



In truth, employment is a human right since it guarantees the basic needs of clothing, food, and shelter. Some of our young graduates have successfully gotten into jobs and self-employment with or without support from their parents, friends or acquaintances. We are happy for them and we congratulate them. Some got their jobs through merit and others through the “who-you-know” option; others worked their way into the “in-for-a-period-out-for-a-season” cycle while others are stuck in the under-employment lane. The bottom line is that we now have well over 270,000 unemployed young graduates with very little hope, no resources and nowhere to go for support. So what are we going to do about it? Leave them as statistics? Well, if we do that then we have failed to take care of the future, because like it or not, the youth are the future. Their social and economic development is inextricably intertwined with the sustainable development of our dear country. Taking care of our youth, is therefore not a choice, but rather an obligation. So let’s act today to save tomorrow - our future.

If you want to know the facts, here’s the story of a typical youth. Kofi has just graduated from Legon with a BA degree. His parents are both on retirement. Having spent 25 years taking care of Kofi from nappies to graduation gown, they have deservedly been looking forward to this special day – Kofi’s graduation day. Now he can work and bring home the additional income needed to maintain the family lifestyle they have built over a period of 40 years. They can now mend the leaking roof and pay for dad’s knee operation. Kofi’s siblings are also happy, because mom and dad can now focus on their needs and Kofi will be able to help. Congratulations pour in freely from family, friends, neighbours and acquaintances, close and far.

Kofi now waits for his National Service assignment. There is basically no room for negotiations here. You are lucky to get a placement. Insisting on where you want to go is an invitation to stay on the “waiting list”. At best, you will be tossed around a few times and at worse you may end up on a “floating list” that never lands. So Kofi accepts the first placement offered and goes off to do his National Service. Mom and Dad are now basking in the sweeter aroma of blissful retirement. They can now spend some money on themselves and ensure that their utility bills are paid regularly so that any “dum so” can rightly be placed at the doorstep of the electricity company.

All too soon, Kofi completes his National Service and starts the hopeful journey of looking for a permanent job. After all, he is a qualified, confident and determined young man. Being Internet savvy, he hits the job search engines, Asks, Yahoos and Googles his way to interesting job offers. He clicks at leisure and submits various online applications and uploads his one-size-fits-all CV. This is the electronic age, so he is bound to tweet a job sooner rather than later. However, after four weeks, his confidence starts to ebb, so he turns round and wades through numerous ads of the paper kind, including the specialised job magazines, for more vacancies. He religiously writes and sends off hard copy and e-copy applications and CVs for the ever-changing requirements of each ad.

However, for lack of experience, mismatch of qualifications and shortage of jobs, Kofi's efforts perish. He is getting nowhere fast. The third month is on the horizon, Mom and Dad are still hopeful, supportive and encouraging. By the sixth month, out of 50-plus applications, only two got Kofi to the interview stage, but he never got the call. It's a year now and Kofi has officially become an unemployed graduate. Next year, 90,000 newly graduated youth will join him on the job market.

There must be something wrong somewhere. Some evil spirit, witchcraft, fetish or juju must be interfering with the divine interventions meant for Kofi. Pastoral assistance must be sought. Frequent visits to the pastor, intensified prayers, diligent fasting, thanksgivings, offerings, tithing, retreats, all-nights and letters to God, all become part and parcel of the daily life of Mom, Dad, siblings and above all, Kofi. He is the first to volunteer for church projects. He even does weekend cleaning in the pastor's house. His faith grows stronger and his hopes are high again. God's time is the best. His time will come. However, slowly but surely, Kofi's activities in the church become just a conduit for getting a job and not a means of worshipping God. He soon becomes disillusioned and easily finds excuses for not getting involved in church activities. Frustration sets in for the whole family, because Kofi no longer joins them in church.

A year and a half after National Service, Mom and Dad (M&D), are extremely worried. They start consulting with influential friends and acquaintances to "see-what-they-can-do". Sometimes, Kofi tags along with them to see some of these potential employers/facilitators. After several of these "who-you-know" projects, it becomes clear that some other options need to be explored. But which one? Tensions mount at home. Kofi thinks that M&D do not understand his plight and that they are putting too much pressure on him. M&D are sure that Kofi does not understand their financial constraints, especially the increasingly high cost of the hypertensive drugs that mom has to take daily. Kofi, they believe, does not appreciate the fact that they are simply not in a situation to continue paying for the yearly increases in bills for rent, utilities, medicals and meals as well as for his (Kofi's) clothes and "leisure". A vicious cycle of hide-and-seek and Family Feuds over Kofi's continued unemployment ensues. Advisors are brought in, mostly to get Kofi to try harder! What are they thinking? Kofi has been and is still moving heaven and earth to get a job. He is totally stressed out from the stares of the "neighbourhood watch" and their continuous queries of "Have you got a job yet? Where are you working? Are you working in the same place as Ama? Are you still doing your national service? ". Kofi is doing the best he can, the best way he knows. He is using everything he has been taught by our educational system and by our society.

Kofi somehow finds money to attend a number of inspirational and empowerment seminars. He experiences the rush of the "can-do-spirit" flowing through his heart and veins. He can do whatever he sets his mind to. He is fully energised, but months after the last seminar, with several complimentary cards in his possession, his situation remains the same; he still hasn't found a job. Finally, with the last spurt of the can-do-

spirit, Kofi heeds the advice of his peers who have started their “own business”. His peers “enlighten” him on the projects they have completed, especially in Events Management and e-Business. Some of them are quite successful. Kofi is hooked. He now tells M&D that he is going to set up his own business and sweetens the message with the enticing information received from his peers. His confidence is peaking. He registers his sole-proprietor business and becomes a CEO. He has arrived and is looking for his first “project” to bring in the money.

Kofi starts the “business hustle”. He comes up with a good business idea, which he guards with his life, because someone might steal his great idea. He finally realises that he has to look for capital, because he has not got a pesewa to finance his idea. So his idea must be exposed through a business plan. M&D are sceptical. They know that it is not easy for individuals and entities in Ghana, to dish out grants and loans to young start-up businesses. Unfortunately, M&D also cannot give Kofi any money to start his business. They listen to his resource mobilization plans, which are based on the “success” of his peers, and they hope to God that Kofi knows what he is doing. Kofi’s business idea after all, has potential.

M&D continue to struggle with the medical bills; utilities; rent and other payments and Kofi’s clothes and shoes begin to tell the story of stress. Kofi knows that any new request for money from M&D will give them yet another opportunity to start the Family Feud on unemployment. He does his best to keep up appearances, but he has been missing too many outings with peers due to clothing deficiencies and inability to pay gate fees and T&T to “chilling” venues. The Peer Gossip Machine goes into gear and soon Kofi is bombarded with questions: “Chaley why u no come de show? The 553+ thing e big waa, u miss pa-pa. Chaley, u go portey tonite?” Kofi tries to find some safe haven to get away from prying eyes and wagging tongues. On his lucky days, he locks himself up in his room and he is left alone; on difficult days, he has no option but to walk the streets. His precious mobile phone goes off regularly now, first because he wants some peace but more often, it is because he’s run out of juice. Given his training, the limited jobs on the market and the inadequate support for youth businesses, Kofi is doing the best he can. He moves to the next inevitable hustle of visiting “big-people-you-know” for T&T and meal tickets, hoping desperately for job opportunities. Sometimes he strikes enough cash for the week and sometimes he comes up empty.

Meanwhile, the home front is crumbling fast. Sibling Feuds erupt regularly, because resources, which should now be going to them are still being shared between them and Kofi who has had his share already. Kofi should be bringing in his quota so the older siblings with low-paid jobs or intermittent jobs can start saving some money towards their future; so that younger siblings still in school can have all the support they need, so they can hold their heads high in school, in hole-less uniforms, paid-up fees and money for lunch. They nag at Kofi at the least provocation – “why can’t you be like Akweley? She’s with the Employ Bank. She’s even got her own apartment. Wasn’t she your

classmate?” M&D invariably sides with them because of the mounting financial constraints. “Just get a job like your peers”, they say, “and your siblings will stop nagging you”. Which peers out of the 90,000 are M&D referring to - the 6% with jobs or the 94% unemployed? But you cannot blame M&D. They are dealing with their home front and times are hard. The family fortunes are dwindling fast. Kofi is too old to be at home. Kofi must look for an out, any out....

Kofi turns to his friend Kuku who lives in a rented one-room with shared facilities. Things are not easy, but Kuku gets by. Kuku agrees to share his room with Kofi with the hope of sharing the rent and utility bills as well. Without any notice, Kofi packs his worn-out, dwindled-down belongings and moves into Kuku’s one-room “house”. This is a big relief, even though he sleeps on the hard floor.

Kofi puts together his business plan and starts going round for loans from banks and financial houses. All too soon, he learns that it takes more than his “great idea” and a “self-acclaimed” business plan to get a business loan from banks and financial houses. He has no collateral and his business plan does not cut it. More importantly, he finds out that there are virtually no resources or grants for young start-ups like his. There must be a way out somewhere, but where?

With nowhere left to go, Kofi falls back on the popular advice of his peers – “find individual ‘mentors’ and they will give you money to start your business; write a proposal and take it to private companies and they will sponsor you; make big promises to media houses to partner with you and sponsors will come; team up for an event organised by another peer and share the proceeds”. Unfortunately, these strategies work for only a limited few and only for a period, if they take off at all. More often than not, after such projects, there is very little or nothing to share and ever so often, debts are accrued instead of profits. And even when profit is made, lack of written contracts and sometimes “acquired” greed, turns percentage-shares into disbursement riots. This invariably splits up the team of premature business partnerships made up of competing young CEOs. After several failed or barely sponsored events, Kofi’s confidence and hopes plunge to the lowest level.

Due to his continuing unemployment, Kofi has not been able to contribute to the rent and utilities since he moved in and barely contributes to the food bill. Kofi leaves the room untidy most of the time because he has to rush out to one “business meeting” after another, with his “peer business team”. Kuku’s patience finally runs out and he starts a Roommates Feud. Tensions boil over. Kuku allows Kofi to keep his belonging in his room, but will not allow him to stay there. Kofi does not want to go back home to face more Family or Sibling Feuds. His situation has not changed for the better. He cannot make a triumphant return home.

Kofi starts sleeping-over at one peer lodgings after another. Sometimes he is forced to sleep rough because he cannot go home with anyone from his peer network. Kofi is now homeless, has no job and has no business; but he is a CEO with a degree and a great business idea. Despair and desperation kicks in.

Kuku's unemployed girlfriend is moving in with him. He therefore asks Kofi to take his belongings and leave his one-room haven. Kofi stuffs all his belongings into one worn out backpack. He slumps down at the corner of Kuku's street, dejected. Hours later, Kuku comes by on his way to town. Are you still here? Why don't you just go back home? *And say what? The prodigal son is back? What did they give me to go out into the world with? What have I squandered?* Well, they gave you an education and you squandered it by not becoming employed. Go home and plead. At least you will get a bed to lie on.

Finally, ill health and hopelessness forces Kofi back home. After a furious Family Feud for a welcome, he thankfully gets back into his soft bed. Weeks later, a family friend advises the use of an employment agency. Mom pays the fees and Kofi fills out the forms. Kofi then goes through three days of "intensive" grooming, followed by two weeks of "hectic" placement attempts. After four weeks, the agency informs Kofi that he has exhausted all his options. They can no longer help him. It is yet another end of the road for Kofi. He has tried everything now. He will do anything, anything at all, to end this nightmare. At the end of such an ordeal, Kofi's confidence is low, his self-esteem is lost, his pride is seriously wounded and trust is completely out of reach. We have created a monster who is extremely vulnerable to vice, fraud and crime.

There are several variations on the Kofi story and there are many Kofis in Ghana now. There are better-off Kofis, similar Kofis and worse-off Kofis and their Ama counterparts too, all needing just the right amount of push to get them started. So who do we blame for Kofi's predicament? - Policy makers, employers (public and private), educators or parents? Well, I say all the above. If we had all played our roles effectively, Kofi would have been a responsible professional and a good citizen.

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