

Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion (YOVEX) in Ghana: Key Research Findings

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The YOVEX Project

In 2006, the Conflict, Security and Development Group (CSDG), King's College London began a study of youth vulnerability and exclusion in seven West African countries, in order to better understand the socio-economic and political plight of young people in West Africa. The large-scale participation of youth in civil wars in the Mano River countries and in political instability (electoral violence and other inter-group clashes) across West Africa informed our interest in knowing more about youth in the region.

Specifically, we were interested in the impact of decades of economic decline, collapsed education, unemployment, poor governance and globalization on the young people of West Africa. Our initial conviction that youth are at the heart of both the region's challenges and of its opportunities for sustainable development and security has been reinforced by the subsequent interest in young people displayed by major international organizations like ECOWAS, the World Bank and the United Nations. Also, the outbreaks of recurring ethno-religious violence involving youth in Ghana (most recently in the Bawku–Yendi axis), despite the country's fairly stable political system, serve to reinforce the continued importance of paying attention to youth in this country.

What we found in Ghana

- Despite the relative socio-political and economic stability of Ghana, considerable challenges are associated with meeting the needs of youth.
- A series of government-led initiatives on youth indicate official recognition of and response to youth issues; however, the impressive policy framework has not had a real impact on youth in Ghana.
- Despite the high levels of vulnerability and the extent of the general exclusion of youth, most young people are not inclined towards using violence to change their circumstances.
- Young people's resort to violence and crime has been linked to historical inter-communal (ethnic group) conflicts and occurs in the context of

unemployment and limited informal economic opportunities.

- Youth continue to have limited participation and representation in decision-making processes because of the nature of Ghanaian politics and a culture that subordinates youth to elders.
- Most youth continue to engage the state and society through the media, self-help youth groups, and membership of religious and community groups.

The nature and needs of youth in Ghana

- People aged 20 years and under make up 50 per cent of the country's total population, while those aged 21–30 make up an additional 19 per cent.
- Officially delineating youth as people between 15 and 35 years of age is more appropriate to the country's post-colonial historical experience and current needs than the internationally specified bracket of 15–24 years.
- The key needs of youth are access to education and employment, and participation and representation in decision-making and public policy processes (beyond voting during elections).

What the government is doing to assist youth

- Since the 1970s, when government set up the National Service Scheme and the National Youth Council to articulate the interests of young people, several other initiatives have been launched, including the 1999 National Youth Policy and the 2001 effort to register unemployed youth. Other programmes are the Skills Training and Employment Placement (STEP), Ghana Youth Employment, the National Voluntary Scheme, the National Youth Fund and the Presidential Special Initiative, all instituted to tackle youth unemployment through training, provision of micro-credit, etc.
- However, the good policy framework is not matched by the reality of these programmes' limited impact on

young people. Most youth still find education (especially post-secondary education) highly inaccessible due to high fees and limited space, and consequently there is only a 50 per cent adult literacy rate in Ghana. Also, most of the programmes are directed at employment and already educated youth.

- The design of programmes for youth is hardly participatory, and the limited participation of youth in decision-making processes is rarely seen as a problem, reinforced by a reinvented culture that subordinates young people to adults. It is unsurprising that among youth there is a lack of trust and confidence in state-sponsored programmes.

What happens to vulnerable youth?

- In spite of government failings, most youth are not disposed to the large-scale use of violence to change their circumstances, despite some cases of localized inter-group violence related to ethnic and religious affiliations.
- Nonetheless, some youth take to a variety of options like emigration, crime and political thuggery; engaging in prostitution; or dependence on families and peer groups for support.

What sustains youth?

- Social networks made up of families, communities, and civil society and religious groups have emerged as critical sources of support for marginalized youth in Ghana. In many places, self-help youth organizations focus on peer support and advocacy, conflict resolution, security, community development and recreational activities, including sport.
- Violence and crime tend to be frequent in places and among youth lacking these support structures, and where age-old communal disputes over land have been politicized.
- Informal economic activities, including *okada* (commercial motorcycle) transportation, artisanship, petty trading and cross-border commerce, are also popular among youth.
- Increasingly, youth are using music, phone-in programmes on radio and the 'new media' (sms messaging and the Internet) as outlets to make their voices heard and engage the state and society.

What should to be done?

The government of Ghana should:

- provide more space for the youth to contribute towards policies and programmes that seek to respond to their needs;
- increase its commitment to youth initiatives and programmes (like those on employment and education) in order to have a greater impact on the lives of young people;
- formulate a more robust mechanism to evaluate and monitor youth programmes in line with best international practices;
- pay increased attention to the issue of access to education and skills training, and to specific categories of youth, especially uneducated young people; and
- create or reform platforms for state-youth political dialogue and engagement to improve the inclusion of youth in mainstream governance.

National youth groups should:

- increase their capacity to engage formal state institutions and processes in order to influence policies that affect youth;
- use the media constructively to engage the state and society (especially in generating positive debates about cultural practices that subordinate youth) and to articulate their concerns and needs more forcefully; and
- build an effective network of youth associations in order for youth to learn about one another as a way of breaking down stereotypes that sometimes contribute to conflicts.

DFID and other international agencies should:

- use the national definition of youth as being those aged 15–35 years in programmes for young people in Ghana;
- initiate programmes to increase the organizational capacity of youth groups so as to assist with self-advocacy and the establishment of formal channels for engaging the state and society;
- initiate projects targeted at improving youth access to education and skills training, with specific focus on categories like rural and female youth; and
- initiate programmes on peace education and conflict resolution for youth in violence-prone areas like the Bawku–Yendi axis.