

Youth employment in Ghana: economic and social development policies perspective

Youth
employment in
Ghana

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413

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Abstract

Purpose – Creating employment opportunities for the youth remains a dilemma for policymakers. In many cases, policies and programmes to tackle youth unemployment have produced little results, because such initiatives have failed to consider some fundamental inputs. In Ghana, youth unemployment rate has doubled or more than doubled the national average unemployment rate in recent years. The current study, therefore, examines how policies in the past two decades have affected youth unemployment rate and other development outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – The study reviewed national economic development policy documents from 1996 to 2017 and other relevant policies aimed at creating employment opportunities for the youth, applying the content analysis procedure. Four main policy documents were reviewed in this regard. Data from secondary sources including International Labour Organisation (ILO), World Bank (WB), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) were analysed to examine the trends in youth unemployment rate, human development index and GDP growth rate in Ghana over the years. There were also formal and informal consultations with youth and development practitioners.

Findings – The results of the study show that policies that promote general growth in the economy reduce youth unemployment, while continuation of existing youth programmes, expansion, as well as addition of new ones by new governments reduces youth unemployment rate. In particular, GDP growth and youth unemployment rate trend in opposite direction; periods of increased growth have reduced youth unemployment rate and vice versa. The period of Ghana Shared Growth and Development Agenda I & II witnessed better reduction (5.7%) in youth unemployment rate than any of the policy periods. This was not sustained, and despite the current youth employment initiatives, unemployment among young people still remained higher than the national average.

Research limitations/implications – The study provides relevant information on how development policies and programmes affect youth unemployment rate over time. In as much as it is not the interest of the study, the study stops short of empirical estimation to determine the level of GDP growth rate that can reduce a particular level of youth unemployment, which is a case for further research. Nevertheless, the outcome of the study reflects the data and methodology used.

Originality/value – To the best of the knowledge of the authors, this is a first study in Ghana that has attempted to directly link development outcomes such as youth unemployment to national economic development policies, although there are studies that have analysed the policy gaps and implementation challenges. This paper, therefore, bridges the knowledge of how development policies affect youth employment opportunities, particularly for Ghana.

Keywords Employment, Youth, Development, Policy, Ghana, Unemployment

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The challenges confronting the youth are numerous and multifaceted, and therefore addressing them requires a multi-sectorial approach. One of such challenges is unemployment. Youth unemployment has become one of the greatest challenges to governments worldwide, and



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finding solutions to it has become more pressing than ever (Mahama, 2016). Unfortunately, decades of economic reforms and policies to address youth unemployment have not been encouraging. Youth unemployment rate has remained consistently higher than the national average unemployment rate in Ghana despite the youth forming a significant proportion of the population, and also being those who are more energetic (Figure 1). Generally, unemployment rate in Ghana has, over the last two decades, been declining, yet more needs to be done because the rate of population growth (2.5% per annum) implies many more people, especially the youth, are churned out into the labour market each year. The highest rate was observed in 2000 where it reached a peak of 10.36% (ILO, 2018).

While the common causes of unemployment have been widely discussed in literature (see (Kezban, 2008; Parkes and Conolly, 2011; Mago 2014)), the case may be different from one country to another. For example, in Ghana, it has been found that one common cause of unemployment is the mismatch between educational curriculum and job market demands (Baah-Boateng, 2013). More jobs and employable skills are obtained mostly in the science, technical and vocational courses, but many of the graduates that turn out from the tertiary institutions are in the arts, which rarely provide employable skills or employment opportunities.

Considering the level of poverty, particularly in rural areas, providing free education up to the senior high school level is novel and profitable if this policy is able to improve the literacy level and joblessness among the youth. However, it has been observed that the programmes or courses taught at the various levels of the education do not align with current labour market demands. Generally, it has been noticed that little attention is given to practical training and professional skills development which are critically needed in the current job market. The curriculum is not flexible enough to allow for generational changes, and it takes years to review them if the need arises (Baah-Boateng, 2019).

Aside from the education, population or population growth rate of a country or community also plays a role in influencing the level of (un)employment of a country. Statistics show that in 2017, Ghana's population was estimated at 29.6 million, an increase of about 5.1 million from 24.6 million in 2010 (Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), 2010). Out of this, it is estimated that over a third (38.8%) of the population constituted the youth (UN, 2017). In Ghana, the youth are young people between 15 and 35 years (MOYS, 2010). This suggests that about 11.5 million of Ghana's population are the youth. Statistics shows that Ashanti Region, the most populous region in Ghana, has the highest youth population (6.8%), followed by Greater Accra Region (6.2%); the Upper East Region had the least (1.0%),



Figure 1.
National
unemployment versus
youth
unemployment rate

Source(s): ILO, 2018; WB, 2018

followed by Upper West Region (1.4%) (GSS, 2014). These energetic groups of young people, when adequately trained with the relevant skills and knowledge, can be relied upon as human resource to help address the nation's economic and social challenges.

The Ashanti and Greater Accra regions have predominantly urban communities, while the Upper East and West regions have mainly rural communities. As a result of the differentiated economic endowments among these regions, there has been a large public discourse on population drift, particularly a movement of the youth from rural areas to urban centres in search of economic opportunities. As a result, about 54.0% of the youth are said to be residing in urban areas, while 46.0% reside in rural areas of Ghana. This has given rise to about 13.4% youth unemployment rate in urban areas and 10.2% in rural areas (GSS, 2014). Some studies indicate more females reside in urban areas than males. Females may have better chance of residing with their partners or loved ones in urban areas and may have better economic opportunities than males. The differences in geographical location of these residents, as against the growth rate of employment at the places of residence, play a key role in the creation of unemployment.

In all these, attempts have been made at various national and regional platforms to resolve the issue of youth unemployment, but the results seem not encouraging. This implores for a universal solution to youth unemployment situation since there are similarities in the challenges confronting the youth globally. Unfortunately, this may not be possible as the definition of who is even a youth already poses a challenge. Currently, no single universally accepted definition for youth exists, and therefore each country attempts a definition that suits the purpose and needs of its society. The United Nations (UN) defines the youth as young people from the age of 15 years to 24 years (UN, 2018). While some countries may have adopted the UN definition, other definitions which vary from that of the UN exist in the literature. Countries like Ethiopia adopt the UN definition, and Ghana, like some other countries, uses a definition that varies from that of the UN. In Ghana, a youth is a legally qualified person to work, and therefore anyone between ages 15 and 35 years is classified as youth. In Mali, the youth are young persons from the ages of 15 to 40 years, while in Nigeria, they are those aged between 18 and 35 years (WB, 2015). This non-uniformity in the definition makes it difficult for countries to have a common solution to the youth challenges facing the world's youth today, although these challenges may be related or the same in nature.

In defining unemployment, authors have always sought to use concepts that suit their purposes. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), unemployment is a situation of an individual or group of persons of working age who is/are without work or employment, presently available and seeking for work within a short time frame (for example, a month, a week or a day), but cannot find one (ILO, 2019). In the context of this definition, the World Bank estimated that about 48% of the youth in Ghana are unemployed (World Bank 2016).

It has been observed that proportionally, more male youth were in employment (70.3%) than females (65.8%) (GSS, 2014). Also, more youth had completed school (57.1%) than were in school (29%) or had no formal education (13.9%) (GSS, 2014). Proportionally (females who completed school to total female population), there were more females (57.7%) who had completed school than males (56.2%). However, there were more males still in school (33.9%) than females (24.8%). Statistics indicates that in rural areas, fewer youth are completing school (50.1%) than in urban areas (62.9%) (GSS, 2014). From the foregoing, it becomes clear that should all youth in school at the various levels graduate, Ghana may have about 86% or more of its youth attaining a certain level of formal education (UNESCO, 2015; WB, 2016), but creating job opportunities for this population still remains a national challenge which needs urgent attention by all stakeholders.

According to a report by the Institute of Statistical Social and Economic Research (ISSER) of the University of Ghana, young people were withdrawing from the labour market due to

the difficulty of finding jobs. This was in spite of the high level of attainment in formal education (ISSER, 2018). Such a phenomenon is threatening, as the youth are particularly vulnerable to getting caught up in social unrest and other forms of violence. Involvement in anti-social vices (gambling, prostitution) has been documented as consequence of youth unemployment. Some analysts have argued that the increasing pace of antisocial vices in the country by the youth is due to inadequate social and economic opportunities available for them. Majority of the youth, especially rural youth, do not expect to find employment and receive employment support from their family networks. Although, in general, rural youth do not expect support from their family networks, female rural youth expects and receives support from their male partners (Dwumah *et al.*, 2018).

It has been observed that over the years, Ghanaians have become used to being employed by the state or, worse, employed by another for paid salary. This attitude does not encourage the drive for entrepreneurial skills development. This can be attributed to the challenges one faces in a bid to start and own a business in the country. This contributes to explain the desire of the youth to seek “work for pay” rather than creating their own businesses. It has also been observed that university graduates have the mentality that self-employment is for illiterates and those with little education, and therefore many do not bother venturing into such enterprises. Entrepreneurship requires some amount of capital, but unfortunately access to capital, especially by budding and young entrepreneurs, is a major challenge, particularly to business growth and development (Jumpah *et al.*, 2018).

In the past two decades, Ghana has initiated four national economic development policies: (1) Ghana Vision 2020, (2) Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS) I & II, (3) Ghana Shared Growth Development Agenda (GSGDA) I & II and (4) Coordinated Programme of Economic and Social Development Policies (CPESDP). In addition to these major policies, which have served as Ghana’s development blueprint documents, there have been other specific policies developed to address the myriad of challenges confronting the country. Some of these including National Employment Policy (NEP) and National Youth Policy (NYP) were formulated to resolve high unemployment rate among the youth. Interventions such as Youth Employment Programme, Youth in Agriculture Programme (YAP), National Entrepreneurial and Innovation Programme (NEIP) and Nation Builders Corp (NABCO) are all efforts aimed at resolving youth unemployment in the country.

Despite years of implementation of these policies and programmes, youth unemployment still remains higher than the national average (Figure 1), and almost half (48%) of the youth are unemployed (WB, 2016). Corroborating the view of the World Bank (WB), the current and sitting president of Ghana has said “the number of young people who cannot find jobs in Ghana is staggering” (Akufo-Addo, 2018). These statements raise critical questions about “what policy guidelines were introduced in the past two decades and what have been the effects of these policies on unemployment and particularly youth unemployment”. The intention and purpose of this study is to provide answers to the above questions as a way of enriching policy formulation and implementation. This review looks at the performance and conduct of selected key development policies and other youth employment-related initiatives which were implemented in the country over the past two decades. The study also aims at establishing how these policies have addressed youth employment and identify gaps for future considerations in development policy planning in Ghana.

2. Literature

2.1 Factors influencing youth employment

Youth unemployment and related issues have been given prime attention in the Ghanaian media in recent years. The issue has become alarming that an association of unemployed graduates has been formed. While public discourse is still continuing on the way to find sustainable solution to the problem of unemployment, several studies have been carried out to

analyse the determinants of unemployment, using both time series and cross-sectional data. In analysing the determinants of unemployment, different theoretical models have been proposed and used. For example, [Mortensen \(1970\)](#) and [Lippman and McCall \(1976\)](#) used the job search model. This model shows that unemployment depends on “job offer and acceptance”. Job offer or the ability to secure a job is a function of labour skills, education, work experience and demand conditions in the jobseeking environment. Other factors that influence unemployment are inflexibility of wages, the influence of trade unions and national labour laws ([Acero, 1993](#)).

As found by [Assaad *et al.* \(2000\)](#) in Egypt, a combination of factors (education with gender) is critical to the employability or otherwise of a jobseeker. Their study found that educated females have lower probability of entering the job market, as Egypt economy transitions to market-oriented economy. They emphasised existing policies favoured males than females.

The particular sectors of an economy that generate employment in a country play a role in explaining the dynamics of unemployment and cannot be ignored. In Ghana, economic sector has been categorised into three, namely, agriculture, services and industry, with each of the sectors having different strength in terms of capacity to employ. According to a Ghana Statistical Service report, the percentage of youth engaged in agriculture and services sector is almost equal ([GSS, 2014](#)). The two sectors are the main source of employment for the youth. While agricultural sector contributed 41.6% to total youth employment, the service sector contributed 42.1%. There appears to be few job opportunities for the youth in the industry or manufacturing sector. The manufacturing sector contributed less than a quarter to total youth employment. By proportion, the service sector provides more employment opportunities to females (48.6%) than males (35.3%). On the contrary, agriculture provides more job openings for males (45.1%) than services, with industry accounting for 19.6%. In addition to the sectors providing jobs and employment, education of the individual also plays a key role in determining what job or employment the young people prefer ([GSS, 2014](#)).

Using data set from 220 youths in Umuahia in Abia state of South-Eastern Nigeria, [Echebiri \(2005\)](#) showed that youth unemployment was a function of education and job preference. In particular, he found that most of the unemployed youth were first-time jobseekers who were unwilling to be self-employed but preferred to work for the government. Job security appears to be the main reason why the youth prefer to work for the state. In developing countries, the risks associated with entrepreneurship are very high because of which many youths are unwilling to explore. Location (urban or rural) is also critical in determining employment opportunities as posited by [Echebiri \(2005\)](#).

The youth dislike residing in rural areas because of lack of job opportunities and poor physical and social infrastructures. [Eita and Ashipala \(2010\)](#) used time series macroeconomic data from 1971 to 2007 to estimate the factors that determine employment. The study found that macroeconomic factors (inflation and investment) were negatively related to unemployment (also [Maqbool *et al.*, 2013](#)), but wage rate had a positive relationship with unemployment. In addition, [Maqbool *et al.* \(2013\)](#) found population growth to be negatively related to unemployment. [Kyei and Gyekye \(2011\)](#) analysed the factors that influence unemployment in South Africa (Limpopo province) and found out that gender was a key determinant of unemployment. Other studies such as [Kalim \(2003\)](#) and [Monastiriots \(2006\)](#) have also analysed the determinants of unemployment.

Active labour market policies (ALMPs) and activation actions were intended to stimulate integration of labour markets to decrease jobseeking impediments, thus improving the prospect of gaining employment positively. Precise tools used in the ALMPs include, but are not limited to, skills training for jobseekers, particularly young people, to develop their skills and increase productivity or transfer grants intended to pay for lack of work experience and other job recruitment criteria. According to [Eichhorst and Reine \(2016\)](#), most countries in the developed world, Europe in particular, have relied on this approach to create employment opportunities. However, summary of empirical studies on these interventions has shown little

or no positive impact on sustainable employment creation, especially on young people. ALMPs and activation actions clearly are unable to resolve the large numbers of unemployed young people, in particular when economic and social development policy environment produces little demand of labour. Massive overhaul economic, social and political systems and structures may rather be required to revive economies and create the needed jobs for the youth. The ineffectiveness of ALMPs and activation actions in creating the needed employments notwithstanding, ALMPs and activation policies can play some role in job creation.

Fox and Alun (2016) provided a diagnostic view of the challenges of youth employment in low- and lower-middle-income economies in sub-Saharan Africa using macroeconomic data and found that youth unemployment is just part of the general unemployment challenge; youth unemployment is not an isolation although the youth are more vulnerable to unemployment, which it emanates from the slow nature of “demographic transitions” and slow pace of economic and social modernisation of the economies. Such economies are characterised by lack of investment and modernisation of the productive sectors of the economy such as agriculture. This causes the youth to come to a labour market, where there are no employment opportunities. This leaves many youth with no options but to rely on menial jobs, which rarely pay a living wage. Because of the poor wages, productivity becomes very low, and the cycle of underemployment with its associated underpayment continues. The study proposed an acknowledgement of the failure of current policies to address unemployment in general, and youth unemployment in particular, so that the relevant investments can be made in the productive sectors of the economies to increase productivity to promote employment creation. In analysing “the politics of youth employment and policy processes in Ethiopia”, Gabremariam (2017) raised two arguments: policy developments to promote growth are motivated by political and ulterior motives instead of technocratic, linear and research-based arguments; and the position of the youth is socially regarded to be vulnerable and marginalised instead of active participants and potential resources for future development. The article therefore analysed two employment-focussed economic and social development policies of Ethiopia between 2004 and 2015. The article concluded that a prevailing political situation, and not necessarily the needs of the youth, determines which policy evolves, how it is designed, how it is administered and who are likely to participate in the process. By just providing definition of who a youth is, and to suggest the youth are isolated and marginalised individuals cannot resolve the many challenges that are confronting the youth of Africa. If the youth are to be really supported, then they must be brought into the decision-making processes and seen as partners in the economic development of a nation. It requires making appropriate investment in the sectors of an economy where the energy and productivity of young people can be brought on-board. National economic and social development policies are very crucial to creating and providing employment opportunities for young people; however, such policies must be driven by research-based information.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sources and methods of data gathering

The paper's main aim is to analyse how national development policies have trend over time with employment opportunities for the youth, because most of the studies for Ghana have focussed on *specific* youth policies and programmes and their impact on youth employment. Other development indicators like gross domestic product (GDP), human development index (HDI) and national unemployment rate (NUER) have also been examined. The current study employs the GDP growth rate, HDI and unemployment rate (youth unemployment in particular) data in Ghana in the period 1996–2017 to analyse the development policies and their outcomes.

To analyse the linkages between policy implementation and development outcomes—unemployment, HDI and GDP, the study sourced data from online databases, archives and libraries. We obtained secondary data such as national and youth unemployment rate, HDI and GDP from UNDP, ILO and WB/Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) at various points in time (policy implementation periods). Here, the study sourced data on youth unemployment rate (YUR), GDP, HDI and NUER for the beginning and end of each of the policy implementation period. These policy periods were in the periods 1996–2000, 2000–2003, 2003–2009 and 2010–2017. These were analysed to determine the trends of success or otherwise in relation to youth employment. This enabled us to draw links between the outcomes and the period of implementation of the various development policies to see how they are related. We also had formal and informal conversation with programme managers and coordinators who want to remain anonymous.

3.2 Data analysis

Data gathered were analysed using MS Excel. These data, obtained in [Section 3.1](#), were inputted into MS Excel. This enabled the authors to observe the trends in the selected key variables. The trends were then linked to the policies implemented at various time periods after a review and content analysis of the policies. Content analysis is a research procedure used to make replicable and logical interpretations from a document to the context of their use ([Krippendorff, 2012](#)). According to [Passad \(2008\)](#), it is the study of contents in relation to the intentions, contexts and meanings embedded in the documents. To help analyse the outcomes of the various development policies, we drew tables with data from secondary sources, applying the content analysis technique to observe linkages and trends.

3.3 Limitations of the study

The research was challenged by access to and/or data availability at the national level, for which reason we were compelled to undertake a qualitative analysis of the study, although it would be more appropriate to undertake a strong empirical quantitative examination. It appears technocrats in ministries, departments and agencies of the state find it difficult to divulge relevant data or information for fear of political ramification, especially when the study under consideration may have a political undertone, regardless of the promise of anonymity. The challenge of data notwithstanding, the study relied on data from international organisations such as the WB/IMF and UN to undertake this study. Although these organisations have provided most of the data used in this study, it was inadequate to enable us undertake a quantitative analysis of the paper for which reason we opted for a qualitative approach. These challenges notwithstanding, efforts were made to ensure that these did not affect the quality of the paper. It will therefore be relevant to undertake future research that provides quantitative analysis of the paper. The study recognised these limitations in the analysis of the results.

4. Results and analysis

4.1 Development policies and youth employment in Ghana

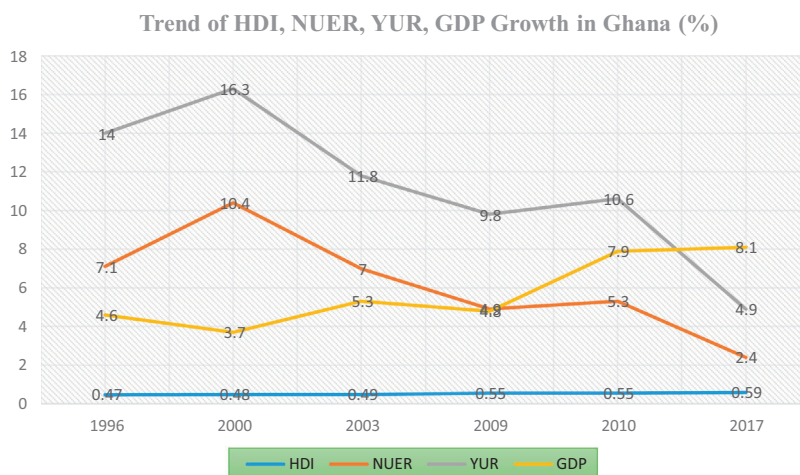
Ghana's constitution serves as the supreme law, and therefore the first port of call exploring development framework of the country. Article 36, clause 5 of the 1992 constitution of the Republic of Ghana, enjoins all governments to within two years of assuming political power to present to the Parliament of Ghana, a national policy that addresses the myriad of socioeconomic challenges confronting the country. It states "...within two years after assuming office, the president shall present to parliament a coordinated programme of economic and social development policies, including agricultural and industrial programmes at all levels and in all the regions of Ghana" ([Constitution of Ghana, 1992](#)). In fulfilment of this

requirement, various governments, since the beginning of the fourth republic dispensation, have initiated policies to address national challenges, and unemployment has been key in all these developments. The authors therefore have reviewed the policies which have guided the development agenda of Ghana from 1996 to 2017.

4.1.1 Ghana Vision 2020: the First Step (1996–2000). The birth of Ghana Vision 2020 was necessitated by the need to have a long-term development plan after years of implementation of Economic Recovery Programme (ERP) and Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) which were aimed at curtailing the deep economic crisis experienced by Ghana during the 1980s (Baah-Boateng, 2004). The adoption of these programmes was unpopular with the labour unions because of labour rationalisation and downsizing of the public sector and wage reductions. The failure of ERP/SAP to resolve unemployment and other development challenges led development analysts to posit the need for a long-term development policy, and hence Vision 2020: The First Step (1996–2000). During the period, the policy became the blueprint to propel economic growth and development in 1996–2000 in Ghana. It was envisaged in the policy document that pragmatic measures should be put in place to ensure that Ghana achieved a middle-income status by 2020 and in the process create employment opportunities for the people. The long-term goal of Ghana Vision 2020 (the First Step) was to sustain the gains made from the ERP and SAP and lay strong foundation to accelerate economic growth and development towards the long-term vision of 2020. The basic objective was to improve the HDI of the country. This was important because economic growth over time did not necessarily translate to employment opportunities. Priority areas to invest in order to improve the living standard of Ghanaians were human development (poverty level, un/employment levels, education and health), economic growth (GDP, agriculture, industry and service growth and science and technology) and rural development (income disparity, optimal exploitation of natural resources on sustainable basis and public investment in rural areas).

The period of Ghana Vision 2020: (The First Step) witnessed increased youth unemployment rate from 14% to 16.3%, with a similar trend for national unemployment, while GDP declined from 4.6% to 3.7% (Figure 2). The youth were therefore more vulnerable to unemployment during the period of Vision 2020. During the period, little emphasis was placed on youth-specific interventions as the study could cite the word “youth” only twice in the policy document, although the policy acknowledged the rising number of youth without jobs. Key in the policy was to increase agricultural productivity and income to attract the youth, but there were no clear strategy to achieve this. Indeed, there was no specific youth policy or strategy for the period. Most programmes under the period were focussed on economic growth because it was perceived that economic growth will automatically translate to employment opportunities, which did not happen. With the exception of HDI, which increased marginally from 0.47 to 0.48, all other indicators considered have shown negative outcomes.

Studies like those by Sommers (2012) found similar results to this study, where, in Rwanda, implementing the Vision 2020 policy had generated significant economic prosperity, but not to the advantage the youth. Sommers observed that while the policy was favourable in generating economic growth and employment for mid-aged people and the others, many of the youth were unskilled and unemployed. Indeed, thousands of the youth who rely on street hawking for livelihood support were even prohibited from doing so, resulting in joblessness and poor standard of living among young people. Many young people therefore had to rely on their parents for survival, delaying the transition to adulthood. Ansoms and Rostagno (2012) argued that the growth and prosperity of the Rwanda economy from implementing Vision 2020 was concentrated in the hands of few elites to the detriment of the youth; therefore, there was the need to find a “broad-based inclusive growth model” instead of the trickle-down approach.



Source(s): Authors own computations from ILO (2018), WB (2018), GSS (2018), UNDP (2018) figures, NUER (National Unemployment Rate), YUR (Youth Unemployment Rate)

Figure 2.
Trends of youth
unemployment, GDP
growth and HDI
(1997–2017)

4.1.2 Ghana poverty reduction strategy (GPRS I & II) (2003–2009). The change of government in 2001 brought with it a new policy direction – GPRS I – to improve the worsening economic and social conditions of Ghanaians. Among other reasons for the change of government was the rising number of youths without jobs, which resulted in high crime rates, antisocial vice, and migration.

In 2003, the government adopted the GPRS I policy framework as the guide to addressing economic challenges. This was done after formal consultations with youth groups and other key stakeholders. The goal was to ensure “sustainable equitable growth, accelerated poverty reduction and the protection of the vulnerable and excluded within a decentralized, democratic environment” (NDPC, 2003). In relation to the agriculture and the youth, GPRS I identified the use of rudimental tools, technologies and farming practices as disincentives for the youth to participate in agriculture. To address this challenge, specific emphasis was placed on developing technologies and providing supports services (credit supply, tractor services) to attract the youth to agriculture. With collaboration and support from research institutions, improved crop varieties and animal breeds were to be provided to the youth. Aside crop production, there were to be interventions in aquaculture to create youth employment. Legislations were to be introduced to make access to land by the youth easier, and establishment of microfinance institutions (MFIs) to improve access to credit by the youth [Microfinance and Small Loan Centre (MASLOC) was established thereafter] (Odoro-Ofori, 2014). Besides agriculture, there were to be interventions in technical and vocational education training (TVET) to improve skills training/development. This resulted in increased numbers of TVET institutions, and the establishment of council for technical and vocational education (COTVET) in 2006 to coordinate all aspects of TVET in Ghana.

The completion of GPRS I in 2005 was followed by the introduction of GPRS (Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy) II in 2006. It aimed at sustaining and improving the gains of GPRS I while addressing the limitations. The goal was to generate decent job opportunities for the citizens, particularly the youth and other vulnerable groups. In connection with the agriculture sector and youth employment, the strategy continued with the modernisation of agriculture and rural infrastructure improvement. A number of important issues that were to

be addressed to ensure competitive private sector agriculture were reforms on land acquisition and land rights, provision of irrigation facilities, promoting selective crop development, modernising livestock production, improving access to mechanised agriculture, among others.

The period of GPRS saw stagnated economic growth. GDP declined marginally from 5.3% in 2003 to 4.8% in 2009, although much better than 2000, but HDI improved significantly from 0.49 to 0.55. Also, youth unemployment declined by 2% (from 11.8% to 9.8%) (Figure 2) unlike Ghana Vision 2020: (The First Step). The study found that during the period, there were specific youth initiatives such as Ghana Youth Employment and Entrepreneurial Development Agency [GYEEDA (now Youth Employment Agency (YEA)], COTVET and MASLOC which may have resulted in reducing youth unemployment. While significant progress has been made in addressing youth employment for the period under consideration, some analysts and development practitioners have argued that Ghana may have done better because of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) initiative which provided for debt forgiveness that relieved government of the burden of debt servicing. This placed more financial resources available for the government to invest in the much needed infrastructure to create employment opportunities for the youth. The creation of YEA, MASLOC and COTVET during the period is an indication of available resources for the state to provide employment opportunities and skills development for the youth.

Gyampo (2012) analysed a specific youth employment initiative, National Youth Employment Programme (NYEP), in Ghana and concluded that the initiative, large as it seems, was deficient and mediocre in resolving the youth unemployment problem because about 65% of the youth were still unemployed. However, Twerefou (2012) found contrary results and argued that even though there was nationwide suspension of employment by the state, a result of the HIPC initiative under GPSR I & II, large numbers of employment opportunities were created (of which the youth benefitted) with support from social partners. This study appears to agree with the argument of Twerefou (2012). However, there is the need to stress that Twerefou's study covered the entire GPRS I & II, just like this study. The differences might arise because Gyampo's (2012) study focussed on a specific intervention while this study examined the entire GPRS I & II period. It needs to be stressed that the analysis implied that youth unemployment considerably declined under GPRS I & II.

4.1.3 Ghana shared growth and development agenda (GSGDA I & II) (2010–2017). The GSGDA was launched in 2010 after consultations with relevant stakeholders. The objective of this policy was to increase food production, nutrition and security, and create sustainable job opportunities, among others. To ensure the objectives are achieved, the government of Ghana was to increase agricultural financing through the establishment of Agricultural Development Fund. To address youth challenges specifically, a number of guiding principles and actions were to be undertaken. These include coordinating inter-sectoral approaches to youth challenges, trade and investment activities, training/skills development, education and appropriate labour laws. Emphasis was placed on YAP and Savannah Accelerated Development Authority (SADA) as vehicles to propel youth participation in agricultural sector. While the YAP has achieved some modest gains, SADA has encountered administrative challenges. There is no holistic and robust empirical estimations of the impact of SADA yet, though there are pockets of individual researches to ascertain the impact of some of the interventions under SADA.

Youth unemployment has remained largely high (in two digits) prior to initiation of the NYP in 2010 and NEP in 2015. In 2010 (at the start of GSGDA), youth unemployment rate was 10.6%, and by 2017, it declined drastically to 4.9% (the highest decline for any of the policy implementation periods), though still higher than national average (2.4%). It is noteworthy that the period also saw GDP increase marginally from 7.9% (2010) to 8.1% (2017), while HDI improved from 0.55 to 0.59 (Figure 2). The period again witnessed the introduction of two

significant policies (NYP and NEP, highlighted later) that focussed on youth employment. It can therefore be adduced that these policies may have played a significant role in reducing youth unemployment rate, though more remains to be done, considering the fact that an estimated 230,000 youths are churned into the labour market in Ghana year on year. Critical youth employment initiatives from GPRS I & II were sustained and others were added on. For instance, the YEA was continued, and Youth Enterprise Support Programme (now NEIP) was added.

4.1.4 Coordinated Programme of Economic and Social Development Policies (CPESDP) (2017–2024). The current national policy to address national challenges and economic development is the CPESDP. Programmes initiated under CPESDP (Planting for Food Jobs, NEIP, YAP, NABCO, Planting for Export Rural Development, etc.) are expected to boost the economy and reduce youth unemployment further. As additional programmes and projects that target the youth are added, it is expected that by the end of 2024 (when CPESDP is expected to end), youth unemployment rate will further reduce, economy growth will be sustained and HDI will improve.

In general, increase in GDP growth rate has resulted in decline in youth unemployment rate and vice versa (Figure 2). For example, Figure 2 shows that in 1996–2000, GDP growth rate declined by 0.9% (from 4.6% to 3.7%), while youth unemployment rate increased by 2.3% (from 14% to 16.3%). On the contrary, from 2000 to 2003, GDP growth rate increased by 1.2% (from 3.7% to 5.2%). This resulted in decline in youth unemployment rate by 4.5% (from 16.3% to 11.8%). A similar trend is observed for the period 2010–2017 (Figure 2). This could mean that policies that promote overall growth in national economy may translate to improved employment opportunities for the citizens. Expansion in the sectors of the economy such as agriculture can create employment opportunities for the youth, particularly for rural youth. The fact that there have been results to the effect that GDP growth rate does not necessarily translate to employment opportunities for the youth may be due to the sectors of the economy that generate the growth. For example, the telecommunication and oil sectors may contribute to GDP significantly but could provide few jobs for the youth due to the level of capital and skills required in such industries, which few youth have. This implies policies will have to target sectors that provide employment opportunities for the youth while, at the same, improving overall national economic growth.

A case is made for agriculture sector which can provide employment opportunities and growth in the economy if the right investments are made. A policy that has specific youth initiatives, promotes and expands existing ones and adds trends to reduce youth unemployment better. For the period under consideration for this study (1996–2017), progressively Ghana's HDI has been increasing marginally from 0.47 in 1996 to 0.59 in 2017, with an annual average increase of 1.14% (considered high). This could mean, even though policies could not address all national challenges, some progress has been made in the quest to eliminate poverty, improve the quality of life and improve education of the citizens. The period of GSGDA witnessed more reduction in youth unemployment (5.7%) than any of the other policy periods, but the study found that this was the period that existing initiatives prior to GSGDA were continued, expanded and others were added.

Comprehensive national economic and social development policies that facility growth in the whole economy are likely to create the needed employment opportunities for the youth. Growth, in GDP especially, over the years, had been touted as a way to increasing youth employment opportunities. This study appears to lend credence to that school of thought. However, Baah-Boateng (2013) observed that GDP growth does not necessarily translate to economic opportunities for the youth, but it rather depends on the sectors of the economy in which the growth occurs. The study posited that growth in the agricultural and tourism sectors are more likely to generate the much needed jobs for the youth. The implication is that further research would be needed in the field to understand the Ghana nexus.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Since 1957 when Ghana became politically independent, it has had several development policies geared towards improving the economic fortunes of the citizens. Before the nearing of this millennium, Nkrumah's 7 years development plan, Operation Feed Yourself of I.K. Acheampong and Economic Recovery Programme/Structural Adjustment Programme were some of the policies and programmes that guided national development and employment creation.

This paper has focussed on policies to address national challenges, specifically youth employment, in the past two decades. In addition to sector- and youth-specific policies, Ghana has had four main national policies to improve the economic and social conditions of the people. These are Ghana Vision 2020: (The First Step), GPRS I & II, GSGDA I & II and CPESDP. Though these policies have not achieved the desired outcomes, there have been some modest gains. Poverty has declined drastically, which has resulted in improved HDI and the country attaining middle-income status. General growth in the economy does translate to employment opportunities for the youth but is conditional on youth-specific interventions for the period.

Youth unemployment rate still remains higher than the national average, while rural-urban migration is still a challenge to national government, although it has improved from 16.3% in 2000 to 4.9% in 2017. The implication is that improved economic and social environment could create a better employment opportunities for young people more than specific youth policies and programmes. Specific policies in agricultural sector to attract the youth appear not to be achieving the desired outcome. Change of political parties has led to discontinuation of policies, even if such policies were delivering national goals and objectives. This has stagnated the pace of national progress and employment creation. It was observed that periods of sustained economic growth result in decline in youth unemployment in Ghana.

5.2 Policy recommendation

Policies that promote economic growth reduce youth unemployment; therefore, policies must ensure consistent and sustained economic growth, especially in sectors of the economy that Ghana's youth have comparative advantage in (agriculture sector for example). While addition of programmes to create youth employment is ideal, continuation of existing policies and programmes that address youth employment needs to be encouraged even where there is a change from one political regime to another. Our result shows youth employment opportunities do not happen in a vacuum; it takes specific policies and programmes to resolve unemployment, and hence media campaign to continuously highlight youth challenges must be encouraged and promoted.

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