

Beyond poverty and criminalization: Splintering youth groups and 'conflict of governmentalities' in urban Ghana

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Abstract

Youth violence is a universal phenomenon and can take many shapes and forms. In Ghana the upsurge, scale and scope of such violence in major cities are becoming worrying, making it imperative to examine the nexus between poverty, splintering youth groups, and crime. Typically, youth criminal and antisocial behaviour raise questions as to whether city authorities lack effective structures to cope with increasing urbanization or are being overly accommodating to varying crime responses, some of which are above and beyond legal policing measures. Using content analysis of media reports, archival records, scholarly literature, 50 key informant interviews (KIIs), and 15 focus group discussions (FGDs), we examine the multiple fields of youth 'governmentalities' and their preoccupation with security issues—issues that are of great significance to formal state institutions. Borrowing from the philosophy of methodological individualism embedded in rational choice theory, our study reveals the emergence of a number of local youth groups whose activities, predicated mainly on the quest for better livelihood, incorporate varied rationalities, techniques, and practices, some of which are negatively impacting on the urban fabric. We contend that some of these activities not only challenge the legitimacy of the state but also call into question the ability of the official institutions responsible for maintaining law and order to guarantee protection and secure justice for all.

Keywords: urbanization; youth groups; organized crime; governmentalities; Ghana

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Introduction

Urbanization presents burgeoning opportunities, but unplanned urbanization is a threat to sustainable development. Prior studies (Pieterse, 2010; Grant, 2015) have underscored how population growth rates, particularly in developing countries, negatively affect the capacity of local governments to provide decent job opportunities. Indeed, Africa stands out as an archetype of this phenomenon of urbanization without growth (UN-Habitat, 2008). The inability of local governments to plan effectively for increasing urbanization casts doubts on their ability to cope with some of its inherent externalities, including crime (Buur & Jensen, 2004; Hove et al., 2013). One of the major fallouts from such a policy gap is the emergence of a number of unorthodox crime-fighting and -response formations, many of which act illegally in the face of institutionalized policing procedures (Gupta, 1995; Harris, 2001). The impact of such a development on the local economy includes, but is not limited to, deterring potential investors, limiting new investments, and making urban spaces almost ungovernable (Hove et al., 2013).

Ghana is deservedly hailed as ‘a beacon of peace’, being located within an urbanizing sub-region where most of its neighbouring countries—Cote d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, etc.—are victims of violent conflicts (see Darkwa & Attuquayefio, 2012). Consistent positive economic growth for the last two decades and the liberalization of markets and increasing growth opportunities (Bank of Ghana, 2007), as well as the recent oil find and production in Sekondi-Takoradi (the Oil City), have added extra economic impetus (Obeng-Odoom, 2014). However, these factors have simultaneously raised a number of security concerns (Adu-Meriku, 2002; Appiahene-Gyamfi, 2003) that remain largely under-addressed. For example, the surge in sales of both residential and industrial lands in Accra, the national capital, has enhanced the city’s commercialization, and this has ultimately given birth to *landguardism* (explained in detail later in this paper), involving illegal ‘death squad’ organizations whose members employ premeditated acts of force as their *modus operandi* (Owusu et al., 2012). Tamale (the northern regional capital) has also acquired notoriety as the epicentre of sociopolitical and religious-induced youth violence, previously unknown in its long history (Tonah, 2012). In the Ashanti regional capital, Kumasi, youth groups increasingly defy attempts by some traditional chiefs to sell community lands, while a glance at youth activities in the Oil City (Western regional capital) also reveals a desperate squad embarking on deadly adventurism—the *stowaway syndrome* (hiding on ships in order to travel without paying)—as a way of escaping poverty.

These often violently flavoured youth survivalist acts, undertaken outside the ambit of the law (Buur & Jensen, 2004), undoubtedly impact the urban landscape and create varied chaotic and contingent scenarios. While many scholars point to the negative outcomes of such youth violence, relatively few studies have explored the types, tactics, and conflicting governmentalities (the creation of ‘no-go’ areas) between and within cities. Indeed, the literature contains a rich account of youth violent behaviour, but how the ‘strategies of the powerful’ are creating, maintaining, and securing cultural identity and close-knit networks and reconfiguring urban spaces remains poorly researched.

The purpose of our paper is to fill some of these knowledge gaps by drawing upon scholarship on rational choice theory. We argue that these various youth activities involve multiple spatialities, relationships, strategies, and practices, within which power is stratified, and entail appropriation of specific urban spaces. We examine how these networks generate competing interests within and between the four major cities in Ghana.

Our paper contributes to the nascent criminology literature in Africa by presenting a case study in the context of Ghana. Indeed, the research is significant and timely since more than half of the global population now lives in urban areas in developing countries (United Nations, 2014). More importantly, demographic changes in recent decades have led to the largest generation of youth in the world today. Globally, there were 1.2 billion young people aged 15–24 in 2010. In particular, high-fertility-rate countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Ghana, are projected to experience a rapid increase in their populations aged 15–24: from 173 million at present to 362 million by mid-century. Thus, it is crucial to understand questions related to the intersection of the growing youthful population and networks, violence, and public safety, especially in the major cities.

The following section outlines the tenets of the rational choice framework and describes its interplay with organized crime and the creation of chaotic cities. We interrogate the theory in order to provide the academic space for understanding the different motives of various youth groups operating in individual cities. Thereafter, we outline our methodology and discuss a brief history of specific youth activities in each city. We use interviews and site reconnaissance data to analyse specific spatial contestations. We conclude by re-examining the themes arising from the interplay of youth networks. It is our view that while the objectives of some of these groups are well intentioned, others have doubtful intentions and adopt illegal strategies challenging the state's monopoly over the use of force.

Rationality, strategies and tactics of youth violence

The development of theories of space in criminology studies has coincided with a leaning in research toward understanding intra-city crime dynamics. Using ideas borrowed from the analyses of rational choice theory—a conceptual tool that holds that all human activities, including violence, are products of rational decision making at the individual level (Felson & Cohen, 1980)—we examine the *modus operandi* of youth groups in urban Ghana. We build on the methodological individualism of the theory, which assumes that complex social phenomena are reducible to individual actions. Elster (1989: 13), in particular, argues that ‘the elementary unit of social life is the individual human action. To explain institutional and social change is to show how they arise as the result of the action and interaction of individuals.’ Support for this argument is found in earlier scholars, such as Homans (1961) and Blau (1964), who argue that all actions are fundamentally rational in character (rationally motivated) and purely calculative (instrumental action). In the view of these scholars, individuals are motivated by their wants, which express their preferences, and as a result people calculate the likely costs and benefits of their actions before deciding what to do (based on available information). Such costs and benefits may manifest in sociopolitical and economic terms. An important pillar underpinning this methodological individualism thinking is that since wants are insatiable,

individuals anticipate the outcomes of alternative courses of action and choose the one that is likely to give them the greatest satisfaction (Carling, 1992: 27).

Using the theory as an analytical approach to explain why youth participate in illegitimate activities, Ehrlich (1973: 523) suggests that '[a]ny violation of the law can be conceived of as yielding a potential increase in the offender's pecuniary wealth, his psychic well-being, or both'. The motivation for criminal activities can also include anticipated socio-economic benefits, and therefore those who engage in crime perceive it as work that has the propensity to yield returns that exceed what they may earn legitimately elsewhere (Williams & Sickles, 2002: 479). This position parallels Becker's (1968: 176) analogy that 'a person commits an offense if the expected utility to him exceeds the utility he could get by using his time and other resources at other activities'.

This paper builds upon and expands the work of these scholars. Specifically, we use the methodological individualism thinking underpinning rational choice theory to unpack the spatiality of youth violence within various Ghanaian cities, and we examine how these cities are reconfiguring or have culminated in the convergence of ethnic enclaves in urban spaces. We see youth groups as 'rational interest groups', pursuing calculated spatial strategies and creating multiple and conflicting fields of governmentalities (interests). While some studies (Exum, 2002; Carmichael & Piquero, 2004; Wright et al.; 2006) have found mixed support for the rational nature of decision making, we maintain that the creation of surrogate 'policing units' and the use of illegal weapons create 'cities within a city' in terms of where people reside, traders operate, and industry locates. By building upon the work which inherently admits that, indeed, social actions are rationally motivated albeit with some varying degree of rationality, this paper extends the rational choice model conceptually by showing that the impact of youth violence is reflected not only in person and property casualties, but also in the reconfiguration of urban spaces.

Methodology

This study is a comparative one, culled out from a larger national project, 'Exploring crime and poverty nexus in urban Ghana' (see Owusu et al., 2015; Oteng-Ababio et al., 2016). The data for this paper covers the cities Accra, Kumasi, Tamale, and Sekondi-Takoradi and draws on three months of participant observation and a total of 50 key informants interviews (KIIs) of individuals (39 male, 11 female) between the ages of 36 and 72. There were also a total of 15 focus group discussions (FGDs), a review of archival records and scholarly literature on youth violence, and unstructured discussions with selected community leaders. In all four study areas, our interviewees included those who had either resided in their neighbourhood for at least five years and/or had been victims of crime. We also interviewed those who both had a family member or friend who had been a victim of violence and had an explanation for why they were attacked. In the field, interviews were conducted with residents who consented to participate in the study.

All interviews were guided by the project's approved security and ethical protocols and were conducted in the language favoured by the respondents—in the majority of cases this was

English. We do not intend our sample to be statistically representative. Rather, our main goal was to draw on a smaller but diverse sample in order to develop an in-depth understanding of the types, tactics, and conflicting governmentalities, and how these factors are linked to the overall safety of urban spaces. For those interviewees who opted for their local language, we employed the services of a translator. The average length of interviews was approximately 60–90 minutes. Audio recordings of each interview were made, transcribed, and thematically analysed (for detailed methodology, see Owusu et al., 2015; Oteng-Ababio et al., 2016).

Results: Splintering youth groups

Glorifying Ghana's apparently peaceful environment within a largely restless and turbulent West African sub-region may achieve a paradoxical effect in the future. The danger manifests clearly in view of the country's youthful population structure,¹ which increased from 1.1 million in 1960 to 2.3 million in 1984, and to 3.5 million in 2000 (Oteng-Ababio & Wrigley-Asante, 2013; Oteng-Ababio & Arthur, 2015). Correspondingly, the youth share of the population is also reflected in their share of the unemployment rate, with about 60% of the unemployed economically active population found within the 15–24 years age group, making Ghana's youth unemployment rate one of the highest in the world (Amankrah, 2006; Oteng-Ababio et al., 2015). The country's Ministry of Manpower, Youth and Employment attributes the causes of youth unemployment to various factors, including:

- the introduction of a junior secondary and senior secondary schools system without adequate planning for integration into trades/vocations and job placement;
- the shrinkage of public sector employment opportunities, coupled with a relatively slow growth of the private sector; and
- the lack of a coherent national employment policy and comprehensive strategy to deal with the employment problem (MMYE, 2006).

Although some studies have explained the onset and persistence of youth violent behaviour, or the increasing probability of youth propensity to violence, to increasing poverty and social inequality (Amankrah, 2006), it is quite difficult to negotiate and organize the plethora of ideas, hypotheses, and empirical findings that mark the study of poverty and youth violence (Wortley, 2008). However, addressing the UN General Assembly during the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in New York on 27 September 2015, President Mahama cautioned members that if the teeming youth of Africa must find jobs at home and stop attempting to cross the Mediterranean to enter the supposedly greener pastures of Europe, then the world needs to define a new paradigm of development.² He emphasized that the Sustainable

¹ The Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) officially defines a youth in Ghana as aged 15–24 years

² Statement by H. E. John Dramani Mahama, President of the Republic of Ghana, at the UN summit for the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, General Assembly Hall, New York, 27 September 2015.

Development Goals (SDGs) represent the most ambitious, transformational development ever attempted in the history of the UN, and he asserted that it provides a level of hope to many unemployed youth and a major re-dedication of the world to a commitment to fight growing inequality and wipe out extreme poverty.

Be that as it may, we have been met with increasing youth unemployment and a recent upsurge in incidences of heinous and violent crimes, which have compromised the sense of security in some Ghanaian cities. The situation is aggravated by a correspondingly low rate of apprehension of perpetrators, hence feeding the perception that state agencies are under-resourced and perhaps corrupt and inefficient (Aning, 2006; Tankebe, 2008; Beek, 2012). In response, some residents tend to seek security solutions from the private sphere, providing endorsement, support, and justification for splintering youth groups.

The subsequent discussion provides an overview of the operations of the predominant groups in four cities, in order to develop a comparative perspective regarding how these activities have shaped and/or are re-shaping the urban landscape.

Accra and landguardism

Many youth groups operate within the Accra metropolis, but the most lethal activities have been those of *landguards*. Although *landguardism* is not a recent concept, most residents' perceptions of this phenomenon remain ambivalent. A landguard is typically an individual (usually 17–40 years old) who is hired by a private person to guard and secure either land or landed property (Darkwa & Attuquayefio, 2012). Working as a group, these landguards act as a non-state 'police force' to settle private disputes, usually by resorting to violence and intimidation. They vary in character and level of organization, and their membership is generally recruited from among low-income, poverty-stricken communities (see Table 1). Most of the members of these groups are illiterate and can include people employed in vocations such as carpentry and masonry, but they sometimes also include serving and retired security personnel (Aning, 2006). Nonetheless, irrespective of their motives, all landguards have common characteristics: they are primarily young, unemployed, and possess few rudimentary skills for legal employment—or no skills at all.

Table 1: A profile of landguards operating within Accra Metropolis

Category	Objective	Characteristics	Remarks
Community landguard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share responsibility to protect communal interests - Have virtuous and positive motivations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emerge sporadically to address specific problems - Exist only for the period of contention - Do not receive remuneration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not financially motivated - Act as ‘defenders of their heritage’
Amateur landguard (extortionists)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community members come together to exploit developers - Impose a ‘digging fee’ prior to development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use violence - Operate within their community - Operate in peri-urban/newly developing areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - See their extortion as a right - May offer preventive services on negotiated terms
Traditional <i>Asafo</i> group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work under the umbrella of traditional leaders - Operate as <i>tools of legitimatization</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Usually delegated by traditional authorities to demarcate land - Demand ‘digging fee’³ before executing their assignment - Members may not necessarily belong to the families for whom they claim to be working for 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Act as ‘warriors to the land’ – <i>Asafo</i> - Take ‘token’ as a fee for protection against potential encroachers - May negotiate separate contracts to provide additional surveillance
Professional landguards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have identifiable hierarchies - Service the highest bidder - Perform contracted jobs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perform a wide range of jobs including VIP protection and elimination of opponents - Ruthless and usually feared - Do not necessarily belong to the ruling family or community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide services for clients in conflict (individuals and between families) - Traditional authorities in conflict over boundary demarcations and control

Source: Fieldwork, 2014

³ A ‘digging fee’ is an amount of money demanded by the *Asafo* group before allowing a prospective developer, who has legitimately acquired land from the traditional authorities, to start the intended development.

According to Darkwa and Attuquayefio (2012), the clients of landguards are varied and include individuals with land or landed property, chiefs with custodial lands, real estate developers, and building contractors embroiled in land (property) disputes. This situation is very common in Accra due to the increase in land values, culminating in multiple sales of land by landowners who exploit lapses in the land administration process and delays in adjudicating land disputes at the law courts (Gough & Yankson, 2000). The services of landguards are therefore used for physical protection of land and property and the prevention of access to the site of their clients by competing parties. As emphasized by Darkwa and Attuquayefio (2012), they do not have any formal training—although they engage in physical training and bodybuilding exercises, while those with illegal access to weapons, particularly locally manufactured guns and pistols, train in their use.

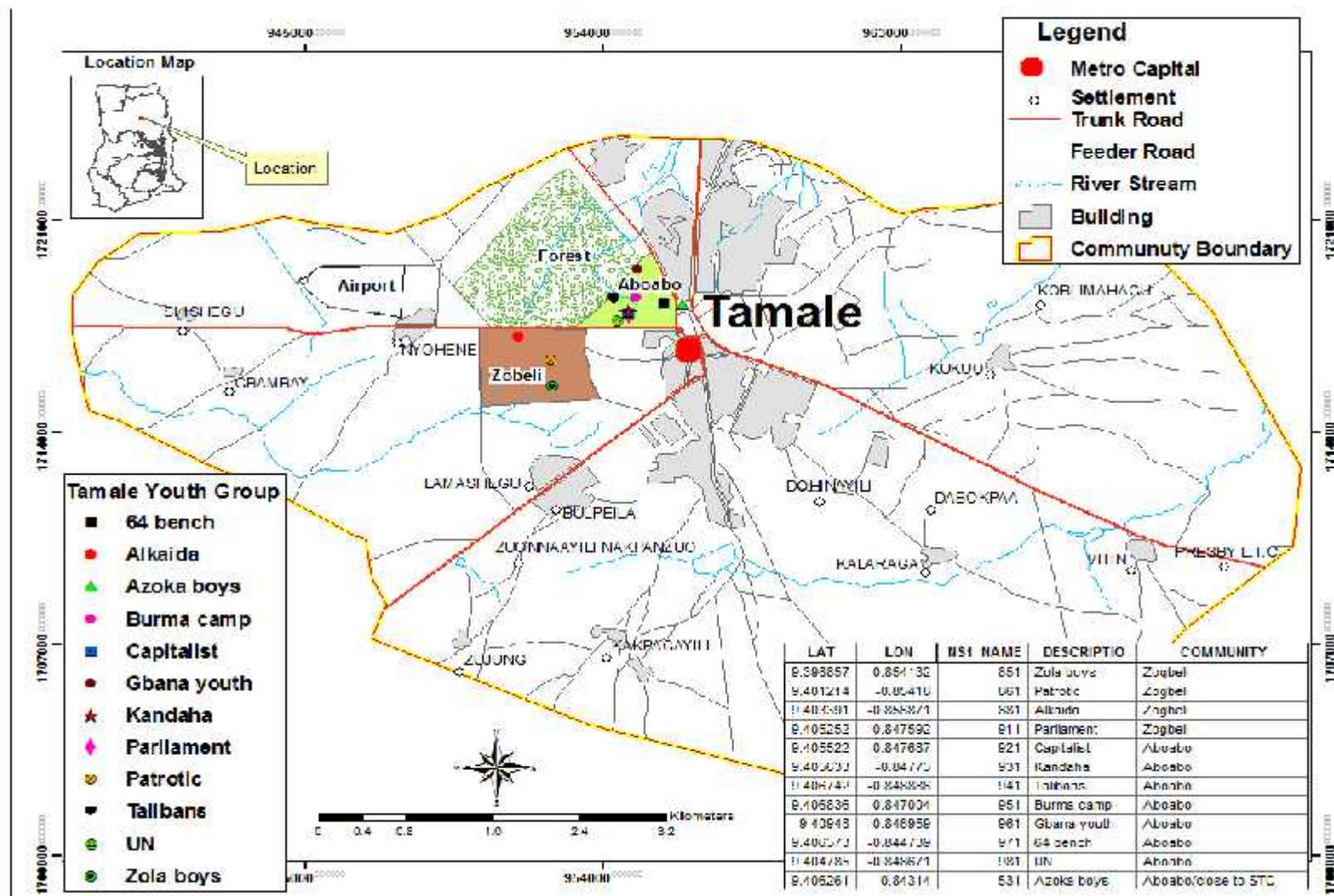
In spite of their illegal status, they sometimes assist state security agencies with information during investigations; and from all indications, this ‘involuntary cooperation’ is out of fear of retribution for their illegal acts (ibid.). Typically, the regular tool box of most landguards is stuffed with pickaxes, cutlasses, cudgels, crowbars, and other improvised equipment and weapons, which are used to vandalize contesting partys’ structure(s) or engage in physical violence. Some better-organized groups have shotguns and vehicles to be more functionally effective. As noted by Buur and Jensen (2004: 142), a formal term in criminology for such groups that take the law into their own hands in a violent manner is ‘vigilantes’. It came as no surprise in 2004, therefore, when the government banned landguardism, stating unambiguously that their ‘unacceptable activities are in contravention of provisions of the criminal code’ (GNA, 2004).

Organized violence and youth groups in Tamale

A phenomenon related to landguardism is the emergence of loosely defined youth groups in Tamale, engaging in violent reprisal clashes and triggering a major debate regarding the safety of residents. Unlike Accra, where land takes centre stage, the sites of hostility in Tamale remain politically, ethnically, and religiously linked (Tonah, 2012). According to Amanor (1999), an increasing climatic challenge combined with meagre returns has made agriculture unattractive in most parts of the northern regions of Ghana. This has provided a fertile ground for increasing unemployment and the creation of reactionary groupings, a number of which virtually clutter the streets and sidewalks in Tamale, turning public spaces into youth rendezvous locations (Tonah, 2012).⁴ These ‘non-political’ groups ostensibly seek to raise community awareness through discussions and participatory engagements. However, there are sufficient reasons to conclude that they are rather sowing the seeds of ethnic, religious, and political discord and division. Without pretending to be exhaustive, Figure 1 presents a graphical representation of some youth groups recorded during the study in Tamale.

⁴ Indeed, several rounds of Ghana’s Living Standard Survey (GLSS) reports classified the three administrative regions in Ghana including Tamale as the least developed and the poorest in the country (GSS, 2008, 2014).

Figure 1: Tamale: Selected youth groups' location and their ethno-political affiliations



Source: Fieldwork, 2014

NPP* (New Patriotic Party) is the largest opposition political party in Ghana. NDC** (National Democratic Congress) is the ruling party in Ghana.

As noted by Tonah (ibid.), names like *Taliban* and *Kandahar* bring to life some ‘dormant spines’. One characteristic feature of these groups relates to their ability to create safety zones (governmentalities) without any intrusion. Operationally, each group has a ‘secured’ territorial monopoly backed by force, and in most cases ‘enemy infiltration’ or ‘cross boundary’ incidents come with a price. These are also not just loosely confederated groups that lack cohesion but seem to be infiltrated by various political, religious, and chieftaincy motives, thereby blurring their supposed apolitical status.

The emergence of ‘positive defiance youth’ in Kumasi

Although youth violence is universal, nuanced analysis of the motives and practices of individual youth groups in our research locations shows that the gulf between them may be wide. Unlike the volatile situations discussed in Accra and Tamale, some youth groups in Kumasi present different orientations and motivations. Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti Region and the second-largest city in Ghana, is a socially homogenous Akan ethnic enclave. Traditionally and spiritually, the Asantes are all united around the Asantehene (King of Asanti) and the Golden Stool,⁵ which is said to have miraculously descended from heaven in the eighteenth century (Abotchie, 1997: 169). Apart from the Asantehene, the other traditional chiefs and sub-chiefs are also revered by their subjects and perform a number of functions, including religious roles. They also act as founts of honour and as sole custodians of stool lands, and they are the embodiment of the beliefs, hopes, fears, and aspirations of their people (Abotchie, 1997).

However, the emergence of the modern state has also seen a redefinition of the authority and functions of some of the chiefs (ibid.). Currently, many chiefs have become ceremonial figures, while the institution itself is bedevilled by numerous land-related conflicts. As of 2003, an estimated 60,000 land cases were before the law courts in Ghana (Kasenga, 2003; cited in Yeboah & Obeng-Odoom, 2010). These developments have compelled some youth, particularly around the peri-urban areas, to analyse their *want–get ratio* regarding the sale of customary land by their chiefs and to demand accountability from them. They have questioned the justification for the continuous sale of community lands, given that earlier sales failed to benefit the entire community. They act on a pent-up frustration and deny any further land sales, owing to their chiefs’ inability to account for previous transactions. Such ‘positive defiance’ attitudes were hitherto considered an abomination and deeply disrespectful to traditional authority.

⁵ The Asantehene is the absolute monarch of the Kingdom of Ashanti (or Asante) ethnic group. The Golden Stool (*sika dwa* in local dialect) is the royal and divine throne of the Asante people, said to have been caused to descend from the sky by the High Priest, Okomfo Anokye, who is one of the two chief founders of the Asante Confederacy. That stool is traditionally symbolic of the Asantehene’s leadership and is believed to house the spirit of the Asante nation—living, dead, and yet to be born.

‘Deadly adventurism’: The stowaway syndrome in Sekondi-Takoradi

We determined that in the Oil City there are streams of youth groups who indulge in deadly stowaway fortune-seeking adventures, which may not necessarily impact on the local economy directly. A stowaway refers to

a person who is secreted on a ship, or in cargo which is subsequently loaded on the ship, without the consent of the shipowner or the master or any other responsible person and who is detected on board the ship after it has departed from a port, or in the cargo while unloading it in the port of arrival, and is reported as a stowaway by the master to the appropriate authorities. (MKC, 2013: 3)

It is an ever-present problem for the shipping industry and has various motivations: political, economic, criminal, or adventure-seeking. Although beyond the scope of the current study, suffice it to state that accurately predicting which ports are high risk is difficult, although there are certain known ports that commonly serve as starting points for stowaways, including ports in West African countries.

Although our study indicates the practice has a long history, this ‘deadly voyage’ gained prominence when one Kingsley Ofofu, a Ghanaian who attempted to flee poverty to Europe with eight others, made international news in 1992 when he survived ‘slaughter’ by the six-member crew of a Bahamian-flagged cargo ship, *MC Ruby* (Adams, 2007). Ofofu’s ordeal was dramatized in the 1996 feature film, *Deadly Voyage*, produced by Union Pictures for distribution to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Home Box Office (HBO) (ibid.). As recently as July 2015, the Angolan authorities also arrested some Ghanaian stowaway fishermen who were heading to the USA but were apprehended and allegedly thrown into the sea in Angola (Myjoyonline, 2015). The increased concerns about this development in recent years are due to how those who embark on such ill-fated expeditions are treated on arrest (ibid.).

The fact that stowaways cause considerable difficulties for shipmasters and owners on arrest explains why culprits are likely to be thrown into the sea. Moreover, the cost for care and repatriation can be substantial. According to Gard (n.d.) the average cost of each stowaway case in 2002 was approximately USD 7,000, increasing significantly to over USD 18,000 in 2008, and by 2013 had reached USD 22,000. In situations where more than one stowaway are involved, the costs can peak to USD 100,000 or more (ibid.). Commenting on the situation in Ghana, a Takoradi District Magistrate noted that the practice has a well-organized network (GNA, 2003). Consequently, he charged the police to go beyond ‘hauling the small fry before the courts’ and identify their collaborators and abettors, reminding them of Section 56 of the Courts Act of 1993, Act 459, which stipulates that persons who stowaway, their collaborators, and those who assist them are all culpable.

Our findings from the various cities make a persuasive case. Firstly, youth criminal activities in Ghanaian cities are varied in terms of scope, scale, and impact. Secondly, although these activities are strongly motivated by various economic, sociopolitical, and religious motives, the underlying factor is poverty and the ultimate desire to escape poverty. In some cases, as in the case of Tamale, the lines of differentiation between the inter-city youth groups are

entrenched, rather than being ambiguously fluid and permitting crossover, as in the case of Kumasi. From this perspective, a tentative conclusion can be drawn that, the economic motivation notwithstanding, the harder the sociopolitical and religious fissures, the greater the disposition toward extremism and violence, as exhibited in Accra and Tamale. Principally, the groups from Kumasi and Sekondi-Takoradi show progressively clear distinctions in their *raison d'être* and discourses, in contrast to those from Accra and Tamale, whose economic motivations have been overshadowed by their violent *modus operandi*.

Conflicting governmentalities and land use reconfiguration

The diverse youth experiences discussed above necessitate a more nuanced understanding of how the various groups carve out their respective spaces and how these are (re)shaping the overall urban landscapes. In large part, their 'benevolent' activities have been fuelled by the police incapacity to adequately cover and secure all people and their properties and by high youth unemployment. This presents a justification for some youth groups to opportunistically bridge the gap, in some cases using illegitimate means. We examine some of these negativities as follows:

Reflections on landguard crime in Accra

Most national media outlets are replete with landguard stories. Content analysis of such stories revealed a number of crimes committed by landguards, resulting in injury, loss of investment, and even death. These have serious implications for the local and national economy (Aning, 2006; Darkwa & Attuquayefio, 2012). Perhaps the most heinous of these crimes was the bizarre murder of Police Constables Owusu Sekyere, popularly known as 'Kwaku Ninja', and Jerry Wornu, alias 'Taller', on November 1998.⁶ The two constables, Kwaku Ninja and Taller, who were members of the Striking Force Unit of the Ghana Police Service, were reportedly assigned to invite the parties involved in a protracted land dispute at Ablekuma, a suburb of Accra, to a meeting. Reports indicate that upon reaching the community, a group of landguards, including one 'Terminator', 'Black Rasta', and 'Wisdom', wielding an AK-47 assault rifle and pump action shotguns, attacked the two police officers. In the process Taller was killed on the spot, while Kwaku Ninja, a master in martial arts, attempted to escape but was eventually killed. His corpse was initially dragged into a nearby bush and buried but was subsequently exhumed, as was that of Taller, which was initially dumped in a well. Both corpses were subsequently buried under a newly constructed building, and concrete was cast over them to outwit investigators.

The story of the policemen is specific though not unique (see Table 2). Indeed, the impunity and absolute fearlessness the perpetrators display in carrying out such crimes only create frontiers of contestations rather than mere boundaries. Within their zone of operations (governmentality), one is at a loss whether the group is sponsored by, supplementing, or working against the law enforcement agencies, as they threaten, maim, and kill their victims in addition to demolishing what they consider 'unauthorized' property and prevent hired labourers

⁶ <http://thechronicle.com.gh/kwaku-ninja's-killer-in-police-grips/>

from working. The Minister of the Interior re-echoed the point in 2004 when landguardism was banned:

The government had noted with great concern the illegal activities of landguards who had become law unto themselves [...]. [G]overnment had to spend substantial resources to manage the situation caused by the activities of the landguards. (GNA, 2004)

If the operation of these groups is allowed to continue unchecked, they will only further expose the weakness and ineffectiveness of official law enforcement agencies and also undermine investor confidence, since they are clearly a gross affront to people's basic human rights.

Table 2: Sample list of crimes perpetrated by landguards in Accra and its environs

DATE	Incident	REFERENCES
20 May 2015	Landguard stabbed a member of the Ga Paramount Stool Dzaase Council	http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=358890
4 August 2015	Landguards killed 1 person at Okponkpon, Abokobi, Accra	http://www.dailyguideghana.com/landguards-kill-one-at-abokobi/
24 August 2015	Landguards attacked workers of Positive Drive Investment Company at Ayikai Doblo	http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/regional/Police-assist-landguards-at-Amasaman-377246
15 February 2014	Landguards threatened to kill the Queen Mother of Kwabenya, Naa Korkoi Dugbatey II	http://www.spyghana.com/landguards-threaten-kwabanya-queenmothers-life/
29 April 2014	Landguards killed 1 person at Amanfrom near Accra	http://newsghana.com.gh/stopping-land-guard-menace-ghana/
19 May 2014	Landguards attacked and killed an Irroko Company Limited worker over disputed land at Amanfrom	http://www.modernghana.com/news/542082/1/killer-land-guard-arrested.html
10 October 2014	Imposter 'soldier' landguard terrorized Weija residents	http://www.dailyguideghana.com/soldier-land-guard-grabbed/
24 October 2014	Landguard opened fire on suspected encroachers, killing 1 person	http://www.dailyguideghana.com/killer-land-guard-busted/
3 November 2014	Over 300 houses pulled down at West Hills Mall, Kasoa	http://www.myjoyonline.com/news/2014/November-3rd/landguards-pull-down-over-300-houses-at-kasoa.php
12 July 2013	Landguards besieged Bohye Church at Haatso, Accra	http://www.modernghana.com/news/474780/1/bohye-church-threatened-by-landguards.html
2 May 2012	Landguards injured 24 civilians at Prampram	http://news1.ghananation.com/headlines/252748-landguards-open-fire-on-innocent-prampram-residents.html
24 September 2010	Landguards terrorized residents of a quarry site at Oyibi	http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=190964

DATE	Incident	REFERENCES
17 November 2009	Landguards killed 2 persons at Avenor, Accra	http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=172009
14 December 2009	Landguards burnt 3 bulldozers at Gbawe, Accra	http://news.peacefonline.com/pages/social/200912/34405.php
14 August 2007	Landguards brutalized a 15-year-old pupil at Amanfrom	http://edition.myjoyonline.com/pages/news/200704/3462.php
9 April 2006	Landguards took over activities in Langma, Kokrobitey	http://www.modernghana.com/news/98018/1/curb-land-guard-activities-in-greater-accra.html
28 December 2005	Landguards shot an officer of Internal Revenue Service (IRS) over land bought for the members	http://www.modernghana.com/news/92544/1/land-guards-kill-top-irs-man.html

Tamale experiences with youth violence

Arguably, most youth join the various groups based on their own rational decisions. Nonetheless, understanding their underlying motivation is something city authorities must strive to ascertain. This is particularly important in the case of Tamale, a city where climatic conditions and poor returns on farming (Amanor, 1999; Yaro, 2013; Samaddar et al., 2014) have made agriculture unattractive, thus consigning most youth to vulnerable conditions. Hence, weighing their abilities and resources against the available opportunities, most youth appear to be convinced that engaging in illegal sociopolitically motivated activities is more rewarding than trying to find legitimate employment, and we can conclude that the youth violence in Tamale is being deliberately inflicted on their victims. Tables 3 through 5 present different media representations of violent clashes in Tamale and their outcomes between 2008 and 2015.

From Tables 4 and 5, we can deduce systematic and periodic reprisal outbreaks of violence in Tamale. The situation smacks of escalating incidences of provocation, retaliation, and revenge, creating largely divided ‘turf’ of governmentalities between the two major political parties in the country—National Democratic Congress (NDC) and New Patriotic Party (NPP)—which metamorphose into chieftaincy issues (Abudus and Andanis) and religious divisions (Al-Sunnah and Tijaniya). According to police sources, in the past decade (perhaps after the murder of the overlord of Dagbon in 2002), many people have been murdered and/or been victims of non-lethal violence (see also Tonah, 2012). Our field interviews are replete with various accounts of horrific acts of vandalism, fuelled by ethno-religious and political sentiments which are seemingly reconfiguring where people live, work, and interact in Tamale, although a deeper impact analysis of these claims is beyond the scope of the current study.

Nonetheless, the case of North Star FM, a local FM station established in 2007 by a former Vice-President of Ghana (an Abudu) under President Kuffour’s regime, perhaps epitomizes how the violence-induced reconfiguration of the city is manifesting. The FM station, which covers 12 districts in the region, was the second private station to be established after Diamond FM, owned by the current Minister of the Interior (an Andani). However, as one interviewee remarked: ‘If you are sitting on somebody’s chair, then it is as good as indirectly sitting on the ground.’ Because the North Star FM station was located in a predominantly Andani neighbourhood, it became a constant target for violent attacks owing to political, chieftaincy, and religious differences. In one instance, a group of about 50 men barged into the station, assaulted participants on a live programme, and attempted to set the station ablaze. These unprovoked attacks compelled management to relocate from its rented location at Kamina to Nim Avenue in Russian Bungalow, perceived to be a friendlier location. While the case of the FM station is a single incident, it nonetheless illustrates how violent attacks are reconfiguring the city fabric. Indeed, Table 6 presents some other instances of occupational relocations captured during the fieldwork.

Table 3: Media representations of violent clashes in Tamale (2008–2015)

Date	Event/Incident	Casualty	Remarks	Reference
23 February 2009	Renewed violence between NDC and NPP supporters in Tamale	7 houses and 3 vehicles burnt. NDC man lynched and NPP supporter shot dead	The police and military intensified patrols and mounted check-points	http://ghanaelections2008.blogspot.com/2009/02/seven-houses-burnt-in-renewed-violence.html
18 August 2009	Clashes erupted between NDC and NPP over comments by NPP supporter against some traditional rulers	1 person died while 7 suffered gunshot injuries	Combatants brandished and used powerful rifles	http://politics.myjoyonline.com/pages/news/200902/26487.php
23 May 2011	Action Youth Group attacked MCE for unauthorized demolition exercise	MCE office was destroyed	Regional Minister described youth behaviour as unacceptable	http://elections.peacefmonline.com/pages/politics/201105/43710.php?storyid=100&
18 January 2013	NDC youth demonstrate over exclusion of MP from ministerial appointments	NDC Party billboards vandalized	Regional Minister described the action as regrettable	http://elections.peacefmonline.com/pages/politics/201301/153913.php?page=2&storyid=100&
26 November 2013	NPP Gen Secretary chased out by party youth over arrest of 5 members	NDC supporter murdered by 5 NPP sympathizers	One Yakubu Yahuza was sentenced to death by hanging; 4 others sentenced to 36 years in prison each	http://www.myjoyonline.com/politics/2013/november-26th/sir-john-chased-out-in-tamale-by-angry-npp-

11 March 2013	NDC activists torched a local FM station in protest against a radio discussion	Revenge killing of NDC member, local FM station and 3 cars burnt	NDC group besieged local FM station demand the head of a panellist for making unguarded comment	http://news.peacefmonline.com/pages/social/201403/192600.php?storyid=100&
12 March 2015	Forum for Accountable Government protest against ethnocentric comments	Peaceful march	The residents said the comments could plunge the nation into chaos	http://www.myjoyonline.com/politics/2015/March-12th/tamale-residents-hit-streets-over-maaf-ethnocentric-comments

Source: Content analysis of media reports, 2015

We acknowledge that, as with all media reportage, one should underline the element of under-reporting and the leverage editorial policies command in deciding what to publish and what not to publish. Furthermore, the fieldwork seems to bear out some of the ‘benevolent’ claims by some of the groups. These factors enjoin us to be cautious when interpreting such media data (Holtmann, 2001). However, this does not make these incidents any less worrying, as all violence results in pain and heartbreak and can ignite retaliatory responses. What is especially of concern is the level of impunity with which some youth groups perpetrate their crimes, a fact a former Interior Minister, in a discussion on the landguard issue, openly admitted: ‘These landguards use illegal fire arms, harassing and intimidating law-abiding citizens and further promoting the proliferation of illegal arms in the country’ (GNA, 2004). Such shows of force and fearlessness reluctantly compel the ‘weak’ to selectively relocate in order to guarantee some level of confidence and security.

Table 4: Some religious motivated clashes in Tamale (2012)

Date	Event/Incident	Casualty	Remarks	Reference
21 August 2012	Al-Sunnah (Afajirah Mosque) and Tijaniya (Central Mosques) Muslims clashed over scripture interpretation	Equipment at local radio station vandalized	Zaa was inconveniencing motorists	http://www.ghanadistricts.com/news/?read=46798
6 September 2012	Clashes between sections of the Tijaniyya and Al-Sunnah	Supporters of Rashid assaulted	Imam Regional Minister accused of being responsible for the clash	http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=249655

Source: Media portals, 2015

Table 5: Some chieftaincy-motivated clashes in Tamale (2012)

Date	Event/Incident	Casualty	Remarks	Reference
30 August 2008	Violence erupted over chieftaincy title between two claimants	4 houses burnt down	MCE asked the youth not to resort to activities that drain scarce resources	www.modernghana.com/
6 August 2011	Andani youth rampaged over discharge of Abudus on trial for Ya-Na murder	NDC office burnt; State properties vandalized; 1 person stabbed to death	A Deputy Minister of the Interior linked the violent clashes to intelligence failure	http://edition.myjoyonline.com/pages/news/201104/63861.php
21 April 2012	Chieftaincy disputes between Abudus and Andanis revisited	1 person shot and 7 wounded	The incident forced the police to fire warning shots to disperse the crowd	http://news.peacefmonline.com/pages/news/201204/109548.php

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12 March 2013	Two communities in violent clashes over disputed land	1 person killed, with 4 sustaining serious injuries	Military and police presences were increased	https://233livenews.wordpress.com/2013/03/12/ghana-one-killed-others-injured-in-violent-clashes-in-tamale/
12 March 2014	Chieftaincy disputes between Abudus and Andanis turned bloody	2 lynched and 14 received gunshot injuries	Government accused of conniving with Andanis to wipe out Abudus from royal succession	http://news.peacefmonline.com/pages/social/201203/100463.php?storyid=100&
4 July 2014	Chieftaincy/land disputes between Konkombas, Bimobas, and Bogni erupted	11 deaths; 26 houses burnt; 3 arrested with AK 47 rifle	Most residents vacated troubled communities for fear of recurrence	http://news.peacefmonline.com/pages/social/201404/195482.php

Source: Culled from media portals, 2015

Table 6: Selected cases of occupational relocation as a result of incessant youth attacks and counter-attacks

Company	Year of establishment	Location history	Reason(s) for relocation	Remark(s)
Dichiwuni Enterprise	1991 (Manufacture rubber bags)	Moved from Gumbini to Choggu Yapalsi	Mainly chieftaincy, as Abudu shop located in Andani area	The shop and all its contents burnt The old location within CBD
A. A. Zabs Enterprise	1991 (General merchant)	Moved from Lamashegu to Kakpagiyile	Chieftaincy and political issues, with the shop consistently burnt down	The new location is more secured since most of the locals belong to the same ethnic group and political party
Top Up Investment Limited	2004 (Dealers in Gino products)	Moved from Alhassan Iddrisu's Yard to Diamond FM	Safety and convenience	The new location is close to other establishments, with strong security measures
Foundation Academy	2002. (Academic institution)	Moved from Nyohini to Pito House	Safety and convenience	
Great Ambition School Complex	2003 (Academic institution)	Moved from Poloya Fong to Metro Mass Transit Station	Safety and convenience	
Modern City Hotel	1999 (Hospitality industry)	Moved from Watersin to Naa Liro Estate	Safety and convenience	
Northern Star FM Station	2007 (FM Station)	Moved from Kamina to Russian Bungalow	Attacks from party faithful	Move triggered by political misunderstandings

Source: Fieldwork, 2015

Discussion and concluding remarks

Our study, borrowing from the principles of the rational choice theory, explores the intersection of the types and tactics of youth violence and conflicting governmentalities. Our main findings show how youth groups work differently within different cities. It also reveals that significant shortcomings in the provision of efficient urban security in the face of increasing crime rates and complexities have fuelled the take-over of this niche by opportunistic youth groups, whose *modus operandi* is that of organized criminal groups. This is obvious in Accra and Tamale, where these groups operate by living off rather than working for the communities they purport to protect (see Albanese, 2000: 41). This observation parallels Hagan's definition of organized crime as a profit-oriented group with violence as its trademark (Hagan, 1983: 52).

Our results show that although most opinion leaders deny having any control over youth groups—ostensibly to avoid taking responsibility for the latter's crimes—some groups enjoy the support of people of influence both at the local and national level. Our study suggests that the landguards in Accra work to satisfy the paymasters who contract them (also see Darkwa & Attuquayefio, 2012). In a similar way, the youth in Tamale work for the admiration of their ethnic, religious, and political cronies in order to win favours—a point well articulated by Tonah (2012). We also established that some groups seek to metamorphose into legal structures by exploiting the inadequacies of law enforcement agencies, particularly during the occasional aggressive strikes by the police to curtail their criminal activity. There were several instances where landguards presented themselves as members of the traditional *Asafo* groups, thus evoking legitimate traditional institutions to cover up their illegal activities and attempting to justify activities that are clearly antithetical to the well-being any sustainable city. Some also secure and possess legal letters of authorization, appointing them as caretakers. These letters then provide them with the right to be on their client's property and to question and ward or beat off anyone whom they deem an encroacher.

In Tamale, the groups present themselves as watchdog committee members, ostensibly to make up for the perceived official incompetence and inadequacies, as noted by Felson and Cohen (1980). The current police–population ratio in Tamale is 1:1,288, far below the UN approved standard of 1:500. Taking advantage of this inadequacy, some groups position themselves as the embodiment of community virtues and defenders of the people. They align themselves politically and resort to the use of force in self-defence, which sharply contrasts with the legally accepted practice. Some also serve as 'foot-soldiers' of their political parties and display their party political cards as a proof of their party's endorsement of their operations. While these operations largely remain illegitimate, these groups—for example, the *Azorka Boys* and *Kandahar*—tend to rebrand themselves during national elections when they serve as 'polling agents', a position legally

sanctioned by Ghana's electoral laws.⁷ Through such disguises as supposed performers of legitimate roles, these groups obtain sanction under the protective umbrella of legitimate institutions and succeed in averting possible confrontation with the police and breach of the law. Our findings suggest that there are deep sociopolitical and religious structural forces that condition the intensity of the use of violence.

When these findings are put together, it becomes evident that exploiting legitimate 'need-gaps' leads to illegitimate undermining of the state's security structures and creates a dangerously volatile situation, which, if left unattended to, could compromise the internal security apparatus of Ghana. The intertwined effect of the results identified above is a clear demonstration of the principles of rational choice theory in action, and it shows how increasing youth population and networks converge with urban poverty and violence to create urban insecurity. The use of illegitimate force to threaten, intimidate and, in extreme cases, kill opponents directly challenges the state's monopoly over the use of force and calls into question the state's ability to provide and guarantee security for all. These youth groups openly act with impunity, creating public fear and undermining people's trust in state institutions. Their unchallenged 'successes' magnify the government's inadequacies and thereby shift trust from official agencies to themselves. While they may have an agenda to supplant inefficient official agencies, the danger is that when their successes come without questioning or resistance, this lends weight and credence to their perceived invincibility.

There are several policy implications that follow from our results. Undoubtedly, urbanization presents burgeoning opportunities (and daunting challenges); and within a suitable political milieu, the potential of urbanization can provide economic opportunities, particularly for the teeming youth population, and a strong foundation for building vibrant, affluent, and sustainable cities. City authorities can therefore assimilate success stories from elsewhere to transform their local situations from unbridled rule of illegitimate force to centrepieces to secure human security for all residents. They require pragmatic efforts, such as a re-thinking of the green revolution, which according to President Mahama (during his recent speech to the UN) has never really taken off in Africa, although the continent has a significant proportion of the world's remaining arable lands. In Mahama's words:

*with improved seeds, fertilizers, appropriate technology, and agricultural extension advice, we would not only increase agricultural productivity in Africa, but we will also provide jobs for the growing population of young people.*⁸

Given that so many of these groups, particularly those in Accra and Tamale, operate openly, we need to also ask why is it that their violent activities have remained outside the remit of the official

⁷ A candidate for parliamentary elections may appoint one polling agent to attend at each polling station in the constituency for which the candidate is seeking election.

⁸ <https://www.ghanabusinessnews.com/2015/09/28/africa-asked-to-focus-on-sdgs-2-and-7-to-ensure-economic-growth/>

domain for so long? A large part of the answer to this question lies in the discourse that has surrounded the overall urban governance structure and who matters when it comes to protecting the urban space. Even during some official activities, such as some criminal investigations (Beek, 2012) and general elections (Owusu et al., 2015), the services of some of these groups are solicited. Although some youth groups have made some useful inputs to society in the past, their orientation, motivation, and control at the hands of the highest private bidder can make their relevance to society only ever be partial and involve an uncomfortable degree of uncertainty.

While youth violence may exist owing to massive youth unemployment, a perceived power vacuum, and the absence of ultimate enforcement (Skaperdas, 2001: 178), there is no justification for the operations of landguards in Accra and party foot-soldiers in Tamale—at least in their current formations. These groups hinder their respective communities from assessing development funding, investment, and employment initiatives aimed at realizing full potential for the benefit of all (Buur & Jensen, 2004). Redressing the youth group situation will require a combination of effective laws, accessible mechanisms of law enforcement, and fair punishments that it is hoped will serve as effective deterrents. It will also require fostering citizen engagement in city governance and advancing popular civic awareness creation as well as the institutionalization of democratic culture. These are important pre-requisites in the quest for a sustainable city, and city authorities cannot fail to neglect them.

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