

Stability and Change: Multi-Streams and Ideational Explanation of Free Senior Secondary Education Programme Adoption in Ghana

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Abstract

After decades of implementing neoliberal-induced cost-sharing senior secondary education policies, Ghana introduced comprehensively free universal education (FSHS) in 2017. Although much has been written about the FSHS, little is known about how the issue of education access rose to the status of a national problem requiring a major policy shift. We combine insights from Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework with ideational perspectives to investigate and explain the political factors and the agenda-setting dynamics that led to the paradigmatic shift in high school financing in Ghana. This article draws upon elite interviews with government officials, members of parliament, former ministers, donors, CSOs, teachers, parents' associations, and education experts, as well as extensive documentary reviews, including parliamentary Hansards and media publications. We find that a change in government in 2016, the first time an incumbent President had lost power to an opposition candidate since the return to democratic rule in 1992, created a "policy window" for the NPP government to implement free high-school education. This was aided by the rise of new policy entrepreneurs with political commitments and the institutional leverage to provide a solution to an existing policy problem, and financial capacity from Ghana's status as a new oil-producing country. We challenge reductionist accounts which suggest that the main enabler for the adoption of universal social policies in developing countries, including comprehensively free education, is electoral incentive to win political power. We contend that such readings fail to recognise the role of coupling of the problem, policy and politics streams in the agenda-setting and adoption process and the increasing relevance of ideas in shaping the worldviews and incentives of political and policy elites. The paper makes an important contribution to the literature on universal social policy adoption and highlights possible pathways for achieving the sustainable development goal of *leaving no one behind*.

Key Words: Free secondary school; education access; inequality; Sustainable Development Goals; policy entrepreneurs; politics; Ghana

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1. Introduction

In 2017, the Government of Ghana adopted and implemented a nationwide free senior high school (FSHS) programme. The FSHS programme is comprehensive², covering feeding, boarding, tuition, uniforms, utility bills, textbooks, and any other costs associated with the upkeep of students and the administrative management of senior high schools. The adoption and implementation of the FSHS, hardly possible a few years earlier, was a radical policy change that ended the cost-sharing model of high school education financing in Ghana.

The Ghanaian case presents a learning opportunity for most developing countries, especially in Africa, in their quest to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of *leaving no one behind*. SDG 4 calls on countries to implement policies that will “ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. This Goal has significant implications for the realisation of other Goals³ and providing universal access to education may also strengthen the social contract between citizens and the state to achieve broader development outcomes (Porisky et al., 2022). Despite global recognition of education as one of the most significant instruments for achieving desired development outcomes, access to secondary education is largely out of reach for many households in most developing countries, especially in Africa.⁴ A joint UNICEF and African Union Commission (2021) report notes that, notwithstanding some progress in educational enrolment since the 2000s, only 23% of any cohort completes upper secondary education in Africa. By 2019, about 53% of children in the upper secondary education age group were out of school (UNICEF & African Union Commission, 2021). The inequity in education access in sub-Saharan Africa also has gender dimensions, with the United Nations Institute for Statistics also estimating that 36% of girls and 32% of boys are excluded from school by the time they reach adolescence. This situation is compounded by the fallout of COVID-19 and other strains on state capacity to finance education. Expanding access to secondary school education for children in poor households would entail devising innovative funding mechanisms (UNICEF & African Union Commission, 2021), including the introduction of a fee-free policy for all (Williams, 2017). Drawing lessons from the Ghanaian FSHS programme adoption process therefore becomes paramount.

This article explains how secondary education access rose to the status of government policy agenda in Ghana by combining insights from John Kingdon’s (1995) Multiple Streams

² Prior to 2017, parents/guardians paid for feeding, boarding,² and upkeep of students while the government paid for tuition. The cost-sharing arrangement existed for over four decades.

³ These include Goal 1 (No Poverty), Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), Goal 5 (Gender Equality), and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequality)

⁴ This can undermine global development efforts, given that Africa will be home to 40% of the world’s adolescents and children by the middle of the Century (UNICEF & African Union Commission 2021)

Framework with ideational perspectives to illuminate the policy-making process that led to the adoption of the path-departing FSHS. Our goal is to explain the political factors behind the adoption of the programme by highlighting the effects of timing and policy context, key policy actors, events, and conditions that led to the adoption of the programme. Earlier research on the FSHS focused on the impact of the programme on students' performance, access to secondary education (e.g. Adu-Gyamfi et al, 2020; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021) or the challenges of implementation (e.g. Chanimbe & Dankwah, 2021; Tamanja & Pajibo, 2019). However, little is known about the political and the policy making context that facilitated the adoption and implementation of the programme. The only notable exceptions are Asante et al. (2022) and Mohammed (2020), although these studies are limited in two respects: they both offer very thin analyses of the programme's adoption process by either failing to offer a deeper historical and socioeconomic context that made the FSHS programme so groundbreaking, or provided their analyses as part of broader studies that evaluated the entire policy cycle for industrial and educational policies.

This article attempts to fill the gap in the literature on education policy adoption by outlining the process of coupling the three streams of problem, politics, and policy (Kingdon, 1984; Herweg et al., 2022), and the roles of timing and the policy entrepreneurs (Cohen, 2021) that facilitated the coupling process. The findings show that a confluence of factors, such as the change in government in January 2017, the rise of new policy entrepreneurs, the administrative capacity of the new government with reform agenda, electoral calculus and availability of resources made possible by Ghana's new status as an oil-producing country, as the primary reasons that led to the adoption and implementation of Ghana's free SHS in 2017.

Kingdon's MSF and the ideational literature (e.g. Beland, 2005; Cox & Beland, 2013; Cairney, 2020) provide a robust theoretical lens through which to make sense of Ghana's policy making process. This article also presents a historical overview of Ghana's education financing from independence to the time of this writing, before examining how political actors and policy makers defined or framed the cost-sharing policy of high school financing as a problem that needed change. Following an outline of the methodology used for this study, we discuss the roles of ideas, institutions, policy entrepreneurs, and party platforms in the eventual adoption and implementation of the FSHS programme. The conclusion highlights the theoretical and practical lessons that can be learnt from Ghana's experience.

2. Streams, Entrepreneurs, Ideas and Path-Departing Change

Change can be defined as the "empirical observation of difference in form, quality, or state over time" (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995, p. 512). Kingdon's MSF provides us with a useful starting point from which to investigate and explain the impact of timing, government turnover, and policy entrepreneurs in creating a window of opportunity for policy change.

Kingdon (1995) pays particular attention to three streams: problem, politics, and policy. The problem stream refers to issues that citizens and policy makers generally recognize as requiring solutions. Interest groups may seize upon three main concerns within the problem stream: first, they can point to indicators such as inflation, high cost of education and gun violence. Second, they can cite focussing events, that is, significant exacerbations of the problem, usually triggered by an upheaval or disaster (Birkland, 1997). Third, actors can highlight the negative feedback effects of existing policies, such as cost-sharing education policies, and resultant high rates of school dropouts, teenage pregnancy, and unemployment. The political stream consists of the national mood, pressure group campaigns, and administrative or legislative turnover. For MSF scholars, because the executive and the legislature are clothed with significant institutional and policy-making powers, they may constitute the spearhead of agenda setting and change in the political stream (Cairney, 2020). The policy stream is the stage of incisive solutions to the policy problem. According to Zahariadis (2007, p. 72), the policy stream involves a “soup of ideas” that compete for acceptance in the policy process. In the policy stream, various policy brokers, including bureaucrats, parliamentarians, interest groups, policy analysts, and other stakeholders may provide input in the search for solutions to the problem. The acceptance or rejection of an idea will depend on “value acceptability”, “technical feasibility”, budgetary constraints, and future ramifications of the idea (Kingdon, 1984, pp. 138–46; Zahariadis, 2007).

Kingdon (1995) notes that the joining of these three streams opens a window for policy change to occur. However, he also observes that there is an element of chance in the decision of which policy initiatives gain the attention of policy makers and which ones do not. As Section 6 will demonstrate, in the case of Ghana’s FSHS programme, the element of chance is linked to timing, in the sense that the election of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) in December 2016 led to the entry of new power brokers and political leaders, who favoured comprehensive public financing of senior high school education. At the same time, a confluence of factors, including the timely availability of petroleum revenues, donor support, political accountability, and electoral calculus, helped the government of the time to adopt the FSHS.

Cohen (2021) discusses the importance of policy entrepreneurs in harnessing new ideas, reframing policy problems, and determining the right venue for policy change. The role of policy entrepreneurs goes beyond mere advocacy; they specify policy alternatives and help set the national mood for eventual policy change. Policy entrepreneurs are, therefore, those individuals with the resources and skills of manipulation and tact, and who are willing to invest resources in support of a policy they believe in. Most importantly, policy entrepreneurs are the sources of new ideas and innovations in the policy-making process. This is true in Ghana’s case, where decades of the cost-sharing policy for high school financing gave way to free SHS

following the election of a new government with a platform commitment to affordable and accessible high school education for all Ghanaians. Although policy entrepreneurs may be incentivised to canvass policy change to gain political advantage, they may also be driven by ideas of what types of solutions may work better compared to others (Lavers & Hickey, 2016). An effective application of the MSF can therefore benefit from a deliberate incorporation of insights from the literature on ideas to understand the hearts and minds of policy actors within the education policy sub-system in Ghana.

Ideas are causal beliefs held by individuals or adopted by institutions that influence attitudes and actions (Béland & Cox, 2011). Ideas offer the "policy blueprints" that provide political actors with models for reforms (Béland, 2007, p. 3). Ideas also offer the opportunity for actors to coordinate their interests and build coalitions. However, the ideational literature in public policy analysis continues to present a challenging analytical and practical problem. On the one hand, ideas give meaning to the social world of policy actors and often provide the basis for policy actors to rally support for or against an existing policy. As objects of scientific inquiry, ideas are usually treated as subordinate variables to material interests or institutions (Béland & Cox 2011). Ideas, according to Emmerij, Jolly, and Weiss (2005, p. 214), are "beliefs held by individuals or adopted by institutions that influence their attitudes and actions." Ghana's free SHS programme follows this trajectory to a large extent. The cost sharing policy of high school financing, inspired by neoliberal ideas, dominated the policy subsystem for decades until several actors in the policy process started constructing cost sharing as a problem, anti-progress, and unjust to children from less privileged homes. This will be discussed further in Sections 4 and 5.

Kingdon's MSF and the Ideational perspective provide theoretical opportunities to examine the new paths charted in Ghana's educational policy subsystem despite decades of neoliberal market-driven methods of high school financing.

3. Methods and Data

The study draws from elite interviews with policy makers, politicians, donors, teachers, education managers, civil society organisations (CSO), academics, media personnel, and other stakeholders and extensive reviews of available public records, including parliamentary Hansards, media publications, and interviews with key policy officials, as well as legal and policy documents.

We purposively sampled key informants with relevant knowledge in Ghana's education policy process (see Table 1). For example, we targeted only NGOs/CSOs that worked specifically on education and inequality, such as Oxfam and Africa Education Watch. For media personnel, we focussed on Parliamentary correspondents and senior journalists who had followed the debates on the FSHS in the legislature and policy development in Ghana more broadly. Many

of our key informants had occupied multiple education policy and implementation roles in the past, and this enabled them to provide more rounded, informed, and balanced views on the FSHS. For example, one key informant had previously occupied the positions of Pro-Vice Chancellor of a public University, Director General of the Ghana Education Service, Member of Parliament, and Minister of Education. Another key informant, an opposition Member of Parliament at the time of fieldwork, had served as a Deputy Minister of Education in the past. Yet another key informant who was the Ranking Member on Parliament's Select Committee on Education was a former teacher in one of Ghana's popular senior high schools. Our selection criteria also included participants who had followed developments in the Ghana education sector over a *longue durée* and therefore could provide historical insights into the SAP-induced cost sharing and its impact. In total, we sampled 43 participants for the study.

We collected primary data in three phases in 2018, 2020, and 2023. Our aim was to trace both the adoption and implementation processes⁵ of the FSHS over time to obtain a more informed view on the policy. Staggering the data gathering exercise also enabled us to study initial responses from interviewees, allowing for reflection and revision of our instruments to fill in gaps identified in our initial analysis. Our interview guide was drafted to reflect the assumptions of the MSF including the three streams, the role of policy entrepreneurs, windows of opportunity and ideas. On average, interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and a little over one hour.

The next section traces the history of education financing in Ghana and pays more attention to the 1980s when cost-sharing was introduced as an adjustment measure. This will set the tone for appreciating the context within which the FSHS programme was introduced in 2017.

4. Education Financing in Ghana: A Brief History

Historically, access to education in Ghana has been a priority of the state. Key interventions in the pre-independence era included the 10-year education expansion plan in 1945 under the British colonial government, and Kwame Nkrumah's Accelerated Development Plan in 1951, both of which aimed to achieve universal primary education coverage. These interventions used a mixture of strategies to achieve their objectives, including the removal of financial barriers by abolishing fees, providing targeted scholarships and improving teacher-to-student ratios (Akyeampong, 2009). In the immediate post-independence period, successive governments also introduced policies to enhance education access, although rampant disruptions in the governance architecture, particularly through military takeovers, affected

⁵ To enable us to provide a complete and detailed account, this paper focuses on only the adoption process of the FSHS.

the sustainability and impact of these policies. It was not until the early 1980s that Ghana's governance system achieved stability, and educational policies began to take full effect. The early 1980s was a critical moment in Ghana's political and economic history, as a combination of factors plunged Ghana's economy into a downward spiral (Konadu-Agyeman, 2000; Boafo-Arthur, 1999). Ibrahim (2020, p. 103) summarises the situation as follows:

all macro-economic indicators had taken a nosedive, characterised by extremely high-level inflation (about 100% by some accounts), reduction in import volumes by a third, and a significant decline of GDP by some 27% compared to the figure recorded over 20 years prior... These were further compounded by one of the worst droughts in the nation's history, recorded in 1983, as well as the deportation of more than one million Ghanaians from neighbouring Nigeria.

To address the economic crises, Ghana committed to Economic Recovery and Structural Adjustment programmes (SAPs) spearheaded by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As part of the conditions of the SAP, the government withdrew subsidies from social services provision. Notably, “education suffered an even worse fate under the SAPs” witnessing a sharp decline of “its share of budgetary allocation... from 4.3% of government expenditure in 1982... to less than 1% in both 1996 and 1997” (Konadu-Agyemang, 2000, p. 476). Secondary school education was perhaps the most affected by these policies. An African Development Bank (AfDB) report notes that, except for a World Bank intervention of \$15m to support the Community Secondary Project as part of the 1987⁶ education reforms, there was no donor “intervention that targeted senior secondary schools” (AfDB, 2003, p. 29). For these reasons, “household requirement on education” and other services “increased tremendously... thus reducing access... by a majority of the population” (AFRODAD⁷, 2003, p. 29). One notable effect of these measures on secondary school education is that a significant proportion of government expenditure commitments were withdrawn, and the responsibility was transferred to parents (Akyeampong, 2008). The situation saw “a 50 percent rise in feeding and boarding fees, followed by a gradual withdrawal of boarding subsidy” (Acheampong, 2008, p. 2) resulting in a sharp decline in the demand for secondary education due to the heavy financial burden on parents (Akyeampong, 2008). By the late 1990s, disparities in education access had assumed the status of “national concern,” not least because senior secondary schools recorded an “unsatisfactory” gross enrolment ratio of around 18% (64% for junior high) and “equality of access and gender [was] far from being realised, especially in the disadvantaged regions of the northern part of the country” (AFRODAD, 2003, p. 8).

⁶ The 1987 education reforms aimed to increase access to education at the basic level whilst increasing access to secondary education by introducing community-based day schools, increasing enrolment of day students in boarding schools, and diversifying the curriculum (Acheampong, 2008).

⁷ African Forum and Network on Debt and Development.

Since the 2000s, the government of Ghana has implemented several policies to reduce financial barriers and widen access to education (see Table 2). These interventions were in line with Article 25(1)(b) of the 1992 Constitution, which mandates the state to take steps within the first ten years into the promulgation of the Constitution⁸ “for the provision of Free, Compulsory and Universal Education [FCUBE] for all Ghanaian children of school-going age” (Republic of Ghana, 1993)⁹. Whilst these interventions have had some positive effects, challenges still abound, not least because some of the policies may have led to less optimal benefits that were not commensurate with investments.

The limited effect of these interventions is due to political interferences, a lack of policy coordination, delays in release of funds, paltry allocations, wastage and corruption, inadequate infrastructure, inadequate teachers and poor teacher quality (Int. CSO Representative, 2023; see also Akyeampong, 2009; Ampratwum and Armah-Attoh, 2010; Essuman, 2019; Ibrahim, 2020). Crucially, these policies focussed disproportionately on basic education access, meaning that the financial barriers to and inequities in secondary education persisted. Investments in basic education had expanded access at the primary and junior high levels, thereby producing a significant cadre of graduates every year, many of whom could not enter secondary school either because of their inability to pay or lack of space to accommodate them. Notably, gender parity in education was still a challenge, and children “coming from the poorest 20 percent of households, the most deprived districts, and/or from rural areas are about five to six times less likely to access SHS” (Ministry of Education, 2018a, p. xvii).

The following sections analyse the political and policy-making contexts that elevated secondary education access to the status of a national problem.

Insert Table 2 here

5. Education financing in Ghana: a problem in search of a solution?

The definition of a problem by actors depends on the perceptible construction of an issue as a “problem” (see Zahariadis, 2007). The limited access to secondary education owing to financial constraints was acknowledged by some stakeholders, including policy makers,

⁸ On secondary education, Article 25 (1)(b) further states that “Secondary education in its different forms including technical and vocational education shall be made generally available and accessible to all by every appropriate means, and in particular, by the progressive introduction of free education”.

⁹ The interventions were also partly in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and their successor Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 2 of the MDGs aspired to universal primary education coverage for all boys and girls by 2015 whilst Target 1 of SDG 4 envisages that “by 2030, all boys and girls [will] complete free equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes”.

education experts (Int. with Member of Parliament, 2022; Int. with Former MP&Minister of Education, 2018), civil society organisations, and teachers, some of whom were compelled to use “their own monies to pay fees of some students” (Int. with CSO Executive, 2018). In the two years preceding the FSHS programme, that is, 2015 and 2016, nearly 30% of BECE graduates who passed their exams did not enter SHS (Ministry of Education, 2019). The 2017/18 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021) also found that net enrolment was reduced at the senior high school level, with only one out of five children attending; attendance was higher for children from wealthy homes or in urban residence. This situation had been a long-term trend, reflected in persistently low pre-tertiary gross enrolment ratios (Int. with Member of Parliament, 2022).

Insert Table 3 here

Despite the above indicators, the situation of unequal access to education had not been elevated in national discourse as a major issue in need of a new solution, plausibly because policy makers were only concerned with correcting the ills of the existing cost-sharing policy (Int. with SHS Teacher, 2023).

Interviews with study participants and reviews of secondary materials revealed that the first conscious attempt to frame education access as a national problem occurred in 2008, when the opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP) brokered the idea of free senior high school to replace the neoliberal cost-sharing policy. The 2008 NPP Manifesto promised “guaranteed access for all children of school-going age to free quality education currently available at the basic school level” by redefining the scope of basic education from pre-school, primary and junior high “to cover Senior High School education as well” (New Patriotic Party, 2008, p. 69). Whilst Ghanaians recognised the negative feedback effects of cost-sharing on education access, the proposal for comprehensively FSHS seemed a mere political sloganeering at best (Interview with Education Expert, 2018). This pessimism was further highlighted by the incumbent National Democratic Congress (NDC) government, who accused the NPP of making grandiose campaign promises merely to win political power (Int. with MP & Former Deputy Minister, 2022). Critics further argued that the NPP had not demonstrated how it was going to fund such an ambitious policy. The NPP was, however, persistent, citing its past record in introducing similar programmes such as the national health insurance scheme (NHIS) in 2004, which had been deemed impossible by NDC and some Ghanaians before its introduction. On this point, one Member of Parliament, Stevens Siaka, intimated during a debate of the FSHS as follows:

The popular opinion on the other side suggests that it is not yet time and that it should be postponed to the future... When is the future? The future is now... Free SHS would shake every household in the country just like the National Health Insurance Scheme [NHIS]. [When Parliament had to vote on NHIS] they [NDC MPs] walked out. They

rather turned out championing the cause of health insurance. So, I believe that 30 years from now, my Hon Colleagues on the other side would, in the same manner, praise the free SHS policy.¹⁰

These parallels drawn by the NPP seemed to resonate with some Ghanaians, not least because the NHIS had also been introduced within the first term of the Kufuor-led NPP government to replace the neoliberal cash and carry health system.

Despite a closely fought campaign and some progress in selling the FSHS idea to the electorate, the incumbent NPP¹¹ lost the 2008 elections to the NDC, and the debate about FSHS receded, at least for a brief period, only to resurface as a significant issue in the 2012 and (especially) 2016¹² election campaigns (Int. with Member of Parliament, 2022; SHS Teacher, 2023; CSO Representative, 2023). In the NPP's 2012 and 2016 manifestos, the party reiterated that fee-paying secondary school education provision was a problem in need of urgent solution:

Over half of Ghanaian children who sit the BECE do not progress to secondary school. The situation where over 150000 Ghanaian children every year are thrown out of the system is not acceptable. There are approximately 3.8 million persons of secondary school age in Ghana of which 1.2 million are enrolled... less than half [of] our children are in secondary school.

(New Patriotic Party, 2012, p. 23)

The New Patriotic Party (2012, p. 23) manifesto further signalled that “to solve *this problem*, we will extend Free Senior High School education to each child” (our emphasis). By 2012, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) had also softened its earlier position against the FSHS idea, indicating that it was not against the proposal in principle and that the party favoured the approach outlined in the country's Constitution, that is, to make education *progressively* free. Therefore, the NDC's core position outlined in its manifesto revolved around a *progressive* implementation of free SHS education.

Parliament, traditional (print and electronic) and social media, as well as political party campaign platforms, served as the main venues to articulate and contest the ideational stands on the Free SHS programme. In a November 2012 campaign message at a rally in Okere in the Eastern Region, President Mahama said the NDC's programme was that “between 2013 and

¹⁰ Parliament of Ghana - Hansard, 9 March 2017, Column 2530.

¹¹ In the 2008 elections, the NPP Presidential candidate was Nana Addo-Danquah Akufu-Addo, who had taken over from incumbent President Kufuor. The NDC was led by John Evan Attah-Mills.

¹² Nana Akufo-Addo and John Dramani Mahama were the NPP and NDC Presidential candidates, respectively, in both 2012 and 2016.

2016 we are going to eliminate all costs that parents bear at the basic level” and ultimately “make education universal by eliminating all schools under trees so that every community where children are they can have an opportunity to go to school” (*Myjoyonline*, 20 Nov. 2012). A month before that, the flagbearer of the New Patriotic Party, Nana Akufo-Addo, noted at a political rally in the Greater Accra Region that the NPP would begin implementation of the policy in the first year in government – 2013 – should they win the election. For Nana Akufo-Addo, the urgency of the situation was such that “Ghanaians cannot wait for the next 20 years before benefiting from free senior high school education” (*Graphiconline*, 17 Sept. 2012).

Plausibly, the idea brokered by the NPP, and the subsequent framing and reframing of the issues by various actors, had led to a recognition of the inequality in access to senior high school education as a national problem. So popular was this framing and its electoral purchase that the NDC and NPP began to fight over who was the originator of the idea. One NDC MP and Former Deputy Minister, for instance, contended that whilst his party had already initiated plans to achieve a progressively free senior high school access, the NPP had set in motion a more robust communication system which made the idea of free secondary school more associated to that party in the eyes of Ghanaians (Int. with MP & Former Deputy Minister, 2022). On its part, the NPP accused the NDC of trying to appropriate its ideas:

When Nana Akufo-Addo announced the commitment of the NPP to the delivery of free education for senior high schools, the NDC promptly denounced it as impractical. As the import of the proposal, however, began to dawn on them, they began to back track and through massive propaganda created the impression to the people that they too were committed to free education step by step.

(New Patriotic Party, 2016, p. 103).

This section has shown that, whilst previous ERP and SAP policies had led to unbearable financial hardships on parents, and consequently limited access to secondary education, the issue did not rise to the status of a national problem until the NPP framed it as such. This finding aligns with MSF scholars’ assertion that indicators and adverse feedback from existing policies will not automatically be recognised as a problem by policy makers (Herweg et al., 2022), who may be less receptive to new solutions because of “perceived intractability and excessive costs” (Cairney, 2020, p. 197). Rather, whether an issue will be recognised as a national problem is a “political process to exercise [agenda setting] power” by policy actors who consciously frame and assign “causal responsibility” to attract public sympathy and support (Cairney, 2020, p. 197).

The following section presents and explains the various alternatives proposed by policy actors in response to the problem of cost-sharing.

6. Policy stream: policy contestations and the emergence of a “solution”

A policy problem may gain sustained attention in the minds of relevant actors if they are convinced that a feasible solution may be available (Cairney & Zahariadis, 2016). To set the tone for its policy proposals, the NPP promised, through its 2012 (p. 23) and 2016 (p. 107) manifestos, to redefine basic education (kindergarten to junior high school) to include senior high school under the broad theme of *Redefinition of Basic Education*. This promise of a *Free Universal Secondary Education* departed significantly from the constitutional provision of a progressively free secondary education as noted by the NDC’s MP and Ranking Member on Parliament’s Education Select Committee:

In the constitution, levels of education in Ghana are three different levels. We have the basic level, we have the secondary level and then we have the tertiary. So constitutionally basic education ends after junior high school, the secondary level is the senior high school including the technical and vocational and, in the tertiary, we have the diploma and the degree awarding institutions. So basically, for now, there is nothing that makes a senior high school part of basic education, so we still have the three levels of education in the country.

(Int. with Ranking Member, Select Committee on Education, 2022)

For Kingdon (1984) and other MSF scholars, policy proposals must pass several tests, including technical feasibility and the capacity to meet associated cost, before it can be accepted by the public. Whilst most Ghanaians welcomed the idea of a free secondary school education programme, the NPP’s announcement sharply divided public opinion. In line with Kingdon’s (2014, p. 117) expectations, contributors to the “policy primeval soup”, and in some cases skeptics about the NPP’s proposal, included parliamentarians, teachers’ unions, political parties, academics, and church leaders. One leader from the National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT) summed up the situation as follows: “In principle, I don’t think anyone objects to free senior high school. The point of divergence is when we talk about when and how we implement and sustain free senior high school” (Int. with NAGRAT President, 2018).

In Parliament, the opposition NDCs position included those canvassed by Bernard Ahiafor and Twumasi Ampofo, respectively:

Mr Speaker, what is the worth of going to school free of charge under a tree? [In] this Budget Statement... How many new classrooms are proposed for Senior High School — The answer is zero. How many new schools are proposed for Technical and Vocational Schools? The answer is zero. (Parliament of Ghana - Hansard, 9 Mar. 2017, Column 2542)

Mr Speaker, on the free Senior High School (SHS), it is fully welcome, and it is in order... we cannot introduce free SHS without considering a lot of factors. We need

to consider the allowances of teachers, incentives, libraries, the tools— that is technical equipment and so on and teaching and learning materials. If all these things are not there, it would be difficult for us to get quality education while it is free (Parliament of Ghana - Hansard, 17 Mar. 2017, Column 277)

In view of these divergent positions, informed by ideas about alternative solutions to the problem, some opposition political parties, civil society organisations, and religious leaders opposed the NPP's idea of universal FSHS. Three main issues were canvassed to counter the NPP's approach. One, for some, whilst making secondary education completely free may transfer all responsibility from parents/guardians to the government, the history of the Ghanaian state in public service management, and non-contributory social policies would suggest that such an approach may compromise the quality of secondary education (Int. several key informants, 2018). In October 2012, Pastor Mensah Otabil, a well-known and respected public figure and founder of the International Central Gospel Church, received backlash from sympathisers of the NPP for some comments attributed to him over the free SHS idea. Pastor Otabil had intimated that "If somebody tells you something is free, ask them what is the quality? Anything free without control, when it is bad you can't complain. If you don't know the quality, don't take it" (*Modernghana.com*, 29 Oct 2012). Still on quality and the state's poor history in managing social policies in the past (see Section 4), Nana Konadu Agyemang Rawlings, former First Lady of Ghana and then member of the NDC, said in November 2008 that "I am not a prophet of doom, but I can foresee that the investment parents are making in education would go down the drain" if the NPP and "Nana Akufo-Addo is voted into power to implement his free secondary education" (*Ghanaweb*, 17 Nov. 2008).

For Nana Konadu, the inability of the government to effectively implement free education at the basic level was an indication that a FSHS programme would be unsuccessful. She added that "if the government could not pay feeding grants to the few secondary schools in the North promptly", what would Ghanaians "expect the situation to be when those in the whole country are taken on board?" Clearly, there was enough evidence to suggest that whilst successive governments were committed to expanding accessibility to secondary schools, there was reason to expect that much more needed to be done to demonstrate that the FSHS proposal was feasible and acceptable, as the account below shows:

History tells us that [Ghanaian] governments have not been able to fulfil their obligations to institutions especially when it's free. We gave a classic example of the northern school feeding debacle where when school re-opens headmasters and headmistresses in the northern parts have to shout and cry and sometimes threaten to close down the schools before the feeding grant is sent there....So, we were apprehensive that when we are going to have a free senior high school across the length and breadth of the country then the challenges that are associated with the

exercise of free education in the north should be a yardstick for us to follow. (Int. with NAGRAT President, 2018)

Two, in line with expectations of the MSF (Cairney & Zahariadis, 2016), cost and sustainability also shaped debates around the policy idea. Exponents of this position believed that targeting was the best way to ensure value for money and durability particularly given that some parents could afford to pay. A teacher union representative recounts that his association “was a bit apprehensive from the point of... sustainability, and the consequence of resources [not being] channelled timeously and adequately” (Int. with NAGRAT President, 2018). For NAGRAT and other stakeholders, Ghana was “resource challenged” at the time, and introducing such a policy, however well intended, may not be feasible in addressing the problem (Int. with several stakeholders, 2018). Recall that successive governments had struggled to fully implement the constitutionally-enshrined Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) because of the wholesale, rather than needs-based targeted, approach adopted (see Section 4 and Table 2).

Three, Ghanaians were further divided on the question of infrastructure, logistics, and teacher availability. For some, the absence of these resources did not have to be a stumbling block in the adoption and implementation of FSHS because, once the policy was in force, the government could take steps to address the resource gaps (Int. with Political Party Representative, 2023; Education Expert, 2018; Parent-Teacher Association Representative, 2018). Others suggested a gradualist or incremental approach. The then-governing NDC (Int. with Journalist and Parliamentary Correspondent, 2023) and other education sector observers favoured such an approach, particularly given the human resource, logistical, and infrastructural deficit in education service provision at the second cycle level (Interview with SHS Teacher, 2023). This group argued that introducing such a far-reaching policy before looking for the resources was like putting the cart before the horse, in that implementation problems that could have been addressed with careful planning might emerge (Int. with University Professor and Education Expert, 2018).

In line with the NDC’s policy alternative, on 17 September 2015 incumbent President John Dramani Mahama launched his NDC-led government programme, which was referred to at the time as progressive free SHS (PFSHS). Excerpts of a statement issued by the government read: “all is set for the commissioning ceremony of the community day senior High School project at Otum in the Central Region. The President of the Republic will equally take the opportunity to launch the progressively free senior high school programme on this particular day” (Myjoyonline, 17 Sept. 2015). To support the PFSHS programme, the government contracted a \$176 million loan facility from the World Bank under the Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SEIP) to finance the construction of E-blocks and staff bungalows and to tackle declining performance in science and mathematics education by “providing

refresher courses for science and mathematics teachers in less performing schools” (Int. with Ranking Member, Parliamentary Select Committee on Education, 2022). The PFSHS also provided stipends to students from poor households to “meet their basic needs, [such as] taking transportation to school,” and, for girls, buying essential items such as “their sanitary wear”¹³ (Int. with Ranking Member, Parliamentary Select Committee on Education). Although the PFSHS increased access, it adopted a targeted approach that still excluded some who could not afford to pay (Int. with CSO Representative, 2018). The PFSHS was short-lived, as it did not change the NPP’s position of making secondary school education entirely free.

Essentially, whilst the NPP, NDC, and Ghanaians generally had come to recognise cost sharing as a national problem, their proposals for solving the problem were informed by ideas of what may work best under the circumstances, confirming scholars’ assertions that ideas may be integral to actor discourse and choices in the policy stream (Schmidt, 2010; Beland, 2005; Lavers and Hickey, 2016). The following section examines how the NPP seized the right time to popularise and actualise its policy alternative.

7. Path-departing change: timing, policy windows, entrepreneurs, and electoral incentives

Herweg et al. (2018) have hypothesised that where unfavourable conditions threaten a policy maker’s chances of re-election, there is a high probability of a policy window opening in the problem stream (see also Zohlnhöfer et al, 2022, p. 28). Our analysis found that by 2016, the NPP’s free senior high school idea had caught on with Ghanaians. Several factors had rendered the incumbent NDC government unpopular, thus foreshadowing a gradual shortening of its lifespan in power, and, ultimately, the possibility of ceding control of the policy space to another party (Int. with CSO Representative, 2023). Key among these was a worsening economy, with a Centre for Democratic Development survey reporting that about 73% of Ghanaians regarded the economy as “very” or “fairly” bad. The Ghanaian cedi had also depreciated substantially, making it the worst performing currency on the African continent, stronger only to Zambia’s kwacha (Reuters, 31 Dec. 2014). The government was also accused of wanton profligacy involving its appointees whilst corruption had assumed alarming proportions (Int. with Senior Journalist, 2023). Two notable examples were a \$510m dubious energy deal with the UAE-based Ameri group and the payment of a questionable judgment debt of \$12.3m to a businessman and NDC party financier, Afred Agbesi Woyome. The Afred Woyome payment made the government more unpopular after it was declared unlawful by the courts following a whistleblowing act and subsequent legal action by Martin Aminu, a

¹³ Period poverty has lately been recognised as a key challenge for education access for many girls in Ghana and developing countries in general.

former Attorney General in Attah-Mills¹⁴ NDC government who had fallen out with the ruling elites.

Persistent power outages, unpopularly termed “dumsor”, had become a major concern nationwide, frustrating both domestic and commercial life. The NDC government had also attracted opprobrium from some Ghanaians for abolishing a long-held practice of paying allowances/stipends to nursing and teacher trainees. Finally, the government was regarded by many citizens as quite aloof from the burning issues in the country, a situation worsened by President Mahama’s comment that he had developed a “dead goat” syndrome; in other words, he was unperturbed by public criticisms he regarded as unfounded. These and other issues intersected to set the national mood (Int. with Political Party Representative, 2018) for the 2016 elections, ultimately leading to the defeat of the NDC and candidate Mahama by the NPP and Akufo-Addo. President Mahama and the NDC’s 2016 defeat was the first time an incumbent candidate had lost a presidential election since Ghana returned to democratic rule in 1992. Viewed from a MSF perspective, these developments were chance encounters (Kingdon, 1995) that may have provided room the NPP’s FSHS proposal to gain a better chance for adoption than the alternatives canvassed by other policy actors, as we shall see subsequently.

According to Kingdon (1984, p. 152), electoral changeovers “make some things possible that were impossible before”, including surmounting the obstacles that once swayed more powerful policy makers’ attention from new policy problems and solutions in favour of correcting the fallout of existing policies. We find that the outcome of the 2016 elections in Ghana created a policy window for the adoption of the FSHS programme. Nana Akufo-Addo won the elections on the ticket of the NPP having made two unsuccessful attempts in 2008 and 2012. The outcome of the elections presented a test case for actuating the NPP’s campaign promise of making senior high education free. In line with this expectation, the Akufo-Addo government introduced the FSHS programme in September 2017 after less than one year in office, effectively supplanting the PSFHS introduced two years prior by the Mahama-led NDC administration. Following the introduction of the FSHS programme, gross enrolment ratio increased from 37% in the 2011-12 academic year to about 50% in 2016-17 (Ministry of Education, 2018b). According to the Director General of the Ghana Education Service, by August 2020 student enrolment stood at 1,200,645 (from base enrolment of 787,861 in 2016-17) covering 721 senior high as well as technical and vocational schools. Few Ghanaians believed that the policy was possible in the short-term:

¹⁴ President Attah-Mills passed away in July 2012 and was succeeded by John Mahama, who had served as the former’s Vice President.

I think people had an idea it was going to happen though we didn't know when it would happen, so I am sure people were kind of surprised when it happened in the first year [of Akufo-Addo's presidency] (Int. with University Professor and Education Expert, 2018).

Our analysis of the data found a combination of factors and strategies that made it possible for the NPP to implement the policy within a short time once the policy window was created. These included the emergence of both political and technical policy entrepreneurs, strategic deflection of alternative routes to policy development, donor support, political accountability, and electoral incentive.

First, President Akufo-Addo ¹⁵was the primary policy entrepreneur in the FSHS programme adoption process. Being the lead advocate for the FSHS idea in the period leading to the elections, President Akufo-Addo had been put in charge of the resources necessary for giving life to his campaign promise as head of the executive. At same time, the political cost of reneging on his promise could threaten his fortunes in the next elections in 2020 (Int. with Political Party Representative, 2023; Member of Parliament, 2022). The President also had the executive powers under Ghana's constitutional arrangement to adopt and implement the FSHS programme without going through the elaborate process of parliamentary approval. President Akufo-Addo exploited his executive powers to make the Free SHS one of the key policy agendas of his cabinet and the government (Int. with Member of Parliament, 2022). In barely six weeks after being sworn into office, the President signalled in his first State of the Nation Address to parliament on 21 February 2017 that "free SHS starts with the 2017/2018 entrants into public SHS". The following month, on 2 March 2017, the first budget statement presented by the Minister of Finance on behalf of the President also made provisions to "roll out free SHS to ensure equal opportunities for all" (Ministry of Finance, 2017, p. 4). Of the GHS996,800,391 allocated for goods and services to cover the cost of special initiatives, the share of FSHS was GHS400,000,000, representing over 40% of that allocation.

Whilst there was still opposition within government, particularly from Finance Minister Ken Ofori-Atta,¹⁶ who believed that a targeted approach was more feasible, the balance of power swayed in favour of the President. The President was therefore able to ward off internal opposition,¹⁷ aided in part by his appointment of two secondary policy entrepreneurs: Education Minister Matthew Opoku-Prempeh and Dr. Yaw Adutwum. A Member of Parliament and medical doctor by training, Dr. Opoku-Prempeh was regarded by many as a

¹⁵ According to UNESCO (2009, p. 22), "when fee abolition is a major departure from current policies, strong political leadership at the highest level is a prerequisite for successful implementation."

¹⁶ Ofori-Attah later articulated this position in an interview with Bernard Avle on Citi TV.

¹⁷ He had also sidestepped advice from technocrats and experienced educationists such as Prof. Addae-Mensah, although the advice had been solicited by the NPP itself.

promising, high-flying, and astute politician. His relatively young age also projected him as a representation of youth aspiration. Dr. Prempeh seemed more suited for the opposition that might attend the programme idea within the executive and legislature. Also, as a Member of Parliament and educationist by profession, Dr. Adutwum had acquired significant experience in education policy adoption and implementation in the United States, having worked as head of some community schools in that country, and therefore brought technical expertise to complement Dr. Opoku-Prempeh's political experience (Interview with Education Expert, 2018). These two secondary policy entrepreneurs represented the spearhead of the President's translation of the policy intent into action. The primary and secondary policy entrepreneurs understood the rules of the game in Ghanaian politics and policy space, including the right timing, and how to navigate opposition and canvass the resources necessary to operationalise policy ideas. These qualities placed them on a solid footing to actualise their mandate, as MSF scholars have postulated (Cairney, 2020).

Policy entrepreneurs may not necessarily have the resources to exploit policy windows or achieve their policy objectives (Cohen, 2021). To be effective, they must devise strategies to garner the requisite resources, lest they fail to achieve the instrumental benefit which may have incentivised them to push for particular policy solutions (Kingdon, 2011). To address the financial and administrative capacity challenges that were envisaged to forestall the adoption and implementation of the FSHS, the NPP government turned to petroleum revenue allocations. According to the Public Interest and Accountability Committee (PIAC) the FSHS has "benefited substantially from the Annual Budget funding amount (ABFA)¹⁸ ... as a priority area for petroleum revenue spending" (PIAC, 2020). This was complemented by other revenues generated by the government, including loans from development partners as well as contributions from corporate organisations¹⁹ and other stakeholders. Between September 2017 and July 2021, total government allocation to the FSHS was GHS7.62 billion, comprising 4.18 billion from the Government of Ghana and GHS3.44 billion from ABFA. These amounts represented 54.76% and 45.24%, respectively (Ministry of Finance, 2021). At the institutional level, a FSHS Secretariat has been established and headquartered at the Ministry of Education to provide dedicated attention to the implementation of the policy (Int. with Government Official, 2023).

Insert Table 4 here

Second, the resource generation capacities were further boosted by donors (Int. with Donor Representative, 2023). In 2017, the World Bank Group supported the FSHS programme with \$40m credit at the request of the government which amount was in addition to the \$156m

¹⁸ ABFA is the allocation of petroleum revenue for spending as part of the budget in the financial year.

¹⁹ In 2018 Tullow Ghana pledged to invest \$10m to provide infrastructure in support of the FSHS over a five-year period.

provided by the Bank in 2014 as part of the Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SEIP). The financial support was in addition to endorsement statements which were received from donors, thereby legitimating the FSHS programme. For example, in March 2019 the World Bank Vice President for Africa, Dr. Hafez Ghanem, lauded the government for its “decision to provide free education at the senior school level” as an important intervention which “we would like to support” (*Presidency.gov.gh*, 25 March 2019). The Bank’s country director has made a similar endorsement, noting that the policy would enhance access to education for girls (*Ghanaweb*, 27 March 2019). Earlier in 2018, the executive Director of the United Nation’s Children Fund (UNICEF) decided “to pay homage to President Akufo-Addo” because “having free secondary school is probably the greatest gift you can give to a family and a girl” (*Graphiconline*, 28 April 2018). Getting donors on board the FSHS programme was therefore a major boost that cemented the policy idea and helped to make it a reality.

Third, although the FSHS programme represented a substantial shift from that envisaged by the Constitution, the government did not adopt an approach that would entail an amendment of the existing law (Int. with Member of Parliament, 2022). Given the significant difference in opinion between the NPP and the opposition NDC, using the Parliamentary approach would have derailed the process, as had been witnessed in the 2000s when President Kufuor attempted to pass the National Health Insurance (NHIS) law (Int. with CSO Representative, 2023). For these reasons, the government opted for the policy, rather than the legal, route. Consequently, Parliament could not prevent the executive from introducing the programme nor make substantial changes to the course of the government’s plan. Indeed, where the executive had introduced policies to the legislature in the past, the latter only performed an advisory role, as the following response from a member of Parliament demonstrates:

Many a time ... the committee hardly changes or has anything to do with policy issues, whatever comes to us... there is a policy, we look at what they’re saying around the policy...if we see that that policy is going to be disadvantageous to the people then we will make our recommendations for a change of it but the policy itself will remain like that, so we don’t discuss such issues as oversight responsibility. (Int. with Ranking Member, Select Committee on Education, 2020)

Fourth, political accountability and the incentive to win the next elections in 2020 played important roles in the decision to introduce the FSHS as well as the approach adopted by the government (Int. with CSO Representative, 2023; Int. with Member of Parliament, 2022). Since Ghana’s return to democratic rule in 1992, political power has alternated between two major political parties, the NDC and NPP, through elections that are often won by very close margins. The highly competitive elections often make political incumbents vulnerable to losing power to the opposition, with the result that governments have often been torn between governing and survival. Over the years, politicians have navigated these electoral threats through

strategic or instrumental allocation of state resources along patron-client logics, guided by core and swing voter considerations (Int. with CSO Representative, 2023; Political Party Representative, 2023). Quite notably, government expenditure and budget outturns have increased substantially in election years, motivated largely by the desire to provide evidence of government performance, including the provision of infrastructure such as school buildings, hospitals, and roads, in order to appeal to voters (Abdulai & Hickey, 2016). The politics of patronage and clientelism has also led to a short-termist policy planning process that prioritises quantity over quality, and policy discontinuity or layering after political changeovers. It is within this context that the politics surrounding the adoption and implementation of the FSHS must be understood.

Having come to power on the back of a campaign promise to provide FSHS education, the NPP government was under pressure to show evidence of accountability to the electorate. It was motivated by the desire to show evidence that would appease voters as argued by one key informant in the education sector believes that “I am tempted to believe that the genesis of it [FSHS] is to maximize political capital” (Int. with Teachers’ Union Representative, 2018). This point was also made by an NDC parliamentarian who intimated that the FSHS is “just political propaganda to enable the NPP to catch voters” (Int. with MP, 2022). Plausibly, the incentive to implement the FSHS to win voter support may have led to a situation in which the programme was rushed by the government without adequate stakeholder consultation. Regarding this point, and whilst expressing profound support for the FSHS policy, a leader of a parents’ teachers’ association suggested that:

We [parents] produce the raw materials; without the children there wouldn’t be a ministry of education, there wouldn’t be GES, there wouldn’t even be a minister in charge of education. So, you realise that it’s a tripod, the government, the teacher, and the parent. One cannot think and act alone; the three have to sit down and discuss it. So, I will urge the government that in bringing up any policy that involves children, they should consult the parents because they are the major stakeholders in our children’s education. (Int. with Representative, National Parent Teachers Association, 2018)

Key informants were also near-unanimous in their observations that the government started rolling out the policy without a policy document:

I would rather have had a situation where the government would have subjected the free senior high school to a stakeholder discussion and consultation for the development of a national policy which will serve as a blueprint for us to work with. Unfortunately, we don’t have that. Free senior high school is [just] running. (Int. with President, National Parent Teachers Association, 2018)

The foregoing suggests that the outcome of the 2016 election provided a policy window for the actualisation of the NPP's idea to introduce a FSHS in response to the problem of secondary school education access. To use this window, however, the emergence of policy entrepreneurs was critical, as was the opportunity to use oil revenues and support from donors. Equally germane was the government's quest to consolidate its political fortunes in the next elections whilst warding off opposition from the NDC. These findings suggest that the interconnection of the problem, politics, and policy streams is crucial to allowing policy adoption and implementation to occur (Kingdon, 1995).

8. Discussion and Conclusion

Since the early 2000s, universal access to education has been prioritised in the global development agenda evidenced in the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals. Although some gains have been made by extending education to poor and vulnerable populations, a substantial number are still being left behind, especially in low- and middle-income countries (UNICEF and African Union Commission, 2021). Some countries lack the requisite resources or political will to make senior secondary education accessible to all, and cost sharing poses major financial barriers. It is within this context that understanding the few success stories in terms of adoption of comprehensively free or fee-free secondary education policies is paramount. Our research has contributed to this agenda by investigating and explaining the agenda-setting and adoption dynamics that led to the introduction of Ghana's novel comprehensively free senior high school (FSHS) programme. Using Kingdon's MSF and insights from the ideational literature, we have demonstrated how a confluence of factors provided a policy window that enabled the New Patriotic Party (NPP) to break Ghana from a path-dependent cost-sharing education financing model to embrace and introduce a full-fledged comprehensively free secondary education policy in September 2017, less than a year into assuming the reins of government.

This study finds that decades of implementing a cost-sharing education policy in Ghana, spurred by economic recovery and structural adjustment programme conditionalities and their antecedents, had created a challenge for children from poor households to access senior high school education. Despite the adverse effects of past policies in the education sub-system, the prevailing financing model had become entrenched, until the NPP and its presidential candidate framed it as a problem requiring a deliberate policy response. Despite initial scepticism about the possibility of paradigmatic change in the face of stability, other actors, including the National Democratic Congress (NDC) political party, embraced the NPP's idea, thus accentuating the recognition of cost sharing of senior high school education as a problem. Our findings align with the postulations of the multiple streams framework (MSF) that, regardless of the negative impact of prevailing policies and the evidence thereof, they are more likely to attract official recognition if they are projected as a national problem

(Zohlnhöfer et al., 2022; Kingdon, 1984). Whilst stakeholders in Ghana had become sympathetic to the idea of redressing the education financing problem, albeit with different framings, they were still divided as to which policy proposal would offer the best solution. Ideas about feasibility, cost, and historical evidence of the state's (in)capacity to manage social policies gave rise to various alternatives, including comprehensively free universal education, targeted free education policy, among others.

Political party platforms, parliament, and traditional and social media served as the avenues for canvassing support for the various alternatives advanced by divergent policy actors. Whilst the problem of education access seemed to be the primary reason in the debates for policy solution, our study found that the electoral incentive to win political power (for the opposition NPP) or to maintain power (for the incumbent NDC) was a significant driving force in the approaches adopted by various actors. This finding aligns with similar observations by Mohammed and Kuyini (2021) on the FSHS, and Abdulai and Hickey (2016) on the education sector spending. It also highlights the fluidity among the various elements in policy adoption (e.g. ideas vs political incentive). Equally germane is our finding that the FSHS proposed by the NPP only became possible after a window of opportunity had opened for the party to assume political power following the defeat of the NDC in the December 2016 Presidential elections, the first time an incumbent candidate had lost a Presidential election since Ghana's return to democratic elections in 1992.

The pressure to make good a political campaign promise to appease voters for electoral support in the next elections, and the commitment of primary and secondary policy entrepreneurs (Cairney, 2021) to marshal the requisite material and intangible resources were critical to the successful adoption of the policy. Citing the case of fee-free education policies in The Gambia, Namibia, Malawi, and other sub-Saharan African countries, Asante et al. (2022) have also found that electoral campaigns and political turnovers are necessary precursors for significant changes in the education policy sub-system. Our findings and those of other studies confirm the theoretical assumptions of MSF scholars that political power makes the executive and the legislature the most important organs necessary for actuating a policy idea (Zohlnhöfer et al., 2022). Theoretically, our findings align with the assumptions of the MSF and add to recent works that have explored the applicability of the framework in Ghana and Africa more broadly (Osei-Kojo & Leech, 2019; Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021; Kusi-Ampofo et al., 2015). For example, our study supports Osei-Kojo et al. (forthcoming), who used MSF to study performance management in the Ghana Civil Service and concluded that the framework has explanatory power for tracing policy change in non-Western countries. Below, we highlight three main theoretical implications of our study in relation to the MSF and the ideational literature.

First, the evidence from the FSHS suggests that the boundaries between the various streams advanced by the MSF are not rigid, and that, for example, the same issues that frame the problem stream may significantly shape the debates in the policy stream to reach stakeholder consensus or highlight the best alternatives from the “primeval soup” (Kingdon, 1984) of ideas. We note, for instance, that Nana Akufu-Addo, once the lead campaigner against the cost-sharing “problem” of education financing, ultimately became the primary advocate for, and oversaw the implementation of, the FSHS idea. This plausibly suggests that problem brokers may not always be distinct from policy entrepreneurs, and hence supports the arguments of other MSF scholars (Cohen, 2021; Cairney, 2020).

Second, although we agree in part with previous studies that electoral calculus and other political incentives often loom large in agenda-setting and policy adoption, including the FSHS, our study also challenges reductionist accounts that suggest that the “the underlying mechanism causing the adoption of [the] policy is more of a political strategy to win power than responding to a social issue” (Asante et al., 2022). Such readings fail to recognise the increasing relevance of ideas in shaping the worldviews and incentives of political and policy elites. We contend, based on the findings reported in this study, that ideas must not be treated as incidental or appendages to, but rather, as integral parts of the MSF, and may even permeate all facets of the streams advanced by Kingdon and other exponents of the framework. This is regardless of whether these ideas are anchored on some instrumental objectives of political elites or coalitions. Relating this to the FSHS, we suggest two distinct but related questions which may guide ongoing debates on this point: *Ideas* – What drove the conviction of political elites that (i) an issue (e.g. cost-sharing) was a problem and (ii) a particular policy (FSHS) was a feasible solution? *Political incentives* – Were politicians motivated by only the desire to solve a national problem and/or to gain from the window of opportunity that might enable them to actuate the desire to solve the “problem” (of unequal education access)?

Third, although recent research has called for a more deliberate recognition of multinational actors/external factors in policy adoption in Africa and Ghana (Lavers & Hickey, 2016; Foli, 2016), and the integration of this fact in the MSF especially (see Osei-Kojo & Leech, 2019; Osei-Kojo et al., forthcoming), we find that the FSHS was a homegrown²⁰ policy made possible by the political will of policy elites in the country who recognised inequality in education access as a problem. This finding may well suggest that policy actors in developing countries are not

²⁰ This point does not negate the fact that the FSHS idea also served the additional purpose of achieving global development objectives, including the Sustainable Development Goals.

merely passive, nor do they often require external force to activate processes for significant change in the policy space. Regardless, we recognise that once the FSHS idea was set in motion, the Ghana government received commendation and financial support from external partners such as UNICEF and the World Bank thereby lending some legitimacy and potential sustainability to the policy. Presumably, this endorsement contributed to making Ghana's FSHS an example of developing country best practice worthy of emulation by other countries within the sub-region, including Sierra Leone (Asante et al., 2022).

To conclude, this article has provided deeper insights into how developing countries, particularly in contexts of limited state capacity and nascent democratic accountability, can make a paradigm shift from stable but self-undermining past policies and introduce progressive policies with potential for addressing unequal access to social services and achieving development goals more broadly. The findings are, however, limited, not least because they do not report on how the policy formulation and adoption processes of Ghana's FSHS may have affected the quality of policy implementation and outcomes. Indeed, there is reason to expect that where stakeholder concerns about the feasibility, acceptability, and cost of a policy idea are not fully addressed before its adoption, as was the case with the FSHS, lingering contestations may feed back into implementation and thus the policy's durability and quality of outcomes. This concern was similarly reported about Kenya's universal social pension (Porisky et al., 2022) and Obama's Affordable Care Act and the Dodd-Frank Act in the US (Patashnik & Zelizer, 2013). Future research should investigate whether decisions taken in the agenda-setting, formulation, and adoption stages of the FSHS policy may have impacted its sustainability and, in doing so, (failed to) achieve the policy's objectives.

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Tables

Table 1: List and details of study participants

Organization/ Group/Individual	No. of participants
Members of Parliament	2
(Former) Ministers of State	2
Political Party Representatives	4
NGOs/Civil Society Representatives	3
Teachers' Union Representatives	4
Parent Teachers Association Representatives	6
Senior High School Managers and Teachers	10
Educationists/Experts	4
Donors/Transnational actors	2
Ghana Education Service officials	4

Journalists/Media Personnel	2
Total	43

Table 2 Some key moments in education financing and subsidies in Ghana

Year	Policy	Funding	Objectives and fee strategy	Achievements	Notable Challenges	Sources
1945	10-year education expansion plan	Colonial Administration	To achieve universal primary education by 1970	Improved access but didn't achieve universal enrolment	Impeded by quality criterion for expansion	Acheampong,2009:179-80
1951	Accelerated Development Plan (ADP)	Nkrumah-led/Colonial Administration	To achieve universal primary education by 1966 -Abolished tuition -School expansion -Teacher recruitment	Improved access but did not achieve universal enrolment		Acheampong,2009:179-80
1961	Education Act	GoG	Compulsory universal primary education to build on benefits of ADP -Abolished fees -Scholarships for secondary and tertiary targeted at the northern and Brong Ahafo Regions	Improved access but didn't achieve universal enrolment	Cost of books, stationery and equipment borne by parents/guardians	Acheampong,2009:179-80
1987	Education Reform Programme	GoG and donors	Increase access to both basic and secondary education -introduce community day schools -admitting day students into boarding schools			Casely-Hayford et al.,2007; Acheampong;2008
1995	Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE)	GoG and donors	Achieve universal primary enrolment -Expand infrastructure and access, improve teaching and learning, ensure efficiency and sustainability, decentralise education management -Fees reduction, exercise books subsidies	Significant increase in basic school enrolment	Poor supervision and management by District Education Offices Poor coordination e.g. of donor support Urban vs rural disparity in teacher distribution Inefficiency i.e. 'wastage' of resources on households capable of paying	Essuman,2019: 31-35; Acheampong, 2009:179-80; Casely-Hayford et al.,2007

1999/2000	Ghana Education Trust Fund	GoG: VAT tax				Casely-Hayford et al., 2007
2004/2005	Capitation Grant		To support FCUBE Removed fees and levies	Increased basic school enrolment e.g. by 22% in <2 years	Delays in funds release, limited textbooks, large class sizes etc. Unofficial reintroduction of levies e.g. PTA dues	Ampratwum&Armah-Attoh, 2010; Essuman, 2019: 31-35
2005	Ghana School Feeding Programme	GoG, FAO...	Increase enrolment, attendance and retention	Increased access Providing one hot meal a day in targeted poor primary schools	Politicization, inadequate funding, payment delays, corruption	Essuman, 2019: 31-35
2015	Progressive Free Senior High School	GoG and Donors	Increase enrolment in SHS -expand infrastructure -Train teachers in STEM -provide targeted stipend	Increased enrolment but did not remove financial barriers to access		

Table 3 Qualified BECE graduate vs SHS enrolment

Year	Registered BECE Candidates	Qualified for SHS	Enrolled in SHS	Qualified but didn't enrol in SHS	%Placed but could not enrol
2015	440,469	415,012	299,649	115,363	27.8
2016	461,009	420,135	308,799	111,336	26.5
2017	468,060	424,224	361,771	62,453	14.7
2018	521,811	486,641	433,819	52,822	10.9
2019	512,083	459,912	404,856	55,056	11.9

Source: Ministry of Education, 2022

Table 4 Component of ABFA allocation spent on FSHS

ABFA on FSHS	Year		
	2017	2018	2019
Petroleum revenue amount (GHS)	196m	415m	680m
%of ABFA	59	52	32

Compiled from PIAC, 2020