

Graduate Personal Statement

“Will I die here where is thousands of kilometers away from my home? Why am I here?” I asked myself when I was having a high fever lying on a bed in a small hotel in Tarkwa, a mining town in southern Ghana. It was the 4th day since the fever started. I suspected that I got malaria and the doctor proved my suspicion. At the time I was doing a research on community’s response to illegal small-scale gold mining in Ghana for UNDP after my first-year of study at Columbia University. That was the only moment I have ever questioned my motivation in working in the field of development. After I got recovered from malaria, I become more determined to help the underdeveloped world. Malaria is so common that Ghanaians react to it as having just a common cold. It’s not because malaria is not a serious disease considering 25% of death of Ghanaian children is due to malaria. It is simply because people are used to it and have no choice but to live with it. There are so many other things like malaria that people in underdeveloped world get used to while unbearable in a developed world, e.g. lack of stable electricity and clean water, not alone internet access. I know I should never live in my own comfortable world and take it for granted and I know it is the deep compassion for the underprivileged that drives me to where I am now.

Three years ago, I resigned from investment banking and started my exploration in international development. My journey started with a half-year microfinance project in rural Bangladesh and China, followed by my graduate study at Columbia University in Economic and Political Development. After my first year at Columbia, I took one gap year to work for Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI) in China. As the only junior employee hired in China, I helped Chinese pharmaceutical companies to enter into global procurement system led by major development agencies such as UNICEF, USAID and DFID, supplying medicines to the low-income countries at low but sustainable price.

I really enjoyed my time working for CHAI, however, the most unforgettable experience came from my research project for UNDP in Ghana. 102 questionnaires and 46 interviews have been conducted with major stakeholders such as miners, community members, government officials, chiefs and NGO representatives on their interaction with and impression on illegal small-scale mining. I found out that unemployment is the main catalyst for Ghanaians entering into illegal small-scale mining and complex legal and registration process is the major barrier to legalization of small-scale gold mines. Based on research findings, I have made several policy recommendations to both UNDP Ghana office and Ghanaian national government, such as establishing an electronic filing system for Minerals Commission in Ghana. I realized that finding out root causes of a social problem by conducting a field research and making relevant policy recommendations is more attractive to me than implementing a project, since it’s important to take actions for the right causes rather than help others blindly. Since then, I decided to become a researcher rather than a practitioner in international development.

Thanks to Columbia, I have opportunities to meet and learn from world-renown scholars and become fascinated by some common questions in development. For example, can the cause of poverty be explained and generalized into one big idea (e.g. lack of inclusive economic and political institution as written in *Why Nations Fail* by Acemoglu & Duflo) or should we not hope to find a single cause for poverty given its complexity? Should government spend more money on international aid as advocated by Jeffrey Sachs or should we be critical about aid as supported by William Easterly and Dambisa Moyo? In addition, I wish to explore more on natural resource governance in resource-rich African countries inspired by my research experience in Ghana and on the role of Chinese companies in western development system inspired by my working experience with CHAI. I wish someday I will be able to provide my own inputs to answer above questions based on my own research.

Though rich in academic resource, Columbia does not offer an interdisciplinary doctorate program dedicated solely to development studies. Comparatively, PhD in Development Studies at Cambridge fits perfectly for my interdisciplinary backgrounds in business, economics and development and my long-term goal to become a researcher in academic institution or think tank. I decided to apply for MPhil in Development Studies instead of the PhD program since I believe the MPhil program could not only extend my knowledge in many other walks of development which I have not learnt at Columbia, e.g. sociological and philosophical issues in development, but also give me more time to decide my research topic for PhD study. Therefore, I believe the MPhil in Development Studies will become a good stepping stone for further doctorate study at Cambridge and help me realize my long-term goal.

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