

In search of a (new) purpose?

An analysis of Ghana's National Service Scheme (NSS)¹

Arnim Langer² & Abdul-Gafar Tobi Oshodi³

Abstract

From the 1960s, many African countries have introduced a range of measures and policies aimed at strengthening national unity and integration. One of the most common policies in this respect was the introduction of national service programmes. Despite the fact that many African countries currently have an active national service programme of some sort, which often cost a significant amount of public money, almost no research has been conducted on assessing the relevance of these programmes for promoting national unity or achieving some other developmental or political objective in contemporary Africa. Our paper addresses this issue head-on by analysing the impact and relevance of Ghana's National Service Scheme (NSS); i.e. one of the oldest and largest programmes on the continent. We have used a mixed-method approach to data collection, which consisted of conducting 50 semi-structured interviews with Ghanaian politicians and NSS officials as well as conducting an online perceptions survey among 1,374 recent participants in the NSS programme. The main finding of our analysis was that both policymakers and participants considered the NSS programme to still be very relevant for Ghana, but not necessarily for the reasons for which the NSS was established in 1973.

Keywords: Ghana, NSS, nation-building, national youth service, and national unity.

¹ This is a draft paper to be presented at the 7th European Conference on African Studies (ECAS), 29 June to July 1, 2017, University of Basel, Switzerland. Acknowledgements: This work was supported by the *Research Foundation Flanders* (FWO) project 'Making Citizens 'National': Analyzing the Impact of Ghana's National Service Scheme (NSS)' (grant reference G049513N) and the *KU Leuven Special Research Fund*. We would also like to thank Maarten Schroyens for his help in the implementation of the National Service Scheme Survey (N3S).

² Director of the Centre for Research on Peace and Development (CRPD), UNESCO Chair in Building Sustainable Peace & University lecturer in International Relations at the University of Leuven (email: arnim.langer@soc.kuleuven.be).

³ Doctoral researcher at the Centre for Research on Peace and Development (CRPD), University of Leuven (email: oshoditobi@yahoo.com)

1. Introduction

Following Africa's decolonisation in the 1960s, nation-building became a major focus for both academics and policymakers.⁴ Back then, there was widespread concern about the presumed centrifugal tendencies of ethnic groups and parties, and the associated risk for the stability and progress of the newly independent countries. Many African leaders in the 1960s therefore became preoccupied with the challenge of making 'national' citizens out of 'ethnic' citizens, whose loyalties to their ethnic communities was considered a threat to national unity and stability.⁵ Africa's nation-building challenge at the time of decolonization was daunting given that 'inter-state boundaries were ... artificialities at every point, as kingdoms, ethnic groups and families were dissected arbitrarily according to European whims and caprices'⁶. In light of this formidable challenge, it is hardly surprising that many African leaders in the 1960s were convinced that nation-building ought to take 'precedence over all other tasks, including economic development'⁷.

After the 1960s, nation-building and the closely related issue of the 'national question' remained an important preoccupation of many African countries. In order to foster and promote national unity, African leaders introduced and maintained a range of (symbolic) policies and measures throughout the post-colonial period, including for example changing the colonial names of their countries, changing the name and location of their capital cities, changing their national currencies, homogenizing religious differences, centralizing states' structures and decision-making institutions, conducting non-ethnic censuses, promulgating one-party states, promoting national reconciliation, affirmative action and power sharing among ethnic groups, and introducing conscription and national service programmes.⁸ Interestingly, relatively little research has been

⁴ Sanghamitra Bandyopadhyay and Elliott Green, 'Nation-building and conflict in Modern Africa', *World Development*, 45 (2013), pp. 108–118.

⁵ See Terence Ranger, 'The invention of tradition revisited: The case of colonial Africa', in Preben Kaarsholm and Jan Hultin (eds), *Inventions and boundaries: Historical and anthropological approaches to the study of ethnicity and nationalism* (Roskilde: Institute for Development Studies, Roskilde University, 1994), pp. 5-50; Bruce J. Berman, "'A palimpsest of contradictions": Ethnicity, class, and politics in Africa', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 37, 1 (2004), pp. 13-31; David Welsh, 'Ethnicity in Sub-Saharan Africa', *International Affairs* 72, 3 (1996), pp. 477-491.

⁶ Nicodemus Fru Awasom, 'Anglo-Saxonism and Gallicism in nation building in Africa: The case of bilingual Cameroon and the Senegambia Confederation in historical and contemporary perspective', *Afrika Zamani*, 11-12 (2003–2004), pp. 86–118, p. 87.

⁷ Aristide R. Zolberg, 'Patterns of national integration', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 5, 4 (1967), pp. 449-467, p. 461.

⁸ Akin Akinwumi, 'The will to transform: Nation-building and the strategic state in South Africa', *Space and Polity*, 17, 2 (2013), pp. 145-163; Bandyopadhyay and Green, 'Nation-building and conflict in modern Africa'; Michael Kpessa, Daniel Béland and André Lecours, 'Nationalism, development, and social policy: The politics of nation-building in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 34, 12 (2011), pp. 2115-2133; Abdul Raufu Mustapha, 'Institutionalising ethnic representation: How effective is affirmative action in Nigeria', *Journal of International Development* 21, 4 (2009), pp. 561-576.

conducted on the impact and continued relevance of these and other nation-building policies on advancing national unity in Africa.

In this paper we will analyse the perceived impact and relevance of national service programmes in contemporary Africa, with a particular focus on the Ghanaian national service programme. National service programmes generally entail that young people have to conduct a period of civic or public service for a limited amount of financial compensation. As we will show below, national service programmes in Africa take on many different forms and can differ regarding, among other things, whether participation is mandatory or not, which group of people is targeted and the length of the programme (below we will provide an overview of the existing programmes and their main characteristics). Despite the fact that many African countries currently have an active national service programme of some sort, which often cost a significant amount of public money, almost no research has been done on assessing the relevance of these programmes for promoting national unity or achieving some other developmental or political objective in contemporary Africa.

Hence, in this paper we aim to address this important academic void by investigating and analysing the role, objectives and perceived impact of Ghana's National Service Scheme (NSS); i.e. one of the largest and oldest national service programmes in Africa. We will analyse the NSS programme both from a policy-maker and participant's perspective. An analysis of the Ghanaian programme is academically intriguing, because of the programme's longevity and rapidly expanding number of participants. The programme was first introduced during the military regime of Ignatius Kutu Acheampong in 1973 and has remained in operation ever since, despite rapidly rising costs in recent years. Moreover, given that Ghana has not seen any major inter-ethnic violence in the past two decades, and is generally regarded as a relatively peaceful country, it will also be extremely interesting to find out to what extent people think that the NSS programme has actually positively contributed to this situation.

We have used a mixed-method approach to data collection, which consisted of conducting in-depth interviews with Ghanaian politicians and policy-makers as well as conducting a perceptions survey among recent participants in the NSS programme. In total, we have conducted 50 semi-structured interviews with Ghanaian Members of Parliament (MPs) and NSS officials between November 2014 - February 2015. In order to assess participants' perceptions concerning the role and relevance of Ghana's NSS programme, we have conducted a large-scale perceptions survey

in September 2015 among 1,374 Ghanaian students, who had just returned from their one-year mandatory national service. Below we will provide more details on the methodology we have used to collect our survey data.

The paper will proceed as follows. In the following section we will provide a brief historical and comparative overview of the on-going national service programmes in Africa. In Section 3, we will discuss the origins and evolution of Ghana's NSS programme. In Section 4, we will then present and analyse the opinions and perceptions of both Ghanaian politicians and participants concerning the role and relevance of the NSS programme in contemporary Ghana. Section 5 concludes.

2. National service programmes in Africa: A comparative overview

Civic service or national service (as it is often referred to in African countries) is a social practice, which can be found in many countries across the world⁹. As we will show below, national service programmes can take on many forms and can become national institutions after having been in place for a number of years. These programmes have been introduced for a number of reasons, including to promote patriotism, nation-building, national development, national security, and youth employment¹⁰. In Africa, the introduction of national service programmes is usually linked to what has become known as the 'national question', which essentially refers to 'contestations over statehood and citizenship'.¹¹ In this respect Thandika Mkandawire has pointed to the 'close affinity between nationalism and developmentalism' in Africa¹² and argued that dealing with the national question therefore required simultaneously addressing the developmental question (i.e. improving people's socioeconomic wellbeing).

It is worth noting here that national service programmes established in Africa were often aimed at addressing both dimensions of the national question: nation-building and national development. Indeed, in most cases the stated objectives of national service programmes – from the largest

⁹ Amanda Moore McBride, Carlos Benítez and Michael Sherraden, 'The forms and nature of civic service: A global assessment,' (Research Report, Center for Social Development, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, 2003).

¹⁰ See Bandyopadhyay and Green, 'Nation-building and conflict in modern Africa'; Donald Eberly and Reuven Gal, 'From military service to civic service: The evolution of national youth service', in Amanda Moore McBride and Michael Sherraden, *Civic service worldwide: Impacts and enquiry*, (Routledge, London, 2015), pp. 17-33.

¹¹ Eghosa E. Osaghae, 'Revisiting the concept of state fragility and state building in Africa', in Solomon Akinboye and M. M. Fadakinte (eds), *Fifty years of nationhood? State, society and politics in Nigeria (1960-2010)* (Concept Publications, Lagos, 2010), pp. 75-131, p. 113.

¹² Thandika Mkandawire, 'From the national question to the social question', *Transformation*, 69 (2009), pp. 130-160, p. 145.

ones, such as Nigeria's National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) and Ghana's National Service Scheme (NSS) to the smaller ones, like the National Youth Service of Zimbabwe and *Tirelo Setshaba* in Botswana – included both elements of nationalism and developmentalism. This is illustrated in Table 1 below, which provides an overview of the ongoing national service programmes in Africa and lists the main characteristics of the different programmes, including the programmes' objectives, the year of establishment and the nature of the programme.

Table 1 shows that there are important differences in the nature and structure of the existing national service programmes in Africa. A first notable difference between these programmes has to do with the period in which different programmes were established and the length of time that they have remained operational. While some programmes, like for example Nigeria's NYSC which was established in 1973, have a very long history, other programmes, like the ones in Rwanda and Zimbabwe, have only been launched in the 21st century. Further, some countries have had a national service programme in the past, but decided to abolish it. For example: Malawi's Young Pioneer Movement was established in 1963, but it disbanded in 1994; Seychelles' National Youth Service (NYS) was initiated in 1981, but subsequently abolished in 1998, and Mali's National Youth Service Programme only existed between 1980 and 1990.¹³ Other countries, after having cancelled their national service programme, later decided to re-introduce a new or adapted programme. Botswana, for instance, cancelled its national youth service programme in 2000, but re-introduced a new programme in 2014.

Africa's national service programmes also differ with respect to the age and targeted pool of participants. While national service programmes are usually targeted at the 'youth', there is quite a bit variation across countries in what this exactly means. For instance, while Nigeria's NYSC mobilises participants up to the age of 30, the Zimbabwean programme accepts individuals up to 35 years old and in Eritrea's programme the upper-limit is 40 years old. Some programmes, such as Ghana's National Volunteer Service, Senegal's National Volunteering Programme and the National Volunteer Programme of Mauritius, even accommodate older people.

¹³ See Reuben Chirambo, "'Operation Bwezani': The army, political change, and Dr. Banda's hegemony in Malawi", *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 13, 2 (2004), pp. 146–163; Carrie Bodley-Bond and Karena Cronin, 'Overview of the national youth service landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa', (Compilation of landscape study on national service in sub-Sahara Africa countries, Learning Forum, Johannesburg, 2013), <<http://www.icicp.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/131123-Landscape-in-National-Youth-Service-final.pdf>> (3 October 2014).

Table 1: An overview of ongoing national service programmes in Africa

Country	NYS Programme	Year launched ¹	Type of program	Target group/ Age group	Length of programme
Algeria	National Military Service	1969	Mandatory service	Male citizens between 19-30 years	18 months
Botswana	<i>Tirelo Setshaba</i>	2014	Voluntary service	18-30	1 year with possibility of less than a year extension
Burkina Faso	<i>Programme National de Volontariat du Burkina Faso</i>	2006	Voluntary service	18+	6 months to 3 years
Côte d'Ivoire	<i>Programme du Service Civique National</i>	2010	Voluntary service	18-35	Training last for not more than 9 months.
Eritrea	National Youth Service	1994	Mandatory service	18-40	Initially for 18 months, but service may be extended indefinitely
Gambia	National Youth Service Scheme	1996	Voluntary service	Regular program: 18-25; apprenticeship program: 13-25.	Regular program: 2 yrs; apprentice. program: 3-4 yrs.
Ghana	National Service Scheme	1973	Mandatory service	University and tertiary education graduates	12 months
Kenya	National Youth Service	2014	Voluntary service	High school graduates and disadvantages youths.	Up to 2 years
Liberia	National Youth Service Programme	2007	Voluntary service	College, technical school, and university graduates	1 year

Mali	<i>Centre national de promotion du volontariat du Mali</i>	2009	Voluntary service	18-30	3 months-2 years
Namibia	National Youth Service	1999.	Voluntary service.	16-35.	2 years and 6 months
Nigeria	National Youth Service Scheme	1973	Mandatory service	Graduates of tertiary institutions between 18-30 years	12 months
Rwanda	<i>Urugerero</i>	2013	Voluntary service	18-35.	Not more than 12 months.
Senegal	<i>Service Civique National</i>	1997	Voluntary service	18-35	2 years
South Africa	National Youth Service Programme.	2004	Voluntary service	18-35	0-1 year.
Tanzania	<i>Jeshi na Kujenga Taifa</i>	2012	Voluntary service	18-35	1 year
Zambia	Zambia National Service	2013	Voluntary service	17-30. Out-of-school youths	1-2 years
Zimbabwe	National Youth Service	2001	Voluntary service	18-35	1 year

Source: Compiled by the authors.

- 1) Please note that if a programme existed in the past, but was abolished at some stage, the year provided refers to the time that the programme was reintroduced.

Most national service programmes include both male and female participants. The Algerian national military service programme is an exception in this respect, as it is restricted to male citizens¹⁴. In terms of the level of education of the targeted participants, there is also quite a bit of variation. Some programmes, such as the *Tirelo Setshaba* programme in Botswana and Rwanda's Urugerero programme, are targeted at pre-bachelor students and pupils. Other programmes, such as Nigeria's NYSC and Ghana's NSS, target graduates of universities and other tertiary institutions. Africa's national service programmes also differ with respect to whether or not participation is mandatory. While some programmes, such as Ghana's NSS and Nigeria's NYSC, are mandatory for the targeted population, other programmes are voluntary, as in the cases of Senegal and Zimbabwe. Some programmes, such as for example Kenya's national service programme, have vacillated between being mandatory and voluntary. Given the differences identified above, it is unsurprising that there is also a large variation in the number of people enrolled in the different national service programmes. Thus, while Burkina Faso's national service programme mobilises around 5,000 people¹⁵, 150,000 people participate annually in Nigeria's NYSC.

In what follows we will zoom in on the origins and evolution of one of the oldest and largest national service programmes in Africa: i.e. Ghana's National Service Scheme (NSS).

3. The origins and evolution of Ghana's National Service Scheme (NSS)

Like most African countries, when Ghana gained independence in 1957 under the leadership of Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah, it inherited a state which was composed of numerous ethnicities; some of which had existed as independent states in the pre-colonial era¹⁶. British colonial rule had directly contributed to increasing the salience of these ethnic groups and divisions¹⁷. As a consequence, in the immediate pre-independence period, several ethno-regional political parties emerged, including the Gurma/Mole-Dagbani-based Northern People's Party, the Ashanti-based National Liberation Movement and the Ewe-based Togoland Congress Party, and this resulted in

¹⁴ Kamal Rarrbo, 'Studies on Youth Policies in the Mediterranean Partner Countries: Algeria', (Country Report, EuroMed Youth III Programme, Marlyle Roi, Institut national de la Jeunesse et de l'Éducation populaire Regional Capacity Building and Support Unit / Unité Régionale de Renforcement des Capacités, 2009).

¹⁵ ICP, 'Youth civic participation in action: Meeting community and youth development needs nationwide', (Innovation in Civic Participation, Washington DC, 2010).

¹⁶ Victor Azarya and Naomi Chazan, 'Disengagement from the state in Africa: Reflections on the experience of Ghana and Guinea', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29, 1 (1987), pp. 106-131.

¹⁷ Ousman Kobo, 'We are citizens too: the politics of citizenship in independent Ghana', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 48, 1 (2010), pp. 67-94.

serious political tensions¹⁸. Nkrumah was very concerned about the centrifugal aspirations of these ethno-regional parties and in order to contain ethno-regional mobilization and promote national unity, he decided to introduce a range of measures, including, most importantly, the Avoidance of Discrimination Act in December 1957 which prohibited the formation of political parties along ethnic, regional or religious lines (Ibid.). Nkrumah and his Convention People's Party (CPP) are also widely regarded as having promoted national unity by 'its denunciations of communalism and by the 'ethnically blind' stance of Nkrumah himself'¹⁹.

In order to foster a stronger sense of national unity under a socialist banner, especially among young Ghanaians, Nkrumah and his Convention People's Party (CCP) established the *Builders Brigade* (later renamed the Workers Brigade) in 1957²⁰. The Builders Brigade – rather than being a strictly national youth service programme – was designed to provide employment to both youths and adults. It was initially only open to Ghanaian males up to the age of 45, but it was soon expanded to accommodate females as well. Most participants in the programme were employed in the agriculture sector, although some people were made to work in flood control, building of homes, craftsmanship and the paving of streets²¹. After a couple of years, however, Nkrumah concluded that most participants in the Builders Brigade were actually 'too old to instil with patriotism'²² and hence he decided to establish the Young Pioneer Movement (YPM) in 1961.

The YPM was the first full-fledged government-sponsored youth programme in post-colonial Ghana. According to Nkrumah, the YPM was established to inculcate virtues of community service, humility, and courage among young people, in addition to providing training in 'citizenship within a society which will be rooted in co-operation and not acquisitive competition'²³. Within two years of its establishment, the YPM had numerous branches across the country and more than 500,000 members²⁴. This completely dwarfed the 25,000 members of the Workers Brigade in 1966²⁵. The YPM did, however, not exist for a very long time. Indeed, soon after Nkrumah was

¹⁸ Arnim Langer, 'Living with diversity: The peaceful management of horizontal inequalities in Ghana', *Journal of International Development* 21, 4 (2009), pp. 534–546.

¹⁹ David Brown, 'Who Are the tribalists? Social pluralism and political ideology in Ghana', *African Affairs* 81, 322 (1982), pp. 37–69, p. 41.

²⁰ Heidi G. Frontani and Lauren C. Taylor, 'Development through civic service: the Peace Corps and national service programmes in Ghana', *Progress in Development Studies* 9, 2 (2009), pp. 87–99.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²³ Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa must unite* (Frederick A. Praeger, New York, 1963), p. 130.

²⁴ Ebenezer Obiri Addo, *Kwame Nkrumah: A case of religion and politics in Ghana* (University Press of America, Lanham, Maryland, 1999).

²⁵ Jeffrey S. Ahlman, 'A new type of citizen: youth, gender, and generation in the Ghanaian Builders Brigade', *Journal of African History* 53, 1 (2012), pp. 87–105.

removed from power by a coup d'état in 1966, the new military regime –i.e. the National Liberation Council (NLC), abolished the YPM in order to break with Nkrumah's ideology and policies

In 1969, the NLC handed over power to the civilian government of Prime Minister Afeifa Busia, who initiated a plan to establish a voluntary national youth service programme, named the Ghana National Service Corps²⁶. However, before being able to implement this programme, the Busia regime was removed from power in January 1973 by another military coup d'état. However, the new military regime –i.e. the National Redemption Council (NRC) under the leadership of General Ignatius Acheampong- decided to go ahead with the implementation of Busia's national youth service programme, but renamed the programme Ghana's National Service Scheme (NSS). As stated in Table 1 above, the NSS objectives included to:

- 'Encourage the spirit of national service among all segments of Ghanaian society in the effort of nation-building through active participation;
- Undertake projects designed to combat hunger, illiteracy, disease and unemployment in Ghana;
- Help provide essential services and amenities, particularly in towns and villages of the rural areas of Ghana;
- Develop skilled manpower through practical training; and,
- Promote national unity and strengthen the bonds of common citizenship among Ghanaians'²⁷.

The National Redemption Council Decision 208, which established the NSS programme, was replaced by the Ghana National Service Scheme Act of 1980, which made national service mandatory for Ghanaian high school students. This was later changed to graduates from university and other tertiary education institutions. While initially participants had to complete two years of national service, in 1995, the government decided to reduce the length of national service to one year; a term which is still in place today. The NSS has expanded from a relatively small operation in its early days to an institution with more than 70,000 participants a year. As shown in Table 2, in recent years in particular, the number of NSS participants has increased sharply;

²⁶ Awimbila Ahmed Ali, *Assessing the computerised posting system of the National Service Scheme: A case of the Brong Ahafo Region*, (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, unpublished Masters' thesis, 2011).

²⁷ National Service Scheme, 'Who we are.'

from 34,000 in 2008 to 70,000 in 2014. This sharp increase is directly related to Ghana's relatively strong economic performance from the early 2000s, which enabled more young people to go to university or attend a tertiary education institution.²⁸ Table 2 also shows that most national service postings take place in Ghana's public sector. In particular, in the educational sector, national service personnel constitutes a major source of manpower. Most national service personnel posted to the educational sector are employed as primary or secondary school teachers.

Table 2: Sectoral posting of national service personnel between 2008 and 2014

Sector	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Education	12890	14174	32375	33814	46,896	36,426	36,825
MMDAs	9812	18383	14422	16,066	8,004	-	18,383
Health	3024	3100	5135	6720	8,249	3,100	2,685
Private	8381	5426	2060	5713	5,061	10,427	13296
Total	34107	41083	53992	62313	68, 210	70,110	71189

Source: Compiled by authors²⁹.

Table 3 shows the regional distribution of the NSS postings. It emerges that the Greater Accra Region had the highest number of NSS postings in 2014 (i.e. 22,824), followed by the Ashanti Region (i.e. 13,537), and the Brong Ahafo Region being a distant third (i.e. 5,993). The relative distribution of the NSS postings appears to be roughly in line with the relative demographic sizes of Ghana's ten regions, except for the Greater Accra Region. Indeed, while about 16.3% of Ghana's population was living in the Greater Accra Region in 2010 (see last column of Table 3), 32.1% of the NSS postings in 2014 were located in this region. The main reason for this relative over-representation of the Greater Accra Region in terms of NSS postings is that the capital city, Accra, is located in this region. Accra is the largest city of the country, an important area of economic activity and the place where most public institutions are located. Thus, in other words

²⁸ According to the World Development Indicators, please note that Ghana had an average economic growth of 5.9% over the period 2002-2010.

²⁹ NSS, 'National service deployment for 2012/2013 service year', (National Service Secretariat, Accra, 2012); NSS, 'Ghana National Service Scheme under President Mills' Better Ghana: An overview of the operations of the Ghana National Service since 2009', (National Service Secretariat, Accra, 2012); Anita Frimpong, 'National Service Scheme postings for 2014/ 2015 released', *Modern Ghana*, 2 September 2014, <<https://www.modernghana.com/news/567054/1/national-service-scheme-postings-for-2014-2015-rel.html>> (18 September 2016); *Vibe Ghana*, 'NSS deploys 70,000 service personnel', 4 September 2013, <<http://vibeghana.com/2013/09/04/nss-deploys-70000-service-personnel/>> (2 January 2016).

the relative over-representation of NSS participants in the Greater Accra Region does not appear to be the result of favouritism or undue preference for this region, but is rather a direct consequence of the fact that Accra has the highest number of public institutions and large-scale companies and enterprises.³⁰ It is further noticeable that in the period from 2009 to 2014, the total number of NSS participants increased by 73%. This substantial increase in participants was relatively equally distributed over the different regions, except for the Western Region which only witnessed a very small increase and the Greater Accra and Upper West Regions which saw increases which were substantially larger than the national average.

Table 3: Regional postings of NSS participants between 2009 and 2014

Region	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	% of total NSS postings (2014)	% increase between 2009-2014	% regional population (2010) ¹
Greater Accra	9755	12048	16164	-	18,424	22824	32.1	134.0	16.3
Ashanti	8639	10004	10391	-	10,122	13537	19.0	56.7	19.4
Brong Ahafo	3848	5901	5144	-	6,596	5993	8.4	55.7	9.4
Central	2670	5412	5937	-	5,148	4615	6.5	72.8	8.9
Eastern	3940	5220	5433	-	6,072	5611	7.9	42.4	10.7
Western	4550	5133	5489	-	5,933	4590	6.4	0.9	9.6
Volta	2195	3382	3813	-	4,652	3837	5.4	74.8	8.6
Northern	2894	2947	4292	-	5,811	5256	7.4	81.6	10.1
Upper West	1233	1813	2443	-	3,638	2662	3.7	115.9	2.9
Upper East	1359	2132	3207	-	3,714	2264	3.2	66.6	4.2
Total	41,083	53,992	62,313	68,210	70,110	71,189	100.0	73.3	100.0

Source: Compiled by authors³¹.

Given the large number of NSS participants, who each receives a monthly stipend of 350 Ghana cedi (about US\$92), the programme constitutes a considerable expense for the Ghanaian state. In particular, in 2012, it was estimated that the total NSS expenses amounted to about \$113 million³². In recent years the NSS expenses have further increased as a result of the sharp expansion in participants as well as a moderate increase in participants' monthly stipends.³³ Given

³⁰ Based on interviews with NSS officials.

³¹ NSS, 'National service deployment for 2012/2013 service year'; NSS, 'Ghana National Service Scheme under President Mills'; Anita Frimpong, 'National Service Scheme postings for 2014/ 2015 released'; *Vibe Ghana*, 'NSS deploys 70,000 service personnel'.

³² Bodley-Bond and Cronin, 'Overview of the national youth service'.

³³ Interview, NSS official 42, NSS headquarters, Accra, 5 February 2015.

the considerable costs of the NSS programme for Ghanaian taxpayers, it is crucial to analyse what the NSS programme is contributing or is seen to be contributing to the Ghanaian society. Hence, in the next section we will analyse the (perceived) relevance of the NSS programme in contemporary Ghana, both from a policy-maker and participant's perspective.

4. Ghana's National Service Scheme: Still relevant in the 21st Century?

The purpose and perceived impact of Ghana's National Service Scheme: A policymaker's perspective

Ghana's National Service Scheme has been in operation for more than four decades and has in this period transformed from a small-scale government programme into a national institution. In order to find out how policy-makers perceive the current role and relevance of the NSS programme, we have conducted a total of 50 semi-structured interviews with Ghanaian MPs and several high-ranking NSS officials in the period from November 2014 until February 2015. When asked about the NSS scheme, most Ghanaian Members of Parliament (MPs) and policymakers interviewed as part of this study agreed that the NSS programme has contributed towards bringing people closer together and exposing them to 'a lifestyle that they may never ever have experienced but for the service scheme'.³⁴ Indeed, as one MP noted in this respect, the NSS scheme is a 'way of getting to know each other's cultures, language and a whole lot of things and it is going to help us a lot'.³⁵

Another MP explicitly linked the NSS scheme to the strengthening of inter-group relationships and the promotion of inter-cultural or mixed marriages. In particular, he mentioned the following with respect to the impact of the NSS scheme: 'People go outside to teach, to work in farms that are not within their own original jurisdictions. And I think that also helps in fostering relationships. A lot of boys, when they go for national service, they get married there. The girls, when they go, they get married there. We call this *Bidiako*. You have gone somewhere and the girls have cooked something and you cannot go again. And then that is when the inter-marriages thing I am talking about also comes in'.³⁶ The building of long-term relationships and friendships as a result of people's participation in the NSS scheme also emerged from the personal experiences of the interviewed MPs and policymakers themselves. Indeed, when asked about the contacts and friends they made during their own national service, nearly all of the interviewed MPs and

³⁴ Interview, MP 47, Ghana Parliament, Accra, 2 December 2014.

³⁵ Interview, MP 8, Ghana Parliament, Accra, 27 November 2014.

³⁶ Interview, MP 15, Ghana Parliament, Accra, 4 December 2014.

policymakers who had conducted national service at some stage in the past (for some of them this was more than 30 years ago), not only claimed that they had made a lot of new friends and contacts during their national service, but they also said that they continued to be in touch with many of the people they had met back then.

Nevertheless, while most interviewed MPs and policymakers agreed that the NSS programme contributed to promoting national integration, many respondents considered other measures, interventions and policies to have been more important for explaining why Ghana has been able to sustain relatively peaceful and harmonious inter-ethnic relations for long periods of time. In this respect respondents often referred to the important role that Kwame Nkrumah played in fostering national unity in the wake of Ghana's independence in 1957. Illustratively, one MP stated the following when asked about how Ghana had been able to peacefully manage its ethnic diversity and promote national unity: 'So far, it has been very good for Ghana. Ethnicity was there, but it was not deep. Coming from the colonial days, Kwame Nkrumah, who was the first Prime Minister, tried to bring us together to the extent that he initiated boarding schools. He also encouraged inter-ethnic marriages. He started by marrying someone who was not even a Ghanaian. Most people married people from other tribes or ethnic groups. So he initiated most of these things and it has worked'.³⁷ The boarding school system, which emerged with the establishment of missionary and colonial government schools in the mid-19th century³⁸, was also repeatedly mentioned to have contributed to national unity in Ghana. As one MP argued in this respect: 'What actually brought about integration is the boarding school system. I see that as a discrete way of integrating our society; that is, early high school, you are talking of 13 or 14-year-old-teenagers moving together with a sense that we are all one. By the time that you are older, you are formed'.³⁹

Besides being perceived to contribute –admittedly in a limited way– to the development of the country and the promotion of national unity, the NSS programme was also perceived to be important for the Ghanaian society for a number of other reasons. Some of the interviewed MPs and policymakers argued that the NSS scheme essentially serves as some sort of a 'pay-back' scheme, whereby participants receive relatively low stipends compared to the cost of hiring regular full-time staff. Illustratively, while a regular primary school teacher earns between \$260 and \$500 a month, the monthly stipends of NSS participants employed as teachers in primary

³⁷ Interview, MP 45, Ghana Parliament, Accra, 3 December 2014.

³⁸ Stephan F. Miescher, *Making men in Ghana* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2005).

³⁹ Interview, MP 10, Ghana Parliament, Accra, November 28, 2014.

schools is currently only GHc 350, which is about \$92.⁴⁰ Given that last year more than 36,000 people were employed as teachers as part of their national service obligations, the total wage savings for the Ghanaian state was quite considerable.⁴¹ This idea that national service is partly about giving back to society appears to be widely supported among the interviewed MPs and policymakers. In this respect, one MP stated that ‘the concept [of national service] was to allow people to give back to society what they have gained and also learn something before they get to the outside world.’⁴² In a similar vein, another MP stated that the NSS scheme is an ‘organization to ensure that there is some service by people who have been looked after by the state.’⁴³

A number of MPs and policymakers also argued that the NSS scheme was important for Ghana because it contributed towards maintaining social stability by keeping young people occupied; be it only for one year. Moreover, in their view, the NSS scheme essentially serves as a form of ‘stop gap’ between the time that young people finish their education and the time that they have to enter the regular work force. In other words the NSS scheme was perceived to act as a ‘safety valve,’⁴⁴ which takes idle youths off the streets by providing them with temporary jobs within the purview of the one-year national service programme. One MP explained this point in relation to the high rate of unemployment among young people: ‘[The unemployment rate] is getting very high and if we are not careful, people in authority like us, if we are not careful, the youths could rise up one day’, adding that ‘they will come with whips and wipe all of us, saying that it is because of us that they are not enjoying. If you scrap this [i.e. the NSS scheme], you are only increasing the unemployment rate. At least for one year, they get themselves occupied to do something.’⁴⁵ Another respondent noted that the NSS scheme was ‘conceived to take hold of the numbers immediately after school and be reducing them gradually into public service. So it is a stop gap. How do you deal with the many people who are leaving school and transitioning into work? How do you deal with them? If you leave them, they constitute a national security threat.’⁴⁶

While all the interviewed MPs and policymakers were in favour of keeping the NSS scheme in place and maintaining its mandatory nature, at the same time, most respondents acknowledged that the programme faced serious challenges (e.g. corruption, rising expenses, ineffective

⁴⁰ Interview, NSS official 40, NSS headquarters, Accra, January 29, 2015.

⁴¹ Interview, NSS official 43, NSS headquarters, Accra, January 29, 2015.

⁴² Interview, MP 17, Ghana Parliament, Accra, 2 December 2014.

⁴³ Interview, MP 30, Ghana Parliament, Accra, 10 December 2014.

⁴⁴ Interview, NSS official 41, NSS headquarters, Accra, 4 February 2015.

⁴⁵ Interview, MP 19, Ghana Parliament, Accra, 27 November 2014.

⁴⁶ Interview, MP 31, Ghana Parliament, Accra, 6 February 2015.

oversight of participants, etc.) and needed to be reformed in order to become more efficient and effective. Many of the interviewed MPs and policymakers also recognized that the NSS scheme had the potential to play a more important role in fostering national unity in Ghana. In this respect one interviewed MP stated the following: 'I think the national service scheme is an overlooked giant in the quest to unify this country and maybe because it has been running for 40 years now many have probably forgotten the essence of it and some other priorities of government have made people to lose the basic tenets of the reasoning behind national service.'⁴⁷ Moreover, an important reason why the NSS scheme in its current format was perceived to be less effective in fostering national unity than it could potentially be, had to do with the absence of a 'deliberate policy to post students from one tribe or area to another area just for them to overcome such barriers'.⁴⁸ This is an issue we will return to in the next section.

The purpose and perceived impact of Ghana's National Service Scheme: A participant's perspective

As part of our research, we also surveyed the perceptions and opinions of a large number of individuals who had just completed their national service. The data were collected in September 2015 by means of an online survey of a group of students who had conducted their national service between 1 September 2014 and 31 August 2015. The students had previously been selected from three of Ghana's biggest public universities: University of Ghana (UG) in Accra, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi, and the University for Development Studies (UDS) in Tamale respectively. In the survey we asked a range of questions concerning students' NSS experience and their views on the impact and workings of the NSS programme. Below we will analyse the results of the survey.

Our survey sample consisted of 1,374 students, of which 1,306 had completed their national service in the period September 2014 and August 2015. In Table 4 below, we provide some basic information about our survey sample.

First, it is clear that all three purposively selected universities are well represented in our sample, in particular: 30% of the interviewed students came from UDS in Tamale, 36% of our respondents came from UG in Accra and 34% of them came from KNUST in Kumasi. Second, it also emerges that a vast majority of interviewed students were male (72%), confirming earlier studies into

⁴⁷ Interview, MP 49, Ghana Parliament, Accra, 3 December 2014.

⁴⁸ Interview, MP 21, Ghana Parliament, Accra, 9 December 2014.

Ghana's male-female imbalance in post-middle school education⁴⁹. Unsurprisingly most students in our sample were between 22 and 25 years old (79%). Third, in terms of the ethnic composition of our sample, it is further noticeable that about 57% of students was Akan, which is slightly higher than this ethnic group's relative demographic weight in the Ghanaian population as a whole (i.e. about 48% in 2010).⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Francis Atuahene and Anthony Owusu-Ansah, 'A descriptive assessment of higher education access, participation, equity and disparity in Ghana', *Sage Open* 3, 3 (2013), pp. 1-16; Aysit Tansel, 'Schooling attainment, parental education, and gender in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana', *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 45, 4 (1997), pp. 825-856.

⁵⁰ Source: 2010 Population and Housing Census - Ghana Statistical Service.

Table 4: Basic information concerning our NSS survey sample

University	Freq.	Percent
University of Development Studies, Tamale	417	30.4
University of Ghana, Accra	498	36.2
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi	459	33.4
Total	1,374	100
Gender	Freq.	Percent
Male	989	72.0
Female	385	28.0
Total	1,374	100.0
Age	Freq.	Percent
19-21	54	3.9
22	296	21.5
23	406	29.6
24	263	19.1
25	124	9.0
26 or older	231	16.8
Total	1,374	100.0
Ethnic groups	Freq.	Percent
Akan	787	57.3
Ga-Dangme	110	8.0
Ewe	205	14.9
Guan	43	3.1
Gurma	45	3.3
Mole-Dagbani	116	8.4
Grusi	17	1.2
Mande	12	0.9
Don't	6	0.4
Missing	33	2.4
Total	1,374	100
Religion	Freq.	Percent
Catholic	227	16.5
Protestant	222	16.2
Pentecostal/Charismatic	595	43.3
Other Christian	176	12.8
Muslim	99	7.2
Traditional religion	3	0.2
No religion	8	0.6
Other religions	35	2.6
Missing	9	0.7
Total	1,374	100.0

The three other major ethnic groups in Ghana were nonetheless relatively well represented in our sample: i.e. Ewe (15%), Ga-Dangme (8%) and Mole-Dagbani (8%). While the proportions of the Ewes and Ga-Dangmes in our sample were very much in line with their relative sizes in the population as a whole, conversely, the Mole-Dagbanis were considerably under-represented compared to their relative demographic weight in the Ghanaian population as a whole (i.e. about 17%). Lastly, the religious composition of our survey sample confirmed the reality that Ghana is a predominantly Christian country, with 89% of interviewed students stating that they adhered to some type of Christian denomination.

In line with the views expressed by the vast majority of interviewed MPs and policymakers, most students appeared to have enjoyed their national service and appeared to be relatively satisfied about the location of their national service posting. Figure 1 shows in this respect the extent to which students enjoyed their national service and were satisfied with their location of posting, with higher scores referring to more enjoyment and satisfaction. In this respect it is important to note that during the NSS registration process, students can list three regions where they would prefer to conduct their national service. In our sample of participants, more than 80% of the interviewed students had actually conducted their national service in one of their preferred regions. Thus, in many ways, the extent to which students may be disappointed about the location of their posting is significantly curtailed by the fact that in most cases their preferences are taken into account. It further emerged that most students thought that their participation in the NSS scheme had strengthened their career opportunities and had contributed to their personal development. In particular, while 78% of the interviewed students agreed with the statement that 'by conducting National Service, I have strengthened my career opportunities considerably, 92% of them agreed with the statement that 'conducting my National Service has been beneficial for my personal development'. Given that most students appeared to have enjoyed their national service and in addition considered it to be useful for their career and personal development, it is hardly surprising that a majority of 74% of interviewed students stated that given the experience they have had, they would have participated in the NSS scheme if it had been voluntary.

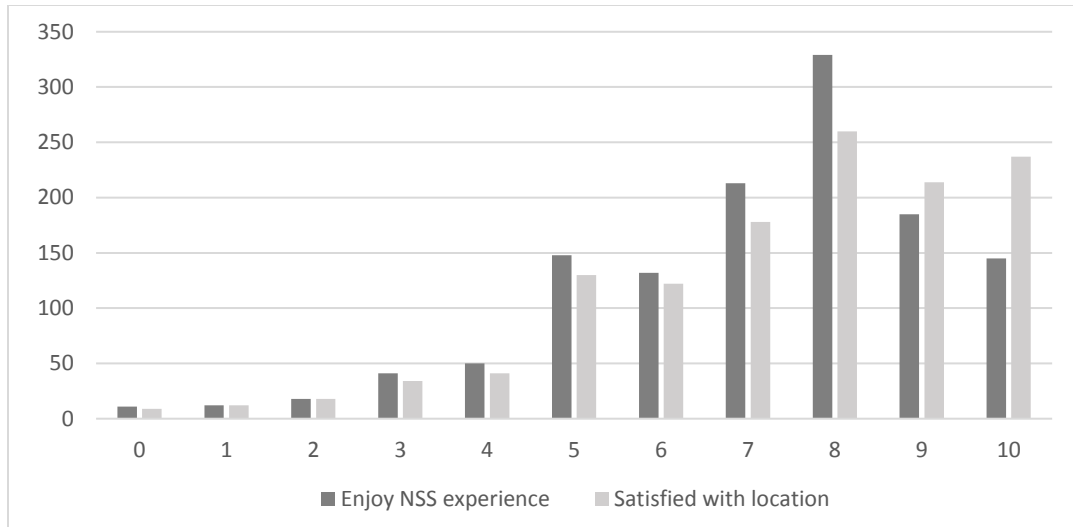


Figure 1: The extent to which participants enjoyed the NSS experience and were satisfied with their posting (N=1,306).

We also asked students about the impact of the NSS scheme. In particular, we asked them to indicate to what extent, with answering options ranging from 0 'no contribution at all' to 10 'very important contribution', they thought that the NSS scheme contributed towards the following objectives: a) diminishing poverty in Ghana, b) diminishing unemployment in Ghana, c) diminishing illiteracy in Ghana, d) improving national unity and reducing ethnic loyalties and e) making people feel more national. Figure 2 visualizes how the interviewed students perceived the impact of the NSS scheme on these five objectives.

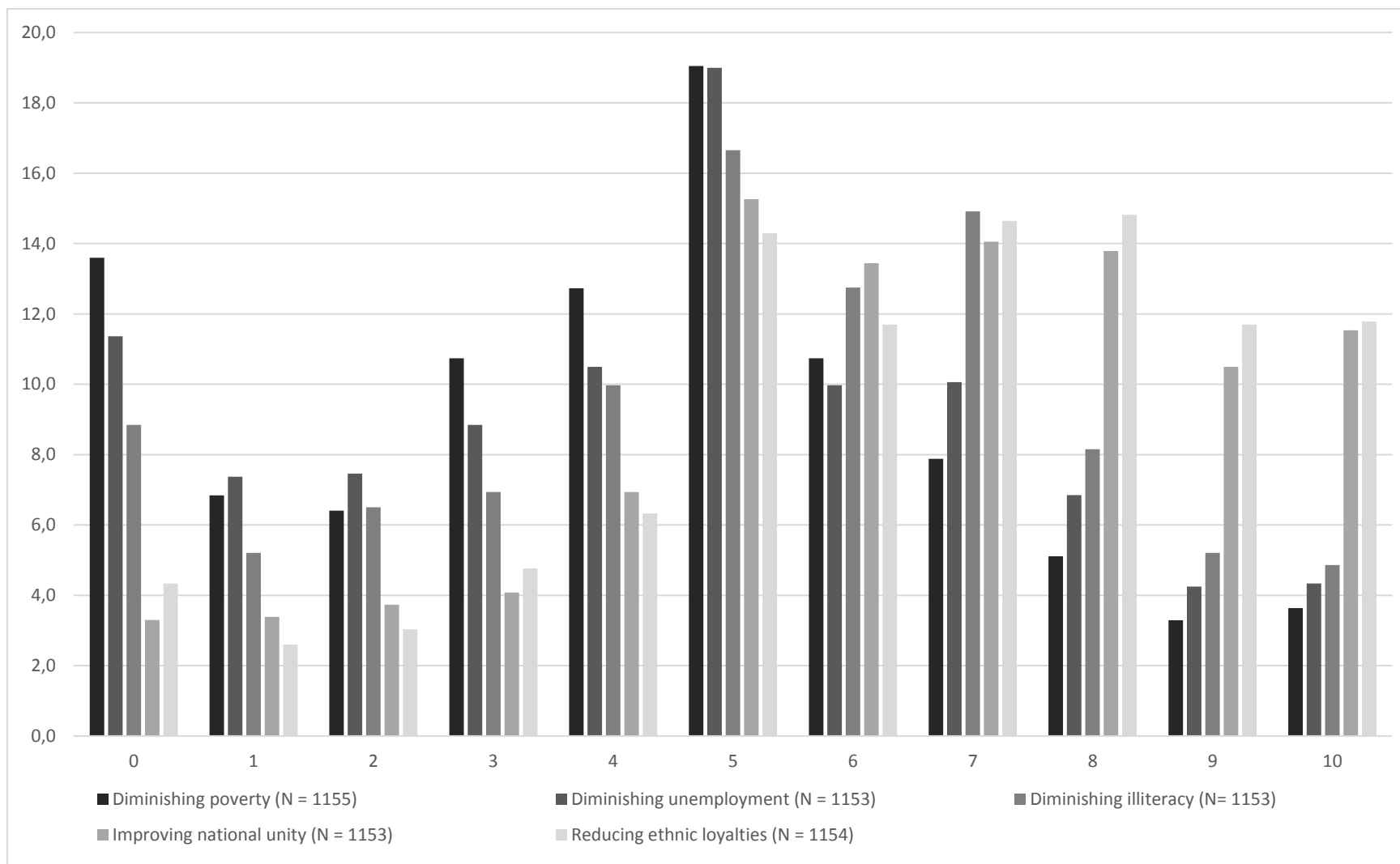


Figure 2: Participants' views of the impact of Ghana's National Service Scheme (NSS) (N=1374).

Two important points can be made regarding students' perceptions concerning the impact of the NSS programme. On the one hand, it appears that the interviewed students are quite critical about the contribution the NSS programme is making towards diminishing poverty, unemployment and illiteracy in Ghana. In particular, only 31% of respondents gave a score of 6 or higher for the NSS contribution towards diminishing poverty and only 35% of students gave a score of 6 or higher for the NSS contribution towards diminishing unemployment. With regard to diminishing literacy in Ghana, students were somewhat more positive about the NSS impact, with 46% of students scoring the NSS contribution a 6 or higher in this respect. But in light of the fact that a substantial proportion of students are usually employed as teachers in primary and secondary schools during their national service, this score is still surprisingly low. Hence, recent participants appeared to rate NSS low in terms of achieving its socio-economic objectives.

On the other hand, students were much more positive about the contribution of the NSS scheme towards reducing ethnic loyalties and making people feel more national. In particular, 63% of students scored the NSS contribution towards improving national unity 6 or higher and 65% of them gave a score of 6 or higher for the NSS contribution towards reducing ethnic loyalties and making people feel more national. Interestingly, the students who participated in the NSS scheme were not only much more positive about the contribution of the NSS programme towards fostering national integration compared to the contribution the programme was making towards its developmental objectives (i.e. diminishing poverty, unemployment and literacy in Ghana). But it also appeared that students were much more positive about the NSS contribution towards fostering national unity compared to the interviewed MPs and policymakers.

Besides asking students about the overall contribution of the NSS scheme in bringing Ghanaian people closer together and promoting national unity, we also asked students about the way in which their participation in the NSS scheme had changed their own views and attitudes towards other ethnic and cultural groups in Ghana. In particular, we asked students to indicate to what extent they agreed with a number of statements on how their national service experience had changed their intercultural knowledge, understanding and tolerance towards other ethnic and cultural groups. In Table 5 below we list the statements and provide the proportion of students who 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with a particular statement, differentiating in this respect between students who had conducted their national service in their region of birth and those who had conducted their national service in a different region.

Table 5: Improved intercultural understanding and tolerance, by posting to region of birth or other region (%)

Participation in NSS has...	N	<i>Not posted to region of birth (% agree & strongly agree)</i>	<i>Posted to region of birth (% agree & strongly agree)</i>
... increased my knowledge of other cultures in the country	1143	55,4%	44,6%
... confirmed the similarities between all ethnic groups in Ghana	1142	55,2%	44,8%
... reduced my prejudices towards other groups in Ghana	1143	53,6%	46,4%
... made me develop common ties with youth from all ethnic groups	1142	53,9%	46,1%
... made me more open to traditions and customs of other ethnic groups	1141	55,4%	44,6%

It is interesting to note that intercultural understanding and tolerance appears to have improved considerable more among students who conducted their national service outside of their region of birth. This is clearly in line with the contact theory, which hypothesizes that ‘intergroup contact typically reduces intergroup prejudice’⁵¹. However, it is also notable that ‘only’ about 55% of students who conducted their national service outside of their region of birth, acknowledged to have obtained more tolerant and less prejudiced views towards other ethnic and cultural groups in Ghana. While this observation constitutes an interesting avenue for future research, it is worth pointing out here that an important reason for why such an arguably low proportion of students agreed that they had obtained more tolerant and less prejudiced views about other ethnic and cultural groups, is related to the fact that many of them had already lived outside of their region of birth for long periods of time *and* ended up conducting national service in the region where they lived. By moving away from their region of birth and settling in a region with different groups, they may have already obtained relatively tolerant views of other groups, hence little further improvement could be expected from the national service experience. In addition, when one conducts national service in the region where one has lived for a long period of time, a person is clearly less likely to have a lot of contact with people from groups who one has not encountered before or do not know particularly well. This issue is clearly related to the observation made earlier about the lack of a deliberate policy to take into account people’s region of birth or region of living when sending out students to conduct their national service. We will return to this important issue in the conclusion.

⁵¹ Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, ‘A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory,’ *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, 5 (2006), pp. 751-783, p. 751.

5. Some conclusions

In this paper we set out to investigate and analyse the perceived impact and relevance of the National Service Scheme (NSS) for promoting national unity and development in Ghana. An important conclusion which has emerged from our research is the fact that the NSS scheme is considered to be an important national institution, which enjoys a lot of support among MPs and policymakers as well as recent participants in the scheme. However, it is equally true that the *raison d'être* for the NSS programme, in particular among the interviewed MPs and policymakers, was not primarily related to its contribution in fostering national unity and development in Ghana. While most of them acknowledged that the NSS scheme contributed to these objectives, the importance of the NSS scheme was particularly linked to the idea that the programme ensured that young people who had been looked after by the state in terms of their educational needs would give something back to society. A number of MPs and policymakers also considered the NSS scheme to be important for the Ghanaian society because it acted as a sort of 'safety valve,' whereby young people were kept busy for at least one year before entering into the regular job market. Interestingly, compared to the majority of interviewed MPs and policymakers, most students were much more positive about the contribution that the programme was making towards reducing ethnic loyalties and fostering national unity in Ghana. Students also had more personal reasons to be positive about the NSS scheme, given that many of them thought that their participation in the NSS scheme would be beneficial for their career opportunities and personal development.

In terms of reducing ethnic loyalties and fostering national unity, both the interviews with MPs and policymakers as well as the empirical data collected among recent participants suggested that the NSS scheme was less effective than it could be. Indeed, the lack of a deliberate policy to send students to regions where they had not been born or were residing at the time of national service, appears to be an important break on the potential positive change that could be achieved through the NSS scheme in terms of improving inter-group attitudes, knowledge and understanding. While any reform in this respect will inevitably have to deal with important practical and organizational issues, such as for example matching the regional availability and distribution of NSS positions with students' regional and educational backgrounds, other national service programmes in Africa, most notably the Nigerian one, have found ways of overcoming these obstacles and in doing so have created programmes which (at least with respect to this aspect of the programme) are more likely to lead to more substantial and extensive inter-group contact, which in turn may well lead to improved inter-group perceptions, attitudes and relations. In this respect it is crucial to stress that university students are usually a country's future elite and the next generation of political leaders. In cases where these elites

are 'consensually unified'⁵² and interact in relatively peaceful and harmonious ways, the risk of ethnic mobilization and tensions, political instability and even violent conflicts will be much lower⁵³. A well-designed national service programme which targets university students, such as Ghana's National Service Scheme (NSS), could quite possibly have an important impact on unifying and integrating the next generation's elites, thereby contributing to a country's future stability.

⁵² John Higley and Michael Burton, *Elite foundations of liberal democracy* (Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2006).

⁵³ James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, 'Violence and the social construction of ethnic identity', *International Organization* 54, 4 (2000), pp. 845-877; Stefan Lindemann, 'Inclusive elite bargains and the dilemma of unproductive peace: A Zambian case study', *Third World Quarterly* 32, 10 (2011), pp. 1843-1869; Authors reference.