Labour Market in Ghana (1957–2024): Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

From Ghana's independence in 1957 to 2024, this study tracks structural changes in the country's industries, services sector, and agriculture. In addition to underlining the opportunities presented by demographic dividends, digital technologies, extractive industries, and legislative reforms, it examines the enduring problems of unemployment, underemployment, informality, skills mismatches, gender inequality, and insufficient social protection. It does this by drawing on data from the Ghana Statistical Service, the International Labour Organization, the World Bank, and peer-reviewed academic study. The discussion is organized chronologically and thematically, covering the colonial labour legacy, the post-independence developmental era, structural adjustment, democratic consolidation, and the contemporary digital-and-oil economy. The study makes the case that, the Ghana's labor market has continuously improved from the state-building employment drives of the Nkrumah era through the structural adjustment retrenchments of the 1980s to the digital and oil-driven opportunities of the current period. However, fundamental structural challenges of informality, high underemployment levels, low productivity, skills mismatches, gender inequality, and weak institutions have persisted across policy regimes.

Keywords

Labour, Labour market, Unemployment, Structural changes, Reforms, and Ghana.

1. Introduction

One of the most useful case studies in Sub-saharan Africa is Ghana's labor market. The nation has gone through alternating cycles of state-led industrialization, economic crisis, structural adjustment, democratic renewal, and commodity-driven growth since gaining independence on March 6, 1957.

Each of these cycles has had a unique impact on employment trends, wage structures, worker welfare, and institutional frameworks governing work (Aryeetey & Baah-Boateng, 2015). In order to create policies that can capitalize on the demographic dividend that Ghana's young population represents, it is necessary to comprehend these dynamics, which are not just of historical relevance.

The Ghana Statistical Service (GSS, 2021) estimates that 13.1 million people were employed in the nation in 2021, with a labor force participation rate (LFPR) of roughly 67.3 percent. However, only roughly 16 percent of all employment was formal, with the remaining 84 percent working in vulnerable, subsistence, or informal jobs (GSS, 2021). The fundamental contradiction of the Ghanaian labor market is captured by this structural dichotomy between a sizable informal economy and a tiny formal sector: growth without correspondingly creating adequate jobs.

There are seven main sections to this study. A historical summary of the labor market from 1957 to 1966 is given in Section 2. The structural adjustment period and its effects on the labor market are examined in Section 3. Section 4 looks at the developing services economy and post-1992 democratic consolidation. The digital shift and the oil economy are covered in Section 5. The labor market dynamics, digital transformation, and the oil economy are all covered in Section 6. Section 7 presents the major prospects for the labour market. Section 8 analyses the key challenges. Section 9 concludes with policy recommendations.

2. Research Methodology

The study employs a historical-descriptive and documentary research design. This design is suitable because it enables the researcher to investigate labour market developments across different historical periods in Ghana, including:

- The post-independence period (1957–1966)
- The military and economic restructuring period (1966–1992)
- The democratic and liberalization period (1993–2010)
- The contemporary labour market transformation period (2011–2024)

The design provides a framework for examining labour policies, employment patterns, labour force participation, informal sector growth, youth un-employment, skills development, and labour market reforms over time. The study relies exclusively on secondary data obtained from credible academic, governmental, and international sources. The major sources include:

Academic Databases

- Semantic Scholar
- Scopus-indexed journals
- Google Scholar
- Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)
- JSTOR

Government and National Institutions

- Ghana Statistical Service (GSS)
- National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE)
- Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations
- Labour Department of Ghana
- Ghana Labour Market Information System (GLMIS)

International Organizations

- World Bank
- International Labour Organization (ILO)
- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
- African Development Bank (AfDB)
- International Monetary Fund (IMF)

Policy and Technical Reports

- Labour force surveys
- Employment and unemployment reports
- National development plans
- Skills development and education policy documents
- Labour market assessment reports
- Economic and social development reports

These sources provide reliable evidence regarding labour market trends, employment generation, labour productivity, structural transformation, informal employment, and workforce development in Ghana.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through a systematic review of relevant literature published between 1957 and 2024. The researcher conducted comprehensive searches using keywords such as:

- Labour market in Ghana
- Employment trends in Ghana
- Unemployment in Ghana
- Labour force participation
- Informal sector employment
- Youth unemployment
- Skills mismatch
- Human capital development
- Structural transformation
- Labour market reforms

Documents were selected based on relevance, credibility, publication quality, and contribution to understanding Ghana's labour market development. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, official statistical reports, policy documents, and publications from recognized international organizations.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The study included:

- Publications focusing on Ghana's labour market.
- Peer-reviewed journal articles.
- Government and institutional reports.
- Publications covering the period 1957–2024.
- Documents addressing employment, unemployment, labour policies, skills development, and workforce dynamics.

The study excluded:

- Publications lacking academic credibility.
- Non-english publications without verified translations.
- Studies unrelated to labour market issues.
- Duplicated reports and outdated versions of the same document.

3. Historical Background: The Labour Market at Independence (1957 to 1966)

Ghana inherited a colonial labor market centered on export agriculture, especially cocoa, and a small area of formal public administration and mining when it gained independence (Szereszewski, 1965). A huge layer of small holder cocoa growers, an urban artisan and petty-trading class concentrated in Accra, Kumasi, and the coastal towns, and a tiny African wage-earning class employed in government service and European trading businesses were all established by the colonial economy. Due to institutional discrimination and sociocultural constraints, women were primarily restricted to food production and small-scale trading and were not allowed to work for formal wages (Akyeampong, 2000).

The ambitious industrialization policy of President Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party (CPP) government was based on infrastructure development, import substitution, and state companies (Killick, 1978). Formal public sector employment increased significantly between 1957 and 1966, and the number of state-owned businesses increased from fewer than ten to over fifty (Huq, 1989). The Volta River Project, finished in 1966, was designed to power aluminum smelting and diversify the employment base as part of the Seven-year Development Plan (1963 to 1970), which aimed to turn Ghana into an industrial economy. However, institutional inefficiencies, growing debt, falling cocoa prices, and an excessive reliance on commodities revenues caused economic stagnation, which ultimately led to the military takeover in February 1966.

4. Economic Instability and Labour Market Deterioration (1966 to 1983)

Between 1966 and 1983, there was severe political and economic unrest interspersed with four military takeovers. In the face of fluctuating cocoa prices, worldwide oil shocks, and growing public payrolls, successive governments found it difficult to preserve fiscal balance. According to Ewusi (1984), real minimum earnings in the formal sector fell by more than 80 percent between 1970 and 1983. As smallholder agriculture became less lucrative, rural-urban migration increased and urban unemployment increased. During this time, the informal economy grew quickly as a means of survival rather than as a sector of dynamism (Hart, 1973).

The majority of urban migrants supported themselves through self-employment and small-scale trading outside of formal regulation, according to Keith Hart's ground breaking work, which created the term "informal sector" in part based on findings from Accra in the early 1970s. The Ghanaian labor market would come to be characterized by this structural informality. Ghana's economy had reached its lowest point by 1983: GDP per capita had dropped to levels equivalent to independence, inflation had above 100 percent, and the public sector—the country's largest formal employer—was unable to pay its employees on a regular basis (World Bank, 1984). The Rawlings government's Economic Recovery Programme (ERP), supported by the World Bank and IMF, was initiated in April 1983 as a result of the labor market crisis.

5. Structural Adjustment and Labour Market Reforms (1983 to 1992)

The ERP and its successor, the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), transformed the Ghanaian economy through liberalisation, privatisation, and fiscal austerity. While macroeconomic stability was largely restored by the late 1980s; GDP growth averaged approximately 5 percent per annum between 1984 and 1991, though the social costs were substantial (Hutchful, 2002). The retrenchment of state-owned enterprises and the public sector workforce released tens of thousands of formal employees into the labour market. It is estimated that between 1984 and 1990, approximately 50,000 to 60,000 public sector workers were retrenched (World Bank, 1995).

Labour market institutions were simultaneously reformed. Trade unions, which had been closely tied to the CPP state, were reorganized under the Trade Union Congress (TUC) of Ghana, though their bargaining power was constrained by the depressed economic environment and the structural leverage of international financial institutions (Ninsin, 1991). The Ghana Employers' Association was reconstituted, and labour legislation was revised to facilitate market flexibility, though critics argued that these reforms weakened worker protections (Baah-Boateng, 2013).

Women's labour market participation shifted during this period, partly due to gender-differentiated impacts of adjustment. Female-headed households, which bore a disproportionate share of the burden of public service cuts in health and education, increasingly entered petty trade and food processing. The Programme of Actions to Mitigate the Social Costs of Adjustment (PAMSCAD), launched in 1987, attempted to cushion vulnerable workers but had limited reach given its modest funding (Anyemedu, 1993).

Table 1:- Selected Macroeconomic and Labour Market Indicators, Ghana 1957 to 2024

Period	Real GDP Growth (%)	Formal Employment Share (%)	Inflation (%)	Key Policy
1957 to 1966	4.2	~12	5.1	State-led Industrialisation
1967 to 1982	-0.4	~10	35.0+	Military regimes; instability
1983 to 1991	5.0	~11	18.0	ERP/SAP; retrenchment
1992 to 1999	4.3	~13	25.0	Democratic transition
2000 to 2010	5.8	~14	16.5	HIPC; GPRS I & II
2011 to 2019	7.1	~15	12.0	Oil production; SDGs
2020 to 2024	1.7	~16	23.5	COVID-19 recovery; IMF

Sources:- Ghana Statistical Service (various years); World Bank World Development Indicators (2023); IMF Article IV Consultations (various years); Killick (1978); Huq (1989).

6. Democratic Consolidation and the Emerging Services Economy (1992 to 2010)

Ghana's return to constitutional rule in January 1993 ushered in a period of sustained, if uneven, economic growth. The labour market responded to democratisation in complex ways. Political competition intensified pressures for public sector wage increases, while the growth of the financial services, telecommunications, and retail sectors created new categories of formal private employment (Baah-Boateng, 2013). However, employment growth lagged output growth, a phenomenon that economists have described as 'jobless growth' in the Ghanaian context (Osei, 2012).

Ghana's attainment of Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative completion point in July 2004 freed fiscal resources that were partly channeled into social sector investments, including the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS, 2003) and the Capitation Grant for primary education (2005), with positive spillovers for human capital formation and labour quality. The introduction of the National Minimum Wage Act (2003) and subsequent annual revisions by the National Tripartite Committee (NTC) represented an attempt to anchor earnings at the lower end of the wage distribution, though enforcement in the informal sector remained negligible (Aryeetey & Baah-Boateng, 2015).

The telecommunications revolution of the 2000s was a significant labour market disruptor. The entry of multiple mobile network operators, namely MTN Ghana (2006 re-branding), Vodafone, Airtel, and Tigo, created direct formal employment in the order of tens of thousands and indirect employment many times larger through the mobile money agent network that would later emerge. The ICT sector's growth catalysed complementary demand for software development, data entry, call-centre services, and logistics coordination (UNCTAD, 2019).

Importantly, agriculture remained the largest employer by headcount throughout this period, absorbing approximately 45 to 55 percent of the labour force, though its share of GDP declined steadily from around 35 percent in 1993 to approximately 22 percent by 2010 (World Bank, 2023). This structural divergence, whereby agriculture employs more workers than its output share suggests, reflects the low productivity of smallholder farming and constitutes one of the deepest sources of underemployment in Ghana.

7. The Oil Economy, Digital Transition, and Labour Market Dynamics (2010 to 2024)

The commencement of commercial oil production from the Jubilee Field in December 2010 created expectations of transformative employment effects. In practice, the direct employment created in upstream petroleum, estimated at fewer than 5,000 core technical jobs, was modest relative to the scale of the revenues generated (Dzansi et al., 2018). The 'resource curse' hypothesis, adapted to Ghana's context, suggests that petroleum revenues may have contributed to exchange rate appreciation (the 'Dutch Disease'), squeezing the manufacturing sector and its attendant employment potential (Gyimah-Brempong & Asiedu, 2015).

Ghana's labour market in the 2010s was nonetheless characterised by significant structural change. The services sector overtook agriculture as the largest contributor to GDP by 2013, with financial services, real estate, trade, and transport leading growth. Graduate unemployment emerged as a prominent social concern: the Association of Ghana Universities reported that approximately 50,000 to 60,000 university graduates entered the labour market annually by the mid-2010s, yet the formal private sector absorbed fewer than 30 percent of them (NCTE, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 to 2021 inflicted severe labour market dislocations. The GSS (2020) Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Phone Survey found that approximately 47 percent of Ghanaians reported a reduction in working hours or total loss of employment during the first lockdown period from April to May 2020. Informal workers, who lacked access to unemployment insurance or severance mechanisms, were disproportionately affected. The government's GH¢600 million Ghana CARES 'Obaatanpa' programme and the COVID-19 Alleviation Programme (CAP) provided some relief, but critics argued that the response was inadequate relative to need (Asante & Mills, 2020).

By 2023 and into 2024, Ghana's labour market was grappling with the consequences of a severe economic crisis triggered by debt distress, currency depreciation, and high inflation (peaking at 54 percent in December 2022). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) programme approved in May 2023, which required fiscal consolidation measures, created additional pressure on public sector employment and real wages. The Domestic Debt Exchange Programme (DDEP) of 2023 disrupted the financial sector, with cascading effects on white-collar formal employment.

Table 2:- Sectoral Employment Distribution, Ghana 2010 and 2021 (% of total employment)

Sector	2010 Employment Share (%)	2021 Employment Share (%)	Change (pp)
Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing	51.2	43.1	-8.1
Industry (Manufacturing, Mining, Construction)	14.1	14.8	+0.7
Services (Trade, Finance, ICT, etc.)	34.7	42.1	+7.4
Total	100.0	100.0	,

Source:- Ghana Statistical Service, Ghana Living Standards Survey Round 7 (GLSS 7, 2017) and Population & Housing Census (2021); ILO ILOSTAT Database (2023).

8. Prospects of Ghana's Labour Market

8.1 Demographic Dividend

Ghana's population, estimated at approximately 33 million in 2024, is predominantly young, with about 57 percent below the age of 25 (GSS, 2021). If channeled through quality education, skills development, and productive employment opportunities, this youthful demographic could generate a demographic dividend, which refers to a period of accelerated economic growth associated with a high ratio of working-age to dependent population, analogous to the East Asian experience of the 1970s to 1990s (Bloom & Williamson, 1998). Projections suggest that Ghana's working-age population, those aged 15 to 64 years, will continue to grow through the 2040s, creating both an opportunity and an imperative for robust employment creation.

8.2 Digital Economy and Technology-driven Employment

The rapid expansion of mobile internet penetration, which reached approximately 58 percent of the population by 2023 (GSMA, 2023), has opened new labour market pathways through e-commerce, fintech, remote work, and the gig economy. The rise of mobile money, exemplified by MTN MoMo's over 20 million active users in Ghana (MTN Ghana Annual Report, 2023), has created an ecosystem of mobile money agents, digital merchants, and platform-based logistics workers. Government initiatives such as the Digital Ghana Agenda and the establishment of Innovation Hubs in Accra (iSpace, MEST Africa) and Kumasi (Kumasi Hive) are nurturing a tech entrepreneurship ecosystem with significant employment potential.

8.3 Expanding Natural Resource and Green Economy Employment

Beyond petroleum, Ghana possesses significant mineral wealth including gold, bauxite, manganese, and diamonds, alongside a substantial renewable energy potential from solar, wind, and hydropower resources. Deliberate policies to deepen local content requirements in extractive industries, as envisaged under the Ghana Local Content and Local Participation Policy for the Petroleum Industry (2013) and the Minerals Commission's local procurement framework, could expand linkages between the extractive sector and domestic manufacturing and services employment. Similarly, a transition toward green energy infrastructure, consistent with Ghana's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement, could generate employment in solar installation, energy efficiency retrofitting, and sustainable agriculture (UNEP, 2021).

8.4 Agricultural Modernization and Agro-processing

Given that over 40 percent of Ghana's workforce remains in agriculture (GSS, 2021), productivity-enhancing investments in this sector have the greatest potential to simultaneously reduce poverty and improve labour market outcomes for the majority. The Planting for Food and Jobs (PFJ) programme, launched in 2017, aimed to subsidise inputs and support the transition to commercial small-holder farming. The government's commitment to agro-processing through the One District One Factory (1D1F) initiative represents a further attempt to add value to agricultural produce domestically, creating manufacturing employment in rural and peri-urban areas.

9. Challenges of Ghana's Labour Market

9.1 Unemployment and Underemployment

Official unemployment figures in Ghana have historically appeared low by African standards, hovering around 8 to 13 percent in standard surveys (GSS, 2017; ILO, 2023), but these figures mask enormous underemployment. Many Ghanaians who are classified as 'employed' work fewer hours than desired (time-related underemployment) or in activities that do not utilize their skills or generate adequate income (skills mismatch and working poverty). The ILO (2023) estimates that Ghana's vulnerable employment rate, which comprises own-account workers and contributing family workers, stood at approximately 71 percent in 2021, among the highest in West Africa.

Table 3:- Key Ghana Labour Market Indicators, Selected Years 2013 to 2023

Indicator	2013	2017 (GLSS 7)	2021 (PHC)	2023 (Est.)
Labour Force Participation Rate (%)	68.1	67.4	67.3	67.8
Unemployment Rate (%)	11.9	8.4	13.4	14.7
Youth Unemployment Rate (15 to 35) (%)	15.2	11.7	19.5	22.1
Informal Employment (% of total)	~85	~83	~84	~83
Vulnerable Employment Rate (%)	74.2	72.8	71.0	71.5
Female LFPR (%)	72.0	69.3	67.1	67.5

Sources:- Ghana Statistical Service GLSS 6 (2014), GLSS 7 (2019), Population & Housing Census (2021); ILO ILOSTAT (2023).

9.2 Dominance of the Informal Economy

The persistence of large-scale informality is perhaps the defining structural challenge of Ghana's labour market. Informal workers such as street traders, artisans, domestic workers, and subsistence farmers operate without access to formal social protection, paid leave, occupational health and safety protections, or recourse to formal labour dispute resolution mechanisms (Baah-Boateng, 2013). The informal economy's dominance also erodes the tax base, weakens trade union bargaining power, and fragments the labour market into circuits that rarely benefit from productivity-enhancing investment or skills upgrading.

Formalization strategies have had limited success. The Ghana Revenue Authority's expansion of the Tax Identification Number (TIN) system and the introduction of mobile-based taxpayer registration represent important steps, but institutional enforcement capacity remains constrained. Moreover, overly onerous formalisation requirements may deter small enterprises from registering, suggesting a need for graduated, incentive-based approaches (ILO, 2018).

9.3 Skills Mismatch and Educational Quality

A growing body of evidence points to a significant mismatch between the skills produced by Ghana's educational system and those demanded by employers. The World Bank's Skills Measurement Programme (STEP) survey for Ghana (World Bank, 2016) found that many graduates lacked the socio-emotional and technical competencies required in modern workplaces. The Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system, historically underfunded and stigmatized relative to academic education, has struggled to produce the intermediate-level technical workforce demanded by manufacturing and construction industries. Reforms under the TVET Service Act (2016) and the National Board for Professional and Technician Examinations (NABPTEX) represent attempts to address this gap, but implementation has been uneven.

9.4 Gender Disparities in the Labour Market

Despite relatively high female labour force participation rates, driven partly by necessity rather than choice, Ghanaian women face persistent disadvantages in earnings, occupational status, and job quality. Women are overrepresented in subsistence agriculture, domestic work, and low-margin petty trade, and underrepresented in managerial, technical, and professional occupations (GSS, 2021). The gender wage gap, estimated at approximately 25 to 30 percent in formal employment, reflects a combination of occupational segregation, discrimination, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work borne by women (Osei-Boateng & Ampratwum, 2011).

Legal frameworks such as the Labour Act (Act 651, 2003), which prohibits gender discrimination in employment, and the Domestic Violence Act (2007) provide some protection, but enforcement is weak and access to justice for labour rights violations is limited, particularly in the informal economy. The AfCFTA, which Ghana was the first country to ratify, holds some potential for expanding female employment in agro-processing and digital services, but capturing this potential requires deliberate policy targeting.

9.5 Youth Unemployment and Graduates' Labour Market Transitions

Youth unemployment has emerged as a politically salient challenge. In 2021, Ghana's youth unemployment rate for those aged 15 to 35 stood at approximately 19.5 percent, rising to an estimated 22.1 percent by 2023 against the backdrop of the economic crisis (GSS, 2021; ILO, 2023). Graduate unemployment is particularly acute: universities produce approximately 70,000 to 80,000 graduates annually, of whom a substantial proportion spend extended periods in unemployment or in mismatched informal work before securing appropriate positions (NCTE, 2017).

The government's flagship National Service Scheme, Youth Employment Agency (YEA), and various NABCO (Nation Builders Corps) programmes have attempted to bridge the gap, but these initiatives have been criticized for creating temporary, government-subsidised employment rather than addressing structural barriers to permanent private sector absorption (Asante & Mills, 2020). The sustainability of such programmes is also contingent on fiscal headroom, which the current debt crisis has severely constrained.

9.6 Weak Labour Market Institutions and Social Protection

Ghana's labour market institutions, including the National Labour Commission, the Labour Department, and the National Pensions Regulatory Authority, are chronically under-resourced relative to the scale of the labour force they are mandated to serve. Labour inspectors are estimated to cover only a small fraction of workplaces, particularly in the informal sector (ILO, 2018). The Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT), while a significant institutional player, covers only approximately 10 to 12 percent of the workforce, leaving the vast majority without pension protection.

The introduction of the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) cash transfer programme and the National Health Insurance Scheme represents progress in social protection architecture, but coverage gaps remain wide, financing is precarious, and benefit levels are low. A comprehensive social protection floor, aligned with ILO Recommendation 202 (2012), remains an aspirational rather than achieved policy goal for Ghana.

10. Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

Ghana's labour market over the six-and-a-half decades since independence reflects the country's broader developmental trajectory: periods of ambition and growth interspersed with crises, adjustments, and resilience. From the state-building employment drives of the Nkrumah era, through the structural adjustment retrenchments of the 1980s, to the digital and oil-driven opportunities of the contemporary period, the Ghana labour market has continuously improved, yet fundamental structural challenges of informality, low productivity, skills mismatches, gender inequality, and weak institutions have persisted across policy regimes.

Ghana's demographic dividend, if realized through investments in education, health, and productive employment, could underpin sustained economic transformation. The digital economy, agro-processing, green energy, and the African Continental Free Trade Area all offer concrete pathways to decent work creation. However, translating these opportunities into labour market outcomes requires overcoming the governance, fiscal, and institutional constraints that have historically limited policy effectiveness.

Three priority areas merit particular attention. First, a comprehensive national employment policy that coordinates education, macroeconomic, industrial, and social protection objectives around the goal of decent work creation. Second, a genuine formalisation strategy that reduces the costs and increases the benefits of operating formally for small enterprises and workers. Third, sustained investment in TVET, lifelong learning, and digital skills to align workforce capabilities with the demands of a twenty-first-century economy. Without such interventions, Ghana risks that its demographic window of opportunity closes without generating the shared prosperity that political leaders and ordinary citizens justifiably seek.

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