



Participatory Educational Research (PER)
Vol. 2(1), pp. 24-33, April, 2015
Available online at <http://www.partedres.com>
ISSN: 2148-6123
<http://dx.doi.org/10.17275/per.14.17.2.1>

Youth Empowerment: A strategy to Mitigate Vulnerability to Human Trafficking in Ghana

Kofi Poku Quan-Baffour*

University of South Africa, Pretoria

Article history

Received:
27.11.2014

Received in revised form:
10.12.2014

Accepted:
12.12.2014

Key words:

participatory- exploratory
study, vulnerability,
mitigation, human
trafficking, unemployment,
youth

Due to paucity of industries work opportunities in the rural areas in Ghana are very limited. Many youths complete high school and cannot get employed because they are not skilled and on the account of limited job opportunities. As a native and a frequent visitor to the area of study (Bono Ahafo) the researcher became aware of the situation where unemployed youth have virtually fall prey to overseas work scam. The so-called connection men/women take advantage of the unemployed youth who dream of better life in the cities and overseas destinations. They charge them huge sums of money with promise of work and manage to smuggle the unsuspected youth overseas. The plight of some victims of human trafficking informed the choice of this exploratory participatory study. This participatory study which took place in four rural municipalities involved some victims of the scam, their parents and relatives in face to face interviews.

Introduction

The issue of the youth which touches on political, social and economic life of every country has become an important topic of discussion globally since the beginning of the new millennium. The term, *youth*, is not easy to define because different countries and cultures do not have a common demarcation. In some countries or cultures adulthood is conferred on individuals at 18 but in some others it is attained at the age of 21. For the sake of this paper the term, *Youth*, may be confined to individuals, both males and females, who are between the ages of 15 and 30 years; the stage of wild dreams. In Ghana and other developing countries *youth* is generally characterised by wild dreams, ambitions, adventure, sometimes stubbornness, lawlessness or deviance and unemployment due to lack of relevant knowledge, skills and job opportunities. In pursuing their wild dreams the youth in the countryside often migrate to the cities with the hope of better life. Most often when they get into the cities they realise that the '*grass is not greener*' that side because of paucity of work and lack of relevant knowledge and skill to compete with others for the few job vacancies. They become frustrated and sometimes destitute refuse to go back home with the hope that they can make it in the cities sooner or later. Out of frustration and the desperation for work to live their dreams the youths are usually lured by human traffickers (commonly referred to as '*connection men and women*') to believe that work is waiting for them in overseas countries. Lack of life experience and the desire to lead a better life make the youth believe in the scam and fall into trouble in foreign countries. As the Greek Philosopher, Aristotle

* Correspondence: quanbkp@unisa.ac.za

(384- 322BC) once remarked, ‘young people are in condition like permanent intoxication because youth is sweet and they are growing’.

The Context And Background To The Study

Techiman, Nkoranza, Kintampo and Wenchi are large predominantly rural municipalities in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana. There is serious lack of job opportunities for most school graduates in the area because successive governments have not taken advantage of the agricultural products from the area to create agro- based industries. The municipalities mainly serve as food producing and marketing areas for the entire country and beyond. The absence of job opportunities coupled with lack of relevant knowledge and skills for employment among the youth serve as a major ‘pushing’ factor for thousands of school graduates in the area to migrate to big cities in search of jobs. The paucity of job opportunities in the formal sector of the economy in the area therefore makes the youth vulnerable and target for human trafficking.

Again the four municipalities have informal market centres where traders from all parts of Ghana and the countries in the West Africa sub-region converge from Tuesdays to Fridays (every week) to buy and sell their wares. Traders from as far as Togo, Benin, the Ivory Coast, Bourkina Faso, Liberia, Chad and Niger gather at the markets to buy, sell and transport food stuffs, hard wares, clothes, cola nuts, fruits, vegetables, wood and other forest products across borders. This free movement of people in a region with porous border controls could be exploited by human traffickers who might deceive the young people into believing that work is up there for them. Some of the connection men take the adventurous youth by road to as far as Libya and put them on boats to go to Europe. Youth is easily deceived because it is quick to hope (Aristotle, 384-322BC). As a result of this deception this researcher lost his nephew in a road accident in 2009 when he and others were on their way to Libya.

Problem Statement

As originally a native of Ghana the researcher has heard of incidents where youths were suspected to have been trafficked outside the country on regular basis mainly due to unemployment. With the promise of work some parents provide their young children with money to pay for the adventurous trips with all the uncertainties associated with them. On arrival at destinations many of them become stranded, destitute and illegal immigrants who often serve jail terms in foreign countries. The plight of these adventurous youth in foreign countries informed the choice of this exploratory study. This study was based on the assumption that unemployment makes Ghanaian youth vulnerable to human traffickers. The study therefore aimed at exploring how the training of the youth in relevant knowledge and skills can reduce unemployment and thus mitigate their vulnerability to the problem of human trafficking. The study sought to investigate the possible value of job creation in making the rural youth in Ghana shun human traffickers informed the choice of this exploratory investigation.

Objective of The Study

The objective of this study was to explore the possibility of equipping the youth of rural Ghana with relevant knowledge and skills as a strategy to mitigate their vulnerability to human trafficking.

Theoretical Framework: The Empowerment Theory

This paper advocates for the equipment of the rural youth of Ghana with relevant knowledge and skills for employment and for this reason it is grounded in the *Empowerment Theory*. To empower is simply to make *able* or provide an individual with strength and energy. The concept *empowerment* cuts across social, economic and political efforts of individuals, communities and organisations. The main proponents of the theory include Perkins and Zimmerman(1995) who describe the concept empowerment as ‘an intentional ongoing process centred in the local community, involving natural 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 more succinct exposition empowerment is a process by which people gain control over their lives, democratic participation in the life of their organization or community (Cornell Empowerment Group,1989) and a critical understanding of their environment (Zimmerman, Isreal, Schulz and Checkoway, 1992). Empowerment is thus a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems and proactive behaviours to social policy and social change (Rappaport, 1984). It relates to the dynamic process of interaction between the follower and the leader. Empowerment is more than merely giving consent to an individual to exercise control over tasks; it relates to the use of a person’s potential and competencies, the discovery of new expertise and creation of new opportunities to apply such competencies (Jooste, 2009). In reality actions, activities and structures may be empowering and the outcome of such processes result in a level of being empowered (Swift and Levin, 1987).

The theory is based on the principle that individual and group participation which is facilitated by an expert in specific skills can lead to building of capacities for the individual, groups and members of a community or an organization. Empowerment is thus both individual and group endeavour to bring about transformation. Every organization is rich in talent and the value of the gold we mine is in the team of people we lead (Scarnati & Scarnati, 2002). Thus the talent of each member of a community should be identified, strengthened and harnessed for individual and community advancement. In an environment that empowers authority is discreetly delegated to promote independent decision-making and the followers experience empowerment through responsibility for solving problems (Jooste, 2009).

By implication the empowerment theory could mean that in the rural communities some individuals, particularly, the youth might lack relevant skills and knowledge and this situation can impede their access to employment. Indeed without relevant knowledge and skills the youth cannot live their dreams and might remain vulnerable to human traffickers with empty promises of work overseas. The theory therefore has some implications for youth development. The rural youth in Ghana need to be strengthened by equipping them with job skills which will enable them seek employment or become self-employed. Once they are gainfully employed they can shun human traffickers because as the saying goes, ‘the devil finds work for the idle’. As Bill Clinton, the



former U S President (2002) once remarked ---‘particularly in the developing world young people are in desperate need of productive employment. They want and deserve opportunities to contribute to their communities and develop their skills. I do not believe we can repair the basic fabric of society until people who are willing to work have work. Work organises life. It gives structure and discipline to life’ (Clinton, 2002).

The theory sees empowerment as a process that enables individuals, through participation with others to achieve their primary personal goals (Perkins & Zimmerman, 2005). In the context of this paper the focus is on the acquisition of relevant skills by the rural youth of Ghana through skills development (education and training). This process of empowerment involves collective action in mobilisation of resources to equip individuals or group of people with competencies needed for survival and advancement. Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) affirm that at the community level empowerment refers to collective action to improve the quality of life and therefore organisations in a community. Empowerment is therefore an important construct for understanding the development of individuals, communities and organizations. It raises everyone’s dignity by having a say in where the enterprise is going. Empowerment is really about involvement and it starts with truly believing that everyone counts (Jack Welch, cited by Jooste, 2009).

Research Design and Methodology

This ethnographic and phenomenological study aimed at exploring the efficacy of skills training on job creation and access to employment among the youth of rural Ghana.

Research Design

The study used qualitative explorative (Creswell, 2007; Meadows, 2003) method to explore how relevant knowledge and skills that can assist the rural youth of Ghana to create their own jobs and thus reduce the vulnerability to human trafficking. In order to address the problem being investigated adequately the researcher employed both ethnographic and phenomenological methods because they helped to describe the phenomenon as it is and also enabled the researcher to understand the participants’ personal meanings they might construct from their daily or ‘lived experience’ (Johnson & Christenson, 2000) as people who have either been affected or experienced human trafficking. Welman, Kruger & Mitchel (2007: 192-193) appropriately affirm that the primary task of ethnographic study is to uncover and explicate the ways a group of people understand their settings and take action to manage their situations, problems and difficulties for better improvement. Phenomenological research on the other hand focuses on the understanding of social and psychological phenomenon from the perspectives of the people involved. It is more concerned with how participants in the study experience a particular phenomenon (Welman et al, 2007). For this reason the researcher combined the two approaches in order to get the relevant information for the study.

Population And Sample

The entire population for the study comprised 500 participants made up of 100 parents and guardians (male and females) and 400 unemployed youths from the four municipalities of Techiman, Nkoranza, Kintampo and Wenchi. The researcher used the purposive sampling technique to select 400 unemployed youths and 100 parents and guardians in the four

predominantly rural municipalities to participate in the study. The participants included parents and guardians whose children have become victims to the scam (human trafficking), some of the victims themselves, their friends and relatives. In deed the participants in the informal interview were market women and men who might not necessarily come from one particular town or village.

Data Collection

A semi-structured 6 item interview schedule was administered on purposively selected individuals who were deemed information rich. Using the snowball technique the researcher and his two research assistants were able to track down some of the victims' parents, some unemployed youths, some of the deported victims of the human trafficking, their friends and relatives. Most of the parent participants were interviewed in their market stalls or their work places. The informal interviews had the duration of two months (December 2013- January 2014) and took place on market days- Wednesday to Fridays every week. The interviews covered issues like youth unemployment, causes, consequence, participants' views on the problem of migration of the youth and what could be done to improve the situation. One hundred (100) youths and 25 parents/guardians were interviewed in each of the four municipalities bringing the total participants to 500 (e.g. 400 youth and 100 parents).

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research trustworthiness is an important issue. Trustworthiness relates to the level of dependability or reliability of the data gathering instruments, the process that was carried out when gathering the data, the quality of data gathered and their validity. For the study to adhere to trustworthiness all responses provided by the participants were recorded or transcribed verbatim. Throughout the interviews the researcher carried a journal in which he wrote down whatever he heard, saw or observed. Again during the interviews the researcher often made respondents to clarify their responses to ensure that only the correct information was captured. Also to achieve triangulation the responses from the various municipalities were compared to see where the information differed or corroborated. These strategies were employed to ensure the dependability and credibility of the findings of the investigation.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical issues are equally important in any study that involves human lives. To this end the researcher adhered to basic ethical principles. For example before each session started he informed participants about the purpose of the interviews and sought their consent. Again he made it clear to all the participants that their participation in the study was voluntary and those who did not want to participate were free to leave. In one or two cases those who did not have time to participate in the interviews were excused and replaced with others who were willing to be part of the investigation. As a measure to ensure confidentiality and anonymity the researcher did not record names and voices of all the participants in the investigation.

Data Analysis

The researcher used the interpretative approach in analysing the data. That is, the interview texts were arranged under various themes in order to understand and report the meaning carried by



the data. This strategy of data analysis made the various constitutive elements in the data clearer through an inspection of relationships between concepts, constructs and variables and to see whether there were any patterns or trends (Mouton, 2004).

Results and Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the possibility of equipping the youth of rural Ghana with relevant knowledge and skills for employment as a strategy to mitigate their vulnerability to human trafficking. To obtain the views of people on the subject, face to face interviews were conducted on purposively selected youths and parents in four municipalities in Ghana. The responses of the participants were arranged under themes, analysed and interpreted.

Theme 1: Migration of youth to urban areas

On the question of what motivates the youth most to migrate to the urban areas the respondents expressed various views. For example 90% (N= 360) of the youth and 85%(N=85) of the parents and guardians referred to lack of job opportunities as the major factor that pushes the youth out of the rural areas. The responses below from a youth and a parent epitomise the *raison d'être* or the justification for youth migration.

Youth:

There is no life here in the village. No matter how well your school results you cannot get any job here. If your parents are unable to assist you to further your education you end up as a peasant farmer. When my seniors and friends who migrated to the urban areas visit home I see the difference.

Parent:

I did not spend so much money on my son's education for him to stay in the village doing nothing. I expect him to look for work to be able to take care of himself and assist me look after his brother and sisters.

Ten percent (10%) and 15% of the youth and parents respectively added that there are no modern amenities such as clean water, electricity, good roads, proper health and entertainment facilities in the rural communities hence the educated youth leave in droves for towns and cities to enjoy such facilities. It can be inferred from the above responses that both parents and youth in the rural communities do not seem to have any apology for youth migration because of lack of job opportunities and apparent neglect of rural areas by most of the successive governments of Ghana since political independence in 1957.

Theme 2: Perception of parents/youth about adventure [travelling]

Regarding the perception of respondents on adventure [i.e. travelling to look for work] various views were expressed. For example while some of the participants in the study perceived it in a positive light few others saw travelling out of home as a necessary evil. Eighty six percent (N=344) of the youth and 70% (N=70) of parents respectively perceived travelling in a positive light. A parent and youth summed it up in the following sentences; reproduced verbatim;

Parent:

*Travelling from home can improve life. In my village
the only modern houses and cars belong to young men
and women who are working in the cities or overseas.
My uncle's daughter in Spain remits his parents regularly.*

Youth:

*The young people from my village, Dome, who work
in the cities and Spain are rich. They lead better life
and are respected. That makes me think of moving out
of this village too.*

In spite of the above support for travelling to the cities or overseas there were some of the respondents 30% (N=30) parents and 14 % (N=56) youths who perceived travelling far from home as adventurous or dangerous.

The following verbatim responses attest to their fears and misgivings:

Parent (woman)

*Youth is full of adventure. My son left home in 2005.
He never contacted home. Just last year a lady,
his girl friend he met in the Ivory Coast, came with
their daughter of 4 to inform me that 'K' was killed
in what appears to be xenophobia attack
during the political upheaval in that country.
I was devastated!*

Youth:

*My senior brother died in Niger in 2009 when the bus
on he was travelling to Libya passed on land mine
He and ten others were torn into pieces. Our family
heard of it when one of the survivors from my village
sent a message to my father after three months.*

It can be inferred from the above responses that although majority of the respondents agree that travelling outside home to look for work has become a global phenomenon that can make the youth achieve their dreams some of them expressed some misgivings about such adventures because of the uncertainties associated with them.

Theme 3: Experiences in the cities/towns and vulnerability to human trafficking

The participants were requested to report on their experiences or those of their children, relatives and friends who have migrated to the urban areas of the country or overseas. To this item all the respondents (100%) agreed in their responses that many of the youths who migrate to towns and cities or abroad encounter social and economic problems. The parent component of the participants corroborated in their answers that they worry about sleeping accommodation and food. As one woman participant affirmed,

*As a parent whenever I finish cooking and sit at table
I ask myself whether my son has eaten today
wherever he might be.*



The 400 youth who participated in the study corroborated in their responses that apart from sleeping accommodation it is not easy to secure jobs in the towns and cities because of lack of work experience, relevant knowledge and skills which prospective employers require. In addition to the above 84% (N=336) of the unemployed youth affirmed that out of frustration and the desire to live their dreams they could unknowingly become vulnerable to human traffickers. As one young lady participant said,

*When attempts to get work locally failed I was
tempted to look for money to pay the connection
men who say they could get work as a maid for me
anywhere in the world.*

As regards what experiences they have in travelling abroad for work 4 young men who were deportees recounted the trauma they had gone through in foreign countries. The bitter experiences of two of the participants are reported here.

Youth 1:

In June 2010 the connection man charged me USD 3500 for visa, sleeping accommodation, air ticket and work permit to take me to Johannesburg.

The plan was that I go as a soccer fan and by the end of the world cup his friends would have arranged with a security firm to employ me. The man's friend came to pick me from the airport but three days later he told me to leave his house because his wife and children were coming. The little pocket money got finished. I met some student at a university who accommodated me for a week. I was later arrested, detained under very inhuman condition at a repatriation camp outside Krugersdorp near Johannesburg for two months before being deported.

Youth 2:

The 'connection man' promised to take me and two friends to Italy if we could meet him in Bangazi, Libya. He arranged for a boat to take us to Spain but on the second day we were arrested on the Mediterrean sea and detained by Spanish sea patrol. We were detained for more than a week before deporting us back to Bengazi. A family friend gave me a loan of USD 450 to travel back home by road. My mother paid the money to the man's wife.

Theme 4: Actions to mitigate vulnerability to human trafficking

The researcher asked for the views of participants on what should be done to stop or mitigate the vulnerability of the to human trafficking. The two groups of interviewees corroborated in their responses that:

- The current school curriculum should be urgently reformed to include more practical job oriented skills which may enable school graduates to either find work or create their own work.
- The government should establish agro-based industries in the rural areas to provide job opportunities for the youth when they complete Junior and High schools.
- The government should set up practical and job oriented training centres for school graduates (e.g. carpentry, panel beating, fitting, painting, building, basic accounting and entrepreneurship) to enable them create own jobs.

Conclusions

The study was set up to explore the ways and means of empowering the youth in rural Ghana as a strategy to minimise their vulnerability to human trafficking. The findings from the exploratory study indicated that there is a general frustration among the youth due to lack of job opportunities and skills for employment. This could make them vulnerable to human traffickers with empty promises of jobs overseas. The study concluded that for the government of Ghana to mitigate human trafficking among the unemployed youth it has to rethink skills training as part of the school curriculum and for post school youth.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from the empirical investigation the study recommended that:

- The government of Ghana should establish youth training centres in the rural communities to equip the youth who have already completed school with relevant
- skills for employment.
- The Ministry of education should involve all education stakeholders- parents, learners, the industry and prospective employers to revise the school curriculum to include courses that can equip learners with more practical skills (alongside with academic offerings) to enable school leavers create own jobs.
- The government should set up agro-based industries in the rural areas where there is abundant supply of raw materials to create job opportunities for the youth.
- People caught in trafficking of persons should be prosecuted and given heavy fines and long jail sentences as a deterrent to crime against humanity.

References

- Aristotle (384-322 BC). An ancient Greek Philosopher. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. (Accessed 19/2/14)
- Clinton, B. (2002). *Youth Employment Summit*. Alexandria, Egypt September 7-11
- Cornell Empowerment Group. (1989). Empowerment and family support. *Networking Bulletin*, 1 (2):1-23.
- Creswell, J W. (2009). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approach*. 3rd Edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Johnson, B & Christenson, L. (2000). *Educational Research; Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Meadows, K. A. (2003). So you want to do research? An Overview of the Research Process. *British Journal of Community Nursing*. 8 (8): 369-375.
- Mouton, J. (2004). *How to succeed in your Master's & Doctoral Studies. A Southern African Guide and Resource Book*. Pretoria. Van Schaik Publishers Ltd.
- Jooste, K. (2009). *Empowerment and Leadership*. In *Leadership in Health Services Management*. Jooste, K (ed.) Cape Town Juta Publishing Company Ltd.
- Perkins, D D. and Zimmerman, A. (1995). Empowerment theory, research and application. *American Journal of Community Psychology*. Volume 23. No 5. Pp. 569-579.



- Rappaport, J. 1984. Studies in empowerment: Introduction to the issue. *Prevention in Human Services*. (3): 1-7.
- Scarnati, JT & Scarnti, BJ. (2002). Empowerment: The key to quality. *Total Quality Management Journal*, 14 (2):110-119.
- Swift, C & Levin, G. (1987). Empowerment: An emerging mental health technology. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, (8): 71-94.
- Welman, C. Kruger, F. & Mitchel, B. (2007). *Research Methodology*. Cape Town. Oxford University Press.
- Zimmerman, M.A, Isreal, B.A., Schulz, A & Checkoway, B. 1992. Further explorations in empowerment theory: An empirical analysis of psychological empowerment. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Volume 20, pp.707-727