Public Policy and Political Powers: Exploring the Context in Ghana – A Focus on Environmental Issues

ENVS 476C/SCI 300

My name is Andrew Housh, and I am an undergraduate student from the University of Waterloo in the Environment, Resources and Sustainability Co-op program. I am currently participating in a field school program in Ghana with eleven other undergraduate students, exploring environmental challenges and opportunities. It is an immersive learning opportunity offered through the University of Waterloo and funded by the Queen Elizabeth Scholars (QES) program.

We have just completed our seventh week of this eight-week program, currently taking place in the Eastern Region at Ashesi University. During our first month in Ghana, we explored foundational concepts related to environmental issues. This second month has introduced us to three specific angles at which to examine these issues, including socio-economic, health, and now policy and political dimensions. This week, we engaged in course readings, lectures, and presentations (accompanied by activities), as well as field trips that provided meaningful insight into the strengths and limitations of current public policies and political systems, specifically in relation to the environment. These learning opportunities highlighted the importance of understanding the complexity of societal relationships and recognizing local contexts. They also emphasized the need to consider these factors when analyzing public policies and determining how political actors and institutions can best implement them.

We began this week with a student presentation from Banujah, who shared key points from this week's academic reading focused on the political ecology of cocoa farming in Ghana. A political ecology lens was applied by Bryant & Mitchell (2021) to bridge physical and social sciences in order to better understand the ways that humans are linked to ecological issues across different geographies and societies. In this paper, we were introduced to the complex political landscape of cocoa farms in Ghana, as well as the challenges faced by the industry—which is the second largest cocoa producer in the world. We learned that there are many factors that are threatening cocoa production, which some believe could lead to its extinction by the year 2050

(Bryant & Mitchell, 2021). The cocoa industry is being challenged by several factors, including labour shortages driven by declining profits, and the increasing vulnerability of cocoa crops to diseases and changes in the environment (Bryant & Mitchell, 2021). As part of Banujah's presentation, she facilitated a case study exercise that prompted us to develop a 1-minute policy brief, considering several local stakeholders within the cocoa industry. This activity solidified the lessons learned in the readings as we were tasked to consider several of the complex challenges facing the cocoa industry, beyond environmental factors. In our 1-minute policy brief, my group focused on land-use conflicts, the influx of migrant workers, and regulation of wages for workers entering the cocoa industry. However, this activity taught us how difficult it can be to make policy suggestions that address environmental issues and satisfy multiple stakeholder groups. As we later learned, beyond designing effective policies, there are also several barriers faced in implementing public policy in Ghana's political system.

After learning about the cocoa industry, we had the opportunity to visit the Tetteh Quarshie Cocoa Farm, located in Akuapim-Mampong—the very first cocoa farm in Ghana. The farm was started in 1879 and has been preserved over time, still functioning, but with new trees and tree species, a few of the original trees still

standing and bearing cocoa. Our tour guide walked us through the cultivation and fermentation process used to transform cocoa into the product we are used to consuming in chocolate. We learned that the Ghana Cocoa Board regulates the industry. The agency has played an important role in regulating child labour, which has made a positive impact on improving labour standards within the industry. However, there have been conflicts stemming from the agency's regulatory power over prices, paying farmers 60% of what would be made in profits if they sold independently. Although there have been recent changes in policy to ensure farmers receive 70% of the world market price, this has yet to be realized in the industry, showing a gap in implementation. The reasons for this gap were not explored, but we have learned throughout the week

that barriers to public policy implementation are constant challenge faced by governing bodies all over Ghana.

In a lesson given by the course TA, Pascal Meho-Akakpo, he presented his research which explored barriers and opportunities in policymaking, specifically in addressing gender inequalities in Ghana's health and water and sanitation (WaSH) sectors. Pascal presented both institutional and implementation barriers within the realm of public policy. Through putting a focus on health and WaSH sectors, we were able to see the shortcomings of the systems in place, which lack female representation, adequate consultation, political commitment, and efficient bureaucratic structures. Although good policies may be written, there is not enough consideration of local contexts that are limited in their ability to implement policies due to socio-cultural, financial, logistical factors (Meho-Akakpo, 2025).

To gain insight into the application of our learning from this week's lessons, I asked for Pascal's input on the following question:

Why is it important for those in the field of environment to be well-informed about Ghana's policy and political dimensions?

> *"Students like yourself, need to understand the policy and political dimensions of [environmental issues in] Ghana because it forms the social aspects of the people living here. These dimensions involve cultural, economic and environmental aspects that form the social dimensions of the environment. Even within the social dimensions, there are rules, customs and norms that govern people within this environment and these rules and customs come in the form of policies. So, as an environmental student, in order to understand how people relate within a given society, you need to first understand the policies."*

> - *Pascal Meho-Akakpo*

Later in the week, Dr. Elijah Bisung from Queen's University gave a lecture titled "Thinking About Politics and Environment", where he taught us to use social theory to analyze information we read about political action. One of the analytical tools we learned to apply under social theory is assessing the unintended consequences of purposive action as it relates to policy. We engaged in an activity where we applied our learning through analyzing a case study provided by Dr. Bisung, which outlined an irrigation project implemented by the Ghanaian government. We were able to pinpoint unintended consequences of the policy implementation, and the potential oversights that occurred in the decision-making process. Reflecting on the trip to the Tetteh Quarshie Cocoa Farm, I can apply these social theories to understand the unintended consequences of regulating the profits of farmers. Our tour guide explained how farmers will resort to smuggling their cocoa across borders into nearby countries to sell at a full price. The resulting illegal activity is an unintended consequence of this regulation, which may be influencing current policy changes that will increase profits for farmers.

Over the past three weeks, we have been working on a culminating group project that is aimed at addressing a specific environmental challenge in the context of Ghana. With a focus on policy and political dimensions this week, our group is putting together a policy brief. In order to write a brief, our group first needed to assess the current policies and political structures that relate to our issue (i.e., flooding of informal settlements in Accra). I now understand the root causes that contribute to the lack of support for informal settlements as it relates to the provision of flood early warning systems. Although these communities are not deliberately excluded from receiving support, the ineffective and unofficial structures in place do not allow for the provision of early warning systems. Our policy brief seeks to improve knowledge dissemination by proposing co-creative community engagement approaches that allow communities to manage and operate warning systems. This is an example of why it is important to understand and consider contextual barriers to implementing written policies. This was a lesson that was emphasized throughout the week.

Looking back on this module, I was able to explore Ghana's policy and political context through the activities and experiences I had the opportunity to participate in. The readings introduced me to the complex political landscape of Ghana's cocoa industry. This learning was solidified during Banujah's interactive activity which allowed us to interact with hypothetical policy makers through a one-minute policy brief. Then, we were able to see an operating cocoa farm where we learned about the challenges they face, as well as current regulations and their positive and negative consequences for the industry. Pascal's lesson clearly illustrated the barriers to effective policymaking and implementation for Ghana's health and WaSH sectors, showing the need for contextual understanding of communities and local knowledge in order to form an effective policy. The gaps in policy implementation were also shown in the recent changes made by Ghana's Cocoa Board that intends to increase farmer profits, yet this has not been realized in the industry. Dr. Elijah Bisung's lecture helped us to better understand how to analyze case studies in a way that recognizes the shortcomings of the decision-makers during the policymaking process. Working on this week's deliverables for our group project, I was able to read about policies related to our environmental issue and collaborate with my group to make an informed recommendations. A key takeaway I learned from the week is that in order to make meaningful changes in policy regarding environmental issues, it is essential to explore contextual factors and to consider the local barriers that may hinder action related to implementing policies.

References

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