

Reducing the vulnerability of the youth in terms of employment in Ghana through the ICT sector

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ABSTRACT

In a growing population like that of Ghana youth placement in education and/or work is very critical. Studies have revealed that youth participation in education and skills training in Ghana is inadequate, hence their vulnerability in terms of employment. In view of these situations the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector which has the potential to generate job opportunities for the youth needs to be promoted. The regulatory body in the sector has to be strengthened and given the necessary independence to provide an enabling environment for private sector participation for the sector to develop and create the much needed jobs for the youth.

Keywords: *Youth, Unemployment, Population, Information and Communication Technology*

INTRODUCTION

According to a recent report by the International Labor Organization, 85% of the world's youth live in developing economies and the proportion is not likely to change much in the near future given the demographic trends in these economies (ILO, 2004). Unfortunately the youth in these countries are relatively disadvantaged in terms of employment. They are 3.8 times more likely to be unemployed than adults, as compared with 2.3 times in industrialized economies. The report also says that labor force participation rates for young people decreased in the world as a whole by almost four (4) percentage points over the last decade, partly as a result of young people staying in education but also because many young people become so frustrated with the lack of employment opportunities that they simply drop out of the labor force. The report further claimed that young people represent some 130 million (24%) of the world's 550 million working poor who work but are unable to lift themselves and their families above the equivalent of US\$ 1 per day poverty line. These young people struggle to survive, often performing work under unsatisfactory conditions in the informal economy.

Due to the sheer numbers and vulnerability of the youth in sub-Saharan Africa it is generally believed that getting them employed in decent and productive work, for example, could result into 12 to 19 percent gain in GDP (ILO, 2004). Besides it will reduce the burden on households and parents so that the limited resources that they have could be invested in the education of other siblings. Continuous youth unemployment stands the chance of keeping poor families perpetually and chronically poor due to its multiplier effects on other family members and their children and those yet to be born. The above therefore suggest that there is an urgent need to explore all avenues of getting the labor force participation rate for the youth improved through the creation of decent job opportunities for them.

Following the world trend of rising unemployment and lowering labor force participation rate of the youth (ILO, 2004), the case of Ghana with a growing population and an increasing number of youths needs critical assessment especially when it is most likely that the trend is not attributable

to long years in school as is the case in the industrialized nations. The search for innovative programs to engage the increasing numbers of youth in decent employment or education can only be fruitful if their situation is clearly analyzed.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the momentum of the youth and their vulnerability in terms of unemployment, access to education and/or decent jobs and the opportunities available for exploitation to tackle the vulnerability. The article is organized into two major sections. The first section covers an analysis of the state of the youth in Ghana and the problems that make them vulnerable. The second section actually examines the ICT sector in Ghana with the view to demonstrate how the sector could be exploited to reduce the vulnerability of the youth. This section examines a number of options including job creation and skills acquisition, job placement and application of ICTs for job creation.

A substantial proportion of the data used for the analysis in the situation of the youth in this article was gathered for a World Bank sponsored study on youth employment in Ghana in June, 2005 and executed by the authors. Additional secondary and primary data was gathered from the relevant Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDA) including the Ghana Statistical Service, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Manpower, Youth and Employment (MOMYE).

For the purpose of this study the International Labor Organization's definition of young people as those belonging to the 15-24 age groups was adopted in spite of the different socio-cultural, administrative and institutional interpretations of the youth in Ghana.

STATE OF THE YOUTH IN GHANA

With fertility well above replacement level, Ghana's population may be regarded as young and growing. This is typical of less developed economies which are characterized by a large proportion of young people and a small proportion of elderly people aged 64 years and above. As indicated in Table 1, the proportion of the population that formed the youth (i.e. 15 – 24 years) was 21% in 1984 and it reduced slightly to 20% in the year 2000 mainly as a result of declining fertility. However in terms of absolute figures the size of the youth increased tremendously from 2,302,391 in 1984 to 3,484,574 in 2000 representing an increase of 51%.

Although fertility in Ghana is declining the size of the youth population is not likely to decline within the next 10 years due to the phenomenon of population momentum characteristic of growing populations. It is expected that by 2015 the two largest age cohorts (i.e. 0 – 4 and 5 – 9 years) making up 30% of the population in 2000 will form the population of the youth in Ghana. This means that the total population of the youth aged 15-24 years would have increased from 3,484,574 in 2000 to about 5.5 million in 2015.

Table 1: Age and Sex Structure of Ghana's Population in 1984 & 2000 (in '000s)

Age in Years	1984 Population						2000 Population					
	Male		Female		Total		Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
0-4	1,015	8	1,015	8	2,030	17	1,380	7	1,390	7	2,769	15
5-9	1,013	8	989	8	2,002	16	1,391	7	1,385	7	2,775	13
10-14	775	8	728	6	1,503	14	1,151	6	1,111	7	2,262	13
15-19	637	6	610	5	1,246	11	961	5	923	6	1,884	11
20-24	484	5	572	5	1,056	10	763	4	838	5	1,601	9
Total 0-24	3,923	36	3,914	32	7,838	68	5,646	30	5,646	33	11,291	60
25+	2,140	17	2,318	19	4,459	36	3,712	20	3,909	21	7,621	40
All Ages	6,064	49	6,232	51	12,296	100	9,357	49	9,555	51	18,912	100

Source: Population Census, 1984 & 2000

The greatest challenge for Ghana will be to provide sufficient places in school or gainful jobs for this 5.5million that will constitute the youth in 2015. If school enrolment and job creation do not increase significantly and simultaneously from 2005 – 2015, Ghana will have to recon with a very large proportion of the youth out of school and not gainfully employed. This could create problems for parents and the nation since the idle youthful energies and minds could be channeled into crime and political agitation. It is believed that the potential for any country is its youth which if developed could increase the GDP of the country. Achieving the above however is determined by the kind of investment that goes into the development of the human and social capital of the nation, particularly the youth.

What this implies for development is that the youth could become either a major resource for the development of the country or potentially a major problem that could derail the development process of the country. This is based on the fact that on one hand a youthful population could become a social burden with huge expenditure budgets in areas such as education, training, health and other social services at both the household and national levels. On the other hand, if the potentials of the youth are properly harnessed it could provide a rich resource pool from which the needed human capital for rapid socio-economic development could be harnessed. However failure to do this, will translate into a highly underutilized asset in subsequent years. The lack of economic empowerment and active engagement in social development, generally increases the vulnerability of the youth to social vices such as armed robbery, drug trafficking, prostitution and teenage pregnancy.

Education and Employment Prospects for the Youth

According to the 2000 Population Census, 39% of Ghana's total active population (defined as those between the ages of 15-64 years) is between the ages of 15-24 years as compared to an average of 35% for sub-Saharan African countries and an average of 16% for industrialized countries. With an annual population growth rate of 2.7% and economic growth rate of between 4-5% per annum, the economy is not expanding fast enough to provide decent jobs (i.e. relatively well paid jobs, with reasonable levels of income and job security) especially for the growing youth population. The 2000 Population Census results also indicated that 45% of the population was employed, with only a third (15%) working in the formal public and private sector organizations

including government ministries, departments and agencies, banks and other financial institutions and manufacturing companies. A large percentage of the employed population (i.e. about 68%) and especially the youth are working in the informal sector as self-employed with no employees. The situation of widespread self-employment with no other employees apart from themselves is an indication of the inability of the economy to provide jobs for the growing youths. The self-employed youth are mostly engaged in activities such as petty trading, street hawking, shoe shining and repairs, retail of telecommunication services, subsistence farming and other menial jobs. Youth unemployment is increasingly an urban phenomenon and it is particularly noticeable among the uneducated ones.

Evidence from the national census in 2000 indicated that the participation of the youth in education was only 51% with as many as 49% not in school. Those not in schools had never been to school at all or had quit school at various stages before the age of 24 years. The low participation rate of the youth in education may be attributed to a number of problems including poverty and in adequate places in school. In the year 2000 for instance, there were 14, 097 primary schools that were supposed to cater for over 3.1 million children aged 6 – 11 years but they managed to enroll only 2,547,441 children. The 6,829 Junior Secondary Schools (JSS) which were to cater for 1.3 million children aged 12 – 14 years could enroll only 906,655 children whilst the 504 Senior Secondary Schools (SSS) could enroll just 338,250 students. From the enrolment figures at the various stages as indicated in table 2, it is obvious that there are serious gaps causing serious transitional difficulties from primary through JSS, SSS to the tertiary level. This is reflected in very significant dropout rates from school. It was recorded that due to transitional difficulties only 50% of primary school children managed to get to the JSS and only 20% of them ultimately reach the SSS level. Unfortunately only 25 Government technical/vocational schools were available to absorb the large mass of basic school leavers who do not make it to the SSS. This means that majority of the children have to quite the school system or enter the informal apprenticeship system which has been ignored although it contributes about 70% of self-employment among the labor force of over 7 million.

Table 2: School Attendance (3years +) in '000

Educational Level	Pre school	Primary	JSS	SSS	Voc./ Tech.	Post Sec/ Prof.	Tertiary	Total
Enrolment (No.)	680.1	2,547.4	906.7	338.3	76.1	67.3	84.7	4,700.6
Percent (%)	14.5	54.2	19.3	7.2	1.6	1.4	1.8	100

It must be mentioned that providing opportunities for the youth to enroll in school and stay until completion is one effective way to handle this huge youth inactivity and non participation in school. This does not however replace job creation since they will ultimately complete and flood the labor market. Thus, the challenge of generating sufficient demand for labor in the national economy to match the growing supply will continue as long as the country's population continues to grow at the current rate of over 2.7% per annum. In fact, based on the proportion of children aged below 10 years in 2000 (i.e. 30%) it could be deduced that the nation will have a greater proportion of the youth demanding either jobs or education and skills training from 2010 to 2015 than the situation analyzed above for 2000.

From the above analysis Ghana's skills training industry has to be prepared to absorb the large number of youth who are either unemployed or economically inactive. This is a Herculean task that the industry may not be able to cope with. With all the support that the formal educational sector receives it is unfortunate that it is able to absorb only 25% of the youth. The skills training industry in Ghana is neither large enough nor well organized and positioned to absorb the rest of the youth who are unable to get into the formal education system. . It is dominated by private enterprises and Non Governmental Organizations, many of which are not registered and therefore the total number of youth they train cannot easily be determined without conducting a census. There is a very wide variation in terms of fees paid for skills training or apprenticeship and the quality assurance measures are weak and uncoordinated. Some of the skills training centers like Opportunity Industrialization Center (OIC) that included job placement and follow-up of their students have stopped due to inadequate logistics and the high cost involved. Surprisingly, the drop out rate for skills training is equally as high as the drop out rate for the youth in the formal education sector. Evidence from studies conducted and from key informant interviews at the skills training centers indicated that parents were finding it difficult to pay the fees for skills training (IAP, 2005).

The traditional apprenticeship training (TAT) in the informal sector provides the bulk of the skills training in the country. They provide training for all categories of the youth. Many poor people find it affordable and therefore it continues to serve the needs of the majority of the youth than the public formal institutions. Its higher patronage is also due to the fact that it does not necessarily require high literacy levels which tend to suit many of the youth who drop out of school. Korboe (2001) is of the view that the TAT is responsible for about 80 -90 percent of the skills training in the country since they admit those without any formal education too. TAT is therefore an indispensable component of skills training in the informal sector.

Employment Problems of the Youth

The Ministry of Manpower, Youth and Employment (MOMYE) is the government ministry formally responsible for registering employment seekers in the country. It has a total of 62 Employment Centers throughout the country serving 138 districts. It is obvious from the number of centers alone that many of the youth especially those in very remote rural areas may not have access to any of the 62 centers. Statistics from the Employment and Statistics Unit of the MOMYE indicate that many people do not go to these centers in search of employment because only a negligible proportion of those who register are able to obtain job placement. For example, of the 59,804 job seekers who registered with the Employment Centers between January and March 2000, only 2.8 percent could get placement. The youth often find it more difficult to find employment due to a number of factors including inexperience.

The youth face discrimination in the open labor market. Employers will always go in for experienced and skilled people and these are often people who have worked on the job for a number of years. There is therefore a high probability of employing adults who have some working experience than the youth. In such cases, the youth are forced to enter temporary work where evidence shows that "temporary work is disproportionately filled by younger, less educated workers" (OECD, 2002: 130 cited in ILO, 2004).

Due to the vulnerability of the youth in the labor market as many as 36.1% remained unemployed in 2000. The challenge of addressing this undesirable youth unemployment is to create decent job opportunities for them or to engage them in some form of skills training to improve their chances of employment.

Government has made several attempts to address the problem of inadequate decent job opportunities for the youth in Ghana. A panel of eminent persons, set up by the UN Secretary

General as part of a Youth Employment Network Initiative, has specifically recommended a focus on information and communication technologies (ICT) as a means of creating more jobs for young people (UN, 2004, para. 19, p. 6).

The second part of the article examines this prospect in Ghana.

The first section of the article sought to demonstrate that in spite of declining fertility the size of the youth with continue to grow in numbers within the next ten years. This should be matched with increasing opportunities for formal education, skills training and job opportunities. Whilst this is unfortunately not the case the ICT sector is being regarded as an opportunity for skills training and job creation. The second part of the article is devoted to an analysis of these prospects.

ICT SECTOR AS JOB CREATION OPPORTUNITY FOR THE YOUTH

The link between ICT and youth employment can be seen in several dimensions. Given the multiplicity of industrial settings comprising the ICT sector in Ghana many direct and indirect levels of employment opportunities could be generated for the benefit of the youth. It is generally believed that since the ICT sector is characterized by rapidly changing technological advancement, the youths (particularly the males) who happen to be more daring are mostly attracted to jobs in the sector.

The Deployment of ICTs in Ghana

Clearly not all countries have an equal opportunity to generate employment opportunities for young people through ICT. Countries vary widely in their capacity to participate in technological innovation. According to Braimah and Frempong (2004) the level of ICT dissemination is yet to get Ghana across the “digital divide” between the “technological haves” and the “technological-have-nots”. It is therefore government’s responsibility to establish an enabling environment to ensure effective private sector participation for rapid deployment of ICTs if Ghana is to cross the digital divide.

A number of studies have concluded that the enabling environment is not very good for any rapid deployment of ICTs in Ghana and several causes have been identified. The main cause has been the establishment of a weak regulator i.e. the National Communications Authority (NCA) with little independence mainly because it could be a “cash cow” for government. The fact that many ICT providers paid large sums of money to obtain operating licenses but could not start operation and the fact that some start but easily fold up or are unable to meet their roll out targets shows that all is not well in the sector. The effect of these problems is the slow rate of deployment and the low quality of services provided without any arrangements for consumer protection. Under such conditions the effect on employment generation can not be overemphasized. If Western Telesystems Ghana Limited (WESTEL) which was licensed to be the second national network provider and Capital Telecom which was to provide rural telephony were able to meet their contractual obligations, the number of jobs that could have been created for the youth in Ghana would have been very great.

From the Ghanaian perspective the ICT sector could offer direct employment opportunities to young people with high tech skills such as software engineering, which can even transcend national boundaries through outsourcing of data processing. According to Adom-Mensah (2006) Ghana Telecom alone increased its staff strength from 748 in 2003 to over 3,000 in 2006, most of whom were young University graduates.

Employment opportunities such as call centers are yet to develop in Ghana. These are options better suited to young people with junior and senior secondary or tertiary educational qualifications. However, these opportunities are relatively few due to the relatively low level of ICT applications in the Ghanaian economy.

Employment opportunities created by the ICT sector in Ghana include assembly, sale and repair of ICT equipment including computers, television sets, musical instruments, telephones and accessories, etc.

A third broad category of employment options includes the retail of communication services, which started in Ghana with what is termed “communication centers”. With the expansion of the GSM mobile technology, mobile telephone service retail units popularly called “space-to-space” and “one4all” have sprung up everywhere in the urban areas. These easy to establish businesses offer low-level employment opportunities for the youth. Statistics about the number of jobs created by this phenomenon is difficult to gather but it is believed that quite a significant number of youth, who would have otherwise been unemployed, are engaged in these jobs.

ICT as Skill for Enhancing the Chances of Securing a Job

It is becoming clear that no country can ignore the ICT revolution and its application to all sectors. Subsequently employers and prospective job seekers are all aware that ICT skill is becoming a criterion for employing or securing a job, especially in the formal sector. Related to this is the growing policy objective of many governments to incorporate ICT skills acquisition in education and training of the youth. This is expected to equip them with the requisite technical skills and entrepreneurship for industry as well as the service sectors. In Ghana the government has initiated a policy of extending Internet to every secondary school and training college. Many private schools include computer lessons even at the basic level of education i.e. pre-school, primary and Junior Secondary School level.

There are many computer training schools in the country providing ICT training, particularly the youth who could not learn such skills at school. These serve as opportunities for trainers (who are mainly the youth) to be employed in these training centers. These training centers, which are mainly privately owned except for the high level Kofi Annan Center of Excellence, offer different packages to meet the needs of the different range of customers and their training and service needs.

Application of ICT in Formal Education

It is generally believed that the introduction of ICT in education enhances employment chances especially of the youth. In recognition of this fact Government in collaboration with Ghana Telecom embarked on a program to provide additional fixed lines to support extension of broadband connectivity to towns with senior secondary schools and training colleges to facilitate extension of computer literacy in schools.

According to the Annual Progress Report (APR) of the GPRS, in 2003, a total of 257 schools were equipped with computer laboratories and the target for 2005 was 514 schools. The ICT sector is promising in equipping the youth with marketable and relevant skills for the job market and government’s intervention is therefore on the right path of reducing youth unemployment.

ICT as an Enabling Factor in Job Placement

The transition from school to work in Ghana can be very frustrating for many of the youth. This is mainly because the job market is not very vibrant and transparent. Apart from the inadequate number of job placement centers, majority of the youth do not even know that they exist. There are very few private job placement centers in the country. In the absence of job placement centers many of the youth depend on what is generally termed 'contacts' to secure employment.

The print and electronic media are expected to play a role in job placement but there are problems here too. Jobs in the formal sector are often advertised in the popular print media like the Daily Graphic, the Ghanaian Times, the Ghanaian Chronicle, etc. Most of the jobs advertised through these media are often not for the youth because they require long years of experience that school leavers do not have. Jobs for the majority of the youth, especially those in the informal sector, are rarely advertised. This is probably due to the very high cost of placing such adverts in both the print and electronic media. The cost for adverts ranges from 3 million cedis to as much as 15 million cedis. Whilst in some countries there are opportunities for placing adverts for jobs free of charge in selected print media, such golden opportunities are yet to come to Ghana. Opportunities like those being referred to above could lessen the frustration of both job seekers and less endowed employers to actively participate in the job market.

The use of the Internet to advertise and search for jobs is yet to grow in Ghana. At the time of the study an intensive search in the Internet for such opportunities yielded only three results. Two of them were job placement centers (i.e. the Executive Links Consult at Ahinsan in Kumasi and the Work Lake Job Placement Centre in Accra). The third one was a web-based job placement centre (Ghanacityguide.com) that offers free opportunities for adverts and searches. The later is a novelty that must be encouraged to grow in terms of popularity and coverage. Presently the types of jobs advertised are formal sector jobs requiring higher levels of qualification and experience. Such initiatives must be supported to grow. Organizations like the Ministry of Information could host such free web-based job placement opportunities with links to other job announcements on other websites of the various organizations. This could lessen the burden of the youth in their search for jobs immediately after school. Government has plans to open job placement and counseling centers in all tertiary institutions. Again this will only serve the needs of the highly educated youth whilst still leaving the majority to their faith.

Application of ICT in the Informal Sector

The possible application of ICT for job placement to facilitate the transition of the youth from school to work has already been demonstrated. The rapid deployment of ICTs is very crucial for such transitional problems to be ameliorated through the use of ICT.

Since the informal sector has been identified as an area with the potential to expand and employ a greater proportion of the youth, the application of ICTs in the production, distribution and marketing of the products and services of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) and the informal sector in general could produce multiplier effects in terms of the overall growth and development of the economy. ICT could be used in the marketing of their products as is currently being done by a few retailers of vehicle spare parts at the Suame Magazine in Kumasi (King and Obeng, 2002). This is one way of enhancing their market to ensure a sustainable growth and development of the sector and the national economy in general. Haan and Serriere (2002) argue that the introduction of ICT to the informal economy will gradually produce changes in the attitudes towards working in the informal sector since the use of ICT requires skills upgrading.

Unfortunately as noted by King and Obeng (2002) the application of ICTs in the informal sector in Ghana is yet to reach an appreciable level. For economy-wide advantages of deployment of ICTs to accrue, new initiatives in a number of complementary sectors are necessary to integrate ICTs into the economy. Such initiatives may include the following:

- (i) Establishment of technology parks as incubators for the development of local digital content that can promote the development and application of science and technology in the production of goods and services as well as the development and promotion of local cultural heritage.
- (ii) Establishment of a range of technical and organizational infrastructure for the development of skills needed to maintain, customize, and use ICT applications
- (iii) Ensuring universal access to ICTs in order to avoid exclusion of the informal and unorganized economic sectors and marginalized populations by keeping the user-costs at affordable levels,
- (iv) Development of legal instruments in areas like digital intellectual property protection, online payments and transactions, privacy and consumer protection, evidentiary, and audit considerations, information and infrastructure security, etc

Most of these initiatives have been proposed in the Government's ICT4AD policy and plan documents but are yet to implemented. The implementation of these plans is expected to provide direct and indirect employment opportunities for the youth which will go along way to reduce their vulnerability.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The demographic analysis revealed that although the proportion of the youth in the total population of the country was on the decline the size of the youth was on the increase. In 2000 the size of the youth was 3.8 million and it is expected to increase to 5.5million by 2015. The implication of this trend is that plans must be made to engage this 5.5million in school, skills training or in gainful employment if the nation is to turn the size of the youth population into an asset.

There are prospects for the ICT sector to be used to reduce the vulnerability of the youth due to its multi faceted roles in employment creation, job placement, skills training and enhancement among others. These prospects however depend on the deployment of ICT as well as the level of application of ICT in all sectors of the economy. Since telecommunications in particular and the ICT sector in general have been deregulated, the independent regulatory framework must provide an enabling environment for the rapid deployment and growth of the sector. An implementation of the ICT policies and plans of government could boost youth employment significantly.

The analysis reveals the need for an integrated and holistic approach to distribute the youth between education, skill training and upgrading and gainful employment. Since employment in the informal sector is large and has the potential to grow a strategic move to boost the application of ICT in the rapidly growing small and medium scale enterprises in the country will contribute greatly towards the overall growth and development of the economy which will ultimately lead to a sustainable management of the momentum of the youth.

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