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DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT



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The Future of Ghana's Youth:

Engaging Ghanaian Diaspora Youth with Ghana's Development

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OVERVIEW

Predictions suggest that by the year 2050 31 per cent of the world's youth population will be African.¹ Countries such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Ghana are forecast to witness rapid growth over the next decade with GDP expected to rise by an average of 6 per cent per year.² With one of the highest GDP per capita in West Africa – reaching an all-time high in the first quarter of 2011 at 7.8 per cent³ and with a projected 7.2 per cent GDP growth in 2014 –⁴ it is no surprise that Ghana is attracting high levels of Foreign Direct Investment⁵. The recent announcement of the high-level prosperity partnership between Ghana and the UK further reaffirms the attraction to the Land of Gold⁶. While both the Ghanaian government and various international organisations recognise the importance of the potential contributions of the diaspora to the country's booming economy, and indeed have launched a number of projects and incentives to make investing or returning more attractive, initiatives to actively engage diaspora youth are surprisingly scarce.

Through its volunteering programmes, WAM has encountered a skilled diaspora youth population who are keen to engage in Ghana's development, and identified the need for more formal structures aimed at engaging diaspora youth. This paper addresses the current barriers that prevent these young people from being involved in Ghana's development, points out ways to overcome such barriers, and provides a set of recommendations on how diaspora organisations, the Ghanaian government, and the youth themselves can work together towards a more active and constructive involvement in Ghana's future development.

DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT: EXCLUDING DIASPORA YOUTH

During Ghana's economic downturn and political instability in the 1980s and 1990s, North America, the UK and other parts of Europe were choice destinations for skilled professionals.⁷ Recognising this, there have been a number of diaspora engagement initiatives aimed at drawing these professionals back to Ghana to contribute to the country's development. For instance, in 2001 Ghana became the only African nation to grant a person of African ancestry the right to reside and work in the country – through the Right to Abode Act – making returning to Ghana a more attractive option.⁸ Ghana's former Minister of Foreign Affairs affirmed that the



Photo courtesy of wamcampaign.org

Ministry should engage the diaspora in the country's development in a proactive manner.⁹ However, past diaspora engagement initiatives, such as the Joseph, Homecoming, PANAFEST and IOM (International Organization for Migration) diaspora projects, failed to directly engage diaspora youth.¹⁰ The most recent diaspora engagement project, spearheaded by the IOM, supports Ghana's Ministry of External Affairs' diaspora engagement and in November 2012 launched the Diaspora Support Unit based in Ghana.¹¹ Although such efforts are very

positive, this project has failed to engage the youth, despite recommendations from Ghanaian diaspora groups expressing such a need during the IOM's diaspora colloquium consultation engagement in Accra, Ghana 2012.¹²

"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's margins, all of us will be impoverished."

(Kofi Annan)

WAYS DIASPORA YOUTH WOULD LIKE TO BE INVOLVED IN GHANA'S DEVELOPMENT

A survey held among 53 diaspora youth in January 2014, conducted by the Future of Ghana Youth Forum, highlighted that 57 per cent are keen to be involved in enterprise and investment opportunities in Ghana, whilst 31 per cent expressed interest in Education and 12 per cent in Agriculture initiatives. Furthermore, 74 per cent of this diaspora sample expressed a desire to volunteer their time and skills in Ghana. A WAM Campaign survey of 96 Ghanaian's conducted in Accra in 2012 – of whom 91 per cent were under 35 years of age – found that 80 per cent of those surveyed would be keen to volunteer, out of whom 52 per cent stated that the key drivers for wanting to volunteer were either further skill development or career progression.

BARRIERS PREVENTING DIASPORA YOUTH FROM BEING INVOLVED IN GHANA'S DEVELOPMENT

Yet, alongside the abovementioned enthusiasm found amongst diaspora youth to be involved in Ghana's development, there is an array of barriers preventing them from doing so. The following obstacles were highlighted at the Future of Ghana Youth Forum and via the WAM Campaign volunteer programmes evaluation reports:

Lack of Information

Where to access reliable and credible information remains a critical issue. A recent report by Africa Gives highlights the desire of diaspora youth to be informed and involved with development in their homeland, but expressed poor access to information and opportunities as a barrier¹³ Out of the attendees at the future of Ghana networking forum, 83 per cent explicitly stated that their attending was to get better informed about what avenues exist to enable them to contribute to Ghana's development. The WAM Campaign research coordinated in Accra in 2012 indicated that there are no formal structures for volunteering, with respondents commenting that if they were to volunteer they would do so through a Church (26%) or through a family or friend (36%).

Bureaucracy, Communication Problems and a Lack of Trust in Authorities

Land and enterprise are areas diaspora youth are keen to invest in. But a lack of trusted or known organisations facilitating such opportunities is a prominent reason that steers the youth away from making such investments. According to DIFID's 2011 report, remittances from the Ghanaian diaspora have heavily contributed to Ghana's economy over the last two decades, officially making up 11 per cent of the GDP.¹⁴ But the growing second-generation diaspora youth are not remitting to the same extent.

Top-down Approach

It should be stressed that development involves more than just financial investment and must correlate with issues affecting Ghanaians on an individual level. The Ghanaian government has been criticised for its top-down approach, for contributing to the ever-growing gap between the rich and poor, and for not actively taking into consideration the people's voice when making decisions.¹⁵ However, responsibility for finding a balanced bottom-up approach, through integrated partnerships, lies also with the people.

Cost of Volunteering

Volunteering is a means for diaspora youth to engage in Ghana's development, but there is usually a substantial fee involved, which often acts as a deterrent. Volunteering programmes such as the WAM Campaign offer a flexible low cost approach to volunteering and engaging diaspora youth in development. Through branded marketing and research WAM has identified the following reasons preventing young people from volunteering: 'not enough spare time' (82%); 'put off by bureaucracy' (49%); 'worried about risk/ liability' (47%); 'do not know how to find out about getting involved' (39%); and 'lacking the right skills/experience' (39%).¹⁶ By taking these

barriers into consideration, WAM has been able to directly facilitate over 1,100 hours of volunteering in Ghana since 2011, with over 78 participants from 7 different countries.

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WAYS DIASPORA YOUTH COULD BE INVOLVED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF GHANA

Volunteering

The easiest ways for the diaspora youth to use their skills is to research where potential funding is being channelled in the policy areas they are most concerned with.¹⁷ An alternative approach would be to spend some time in Ghana, lending a hand to know what skills one has and where they will be needed. Again, this requires time, finance and access to credible organisations who are genuinely willing to support such endeavours. However, the WAM Campaign has witnessed positive results via the volunteer programmes, with 100 per cent of diaspora youth stating that they would volunteer in Ghana again after participating in past programmes, and 95 per cent indicating that they would be keen to obtain employment in Ghana as a result of their volunteering experiences with WAM in 2012.



Photo courtesy of wamcampaign.org

WAM's volunteering programmes have managed to create an empowering and enabling environment for youth to engage with Ghana's development, as is reflected in the feedback from volunteers who took part in the December 2012 volunteer programmes:

"I absolutely loved working with the kids, which I did not think I would. I loved meeting and networking with the other volunteers, I built good relationships with them. I also enjoyed the fact that I gained new skills that I never knew I had."

"Personally, I have never worked for free, I charge for every minute of my time. But this experience has given me an opportunity to give back without even asking for anything and I feel like I haven't done anything. I wish I could do more. I want to do more."

"I love what WAM is doing and support it 100%! It's so encouraging to see young people who were not born in Ghana be so connected to the country so much so, that they are willing to give up time to help God Bless y'all."

Investment platforms

A report from Africa Gives cites the following driving factors for investment: (re)connecting with one's identity and with Africa; being able to trace the final destination of investments; and a feeling of 'paying back' to one's community. It is hoped the High Level Prosperity Partnership, inceptioned in November 2013 between Ghana and the UK, will also include a youth engagement element, although initial discussions are geared towards investment-orientated activities.¹⁹



Photo courtesy of Sena Kpodo

Communication

Social media is one of the most effective means of communicating with youth.²⁰ Ghanaian diaspora organisations like the WAM Campaign charity and Me FiRi Ghana Ltd are examples of how to affectively engage and mobilise the Ghanaian Diaspora youth community. Since 2009, both organisations have successfully engaged the diaspora youth, by producing apparel, promoting Ghana and the identity of Ghanaians, hosting branded events and forums, and providing a number of award winning youth volunteer programmes in Ghana. This way, these organisations have boosted citizenship and created a platform reaching out to more than 19,000 people through social media.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ghana has the right ambitious targets to become an upper middle class country by 2015, but leveraging the skilled diaspora population is critical in achieving such targets and managing future investment initiatives. Youth has the potential to form the most innovative and energetic segment of society, but if they are marginalised from engaging in Ghana's development the country risks itself of being deprived of well-needed skills, financial investment and innovation. Therefore, it is essential that the right platforms are created to capitalise on the youth's skills and potential. The following recommendations may contribute to more active and constructive involvement of diaspora youth in Ghana's future development:

- For the Ghana High Commission to use the 'Future of Ghana Youth Networking Forums' as a medium to communicate volunteering-, investment- and general information to the diaspora youth on a quarterly basis, through the distribution of an electronic newsletter.

- For the ‘Diaspora Support Unit’ of Ghana’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs to forge a partnership with the WAM Campaign’s volunteer programmes in Ghana, and increase their efforts to actively engage more diaspora groups outside the UK with volunteering opportunities.

- For the Ghanaian government to actively reach out to grass-root level organisations involved with diaspora engagement, to establish integrated partnerships and more transparent communication channels, allowing both the diaspora youth and the wider Ghanaian society to benefit and grow with the economic upturn of the country.

- For local NGOs and other organisations in the diaspora to organise workshops and information events where youth can inform themselves regarding funding and investment opportunities, gain knowledge about life in Ghana, receive practical advice with regard to volunteering, exchange experiences, and form think tanks.

- For local NGOs and other organisations in the diaspora to develop innovative online campaigns through social media in order to communicate information to the wider diaspora youth community.

- For Ghanaian diaspora youth themselves to research and connect with existing diaspora groups within local communities and to be actively involved on various social media platforms in order to attract interest from those who are not yet engaged or less informed about development opportunities.

NOTES

¹ Ibrahim Forum (2012)

² <http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21572377-african-lives-have-already-greatly-improved-over-past-decade-says-oliver-august>

³ <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/ghana/gdp-growth>

⁴ <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/10/29/uk-ghana-growth-idUKBRE99S0OJ20131029>

⁵ http://unctad.org/en/docs/iteipcmisc14rev1_en.pdf

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/uk-signs-high-level-prosperity-partnerships-with-ghana-and-others>

⁷ <http://www.imi.ox.ac.uk/pdfs/ghana-country-paper>

⁸ <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3df4be350.html>

⁹ http://www.ghanaiandiaspora.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/dep_colloquium_report.pdf

¹⁰ <http://graphic.com.gh/archive/Business-News/foreign-ministry-creates-diaspora-support-unit.html>

¹¹ <https://www.iom.int/developmentfund/files/infosheets/diaspora-support-unit-Newsletter-May-2013.pdf>

¹² http://www.ghanaiandiaspora.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/dep_colloquium_report.pdf

¹³ http://www.afford-uk.org/images/Documents/Mobilising%20resources%20for%20Africa_final_EO_jan14%201.pdf

¹⁴ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67580/handout-UK-Ghana-remittance.pdf

¹⁵ Oluwu, D. and Wusch, J.S. (2004) Local Governance in Africa. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers

¹⁶ http://www.ivr.org.uk/images/stories/Institute-of-Volunteering-Research/Migrated-Resources/Documents/H/OTS_Helping_Out.pdf

¹⁷ Bauböck, R. “Towards a Political Theory of Migrant Transnationalism,” International Migration Review, 37, no. 3 (2003): 709.

¹⁸ http://afford-uk.org/components/com_booklibrary/ebooks/Africa-Gives%20Academic%20Study%202014.pdf

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/uk-signs-high-level-prosperity-partnerships-with-ghana-and-others>

²⁰ <http://harvardpolitics.com/hprgument-posts/youth-political-engagement-era-social-media/>



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WAM Campaign is a registered charity that sponsors volunteer programmes to Ghana for young people. It also hosts fundraising initiatives to support specific projects in Ghana especially for education development wamcampaign.org

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