

Chapter 11

Youth, Conflict and Peace-Building

Ghana is the highest-ranking sub-Saharan country on the inaugural Global Youth Wellbeing Index (Goldin et al., 2014) and yet it still faces major challenges with respect to youth and conflict. Factors such as youth unemployment contribute to youth involvement in crime. Youth may be involved in conflict either as offenders or as victims. In areas rife with conflict, youth populations are either viewed as vulnerable, powerless and in need of protection or feared as dangerous, violent and threats to security.

11.1 Conflict in Ghana

It is universally recognised that the factors that spark conflict include poverty and its attendant struggle for and misuse of resources, ethnic rivalries, religious intolerance, bad governance and arbitrary national boundaries. Many of these factors are at play in Ghana and are often interconnected (UNDP, 2018). For example, ethnic rivalries are often combined with competition over resources and land use, as is the case in the north of Ghana (ibid.).

Even among groups of similar ethnicity, conflicts are occurring as a result of tensions over landownership, land use and access to resources. Moreover, long-standing chieftaincy conflicts tend to exacerbate any resource-based conflicts (UNDP, 2018). During research interviews, youth expressed concern about the proliferation of vigilante groups, with most members likely to be youth. Land conflicts result in lack of land for youth populations, which in turn means youth have little opportunity to engage in agricultural pursuits, leading to increased unemployment in this demographic. Unemployed youth are all too often used as pawns in traditional chieftaincy, political and land use conflicts, lured by the promise of wealth (ibid.).

Through initiatives to increase employment opportunities for youth, Ghana has been able to accelerate its economic growth by 8.5 per cent.¹ This indicates that efforts have been made to provide meaningful pursuits for youth, thereby reducing potential conflict and increasing safety and community security, while improving youth well-being.

11.2 Defining youth violence

WHO (2002) defines youth violence as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, by youth, against themselves, another person or a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, abnormal development or deprivation.

Physical fighting is the most frequently perpetuated form of violence, followed by robbery, stealing, threatening, bullying, hitting and obscene gestures. Other forms of violent behaviour include swearing, yelling, sexual abuse and embarrassment. Violence occurs among youth populations on a weekly basis, with most youth targeting their peers (Barnie et al., 2017). Moreover, a study among youth in Ghana showed that respondents were relatively accepting of violence towards women (Glover, 2003).

11.2.1 Youth as victims

Conflicts have the ability to destabilise communities to the extent that young people have limited access to resources, information and education and hold little to no control over their own lives. Living in these conditions makes youth populations vulnerable to various forms of abuse, exploitation, harassment and neglect. Exposure to violence can cause lifelong damage to psychological health and well-being. Youth vulnerability to violence is even more pronounced in rural households and among low-income or underemployed youth populations, youth with disabilities and youth with psychosocial problems (Arora et al., 2015). To address this trend, the NYP 2010 advocates for the elimination of all forms of discrimination and fortified protection against sexual harassment, physical violence and abuse and labour exploitation, as well as other negative attitudes and cultural practices.

11.2.2 Females as particularly vulnerable to violence

‘Most youth, guys, feel girls are their property.’ Male, 15–20 years

In Ghana, girls and young women are particularly vulnerable to violence, owing to their secondary social roles and the expectation that they should be submissive and supportive of the male elements in the family. Research has also highlighted a disturbing trend of sexual violence, including indecent assault, defilement, rape and incest (GNCRRC et al., 2017), with one in four women reporting having been coerced into sexual situations and one in three adolescent females reporting their first sexual experience as forced. Recovery support for women who have experienced violence is limited in Ghana (OSAC, 2018). Whether the support required is psychologically based or physical, the recovery programmes that do exist simply do not have enough of a presence to make a sizable impact (ibid.). During research interviews, it was also noted that victims might be left to figure out life after assault on their own as culturally sexual violence typically renders them societal outcasts.

11.2.3 Youth as perpetrators

Youth inability to find gainful employment can lead to increased crime, violence and conflict. Unemployed youth desperate to obtain some form of livelihood can all too easily be swayed by small monetary incentives in return for conducting violent acts. Young people may be involved in a wide range of violence and conflicts, including armed robbery and by-election struggles (NCCE, 2011).

11.3 Sites of violence

11.3.1 Home and family

Exposure to violence at an early age often leads to the manifestation of violent behaviours among youth (Warner and Fowler, 2003; Brown et al., 2009). Absence of social support systems, coupled with weak family and attachment structures, exacerbates the problem, increasing the likelihood of these behaviours (Hirschi and Stark, 1969). Family risk factors that have been associated with physical violence include food insecurity as well as parental alcohol and tobacco use. Likewise, studies have shown that corporal punishment and its acceptance increase the risk of further violence and adverse socio-economic outcomes (UNICEF, 2014).

11.3.2 Violence in schools

In Ghana, violence in schools often takes the form of bullying, violent victimisation and corporal punishment (caning) (UNICEF, 2014). According to a report by Ghana's Department of Children and Children and Youth in Broadcasting, more than 80 per cent of children have experienced caning in school (*ibid.*). To prevent violence from occurring in schools, GES has taken steps to abolish corporal punishment, such as revising the teachers' handbook and making teachers aware of the consequences of harming pupils (*ibid.*). The Stop Violence Against Girls programme, launched in 2013, has also specifically targeted violence against girls in schools.

During research group discussions, it became evident that bullying is also prevalent in boarding schools: seniors may bully juniors as a way of expressing their authority. This may result in depression, loneliness and other emotional challenges after school or in adulthood.

11.3.3 Violence in urban settlements

Violence by young people is one of the most visible forms of social disorder in urban settlements. More than half of the youth population involved in one study admitted to engaging in violence within the time span of one year (Barnie et al., 2017). Youth violence in urban settlements principally manifests itself in noise-making, murder, stealing, drug addiction, obscene gestures, robbery, sexual abuse and embarrassment (*ibid.*). Peer pressure and street survival coping mechanisms are reported to be the pivotal factors in sparking youth violence (*ibid.*). To address the occurrence of youth violence in urban settlements, the NYP 2010 has begun providing opportunities for rehabilitation of youth perpetrators of violence. Several national action plans exist to address different types of child violence, as well as social and educational policies regarding child maltreatment, interpersonal violence and sexual violence. However, there is no national action plan concerning youth violence (WHO, 2014). One programme, Gender-Based Education, Advocacy and Research: Unleashing Potential for Adolescents in Ghana, seeks first to conduct formative research to understand underlying cultural and social norms about adolescent habits to improve gender-equitable attitudes and support adolescents and their communities to live healthy lives free from violence.

11.4 Factors contributing to youth involvement in conflict

11.4.1 Youth unemployment challenge

Youth unemployment and joblessness remain a major socio-economic and political challenge in Ghana. Ghana has enjoyed significant economic growth, registering annual GDP increases between 4 and 14 per cent. And yet large percentages of the youth demographic remain unable to find work, with those who are highly educated the most affected. Job production in Ghana is falling critically short, year after year (Baah-Boateng, 2016). One critical reason for this relates to which sectors actually create growth in the country. Mining, oil and financial markets are the sectors creating the greatest growth in Ghana but generally produce very few employment opportunities. Finally, violence may be perpetuated as a coping or survival strategy for unemployed or out-of-school youth (UNDP, 2018). Absence of economic opportunities also encourages large numbers of youth to migrate to the south in the hopes of finding employment (ibid.).

11.4.2 Political and electoral corruption

Elections have become a conduit for already existing tensions, although political violence between parties and their supporters predates independence and has been part of the political scene since the colonial struggle (Tsikata and Seini, 2004). Parallels have been drawn between election timing and spikes in violence activity (ibid.). Some youth may verbally or physically abuse others during elections processes. Intimidation, threats and application of force by ‘party thugs’ are also common forms of by-election conflict (Fisher, 2016).

11.4.3 Helplessness and lack of options

The idea of helplessness creating resistance and ultimately violence has been used to argue that the very community youth live in becomes in itself a catalyst for youth violence (Barnie et al., 2017). Loss of self-power and self-direction promotes anger and frustration, ultimately prompting youth to act out in order to regain some semblance of control. Research interviews for this report revealed that, in Ghana, the expectation that youth will never achieve full adulthood without gainful employment can contribute to violence as an immediate means to rewrite the social rules and norms. This can be compounded by alcohol and drug abuse.

Furthermore, limited safe spaces for inter-generational dialogue and engagement around issues related to the inadequacy of governing bodies have led to violent protests at two universities.

11.5 The cost of violence

The adverse impacts of violence on the development of young people are particularly acute, where violent behaviours can lead to destruction of public facilities, migration or refusal of public sector workers (e.g. teachers) to accept postings to areas with ongoing conflict. This affects development by decreasing the level of education,

leading to declines in business and other livelihood activities such as farming (UNDP, 2018).

11.6 The role of youth in peace-building

Young people can play a very positive role in peace-building and aiding societies in recovering from conflict, by addressing the root causes of conflict; helping prevent and mitigate all forms of violence; and working towards healing and reconciliation (Ozerdem, 2016). Most commonly, youth participate by leading dialogue as well as engaging in social, educational and advocacy activities. Recognising the role youth can play as agents of peace can help transform the negative discourse that represent youth as ‘troublemakers’ to agents of development (ibid.).

Although youth populations can create positive impacts with minimal resources, providing them with tools and resources will enable them to become more effective change-makers (Ozerdem, 2016). Promoting and supporting peace-building should begin early, preventing youth from engaging in violence in the first place.

In recent years, the role of young people in peace-building has evolved rapidly, culminating globally in 2015 with the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security. This acknowledges that young people can be strong and active players in creating peaceful societies, free from violence and conflict, and have the potential to be ‘valuable innovators of change’. Young people are increasingly emerging as vocal and effective actors within the peace-building movement at the global level.

11.7 Summary points

1. Youth are often either the victims or the perpetrators of conflict.
2. Struggles over land rights and land access are a large source of conflict in Ghana. Without access to land, youth populations often have little means to make a livelihood.
3. Unemployed youth are often used as pawns in traditional chieftaincy, political and land use conflicts.
4. Youth violence happens at home, within the family, in schools and in deprived neighbourhoods. Displays of masculinity and gender violence are two other main forms of violence among youth.
5. Unemployment, lack of parental support and limited safe spaces for youth and adult engagement can be seen as contributing to youth involvement in conflicts.
6. Although the NYP 2010 was supposed to create and strengthen mechanisms for peace-building as well as institutionalising a culture of peaceful co-existence, the need to create safe spaces for youth voices remains critical.
7. Young people can play a very positive role in peace-building and aiding societies in recovering after conflict.

11.8 Recommendations

1. Focusing on education to spread awareness of electoral laws as well as to promote peaceful elections, thereby enabling youth to organise in support of peaceful elections, can help spread change and mitigate attempts to manipulate youth populations into carrying out violent or destructive acts.
2. MOE should take steps to promote a culture of recognition and prevention of violence and victimisation in schools and associated negative health behaviours. Further investment in teacher training in peace-building, conflict resolution and positive forms of discipline is necessary.
3. The creation of girls clubs will have positive effects on knowledge, confidence, attitudes and practices in relation to managing gender-based violence and inequality.
4. Focus should be placed on creating more safe spaces for meaningful and inclusive engagement of young people. These efforts could leverage decentralisation efforts already championed by GoG and district assemblies to engage in bottom-up development.
5. Providing youth with access to teachers, facilitators, educational programmes and networks that can hone their conflict resolution and leadership skills would be an effective preventive measure in combating youth involvement in violence. Moreover, rather than working with youth in isolation, peace-building projects seeking the engagement of youth should also include parents and elders.
6. Strengthen youth education and employment opportunities in underserved regions to decrease the need to join political vigilantism groups and to engage in land and chieftaincy conflicts.

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Note

- 1 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/ghana/overview>

