



**National Youth Service,  
Employability, Entrepreneurship  
and Sustainable Livelihoods**

**National Youth Service Programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa:  
Strengthening National Youth Service as a strategy for youth  
employability, entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihoods**

## **The Case of Ghana**

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## 1. Executive summary

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### **The National Service Scheme: background and context**

The National Service Scheme (NSS) in Ghana is the only institutional option for tertiary students to exercise their civic responsibility towards the state through volunteering. The goal of the programme is to provide hands-on training to participants whilst furthering the country's social agenda. The scheme, a government programme both in terms of institutional and financial support, is mandatory for all graduates of Ghana's tertiary institutions, who are legally prohibited from entering employment without their NSS certificate of completion. In 2013 alone, 80 000 young Ghanaian graduates are expected to be deployed through the scheme in the public and private sectors as well as some civil society organisations across rural and urban settings.

As one of the largest and most active National Youth Services across the African continent, the Ghanaian NSS was selected as one of three case studies to examine the role and potential of the NSS to intentionally design and implement programmes to assist young Africans with accessing employment and livelihood opportunities post-Service. This case-study is based on a review of secondary literature, 15 interviews with key stakeholders in the NSS space, as well as two focus group interviews with current Service Personnel and alumni.

### **Youth unemployment: one of Ghana's most daunting development challenges**

With young people under 32 making up 60 per cent of the total Ghanaian population, the social impact of high rates of youth unemployment cannot be underestimated. For Ghanaian youth, navigating the job market can feel overwhelming, with fierce competition for jobs, limited opportunities for work experience, nepotism, financial and cultural barriers to entrepreneurship, and unrealistic aspirations on the part of young people making it highly challenging to get a foot on the first rung of the career ladder.

Young Ghanaians also face further structural constraints in accessing the world of employment due to the gross mismatch between skill supply and labor market demands. Despite a booming Ghanaian tertiary education market,<sup>1</sup> the system is criticised for being overly theoretical and out of alignment with what industry demands. The structure of the labor market is changing, with both private and informal sector employment encroaching on traditional waged public sector jobs, without a concomitant shift in skill-supply. An acute communication deficit exists between training institutions and industry, with little interaction between them. As such, the availability of trained workers itself is not necessarily the primary constraint in the youth unemployment equation. Rather, worker skill-sets do not meet demand in terms of relevance and quality.

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<sup>1</sup> Tertiary education enrolments have multiplied more than ten times over the past two decades in Ghana, with a corresponding growth in tertiary institutions.

**The National Service Scheme has great potential to foster young people's route into paid employment, sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship**

- **Well-positioned.** The NSS has great potential for altering the youth employment landscape in Ghana based on its position, scope and target intervention group:
- **Scale.** As a mandatory programme, no other institution in Ghana can claim to be working at the same scale: 62 000 young graduates left university in 2011, 74 000 graduates in 2012, and the increase shows no sign of stopping with an estimated 80 000 in 2013.
- **Target group.** As a programme for all tertiary graduates, the NSS is squarely positioned at the cross-roads between university and the work place at a time of transition in young people's lives.
- **Institutional underpinning.** As a government-sponsored programme, the extent of state backing in financial and legislative terms gives the scheme a strong mandate to mobilise the youth and place them at the service of their nation's development.

The combination of these three key elements makes the NSS ideally positioned to bridge the gap between the educational system and industry, providing crucial feedback to parents, students and institutions on the (mis)match between skill supply and skill demand in the employment market.

**Provision of skill-building opportunities.** In addition to scheme's ideal positioning, it provides service personnel (the NYS participants) with a solid basis upon which to build professional skills, particularly technical, communication, interpersonal, leadership and IT skills, as per service personnel's self-assessments. In addition, qualitative assessments by private sector institutions indicate that the NSS either fosters new skills and attributes (e.g. communication and new technical skills etc.), or develops and capitalises upon skills learnt at university (e.g. analytical skills, technical skills gained previously etc.). Above and beyond skills building, the NSS provides young people with critical exposure to the workplace and helps them develop the professionalism, work ethic and interpersonal skills that are often not part of a tertiary education curriculum. Significantly, a large proportion of current service personnel interviewed cited punctuality, professional appearance, confidence and general exposure to the workings of an office environment as positive attributes acquired through Service.

**Best practices and challenges in the National Service Scheme**

NSS best practices in Ghana include:

**Fruitful partnerships.** The scheme's long-standing collaboration with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) is a prime example of the strength partnership can bring to NSS activities. VSO works with key NSS management staff to build capacity, carry out organisational assessments, develop strategic plans, provide in-house training packages, as well as encouraging the NSS to be inclusive in its work. In addition, NSS has partnerships with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Rural Development, a selection of private sector institutions including most of Ghana's commercial banks and all the district assemblies. Such partnerships provide placement opportunities and training for service personnel and financial support to the scheme. Partnerships with public and private organisations thus constitute one of the best ways of becoming more intentional about preparing and linking the youth to economic opportunities and sustainable livelihood opportunities.

**Alternative income generation.** As the graduate body experiences exponential growth, the NSS funding streams are put under increasing strain. In response to this, the NSS has begun taking steps to source alternative resources through a number of income-generating projects. Many of these activities constitute best practices for the way in which they combine income-generation with a skills building element for the young people in question. For example, service personnel assist with the operation of the NSS catering unit, bore-hole drilling unit, and water-bottling factory and farms, where income is generated and skills built at the same time.

**Sustainable livelihoods preparation.** In Ghana, the agricultural sector employs 60 per cent of the population, but only a fraction of tertiary graduates major in agriculture. The NSS has taken the opportunity to reorient many young graduates towards agriculture<sup>2</sup> by providing solid practical farming skills as well as using agricultural initiatives as a means to encourage entrepreneurship. In response to a short survey undertaken as part of this study, 87 per cent of current service personnel and 67 per cent of alumni agreed that their National Service experience has best equipped them to pursue other livelihoods such as farming. In addition, the scheme's focus on agriculture straddles the interface between skills-building and civic service as agricultural produce is donated to needy causes.

**Entrepreneurial training.** While entrepreneurial training at the NSS has had a stop-start history in Ghana, those who undertook the training and/or were exposed to business through deployment reported feeling more equipped to be entrepreneurial (45 per cent of current service personnel and 67 per cent of alumni who responded to a short survey undertaken during this study).

**Exit schemes in teaching.** The National Volunteer Service (NVS) is a VSO-NSS creation to provide existing service personnel with an additional one-year voluntary teaching placement in rural and deprived communities. The NVS absorbs a sizeable number of service personnel post-service and provides training and hands-on experience to further a career in teaching.

**Stakeholder fora.** The NSS has showed its commitment to receiving independent feedback on its operations through a first stakeholder forum in 2010, now set to be a regular event, funds permitting. Not only do such events provide opportunities for constructive feedback, they also create the space for the NSS to dialogue with other agencies and stakeholders about future collaboration.

However, challenges still remain:

**Disparities in Service deployment.** One of the major challenges the scheme faces in fostering employability lies in its capacity to provide every participant with the same quality of experience across the board. The issue is not whether the NSS in Ghana has the reach and capacity to prepare young people for the job market, as this case profile suggests, but that it seems unable of doing this for everyone, across all fields of deployment. For example, interviews indicate in general terms that the private sector is favored over the public for its preferred skills-building and mentorship opportunities.

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<sup>2</sup> All Service Personnel deployed in the NSS headquarters in Accra are required to carry out weekly farm visits where they are given the opportunity to cultivate skills in agriculture.

**Monitoring and evaluation.** The NSS in Ghana houses a Policy, Planning and Monitoring and Evaluation Department, but as yet, monitoring and evaluation systems are undeveloped and limited in scope. Existing mechanisms include an end-of-service evaluation form for host organisations and Personnel where feedback is collected on both sides of the experience. There is no formal, wide-scale, periodic evaluation of the scheme. As such, there is no data available to show the routes that young people take post-Service and no institutionalised monitoring data to indicate the quality of the experience.

**Exponential growth of the student body.** The NSS has been put under increasing organisational and financial strain as the number of tertiary institutions increases alongside the corresponding number of graduates they produce. Personnel stipends, training, accommodation and transport (for rural deployment) will require a larger budget. The NSS cannot rely on government support to increase commensurately with an ever expanding student body. As a consequence, NSS management cited finances as the single biggest threat to the scheme, with a substantial funding gap to be bridged, despite efforts to raise funds internally.

**Mentoring.** The young people who participated in focus group interviews highlighted the lack of mentoring in Ghanaian society as an important challenge for the youth at large. It is therefore unsurprising that 100 per cent of all service personnel interviewed attributed ‘Very useful’ or ‘Quite useful’<sup>3</sup> to the mentoring they received during their Service. When the mentoring system works, it makes a noticeable difference to skills development and professional evolution. When it does not, it can be a de-motivator. At present, the NSS has a loose, uneven mentoring system for Service Personnel where the level of mentoring received varies hugely depending on where and in which industries they are placed.

**Exit opportunities.** The NSS has not yet developed an institutionalised support system to provide guidance on the routes service personnel can take post-Service. Some Personnel are retained by their host organisations, but this tends to be an individual arrangement between the organisation and the young person in question. Otherwise, unless the young person has a particularly dynamic mentor, post-Service guidance is thin on the ground.

### **Recommendations to strengthen the NSS as a strategy for youth employment, entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihoods**

**Align it more fully with the private sector.** To increase private sector participation in the scheme, the NSS could: i) take a more proactive approach to building relationships with the sector through stakeholder outreach; ii) raise awareness among industry associations about the benefits of hosting service personnel; and iii) take steps to invite a private sector member to the Executive Board to bring an industry perspective to the table.

**Strengthen orientation week.** Orientation week could be further leveraged to make sure service personnel and host organisations are best equipped to approach National Service in the most productive way. Orientation week could be more comprehensive by: i) inviting potential employers to talk about post-Service routes of employment and the corresponding skills required; and ii) providing

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<sup>3</sup> The ratings options included: ‘Very useful’, ‘Quite useful’ and ‘Not at all useful’.

orientation for host-organisations as well as service personnel to effectively manage each party's expectations from the beginning.

**Update the National Service Act.** If the policy framework was updated to reflect the shifting structure of the employment market, the NSS would have a strong mandate to send young people to undertake their Service in some of the newer, up-and-coming industries such as ICT and Oil and Gas. In addition, enshrining a certain level of NSS autonomy in the National Service Act could allow for a balance to be reached between adequate government support and sufficient organisational and financial autonomy.

**Strengthen the monitoring and evaluation system.** A robust institutional monitoring framework would be an effective way of ironing out some of the challenges facing the NSS regarding: i) disparities in deployment, mentoring quality and any serious complaints; ii) lack of sufficient detail for host organisations regarding service personnel's skill sets, such as command of local languages for local research; and iii) absence of formalised alumni relations. A comprehensive, up-to-date database would provide the NSS with the tools to ensure the National Service experience fulfils its mandate as fully as possible.

**Expand entrepreneurial trainings.** Entrepreneurial workshops are an effective way of fostering an entrepreneurial mind-set amongst the youth as well as providing practical information and skills about how to move forward in concrete terms. Considering the financial burden of providing such training to the large numbers of young people who pass through the NSS every year, partnership models should be explored.

## 2. Methodology

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This case profile is based on 17 semi-structured interviews (15 interviews with key stakeholders, as well as two focus group interviews with current service personnel and alumni) undertaken in the National Youth Service and youth employment space in Accra, Ghana. In April 2013, the research team interviewed key players from the private and public sectors, civil society and the National Service Scheme itself. In addition, two focus groups were carried out with 15 current service personnel and nine alumni, who also filled out a short questionnaire on their experience, found in Appendix 2 and 3. This quantitative data, while not intended to provide representativeness, provides a complementary angle of analysis to the qualitative insights gleaned throughout stakeholder interviews.

## 3. The country context of youth employment

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Ghana is the second most populous country in West Africa, with 24 million inhabitants (Ghana Statistical Service 2010). With a strong democratic track-record, Ghana has enjoyed multi-party democracy since 1992, further cementing its credentials with the peaceful transition of power following the former President John Atta Mill's death in late 2012. Political stability is matched by solid economic growth which has hovered between 4 and 7 per cent since the mid-1980s (Palmer 2009:13). The local economy is based on agriculture, and unlike some of its West African neighbours, Ghana is not heavily dependent on its extractive industries, although the impact of recent oil discoveries is yet to be gauged.

The country has made great strides towards halving the number of people living on US\$ 1 a day with poverty down from 52 per cent in 1992 to 28.5 per cent in 2006 (World Bank 2010:1). Consequently, Ghana gained World Bank reclassification as a lower-middle income country in 2011. Significantly, young people under 32 make up 60 per cent of the total population and unemployment is high amongst this sub-group. The social impact of high rates of youth unemployment and underemployment in Ghana increases the vulnerability of young people to engage in armed robbery, drug trafficking and prostitution. Youth unemployment and underemployment is thus one of the most visible development challenges for the country (Braithwaite and King 2006, The Guardian 2011).

**The data deficit.** One of the most striking points that emerged across a range of interviews with different stakeholders in the youth employment landscape indicated a crucial absence of current official data on youth unemployment in Ghana. The latest available country-wide statistics on unemployment were collected in 2006, and the full 2010 census results have yet to be released. Significantly, part of the problem in the data equation seems to be that informal sector employment is not officially considered to be employment, and thus does not appear in official data:

*In Ghana we don't have official statistics on youth unemployment. There are a lot of young people who are unemployed unofficially but that's the interesting thing about Ghana and employment. In Ghana, everything is employment even if you are selling a dog chain, but officially, it's not recorded as unemployment. We haven't captured all of that, not officially considered it. We have a very high informal sector in this country where anything that brings you money is work. (Interview, Government Representative from the Ghana Education Service, 2013)*

Despite this lack of hard data, unemployment rates are believed to be high, especially amongst the youth, and certain long-term trends have emerged, re-shaping the employment landscape.

**The private sector driver.** Waged jobs, especially in the public sector, have traditionally taken the lion's share of total employment in Ghana. However, data collected over the last few decades has shown formal public sector employment dropping from 63 per cent in 1983 to 51 per cent in 2000 (YEN 2009:11). While International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank Structural Adjustment Programmes partly account for this trend, the emergence of a strong private sector has had a larger role to play both in the formal and informal sectors. In the formal sector, the proportion of public sector jobs decreased from 7.6 per cent to 6.3 per cent whilst that for wage-earning private formal jobs increased from 4 per cent to 5.9 per cent (YEN 2009:17). In the informal sector, the increase is more substantial with an estimated 9 out of every 10 jobs created between 1991 and 2006 an informal sector phenomenon, bringing total informal employment up to 86 per cent of total employment (Palmer 2009:137). If one looks in greater depth, the number of firms with fewer than five employees has increased from 2 884 to 14 535 over the period 1987-2003, whereas the number of firms with more than 100 employees has scarcely changed at all (World Bank 2010:4). This reflects wider evidence across sub-Saharan Africa pointing to trends in rapid job growth in urban self-employment, not wage employment.



**Gross skills mismatch between skill supply and labour market demands.** The market for tertiary education in Ghana is booming with 10 major universities, 40 private tertiary institutions, 1 000 technical, vocational education and training institutions (Ikatu 2010a:3) and 200 public formal training institutions (World Bank 2010:6). These institutions have been met with an exponential explosion in student enrolments, with Ghana witnessing a 91 per cent increase in tertiary graduates over the period 2008-2011 (NSS Brochure). However, while the quantity of tertiary enrolment in Ghana is indisputably on the rise, the quality of the education provided has been questioned. Indeed, Ghana's education system from primary through to tertiary is criticised for being overly theoretical and out of alignment with what industry demands:

*The curriculum does not match with what industry is looking for [...] so if we're talking about ICT, I would love to see that most of the engineers from MTN and Vodafone are Ghanaians. As I speak to you now, there is a vacancy to be filled for a software development company, and we're searching in Ghana but it's so difficult to find the relevant skills. It means you have to transfer, bring them in from outside to occupy the positions. The curriculum of these schools should be in tandem with what business desires. (Interview, HR Manager, Leading Internet Provider, 2013)*

*Firstly, it's about the practicality of what they do in school. Whatever they learn in school is far different from what the job market requires. Sometimes it becomes difficult for employers to have the confidence to employ these people. (Interview, HR Manager, Leading Bank, 2013)*

*Young people don't get practical trainings and so we can't get into the system. (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

The emerging picture presents an acute communication deficit between public institutions, such as universities, and research institutes and the private sector, with little interaction between them. In this way, the availability of trained workers itself is not necessarily the primary constraint. Rather, worker skill-sets do not meet demand in terms of appropriateness and quality. As a result of this skill mismatch, research has shown that prospective formal employers often prefer to train in-house and, when asked about what they want graduates to have, cite 'solid general education' or 'better soft and ICT skills' (World Bank 2010:6). In another study, employers in Ghana remarked upon the lack of professional and personal maturity, high turnover and attrition rates, and a 'lack of skills' including creativity, original thinking, initiative, life skills and loyalty amongst the youth (YEN 2009:26). This was corroborated by private sector interviews undertaken for the present study who also emphasised the importance of the 'softer' side of the skill scale.

**Mismatch of aspirations.** The mismatch also emerges between the youth's understanding of what they think they can apply for, and what they should apply for, based on their qualifications and experience:

*Young people are ready to work but they want to work in areas where their competencies are low, like as a business man, starting doing it from the top without starting small. They save for a car but can't maintain it. Their aspirations are too high' (Interview, Youth Wing of Major political part, 2013)*

When you transfer this thought process over to entrepreneurship, a similar problem emerges:

*Young people have grand ideas but don't know how to translate that into reality. They think it should start off big, not small and gradually scale up. (Interview, Entrepreneurship Scheme, 2013).*

Both comments above were mirrored by a debate between the youth in a focus group interview. One half of the focus group were telling the other about a man who started selling cassettes and toothpicks and gradually moved his way up to owning his own business. The response was the following:

- *Toothpicks! I don't know what he or she did to do that. You can't tell me they were selling toothpicks and moved their way up.*
- *Nobody wants to start small, that's the problem.*
- *People lie about how they get there. There's no transparency.*
- *You can start small, it depends on you.*

(Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)

The picture that emerges is both a lack of information and a lack of communication. Young people themselves struggle with knowing what to study at university and are “pushed into going for careers that are more lucrative rather than chasing our talents” (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013).

*It all goes back to employers' relationship with universities. There is no feedback loop, there needs to be a feedback loop into the universities. This is where the poor standard of education in some of these African countries becomes an issue ... If you look at a lot of countries across Africa, the opportunities like career guidance and career training are not even there, so people channel their efforts in the wrong area and they need support to be able to handle themselves where they're headed. (Interview, Pan-African Recruitment Agency, 2013)*

In this way, as will be explored below, the National Service Scheme in Ghana could redress the asymmetries of information by acting as an intermediary between employers and the educational system, by working to understand the requirements of the former and feeding this back to the latter.

**Fierce competition for jobs.** While the mismatch between education and industry is clearly a critical problem for youth in the job market, it is also evident that the number of vacancies on offer are not sufficient to cater for the number of young people searching for jobs:

*We have limited opportunities in the job market to absorb all these people. That is a serious barrier. A lot of people are fighting for a small number of jobs which makes it quite difficult. (Interview, HR Manager, Leading Bank, 2013)*

These limited vacancies become even more elusive when one considers the wave of employers now asking for a second degree at entry level:

*A first degree is often not enough – we’ve raised the bar. Most advertisements say “a second degree is an added advantage”. This blocks the inflow of those who only have one degree. (Interview, HR Manager, Leading Internet Provider, 2013)*

From the youth’s perspective, fierce competition for limited jobs in the market is further complicated by what they perceive as unwillingness on the part of employers to let older employees go, seconded by the National Youth Wing of the ruling political party (the National Democratic Congress):

*Young people are seen as a threat to older folks in the system. Older folks don’t want to retire, delaying the progression of young people. (Interview, Youth Wing of the National Democratic Congress, 2013)*

When combining this observation with the communication deficit between industry and the educational system, what emerges is a vicious cycle of recruitment proceedings where young people find it challenging to break into the job market:

*Young people are fresh, have drive, energy, bright ideas straight out of school – if enterprise has a better relationship with schools and we bring them in they can be a creative mill for us. But we’ve blocked that and [are] still using the old people who are already in. And so you wait for an older one to exit, and then the new one doesn’t have experience so he’s blocked. The opportunity is given to a competitor who understands the business. (Interview, HR Manager, Leading Internet Provider, 2013)*

Investing in the young on the part of industry is a crucial element in the equation and is flagged below in the discussion of organisations’ responsibilities toward the youth that undertake their National Service Scheme with them.

**Entrepreneurship.** With the above in mind, the employment prospects for young people in Ghana hold great potential in self-employment and entrepreneurship. While 80 000 graduates leave tertiary education each year, only 5 000 of these find employment in the formal sector, while the rest remain unemployed or are absorbed in the informal sector (GEBSS Brochure). Unemployed graduates in Ghana traditionally seek paid jobs in the formal sector, referred to as “the craze for white collar jobs” (Interview, Assistant to National Youth Organiser of Major Political Party, 2013), but could create their own jobs through self-employment. The entrepreneurial mindset, however, has yet to be fully developed amongst the youth in Ghana:

*Among the graduates of today, everyone wants to go into white collar jobs. Not to be innovative, go be creative, go into agriculture, to produce new things. (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

*... the lack of entrepreneurial skills is also an issue. People refuse to assert that they can do things on their own. Everybody thinks they need to be employed in the formal sector. But opportunities need to be created to veer into the informal sector. (Interview, HR Manager, Leading Bank, 2013)*

*Ghana has one of most inefficient basic school systems which carries [the youth] through to adult life. A lot of them are not prepared to make the most of technology and ideas to become self-sufficient. This is the cause of our problem. They're all looking for white collar jobs. (Interview, Former NSS Director, 2013)*

While underdevelopment of the entrepreneurial mindset constitutes one barrier to self-employment, difficulties accessing finance are also a major obstacle. Significantly, the government representative interviewed singled out a lack of resources as the single most important barrier to economic opportunities among the youth. In Ghana, interest rates for access to finance are very high at around 20 per cent:

*You'll be lucky to break even after your third year. If you're paying 20 per cent you're going to struggle. (Interview, Entrepreneurship Initiative, 2013)*

*Ghanaian youth are very creative. It's about the enabling environment. There are no policies to tap into. Getting start-up capital is very difficult. (Focus Group Interview, National Service Alumnus, 2013)*

Alongside an underdeveloped entrepreneurial mindset and difficulty accessing finance, a critical shortage in information also plays a role in hampering self-employment amongst the youth, further cementing the real need for entrepreneurship training and information sessions. There is also a lack of co-ordination between training agencies and self-employment agencies with post-training support for many graduates inaccessible and badly organised. Those seeking to enter the informal micro-enterprise sector thus continue to rely on informal networks and family contacts to assist them (Palmer 2009:138).

**Who-you-know.** Research indicates that one crucial factor in gaining access to job or business opportunities are personal contacts (Chant 2005:194). In Ghana, "employment is frequently a matter of 'know who' not 'know how', with the 'knowing who' involving a complex array of familial, ethnic and religious contacts" (Ibid.). The literature, corroborated by interviews across the sample, confirmed that the issue is pervasive across private and public formal arenas, the informal sector and even the National Service Scheme itself:

*Some of us in HR try as much as possible not to be employing based on that but there are situations where sometimes you can't help that. Your CEO brings you CVs of very good people and people they know. The Bank of Ghana being our regulators, officials who bring CVs and you can't help it. (Interview, HR Manager, Leading Bank, 2013)*

*Even for jobs that are publically known, they advertise so you apply and go for interviews, but they know the people they take already. (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

Some national service personnel<sup>4</sup> also believe that certain deployments are secured through personal contacts. In 2012, and in confirmation of this, the then executive director complained of being inundated with “incessant pressure from officialdom” (NSS website, ‘Don’t interfere in NSS postings’) to interfere in that year’s postings and warned the general public that it would not be tolerated.

**Limited culture of “work experience”.** It was highlighted in stakeholder interviews that both interning and volunteering for skills-building are not yet fully part of the culture in Ghanaian society as they are elsewhere. For example, it was suggested that some young people do not attach significant value to the experience and skills to be gained through their National Service:

*Many see [their service] more as an obligation they’d rather not do than an opportunity to get their employable skills that they need. (Interview, Entrepreneurship Initiative, 2013)*

*Young people go into the NSS seeing it as a burden. They don’t go into it with the spirit of volunteerism and not for skill-building either. They do it, then walk away to be a free person. (Interview, Youth Wing of National Democratic Congress, 2013)*

In a similar vein, interviews with the private sector suggested that, on the one hand, schools and universities rarely engage directly with industry to seek out internships for their students, and on the other, some students do not make the most out of work experience when they have access to it, indicating a vicious cycle at work. In addition, paid entry-level work experience opportunities are few and far between, contributing to the aspirational mismatch observed in those young people who do not wish to scale the career ladder, as discussed above:

*There is no starting point that people can piggy back on to. For example, in the States, someone can start as a newspaper boy, or work at McDonalds or something, even if it’s not your career path; it’s a starting point and experience. (Interview, IPA, 2013)*

It is in this context that the National Service Scheme in Ghana must be assessed. While the NSS cannot be a panacea for all these problems, it is clear that the sheer reach of the programme and its position at the crossroads of young people’s first dive into the world of work means that it has great potential to straddle the gap between university and industry, providing the feedback loop that is severely missing.

## 4. About the NSS Programme

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### 4.1 History of the NSS

**The Ghana Workers Brigade (GWB).** The Ghanaian NSS as it is known today has undergone a number of transformations dating back to 1957 with the birth of the Workers Brigade, the NSS’s earliest incarnation. Created by the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development following wide-scale protests against unemployment, the Workers Brigade brought together an amalgam of

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<sup>4</sup> National Service Personnel is the name officially given to young people who undertake their National Service.

different ideas aimed at providing work opportunities for the unemployed as well as instilling within them a patriotic sense of service for their country (Hodge 1964:124). It is significant that the pre-NSS did place an emphasis on both the civic *and* employability elements of the Service, as some other national service models across the continent were more concerned with citizenship and national development alone. Indeed, the government at the time observed that:

*At least the fact that the Brigade employed at the time of the Revolution of February 1966 about 28,000 persons meant that this country's unemployment problem would have been worsened to that extent if the Brigade did not exist. (Ministry of Information in Sikah 2000)*

**The history of the NSS: the National Service Corps.** Following the dissolution of The Worker's Brigade, accused of mismanagement and misuse of funds, the National Service Corps (NSC) was created in 1969. Like its predecessor, the NSC was a voluntary youth service designed to develop the country through provision of services and infrastructure as well as training the unemployed in vocations at some technical institutes (Sikah 2000). However, by 1979 the NSC had achieved little of what it set out to do, and was dissolved with the fall of its founding father, President Kofi Abrefa Busia's government.

**The history of the NSS: the early National Service Scheme.** Soon after the dissolution of the NSC, the National Service Scheme (NSS) was born in 1973. This time, the Service was directed at university students with the aim of providing military orientation in order to "instill in the students a sense of national awareness and discipline as the nation's future leaders and to provide them with opportunities to contribute to their country's development" (Sikah 2005:6). The scheme was to last for a year and students were to be engaged in education, health, local government, and rural development including agriculture and surveying, much like it is today. The programme was mandatory with strict rules and regulation prohibiting employers from contracting graduates who hadn't undertaken their national service with non-serving graduates punishable by a two-year long prison sentence (Frontani and Taylor 2009:94 and Sikah 2000:5). However, in 1978, the NSS underwent a review by the National Service Scheme Review Committee who made the following recommendations: that the scheme be extended from one to two years; that it extend its reach to cover every Ghanaian above 18 years old rather than uniquely targeting university graduates; and that it include an obligatory six months military training. Most of these recommendations were brought into force through the passing of the National Service Scheme Act of 1980, which governs the scheme, structures and procedures of NSS operations today.

**The National Service Scheme today.** Since 1973, the NSS has survived successive governments, unlike previous Ghanaian youth movements that were closely associated with party politics and sank or swam with them (Sikah 2000:5). Its existence has also been safeguarded through enshrinement in the third constitution (Ibid: 15). While the NSS Act of 1980 has not been updated, there have been some changes related to the way the NSS is now practically rolled out. This includes reducing the two-year service duration to one year, as well as exclusively targeting graduates from tertiary institutions rather than the youth population at large, as it did pre-1978. In addition, financial constraints and an ever growing graduate body mean it is not possible to provide six months military training to the majority of service personnel. Rather, the NSS provides military training for those posted to rural areas and/or to young people carrying out their service in the military itself. The aims of the scheme, much like the aims of

the Workers Brigade, are to contribute both to the national building project, as well as to provide practical skills trainings (more information on programme aims can be found in Section 4.3).

## 4.2 NSS policy

*[The policy framework] provides many possibilities for connecting national service to the broad vision of those running the country and what they see as key issues. Particular challenges at particular times can be addressed whether it's vaccinations, sanitation, agriculture, etc. (Interview, NSS Board Member, 2013)*

As discussed above, NSS operations are structured by government policy and the National Service Act of 1980 in particular. The policy framework directs the NSS to deploy personnel to certain sectors of the economy that are aligned with Ghana's national priorities and critical areas of need. These include but are not limited to:

- agriculture
- cooperatives
- education
- health
- local government
- military
- rural development
- youth programmes.

One of the most critical areas of need in Ghana is the education sector, which absorbs 60 per cent of all service personnel each year to stop-gap the severe shortage of teachers, especially in rural areas. Health is another critical area of need with skilled manpower deployed to support health institutions and 1 873 nurses and midwives deployed in 2013. Agriculture has also become a priority area for the Government of Ghana whose efforts to reinforce agriculture as the backbone of the economy is mirrored in the scheme's current focus on farming, and deploying personnel to support the government's food security programmes. While directing the NSS to certain critical areas of the economy, the Act does not limit the areas of engagement and stipulates that personnel may be sent to "any other field that the Board may prescribe from time to time" (The Ghana National Service Scheme Act 1980:2) thus allowing for flexibility in programme design and innovation:

*You know, the law is so open. The law doesn't restrict the scheme to one particular area where we can develop programmes. We are running an integrated programme that cuts across all sectors of the economy. The law is so flexible so we can develop programmes at one point, review them, and establish new ones where we see either we have achieved success in one area or we'll have the opportunity to move on to other areas without restriction. (Interview, NSS Management, 2013)*

The freedom to innovate afforded by the law is evident in developments such as the establishment of a community unit, the design of an entrepreneurship training programme, and the fact that five to ten per cent of all service personnel are now sent to undertake their national service in the private sector,

even though none of this is mandated directly by law. This flexibility, according to the government, is “where its strength lies” (Interview, Ghana Education Service, 2013).

Alongside the flexibility to innovate, NSS management and partners agreed that the policy framework also provides adequate support:

*It gives us sufficient power and authority to mobilise thousands of youth who otherwise it would be difficult to mobilise. It allows us to mobilise the youth and grants us funds from central government to pay stipends so we do have that support. (Interview, NSS Management, 2013)*

The idea of “mobilising thousands of youth who otherwise it would be difficult to mobilise” was seconded by VSO and refers to the mandatory nature of the scheme which gives legislative backing to the enlistment of all tertiary graduates in Ghana. While providing legislative support to the Scheme’s mandate, the Act also stipulates that the NSS will receive funding from the government and gives it the freedom to solicit funds from outside. This last point is particularly important, providing the Scheme with the space to be self-sufficient and thus, in theory, only partially dependent on the government.

However, despite the flexibility of the law to adapt to changing contextual realities, the National Service Act has not been updated since coming into force in 1980. All stakeholders interviewed agreed that the Act should be tweaked so the Scheme has a direct mandate to stay abreast with the times:

*... the law is too open, it has no outer limits and it is not explicit in terms of employability, empowering the Scheme to go into certain areas of employment like ICT where we see there is huge potential. Also, [it is not explicit in] trying to generate income that will support our programme and make us independent so that we will be moving from dependence on government resources, towards becoming self-sustaining. (Interview, NSS Management, 2013)*

Although the Act does stipulate that National Service Personnel shall not be employed until they have completed their national service, the Scheme does not have an explicit mandate to foster employability. Indeed, this is also one of the major challenges of the NSS policy framework in its current state. From a government perspective, the law should be amended to reflect the fact that the NSS is increasingly seen as a strategy to foster youth employability (Interview, Ghana Education Service, 2013). In addition, as mentioned above, the Scheme does have room to generate funds from outside, but it is not mandated to do so, making the route to independence more challenging.

Others suggested that the law be broadened so it is not skewed towards graduates of tertiary education alone and that the length of the Scheme should be two years, as it used to be, in order to give young people enough time to receive adequate preparation to acquire skills such as communication, team work, problem-solving, innovation etc. (Interview, Ghana Education Service; IPA, 2013). However, as explored below, skills development in these areas is, to an extent, an outcome of the NSS in its current state. Rather than simply extending service duration, a concomitant improvement in the quality of the youth’s service experience across the board must be taken into account.



It thus seems that the NSS policy framework is adequate in providing sufficient powers and authority to the NSS administration in terms of financial and legislative support as well as providing the flexibility to innovate. However, there is a need to update and broaden the framework in order to empower the Scheme to become more intentional about helping young people develop employable skills in new areas such as ICT, as well as underpinning its mission to become more self-sustaining in financial terms.

### 4.3 Programme aims and objectives

*[The NSS] emphasises that all 18-year-olds must be taken into a programme for a year or two depending on national needs. They will make contributions across the country ... and at the same time prepare themselves or be prepared for productive life in the country. Every society who wants to see development occur has a great opportunity in that Scheme to audit its 18-year-olds. Do they participate in schooling as they should? Do they imbibe society? How can we correct this in next lot?* (Interview, Former NSS Director, 2013)

In broad terms, the aims and objectives of the NSS are two-fold: to provide young Ghanaians with the opportunity to contribute to national development through civic service, and to prepare them for productive life through practical training. The full list of programme aims are:

- to encourage the spirit of national service among all segments of Ghanaian society in the effort of nation-building through active participation
- to undertake projects designed to combat hunger, illiteracy, disease and unemployment in Ghana
- to help provide essential services and amenities, particularly in towns and villages of the rural areas of Ghana
- to develop skilled manpower through practical training
- to promote national unity and strengthen the bonds of common citizenship among Ghanaians.

On the civic side of the Scheme, one of the major objectives is to fit the energy of the youth to key development tasks. In the words of one board member, “if the youth can’t, who will?” (Interview, NSS Board Member, 2013). Through such civic engagement, the scheme seeks to foster national integration, providing tertiary level graduates with a window into a different Ghanaian reality:

*... a person who has just gone through primary, secondary school and university, what is such a person going to know about Ghana? Now if you take him out of his community to areas he would normally not have gone, he gets to see real life. Then it changes his mind set so that when he comes and is employed, he knows what is at stake in the country.* (Interview, NSS Management, 2013)

Alongside the programme’s civic aims, the NSS has made skills trainings and youth employability a key priority, since the NSS is often the first entry point for university graduates into the world of work:

*One of the key objectives of the Scheme is to provide skills trainings to the personnel during their national service. Why skills training? To equip them to be able to be employable in the future.* (Interview, NSS Management, 2013)

In fact, young participants are called National Service Personnel, reflecting how the experience is very much about civic engagement, 'service', but also work and work preparation, 'personnel'. NSS management, however, was clear that they are not an employment agency. Rather, they wish to be seen as "a warehouse and forum" to ease young people's transition from education to employment (Interview, NSS Management, 2013).

While the intentionality of fostering employment through civic engagement is emphasised by current and former NSS managers as a primary goal of the Scheme, the policy framework, as noted above, has not enshrined this intentionality in law. Policy reform was highlighted as a priority both by NSS management and other NSS stakeholders, and as such, should be a primary goal of current management to help them push their employability agenda forward.

#### 4.4 The target group

The National Service Scheme targets all tertiary-level graduates of 18 years and above from university and polytechnic institutions. There is no upper age limit although exemptions are made for those over 40 years old. Graduate numbers are on the increase with the NSS estimating the 2013 intake at 80 000, up on the previous year at 70 000. The gender divide stands at 69 per cent male and 31 per cent female, reflecting the gender gap at the university level.

**Gender considerations.** Significantly, the most recent innovation within the structure of the NSS administration is the creation of the Gender, HIV and AIDS and Inclusion Services desk to ensure that the NSS is as accessible as possible. What began as a department dedicated to raise awareness around HIV and AIDS, later grew to incorporate a gender equality component following the Government of Ghana's evolving priorities. While HIV prevalence in Ghana is relatively low at 1.8 per cent of the adult population, 54 per cent of those are women, indicating the importance of raising awareness amongst this sub-sector.<sup>5</sup> While the gender desk is still in its early stages of operationalisation, it has been working to collect data on the gender ratios within the NSS at both a staff and personnel level. In terms of widening access for women to join the NSS, management was clear that the work must begin at school.

*The key is education ... because if you don't get into tertiary education you cannot join us. There's an imbalance at the university level.* (Interview, NSS Management, 2013)

Once women are in tertiary education, however, the mandatory nature of the Scheme means that all graduates have access, regardless of gender. Deployment is also gender-blind with women and men deployed equally across rural and urban settings.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.avert.org/africa-hiv-aids-statistics.htm](http://www.avert.org/africa-hiv-aids-statistics.htm), accessed 16/7/2013 (Dalberg analysis).

## 4.5 Design principles

Figure 1: Regions in Ghana



Source: USAID

**Deployment processes.** The latest deployment statistics are indicative of regional and sectorial distribution. Using these figures, sector distribution of personnel in 2012 was largest in education, with 59 per cent of personnel deployed in education, up from 54 per cent from 2011, followed by 17 per cent deployed to government ministries, up by 11 per cent from the previous year, with 16 per cent in the health sector and 7 per cent in the private sector, the former down from 25 per cent and the latter from 9 per cent in 2011. In terms of deployment by region, data from 2010<sup>6</sup> show that Greater Accra held the lion's share with 22 per cent of deployments, reflecting the concentration of schools, government ministries and other opportunities there, followed by Ashanti, the third largest of the administrative regions, with 19 per cent. The other eight regions shared relatively equal numbers of personnel apart from the Northern, Upper West and Upper East regions receiving just three to five per cent each, reflecting their remoteness and the relative lack of

opportunities available for service personnel.

As mentioned above, the national policy framework directs the Scheme to the areas of the economy where national service personnel can be deployed. However, any approved private or public sector institution can request personnel. This includes: i) all the major government ministries; ii) a range of public sector institutions such as schools, hospitals, the police, prison, immigration and the army; iii) a range of private sector institutions in varied fields such as banking, ICT, tourism, food processing, security services, catering, insurance, farming; and iv) a limited number of civil society institutions such as NGOs.

The activities of service personnel are determined by the field in which they are deployed as well as the needs of the host organisation. Service personnel activities thus vary widely depending on whether one is deployed in the public, private or non-profit sector; whether one is deployed in rural or urban settings; and the capacity of the host organisation to offer suitable vacancies.

In terms of placement alignment, where NSS personnel used to approach their host organisations directly, potential host organisations are now asked to post a request for skilled labour directly to the NSS Secretariat who then match candidates to demand:

*Normally we take the class lists from the various training institutions then we are able to tell the number of service personnel in each skill area. Then we advertise and then request organisations*

<sup>6</sup> Data from 2011 and 2012 have yet to be published.

*that will need the service personnel. They will then apply and indicate the skills areas and number that they will want. (Interview, NSS Management, 2013)*

In theory, then, personnel are deployed according to their skill set and subject area when possible. However, considering that one of the government's critical areas of need is education and around 60 per cent of all personnel are placed in education every year, it is not always possible to align service personnel's qualifications with their placement. In addition, personnel are asked to give regional preference rather than area of interest upon inscription. On the one hand, this can and sometimes does provide new potential avenues of employment and can lead personnel to change careers as explored in Section 6. On the other, the lack of alignment can be a source of resentment on the part of the personnel. As the government representative interviewed explained, the NSS is about giving young people exposure, but it is not about alignment. In other words, the scheme is not designed to put all architecture graduates into architecture programmes and all education graduates into education, etc. Rather, it is a question of demand in terms of matching candidates to vacancies posted by host organisations (Interview, Ghana Education Service, 2013).

**Private sector alignment.** At present, the private sector absorbs five to ten per cent of all personnel. With an estimated 80 000 personnel deployed this year and the numbers ostensibly on the rise, the NSS is deploying a significant number of young people (7 000 in 2012) into private sector industries. As mentioned above, this can be any approved private sector institution that requests personnel. However, there is room for greater engagement and while the government admits that NSS policy should be more explicit about private sector engagement with the scheme, they also want to see the private sector being more proactive in requesting personnel and making opportunities for these personnel within their company (Interview, Ghana Education Service, 2013).

*The NSS is too much of a state business. The private sector should be interested. The law must be amended to provide space for the private sector to come in and create that dialogue so you can get non-traditional areas of work. (Interview, Ghana Education Service, 2013)*

The private sector, as explored above, is a major driver of Ghana's current growth, and while five to ten per cent of an 80 000-strong student body is a substantial contribution, it is not adequate in reflecting the changing structure of the Ghanaian economy, where the public sector is becoming less important in terms of employment. Indeed, as explored in Section 7.1, a frequent critique of public sector deployments indicate that service personnel are left with not enough to do and both the NSS and the private sector must engage more proactively with one another in order to fill the gap. Such engagement is also important because institutions often use the NSS as an easy pool of potential entry-level employees, saving them time and money on advertising and full-blown recruitment procedures:

*We took 12 people this year and 20 or so the year before. We retained 18 of them two years ago which reduced the number we can take this year. So the NSS is very positive in providing a pool of employees. (Interview, HR Manager, Leading Bank, 2013)*

However, all institutions should be investing in their personnel, not just those who consider employing them after their service has finished. Structured orientation for the host-organisations pre-service could play a powerful role in ensuring this happens.

One private sector interviewee suggested that the relationship between the NSS and industry was still underdeveloped with the latter not valuing service people as they should:

*Business hasn't put enough emphasis or not shown much interest [in the NSS]. We've not had the opportunity of identifying what they can offer and what we can offer for them ... If the organisation itself understands that this is the cream of the crop that they will need one day, we will all go out and train them well for ourselves. Even if we do not keep them, we will train them well for the next person who our businesses rely on. For example, my business relies on energy, if we get electrical engineers to do an internship I'll train them so well as when they go into the electricity company of Ghana, I'll be relying on them. (Interview, HR Manager, Leading Internet Provider, 2013)*

As explored in Section 8, the recent stakeholder learning forum initiative attempts to bring together NSS stakeholders, including the private sector, to discuss challenges, successes and ways to improve. However, funding constraints mean that this has only happened once since 2010. To be truly effective, such fora would need to happen on a regular basis. In addition, it is not enough that the private sector can approach the NSS directly to request personnel since this invariably leads to some not making the request. Rather, the NSS needs to proactively build relationships with the private sector and raise awareness about the importance of their active participation in the development of the nation. To do this, providing orientation for host organisations as well as the young people in question would manage each party's expectations as well as providing the private sector with the necessary understanding of how to approach national service. It might also be worth inviting a private sector member onto the NSS Executive Board as a way of increasing private sector involvement in the scheme. A private sector board member would bring a business perspective to the table, as well as providing the opportunity for the NSS to align more tightly with industry.

## 5. Programme governance and financing

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### 5.1 Structure and implementation

The National Service Scheme sits under the Office of the President, who appoints the Executive Director and the Board, and is overseen by the Ministry of Education. The administrative structure of the NSS is headed up by the Board, who provides strategic direction to the scheme as a whole, followed by the Executive Director, who has direct oversight responsibility over mandatory and voluntary service personnel postings.<sup>7</sup> Two Deputy Executive Directors sit under the Executive Director: one manages Finance and Administration and the other is in charge of Programmes and Projects (Operations). These four components comprise the NSS Management Team (see Figure 2).

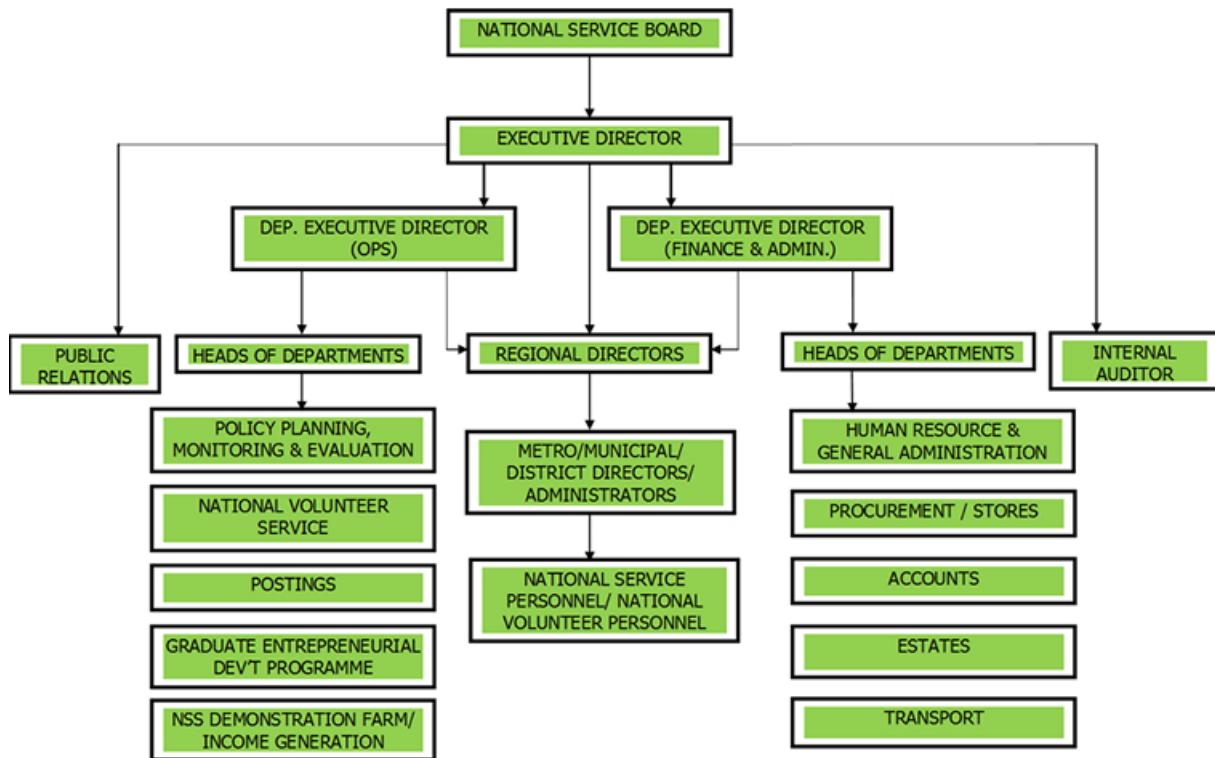
Below this management structure sits the Internal Auditor and Head of Public Relations who report directly to the Executive Director. There are ten Regional Directors who also report directly to the

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<sup>7</sup> As detailed below, the National Service Scheme and the National Volunteer Scheme are two separate programmes. The former is mandatory for all tertiary students whereas the latter is a voluntary exit option for ex-service personnel who can choose to continue their service in the education sector.

Executive Director, and they in turn supervise the work of 174 District Directors in their work to support rural deployments. The Deputy for Operations oversees Policy Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, Projects, Research and Development, Voluntary Service and the Graduate Entrepreneur Development Programme. The Deputy in charge of Finance and Administration has oversight responsibility for Human Resource and General Administration, Estate, Procurement, Accounts and Transport, Information Technology as well as the Regional Directors (NSS website).

Figure 2: The NSS administration



Source: NSS website

Of this administrative structure, three elements deserve further study due to their ‘add-on’ status as components that go beyond the original mandate of the scheme: the Graduate Entrepreneurial Development Programme, NSS Demonstration Farming and the National Volunteer Service:

**Entrepreneurship.** Entrepreneurial training has a ten-year, stop-start history at the NSS in Ghana. Between 2000-2004, and consummate with the then government’s focus on non-graduate unemployment, NSS personnel were charged with providing entrepreneurial skills training to their non-graduate counterparts as part of their service. NSS personnel would undergo a two-week trainer-training session, given in-house by the NSS, and would offer catering, textile design, batik, tie-die, bead-making as well as business management, numeracy courses, and conflict resolution to the non-graduate unemployed to encourage them to set up a business in these vocational areas. This initiative was maintained over three years, until funding dwindled, which put an end to it (Interview, Head of HIV/Aids, Gender and Inclusion, 2013).

Following this, the NSS partnered with Empretec, a private sector foundation, to develop an entrepreneurial training pilot giving personnel self-employment preparation. Five hundred students

were selected from all over the country, 200 were shortlisted and training began by showing them how to elaborate business proposals and business plans. The top 35 of these were linked up to financial institutions and became automatic members of the Empretec Foundation. The training ended with the changing of governments and national priorities.

Since the end of Empretec, the NSS has partnered with the Graduate Business Support Scheme (GEBSS) to provide information on entrepreneurship options during orientation, encouraging young people to register with them to open a business after their nine-month service is over. The NSS also uses its agriculture initiatives as a means to encourage entrepreneurship by training young people on how to start their own farms and by supporting them financially.

While three waves of efforts to promote entrepreneurial training have been made, the stop-start pattern that emerges is a result of funding constraints tied to changing government priorities, pointing to an area in the scheme that can be improved with uninterrupted support.

**Farming.** The NSS has added an active Youth in Agriculture component to its programme in recent years, establishing farms in various regions of the country. The agricultural sector employs 60 per cent of the population and contributes 30 per cent to the country's GDP, and in recognition of this, the government is promoting agriculture as a key growth area of the economy.<sup>8</sup> However, only five per cent of all graduates leaving tertiary education in 2010 majored in agriculture (NSS Brochure). NSS thus has the chance to reorient many young graduates to take an interest in agriculture, echoing one of the aims of the first national civic service in Ghana:

*... to change the attitude of young men to agriculture, ... to convince youth that making the land productive was a patriotic duty and the most practical method for a young man of average ability to make his way in the world ... (Hodge 1964:125)*

For example, in the Greater Accra Region, the NSS Papao Farm is a fully integrated farm cultivating a number of crops as well as fish farming and animal husbandry. The farm provides practical experience for agricultural graduates and the same opportunity for non-agricultural specialists. Training is offered to service personnel by providing skills building in agricultural methods, food processing and marketing to give them the tools to build livelihoods in agriculture. The scheme has farms in five other regions with plans to expand coverage to every region in the country. As well as providing solid practical skills in agriculture, the farms contribute to the scheme's fundraising strategy by selling produce at subsidised prices when it is not donated to needy causes.

**National Volunteer Service.** The National Volunteer Service (NVS) was created in 2003 in collaboration with VSO to provide service personnel who had completed their service with a one-year voluntary teaching placement in rural and deprived communities. The major objectives of the National Volunteer Service are to develop skills and experience in teaching, provide career advancement and build bridges between sectors of society through wider social and cultural networks. At its inception, the NVS was created to respond to the challenges Ghana was facing in meeting the Millennium Development Goals

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<sup>8</sup> The John Atta Mills administration made the Acceleration of Agricultural Modernisation and Commercialisation a central pillar of development to further drive growth of the economy.

at the level of basic education, and sought specifically to rectify this through correcting the low teacher-student ratio. Every year, a Teaching Skills Training course is provided to volunteers to orient them in their work. In 2012, 5 000 young people were deployed as volunteers, down from an average of 20 000 in previous years. To explain the drop in numbers:

*As a volunteering programme, [the NVS] is not supposed to take over the government's job of training out more professional teachers ... the agreement was that when it got to a particular point, we would reduce the numbers. (Interview, VSO, 2013)*

Nevertheless, the National Volunteer Service absorbs a sizeable number of service personnel post-service and gives them the training and hands-on experience to further their career in teaching.

## 5.2 Institutional anchoring

*Ultimately, the NSS is very much in tune with National Development efforts and priorities. (Interview, Ghana Education Service, 2013)*

As outlined above, the NSS is a government programme both in terms of legislative and financial support. In addition, the Executive Direction and Board of Directors are appointed by the Office of the President. Significantly, the NSS sits under the Ministry of Education, not the Ministry of Employment, reflecting its commitment to teaching, a sector which absorbs the largest part of all personnel per year. In doing so, service personnel help to bridge the huge employment gap in the teaching service, which was one of the initial reasons why the NSS was re-introduced. Indeed, one of the main expectations of the NSS from a government perspective is to increase the number of teachers working for the state. But above and beyond that, the government sees the NSS as an opportunity for young people to put their literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills at the service of national development. Aside from this, it also makes strategic sense to house the NSS under the Ministry of Education. Firstly, it is already dealing with a large number of young people and secondly, it is a ministry that can respond to the question "Where do I have the most resources that I can use without unduly upsetting the system?" (Interview, Ghana Education Service, 2013). Indeed, the NSS budget comes from the Ministry of Education who is responsible for the allocation of resources to the NSS. However, despite this financial connection, contact between the NSS and the Ministry of Education is limited, with the latter's hands full with teacher placements (Interview, NSS Board Member, 2013).

While providing support to the teaching sector is one of the NSS's strategic objectives, the Ghana Education Service considers work preparedness to be primordial:

*The strategic objectives of the NSS is first of all to provide young people with an opportunity to get experience in the world of work and to use that to prepare them to situate themselves in the world of work. The strategic imperative is that it allows young people to get exposure. Essentially it's for that. It's about keeping young people busy. Not busy about nothing but busy in a constructive way where they can make a specific contribution. (Interview, Ghana Education Service, 2013)*



While the government itself does not feel that the NSS is at the mercy of political currents and changes in national priority, there is no doubt that NSS priorities are very much aligned to national development objectives. When, for example, ensuring sanitation and promotion hygiene was a high-level national objective, the NSS saw a corresponding focus. Now the focus is on agriculture, and so the NSS has a Youth in Agriculture Programme.<sup>9</sup> As discussed below in Section 5.1 the flip-side of this intimate relationship with government has implications for its ability to maneuver and decide on its own fate.

### 5.3 Partnerships

*The NSS does not have all it takes to create those avenues [of employability]. (Interview, NSS management, 2013)*

Both NSS management and the government considered partnerships with other organisations to be one of the scheme's greatest strengths. They also believe that building partnerships with public and private organisations is the best way of becoming more intentional about preparing and linking the youth to economic opportunities and sustainable livelihood opportunities. Such partnerships provide placement opportunities and training for service personnel, share expertise with the NSS, and provide financial support. At present, the NSS has partnerships with Volunteering Services Overseas (VSO), the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Rural Development, a selection of private sector institutions including most of Ghana's commercial banks, and all the district assemblies.

The scheme's long-standing collaboration with the VSO is a prime example of the strength partnership can bring to its activities. VSO has a memorandum of understanding with the NSS which they review every three years. The objective of the partnership is to build organisational capacity so the NSS can better support the youth it is working with. VSO works with key NSS management staff to build capacity, carry out organisational assessments, develop strategic plans, provide in-house training packages, and encourages the NSS to be inclusive in its work. Outcomes of the partnership include:

- developing the National Volunteer Teaching Programme (2003) which is a voluntary option to support young people interested in teaching. It is open to anybody who has done their national service
- developing a volunteering teaching manual together with UNICEF which has been accepted by the Ghana Education Service covering pedagogy, teaching methodology, community mobilisation, inclusion, health and sanitation
- providing management trainings for staff in collaboration with the University of Cape Coast to help them manage the large numbers of young people
- supporting the NSS in its agriculture work by adding a nutrition component to the programme
- involving the youth involved in decision-making processes through engagement with the National Service Personnel Association (NASPA)
- creating a road show to raise awareness among employers on what the NSS can do for them
- supporting the scheme's National Stakeholder Forum and other monitoring/feedback initiatives.

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<sup>9</sup> There is no data to show how many young people pursued a career in agriculture post-service. However, the Public/Private Entrepreneurship Scheme did report a growth in the number of agriculture-focused business plans over the last few years, indicating that the programme is resonating with servers.

Considering the output presented above, the VSO-NSS partnership is a fruitful one that yields results. Encouragingly, the benefits are mutual:

*I would say, of all the partnerships we have had with government, the NSS has been one of the most fulfilling partnerships. They have been open to learning and sharing their experiences with us because even they have had a wealth of engaging the youth and so we jointly looked at building active citizenship programmes based on partnerships with them ... This is one government group that I love working with. They understand what they do, they understand their mandate and they are open to innovations within the scope of work they do. (Interview, VSO, 2013)*

VSO is the only civil society organisation that has an MOU and thus a clear agreement with the NSS. The VSO recommends that civil society organisations working in the area of youth should come on board with the NSS and build a formal relationship with them. In this way, work around youth engagement could be effectively co-ordinated.

In terms of partnerships with government ministries, the nature of the partnership essentially consists of requesting and hosting service personnel within their institutions and providing them with work experience. The NSS-private sector partnerships are similar and the NSS has formalised relationships with a number of banks who share their employment strategy with the scheme and ask for a certain number of personnel with a certain skills set each year. They then host personnel within their institution, provide training if necessary, cover their stipend, and pay a levy to the NSS to cover recruitment and operational costs. However, as promising as these early stages of partnership are, NSS-private sector collaboration as a whole is as yet undeveloped and something the NSS would like to encourage. The NSS is particularly keen to find partners who would like to finance their training programmes.

In order to open up greater possibilities for partnership, the data recording system of the service personnel's skills could be more sophisticated. For example, one prominent international NGO would be interested in hosting service personnel in rural primary schools, or to use them to assist with their research, but need young people with relevant local languages. At present, the NSS databank does not account for such detailed requests (Interview, IPA, 2013).

## **5.4 Financing**

*[We were] close to closing down two or three times. The required budget is too big. They've got to work out a way to be partially dependent on government and [be] self-sufficient. (Interview, Former NSS Director, 2013).*

The NSS is a government programme and thus receives a sizeable financial investment from the government itself. In Ghanaian Cedis, the Government of Ghana pays about 18 million Cedis (US\$ 9.4

million<sup>10</sup>) per month into public sector stipends for service personnel and invests between 2 and 5 million Cedis (US\$ 1-2.6 million<sup>11</sup>) per year in country-wide administration costs.<sup>12</sup>

The private sector is also an investor both in terms of paying the stipends of service personnel deployed with them and paying levies to the NSS of up to 20 per cent of costs relating to the recruitment and assessment of the service personnel they take on. Private sector engagement thus feeds into the scheme's fundraising strategy (Interview, NSS Management; VSO; Leading Bank, 2013).

Where the private sector takes financial responsibility for the service personnel it accepts, and the government does the same for the public sector, civil society is one sector that struggles to make the funds available to accept service personnel within an organisation. Since the funding structure of an NGO is often tied up to specific activities along particular budget lines, it is not always possible to free funds to support service personnel. As a result, NSS personnel are rarely deployed in the sector, and when they are, many more are deployed to international organisations rather than local NGOs (Interview, VSO, 2013).

In addition, the NSS has a number of income-generating projects where personnel are deployed for both skills development and income generation. It has been operating a catering unit and has a borehole drilling unit and a water bottling factory. In addition, the NSS has a number of farms where income is generated from agricultural activities including raising poultry, pigs and rabbits as well as through the growing and selling of cereals and commercial borehole drilling. As one interviewee suggested, if the Ministry of Agriculture were to help support the scheme's agricultural initiatives with technology loans, NSS personnel could be involved in consultancies which would increase their technical capacities as well as providing an additional source of income for the scheme.

In terms of value for money, it is clear that service personnel are saving the Ghanaian nation resources in terms of the full salaries they would have been paid by government and the private sector if they were full-time staff. The current stipend paid to each service personnel is 243.8 Cedis per month (US\$ 127<sup>13</sup>). However, with this amount under the minimum wage, there is a danger than personnel are being used as cheap labor to fulfil tasks that would otherwise be undertaken by salaried staff. This was a particular concern that emerged out of focus group discussions with current service personnel and alumni, perhaps reflecting a more general sense of feeling undervalued by some host organisations.

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<sup>10</sup> Using an exchange rate of 1.92 Cedis to US\$ 1 as of April 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Exchange rate as above.

<sup>12</sup> The NSS runs a 'lean administration' with 365 paid employees (Interview, NSS Management, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Using an exchange rate of 1.92 Cedis to US\$ 1 as of April 2013.

## 6. Programme impact

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### 6.1 Monitoring and evaluation systems and tools

While the NSS houses a Policy, Planning and Monitoring and Evaluation Department, monitoring and evaluation systems are as yet undeveloped and quite limited. Existing mechanisms include an end-of-service evaluation form for host organisations and personnel where feedback is collected on both sides of the experience. There is no formal, wide-scale, periodic evaluation of the scheme at this stage. As such, there is no data available to show the routes that young people take post-service and no institutionalised monitoring data to indicate the quality of the national experience of service.

Indeed, the lack of monitoring and evaluation of the scheme was flagged by private and civil society stakeholders as a critical area in need of improvement:

*I'd like [the NSS] to focus more on real assessment to see whether certain skills and opportunities have been created and developed. Because at the moment the forms I see are just attendance [forms]. But what about the quality of the experience? We need to be able to capture that. We need to be able to survey a pool of people who have completed the NSS to find out what their experience was. Did they find it was beneficial? What would they have liked to be different? And then build that into the scheme. They'd need to start doing research on post-national service on where are people going and what is happening to them. Are there trends? What impact has the NSS had 3-5 years post-completion? (Interview, Entrepreneurship Initiative, 2013)*

The VSO has been working with the National Service Personnel Association (NASPA) to engage them in discussion about how the NSS could be enhanced. They went to the rural areas to produce a documentary talking to young people about their experiences and their perception of the NSS and shared the results with the NSS administration.

While these are admirable endeavors, the NSS needs to develop an institutional monitoring and evaluation system that provides detailed feedback to the scheme about its operation on a periodic basis. Only then will they have the data to begin to resolve many of the challenges within programme implementation (see Section 7.1). Providing guidance on clear exit routes would add value to the NSS experience. In addition, by discussing the aims, needs and goals of service personnel going forward, the scheme could gather information about those who secured employment, those going into business and other post-service routes.

### 6.2 Evidence of impact

**Exit opportunities.** At this stage, the NSS does not have any mechanisms in place to support personnel with their transition out of the programme:

*It's absolutely an individual thing. If your institution retains you it's an arrangement between the two of you but NS doesn't have anything to do with it. (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

The NSS does not yet give its national service personnel institutionalised support with exit opportunities, but on an ad-hoc basis, a young person may be lucky enough to have a mentor who instigates an informal chat to talk about his/her future options. Similarly, as outlined above, institutions may retain personnel post-service as fully-fledged employees. Again, orientation week can be leveraged to set out the possibilities for exit opportunities once service is completed. Employers could be engaged to present to national service personnel on employment/entrepreneurship/livelihoods routes post-service. For example, the entrepreneurship scheme proposed a regular slot every year with service personnel where they could talk to the youth about how to transition through the NSS into setting up their own business. The ICT firm seconded this by proposing engagement with the NSS through information and education provision for personnel on the skills that the ICT industry desires.

**Impact.** As outlined above, there is as yet no hard data to show definitively the real impact of the NSS on young people's civic sense of engagement, nor their employability. However, the present study has made inroads into providing a qualitative lens on impact. For example, three private sector companies interviewed were asked to rank the performance of NSS employees versus non-NSS employees.<sup>14</sup> With the proviso that much is dependent on the educational background of the person as well as their place of deployment, the results are as follows:

**Table 1: The performance of NSS employees versus non-NSS employees**

Skill/attribute	Better than their non-NSS counterparts? (yes/no answer)	Key takeaway
Technical skills	<i>Entrepreneurialism</i>	
	Generally yes	It depends on deployment. Difficult to compare someone who did their national service teaching in a rural community to someone working in a bank. Access to certain skills like ICT in the village is different.
	<i>Formal private sector</i>	
	Yes	Depending on where they are placed, graduates have the opportunity to develop their technical skills on-the-job. They have an opportunity to consolidate previous learning in a practical way.
Analytical skills	<i>Entrepreneurialism</i>	
	Definitely yes	Regardless of where they are deployed, personnel are faced with problems and challenges for which they must find solutions.
	<i>Formal private sector</i>	

<sup>14</sup> The researchers compared the responses of three businesses in this section. One IT company and one commercial bank provided input on the 'formal private sector' category, with the Public/Private Entrepreneurial Development Scheme providing input on the 'entrepreneurialism' category.

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Skill/attribute	Better that their non-NSS counterparts? (yes/no answer)	Key takeaway
	Yes	NSS graduates have the ability to think through things analytically, but could do with being given opportunities to practice decision-making.
	<i>Entrepreneurialism</i>	
Communication skills	Definitely yes	Regardless of where they are deployed, service personnel will be dealing with different groups of people, from academics to village chiefs.
	<i>Formal private sector</i>	
	Yes	Service personnel are tertiary level graduates, so they are trained to write essays. Then NSS experience consolidates those skills and helps them improve those skills on-the-job.
Adapting to change	<i>Entrepreneurialism</i>	
	Definitely yes	Wherever personnel are placed they learn how to do things differently from their previous academic environment.
	<i>Formal private sector</i>	
	Not necessarily	All young people are energetic and adaptable, not just NSS graduates.
Professional appearance	<i>Entrepreneurialism</i>	
	Definitely yes	Wherever personnel are deployed, they have a dress code which they would be expected to follow.
	<i>Formal private sector</i>	
	Yes	Personnel have working experience vis à vis someone jumping straight from school.
Work ethic	<i>Entrepreneurialism</i>	
	Definitely yes	Service personnel are always working under somebody, even in a school, you would be responsible to the education officer in that district with rules and regulations they need to abide by. There are requirements to evidence attendance. That is discipline.
	<i>Formal private sector</i>	
	Yes	Given they've had a little bit of exposure, they understand regulations, what they must do and what they must not do. Whereas there can be problems or disciplinary issues with those coming straight from school.
Professionalism	<i>Entrepreneurialism</i>	
	Yes	Compared to someone who has not done any work, service personnel have had the opportunity to be in a professional environment.
	<i>Formal private sector</i>	

Skill/attribute	Better than their non-NSS counterparts? (yes/no answer)	Key takeaway
	Yes	National service provides nine months of work experience whereas other young people's access would be six weeks during an internship.
Creativity	<i>Entrepreneurialism</i>	
	Yes	NSS can be challenging wherever the young people are placed. It is a change from what they are used to so they have to find ways of adjusting to this freedom and have to be creative in responding to everything.
	<i>Formal private sector</i>	
	No	Creativity is lacking.

The results above indicate that service personnel do have the edge vis à vis their counterparts who have not done their service. Technical skills as well as the softer skills such as professionalism, adapting to change, analytical skills and communication skills were noted as valuable preparation for work readiness that young people would otherwise not necessarily have gained without the NSS. However, it is important to note a potential double driver of causality here for selected skills and attributes, since all service personnel are tertiary graduates and thus are being compared with those who have not only not undergone national service, but have not completed tertiary education either. This is particularly pertinent for analytical skills, which were specifically highlighted as something gained through university and built upon during service, if deployment was good. In this case, one can either see the NSS as fostering new skills and attributes, or capitalising and developing skills learnt at university. Crucially, service provides young people with exposure to the workplace and helps them develop the professionalism, work ethic and communication skills that are often not part of a tertiary education system.

**Gender.** As explored above, the NSS targets all tertiary graduates indiscriminately and thus ensures equal access. However, as outlined before, there are some slight differences in NSS participation across the male and female cohorts. Despite this, most personnel interviewed did not consider gender to play a major role in the different experiences of service personnel:

*I think the whole of the National Service one way or the other empowers ladies in Ghana since there are no considerations in the postings. They post everybody wherever. The only exception is for those who are married, sick and pregnant. Otherwise everybody is posted based on qualifications and other reasons. (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

Female service personnel also have the opportunity to take on positions of leadership with examples of women rising to leadership positions in the National Service Personnel Association (NASPA). In addition, the fact that women are building skills in the same areas as men across sectors also constitutes an equalising factor.

NSS management reinforced the idea that the NSS experience is empowering for women especially in terms of increased confidence and self-assertiveness, the latter cited across the board by service personnel as a major benefit of the scheme:

*From our view it's about getting women to be assertive. They've been subservient for a long time. They've been trained at home that they should be seen and not heard. If we can get the young women to be assertive and self-confident then the young women can take their destiny into their own hands. (Interview, NSS Management, 2013)*

Certainly, during the focus group interviews, the women were just as outspoken as their male counterparts and felt they had a right to give their opinion. Indeed, at every level of the NSS, from current personnel and alumni, through to the higher echelons of management, the message was that:

*We have equal knowledge and potential. The difference is in attitude, customs and beliefs. (Interview, Gender, HIV&AIDS and Inclusion Services Desk, 2013)*

In this way, the NSS also has the potential to empower women by providing the opportunity for them to take on leadership positions, and by providing female personnel with the same postings and opportunities to build the same skills as their male counterparts, irrespective of gender. In addition, female personnel could also be instrumental in encouraging more girls to stay in school by posting them to teach in rural areas. In building confidence and tackling education needs inclusively, female personnel could have a powerful impact on younger girls' aspirations as role models and agents of change. By inspiring more young girls to continue studying, NSS personnel could contribute towards correcting the gender imbalance at Ghana's universities.<sup>15</sup>

### **6.3 Engagement with alumni**

At this stage, the NSS does not have a formalised relationship with alumni. In the words of NSS management:

*In their work life they are primarily alumni of their universities. When we call them they respond but we haven't structured it in such a way. (Interview, NSS Management, 2013)*

Institutional alumni engagement could add value to the NSS experience. For example, alumni could be given mentorship roles and asked to take part in orientation week. They could have a great impact in inculcating an understanding of civic service and helping the youth see the value of their service in terms of employability, especially as they are in a similar age cohort as service personnel.

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<sup>15</sup> Please note that some challenges facing female participants during their service should be considered alongside the information presented in this section. These are discussed in section 7.1.



## 7. Challenges and changes in the NSS

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### 7.1 Forces for change

#### Challenges

**Disparities in deployment quality.** One of the major challenges the scheme faces in fostering employability lies in its capacity to provide every participant across the board with a fulfilling experience. In fact, the question seems not to be whether the National Service Scheme in Ghana has the reach and capacity to prepare young people for the job market, as the evidence below will demonstrate. Rather, the issue is that the scheme seems unable, at present, of doing this for everyone, across all fields of deployment. What comes across as acute disparities of experience means that some young people are disadvantaged vis à vis their peers:

*I was expecting half way through my service I would have gained a great deal of knowledge of the software in my sector in geophysics, but I've not even had the possibility to try it. I also thought I'd gain experience in fieldwork but I haven't. I'm lagging behind. Most of my information comes from friends in the field ... I compare myself with colleagues in the private sector and they're way ahead of me. Private sector supervision is high If you compare it to the government sector, even getting a contract to undertake fieldwork is bureaucratic. The private sector is better equipped. (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

From differing levels of support and mentoring to varying degrees of challenging work, service personnel's experiences are more or less fulfilling according to where they are placed. An emerging criticism of some public sector placements, for example, was that people did not have enough to do:

*The jobs don't come too often. I've not had much to do. Maybe in a week I might not do anything. (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

*A major problem is that they don't have enough to do. Some are photocopying. There's a lot of need to deploy them where they would be useful rather than where they will become a liability. That's why we need a monitoring and evaluation mechanism to monitor how efficiently the people are deployed. Then they can be re-deployed. A mechanism of monitoring and evaluation is very important. (Interview, Youth Wing of Major Political Party, 2013)*

*If they are unfortunate to have certain placements, let's take the public sector, for example, the Ghana Water Company, they're just gallivanting – if they are unfortunate not to find somebody who understands their needs, they'll be lost because that organisation does not have firm mentor/mentee work ... So if they come here, I'm not going to pretend that they have a certain amount of experience. I'm going to start all over with them. ... But if they are coming from Barclays bank – great! Because the culture is great. You can't escape learning ... So if the deployment is good, then it gives me a better footing to know where to start with them. (Interview, HR Manager, Leading Internet Provider, 2013)*

Again, as explored above, much of these disparities could be solved if a robust institutional monitoring framework were in place that can identify problem placements, provide feedback to the host organisation in question and re-deploy if necessary. In addition, a comprehensive orientation for host organisations would provide them with a uniform set of guidelines about how to best cater for their personnel. Without this, disparity of deployment can make young people feel demotivated and even resentful about the civic element of their service.

**Understanding civic engagement.** During the interview period, a variety of stakeholders identified a lack of understanding by the youth of civic engagement as a challenge for the programme. What is dubbed by many as ‘national suffering’ belies a lack of understanding of what civic engagement entails on the part of the youth:

*They will tell you, “I struggled to see myself through school so why do I have to give back?” Or “I want to give back but by supporting Greater Accra where I’m from so why do I have to go to the Ashanti region?”* (Interview, Assistant to the Youth Wing’s National Co-ordinator of the Major Political Party, 2013)

Notably, some service personnel themselves supported this point:

*I also think an understanding of National Service is lacking. What we’re supposed to be knowing as service personnel is that it’s not just about developing ourselves, but about developing the nation. So you are posted to schools because they lack teachers, and so doing you’ll be helping the communities and educating younger Ghanaians growing up.* (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)

Significantly, the youth wing of the ruling party of Ghana believes that public education is key in combating this educational deficit. They have made strides in addressing this by delivering a series of talks to raise awareness on what civic service means and to make young people understand the benefits of civic service for them and their nation.

However, civic service must be accompanied by the perception that postings are done fairly. In the words of one member of the current service personnel cohort:

*You have a friend and say I want to work here, I know someone here, I’ll send my letter to him and he’ll get me that post. It should be free and fair. Otherwise you’re in the village and it’s not fair.* (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)

Greater transparency around postings coupled with civic engagement awareness sessions could make inroads in changing young people’s perceptions around their commitment to the scheme. In addition, disparities in deployment quality must be tackled to avoid the sense of unfairness felt by young people regarding civic service:

*The attitude is that “you can’t convince me you’re doing national service at Zenith Bank where you have good wages etc. ...* (Interview, Assistant to the Youth Wing of Major Political Party, 2013)

Where the youth wing of Ghana's ruling party targets current tertiary graduates for awareness raising sessions, the VSO believes civic education must begin before this, at school, preparing young people to think about their civic responsibilities and what it means from an early age:

*If active citizenship was part of our core curricula activities, people would start looking at "what can I do?" ... and look forward to doing [their service] without complaining. (Interview, VSO, 2013)*

Significantly, public education around civic engagement is not only a question of targeting the youth, but the parents too:

*Every year when we post people's children the parents get very angry ... People will want to terminate their service because [they think] their beloved kid, who you have placed in a rural area, is going to die because mosquitoes are going to eat her. (Interview, Former NSS Director, 2013)*

In this way, public education on the aims and objectives of civic service is needed to adequately prepare all stakeholders for the NSS experience. A strategy for managing personnel and employer expectations is to ensure that clear and comprehensive orientation is provided and a detailed training programme is administered by each host organisation for all service personnel in each sector.

**Dependence on the government** is not just an issue of financial resources. One of the greatest challenges that came up again and again is the fact that the scheme has become too political. Changes in government regime can change the scheme's goals and focus areas, and the new president of the republic can decide at any moment that there will be a new board, or a new director, bringing corresponding changes with them. For example, from a partnership point of view:

*You have to go through the process of building a relationship with this new person all over again ... every new year you're on tenterhooks about what is going to happen ... (Interview, VSO, 2013)*

*The national policy should be improved to remove the political agenda from the policy. Today we do farming if the president says and so everybody does. Or today the personnel must go out there and direct traffic. It needs autonomy from the presidency. It should be separated. (Focus Group Interview, Alumni, 2013)*

In this way, establishing a certain amount of financial and organisational autonomy from the government would allow for greater freedom and programme consistency. However, striking a balance between adequate government support and sufficient organisational autonomy is not an easy task. One of the reforms that could be enacted at the policy level would be to enshrine a certain level of autonomy in the National Service Act.

**Accommodation and health in rural areas.** As the NSS readily admits, accommodation has been a problem for personnel deployed to rural areas. In theory, the chief of each district should help personnel find modest accommodation. Some are housed by community leaders and they eat what

their host provides them with. The problem is that the standard varies hugely with some personnel asked to contribute towards their accommodation from their monthly stipend. Another problem in the rural areas concerns health because service personnel who fall ill often do not have enough money to take care of themselves. Only if service personnel benefit from health insurance are they able to access health facilities. The NSS is currently working on getting all rural personnel a health insurance card. Discrepancies in accommodation and health provision constitute one contributing factor that leads young people to feel less than enthusiastic about civic engagement. Rectifying these would be an important push factor in transforming this mentality.

**Gender.** In terms of gender differences in participation, there were a number of points raised in the focus groups with current service personnel and alumni indicating certain gender disparities in the NSS experience. To begin with, sexual harassment was cited as a pervasive problem in Ghanaian society “that goes on everywhere” (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013). A current NSS personnel member retold the story of a colleague posted to teach in a rural area who suffered unwelcome advances from the school’s headmaster. When reported, she was placed elsewhere, but the experience was nevertheless a distressing one. Significantly, the service personnel interviewed did not believe institutional mechanisms were in place to tackle harassment. In the words of one current personnel member: “It’s up to you [to deal with it].” While it is stipulated in the service personnel’s welcome letter that anything of concern must be reported to a director, sexual harassment is not mentioned specifically. In terms of the gender desk being able to respond to this need, the NSS does not have regional gender offices and even at headquarters its visibility is limited, according to the personnel interviewed. Alumni explained that the National Service Personnel Association (NASPA) has had a role in the past in investigating reports of sexual harassment, but this is an ad-hoc rather than institutional arrangement. Suggestions from the personnel on how the NSS could improve this included setting up a committee to ensure staff are responsive to this issue in particular. Culturally, however, it was suggested that the act of reporting incidences of sexual harassment would not be well received from personnel and staff alike, even if there were a formal reporting mechanism in place:

*Even if you report, you’re going to be hated. Everybody’s going to hate you.* (Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)

This reflects a society-wide culture of stigmatising, shaming and exposing the victim to possible reprisals when complaints about harassment are made (Bortei-Doku Aryeetey 2004:vii). The NSS could be instrumental in changing attitudes around this by including a session on sexual harassment and what can be done about it during orientation week.

Other examples of differences in NSS experience along gender lines include female geologists recounting incidences of being excluded from manual work like digging boreholes and having to insist on taking part. Suggestions from men and women in focus groups also suggested that women should enjoy higher allowances because their needs are different in terms of buying sanitary products and toiletries.

To iron out these differences, institutional mechanisms for sexual harassment must be introduced to allow women to profit equally from the NSS experience. The Gender, HIV and AIDS and Inclusion

Services Desk could also fill an important gap by engaging young men and women to discuss their different needs and explore ways in which these could be fulfilled.

**Mentoring.** The NSS has a loose mentoring system for service personnel. However, the level of mentoring varies hugely depending on where you are deployed. For example, many of the personnel deployed in the NSS Secretariat receive some form of mentoring on a daily basis, whereas others in more rural areas experience a ratio of 1-2 mentors for 150 personnel. The less fortunate receive none at all if they are placed in a host organisation that does not have such provisions. Significantly, the youth themselves flagged the lack of mentoring in Ghanaian society as a whole as a challenge. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that 100 per cent of all service personnel interviewed attributed 'Very useful' or 'Quite useful' to the mentoring they received. When the mentoring system works, it makes a noticeable difference to skills development and professional evolution. When it does not, it can be a demotivating factor:

*Coming into work is heartbreaking. You're spending all your money on transportation and you go empty handed. Nobody motivates you or helps you for transformation. (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

A good example of mentoring content provided by the headmaster of a school to a young graduate serving as a rural teacher included:

- guidance and control of teaching and learning
- ways of imparting knowledge to pupils
- writing and preparation of notes for teaching
- report writing for review by headmaster.

This on-the-job training does provide solid work preparation and is an area that the NSS could improve upon. Quality mentoring should be a requirement at each host organisation and a robust monitoring and evaluation system would allow the NSS to track impact.

## 7.2 Changing demands

**Exponential student growth.** The NSS has been put under increasing organisational and financial strain as the number of tertiary institutions increase alongside the corresponding number of graduates they produce. In 2013, around 80 000 service personnel will have been deployed, up by 134 per cent compared to five years ago<sup>16</sup> As this increases year upon year, personnel stipends, training, accommodation and transport (for rural deployment) will require a larger budget.

In addition, since the NSS is dependent on government support, it cannot necessarily rely on this to increase commensurately with increasing student numbers. As a consequence, NSS management cited finances as the single biggest threat to the scheme, explaining that:

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<sup>16</sup> Data from the NSS Brochure (Dalberg analysis).

*NSS is basically a government programme, so we cannot run if we don't have a budget and budgetary allocations to the scheme are dwindling because there are competing causes in the economy. (Interview, NSS management, 2013)*

The challenge is thus to raise funds internally to complement government support with income-generating activities. There has been efforts to do this through the establishment of NSS farms, processing industries and partnerships with the private sector. However, there is still a substantial funding gap to be bridged.

Aside from the financial challenges of growing student numbers and dwindling government support, NSS management also recognises that staff capacity must be reinforced to manage the expectations of both service personnel and host organisations, while adequately monitoring the large numbers that pass through the NSS every year.

**Changes in the wider economy.** In addition, the changing graduate body is not only experiencing a quantitative, but also a qualitative shift. NSS management explained that with the exponential growth in private universities, students are leaving with a broader skill set than they did a few years ago. Moreover, the Ghanaian economy is changing, necessitating changes in the NSS Programme design:

*In the 1980s, ICT wasn't what it is today. Now we have the Oil and Gas sector coming up and we need to focus and see how we can build our programmes into that. So we are driven by the economic reality at any point in time. (Interview, NSS management, 2013)*

In this way, the shifting growth points of the economy necessitate changes in NSS programmatic focus. As job creation becomes less dynamic in the public sector and gains prominence in the private, NSS deployment should reflect this by reducing the number of its personnel sent to state ministries. Aside from economic alignment, there are also complaints that not all of those deployed to the public sector have enough to do. In pro-actively building new relationships with other sectors that are growing in the wider economy, rather than letting private sector institutions request personnel, the NSS may have other opportunities to proactively deal with these changing demands.

### **7.3 Reforms underway**

While NSS management, government, private and civil society stakeholders agree that reforms are needed both at the policy level, to ensure the framework is in line with modern developments, and at a programmatic level, in terms of monitoring and evaluation, the NSS currently has its hands full with the exponential growth of the student body. While the NSS is open to feedback, as demonstrated by VSO's interactions with it, turning this feedback into concrete overhaul reform processes has not yet begun on a large-scale.

## 8. Lessons learned and promising practices

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*The National Service Scheme can't create employment but it can provide information. (Interview, Board Member, 2013)*

*The NSS is located at a transition period when the youth are thinking about what they want to do with their life. Their time at the NSS is a time to reflect, a time to reflect about choices' (Interview, Former NSS Director, 2013)*

*Working here has exposed all of us. Maybe it hasn't met our expectations, but it has exposed us. Many people didn't know how institutions work but being here you at least know some administrative things. We are confident to go into the workplace. (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

*Some may disagree, but I think it makes a lot of difference. [The NSS] is your work experience ... Most of them come straight out of university and will be better prepared ... With NSS you learn discipline, how to even dress properly, how to communicate properly in the workplace, basic skills that will serve you for life so I think it's very very important. It makes a lot of difference. (Interview, Entrepreneurship Initiative, 2013)*

Overall, a mixed picture emerges regarding the impact of the NSS on employability, entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihoods. In essence, the outcome of the scheme on participant employability hinges upon the quality of the service personnel's deployment, as explored above. For some, service leads directly to employment with their host organisation retaining them post-service. For others, it provides the opportunity to develop hard and soft skills that can propel them onto other career paths and livelihoods. For all of those interviewed, however, it is clear that the NSS experience provides personnel with workplace exposure, which most have never had before. The rest of this section assesses the promising practices that improve participants' employability and ability to become entrepreneurs or develop other forms of livelihoods in Ghana.

**Well positioned.** In many ways, the NSS in Ghana is ideally placed to foster young people's route into paid employment, sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship. To begin with, no other institution in Ghana can claim to be working at the same kind of scale: 62 000 young graduates were produced in 2011, 74 000 graduates in 2012, and the increase shows no sign of stopping with an estimated 80 000 in 2013. Secondly, the extent of state backing in financial and legislative terms gives the scheme a strong mandate to mobilise the youth and place them at the service of their nation's development. Thirdly, the scheme's target group positions it squarely at the crossroad between education and the work place. The combination of these three key elements opens up a range of different possibilities for the service personnel, for employers and for educational institutions:

*It is a good opportunity for the employer to assess the quality of human resources we're turning out from our institutions. (Interview, Youth Wing of Major Political Party, 2013)*

*Given [education] is a large investment that individuals make there ought to be some feedback between what industry is looking for, the new skill areas in demand, and what institutions are offering ... National Service could be the bridge. (Interview, NSS Board Member, 2013)*

The NSS is therefore well placed to tackle, among other things, the disconnect in Ghana between the educational system and industry by providing the crucial feedback to parents, students and institutions that is currently missing. Given the place that the NSS occupies in terms of scope and target group, it could generate information about the kinds of study areas students are pursuing in relation to what businesses are requiring. This could be an important source of information for stakeholders. The NSS Executive Board explained it as follows:

*One of the things we want to do is to develop capacity to do basic research on some of these things and to present evidence and information. Policy is blind. As part of the NSS and its structure, we can develop capacity to put young people [in]to researching these issues to present evidence to influence policy. (Interview, NSS Board Member, 2013)*

The NSS thus has great potential for altering the youth employment landscape in Ghana, based on its position, scope and target intervention group. Steps are already being taken to utilise these assets with regular stakeholder/learning fora in place. For the first time in 2010, and set to become a regular event, the NSS invited all user agencies including government ministries, the private sector and civil society to participate in a forum that created an opportunity to collect independent feedback on NSS operations. It also provided the space for stakeholders to communicate with each other about possible collaboration. Stakeholders discussed problems, identified solutions and explored how they can participate more fully. The first of these was a roaring success with more in the pipeline.

**Alternative funding mechanisms.** The stakeholder forum discussed above is but one best practice that requires financial resources for its execution. Others, including livelihoods and entrepreneurship training, face similar constraints. These could be considered as 'value-added extras' since increased funds are also needed to cover the core stipends and accommodation needs of an ever-increasing graduate body.

Funding constraints are a real challenge, but the NSS has begun taking steps to find alternative resources. For example, the NSS has a number of income-generating projects where personnel are deployed for both skills development and income generation. The NSS has been operating a catering unit composed of a fast food outlet that specialises in pastries and a full-service restaurant offering both local and continental dishes. It also has a commercial borehole drilling unit and a water bottling factory. In addition, the NSS has a number of farms where income is generated from agricultural activities like raising poultry, pigs and rabbits, as well as through the growing and selling of cereals. A select number of private sector companies also pay levies to support the recruitment and orientation of the personnel they host. Many of these activities constitute best practices for the way in which they combine income generation with a skills building element for the young people in question. However, a greater fundraising effort is required for the NSS to deliver employability through civic service for its service personnel.



**Skill-building.** In addition to the scheme’s ideal positioning, the workplace exposure the NSS provides gives service personnel a solid basis upon which to build professional skills, especially on the softer side of the scale:

*We realise that when they finish school they do not have opportunities. So they join the NSS and have a starting place for learning the rudiments of how to grow and build their capacity, how to engage and build teams, basically the soft skills, within a work setting. [The NSS] is a huge platform to enable the young graduates to build these soft-skills. (Interview, VSO, 2013)*

As explored in Section 1, one of the most pressing problems in the youth unemployment equation in Ghana is the skills mismatch between education and industry. To investigate this further, three private sector institutions<sup>17</sup> were asked to list the skills they require from entry-level youth:

While the job role in each institution may demand a different skill set depending on the specificity of the position, there were many crossovers skills, especially on the softer side of the scale. On the technical side, degree choice was considered important with institutions expressing concerns about young people choosing “relegated subjects” like classics or dance. Among the entry-level skill sets cited previously, creativity, analytical skills and communication skills (written and verbal) were lacking. As discussed below, communication skills were seen as something the NSS helps young people to develop.

**Table 2: Skills required from entry-level youth**

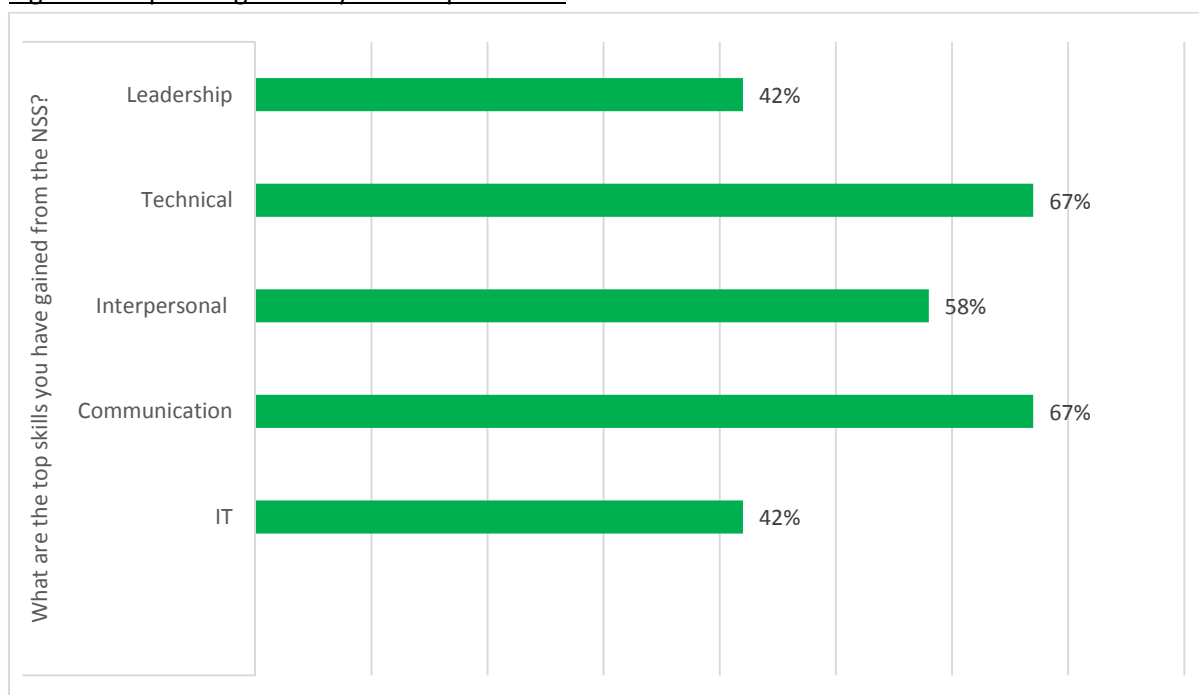
Skills	ICT firm	Commercial bank	Entrepreneurship
Relevant degree	✓	✓	
ICT skills	✓	✓	✓
Previous work experience	✓	✓	✓
Problem solving	✓	✓	✓
Leadership	✓	✓	✓
Team work	✓	✓	✓
Communication	✓	✓	✓
Report writing	✓	✓	
Creativity	✓	✓	✓
Innovation	✓	✓	✓

<sup>17</sup> Two formal and one informal private sector institution were interviewed for this case profile, including one leading commercial bank, one leading internet provider, and one entrepreneurship scheme that supports young entrepreneurs to build their businesses.

Skills	ICT firm	Commercial bank	Entrepreneurship
Initiative	✓	✓	✓
Adaptability	✓	✓	✓
Analytical skills	✓	✓	✓
Typing skills	✓	✓	
Tenacity			✓
Financial management			✓
Business management			✓
Research skills			✓

A selection of alumni and current personnel<sup>18</sup> were asked to list the top skills they felt they had gained through their national service. As can be seen from the Figure 3, the top skills cited cover both soft and hard skills with improved technical and communication skills observed by 67 per cent of participants, improved interpersonal skills by 58 per cent of respondents, and improved leadership and IT skills by 42 per cent of participants.

Figure 3: Top skills gained by service personnel



Technical skills included hard skills like teaching, farming, accountancy, geo-physical exploration, bookkeeping, procurement and financial management, illustrating the hands-on practical element of the scheme:

<sup>18</sup> Fifteen current personnel and nine alumni took part in the survey.

*Our educational system focuses more on theory than practice. We have little or no time at all for practicals so it is only through the NYS that we are able to know about the practical aspect of our course. (Survey, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

However, it is important to note that while the NSS does provide the opportunity to develop certain technical skills, these skills are not always aligned to what the young person feels they need to propel them into their future career of choice:

*I have never wanted to be in the borehole drilling industry, so it may not be a very good start for the required experience for my desired industry. (Survey, Current Personnel, 2013)*

*I have not been given the chance to practice what I learnt at school which is BSc Accounting, [although] with NYS I can confidently say I can teach someone to understand better than before. (Survey, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

Conversely, when technical skills are built within the young person's area of expertise and interest, participants report feeling very satisfied with their NSS experience because they are able to supplement their theoretical educational training with technical, on-the-job know-how. For example, one of the current personnel members interviewed studied accounting at university and was placed in the internal audit department of the NSS Secretariat. He was one of the most satisfied focus group participants because he was able to develop technical skills in a relevant area:

*When I was in school, I learnt a lot about books. But now, I can say I understand what the books said. (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

There are other examples, outside the survey sample, of how the NSS provides opportunities for developing relevant technical skills, like lawyers placed in the legal aid department, accountants deployed into banking, teachers placed in education and nurses and doctors in hospitals and clinics. However, considering the scheme's current need to deploy around 60 per cent of personnel as teachers, postings related to subjects of study and corresponding opportunities to build relevant technical skills is seen as a lottery. This is reinforced by the fact that personnel have the right to give a preference regarding *where* they would like to be posted, but not *what* they would like to be doing.

However, lack of course alignment is not always a bad thing. Those that are deployed in an area unrelated to their degree choice sometimes change career direction to align with their new-found skills, as one alumnus who studied procurement, but was placed as a teacher, explains:

*For me, I am a teacher. I studied procurement ... I didn't study anything about education. But through liaising with children [through deployment as a teacher] I was motivated to enter into the teaching service. ... It has identified another talent in me. (Focus Group Interview, Alumni, 2013)*

The same applied to another alumnus who studied accounting, but through the National Service found his vocation in teaching:

*[The NSS] has given me a sense of realisation of the need for rural development and my responsibility as a resource person or future leader. Above all, I never knew I could be a good teacher, counsellor and trainer. I loved my experience with the town folks and my improvement in learning the Ewe language. (Survey, Alumnus, 2013)*

Where technical skills tend to be career-specific and less likely to transfer over to other professional areas, the softer skills are transversal and were reported as a benefit of the scheme, regardless of placement. Communication, both verbal and written, was cited by participants as a top skill, receiving the same percentage of votes as the technical skill category:

*My communication skills were boosted up hugely. They've tremendously improved. (Focus Group Interview, Alumni, 2013)*

*Some of us could not stand [and talk] in front of thousands of people, even our communities and even family. But by virtue of these positions and being groomed by the scheme we are able to decrease that fear. (Focus Group Interview, Alumni, 2013)*

Interpersonal skills, closely linked to communication skills, was also voted a top skill with respondents providing positive feedback about being exposed to a great variety of people in the workplace:

*My experience as a service personnel has given me almost all the experience, that is, many of the characteristics or attitudes to relate to subordinates, bosses, groups, public and all kinds of humans or people in any endeavor. (Questionnaire, Alumnus, 2013)*

*[I've learnt how to] work with different people from different backgrounds and characters and being tolerant. At first you don't know them and they don't know you. Within the service and throughout the year you get to know certain things about each other and how to relate and how to cope with different situations. (Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

*I was the reserved type and have learnt how to socialise. (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

Leadership skills also scored highly, reflecting the high number of former National Service Personnel Association (NASPA) leaders and teachers in the present sample:

*[The NSS] has been able to create a platform for personnel ... who have been able to rise and distinguish themselves which has given lots of people the edge to become leaders. If it wasn't for that I would not be here today ... NASPA has provided a platform to access the world of work. (Focus Group Interview, Alumni, 2013)<sup>19</sup>*

The service personnel-run NASPA itself emerges as an example of best practice. It was established by former Director Peter Kpordugbe and continues to enjoy an active existence today. NASPA provides

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<sup>19</sup> This alumnus is now a politician.

male and female service personnel with leadership opportunities and service personnel as a whole a voice to articulate demands to NSS management. Anecdotally, it is said that many NASPA leaders go into politics post-service.

Certain deployments are more likely to foster leadership than others, with teaching presented as an ideal experience for developing these skills, both because of the classroom environment, and perhaps also because most teaching placements are in rural areas, allowing young people from the city to make something of themselves in a different environment. As the former Executive Director of the scheme explained, the NSS experience provides young people with basic leadership skills, confidence and increased self-worth.

*'You send a kid to a rural area and he becomes the most important person in the village. Even after he's left he's more or less the chief. He's a simple sixth former who didn't realise he was so important.* (Interview, Former NSS Director, 2013)

To round off the top five skills gained from the NSS experience, IT skills featured highly, especially within the current cohort of personnel, since all were deployed in an office space and needed to use a computer on a daily basis. IT skills included typing, statistical packages like SPSS, and navigating the web.

If the top five skills gained by personnel are cross-referenced with the entry-level skills listed by the private sector, all of the soft skills here find their place among them. Knowing how to present and package skills is important, and this represents another opportunity for the NSS to add value to service personnel's experience by helping them with career workshops, CV clinics and interview advice:

*I see lots of CVs and even from the CVs you can automatically discount a certain number of people in terms of communication ... I see poor, shoddy layout, bad handwriting, you don't even get to read it. That just puts you off. There's a lot of emphasis on all the qualifications, but nothing on the experience. These are things that people need to be educated on.* (Interview, Pan-African Recruitment Agency, 2013)

**Work readiness.** From skills to work readiness, it is also important to mention that a significant proportion of current service personnel cited punctuality, professional appearance, confidence and general exposure to an office environment as positive attributes they acquired through their service:

*[NSS] has given me the exposure as to how to dress to the office, how to carry myself, how to relate to people.* (Survey, Current Service Personnel, 2013)

*[NSS] has given me an idea of how the office is run and what you are supposed to do and not do.* (Survey, Current Service Personnel, 2013)

*I used to be late for programme, but it looks like its improving.* (Survey, Current Service Personnel, 2013)

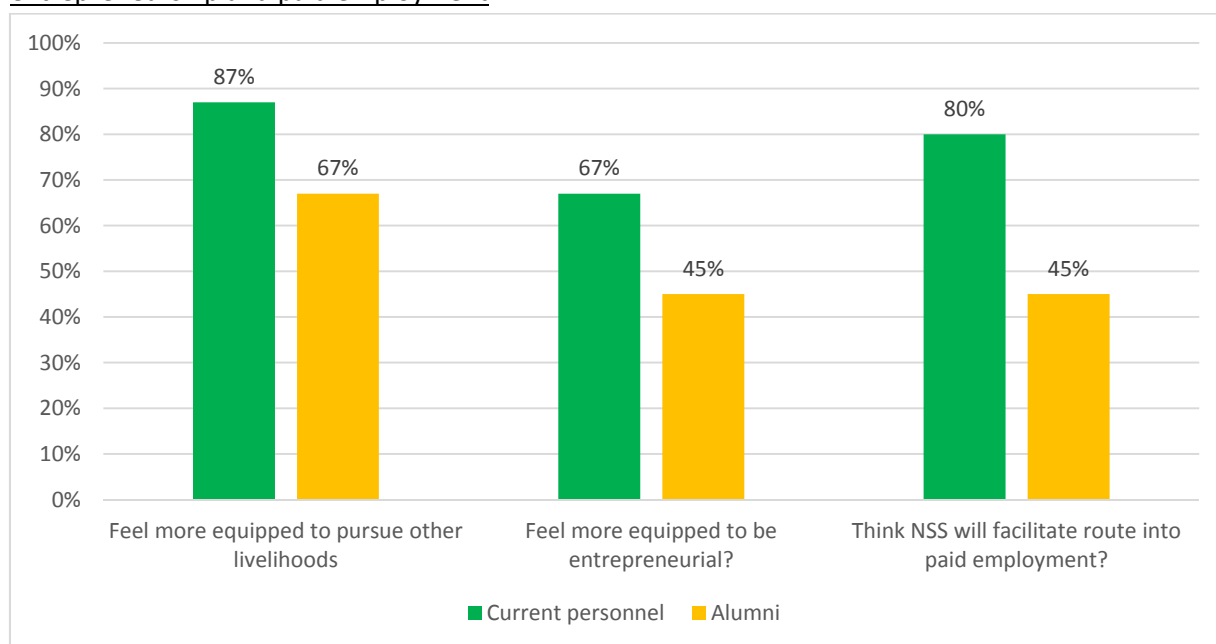
*I've learn how to work within limited timeframe and deadlines. (Focus Group Interview, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

Indeed, as the VSO emphasised, fostering employability is an umbrella term that covers skills building, but also contributes to work readiness:

*It prepares you for the job market, no matter how minimal it is. You know that you need to wake up in the morning, to take a car, to report to somebody, to carry out certain tasks, these are things you only get in a work setting. (Interview, VSO, 2013)*

This combination of workplace exposure and skills development led the majority of current service personnel to believe that their national service would ease their route into gainful employment/self-employment. Alumni, while strong advocates of the impact of the NSS on their ability to pursue livelihoods, were less supportive of the scheme's impact on their ability to be entrepreneurs or to enter into paid employment, since many of them were not currently employed. The survey results are presented below:

**Figure 4: Participant opinions on the impact of NSS on their ability to pursue livelihoods, entrepreneurship and paid employment**



**Other livelihoods.** The results show that respondents across the sample of both current personnel and alumni cohorts feel most strongly about their service best equipping them to pursue other livelihoods (87 per cent and 67 per cent respectively):

*As a worker of the NS Secretariat it is mandatory that we go to the NS farm once a week to help with the work there, so that has helped me ... gain some knowledge in agriculture, hence I can make a livelihood through agriculture. (Survey, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

*Due to the NYS training in agriculture I was able to cultivate about 15 acre of maize. (Survey, Alumnus, 2013)<sup>20</sup>*

In recent years, the scheme's focus on agriculture has given many young people the knowledge and skills to cultivate their own crops, operate machinery on farms, understand the use of fertilizer, and be supported in setting up their own farms should they wish to. As a result, 47 per cent of those who felt better equipped to pursue other livelihoods referred to farming and agriculture in particular and 53 per cent of current service personnel (who have benefitted most from the government's agriculture drive vis à vis alumni) cited "farming" as an additional technical skill. In addition, 30 per cent mentioned farming as "what they liked the most about the NSS". One participant in the current service personnel cohort had already been inspired to grow produce in her back garden and two others had plans to enter fish farming and poultry farming.

Significantly, the scheme's focus on agriculture as a viable livelihood not only equips service personnel with additional skills to pursue other livelihoods, but also straddles the interface between skills building and civic service. It was mentioned by NSS stakeholders and corroborated by these study findings that rural deployments tend to encourage civic service engagement more than urban placements. The current personnel in the sample were all deployed in the city, but as part of their programme were required to render farm visits and agriculture project work on a weekly basis, thus exposing them to a different side of life. As one of the current service personnel cohort explained:

*For me I would say the farming aspect [is what I like most about the NSS]. This is because the produce from the farms are used to feed secondary school pupils and other organisations which cannot afford to feed their people. This makes me feel happy because I am in a way contributing to my nation's development. (Survey, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

In this way, the agricultural component of the scheme can be held up as an example of best practice for providing employable skills for alternative livelihoods, fostering civic engagement, and exposing young people to a sector of the economy that is set to expand.

**Entrepreneurialism.** From livelihoods to entrepreneurship, the NSS offers entrepreneurship training to selected personnel, funding permitting. However, of the three areas explored in the graph above, personnel felt least equipped to be entrepreneurial with 45 per cent of alumni and 67 per cent of current personnel giving an affirmative response to the question, "Do you feel more equipped to be entrepreneurial?"

*Yes, because several business and entrepreneurial workshops were organised for us, of which we were trained to be entrepreneurially driven. (Survey, Alumni, 2013)*

*Yes, because the experience during my NYS at the internal audit department has given me the zeal that one day I will open my own audit firm. (Survey, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

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<sup>20</sup> The NSS provided technical and financial support to this alumnus to start a maize farm.

*No, because I have not received any entrepreneurial training or motivation to do so from where I am. (Survey, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

Those who felt better equipped to be entrepreneurs were the personnel who underwent the entrepreneurship training and workshops and/or were exposed to business through their deployments, which most of them were not. Indeed, entrepreneurship has not received the same level of NSS support as, for instance, agricultural livelihoods.

Entrepreneurial workshops are certainly something that the NSS could expand, considering the emphasis the private sector puts on such skills for job creation, as well as the existence of entrepreneurial schemes open for collaboration such as the Entrepreneurship Initiative interviewed for this study. However, considering the financial burden of providing such training to the large numbers of young people who pass through the NSS every year, it may be prudent to build upon the partnership model that the scheme has enjoyed success with in other areas.

**Paid employment.** Finally, with regards to whether survey participants believe the NSS facilitated/would facilitate their route into paid employment, results reveal a large gap between current personnel and alumni opinion. Eighty per cent of current service personnel were optimistic about their chances for the future, based on their national service experience and believed that their chances were better because of the work experience they gained:

*Yes, because I have gained experience in my field. And in Ghana all the organisations are looking for people with experience. (Survey, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

And because it acts as an effective bridge between university and the work place:

*Yes, the NYS will definitely help me achieve this because it's something that shapes your future by giving you a stepping stone to face the future and help you get employment. (Survey, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

The 20 per cent that responded negatively either explained that the work experience gained was not in their field of study, or that the scheme has no exit programme in place to help them make the transition between NSS and the job market.

*No, because the task of finding a job lies on me and how good I am at scouting and impressing recruiters. (Survey, Current Service Personnel, 2013)*

Only 45 per cent of alumni, on the other hand, responded positively to whether the NSS facilitated their route into paid employment. Where some were in gainful employment because the scheme had equipped them with the right skills or introduced them to a new career path, others were still unemployed, having only left the scheme a few years previously.

The results of this small survey thus complement the data collected through interviews with key stakeholders in the national youth service landscape. Both sets of data indicate that the NSS has great potential for skills building through civic engagement, but that place of deployment and the



corresponding levels of mentorship and different exposure to skills building that come with it are a bigger determinant of whether the NSS gives young people access to the world of work or not.

The NSS is not an employment agency, but it can and does prepare young people for the workplace to varying degrees. An adequate policy environment, fruitful partnership models, the sheer scope of the scheme, and its target group, make it ideally placed to bridge the gap between education and employment. However, financial and organisational constraints exacerbated by the exponential growth of the graduate body have led to disparities in young people's deployment experience. This, in turn, is fed by the lack of an institutional monitoring and evaluation system which means the scheme is far from intentionally preparing *all* Ghanaian graduates for economic engagement. If these challenges are overcome, however, the National Service Scheme in Ghana has tremendous potential to make a substantial contribution towards improving the educational and employment landscape in the country as a whole.

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## Appendix 1: Interview list

- Interview, Pan-African Recruitment Agency, Phone Interview, 20 April 2013
- Interview, National Service Scheme Management, National Service Scheme Secretariat, Accra, Ghana, 22 April 2013
- Interview, HR Manager of Leading Internet Provider, Head Office, Accra, Ghana, 22 April 2013
- Interview, National Service Scheme IT Department, National Service Scheme Secretariat, Accra, Ghana, 23 April 2013
- Interview, Gender, HIV&AIDS and Inclusion Services Desk, with Emma Hamilton, Head of the Desk, National Service Scheme Secretariat, Accra, Ghana, 23 April 2013
- Interview, Entrepreneurship Initiative, their office, Accra, Ghana, 23 April 2013
- Interview, National Service Scheme Board Member, with David Pessey, Accra, Ghana, 23 April 2013
- Interview, Former National Service Scheme Executive Director, with Peter Kporbugbe, Hotel Fiesta Royale, Accra, Ghana, 24 April 2013
- Interview, Innovations in Poverty Action, Accra, Ghana, 24 April 2013
- Focus Interview, Programme Manager, with Kafui Adzo Mills-Odoi, Volunteer Services Oversees (VSO) Headquarters, Accra, Ghana, 24 April 2013
- Focus Interview, Current Service Personnel, National Service Scheme Secretariat, Accra, Ghana, 25 April 2013
- Interview, National Service Alumni, National Service Scheme Secretariat, Accra, Ghana, 25 April 2013
- Interview, National Youth Authority, Accra, Ghana, 26 April 2013
- Interview, Youth Wing of Major Political Party, Headquarters, Accra, Ghana, 26 April 2013
- Interview, Assistant to Youth Wing of Major Political Party, Headquarters, Accra, Ghana 26 April 2013
- Interview, Ghana Education Service, Hotel, Accra, Ghana, 26 April 2013
- Interview, HR Manager of Leading Bank, Head Office, Accra, Ghana, 26 April 2013.

## Appendix 2: Survey questionnaire (current service personnel)

*Individual questionnaire to be filled out by each participant prior to focus group interview.*

**Country:**

**Name of the location within the country:**

**Date of interview:**

### General profile

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Gender:
4. Marital status:
5. Ethnic group:
6. Contact number:
7. Email address and Skype name:
8. When did your service start?
9. In what field are you deployed?

<i>Agriculture</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Cooperatives</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Education</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Health</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Local government</i> <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Military</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Rural development, including surveying, physical planning, civil engineering and rural industries</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Youth programmes</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Other, please specify</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	

10. What is the highest level of schooling you have obtained?

11. If you are a university graduate, what did you major in?

12. Is your current field of deployment related to what you studied at university/college?

Yes

No

**The service**

13. What does your service involve?

14. What aspects of the NYS do you like the most? Why?

15. Do you receive a stipend?

Yes

No

16. If so, how much?

17. What do you use this stipend for?

18. Do you think NYS should be mandatory?

Yes

No

19. Why?/Why not?

20. While you are undergoing the service do you receive mentorship or coaching?

Yes

No

21. If yes, who provides the mentorship or coaching?

22. How often do you meet with your mentor or coach?

<i>Once a week</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Once every two weeks</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Once a month</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Once every two months</i> <input type="checkbox"/>
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Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

23. How useful did you find your coaching/mentoring?

<i>Very useful</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Quite useful</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Not at all useful</i> <input type="checkbox"/>
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24. Please rank the most important skills (hard and soft) you have gained.

25. Does the NYS encourage you to save funds to start your own business?

Yes

No

26. Do you feel more equipped/confident to seek employment opportunities which you would not have been able to without the NYS?

Yes

No

27. Why?/Why not?

28. Do you feel more equipped/confident to be entrepreneurial which you would not have been able to without the NYS?

Yes

No

29. Why/Why not?

30. Do you feel more equipped/confident to pursue other livelihoods which you would not have been able to without the NYS?

Yes

No

31. Why/Why not?

32. Do you think the National Youth Service will facilitate your route into paid employment?

Yes

No

33. Why?/Why not?

34. How satisfied are you with your overall NYS experience?

*Very satisfied*

*Quite satisfied*

*Quite dissatisfied*

*Very dissatisfied*

35. How could NYS be improved to help its graduates generate an income post-service?

36. What are your plans post-service?

37. Do you think the NYS programme will help you achieve this?

Yes

No

### Appendix 3: Survey questionnaire (alumni)

*Individual questionnaire to be filled out by each participant prior to focus group interview.*

**Country:**

**Name of the location within the country:**

**Date of interview:**

<b>General profile</b>
------------------------

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Gender:
4. Marital status:
5. Ethnic group:
6. Contact number:
7. Email address and Skype name:
8. In which part of the country are you based (rural/urban?)
9. In what field were you deployed during your term with the NYS?

<i>Agriculture</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Cooperatives</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Education</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Health</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Local government</i> <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Military</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Rural development, including surveying, physical planning, civil engineering and rural industries</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Youth programmes</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Other, please specify</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	



10. Are you currently employed?

Yes

No

11. Employed or self-employed?

12. If self-employed, how many people do you employ?

13. If employed, how many people do you manage/supervise?

14. What sector of work are you engaged in?

15. Are you employed in the private or public sector?

16. What is the highest level of schooling you have obtained?

17. For college/university graduates: What did you major in?

18. Was your field of deployment related to what you studied at college/university?

Yes

No

<b>The service</b>
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19. What did your service involve?

20. What aspects of the NYS did you like the most?

21. Why did you like them the most?

22. Did you receive a stipend?

Yes

No

23. If so, how much?

24. What did you use this stipend for?

25. Do you think NYS should be mandatory?

Yes

No

26. Why?/Why not?

27. While you were undergoing the service did you receive mentorship or coaching?

Yes

No

28. If yes, who provided the mentorship or coaching?

29. What did you receive mentoring in?

30. How often did you meet with your mentor or coach?

<i>Once a week</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Once every two weeks</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Once a month</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Once every two months</i> <input type="checkbox"/>
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Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

31. How useful did you find your coaching/mentoring?

<i>Very useful</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Quite useful</i> <input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Not at all useful</i> <input type="checkbox"/>
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32. How could coaching/mentoring be improved?

33. Did the NYS encourage you to save funds to start your own business?

Yes

No

34. Do you feel more equipped/confident to seek employment opportunities which you would not have been able to without the National Youth Service?

Yes

No

35. Please rank the most important skills (hard and soft) you have gained?

<b>Post-service</b>
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36. When you graduated from the NYS were your qualifications recognised by educational or training entities in the country?

Yes

No

37. Which educational/training entities?

38. Do you think the NYS facilitated your entry into paid employment?

Yes

No

39. Why?/Why not?

40. Do you feel more equipped/confident to be entrepreneurial which you would not have been able to without the NYS?

Yes

No

41. Why/Why not?

42. Do you feel more equipped/confident to pursue other livelihoods which you would not have been able to without the NYS?

Yes

No

43. Why/Why not?