

### Ghana's e-Waste Dump Seeps Poison

By Samantha L. Stewart



- 1 ON THE OUTSKIRTS of Accra lies the Agbogbloshie slum — one of Ghana's largest electronics-waste dumps. Amid black smoke and the stench of burning plastic, a mountain of abandoned motherboards, computer monitors, and hard drives litters the landscape. It is no wonder the locals call it "Sodom and Gomorrah."
- 2 Behind this apocalyptic scene is the best of intentions gone awry. For decades, Western countries have been donating computers to West Africa with the hope of pushing the developing world into the digital age. Instead, the efforts have backfired, reducing many communities to massive piles of smoldering e-waste.
- 3 The problem really began with the computers themselves: many were outdated, broken, and unusable. And they arrived in far greater numbers than anyone had originally expected. More than 50 million tons of discarded electronics are produced each year, according to the United Nations Environment Programme. And in Europe, only 25 percent of e-waste gets recycled. So in recent years the need for disposal alternatives has skyrocketed. Unregulated shipping containers, marked "donations," started landing in developing countries, packed with e-waste. What had been an ad hoc development project quickly devolved into a scheme for companies to get around national regulations and cheaply dump dangerous garbage into ill-equipped and extraordinarily poor rural villages.
- 4 The result? In Agbogbloshie it is a treacherous treasure hunt. Villagers burn the discarded electronics to extract copper and other salable metals. Local manufacturers buy the commodities, offering one of the only steady income streams in town. Unfortunately, the fumes from the burning debris are extremely hazardous: in Agbogbloshie's soil and water, there are high concentrations of lead, mercury, thallium, hydrogen cyanide, and PVC.

- 5 As if poisons weren't enough, Ghana is also one of the top sources of cybercrime in the world, according to the U.S. State Department. Hard drives containing sensitive personal data end up in the hands of criminals who comb through these dump sites to steal information. So the hazards of technological trash actually flow north as well as south.

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