INTRODUCTION

The Coalition of SADA Zone Civil Society Organizations organized a three-day National Forum in Bolgatanga on the transformation of the Northern Savannah Ecological Zone. The forum which was under the theme "The Visions of the NPP/CPP/NDC to transform the Northern Savannah Ecological Zone of Ghana into a Place of Opportunity for All, Free from Poverty and Inequality", had representatives of the three main political parties which were first qualified by the Electoral Commission to contest the December 2016 polls addressed participants. The main objective of the forum was to obtain commitment of competing Political Parties in the 2016 General Elections on the implementation of the SADA Master Plan for the transformation of the Northern Savannah Ecological Zone. While the Presidential Candidates of the New Patriotic party (NPP) and the Convention Peoples Party (CPP) were represented by former ministers in the Kufour led administration and party executives in the forum on separate days, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) had its presidential candidate address the forum in person.

Each Candidate was requested to espouse his vision and strategy for implementing the vision, and how the manifestoes of their parties relate with the Master Plan for the development of the zone if elected President of the Republic of Ghana in the 2016 December polls.

The rationale for the consultation and request for commitment from the Presidential Candidates is founded in historical abandonment of policies and programmes and consequential waste of resources upon change of Government. SADA under its new leadership, through extensive stakeholder consultations, developed a comprehensive Master Plan with game-changing and life-transforming programmes and projects. Based on the history of abandoning policies and programmes by new Governments in Ghana, there is a growing concern from some constituents of the SADA Zone that this Master Plan may be abandoned upon change of Government. Obtaining the commitment of the invited Presidential Candidates sought to guarantee the continuity of the Master Plan and its Projects and Programmes irrespective of any change of Government.

The Coalition of the SADA Zone Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) is made up of civic groups, networks and NGOs operating in the five SADA regions. The Coalition’s main objectives are twofold: first, to serve as a watchdog on SADA to ensure the Authority delivers on its core mandate of eradicating extreme poverty, deprivation and general underdevelopment in one-half of the country. Second, to lobby and advocate for increased resource allocation to SADA by Government and support from Development Partners.

Participants came from all the five SADA regions consisting of varied groups such as Traditional and Religious Leaders, Assembly members, Unit Committees, Peasant Farmers, Association of Small Scale Industries, Development Partners, Students, Youth and Women groups as well as Media Practitioners.
The Presidential Candidate of the New Patriotic Party was represented by former Northern Regional Minister, Mr. Imoro Andani supported by Hon. Boniface Agambilla, Member of Parliament for Nabdam Constituency; former MCE for Bolgatanga, Mr. Rockson Bukari, and other party Stalwarts.

The Party in sharing its vision stated that it will continue the activities and programmes of SADA when voted into power, explaining that the Master Plan fits well into its manifesto. According to the former minister, the NPP as a party is very passionate about Northern Ghana’s transformation and will therefore allocate 54 million cedis as seed funding to reactivate what was described as the defunct Savannah Accelerated Development Authority (SADA). As part of its vision and commitment to SADA’s Agriculture-led transformation, fertilizer and seed subsidy would be restored whilst cashew, tomato and rice production will be up-scaled to reduce the nation’s wage bill; particularly rice importation. The party will also create small dams for irrigation and harness solar energy as alternative energy to power its industrialization agenda. The NPP will equally adopt the Land Bank concept for Agricultural transformation including the creation of Agriculture Mechanization Centers.

The NPP will however, rename the Authority as Northern Development Authority (NDA) and change the territorial cover of the zone to only the three Northern Regions. A million dollars will be allocated to each constituency within the area and the NDA will manage this resource. Similar Development Authorities will be established for the Middle and Coastal Belts. They will in concert with CSOs in the area, develop baselines for evaluating impacts of the Authority after its first four years of operation.

While commending NPP for their good vision for the transformation of the northern savannah, participants urged the party not to change the name of SADA since there was multi-party consensus on SADA as evidenced in the passage of the law on SADA, that is Act 805 of 2010 by all parties represented in parliament. They argued that the change of name will delay implementation of the life-transforming programs and projects contained in the SADA Master Plan.
The Presidential Candidate was represented by the Upper East Regional Executives of the Party. Their vision for the zone was anchored on two broad policies; first, a Social Policy anchored on free education and health for Human Resource Development for women empowerment and economic transformation; and second, an Economic Policy for rapid industrialization beginning with Agriculture and Agribusiness transformation. Irrigation, Solar Energy production, Groundnut and Almond tree cultivation will be given special attention in this regard. They considered the Master Plan as a comprehensive instrument on which they will draw the Economic Policy and adequately resource SADA to effectively and efficiently implement their laudable programs for accelerated development of the northern savannah ecological zone.

On the same day, the Guest Speaker of the occasion, Naba Sigri Bewong, Paramount Chief of the Sakote Traditional area and President of Upper East Regional House of Chiefs commended the Master Plan for being a product of broad based consultations, bottom-up and the fact that it has given special attention to Agriculture. He demanded Political Parties to provide substantial resources for the implementation of the Plan when they win the Elections else they will be “rejected” by the Chiefs and People of the zone.

Naba further made the following proposals: that a fifteen-year budget allocation be made to SADA for the implementation of the Plan; that a proposed draft Legislative Instrument for the SADA Act to improve the Authorities execute role should be facilitated and passed without delay, and finally, a separate Board should be established to focus solely on Sheanut value chain development. Other Traditional Leaders demanded the construction of a South-North railway line and further into Burkina Faso to facilitate transport of cargo.
The Presidential Candidate of the NDC, His Excellency John Dramani Mahama addressed the forum in person. The party had described the forum as an important platform and requested for its date to be rescheduled to enable either the presidential candidate or his running mate attend. During this engagement, the NDC Presidential candidate stated that the NDC having established SADA will not shirk its responsibility to it. The party and government are therefore very much committed to the SADA Master Plan and the transformation of the Northern Savannah Ecological Zone into a Place of Opportunity for All, free from Poverty and Inequality. The NDC Presidential Candidate described SADA as one of the boldest attempts of government at transforming the northern savannah and noted that once SADA has had its internal systems of accounting strengthened through a successful restructuring process, government in its second term will adequately resource the authority through annual budgetary allocation, levies on non-petroleum imports among others. The President and flag bearer of the NDC stated, “I am satisfied with the new management and accountability systems, and the development plans by SADA”. He continued “Now I do believe we are on the right track and I will continue to give SADA my utmost support”. A number of key development initiatives including a Master Plan facilitated by SADA; the signing of an MOU with a Chinese company for a full integrated value chain development of cotton in the Savannah Zone; the establishment of a shea nut processing factory in Buipe and significant investment by government in infrastructure such as roads, airports, irrigation systems, schools and training institutions, among others in the SADA Zone were highlighted as initiatives government was already doing to transform the SADA Zone.

The flagbearer while calling for private sector investment in the SADA areas, urged SADA to target women in its interventions to enable them improve on their income generation. An appeal was equally made to traditional authorities in the zone to release land for projects that would benefit their areas and the nation in general.

The Vice President of the Upper East Regional House of Chiefs and Paramount Chief of Bongo Traditional Area, Naba Lemiyarum Salifu who read a statement on behalf of chiefs from the northern savannah ecological zone described the SADA Master Plan as the best strategic policy document ever. He admonished that when implemented, this will effectively and efficiently transform the
northern savannah area. He therefore urged all competing political parties in the 2016 elections to strongly commit to it. He stated that there was the need for government now and in the future to seriously commit to SADA’s agricultural-led transformation of the northern savannah zone to improve Ghana’s agricultural sector.

The chiefs impressed upon government to implement Section 18(1h) of the SADA Act which requires that government introduces levies on all non-petroleum imports to fund SADA as well as pass a Legislative Instrument (LI) for the SADA Act.

Other issues contained in the statement by the chiefs included the need to revamp defunct factories for agro-processing for value addition, develop and implement a strategic plan to address delays in release of feeding grants to 2nd cycle institutions in northern Ghana and construct railway lines to the SADA Zone.

The chairman for the occasion, Prof David Millar who is also a member of the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC) urged SADA to include bush fire control in the Master Plan to reduce the destruction of farms by bush fires in the zone. In the opinion of Prof Millar, groundnut production has not been given much attention in the country’s agricultural sector, he therefore urged SADA again to prioritize groundnut production in the plan.

Conclusion:

Members of the CSO coalition commended each of the political parties that shared its vision and committed to the SADA Master Plan. The Members wished them well in the elections and stated that the Coalition and the chiefs from the northern savannah ecological zone will be following up with another engagement meeting with the political party that will emerge winner and form a government in 2017.