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**Challenges and Sustainability of Smock Weaving within the West Gonja District  
of the Northern Region**

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**Abstract**

*Smock weaving is an indigenous textiles production industry which has been one of the prominent rural enterprises with economic sustainability prospects for the study area. This prominent rural industry is gradually facing challenges that seem to be deepening the unemployment rate in the District, resulting in drift of some youths into the urban sectors in search for jobs that do not exist. To obtain a fair assessment of the impact, the study undertook a close examination of the situation using qualitative method that employs a case study techniques to collect and analyze data using instruments such as questionnaire and observation guide. Both open and close ended questions were designed for the study to examine various factors that impede the manufacturing of the smock and suggests best ways by which the youth may be encouraged to engage in the weaving industry to promote sustainable rural development. One hundred and ninety two (192) persons were selected for the study, constituting the sample population of the people engaged in the smock weaving industry in the district, out of which 171 responded to questionnaire used for the study. The study employs simple frequency distribution in analyzing data collected from the field. The study found that, most of the smock weavers in the industry have quite an in-depth experience in the industry. The findings, among other things, revealed that smock producers in the West Gonja District within the six (6) centers selected have the potential to produce and market their products to both local and international markets if the needed funds, training and other supports can be sourced from Government and other donor bodies. By way of recommendation, the researchers call on government and other donor bodies to support the smock producers to form cooperative bodies to enable them have a common voice in channeling their grievances.*

**Key words:** Sustainability; challenges; Indigenous textiles; smock weaving,

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**INTRODUCTION**

Indigenous Ghanaian textile industries have immensely contributed to the sustainability of rural development in Ghana. This textile comes mainly in strip forms and are fashioned

into traditional clothes and garments used in various jurisdiction for traditional festivities (Dzramedo, et al, 2011).

Indigenous textiles are traditional methods of textiles production perceived to have emanated from or are native to the northerners hence the Gonjas and are expressive of the people's culture through clothes. Textiles become indigenous when everything about them has traditional origin. Products within the Ghanaian indigenous textile industry include; traditional woven cloth (Kente, Kete-Agbamvo and Fugu), 'Nwomu', dyed materials such as Kuntunkunu, Birisi, Kobene and printed Adinkra or Ntiamu designs" (Asante, 2005; Appiah, 1993; Akrofi, 2004).

Akwaboa (1976) discloses that textile production in Northern Ghana centres on the following ethnic groups: Moshie, Kokomba, Dagomba, Mamprusi, Lobi, and Gonja among others. Indigenous weaving in Gonja and Dagomba used to be the reserved of the male sex and was done on vertical looms while spinning and processing of the raw cotton was an art for their female counterpart, however this has changed and women are now seen in the art of weaving but not necessarily the sewing of smocks.

Amateye (2009) opines that the traditional value of smock is central to the people of Northern Ghana especially the Kusasi, Mamprusi, Gonja and the Dagomba who are also identified by their type of textiles art which is usually used for smock locally referred to as 'fugu'. Smock is one of the cherished traditional apparels of the people of the north and therefore any effort to reactivate indigenous smock weaving centers in West Gonja District is a recipe for sustainable rural development.

According to the West Gonja Human Development Report of 2007, prepared by the Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (ISSER), West Gonja is predominantly rural and its economy is built on natural resource base. The district, the report says, has an agricultural -based economy, with agriculture including fishing employing close to 60 per cent of the economically active population. The report further reveals a sign of gradual structural change indicating a considerable decline in Agriculture in terms of employment from 80 per cent of the economically active population in 2000 to the current 60 per cent. The decline appears to have been absorbed by industry (particularly manufacturing) and the service sector. In

reaction to the report one is quick to find out the role of the Rural Enterprises Project, Micro-Financial Institutions and the District Assemblies in the promotion of indigenous textile industries in the West Gonja District.

Several strategies to improve the socio-economic wellbeing of people in the West Gonja district have to be improved upon including that of both formal and informal education in crafts as in indigenous textiles production in the area. This is to ensure that any social income distribution towards the welfare of its citizens are in line with Educational mechanism that improve on the vocational sector of the economy (Fernandez and Rogerson, 1995).

The 1987 educational reform placed much emphasis on Vocational and Technical education of which textiles related education in schools were part. This is to equip the youth with skill development when they are out of school. The 2001 Presidential Initiative on Textiles and Garments as part of its policy is to project the concept of made in Ghana goods to facilitate the patronage of locally made textiles.

The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGO) which was enacted and passed into law in 2000 by the US government to reactivate the operations of several collapsing industries in sub-Saharan African countries was a supporting instrument for the attainment of the first item among the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The goal aims at eradicating extreme poverty and hunger by 50 per cent by the end of 2015. Considering the extent of collapses of industries in Ghana including the local textile industry as well as the lack of interest on the part of the youth due to non-availability of start-up capital and low patronage of locally produce goods, one wonders how goal number one of the Millennium Development Goals can be achieved by the close of the year 2015.

The aim of this study therefore is to identify challenges hampering the production and promotion of smock weaving in the West Gonja District and how these challenges will impact on the growth and job creation abilities for the youth. These will help determine the strategies necessary for sustainable capacity building in the industry.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Qualitative approach is considered appropriate for the study due to the social and cultural nature of the phenomena under study (Jacobs, 1988). The researchers used a case study design in order to do an in-depth analysis (Kusi, 2012) through the use of qualitative research instruments such as opened-ended questionnaire and observation guide to examine various factors that hamper the manufacturing of the smock and examines best ways by which the youth may be encouraged to engage in the weaving industry to promote sustainable rural development.

The sampling size used for this study relates to artisans within the six selected centers in the District (Daboya, Yabum, Singa, Achubunyo, Larabanga and Mankragu). From the six centers, 62 respondents trading in smocks products, 52 weavers, 70 respondents who sew the strips into smocks and 8 community leaders presenting 192 sample size of the population where selected for the study. Out of these, 171 respondents representing 58 traders dealing in smocks, 45 strips weavers, 62 respondents sewing of the strips into smocks and 6 community leaders knowledgeable in smock production business responded to the questionnaires. The objectives of the study forms the basis for the questions used for the survey. The purpose was to collect divergent views from respondents on the challenges of smock production and the need to promote its activities within the study area. After carefully designing the set of questions, they were verified and pretested. Errors detected were duly corrected. Where the respondents are not literate, the researchers administered the questionnaire as an interview. The researchers made direct observations on the field. The six groups of smock weavers in the District were observed as they go about their work duties. Their activities as well as production approaches were observed and duly recorded.

The data collected from the smock weavers, sewers and sellers of the smock and the community leaders were analyzed using simple frequency distribution tables and the results discussed. This is to ensure in-depth understanding of the problems at hand and the possible ways of addressing these problems to

improve on sustainability of the craft in the district.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Indigenous textile industry has been one of the economic mainstays of the people in the rural West Gonja. Prominent among the indigenous Ghanaian textile industry in rural West Gonja is smock (fugu) weaving. The 'fugu' or 'batakari' is of several varieties, among which are the 'kumbi' suit and the 'datasiki'. This study explored the challenges confronting the industry and how it can be sustained.

### **Respondent's demography**

The survey gathered data from males and females who are into smock weaving, sewing and marketing within the study area. It was revealed that, 198 were males and 28 were females who were mainly into strip weaving, spinning of cotton, gathering of natural dye yielding plants and its related activities. This is evidence that, the craft is dominated by males, representing 86.5% while the females accounted for 13.5% respectively. Their age distribution revealed that the active labour forces are in the bracket of twenty six (26) and (40) forty years collectively representing 69.9%. The other respondents who are between the ages of 18-25years; 41-45years and those within 46 and above years representing 10.0%, 4.8%, and 15.3% respectively. This implies that active participation are favourable towards the working class who engaged in the smock production ventures to support their families.

Respondents' distribution in relation to weaving centers within the sampling areas, revealed that, fifty six (56) respondents representing 32.8% resides in Daboya. Yabum community has thirty one (31) respondents representing 18.1% while Singa reported fifteen (15) of the respondents representing 8.8%. Achubunyo respondents were nine (9) representing 5.2%. Larabanga respondents were forty three (43) while those of Mankragu were seventeen (17) representing 25.1% and 10.0% respectively. From the study sample, the prominence of the Daboya community in smock production in the District reflects in the volume of people engaged in weaving activities in the

area. Daboya seem to be the only unique community which is also the district capital where the entire process associated with weaving can be found (Buta, 2013), from yarn preparation through natural yarn dyeing process (from vegetable dyes) to weaving and sewing of the smock and finally marketing of the products. All the other centers used imported dyed yarns for the rest of the processing, although Daboya has started importing undyed yarns from Nigeria due to the demand level of which local spinner of cotton yarn could not meet due to challenges in the cotton production and the slow processes associated with traditional hand spinning processes.

### **Challenges associated with the weaving craft industry in West Gonja district**

Challenges must be overcome if sustainability is key in the production and marketing lines of any product. This may include, levels of maintaining product value, quality, aesthetics, meeting needs of suppliers and coping with higher material and labour cost (Lisa, et al 2013). In identifying challenges encountered with regard to the acquisition and use of the raw materials in their production processes, 12 of the respondents representing 7.02 identified frequent shortage and delays in accessing raw materials as challenge they faced in the production of smocks. 26 respondents attributed the delay to slow paste of strip weaving for the sewing of smocks, 82 respondents relate the challenges to the difficulties associated with the cultivation and spinning of cotton into yarns which is the main form of raw material for the local smock production while 51 of the respondents relate the problem to lack of fund to purchase the raw materials for the production. These are represented in percentages of 15.2%, 48.0% and 29.8% respectively. The views of the respondents are illustrated on Table 1.

With glowing demands for the use of environmental safe fibres and organic dyes (Gam and Banning, 2011), the smock industry have a chance of penetrating into the larger market globally. However, this will only be possible if issues of motivation, inadequate facilities and amenities, lack of funding and insufficient managerial ability as challenges in other garment

producing industries like AGOA in Ghana (Quarcoo, et al, 2013) are addressed by stake holders in effort to promote the industry as also identified through the field survey.

The above analysis identified that, problems relating to the cultivation, processing of the cotton into yarns and the weaving processes can be improved with the injection of funds into the smock weaving business to alleviate poverty within the district. Although, some community leaders acknowledged government effort through promises made to them towards the establishment of craft centers in some selected towns like Daboya, Yendi and Tamale, the projects that are to be supported by United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) have not yet taken off (Buta, 2013; Mubarik 2014).

In assessing the challenges associated with the promotion of smock weaving in the West Gonja District in order to determine how these challenges can be overcome for sustainable strategies that will improve on capacity building in the weaving sector, a liker scale approach was used in collecting and analyzing data to that effect. The respondents were asked to select answers that are most suitable for each question by agreeing or disagreeing with the statement. To this effect the respondents have the option to select one of the five options based on their conviction for the answers chosen; Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Undecided (U), Agree (A) and Strongly Agree. When the researchers assume there is ready market available for the smock products, the respondents' responses revealed there is some level of marketability for their products, 84 of the respondents agreed and 54 of them strongly agreed. This implies that if production can be biffed-up, patronage will equally improve. Akalaare (2000) confirms that, the demand for the smock production is growing. He therefore encourage indigenes to see the craft as a business other than a heritage, thereby demystifying the arts of smock weaving to enable more people patronizing it and using it on the bases of fashion instead of ceremonial wears. The researchers want to know if the activities associated with the production processes promote tourism within the catchment areas. The responses were average as 50 and 30 of the respondents agreed and strongly

agreed to that assertion, 41 and 32 respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively while 18 were undecided on the issue representing 29.2%, 17.6%, 24.0%, 18.7% and 10.5% respectively. Other questions were asked to find out the forms of support given in relation to training, tools and equipment, as well as financial support to them. The results were outline in Table 2.

On issues relating to skill training programmes and support systems for artisans, the result reflects little or no action to that effect, however, COTVET-PSU outreach team claims they have given support in terms of skill training and support for tools to the smock weavers association in Tamale (Graphic.com.gh, 2014). Perhaps, if weavers within the West Gonja District can form association and tailored their grievances to the right channel, help might come. It is therefore the duty of the District assembly to encourage the formation of such groups among weavers in the District.

In spite of all the challenges identified, the researchers wanted to know if the business of smock production is lucrative. The results had 67 (39.2%) of the respondents agreeing to the lucrativeness of the business while 104 (60.8%) stated no, implying that not all engaged in the smock business considered it as lucrative though they all believe it can be a lucrative venture if all parameters are put right. This is represented in Table 3.

A follow up question asked respondents to state what they want to see being done differently to improve on their businesses. The responses were classified by the researchers into three categories; 93 representing 54.4% of the respondents stated they require for financial support in various forms, 33 of them representing 19.3% asked for improved working conditions, accessibility of materials, tools and equipment and technical support in terms of processes associated with production such as enhanced dyeing techniques, weaving techniques and the stitching and finishing of the products. The third part of the demand from 45 respondents representing 26.3% were based on improved market condition for their products to enable them widen the market base with export opportunities created for their smock production.

## **Overview of responses in-line with smock production**

Data gathered from the field and analyzed revealed that, the various smock production communities within the district cherished and pay much attention to the craft of smock production as it is their main source of revenue for their family especially within the lean season when farming activities are on the down side. Through the study, a number of challenges were identified that hinges on the production processes and in some instances the quality of smock produced, hence its marketing. Notable among them are the tools and materials used, which are absolute and crude making the process of weaving slow and tedious. Although some artisans think of maintaining the same tools and equipment, most advocated for a new, improved tools and equipment that will help make work easier and faster. There is also a demand to improve on the quality and processes involved in yarns produced locally, as this will help reduce prices of locally manufactured smock and improve on quality of products manufactured. Among the challenges identified were the fastness of the local dyes used in the dyeing process of cotton yarns and the limitation of colours used. The weavers are ready to welcome any process that will improve on the fastness properties of dyes used but not to change production processes and colour yield. They also declared their intension to use other bright colour yielding processes of natural sources provided the colour yielding materials is/are available and accessible to their communities.

## **Fundamental challenges identified among producers**

Challenges relating to the sewing of strips into smocks were seen as culture appreciation and a way of sticking to tradition; in that, the artisans stated that, customers prefer hand stitched smocks to machine stitched smocks, hence they enjoyed stitching with hand needles. The simple reason being that, the hand stitched smocks conforms to tradition and make the garment appeal better on the wearer in terms of easiness in flare at the base or hemline, making it easier to spin when performing traditional dances that involved mostly turning. Marketing is a major challenge as almost all the weaving centers in the

various communities within the district visited lamented that their main mode of selling their products is conveying them to regional market center in Tamale or when they reserved an order from a client or a dealer orders for some quantity to be produced from him or her.

Results relating to support and assistance given to these artisans by financial institution, NGOs and the District Assembly to improve on sustainability issues revealed that little or nothing has been done in that direction. The research revealed that there is no training programme or workshops organized by the assembly or any NGO to train or educate the artisans on ways of raising capital to finance their businesses through formation of cooperatives to solicit for funding from both governmental and other institutions. Although training and support listed by government agencies are all limited to Tamale and perhaps Daboya only, no training was carried out on ways of production to improve on quality delivery in smock production. There is no assistance to improve on tools and equipment, workplaces for artisans and amenities like water, electricity and good road in these communities to facilitate easy accessibility which may go a long way to improve on the marketability of the products.

They believe if a common market can be established within the district and a festival instituted to celebrate the smock heritage and other artifacts in the district similar to those seen in Asante and Ewe land, it will go a long way to improve on the patronage of the products. This they believe will increase the tourist attraction base of the district, open the district for investors and also generate income for artisans thereby boosting the revenue level for the District Assembly as a whole.

The findings revealed that there is little or no support from any institutions or the district assembly toward the growth of their businesses. Other forms of support toward the sustainability of their businesses were not also forthcoming, in the form of technical training to improve on their skills. They equally believe there is the need to develop easier and faster methods of production processes to improve on quality and introduce varieties of smock or other types of garments. Generally, it was identified that, sustainability of this craft will largely depend on the sharpening

of skills of the artisans, creating new forms of products using the same or varied weave structures, having access to fast and improve techniques with varied colour traits, creating new avenue in terms of markets for the products through festivals, good finishing qualities and export promotion strategies for these artisans.

## **CONCLUSION**

The smock production industry is a product area with export potential and therefore needs to be revived. The indigenous textile industry lacks good infrastructure and ready market for its product. The production within the indigenous textile industry also lack mass production approaches hence their inability to meet consumers' demands in some instances. The indigenous textiles industry has not made any significant impact on the industry towards poverty reduction and employment creation. The way forward for the smock producers in the industry is to maintain good market conditions that enable producers of smocks to plan ahead and have quicker techniques of production to avoid any disruptions in their production. They should also create environment conditions that encourage the development of new ideas.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Indigenous textile industries with special reference to smock weaving can be revived in the West Gonja district if credit facilities and financial support services are made accessible by Formal Financial Institutions (FFIs). Revamping the smock weaving industries under the Small Scale and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) will help provide source of livelihood, generate income and contribute immensely to the growth of the district and also pave way for sustainable rural development.

One area of concern to the effective revitalization of indigenous textile industries in the West Gonja District will also be the availability of ready-made market which is a big assurance of regular income and a measure to curb rural-urban migration. The availability of ready-made market for regular income will also assure the youth that the industry provides beyond subsistence livelihood where income will not be generated just for a sustainable

economic livelihood. The availability of ready-to-wear clothing market is also an assurance for appropriate and prompt loan repayment.

In a nut shell, the study calls upon the Government, District assemblies, NGO'S and other institutional bodies to support smock producers with financial assistance for them to increase their products and also support them to form associations which can help them channel their grievances faster and be able to solicit for ideas, training and other developmental programmes in all forms. They should equally create marketing conditions that are favourably for their products and make room for exports.

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**Table 1: Problems faced in getting raw materials for production**

<b>Problems in getting raw materials</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Frequent shortage and delays in accessing the raw materials for production.	12	7.0
At times there is delay in strip production (Weaving) for smock sewing.	26	15.2
Difficulty associated with the cultivation and spinning processes of raw material (cotton)	82	48.0
The problem of inadequacy of funds to purchase the raw materials.	51	29.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>171</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey, May 2014

**Table 2: Challenges and sustainability issues associated with smock production within the West Gonja District of the Northern Region**

<b>Statement</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>U</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>
The availability of amenities like good water, road and electricity help to boost the working environment hence promoting weaving activities in those communities.	42 (34.0%)	86 (23.0%)	24 (27.0%)	13 (4.0%)	6 (3.5%)
There are support for tools, equipment and workshops for local artisans in the weaving sector.	64 (37.4%)	90 (52.6%)	13 (7.7%)	3 (1.7%)	1 (0.6%)
Training programmes are available to improve on the technical knowledge of the artisans in the district.	52 (30.3%)	76 (44.3%)	18 (10.5%)	21 (12.0%)	4 (3.1%)
The craft of weaving and its production processes provides means of tourist attraction within the smock production communities in the district.	32 (18.7%)	41 (24.0%)	18 (10.5%)	50 (29.2%)	30 (17.6%)
The district Assembly and NGOs provides financial support anytime they are contacted.	107 (62.6%)	41 (24.0%)	10 (5.8%)	10 (5.8%)	3 (1.8%)
There is ready market for the smock and fabric stripes produced.	17 (9.9%)	9 (5.3%)	7 (4.1%)	84 (49.1%)	54 (31.6%)

Source: Field Survey May 2014

**TABLE 3: Lucrativeness of the smock production business**

<b>Lucrativeness of the smock business</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	67	39.2
No	104	60.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Field Survey, May 2014