceptions. The focus-group discussions on change usually lasted two to three hours and were part of larger three-day workshops that were organized in six areas of northern Ghana (see Map 1).

Some fifty to sixty local people participated in each of the three-day PADev workshops. They were held in small towns of 5000 to 10,000 inhabitants that typically have a central market place and a hinterland of 20,000 to 50,000 inhabitants. About 30% of the workshop participants came from the main town and the rest were from the surrounding villages. An attempt was made to have a good representation of the area's population in all the workshops in terms of religion, ethnicity, gender and social-economic status. The PADev workshops consisted of a total of nine exercises that jointly enabled a holistic evaluation of all development interventions in a certain geographic area. The exercises used are described in more detail in the PADev Guidebook, which also gives background on the project's general methodology (Dietz *et al.* 2013, [www.padev.nl](http://www.padev.nl)).

The focus-group discussions on change were held on the first day of the PADev workshops. Prior to the workshops, the researchers drew up a list of six domains of changes reflecting the 'capitals' and 'capabilities' identified by Bebbington (1999): the natural environment, the physical or built-up environment, human capital, the economic environment, social and political organization and culture. Each had several sub-domains. Under the natural environment, for example, were the sub-domains of land, water, forests, livestock and crops. In the first part of the exercise, participants were simply asked what

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<sup>1</sup> ICCO, Woord en Daad, and Prisma,. All three have a Protestant background.

major changes they had experienced in an area over the last twenty to thirty years and whether they considered each change positive or negative. The workshop facilitators recorded the changes mentioned in the corresponding sub-domains. The second part started when the participants had exhausted the changes they mentioned spontaneously and the workshop facilitator would then go through the list of domains and sub-domains to fill in the gaps. For example, if nothing had been said about livestock, the facilitator would ask whether the participants had experienced any changes with regard to livestock keeping.

This chapter only reports on the PADev findings concerning local people's perceptions of development and change and does not discuss the evaluation of different types of development agencies. Nor does it go into much depth about the causes of these changes. It looks purely at the kinds of changes local people in northern Ghana have experienced over the past two to three decades. The thought-provoking question about local people's conceptual ideas of development – what does development really mean? – is also beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, it describes the broad changes that have been taking place in northern Ghana in virtually all aspects of people's lives. The wide range of changes discussed here inevitably precludes a more in-depth analysis of individual changes and differences in perceptions between geographical areas and types of groups (men vs. women, old vs. young). Such analyses will be published in separate papers and will be available on the project's website at a later date ([www.padev.nl](http://www.padev.nl)). Below, the major changes are described per domain, followed by a summary of the changes at the end of the chapter.

## Natural environment

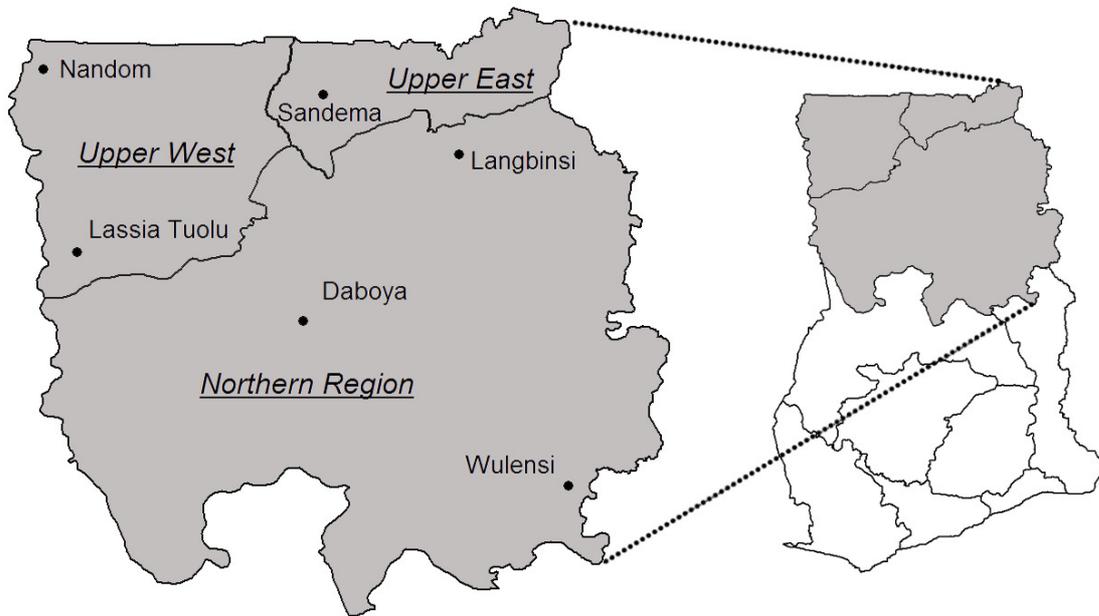
Most people in northern Ghana live in rural communities and regard themselves as farmers, so people's perceptions of the changes in their natural environment are closely related to their farming activities. Farming in northern Ghana consists of rainfed cultivation of crops (mainly sorghum, millet, groundnut, cassava, maize and cotton), irrigated horticulture (mostly tomatoes, onions and local vegetables), livestock rearing (cattle, goats, sheep, pigs and poultry) and the collection of products from commercial trees (mainly sheabutter and *dawadawa*). The natural resources that are most important for people in this area are land, vegetation cover and water (rainfall and water bodies). Until recently, there was little extraction of minerals in northern Ghana.

While in most of the other domains mentioned below the perceived changes were predominantly positive, this was less the case concerning the natural environment. A little over 50% of the changes mentioned were negative here. The decline in soil fertility, the loss of tree cover and increasingly erratic rainfall were mentioned in particular. Soil degradation and deforestation were often attributed to the expansion of the areas under crop cultivation and increased livestock populations.

The overall perception of changes in access to land was also negative but with some notable exceptions. A distinction has to be made here between farm land and urban and peri-urban land used for building. In general, there has been a slow but gradual transition from customary land tenure to private ownership. Chiefs and families that have held land under usufruct rights for generations are increasingly interpreting their rights to it as private ownership, which includes the opportunity of selling the land as building plots. This new

arrangement tends to favour the rich and leaves the poor and vulnerable at a disadvantage. With regard to farm land, the most significant change is the reduction in land holdings at both the household and individual level. The plots now available for farming are smaller because of population growth and, in the case of Langbinsi and Wulensi, in-migration.

**Map 1: Location of research sites**



A more positive change noted in the group discussions was women's increased access to land. In Wulensi, Langbinsi and Sandema, women can reportedly now own land both for farming and building purposes. Widows in these areas are entitled to the land of their dead husbands and can even own the title deeds. This change is related to the gradual move away from customary land tenure that previously excluded women from owning land, and is confirmed by a recent study in northeast Ghana by Bugri (2008). Yaro (2010) also discovered that women and migrants can potentially benefit from the move from customary land tenure systems but, in practice, women often lack the means to acquire land. The same is true for migrant farmers. Most of them gain access to land by borrowing it and always face the risk of losing their rights to cultivate any land accessed in this way. And they are not allowed to cultivate tree crops.

In recent years, conflicts over land have caused havoc in parts of northern Ghana. For example, the 'Guinea Fowl War' or the 'Konkomba War' that started near one of the PADev research sites (Wulensi) in 1994 was largely caused by land-related conflicts between Nanumba land owners and the Konkomba who had migrated in large numbers onto Nanumba land in the 1920s and 1930s (Wienia 2009). According to most of the workshop participants, conflicts over land have now lessened, which is surprising given the increased pressure on land today and the likelihood of changes in the land tenure system that causes conflicting interests.

With regard to crop cultivation, the workshop participants highlighted two trends that work in opposite directions. On the one hand, they felt that the natural conditions for farming had deteriorated, which has had a negative effect on crop yields. On the other hand

though, they noted that improved seed varieties and better farm practices have produced higher yields. The deterioration in natural conditions mostly involves the reported decline in soil fertility and changing weather patterns. Reduced soil fertility is sometimes attributed to over-cultivation and the use of chemical fertilizers, which leave the land less productive after time. The perceived worsening of weather conditions for farming is due to erratic rainfall, more droughts and floods, higher temperatures and a delayed rainy season (Dietz *et al.* 2004; Obeng 2005).

A positive change in crop cultivation has been the introduction of improved, early-maturing, high-yielding crop varieties, mostly maize, rice, soybean, groundnut and cowpea. Major positive changes were further reported in people's skills and knowledge of new farming methods and in their use of farm tools (as was also reported in Dietz, Millar & Obeng 2002). Many of the new farm practices, like composting, line sowing and new soil and water conservation measures, were introduced by NGOs. The tools used to cultivate the land are changing gradually from hoes and cutlasses to tractors and bullock and donkey ploughs. This is a very positive development for people in the area because it helps them to expand their farms and reduces the drudgery involved in using traditional tools. A final positive change in crop cultivation is the upsurge in dry-season gardening because of the increased availability of water from small dams and dugouts and the improved road infrastructure. And one final negative change in crop cultivation that was mentioned in several workshop groups was the loss of traditional/indigenous crop varieties like *frafra* potatoes and late-maturing millet varieties.<sup>2</sup>

Both positive and negative changes were reported in livestock keeping. On the negative side, most households own fewer livestock now than in the past because of disease, theft, reduced pasture and the fact that more and more children who would in the past have herded animals nowadays go to school. The most significant positive perceptions were the introduction of improved breeds, increased veterinary care, improved animal housing and the re-introduction of donkeys for ploughing and transporting goods. While livestock ownership has dropped in general, this is not the case for pigs, which are especially popular among women in Christian families. Besides changes in livestock rearing, some groups had also noted changes regarding game and fish stocks. These have dropped in number and, in some cases, have disappeared entirely because of excessive hunting, bush fires, deforestation, increased farm sizes and the use of chemicals in fishing.

### Physical assets

Workshop participants reported noticeable and positive changes regarding their physical assets and the built-up environment, especially regarding boreholes, telecommunications, houses and electricity. People were more ambivalent about changes in road and dam infrastructure but the overall perception of changes in these sub-domains was positive.

The most significant change has probably been people's increased access to potable water due to the massive construction of boreholes over the past two to three decades. This has improved the health of community members by eliminating or reducing exposure to

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<sup>2</sup> An early analysis of these trends is given in Millar (1996).

guinea worms and other water-borne diseases. The construction of boreholes has also reduced the distance women need to go to fetch water, which gives them more time to work on their farms and on non-farm income-generating activities. Some workshop groups did, however, complain about the poor maintenance of some boreholes, with a similar problem being expressed even more strongly about local dams. People applauded the fact that more dams and dugouts have been constructed over the past decades, making water available for dry-season gardening and for animals to drink. However because of a lack of maintenance, many dams have dried up or are heavily silted. Poor maintenance is also a problem in the case of roads and bridges. There has been a marked expansion in the road network in the area, especially feeder roads, and this has reduced travel times. The marketing of farm produce is now easier, which was judged as a very positive development. On the other hand, poor maintenance has led to a deterioration in road conditions, rendering some impassable in the rainy season.

In terms of buildings and other structures, most of the changes were perceived to be positive although some were seen as negative. Mud houses are giving way to block houses that are constructed from sand and cement and are thus more durable and resistant to floods. Roofing materials are changing from thatch or mud to zinc, and ventilation has improved too, which reduces the prevalence of air-borne diseases. On the other hand, people complained of haphazard building practices due to a distinct lack of planning regulations. They also complained that the cost of constructing modern houses is very high compared to traditional styles of architecture. Traditional houses also had certain advantages: they were cooler and their flat roofs could be used for drying crops and provided a cool place to sleep in the hot season.

One huge change in northern Ghana has been the arrival of electricity. Twenty years ago, only the three regional capitals were connected to the national grid but nowadays most towns and even many villages have an electricity supply. This has had a significant impact on everyday life in northern Ghana. Having light bulbs in their houses means that people go to bed later and the arrival of television has resulted in images from all over the world coming into people's houses. The availability of electricity has also led to the development of local industries and other businesses in the area, for example welding, blacksmithing, bars and video centres. People have also reported its positive effects regarding safety and security in the area. Although the general perception of electricity was very positive, some groups noted that it has made their communities noisier and that electrical problems sometimes lead to house fires. In addition, people report difficulties paying their electricity bills.

And last, but not least, there has been a very significant change in telecommunications with the introduction of mobile telephony. Like the arrival of electricity, the mobile phone has had an enormous impact on daily life. Workshop participants noted that it has made life faster and business easier. For migrants and their relatives, the mobile phone bridges (large) distances and this is particularly useful at times of family crisis and in emergencies. Another important change in the area of telecommunication has been the establishment of local FM stations. Besides playing music, these stations also broadcast educational programmes on health, literacy, human rights, local culture and other relevant issues, which people judged very positively.

## Human capital

Human capital is defined as people's skills, knowledge, good health and the ability to participate in the labour force and make a living (Scoones 1998; DFID 1999). Within this domain, changes in education, knowledge, health and hygiene were the focus in the PADev project.

Across all six research sites, positive changes were observed in the area of education. A lot of new schools have been built over the past twenty to thirty years, and enrolment rates have increased sharply. Nine out of ten children now receive primary-school education<sup>3</sup> and most villages have their own school. A greater awareness of the importance of education was often mentioned as the prime reason for increasing enrolment, but certain incentives, like the government's capitation grant and school-feeding programmes, were also instrumental here.

In the past, the majority of students were boys who came from families that had adopted a Christian identity. Parents often did not see the use of sending their daughters to school and many Muslims were hesitant about letting their children have a western-style education. In the eyes of the workshop participants, this is no longer the case. Primary-school enrolment rates for boys and girls are now similar, though dropout rates among girls are still higher in junior and senior high schools. Teenage pregnancy was often mentioned as the cause of this. Increased enrolment among Muslim children is partly due to the setting up of Islamic schools, some with Arabic instructors. This has removed parents' fear that their children might become Christian if they attended school.

Positive changes were also noted in the area of non-formal adult education (literacy training), vocational training and kindergartens that help women to engage in economic activities. And finally, people applauded the fact that educational reforms (from middle schools, O levels and A levels to JHS and SHS) have reduced the number of years of schooling, which enables students' earlier entry into the labour force or tertiary education. Some concern was expressed, however, that SHS graduates do not have the same level of education as A-level graduates had under the old system.

This was not the only concern respondents had. In all the workshops and types of groups, people complained that the quality of education had declined due to higher pupil-teacher ratios (crowded classrooms) and the fact that there were more untrained teachers nowadays. It would seem that the Ministry of Education has not been able to keep pace with the extraordinary growth in the number of students over the past two decades. Another negative side effect of increased education levels is that a secondary-school diploma now has less value. Whereas in the past such a diploma would have given instant access to employment, it is very difficult to find a job today with only a secondary-school education. If, after twelve years of schooling, a student cannot proceed to a tertiary institution and s/he does not find a suitable job, it is often difficult and humiliating for them to go back to the family farm and this causes frustration and negative behaviour among unemployed youth.

Formal education is not the only source of knowledge that is relevant to making a living in northern Ghana. An often-mentioned perception was that there is an 'explosion in new types of knowledge'. Migration and new technologies, especially in the area of

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<sup>3</sup> See also Osei *et al.* (2009) who use 2007 data from Ghana Education Services. The enrolment figure for primary schools was around 90% in the three northern regions. For junior high schools, the figure was 53.4% for the Upper East, 61.18% for the Upper West and 84.15% for the Northern Region.

telecommunications, have contributed significantly to the diffusion of such types of knowledge. Examples given included: knowledge about modern building techniques, family planning, record keeping, human rights, long-term planning, and market prices (which are announced by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture on local radio stations). Another important change that people have observed is that there is more sharing of knowledge nowadays, especially in the area of agricultural innovations. Farmers' knowledge, skills and methods of farming have seen very positive changes and new skills have been acquired regarding animal traction, farming methods and land/soil and water management.

Process of development and modernization in northern Ghana have also resulted in a loss of knowledge about traditional medicines, old crop varieties, music and dance, stories, and local culture in general. In addition, several groups emphasized that there has been an increase in what they called 'bad knowledge', for example drug and alcohol abuse and criminality, especially theft.

As in the area of education and knowledge, vast improvements were noted with regard to health and hygiene. Access to healthcare is much better now than twenty to thirty years ago because of increased numbers of clinics and trained nurses. While in the past people often had to travel long distances to find medical assistance, many now have a clinic in their own village, which saves time and, in serious cases, even lives. Medicines are more widely available today and hospitals have expanded their services and facilities. And the introduction of the National Health Insurance Scheme has made healthcare accessible to poorer people who no longer have to worry about going into debt if they need medical attention.

Besides better access to healthcare, many workshop groups noted other important improvements in their lives. As a result of free immunization programmes, measles and polio have been eradicated, or at least drastically reduced in the area, as have incidences of the five 'killer' diseases among children (diarrhoea, measles, tetanus, pertussis and malaria). Treated mosquito nets have been made available free of charge and this has led to a decline in the number of cases of malaria. And water-borne diseases, like guinea worm and bilharzia, are less prevalent today due to better sanitation facilities and the provision of safe drinking water from boreholes. Other perceived changes that have contributed to better health among the population of northern Ghana are: better hygiene in general as a result of health education programmes by community health nurses and NGOs, the construction of private pit latrines, the establishment of central slaughter houses, and better solid-waste management. Opinions about public latrines were often divided as maintenance in many cases tended to be poor and they were considered breeding grounds for disease.

Important improvements have been noted in maternal healthcare and infant mortality rates have dropped. Due to increased knowledge of family planning and the value of spacing births, the training of traditional birth attendants, the introduction of antenatal clinics and less female genital mutilation, there are significantly fewer complications during deliveries nowadays.

Some concerns were also raised. Due to improved access to healthcare, clinics and hospitals are often over-crowded and there is a high patient/doctor ratio. In addition, 'new diseases' like HIV/AIDS, hypertension and strokes have appeared on the scene. Some groups lamented the loss of knowledge of traditional medicines and some noted an increase in self-medication, fake drugs and quack doctors. Lastly, many of the positive changes mentioned above also had a negative connotation: 'there is still along way to go'. Child mortality rates are still too high; not everybody can afford health insurance; only a few households have

their own latrines; the cost of medicine is seen as being too high; and hospitals lack important equipment.

Whereas the changes in healthcare were perceived to be predominantly positive, there was some debate about whether people were actually healthier nowadays. Many felt that people currently have less healthy lifestyles and commented in particular on increased smoking and drinking levels, drug abuse and promiscuity, which has led to higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases. Opinions differed about the effect of less physical exercise because of the introduction of grinding mills, ploughs, pesticides and motorbikes. Some thought that this had made people less healthy while others considered the impact to be positive because fewer people are 'worn out' at an early age as a result of hard physical work.

## Economy

Despite a long history of underdevelopment in northern Ghana (Plange 1979; Schraven 2010; van der Geest 2004), numerous positive changes were noted in the economic domain. The opportunities for generating a living are more diverse nowadays than in the past. The dominant perception is that most of the changes are positive but that economic development is not moving fast enough. Another major concern is that spending opportunities have grown much more rapidly than income-generating opportunities, which can make people feel poorer. Increased income inequalities contribute to this feeling of relative deprivation.

Within the economic domain, the PADev project considered income-generating activities, markets and shops, transport, access to credit, and migration and remittances. In addition, the changing role of women in the local economy was also discussed.

The paramount change in the local economies in northern Ghana is that there are now many more ways of making a living. In the past, economic activities were limited to crop cultivation, livestock keeping, local crafts, some processing of tree crops and petty trade. In addition, there was a small class of civil servants, consisting mostly of teachers and nurses. Today, virtually every household is engaged in non-farm income-generating activities. Activities that in the past were outside the money economy (e.g. house construction) are now a source of cash income, especially in the dry season, and other income-generating activities, such as bars, commercial food preparation and sales of general goods, that existed twenty to thirty years ago have expanded (see Yaro 2006).

Besides the greater monetization of existing activities, all kinds of new trades have been introduced into the local economy, such as selling phone credit, taxis, plumbing and electrical repairs. There are also more opportunities for finding salaried work, not only in the civil service but also through NGOs and, to a limited extent, private companies. In some areas, there are important improvements in what could be called rural industries. Local craftsmen are making tools and implements that previously had to be imported from southern Ghana or abroad but, at the same time, other local industries have collapsed. A good example is pottery, which has suffered as a result of the introduction of cheap plastic containers.

One effect of the expansion of income-generating activities is that more people have access to money nowadays. In the past, the household head controlled any revenue from the harvest and the family's herds but today women and youngsters often have their own incomes from on-farm, non-farm or off-farm activities. Although this is generally seen as a

positive development, some groups were concerned that children no longer respect their parents once they have money in their own pockets.

Workshop participants felt that the number of shops had increased rapidly and market infrastructure had greatly improved. Consequently, many goods which one previously had to travel to other places for are now available locally. In small towns, products such as electrical appliances, farm tools, furniture and mattresses that used to only be available in southern Ghana or in the regional capitals are now sold locally. And in smaller villages, one can now buy basic goods such as sugar, petrol, matches and medicines, which in the past one had to go to a nearby town for. In Sandema, the group of young men estimated that the number of shops had increased five-fold in the past ten years and that the introduction of street lighting in Sandema town had been an important boost to local trade and the viability of shops.

While people's opportunities to earn an income have expanded greatly, their cash needs have exploded. Some examples of people's recurrent basic expenses are school fees, health insurance or hospital bills, borehole contributions and electricity bills. In addition, people inevitably have to spend money on food, clothing, soap, house maintenance, transport, basic furniture, utensils and contributions to ceremonies, especially funerals. And a certain amount of their income now goes on expenses like drinks and mobile-phone credit. Despite having more money, many people feel that they are in fact becoming poorer. One participant said: 'There are so many things to buy, but where is the money?' A negative side effect of the wider availability of goods is an increase in theft, cheating, jealousy and conflict if 'people no longer cut their coats according to their sizes'.

An important reason for the increase in income-generating opportunities is better transport services: better roads and more commercial vehicles (trucks) have facilitated trade. The general perception is that it is easier nowadays to access non-local markets and get a better price for one's produce. For example, there is huge demand for meat, charcoal and vegetables due to improved living standards in southern Ghana's growing urban centres. And better transport in parts of northern Ghana has meant that people can benefit from these opportunities. Yam farmers in Wulensi used to sell their produce locally at low prices but today can sell to traders who take their yams to urban centres in the south and are willing to pay higher prices for them.

In addition to more commercial vehicles, there has been a veritable explosion in the number of motorbikes and donkey carts in northern Ghana. Twenty to thirty years ago, only a few civil servants and successful traders had motorbikes as they were relatively expensive in those days. Imports of cheap Chinese motorbikes, higher cash incomes and special credit schemes for salaried workers have meant that many more people can now afford a motorbike. To date, it has been mostly men who own them but this is already changing in the larger towns in northern Ghana. Bicycles were common decades ago but their numbers have also increased greatly. In the past, a household would typically have only had one bicycle that was used primarily by the household head or other adult males, but today women and children also ride bicycles.

There are also many more *trotros* (public minibuses) and big buses owned by the government and private transport companies, which makes long-distance travel much easier than in the past. Migrants from Northern Ghana can now reach their main destination areas – in the Brong Ahafo and Ashanti regions – in less than a day (van der Geest 2011).

Another factor that has contributed to increased income-generating opportunities and economic activities is better access to credit and banking services. People have multiple

options now to access loans through micro-credit schemes, *susu* groups,<sup>4</sup> government agencies (e.g. Ministry of Food and Agriculture) and banks. Group credit is most popular among women and helps them to start up small businesses and generate their own incomes. This has significantly improved the economic situation of households because women tend to spend the money they earn on household needs (e.g. children's education and food items). Men reportedly prefer to have bank loans, despite the higher interest rates involved, because they find the process of group formation and regular group meetings too time-consuming.

Much has improved in the area of credit over the past decades but the workshop participants indicated that there is still room for further improvement. In Daboya, for example, people lamented the fact that they still have no access to credit from banks and no micro-financing or *susu* groups and so have to depend on local money lenders, who charge high interest rates. In other localities, people complained that time is lost as a result of long, bureaucratic processes. Another concern raised was that defaulting on a loan payment is becoming more common. When people have problems paying back loans and become indebted, their situation becomes worse than it was before they took out the loan. There is, therefore, still a degree of fear surrounding loans.

One of the most fundamental changes in northern Ghana over the past decades has been the changing position and role of women in the household economy. Whereas in the past women contributed their labour to the family farm and dedicated the rest of their time to raising their children and household chores, most women nowadays have their own income-generating activities. Many have their own farm plots and domestic animals but, even more commonly, they have their own non-farm income sources. The group of young men in Daboya stated that 'women now can do any job that a man can do' and the old men in Nandom added that 'they even do it better because they are more dedicated'.

Having their own incomes has made the position of women stronger in their households and their livelihoods more secure. An important factor in their ability to earn a living is that they have to spend much less time nowadays fetching water because of the wide availability of boreholes. Activities by NGOs and government agencies have contributed significantly to a mental shift in people's thinking on gender roles in northern Ghana. These are all seen as positive changes but some groups emphasized how women have started earning their own money as a response to the increasingly irresponsible behaviour of men. As the older women in Lassia Tuolu said: 'Men sell the produce of the family farm to buy drinks, so women have to jump in to feed the family and pay school fees'. Several groups also reported tensions between husbands and wives when women have their own incomes, especially if they bring in more than the men.

While livelihood opportunities in northern Ghana are gradually improving, economic development has been much faster in southern Ghana. Not surprisingly therefore, people felt that migration from the north to the south was on the increase. This has been confirmed in several studies using national census data (van der Geest 2011; Owusu 2007). An important change in migration is that women are now migrating in almost equal numbers. In the past, women tended to migrate with their husbands but nowadays women and adolescent girls are also moving alone. Most people view the increase in migration as a

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<sup>4</sup> *Susu* ('small-small' in Twi) is a Ghanaian saving system. There are different types of *susu* arrangements but generally people contribute small amounts of money on a daily basis in order to receive a lump sum at the end of the month or at some different interval. When enough trust has been built up, people can also request a loan from the *susu* collector (Schindler 2010).

positive development, primarily because migrants send remittances home that help to 'develop' the family at home. Some groups also emphasized that migration contributed to the learning of new skills and the acquisition of knowledge for development.

Not all the opinions on migration and its impact on home areas were positive though. Many migrants never reach the point of being able to send remittances home because they are not successful in the south or because they prefer to spend their earnings on their own needs. Many return empty-handed or when they are seriously ill and have no one else to fall back on. There was also concern that migration contributes to the spread of HIV/AIDS, leads to broken marriages and that unmarried girls are more likely to become pregnant while they are in the south. Lastly, some people lamented the fact that the 'young and strong' migrate, leaving the old and weak behind.<sup>5</sup>

### **Social organization**

Northern Ghana has experienced many changes in social relations over the last fifty years. The PADev workshop respondents reported changes in family relations, associations and the presence of non-governmental organizations, leadership and political life. They also commented on increases in crime and other social problems, most of which concerned changing family relations and changes in styles of leadership. The respondents were generally less positive about the changes in social organization than about those in the physical, human and economic domains. Changes regarding leadership and political parties in particular were judged to be more negative than positive.

People in northern Ghana used to live in large compounds with several generations of patrilineal relatives but a profound change across the whole area has meant that people are increasingly living in smaller, nuclear households. Workshop participants indicated that people are also cooperating less than before in co-building their houses and in co-managing their compounds. However, many people regard this change as positive (and inevitable) because it allows people to concentrate on solving their own problems and reduces family conflicts. It was felt that living in smaller units makes social and economic life more manageable. Even nuclear households (husband-wife-children) are becoming smaller as polygamy is declining and women are giving birth to fewer children than in the past. Lower fertility rates are the result of increasing trust in antenatal healthcare services, reduced infant mortality and the fact that couples are wary of the costs of raising children, which makes them take family planning more seriously.

People noted that social and geographical linkages have become more wide-ranging as a result of migration. People's social networks have expanded far beyond village level and the authority of family patriarchs has eroded. Family relationships can now be maintained much more easily as a result of the dramatic growth in mobile phones recently, despite the distances involved.

Although economic decision-making has become more individualized, most family problems and those between different groups are still solved in the traditional way, with family elders and traditional chiefs playing a prominent role. And most funerals are still

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<sup>5</sup> See van der Geest (2010) for a more in-depth analysis of perceptions of the impact of out-migration from northwest Ghana.

organized in the traditional way too, with a gathering of the extended family and other relations, and a sharing of the costs.

The individualization of social life can also be seen in individuals' choices of life partners: there are fewer arranged marriages or 'betrothals' today. Wives have become more independent of their husbands, and children nowadays belong to fathers and mothers, with both being involved in any important decisions regarding the upbringing of their children. Older people complain that they are losing control of some of their youngsters and lament their unruly behaviour and abuse of alcohol. Some also complained about the breakdown of family life or even of the community as a whole as a result of individualization. In some areas, an increase in crime and social vices – armed robberies, organized crime, prostitution, teenage pregnancies and growing 'immorality' – was mentioned.

Some groups blamed education for the rise in teenage pregnancies and the growing immorality in society. Many also seemed to be worried about decreasing social support networks, particularly for the elderly. On the other hand, many women (and also some of the men) said that women's freedom in decision making is much higher nowadays than for their mothers and grandmothers, and that 'the dignity of women has improved' and 'wife beating has diminished'. Women's economic independence has made them more confident and helped to reduce their dependence on and quarrels with their husbands. In some cases, it has made divorce easier and the number of separations is higher than before. People also said that existing taboos are decreasing in numbers, for instance about 'women's and men's work' or about who can buy what (women are now allowed to buy meat, for instance) or who can eat with whom. People in Wulensi reported a shift in inheritance practices whereby children are now entitled to inherit the property of their deceased parents instead of it going to more senior family members.

An observation in all areas was the overwhelming increase in the number of associations: women's groups, youth groups, farmers' organizations (cooperatives), savings clubs, religious associations and the like. In addition, many more people than ever before are participating in these associations and everyone talks positively about the atmosphere of unity, team spirit, solidarity, capacity development and empowerment as a result of this type of cooperation. The exchange of ideas, experiences with formal meetings and record keeping, planning, and economic/numeric literacy are mentioned everywhere as important functions of these associations. In places with longer experience of these new forms of social organization (like Nandom), some respondents also pointed to the negative aspects: the fluidity of group formation, the social exclusion of particular sub-groups in society, and the negative social impact at community level if associations become involved in political struggles and corruption. On the other hand, in some areas, such as Lassia Tuolu, respondents say that the traditional structures have not yet disappeared and can cope with the social unrest that sometimes results from failed or troubled forms of association.

Many respondents link the growth of associations to the presence and activities of NGOs. These seem to have developed everywhere, although one or a few major players tend to be dominant in certain areas. NGOs' coverage among the local population has also increased, although not all communities have yet been reached and NGOs tend to be selective in their recruitment of clientele (and some appointments are seen to be politically motivated). Criticism could be heard in areas like Langbinsi with its long presence of foreign-supported NGOs and in areas such as Wulensi where there have been recent conflicts. Some NGOs are being criticized for a lack of continuity, duplicating efforts, a lack of coordination,

their social selectiveness, their emphasis on groups instead of individual entrepreneurs, and for the ease with which they have introduced 'per diems and snacks' that makes voluntary work and the work of state agencies more difficult. This was a point made in particular by the 'officials' in the project's focus groups.

A major change in the social organization of the region is the growing importance of political parties and of new forms of political management, like unit committees and elected assembly members. In the past, the *tendanas* (land priests) and chiefs were most important but there is now more competition and respondents see less respect for traditional leaders almost everywhere and a reduction in their powers. On the other hand, the traditional courts do still exist and are seen as important. People attribute this to slow processes in the formal courts. Among the new leaders are some young people who are well educated and dedicated to the development of their areas and people. At the same time, people complain about corruption, authoritarianism, injustice, selfishness and the greed of other new leaders who quickly 'sacrifice the truth for money'.

In places such as Nandom, Sandema and Wulensi, there were complaints about increased political struggles and the associated risks of greater violence and mistrust, particularly around election times and during chieftaincy inheritance conflicts. People fear the reduced ability of the old leadership to resolve conflicts and assist the poor in traditional ways. More positively, traditional leaders have lost their claims to part of people's harvests, which was a form of land rent in the past. Among the new leadership, there are many more women ('queen mothers') and youth than ever before, which has given real power to people who in the past had to wait or never got a chance.

All over the region, people are ambivalent about the growth of democracy. There is more choice and women and youth also now have a political voice and influence. There is certainly more political consciousness than a few decades ago and people are generally aware of the importance of 'non-violent politics'. In Wulensi, one group formulated it this way, undermining their respect for politicians: 'it is good to play politics, but the way the politicians play it is not good'. Election campaigns sometimes become violent, not least because of the supply of hard liquor such as *akpeteshi*. This creates rifts in communities and within families and politicians sometimes manipulate existing tensions and 'spread tribal lies, causing confusion, and create rivalry and violence'. Experiences during recent violent ethnic clashes in Wulensi still make people uncomfortable about partisan and ethnic politics (Wienia 2009). And everyone is aware of the risk of using ethnic history and migration myths as a foundation for current (party) politics (Lentz 2000, 2006).

### **Cultural change**

Including 'cultural capital' in the framework in scientific circles dealing with livelihood studies is not always self-evident (Bebbington 1999: 2034). In this study, adding 'cultural change' brought additional insights as workshop participants were able to add place-specific cultural practices and often enjoyed this even more than talking about the other domains. People mostly explained 'appropriate behaviour', religious change, the role of ethnicity, language, appearances and styles (clothing, ornaments, architecture), food consumption habits, and rituals, festivals, music and dance.

The ethnic factor is still prominent in people's definition of 'self and others', and many of the so-called ritual performances are linked to old practices with an ethnic background. But there are clear shifts in what people perceive as 'appropriate behaviour' and this has a lot to do with the growing importance of Christianity and Islam. External influences are also visible in the changing choices of food and the desire for modern clothing. The growing orientation towards other parts of the world compared to a few decades ago has opened up a new appreciation of music and dance styles from elsewhere and a greater ability to communicate with the outside world.

The overall assessment of changes in 'appropriate behaviour' was quite negative in all the respondents' areas. The older men and women in particular had many complaints about what they saw as the 'immoral behaviour' displayed among the youth and examples were given of a growth in cases of theft, 'bad dressing' ('even at funerals'), abusive language and insults, a lack of discipline, the smoking of cannabis, alcoholism 'even among women', pornography, sex at a younger age and an increase in teenage pregnancies ('and no punishment for the culprits anymore'), and less respect for the elderly and traditional customs ('nowadays young women even keep their sandals on while climbing on the borehole platforms'). Some people blamed the 'new religions' (Christianity and Islam) for the moral degeneration as, according to them, 'forgiveness is more easily available there', 'taboos are no longer tolerated' and 'the Christian or Muslim god is too tolerant in his punishments'. In general there is evidence of a clash between youth and elders and a rapid change in the position of women in society.

Today, many youth marry partners who they have chosen themselves, sometimes even without the consent of their parents. The young men and women in the workshop groups also saw positive sides to recent changes in attitudes and behaviour. The chance to save money in banks minimizes cases of theft ('old rich people no longer bury their money') and it has become normal to go to local police stations and court in cases of misbehaviour. Women are more respected and can perform official duties more easily, and there are far fewer cases of witch hunts, which makes life less dangerous for older women without children. In general, people see more openness to strangers and to cultural influences from elsewhere but there is a clear uneasiness about the rapid cultural changes in all six case-study areas.

In all the groups in all the areas there was total agreement about the rapid rates of conversion to Islam and Christianity and the decline in Animism and the worship of ancestors and related rituals. This was generally seen as very positive because 'in the past, gods were not so good and created problems'. There is less fear of one's ancestors and taboos today. The workshop groups stressed the peaceful coexistence of different religious groups and if there are problems, these are mainly within Christianity or within Islam (as reported in Daboya) because of different interpretations of adherence to Islamic and Christian principles and as a result of the arrival of charismatic branches of Christianity. The dramatic rise in the number of churches and mosques and of active religious communities has given many people a new sense of togetherness and a way of coping with the recent changes in many other domains. It has also created new and wider circles of solidarity.

Northern Ghana has a diversity of ethnic groups, languages and dialects. Bonding was dominated by ethnicity in the past but the importance of ethnicity has clearly declined in all the workshop areas. Everywhere has become more ethnically mixed and this multicultural mix is predominantly seen as positive because it creates more knowledge exchange, increased business opportunities, more tolerance and integration and it is widely believed to

be 'good for development'. 'Unity gives strength' was what one person reported. Many have improved their language skills and being able to speak Akan and/or English is seen as a very positive development. However some groups complained that the local languages are rapidly being corrupted (Lassia Tuolu) or adulterated (Nandom; Sandema) and that a new language is emerging that combines various local tongues using Ashanti (Twi) and English words and expressions.

Mixing children from different language backgrounds in the local schools has resulted in changing language practices. Migrants from elsewhere are generally welcome to settle and intermarriage between different language groups is not generally seen as a problem. In areas where there used to be ethnic clashes (like Wulensi), joint educational programmes have helped to restore ethnic trust: 'Konkomba children from the villages now come to town to attend school and they stay with Nanumba families'. There were three exceptions to the positive attitudes towards people from other ethnic backgrounds. There was harsh criticism of Fulani herders in three areas (Daboya: 'they are disturbing the rest'; Lassia Tuolu: 'they destroy our crops', and Wulensi: 'there are cases of rape'). In Lassia Tuolu there were also complaints about exploitation by Ashanti women traders. And in Langbinsi and Wulensi some groups were becoming worried about the growing pressure on land and resources as a result of on-going immigration.

The growing importance of Christianity and Islam and exposure to other cultures have rapidly resulted in changing appearances. Old people still remember how in the past people would use leaves to cover their naked bodies but this is, of course, no longer the case and northern Ghana has developed its own clothing style, resembling the 'smock and pantalon' style of the Mossi, and some places (like Daboya and Nandom) have become famous centres for smock production. However, western-style clothes (trousers, 'even for women') are taking over, partly because they are a lot cheaper (especially second-hand clothes). In the Upper West Region, workshop participants also reported the adoption of Ashanti styles, particularly for funerals. Mostly the changing clothing styles are appreciated, although people realize that the smock industry is having a difficult time and that, on the other hand, job opportunities for tailors and seamstresses (adjusting or repairing western clothing) have increased significantly. There are some complaints about 'immoral' or 'indecent' modern dress styles being 'too revealing' but women's trousers are generally accepted nowadays. 'Cycling becomes easier', 'it is more comfortable' and 'it is easier to carry money' were some of the comments made. Almost everybody now wears shoes: 'In 1997 I used to walk barefooted; now my two-year old child even wears shoes in bed'. And finally, people are less inclined to use clothes and ornaments to show their ethnicity. The use of ethnic body markings has declined although it is still practised in some areas.

Wider exposure to customs from other areas and an improved economic position have stimulated food-consumption patterns quite different to those seen in the past. Sorghum and millets dominated people's diet in earlier days, together with bush meat, guinea fowl, goat meat and spices from the *dawadawa* tree. Nowadays, eating rice and maize has become more popular as has the consumption of pork and chicken, and the use of Maggi cubes. Food taboos are disappearing: young people can now also eat fowl, and women can eat meat in the market place (and even meats that were previously regarded as strongly taboo for them, like dog meat and pork). Muslim food practices have become more important too, like the taboo regarding the eating of pork and the halal butchering of animals. Food preparation has become easier due to grinding machines, better utensils and

borehole water near people's homes, and this has had a profound impact on women's and girls' labour time. People also commented that food preparation has become healthier (e.g. cooking pots have lids now; veterinary checks mean meat consumption is safer), although some workshop groups were worried about the chemicals in modern foods. In Lassia Tuolu there was concern about rising food prices and less food security, and also about what was regarded as continuing unhygienic practices in youth initiation camps.

Finally, northern Ghana is seeing differences in its festivals, entertainment, music and dance. In some areas there was a negative assessment of the situation with complaints about the neglect of traditional rituals and the disappearance of traditional music, dances and festivals (like the Salt Festival in Daboya and the Yam Festival in Wulensi). There is a strong desire to keep traditional songs and dances alive and to conserve indigenous knowledge related to their meaning. This is difficult, however, because of the arrival of modern music and dances, as well as the new technical possibilities, like sound systems at funerals and local FM stations. Among young people, these changes are usually seen as an improvement. In Sandema there was an emphasis on local attempts to adhere to old cultural practices surrounding marriages, funerals and initiation events. People in Nandom have realized the importance of a plurality of cultural expressions and the entertainment value of revived cultural practices. On the other hand, many workshop groups complained about the commercialization of ritual practices and the increasing prices being demanded for entertainment at funerals and weddings. In Nandom, they also lamented the fact that bride prices are rising.

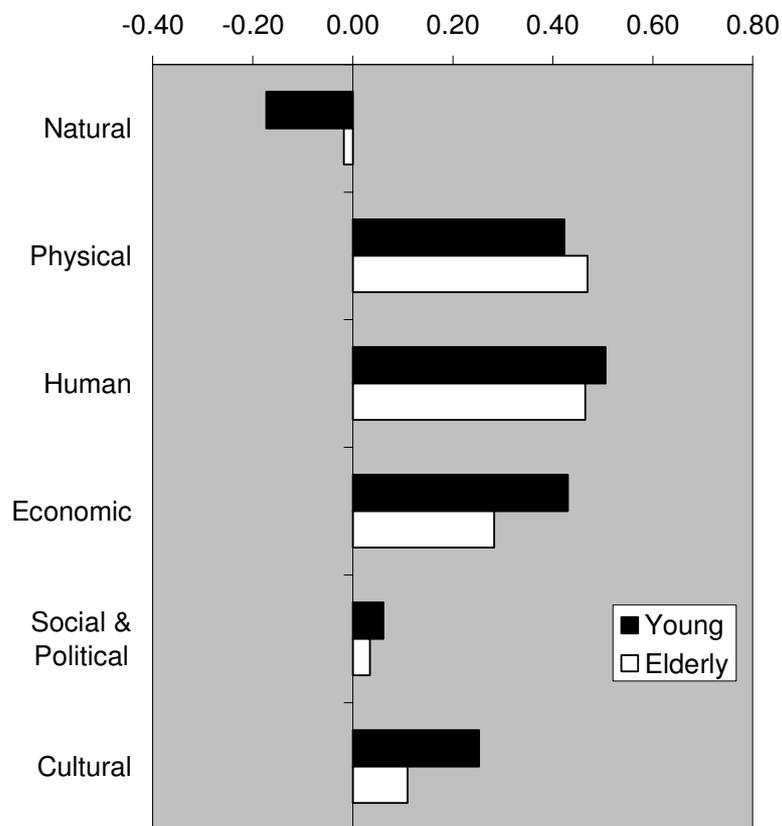
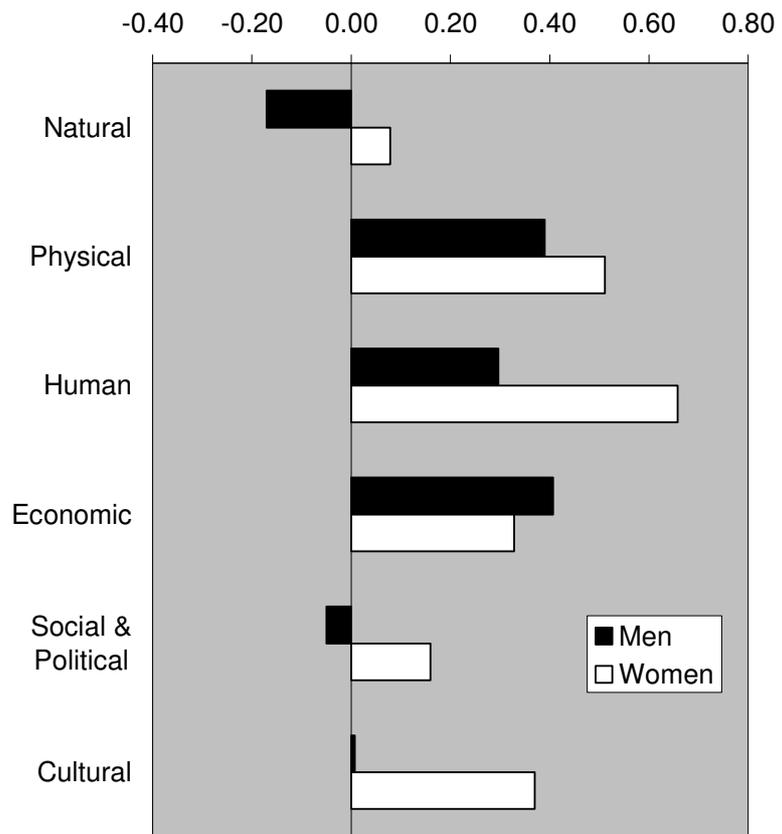
### **Perceptions of change in northern Ghana**

On the whole, the 327 participants at the PADev workshops in northern Ghana were quite positive about the changes in their area over the past twenty to thirty years. Important differences were noted, however, between different domains and in each domain there were both positive and negative changes. The most positive changes were seen in the human, physical and economic domains. People were least positive about the changes in the natural environment and were also critical about those in the social-political domain, and to a lesser extent the cultural domain.

In the human, physical and economic domains, people particularly applauded improved access to education and healthcare, new types of knowledge and techniques (especially in farming), the arrival of electricity and mobile phones, the increase in motorbike ownership, better roads and transport facilities and more non-farm income-generating opportunities, especially for women.

The more negative perceptions of changes in the natural environment involved the decline in soil fertility, the loss of tree cover and changing weather patterns. In the social-political domain, people were critical about changes in leadership and the role of political parties but they saw a lot of improvements too, like the advent of all kinds of associations in which people participate. In the cultural domain, people noted negative changes in what could be considered 'appropriate behaviour', which was seen as a negative side effect of exposure to the wider world. They also lamented the loss of traditional cultural expressions, for example in local music and dance. The most positive changes that people mentioned in the cultural domain were in religion and inter-ethnic relations.

**Figure 1: Perceptions of change by domain, gender and age**



Note: Positive values mean more positive changes than negative changes.

Figure 1 shows the differences between men and women and between young people and the elderly with regard to their assessment of the changes in the six domains. Women in northern Ghana appeared to be more positive about the changes they have experienced over the past twenty to thirty years than men. It could be that women were less critical and shy about speaking out negatively in the PADev focus-group discussions, but the project's more qualitative findings also indicate that their position in society is clearly improving relative to that of men. The differences between older and younger people are not as clear as those between men and women. This is partly because the differences between the young and the elderly in the workshop were not very pronounced as the young people who participated were typically between thirty and forty years old. Still, one clear difference should be highlighted here. Young people were much more positive about the changes they have experienced in the economic domain. This is probably because they are benefiting more from the new opportunities than the older people who are gradually losing economic control over their dependents.

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