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Comparative Fieldwork Experiences in Three Neighboring West African Countriesⁱ

Tyson Robertsⁱⁱ

Abstract

These field notes describe research that took place in Ghana, Togo and Benin during the summer of 2006. The goal of the trip was to collect information about how the government strategically interacted with other groups, domestic and international, in the process of changing political institutions and economic policies. I begin with a summary of my research design and preparations before heading into the field. I then offer some observations and anecdotes for each of the three countries, and close with some lessons learned.

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Introduction

During the summer of 2006 I traveled to Ghana, Togo, and Benin to conduct preliminary dissertation research. Here I present some material about my fieldwork experience. The first section, *Pre-Departure*, contains excerpts from a research design I presented to a number of professors to solicit feedback before the trip. My research design describes my research question and my country case selection. I then discuss some prep-work I did before leaving the US. In the second section, I present notes from the field. These notes are an amalgamation of emails I sent to friends and colleagues (hence the casual tone and personal references) and observations about the research experience. I conducted roughly 45 interviews with professors, journalists, government officials, representatives of chambers of commerce and labor unions, and politicians (both pro-government and opposition). I also collected data on foreign direct investment (FDI), government budget statistics, investment-related legislation, and I purchased a number of books that are typically unavailable in the US.

The government statistics, legislation, and books were materials I clearly couldn't have obtained without traveling to Africa, and these acquisitions alone made the trip worthwhile. The majority of my time, however, was spent on interviews. In some ways these interviews were not necessary because most of what I was told was similar to what I had already read in books and articles. However, the fact that locals were giving me the same stories gave me more confidence in what I read, and will give me more credibility when writing my dissertation. Usually in each interview there was just one insight, one specific piece of information, or one anecdote, that made the entire

interview worthwhile. I won't be able to fit all of these anecdotes into the dissertation, so just a few good ones were very valuable. And in each country I occasionally struck gold – a subject who really understood my questions, was extremely well informed, provided information that I hadn't read in books, gave me very specific examples to illustrate particular points, and/or gave me a big-picture understanding of the dynamics I was studying.

Pre-departure

The Research Question

Two of the most important events in Africa in the past 20 years has been what Huntington called "the Third Wave of Democracy" (1993), and the emergence of foreign direct investment (FDI) as a critical part of the development plan for African nations. African states prior to 1989 were predominantly authoritarian, except for a dozen that experienced "brief interludes of democratic rule between long periods of authoritarianism" (Bratton and van de Walle 1997, 69).¹ In the early 1990s a wave of democracy washed over Africa: 30 of 54 "founding elections" were considered free and fair, and in eleven countries sitting presidents were voted out of office (Bratton 1998). Furthermore, most of these new democracies were relatively stable. By the end of 2000, 31 countries in Africa were still considered to have Free or Partly Free multiparty democracies (van de Walle 2002).²

At the same time, virtually all African governments shifted from an economic strategy that emphasized state ownership of most industries (Quinn 2002, 8) to one that emphasized FDI. In African countries,

as in other developing countries, there was an “unmistakable liberalization of foreign direct investment policies” over the 1980s (UNCTC, 1991, 59). FDI’s share of long-term resource flows³ into Africa grew from 4% in 1990 to 36% in 2000 to 53% in 2001 (World Bank 2002).

This past summer I conducted fieldwork in three West African countries – Ghana, Togo, and Benin – in order to better understand how and why the governments of these countries made the decision to liberalize both their economic policies and their political systems. I am particularly interested in understanding why these developments occurred at the same time.

A common explanation is that both of these developments occurred because of external pressure from foreign governments or from international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). A second possibility is that developments domestically and in the international economy were such that the decision of opening up both economically and politically was the preferred outcome for these governments given their economic conditions (in this case, is the government serving the national interest, or the interest of particular sub-national groups?). A third and fourth possible explanation is that one development affected the other – perhaps democracies are more likely to attract FDI, or perhaps countries that are open to FDI are more likely to liberalize politically.

Country Case Selection

These countries were selected for a number of reasons. They are similar in a number of ways that are outside of my area of interest. They are geographically contiguous and have fairly similar climates, economic levels, and mineral endowments. None are major oil

producers, which would tend to overwhelm the effect of political and institutional factors. Benin produces some oil, Togo has phosphate mines, and Ghana has gold mines. They also have fairly similar histories – each became independent around 1960, had a number of coups in the first decade, and pursued a state-led development strategy for most of the first two decades of independence.

The countries vary in the factors that I am studying – in the timing and extent of FDI policy liberalization and political liberalization. The three broad periods in the international political economy relevant for sub-Saharan African countries were pre-structural adjustment, structural adjustment through the end of the Cold War, and post-Cold War. During these periods, the general tendency was to move from statist economic policies and authoritarian political systems, to liberal economic policies and authoritarian political systems, to liberal economic policies and democracy. However, in each of these periods, one of these three countries deviated from the norm. With three countries and three broad periods, I will have at least nine cases to consider (variations within each period will provide additional cases).

Research Design

The unit of analysis is government regime, by which I mean the time period within a country during which the primary government officials are constant and the institution is constant. I will use this unit of analysis rather than use changes because I am also interested why, in some situations, change does not occur. The time period I intend to cover is 1970-2005.

I have two dependent variables: changes in the political system, and changes in FDI policy. I have detailed data on changes in the Investment Code and the Mining

Code from the Economist Intelligence Unit, and more detailed data on changes in the political system from sources such as Polity, Freedom House, and the ACLP data set.⁴ An initial objective for the research trip is to corroborate these data points.

The explanatory variables include who the relevant players are, their positions on democratization and investment policy, and the institutions (formal and informal) and context that determines how these players' positions translate into outcomes.

My methodology will primarily consist of elite interviews with academics, expatriate officials such as those at the US Embassy and the World Bank, business journalists, government officials, and managers of MNC subsidiaries.⁵ I will also collect some documents such as the Investment Codes, and data on FDI inflows and privatization of state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

Preparation Before Departing the US

I tried to get in touch with contacts in each country to set up a few interviews and, most importantly, hire a research assistant (RA), for which I had funds in my budget. Professor Michael Lofchie at UCLA knew several academics personally in Ghana, and so those professors responded to my emails and suggested I call when I arrived and they would set up appointments with me and assist in finding an RA. George Mason University Professor Marcel Kitissou found me an RA for my work in Togo, and New York University Professor Leonard Wantchekon was going to be in Benin during the summer, running a master's program at the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy,⁶ and so he agreed to set me up with an RA when I arrived. After arriving in the field, I realized that I should have made business cards to demonstrate

my official status at UCLA, and I should have had a letter of introduction from my department. I managed to take care of both after I arrived in Ghana and had them sent to me via Fed-Ex.

Notes from the Field

Ghana

I started my fieldwork in Ghana at the end of June. I bought a cell phone that cost roughly \$75, and later bought a simcard in each country for network access, as well as prepaid credit to make calls. The cell phone was critical for communicating with my RAs and setting up interviews. I went to the University of Ghana at Legon to meet with a professor and get a referral for a RA. We spent the next two weeks driving around in congested Accra traffic meeting with professors, government officials, journalists, and others.

Before beginning the interviews, I went over my questionnaire with my RA and he suggested a number of changes. We began by interviewing professors, who were well informed and willing to help. However, they had limited time because they were literally bombarded by graduate students spending the summer doing research. One of them had a whole day dedicated to American and European graduate students, a one-hour appointment for each. Several of the professors with whom I met had published a great deal, both in Ghanaian and American journals and books, and were able to refer me to articles and chapters to read. My RA was surprised that I wanted to ask the same question of several professors, but it was a good thing I did because some professors would give me the conventional wisdom for topics on which they were not experts, and the conventional wisdom was not always

accurate. For example, several thought that the Busia government (1969-1972) was very liberal on investment policies, but as others pointed out, this was largely rhetoric – in fact the Busia government created some new state-owned enterprises (SOEs), privatized few of them, and passed a law limiting foreign direct investment.

We also set up interviews with three journalists. One of them was willing to meet but never went into much detail; another was willing to make an appointment but failed to show. The third was one of the best interviews I had. He was well informed about Ghana dating back to independence. He provided me with a collection of articles his newspaper had assembled, and recommended books for me to read. I had more difficulty scheduling appointments with government officials, but after several attempts I was able to get appointments with a few. Some wanted written requests, including the questionnaire and the letter of introduction. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) was also a great help; I met with the director of policy research, who was well informed and recommended some books.⁷

I found several of the Ghanaian-published books in the University of Ghana library and bookstore, and also went to the Library of Parliament and photocopied some legislation I had heard about.

Trying to find one's way around Accra is a challenge. A major difficulty in Accra is the tendency not to use street addresses. Rather, directions went something like "Go to the coffee shop, take the street to the right of the shop, then ask someone around there where to go next." Sometimes it worked and sometimes it did not. My RA had a car so he drove me around most of the time, but we often met at the university that I had to get to myself. In getting to the university each day to meet my RA, I

experienced firsthand how the learning curve increases efficiency: the first day I was in a rush and took a taxi, who told me the price was \$8, I think I haggled him down to \$7.50. Then I found out I overpaid and took a taxi for \$5. Then I found out I could go to the bus station (for a \$2 taxi ride) and then take a minibus for 75 cents. Then I found out the bus goes near my hotel, so I could catch it for just 75 cents and save myself the cost and time of the taxi ride.

One of my research goals was to find out which sectors of society supported each elected government, coup, and economic policy change. Interviewees generalized a lot. For example they would say that everyone supported a particular president. I would ask if anyone opposed the president, and they would concede that yes, some did. I would ask who, and they would respond, his opponents. For the best interview subjects, I was usually able to get some more description about the cleavages, but they were usually in very broad strokes - an entire region, for example. The political science department at the University of Ghana at Legon has been running surveys for each presidential election and publishing research articles based on those surveys in a series of books, some copies of which they gave me to bring to UCLA and are now available at the Young Research Library. I was excited to find such state-of-the-art research was available for Ghana's most recent democratic period.

Togo

Marcel Kitissou of George Mason University connected me with a student in Lomé whom I retained as an RA and who was exceptionally useful because of his extended personal network. He was able to arrange

meetings with about 20 people, including government ministers from every decade since 1960, as well as several opposition party leaders, government officials, the VP of the chamber of commerce-equivalent, and several professors.⁸ In some ways, it was easier to get access to people in Togo than it was in Ghana, particularly if the person was retired. Sometimes, however, I was told that I needed to get permission from the appropriate minister before I could schedule an interview. There was one official in particular I wanted to meet, because he had data I wanted for my dissertation research, but he would not meet with me without ministerial approval. I sent the request to the minister, but did not receive a response before I left for Benin. I kept in touch with my RA while I was in Benin, and then stopped in Togo again on my way back to Ghana. I never did get the approval.

In some ways Togo was very organized. For example, several times people would use the yellow pages to access phone numbers, whereas in Ghana it seemed the only way to get phone numbers was through personal networks. Lomé is also much easier to navigate than Accra. However, during my research, subjects often gave conventional wisdom, and this turned out to be a bigger problem in Togo than in Ghana. It seems everyone had learned the official story of Togo's history and gave the same answer or refer me to the same book. For the history of the first few decades, they would answer or refer me to the governing party's Green Book, yet this book proved very difficult to find. It wasn't even available in the national library. Everyone reportedly knew what was in the Green Book, but no one could get me a copy. Fortunately, my RA recently obtained a copy, so hopefully I will be able to read it soon.

There was one journalist that my RA thought would be very helpful, but after submitting our written request he refused to meet with me. It seems he'd helped some graduate students in the past with their research, and had lent them books, which were never returned. He felt they had not been appreciative of his help, and was reluctant to meet with me because of this experience.

I went to Paris for a long weekend to meet my wife halfway through my two-month trip, and while I was there I interviewed the opposition leader/former presidential candidate who is the son of the first president of Togo. He was such a threat to President Eyadema in elections that the constitution was changed to preclude him from running.⁹ He had published some material that he referred me to for my research.

One of the advantages of visiting Togo was that it corrected the impression that I had from some reading that Togo was a fairly free-market economy. Although they were aligned with the US during the Cold War and were chosen by Reagan to have an Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC)-supported export processing zone (EPZ), the government continues to play an important role in managing Togo's economy.¹⁰ Also, from reading theories about economic liberalization in general, I assumed that many business leaders would have been in favor of the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in the 1980s and 1990s. However, it seems most were against them because SAPs restricted how much money the government was supposed to spend, and many businesses depended on government contracts.

Benin

Research in Benin went pretty well, although I didn't get to meet all the high-level politicians I got to

meet in Togo. I did get to meet with one former cabinet minister, who was retired. He had several books that were out of print, and told stories about Benin's history that my RA, who had a master's degree, had never heard before. These books weren't available in the university library or bookstores, but some of them were available for photocopying in the Constitutional Court Library. Data in Benin was easier to get than in Togo. Government officials would generally give me whatever data I requested, assuming they had it assembled. There were a few cases where I needed to submit a written request, but the request was usually granted expeditiously. I wasn't always able to meet with the top person, but I generally got to meet with someone. There were still several frustrations, and things weren't as well organized as in Ghana, but it went pretty well.

Conclusion

Although I wasn't able to get answers for many of the questions I had prepared before leaving the US, my field research experience was extremely valuable. I was able to get both a big-picture understanding of how politics worked in three neighboring countries, and I was able to pick up a lot of specific data and anecdotes that will add color and substance to my dissertation. I also learned a lot about doing field research, which will be useful when I make follow-up trips.

There were pros and cons about each country. Ghana, for example, has been studied a great deal both by outsiders and by Ghanaian nationals. There were therefore a number of experts available to interview and articles and books available in libraries, bookstores, and research institutes. However, I had to share professors'

time with others, and government officials were sometimes too busy to meet with me. In Togo, on the other hand, little research has been done. It was therefore very difficult to find research material that could inform my dissertation. However, high-level politicians were more accessible. My timing was good because the political environment has become more open since the new president took office.

The most important reason to do field research, I feel, is the opportunity to make important contacts. More and more people in these three countries have access to email, and cell phones are becoming widespread. But most people don't respond to emails the way they do in the US, partly because of slow connections and partly because a request from a stranger thousands of miles away isn't a pressing concern. Once in the country, people were incredibly helpful. I hope to maintain good relationships with these people so that I'll be able to be more efficient on future trips, and so they will continue to be willing to help graduate students in the future.

Endnotes

¹ There are a handful of cases that can arguably be considered stable democracies. Bratton and van de Walle (1997, p. 69) describe Botswana, the Gambia, Mauritius, Zimbabwe, and (since 1980) Senegal as sustained multi-party democracies with reasonably free and fair elections, although all but Mauritius were ruled by a dominant party.

² In addition to the nine countries Freedom House rated Free and the 22 coded as Partly Free, there were also eight countries with multiparty electoral systems that were coded Not Free.

³ Net resource flows include new flow of long-term debt (e.g. IMF), net foreign direct investment, portfolio equity flows,

and grants/official development assistance (excluding technical cooperation).

⁴ For more information about these data sets, see www.cidcm.umd.edu/polity/, www.freedomhouse.org, and www.ssc.upenn.edu/~cheibub/data/Default.htm.

⁵ A sampling of the questions I prepared prior to departing for the field are attached in Appendix I.

⁶ Find out more about IREEP at www.ireep.org.

⁷ The TUC of Ghana was created in 1945 when the existing 14 unions came together under a central coordinating body. It was particularly influential under the Nkrumah government in the 1950s and 1960s, when the TUC was the sole legal representative of the trade union movement.

⁸ I met with professors of history, economics, and political philosophy; the University of Lomé doesn't have a political science department, nor do the universities in Benin. Apparently, political science as it is known in the US is not a major academic field in most French-speaking countries.

⁹ Sylvanus Olympio was president until he was assassinated in 1963. In 1967 a second coup put Eyadema in power; he remained president until his death in 2005 and was succeeded by his son. Eyadema agreed to multi-party elections in 1991 but the army intervened on Eyadema's behalf. After being ambushed, allegedly by soldiers, in 1992, Gilchrist Olympio went into exile, and was precluded from running for president when the constitution was amended in 2002, requiring candidates to reside in the country 12 months before the election.

¹⁰ OPIC is the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, an agency of the US government.

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Appendix I: Sample of questions

These are just some of the questions I had prepared before beginning my research. Because the interviews were open-ended and usually lasted one hour, I was never able to pose all of my questions to a single subject. Usually I would work with my research assistant to come up with a shorter questionnaire that focused on the area of expertise for that subject.

Outcomes/Dependent Variables

1. When did major changes in foreign direct investment policy occur? What were the changes? Include both legal changes and substantive changes (i.e. de facto changes in execution that were not a result of changes in legislation).
2. Looking at each foreign direct investment policy (legal and de facto), please rate each one on a scale of 1-10, where 1 is completely closed (no FDI allowed) and 10 is completely unrestrained (no limitations, no requirements such as domestic shares or employment, no restrictions, no taxes).¹²
3. When did major changes in the rules of the political system occur? What were the changes? Include both legal changes and substantive changes (i.e. de facto changes in execution that were not a result of changes in legislation or the constitution).
4. Looking at each political system/institutional regime (legal and de facto), please rate each one on a scale of 1-10, where 1 is completely authoritarian (no popular participation in government at all) and 10 is completely democratic (free multiparty competitive elections, all significant segments of society have an opportunity to be represented).

Players

5. For each government regime time period, who are the significant actors (individuals or groups) in making decisions about changes in FDI policy and changes in the

political system? This includes individuals and organizations that have a significant input in proposing ideas that will be considered, and whose agreement is required to make the change happen.

- a. Domestic institutional players such as the president, cabinet ministers, legislative leaders, political parties
- b. Societal players such as the military, trade unions, government employee unions, non-government parties, interest groups such as farmers, businesses
- c. International players such as foreign governments, the World Bank, the IMF

Player positions

6. For each player, what are their primary goals and objectives?
7. Can you provide some anecdotes that illustrate that these goals are most important to that player?

Institutions

8. For each government regime, how does a policy change happen? Who initiates it? Who has input into the process? How do interest groups communicate their preferences? How is it decided which policy will actually be implemented?
9. Please provide some anecdotes that illustrate how the different players interacted, who the real decision-makers are, and how a particular policy change succeeded (or failed) to be implemented. Why was an attempted change initiated? Was there an external shock (such as a budget crisis) or some new demand from a player who had a change in preference or an increase in bargaining power?
10. How did each change in the political rules occur? Who initiated, whose acquiescence was necessary for it to succeed, and whose acquiescence could be ignored?
11. Were there cases when a change in the political rules was attempted but did not succeed? Why didn't it succeed?

12. When changing the FDI-policy, how do the political rules make a difference? Is a change in the political rules ever discussed when FDI policy is discussed?
13. When changing the political rules, how does the FDI-policy make a difference? Is a change in the FDI policy ever discussed when changes in the political rules are discussed?

Endnote to Appendix

¹¹ Most of the subjects I interviewed were not used to answering questions that used a range of numbers, so I only got good answers to these types of questions from a handful of interviews.