

Plastic Waste: A monster

The Times Call for Drastic Measures

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Recently, as my 'trotto' waited in a bumper-to-bumper traffic situation, I gave a young boy hocking "pure water" my business. But as I handed him 5 pesewas for the Cool Pack sachet, the environmentalist in me cringed. I began to wonder: *Where will this sachet end up? Will it stack in a far-off landfill? Will it clog the flow of a gutter? Will it drift to the ocean? Or will it add to slum-side waste*

ropolis' waste is a major threat to marine ecosystems, upon which many Ghanaians are economically dependent. As we've seen repeatedly throughout the industrial world, the short-term dumping of pollutants into ecosystems has long-term consequences. When animals mistake plastic particles for food, they soon die off, and the food chain's fragile equilibrium is disrupted. If plastic waste regulation isn't greatly and forthwith improved, fish won't be on Ghana's menu.



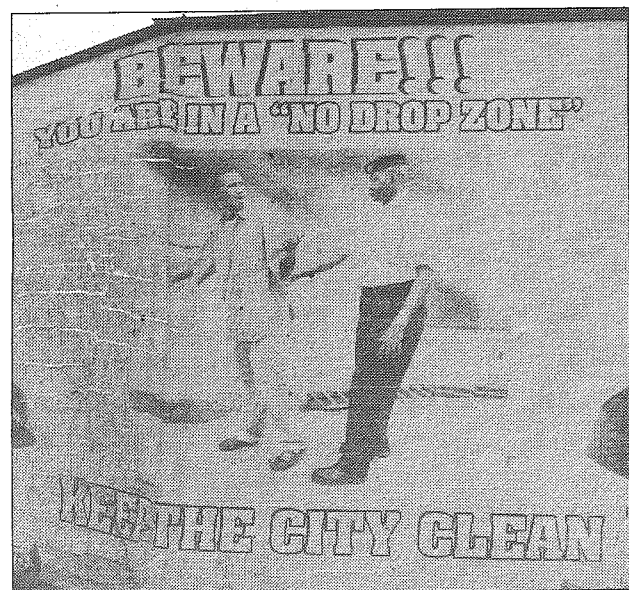
no economic opportunities for the inhabitants (most of whom are immigrants from rural northern Ghana), many make their meager living by extracting copper from computer innards and selling it for scrap. As a result of sustained exposure to the heavy metals that computers contain, the workers suffer severe respiratory symptoms and long-term nervous system damage. In addition to this frighteningly malignant E-waste, plastic bags, bottles, and wrappers cause a host of other health problems for Sodom and Gomorra inhabitants. "When it rains, the water just stays there," explained Alberta Alhass, a 24-year old resident. The plastic debris prevents water from draining. Stagnant puddles fester with rot, teem with mosquitoes, and emit a nauseating odor. "It brings diarrhea, malaria,

and lots of sicknesses. We need our health." Agboghloshie is an extreme illustration of the perils of plastic, but the issue is not confined to the slums. Throughout the city, cashed sachets and tattered black bags obstruct gutters and create unmoving cesspools for bacteria and mosquitoes to breed in.

Pre-plastic technologies

If severe health hazards result from discarded plastic, should we stop producing it altogether and "revert" to pre-plastic technologies? Although the thought of a plastic-less world seems grossly inconvenient, it is important to note that the stuff has been around for only fifty years. We can do without it, if we choose. When I raised this argument to Alberta Alhass, she coun-

tered, "No, plastic is good. But when you use plastic, you have to have a good place to put it at the end. After taking what we need from it, we have to burn it, but the smoke that comes from it causes disease. It's good. It's bad. It has advantages and disadvantages. How to maintain it is the problem." The Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA), Accra's municipal government, is charged with this seemingly insurmountable task. AMA WARNING: "KEEP GHANA CLEAN," read the AMA's downtown signage, one part of its effort to discourage careless littering. AMA lists the "springing up of unauthorized temporary structures" and the "continuously increasing number of squatters" as principal reasons for Accra's waste-related woes.



piles that burden already-burdened communities?

Plastic is fundamentally different from other human-made materials. It cannot break down into naturally occurring minerals, nor can it be eaten by any living organism. Thus, once it's made, it's here to stay for a long time. This makes the production and disposal of plastic a grave environmental problem in our increasingly industrial world. Here in Accra, the effects of plastic waste are plain to see. Not all of the city's plastic waste makes it to the landfill. Inevitably, whether out of ignorance, apathy, or necessity, some fail to properly dispose of their plastic. As a result, every street, every sidewalk, every corner of Accra is peppered with detritus. The Gulf of Guinea is the final resting place for much of the littered plastic. According to the Geological Survey Department's 2005 pollution map of Accra, household waste and sewage overflow into the Atlantic on several stretches of Accra's coast. The me-

for long. Plastic hurts humans too. It leeches toxins, obstructs sanitation, and breeds disease. Our synthetic invention has come back to bite us. We've created a monster.

Dumping Ground

Sodom and Gomorra, the slums of Agboghloshie, are a tragic case in point. Just meters away from the shanties where impoverished multitudes eat and sleep a deep ditch piles with reeking waste products. The majority of the trash comes from the slum itself, where waste collection services are unavailable or unaffordable. Throughout the day, the slum-dwellers cross this river of refuse on rickety wooden bridges.

A notorious dumping ground for the world's discarded electronics, the Agboghloshie dump is full of circuit boards and central processing units, which contain lead, mercury, cadmium, and other highly toxic metals. With next to



Granted, squatters and unauthorized structures do make plastic waste difficult to manage but there wouldn't be such an urban influx of squatters if rural living standards weren't so dire. And who is to blame for that? Neglected by a central government stripped for revenue, rural immigrants flood into Accra in hopes of benefiting from an economy on the rise. Understandably, for the downtrodden squatters, putting food on the table takes precedent over long-term issues like sanitation, environmental protection, and urban planning. For the past decade, the AMA's efforts have targeted the Sodom and Gomorra squatters in particular. In 2002, the Assembly launched its foreign-funded Korle Lagoon Ecological Restoration Project, which will demolish Sodom and Gomorra and dredge solid waste from the neighboring Korle Lagoon's putrid water. Plans have been postponed, however, due to lengthy debates on the legality of evicting more than 40,000 people from their homes.

Although the AMA may be trying in earnest to prevent plastic pollution, its efforts are insufficient and misguided. It has slowed the damage slightly, not stopped or repaired it. Much is left undone.

Creative solutions

Perhaps the AMA should look abroad for inspiration. Ghana is not alone. Developed and developing nations all over the world face the same plastic problem, and many of them are finding creative solutions. For example, the New York Times reported last year that Ahmed Khan, an entrepreneur in Bangalore, India, is pioneering an environmentally friendly industry: taking salvageable plastic from landfills and incorporating it into pavement. Khan has managed to solve two serious problems plaguing his country: copious plastic waste and shoddy roads. Although it's no milk and honey, streets paved with plastic could be an important piece of Accra's waste management puzzle.

Improving environmental education, dredging polluted waters, and finding ways to recycle our waste are all crucial components, to be sure. But these leave the root causes of plastic pollution unaddressed. Is the problem that squatters overwhelm the city's waste management capabilities or is it that northern Ghana is economically marginalized? Is it that we improperly dispose of our sachets or is it that we produce them in the first place? While we need immediate, short-term remedies, we also need to consider the long-term consequences of Ghana's industrial and consumer ambitions.