

POLICY BRIEF

Social Relations in Ghana: Focus on Tolerance and Trust

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social relations are central to human existence and provide a unique opportunity to study the nexus between the micro-sociological and the broader factors that shape or influence social life. These interactions and dynamics construct and reproduce the structural realities like social classes, gender ideologies, social hierarchies, among others; and these structural realities in turn have implications for political stability, social equality, empowerment, and other aspirations connected with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This policy brief highlights some of the themes from the 'Social Relations' chapter of the Ghana Social Development Outlook (GDSO) 2022 relating to tolerance and trust. The data shows that while there are very high levels of tolerance of various groups, some boundaries are rigidly policed and enforced.

INTRODUCTION

Social relations are central to human existence. Even though individuals constitute the basic units in social interactions, the character of these relations is determined not only by the inclinations of the individuals involved but also by the wider socio-political context within which these interactions occur (Assimeng, 1981). Social relations thus provide a unique opportunity to study the nexus between the micro-sociological and the broader factors that shape or influence social life. In everyday life where these processes take place, social relations occur in the context of families, friendships, workplaces, religious and other organisations, and political structures. It is in the course of these relations that structural realities like social classes, gender ideologies, social hierarchies, among others, are constructed and reproduced (Assimeng, 1981;

Nukunya, 2003). These structural realities in turn have implications for political stability, social equality, empowerment, and other aspirations connected with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



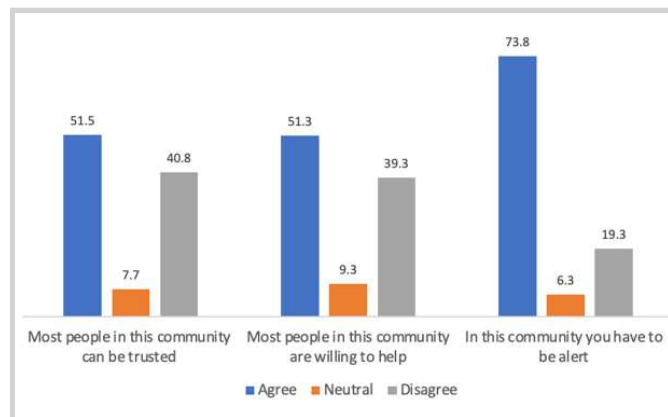
The ‘Social Relations’ chapter of the 2022 Ghana Social Development Outlook (GSDO 2022) builds on the foundation of the maiden GSDO (ISSER, 2012) and explores, among other themes, the nature and patterns of social relations in Ghana, including i) tolerance and trust; ii) equality in intergroup relations; iii) volunteerism; iv) ethnicity and national belonging; and v) political and social engagement. Data for the chapter comes from the Afrobarometer dataset (collected by the Center for Democratic Development – Ghana) and the Ghana Socioeconomic Panel Survey (GSPS) (collected by a consortium comprising ISSER in Ghana as well as Northwestern and Yale universities in the United States of America). Eight rounds of Afrobarometer surveys have been conducted in Ghana since 1999, while three waves of the GSPS have been conducted since 2009. The chapter uses the last round of each dataset. This policy brief focuses on the themes of tolerance and trust. The data shows that while there are very high levels of tolerance of various groups, some boundaries are rigidly policed and enforced.

Tolerance and Trust

Tolerance and trust are important barometers of a healthy and harmonious society. They are core constituent elements of social pluralism and a test of a society’s ability to withstand difficult times. The GSPS data show that Ghanaians are “carefully trusting” of their fellow community members. A little over half of the respondents believed that most people in their communities can be trusted or that it is safe to deal with them. A similar proportion of respondents also agreed that most people in their communities are willing to provide assistance of any kind if they needed help. At the same time, a clear majority (almost 74 percent) also felt that if one was not alert enough, they would be taken advantage of by people in their communities (see Fig. 1). This suggests that convivial social relations exist alongside widespread social suspicion. This suggests that there are many areas of social life where people may successfully engage with others even if there is a deficit of trust. However, when money is involved, people tend to be a lot more guarded. This state of ambivalence entailing strong communal bonds as well as mistrustful relations especially with regard to financial

dealings, is actually quite widespread and has been well-documented among communities both at home and in the diaspora (Asante, 2018; Dzanku et al., 2020; Takyiakwaa et al., 2021).

Figure 1. Levels of social trust (%)



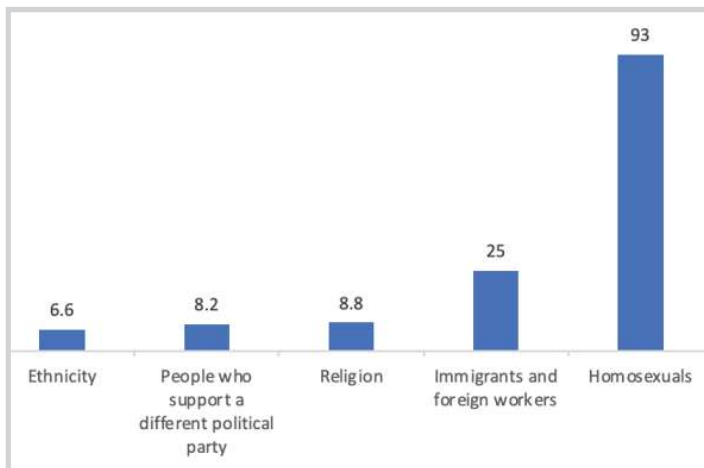
Source: GSPS Wave 3

Tolerance is another core feature of all healthy and harmonious societies. In the Afrobarometer dataset, willingness to live together with others in the same neighbourhood is used as a proxy for tolerance. Figure 2 shows that there are very high levels of tolerance for social differences across four out of the five identity categories on which the Afrobarometer questioned respondents. Less than 9 percent reported that they were against the idea of having people of different religions as neighbours, in contrast to just over 91 percent of respondents who expressed no distaste for having neighbours who had different religious faiths. The level of tolerance was even higher for ethnicity.

Over 93 percent of respondents said they had no problem with being neighbours with people from other ethnic groups. Those who expressed discomfort with the idea were only 6.6 percent. In the same vein, even though there is a widespread belief that partisan political polarisation is tearing the country apart, this is not borne out by the available data. Only 8 percent of respondents disliked the idea of having neighbours who belonged to political parties different from their own party.

While the data show equally tolerant attitudes towards foreigners, the rate of acceptance is a bit lower. A quarter of the Afrobarometer respondents reported not liking the idea of being neighbours with foreigners. While the 75

Figure 2. Categories of persons respondents would not like as neighbours (%)



Source: Ghana Center for Democratic Development, Afrobarometer Round 8

percent of respondents who claimed to have no problems with foreign workers as neighbours is very high, it pales in comparison with the over 90 percent who expressed tolerance for all the social identity categories described in the preceding paragraph.

Although tolerance for immigrant workers appears to be relatively high, Ghana has had a complex relationship with its immigrant population. A posture of hostility towards foreigners tends to surface during periods of economic crisis or when there are struggles over material resources. Under the government of Prime Minister Kofi Busia, Ghana expelled mainly Nigerian residents under the Aliens' Compliance Order of 1969 when the country was grappling with external shocks to its economy and a high rate of youth unemployment (Aremu and Ajayi, 2014). In the past two decades, similar conditions of economic hardship have led to the eruption of conflicts in the local retail market, with Ghanaian traders attempting to kick out their Nigerian counterparts in a bid to enforce legislation that prohibits foreigners from engaging in retail trade (Brobbe, 2018; Dankwah and Amoah, 2019; Bosiakoh, 2017).

By far the strongest expression of intolerance was directed against homosexuals. For this sexual minority, the extremely high levels of tolerance displayed towards other groups were totally reversed, and 93 percent of respondents expressed distaste for having neighbours who were homosexuals. In fact, up to 89.1 percent expressed a strong dislike for having to live so close to members of this social group.

Gay people in Ghana risk getting verbally or physically assaulted if they openly declare or manifest their sexual identities (HRW, 2018). The introduction of the Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill in 2021 and the fiery debates that it has generated provided an additional outlet for the expression of strong distaste for sexual minorities in the country.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Humanity is a social achievement for it is only in a social context that we become fully human. Social relations are foundational to this process by which individual humans are formed and social institutions emerge. Societies since antiquity have recognised the importance of social relations to ensuring the holistic well-being of the individual. This policy brief has focused on two dimensions of social relations in contemporary Ghana. The core finding is that while there are very high levels of tolerance of various groups, some boundaries are rigidly policed and enforced. This is particularly the case for sexual minorities, for whom Ghanaians exhibit fierce intolerance.

Based on the findings, the following recommendation is offered: Given the fact that Ghanaians are naturally tolerant of diverse ethnic, religious, and other identities, the prevailing environment of tolerance must be maintained. Political and social elites must refrain from stoking tensions between identity groups. Regarding the identity categories for which tolerance is low, especially concerning sexual minorities, leaders bear an important responsibility to avoid exposing members of those communities to harm or ridicule.

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Researcher:

Kofi Takyi Asante (PhD)
ISSER, University of Ghana
ktasante@ug.edu.gh

*A full version of the content of this policy brief can be found in the **Ghana Social Development Outlook 2022**

Acknowledgment:

ISSER gratefully acknowledges the support provided by the Agricultural Development Bank (ADB) for the research summarised in this policy brief, and associated dissemination activities.

Published by:

Institute of Statistical, Social, and Economic Research (ISSER), University of Ghana
P. O. Box LG 74, Legon, Accra
Tel: (+233) 057 7699900; (+233) 057 7699902
Email: isser@ug.edu.gh
Website: www.isser.ug.edu.gh



Editorial review & Design:

Vicentia Quartey
(vquartey@ug.edu.gh; +233 244 766492)