

## Double Standards, Single Purpose: Deconstructing The ‘Fence Wall’ For Sustainable Municipal Waste Management

### **ABSTRACT**

In 2017, when the President of the Republic of Ghana pledged to make Accra the neatest and best city in Africa by the end of his first term of office, he unequivocally conceded that the country was in peril. However, he gave Ghanaians hope that strategies had been forged to deal with the situation. The challenge, however, arises when the strategy for righting the wrong itself happens to be the Achilles heel. How do we profess sustainable waste management when all we do is collect municipal solid waste from households to DUMPSITES? Or when municipal waste management is treated as an action or an event instead of a process? Or when we promise to breastfeed the waste management department of the various assemblies, but instead make the department an orphan by our actions or inactions? Or when we put profit before people in the waste industry?

From a fascinating history of waste management to a critical review of policy options, my presentation explores the waste problem in Ghana with rigorous research, compelling examples, deep insights, and pertinent suggestions about the path forward. I examine how waste, in its diverse forms, has been defined, conceptualised, produced, managed, experienced, imagined, circulated, concealed, and aestheticised in contemporary urban environments and across different creative and cultural practices. The objective is to explore the future imaginaries and opportunities to make positive changes to the waste industry towards the future we want. My motivation is anchored on the position that managing municipal waste is inextricably linked to the rate of urban growth, the level of development, climate change dynamics, and the prospect of promoting human-centred and environmentally friendlier management futures.

Indeed, the ability of cities and their governing authorities to improve the waste sector provides enormous opportunities to mitigate future climate variability and generate co-benefits, including improved human and environmental health. Urging the authorities to appreciate, embrace and indeed, consciously work towards sustainable waste and resources management, I elaborate on the concepts of the waste hierarchy and its transition towards a circular economy which is based on three principles: eliminate waste and pollution, circulate products and materials, and regenerate nature. These concepts are offered as starting points to ensure that the waste sector becomes a net reducer of greenhouse gas emissions. Thus, I argue that the quest for the future we want is not only about instituting effective waste collection systems but also about improving their treatment infrastructure to mitigate future climate change.

In my critique of the current waste management architecture, I have analysed, maintained, and empirically demonstrated that in their quest for an efficient management system, city authorities' 'waste war' adjudication strategies so far have grossly ignored the known historical focus on socially all-inclusive planning designs. In its stead, they have adopted what appears to be a 'stomach-direction approach' that unduly promotes a market-led agenda, largely ignoring the good public nature of waste. The present prescriptive rights-based discourse, tempered as it is with a neo-liberal cost-recovery approach, implies that not everyone (including residents in slums and informal settlements) will be able to pay for the right services. This raises concerns about whether the focus of the service is on cost-recovery or the pursuit of social and environmental justice (public good). A cyclical system thus ensued where the generation of waste has consistently outpaced the efforts to dispose of it cleanly. Additionally, the material recovery from waste is easier said than done, as in most cases, what is technically feasible is economically unfeasible.

And what is financially feasible - such as setting waste on fire—as is often done—is exceedingly harmful to the environment and human health.

I submit that careful consideration of how each society engages with service provision and its normative dimensions should be at the centre of sustainable waste management policies. I have further argued that such an approach transcends ideology and institutional exigencies and moves towards the realm of practical reasoning, everyday ethics, and embodied practice. I maintain that in seeking an innovative way to see, think, and understand the waste war and perhaps build one of the cleanest cities in Africa, there is a need first to deconstruct the fence wall and expose all the barriers to the future we want. We need to question what went wrong and what has been assumed thus far.

The challenge is not simply to call for new and improved solutions; indeed, it is not a problem at all—if by ‘problem’ is meant an issue separate from a society that must be confronted, deconstructed, and solved. As the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel would argue, we deal here with a ‘mystery’—a situation in which we are inextricably involved and in which we must call ourselves into question if we are to see clearly again. The fence wall must go! And to that extent, I dare recommend that until the evidence—along with institutional and financial instruments—shows otherwise, Ghanaian authorities will do well to integrate proven innovative management practices in their backyard.

## **PROFILE**

### **Background**

Martin Oteng-Ababio is a Professor of Geography at the Department of Geography and Resource Development and the Acting Provost of the College of Education, University of Ghana. As an Urban Environmental Geographer, Professor Oteng-Ababio has over a decade and a half experience in teaching, researching and providing consultancy and mentorship. His research interests span broadly from urban studies with a speciality in the waste economy and environmental management policies, waste governance and waste-induced entrepreneurship, to a variety of role-players in the recycling industry, infrastructure services, environmental risk reduction, and the problems of informality.

Professor Oteng-Ababio hails from Nsuta-Ashanti in the Sekyere Central District and attended Nsuta Roman Catholic Primary School and continued at Nsuta Local Authority (No.2) Middle School and then proceeded to the Nsutaman Catholic Secondary School, where he obtained his GCE Ordinary Level certificate. He later pursued his sixth form education at Tema Secondary School. Professor Oteng-Ababio holds a Bachelor of Arts in Geography and Resource Development with Archaeology, a Master of Philosophy in Geography and Resource Development, and a Doctorate degree in Geography and Resource Development (Urban Studies) all from the University of Ghana. In 2008, Professor Oteng-Ababio also obtained postgraduate certificates in Community Risk Assessment, and Disasters and Development, both from the University of Cape Town, South Africa.

Professor Oteng-Ababio began his career as a lecturer in August 2009 at the Department of Geography and Resource Development, University of Ghana. Through the unwavering Grace of God and a personal commitment to hard work, Professor Oteng-Ababio was promoted to the rank of Senior Lecturer in January 2012, Associate Professor in April 2014, and then finally a Professor in 2018. Before taking a lectureship position at the University of Ghana, Professor Oteng-Ababio

worked with the then Bureau of National Investigation (BNI), now the National Investigation Bureau (NIB). He also had a stint with the Revenue Agency Governing Board (RAGB), as the Coordinator of the Revenue Protection Unit (RPU).

### **University Roles and Responsibilities**

Professor Oteng-Ababio served as the Senior Hall Tutor for Hilla Limann Hall between 2012 and 2015. This was the period in the history of the University that the Hall became the most sought-after hall of residence on campus. In October 2018, he assumed the headship of the Department of Geography and Resource Development, University of Ghana, and also served as the Acting Director of the Centre for Urban Management Studies until August 2021 when he was appointed as the Acting Provost of the College of Education.

Professor Oteng-Ababio has been the Principal Investigator (PI) for the Periperi U (Partners Enhancing Resilience for People Exposed to Risks) consortium, a partnership of research units and departments from twelve (12) African universities which focus on advancing research and capacity building in risk and vulnerability reduction action on the African continent. The University of Ghana has been a member of this consortium since its inception some fifteen (15) years ago.

Professor Oteng-Ababio's academic career has been interspersed with international collaborations and fellowships. He has served as a guest lecturer at the Department of Geography, University of Miami, a visiting research fellow at the Columbia University, USA, and the Department of Geosciences and Natural Resource Management at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. He has also served as a visiting scholar at the Disaster Prevention Research Institute, Kyoto University, Japan; and a visiting research fellow of the Research Alliance for Disasters and Risk Reduction (RADAR), a research centre based at Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

### **Membership of Professional Bodies**

Professor Martin Oteng-Ababio has served as a member of several bodies including United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Global Development Network, Urban Climate Change Research Network, African Urban Risk Analysis Network, International Society for Urban Health, the Academy of Medical Service (London), Association of American Geographers, and Ghana Geographical Association.

### **Teaching and Thesis Supervision and Examination**

Prof. Oteng-Ababio's teaching portfolio includes undergraduate and graduate courses such as History of Geographic Thought; Geography of Developing World; The City: Origins, Internal Structure and Economic Function; Cities in Economic Development and Problems of Urban Management; Theories and Analytical Methods for Integrated Disaster Risk Reduction; Policies and Strategies for Integrated Disaster Risk Reduction; Integrated Disaster Risk Reduction; Applied Integrated Disaster Risk Reduction; Global Trends and Perspectives of Environmental Sanitation; Sustainability of the Built Environment; and Historical & Contemporary Dynamics of the City. Indeed, even as the Acting Provost of the College of Education, Professor Oteng-Ababio continues to teach all his undergraduate and graduate courses and undertake supervision of thesis at his department and at the Institute of Sanitation and Environment as well as the Centre for Migration Studies.

Prof. Oteng-Ababio is a member of the Graduate Supervisory Committee in the Department of Geography and Resource Development of the University of Ghana. He has examined over 80 graduate theses (PhD, MPhil, and MSc) from the University of Ghana, University of Cape Coast, University for Development Studies, Tamale, and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi. He is also an External Assessor for promotion for the Kwame Nkrumah

University of Science and Technology, University for Development Studies, Tamale, and University of Cape Coast. He serves as Assessor for the National Accreditation Board.

## **Research**

Prof. Martin Oteng-Ababio is an Urban Environmental Geographer, and his research interests span the intersection of urbanisation, urban planning and development, waste management, environmental management, and disaster risk-related and climate change issues. His research publications cover areas including sustainable waste management, policy and practices (including waste entrepreneurship); infrastructure for urban housing; e-waste processing, environmental health and food security; rural-urban connections, crime and poverty nexus, sustainable market actors for responsible trade; climate change resilience in urban mobility, sustainable wastewater systems; and sustainable development of the circular economy.

Through his research, Professor Oteng-Ababio has emerged as one of the leading African urban development experts. His contribution to the fields of waste management and urban development has provided a richer understanding of the urban development dynamics in Ghana. He collaborates extensively with several researchers in Ghana, Africa and beyond to undertake his transdisciplinary research work.

Professor Oteng-Ababio's work on waste management issues in Ghana has attracted global recognition and impacted the lives of urban residents, particularly the urban poor. His research has received several citations with a high h-index and i10-index. The World Scientist and University Rankings 2022 ranked him as the 20th top scientist at the University of Ghana and 46th in Ghana. He has granted interviews on his research on reputable media platforms such as Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, Ghana Television, City TV and News, and Joy FM. He has also been

featured in scientific documentaries produced by world-leading media houses such as Deutsche Welle, Alliance France Internationale,

Professor Oteng-Ababio has to his credit 95 peer-reviewed journal publications, 18 book chapters, and 3 monographs. He also has a number of refereed conference proceedings, policy briefs, newspaper publications, and over 30 consultancy reports. Professor Oteng-Ababio has attended and presented his research at over 70 conferences and workshops globally as a keynote speaker, presenter or discussant.

Professor Oteng-Ababio has succeeded in placing his research at the service of society. Through his research, he has informed various societal concerns and intervention projects related to solid waste management, e-waste management, informality, service provision, disaster risk reduction and urban planning and development. The issues addressed by his research are highly relevant in the context of the sustainable development goals, especially given the necessity of developing and promoting proper environmental sanitation and making cities inclusive, safe and resilient.

### **Grants and Consultancies**

Professor Oteng-Ababio has attracted numerous grants from a variety of funding organisations to the University of Ghana to support his research and has served as a consultant on many waste management and urban development related projects for organisations such as UN-Habitat; Millennium Cities Initiative; African Urban Risk Analysis Network (AURAN); Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); Global Development Network (GDN); Sustainable Development Solution Network (SDSN); the European Union; International Development Research Centre (IDRC); Department for International Development (DFID); Danish Development Agency (DANIDA); GIZ; International Growth Centre (IGC); and Ghana Statistical Service.



Recently, Professor Oteng-Ababio served as the lead consultant for GIZ in developing risk management approaches for climatic and health risks in Ghana. He has designed and facilitated workshops to build the capacity of selected Metropolitan and Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs) in the Greater Accra region for contingency planning. He also pioneered and facilitated a number of simulation exercises for the National Fire Service and National Disaster Management Organisation (NADMO) on responding to and managing market fires in Accra. Professor Oteng-Ababio serves on the United Nations Sustainable Development Solution Network which is made up of a team of academics and practitioners responsible for promoting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in selected countries, including Ghana.

### **Extension Activities**

Professor Oteng-Ababio has served as a member of statutory boards and ad-hoc committees and is currently the Chairman of the University Security Committee. Professor Oteng-Ababio has considerable experience in fundraising activities. He has mobilised funds from several organisations to support his administrative and extension services to the University of Ghana. As the Senior Hall Tutor of Hilla Limann Hall, he led the Hall and the leadership of the Junior Common Room (JCR) to mobilise funds to erect the statue and fountain for former president Dr. Hilla Limann.

He also created a conducive learning environment in the Hall by providing the appropriate infrastructure (including furniture and air conditioners) in all the Reading Rooms in the Hall. Furthermore, he initiated and instituted a Saturday morning walk around the University for tutors and students. It was during his tenure that the hall independently raised funds to purchase a brand-new saloon car to aid administrative work.

During his tenure as the Head of the Department of Geography and Resource Development, Professor Oteng-Ababio's administrative and fund-raising acumen was quite apparent. Through fundraising activities, he led a dedicated team to organise the Department's maiden alumni homecoming, during which the first departmental cloth was unveiled. Through his instrumentality, a 30-Seater Civilian bus was acquired by the team for the Department to replace its old 18-seater Urvan bus acquired in 1989. Professor Oteng-Ababio further set up and furnished with modern facilities, the Professor George Benneh Graduate Reading room for PhD students.

As the Acting Provost of the College of Education, Prof Oteng-Ababio has been described variously as "the Transformative Provost". Indeed, a letter signed by the Vice-Chancellor, dated May 18, 2022, bears enough testimony to this. The letter reads in part: "I thank you for channeling your efforts into securing our lands and finding creative and innovative means of supporting UG in generating funds to increase revenue. I am also pleased to note that, your initiatives to increase the visibility of our centres and city campuses are laudable".

As the Patron of the Geography and Resource Development Students Association (GREDSA), Professor Oteng-Ababio sought funding to erect a canopy shed at the foyer of the Department. As the President of the Ghana Geographical Association (GGA), he mobilised funds to support the Association's events including its 2015 annual conference in Tamale.

Since 2017, Professor Oteng-Ababio has been the President of Tersus Ghana, a Consortium (Think Tank) of Environmental Sanitation and Waste Management Researchers from tertiary institutions in Ghana. He also doubles as the President of the Research Associates of the Environmental Sanitation Providers Association (ESPA) research group, and the Chairman of the Man-made Disaster Technical Committee of the National Disaster Management Organisation (NADMO).

Professor Oteng-Ababio is also a member of a newly established consultancy firm, EnvironQuest, Ghana, with its headquarters in Nigeria.

### **Mentorship**

Professor Oteng-Ababio has provided mentorship for several students and younger faculty. He has strong interest in skills development and capacity building of his students, and he invests time and resources in them to make sure they succeed academically and professionally. He ensures his students are self-motivated and develop a strong desire to accomplish their career aspirations and future endeavours. This is how he measures students' success.

It is therefore not surprising that since 2009 almost all his national service personnel (teaching assistants) have pursued at least a master's programme and several of them have proceeded to obtain a Doctorate degree. Some of his PhD graduates are Lecturers and Research Fellows in Universities in Ghana and beyond and are continuing research activities within waste management and the urban environment. He currently supervises two Post-Doctoral Research Fellowships and serves as a mentor to a number of research fellowships for young faculty members.

### **Awards**

Professor Oteng-Ababio has received many academic awards. In 2011, he was awarded the second prize winner by the Global Development Network (GDN), a Japanese Government Award for Outstanding Research on Development. In 2012, he was the proud recipient of the Best Paper Award at the Africa Disaster Reduction Conference in South Africa. In April 2015, he was again the recipient of the 2013/2014 Best Researcher Award from the School of Social Sciences, University of Ghana. In 2016, Prof Oteng-Ababio's article in Habitat International was awarded the highly cited research paper for the year. In 2019, Prof won the Dean of School of Social Sciences, Best Mentorship Award for 2018/2019 academic year in University of Ghana.

### **Editorial boards**

Besides serving in several capacities on numerous statutory boards and committees in the University of Ghana, Professor Oteng-Ababio serves on both national and international editorial boards including Ghana Social Science Journal, Frontiers in Sustainable Cities, and Disaster Prevention and Management journals. He is also a reviewer for several internationally reputable peer-reviewed journals.

### **Personal Details**

Professor Martin Oteng-Ababio comes from Nsuta, Ashanti Region. He is the 3rd of 7 siblings of the late Obaapanin Grace Oforiwaa (Yaa Bedwa). His father was the late Joseph Stephen Oteng and both parents also hail from Nsuta in the Ashanti Region. Professor Oteng-Ababio is married to Mrs Sylvia Oteng-Ababio and has seven children – Prince, Gloria, Jessica, Nervisa, Nadia, Margaret and Margareta. He enjoys watching soccer as a hobby. He is a Catholic and worships with the St. Thomas Aquinas Congregation on the Legon campus.