Chapter 9

Active Citizenship and Participation in Democratic Governance

'No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts off from its youth severs its lifeline.'

Kofi Annan, Former UN Secretary-General

Ghana's population is more youthful today than ever before. While the country is constantly evolving, young people and adults alike are facing increasingly complex and unprecedented social, economic and cultural challenges that are affecting growth and stability. Creating an enabling environment of legal frameworks, policies and platforms for the youth demographic would help allow them to participate on the broad range of issues that affect them, providing them with a sense of active agency in national development processes.

Meaningful youth participation in governance and civic life has particularly strong resonance here because of the association between political or social disenfranchisement of young people and social unrest. Peace, stability and development in Ghana will depend not only on the choices young people make today and in the future but also on how society perceives them and addresses their needs as rights-holders. Within an appropriate enabling environment, youth will be increasingly likely to get involved in development issues affecting them, thereby allowing them to access existing opportunities and create new ones.

In Ghana, enhancing the autonomy as well as well as the financial capacity of the NYA (formally the National Youth Council) through parliamentary enactment of the National Youth Act 2016 represents a milestone. Moreover, significant effort has been made to bring GoG closer to the people through decentralisation of key government functions to local authorities. This process, which began in 1988, presents an important opportunity for citizens, including youth, to engage more effectively with local governance at council and sub-council levels. Likewise, more recently, structures and programmes that serve youth needs have been introduced, including the Youth Parliament programme.

Young Ghanaians are entitled to rights and privileges such as free basic and secondary education and voting. If they engage in the workforce, they are obligated to pay taxes. Many young people are required to undertake National Service. Some may choose to volunteer and hold public officials accountable. Youth actions – both social and political – can be seen as aspects of citizenship that require formal mechanisms and safe spaces where young people can engage positively with society without having to use violent means.

Government, public institutions and families are responsible for nurturing good citizens. Social participation does not guarantee active citizenship, nor does it always foster young people's participation in development. Thus, there is a need for deliberate interventions to involve youth, including inter-generational partnerships that foster engagement between young people and policy-makers.

9.1 Mechanisms, processes and structures for youth participation in governance

'*Youth should be motivated and be able to come out, express themselves. More organisations… need to be set up to help youth come out and voice out their problems or things hindering them.*' Female, 15–20 years

In Ghana, there are a number of different routes and levels through which young people can engage either directly or indirectly in governance processes. That being said, the extent to which youth are able to take advantage of these opportunities in practice depends largely on the principles of participation and their capacity to proactively engage.

This section highlights case studies of youth involvement in a range of governance processes. This includes interventions in participatory governance: planning and budgeting, monitoring, research, youth parliaments and awareness campaigns. Moreover, it outlines the interventions and offers some lessons learnt from research interviews where possible.

9.1.1 Participatory research, planning and budgeting

A decentralised development and budgeting process can inform and shape national budgets. MMDAs are encouraged to engage various social groups in budget development. However, research interviewees suggested there are instances of exclusion during this process, owing to the absence of legal requirements to engage youth. Some young research participants argued that, though some opportunities to include young people exist, the assumption that they do not have the capacity to critically examine and contribute to budget planning is still widespread. Since 2010, a number of local and civil society organisations including Plan Ghana, YES and the Integrated Social Development Centre have initiated and implemented rights-based approaches to youth budget advocacy and planning. Capacity-building opportunities for youth have included week-long training camps to advocate for key development interventions, understanding the budget cycle and tracking, implications of budgets for vulnerable groups including girls and women and how to engage with the media and decision-makers. These participatory learning processes are useful in empowering young people to engage in local budgetary processes and hold governments accountable.

Similarly, following Ghana's NYP review, youth-focused organisations including YES, with support from the Commonwealth Foundation, implemented a capacity-building project to empower youth to participate effectively in the review process, with some key policy and programmatic considerations (Voices of Youth Coalition,

2017). Youth were equipped with research skills and then conducted research on youth development issues and policy review.[1]

9.1.2   Youth advisory panels

As most international organisations are recognising the agential role of young people with respect to development, youth are increasingly being viewed not only as *beneficiaries* of development interventions but also as *partners*, through the institutionalisation of youth leadership roles within organisations. For instance, UNFPA Ghana has established the Youth Leaders Fellowship Programme to include young people in its internal governance structures and strategies. These youth benefit from funding and training and participate in programme planning as well as key advocacy and campaign work. The approach has the potential to improve accountability regarding youth development outcomes.

9.1.3   Youth parliament

In 2019, the NYA initiated the Youth Parliament Model in MMDAs to empower and build capacity among youth with the goal of increasing active youth participation in decision-making processes, as well as to provide them with safe spaces to express their needs to leaders in local government structures. Thus far, the initiative has involved training youth drawn from the 15 MMDAs per region in regional workshops on the Youth Parliament Model. The goal is to enable youth to cultivate new leadership skills, to promote transparent decision-making and to empower youth to understand governance processes, demand accountability and serve as positive forces of change.

Similarly, ActionAid Ghana and the Northern Sector Action on Awareness Centre have established the Young Female Parliament in northern Ghana to provide space for training and dialogue among girls while building skills and confidence to engage in participatory governance. Initiatives that focus on engaging females are crucial, given that they constitute a significant proportion of Ghana's productive population yet in many cases remain marginalised. These safe spaces allow female youth to dialogue on issues that are important to them, such as violence, harassment and discrimination, cultural issues and the gender gap found in current leadership.

9.1.4   Electoral participation and civic life

Elections remain a key feature of Ghana's democratic governance. Youth aged 18 years and above have the constitutional right to vote in local and national elections as well as to stand for political leadership. At the age of 21 they are able to stand for parliamentary election and by 40 they can run for the presidency. As of June 2019, Ghana had about 10 MPs aged 35 years or below out of the 275 MPs. However, despite efforts by both international and civil society organisations, political empowerment of youth and particularly young women lags behind in Ghana. Additionally, data from recent surveys indicates that youth participation in political processes is still surpassed by the participation of elderly people (Lekalake and Gyimah-Boadi, 2016) – findings that can be attributed to low voter registration of young people, voting apathy and cynicism in politics.

9.1.5 Political voice through media and ICT-based initiatives

Not only has ICT become an essential tool for daily communication but also certain media tools and technology have become useful in enhancing young people's civic participation. Electronic media, especially the radio, TV and social media, are useful modes youth use to understand and participate in local, regional and national issues. Youth-led organisations such as Curious Minds and other stakeholders, like the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE), use these media sources in a number of governance processes (e.g. to improve voter education) and areas of civic life (e.g. radio production to promote sexual and reproductive health rights, gender equality, etc.). By participating in these organisations, young people have cultivated skills in writing, production, verbal communication and presentation, all necessary for youth employability in certain sectors. Many of these young people have gone on to roles as activists and facilitators at key events such as the International Conference on Population and Development. Despite the success of these programmes, however, most media-based youth-focused or youth-led programmes extend mainly to youth in urban centres and not those in rural environments.

The U-Report (implemented by UNICEF Ghana) is a free mobile platform that runs weekly large-scale polls with young people on issues such as safety, access to education, inflation and early marriage in order to foster youth political participation. The data is then analysed by UNICEF and published. A detailed review of this programme by Berdou and Lopes (2017) found that, while it is a cost-effective approach to assessing what people think about certain issues, the U-Reporters tend to be more educated and tech-literate than other groups in the population. This may suggest that in Ghana it is important for stakeholders to deliberately ensure inclusion of certain populations not familiar with the technologies used.

Box 9.1 Why does meaningful participation of youth in governance processes matter?

Numerous international frameworks adopted at the national level have reiterated the importance of youth engagement in the issues that affect them. For instance, Article 11 of the African Youth Charter adopted in 2006 requires states to take action in improving youth participation in governance processes and in public discourse. This resulted in the NYP 2010 in Ghana. Subsequently, in 2014, the Youth Policy Action Plan was launched. Similarly, Ghana is widely known for being the first country to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and thus expectations remain high regarding Article 12: the right to participate in decision-making processes that may be relevant in their lives. In essence, participation of young people in matters that concern them is a right, rather than a privilege.

Globally, it is recognised that youth possess vital capabilities, valuable knowledge and viewpoints that are useful in governance processes and achievement of the SDGs. Consequently, the UN and its sister agencies have developed

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strategies at global level to ensure youth participation in global governance issues such as climate change and migration. A key outcome of these is the appointment of young people as AU or UN Youth Envoys, suggesting that it is not enough for young people to be merely engaged in national development issues: their participation in global development issues at sub-regional or global levels of decision is vital. Young people are not just the future; they are also part of the present and have the ability to offer solutions to local and global challenges to development.

Evidence suggests political or social exclusion generates distrust and disengagement from institutions. The absence of participatory mechanisms and safe spaces for young people to have a voice and hold leaders accountable can thus result in social unrest. Conversely, active citizenship through mechanisms to empower youth can facilitate collective action towards addressing their needs and promote trust and inter-generational partnerships while offering youth useful life skills and a sense of purpose.

Despite global recognition, in many cases approaches to youth participation are donor-driven, adult-initiated and patronising, resulting in participation that is manipulative and tokenistic (Hart, 1992). Instead, working towards a continuum of youth engagement aimed at achieving the highest degrees of participation is thought to be a better strategy. Focusing on the quality of participation initiatives, which achievements are actually important and whether they actually result in change can help improve outcomes (Farrow, 2015). Furthermore, youth-led approaches, characterised by diverse youth (including young women) defined and led by their own development agendas, should not be dismissed and deserve to be recognised in their own right (SPW and DFID, 2010; UNDP, 2014).

9.2 Policies supporting youth civic engagement

9.2.1 National Youth Policy 2010

The NYP 2010 was the first of its kind in Ghana to give legitimacy to youth as a national development priority. It allows for review after five years – and is currently under a review process spearheaded by the NYA nearly nine years since it was enacted. Efforts are being made to ensure that in the future the NYP responds to young people's contemporary needs while at the same time aligning with regional and global commitments. It is currently still unclear how effective the current policy has been.

Additionally, during research interviews, youth participants noted that neither the NYP nor the National Youth Authority Act clarifies the mechanisms or methods through which active participation in governance, decision-making and democratic processes shall be achieved at various levels. Questions such as how district youth committees should interact with regional committees and local councils, ministries

or other decision-making bodies with respect to localised youth issues, development planning processes and accountability still need to be addressed.

One of the major critiques of the current policy relates to the limited involvement of youth stakeholders in its formulation and the implementation (Adu-Gyamfi, 2014) including in local and rural communities and at national level. It has also been suggested that the formulation process itself was highly politicised, with strong involvement of political party 'youth wings' (ibid.). Furthermore, interviewees noted that the four-year wait between the policy launch and development of an actual implementation strategy potentially had an impact on the effectiveness of the policy. Finally, the NYP supports the idea that active participation can be achieved through education on good governance and through private sector support of volunteerism but offers no clear-cut strategies, frameworks or methods of implementation.

9.2.2 National Decentralisation Policy, 2010

The National Decentralisation Policy, launched in 2010, widened and strengthened the scope of Ghana's Local Government Act (1993). It clearly establishes goals of decentralisation, including innovative new principles such as gender mainstreaming, capacity-building of councils and collaborating with a wider range of partners like those in the private sector and NGOs. It highlights the need to conduct youth situational analysis, assess the needs of youth organisations, review youth employment interventions and support the development of district youth strategies and programmes informed by the NYP. By embodying the principles of participatory democracy, the policy created space for youth and youth organisations to become meaningfully involved in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation of development projects and local economic development. However, it does not specify the process through which it will be held accountable.

9.2.3 Further decentralisation

The Local Governance Act of 2016 empowers the 254 MMDAs with governing authority in areas such as education, sanitation, youth and sports. Following the 2016 presidential and parliamentary elections, further policy reforms allowed for more focused allocation of resources across regions in addition to addressing rural–urban socio-economic disparities. These reforms could in the long term increase development at the local level and equally offer the opportunity for local authorities to invest in youth mechanisms that facilitate youth participation in local governance processes. Although decentralisation is critical to local economic development and democratic governance, the extent to which it improves the level of engagement of youth in public policy issues is yet to be understood.

9.3 Youth participation in governance and challenges

Ghana is considered one of the stable countries in West Africa since the 1992 transition to multiparty democracy. Though support for democracy in the country is relatively high, at 81 per cent in 2016–2018 (Afrobarometer, 2019), youth engagement

in public policy issues and political processes remains low compared with that of adults and elderly populations (Lekalake and Gyimah-Boadi, 2016). According to an Afrobarometer survey from 2014/15, only 55 per cent of Ghanaian youth show an interest in public affairs; 34 per cent indicated that they never discussed political issues with friends or family members (ibid.). This lack of interest in politics and political institutions may owe to several factors, including a lack of trust in political life, limited knowledge on how to participate in political processes, the idea that their participation will never lead to change, and few opportunities or weak support to participate in various levels of political processes (ibid.).

Despite the possible opportunities linked to youth engagement, key challenges and barriers remain. During youth consultations for this report, most young people felt disillusioned with political leadership. Without access to youth development structures that are not politicised and that foster unbiased accountability, these youth are unlikely to participate in any government-led initiatives. Furthermore, certain barriers exist. For instance, although the range of legislation and policies in Ghana has worked to encourage local participation in development issues, often English is the language used in both meetings and official documents. This results in the exclusion of a certain portion of the youth population, especially among the less educated.

Other challenges that are working to prevent youth participation in governing processes include funding constraints and limited capacity of local authorities on how to meaningfully engage young people. This was noted during interviews with representatives of government ministries and agencies as well as young people. Moreover, as noted by youth representatives, registration costs or participation fees for initiatives serve as another barrier, given that most youth organisations lack strong financial base.

Additionally, structural barriers are evident in the ways in which local authorities or public institutions conduct their work. Interviews with various government institutions suggested lack of youth participation principles. Similarly, youth development workers themselves remain unclear about the modalities guiding how certain youth are selected for events or projects. Research suggests that, when youth structures are well supported through effective mechanisms of participation and funding, they tend to be better organised. When they remain under-resourced and underfunded, they become limited in their effectiveness and vulnerable to manipulation.

> 'We just hear gender equality, more women in parliament, etc. But the education is not really there. People are just advocating for it. They are not really understanding what gender equality is.' Female, 15–20 years

The visibility of young women in governance processes and political discussions is still a challenge in Ghana: female participation lags behind that of young males, with a 12 per cent difference in both campaign attendance and civic participation between the sexes, and a 14 per cent difference with respect to contacting political leaders (Lekalake and Gyimah-Boadi, 2016). While female participation in Ghana is above

the average for African countries, women still remain underrepresented in political processes. This is in line with earlier data from 2005, indicating that gender disparities have not improved during the past decade (Coffe and Bolzendhal, 2011; Lekalake and Gyimah-Boadi, 2016). Traditional gender roles and other socio-cultural factors may be preventing females from taking on decisive roles in politics, even if they are active participants in local public life.

9.4 Summary points

1. Opportunities for youth participation in governance and participation in political and decision-making processes depend largely on the political, socio-economic and cultural contexts and existing frameworks at various levels (from local to global) of decision-making.

2. The promotion of an enabling environment (legal frameworks, policies and plans) increases young people's participation in a broad range of processes and areas (electoral and parliamentary processes, public administration and local governance, including in peace building environments) at local, sub-national and national levels.

3. There is a risk of seeing youth as a homogenous category, overlooking important power inequalities among them, especially based on gender and socio-economic status.

4. New media and ICT-based interventions can enable youth participation in both governance and civic life. However, it is important also to consider how to reach the digitally disconnected in rural areas, in particular to understand their needs.

5. Among donors there may be the tendency to focus on formal measures for youth participation, through institutions such as national youth parliament. However, it is important to understand their operational mechanisms and how they foster inclusion and engagement of marginalised youth (e.g. rural or uneducated youth) or informal youth community movements.

6. Inter-generational power dynamics may create divisions and distrust between young people and adults. There is thus a need to foster trusted inter-generational partnerships and safe spaces where young people can share their concerns with adults.

7. Contemporary youth development models have emphasised the need for genuine youth engagement. They recognise youth agency/leadership, and youth as key partners in development processes (from planning to monitoring and evaluation).

8. Promoting meaningful youth participation can be challenging, especially if the cultural ethos encourages youth to be 'seen and not heard'. Thus, it is important to institutionalise a culture of participation across ministries, agencies and departments with high-level political support.

9.5 Recommendations

1. Encourage active dialogue between political leaders and young people in order to improve understanding of youth civic rights and the benefits of political participation and civic engagement at local, district and national levels.

2. Involve young people with diverse backgrounds in all stages of policy and programme development, implementation and evaluation, without regard for political affiliation.

3. Conduct local research to improve understanding of factors that encourage or hinder diverse youth (e.g. girls and rural youth) participation in development processes.

4. Create policies/programmes, training and funding for marginalised youth to foster an enabling environment for young people from all walks of life.

5. Invest in youth organisations, grassroots movements and skills development to foster the professionalisation of youth work.

6. Promote meaningful participation of grassroots organisations to encourage them in addressing local development needs.

7. Promote civic education and sensitisation programmes, including adapting the school curriculum and creating school-based development clubs that allow young people to participate in development issues affecting them.

8. Review the legislative framework for youth representation in leadership (e.g. use quotas) and strengthen the technical capacity of MMDAs to meaningfully engage youth.

9. Promote research and knowledge-sharing of youth development interventions, lessons learnt and best practices.

10. Mainstream youth development for government ministries, departments and agencies to ensure they can work with young people as partners in development.

11. Promote joint programming to foster coordination and effectiveness in addressing youth development issues.

12. Establish a multi-donor trust fund to ensure adequate funding to support youth development interventions at all levels.

13. Encourage youth organisations to register, coordinate and offer training to enhance the professionalism and effectiveness of youth work.

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Note

1   https://commonwealthfoundation.com/project/improving-youth-participation-public-policymaking-ghana/