

## HOW CAN YOUTH MAINSTREAMING WORK IN GHANA?

Youth Policy is a cross-sectoral or horizontal policy area that affects several sectors. A policy area as such is not responsible for the funds necessary to achieve the political goals. Instead, implementation must take place via vertical sectors and areas that control resources.

Ghana's National Youth Policy sets the tone for youth mainstreaming. In all, seventeen(17) priority areas have been identified as follows: Education and Skills Training; Science, Research and Technology; Information and Communication Technology (ICT); Youth and Employment; Entrepreneurial Development; Youth in Modern Agriculture; Gender Mainstreaming; Environment; Health, HIV and AIDS; Networking and Partnership; Mentoring; Arts and Culture; Governance, Democracy, and Leadership; Sports and Recreation; Youth in Conflict Prevention and Peace Building and National Youth Week.

The policy also outlines clear objectives for each of the priority areas above.

First of all, it is important to develop an implementation plan. This must involve the identification of all stakeholders from the various ministries, departments and agencies, development partners and non-governmental organisations involved in youth development and youth themselves. These stakeholders will then appreciate their respective roles in the implementation of each of the priority areas, set timelines, allocate resources for implementation and set up monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. All organisations both state and non-state actors that deal with youth issues should be encouraged to consider youth perspectives in their work by engaging with young people

The next level is to create opportunities for young people themselves to engage, and before the youth can engage, they need the capacity to do so. There is therefore the need to facilitate the creation of a national youth platform that comprises youth groups and organisations of national character taking cognisance of their areas of interest per the respective priority areas in the youth policy. This youth platform should be replicated at the regional and district levels.

The above approach to youth development requires high level of government commitment, availability of committed youth and development workers and other youth-related non-governmental organisations, strong management systems, adequate funding for implementation of the programmes, focused programme development which addresses real needs and a conscious attempt to institutionalise youth programmes

## CONCLUSION

Young people are also seeking their own alternatives. They present the vision of a social order struggling to emerge despite repression and economic hardship, and seeking to have a voice in societies whose basic structures are not conducive to listening to young voices. Nevertheless, the reality is that today's youth no longer accept or respect those structures and increasingly demand a voice of their own.

The popular cliché that youth are the future leaders raises an important question as to the quality of investments being made in young people to prepare them for their role as leaders. Mainstreaming youth is the surest way of achieving effective youth development.



## MAINSTREAMING YOUTH: THE KEY TO EFFECTIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN GHANA

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### INTRODUCTION

Young people constitute a major source of human capital base that hold and drive the socio-cultural, economic as well as political development of their countries all over the world. Their intellectual abilities coupled with their productive acumen when properly harnessed underpin social progress.

In a demographically young continent like Africa, young people represent immense potential, as both threat and opportunity. Political leaders demanding change and those seeking to defend the existing order, seek to mobilise young people to their side. In effect, the energies and abilities of young people are exploited positively through various activities that promote development and negatively through their involvement in violent conflict and other social vices that undermine social progress.

In many countries in Africa, the population growth rate among young people is higher than the national averages. Even though a large youth cohort reduces labour market opportunities for the youth (World Bank, 2008) this phenomenon is not necessarily problematic. With appropriate policy interventions and institutions African countries could transform this challenge into

opportunities by reaping the so-called demographic benefits which come from a large labour force.

The enormity and the complexity of the challenges that confront young people create the panic in policy makers and government functionaries in charge of youth programmes with regard to the right approach to use in addressing such challenges and where to begin. The situation cannot be seen as hopeless after all.

### DEFINING YOUTH

A persistent challenge confronting work with youth is defining who they are. The meaning of youth and how society perceives youth is subject to variations of time, space and societies.

Functionally, youth is used to describe the transition period between the social categories of childhood and adulthood which is characterised by rituals and other physical changes. However, there are other important perspectives to defining youth.

Culturally, the definition of youth relates to the role that individuals play in a given social context. In addition to this is the gender dimension in

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defining youth, where boys and girls experience being young in different ways.

Youth can also be defined chronologically as those who fall within a certain age range. It is important to note that age definition is important for the purposes of policy, planning and implementation. Youth is defined by the United Nations as those between the ages of 15 and 24<sup>1</sup>. This definition is provided by the UN General Assembly, and is not legally binding hence age definition of youth vary from one country to another and one organisation to another. The African Youth Charter defines youth as those between the ages of 15 and 35 and Ghana adopted this age definition in its National Youth Policy.

### CHALLENGES FACING YOUTH

The present generation of young people face many difficulties that affect their development into responsible adulthood.

Inadequate public services, especially education, is one key challenge. While many young people remain uneducated and unskilled, a considerable number of youth enter the labour market unprepared in terms of education and labour market experience. This phenomenon coupled with limited employment opportunities is largely responsible for the high unemployment and underemployment rate.

Limited or, in some cases, no opportunities for constructive political engagement are a key challenge to young people in the developing world, particularly for those without personal connections.

Young people remain gullible to manipulation to engage in violence. In most conflicts across Ghana and elsewhere in the world, the youth are used to prosecute violence in religious, ethnic, political, land and other natural resource related conflicts (USAID, 2005). Youth are exposed to the trade and use of illicit drugs and arms. Other vices in society where the youth are most vulnerable include: armed robbery, alcohol abuse, sex abuse among others.

Obviously, factors affecting the quality of life of our youth and their ability to reach their full potentials are now multifaceted and challenging than before.

Meanwhile, young people are naturally creative and dynamic and must be considered as actors, players and partners. Indeed, they are strategic catalysts for new ideas contributing to peace and human development, as well as to the renewal of the human society, especially in a globalising world.

### OUTLOOK OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN GHANA

Successive governments in Ghana have focused on economic empowerment as the key to youth development; apparently due to the alarming unemployment rate. However, this approach has failed. In spite of the numerous youth development initiatives by government and its agencies, non-governmental organisations, faith-based organisations, youth groups and other civil society organisations, these initiatives are not implemented within any clear framework with specific national goals on youth development. Such programmes and projects were also poorly coordinated and as a result achieved limited impact and gave room for duplication of efforts and activities.

The absence of a national youth platform where young people's capacities could be built to engage in governance has also been a key challenge. Even though young people are represented on some state boards and committees there have been practical difficulties.

In recognition of the need to adopt a holistic approach to youth development in Ghana, government launched a youth policy in August, 2010 which sets clear youth development objectives and priority areas.

### MAINSTREAMING YOUTH

Mainstreaming youth implies that youth concerns, visions and contributions are fully taken into account by all government ministries, departments and agencies as well as other institutions and organisations. It is a deliberate initiative to involve young people in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of national policies. With this approach, education is key, because it serves as a major means of empowering the youth for effective participation. In addition to that there is the need to create the opportunity to engage the youth, through partnership, in the conceptualisation, design, implementation as well as monitoring and

evaluation of programmes and policies. This is summarised in paragraph 4 of the Lisbon Declaration by Ministers Responsible for Youth in 1998:

*'Reviewing the situation of youth and their needs and incorporating young people's own assessment of priorities, through their participation in a consultative process, and ensuring that young women and young men actively contribute to the formulation, implementation and evaluation of national and local youth policies, programmes and action plans'*

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has been instrumental in this innovative and result-oriented approach to youth development. The key objective is to empower young people so as to ensure and enhance their full participation as equal and valuable partners, especially in the design and shaping of the society.

The approach is premised on the understanding that young people are not only subjects for whom various actions and activities are carried out; they are also agents and actors with whom programmes should be envisaged and implemented. UNESCO's policy for mainstreaming youth is guided by the *World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond*, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1995.

### BENEFITS OF MAINSTREAMING YOUTH

Mainstreaming youth comes with several benefits. First of all, it tends to make interventions such as policies, programmes and projects more responsive to the needs of young people since their views are carefully considered in the design, implementation as well as monitoring and evaluation. Again, the participation and partnership with young people in addressing their challenges help them build their capacities and prepare them for future leadership roles.

It also helps them better appreciate challenges and makes them more reasonable in their demands.

### CHALLENGES OF MAINSTREAMING YOUTH.

The above benefits notwithstanding, it is important to help correct misconceptions about young people and create opportunities for them to build their capacities to enable them to make useful contributions in the process. The level of education of young people is crucial since this

offers them critical analytical skills to make useful contributions in decision-making processes.

The availability of young people for participation can equally be problematic since many are in school while others are in employment. One other difficulty is the identification of legitimate youth representatives since there are many youth groups. The challenges are complicated by the deep political polarisation on the youth front where some young people are unable to separate youth interests from political affiliations. In Ghana for instance, students are represented on some national boards by law. Examples of such boards are the Ghana Education Trust Fund, the Student Loan Trust Fund Board as well as the National Youth Council Board. In our universities too, students are represented on several boards and committees. We can address the problem of representation by building an effective and to some extent independent National Youth Commission which will register all youth groups at the national regional and district levels to be duly recognised as such.

Youth development involves conscious efforts to develop, coordinate and support the social, emotional, physical, moral and academic well-being of young people. This enterprise involves the state, communities, families, schools, faith-based organisations, non-governmental organisations, the private sector and youth themselves in determined efforts to improve the quality of life of young people. Again, it recognises that young people are partners and not the problem; assets and not liabilities and since they cannot improve their quality of life by themselves they need support in order to realise their full potential and also acquire the necessary skills, values and competencies for meaningful living.

What happens to the young people who are unable to find employment or continue their education? Our system has no programmes in place to address the needs of the vast majority of our young people. With no youth programmes in place to encourage, motivate, direct and channel the energies of our young people into productive and healthy activities, the devil finds work for their idle hand as they engage in deviant activities such as violence and unhealthy lifestyle such as alcoholism, drug addiction etc.

<sup>1</sup>United Nations General Assembly, *The World Programme of Action for Youth in the Year 2000 and Beyond*, A/RES/50/81 (1995)