

Youth employment programmes in Ghana: where do we go from here?

By Samuel Adomako, PhD

GHANA, like many African nations, faces a significant demographic challenge characterised by a burgeoning youth population aged between 15 and 35 years.

This "youth bulge" highlights a demographic where a substantial portion of the population seeks meaningful employment opportunities amid a landscape characterised by a skills gap and mismatched employment needs.

Over the years, successive Ghanaian governments have launched various youth employment programmes to address this issue, albeit with varying degrees of state involvement and effectiveness.

Since gaining independence in 1957, Ghana's approach to employment creation and economic development has oscillated between periods of heavy state intervention and more limited involvement.

The National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP), Ghana's two primary political parties, have played pivotal roles in implementing these initiatives.

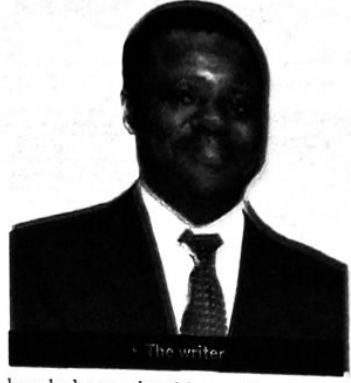
However, despite these efforts, there remains a significant disconnect between youth employment schemes and the country's Labour Department, which has led to inefficiencies and hampered overall effectiveness in tackling youth unemployment.

Historically, Ghana's efforts to address youth employment predate the current NDC-NPP political duopoly. During Kwame Nkrumah's era, initiatives like the Youth Brigade aimed to engage young people in developmental projects, promoting civic duty and contributing to national infrastructure.

Subsequent governments introduced programmes such as Operation Feed Yourself under Colonel Ignatius Kutu Acheampong, focusing on agricultural self-sufficiency and rural employment.

The Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) led by Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings further implemented programmes such as the Youth Corps and Skills Training and Employment Programme (STEP) to enhance vocational training and employment prospects.

In 2006, under President John Kufuor's administration, the National Youth Employment Programme (NYEP) was



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launched to combat rising youth unemployment.

Initially featuring nine modules spanning sectors from security services to agribusiness and ICT, the NYEP aimed to provide training and employment opportunities for young Ghanaians.

Despite its early successes, challenges persisted, prompting subsequent administrations to rebrand and reformulate youth employment strategies.

The Ghana Youth Employment and Entrepreneurial Agency (GYEEDA) replaced NYEP but faced governance challenges and corruption scandals, highlighting deficiencies in oversight and accountability.

This prompted further reforms, leading to the establishment of the Youth Employment Agency (YEA) under the NDC government. YEA focused on providing skills training, internships, and financial support for young entrepreneurs, complementing broader developmental goals set by the National Youth Authority (NYA).

The Nation Builders Corps (NABCO), initiated by the NPP in 2018, targeted post-secondary graduates with training and employment opportunities across public and private sectors.

However, its sustainability and impact beyond its initial phase have been questioned, underscoring the need for more robust implementation frameworks.

The National Entrepreneurship and Innovation Plan (NEIP), another NPP initiative, supports start-ups and small businesses through incubators, business development services, and financial aid.

Similarly, the YouStart programme, introduced in the 2022 budget, aims to create one million jobs over three years by fostering entrepreneurship and leveraging

international partnerships and domestic funding sources.

Despite these efforts, challenges persist. Sustainability remains a concern due to inconsistent funding and economic fluctuations.

Moreover, the fragmented nature of youth employment initiatives, coupled with politicisation and governance issues, has hindered their overall effectiveness.

The Ghana Labour Department, which possesses critical labour market expertise, has often been sidelined, resulting in a lack of coordination and strategic alignment with national employment policies.

To address these challenges and ensure the sustainability of youth employment policies in Ghana, several recommendations can be considered.

First, it is imperative to give the National Labour Department a role to play. Collaborative efforts between the National Labour Department and other relevant stakeholders can lead to more comprehensive and targeted initiatives.

This would ensure that initiatives are informed by real-time labour market dynamics and adhere to legal and ethical standards.

Second, establishing a policy framework backed by legislation would institutionalise youth employment initiatives, safeguarding them against political interference and ensuring continuity across government transitions.

Implementing a policy instrument backed by legislation is essential to establish a framework that safeguards against misuse and ensures the longevity of youth employment initiatives.

Enshrining these policies in law will help create a foundation for consistency and prevent manipulation for personal or political gains.

Third, the government should make frantic efforts to prevent politicisation and cronyism by establishing clear guidelines and regulations that stipulate the criteria for participation in youth employment programmes.

Establishing merit-based selection processes, independent oversight and accountability mechanisms can help depoliticise these initiatives and ensure they serve their intended purpose.

In conclusion, Ghana's efforts to address youth unemployment have seen progress through various initiatives, but challenges persist.

The involvement of the National Labour Department and the enactment of robust policy frameworks are crucial steps towards achieving sustainable youth employment policies. By leveraging these recommendations, Ghana can better harness its youthful demographic dividend and propel economic growth and development in the years ahead.

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