

**EMERGING
PUBLIC
LEADERS**

G H A N A

ENHANCING YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION IN GOVERNANCE

IN GHANA AND SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA



1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, youth aged 15-24 constitute approximately 16 percent of the total population, amounting to 1.2 billion individuals (UNDESA, 2020), while in sub-Saharan Africa, youth account to over 60 percent of the population, making them a powerful demographic asset (Rocca & Schultes, 2020). Youth represent a significant majority demographic in Ghana (about 35.3%), however, they remain marginalised and starkly underrepresented in governance structures, including political decision-making, and excluded from public sector processes (Axios, 2020; GNA, 2024 & USAID, 2023). In Ghana, these issues persists despite the historic and ongoing contributions of the youth to national development (Commonwealth, 2021). This disconnect between population size and political voice has contributed to a governance gap where young people's perspectives, needs, and potential are not adequately reflected in national and local decision-making. Emerging Public Leaders of Ghana (EPL Ghana) recognises that empowering youth participation is not just a demographic imperative, but a strategic requirement for accountable governance, sustainable development, and social cohesion (EPL, 2024)

This policy brief draws on regional and national evidence, including youth participation trends in Ghana to propose targeted policy reforms that align with the mission of Emerging Public Leaders (EPL) Ghana, which is strengthening public institutions by equipping young leaders to drive positive change in governance. Also, the policy brief aligns with EPL Ghana's mission to cultivate ethical, skilled, and innovative young leaders who can drive public sector transformation. By drawing on data from Ghana and the wider Sub-Saharan African region, the brief highlights barriers to youth engagement, showcases promising practices, and proposes practical reforms to integrate youth meaningfully into governance systems. Investing in youth inclusion today forms the foundation for transparent, effective institutions tomorrow. This brief supports ongoing efforts by EPL Ghana and its partners to promote systems-level reforms that provides young people opportunities to lead, influence, and thrive in the public service.

1.1 OBJECTIVE

To promote meaningful youth participation and representation in governance processes at national and local levels in Ghana and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Specific Objectives

1. To identify structural, political, and social barriers hindering youth engagement in governance.
2. To analyse existing initiatives and best practices in youth inclusion across Ghana and Sub-Saharan Africa.
3. To support the vision of EPL Ghana in strengthening public institutions through youth leadership and innovation.
4. To encourage partnerships across sectors to facilitate youth empowerment and civic engagement.
5. To recommend national and local policy reforms that enhance youth participation.

2. KEY ISSUES

2.1 Underrepresentation in Political Leadership

- Despite their numbers, youth remain significantly underrepresented in formal political spaces across Ghana and Sub-Saharan Africa (Zhou & Tandi, 2023).
- In Ghana's 2024 elections, only 43 out of 275 Members of Parliament (MPs) aged 21–40 were elected. Most young MPs acknowledged they did not champion youth issues due to party loyalty and systemic constraints (Van Gyampo, 2015)
- Young politicians are often perceived as inexperienced, contributing to tokenism rather than authentic representation (Stockemer & Sundstrom, 2022).

2.2 Exclusion at Local Governance Levels

- In districts like Yilo Krobo, Awutu Senya, and Ashaiman, youth engagement is mainly symbolic (Titigah, Yaro & Klu, 2023).
- Majority of youth reported being excluded from decision-making, although most of them (96%) believed youth should play a role (UN, 2021)

- There is inadequate youth-focused policies and structures, and communication channels between youth and assemblies. Most of these communication channels are outdated or ineffective (Ahmed, 2019).

2.3 Structural and Systemic Barriers

- Restrictive age policies, rigid institutional norms, political patronage, and a limited youth-responsive policy framework (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, 2025; Gyampo, 2017; Millar, 2014; NYA, 2022).
- Even when elected, adultist norms and hierarchical systems limit young people's influence (Kennedy, 2019).
- High youth unemployment exists in sub-Saharan Africa (ILO, 2024). For instance, in Ghana, youth unemployment is 14.7 percent (GSS, 2023). Political apathy and limited civic education further hinder participation (NCCE, 2020)

3. LESSONS AND BEST PRACTICES

- Youth have historically played critical roles in nation-building, significantly in Ghana's independence and reform movements.
- Promising practices, such as youth parliaments in Sierra Leone and youth employment policies in the Gambia, are emerging across the region.
- These initiatives often have limited institutional support, funding, and the legal frameworks necessary for lasting impact.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 National-Level Reforms

- **Constitutional Amendments:** Introduce youth quotas in Parliament and local governance, modeled after Kenya's youth representation approach.
- **National Youth Inclusion Framework:** Develop a national roadmap with clear indicators, targets, and resources to institutionalise youth inclusion.
- **Capacity Building:** Scale up leadership and civic training programmes, leveraging models like the EPL Ghana Public Service Fellowship to prepare youth for governance roles.

4.2 Strengthening Local Governance Structures

- **Youth Sub-Committees:** Institutionalise youth desks or committees within all Metropolitan, Municipal, District Assemblies (MMDAs).
- **District Youth Development Plans:** Require youth-responsive development planning with participatory mechanisms.
- **Communication Channels:** Use radio, social media, and SMS platforms to create feedback systems between Assemblies and youth.

4.3 Enhancing Representation in Parliament

- **Mentorship Platforms:** Link young MPs with experienced legislators to champion youth-centric legislation.
- **Strategic Committee Placements:** Position youth MPs on key committees like Education, Youth, Employment, and ICT.
- **Civic Education Expansion:** Build civic literacy programmes to sustain youth participation beyond elections.

4.4 Cross-Sectoral Partnerships

- **NGO and CSO Collaboration:** Promote partnerships with youth-led organisations for monitoring, advocacy, and grassroots mobilisation.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Encourage private sector investment in entrepreneurship, innovation, and digital skills training.
- **Community Counselling Services:** Establish civic guidance centres at the district level for youth empowerment and public engagement.

5. CONCLUSION

The youth are not just future leaders, they are today's critical agents of change. Failure to involve youth in governance undermines democracy and limits sustainable development. Inclusive governance requires systemic reform, comprehensive accountability, and genuine empowerment.

EPL Ghana's Public Service Fellowship, PEACE Fellowship, and Women on the Rise project provide a practical model for engaging youth in governance. These initiatives have placed over 100 fellows and engaged young men and women in governance in public institutions, equipping them with leadership, ethics, and public administration skills to effect real change. Scaling such efforts across Ghana and Sub-Saharan Africa will strengthen institutions and ensure a governance culture that reflects the energy, innovation, and values of young people.

About EPL Ghana

Emerging Public Leaders of Ghana (EPL Ghana) was established in 2018 to strengthen public sector institutions by cultivating a network of ethical, skilled, and innovative young leaders.

Through the Public Service Fellowship, EPL Ghana offers young professionals a meritocratic pathway into public service, equipping them with leadership skills, civic values, and policy competence.

i From 2018 to 2024, EPL Ghana has trained and placed over 100 fellows in public institutions.

ii EPL Ghana's programming ensures integrity, transparency, excellence, and youth inclusion in governance, aligning with its core values: PIVETS (Partnership, Integrity, Value-Based Leadership, Excellence, Transparency, and Sustainability).

EPL Ghana's work demonstrates that inclusive, youth-centered governance is not only possible, it is essential.

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