



Received: 21 February 2018  
Accepted: 19 September 2018  
First Published: 26 September 2018

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## POLITICS & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The paradox of youth empowerment: Exploring youth intervention programme in Ghana

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**Abstract:** Empowerment is a necessary determinant of young people's participation in national, regional and district or local level decision-making processes. For inclusiveness in any social intervention programme, the policy process should be all-embracing sharing of knowledge and active stakeholders' participation which includes the youth. This paper delineates the context of Local Enterprise and Skills Development Programme (LESDEP) by focusing on the extent to which the programme beneficiaries (youth) were empowered to play active roles in the decision policy processes which goes beyond the rhetoric. In particular, to unpack the perception that young people empowerment in a youth-oriented programme has the potential of curbing the problem of exclusion. Inferences from the concept of an empowerment might be the premise for rethinking the debate surrounding youth empowerment in the initiatives oriented towards young people. Youth in Ghana has a very little aptitude and plays an inconsequential role in policy design; therefore, the need arises for youth empowerment to enable them to engage in the broader national policies. Having assumed a negative deviation after a further analysis using empowerment perception index (EPI), the study revealed that youth marginal

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The teeming youth in Ghana are crucial agents in the country's social, political and economic development. To better harness this demographic dividend, it is essential to empower the youth to actively participate in the national development agenda. The buzzword in recent social intervention project is "participation". However, the extent to which perceived primary beneficiaries (youth) are empowered to participate meaningfully in the project monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activities is vague. The study discovered that the youth involvement in the participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) activities was inconsequential with a negative deviation of 1.45 (-1.45). The beneficiaries participated only in the data collection stage. Clearly, the youth were largely bystanders and not as partners empowered enough to participate in the PM&E activities. The poor empowerment of project beneficiaries in social intervention programmes in Ghana is a key reason that has hampered mainstream socio-economic development.

involvement and consultation in decision making cannot constitute empowerment to any degree. Given the crucial implications of this for youth policy implementations at the national as well as subnational level, the paper recommended some pathways for ensuring youth empowerment in youth-oriented programmes in Ghana.

**Subjects:** Development Studies, Environment, Social Work, Urban Studies; Public Administration & Management; Political Behavior and Participation; Government; Development Studies; Humanities

**Keywords:** Beneficiaries; empowerment; Ghana; monitoring; participation; youth

### 1. Introduction

*Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace. If, however, they are left on society margins, all of us will be impoverish. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the lives of their societies (Kofi Annan, Former Secretary General, United Nations (UN), 2015).*

It is against this background that this paper seeks to explore how the Ghanaian youth are empowered to take an active role in decision-making processes that have a substantial influence on their well-being. The lingering gap towards youth empowerment globally possesses a challenge to international, national and local social interventions programmes. The widening vulnerabilities among youth in the world stem out of poverty, unemployment and lack of youth empowerment (Banks, 2016; Frame, De Lannoy, & Leibbrandt, 2016; Min-Harris, 2010). The absence of youth empowerment in most youth policies ultimately will prevent proper accountability and commitment on the part of policy makers at both national and local levels (Boadu & Isioma, 2017).

Globally, there are copious youth intervention programmes in most countries, sub-Saharan Africa in particular (Youthpolicy.org, 2017), and Ghana is no exception (Gyampo & Obeng-Odoom, 2013, p. 20). Despite the rhetoric of youth empowerment in youth-oriented initiatives in Africa, in practice very little of such empowerment is seen on the part of beneficiaries (youth) in most of these initiatives even though it can be beneficial to youth and the large society (Anderson & Sandmann, 2009; Gyampo, 2012). Youth intervention programmes and policies will only succeed when youth are empowered to become active partners and not mere spectators in the programme formulation stage (Hope & Kempe, 2012, p. 228). While several youth policies tend to have a very seductive theoretical conception of youth empowerment, yet, in reality, their involvement in the policy-making processes is very dormant. However, their involvement across the board can be a ground set to influence their long-term empowerment as active citizens (Okojie, 2003, p. 12).

There is no “one size fits all” approach to modelling what really constitutes youth empowerment. However, having taken LESDEP as a case study, it is vital to acknowledge that its unique emphasis on youth development is a better position in determining what truly is youth empowerment. In the context of Ghana and in this paper, we defined empowerment as the process of enhancing the capacities or abilities of individuals (youth or beneficiaries of an intervention programme) or groups of persons to influence or make informed policy choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes (Narayan, 2002, p. 13). When young people are empowered to participate actively in the policy process, it can advance the individual abilities as well as the society at large (Jennings et al., 2006; Hope & Kempe, 2012). Thus, initiators, as well as implementers of youth intervention programmes, should view youth empowerment as a positive investment which will yield imminent outcomes.

## 2. Two decades of youth intervention programmes in Ghana

Since the inception of the Fourth Republic (1992), there is a good number of youth development intervention programmes. Ironically, the unemployment situation among the youth has remained unchanged, and in fact, it is increasingly becoming worse (Ghana Youth Employment and Entrepreneurial Agency (GYEEDA, Report, 2013 pp. 3). These policies and other numerous youth-oriented intervention programmes which include but not limited to the National Youth Employment Programme (NYEP), Youth Enterprise Support (YES), Youth Enterprise and Skill Development (YESDEP), Graduate Business Support Schemes (GEBSS), Local Enterprise and Skills Development Programme (LESDEP), The Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy Programme (GPRSP I & II), Youth Enterprises and Skills Development Centre (YESDEC), The Youth in Agriculture Programme (YIAP) and the newest Ghana Youth Employment and Entrepreneurial Development Agency (GYEEDA) are all premised on altering the ongoing youth marginalisation in national development planning. Notwithstanding, the established structural arrangement continues to hinder active youth empowerment since their participation in the decision-making processes is limited. The majority of these youth intervention programmes in Ghana are bedeviled by shortage of funds, corruption and misappropriation (GYEEDA Report, July, 2013).

Despite the sharp increase in the economically active population in Ghana, policy makers have failed to properly target the needs of the youth and failed to ensure their active participation and complete adequate analysis of their unique priorities. Youth policies have been touted to be more interested in the outcomes and improvements in the livelihood of young people (Godfrey, 2003) and not just the mere processes and altering of programmes name, usually vague and contested in terms of scope and objectives. For instance, National Youth Council (NYC) as established by law NRDC 241 in 1974 became known as National Youth Authority (NYA) in 2001 and the National Youth Employment Programme (NYEP) is currently called Ghana Youth Employment and Entrepreneurial Development Agency (GYEEDA). The majority of these youth programmes have failed to include specific structures to ensure youth empowerment, nor have they positively addressed specific youth concerns holistically. In fact, a good number of these youth initiatives are “sleep-walking” programmes, and the majority were abandoned before they were even started. These youth programmes are usually outlined in national policies on thematic areas such as employment, education, health, sports, juvenile delinquency among many others. These programmes in most cases have very little to do with youth empowerment, and Local Enterprise and Skills Development Programme (LESDEP) is no exception (Boadu & Isioma, 2017; Motcham, 2014; YES Ghana, 2012). As a result of this impediment on the part of the youth, their voices are limited if not at all heard, and their concerns never reach the top of the political agenda (United Nations, 2006, p. 21).

To inform policy, this paper examined the nuances of youth empowerment in the various youth-oriented programmes in Ghana with special reference to LESDEP. The paper will further unpack youth participation in these interventions programmes, highlighting the level at which target beneficiaries are empowered to influence the programme formulation process. The paper interrogates the shade of this complex situation by suggesting some pathways for future youth-oriented programme implementation.

## 3. Youth empowerment in Ghana. Overview in the Fourth Republic (1992)

Historically, youth participation in national and specific intervention programmes is as old as the country Ghana. The critical question is how has these evolved over the years? And how are they wrapped up in the competing “imaginaries” of national development and progress? How are they embedded in local, national and regional policies? How is the youth participation in national or community development connected to state control, and the exercise of political power at the margins? Evidently, the literature reveals that regardless of the political regime (civil or military), the youth have always been mobilised to participate in the national development agenda (Gyampo & Obeng-Odoom, 2013). There have been many phases, from the pre-colonial era to modern political dispensation. However, this paper will briefly interrogate youth empowerment in the

Fourth Republic (from the year 1992 to date). What does the current youth participation reveal in the lasting youth-government misgivings in Ghana's development?

### **3.1. Youth empowerment and modern political dynamics**

With the promulgation of the 1992 Constitution, the current phase of the evolution of youth empowerment in policies and programmes in Ghana began. The conditions of youth empowerment in the preceding phases, which took place in the three different republics since independence, 1960, 1969 and 1979, respectively, are quite different from the current political dispensation. Having lifted the restriction on the ban of political party's formation, various political parties sprang up to contest the first national election in the Fourth Republic (3 November 1992). The PNDC was transformed into a political party called the National Democratic Congress (NDC). The party ushered the country into another civilian administration in 1992. The enthusiastic youth, once again, gained the opportunity to actively participate in the new political dispensation. The majority of the youth became active members in the political parties that were formed to contest the first national election in 1992. Despite the mushrooming of political parties that sprang up suddenly after the ban on political parties had been lifted, the NDC and New Patriotic Party (NPP) became the two vibrant parties judging from their alliances with other smaller political parties.

### **3.2. Political parties and youth empowerment**

Historically, there is a subtle convention in the formation of political parties and party youth wing in Ghana. To empower the youth, all political parties have youth associations. The practice has been in existence since independence, and the Fourth Republic was no exception. The constitutions of the various political parties, especially the two influential parties, have portfolios for the party's youth organiser. The main duty is to mobilise the party's youth wing to actively participate in the grassroots whilst claiming the political ladder to the national level. The youth wings of these political parties currently have youth organisations in all the electoral areas in Ghana as well as tertiary institutions across the length and breadth of Ghana. The Tertiary Institution Network (TEIN) is a youth wing of the NDC, while the Tertiary Education and Students Confederacy (TESCON) is NPP (Gyampo & Obeng-Odoom, 2013). These political youth wings are sanctioned to will some political power by the national parties. In fact, in many occasions, the youth associations have altered national electoral outcomes in Ghana since 1992.

### **3.3. Development structures and youth empowerment in the Fourth Republic**

The position of the Ghanaian youth in the First Republic (1957) where they were made to be actively involved in the implementation of the national policies and programmes has greatly been altered in the current political dispensation. The implementation of policies and programmes is not within the ambit of these youth organisation or groups as it was in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The developmental structures in the Fourth Republic prevent the youth from active participation in the formation and implementation of development policies and programmes (Gyampo & Obeng-Odoom, 2013). Thus, government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs) and the National Development Planning Commission have taken charge of this responsibility (Ibid). Whether deliberate or otherwise, the current structures for the implementation development programmes and policies tend to sideline the youth. This ultimately has some negative consequences on youth empowerment and participation in the policy designation stages. The launch of the National Youth Employment Policy (NYEP) and subsequently the National Youth Policy (NYP) in the year 2006 and 2010, respectively, was graced with optimism; however, the basic principles for the establishment of these policies are yet to be achieved.

## **4. Conceptualisation of youth-driven intervention programmes in Ghana**

Despite the upsurge in the number of youth intervention programmes in Ghana, the lasting uncertainties surrounding youth unemployment are patent. However, there is an increasing recognition that the national youth interventions programmes christened in the last two decades have performed remarkably well in improving the income earning of the youth (Amankrah 2006; Palmer 2009). These "youth intervention initiatives" indeed constitute a major employment avenue for

most people, especially the youth (Gyampo, 2012; Amankrah 2006). It is, therefore, not surprising that it has become a vital political campaign promise where many political parties in Ghana espouse for the mandate of the youth.

#### **4.1. National Youth Policy (NYP)**

The National Youth Policy (NYP) was established in the year 2010 to provide a well-grounded framework, vividly delineated pathways for youth development. The NYP is the umbrella for all the other youth-oriented programmes in Ghana. It has become the standard around which most youth policy agendas are framed. In fact, the Section 5.1.1 of the policy reads: “an empowered youth contributing positively to national development” (National Youth Policy of Ghana, 2010, p. 7). However, in practice, the policy has very little to do with youth empowerment. There seems to be a little evidence on the part of government ministries, departments and organisations making the effort to wholly implement the policy in the first place (Boadu & Isioma, 2017, p. 215), and at most they are mere rhetoric on paper. Prior to the promulgation of this policy, there had been many other youth intervention policies since the first republic in the early 1960s to the Fourth Republic (1992), for instance, the Young Pioneers, the National Workers Brigade (Goody, 1968; Hodge, 1968) and the National Service Scheme (Chazan, 1974, p. 198). For over six decades, the well-being of young people in Ghana have always found their ways in policy frameworks, but ironically, the youth economic situation has not changed as a result of their neglect in these youth policies. Instead of the negative depiction associated with the “Generation Y” as they are known in certain quarters, a critical look at their plight by decreasing their economic pressures by empowering them to own these programmes will enhance their living standard and distort the negative connotations associated with young people. Unfortunately, in Ghana, many of these youth policies/intervention programmes intended to create jobs opportunities for the teeming youth in order to reduce youth unemployment are mostly abandoned especially when there is a change of government (Boadu & Isioma, 2017). The following section will shed some light on the case study initiative: Local Enterprise and Skills Development Programme (LESDEP).

#### **4.2. Local Enterprise and Skills Development Programme (LESDEP)**

The Local Enterprises and Skills Development Programme (LESDEP) is another youth-focused initiative by the government of Ghana. However, it is managed by a private entity in partnership with the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development. The initiative is operated in all the 10 administrative regions in Ghana in a public-private partnership (PPP). After its establishment in October 2010, the programme set to generate and facilitate skills acquisition, technical or vocational, entrepreneurial and other specialised skills, for the youth. The youth are given special training for about six months with LESDEP providing start-up equipment, funds and post-set-up support services to ensure that they remained in the market (Local Enterprise and Skills Development Programme (LESDEP) Ghana, 2016). All these are focused towards lessening the economic pressure on the teeming unemployed youth in Ghana. The notion that LESDEP will be driven by a decentralised system under the supervision of the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD) is yet to be attained (Boadu & Isioma, 2017, p. 216).

The programme expectation was that the various districts in Ghana will take up the initiative and make it locally driven in order to tackle local-specific employment challenges among the youth with special reference to the district Medium Term Development Plans (MTDPs) (Government of Ghana GoG, 2014). Ironically, LESDEP currently is called a programme, leaving the partnership aspect from the central government and deemed as private sector provider rendering services to the state (GYEEDA). Underpinning this paradoxical turnaround is that districts no more serve as the primary body for the training of beneficiaries but rather LESDEP provides this service. The programme is under the supervision of Ministry of Local Government & Rural Development with support from LESDEP secretariat. It also operates in collaboration with other ministries and agencies for the smooth running of all the 15 modules, which include but not limited to electrician, mobile phone repairer, local garment or fashion designer, beauty care, event organising or decor, beads making, window or sliding door designer, driving, catering

service, fish farming, agro-processing, welding or fabrication, farming, photography and construction (Local Enterprise and Skills Development Programme (LESDEP) Ghana, 2016).

### 5. Youth intervention programmes in Ghana and empowerment approach

The following section takes a critical look at the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings within which the paper was analysed. The empowerment approach has been argued by some scholars including Narayan (2005), that fundamentally, the approach is relational and was put in place as result of existing relationship between poor people (youth) and their environment (Zimmerman, Israel, Schulz, & Checkoway, 1992: 19). The empowerment theory suggests that “participation” is key and should not be overlooked in any social policy aspiring to achieve an effective outcome. Perkins and Zimmerman (1995, p. 2) argued that “participation with others to achieve goals and effort to gain some critical understanding of the social, and political environment are basic components of the empowerment theory”. The theory has been construed in some spheres as the ability to will power individually or as a group (Narayan, 2005, p. 4), a process (Whitmore, 1988, p. 13), while others have emphasised it to be a process and outcome or a means and ends in itself (Rappaport 1984, Whitmore, 1988; Zimmerman, 1993).

The definition of empowerment, like any other social science concept, is abound. Cornell Empowerment Group (1989) defined empowerment as: “an intentional ongoing process centred in the local community, involving material respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources”. In a similar vein, Rappaport (1987, p. 119) opined that “by empowerment I mean our aim should be to enhance the possibilities for people to control their own lives”. The more succinct definition for this paper is the one put forward by the World Bank (WB) empowerment sourcebook, which points out that: “empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives” (Narayan, 2002, p. 5). To better measure and monitor empowerment, a clearer definition of the concept is paramount. The above-quoted definition lays much emphasis on the aspirations of this paper. The paper will demonstrate how LESDEP beneficiaries (mostly are economically pressured youth) can effectively participate in, negotiate with, and influence the policy processes of the initiative that have a direct bearing on their lives.

Departing from the bottom-up approach will delimit the capacities of some economic disadvantaged group (youth). The empowerment approach, therefore, tends to focus more on identifying individual or group assets and capabilities and how when attained can assist the individuals to influence the outcome of social intervention programmes that have an impact on their livelihood. The approach has an inbuilt layer that emphasizes individual or collective strengths and skills which is a “natural helping system” good enough to stir social change (Rappaport, 1987, 121). Theoretically, the empowerment approach critically looks at the well-being of an individual or group in terms of competence versus deficits, disadvantage versus advantage and strength versus weakness (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995, p. 569–570).

The advancements of every social, political and economic policy or programmes are not dependent on how adequate and effective the policies captures every aspect of the initiative, but the participation of the citizenry or any other subordinate groups in the policy process is very important. A proper emphasis on the implementation processes and future reconstruction of the initiative if the need be can go a long way in helping such policies and programmes achieve their intended outcomes. Cleaver (1999, p. 599) argued that whereas empowerment approach has a number of strengths to echo, the approach has some weaknesses too because the concept is vague and often subtly rather than clearly stated in most policy documents. The critical question is whose ability, capacity and power does the empowerment approach seek to permit? Is it the excluded or subordinate groups, the individual, the community, youth, women or the poor, who exactly does the theory seeks to empower?

The empowerment approach lays much emphasis on giving power or control to certain individual or group of person in a community, society or nations to influence, participate, negotiate, evaluate and control. The challenge is that an attempt to grant control to some individuals or group of people in some instances may actually create problems in itself rather than solving one (Perkins and Zimmerman, 2005, p. 571). Obviously, the empowerment approach has got a number of streams which may clearly not be represented in social policies such as LESDEP, and how such programme can better fit into the framework will come with some challenges. Clearly, the proponents of the framework did not have in mind a programme such as LESDEP when framing the concept.

### **5.1. Linking empowerment approach and social intervention**

LESDEP can appropriately fit in the empowerment approach by securing the individual or collective assets and capabilities through the linkages of the initiatives skill base. This will upsurge the youth capacities to influence, control, participate and negotiate well in any policies or programmes that affect their well-being. Assets and capabilities are usually conceptualised as individual powers. However, the empowerment approach argues that collective capabilities and assets are critical in helping the socially excluded or subordinate group to break the chain of powerlessness (Narayan, 2002, p. 6). LESDEP can reduce this powerlessness through beneficiaries' associations which are currently missing. Knowledge or skills acquisition can reduce ones' vulnerability, and such skill development will ultimately empower the individual and youth to possess such values (United Nations, 2006, p. 23) but with no conducive environment to express them. The notion is that when target beneficiaries (youth) are provided with entrepreneurial or vocational skills such as dressmaking/fashion, agriculture (livestock and crop farming), hairdressing, beads making, plumbing, carpentry, or masonry, among others, it will ultimately decrease the unemployment rate among the youth. However, skill development can also increase vulnerability when the individual spends years to acquire such skills but becomes redundant due to low demands and eventually the skills are not put into productive use. The critical question is, how many of the youths were empowered to truly use the acquired skills in their respective field of training?

One way to improve and strengthen youth initiatives is to support the beneficiaries to take ownership of those programmes. The provision of asset and capabilities offered by LESDEP can facilitate such supports. After the training, beneficiaries are granted some soft loans (financial capital) and the necessary equipment (physical capital) needed to set up their own businesses in order to earn a dignified income and employment. Again, the youth who are mostly the beneficiaries of the programme are trusted with a piece of land (natural capital) to construct their kiosk for dressmaking, hairdressing, and plumbing, among others. Skills development (beads making, dressmaking, education, and other life-enhancing skills, which is a component of the programme, obviously is needed for gainful employment.

Social capabilities which grant the individual the abilities to socially network such as membership of group, leadership, relations of trust, a sense of belongingness, networks, values that give meaning to life, and the ability to organise, will enhance the individual networking abilities. Beneficiaries (youth) of LESDEP will need to come together through this social networks to create clusters of skills which can make them formidable than just operating solely. Haan and Serriere (2002, p. 106), in support of this argument, stressed that avenues of employment can be created through networks and social groups and LESDEP can emulate this through associations such as dressmakers, hairdressers and carpenters, just to mention a few. The empowerment approach maintained the need for a stronger voice and collective action (organisation) to coordinate the activities of "individuals" or "communities" for a common goal (Narayan, 2002, p. 9).

Finally, empowerment frameworks have rules, norms, behaviour, rights and resources, and this is situated appropriately in the LESDEP youth-oriented programme. Collective or individual assets and capabilities do not operate in a vacuum to achieve the development outcome. These assets are shaped by the prevailing social norms and behaviours, political (rules and rights) and economic

resources and other structures of the society which have some underpinnings of influence and control. Socially excluded or subordinates in societies lack equal share of the social good and fail to gain access to and control over any resources. The model is not straightforward; rather it is made up of many interweaving sets of legislation among others within which the beneficiaries operate. These rules, rights, norms, resources and processes tend to shape the choices of the beneficiaries in their attempt to break the chain of powerlessness and vulnerabilities (Lord & Hutchison, 2009, p. 8). How rigid or flexible the rules are will determine the extent to which beneficiaries utilise the opportunities offered them to their advantage.

## 6. Methodology and analysis

In unpacking the paradox regarding youth empowerment, the study used a mixed-methods approach. In-depth interviews were conducted with programme officials, while questionnaire surveys were administered out to the respondents (beneficiaries). Out of the 16 districts in the Greater Accra region, Ghana, three districts were randomly selected for the study. In total, 120 survey questionnaires were administered out to target beneficiaries, while in-depth interviews were conducted with at least one programme official from each district. The research relied on various sampling techniques to select samples out of the total population. A simple random sampling was adopted in the selection of respondents out of 500 populations. The stated confidence level was 95% with a margin of error of  $\pm 7.8\%$ . The researcher, however, resorted to a purposive sampling technique in the selection of officials for the in-depth interviews. Using thematic and content techniques, the qualitative data was analysed, whereas an Empowerment Perception Index (PPI) was developed to assess the youth perception of empowerment in the initiative. Using the mixed-methods research design and indicators, this paper assesses youth perspective of empowerment in the LESDEP, Ghana.

Descriptive statistics in the form of frequency distribution table was employed to explore the youth empowerment perception. There is an extensive literature on the usage of different index measures in research (for review, see for instance, the Economic Security Index by Hacker et al. (2014); Corruption Perceptions Index, Transparency International (2016)). Wharton and Baron (1987) also developed an index to measure work satisfaction among employees. In his study of resident satisfaction in Nigeria, Afon (2006) developed residents' satisfaction index. The paper, however, developed Empowerment Perception Index (EPI) to assess beneficiaries' perception of empowerment in the initiative.

The EPI, however, was computed by first allocating values from 1 to 5 to the ordinal responses (Likert-scale responses) of the youth (beneficiaries), with a lower value indicating stronger agreement to the statements that make up a particular variable. The total weight value for each of the variables (SWV) was also computed by adding the number of responses for each rating to a variable and the respective weight value together. It is expressed mathematically as the following where:

**SWV.** = summation of the total weight value

**Pi.** = number of respondents to rating *i*

**Vi.** = weight assigned to a response

To determine the index (*I*) to any of the variables, the SWV was divided by the summation of the respondents to each of the five ratings of the variable and is expressed as the mean index, denoted as is derived by summing up the index for each variable and dividing it by the number of the identical variables.

$$\text{Mean (I)} = \frac{WV}{N}$$

It is computed mathematically thus: Where *N* = total number of identical variables.

### 6.1. Youth empowerment and LESDEP, Ghana

An individual sense of empowerment may originate from many paths: contributing in decision-making processes; controlling, influencing and gaining access to material resources; acquisition of knowledge through learning; holding agencies, department policy-makers and implementers accountable; developing individual skills; and finding alternative methods and solutions to problems that have negative repercussion on the individual or community (Narayan, 2002, p. 14). Empowerment emphasises on giving a person or group of persons, agencies or organisations, communities and societies as a whole the various forms of control or influence to actively contribute in any decision making (which will eventually improve the life of the individual and the society as a whole) that affect their life directly or indirectly (Narayan, 2002, p. 15). Therefore, an empowerment process can be created, altered, accessed, implemented and evaluated in various settings, situations, agencies/organisations and projects and applied to people (youth) as deemed appropriate. There is the need to rethink the empowerment approach used in the LESDEP youth intervention initiative.

Despite the rhetoric of empowerment and engagement of youth in most youth-oriented initiatives in Ghana, they largely remain on paper, and they bear a resemblance of empowerment but largely failed to actively involve young people in the necessary processes that will ensure young people representation. The level in which the various stakeholders are involved in the decision-making processes can better explain the extent to which they were empowered and properly engage in the initiative (Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Larrison, 2000). The findings are in the table below.

The field data revealed that greater proportion of the youth had no skills or the know-how and project initiators also failed to train them in that regards. Responses regarding the youth empowerment in the designing of the intervention programme were not encouraging: a large proportion (68.3%) of the beneficiaries (youth) posited they had no knowledge or skills, while 17.5% opined that they were not involved in the policy design. It is evident that about 85.8% of the youth were not involved in the formulation of the policy framework that led to the birth of the youth-oriented initiative. About 14.4% of the youth stressed that they were given the necessary skills and know-how to partake in the designing of the policy [See Table 1].

*... so that meant they may not be part of these official committees so certainly it may seem like they are not part but in the long run, they become such an important force that you cannot easily ignore. They were there when we started it, they were part of it and they saw for the most part all the processes going on ... We are very focused in terms of ensuring that we give the youth plenty of opportunities to engage and to be actively involved in the initiative, and ones they see it as theirs, they will be willing to work to sustain it. (R1 LESDEP Staff, 9 November 2016).*

Evidently, the findings from the quote above from the in-depth interviews conducted contradict the view that beneficiaries were not involved in the designing stage of the policy. However, further probing revealed that the 14.2% of the youth who were empowered to some extent were only made to serve as a mere respondent in the initiatives PM&E. This is evident in the quote below:

*Arguably they are involved in the policy planning processes. Again they are made to go for apprenticeship training for months and that I can as being part of the implementation stage of the initiative. And ones they are set up after the training, we have field officer that go around to engage them in their work progress among many others, consultations and that's the feedback we receive from the beneficiaries... and they serve as respondent ... (R1 LESDEP Staff, 9 November 2016).*

The youth exclusion from the designing of the existing policy framework, the selection of indicators to be used, and implementation are all consistent with the findings of the interviews conducted. The youth serving as mere respondents in the initiative PM&E process cannot constitute a holistic youth empowerment. Consequently, based on the inferences from the above findings, it can be

**Table 1. Distribution of respondents by level of participation**

Participation Indicators	Frequency (percentages %)				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>Is it true that:</b>					
the youth participated in the decision making regarding the PM&E?	1(0.8)	3(2.5)	12(10.0)	67(55.8)	37(30.8)
youth participate in the implementation stage of the initiative?	1(0.8)	17(14.2)	14(11.7)	53(44.1)	35(29.2)
youth are members of monitoring and evaluation committees?	1(0.8)	1(0.8)	14(11.7)	52(43.3)	36(30.0)
youth have active roles in the PM&E processes?	1(0.8)	3(2.5)	12(10.0)	64(53.3)	40(33.3)
the youth are just consulted when the need requires?	33(27.5)	65(54.2)	6(5.0)	15(12.5)	1(0.8)
the involvement of the youth is valued by the project implementers?	1(0.8)	4(3.3)	27(22.5)	81(67.5)	7(5.8)
there are mechanism to help the youth participate in the PM&E processes actively?	2(1.7)	2(1.7)	20(16.6)	77(64.2)	19(15.8)
the youth participate in meetings/ workshops concerning the PM&E progress?	1(0.8)	3(2.5)	15(12.5)	76(63.3)	25(20.8)
the involvement of the beneficiaries will serve as youth empowerment?	41(34.2)	44(36.7)	33(27.5)	1(0.8)	1(0.8)

Source: Boadu and Isioma (2017)

argued that the scope of the existing LESDEP empowerment is limited. This study stems out of the empowerment approach which is more people-centred, and the “end” perspective of participation holds on to this ideal. The approach emphasises on the empowerment of people in terms of acquiring skills, knowledge and experience to be able to influence the decision-making processes, negotiate well and take control or responsibility for their own development (Cornwall 2008, p. 275). The evidences from the study are contrary to the tenets of the empowerment model. It has further been argued by Mohan and Stokke and Rossman that economically excluded individuals and groups tend to have a worsened poverty status as a result of their limited influence and negotiation, exclusion and lack of access to and control of resources, which are precursors to sustain and improve their lives (Mohan & Stokke, 2000; Rossman, 2000).

Further analysis revealed that the extent of the perceived beneficiaries (youth) empowerment with regards to their involvement in the project PM&E. The study discovered that the youth roles in the PM&E activities were inconsequential. They were only consulted when the implementers deemed it necessary. The youth were bystanders and not treated as partners who are empowered enough to actively participate in the PM&E activities. This gave a negative deviation of 1.45 (-1.45) [see Table 2]. The majority of the respondents also indicated that their marginal involvement in the PM&E process with regards to data collection had not empowered them to any degree. The variable also assumed a negative deviation after a further analysis was conducted (-1.52) [see Table 2]. Young people should have the opportunity to voice out their concerns and offer tangible remedies in any development policies rather than being mere receivers of development interventions perceived by development planners as comprehensive enough to address their problems.

Similar studies from other parts in the world have also stressed the importance of young people participating in regional, national and global policy debates (see; Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Nurick & Johnson, 2001; World Bank et al., 2014). Youth all over Africa have been acknowledged as the continent population dividend, and Ghana is no exception. Since the inception of the First

**Table 2. Distribution of respondents and perception of empowerment**

Empowerment Indicators	Rating with weight Values							
	SA (1)	A (2)	NS (3)	D (4)	SD (5)	SWV	EPI	(EPI-)
<b>Is it true that:</b>								
the youth participated in the decision making regarding this youth policy?	1	3	12	67	37	496	4.13	0.63
youth were involve or participate in the implementation stage of the initiative?	1	17	14	53	35	464	3.90	0.4
you have the skills needed to participate in the policy processes of the initiative?	1	1	14	52	36	432	3.60	0.1
youth have active roles in the policy processes?	1	3	12	64	40	499	4.16	0.66
the youth are just consulted when the need requires and not as partners?	33	65	6	15	1	246	2.05	-1.45
the involvement of the youth is valued by the project implementers?	1	4	27	81	7	449	3.74	0.24
there are mechanism to help the youth participate in the PM&E processes actively?	2	2	20	77	19	469	3.91	0.41
the youth participate in meetings/workshops concerning the PM&E progress?	1	3	15	76	25	481	4.01	0.51
the involvement of the beneficiaries will serves as youth empowerment?	41	44	33	1	1	237	1.98	-1.52
<b>Total</b>							<b>31.48</b>	

Source: Field data, (Boadu, 2017)

Republic in the early 1960s, the Ghanaian youth has been seen as an important human resource based on their involvement in the country's political antecedents. The various political administrations (both civilian and military) have depended greatly on the potential of the youth and their significant contribution towards the national development and have been accorded such recognition in different ways to actively participate in national development by the national government as well as other stakeholders in the country. The youth neglect, therefore, in any social intervention programme such as LESDEP that is intended to enhance their livelihood will be a detriment not only to them but also the country at large.

### 7. Recommendations

To enhance youth participation in decision making and above all the sustainability of young people development initiatives, there is the need to build their capacity to influence the decision-making process and control the resources in order to make inform choices. **First**, understanding of youth participation is a concept embodied in empowerment. The essence of youth empowerment lies in their ability to influence and control their own destiny. This implies that to be empowered, the youth must have equal opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills through education and training in order to influence the decision-making processes as well as equal access to development resources. The youth must be granted the opportunity and power to also use those abilities, rights, resources and opportunities to make informed choices and utter the outcomes national policies. Empower them to copiously participate in the

lives of their communities because they can be crucial agents in the development of such societies.

**Second**, although the youth have empowered themselves through self-organisation (such as youth associations) as well as consciously participating in any policy formulation that affects their well-being, yet, their level of participation is still vague. However, development initiator and donors are not prevented from facilitating youth empowerment through the acquisition of knowledge (education), skills, capacity building, learning and other measures to make them partners and not mere observers in the policy process. Thus, in order to build a sustainable economy, policy makers, scholars and social commentators should refrain from portraying the youths as a lost generation. The teeming youth in Ghana should rather be perceived as great human resources, given the needed education and training. The starting point is not the rigid institutional or bureaucratic structures that prevent the economically active population from taken a seat around the round-table where policies that affect their lives are made; rather young people must be seen as a solution to the problem. Narrowing all the social exclusion pitfalls of young people can be a precondition for sustainable youth empowerment. Active inclusion of young people in any social intervention programme is an essential condition for sustainable development. The empowerment of young people to actively participate in the policy processes is bound to enhance development in a society, by redirecting the youthful energies in the implementation of such projects.

**Third**, Ghana needs to realise the economic potential and resources she possesses due to the youthful population. The youthful population in recent times is the largest in the history of the world, and Ghana is no exception. However, in most politically unstable societies, young people comprise the majority. Therefore, it will be politically, economically and socially dangerous if the needs and aspirations of the youth are neglected in the development agenda. In matters of development, the current youthful population in Ghana is demographic dividend. To better harness the demographic dividends, there is the need to empower the youth in various aspects (social, political and economic) to enable them to actively participate in the national development agenda. Adult-youth participation needs to be positively tapped and harnessed to release the youth potentials as agents of development. An adoption of a multi-stakeholder approach to policy formulation should be encouraged by ensuring that youth are rightfully positioned to propel the wheel of development Ghana needs.

## 8. Conclusion

Young people empowerment is paramount in any youth-oriented initiative. The study findings have demonstrated some constraints on the part of programme implementers and donors to properly empower youth in the policy processes. In spite of the constraints that confront the youth in their effort to actively participate in the policy cycles, their involvement tends to have a positive effect on their well-being as project beneficiaries as well as the effectiveness of the project itself. Youth empowerment will ultimately enhance their participation in social, political and economic development. It was also evident that project managers failed to empower beneficiaries in terms of skills, knowledge sharing and learning which would have boosted their involvement in the formulation of the programme as well as its implementation. The scope of stakeholders' empowerment was very limited and greatly delimited the youth influence in the policy stages. The National Youth Policy (NYP), which was promulgated in the year 2010, provides a well-grounded framework for youth empowerment, and hence, adhering to the framework by policy makers will be of great interest to the economically active population. As per inferences from the rationale of the National Youth Policy (NYP), *the youth constitute the true wealth and future of our country, and addressing their hopes and aspirations must be an integral part of our socio-economic development efforts. Successive governments have, over the years, realised the need for policies that would empower the youth for effective participation in the national development agenda*, which clearly shows that the well-being of youth over the years finds their ways in national policies. Unfortunately, many of these youth policies and programmes intended to create employment opportunities are politically motivated and mostly abandoned when the government that initiated the programmes leaves

power. Consequently, using the study findings as a baseline, by drawing some inferences from the study, accounted for the above recommendations.

#### Funding

The authors received no direct funding for this research.

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#### Citation information

Cite this article as: The paradox of youth empowerment: Exploring youth intervention programme in Ghana, Isioma Ile & Evans Sakyi Boadu, *Cogent Social Sciences* (2018), 4: 1528709.

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