

PhD Seminar: Global Public Health and Development

Instructor: Dr. Matthew Parbst

Term: 2nd Quarter, 2025/26

Schedule: Thursdays, 10:15–13:30 (2 sessions per week in back-to-back 1.5-hour blocks)

Week 6 Exception: Tuesday, Dec 9 (final session)

Room: 4c - IV piano - Sarfatti 25\

Course Overview

This PhD-level seminar introduces students to foundational frameworks and cutting-edge debates in global public health. The course is divided into two parts:

1. **Global Health Toolkit (Weeks 1–2):** Systems thinking, key metrics, methods, and institutions.
2. **Applications and Debates (Weeks 3–6):** Equity vs. efficiency, vertical vs. horizontal interventions, prevention paradox, global health security vs. Universal Health Coverage (UHC), and more.

The course prioritizes deep discussion, interdisciplinary synthesis, policy relevance, and critical analysis of global public health paradigms. It is designed to support your shift from a consumer of knowledge to an emerging producer of it. This course is explicitly critical of the one-policy–one-outcome paradigm, emphasizing the limitations of evaluating interventions without accounting for dynamic, complex social systems. Methodologically, we will interrogate the assumptions behind population-level interventions and explore how their effects depend on the surrounding policy ecosystem, implementation context, and interaction with other social determinants. Assignments are scaffolded to help students apply systems thinking and heterogeneous treatment effect (HTE) logic to real-world policy dilemmas.

Course Objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Critically interpret global health metrics and burden estimates
 - Apply systems thinking tools to public health policy problems
 - Understand and analyze heterogeneous treatment effects (HTE) in evaluation
 - Debate and synthesize evidence across key global health controversies
 - Translate evidence into policy-relevant formats
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Assignments & Evaluation

Rubrics for all assignments will be posted on Blackboard **at least two weeks before each due date** to support student clarity and planning.

Component	Weight
Participation & Discussion Lead	20%
Weekly Reflection Memos (6 total)	10%
Policy Brief Proposal (Week 2)	5%
Seminar Presentations (2 total)	15%
Policy Brief (Week 4)	15%
Final Project (Week 6)	30%
Meta-Reflection & Self-Assessment	5%

Final Project & Assessment (30%)

The final project is the capstone of this course. It invites you to synthesize core course concepts — systems thinking, global health metrics, policy frameworks, and heterogeneous treatment logic — and apply them to a real-world public health challenge. Rather than a single required format, you may select the output that best matches your intellectual interests and professional trajectory.

Objectives

- Integrate and apply course frameworks to analyze a contemporary or historical global health issue.
- Demonstrate mastery in evaluating policy dynamics, implementation complexity, and outcome heterogeneity.
- Communicate your findings effectively to academic, policy, or mixed audiences.
- Reflect on your analytical process and the use (or non-use) of AI tools in developing your final work.

Project Format Options

You may choose one of the following formats. All options require equivalent effort and will be graded with the same rigor.

Option A: Academic Research Paper

- Approximately 15–18 pages, double-spaced (excluding references)
- Grounded in theory and evidence, akin to a journal article
- Must include: research question, conceptual framing, methods, findings/discussion, implications
- *Example:* The impact of vertical vs. horizontal program architecture on HIV outcomes in Uganda, 2000–2015

Option B: Policy Brief + Technical Memo

- 2–3 page policy brief (clear, jargon-free, designed for policymakers)
- 8–10 page technical memo backing the brief (with full evidence, methods, stakeholder analysis)
- *Example:* Reducing under-five mortality in Bangladesh: Policy options for scaling community health workers

Option C: Grant or Study Proposal

- Approximately 10–12 pages. Emulates a real research or implementation grant proposal
- Includes: specific aims, background, theory of change, methods, feasibility, innovation
- *Example:* Proposal to evaluate cash transfers and food security among displaced populations in Lebanon

Option D: Case-Based Portfolio

- Approximately 12–15 page document integrating systems mapping, stakeholder analysis, and evidence synthesis for a real case (country, policy domain, or intervention)
- May include: causal loop diagrams, logic models, or qualitative vignettes
- *Example:* Why did Ghana succeed in rolling out UHC reforms in 2004–2014? A systems case study

Option E: Creative Translation (Podcast/Blog/Visualization + Brief)

- A creative product (e.g. short podcast episode, visual explainer, infographic, policy blog) plus a 5-page written brief explaining rationale, research basis, and intended audience
- Must demonstrate conceptual rigor and engagement with course themes
- *Example:* Podcast: “Decolonizing Aid in Global Health – Voices from the Field” plus brief with stakeholder critique

Schedule (Fall 2025)

Application weeks (Weeks 3–6) will include structured group discussion blocks in each session. These are designed to deepen peer-to-peer learning, support collaborative sensemaking of complex debates, and allow students to test policy arguments in real time. Group activities will include structured small-group debates, stakeholder mapping, role-play, and policy prioritization exercises. Participation in these sessions forms part of the discussion grade.

Week 1 – Nov 6 (Thursday)

- **Session 1:** Introduction to Global Public Health

Assignment: Memo #1

- **Session 2:** Systems Thinking Foundations

Assignment: Memo #2, Causal Loop Activity

Week 2 – Nov 13 (Thursday)

- **Session 3:** Global Metrics in Systems Perspective

Activity: Metric mapping exercise

- **Session 4:** Policy Implementation as Complex Systems

Assignment: Policy Brief Proposal Due

Week 3 – Nov 20 (Thursday)

- **Session 5:** Equity vs. Efficiency

Assignment: Memo #3

- **Session 6:** Vertical vs. Horizontal Approaches

Presentation: Student 1

Week 4 – Nov 27 (Thursday)

- **Session 7:** Prevention & the Prevention Paradox

Presentation: Student 2

Assignment: Memo #4

- **Session 8:** Global Health Security vs. Universal Health Coverage (UHC)

Assignment: Policy Brief Due

Week 5 – Dec 4 (Thursday)

- **Session 9:** Social Determinants vs. Biomedical Approaches

Presentation: Student 3

Assignment: Memo #5

- **Session 10:** Decolonizing Global Health

Presentation: Student 4

Assignment: Memo #6

Week 6 – Dec 9 (Tuesday only)

- **Session 11:** Planetary & One Health + Final Paper Workshop

Presentation: Student 5

Activity: Stakeholder mapping + Draft feedback exchange

- *Final Paper & Meta-Reflection Due: December 12*
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Readings and Materials

All required and optional readings will be announced and uploaded to Blackboard throughout the course.

Contact & Office Hours

Email: matthew.parbst@unibocconi.it

Office Hours: Friday 15:00 to 17:00, by appointment only

Office: Room 6 B2 05, Dondena Centre, Roentgen Building

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to uphold academic honesty in all assignments and discussions, in accordance with Bocconi University's Student Code of Conduct (Rectoral Decree No. 110, 08.11.2023). Academic dishonesty — including but not limited to plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, fabrication of data, or improper use of AI tools — will result in disciplinary sanctions that may include a failing grade, suspension, or exclusion from the university.

Special attention should be paid to the rules regarding the use of Artificial Intelligence. According to Bocconi policy, "unauthorized or improper use of Artificial Intelligence tools during exams or other tests, including final papers/degree theses" may lead to suspension or exclusion (Code of Conduct, Annex 1, Art. 6). In this course, **AI use is permitted and encouraged when disclosed appropriately** (see "Generative AI Use" section).

When in doubt about proper citation, collaboration, or tool use, ask the instructor in advance. in all assignments and discussions. Plagiarism, fabrication, or other forms of misconduct will be subject to university policies.

Course Expectations

This course differs from typical graduate seminars in that it is structured in two explicit phases. The first is a **“toolkit” phase** where you will develop a systems-based understanding of global public health through theoretical and empirical frameworks. The second is an **application phase**, during which we apply these frameworks to real-world health challenges using case-based discussions, small group activities, stakeholder role play, and live policy debates.

Roughly half of your grade is designed to reflect your **engagement with the course materials, your peers, and the learning process itself** — including discussion participation, memos, and presentations. The other half is based on **individual synthesis and communication**, primarily through the policy brief and final paper. This design supports a dynamic classroom environment and active learning.

To succeed, you will need to attend regularly, participate fully, and complete assignments thoughtfully. The structure is deliberately interactive — come ready to think, speak, reflect, and challenge ideas.

Course Policies & Important Information

Blackboard Platform: Course materials, updates, and readings will be posted to Blackboard. Readings not accessible through library subscriptions will be provided directly. Lecture slides will be uploaded the night before class, and additional resources (e.g. policy reports, media links) may be posted periodically. Readings not accessible through library subscriptions will be provided directly. Lecture slides will be uploaded the night before class, and additional resources (e.g. policy reports, media links) may be posted periodically.

Attendance: Full attendance is expected for all scheduled sessions. You are responsible for any announcements or content discussed. If you must miss class, please coordinate with peers for notes or updates. Slides will not capture all material.

E-mail Policy: Students are encouraged to email the instructor with course-related questions or concerns. Please include "Global Public Health" in the subject line and a brief description of your query so it can be prioritized. Use your university-associated email address and maintain professional email etiquette. Emails will typically receive a reply within 48 business hours. For longer or more complex issues, students are encouraged to attend office hours or request a meeting.

Late Policy: Assignments submitted late will incur a 10% per-day penalty unless prior arrangements are made at least 48 hours in advance. Exceptions are made for documented illness or emergency.

Accessibility Accommodations: Students requiring accommodations should register with Accessibility Services and submit documentation to the instructor as early as possible. All personal information will be treated confidentially.

Illness-Related Accommodations: If you are ill and miss a required activity, documentation (Verification of Illness form or equivalent) must be submitted to the instructor.

Additional Support: The university registrar and student services offer help for non-academic concerns. If personal or family challenges arise, these offices can help coordinate accommodations.

Instructor Midterm Review (Week 3)

A brief midterm review will be conducted during Week 3. You'll be invited to complete an anonymous feedback form assessing the course's pace, clarity, inclusivity, and relevance. We'll also hold a vote on potential readings or topic choices for final sessions to ensure the course adapts to your learning priorities.

Generative AI Use

This course assumes the use of generative AI tools (e.g. ChatGPT, Claude, Copilot) in research, analysis, and writing. Generative AI can be a powerful aid to clarify ideas, brainstorm, organize arguments, and refine writing. However, effective use requires thoughtful prompting, critical oversight, and reflective engagement.

Students are expected to use these tools ethically and transparently, as part of a process of intellectual development — not as a shortcut to bypass learning. For each major assignment — including the policy brief, presentations, and final paper — students must include a brief AI Use Reflection (approx. 150–300 words) addressing:

- What tasks did you use generative AI for? (e.g. outlining, summarizing literature, editing, identifying counterarguments)
- Why did you choose to use it at that point in your process?
- What prompts did you use? (List or summarize key prompts or strategies that were especially useful or ineffective)
- How did AI output shape or change your thinking, structure, or conclusions?
- What did you learn — about the topic or your own thinking — through this interaction?

This reflection is not graded for “correctness” but rather for insight and clarity. It supports your skill development, helps the instructor understand your process, and may allow for tailored feedback on your prompt design, judgment, or blind spots.

Best Practices

- Be precise and iterative in your prompts. Ask the model to explain, compare, or clarify rather than just “write.”
- Use AI as a sparring partner, not a ghostwriter: question its answers, ask for alternatives, test assumptions.
- Cross-check any facts, statistics, or claims. You are responsible for final accuracy and academic rigor.
- Save your best prompts and outputs — you may be asked to submit them in an appendix for the final assignment.

This policy aligns with Bocconi’s Student Code of Conduct and current best practices in graduate education. Undisclosed or uncritical use of AI will be treated as a violation of academic integrity. Transparent and reflective use, however, is encouraged — as a sign of intellectual maturity. (e.g. ChatGPT, Claude, Copilot) in research, analysis, and writing. Students are expected to engage these tools ethically and transparently. For each major assignment — including the policy brief, presentations, and final paper — students must include a short section explaining:

- **How generative AI was used**
- **How it improved or changed their thinking or project**
- **What they learned from using it**

This reflective disclosure promotes skill development and metacognitive awareness, and aligns with academic integrity expectations at Bocconi. Students are responsible for the final output and must critically evaluate all AI-generated content for accuracy and appropriateness.

Accessibility

Please reach out early to discuss any accessibility needs or learning accommodations. The course is designed to be inclusive and adaptive.

Course Modifications

The instructor reserves the right to modify topics, readings, or assignments to better meet course goals or respond to student interests. Any changes will be communicated with sufficient advance notice through Blackboard and in class.