

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

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	20%
Weekly Reflection Memos (6 total)	10%
Policy Brief Proposal (Week 3)	5%
Seminar Presentations (1 total)	15%
Policy Brief (Week 5)	15%
Final Project (Week 6)	30%
Meta-Reflection & Self-Assessment	5%

Participation (20%)

Each week includes structured group activities—causal loop mapping, metric mapping exercises, stakeholder analysis, policy debates, and collaborative problem-solving. Participation is assessed based on:

- Consistent attendance and preparation
- Thoughtful contributions to whole-class and small-group discussions
- Constructive engagement with peers' ideas
- Active involvement in all structured activities

Participation is evaluated holistically across the six weeks of the course, with attention to the quality and consistency of your engagement rather than mere quantity of contributions.

Weekly Reflection Memos (10%)

Each memo (500–700 words) engages with the **core theme and assigned readings** of the week. Memos are designed as *low-stakes, high-value* reflections to help you synthesize ideas, identify tensions, and prepare for in-depth discussion.

Rather than summarizing readings, focus on **interpretation, critique, and application**. You are encouraged to explore how the week's materials connect to broader questions of systems thinking, policy design, or global public health governance.

Purpose

To develop your ability to think across levels of analysis — linking theory, evidence, and implementation — and to surface the questions that matter most for your evolving research agenda.

Weekly Focus

The **core question or guiding priority** for each memo will be provided by the instructor at

the end of the previous week's class (and posted on Blackboard).

This allows the memo to reflect where our discussions are heading — whether a key conceptual tension, a recent policy controversy, or a gap you collectively identified in the readings.

Format and Submission:

- 500–700 words (diagrams, bullets, or systems maps welcome)
- Submit on Blackboard by **10:00 AM before class**
- Optional AI-use note (e.g., “Used Claude to summarize key debates; rewrote entirely in my own words.”)

Evaluation (0–10 points each)

- 4 pts: Analytical depth and engagement with weekly theme
- 3 pts: Integration of readings and course frameworks
- 2 pts: Clarity, organization, and originality
- 1 pt: Forward-looking or integrative insight

Average of six memo scores = **10% of final grade**

These memos are reflective laboratories for your thinking — a space to explore, test, and connect ideas before seminar discussion.

This structure:

- keeps your **grading scheme and administrative clarity**,
- lets you set the **weekly focus dynamically**,
- and fits your **systems-thinking ethos** (“adaptive, iterative, responsive”).

Policy Brief Proposal (Week 3, 5%)

Due: November 20, by 10:00 AM (before class)

Length: 150-250 words

Format: Submit via Blackboard

Overview

The Policy Brief Proposal is a short planning document that outlines your intended topic for the Policy Brief (due Week 5). This allows for early feedback on scope, framing, and feasibility.

Required Elements

Your proposal should briefly address:

1. **Topic & Research Question:** What public health challenge will you address? What specific policy question will you explore?

2. **Course Connection:** How does this topic relate to course debates (e.g., equity vs. efficiency, vertical vs. horizontal approaches, prevention paradox, HTE logic)?
3. **Final Project Link** (optional): If you plan to build on this topic for your final project, briefly note the potential connection.

Evaluation

This is a **completion-based assignment**. Full credit for submitting on time with thoughtful topic selection. Instructor will provide brief written feedback within 48 hours to help refine your approach.

AI Use

AI tools may be used to brainstorm topics or refine your research question. An optional 1-2 sentence note about AI use is welcome. Detailed AI Use Reflections are only required for major assignments.

Seminar Presentations (15%)

Overview

Each student will present once during Weeks 4-6, serving as a discussion launcher for one session topic. This is a brief, focused presentation (15 minutes maximum) designed to frame key debates and provoke peer discussion.

Format

- **Length:** 12-15 minutes
- **Slides:** 5-7 slides maximum
- **Purpose:** Frame tensions, pose questions, launch discussion (not teach or lecture)

Required Components

1. **Topic framing** (5-7 min): Identify 2-3 core tensions or debates in the required readings
2. **Systems connection** (2-3 min): How does this topic connect to course frameworks (equity/efficiency, vertical/horizontal, HTE logic, etc.)?
3. **Discussion questions** (3-5 min): Pose 3-4 provocative questions for class discussion

Preparation

- Review all required readings for your assigned week
- Identify genuine tensions or unresolved debates (not “right answers”)
- Prepare questions that invite multiple perspectives
- Keep slides simple - visuals and key points only

Your Role

You are **launching** discussion, not leading the entire session. After your 15-minute presentation, you'll participate as a peer while the instructor facilitates the broader discussion.

Sign-Up

Students will sign up for presentation slots during Week 2. Available topics:

- Week 4, Session 7: Prevention & the Prevention Paradox
- Week 4, Session 8: Global Health Security vs. UHC
- Week 5, Session 9: Social Determinants vs. Biomedical Approaches
- Week 5, Session 10: Decolonizing Global Health

Evaluation

Presentations are assessed on:

- **Preparation & Content** (50%): Engagement with readings, quality of questions, connection to course frameworks
- **Clarity & Delivery** (30%): Stayed within time limit, clear framing of tensions
- **Discussion Contribution** (20%): Thoughtful participation after presenting

This is a low-stakes assignment designed to build facilitation skills and deepen engagement with course material. Rubric will be posted on Blackboard two weeks before first presentations.

Policy Brief Assignment (Week 5, 15%)

Due: December 4, 11:59 PM

Length: 5-7 pages (excluding references and visuals)

Format: Word document (.docx) preferred

Overview

Synthesize course frameworks—systems thinking, HTE logic, and global health evidence—into a policy-relevant document addressing a real-world public health challenge. You are encouraged to select a topic that may serve as a foundation for your final project, though this is not required.

Write for policy-engaged readers (WHO officials, donor program officers, ministry advisors, NGO leadership) with limited time. Be accessible, evidence-based, and actionable.

Required Components

1. Executive Summary (0.5 pages): Standalone overview of problem, evidence, and recommendation

2. Problem Definition & Context (1-1.5 pages)

- Define the challenge (burden, populations, scope)
- Identify key stakeholders and their interests
- Situate in course debates (equity/efficiency, vertical/horizontal, etc.)
- **Required visual:** Systems map (causal loop, logic model, or stakeholder map)

3. Evidence Synthesis (2-2.5 pages)

- What interventions have been tried? What does evidence show?
- Apply HTE logic: For whom? Under what conditions? What implementation factors matter?
- Acknowledge gaps, contradictions, context-dependence, and equity implications
- Minimum 5-7 quality sources; at least 10 total references

4. Policy Recommendation (1.5-2 pages)

- Clear, feasible, specific recommendation with justification
- Address system complexity, tradeoffs, risks, and political economy
- Suggest monitoring priorities

5. Conclusion (0.5 pages): Restate problem, recommendation, significance, and next steps

Connection to Final Project

The policy brief can be adapted to any final project format:

- **Option A (Research Paper):** Expand literature review, add methods, deepen theoretical analysis
- **Option B (Grant Proposal):** Reframe as background/significance, add specific aims, methods, feasibility, budget
- **Option C (Case Portfolio):** Deepen systems analysis, add stakeholder mapping and implementation narrative
- **Option D (Creative Translation):** Use as research backbone for accessible format (podcast, visual, blog) plus 5-page rationale

Students may also pivot to a new topic for the final project.

The Proposal-to-Brief-to-Final Sequence

- **Week 3 (Nov 20):** Policy Brief Proposal due (150-250 words: topic, question, sources, final project connection)
- **Week 5 (Dec 4):** Policy Brief due
- **By Dec 6:** Graded briefs returned with feedback
- **Week 6 (Dec 9):** Final project workshop and peer consultation
- **Final project due:** TBD (sufficient time post-brief feedback for iteration)

Submission Requirements

Submit to Blackboard by 11:59 PM, December 4:

1. Policy brief (Word document preferred)
2. AI Use Reflection (150-300 words: tasks, prompts, impact on thinking, what you learned)
3. Optional: 1-2 sentence note on connection to final project

Evaluation

Full rubric on Blackboard two weeks prior. Key criteria:

- Problem framing & systems thinking (25%)
- Evidence synthesis & HTE logic (30%)
- Policy recommendation & feasibility (25%)
- Communication & clarity (15%)
- AI reflection & integrity (5%)

Complete assignment guidelines, examples, and tips distributed Week 2.

Final Project & Assessment (TBD)

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: 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 C: 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 D: 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

Meta-Reflection & Self-Assessment (5%)

Due: TBD (submitted with Final Project)

Length: 500-750 words

Format: Submit via Blackboard

Overview

The meta-reflection is an exercise in **cumulative reflexive metacognition** - a critical examination of how your thinking has evolved across the course and how AI tools have shaped (or not shaped) your intellectual process. This is not a summary of course content, but rather a reflective analysis of your own cognitive and methodological development.

Required Elements

Your reflection should address:

1. **Intellectual Evolution:** How has your thinking about global health problems changed from Week 1 to now? What frameworks or concepts fundamentally shifted your analytical approach?
2. **AI as Cognitive Partner:** Across the assignments (memos, proposal, policy brief, presentation, final project), how did your use of AI tools evolve? When was AI most/least useful? How did it shape, extend, or constrain your thinking?
3. **Metacognitive Awareness:** What did you learn about how you learn, think, and produce knowledge? What patterns emerged in your analytical process?

4. **Unresolved Tensions:** What questions, debates, or frameworks remain unresolved or uncomfortable for you? Why?

Evaluation

This is a **completion-based assignment**. Full credit for thoughtful, honest reflection that demonstrates genuine engagement with your own cognitive process. There are no “right answers” - the goal is reflexive awareness and intellectual honesty.

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)

Assignment: Memo #1

- **Session 1:** Introduction to Global Public Health
- **Session 2:** Systems Thinking Foundations

Group Activity: Causal Loop Activity

Week 2 – Nov 13 (Thursday)

Assignment: Memo #2

- **Session 3:** Global Metrics in Systems Perspective
Activity: Metric mapping exercise
- **Session 4:** Policy Implementation as Complex Systems
Activity: TBD

Week 3 – Nov 20 (Thursday)

Assignment: Policy Brief Proposal Due

Memo #3

- **Session 5:** Equity vs. Efficiency
Activity: TBD
- **Session 6:** Vertical vs. Horizontal Approaches
Activity: TBD

Week 4 – Nov 27 (Thursday)

Assignment: Memo #4

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

Activity: TBD

Presentation: Student 1

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

Activity: TBD

Week 5 – Dec 4 (Thursday)

Assignment: Policy Brief Due

Memo #5

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

Activity: TBD

Presentation: Student 2

- **Session 10:** Decolonizing Global Health

Activity: TBD

Presentation: Student 3

Week 6 – Dec 9 (Tuesday only)

Assignment: Memo #6

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

Presentation: Student 4

Activity: Stakeholder mapping + Draft feedback exchange

- *Final Project & Meta-Reflection Due: TBD*

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. 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.

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.

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.