Evidence Brief

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Youth Unemployment in Ghana: The Challenge, The Options

Background

Ghana is experiencing a significant demographic transition, with young people aged 15–35 constituting nearly 38–40% of the population. This presents both an opportunity for economic transformation and a major policy challenge. If effectively integrated into productive employment, Ghana's youth population could drive innovation, economic growth, and national resilience. However, the labour market has not expanded sufficiently to absorb the growing workforce.

Youth unemployment, underemployment, and widespread informality remain persistent, with many young people engaged in insecure and low-paying work. The challenge extends beyond unemployment alone. A large proportion of youth are trapped in precarious employment characterised by low wages, weak labour protections, and limited opportunities for upward mobility.

The evidence further shows that Ghana's youth employment challenge is shaped not only by labour market conditions, but also by political economy dynamics, including programme discontinuity across political transitions, fragmented institutional mandates, weak inter-agency coordination, and exclusionary socio-cultural norms.

Against this backdrop, this study was designed to move beyond descriptive labour statistics and examine the structural, institutional, and governance drivers of youth employment outcomes in Ghana. The study provides evidence-based and system-level policy recommendations aimed at improving coherence, inclusivity, and sustainability in youth employment policy and practice.

Methodological approach

The study adopted a mixed-methods Political Economy Analysis (PEA) approach combining:A desk review of youth employment policies, programmes, and regulatory frameworks in Ghana,

- Secondary analysis of labour market and demographic evidence



Source: WWD

In Ghana, 38-40% of its population is between 15 and 35

- Stakeholder mapping and institutional analysis,
- Primary qualitative interviews with policymakers, implementing agencies, private sector actors, development partners, civil society organisations, and youth themselves.

The research further incorporated participatory action research methods to ensure that youth perspectives and lived experiences informed the analysis. Evidence from stakeholder interviews was triangulated with secondary literature and policy documents to identify the structural, institutional, and political drivers shaping youth employment outcomes in Ghana.

Key findings

Structural Labour Market Constraints

The study finds that Ghana's youth employment challenge is fundamentally linked to the economy's limited capacity to absorb the growing labour force. Although educational attainment has expanded significantly, employment opportunities have not kept pace with the increasing number of graduates and job seekers. Many young people therefore remain concentrated in low-income informal activities characterised by income insecurity, weak labour protections, and limited opportunities for upward mobility.

AFIDEP
African Institute for Development Policy

CAP
Youth Empowerment Institute
Linking Learning and Livelihood


Source: Inside Success Ghana

Key issues include:

- Limited labour-absorbing sectors capable of generating quality jobs at scale,
- Heavy dependence on informal employment slow transition from education into stable work,
- Weak social protection coverage for informal workers.

Skills Mismatch and Weak School-to-Work Transitions

The study identifies a persistent disconnect between education systems and labour market demands. Employers continue to report gaps in practical, technical, and digital competencies, while many graduates struggle to transition into stable employment. Although TVET reforms and apprenticeship programmes are underway, implementation challenges remain around curriculum relevance, industry linkages, and equitable access.

The findings highlight:

- Weak alignment between training systems and industry demand,
- Limited practical and workplace-based learning opportunities,
- Uneven rural access to TVET programmes,
- Temporary placement schemes with weak exit pathways.

Political Cycles and Programme Discontinuity

Youth employment programmes in Ghana are highly vulnerable to political transitions. Many initiatives associated with particular administrations are restructured, abandoned, or rebranded following changes in government. This undermines continuity, institutional learning, and long-term sustainability.

The study found:

- Youth programmes are often tied to electoral cycles,
- Effective initiatives are vulnerable to partisan shifts,
- Policy continuity remains weak across administrations,
- Short-term visibility is often prioritised over long-term impact.

Institutional Fragmentation and Coordination Deficits

The youth employment landscape is characterised by overlapping institutional mandates and weak coordination among ministries, departments, and agencies. Limited collaboration and poor data sharing contribute to duplication of effort, fragmented programme delivery, and inconsistent beneficiary targeting.

Key coordination challenges include:

- Weak inter-agency communication,
- Parallel implementation of similar programmes,
- Inconsistent monitoring and accountability systems,
- Fragmented transitions between training, financing, and employment support.

Exclusion and Unequal Access to Opportunity

The study finds that unemployment and precarious work are unevenly experienced across different groups of young people. Young women, persons with disabilities, rural youth, refugees, and less-educated youth face layered barriers related to geography, gender norms, discrimination, accessibility, and limited access to finance and information.

The findings point to:

- Higher unemployment rates among young women,
- Accessibility barriers for persons with disabilities,
- Geographic inequalities in programme delivery,
- Exclusion of vulnerable groups from mainstream opportunities.

NEET Crisis and Youth Vulnerability

A significant proportion of Ghanaian youth fall within the "NEET" category — young people who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training. The findings show that prolonged exclusion from education and

employment contributes to economic insecurity, frustration, and long-term vulnerability, particularly among young women and marginalised groups.

The study highlights:

- High levels of youth disengagement,
- Long job-search periods among graduates,
- Increased vulnerability among young women,
- Risks of long-term labour market exclusion.

Informal Mining ("Galamsey") and Precarious Livelihoods

Youth involvement in informal mining reflects broader employment pressures, particularly in rural communities where livelihood opportunities are limited. Push factors such as unemployment, low agricultural returns, and financial insecurity drive many young people into galamsey activities, despite the environmental and social risks associated with the sector.

Key concerns include:

- Lack of sustainable rural employment alternatives,
- Income insecurity and occupational risks,
- Environmental degradation and social conflict,
- Weak labour protections within informal mining.

Political Economy Dynamics

The study highlights several political economy dynamics shaping youth employment outcomes in Ghana. Access to jobs and programmes is often perceived to be influenced by political networks and patronage, while implementation gaps continue to weaken policy effectiveness. Despite these constraints, many young people continue to demonstrate resilience through entrepreneurship, informal work, and digital livelihood strategies.

The findings reveal:

- Persistent gaps between policy ambition and implementation,
- Employment opportunities mediated through political influence,
- Increasing normalisation of precarious work,
- Strong youth adaptability beyond formal systems.



Source: Magnific

Policy implications



The findings point toward the need for structural and system-level reform rather than fragmented or short-term interventions.

Strengthening Labour Demand and Structural Transformation

- Promote industrialisation and labour-intensive sectors,
- Strengthen agribusiness and agro-processing value chains,
- Expand investment in high-productivity sectors,
- Improve infrastructure and regional economic integration.

Enhancing Policy Coherence and Coordination

- Establish a stand-alone National Youth Employment Policy,
- Strengthen inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms,
- Introduce joint accountability frameworks,
- Improve labour market information systems and data sharing.

Improving Job Quality and Worker Protection

- Expand social protection coverage to informal workers,
- Develop protections for gig economy and platform workers,
- Promote fair wages and decent working conditions,
- Strengthen pathways from temporary placements into sustainable employment.

Aligning Education with Labour Market Needs

- Strengthen TVET-industry partnerships,
- Modernise curricula to reflect labour market demand,
- Expand digital and soft skills training,
- Scale apprenticeship and internship opportunities.

Advancing Inclusion and Equity

- Implement gender-responsive employment interventions,
- Introduce inclusive hiring benchmarks,
- Expand disability-inclusive programming,
- Decentralise programme delivery to underserved regions,
- Improve access to finance and support for marginalised youth.

Strengthening Sustainability and Governance

- Insulate effective programmes from partisan disruption,
- Expand long-term financing mechanisms
- Improve monitoring and evaluation systems,
- Integrate political economy insights into programme design.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that youth unemployment in Ghana is not driven by a lack of aspiration or effort among young people. Rather, it reflects a deeper structural and governance challenge in which economic transformation has lagged behind demographic growth, policy ambition has outpaced implementation, and opportunity remains unevenly distributed.

Addressing this challenge requires more than temporary employment schemes or isolated skills interventions. It demands a coherent, long-term, and inclusive youth employment strategy grounded in institutional coordination, structural economic transformation, sustained political commitment, and equitable access to opportunity.

With coordinated and sustained action, Ghana can reposition youth employment from a persistent development challenge into a foundation for inclusive growth, resilience, and national transformation.

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