

# **Creation of Sanitation and Water Resources Ministry; A bold step in the right direction**

By Frank Awuah

The president Akuffo –Addo led government is about nine months old. The government was formed after the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and candidate achieved a resounding victory in the December 2016 general elections. Then presidential candidate and party outlined some lofty policy proposals that they intended to use to address the many socio-cultural and economic challenges facing the country should they win the election. They promised, inter alia, to adopt a better economic management strategy that will restore micro and macroeconomic stability. The One-District One-Factory policy was to drive the industrialization agenda of the government and tackle the serious unemployment problem, especially among the youth. The Free Senior High School (SHS) policy was to remove the financial barrier to second cycle education and make it generally accessible to all qualified candidates.

Most of these policy proposals have now been translated into real programmes, and, are being implemented. Others, we are told, will start in a few weeks to come. To be able to implement the programmes successfully, some existing ministries had to be realigned and new ones created. The creation of the Sanitation and Water Resources Ministry, for me, stands out as one of the most thoughtful and innovative decisions taken by the president. The ministry, as the name implies, is to manage two critical major sub-sectors of our national life-sanitation and water resources.

The president announcing the creation of the ministry on 11<sup>th</sup> January, 2017, rightly indicated that, splitting water and sanitation from the ministries of Water Resources, Works and Housing, and Local Government and Rural Development was because of the neglect of the two sub-sectors. Over the years these subsectors have been appended to other ministries, and so, have not gained the needed attention it deserves. In this write up my focus is on the sanitation subsector. This is because of, perhaps, my background as a Social Studies practitioner and, also, very importantly the fact that the sanitation situation has reached alarming levels in the country.

Ghana's sanitation records, in the world, are not one that Ghanaians can be proud of. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on water and sanitation had a target that, by 2015, half of the population without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation should have access to improved sanitation and safe drinking water. By this target, Ghana was expected to achieve 78% and 54% of her population having access to hygienic drinking water and improved sanitation respectively. But the country, on her own, set an ambitious 85% target for the two sub-sectors to be achieved by 2015. While the country over achieved her target in respect of safe water provision, unfortunately, her performance in the sanitation subsector was woefully abysmal. By the end of 2015 the country had attained only 15% coverage, far lower than the 54% MDG target and, also, shamefully far below the 85% national target. The situation has improved slightly. At its first Meet -The -Press programme on 24<sup>th</sup> August, 2017, the sector minister, Hon. Joseph Kofi Ada, indicated that only 19% of the population has access to improved sanitation.

Access to improved sanitation must be a concern to all Ghanaians. Sanitation related health issues are very rife in the country. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the most prevalent diseases in Ghana are mostly those related

to sanitation. These include cholera, typhoid, measles, chicken pox, malaria and so on. In 2014, Ghana was hit by a massive cholera outbreak nationwide, except Northern Region, with over 17,000 cases and 5,100 death recorded. This was the hardest hit since 1982. In 2015, a World Health Organization situational report on cholera revealed that Ghana recorded 591 cholera cases with five deaths from January to May alone. The year 2016 recorded 720 cholera cases with no death recorded. Malaria is, without any shred of doubt, the most commonly reported health condition recorded by most health facilities in Ghana. A study by Dzotsi et al conducted in the most affected areas predictably found that the causes of the 2014 cholera epidemic were lack of personal hygiene and safe drinking water, open defecation, poor sanitation, among others. These causes, I am optimistic, will turn up positive as causes for all the outbreaks that followed, and, may also be the causes for most diseases treated at our health facilities in Ghana.

The precarious sanitation situation of the country also has serious economic implications. A desk study conducted in 2012 by the World Bank's Water and Sanitation Program (WSP) revealed that Ghana's economy loses GH¢ 420 million each year (over US\$ 290 million, 1.6% of GDP) as a result of the insanitary conditions. The report found that a significant majority (74%) of these costs come from annual premature death of about 19, 000 Ghanaians from diarrheal diseases, including 5,100 children under the age of 5, of which 90% are directly attributable to poor water, sanitation and hygiene; the report averred.

Apart from the health and economic problems it poses, the capital city of the country, Accra, regional capitals and other major towns in the country are fast becoming unattractive. There are heaps of refuse everywhere, especially in the market and business areas. The cities and towns are filled with offensive stench. Drains and gutters are choked

with refuse and smelling very badly. Polythene (plastic) bags and other materials are scattered everywhere. Our lorry parks and streets have lost their aesthetic features. Indeed, it is very sad that our country was ranked the 7<sup>th</sup> dirtiest country in the world by WHO and UNICEF in 2015. Ghana came immediately after South Sudan.

This horrible sanitation record, described above, cannot be allowed to continue. There must be pragmatic approaches aimed at reversing the situation for the better. It is for this reason that I consider the creation of the sanitation and water resources ministry a bold step in the right direction. We cannot afford to fail this time. Most importantly, we must assist the ministry to overcome the challenges it is confronted with at its birth. At the Meet -The -Press programme the minister outlined some challenges it has inherited from the immediate past government. Principal among them is an outstanding debt of Eight Hundred and Ninety Two Million Ghana cedis (GH¢ 892, 000, 000) owed to the waste management companies. According to the minister the debt accrued from the provision of fumigation, landfill management services and debt arising out of contracts with the ministry of Local Government and Rural Development and the MMDCE'S. At least it was gratifying to hear, from the minister, that government has started making payments.

Another emerging challenge is the springing up of unauthorized dumping sites. A tour by the ministry to some sites in Accra revealed that multiple dumping sites have emerged. Some of them are located at Mallam Market, Glikpe 1 and 2, Mempe-Asem, Trinity, Weija, New Weija Cross and other places. At all these sites it came to light that some men called 'Bola Guards' have elected themselves to 'manage' these sites. They guard the place and charge those who come to dump refuse various sums of money as fees. Any attempt to evacuate and engineer these sites is fiercely resisted by these 'bola guards'. Then also are the activities of 'bola taxis'. They comprise young men

who move around with tricycles in neighbourhoods to collect refuse from households at a fee. My opinion is that the ministry should take steps to regularize the activities of these bola taxis. The fact that households are ready to pay these operators for their refuse to be collected is ample evidence that Ghanaians are ready to pay for these services. The ministry should systematically integrate them into the waste management structure. I foreshadow that when their activities are regularized it could be an avenue to generate lots of employment for young people.

I was also elated to learn from the press conference that the ministry has completed a draft policy, awaiting cabinet approval, to establish a National Sanitation Authority (NSA) with a supporting fund. The authority will lead the implementation of sanitation policies. In addition, the authority will have a dedicated enforcement team to be called National Sanitation Brigade. This is a brilliant idea! My suggestion is that the authority should be given prosecutorial powers. Also, the judicial service may assist by setting some courts aside, in all the regions, as sanitation courts to dispense quickly sanitation cases. We need to have a business minded orientation towards waste management in Ghana. The sector has the potential to create lots of businesses, employment and wealth. Evidence abound in many countries. The ministry should always be guarded by the maxim 'waste is money' in its effort to manage waste in the country.

Finally, I would like to appeal to the president and government as a whole to adequately resource the ministry so that it can deliver on its mandate in the shortest possible time. So far the president, in particular, by creating the ministry and subsequent pronouncements has demonstrated enough commitment to deal with the sanitation situation, but, I still want to appeal to His Excellency to personally have interest in the activities of the ministry by ensuring that it gets the resources that will make it succeed. I also call on Civil

Society Organizations (CSOs), donor countries, multi-lateral institutions, religious bodies, and all Ghanaians, irrespective their political affiliations, to endeavour to support the ministry as it pursues a clean Ghana. Again, we must succeed in this agenda. Let us give real meaning to the saying that 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness'.

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