

## Summary

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Over the past two decades, Ghana, as a relatively stable democratic nation, has enjoyed positive economic trends that have encouraged both local and foreign investment. As such, it has been able to make great strides with respect to improving its social, economic and political structures, ensuring inclusive, free education for all and reducing inequalities across its population. Nevertheless, a variety of socio-economic issues continue to plague the people of the country, in particular the youth demographic. Central among these are underemployment, lack of access to quality education, poverty, crime, migration and low civic participation. As the majority of the population are under the age of 25, any actions that improve the well-being of this demographic have the potential to move Ghana forward towards building a more sustainable and resilient society.

This report touches on the developmental concerns surrounding critical issues affecting young people in Ghana and presents some pragmatic policy- and programme-related recommendations on how to move forward. It provides a baseline evaluation that can work to inform revisions of current policies as well as to support the creation of new policies on priority issues for youth development. For each critical issue, it offers recommendations to ensure future policy success in youth development. Proper monitoring and analysis as well as inclusion of youth voices in decision-making processes can enable policies, programmes and initiatives to have positive youth development outcomes.

### Critical issues

A variety of factors drive and exacerbate the vulnerabilities facing Ghanaian youth today. Access to quality education and training, information and communication technology (ICT) and health care has a significant impact on the transitioning of youth into the workforce and their ability to contribute to society. Tackling the root causes of crime, understanding migration trends and considering cultural implications when drafting legislation can encourage unity and stimulate economic growth. Similarly, creating opportunities for young citizens to participate in governance can empower them to make decisions that will positively affect their future and the future of Ghanaian society as a whole. Outlined below are the primary critical issues affecting Ghanaian youth as well as recommendations for best practices to address them.

## Education and skills training

As a result of colonial rule, corruption and poverty, inequalities in access to quality education have existed in Ghana for decades. Progressive and inclusive reform measures began in the late 1980s and 1990s but improvements are still necessary. To increase the quality of secondary education, work must be done to bridge the gender gap within schools, improve teaching resources, expand infrastructure in rural communities and promote lifelong learning as part of Ghanaian culture. Policies that subsidise school fees for impoverished families based on their socio-economic status can help lower student absentee rates.

Studies have shown that a considerable portion of government-allocated funds never make it to students or schools, owing to corruption and poor financial management. By employing strict financial accountability policies and anti-corruption measures and hiring local enforcement officials, schools can document, track and ensure delivery of any and all funds. Allocating funds to salaries, classroom equipment and teacher housing can help reduce staff absentee rates caused by low pay and poor infrastructure. Creating opportunities for impoverished students to receive additional funding for fees, books, uniforms, computers and transportation can help every child, regardless of their economic background, to succeed. The extractive sector can serve as a key funding source for these initiatives, alongside funding from international development partners, with the goal of creating a more stable revenue source for these programmes.

Training to address the inequalities facing students with disabilities can help give disadvantaged youth a better chance of receiving a quality education. Similarly, funding programmes that encourage young girls to explore male-dominated science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects, in addition to mentoring, can help reduce social stigmas and future employment inequalities. Research suggests that the skills taught in secondary schools do not always align with the reality of the labour market. The inclusion of industry case studies and opportunities for discussion with industry leaders, some of whom can mentor young people, especially girls and youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, would help equip graduates with increasingly relevant skills and knowledge when entering the workforce.

## Information and communication technology

Research shows that ICT can have a positive impact on youth development and employment. Increased support to the National Youth Policy and the discouragement of 'negative ICT use' are recommended but new policies must also be developed to combat deeper issues. These include in particular strategies for combating gender inequalities in ICT access. Flexibility and adaptability are key components in ICT policies that accommodate new technologies, and relevant skills development and programmes that promote awareness of privacy invasion, identity theft, online scams and exposure to offensive content should be supported.

## Health and well-being

Poverty and hunger continue to exacerbate medical conditions and create on-going health issues. Increasing government funding by 15 per cent or using revenue from health service taxes would make universal health coverage in Ghana obtainable. Granting vulnerable youth free access to quality preventive care, well-equipped facilities and trained staff can help combat the spread of disease and increase the overall health and productivity of an entire generation. Increased awareness of sexual and reproductive rights, as well as family planning services, over recent years has helped maintain a steady decrease in teenage pregnancies. However, more must be done to protect the most vulnerable. Young people, including girls and teenage mothers, are often more susceptible to communicable diseases such as HIV. High rates of pregnancy within youth groups mean additional efforts must be made to target this demographic. Widespread dissemination of accurate medical information should also be improved, along with young people's rights, and campaigns that combat the stigmatisation and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS need to be expanded to reach the youth demographic. Initiatives to reduce high-risk behaviours should also be scaled to reach more of the youth population.

Non-communicable diseases, including blood disorders, cancer, renal problems, cardiovascular issues, mental health disorders and substance abuse, have been progressively on the rise. Promoting healthier lifestyle choices and incorporating prevention, management and treatment options as part of new health policies may help counteract these increases. Similarly, expansion of policies that cover nutrition and food safety in schools can help create healthier learning environments. Improvements in policies that focus on infant nutrition deficiencies through increased education can also help prioritise the well-being of young children in Ghana. Finally, policies that focus on the eradication of child marriage should be expanded to support girls who are already married. Increasing accurate data collection in both rural and urban locations can help us better understand the trends in child marriage and find successful solutions.

## Sports and recreation

Studies show that sports and recreational activities have a positive impact on the physical, physiological, emotional and intellectual health of children. Creating environments where these activities are allowed to flourish can help children engage with a healthy lifestyle. While football is considered the most popular sport in Ghana, rebranding and promoting traditional games may help revitalise lost practices and promote cultural unity. Bottom-up, grassroots approaches that encourage active community involvement and accountability through local programmes are invaluable approaches to ensuring success.

Mentoring should be recognised as an important tool for teaching life skills and supporting the autonomy of young athletes among the youth demographic. While initiatives such as the Youth Resource Centre Project are already in place, it is

imperative to pay more attention to gender equality and the provisioning of equal opportunities, as female athletes are still overlooked in comparison with their male counterparts.

## Economic labour force participation and skills development

While an increasing number of youth are completing higher education, there are not enough jobs to support the rising numbers of qualified professionals entering the labour market. Integrating relevant skills into secondary education may better prepare young workers for the labour market. Local governments can reduce information asymmetry through the creation of databases for youth employment opportunities. Supporting youth entrepreneurship through academic and private sector events as well as issuing microfinance loans could contribute to addressing youth employment concerns.

Agriculture, forestry and fisheries continue to be the largest employers of young graduates. This is closely followed by the sales, craft and trade industries. However, reports suggest young Ghanaians are not particularly interested in careers in these industries; in particular, decreasing participation in agriculture is raising concerns related to food security. Developing incentive programmes for the private sector to invest in businesses with high employment potential – specifically ICT, sustainable agriculture and renewable energy – should be made a priority. Furthermore, increased attention must be paid to improving employment opportunities for graduates who have already transitioned into the labour force. Using and improving on successful policies by tapping into existing government and non-governmental initiatives can promote fairer labour market outcomes for youth within informal sectors, as well as a basic standard of pay. Incentivising youth leadership in private sector roles can help graduates feel confident in moving away from the more dominant informal markets, reducing the load placed on these industries. Focus on promoting job flexibility can create opportunities for young workers looking for non-traditional work environments. Finally, to contribute towards closing the gender wage gap, policies that incentivise gender movement across industries and mentoring can help young women access positions in male-dominated jobs.

## Financial inclusion

A financially secure younger generation can lead to improved well-being and a stronger economy. Ghana is still struggling with the creation of a financially responsible population, in part because of a lack of trust in banking institutions and low levels of capital. With little financial literacy, young Ghanaians are unable to create and maintain positive financial habits. While certain programmes, such as the Youth Save Ghana Project, have had some success in improving youth financial literacy, it is necessary to increase the number of these training programmes. Furthermore, young women and girls are not always included in economic conversations, owing to gender and patriarchal norms that have resulted in an imbalance of financial security between men/boys and women/girls. Financial literacy programmes geared specifically towards adolescent girls and young women can help bridge this gender gap.

Accessibility is critical to promoting stable financial practices among younger generations, yet many youth still face limited opportunities, owing to technological limitations that stall advancements in digital banking and hinder accessibility to those in rural and impoverished areas. Similarly, access to finance for young entrepreneurs could easily help them acquire needed resources for their businesses or expanding initiatives. Furthermore, many young adults cannot open an account because they lack parental consent or approved identification documents. Adjusting banking requirements to allow these groups to gain access to their own accounts can promote financial responsibility at a younger age. Mobile network operators and microfinance institutions could provide products and services that cater specifically to customers with low and irregular incomes.

### Active citizenship and participation in governance

Opportunities for youth participation in governance can be thwarted by socio-economic, cultural and financial circumstance, and ignorance of the diversity present across the youth demographic makes this worse. Ghana's cultural ethos has led to a *status quo* whereby youth voices are either unheard or ignored. Support for the expansion of initiatives such as youth parliaments and the creation of additional opportunities for inter-generational dialogue can foster better understanding of pressing Ghanaian youth development concerns. Grassroots organisations with strong connections to local communities are better able to engage rural youth and should be supported. With additional research, much can be done to ensure the formulation of efficient action plans to provide opportunities for those typically excluded from society, such as young females, rural youth and youth with disabilities.

Not all areas of Ghana have access to the internet or advanced technologies; ICT-based interventions and investments must be increased to help bridge this disconnect. One way to achieve this is by including development clubs in school curricula, at which students can engage in mock decision-making and gain a better understanding of governmental processes. When young citizens become politically aware and feel empowered to make positive changes to their communities – whether through elections, local development or social outreach – Ghana as a whole will benefit. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that younger generations are given a substantial voice in the development of their country.

### Youth and crime

Criminal activity among youth is caused by a variety of economic and social factors. Understanding the root causes can help prevent further destructive actions as well as work to rehabilitate those already involved. When underprivileged youth are given an opportunity to develop their skills and have access to education and employment, instances of drug trafficking and armed robbery are likely to reduce. Similarly, second-chance opportunities and effective rehabilitation programmes that target ex-convicts by providing access to education, employment and medical services can help youth get back on their feet and move forward, reducing the likelihood of reoffending.

Access to legal representation remains a challenge in Ghana. Several initiatives are in place to improve access for youth regardless of their location, income or disabilities. Nevertheless, more can be done to protect the rights of those already incarcerated. By upholding the penal code and creating transparency within the judicial system, it will be possible to establish trust between youth groups and law enforcement agencies.

### **Youth conflict and peace-building**

Ghana's regions in the north are experiencing high levels of conflict, with youth populations becoming increasingly likely to cause or fall victim to violence. Land access is often at the heart of these conflicts, and unemployed youths are typically used as pawns. Strengthening education and employment opportunities for these underserved regions would help defuse political vigilantism and create alternatives to land ownership. Likewise, during electoral periods, manipulation of youth often occurs, and youth are enlisted to carry out violent acts on behalf of conflicting political agendas. Spreading awareness of the current electoral system and educating young adults on the importance of peaceful elections can help mitigate conflict during these periods.

Providing youth with opportunities to hone their conflict resolution and leadership skills can also help prevent violent outbursts and promote mediation. As such, the Ministry of Education should take steps to promote conflict resolution in schools and provide better intervention measures for vulnerable youth, as well as to address the gender-based violence young females are facing. The Stop Violence Against Girls programme that was launched in 2013 has had a very positive influence on problematic family dynamics and communities. Continued support to the creation of girls' clubs will help promote confident and effective attitudes and practices in managing violence and gender inequalities.

### **Volunteerism**

Volunteering can provide youth with a platform to effect change in addition to strengthening communities and enabling the exchange of ideas and opinions. In particular, volunteering can help generate empathic connections between communities and place young activists at the centre of policy. As such, more support must be given to building local volunteering programmes that are accessible by the diverse youth demographic. Creating long-term partnerships with existing volunteer programmes and developing new opportunities for collaboration can improve the prospects of both the volunteers involved and those whom each programme targets. Furthermore, incorporating volunteer programmes into school curricula would promote the development of opportunities at the national level and enable more youth to participate in national sustainable development goals.

### **Culture, religion, life skills and tourism**

Ghana's great cultural diversity is evident in the numerous ethnic groups, languages and religions practised nationwide. The promotion of national cohesion through youth participation in the arts has been actively pursued. Thanks to these efforts,

there has been a continuous rise in religious tolerance and acceptance across the country. Efforts that capitalise on this momentum should be supported. Preparing teachers to work with youth from various economic and religious backgrounds can further promote a culture of tolerance, as can the incorporation of indigenous practices and history into the modern curriculum.

The positive promotion of Ghana's culture can both increase tourism and instil national pride among young people. Research shows that the youth population has great interest in historical and cultural attractions. Investing in the development, rebranding and advertisement of local attractions can increase tourism from within and outside the country. The Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture should focus on evaluating the effectiveness and sustainability of existing youth initiatives in this sector.

### **Youth and environmental sustainability**

As with most policy development, inviting youth to join the conversation around environmental initiatives can help empower them to take control of their future, as well as encouraging the development of policies that support sustainability. Mapping programmes to identify climate vulnerabilities and holding campaigns and workshops to raise awareness of critical climate issues are some ways to engage young people. For example, youth groups could conduct vulnerability assessments within the agriculture sector; this may also increase the number of graduates entering the sector after school. Youth involvement would also work to decrease illegal mining activities, as the next generation would monitor, utilise and protect more land.

Moreover, youth involvement in environmental programmes can help Ghana reach the Sustainable Development Goals. In particular, their involvement in the agriculture sector and the reduction of illegal mining and deforestation should be a focus of new policies, as these activities are causing a significant amount of water and land degradation. Stimulating growth within the green sector and creating new environmentally friendly employment opportunities for graduates can help achieve a more sustainable environmental future.

### **Youth and disability**

In 2006, Ghana introduced the Persons with Disabilities Act to protect the rights of Ghanaians living with disabilities. Unfortunately, the Act fails to address accessibility issues in public buildings and transportation facilities. As a result, adequate housing, voting and employment opportunities are not available to those with disabilities. These issues must be addressed when rewriting existing policies and drafting new measures. Development of baseline infrastructure in medical industries must also be employed to ensure persons with disabilities are receiving an equal level of care across the country. An increase in family support networks and neighbourhood groups can help alleviate these concerns and unite communities.

Young women with disabilities face certain forms of discrimination across various fields based on their gender and disability. Increased support to educational campaigns and the expansion of programmes covered by the Inclusive Education Policy can help

eradicate discrimination. Teachers should be equipped with the skills and training to take on students with disabilities and provide effective educational programmes for all youth. As more research is conducted and relevant data is collected, policies and programmes can be designed to combat these issues with greater accuracy.

### Youth migration and mobility

Increasingly, young people are migrating from rural to urban areas looking for employment and educational opportunities. Often settling in slums, they sacrifice quality of life for work opportunities. Prioritising the development of a sustainable agricultural industry and providing training programmes for rural workers may help curb the migration of skilled workers to urban areas and reduce the negative impacts for those left behind. This in turn may decrease the number of young adults in slums and their exposure to disease. However, more research is necessary to understand the migrant patterns of Ghanaian youth, including risks and motivations. Databases categorised by age, sex, education and occupation can help policy-makers target specific demographics more effectively. Only 1 per cent of the population – often educated – migrate outside of the country looking for work. Of these, younger migrants, especially women and those without proper documentation, are at greater risk of exploitation and slavery. Reintegration efforts for those who have suffered trauma or fallen victim to human rights abuses must be heightened. In addition, negotiating bilateral agreements with countries that support human rights may help workers transition into decent job markets and enhance safe mobility.

Developing strategies and policies to harness the development potential and contributions of young Ghanaians in the diaspora can also help promote socio-economic development and opportunities for return and reintegration. These efforts can be enhanced by focusing initiatives on second-generation diasporas and providing them with opportunities to prosper within the country.

### Moving forward

As the world's economy becomes more integrated, and advancements in technology, agriculture and social structures influence policy, it is more important than ever to improve education and promote viable opportunities for the young people of Ghana. Developing the capabilities of the younger generation requires more than a simple investment; it demands that governing bodies recognise youth as a valuable asset and equal partners in Ghana's development. Youth must be given an opportunity to meaningfully participate in governance. In moving towards a sustainable future for Ghana, youth issues must be mainstreamed into all facets of government as well as local and national development strategies. Policies and programmes must take into account the diverse categories of the youth demographic and empower them to take the country in a direction that will benefit successive generations.