



Leave no waste behind: Exploring bottom-up initiatives in Ghana

18 November 2019

by [Maria Tomai](#)

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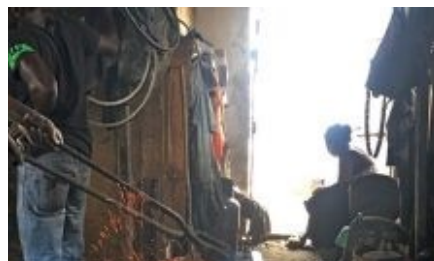


Waste management is a massive problem for many of the world's fastest growing economies, as sacrifices are made on the altar of ever-expanding consumption. Ghana, a country in West Africa, is no different. In 2012, a [World Bank report](#) said that as many as 19,000 Ghanaians were dying prematurely and \$290 million were being lost every year, mainly due to poor sanitation and hygiene. Our [SITE4Society](#) team led a site visit and interdisciplinary workshop to understand the issue from various angles, before proposing a range of new and truly sustainable solutions.

In 2018, the SITE4Society team ([Prof. Shyama Ramani](#), [Dr. Sanae Okamoto](#) and I, [Maria Tomai](#)) won a grant from the Worldwide Universities Network to create a collaboration between four universities (Maastricht University, the University of Ghana, University College Dublin, and the University of York) on the topic of Urban Solid Waste Management. Initial discussions revealed that it would be impossible for the researchers from Europe to understand the different dimensions of the nature of the waste management problem in developing countries through a standard academic workshop alone. Therefore, SITE4Society led the academic team to explore and understand the substance of the problem. That's how, in October, our team hit the ground running in Ghana, on its first and main appointment: to untie the complex knot of issues binding sustainable solid waste management, challenging countries and cities across the globe.

Meeting waste in motion

The Old Fadama scrap yard, better known as Agboghloshie, lying in the Greater Accra Region, is well-known internationally for being one of the world's largest e-waste dumpsites, where electronics arrive when they reach their end-of-life for primary users. Informal recycling and upcycling practices of e-waste, with immense health and environmental hazards, form the base of this unconventional economy. Covering an area of almost 150 hectares, constituting



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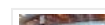
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the home and workplace of 4000 scrap workers and 2000 collectors, our visit to Agbogbloshie challenged our perceptions on what the Circular Economy means and how it can be applied on the ground. From big cooking pots, made out of different aluminium parts (through sand casting) and dainty bracelets from metals extracted from electronics, to repaired laptops and TVs, this place raised question after question: How can a site like Agbogbloshie develop economically while minimising all the grave threats to life and environment? And how can that be achieved while championing inclusiveness and equality?



Our next stop was a (former) turtle nesting beach right next to the Regional Maritime University of Ghana. This is one of the many seaside locations in Accra where tons of waste are constantly washed onto the beach. All kinds of shoes and clothes, handbags, toothpaste tubes, teddy bears, glass items and plenty of plastics are finding their burial ground there. Richmond, the founder of Plastic Punch, an NGO focusing on plastic pollution, invited us to participate in a cleaning activity on the beach. The few kilos of waste collected by our team were like a fistful of sand compared to the ocean of garbage around us. A senior researcher remarked that with a bulldozer, the beach would be cleaned more quickly and efficiently. Another asked: why don't we try to close the "garbage tap" that spews out this trash on the beach once and for all? Richmond turned the question back to us, asking us to locate said garbage tap, the source of all this waste being continually dumped into the sea. But, of course we couldn't. Indeed, a real mystery, since the vast majority of this waste found at the shore, is coming from products that the local population cannot afford or even have access to. Yes, this sort of awareness-creation exercise is the best way to discover puzzles grounded in reality that should be explored much more.

The WUN circular economy conference

The next day, our team of academics, aided by national and international practitioners, consultants, entrepreneurs, policymakers, journalists, researchers and students, came together for an interactive day filled with knowledge sharing. Speakers' presentations and panel discussions shed light on the issue of sustainable waste management, approaching it from a variety of different angles and reflecting on topics raised during our field visits.

Each waste stream exists within a larger socio-political and environmental context and therefore any intervention must be carefully applied in line with the specific context of the community in question. This insight from Dr. Redeker (University of York), served as a touchstone for the arguments and propositions of the day. Problems may seem universal, but the what, how and why of waste is always somehow different. This was reaffirmed again and again by experts from South Africa, Uganda and Ghana in the first panel discussion hosted during the forum. A further consensus point was the need to co-design solutions with civil society, private sector and academia all playing an active role.

From another angle, a wake-up call was sounded by Prof. Holden (University College Dublin), whose research disputes the conventional concept of waste hierarchy (reduce-reuse-recycle-recover-dispose). Taking the line that prevention of waste should be the optimum solution in the case of food waste, his arguments are based on evidence that resources 'spent' on making food cannot be offset. In the same spirit, Dr. Curran (University College Dublin) presented a holistic approach to the Circular Economy, through [Agrocycle](#), a project involving innovative products, trading and education in the agri-food sector.

So, what is next? Should we wait for policies to come first? Definitely not, was the resounding answer of the waste-preneurs in the second panel discussion. Building an organisation that has a clear structure and vision was their first step, indeed the cornerstone of their enterprises. Once these are in place, scaling-up is what matters the most.

The waste management problems faced by Ghana, along with many other countries, are complex in nature calling for multidisciplinary approaches and active participation of every player in the system. This SITE4Society event cut our umbilical cord to many illusions, reminding us that in order to solve a problem we first need to dive into its origins and keep in touch with them all the way.

Click [here](#) for more information about the programme and speakers.



Next external event:
6 February 2020



Next open day:
7 March 2020



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3 April 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our mission to Ghana would not have been possible without the support of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, Plastic Punch and the Institute for Environment and Sanitation Studies (IESS), University of Ghana. This project was co-founded and supported by the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN), Maastricht University, University of York, University College Dublin, University of Ghana, UNU-FLORES and UNU-MERIT.

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Maria Tomai's research focuses on urban sustainability and behavioural change. Maria is working as Research Assistant to Prof. Ramani in SITE4Society to study transitions to a circular economy in Europe and Emerging Countries. She holds a MSc. in Global Innovation Economics from the University of Maastricht in the Netherlands and a BSc. in Business Administration from the Athens University of Economics and Business in Greece.

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