



**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 Executive Summary

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Executive summary

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,¹ 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.

¹ 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 agriculture² 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.

² 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’³ 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

³ 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.