

THE GENERAL SOCIO-ECONOMIC POTENTIAL OF THE UPPER WEST REGION

Introduction

The Upper West Region of Ghana has a great potential for development even though it is one of the least endowed with natural resources. However, this development can only occur as a result of deliberate action by the Regional Authorities and Central Government.

Rapid development of the region will have to come from the application of technology induced by public policy.

The relevant public policy must:

- 1) Provide basic social and economic infrastructure to reduce the transactions costs of doing business in the region;
- 2) Socialize part of the risks of doing business in one of the least developed regions of Ghana;
- 3) Provide incentives, including capital allowances, support in terms of capital and management, to attract investment into the region; and
- 4) Re-orient the educational system to emphasize science and technology.

Since agriculture is the largest contributor to the region's economy, it is prudent to start from the agricultural sector. The soils, vegetation and climatic conditions allow for a variety of crops, both food and industrial, to be grown. These, as will be discussed below, could form the basis of some industrial development of the region.

Using 2002 data, the region ranks second in millet, sorghum, groundnuts, and cowpea production. Soya beans production has also increased recently. However, the levels of production in all these crops are low. This suggests that there is a potential for increased productivity and output in this sector.

The low productivity arises from poor mechanization of agricultural activities, a lack of and limited use in some cases of high yielding seed varieties, virtually no widely

accepted and applied water management and irrigation systems and low application of nutritional supplements to the land.

The region has a competitive advantage in cotton production which is a major intermediate input in textile production. It is also a leading producer of Sheanuts, which is a non-tradition export commodity with a substantial potential to generate industrial activity in the region.

One of the relatively neglected areas but with a huge potential is the commercial production of fruits and vegetables. The neighboring country to the north, Burkina Faso, has demonstrated a substantial competitive advantage over Ghana in the production of fruits and vegetables in a much drier environment. Indeed, at certain points of the year, tomatoes from Burkina Faso tend to be cheaper than those produced in Ghana. And during other times of the year, a substantial share of fresh tomatoes in the open market in Ghana is from Burkina Faso. The difference between the two countries is that in Burkina Faso public policy has supported the growth of the sector through water management systems, provision of appropriate varieties of fruits and vegetables and other incentives. Ghana can learn from the Burkina Faso example and policies. The Ministry of Agriculture in the Upper West Region will have to re-think its strategy.

Using the Burkina Faso strategy will involve using irrigation where there are large water bodies such as can be achieved with the Kanba dam. The Upper West region is poorly endowed with underground water. This means that water harvesting and other water management systems will have to be applied. This is important also in reducing the idle period in the year and in producing two crops.

It is clear that the farming season lasts for about five (5) months in a year. The rest of the seven remaining months of the year is literally idle. Adopting the Burkina model will enable us convert this idle period to productive use. It is not by concise that the savannah zone is the poorest area of Ghana – farming larger acreages just to remain poor. It is

precisely because without appropriate water management and irrigation systems, almost 60 percent of the year is wasted.

Industrial Activity

Agro-processing industries will have to provide the initial momentum for the development of modern manufacturing activity in the region.

The competitive advantage in cotton production led to the establishment of cotton ginneries to process the seed cotton into lint. The value-added component of this activity requiring greater capital and skills were located elsewhere, rendering the region a producer of raw materials. The region has a potential to participate in the higher value-added component of this activity. Spinning and weaving are well-known traditional and cottage industrial activity in the region.

As part of the President's Initiative in Textiles and Garments, the region can attract one or more modern spinning and weaving factories to produce the gray baths before export to the south for finishing into various garments and weaving apparel. Over time, as we gain experience, further upstream activities in finishing the gray bath in garments and wearing apparel can be established. Given the location of the region, a high enough productivity may enable us to import the cotton from Mali, Chad, and other Northern countries for these factories.

The region is a very good source of Sheanuts and is also suitably located to be able to access Sheanuts from neighboring Burkina Faso. Currently both the government and some NGOs are assisting women groups to set up modernized small-scale processing facilities. Shea butter has a huge world market in the pharmaceutical and cosmetics industry. It has a lower body melting temperature than several other butters and it is in high demand.

The assistance for the women's groups is commendable. It increases the incomes of the most vulnerable groups in Ghana as well the region. At the same time, these groups are

confronted with marketing problems. They cannot access the world markets directly and there are no processing facilities that purchase the smaller quantities from the women, repackage and take care of world markets. There is potential for one or two factories located in the region, but at the same time they can purchase and process Sheanuts-processed butter from the women's groups for repackaging for exports. This will provide an instant market for the women's groups produce as it can lead to recommendations on quality improvement.

The extraction of oil from soyabeans and the conversion of the residual to animal feed in the form of soyabean cake provide another area for manufacturing activity. Currently, the growing demand for soyabeans comes from the south, largely from the poultry industry. The Upper West has an advantage in the sense that with dual-purpose machinery, the same factory can extract oil from both soyabeans and cottonseed and the residue from both can be converted into animal feed.

It is important to notice the popularization of cultural events such as the Kobene and Damba. It is also important to notice the identification, labeling and advertisement of tourists' sites such as the hippo sanctuary at We Chan. These indicate that the region has the potential to offer a number of tourist products to both domestic and international tourists.

The region boasts of one of the award-winning dances in Ghana – Nandonei Bawa. In general, the region has one of the largest varieties and different types of cultural dances in Ghana. And yet, these are never performed on an organized basis for tourists. There is a need to develop some cultural troupes that will perform for visiting tourists as well as advertise the richness of dance forms in the region.

The region, therefore, can develop several different forms of tourism, including:

- 1) Adventure and sightseeing tourism;
- 2) Educational tourism; and
- 3) Cultural tourism.

However, realizing these potentials will require investment in the hospitality industry, training of tour guides, and provision of both historical and cultural sites. The basic constraints, therefore, include:

- 1) Lack of detailed information on tourism attractions of the region;
- 2) Marked absence of good quality hospitality services such as hotels, hostels, and restaurants and cafes;
- 3) Marked absence of skilled personnel or the unskilled nature of tour operators/guides; and
- 4) Poor infrastructural facilities such as bad roads, and inaccessible attractive tourists centres.