

## **REFORMED EX-CONVICTS HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**“The country was built on the belief that each human being has limitless potential and worth. Everybody matters. We believe that even those who’ve struggled with a dark past can find brighter days ahead. One way we act on that belief is by helping former prisoners who’ve paid for their crimes - - we help them build new lives as productive members of our society... the work of redemption reflects our values”**

**(George W. Bush’s remarks on signing the Second Chance Act, April 9, 2008)**

George W. Bush, former President of the United States of America, in signing the Second Chance Act of 2008 for a complete take off of the re-entry programmes for inmates of ALASKA Prison admitted that there was the need for the American society to help offenders reintegrate properly into society. He acknowledged the limitless potential that inmates are endowed with which could be tapped for the betterment of the American society.

Training to ensure better ex-convicts who are economically independent with decent living and capable of contributing their quota to national development is critical in lessening the tendency of reoffending among them upon release from prison. There is clearly a value in converting former prisoners into successful taxpayers. Equipping them with employable skills through effective trade training programmes is also crucial in ensuring public safety.

An experience of prisoners reveals that they are equally endowed with enormous talents. However, these energies and creativity of offenders can only find purpose that benefits society when those hidden talents are uncovered, polished and engaged productively for national development.

The Ghana Prison Service, as a security agency, has a dual role of performing both security and social functions. Its operational scope is explicit in the NRCD 46, 1972 which includes ensuring the safe custody of prisoners and their welfare needs as well as undertaking their reformation and rehabilitation.

Whilst the Service continues to enjoy public respect for its performance in ensuring the safe custody of prisoners, little strides have been made in their training. Training workshops which were established several years ago to give inmates skills in carpentry, masonry, tailoring, among others, are now dormant without any refurbishment. This suggests that the reformation function of the Service is adversely affected. One can therefore conclude with a degree of certainty that very soon offenders who will be released back into society will not receive any skills training. They will probably return into our communities as they went in.

Meanwhile, it is estimated that about 6, 219 prisoners, with a monthly average of 267, were released back into our communities in 2011. Out of the 14,128 prisoners for the year, 3580 were within the age group of 18-25 which constituted 50.1% of the total prisoner population for the period. This category of prisoners, some of whom had their education

truncated as a result of incarceration should have the opportunity of either continuing their education or trained with trade skills in the prisons. It is heart-warming to state that these options are available in the country's prisons but are unable to make the expected impact because of numerous challenges.

The training equipment which were procured for the country's prison workshops decades ago are now out-dated with some in irreparable shape. The need for government, corporate and public support in revamping these training workshops is non-negotiable. It is the only way by which some value can be added to the lives of inmates for their complete reformation. This, undoubtedly, will make them better and safe to live with in our communities.

Much can be learnt from other jurisdictions where public involvement in the training of prisoners has brought hope to them. An example of such public interventions is the founding of the St. Giles Trust, a charity organisation, in the United Kingdom. It trains ex-offenders and tasks them to use their skills and first-hand experience to assist others through peer-led support. The impact of the Trust has won it corporate sponsorship from numerous financial institutions such as Barclays, Global bank Nomura, HSBC, etc. to enable it continue to run its training programmes for offenders. Same can be done here to help break the circle of prison, crime and disadvantage and create safer communities by supporting prisoners to change their lives.

The Prison Ministry of Ghana which is made up of churches including the Presbyterian Church, ICGC, Perez Chapel, Vine Church, Assemblies of God, Pentecost, Light House, Royal House Chapel, etc. and Muslim groups have been complementing the efforts of the Prison Administration by assisting in various ways, especially spiritually, towards inmates' reformation. However, training for their effective resettlement into society is equally needed and deserves attention. Without this, the devil will find work for the idle hands that will soon, in my estimation, discharged from our prisons into society.

Credible records of the Prisons Service reveal that the functional days of prison workshops produced some success stories, in terms of inmates' training, that are worth sharing. The masonry unit has to its credit the construction of the multipurpose sport courts including the volley, basketball and handball courts of the St. Thomas Aquinas Senior High School and a two storey dormitory block for the Ordorgonor Senior High School in Accra.

The tailoring shop which also relies largely on trained prisoners currently has sewing contracts with reputable institutions with the Security Units of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Judicial Service and the Reibee securities as the latest contractual beneficiaries of the standard but affordable skilled labour of the shop. This is indicative of the fact that these trade training workshops which are mainly meant to equip inmates with employable skills can do better with the support of the public and corporate businesses. Some of the workshops could even be adopted by reputed companies

such as MANTRAC Ghana Limited, Melcom Ghana Limited, and many more that deal in the equipment that are currently lacked.

Clearly, prisoners who are warehoused and released back into our midst without being properly equipped with employable skills will possibly offer us nothing better than retaliatory intents. The obvious brunt to expect for our failure to act by collectively pooling resources and supporting the Prison Service to effectively train them is public insecurity.

Ghana is held as a beacon of Africa with enviable democratic credentials in the sub region. This has to be upheld and improved. Upholding these commendable strides in the areas of good governance and respect for human rights requires a reflection of the already achieved dividends in the country's Prison System too. That is, offering prison inmates a better option that promises bright prospects which will discourage them from going back into crime.

Confronting the problem of recidivism among ex-convicts requires concerted efforts from stakeholders including government, civil society, religious groups, corporate bodies and public spirited individuals. There must be clear-cut focus and attention on equipping the Prisons Service with the necessary training equipment and logistics. Support in the form of new carpentry, tailoring and masonry, mobile repairs and ICT facilities for prisons that lack them and revamping of existing ones with new equipment and tools are the way to go if the prisoner is to become a better and productive person to our dear country.

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