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A Comprehensive Field Assessment Model of Sanitation Behavior, Water Treatment Practices, and Community-Level Water Quality Management in Rural Areas of Accra, Ghana

Dr. Hossein Gholami
Department of Software Engineering Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran

Dr. Zahra Salehi
School of Data Science University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran

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ABSTRACT

Sanitation practices and water quality management in rural and peri-urban communities remain critical determinants of public health outcomes in developing countries. This study proposes a multilevel analytical framework to examine individual and community-level determinants influencing sanitation behavior, drinking water quality, and resource management in rural communities surrounding Accra, Ghana. Drawing upon empirical field-based evidence and secondary synthesis of relevant literature, the framework integrates socioeconomic, infrastructural, behavioral, and hydrochemical dimensions to explain disparities in sanitation access and water safety. Prior studies highlight that household characteristics, including income, education, and housing type, significantly influence sanitation facility choice and hygiene practices (Adzawla et al., 2020). Similarly, infrastructural limitations and groundwater quality variations in the Accra plains further exacerbate disparities in water safety (Kortatsi, 2006). Evidence from Ghana indicates persistent inequalities in access to improved water and sanitation services, despite national and international interventions (WHO & UNICEF, 2019). According to Ghana. Safe Water Network (2021), rural water supply systems continue to face operational, financial, and quality management challenges, particularly in underserved districts.

This study adopts a multilevel conceptualization to bridge individual behavioral determinants with community infrastructure constraints. The proposed analytical model synthesizes environmental health perspectives with socioecological theory to assess sanitation outcomes holistically. Findings suggest that sanitation behavior is not solely determined by awareness but is deeply embedded in structural inequalities and resource accessibility. The framework provides actionable insights for policymakers and development agencies seeking to improve water quality governance and sanitation infrastructure in rural Ghana.

KEYWORDS

Sanitation, Water Quality, Multilevel Framework, Rural Health, Ghana, Hydrochemistry, Public Health Infrastructure, Environmental Health, Community Determinants, Resource Management.

INTRODUCTION

Sanitation and safe water access are foundational pillars of public health systems, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where infrastructure deficits persist. In rural communities surrounding Accra, Ghana, sanitation challenges are shaped by a complex interaction of socioeconomic constraints, environmental conditions, and institutional limitations. The increasing burden of waterborne diseases and environmental contamination underscores the urgent need for structured analytical approaches to understand determinants of sanitation practices.

Existing evidence suggests that household-level factors such as income, education, and housing quality significantly influence the adoption of improved

sanitation systems (Adzawla et al., 2020). However, these micro-level determinants alone do not fully explain observed disparities. At the community level, infrastructure availability, water supply reliability, and governance systems play equally critical roles. The Safe Water Network in Ghana emphasizes that rural water systems often suffer from inconsistent maintenance, limited funding mechanisms, and fragmented management structures, which compromise long-term sustainability (Ghana. Safe Water Network, 2021).

Hydrochemical variability further complicates the sanitation landscape. Studies conducted in the Accra plains reveal that groundwater quality is influenced by both natural geochemical processes and anthropogenic contamination sources (Kortatsi, 2006). This dual burden of environmental and infrastructural stressors creates significant disparities in water safety across rural communities.

Globally, sanitation inequities remain a persistent challenge. The World Health Organization and UNICEF (2019) report that billions of people still lack access to safely managed sanitation services, with rural populations disproportionately affected. In Ghana, these global trends manifest through localized inequalities in water access, hygiene behavior, and sanitation infrastructure availability. Additionally, Ghana. Safe Water Network (2021) highlights that despite ongoing interventions, rural districts continue to face operational inefficiencies in water distribution and sanitation service delivery.

From a theoretical standpoint, sanitation behavior can be understood through a socioecological lens, which integrates individual behavior, community systems, and policy environments. However, most existing studies focus on isolated determinants rather than integrated multilevel interactions. This fragmentation limits the effectiveness of intervention strategies.

The primary objective of this study is to develop and apply a multilevel analytical framework that captures the interplay between individual behaviors and community-level determinants of sanitation practices, water quality, and resource management. Specifically, the study aims to: (i) identify key socioeconomic and infrastructural determinants of sanitation behavior, (ii) assess the role of water quality variability in shaping hygiene outcomes, and (iii) propose a structured framework for integrated sanitation management in rural Ghana.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform policy design, particularly in resource-constrained settings. By integrating behavioral and environmental dimensions, the framework contributes to a more holistic understanding of sanitation systems. Furthermore, Ghana. Safe Water Network (2021) emphasizes the importance of integrated water management strategies, reinforcing the need for multilevel analytical approaches.

Literature Review

Sanitation and water quality research in Ghana and comparable contexts has evolved through multiple disciplinary perspectives, including environmental health, hydrology, and social epidemiology. A consistent finding across studies is that sanitation outcomes are strongly influenced by socioeconomic disparities and infrastructural inequalities.

Adzawla et al. (2020) demonstrate that household socioeconomic status and housing characteristics significantly determine the choice of toilet facilities among Ghanaian households. Their findings indicate that wealthier households are more likely to adopt improved sanitation systems, while low-income households rely on shared or unimproved facilities. This highlights the role of economic constraints in shaping sanitation behavior.

Similarly, Akpakli et al. (2018) emphasize that access to improved sanitation in rural southern Ghana is influenced by demographic, educational, and geographic factors. Their study, based on surveillance data, reveals persistent rural-urban disparities in sanitation access, reinforcing the structural dimension of inequality. These findings align with broader regional observations that rural communities face disproportionate infrastructural deficits.

Hydrochemical studies provide an environmental dimension to sanitation discourse. Kortatsi (2006) identifies significant variability in groundwater composition across the Accra plains, attributing it to both natural geochemical processes and human activities. Such variability directly impacts drinking water safety and contributes to spatial differences in health risks.

Water quality perception and consumption behavior further complicate sanitation dynamics. Archer et al. (2020) show that bottled water consumption in Ghana is influenced by perceived safety concerns regarding tap water. This perception-driven behavior reflects broader trust deficits in public water systems. Similarly, Rosinger et al. (2018) and Brooks et al. (2017) highlight disparities in water consumption patterns linked to socioeconomic and demographic factors, reinforcing the behavioral dimension of water access inequality.

At a policy level, global assessments by WHO and UNICEF (2019) indicate that inequalities in sanitation and hygiene remain widespread, particularly in rural regions. These disparities are not only infrastructural but also deeply rooted in governance and resource allocation challenges.

The Safe Water Network report on Ghana (2021)

provides critical insights into rural water system performance. It highlights operational inefficiencies, limited maintenance capacity, and financial constraints as key barriers to sustainable water service delivery. Importantly, Ghana. Safe Water Network (2021) emphasizes the need for community-based management systems to enhance sustainability and accountability.

Environmental and socioeconomic studies outside Ghana further contextualize these findings. Condon (2019) discusses rural water crises in developed contexts, illustrating that water insecurity is not limited to developing countries. The American Water Works Association survey (2020) also reveals disparities in water satisfaction across demographic groups, suggesting that water inequality is a global issue.

Overall, the literature indicates three major gaps: (i) fragmentation between behavioral and environmental determinants, (ii) limited integration of hydrochemical and socioeconomic data, and (iii) lack of multilevel analytical frameworks that simultaneously address individual and community determinants. This study addresses these gaps by proposing an integrated framework grounded in empirical and theoretical synthesis.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a technical mixed-methods analytical design combining field-based empirical observations with secondary data synthesis. The approach is structured around a multilevel framework that integrates individual household data with community-level environmental and infrastructural indicators.

The rationale for this design is grounded in the recognition that sanitation and water quality outcomes are not unidimensional. Instead, they emerge from interactions between behavioral choices and systemic constraints. As highlighted by Ghana. Safe Water Network (2021), rural water systems require integrated analytical approaches to capture operational and behavioral complexities.

Analytical Framework Development

The multilevel framework developed in this study is structured into three analytical tiers:

1. Individual Level – Socioeconomic status, education, hygiene behavior, and water usage practices.

2. Household Level – Sanitation facility type, water storage practices, and domestic resource management.

3. Community Level – Infrastructure availability, groundwater quality, governance systems, and service reliability.

Hydrochemical variability is incorporated as an environmental moderator based on findings from Kortatsi (2006), which demonstrate significant spatial variation in groundwater quality.

Methodology

Data Sources and Field-Based Empirical Approach

The methodological structure of this study is grounded in a field-based empirical synthesis supported by secondary datasets from peer-reviewed literature and institutional reports. Rather than relying on a single-site survey, the study constructs an integrated analytical representation of rural sanitation and water systems in communities surrounding Accra, Ghana. This approach is consistent with multilevel environmental health research frameworks that combine observational data with contextual determinants.

Empirical grounding is derived from studies on Ghanaian sanitation and water systems (Adzawla et al., 2020; Akpakli et al., 2018), hydrochemical assessments of groundwater variability (Kortatsi, 2006), and institutional reports on water service performance (WHO & UNICEF, 2019; Ghana. Safe Water Network, 2021). The integration of these sources allows triangulation of behavioral, infrastructural, and environmental dimensions.

The Safe Water Network Ghana dataset is particularly critical in contextualizing rural water supply conditions, including functionality of community-managed systems, service continuity, and operational constraints (Ghana. Safe Water Network, 2021). These parameters are essential for interpreting sanitation outcomes within a systems-based perspective.

Multilevel Analytical Model Specification

The analytical model is structured using a socioecological systems approach combined with hierarchical environmental modeling logic. It assumes that sanitation outcomes (S) are a function of:

- Individual determinants (I)
- Household determinants (H)
- Community determinants (C)
- Environmental hydrochemical variability (E)

Mathematically, the conceptual formulation can be expressed as:

$S = f(I, H, C, E)$

(a) Individual-Level Variables

These include income level, education, hygiene awareness, and behavioral practices such as handwashing and water treatment. Adzawla et al. (2020) emphasize that socioeconomic positioning directly influences sanitation choices, particularly toilet facility adoption.

(b) Household-Level Variables

Household infrastructure, type of dwelling, and water storage practices define exposure risk. Studies indicate that household structural conditions significantly mediate sanitation outcomes (Akpakli et al., 2018).

(c) Community-Level Variables

Community infrastructure includes availability of piped water systems, waste disposal systems, and governance mechanisms. The Safe Water Network report highlights that weak community-level management structures often lead to service breakdowns (Ghana. Safe Water Network, 2021).

(d) Environmental Variables

Hydrochemical characteristics of groundwater, including contamination levels and mineral composition, influence water safety. Kortatsi (2006) demonstrates that spatial variability in groundwater chemistry significantly affects potability in the Accra plains.

Analytical Procedure

The study applies a structured interpretive synthesis method involving:

1. Thematic categorization of determinants (social, infrastructural, environmental)

2. Cross-study comparison of sanitation and water quality outcomes

3. Multilevel interaction mapping between determinants

4. Framework validation through consistency across literature sources

This approach ensures that findings are not isolated but integrated across multiple evidence layers.

Results / Findings

The analysis reveals a complex interaction between individual behaviors, household conditions, and community infrastructure that collectively determine sanitation outcomes in rural Accra communities.

Individual-Level Determinants

Socioeconomic status emerges as a primary determinant of sanitation behavior. Households with higher income and education levels demonstrate greater adoption of improved sanitation facilities and water treatment practices (Adzawla et al., 2020). Conversely, lower-income populations rely on shared or unimproved sanitation systems, increasing exposure to environmental health risks.

Behavioral factors such as water boiling, filtration, and bottled water consumption are also influenced by perceived water safety. Archer et al. (2020) indicate that perceived contamination risks drive bottled water adoption, reflecting trust deficits in public water systems.

Household-Level Determinants

Household infrastructure significantly influences sanitation outcomes. Poorly constructed housing and lack of in-house sanitation facilities increase reliance on communal systems, which are often poorly maintained. Akpakli et al. (2018) highlight that rural households with limited infrastructure exhibit lower sanitation coverage and higher exposure to open defecation practices.

Water storage practices also play a critical role. Inadequate storage containers contribute to secondary contamination even when water is sourced from relatively safe systems.

Community-Level Determinants

Community infrastructure deficits represent a major barrier to sustainable sanitation systems. The Safe Water Network report (2021) indicates that rural water systems in Ghana frequently experience operational failures due to limited maintenance capacity and weak governance structures.

These systemic weaknesses result in intermittent water supply, forcing households to rely on unsafe alternative sources. WHO & UNICEF (2019) further confirm that rural communities experience significantly lower access to safely managed sanitation services compared to urban populations.

Environmental Determinants

Hydrochemical variability in groundwater significantly affects water quality. Kortatsi (2006) identifies elevated levels of certain chemical constituents in groundwater across the Accra plains, indicating natural and anthropogenic contamination influences.

Such variability creates spatial inequities in water safety, meaning that even within the same region, households may experience different levels of water quality risk.

4.5 Integrated Multilevel Findings

The interaction between determinants reveals that sanitation outcomes cannot be attributed to a single factor. Instead:

- Economic constraints limit infrastructure access
- Infrastructure deficits reinforce unsafe behavioral practices
- Environmental contamination amplifies health risks
- Governance gaps reduce system sustainability

Ghana. Safe Water Network (2021) reinforces this interaction by highlighting that technical infrastructure alone is insufficient without effective community governance systems.

Discussion

The findings confirm that sanitation and water quality in rural Accra communities are shaped by interdependent multilevel determinants. The study demonstrates that individual behavior, while important, is heavily constrained by structural and environmental conditions.

Theoretical Implications

The results support socioecological theory, which posits that health outcomes are determined by multiple interacting layers of influence. However, this study extends the theory by explicitly integrating hydrochemical variability as an environmental moderator. Kortatsi (2006) provides empirical justification for including geochemical factors in sanitation frameworks.

Furthermore, the Safe Water Network Ghana data (2021) underscores the importance of institutional and governance-level variables, reinforcing the need for system-oriented approaches.

Practical Implications

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that interventions must move beyond household-level sanitation promotion to include:

- Infrastructure investment in rural water systems
- Strengthening of community water management institutions
- Monitoring of groundwater quality variability
- Behavioral change programs integrated with infrastructure upgrades

WHO & UNICEF (2019) emphasize that inequality reduction requires coordinated multi-sectoral action rather than isolated interventions.

Contradictions and Trade-offs

A key contradiction identified is the reliance on bottled water despite its economic burden and environmental implications. Archer et al. (2020) show that perceived safety drives this behavior, even when it is not economically sustainable.

Additionally, while infrastructure expansion improves access, it does not guarantee consistent service quality, particularly where governance systems are weak (Ghana. Safe Water Network, 2021).

Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data synthesis rather than primary longitudinal field measurements. Additionally, hydrochemical variability is interpreted from existing studies rather than real-time sampling. Despite these limitations, the multilevel framework provides a robust conceptual model for future empirical validation.

Conclusion

This study developed a multilevel analytical framework to assess sanitation practices, water quality, and resource management in rural communities of Accra, Ghana. The findings demonstrate that sanitation outcomes are shaped by interconnected individual, household, community, and environmental determinants.

The integration of socioeconomic, infrastructural, and hydrochemical dimensions provides a comprehensive perspective on rural water and sanitation challenges. Ghana. Safe Water Network (2021) emphasizes that sustainable improvements require system-wide governance and infrastructure coordination, which aligns with the framework proposed in this study.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its structured multilevel approach, which bridges behavioral and environmental determinants into a unified analytical system. Future research should focus on empirical validation using longitudinal field data and real-time water quality monitoring systems.

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