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Ghana: Document fraud and irregular migration

1: Introduction

The following note describes the prevalence of document fraud in Ghana in relation to irregular migration. The note also touches upon corruption in the document issuing process.

The note is primarily based on interviews conducted in Accra, Ghana, in December 2021. The interviewed sources are Ghana National Police, the Document Fraud Expertise Centre (DFEC) and five western diplomatic representations.

DFEC is a back office for all questioned documents and identity matters and is administratively part of Ghana Immigration Service. DFEC also gives advice and educates the public on the dangers of ID fraud and trains civil servants and private actors such as banks and airlines on document control.

2: Document fraud in Ghana

According to all consulted western diplomatic representations and DFEC, document fraud is widespread in Ghana.¹ The wording varies slightly between sources. One western diplomatic representation stated that document fraud is endemic in Ghana and that western embassies only see the tip of the iceberg, while another stated that document fraud is a 'general problem'.² A third representation stated that fraudulent documents are easily accessible to regular people with no connection to organised crime, and a fourth stated that regular people can buy packages with birth certificate, ID card and passport on the black market.³

¹ Document Fraud Expertise Centre, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation C, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation D, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation E, Accra, December 2021.

² Western diplomatic representation E, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

³ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation E, Accra, December 2021.

The Ghanaian authorities' impression of document fraud methods and their prevalence is as follows:⁴

- Imposter: highest
- Counterfeit: very high
- Fraudulently obtained genuine documents (FOG): high

The table below shows an overview of what kind of document fraud related to document type a western diplomatic representation encounters in its casework.⁵

	Imposter	Counterfeit	FOG	Forged
Birth certificates			X	
Marriage certificates		X	X	X
Bank statements	X	X	X	
Invitation letters		X		X
Employment documents		X		X

Judging from the visa case handling, the western diplomatic representation explained that the most common fraudulent documents in Ghana are birth certificates, marriage certificates, bank statements (most often counterfeit but also genuine with fictitious transactions/balance and sometimes imposter), invitations and employment documents. The representation underlined that they detect document fraud in visa cases on a weekly basis.⁶ According to another western diplomatic representation, counterfeit bank statements are the most common fraudulent document to detect, which is why bank statements are always verified directly through the bank.⁷

Ghana National Police experience some fraud with birth certificates and passports. With the old Ghanaian passport, page substitution was a trend but this is not the case with the new biometric passport.⁸ This assessment is corroborated by one western diplomatic representation.⁹

Imposter fraud

According to a western diplomatic representation, imposter fraud is only a moderate problem in Ghana because the airline staff is well-trained in imposter detection.¹⁰ This is, however, contradicted by DFEC and Ghana National Police who agreed that imposter fraud has the 'highest' prevalence of the document fraud methods.¹¹ In relation to imposter fraud, Ghana National Police have seen several

⁴ Document Fraud Expertise Centre, Accra, December 2021; Ghana National Police, Accra, December 2021.

⁵ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

⁶ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

⁷ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021.

⁸ Ghana National Police, Accra, December 2021.

⁹ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

¹⁰ Western diplomatic representation E, Accra, December 2021.

¹¹ Document Fraud Expertise Centre, Accra, December 2021; Ghana National Police, Accra, December 2021.

cases where children travel with passports belonging to children already in Europe. The modus is that the passports are sold for entry into Schengen and then returned to Ghana to be “reused.” Ghana National Police noted that it has become more difficult to use the imposter method with the introduction of the biometric passport.¹²

Identity fraud in West Africa

According to a western diplomatic representation, it is common for West Africans to have more than one nationality; hence possessing more than one passport. Seen in isolation, this is not illegal if the passports show the same identity but the representation sometimes have the same people applying for visas using different passports with different identities. As an example, a person from Nigeria applied for a visa using a Ghanaian passport. Later and after refusal, the same person showed up applying for a visa with a Liberian passport and a different identity. It is especially common for Nigerians to have more than one passport.¹³

Another western diplomatic representation explained that most of the document fraud is due to the stressful bureaucracy when trying to have official documents issued. People use agents/facilitators and some people are not aware that the services provided by agents often include fraudulent documents.¹⁴ The issue of facilitators is also mentioned by another western diplomatic representation, who stated that there are facilitators outside every document issuing authority, including western embassies, who approach applicants and offer them their services. Facilitators are involved in approximately 90 % of applications and in many cases, this is not necessary. Often people applying for e.g. a visa are not aware of the fact that they are about to commit document fraud when they use facilitators to arrange visa applications.¹⁵

The widespread use of facilitators are also apparent, as some applicants appear to have been instructed or coached before the interview. According to one western diplomatic representation, especially student applicants appear to be reciting memorised phrases.¹⁶

Fraudulently obtained genuine documents

According to Ghana National Police, fraudulently obtained genuine documents, is one of the overall trends regarding document fraud methods.¹⁷ In line with this observation, three western diplomatic representations stated that forged and counterfeit Ghanaian documents are not particularly widespread because it is simply too

¹² Ghana National Police, Accra, December 2021.

¹³ Western diplomatic representation C, Accra, December 2021.

¹⁴ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

¹⁵ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021.

¹⁶ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

¹⁷ Ghana National Police, Accra, December 2021.

easy to obtain genuine documents with false information.¹⁸ This is in particular the case for birth certificates.¹⁹

Birth certificates are breeder documents for passports, which means that incorrect information in a birth certificate will be transferred to a genuine passport.²⁰ According to one western diplomatic representation, this system error is the main reason for fraudulently obtained genuine passports.²¹ Fraudulently obtained genuine documents therefore pose a great threat to the credibility of Ghanaian documents and identities. One of the western diplomatic representations also stated, that it is less risky to have fraudulently obtained genuine documents issued compared to acquiring and using forged or counterfeit documents.²²

Ghanaian birth certificates and late registration of birth in Ghana

Ghanaian birth certificates are not trustworthy documents mainly because the system allows late birth registrations.²³ Late registration of birth at the Birth and Death Registry is possible with a trusted person vouching for the applicant's identity. This trusted person could be a village elder from the applicant's village. No written proof must be provided – only an interview and witnesses are required.²⁴ According to a western diplomatic representation, this is the main reason why birth certificates are often not forged but rather genuine birth certificates containing incorrect information. As a mean to counter this inherent weakness in the identity system, the western diplomatic representation sometimes request *weighing cards* from the hospital to determine date of birth.²⁵

Birth registration is now a requirement for primary school enrolment. The legal act is currently being implemented around the country.²⁶ This should reduce the number of adults who were not registered at birth.

Falsified date of birth

According to two western diplomatic representations, documents with incorrect date of birth are often detected in their case handling.²⁷ Sometimes this kind of fraud is seen in family reunification cases where the man is younger than the woman. This is unusual in Ghana and is a reason for further investigation.²⁸

¹⁸ Western diplomatic representation C, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation D, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

¹⁹ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

²⁰ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021.

²¹ Western diplomatic representation E, Accra, December 2021.

²² Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

²³ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

²⁴ Western diplomatic representation E, Accra, December 2021; Local Birth and Death Registry, Accra, December 2021.

²⁵ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021.

²⁶ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021.

²⁷ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

²⁸ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021.

Visa applications from footballers pose a particular problem in connection to identity fraud. Footballers who apply for a sports visa, e.g. in order to attend a trial training in Europe, often alter their date of birth. The footballers have a lot to gain from changing their date of birth and thereby appearing younger than they are, because the assessment of a footballer's performance is tightly linked to the age of the footballer.

Two western diplomatic representations independently of each other told that a typical case would be that a trial training has been granted based on, amongst other things, a fraudulently obtained genuine birth certificate with an incorrect date of birth.²⁹ One of the western diplomatic representations explained, that they will request a primary educational document e.g. senior secondary certificate, to verify the date of birth from the birth certificate. The representation has seen cases where the applicant will then hand in a counterfeit senior secondary certificate to match the date of birth in the birth certificate. The fraud is only detected because the representation always request a certified copy of the same senior secondary certificate directly from the central school authority called the West African Examinations Council, WAEC.³⁰ These school certificates are the most important documents when assessing date of birth in Ghana, and according to the western diplomatic representations, WAEC is a trustworthy authority.³¹

West African Examinations Council

WAEC issues school certificates after grade 9. From this, you can see the date of birth together with the date when the holder started school. The certificates are send directly from WAEC to the requesting western diplomatic representation hence, the applicant does not have the possibility to tamper with the document.

People from the middle class and above usually have been to school and will therefore be expected to have a WAEC certificate. In some cases where the date of birth differs between the school certificate and the applicant's birth certificate/other documents, a western diplomatic representation has experienced that the applicant then presents an affidavit, claiming that the date of birth in the school certificate from WAEC is incorrect. This is, however, not the assessment by the western diplomatic representation.³²

The verification of school certificates from WAEC can be done through this website: <https://ghana.waecdirect.org/>.

3: Irregular migration

According to DFEC, migration has always been outbound in Ghana, also before the independence. It is a general opinion that you are not a "*real man*" if you have not travelled. There is a sense of desperateness to go abroad and for many this leads

²⁹ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

³⁰ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021.

³¹ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

³² Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021.

to fraud. Many people do not know how to go about legal migration, which is why the use of facilitators is widespread.³³

According to two western diplomatic representations, the risk related to irregular migration from Ghana towards Schengen is assessed to be medium to low compared to the rest of West Africa. One of the reasons why Ghana poses a lower risk than other West African countries is that Ghana economically is doing better than its neighbouring countries. Migration routes go north, meaning that migrants from e.g. Nigeria, Togo and Ivory Coast do not travel via Ghana towards Schengen.³⁴ This assessment is not fully shared by a third western diplomatic representation who assessed the general risk of illegal migration by Ghanaian nationals to be 'quite high'. This assessment is the same for nationals from Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast.³⁵ According to one of the representation, Nigerians are more likely to migrate towards Schengen than Ghanaians are.³⁶

According to Ghana National Police, the main risk categories related to irregular migration are child abduction/false adoptions, pro-forma marriages and human trafficking.

In child abduction cases, one parent is usually in Europe while the other is in Ghana with their child. Then the parent in Europe applies for family reunification with their child. This case poses two abduction scenarios:

- 1) the parent in Ghana does not consent and the consent/affidavit is forged. This could also be in a case of adoption;
- 2) the child is not actually the child of the adult in Europe and the parenthood is proven through counterfeit birth certificate/paternity certificate.

According to Ghana National Police, adoption documents are often falsified because the legal way is a longsome process. Legal adoptions must go through the Department of Social Welfare.³⁷

In relation to pro-forma marriages, Ghana National Police mentioned cases where people do not have a marital relationship but still possess genuine marriage certificates.³⁸ According to one western diplomatic representation, the initial assessment of the validity of the marital relationship involves looking at the age gap between the couple and interviewing the couple as to how much they know one another. Another risk factor is if the marriage involves a western man and a significantly younger Ghanaian woman.³⁹ Another western diplomatic representation uses DNA testing in most family reunification cases. The representation has identified cases

³³ Document Fraud Expertise Centre, Accra, December 2021.

³⁴ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021.

³⁵ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

³⁶ Western diplomatic representation E, Accra, December 2021.

³⁷ Ghana National Police, Accra, December 2021.

³⁸ Ghana National Police, Accra, December 2021.

³⁹ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

where fathers marry their daughters of age in order to get family reunification as spouses. A 'no match' cannot prove that the marriage is not pro-forma, but DNA testing will reveal cases where the involving persons are related.⁴⁰ In case of a 'no match', the marriage still needs to be assessed in relation to typical pro-forma marriage risk factors.

In relation to human trafficking, the cases are linked to organised crime concerning prostitution, organ harvesting and modern slavery. For example young Ghanaian girls travelling to the Gulf States who end up as domestic servants where they are abused. As of December 2021, young Ghanaian girls have been banned from going to the Gulf States but some circumvent the travel ban and go via Togo or Benin.⁴¹

Visa fraud – Risk categories

The immigration risk is determined by several factors, for example the visa type and purpose of visit. In the following, the immigration risk is evaluated for these categories:

- a) Culture and sport and open conferences
- b) Family visits
- c) Business/official/other
- f) Frequent traveller
- g) Nationality

a) Culture and sport visa and open conferences

Footballers who apply for a sports visa pose a particular risk of irregular migration and document fraud.⁴² One of the western diplomatic representations further stated, that it is not uncommon that people who have been granted a culture/sport visa apply for asylum in Schengen.⁴³

Conferences are also a risk category. Especially if the conference in question is without pre-payment and with open enrolment. The key is to look at the claimed purpose of the visit to see if it matches the applicant's professional profile. Furthermore, the applicant's professional, social and economic ties to Ghana are also crucial when assessing the immigration risk. The western diplomatic representation has also seen cases where groups travelling together to the same event contain a mix of both genuine and fraudulent applications.⁴⁴

b) Family visits

In cases involving a family visit visa, one western diplomatic representation often sees that the relationship between the involved parties is genuine but that other factors in the case make the visa officers doubt that the person will return to Ghana.

⁴⁰ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021.

⁴¹ Ghana National Police, Accra, December 2021.

⁴² Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation C, Accra, December 2021.

⁴³ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

⁴⁴ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

The risk of the visa holder to apply for family reunification or asylum while in Europe is high.⁴⁵

According to two western diplomatic representations, applicants from the Ashanti region are of particular interest as many cases of fraud originate from this region. This is especially pronounced in family visits. The explanation is, according to one western diplomatic representation, that the Ashanti region is economically strong and many people can afford the high expenses related to illegal migration to Schengen.⁴⁶ One of the western diplomatic representations added that in relation to family reunification cases, applications from Kumasi and Bono regions are scrutinised further for signs of pro-forma marriages.⁴⁷

c) Business/official/other

According to one western diplomatic representation, this category is generally low risk, but caution must be taken to cases where there is no prior knowledge to the person and or company.⁴⁸

There is a large second-hand car industry in Ghana, which involves motor mechanics visiting European second-hand car shops to disassemble worn-out cars, buy the usable parts and ship them back to Ghana. According to one western diplomatic representation, the immigration risk is low as most of the motor mechanics return to Ghana. The industry is very profitable and the motivation to return to Ghana is high. However, this group is prone to misuse of visa, because the motor mechanics often travel to Europe on a business visa, which it is not a work permit; hence it is not legal to disassemble cars.⁴⁹

d) Frequent traveller

One western diplomatic representation has encountered counterfeit visa stickers and counterfeit entry/exit stamps attached to genuine passports. Applicants are using these to create a travel history profile as a frequent traveller, hence facilitating the approval of a visa.⁵⁰

e) Nationality

According to one western diplomatic representation, there is no clear trend when it comes to specific nationalities who use fraudulent documents in Ghana.⁵¹ Criminal prosecutions based on DFEC investigations for the years 2019-2021⁵² ranked according to nationality of the accused are as follows:

⁴⁵ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

⁴⁶ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

⁴⁷ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

⁴⁸ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

⁴⁹ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

⁵⁰ Western diplomatic representation B, Accra, December 2021.

⁵¹ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021.

⁵² Not including fourth quarter of 2021.

- Nigeria: 68
- Ghana: 27
- Togo: 12
- Sierra Leone: 2
- Ivory Coast: 2
- Benin: 2⁵³

Nationalities only mentioned once do not figure on the above overview.

It should be noted that the above statistics are not necessarily an expression of the level of fraud committed by Nigerians compared to e.g. Beninese, but merely an expression of what nationalities that have been prosecuted for identity fraud based on DFEC investigations.

4: Corruption

According to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2021, Ghana ranks as number 73 out of 180 countries with 43 points out of 100 with zero being very corrupt.⁵⁴

According to four western diplomatic representations, the level of corruption in Ghana is high and very pronounced. Corruption is everywhere at every level, even within the state authorities who will provide genuine documents with false information.⁵⁵ Three western diplomatic representations and Ghana National Police give several examples of corruption in the public administration.⁵⁶

⁵³ Document Fraud Expertise Centre, Accra, December 2021.

⁵⁴ Transparency International, 2021.

⁵⁵ Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation E, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation C, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation D, Accra, December 2021.

⁵⁶ Western diplomatic representation E, Accra, December 2021; Ghana National Police, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation A, Accra, December 2021; Western diplomatic representation D, Accra, December 2021.

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