



## ARTICLE

# COVID-19 lockdown defiance, public ‘indiscipline’, and criminalisation of vulnerable populations in Ghana

Festival Godwin Boateng,<sup>\*1</sup> Saviour Kusi,<sup>2</sup> and Samuel Ametepey<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Sustainable Urban Development, Columbia Climate School/Earth Institute, Columbia University, New York, USA

<sup>2</sup>Kumasi–Ghana

<sup>3</sup>Wenchi–Ghana

\* Corresponding Author: gb2751@columbia.edu

### Abstract

Behavioural economics has provided much source of inspiration for public policy in the COVID-19 era. Such is evidently the state of discussion in Ghana, where Ghanaians’ so-called stubborn resistance to positive behavioural change is increasingly the target of public and popular criticisms. This paper argues that further to legitimising the police violence and extrajudicial sanctions meted out to ‘undisciplined’ violators of the restrictions, the indiscipline narrative leaps too quickly from an account of the personal morality/attitudes of Ghanaians to the collective action of mass-defiance of the restrictions without taking adequate account of the range of structural constraints that made it difficult for the majority of the people to comply with the restrictions. The mass defiance of the restrictions is best understood in the context of the unequal outcomes of the broader policy processes and practices, and the historical-institutional power dynamics around them that put some people in criminogenic situations in the country. It is important that media and policy analyses of public defiance of the restrictions and social problems in the country generally move beyond the simplistic notion of indiscipline to dissect how deliberate bias against the needs of the majority operates, and is institutionalised in policy and practice in ways that undermine their commitment to rules and regulations.

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## 1. Introduction

On March 30 2020, Ghana imposed lockdowns on the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area (GAMA, which includes Awutu Senya East), and the Greater Kumasi Metropolitan Area and contiguous districts. The lockdowns were meant to limit community transmission of the new coronavirus (Yeboah, 2020). At the time the restrictions were imposed, the total confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the country stood at 152 with 5 deaths (GHS, 2020: March 30 2020; 08:30HRS). Globally, there were 693, 282 and 33, 106 confirmed infections and deaths (As at 10:00 CET 30 March 2020). The public, however, honoured the restrictions mainly in the breach, forcing the government to suspend

them. Some commuters sought to outwit law enforcement officials by faking identity cards designed for people exempted from the restrictions. Others tried to avoid security officials at checkpoints by trekking long distances or boarding 'Okadas' (motorbikes) that used narrow walkways and bushes to beat the police and transport people to various destinations (Graphic Online, 2020a).

The media, police, politicians and social commentators and other powerful actors and institutions in the country attributed the mass-defiance of the restrictions to indiscipline: the Ghanaian public's so-called stubborn resistance to positive behavioural change (see Ayamga, 2020; Brown, 2020; Dadzie, 2020; Frimpong, 2020; Ghanaian Times, 2020). It is not just the mass-flouting of the lockdown restrictions though; in Ghana, almost every social problem – be they road traffic crashes; pedestrians' refusal to use footbridges; violation of building regulations; poor academic performance among students; littering on the streets or hawking at undesigned places – is attributed to indiscipline or bad attitudes – a narrative which has even seeped into the realm of academe and research (Hagan, 2010; Tagoe, 2007; Wireko-Brobby, 2008).

A body of economic theory – behavioural economics – appears to give some legitimacy to this line of analysis. Behavioural economists argue that although individuals do not have infinite rationality and willpower to make completely rational decisions, when nudged or guided rightly, they often make optimal choices (see e.g., Thaler and Sunstein, 2021). This assumption has been translated into some helpful interventions to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and navigate toward less-than-disastrous outcomes (see e.g., Thaler, 2021; Villarreal et al, 2020; Saleska and Choi, 2021). Behavioural economics, however, assumes, albeit inaccurately, that human beings can easily be manipulated to adopt optimal or desired behaviour, with the result of fueling the narrative that those failing to respond positively to the pandemic's containment protocols, including lockdown restrictions, are just being stubborn in adapting to positive behavioural change.

The lived experience in Ghana where attribution of social problems – and in this case the mass-flouting of COVID-19 restrictions – to bad attitudes or moral pathology is even more extreme and problematic. Not only does this orientation inappropriately cast the Ghanaian people as some inherently stubborn, and irresponsible bunch bent on creating existential crisis for their own country by undermining measures meant to contain the pandemic and navigate toward less-than-disastrous outcomes. It also leaps too quickly from an account of the personal morality/attitudes of the people to the collective action of massdefiance of the restrictions. More fundamentally, careers spent in criminological and sociological research have shown that personal characteristics do not carry as much explanatory weight for deviant behaviour as environmental/structural factors do (See, Merton, 1938; Mills, 1959, for instance). The overall effect of the critiques is that alternative analysis that examine the mass-defiance of the restrictions beyond the personal attitudes of the people is warranted.

Refreshingly, there is a groundswell of studies that approach the topic from a broader societal-level perspective. The studies connect the limited compliance with the lockdown measures to the informal structure of Ghana's economy; the persisting inequalities in access to housing and public services generally and the lack of well-developed infrastructure to deliver large-scale social support or welfare services in the country (see, e.g., Anaafo et al, 2021; Adom et al, 2020; Asante and Mills, 2020; Durizzo et al, 2020). Similar findings have been made in other parts of Africa (see, e.g., Kollamparambil and Oyenubi, 2021; Smart et al, 2020). Adom et al (2020); Anaafo et al (2021); Asante and Mills (2020) and Durizzo et al (2020) analyses could not have been timely enough as they shed a more structural light on Ghana's unsuccessful attempt to leverage lockdowns to contain the pandemic.

This study builds on their analyses by furthering our understanding of the range of policies and practices, and the historical-institutional power dynamics around them that called forth the present patterns of inequalities; informal structure of Ghana's economy, and the poorly developed welfare systems. This insight is critical because effecting changes to build a more resilient post- COVID-19 Ghana will require more than just pointing at poor welfare systems; inequalities and informality as the causes of the country's current containment travails. There is a need to identify the specific regressive

policy processes and practices as well as the historical-institutional power dynamics around them that molded inequalities; informality and the current welfare systems into containment impediments so they could be targeted and dismantled. The next section describes our materials, methods and theory. This is followed by three additional sections. Section 3 provides a systematic account of how the mass violation of the restrictions played out. Section 4 discusses the key highlights of the paper in the light of the present media and scholarly discourses on the topic. The study concludes in section 5 with policy suggestions for building Ghana back better to withstand the next crisis/pandemic to come.

## 2. Materials, methods and theory

The study is grounded in secondary materials from media, scholarly and institutional sources. The media materials were assembled with key term searches including ‘COVID-19 lockdown in Ghana’; ‘inequalities in Ghana’; ‘Ghana’s informal sector/economy’; ‘Ghana’s COVID interventions’; ‘Ghana’s responses to coronavirus’ on Google and in the search engines or databases of reputable Ghanaian news agencies including Citifmonline; Graphic Online; Ghanaweb and Myjoyonline. Media sources have been endorsed in the Ghanaian (Hart, 2013; Obeng-Odoom, 2011; Mintah et al, 2021) and broader African scholarly community (see e.g., Boateng, 2016; Boateng and Wright, 2019; Yahya, 2006) as useful for investigating development issues in the country and the continent. However, the likelihood of bias reporting implies that researchers relying on media sources must consider a variety of media agencies to have a balanced picture of the topic under review. Consequently, information was sourced from local private (e.g., Ghanaweb, Myjoyonline and Citifmonline) and state-owned (e.g., Graphic Online and GBC Online) as well as international media organisations (e.g., Aljazeera).

The search terms employed in assembling the media materials were similar to the terms used to gather the scholarly materials save that the majority of the scholarly materials were gathered from more rigorous sources including Google Scholar; Web of Science, JSTOR, and ProQuest. Many of such databases exclude African scholarship (Obeng-Odoom, 2019), so after reviewing the initial materials for relevance, purposive techniques and the snowball sampling technique were applied to search and incorporate relevant excluded references. This aided in expanding the scope of the materials search. The institutional materials include reports from local Ghanaian institutions including the Ministry of Finance and the Ghana Health Service, and international bodies such as the World Health Organisation. Reports from these institutions were helpful in grounding the paper within the local and the global discourses on the topic, as appropriate. The paper’s focus on showing how deep historical determinants drive contemporary inequalities and informality in Ghana, and, to that end, the mass-violation of the COVID-19 restrictions meant that it needed an analytical framework that is sensitive to history. Therefore, *the critical postcolonial institutional theory (CPIT) was turned to for support.*

The CPIT is a body of studies that approaches the conditions in societies facing late colonialism in the context of the historical, global and national strictures of structures that continue to mold their systems for particular purposes (Amin, 1972; 2002; Njoh, 1998; 2010 in Obeng-Odoom, 2016). The original contribution of the critical postcolonial institutional approach to the study of problems of such societies lies in its capacity to support sustained discursive and systematic analyses that link their present conditions to not just their historical experience but also the various local and external factors that continue to shape their systems for particular purposes (Obeng-Odoom, 2016). Critics often misread postcolonial analyses as mere ‘complaints’ about well past events. Nonetheless, this apparent limitation of the theory is what makes it even more suitable for the topic under consideration. Focused on approaching issues in the light of history and extended impact of historical processes in present time, it was anticipated that the theory will be helpful in responding to the calls (see e.g., Obeng-Odoom, 2020; Yeboah et al, 2020; Walker, 2020) for research on the pandemic to be situated within the appropriate historical processes and factors that created the conditions that made

or have made containing it more difficult than it should have been. The paper moves the media and policy discourses on Ghanaians' mass-violation of the country's COVID-19 lockdown restrictions forward from the current focus on the personal attitudes of the implicated people to the structural constraints (such as inequalities in access to adequate serviced housing and the informal structure of the economy) that undermined their compliance with the restrictions. This, of course, is not the first study to explore Ghana's unsuccessful attempt to employ lockdowns to control community transmission of the new coronavirus in the light of the above structural factors. The originality of this study (distinguished from the existing ones – e.g., Anafo et al, 2021; Adom et al, 2020; Asante and Mills, 2020; Durizzo et al, 2020), however, lies with the explicit application of its structural insight to challenge the analytical purchase of the popular media and policy narrative that attributes the mass-defiance of the restrictions to indiscipline.

Further, unlike the extant analyses that just point to inequalities and informality as the causes of Ghana's travails with containing the pandemic, this study goes a step further to outline some of the specific regressive policies and practices, and the historical-institutional power dynamics around them that molded the inequalities and informality into containment impediments so they can be targeted and dismantled. In short, the paper better articulates avenues for change towards re-building a more just, inclusive and resilient post-COVID-19 Ghana that could respond to the next pandemic/crisis to come even better.

### **3. The cost of leaving so many behind: An account of how policy-driven inequalities undermined Ghana's COVID-19 lockdown restrictions**

Ghana confirmed its first 2 cases of COVID-19 infections on March 12, 2020. The President of the West African country received enormous applause locally and internationally for providing what was widely considered as the timeliest perspective in these distressing times: *'We know how to bring the economy back to life. What we do not know is how to bring people back to life. We will, therefore, protect people's lives, then their livelihoods'* (Peat, 2020, italics added). Based on these considerations, the President imposed movement restrictions on the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area (GAMA, which includes Awutu Senya East), and the Greater Kumasi Metropolitan Area and contiguous districts. The restrictions took effect on March 30 2020. In the initial periods of the lockdown, those who were receiving paychecks from the government and corporations or have access to other guaranteed sources of income while quarantining in their spacious apartments and homes stocked with food, soaps and sanitisers and modern entertainment gadgets were posting patriotic selfies and videos as well as meme sermons on social media extolling the merits of such isolation and the risks of contagion.

Hashtags urging people to 'stay at home' were the trending messages on Ghana's social media agora. The message, however, was widely defied. One state media, Graphic Online, headlined the defiance as follows: 'Public defy lockdown directive in Accra, Kumasi'. Many people disregarded the lockdown directive and went about their daily lives. Traffic remained standstill in the cities almost throughout the morning and early afternoon of March 31 as the police sought to check hundreds of vehicles with the view to enforcing the lockdown directive (Graphic Online, 2020a). Some commuters sought to outwit the law enforcement officials by faking identity cards designed for people exempted from the restrictions. Others tried to avoid the security officials at checkpoints by trekking long distances or boarding 'Okadas' (motorbikes) that used narrow walkways and bushes to beat the police and transport people to various destinations (Graphic Online, 2020a).

A review of media and research reports on the patterns of violations; the reasons the President offered for lifting the restrictions as well as public reactions to the lifting of the restrictions reveals a clear picture of socio-economic status-driven differential responses to the restrictions. Consider, for instance, the response of some head porters, popularly called '*Kayayes*', in the country. These working class people, mainly young female migrants from the poorer parts of northern Ghana, make a living by carting the goods of customers and traders in Ghana's busiest Southern cities – mainly

Accra, Tema and Kumasi (Agyei et al, 2016; Yeboah, 2017; JoyNews, 2016). Research has shown that Kayayes face severe hardships in the country including malnutrition, inadequate access to healthcare, education, sanitation and accommodation. Also, they frequently experience other afflictions such as verbal, physical and sexual abuses (Agyei et al, 2016; Kwankye et al, 2007; Yeboah, 2017).

Sensing that their already precarious living conditions could be compounded by the lockdown restrictions, several number of them tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to smuggle themselves from Accra to their hometowns (AMA, 2020). When the police arrested them in the middle of their journey, one of them explained to the media what compelled them to resort to the drastic measure of attempting to smuggle themselves in a cargo truck to evade the restrictions:

We came to Accra to look for something to eat. We don't have anyone in Accra to give us shelter, we have been sleeping on the streets. We decided to go back to our hometown, when we were told there is an outbreak of a disease in Ghana and only return when the whole situation is resolved. (Ghanaweb, 2020a)

By seeking to flee Accra to their hometowns in the northern parts of Ghana, the *Kayayes* risked spreading the disease from one of the key hotspot of community transmission to some of the most impoverished parts of the country where the healthcare facilities are also poorly resourced. It was not just Kayayes whose response to the lockdown restrictions had undermining implications for public health. But the working class generally who eke out a living in the ever-burgeoning informal economy which employs the majority of Ghana's workforce (Osei- Boateng and Ampratwum, 2011). The reason a sizeable number of Ghanaians are trapped in insecure low-income informal jobs – a condition which placed them at the heart of the defiance of the restrictions – requires a careful consideration of one of the key foregrounds of critical postcolonial institutional theory: the continuing influence of externally-imposed policies, programs and ideologies on development outcomes in societies facing late colonialism.

Ghana's informal economy dates back to the colonial era. Nonetheless, most scholars and urban practitioners (see, Otiso and Owusu, 2008; UN-HABITAT, 2009 in Obeng-Odoom, 2013) agree that its contemporary size, structure and character are closely tied to the implementation of the market-heavy structural adjustment reforms (SAR) in the country (to satisfy World Bank/IMF aid conditions beginning from 1983). The 'cash and carry' (user-pay) policies that removed state supports to health, education and other public services; the wage cuts and freezes; massive retrenchments and other similar interventions that came with SAR intensified economic hardships in the cities and displaced so many people from the formal to the informal sector. Even some formal sector workers invested in small businesses and acquired additional jobs in the informal economy for survival, capital accumulation, or to, simply, minimise their vulnerability to the shocks of the reforms (Obeng-Odoom, 2013; Otiso & Owusu, 2008).

Having bought into SAR's market-heavy 'private sector is the engine of development' mantra (see NPP Manifesto, 2020; NDC Manifesto, 2020, for instance), Ghana's political elites have continued to refuse to create secure public sector jobs, insisting that the formal private sector will grow and absorb the growing population of desperate unemployed and underemployed people in the country. However, not only have many of them not found jobs in the formal private sector, the few people employed in the sector are heavily exploited. For instance, according to the Ghana Statistical Service, 57.3% (that is 6 in every 10) employees in the sector start work without any formal contracts, and about 67% of workers are in organisations with no trade unions (Obeng-Odoom, 2013).

The few public sector interventions introduced to create jobs have been marked by corruption, mismanagement and government-endorsed exploitation. For instance, not too long ago, the National Youth Employment Program meant to create jobs for young people in the country was hit by serious scandals leading to the imprisonment of some key people associated with the Program (see e.g., Hawkson, 2018). Not just that, the government officials managing the Program entered into what one investigative journalist described as 'questionable contracts' that allowed some private companies

to appropriate 80% of their workers' salaries as 'management fee' (JoyNews, 2013). The government has recently introduced another youth employment program called Nation Builders Corps (NABCO). The program, however, employs very few people. The government has also begun an ambitious industrialisation program geared towards building a factory each in every district in the country (see One District One Factory, 2020).

However, only a few of the factories are currently operational and, therefore, employ people with the implication that many Ghanaians continue to eke out a living in the ever-burgeoning informal economy. And since informal jobs generally demand attendance to work on daily basis, it was always going to be difficult for the many people who eke out a living in the sector to stay at home and comply with the coronavirus restrictions. In Kumasi, Ghana's second biggest city, the defiance of the restrictions was so fierce that the authorities were forced to shut down the largest market in the city to deny the many traders and other working-class people who had disregarded the lockdown and were going about their daily lives access to the place (Graphic Online, 2020a).

In addition to the informal structure of the economy, another critical factor that contributed to the defiance of the restrictions was inequalities in access to adequate housing and public services generally. Research has shown that, regardless of the institutional settlement of power (whether colonial or self-rule; military or democratic/civilian regimes) and the ideological foundations (stated or market-led), housing policies in Ghana tend to benefit the high income and middle class, and exclude the majority low income population (Arku, 2009; Obeng-Odoom, 2013). The result is increased use of inadequate and insecure structures such as kiosks/containers, tents, shops/offices as housing in slums and other poorly serviced areas in the cities (Africa Research Institute, 2016; Okyere et al, 2018; Paller, 2014; 2015; 2019). For instance, according to the Ghana Statistical Service (2012), the proportion of kiosks/containers used as accommodation in metropolitan areas grew from 44.5% in 2000 to 62% in 2010, and from 17.5 to 29.3% in municipal areas (within the same period). The provisional results of the recently concluded 2021 Population and Housing Census issued by the Service suggest that 6 out of every 10 of the 10.7 million structures in the country are used for residential purposes, 20% of them are containers, kiosks, and wooden structures (GSS, 2021). These decrepit insecure forms of housing are often not just bereft of adequate sanitary facilities to support basic hygiene; they also are usually overcrowded.

The police arrested some young girls who sought to escape the hardships of locking down in such poorly serviced overcrowded neighbourhoods by seeking to relocate to other parts of the country with better housing and access to public service. Thus, one of them told the media that 'the place I stay with my parents is not healthy – we live in a kiosk. So I decided to join my friends to relocate and return when the pandemic is over' (UTV Ghana Online, 2020). Stressed by their countrywomen and men's refusal to stay at home and self-isolate, the #StayAtHome patriots began to flood Ghana's social media with demands for the authorities to 'discipline' the lockdown defying folks. The Police high command responded to the call: 'Some Ghanaians have decided to take the Police for granted and are flouting the President's [lockdown] directive with impunity. The Police will no longer tolerate this kind of attitude again' (GhanaWeb, 2020b).

In the following days, security personnel were captured on tapes brutalising people including women who refused to lockdown (GhanaWeb, 2020c). The people, however, kept on defying the directive by the day even as the brutalities continued. Successive governments in Ghana have refused to prioritise the needs of lower-class people in the country. This is reflected in the fact that their communities and sources of livelihood, for instance, are not even considered permanent but 'informal' – an excuse which enables the authorities to subject them to arbitrary/forced evictions, and to continue to refuse to extend water, sanitation and other public services to them (Obeng-Odoom, 2011; 2013; Bob-Millar and Obeng-Odoom, 2011; Klopp and Paller, 2019).

This policy bias against the interests of lower class people manifested in the initial interventions the government rolled out to contain the pandemic. For instance, Akuoko et al (2021) argue that

the Minister of Finance's 21-page statement to Parliament on March 30, 2020 did not adequately highlight the vulnerable state of the informal working class. However, as resistance to the lockdown directive continued to escalate, sensing that its legitimacy was under siege, the Government began a food distribution drive targeted at low-income people and neighbourhoods to ease their discomforts and elicit their cooperation (Ministry of Finance, 2020). This rather thoughtful endeavor, however, ended up magnifying risks of contagion. The broader point here is that even with a great number of the population down on their luck, the Ghanaian state has not yet developed robust social protection and welfare systems for delivering support to people of interest in a meaningful way (Castillo et al, 2013; Abebrese, 2011).

There is, therefore, little in terms of infrastructure and institutional competencies for delivering large-scale welfare services – a problem which marred the food distribution exercise. The exercise was not just undignified, it was such chaotic and haphazard that there were fears that it may catalyse the spread of the virus. One respected journalist in the country described the exercise as a 'reckless conduct serving as fertile grounds for an even faster spread of [the] Covid-19 [virus]' (Anyenini, 2020). As happened in other parts of Africa (see e.g., AFP News Agency, 2020), in Ghana too, there were heartrending footages (GhanaWeb TV, 2020) of people forcing their way through thick crowds for a chance at food supplies to feed their families. Aside from opening up the beneficiaries to potential infections, the mode of distribution also effectively denied access to vulnerable people like women, children, the elderly and persons with disability who, for obvious reasons, cannot shove their competitors and pick some of the food.

The Government of Ghana also tried to placate the adverse impacts of the restrictions by providing free water and reducing the cost of electricity. The problem, however, is that many low income people and communities in Ghana have not been connected to water, electricity and other public services with the result that the low-income population who were worst hit by the restrictions could not benefit in any meaningful way from the government's water and energy interventions. This has been confirmed by multiple systematic reviews of the interventions (see Anafo et al, 2021; Amankwaa and Ampratwum, 2020; Akrofi and Antwi, 2020; Antwi-Boasiako et al, 2021; Smiley et al, 2020; Sibiri et al, 2021, for instance). Meanwhile the security personnel were being overwhelmed on the streets by the increasing number of people who kept on defying the restrictions, which, in turn, elicited even more savagely violent reactions from them leading to the death of, at least, one person (see Darko, 2020).

Churches, chiefs, philanthropic organisations and individuals sought to complement the efforts of the government by mobilising cash and other forms of support to needy people. That, however, could not persuade people to stay at home. As footages of more brutalities and stand-offs between the people and the police kept on surfacing by the day, it became apparent to the government that the lockdown was losing its moral authority, compelling the President to lift it. Responding to criticisms against his decision to lift the lockdown, the President said:

I did so on the basis of the data and science, as well as on a careful analysis of the impact of the restrictions on several sectors of our population, especially our informal workers, who need to have a day out in order to provide for themselves and their families, the poor and the vulnerable (Graphic Online, 2020b).

The Finance Minister made a similar remark:

When you look at what happened during the lockdown. It was quite clear after a point that given th[at] 90% of our population is informal and they go out each day to earn wages, it became increasingly impossible to continue with such a policy (Graphic Online, 2020c).

A review of public reactions to the lifting of the restrictions shows some interesting class dynamics. The frustration of one young man who works for a digital creation firm and lives in an apartment in

Accra's affluent East Legon suburb is representative of the views of the affluent and corporate middle class on the lifting of the restrictions: 'The government should have waited at least a little bit longer', he charged. 'People still haven't got the actual understanding of what the situation is' (Akinwotu and Asiedu, 2020). One woman, a hawker, who plies her trade at Accra's central business district, spoke to Aljazeera. She had a different view:

It [referring to the lifting of the lockdown] is a huge reprieve. We have a listening government. It was a war-like situation. We had no money and we couldn't step out to work to earn some cash. God bless our president (Aljazeera, 2020).

As the corporate and affluent middle class (with digitised jobs) was up in arms against the President for lifting the lockdown, the millions of working-class people who eke out a living in the informal economy were full of praise for him.

#### 4. Discussion

The evidence considered suggests that Ghana's unsuccessful attempt to leverage lockdowns to control community transmission of the new coronavirus was primarily due to the entrapment of a large portion of the population in low-income informal firms who, as the President rightly noted, always 'need to have a day out in order to provide for themselves and their families'; inequalities in access to adequate housing and public services generally as well as the lack of well-developed systems to deliver large-scale welfare/social support services in a meaningful way. These findings just as much challenge as they corroborate the existing discourses on the topic.

##### 4.1 *The indiscipline approach to the lockdown violations and social problems generally in Ghana*

In Ghana, almost every social problem – be they road traffic crashes; pedestrians' refusal to use footbridges; violation of building regulations; poor academic performance among students; littering on the streets or hawking at undesignated places – is attributed to indiscipline or bad attitudes (see Graphic Online, 2019; Hagan, 2010; Nkrumah-Boateng, 2021; Tagoe, 2007; Wireko-Brobby, 2008; Owusu, 2019). For instance, in response to the continuing hardships in the country, a movement called #FixTheCountry has emerged on Ghana's social media agora demanding urgent solutions from the government. One high ranking Member of Parliament of the ruling party riposted that the bad attitudes of the #FixTheCountry campaigners and the general citizenry are the cause of the country's woes and, therefore, asked them to 'fix yourself first!' (Myjoyonline, 2021). The framing of Ghana's social problems in terms of bad attitudes carries with it an unverified assumption that there is 'something' inherently Ghanaian that drives people in the country to disregard rules and regulations or undermine the public good.

Thus, an op-ed which appeared in the Business and Financial Times argued: 'It is common knowledge that some of us [Ghanaians] behave like wheelbarrows– unless you push us, we will never act responsibly' (Owusu, 2019). The May 30 2019 editorial of the Daily Graphic, Ghana's premier state-owned newspaper, made similar assertions: 'Many aspects of our lives hinge on indiscipline, anti-human behaviour and disorder' (Graphic Online, 2019). The attribution of Ghana's social problems to bad attitudes is deeply troubling for a number of reasons. First, the view closely aligns with the widely debunked works of criminologists like Cesare Lombroso (1895; 1910) who sought to explain crime in terms of innate qualities or characteristics of people. Second, today, sociologists and criminologists almost universally regard social environments, rather than personal characteristics/attributes, as the most important determinants of people's behaviour. This historical-institutionalist approach to the study of human behaviour is well-established in the works of prominent scholars like Willem Bonger (1916); Robert Merton (1938) and C Wright Mills (1959).

Finally, some Ghanaian scholars have begun documenting that the attribution of social problems in the country to indiscipline deflects attention from the range of structural agencies, incentives,



and constraints that compel or predispose people to behave in ways that undermine the public good including their own personal well-being. For instance, Boateng (2020a; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d; 2021e) has shown that the lack of labour protections and high levels of structural unemployment are what compel working class Tro-Tro (minibus) drivers to sign onto exploitative contracts with car owners which they fulfil by driving recklessly and aggressively and behaving in other unsafe ways that result in crashes and other road transport miseries in the country. Other researchers have arrived at similar conclusions even though they do not use their analyses to directly challenge the ‘indiscipline is to blame for road transport problems in Ghana’ discourse (see e.g., Obeng-Odoom, 2010; 2013; Dotse et al, 2019).

In relation to building safety, again, Boateng (2019a; 2019b; 2020b; 2020c; 2021f; 2021g) has shown that the attribution of the widespread disregard for building safety imperatives in Ghana to indiscipline overlooks how institutional corruption; bureaucratic inertia; land tenure insecurity, and policy failure to meet the housing needs of lower class people drive inappropriate construction practices and, to that end, the creation of unsafe buildings in the country. Thus, there is a growing view that Ghana’s social problems are better understood in the context of wider societal/environmental factors, and not the personal attitudes or morality of the implicated individuals. The evidence considered herein corroborates this view.

It has been shown that many Ghanaians could not cooperate with the authorities not because they had ‘purposed in their heart to [just] disregard the [COVID-19] laid down precautionary measures’ as one widely circulated op-ed sought to suggest (Brown, 2020). They did so because they were trapped in insecure low-income jobs that demand that they go out daily, and in poorly serviced neighbourhoods and decrepit overcrowded houses that were ill-suited to support the personal hygiene and social distancing demands of the restrictions. The fact that the government did not have well-developed systems to deliver welfare/ social support services to them in a meaningful way made it all the more difficult for them to comply with the restrictions. Essentially, the majority of the people had to flout the restrictions as a matter of course – for survival. Thus, Ghanaians’ mass-defiance of the COVID-19 restrictions, as suggested elsewhere (see e.g., Anaafo et al, 2021; Adom et al, 2020; Asante and Mills, 2020 and Durizzo et al, 2020) needs to be understood in the context of the intersecting interplays of inequalities in access to housing and public services generally; the informal structure of the economy and the lack of systems to deliver large-scale welfare/ social support services in a meaningful way.

#### ***4.2 Importance of history and the extended influence of historical factors on contemporary problems***

The widely emphasised indiscipline view which attributes the defiance of the restrictions to bad attitudes or Ghanaians’ so-called stubborn resistance to positive behavioural change (see Ayamga, 2020; Brown, 2020; Dadzie, 2020; Frimpong, 2020; Ghanaian Times, 2020) does not just deflect attention from the structural factors unravelled in this and other studies. It also does not adequately consider how the unequal outcomes of policy processes and practices, and the historical-institutional power dynamics around them put some people in criminogenic situations in the country – i.e. place them in conditions that compel/predispose them to commit crimes or behave in ways that undermine the public good, and even their own personal wellbeing. Consider, for instance, the case of the Kayayes (head porters), who sought to smuggle themselves in cargo trucks to flee Accra with the view to evading the restrictions and the associated hardships. Alarming, their intended destinations are some of the poorest regions of the country with limited number of well-resourced healthcare facilities (Ghanaweb, 2020a), implying that they risked spreading the disease to the parts of the country where it could have had the most devastating impact.

Their behaviour was obviously troubling. Nonetheless, attributing it to indiscipline – their personal moral pathology – grossly ignores the unequal outcomes of the broader policy processes

and practices, and the historical institutional power dynamics around them that trigger or compel them to migrate to the southern cities where they resort to public health-undermining survival tactics such as those witnessed during the lockdown. The northern part of Ghana has long remained impoverished – a condition structurally connected to the post-colonial authorities' failure to dismantle the regressive exclusionary and discriminatory socio-economic organisational structures they inherited from colonialism. The principal focus of the British colonial government was to exploit the colonies' physical, human, and economic resources to benefit the metropole (Drakakis-Smith, 1987; 2000). It had no intention of improving the wellbeing of the indigenous people, except in cases where such improvements aligned with their broader goal of exploitation. For instance, the Southern part of Ghana (the forest and coastal belts) with resources (e.g., cocoa and water bodies) to support the colonial government's export-oriented economy were developed; the less-endowed Northern parts of the country (the savanna hinterland without fertile soil) were ignored (Aboagye and Bolt, 2018; Songsore, 1979).

Unfortunately, not only have successive post-colonial governments failed to dismantle these discriminatory structures for delivering socio-economic development in the country, they have actually replicated them. This has created a problematic path dependency of a continuing alignment of post-colonial interventions to benefit the Southern parts of the country (see e.g., Aboagye and Bolt, 2018; Obeng-Odoom, 2013; Songsore, 1979). For instance, Accra-Tema alone accounted for 49% and 50% of the total number of people employed and the value added respectively in the manufacturing sector. According to the 1969 industrial enterprises directory, about 59.5% of all industrial establishments in the country were concentrated in Accra-Tema alone. That of Kumasi and Sekondi-Takoradi stood at some 16.5% and 10.2%, respectively. These three cities combined hosted over 86% of all registered industries in the country (Songsore, 1979).

Essentially, early post-colonial socio-economic developments in Ghana remained postcolonial – i.e. they retained all the trappings of the socio-spatial discriminations and exclusions of the colonial era. The implementation of the IMF/World Bank market-heavy structural adjustment 'advice' made an already bad situation worse. While the structural adjustment reforms attracted substantial private capital – especially foreign direct investments to Ghana (see Obeng-Odoom, 2013, for a review), the incentives related to economies of scale and profitability directed the investments to the southern industrial enclaves: Accra-Tema and Kumasi but also Sekondi-Takoradi – where poverty is least endemic. For instance, for close to a decade (2001 to 2009), only one investment project was located in the Upper West region—one of the poorest regions in Ghana (Obeng-Odoom, 2013). In effect, the reforms deepened the 'Southern bias' spatial organisation of the Ghanaian economy set in motion by the colonial and early post-colonial governments' policies. The successes of the few targeted interventions such as the Savanna Accelerated Development Program meant to bridge the development gap between the North and the South have been undermined by corruption and mismanagement (see JoyNews, 2016).

The result of these is the continuing widening of socioeconomic and spatial inequalities in the country with the attendant repercussions of pushing and pulling more and more young people from the North to migrate to the Southern cities for opportunities. The Kayayes (head porters) who featured heavily in the violation of the lockdown restrictions are the poster children of this pattern of migration in Ghana. They support the economic development of their host cities through addressing market transportation gaps and assisting in market exchange (Agyei et al, 2016; JoyNews, 2016). City authorities used to impose market tolls on them until the central government abolished it in 2017 (Graphic Online, 2017). Thus, Kayayes play important roles in the socioeconomic life of Ghana's Southern cities – Accra, Tema and Kumasi in particular. However, the focus of both private and public formal housing interventions on high income and middle class people, and Ghanaian landlords' exploitative practice of demanding many years of advance lump-sum rental payments in the informal private rental housing market (Owusu-Ansah et al, 2018) have meant that Kayayes,

but low-income working class people generally, are impeded from accessing decent housing in the country.

In 2019, the Government of Ghana promised to build hostels to provide accommodation and skills training for Kayayes (see Dapaah, 2019). However, some recent media reports suggest that the promise has not been fulfilled yet (see Ghanaweb 2020d) with the result that the Kayayes in the country continue to make a living by carting the goods of customers and traders in the day, and sleeping on the streets, in front of shops and other such places in the night. Some of them access accommodation in the rapidly expanding low-income slum neighbourhoods or communities in the cities. Housing tenure in these parts of the cities are, however, very insecure because the city authorities frequently use revanchist physical-legal justifications (such as ‘slum clearance’, ‘decongestion exercises’, and ‘demolition of illegal structures’) to destroy them (Bob-Millar and Obeng-Odoom, 2011; Obeng-Odoom, 2011). For instance, at the same time the Government was enforcing the ‘stay at home’ restrictions, one of its local agencies, the Accra Metropolitan Assembly, rendered over 1,000 people including *Kayayes* homeless by demolishing their houses because they were deemed ‘illegal’ (see Cromwell, 2020).

Overall, the result of being trapped in an insecure low-income economic activity (due to post-colonial Ghanaian elites’ refusal to develop their hometowns, or mismanagement of resources meant to reduce inequalities in their hometowns); being impeded from accessing adequate serviced housing (through discriminatory housing policies, forced evictions and other such political violence) is that Kayayes are trapped in grueling living conditions in Ghana’s cities. It is within the context of this precarious existence that close to 80 of the Kayayes decided to evade the lockdown restrictions and the obvious further hardships the restrictions were going to foist on them by smuggling themselves to their hometowns. The widely emphasised indiscipline view that attributes the mass-defiance of the lockdown restrictions to Ghanaians’ moral pathology does not adequately attend to any of the above structural and deeper historical determinants that placed the Kayayes and other similarly situated groups of people at the heart of the violation of the restrictions.

## **5. Conclusion: Towards re-building a more just, inclusive and resilient post-COVID-19 Ghana**

We have shown that the popular media and policy narrative which attributes Ghanaians’ mass-violation of the country’s COVID-19 lockdown restrictions to bad attitudes or moral pathology hides more than it reveals. Not only does it inappropriately cast the Ghanaian people as some inherently stubborn, and irresponsible bunch bent on creating existential crisis for themselves and their own country by undermining measures meant to contain the pandemic and navigate toward less-than-disastrous outcomes. It also fails to consider the structural and deeper historical determinants that placed low-income working class people like Kayayes and other similarly situated groups of people in the country at the heart of the violation of the restrictions. In a sense, this analysis is also a critique of the behavioural approach to tackling the pandemic.

The indiscipline framing of Ghanaians’ nonobservance of the coronavirus protocols deserves sustained attention and continued critique not only because it deflects attention from the structural and deeper historical determinants of people’s differential responses to the pandemic, but it also serves to legitimise police violence and extrajudicial sanctions generally. During the enforcement of the lockdown restrictions, videos of police and soldiers meting out extrajudicial sanctions to unarmed civilians who supposedly had breached the lockdown rules began to surface on Ghana’s social media agora. The extrajudicial punishments ranged from the mildly humiliating to the downright violent. There were footages of drivers being made to crawl on their knees, young men forced to do squats and women forced to hop to their homes. A 60-year-old woman was seen weeping on camera, like a child, after being lashed by the police for going to the market (see Asante, 2020). As noted earlier, the security officials reportedly killed, at least, one person in the course of enforcing the lockdown restrictions (Darko, 2020).

Strikingly, there was widespread support for the high-handed manner the police and other law enforcement officials dealt with the supposed violators of the lockdown restrictions. The public were celebrating extrajudicial law enforcement in a country where liberal democratic ethos are supposedly gaining grounds (Acheampong 2020a; 2020b; Freedom House, 2021)! People of different backgrounds, including journalists who should know better that police violence and extrajudicial sanctions are violations of human rights, were full of praise for the security personnel (Asante, 2020). Institutions and people who called out the security operatives (see e.g., GhanaWeb, 2020e) for human rights abuse were rather lambasted for encouraging and supporting public indiscipline. This rather disturbing public support or lack of outrage against the non-isolated cases of police brutalities and extrajudicial sanctions stems partly from the notion that those who could not 'stay at home' and comply with the lockdowns were just being stubborn in adapting to positive behavioural change – and, therefore, needed to be 'disciplined'.

However, as the evidence considered herein shows clearly, the majority of the people disregarded the restrictions not because they just stubbornly wanted to do so. But because they were trapped in insecure low-income jobs that demand that they go out daily, and in poorly serviced neighbourhoods and decrepit overcrowded houses that are ill-suited to support the personal hygiene and social distancing demands of the restrictions. This, in the context of the lack of well-developed systems to deliver welfare/social support services, meant that the majority of the people had to flout the restrictions as a matter of course– for survival. It is, therefore, important that media and policy analyses of the defiance of the restrictions move beyond the simplistic notion of indiscipline to dissect how deliberate bias against the needs of the majority operates and is institutionalised in policy and practice in ways that undermined their commitment to the restrictions.

This will help to more systematically unpack, challenge and mobilise public agency to demand or support the dismantling of the regressive policies and practices and the historical-institutional power dynamics around them which created the conditions that made it difficult for the majority of the people to comply with the restrictions, and replace them with genuinely inclusive alternatives. Such alternative policies and practices might include inclusionary zoning and improved delivery of public land and finance for transit-oriented affordable public and rental housing; moratoriums on evictions and extension of public services to poor neighbourhoods (including more slum upgrading). The pandemic has also highlighted the urgent need for Ghana to build robust infrastructure and systems for delivering welfare or social support on a large-scale.

Finally, further to stymieing elite thievery and mismanagement to free more public resources for the creation of more secure decent jobs, conscious efforts must be made to direct private capital and investments to poverty-stricken parts of the country. These interventions and others aimed at dismantling the persisting unjust socio-political-economic systems and strictures of structures generating progressive outcomes for a minority few will do more to position the Ghanaian public to cooperate with the authorities in containing the next crisis/ pandemic to come – far better than the brutalisation of so-called 'undisciplined' people have done in containing the coronavirus.

### ***Biographical Notes***

**Festival Godwin Boateng** is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Center for Sustainable Urban Development of Columbia Climate School/Earth Institute, Columbia University–New York – USA

**Savior Kusi** is a development management economist. He holds a Master of Arts (MA) degree in Development Management from University of Agder, Norway and a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) degree in Economics from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi – Ghana.

**Samuel Ametepey** is an Agricultural Economist. He holds a Master Science (MSc) degree in Agricultural Economics from University of Copenhagen, Denmark and a Bachelor of Science

(BSc) degree in Agriculture (Agricultural Economics major) from University of Ghana, Legon.

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### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The authors take full responsibility for any opinions and suggestions in this study.

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