

Access to Proper Sanitation in the Okponglo Community: The Need for Public Toilets

Key Words: Ghana, Public Health, Safety, Waste Management

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Introduction

Personal background and purpose

The Boren Scholarship, a program focused on introducing Americans to less commonly taught languages, awarded me a yearlong scholarship to Ghana to study the language Twi. I spent twelve months in Ghana from August 2018 to August 2019 living and studying at the University of Ghana, Legon in Accra, Ghana. While there, I became involved with an NGO called Play and Learn Foundation (PAL). This NGO is a grassroots organization, primarily based in Okponglo, Bawaleshie and Legon. I was involved with writing project proposals, numerous reading literacy programs and home tutoring in Okponglo. Through tutoring in the community, I began building very close relationships with some of the children and their families. After gaining the trust of the girls' families, our tutoring relationship evolved into more of a mentorship or big sister relationship. I would attend birthday parties in the community and take the girls to see movies or go to the mall. Their mothers and older sisters (tried) teaching me how to make banku and jollof rice--which I quickly realized was more difficult than it looked (I'm looking at you, banku). If they finished their homework early, they would come to my hostel and have fun creating dance routines and doing makeovers.

These relationships became a significant part of my experience in Ghana. When I received the GAAP research scholarship from my school, I knew I wanted to work on a project that would be useful and impactful. I spoke with the director of PAL to see if he had any ideas for research projects that I could look into. He had recently conducted a National Health Insurance survey in Okponglo to register the residents for free national health care. One of the questions asked in the survey was "What facility would you like to see built in Okponglo?" Out of options such as a community center, library and public toilets, the overwhelming response was public toilets. It was important to me to choose a project that was chosen by the community, not by myself, so I began brainstorming what a research project concerning public toilets would look like.

After careful consultation with the director of PAL, local doctors and Okponglo community members, the research part of the project was complete. The long-term goal of this research is to present it to potential donors in order to raise enough money for public toilets to be installed in Okponglo. As this is an ongoing process, this paper only covers the initial research process, including interviews with local doctors and survey results from the residents

of Okponglo. It identifies the necessity of having access to proper, sanitary toilets and looks at some of the health and safety risks associated with not having access to a proper toilet.

Okponglo

Okponglo is a neighborhood in Accra, Ghana. It is situated between Legon, East Legon, Shiashie and La Bawaleshie. The surrounding neighborhoods are home to many middle and upper class residents. East Legon in particular is an increasingly popular neighborhood for wealthy families and booming businesses. Legon is home to the University of Ghana, Legon which enrolls around 40,000 students. Despite their affluent neighbors, Okponglo does not seem to share the same socioeconomic status as them. There are no official statistics or demographics recorded from Okponglo, and when asked about the population size of Okponglo, the residents did not have a specific number either. Answers ranged in size from a couple hundred to a couple thousand people.

Okponglo could potentially be categorized as an informal settlement. The neighborhood's layout starkly contrasts the well-planned streets, shops and homes of neighboring East Legon, Legon, La Bawaleshie and Shiashie (Figure 1) shows the approximate location and layout of Okponglo, Figure 2 shows the layout of Shiashie, Bawaleshie and East Legon). The indications that show a person is in Okponglo are the Okponglo tro-tro (bus) stop, Okponglo taxi rank and the Okponglo Junction, which is comprised of the La-Bawaleshie Road and Legon E Road intersection. The houses in the community range from cement structures, to wood and metal, to kiosks turned into homes. The main part of Okponglo is compact with many houses and shops close together. However, there is a large open area filled with trees and bushes where many residents live in make-shift housing. While there is no official data on the demographics of Okponglo residents, the community members have said that the majority of residents belong to the Ga-Adangbe ethnic group and a sizable portion of the population comes from surrounding African countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso. There are also some Akan and Ewe families living in Okponglo, as well as people from multi-ethnic backgrounds, such as Ga and Akan. It should be noted that the original inhabitants of Accra are the Ga-Adangbe people, and the location of Okponglo today belongs to the Ga people, although others live there now as well. Many Okponglo residents work in the informal job sector. Some of these jobs include hawking (selling food and items to car passengers at stop lights), food vending and selling at the market. These, of course, are only a few of the many jobs that Okponglo residents engage in, and not all residents work in the informal economy. Once again, there is no official data or statistics to understand the employment positions of the entire community.

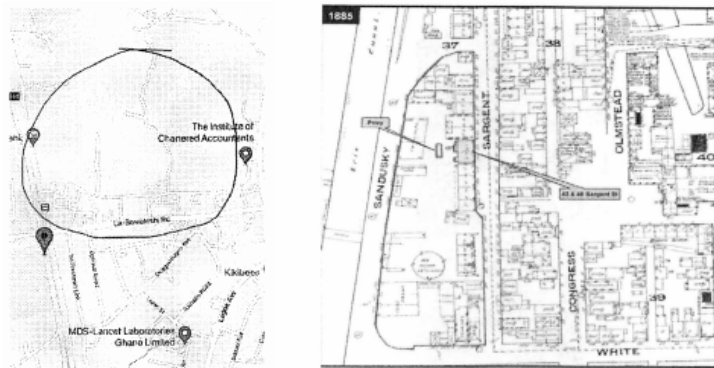


Figure 1 & 2. Maps of Okponglo

Methodology

My ethnographic research had, unintentionally, begun long before this research started. Through daily experiences in Okponglo, I observed and immersed myself in the community. This, in turn, gave me a strong foundation and background for when I officially began this project. My intermediate language background in Twi also made it easier to build trust and a relationship between myself and many of the Okponglo residents.

Qualitative research was the primary method used to collect data in this study. Through interviews with two Ghanaian doctors, I was able to understand the health-related risks related to a lack of access to proper toilets. To understand the residents' current situation regarding toilets, I created a survey questionnaire for them to fill out. A team of eight social work students from University of Ghana, five residents from Okponglo and myself went into Okponglo to find participants to fill out the surveys. We split into groups to cover ground quickly. Most residents in the community are fluent in Ga and Twi, so the Ghanaian students and Okponglo volunteers helped translate for the community members who weren't fully fluent in English. Involving Ghanaian locals in every step of this research project ensured that I gathered accurate data in an ethical and respectful way.

A total of 82 surveys were completed in paper form. I later uploaded this data on the computer in order to have the responses digitized. All questionnaire participants were told the purpose of the research and agreed to give their answers. Participants were chosen by going door to door in the neighborhood. One question on the survey asked the participants how many people were living in their household with the purpose of understanding how many people in that house had access to toilets. To ensure that we were not getting repeated household population numbers and to find an accurate number of how many people in total this survey represented, we tried to limit each household to one survey.

Limitations

The largest limitation of this research was the lack of available data on the Okponglo community. Not having previous data limited my ability to fully understand the composition of Okponglo. In addition, I cannot compare my research results to any previous work.

Understandably, there is some mistrust between the residents and NGOs who make large promises. While I was talking to one lady in the community about the project, she quickly let me know that she didn't think it would actually happen. She walked me to an area in the community where an international NGO had previously installed public toilets. These toilets were not installed properly and stopped working shortly after the NGO left. Now, they just sit around taking up space and reminding the community that once again, they've been let down.

This incident motivates me to materialize this project in a respectful, ethical and sustainable way. That being said, I fully acknowledge my own personal limitations. Being a white American will inevitably limit my capacity to fully understand the Okponglo community and its diverse cultures. Due to this limitation, I rely heavily on information and knowledge from local residents and other Ghanaians that have strong ties to the community.

Additionally, some of the survey participants indicated that they did not want to answer certain questions on the survey. That was completely fine with me, as their comfortability and trust was my number one concern. A question many people chose not to answer was the health related question as they did not want to disclose any health problems they faced. Therefore, not all questions have a 100% answer rate in the survey results.

Access to toilets in Ghana

Access to proper sanitation has been a pressing topic throughout the world, and in Ghana it is no different. A study funded by USAID that examined toilet use in Kumasi noted that only 23% of urban Ghanaians own a private toilet (WSUP 2019). The Ghana Statistical Services 2014 report, Ghana Living Standards Survey - Round 6 (GLSS 6) reported that 38.7% of all urban Ghanaian households use public toilets. Throughout Ghana, 18.8% of the population has no access to any toilet facilities--however this statistic becomes much higher when looking directly at certain rural regions. For example, in the rural savannah regions, 72.6% of the population does not have access to any type of toilets. This is sharply contrasted by the 7.4% of urban Ghanaian households that do not have toilet access (Nyarko 2014).

Toilet construction can be expensive and complicated in Ghana. Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP) estimate that it can cost anywhere from \$200 to \$1,000 (1,109 - 5,545 Ghana Cedis) which is far above the average monthly wage in Ghana (~\$46). In addition to the expensive price tag, it can be difficult to find one company that does everything from installation to plumbing. Many people end up having to contract multiple people to complete the job (WSUP 2019). These realities make having a private toilet a mere fantasy for many working class and rural Ghanaians.

Access to toilets in Okponglo

Okponglo does not have a nearby public toilet facility for the majority of its residents. Out of the 82 responses to the Okponglo survey, 30 participants stated that their home or compound has access to a private toilet, leaving 63.4% of respondents without access to a private toilet. Only eleven respondents said they had access to a public toilet, while 86.4% said they had no access to public toilets. Out of the people surveyed, 52.4% marked that they had no

access to a private toilet nor a public toilet. This statistic is alarming considering the GLSS 6 report indicates only 3% of Accra residents have no access to toilet facilities (Nyarko 2014).

For those who do not have access to any type of toilet or those who only have partial access to a toilet, the areas they use to relieve themselves are limited. When asked where they go to urinate and defecate, the vast majority answered, “the bush” or “refuse dump”. The bush, according to Okponglo residents, is what they call a bushy area in the community that many use to relieve themselves. The refuse dump is a common dumping ground in the community where people dispose of their garbage and sometimes dispose of their human waste (feces) as well. A couple responses indicated that they use their neighbor's private toilet when they can, but one person noted that they have to beg them in order to use it. Alternatively, one lady wrote that her household relieves themselves in polythene bags and then dispose of the bags with the rest of the garbage.

Having access to proper sanitation is a human right that every single Okponglo resident deserves. A little over 87% of all participants selected “yes” when asked if they would utilize the public toilets after they were installed. Around five percent selected “not sure/undecided” and 7.4% said they would not use them. The people who said they would not use them all had access to private toilets. Nevertheless, every person who participated in the survey questionnaire said “yes,” they believe installing public toilets in Okponglo would make a positive impact in the community.



Harms of not having access to a toilet

Health

The lack of access to a proper toilet comes with a long list of health and safety risks. I had the opportunity to speak with two Ghanaian medical doctors, one working locally in Accra and the other currently working in the United States. Dr. Gameli Aheto is a medical doctor who works at Korle Bu Teaching Hospital in Accra, Ghana. He thoroughly understands how important proper, sanitary toilets are to public health. Dr. Aheto explained the correlation between sanitation and disease spreading by saying,

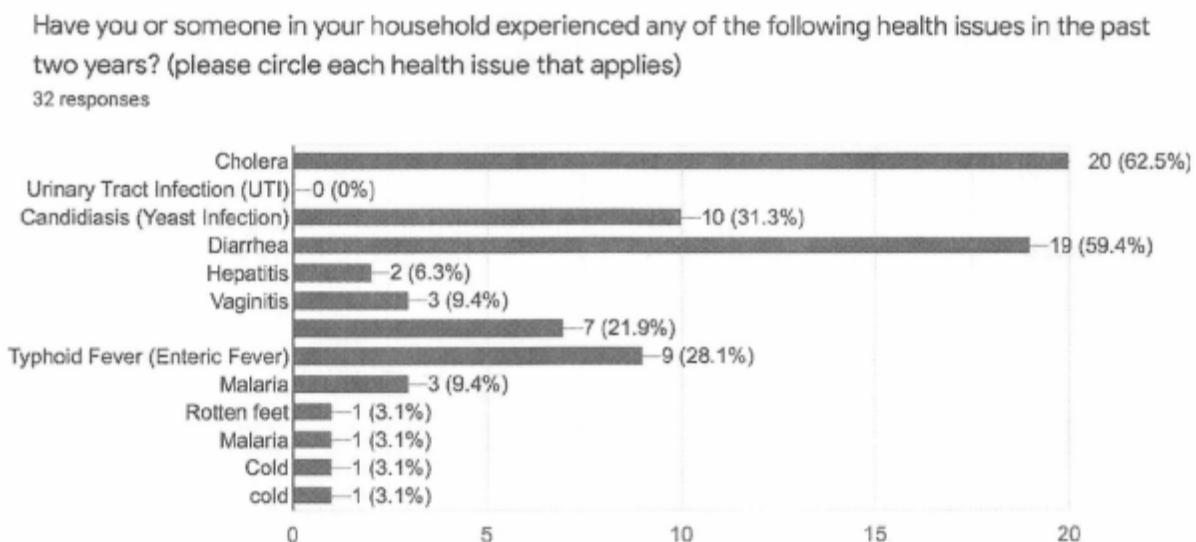
"Almost every parasite or bacteria that's transmitted from person to person is through the oral-fecal route. Access to clean toilets reduces the risk of you contracting an infection

through that. So, not having access to proper toilet facilities will put you at risk of any parasite, any bacteria that's transmitted through the oral-fecal route. Why? Because we do not know where the human excrete ends up when you do not have access to proper toilets. It could end up in the water bodies from which you drink, which is the main source of how people get their infections. It could also end up in the water bodies used in the preparation of meals for people and then sold to the general public. And so having access to proper toilet facilities, where there's a full chain from where you need to use the bathroom to the point where the final excretion is treated, processed or discarded is absolutely essential in keeping people away from parasitic and mycobacterial infections" (Aheto 2019).

He also stressed the importance of distinguishing between a sanitary toilet and an unsanitary toilet. If a toilet is not properly cleaned and maintained, it would then run the risk of spreading multiple parasites and infections (Aheto 2019).

Dr. Prince Samuel Nuamah is a medical doctor originally from Ghana, but is now practicing at Johns Hopkins University. Both he and Dr. Aheto identified cholera, helminthiasis (parasitic worms) and hepatitis being among some of the common health concerns regarding poor sanitation. Dr. Nuamah advises washing hands thoroughly before and after going to the bathroom and before cooking and eating to avoid contracting these infections. He also emphasized that it is important to avoid coming in contact with fecal matter (Nuamah 2019).

However, avoiding fecal matter can be difficult for the Okponglo residents who don't have access to a toilet. Some of the responses from the survey mentioned accidentally stepping in other people's fecal excretions and how relieving oneself in the bush is not hygienic--especially after it rains. The survey asked the participants to check the box of each health issue people in their household had in the past two years. Twenty respondents said they had cholera while nineteen said they had diarrhea. Other common answers included candidiasis and typhoid fever.



Safety

Numerous responses from Okponglo residents about safety issues they encountered went beyond the health risks. Over half of the residents said they have personally encountered a safety issue while relieving themselves in the bush or refuse dump. Some of the most common concerns were about snake bites, animal bites and insect bites. In fact, twenty-two separate answers specifically wrote about these issues. When asked what safety issues they have encounters, some of the answers stated:

“[1] Once saw a snake in the bushes.”

“A snake can bite a person easily while using the bush.”

“Snake bite and ant bite and parasitic] worms.”

“The place is also where rubbish is being disposed and so one can get cut from sharp objects such as glass, tins and others.”

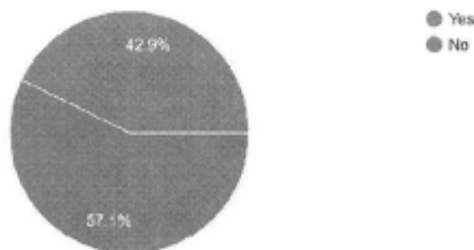
“Insect bites, likelihood of snake bites.”

Prone to animal bites.”

“Reptiles and broken bottles.”

Something so universal--going to the bathroom--has become a daily experience full of dread because there is no guarantee that they won't be attacked by a snake or another animal. These are the real-life fears that people have to live with. On top of fearing animal bites and cuts from broken bottles, women and children deal with even more safety concerns.

Are there any safety issues that you have encountered while using the above mentioned areas to go to the bathroom?
63 responses



Women and children

Both women and men emphasized the safety issues that specifically affect women and children. Among these safety issues were fears of rape, abduction and going to the bathroom in the bush at night. Multiple respondents noted the uncomfortableness of relieving themselves while men are in the bush or refuse dump at the same time. It is well known to the community that there is a group of men who smoke marijuana in the bushes as well. The presence of these men loitering and smoking was mentioned quite often in the survey responses. Women noted that some men would purposely look at their private areas while they were relieving themselves,

causing them to feel exposed and uncomfortable.
Some of the written responses from the survey include:

“Sometimes in the night when they want to go to private they are scared and afraid that someone will kidnap them or rape.”

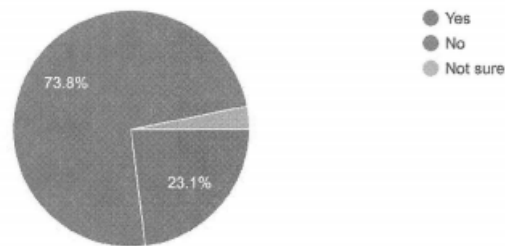
“Complaints of men watching them, smokers in the bush could harm them.’

“Women may be raped and kids abducted.”

“The women feel exposed as their lower part of their bodies are exposed and don't feel comfortable due to the presence of males.”

“Sometime[s] when you go to the bush or refuse dump some men will be spying [on] them.”

Are these areas safe for women and children to go to the bathroom during all hours of the day (including at night)?
65 responses



Conclusion

Okponglo's lack of access to proper toilets has long been a cause for concern in the Concen community. Being forced to relieve themselves in unsafe places such as the bush or the refuse dump has created many health issues and safety concerns--from Cholera to snake bites to rape. This thriving, dynamic community should not have to deal with these problems in one of Africa's most developed cities. There is absolutely no reason that public toilets cannot be properly installed in this neighborhood.

Installing public toilets in Okponglo will mostly eliminate the usage of the bush and refuse dump as a makeshift bathroom. In order to maintain the upkeep of these toilets, the toilet facility will most likely follow the example of the many other public toilets systems in Ghana, where it is pay per use. This will generate revenue to employ a person who'll collect the money and maintain the cleanliness of the bathrooms. However, the question arises of whether everyone can afford to pay the small fee each time they use the public toilet. To ensure the facility is accessible to all residents, a community meeting will be held with residents to discuss the logistics of the installation and upkeep of the public toilets.

It is imperative that the community members themselves stay at the center of this project, because no one knows a community's needs better than its residents. By taking steps to approach

sustainable development issues through an anthropological lens, the residents of the community become the overseers and decision makers, which in turn creates lasting solutions. Although this project is not yet complete, the process thus far has proven the importance of working alongside the local people, not above them. Furthermore, it highlights the necessity of access to proper sanitation--a right that all humans deserve.

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