



The political economy of air quality: A Review of the literature with reflections from Ghana

Sharon Boadu

October, 2024

This review analyses key readings on the political economy of air quality management that have influenced the development of my master's thesis. Literature on this topic is currently limited, while efforts to develop air quality management strategies in many contexts fail to take politics into account. A common – and well known – critique of existing approaches is that they often transplant strategies developed in the global north into countries in the global south with scant regard to context.

Air pollution has been dubbed a “wicked problem”: a complex challenge with multiple causes that lacks clear solutions or boundaries, particularly in countries with limited economic and political resources, political instability, patronage, corruption, and clientelism (Andres et al. 2022). In this review, I argue that researchers and policy makers must think and work politically when developing air quality interventions that are intended to address collective action problems.

Air quality management encompasses all the activities undertaken by a regulatory authority to help protect human health and the environment from the harmful effects of air pollution (US Environmental Protection Agency, 2015). Air quality management is a cyclical process that involves setting targets, identifying emission reductions, conducting ongoing reviews, implementing programmes, and designing control techniques. The achievement of reduction goals requires enacting and implementing policy initiatives and projects as well as ongoing evaluation to ensure continuity and efficiency in the implementation process. One of the challenges with air quality management policy initiatives and policies is that they are usually not tailored to fit the local context or to push back against stakeholders who may be negatively affected by these policies.

Discussions of the causes and consequences of air pollution, as well as recommendations for local, national, and global policy interventions are common in low and middle-income countries. However, there is a scarcity of literature that investigates the barriers to air pollution policy development and implementation, particularly in Asia and Africa, where more than 90% of air pollution-related deaths occur. In emerging economy contexts, air pollution as a policy concern competes with what are perceived to be other, more immediate and concrete problems such as housing, poverty reduction, and access to water. While international organisations have been working on air quality improvement since the 1990s, effective cross-cutting interventions remain elusive, and levels of ambient (or outdoor) air pollution have increased over the last five decades.

My research has identified three articles that explore the political challenges of developing air quality initiatives in the global south:

- According to Andres et al. (2022), it is essential to explore how different institutions, organisations, and groups, each with their own institutional logics, perceive and prioritise a “wicked problem” like air pollution. The authors identify four stages of policy formulation (influence, formation, implementation, and outcomes) that can become blocked due to limited visibility, lack of a clear constituency of support, fragmented decision making, and policy de-prioritisation. They argue that conflicting institutional logics and incentives play an important but overlooked role in air quality management. They conclude that there is a need to build a framework that unpacks how institutions, individuals, and groups in both state and society interact with one another in the policy process in ways that make air quality a secondary concern in policy cycles.
- Clean Air One Atmosphere emphasise that social scientists need to tackle air pollution from a social welfare lens, including raising awareness of sustainable transportation and clean energy in a manner that empowers vulnerable communities to tackle air pollution. They argue that the concept of social welfare and the process of implementing these initiatives must be specific to the political structure and the incentives of domestic stakeholders.
- Hodoli, Abubakari and Adzaho (2018)'s journal on open data on air quality monitoring highlights an important question on the correlation between citizen's awareness of the effects of poor air quality and their engagement in activities that serve as sources of air pollution, including biomass burning and use of firewood and charcoal, among others. The authors also emphasise the need to sensitise citizens about the harmful effects of air pollution by making air quality data open and easily accessible. They suggest that this can encourage positive behavioural change and increase pressure on policy makers to act on poor air quality.

In my master's degree thesis, I drew on these papers to explore air quality management challenges in Ghana through a political economy approach. My research highlights that, despite evidence showing the significant health and economic effects of air pollution, there has been a consistent failure to design and implement effective air quality management policy. This failure relates not only to technical problems and limited fundings, but also to

more political ones, low levels of popular support for measures to increase air quality (in light of other priorities that seem more pressing), politicisation of government policies, corruption, and clientelism. I argue that to get traction on this issue, beyond education and data investment, researchers and policy makers must work in ways that are politically informed. Part of this entails harnessing stakeholder engagement and potential coalitions for change that can help overcome constraints to action.

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About the author: Sharon Boadu is a master's student and Mo Ibrahim Foundation Scholar at the University of Birmingham.

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