

Economic Boom or Environmental Doom: E-waste Management Practices in a Ghanaian City

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In the rapid urbanization of Accra as in most cities in the developing world, individuals try to make a living by engaging in novel occupations such as e-waste management. This study examines the threats and opportunities of current e-waste management at Agbogbloshie, the largest scrap yard in Ghana, using both qualitative and quantitative data. This was against the backdrop that unemployment among the economically active population in Ghana is about 17.6% while about 28.5% of the population lives below the poverty line. Indeed, the national unemployment rate is 3.6% compare to 6.3% recorded in urban areas with Accra recording 8.9%. Thus, in Ghana today, the private sector remains the largest employer, accounting for two-thirds (66.7%) against 28.5% of formal sector employment. hence government's decision to create the enabling environment for the informal sector in particular to thrive. One such informal activity is e-waste scavenging.

Currently, there is body of knowledge about the emergence of e-waste recycling as a source of livelihood for the poor. However, none comprehensively examines the merits and demerits of the new enterprise, given room for and encouraging its occasional sensational castigations by media practitioners and NGO's. This study fills this lacuna, using findings from Agbogbloshie, the biggest e-waste recycling site in Ghana. It hopes to provide valuable insight into its potential impact on complex gamut of urban environmental management and possibly, poverty reduction.

The study for example reveals that, e-waste collectors (the lowest barrier of entry) earn on the average \$3.5, or (GH¢550 a month) representing about two and a half times the average income of most informal workers in Ghana (GLSS, 2007). Also, e-waste collectors also involved in dismantling and metal recovery earn US \$8 a day while even the youth under 15, many of whom participate as part-time collectors after school activities or as truants, earn US \$20 a month. Thus, an average e-waste collector at Abgobgloshie earn about GH¢ 550.00 monthly which is above the poverty line (GH¢ 30.90) and even the earnings of an average public servant (GH¢ 137.28). Notwithstanding this livelihood opportunity, the process is also seen as a potential source of irreparable health and environmental hazards. The study suggests that perhaps the ideal mix of skilled labour from the informal sector coupled with appropriate technology perhaps can provide solutions for sustainable e-waste practices.