

## **Bridging the Civil Society-Academia Gap: Lessons from the Environmental Movement in Ghana**

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**Abstract:** Recent systematic studies of the environmental movement in Ghana have revealed an apparent disconnect between environmentally focused civil society organizations and local academia. This disconnect has implications on both the study of the social dimension of environmental issues and the lack of academic literature on the subject. It is my opinion that the bridging of this gap has potential benefits for both civil society and the development of environmental social science.

**Keywords:** Africa; Ghana; Environmental movement; Civil society; Environmental social science

Since the mid-1990s, civil society engagement in environmental issues has grown considerably in Ghana. This increase in activity has been seen at the community level in particular. Even with this shift, there appears to be a disconnect between community activity and academic fraternity. This gap manifests in both curriculum and academic literature, which I believe has stifled growth and interest in the social science dimension of environmental studies.

Considering the emergence of threats of climate change and conservation of natural resources, there should be a greater concentration of natural sciences in connection with social issues in academics than we are seeing in Ghana. Courses related to 'environmental sociology' or 'environmental politics' are practically absent from many higher education institutions. Issues that touch on social justice, sustainable development, adaptation, and capacity building at the community level haven't been systematically studied and documented enough by local academics. This discrepancy can be contrasted to the growth of environmentalism in the West since the 1970s, which has been characterized by environmental consciousness and the rise of the environmental movement. These shifts in the West have been thoroughly studied, analyzed, and documented.

There is an exceptional gap in the literature on the environmental movement in the global south as a whole, especially from West Africa (Doyle, 2005). The result of this understudied phenomenon is the persistence of western-focused theories that attempt to explain environmentalism and pro-environmental behaviour in Africa.

There has been a progressive rise in the number of civil society groups and NGOs that have been actively engaged in community sustainability projects and various intra-national advocacy outreach events on behalf of communities that are vulnerable to environmental degradation and associated injustices. In my recent systematic study of the budding environmental movement in Ghana, it was clear that there was a considerable amount of work that these groups did – particularly in rural communities – that fell on the blind side of the majority of government agencies, the media, and academia. The work of civil society in addressing community-based issues of sustainable development has evolved into formalized and loose networks and strategies that border on capacity building initiatives for the vulnerable residents in these communities on one hand, and lobbyist approaches of dealing with dominant powers of government and industry, on the other.

My findings suggest that there is a wealth of experience gathered by civil society that is invaluable to understanding environmentalism as it appears on the ground and from the community perspective. In the sense that vulnerable communities have evolved a mouthpiece through the engagement with civil society in unique ways that have earned civil society organizations an 'acquired,' indigenous knowledge of problematic environmental issues, its full effects, and the adaptation mechanisms and strategies that have helped them withstand. This acquired knowledge often manifests in the form of overt ethnographies and is useful in shaping the understanding of environmentalism from the Ghanaian perspective. It is a potential ingredient in the attempt to fill in the theoretical gaps in conceptualizing African environmentalism.

It is on this note that I contend there should be an effort to bridge this gap between civil society and academia with regard to involvement in and awareness of environmental issues. I will briefly elaborate in the following paragraphs why this is important, timely, and possible.

To begin with, issues of social justice and advocacy for marginalized groups dominate civil society engagement in environmental issues in Ghana. For instance, the work of semi-institutionalized NGOs is characterized by what may be described in academic parlance as lengthy ‘field trips’ and are very important in gathering firsthand experiences that may differ from concepts taught in the classroom. Their presence on the ground enables them to capture the dynamics of society and adequately account for the factors that both promote and stifle social change. In the absence of available funds for extensive fieldwork for Ghanaian researchers and students in the environmental sciences, bringing on board experienced environmental NGOs into the fray of the teaching and learning experience could serve not as a replacement per se, but rather as good sources of an informed opinion that could be one step closer to bridging the gap between the classroom and society. My interactions with various environmental NGOs and groups in Ghana revealed that this is both a need and a desire that would require academic initiative to fulfill. Initiatives such as putting in place appropriate structures – e.g., workshops, open lectures, thematic conferences, and restructured course modules – could provide the civil society voice a platform in the Ghanaian academic setting. To illustrate, the civil society engagement would prove useful in the development of research methods modules, whilst at the same time would provide tailored skills training for environmental NGOs and activists. This provides a chance for the development of the social science of the environment with content that is sufficiently local and relevant.

This benefit of the civil society-academia dialogue would definitely not be unidirectional but would provide a complementary, mutually beneficial, and rewarding process whereby civil society groups could significantly benefit from scholarly debates and analysis. In practical terms, academia could become the hub for practicing the ideals of resource mobilization, which is the lynchpin for the survival of civil society groups and NGOs. As the hub for the learning and sharing of ideas, intangible yet invaluable moral and cultural resources (Edwards and McCarthy, 2004) would be readily shared, as well as the potential for other tangible forms of financial and human resources. This resource mobilization hub paradigm would also be an opportunity for stirring academic interest and research into the various facets of environmental issues dealt with by civil society organizations, which in many ways mirrors the concerns of the local communities they engage. It is fairly implicit that heightened academic interest would translate into scholarly publication of research findings that would contribute to filling the gap in literature on the ‘social science’ of the environment by African academics.

Beyond these potential benefits for bridging the civil society-academia gap, I am further encouraged to make this call in view of other external factors that make it timely and feasible. Ghana currently stands in a good position to serve as an example for Africa, having experienced political stability under democratic governance since 1992 and having a relatively stable economy. Comprehensive studies of environmental issues that are inclusive of civil society, and which highlight the developments of the social dimension, would further strengthen its ‘leadership’ position and cement its exemplary status – especially in the West African sub-region. Historically, the political climate of a country is very important to the growth or decline of civil society activities; under autocratic and repressive regimes, the environmental movement in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria’s Niger Delta, has suffered considerably. The favourable political stability, rule of law, freedom of speech, and democracy have allowed steady growth for the civil society space in Ghana since the mid-1990s and as a result some environmental NGOs and groups have gotten the chance to establish, institutionalise, form networks and coalitions, and execute some remarkable

community level projects. I believe that the political climate has fostered a level of depth for environmental groups in Ghana that academia should take advantage of.

My call for a closer collaboration to bridge the civil society-academic gap does not presuppose that the civil society space in Ghana is either perfect or the best source of community-based information on environmentalism. There are substantial challenges – e.g., under-resourcing, low skill and technical expertise, external funding and agenda setting, the politics of institutionalisation, and sensationalism of issues – affecting the work of many NGOs, environmental groups, and activists. These challenges may potentially be responsible for the gap in literature and lack of academic collaboration in the first instance. The panacea for that may simply be a selective collaborative process that aims to streamline civil society groups that have a consistent track record in their advocacy. I believe the potential that the academia-civil society collaboration holds, as touched on above, far exceeds the possible demerits of the call.

The social science of environmental issues in Ghana, and largely in West Africa, is understudied and under published by local academics. There is an opportunity for Ghana to take the lead on comprehensive environmental studies in the sub-region and I am confident that one important step in the process of achieving this is to encourage the bridging of the apparent gap between academia and the civil society that champions local environmental issues.

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