

Opinion

Maintain ambulances to save lives in rural Ghana

By Dr. Bjorn Lomborg and Prof. Ahmed N. Zakaria

WHAT is the best value-for-money in Ghana when it comes to government spending?

Ghana Priorities, a cooperation between the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC)

and the award-winning think-tank Copenhagen Consensus, has set out to identify investments with high social value-for-money, working with 25 teams of Ghanaian and international economists.

More than 400 proposals were collected, out of which 79 policies were selected by stakeholder representatives and individuals for thorough peer-reviewed analysis.

The analyses uncover the social, economic and environmental benefits and compare those to the costs of a specific government investment.

The results of these academic papers have been published and also presented here in Daily Graphic articles throughout the year.

But which are the best value-for-money propositions for Ghana? No government can do all at once, so prioritisation is both inevitable and necessary. An eminent panel met in Accra for three days to debate just that.

Panel

The panel consisted of Finance Minister Mr Ken Ofori-Atta; Planning Minister, Prof. George Gyau-Baffour; former Finance Minister, Prof. Kwesi Botchwey; Prof. Augustin Fosu from the University of Ghana; Prof. Ernest Aryeetey, Secretary-General of the African Research Universities Alliance, Prof. Eugenia Amporfu from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST); and the Nobel Laureate economist, Prof. Finn Kydland.

They read all the papers, met with almost all the researchers (appropriately socially distanced) and heard their arguments, quizzed them and finally made a top-list of interventions with potential to deliver the most social, economic and environmental benefits for

Ghana per cedi spent.

One of the high value-for-money propositions which is placed into the top-ten list is to maintain the rural emergency transport system.

Emergency health

Ghana's emergency health services system is mainly informal in both urban and rural areas. The majority of patients who are severely injured or ill are transported to the health facilities by

commercial vehicles such as taxis or local minibuses.

In the rural areas where such commercial vehicles are not common, patients requiring emergency care are transported on bicycles or motorbikes or sometimes, in locally made carts driven by animals.

Such heavy reliance on informal means of

transportation increases the risk of complications of patients' health conditions.

The keen public interest and political debates generated by this fact, and the urge to reduce unnecessary injuries and deaths, has resulted in the government's purchase of 300 ambulances which have been distributed to 275 constituencies.

Ambulances

But ambulances by themselves don't save any people. This is the main argument of the investment proposal

presented by Nkechi S. Owoo and Monica P. Lambon-Quayefio Charles Adjasi from the University of Ghana, and Brad Wong of Copenhagen Consensus.

Given that the ambulances have already been purchased, their analysis focuses on their maintenance to ensure an effective delivery of health care, particularly the ambulances intended to improve the emergency health care for 13 million people in rural Ghana.

To get the most out of the 206 ambulances that are intended to service the rural population, these vehicles need an ambulance station. These stations would cost GHe339 million to erect, and serve a dual purpose of being the central holding points of ambulances when they are not in use and for routine maintenance.

The ambulances also need drivers and paramedics, including training. In total, this would cost almost a hundred million cedis a year.

But the benefits from the first aid and emergency response provided by ambulances are huge.

In addition to more timely treatment of trauma and injury from accidents, mothers' and children's lives can be saved from childbirth complications.

Effect sizes studied in rural India translated to a Ghanaian context indicate that the ambulances, properly staffed

and maintained, could save as many as 1,918 lives every year.

Benefit

So what is needed to ensure Ghana enjoys the full benefits of the 300 new ambulances? It is not enough that they have been bought and distributed with much fanfare.

They now need to be backed up by the mundane and regular investments in ambulance stations, maintenance and funding for staff and their training.

This will make for less showy politics. But this sustained funding can save more than five lives per day, all year round.

The political will, both on the national and local level, that got the ambulances in place, needs to be sustained to keep them fuelled and maintained, and staffed with skilled health professionals.

Although spending on operations and maintenance is not as visible to voters as the actual purchase of ambulances, it is a great example of value-for-money in government spending, because without it the

ambulances will not save any lives.

The writers are President of the Copenhagen Consensus and CEO of the National Ambulance Service, respectively.



• Some of the 307 ambulances commissioned by the President in January this year