

## **HARNESSING THE POWER OF THE YOUTH THROUGH NATIONAL YOUTH POLICIES IN GHANA: CHALLENGES TO NOTIONS OF EMPOWERMENT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

While Africa has the largest cohort of young people, and governments acknowledge that they are an important human resource with the potential to contribute significantly to national development, little effort has gone into harnessing its most abundant asset. Confronted with unemployment, limited access to opportunities to further education, limited space for political participation and participation in the decision-making process, many are questioning the genuineness of national youth policies which are supposed to empower the youth. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where emphasis is placed on knowledge-economy, what the youth need today are lifelong learning opportunities such as widening access to further education to produce young people prepared to meet the challenges of today and the future. If empowerment is about agency and opportunity structure, and education and our educational institutions are there to create the environment for the youth to become empowered, then policy-makers need to incorporate service-learning and entrepreneurship education into the educational system to help students develop critical and problem-solving skills — interpersonal and communication, and civic skills and dispositions, and also promote employability of young people.

Keywords: youth, empowerment, policy, agency, education, development

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## **RÉSUMÉ**

Alors que l'Afrique a la plus grande cohorte de jeunes, et que les gouvernements les reconnaissent comme une ressource humaine importante ayant le potentiel de contribuer considérablement au développement national, peu d'efforts ont été consacrés à exploiter cet atout. Face au chômage, à l'accès limité aux possibilités de poursuivre leurs études, aux occasions limitées de participation politique et au processus de prise de décision ; nombreux s'interrogent sur l'authenticité de la politique nationale visant l'émancipation de la jeunesse. Au 21<sup>ème</sup> siècle où l'accent est mis sur l'économie de la connaissance, ce dont les jeunes ont besoin, ce sont des possibilités d'apprentissage continu tel que l'accroissement de l'accès à l'éducation supérieure qui produirait de jeunes gens prêts à relever les défis actuels et ceux de demain. Si l'émancipation signifie pouvoir et opportunité, et si l'éducation et nos établissements d'enseignement sont là pour créer l'environnement où les jeunes apprennent à devenir autonomes, alors les politiciens doivent intégrer l'apprentissage à travers le service et l'entrepreneuriat dans le système éducatif pour aider les étudiants à développer les aptitudes à résoudre des problèmes avec un esprit critique et des aptitudes en résolution de problèmes, et ainsi promouvoir leur capacité d'insertion professionnelle des jeunes.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Africa is described as the world's youngest continent, as the proportion of youth among the region's total population is higher than in any other continent. Although, the socioeconomic status of youth of Africa has improved in recent years, the youth still face serious challenges. In the majority of African countries, the youth face unbridled unemployment, high risk to substance abuse and crime, high rate of migration to urban centres. Although, there are significant improvements in access at the primary level and in literacy rates, there are still high levels of drop-out rates, especially in the rural areas, and low participation rates at the tertiary level. The need to address these prevailing challenges has led to a coordination of efforts at international and local levels.

In the last two decades, there have been calls for the development and implementation of national youth policies to harness the huge potential of the youth for accelerated national development. These international and local

initiatives have resulted in the development and launch of national youth policies in African countries. The majority of these youth policies have identified empowerment as the focus of the policies. In the case of Ghana, strong attributions were made to empowerment in both the 1999 and 2010 national youth policies, yet very little research has been conducted to ascertain the extent to which empowerment, as captured in Ghana's 2010 national youth policies, could provide the youth the environment and the resources to become empowered. The starting point of such an empowering process is the creation of an enabling environment as well as compelling vision and realisable action plans for the future encapsulated in national youth policies (Janneh, 2011). In the policy document, there is much attention given to education and skills training, youth employment and entrepreneurial education. However, merely talking about empowerment in a policy text does not mean that it will happen automatically. The youth policy must go beyond rhetoric to action. It means dealing with challenges that militate against the empowerment of the youth. One of the critical pathways to youth empowerment is education. The youth of Ghana are more likely to control their own destinies and effect change in their own communities when they have higher levels of education. However, there are challenges facing the education system which, if not addressed, would limit the policy outcomes as encapsulated in the youth policy. This article explores what has been captured in the policy document towards empowerment of the youth of Ghana and the challenges the youth face in actualising the outcomes as encapsulated in the youth policy.

### **The Concept of Empowerment**

The construct of empowerment is based on the assumption that a society consists of separate groups that possess different levels of power and control over resources, and that social problems stem not from individual deficits, but rather from the failure of the society to meet all the needs of all its members (Gutierrez, 1990 cited in Pearrow, 2008). Empowerment is thus, about power (Hur, 2006). Kabeer (1999) argues that empowerment can only be explained when it is discussed within the context of disempowerment. Thus, empowerment is the "process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability and capacity for self-determination" (Kabeer, 1999:437). It is the process of enhancing an individual's or group's capacity to make effective choices, that is, to make choices and then transform those choices into desired

actions and outcomes (Alsop, et al., 2006:10). It also refers to the ability of people to gain understanding and control over personal, social, economic, and political forces in order to take action to improve their life situations (Israel, Checkoway, Schulz, & Zimmerman, 1994).

Empowerment is realised through a combination of agency and opportunity structure (Kabeer 1999; Alsop, et.al., 2006). According to Kabeer (1999) and Alsop, et al., (2006) agency is the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. It also means an actor's or group's ability to make purposeful choices from available options or 'what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important' (cited in Alkire, 2007: 16). Youth agency encompasses the ability to formulate strategic choices, and to control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes (Malhotra, 2003). Agency is usually predicated by asset endowment. These assets which are stock of resources, equip actors to use economic, social, and political opportunities against shocks. Samman and Santos (2009) argue that agency is determined by the individual's capabilities — good health, education, social belonging, sense of identity, leadership, self-esteem, self-confidence, and the ability to imagine and aspire to a better future.

Opportunity structure refers to the broader institutional, social, and political context of formal and informal rules and norms within which actors operate (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Samman & Santos, 2009). Alsop et al., (2006) argue that although the individual may be able to choose options, the effective realisation of those choices will depend upon the prevailing institutional context and socio-economic and political context within which the actor lives and works. The opportunity structure comprises the institutions that govern people's behaviour and that influence the success or failure of the choices that they make (Alsop, et al., 2006). Indeed, opportunity structure is what enables young people to become effective in terms of inclusion and participation in national development as they translate their asset base into effective agency, through more equitable rules and expanded entitlements (Sammon & Santos 2009; Alsop, et al., 2006).

#### *Global, Regional and National Efforts towards Youth Empowerment*

Various global commitments and initiatives to mainstream youth participation in national development could be traced to 1965, when a declaration on the Promotion of the Ideal of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between

Peoples was adopted in line with the United Nations Charter (Economic Commission of Africa, 2011). In 1969, the United Nations General Assembly called on governments to formulate national youth policies to ensure a more coordinated approach to meeting the needs and aspirations of youth (Hilman-Richter, 2005). In 1985, the United Nations General Assembly declared 1985 as International Youth Year on the topic “Participation, Development, Peace” which drew attention to the potential contribution of youth to development efforts and the goals of the United Nations Charter (United Nations, 1985).

The 1990s saw concerted approaches internationally to address the human dimensions of neo-liberal economic policies of the 1980s of structural adjustments and significant reductions in governments’ subsidies in education and health care among others. To address some of the effects of the past decade, several summits and conferences were held on children, education, the environment, human rights, population, social development, and women’s empowerment (United Nations, 2003). These summits and conferences provided the impetus for the adoption of the World Programmes of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond (WPAY) (United Nations, 1995; United Nations, 2003). The World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) initially identified ten priority areas which covered education, employment, hunger and poverty, health, environment, drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, leisure-time activities, girls and women, and decision-making to guide policy and action in the area of youth development (United Nations, 1995).

In 1998, two important conferences were held in Portugal three years after the introduction of WPAY. At the Third World Youth Forum, held at Braga, Portugal, from 2 to 7 August, a substantive timeline was established for the formulation in all states of youth policies, by the year 2005, which are cross-sectoral, comprehensive and formulated with long-term vision coupled with Action Plans, taking into account the provisions in the WPAY (United Nations, 1998). The World Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth, held in Lisbon, from 8 to 12 August committed itself to ensuring that national youth policy formulation, implementation and follow-up processes were at the appropriate level, and accorded commitment from the highest political level, including the provision of adequate resources (UNESCO, 1998).

In 2000, the accretion in global poverty, limited access to education, high school drop-out and low completion rates, drug and substance abuse, high HIV infections and prevalence rates, and unemployment led to the issuance of Millennium Declaration by heads of state and government and the Millennium

Development Goals. Indeed, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) paved the way for the incorporation of the needs of young people in five of the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2005; UNESCO, 2010). To further strengthened the WPAY, five new areas, such as globalisation, information and communication technologies, HIV and AIDS, conflict and intergenerational relations, were added to the original ten priority areas to make it fifteen (United Nations, 2005).

Although significant gains had been made since the strengthening of the WPAY, there were still some interrelated issues such as education, health, employment, and poverty which constrained youth participation (United Nations, 2007). On national youth policies, it was found that very little success had been made on youth empowerment due to: (a) poor coordination among policies and sectors that affect youth and limited accountability for youth outcomes; and (b) the paucity of proven successes (United Nations, 2007). To further give impetus to the issues confronting the youth, and to bring the youth to the forefront of global debates, the United Nations General Assembly's meeting in November 2009 declared 2010-2011 as the International Year of Youth on the theme: "Dialogue and mutual understanding." The General Assembly called upon all member states, specialized agencies and funds and programmes of the United Nations system to take advantage of the Year and advocate youth development at the national, regional and international levels (UNESCO, 2010).

At the African regional level, several efforts have been made to accelerate youth development and participation. In 2006, the African Youth Charter was adopted in Banjul, Gambia, by Heads of States to address issues related to youth policy, education and skills development, health, poverty reduction, employment, security, leisure, law enforcement, protection of the environment, culture, youth in Diaspora, discrimination against girls and young women, issues of disability and protection of fundamental human rights and freedoms (Economic Commission for Africa, 2009). African governments were also called upon to sign and ratify the Charter to give effect to its provisions. To facilitate the pace of implementation of the African Youth Charter, the Assembly of Heads of State and government of the African Union meeting in Addis Ababa in February, 2009 declared the years 2009-2018 as the Decade of Youth Development in Africa. In 2010, African Ministers in charge of youth adopted the proposed plan of action for the Decade for Youth Development 2009-2018. This Declaration reinforces the African Union's call for member states to ratify the African Youth Charter; and to pursue efforts to popularize, ratify and monitor implementation of the Charter.

In spite of these global and regional initiatives, the efforts by governments to unleash the full potential of the youth have been constrained by several gaps in policy implementation. Some African countries governments have not aligned their national youth policies with the African Youth Charter and the World Programme of Action for Youth, whilst National Youth Councils lack funding to implement programmes. Also, there is lack of research and effective monitoring systems to track youth programmes. Indeed, these challenges have raised some concern among policymakers that African Youth Decade Plan of Action (2009-2018) may face some funding challenges (Economic Commission for Africa (2009) and Economic Commission for Africa (2011)). In order to adequately address emerging issues and promote the UN General Assembly International Year of the Youth, the 15<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session of the African Union Heads of State and Government held in Uganda in 2010 adopted ‘*Accelerating Youth Empowerment for Sustainable Development*’ as the theme for the next Summit (African Union, 2011b).

At the 17<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Summit held from 23<sup>th</sup> June to 1<sup>st</sup> July 2011 in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, delegates discussed the peripheral role being played by the youth in national development and the little achievements made so far on youth empowerment, under the theme “*Accelerating Youth Empowerment for Sustainable Development*”. Indeed, the African Youth Decade (2009-2018) Plan of Action document (African Union, 2011b, p. v) defined empowerment as:

...having the ability for supporting enabling conditions under which young people can act on their own behalf, and on their own terms, rather than at the direction of others. These enabling conditions fall into major categories such as an economic and social base; political will, access to knowledge, information and skills, adequate resource allocation and supportive legal and administrative frameworks; a stable environment of equality, peace democracy and positive value system.

At the Summit, African governments were asked to accelerate the implementation of the Youth Decade Plan of Action (2009-2018) and the African Youth Charter. The Summit called on governments to do more to address youth unemployment in line with the Ouagadougou 2004 Plan of Action on Employment and Poverty Alleviation. Again at the 8<sup>th</sup> Session of the AU Labour and Social Affairs Commission in 2011, African ministers committed themselves to an accelerated reduction in youth unemployment by 2% per annum through the development,

financing and implementations of Youth Employment Action Plans and a Youth Employment COMPACT (African Union, 2011a).

### **YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES IN GHANA**

Efforts at both the international and regional levels towards youth development and empowerment have been complemented at the national levels through locally crafted national policies. Ghana's effort at developing the competencies, skills and character of the youth is not a recent phenomenon. However, it was in the post-independence era that the Convention People's Party (CPP) under the leadership of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah changed the way the youth was organised in the Ghana.

In the 1960s, the Ghana Young Pioneers was formed in 1960 to instil discipline and patriotism in the youth (Hodge, 1964; Assimeng, 1999). The Ghana Youth Pioneers (GYP) which had their roots in the schools were categorised into four groups: age four to six was called African Personality; age eight to sixteen, the Young Pioneers; age seventeen to twenty, the Kwame Nkrumah Youth; and from age twenty-one to twenty-five, the Young Party League. The Young Pioneers provided the space for the training of the youth to take up political roles in the country (Assimeng, 1999). Although the Young Pioneer Movement did very well in inculcating in the youth the idea of patriotism, it was heavily criticised for the indoctrination of the youth. The idea of placing all youth groups under one movement led to the near obliteration of church youth groups and youth voluntary associations that had pre-dated the Ghana Young Pioneer.

The overthrow of the Nkrumah's government and the abandonment of the Young Pioneers called for new strategies to address socio-economic challenges facing the youth. Increased unemployment and acts of indiscipline among the youth were the main reasons for the introduction of the National Service Corps (NSC) by the Busia government in 1969. The NSC was to provide students in the schools, colleges and universities opportunity to offer voluntary service<sup>2</sup>. It was also meant to reduce the high incidence of unemployment in the country (Akyea, 1970a). The National Service Corps, together with the Voluntary Work Camps Association and the Ghana Youth Council carried out a number of projects including construction works and farming. To further strengthen the position of government in youth development, the Ministry for Youth and Rural Development

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<sup>2</sup> Radio and television broadcast by Dr. K.A. Busia, Prime Minister, to schools, colleges and universities on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1969.



was established. The new Department of Youth Services was given the responsibility for all youth work, providing organisation and machinery not only for coordinating but also for giving administrative and technical support, and supervision of youth programmes (Akyea, 1970b).

In spite of these changes, some criticisms were raised on the strategies adopted by the Government in dealing with the youth issues. First, though the establishment of the National Service Corps (NSC) was to provide for employment, it turned out to be an instrument of rural development, an agency for mobilising local people for community development with reach for paid employment of few skilled artisans. Second, the NSC was a duplication of the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development offering a scope for the exercise of private and political patronage (Legon Observer, 1971). Third, the absence of detailed figures on employment levels and reliable data from official sources made attempts to deal with the problem very difficult (Abbey & Brew, 1970).

The decade of the 1970s, which could be described as the decade of military rule, saw pragmatic steps towards youth mobilisation. First, the military regime of Colonel I.K Acheampong disbanded the National Service Corps which was started by the civilian governments and which was in its embryonic stage. Second, the Ghana National Youth Council (GNYC) was re-organised into the National Youth Council (NYC) and given legal backing under National Redemption Council Decree 1974 (NRCD 214) to “provide the dynamism and leadership which the youth require to make even greater contribution to the national development efforts of our people under the philosophy of self-reliance” (Therson-Cofie, 1974:1).

Another step taken to imbue the spirit of voluntarism in the youth was the promulgation of National Redemption Council (NRC) Decree 208 which established the National Service Secretariat and the National Service Scheme. Young Ghanaian graduates from the Universities, the Diploma Colleges and later Sixth Form were required to offer a one year service to any needy area of national development. In 1980, the NRC Decree 208 which had established the National Service Scheme was replaced with Ghana Service Scheme Act, 1980 (Article 426) which increased the duration of national service to two years and a minimum of six months military training.

The 1980s saw a revolutionary posture towards youth mobilisation by the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) under the chairmanship of Fl. Lt J.J. Rawlings. From 1981 to 1992, a new vibrant youth mass movement, the

National Youth Organising Commission (NYOC) was established to carry out the objectives of the 31<sup>st</sup> December Revolution. During this period the youth were mobilised to engage in community development programmes in line with the regime's revolutionary posture and ideals. It was in this revolutionary fervour that agitation for political reforms began in the early 1990s.

### **NATIONAL YOUTH POLICIES IN GHANA SINCE THE 1990S**

The concept of policy means many things to people. Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012: 3) argue that “what is meant by policy will be taken as texts and ‘things’ (legislation and national strategies) but also as discursive processes that are complexly configured, contextually mediated and institutionally rendered.” Monkman and Hoffman (2013: 68) have noted that it is important to analyse and interpret official statements of policy to understand how policies frame problems and solutions “foregrounding particular perspectives, and possibly shutting out alternative views.” Discourse analysis when applied to policy documents, could get us closer to understanding the framing of policy and the likely consequences (Monkman and Hoffman, 2013). The language used in policy documents is critical in understanding the politics of pushing the policy forward (Ibid). According to Monkman and Hoffman (2013), such documents constitute ‘policy talk,’ which refers to the diagnoses of problems and the advocacy of solutions. In the case of national youth policies, one supports the argument of Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) that the youth policies cannot just be implemented, they have to be translated from text to action, that is, put into practice.

Ghana's effort to address the challenges of the youth in a more comprehensive and holistic way could be traced to the draft national youth policy prepared by the then Ministry of Youth and Sports in 1999. In encapsulating the vision of the government in drafting the documents, it noted that:

The Ministry of Youth and Sports has, in this policy document, endeavoured to formulate the necessary guidelines for youth empowerment and development in Ghana. The Policy has been designed to create space for the active involvement of all who have interest in youth development. It also attempts to address the negative perception of people regarding youth matters. Government believes that it is only through a collaborative effort by governmental and non-governmental organisations and civil society that the desired objectives of this Policy would be achieved (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 1999).

The priority areas of action identified in the policy included: (a) the strengthening of linkages between education and training and the world of work, as well as the promotion of apprenticeship and entrepreneurship schemes; (b) increased accessibility of health service; (c) promotion of sports and recreational activities; (d) fostering partnership and collaboration through inter-ministerial committees; (e) institution of national youth week, national youth service and formation of youth clubs; and (f) establishment and administration of Youth Leadership Training Institutes throughout the country by the National Youth Council (Ministry of Youth & Sports, 1999). One of the weaknesses of the policy was the absence of a national action plan. Indeed, before the Policy could be launched, the NDC government lost power to the New Patriotic Party (NPP) in the 2000 elections.

In 2000, the new Government promised revising the National Youth Policy to make it more responsive to the needs of the youth and also add an action plan to facilitate its implementation (Ghana News Agency, 2009a). Between 2000 and 2008, the Government of the National Patriotic Party (NPP) took several steps to empower the youth. A Distance Education Programme for Youth development in collaboration with the Commonwealth Youth Programme, Africa Centre, was introduced at the Institute of Adult Education, (now Institute of Continuing and Distance Education, University of Ghana. The Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS I 2003-2005) and its successor, the Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS II 2006-2009) paid attention to poverty reduction and human resource development of the youth.

To address the issue of youth unemployment, the National Youth Employment Programme (NYEP) was established under the Ministry of Manpower Development, Youth and Employment. The target was to create half a million jobs in 3 years (2006 – 2009). Funding was to come from the District Assembly Common Fund (DACF), Ghana Education Trust Fund (GETFUND), National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS), Road Fund, Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) and percentage of the service and investment from 2006 estimates of MDAs to support the implementation of the NYEP (Republic of Ghana 2006). In 2008, a total of 107,114 youth were engaged under the NYEP (NDPC, 2010).

In spite of the significant achievements of the NPP government, one of the policy failures of the government was its inability to launch a new national youth policy to replace the 1999 draft National Youth Policy. Although several statements issued by the government indicated that considerable progress had been made towards formulating a new National Youth Policy to meet the aspirations of

the youth of Ghana, and a commitment to a passage of a new National Youth Council Bill, by the time the country had Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2008, the National Youth Policy had not been launched (Republic of Ghana, 2008).

The national election in 2008 led to the formation of a new government by the National Democratic Congress (NDC) which made its intentions very clear regarding addressing the challenges facing the youth. The first step taken was the decoupling of Youth from the Ministry of Manpower Development and Employment and aligning it with Sports, thus creating a new Ministry of Youth and Sports. The second step was the preparation of a draft National Youth Policy to replace the one developed by the NPP government and its launch on August 13, 2009 at Elmina in the Central Region under the theme “*Towards an Empowered Youth, Impacting Positively on National Development*”. Indeed, the policy provides guidelines and direction for all stakeholders involved in the implementation of policies, programmes and projects for the development of the youth. It is also intended to help the country demonstrate its commitment to all international conventions and charters it has signed affecting the youth.

The new national youth policy was quite unequivocal on the relevance of youth empowerment to Ghana’s national development. The document noted that “...empowerment involves the creation of a congenial environment for equipping the youth with knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and ethics...” (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2010: 3). Consequently, youth empowerment shall involve the process of preparing the youth to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a series of activities to make them socially, morally, emotionally, physically and economically independent and cognitively competent as well (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2010).

The policy identifies seventeen (17) challenges facing the youth and a number of priority areas which include education and skill training; science, research and technology; information and communication technology (ICT); youth and employment; entrepreneurial development; youth in modern agriculture; gender mainstreaming; environment; health, HIV and AIDS; networking and partnership; mentoring; arts and culture; governance, democracy and leadership; sports and recreation; and youth in conflict prevention and peace building. The National Youth Council (now National Youth Authority [NYA]) was assigned the responsibility of implementing, monitoring and evaluating the policy.

## **STRATEGIES FOR YOUTH EMPOWERMENT**

This section examines two of the priority areas captured in the national youth policy that are critical to achieving youth empowerment in Ghana under the 2010 national youth policy. These are education and skills training, and entrepreneurial development. The focus on these two priority areas is critical because there is symbiotic relationship between empowerment and education. Using education to empower the youth means that the Ghanaian youth should be able to demonstrate self-efficacy, the capacity to think critically and to make autonomous informed decisions.

### *Education and skills training*

Under the policy, education and training are perceived by government as critical to the development of a young person's productive and responsible life. The main goal of the policy is therefore to ensure the development of a knowledgeable, self-reliant, skilled, disciplined, and a healthy population with the capacity to drive and sustain the socio-economic development of the nation (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2010). The outcome of education and skills training include: (a) make education more responsive to the labour market through constant review of curricula; (b) increase access to post basic education skills training; (c) arrest the issue of school dropouts by developing programmes that will keep pupils and students in school until they complete relevant levels of education; (d) make learning a life-long vocation; (e) provide apprenticeship training for out-of-school youth.

Related to education and skills training is youth and employment. Under youth and employment, the national youth policy aims at: (a) building the capacity of the youth to discover wealth-creating opportunities in their backyards and environment; (b) enabling the youth to have access to reliable and adequate labour market information; (c) creating opportunities for young people to take advantage of available jobs; and (d) training and preparing the youth for the global market.

*Empowering the Youth through Education and Skills Training*

The lack of opportunities for young people to further their education and inability to secure decent jobs are some of the factors that may affect the agentic outcomes of young people in Ghana. Strategies for effective youth empowerment in Ghana should focus on the following priority areas: lifelong learning, community service-learning and entrepreneurship education.

Since the 1990s, significant reforms and policies have been introduced in the education sector to improve the human capital of young persons in Ghana. Although these reforms and policies have led to improvement at all levels of the education system, in the midst of these reforms, there are still some challenges that militate against the empowerment of the pupils and students. At the primary level, while the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) is 105.0% in 2012/13, the Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) which provides information on children who are in school at the right age is 84.1%. At the Junior High School (JHS) level, while the GER is 82.2%, the NER is 47.8% revealing a high level of overaged pupils who may be at risk of high dropout. At the regional level, the GER ranges from 89.7% in Greater Accra down to 72.6% in Northern Region. The NER also show that the three northern regions (Northern Region, Upper East and Upper West Regions) have the lowest indicators. What this means is that the significant overage school population in JHS raises the risk of dropout and contributes to the low completion rate of 70.0% at JHS level (Ministry of Education, 2013).

At the Senior High School (SHS) level, the story is not very different. The GER is 36.8% and NER is 23.6%. Progression from JHS3 to SHS1, which is dependent on Basic Education Certificate of Examination (BECE), and the transition rate currently stands at 61.2% in 2012/13. Completion rate show that males are more likely to complete SHS than females. For technical and vocational institutes (TVIs), Darvas and Palmer (2012 cited in Ministry of Education, 2013) have found that only 5 to 7% of JHS graduates find their way to either private or public Technical and Vocational Education Training Institutes (TVETs), because of limited demand and low social and economic demand. TVET is not as popular as general education, carrying low prestige and image that does to guarantee great opportunities into the labour market (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Indeed, low transition rates and completion rates especially at the junior and senior high school (SHS) levels deprive the country of the much needed educated youth for the job market (Ministry of Education, 2010). More children and young people are also leaving school without acquiring the critical skills in mathematics,

science and literacy. Factors such as poor school infrastructure, inadequate instructional time, inadequate teachers and low motivation, and lack of effective supervision are responsible for many of the challenges still confronting education in Ghana.

At the tertiary level, the picture is no different. Evidence shows that tertiary gross enrolment ratio remains rather low (World Bank, 2011). Although the World Bank pegged the gross enrolment rate at 6 percent in 2007, this increased to 9.7 percent in 2008/2009 (Ministry of Education, 2010). In 2010, university enrolment had risen to over 150,000 students. This improved figure is attributed to increase in the number of private universities which contribute to about 28 percent of the total student population of universities and polytechnics together (Ghana News Agency, 2009b) and increase in distance education programmes on campuses of public universities. Enrolment in public universities decreased from 115,452 in 2010/11 to 109,278 in 2011/12. However enrolment in the polytechnics, Colleges of Education and private tertiary institutions increased (Ministry of Education, 2013). In spite of these positive improvement in student enrolment, Ghana falls behind countries such as South Africa, Mauritius and Nigeria (World Bank, 2011) in widening access to tertiary education.

Another major problem also to be addressed is the mismatch of content of what is learned in Ghanaian schools and universities and the needs and demands of the job market. The competitive work environment and the demands by organisations for graduates with both hard and soft skills (team working, interpersonal skills, communication skills, etc.) have made it more difficult for young graduates to find decent jobs easily after university education. Harvey (2003:5) has noted that there is “a chasm between what industry wants and what universities provide”. One of the critical failing of university education is the lack of interface between theory and practice. Indeed, one of the concerns is that existing undergraduate programmes are not producing graduates with appropriate lifelong learning skills for the future (Harvey, 2003).

Apart from the curricula in schools and universities which are not being constantly reviewed to reflect global change and the requirements of the job market, another major contributor to youth unemployment is the slow growth of the Ghanaian economy and the inability of the public and private sectors to offer employment avenues to graduates. In 2010, 42.7% of the unemployed population were aged 15-24 years, 46.2% aged 22-44 years, 9.9% aged 45-64 years and 13% aged 65 years and older (African Development Bank, 2014). Also, the absence of data on youth unemployment in the country is making it very difficult to address

some the challenges facing the youth. The consequences of high drop-out rates and low educational outcomes of the youth have led to high migration by young girls and boys from the rural areas to the urban areas in search non-existent jobs. Migration by the youth to the urban areas has future ramifications for agriculture and food production. The young migrants often find shelter in the most popular urban slums and are engaged in survival types of jobs in the informal sector. Those who find themselves without jobs are easily recruited into criminal networks for illegal activities, including prostitution, substance and drug abuse, robbery, violence, cybercrimes and illegal mining and degradation of the environment.

### *Lifelong learning*

If the youth are to acquire the skills and knowledge critical for building a knowledge-based economy, then much attention needs to be paid to lifelong learning. Lifelong learning means creating alternative pathways for the youth to stay in school long enough to acquire the basic skills, problem solving and analytical skills, to be able to deal with the challenges of life in the present and the future. The concept of lifelong learning has been captured in Article 38 of the 1992 Constitution and also in page 10, Section 6.1.2, and bullet (4) of the national youth policy. Unfortunately, Ghana has no national policy on lifelong learning. Empowerment of the youth within the context of lifelong learning can only happen when there are systems and structures in place to deal with deficiencies in the education system which allow for high dropout and low completion rates at the Junior High and Senior High School levels, and limited access at the tertiary level.

Lifelong learning can be promoted through *second-chance* programmes in the broader context of complementary education and Open University system. Second-chance programmes aim to strengthen the employment prospects for unemployed, low-educated youth to motivate their re-entry into education (National Treasury, 2011). These programmes target early school leavers and young people who have not gone on to further education (National Treasury, 2011). There are several best practices in this area which Ghana could learn from and even adapt to suit her needs. In India, the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) offers the Open Basic Education (OBE) Programme which is an equivalency programme for primary and upper primary levels through open and distance learning methodology. In South Africa, the National Youth Development



Agency (NYDA) has a National Senior Certificate Second Chance Project that targets young people who fail four subjects.

In Namibia Non-formal Education (NFE) equivalent education is part of the formal system, defined as ‘all learning leading to certification’ (Glassman, Hoppers & Destefano, 2008). The NFE programme for youth and adults covers formal through non-formal, such as literacy and distance learning (Glassman, et al., 2008). The Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) provides learning opportunities to those who cannot be accommodated through the conventional school system and offers a wide range of programmes to adults and out-of school youth (Murangi, 2008). The programmes are alternative secondary education (Junior Secondary Certificate (JSC) and Namibia Secondary School Certificate (NSSC)), PETE (Pre-entry to tertiary education), other programmes in community development and youth work, local government and entrepreneurship.

#### *Community Service-learning*

One of the means of empowering the young people in school and universities is through community service-learning. Community service-learning is a “course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher 2000:274). There are several benefits that accrue to students when they take part in service-learning. It has positive effect on students’ intellectual skills; personal development; personal confidence, leadership skills, team work, sense of ethics, moral development and increased social awareness (Jacoby, 1999; Deeley, 2010). Whilst community service-learning has grown in leaps and bounds in high schools and universities in developed countries and some developing countries because of huge benefits which accrue to students, it is yet to be integrated in school and universities in Ghana.

#### *Entrepreneurship Education*

One of the policy options available to governments in addressing youth unemployment and creating an entrepreneurship culture is through the mainstreaming of entrepreneurship education at all levels of the education system (Hannon, 2006; Nelson & Johnson, 1997). In the United States, Italy, Canada,

United Kingdom and Australia and South Africa, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been very active developing entrepreneurial skills among students (Jones & English, 2004; Co & Michell, 2006; Matlay, 2006; Pittaway & Cope, 2007). Ghanaian higher education institutions could create entrepreneurship centres and focus on what Kuratko (2004) identifies as the three areas: (1) entrepreneurship education, (2) outreach activities with entrepreneur, and (3) entrepreneurship research. There is no doubt that Ghana needs an entrepreneurship policy in its education system to combat youth unemployment and that the absence of such a policy is long overdue. Public-private-industry/organisation partnerships within our educational/training systems are essential to nurture this idea and push the agenda forward.

## CONCLUSION

The youth of Ghana face many challenges which policy makers have tried to address with limited success. The chronic deficiencies in the education system which have over the years led to high dropout and low completion rates for young people should be addressed through effective and sustainable equivalencies and bridges across the education structures. Ghanaian higher education institutions need to create space for students to engage in community service to develop critical thinking skills, and problem-solving skills which contribute to student learning that is deeper, longer lasting, and more portable to new situations and circumstances (Jacoby, 1999; Zollinger, et al., 2009). These skills go a long way in improving learning outcomes of students. The much awaited Open University should be established to provide more access to the many young people from Senior High Schools who otherwise could not be absorbed into the already existing tertiary institutions. Service-learning and entrepreneurship education should be integrated at all levels of post-basic education. National Youth Policies need to be weaned of the politicisation and holistic solutions should be prescribed to youth issues. Also, there is a need for systemic reforms of the National Youth Authority and the National Service Scheme to make them more dynamic and responsive to current youth unemployment and underemployment in the country. It is only when these policies are implemented that we can really talk about authentic youth empowerment in Ghana for a sustainable period.

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