Agbogbloshie is a microcosm within Ghana. The old Densu River that crosses this area exudes death and gives off nauseating odours. This outlying suburb, that can be reached by foot from the Accra city centre, has become a new graveyard for the millions of computers, TV sets, printers and cellular phones, arriving uncontrolled and seriously damaged from Europe and the US, crossing the porous borders of this West African country.
"This area is like the end of the world. Everything is toxic and polluted: the soil, the ground, the air and the water". Mike Anane repeats this motto time and time again. He is an environmental activist who has spent more than seven years denouncing the environmental and health consequences derived from the accumulation of tonnes of electronic debris, or ‘e-waste’, in this suburb. According to his estimates, some three thousand individuals scavenge the refuse dump every day. Most of them are minor children. “The health of these kids is put at a serious danger, since they are exposed everyday to toxic chemicals, such as lead and cadmium, that build up in the human body, affect the nervous system and with the passing of time, cause respiratory and carcinogenic diseases”.

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Isaiah is one of those children that wander around the Agbogbloshie dumping ground. Aged 13, he knows what means to work 12 hours a day to earn one or two Cedis (Ghanaian currency, equivalent to less than €1 Euro). His only tools are a small nylon bag and his bare hands to rummage through the scrap, looking for copper and aluminium. He knows where to find it, however he has to draw on all his resources, burning the wires of the computer equipment in uncontrolled fires. “I am aware that the smoke we breathe is very harmful and contaminates blood, however, we need the money,” he admits, with the typical resignation of an adult. Isaiah is the only male member of his family. He never knew his father, and now lives with his eldest sister and his mother, who complains that he can only go to school when there is enough food and money to pay the weekly rent (for the wood hut where they live), that amounts to the equivalent of €4 Euros.

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In Agbogbloshie, experience also gives you that extra edge. Everybody knows Mohammed Hassan. He has been settled at the refuse dump for more than two decades, not very far from a flagging fruit and meat market. Now he runs his own business selling music systems, DVD players and separate computer parts. Everything is out of order, but the parts have their price. The metals contained within these electronic devices, once extracted and subject to the judgement of the scale, are exchanged for a few cents. “We can make €1 Euro per kilogram of copper. Aluminium, steel and brass is bought at half this price,” explains a scrap merchant who is barely 9 years old. Mohammed does not like to speak about minors. “I do not work with children,” he emphatically states. However, child labour is an accepted practice, although it is rarely commented upon by those involved in it.

In Agbogbloshie slum, children work on the e-waste materials to be found there. They normally work 12-hour days to earn one or two Cedis (Ghanaian currency, equivalent to less than €1 Euro).

Two children heading home from school, to Agbogbloshie slum, which contains a large e-waste dumping ground in it. According to Mike Anane, a local environmental activist, approximately 3000 individuals scavenge the refuse dump every day. Most of them are children. “The health of these kids is put in serious danger, since they are exposed everyday to toxic chemicals, such as lead and cadmium, that build up in the human body, affect the nervous system and with the passing of time, cause respiratory and carcinogenic diseases.”
Ghana has the dubious privilege of being one of the new shelters for the illegal shipments of e-waste, following the trail of other countries like China, India, Pakistan, Indonesia or Nigeria. Despite the various international agreements supported by the United Nations, like the Basel Convention (not signed by the US), or European Directives that expressly prevent the export of electronic debris to developing countries, trans-border movement of e-waste has rocketed in recent years.

Different reports issued by Greenpeace denounce that this toxic material crosses the borders very easily. It is imported under the guise of second-hand reusable items. Customs controls are “a colander”, regrets Lambert Faabeluon, Deputy Director of the Ghana Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). According to its own statistics, 75% of the technological material arriving at the Tema harbour is not operational.

“A road sign points towards the main harbour of Tema, the largest in the country. Customs controls are "a colander" according to Lambert Faabeluon, the Deputy Director of Ghana’s EPA.

A woman walking through Agbogbloshie slum, which has become one of the main e-waste graveyards in the world. The lack of control over flow of second hand electronic goods through Ghana’s border has made it a paradise for e-waste merchants from overseas and within Ghana.

Local workers carry the newly received e-waste goods onto trucks in Tema Harbour, the largest in the country. 75% of the technological material arriving at the Tema harbour is not operational.

Computer hardware in Agbogbloshie slum, which has become one of the main e-waste graveyards in the world.

Ghana’s border has made it a paradise for e-waste merchants from overseas and within Ghana.
According to the U.N.O., the amount of electronic waste generated by the planet has increased to more than 40 million tonnes every year. But, who is responsible for its distribution? Who discovered this new business that exploits poverty? The answer is not as easy. “The liability has a collective nature”, says Nick Nutall, spokesperson of the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP). “There are many actors involved in this story: first of all, the manufacturers, who must eliminate the most pollutant materials from their products, then local authorities, who are doing nothing to prevent such an illegal trade, and finally consumers themselves”.

Recycling an old computer following the environmental protocols represents a high cost for companies. But to send it to countries like Ghana or Nigeria through an intermediary might become a true business. “Only in the US there are hundreds of false recycling companies”, reveals Jim Puckett, Executive Director of the Seattle-based NGO Basel Action Network. “They are private companies and at least 80% of them do not recycle anything. Rather, they fill containers and ship them overseas to developing countries”.

ACCRA, GHANA - APRIL 2010: The sun rises at dawn in Agbogbloshie slum, which is a microcosm within Ghana. The old Densu River that crosses this area exudes death and gives off nauseating odours. This outlying suburb of the capital city of Accra, that can be reached on foot from the city centre, has become a graveyard for millions of computers, televisions, printers and cellular phones, arriving uncontrolled and seriously damaged from Europe and the US, crossing the porous borders of this West African country.
Second-hand shops have proliferated in Accra, Ghana’s capital. They form part of the urban landscape, especially in shopping districts like Newtown. "Until two years ago, the demand for computers in Ghana was one of the largest in Africa," explains Frederic, the owner of one of these shops. "People cannot afford to buy new computers, so they come here."

Frederic buys the material from Sweden, but most of the retailers simply go to the port and buy the products on the basis of their appearance. "We cannot test them," complains one of them. "This is a risky business. You are staking your money. Sometimes you win, but other times you are only buying scrap and lose what you have invested."

The scene is the same at every corner. Streets become showcases. Hip-hop music sounds bare out. Goods are piled up. TV Displays of every size, damaged computers, dusty Hi-Fi Systems and shabby freezers. Everything is for sale. The employees of the shops try to repair the damage. If anything does not work, it will end in the hands of the young scrap merchants who travel all over the city each day, pushing their wooden barrows overflowing with e-waste purchased at a ridiculous price. Its destination: the Agbogbloshie refuse dump. Once again, the story begins. The circle is closed.
ACCRA, GHANA - APRIL 2010: A 17-year-old boy displays some electric cables that he is about to burn and melt down. Agbobloshie slum’s dumping ground is full of children at work on the e-waste materials to be found there. They normally work 12-hour days to earn one or two Cedis (Ghanaian currency, equivalent to less than €1 Euro). For tools they often just have a small nylon bag and their bare hands to rummage through the scrap, looking for copper and aluminium. They know where to find it, however have to be resourceful by burning the wires from e-waste in uncontrolled fires, that emit toxic fumes, in order to extract the metal.
ACCRA, GHANA - APRIL 2010: Agbogbloshie slum's dumping ground is full of children at work on the e-waste materials to be found there. They normally work 12-hour days to earn one or two Cedis (Ghanaian currency, equivalent to less than €1 Euro). For tools they often just have a small nylon bag and their bare hands to rummage through the scrap, looking for copper and aluminium. They know where to find it, however have to be resourceful buy burning the wires from e-waste in uncontrolled fires, that emit toxic fumes, in order to extract the metal.
ACCRA, GHANA - APRIL 2010: A group of local workers extracting parts from e-waste in Agbogbloshie slum, which is a microcosm within Ghana. The old Densu River that crosses this area exudes death and gives off nauseating odours. This outlying suburb of the capital city of Accra, that can be reached on foot from the city centre, has become a graveyard for millions of computers, televisions, printers and cellular phones, arriving uncontrolled and seriously damaged from Europe and the US, crossing the porous borders of this West African country.

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ACCRA, GHANA - APRIL 2010: A local worker playing football (soccer) in Agbogbloshie slum, which is a microcosm within Ghana. Football is like a religion here, and a potential means of escape. This outlying suburb of the capital city of Accra, that can be reached on foot from the city centre, has become a graveyard for millions of computers, televisions, printers and cellular phones, arriving uncontrolled and seriously damaged from Europe and the US, crossing the porous borders of this West African country.
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