

## Fragmented Urbanisation in Accra: Tracing the Evolution of Agbogbloshie in the Context of Global and Local Dynamics<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

This paper contributes to increasing and updating the level of knowledge about the Agbogbloshie site in Accra.

Starting from the most recent decongestion activity that led to the demolition of the main e-waste recycling site, the paper aims to reconstruct the leading global and local dynamics that have contributed to the construction, shaping, and now reconfiguring of the urban space of the site. By comparing ethnographic studies conducted on the site and reviewing literature on African urbanisation, the paper identifies characteristic traits belonging to the process of urban space formation and urbanisation on the continent within the site's history. The paper concludes that the development of Agbogbloshie can be traced both within the long-term trends of the fragmentary colonial and post-colonial urbanisation process in Accra and to the influence of external elements attributable to the current phase of globalisation.

Concerning the formation of the scrapyards, the paper analyses the factors that have established links between the local and global dimensions by making Agbogbloshie one of the main hubs for international e-waste traffic. Lastly, the paper traces the dynamics that led to the recent demolition of the recycling site and invites future research to reflect on the possible instrumental use by urban political authorities of the issue of environmental sustainability and economic development to re-appropriate urban spaces to the detriment of the most vulnerable citizens belonging to the informal living and working dimensions.

### Keywords:

Globalisation, environmental justice, e-waste, housing and labour informality, urbanism.

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## **1. Introduction**

Agbogbloshie, known as Sodom and Gomorrah or Africa's largest electronic and electrical waste dump, was closed mainly in 2021 by Ghana's national authorities. This evacuation took place amidst the general disregard of the Western media, which had written about the Agbogbloshie landfill for years, reporting on the living conditions of the informal workers and neighbouring inhabitants. This event is part of a more general tendency by the authorities of developing countries to want to present their urban centres as modern and orderly.

Such interventions in urban space transformation are often based on a techno-scientific logic of environmental improvement and sustainability. These actions frame the most vulnerable portions of society belonging to working and living informality as an obstacle to pursuing modernity. Such dynamics of conflict between modernisation, environmental sustainability, and the rights of the most vulnerable have been analysed by Rowan Ellies (2011) regarding India's urban centres. Similar dynamics, however, also occur in the cities of sub-Saharan Africa where interventions such as the Agbogbloshie evacuation, legitimised by environmentalist and economic development demands, mask 'the political economy of environmental injustice and uneven urban development' (Ellis, 2011).

Moving from these assumptions, this paper aims to contextualise the formation and closure of Agbogbloshie within the broader debate regarding the formation of post-independence African cities and the more recent dynamics of rapid urbanisation on the continent. In doing so, the paper draws on a wide range of literature concerning urban political ecology, African urban studies and ethnographic research projects on Agbogbloshie.

The objectives of the paper are: a) to analyse the leading global and local dynamics that participated in shaping and moulding the site's reality until its closure, b) to propose a reflection on the importance of studying marginal sites such as Agbogbloshie in order to understand characteristic elements of urbanisation and African history c) to propose initial considerations regarding the recent closure of the recycling site and the dynamics of evacuation, demolition and eviction.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

In the countries of the African continent, urban demography is changing dramatically under the pressure of rural-to-urban migration and, above all, unprecedented natural population growth. Since 1915, the continent's urban population has more than tripled from 13% of the total population to about 50% today (Ipsos, 2018; OECD, 2020). Although the continent continues to be largely rural, the rapidity with which the urban population has grown has posed numerous challenges to the organisational capacity of

each city. The picture becomes even more alarming in light of forecasts that estimate that by 2050, the urban population will reach approximately one billion people, surpassing the rural population by ten percentage points (OECD, 2020; Battersby and Crush, 2016).

In 'Rapid Urbanisation, Urban Food Desert and Food Security in Africa' (2016), Battersby and Crush describe such concentrated, constant, and rapid growth in urban centres with the expression 'urban revolution' (2016, p. 3), which, although in different ways and to different degrees, affects the entire continent. Although, in theory, the rapid and constant growth of the urban population can create new development opportunities, it also generates social problems, especially in those urban contexts where the capacity to accommodate "has lagged far behind the pace of urbanisation" (Murray and Myers, 2006, p. 4). According to Parnell and Pieterse, this scenario can lead to a "predominance of informal modes of urbanisation" (2014, p. 9), when regular, paid employment opportunities do not keep pace with the growth of the job-seeking population. Davis (2004) identifies this trend with the term 'perverse urbanism', emphasising how the economic and structural development of cities is unequal to demographic urbanisation and negatively impacts the living conditions of urban citizens.

The negative impacts of this unequal growth on the living conditions of citizens mean that when discussing urbanisation in Africa, there is often a solid tendency to observe the criticalities present in many African cities, so much so that a "permanent condition of failed urbanism" can be perceived (Murray and Myers, 2006, p.1).

In this regard, Martin J. Murray and Garth A. Myers, in their book *Cities in Contemporary Africa*, criticise this Afro-pessimistic conception of urban space, highlighting the exclusive character that obscures everything else. Through a conception of multiple pathways of urbanisation, the two authors put forward an alternative approach for urban studies, one that is less marked by the idealistic model of the Western city and more capable of encompassing the cities of the so-called global South. In line with this, Mbembe and Nuttall also point out how African cities are developing "along unknown pathways" (2008, p. 6), dictated by entirely new forms of sociality that are foreign to urban studies, but not for this reason exempt from being studied. The critical perspective of these authors does not lead to underestimating and excluding criticalities from being the object of study but invites a less descriptive and more comprehensive analysis of the reasons for the current situation. Thus, The multi-disciplinary methodology does greater justice to a heterogeneous context of highly complex urban and social realities whose future is not 'predetermined' (Murray and Myers, 2006, p. 7).

From these approaches, it is clear that it is necessary to look at the past to understand African cities today. Indeed, a historical approach allows one to identify the events and actors that have constituted, shaped and reconfigured urban space up to the



present day. Without such an effort of understanding, African cities remain nothing more than an incomprehensible failure to emulate Western cities.

As Odile Georg (2013) points out, colonialism played a crucial role in defining the spatial features of African cities. The author points out how France and Great Britain, although driven by distinct ideological assumptions, pursued a segregationist policy, which served to ensure the domination of settlers and colonial administration. From the 1920s onwards, the two colonial powers geographically differentiated the areas of residence of Europeans from those of African subjects.

About Accra, Ato Quayson (2014) points out how racial segregation led to the formation of distinct social ecologies in the relationship between population density, characteristics of the built environment and type of natural environment. In other words, this has meant overcrowded shacks in arid or swampy areas for Africans and large brick houses in quiet areas with facilities and large recreational spaces for Europeans.

In general, colonialism represented a deviation from the possible autonomous development of African peoples, which is impossible to quantify socially, economically, and politically. From an urban point of view, the colonial era returned to independent African people's cities that were profoundly changed in size, infrastructure, and spatial, working and residential conformation. The end of the colonial experience certainly marked the re-appropriation of cities by Africans. However, this did not end various forms of social segregation.

Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch points out that in the private sector, only the ruling class and the upper middle class had the resources to take over the residential spaces left by Europeans. The poorest stayed where they were, leading to what the author calls "residential segregation based on wealthy versus poor people" (2014, p. 2). Murray and Myers point out how this segregationist perspective was exacerbated by access to the "global flow of ideas, information, and images" (2006, p. 5). The consumption, development, security, and modernity paradigms have shaped "the identities of well-to-do urban residents" (2006, p. 6), distancing them from the local tradition and making them akin to global consumer culture. Quayson, for his part, in framing urban space as a "symptom and producer of social relations" (2014, p. 5), clearly explains how the division of space in independent African cities has been strongly influenced by the ambitions of African leaders to emulate Western cities by paying scant regard to the poorest.

Although the colonial past and the immediate post-independence period are crucial moments to be taken into account in understanding today's African cities, African urban scholarship emphasises that the insertion of urban centres into the world market and the current phase of globalisation has been equally important. In this regard, the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) sponsored by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the 1980s to combat corruption and oppressive states

in favour of a free and democratic society (Cilliers, 2021). These loan packages were aimed at bringing down the debt of African states through retrenchment of the state in favour of privatisation and the free market and are widely considered in the literature to be the cause of increasing inequality and deteriorating living conditions of the poorest. As Ferguson writes, Structural Adjustment Programmes, instead of triggering the desired economic recovery, have led to the "lowest economic growth rates ever recorded in Africa". (2006, p. 11).

The so-called Washington Consensus, a term we tend to use to define the conditionality of the loan packages of the time, not only aggravated the poorest situation but also allowed global consumerist ideas, significant capital and international corporations to enter the urban context, shaping their image and conformation. Except for a few urban areas modernised by foreign investment, African cities have suffered a decline in terms of jobs, slowing industrialisation processes, falling real wages, rising unemployment rates and dramatic increases in prices for necessities (such as health, housing, food and electricity) (Murray and Myers, 2006)

Faced with the state's retreat to the private sector as a driver of development, urban informality and housing have advanced. As Richard Grant (2009) reminds us, squatter settlements were rare in West Africa before the 1990s and have quickly become a prevalent housing option across the continent. In Accra alone, 76 slums are recorded (Little, 2021, p. 8), and Agbogbloshie, which the paper focuses on, is just one of them.

These places and the societies that inhabit them, long placed on the margins of normed urbanism and globalisation processes, are increasingly recognised as places characterised by "a form of urban informality and directly constitutive of urbanism as such" (Quayson, 2014, p. 6) and by actors who, though poor, can "act as globalising agents" (Grant, 2021, p. 112).

The following pages, starting from these conceptual assumptions, aim to analyse this aspect of African urbanisation through the experience of the complex and varied urban reality of Agbogbloshie within the metropolitan area of Accra.

Following Gupta and Ferguson's indications about focusing "on the social and political processes of place-making" (1997, p. 6), the analysis that follows aims to analyse the dynamics that led to the formation of the Agbogbloshie site from the perspective of the urban-social space that it occupies within the urban context of Accra and the e-waste dump that it hosts and for which the site is internationally known. This explanation will be done by understanding the interaction between the global and local dimensions. As Murray and Mayers (2006) suggest about the study of urban centres, in order to identify the phases and agents that have shaped and configured the Agbogbloshie site, the analysis aims to distinguish the elements attributable to the current phase of globalisation from the long-term trends in Accra's urbanisation process. To do so, the indications of Ato Quayson (2014) regarding superimposing the current image of African cities - in this

case, the Agbogbloshie site - in the age of globalisation on the image of the pre-colonial and immediate post-independence period are also followed.

### 3. Context of the Analysis

Agbogbloshie, also known as Sodom and Gomorrah or, erroneously, as the world's largest e-waste dump (Oteng-Ababio and van der Velden, 2019), is a very complex, large and diverse urban reality. In its approximately 146 hectares of flat, triangular-shaped land, in addition to the landfill, it is home to Ghana's most densely populated slum called Old Fadama, several of Accra's major food markets, a bus depot, shops and stalls of all kinds, and numerous industrial enterprises in the brewing, construction and paint industries (Grant, 2006; COHRE, 2004).

All these socio-economic realities, which, as Federico Monica (2022) writes, might seem like an indistinct pile of metal sheets, are separated by natural barriers - the Odaw River - and artificial ones - Abossey Okai Road - to which correspond different neighbourhoods, living and working formality or informality, different histories and power networks. This complex reality, to which a great deal of interest has been devoted by scientific research and the international media, is located in the heart of Ghana's capital, Accra, in the north-western part of the city, about one kilometre from the Central Business District (CBD) and just over two kilometres from the famous Oxford Street.

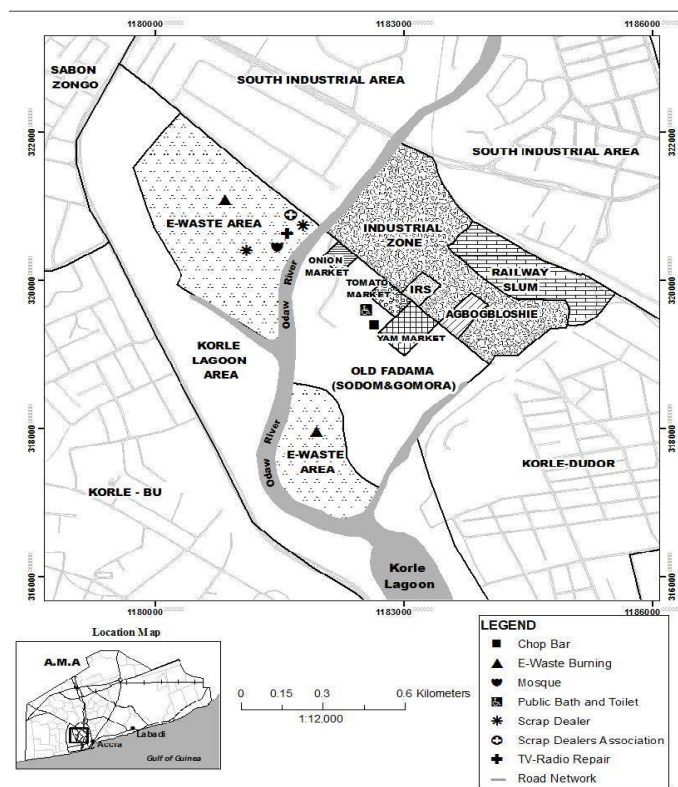


Figure 1. Source: Oteng-Ababio (2012)

Figure 1 highlights the area's geographical features, employment activities and residential settlements before the recent urban decongestion intervention. This intervention led to the relocation of the onion market adjacent to Abossey Okai Road and the closure of the leading recycling site to the left of the Odaw River. As for the other recycling site north of the lagoon, in its current state, it has significantly reduced following a series of demolitions that have taken place since 2015. These demolitions led to a shift of recycling activities away from the coastal area and continue to occur in the adjacent Old Fadama slum. This slum, mainly without electricity and sanitation (Grant, 2006), is considered the most densely populated in the capital, estimated to house around 80,000 inhabitants. (Effah Oppong et al., 2020). Other housing settlements, formal and informal are located north of Abossey Okai Road within the original neighbourhood named Agbogbloshie, which also houses several light industries and offices of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA).

### ***3.1. Explaining How and Why***

The decision to explore the local and global dynamics that led to the creation of Agbogbloshie was triggered by the viewing, in conjunction with the reading of Ato Quayson's book 'Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism' (2014), of Italian journalist Marco Maisano's documentary (Maisano, 2020). He went to Accra to investigate the causes of migration from Ghana to Europe. The extensive space devoted in the documentary by the Italian journalist to the Agbogbloshie e-waste dump, coming from different parts of the globe, led me to formulate the same initial thought that Ato Quayson had coming out of the internet café on Oxford Street: "This is globalisation" (2014, IX). Although they are two very different realities, Oxford Street, a street of prestige, a symbol of the 'African Modern' (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2008) - and the Agbogbloshie landfill - a degraded place, a depiction of African urban failure - the two realities immediately appeared to me very similar. On the surface, the material and non-material external influence of the globalised world and its market appeared as an explicit element linking both experiences of urban life.

As I continued reading Quayson and further investigated the area of Agbogbloshie and its landfill, the idea that the two places were related grew stronger.

What failed, however, was the impression that both places were orphans of a local dimension. This thought has been replaced by the realisation that both Oxford Street and Agbogbloshie present a complexity of elements whose sum and intersection turn out to be much more than the single consequence of globalisation and Accra's urban development process. Global and local cultures merge into an African urban experience that needs to be approached "as objects of inquiry in their own right" (Murray and Myers, 2006, p. 3) in order to be understood.



## ***4. Creation, Development and Configuration of the Urban Space of Agbogbloshie***

### ***4.1. Local Elements that Contributed to the Formation of the Site***

The land dispute over the lands of Agbogbloshie and Old Fadama has deep roots dating back to colonial times, specifically when the traditional Ga community of Accra claimed the sacred character of the Karle bu lagoon in the face of colonial development plans. Resistance from the majority and original group in the city probably led the colonial authorities to carry out limited activity in the area, abandoning ambitions to develop a large lagoon port facility. In this regard, Grant (2006) reports that except for two housing estates where low-income residents from the overcrowded areas of Jamestown and the CBD were resettled and built in the 1950s, the area remained in its natural state overall until 1961. That year, three years after independence, the government claimed land ownership in the name of public interest. It earmarked it for the development of a series of industrial projects.

As Quayson points out, 'the promise of construction jobs that the industrial zone was to provide' (2014, 227) may have been an early factor in attracting migrants from the North who began to arrive and settle in the area in the 1960s and 1970s. In any case, the development of light industries in brewing, food processing and car repair was a partial industrialisation process that could not satisfy the influx of labour supply. The shortage of job opportunities and low-priced housing prompted some migrants who came to the city from northern rural areas to develop the first informal settlements and work activities (Grant, 2006).

It is only since the 1990s, however, that a series of events have led to the geographic and demographic expansion of the site. In 1991, on the occasion of the Non-Aligned Movement conference held in Accra, the AMA began a major decongestion of the city centre by carrying out, as in colonial times, multiple relocations of hawkers and low-income segments of the population to peripheral parts of the city. During these relocations, many people were placed on Aboassay Okai Road in what was supposed to be temporary accommodation (Fevrier, 2020). This political action, driven by a logic of urban cleansing, led to the settlement of new inhabitants, not necessarily from the North of the country, who were added to the already existing inhabitants of Old Fadama.

The 1993 relocation of the Makola market to Agbogbloshie increased employment opportunities at the site and consequently for residents in Old Fadama (Quayson, 2014; Fevrier, 2020). The subsequent expansion of the market and the diversification of food commodities, supported by production from the northern parts of the country, transformed the area into one of Accra's primary fruit and vegetable markets. The labour needs related to this expansion and the social and commercial ties



with the northern areas led to a conspicuous increase in semi-permanent residents from the Northern region of Ghana (Fevrier, 2020; COHRE, 2004).

Finally, fundamental in shaping the demographic conformity of the area were the inter-ethnic conflicts in northern Ghana between Nanumba and Kokumba that erupted in 1994 and lasted until 2000 (Grant, 2006; Little, 2022). These conflicts, prompted by pre- and post-colonial land issues, resulted in an exodus of refugees to the city (Quayson, 2014). Inter-ethnic ties, low housing costs, and employment opportunities in the informal sector meant they settled in Agbogbloshie, the only portion of land within the metropolitan area still available.

Although the socio-economic reality of Agbogbloshie came into being after Ghana's independence, the dynamics of its development find elements characteristic of the urban planning of Accra in colonial times and, more generally, of many African cities. As in most colonial administrations, urban planning intended to ensure settlers' commercial and residential dominance in the most profitable sectors and ecologically favourable areas (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2014). Under colonial administration, the process of shaping Accra's urban space occurred through a logic of expansion from the original Ga Mashie core outwards. However, colonial urban planning was highly fragmented and chaotic: reactive in resolving emergencies and programmatic in creating advantaged and separate spaces for settlers (Ato Quayson, 2014). Coquery-Vidrovitch (2014) refers to the 'sanitary syndrome' as the primary device through which the administration has established different social ecologies within the urban space. As Ato Quayson (2014) noted, the differences in the social ecologies of Accra's urban space have followed a double track of differentiation. The first, advocated by the colonial administration, was established on a Native-European racial axis, and the second, local in nature, though often exaggerated by colonial administrators, followed an ethnic-identitarian Ga/foreigner axis.

Migrants who came to the city from outside, mainly from the northern parts of the country, were thus settled in marginal, ecologically disadvantaged areas, distant from the white settlers and the original identity groups.

Accra's colonial urban policy thus marked aggregations of distinct social ecologies. A distinction is marked by location in space and the relationship between the built environment's character, population density and the natural environment. In a somewhat chaotic logic of filling empty spaces, the city has been configured by shaping degraded areas of high population intensity with evanescent dwellings that serve as interludes to areas of little more balance and others of opulence and affluence (Ato Quayson, 2014).

In line with what Coquery-Vidrovitch (2014) observed, even in Accra, white-native racial segregation in the post-colonial era gave way to rich-poor economic segregation. However, Agbogbloshie demonstrates how this new pattern of urban spatial subdivision



has also been maintained across ethnic-identity distinctions between originals and newcomers. The northern migrants living in Agbogbloshie-Old Fadama represent the last social stratum of the city and, therefore, live in the most ecologically and infrastructurally disadvantaged area. Moreover, its marshy and humid morphology, due to its proximity to the Korle Bu lagoon, reflects how the formation of this urban site is so closely akin to more general colonial urban planning logic. Indeed, as Coquery-Vidrovitch (2014) points out, marshy and wet sites were chosen to house natives. It should be noted that the very name Old Fadama, in the Hausa language 'swampy' (Quayson, 2014), is a reminder of the poor nature of this land - once considered sacred - where today those who last arrived in the city reside.

#### ***4.2. Global Elements that Have Contributed to Shaping the Image of Agbogbloshie***

As seen in the previous section, the formation of Agbogbloshie's urban space follows local dynamics. It can be traced within the broader pattern of formation of the Accra metropolitan area. This highlighted how the Ghanaian government and the Accra municipal administration maintained a fragmented urban planning pattern after independence, faithful to colonial urban planning logic. However, while this may explain the formation of the site, more is needed to understand the controversial contemporary reality of Agbogbloshie. It is therefore also necessary to consider Ghana's process of liberalisation, which, through participation in the Structural Adjustment Programme, allowed global economic forces to embed themselves within the urban context of the city from the 1980s onwards (Quayson, 2014; Oteng-Ababio and Grant, 2019). These have thus shaped the image of more cosmopolitan places, such as Oxford Street, but also seemingly disconnected realities considered marginal, such as Agbogbloshie.

As far as Agbogbloshie is concerned, Ghana's participation in SAPs has contributed significantly to shaping the reality of the site in several aspects. As Peter C. Little (2022) pointed out, the economic liberalisation induced by the SAPs has transformed the agribusiness production system in favour of export monocultures. Instead of alleviating rural-urban and north-south spatial inequalities, these interventions have fuelled migration flows from the country's northern parts towards Agbogbloshie.

In the urban context of Accra, however, the consequences of the SAPs became apparent in the early 2000s. In those years, the cost of participating in the global economy reverberated regarding diminishing formal job opportunities and rising living and housing costs. As investments from foreign companies modernised the city centre, it became prohibitively expensive for the less affluent, who retreated to the Agbogbloshie-Old Fadama area and similar realities (Fevrier, 2020). This triggered urban housing crises and worsening living conditions in rural areas, causing the increased

influx of people into the area, the population density of the site and the number of informal economic activities, including the nascent scrap recycling and recovery business.

The inclination of the site inhabitants to trade scrap developed as a process of diversification from the main activity of the fruit and vegetable market. The profitability of metals inside the broken-down trucks that previously transported foodstuffs has prompted more and more people to trade scrap (Amuzu, 2015; Fevrier, 2020). With the technologisation of Ghana, Africa and the world more broadly, it did not take long for the trade in scrap from trucks and cars to be transformed into the trade from electronic and electrical equipment (EEE), such as home appliances, mobile phones and computers. What might initially have been a dismantling and storage site for local e-waste was then quickly expanded for international consumption, giving way to a continuous flow of e-waste in the area and forming a flourishing informal repair and recycling sector (COHRE, 2004; Amazu, 2018).

Economic liberalisation policies again played an essential role in building and decreasing Ghana's 'digital divide', the links between the global and local dimensions. As pointed out by Amazu (2018) and Grant and Oteng-Ababio (2012), the lowering of duties on second-hand electronics through policies such as a 'laptop per household' or a 'PC per child' has facilitated the technologisation of the country's public and private sectors. However, this neglects the consequences of post-consumption resulting from the influx of second-hand equipment. Numerous studies underline how EEE comes within this traffic of used electrical and electronic equipment, many of which are non-functional and irreparable, as well as scrap of all kinds. Over the years, their informal storage and recycling have shaped the urban space of Agbogboshie, giving it the image of the hellish e-waste dump for which the site is known worldwide.

Another aspect that links Agbogboshie and similar realities to the global dimension is the international politics of hazardous waste trade. As Little points out, the environmental justice movements in the West in the 1970s and 1980s, although unintended, produced citizen protest phenomena with the slogan "not in my backyard" that only fuelled "the global circulation and export of unwanted dangers" (2022, p. 19) including e-waste.

The 1989 Basel Convention, born out of protests over the dumping of toxic waste in Africa and other developing countries, was the primary attempt to change this scenario by regulating and controlling the transboundary movement of hazardous waste and its disposal. Despite its mandate to protect human health and the environment from the adverse effects of hazardous wastes, the Convention has encountered numerous practical limits to its action, which can often be traced back to its liberal conceptual assumptions.

The first limitation debated in the literature concerns that the Convention does not prohibit transboundary traffic. Theoretically, it is always allowed if there is prior



informed consent signed by the authorities of the importing country and justified reasons from the exporting country regarding the environmentally sound treatment of the waste at the destination (Schmidt, 2006; McCann and Wittmann, 2015). Other limitations inherent in the Convention relate to the difficulty in resolving issues such as (a) the hazardousness or non-hazardousness of waste, which, especially about e-waste,

leads to confusion (GTF, 2022) and (b) the distinction between waste and second-hand EEE (GEM, 2020). Thirty years after it entered into force, the Basel Convention has had little success in counteracting exports to poor countries in the global south, which lack the resources for environmentally sound management of end-of-life EEE. This inefficiency is crucial in understanding how Agbogbloshie could end up at the centre of the international e-waste trade.

### ***4.3. Characteristics of E-Waste that Helps to Establish Links between Local and Global***

Without going into particularly technical issues concerning the international e-waste market, what needs to be analysed for the paper are the dynamics that drive some countries to export their e-waste and that make other countries privileged landing spots, creating links between poor urban communities "systematically excluded from the socio-material benefits of techno-capital development" (Little, 2022, p. 19) and global electronics consumption.

Many spatial and scaling dynamics between local and global dimensions, in the case of the Agbogbloshie recycling site, can be explained through the intrinsic characteristics of e-waste.

The first element to consider to understand Agbogbloshie's position within the international e-waste market is the high global electronic and electrical equipment consumption. The increasing pervasiveness of electronics in the public and private spheres, rapid obsolescence dictated by continuous technological renewal, and economic and population growth, together with technological fads, have made e-waste the fastest-growing type of solid waste (Bello et al., 2016; Hector, 2017). According to data from The Global E-waste Monitor (2020), global e-waste has increased by 9.2 mt (million metric tons) in just five years, from approximately 44 mt produced in 2014 to approximately 53 mt produced in 2019. In the face of this exponential growth of e-waste, the share of e-waste collected and recycled in an environmentally friendly manner worldwide has only increased by 1.8 mt, 0.2 mt less than the amount of e-waste grown in a single year. This discrepancy between e-waste produced and recycled, mainly driven by consumption in middle- and high-income countries, testifies to evidence that, regardless of available resources, countries struggle to manage their e-waste and, therefore, have an incentive to export it outside their national borders.

A second characteristic element of e-waste that incentivises export in favour of Agbogbloshie is the materials that these types of waste contain within them. As reported in GEM (2020, p. 58), e-waste can contain up to 69 periodic table elements, including heavy metals and critical and precious materials. The complexity of this equipment from the point of view of material dispersion and hazardousness to human and environmental health makes environmentally friendly treatment processes extremely expensive, often not economically sustainable unless supported by financing models such as extended producer responsibility (McCann and Wittmann, 2015; Magalini et al., 2019). In the porousness of inefficient collection, transport, recycling and disposal systems, the high costs of environmentally friendly treatment provide an incentive for international electronics and waste management companies to export, in collusion with criminal organisations, e-waste to evade management burdens (Bimir, 2020). As Hector (2017) writes, the actors who export e-waste stand at the top of the hierarchy of gains in the entire circuit and, although at a distance, can significantly impact the conditions of informal dumpsites such as Agbogbloshie.

The material properties of e-waste are also relevant in explaining why some places like Agbogbloshie attract internationally produced e-waste and use EEE. To understand this, it is necessary to look at the social inequalities within the global capitalist system and to consider that in the capitalocene era (Moore, 2016), e-waste from rich, industrialised countries acquires socio-economic value in the global south. As we have seen before about market liberalisation policies, second-hand EEE, discarded by consumers in middle- and high-income countries, has value for people in low-income countries as it provides access to electronics through low-cost equipment (Bimer., 2020). In addition to second-hand EEE in these contexts, broken or non-functioning equipment, irreparable equipment, and its various components also acquire value.

This is particularly true in the African context, where the widespread propensity to repair and recycle means that every single component and piece of equipment, even if inoperable or poorly maintained, can acquire value through sale, reuse and material recovery (Stenhouse, 2016; Cross and Murray, 2018). Regarding material recovery, which is undoubtedly the most dangerous and polluting activity, it is curious to note that these materials, generally insufficient to offset the costs of environmentally friendly treatment in industrialised countries, acquire subsistence and survival value for informal workers in Agbogbloshie. Here, the workers, in line with the wordplay proposed by Myers (2016), consider, in a faithful transliteration of the French term 'ordure' (rubbish), the waste as 'solid gold' and are therefore welcome to their arrival. In line with this, the aim of the informal workers is not to carry out impeccable recycling from the point of view of material recovery and environmental protection but to collect materials that are easily recoverable and have economic value within the scrap market as quickly as possible.

A final intrinsic element of e-waste that explains Agbogbloshie's inclusion in the e-waste market from the perspective of local consequences is its hazardousness. Containing heavy metals and toxic chemicals, e-waste, if not managed with proper safeguards and through adequate treatment infrastructures, poses a significant risk to the environment and the health of workers and communities in the vicinity of recycling sites. Mathias Nigatu Bimir (2020) points out that it is not the e-waste itself that poses a danger but that in most developing countries, there still needs to be an adequate infrastructure for environmentally friendly e-waste management. This lack, coupled with the absence or poor implementation of regulations and policies on e-waste management, means that the vast majority of this waste is managed within the informal economy and through rudimentary practices, which we will see in detail in the next section. What needs to be emphasised here is that, as Little points out, the goal of the informal recyclers in Agbobloshie is "to make a living, even if this socioeconomic livelihood leads to their own embodied suffering" (2020, p. 41) and severe consequences for their health.

In line with this, again, Bimir argues that "there is a relationship between the level of economic development and importation of secondhand materials as far as there exist low-income people who are willing to accept unhealthy hazardous work" (2020, p. 660). In other words, it is possible to argue that the need for survival that drives the workers at Agbogbloshie to perform 'toxic work' represents - together with the export-push factors analysed above - an establishing element of the site's place at the centre of the international e-waste trade and thus a link between the local and global dimensions.

In the same way as CO<sub>2</sub> emissions with the climate crisis, e-waste exports have made a global issue - the high consumption of electronics - a problem with local consequences, which, ironically, fall on the same communities historically excluded from the material benefits of technological development.

This unequal dynamic of the causes of the consequences of global electronics consumption has led to the Agbogbloshie site being framed in terms of toxic colonialism, racism and environmental justice. In the face of these undoubtedly accurate representations, however, it is necessary to add that the e-waste clogging up Agbogbloshie does not exclusively come from international trafficking. Growing domestic consumption in Ghana of electronic and electrical equipment, some of which are reconditioned and some of which have come to the end of their life after being purchased new, adds to the imported e-waste. The latter also fuels, although probably to a lesser extent, an informal e-waste economy that Daum, Stoler and Grant (2017) estimated to generate between USD 100 and 250 million annually, supporting up to 200,000 people.

A global registry to track these products is necessary to establish the exact proportions of imports from domestic consumption (Hector, 2017; Fevrier, 2020). However, it is undeniable that Agbogbloshie has long been full of e-waste, which,

waiting to be dismantled, liquefied and burnt by young workers, lay on the ground in the two storage areas. The concentration and scale of recycling activities have contributed to contaminating the lagoon's air, soil and water, making the site known as one of the most polluted places on earth.

#### ***4.4. Perspectives of Globalisation from below in the Scrap Yard***

There are two ways to look at including Agbogbloshie within the e-waste market and, more generally, of African cities within the global economy. The first is to look at the process of globalisation as a sponge that includes African cities in a subordinate position within a centre-periphery hierarchical scale. The second is to look at African cities as agents capable of attracting and seducing certain forms of global capital (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2008). The first path allows us to interpret the Agbogbloshie dump as the normal process of externalising the environmental and human health costs of e-waste disposal within the global capitalist system. Based on this first perspective, African peoples are helpless victims of globalisation, which condemns them to continuous urban bankruptcy.

In contrast, the second option allows us to look at African peoples as active agents who, as in the case of Agbogbloshie, have carved out an urban space for themselves by attracting a sector of the international market that, although devious, allows them to generate an income through which to subsist.

The global dimension allows us to understand where the waste comes from and shows us the consumerist cause of its production. However, we need help understanding the actual size of the Agbogbloshie scrap market. To do so, it is necessary to move from the bottom up by taking the agents within this urban context as objects of study in their own right.

The circuit of e-waste workers within the Agbogbloshie depot is governed by informality. This scenario does not mean it is chaotic; on the contrary, it presents a well-organised hierarchical structure involving an estimated four thousand to six thousand people (Akese and Little, 2018). They are primarily young people aged 14-30 who migrated from northern Ghana and share the same Muslim religion and ethno-cultural affiliation. This does not exclude that there are also older workers and people of different nationalities, predominantly from West Africa (Hector, 2017; Fevrier, 2020).

Ninety per cent of all workers live in Old Fadama in more or less evanescent houses, depending on social status. Excluding those with family living on the site, most live in rooms shared with other workers, often overcrowded (Akese and Little, 2018; Fevrier, 2020).

The work circuit is divided into collection, recycling, dismantling, brokering, repairs and trading. Each activity is interconnected to the others and involves different



types of individuals based on personal, ethnic, economic, and seniority characteristics in the industry (Fevrier, 2020). Activities also represent the hierarchy of power and earnings within the circuit. Generally speaking, relatively wealthier people have a more comprehensive network of acquaintances and have been in the business longer. They are involved in trading scrap, brokering relationships with companies outside the depot, and repairing and selling second-hand electronic goods. Such individuals generally occupy senior roles within the Greater Accra Scrap Dealers Association (GASDA), an organisation that represents and protects before political authorities the rights of all informal workers in the e-waste sector (Fevrier, 2020; Amazu, 2015).

Interestingly, the role of this organisation, straddling the formal and the informal, in representing the landfill workers in front of political institutions is similar to the work of its leaders. In their business of buying and selling e-waste, scrap and second-hand electronic products, they move similarly in limbo between the informal circuit inside the dump and the formal world of outside companies. The revenues they earn are higher than those of the other landfill workers, although small in the market value of the goods they handle. This income often allows them to live outside Old Fadama and make small investments to improve their working conditions (Fevrier, 2020; Amazu, 2015).

Collecting, burning and dismantling equipment represent the lowest rung of the hierarchy. These are performed by the youngest segment of workers who recently entered the circuit. The period for which they carry out these activities ranges widely from 1 to 10 years, depending on their social status and the motivations that drive them to work in the sector (Hector, 2017; Amazu, 2015; Fevrier, 2020). Some of these young people interviewed by journalist Marco Maisano tell of working to be able to start a family, while others use the money to help families in their home areas in northern Ghana. These stories are confirmed in the study conducted in the field by David Amuzu (2015), who points out that many young people work in the depot only for some periods of the year, returning home in the remaining periods to support farming during planting and harvesting.

This highlights how migration to the urban context may not be an individual path but may represent a family livelihood strategy. The author also points out that some work in the depot to save money to support their studies. All this does not exclude the fact that there are also lonely and unattached young people, a type of people that Mario Giro, in the context of contemporary African migration, defines as "out of ethnicity [...] abandoned to themselves in the great sea of opportunities - but also of tragic failures - that globalisation shines before their eyes" (2019, p. 13) of the urban context.

The task of these young people is to recover metals such as aluminium, copper, iron and steel by extracting them from cables and equipment. This is done through rudimentary tools such as hammers, chisels and stones and, even worse, through the risky practices of burning and liquefaction in acid (Hector, 2017). Aware, more or less,



of the risks, they are all highly exposed to severe health consequences, blackmailed by the absence of other sources of income within the urban context.

The entire informal circuit is driven by a logic of 'urban entrepreneurship' (Murray and Myers, 2006; Quayson, 2014) that aspires to improve individual social status and climb the hierarchy within the depot. However, this is not guaranteed, and the long continuity of people performing the same essential activity is testimony to this. Thus, working conditions and earning hierarchies remain unchanged, static in their inequality. Using the words used by Murray and Mayers to describe African cities in general, it is possible to argue that in the site:

"There is the appearance of entropy and stasis, where capacities for innovative change are stalled by ruin, choked with waste, and clogged with useless objects out of place, and where enormous creative energies have been ignored, squandered, and left unused" (2006, p. 7).

Continuing to use the description of the two authors, it is possible to argue that the informal waste management system is dominated by a logic of "self-exploitation" within which the survival of the workers depends on an apparatus that "generates only minuscule returns despite the extensive expenditure of time and effort" (Murray and Myers, 2006, p. 6).

However, these aspects of criticality must be apparent in the 'vitality' and 'resourcefulness' (Murray and Myers, 2006) through which the site inhabitants and the scrap workers give meaning to their lives through the resources they have at their disposal. The entire site and the activities within represent a successful attempt, although hugely defective from a Western perspective, to negotiate an urban space within which to subsist with modern Accra. Here, part of the city's poor and marginalised population found their livelihood independently of government subsidies and the absence of employment opportunities in the formal sector. The informality within it acts as a filter to the city's shortcomings, offering a chance for newcomers to launch themselves within the urban context.

The scrap market added a proper recycling function for the entire city to this area, which was commonly considered wasteful by political authorities. On the one hand, the site performed a draining and decongesting function for the city's clogged solid waste disposal system. On the other hand, the site performed a recycling function by incorporating the metals extracted from the scrap into the production system, in part supporting local and international industrial development. This testifies that the site's inhabitants and, more generally, African cities are not alien to globalisation but responsive in relating to it, carving out a space for themselves, and acting as globalised actors.

## ***5. New Perspectives on the Transformation of the Urban Space of Agbogbloshie***

As mentioned in the introduction and the section presenting the analysis context, the Ghanaian government authorities cleared the leading recycling site in Agbogbloshie on 1 July 2021 (Seidu and Kaifie, 2022). This intervention is part of a more extensive redevelopment programme in the city led by the Regional Minister of Greater Accra, Henry Quaterly. The Make Accra Work agenda, based on safety, hygiene, health, education, and discipline pillars, aims to beautify the capital by cleaning it of dirt and illegal structures (Business Ghana, 2021). Based on these objectives, numerous cleaning exercises have been carried out in various city areas since spring 2021, earning the minister a reputation as an efficient man 'who does not fail in his promises' (Ghanaweb, 2021a).

These drills, which in some cases were simply an urban clean-up operation (CNR et al., 2021a) as in the case of the 'Operation Clean Your Frontage' initiative (Ghanaweb, 2021b), in many others, led to the decongestion of hawkers and the demolition of illegal structures (Ghanaweb, 2022a). These structures are generally dwellings or informal workplaces and represent a source of repair and livelihood for the urban population's poorest and most marginalised segments. Minister Quartey carried out their demolition with the support of the government, the AMA and much of the population of Accra. This reflects an administrative vision that considers informality, slums and the most vulnerable population as obstacles to the city's development. However, this perspective of removing supposed obstacles to modernity depoliticises the historical processes that led to the formation of urban squatting, poverty and marginalisation.

This is particularly evident in the case of Agbogbloshie, where, as analysed in the previous sections, the political authorities played an essential role in producing the preconditions for forming the complex reality of the site.

Even though the decongestion work of 31 July was revolutionary in reconfiguring the seemingly unchanging space, it is necessary to consider that the eviction of the recycling site did not occur in a vacuum but was part of a long history of tensions affecting the entire Agbogbloshie and Old Fadama area.

Since the 1990s, the government and local municipalities have pursued a non-recognition policy towards the site workers and inhabitants who are regarded as unwanted settlers (Grant, 2006). The narrative held by the authorities is that the Old Fadama slum is an illegal settlement born out of the illegal occupation of state-owned land, that the entire site and particularly the recycling areas are a source of pollution, and lastly that the proximity to coastal areas is an obstacle to the restoration of the lagoon through which the problem of continuous flooding can be solved (Little, 2022; Amazu, 2018; Grant, 2006). In addition to these elements, which certainly cannot be considered specious as they tell at least part of the reality, it is also necessary to consider the site's proximity to the CBD. Unlike the capital's other predominantly defiladed slums,

Agbogbloshie and Old Fadama are in a central area and thus undermine the capital's image internationally.

Based on these assumptions and the implementation of the Korle Lagoon Ecological Restoration Project (KLERP) in 1993, when 400 dwellings were demolished in one morning, the AMA undertook a series of evictions and demolitions, mainly targeting the coastal area of Old Fadama and the adjacent recycling site (Grant, 2006).

Without going into the merits of the individual evictions and the resistance on the part of the population, what needs to be emphasised is that last July's evacuation is part of a more extended history of 'infrastructural violence' (Little, 2022) and stigmatisation to which the inhabitants and workers of Agbogbloshie-Old Fadama have been subjected. Unlike in the past, however, the scope of the decongestion intervention was considerably broader. Instead of being directed at the squatter dwellings of Old Fadama, it was directed at the scrap recyclers and repair businesses.

The scrap dealers interviewed by Ghana Web reported that they were neither notified of the eviction nor involved in the decision-making process that led to the evacuation of the area (Ghanaweb, 2021c). As Ghanaian documentary filmmaker and photographer Muntaka Chasant reports, the onion market, another historical activity at the Agbogbloshie site that the government had been trying to relocate to Adjen Kotoku for years (Chasant, 2021), was scheduled to move on that day. While the onion merchants attended negotiating tables with the government authorities, GASDA representatives claim they were notified of the move on 30 July with only twenty-four hours notice of eviction. For its part, the government rejects these accusations and claims to have warned the scrappers who were offered compensation and a resettlement area in Adjen Kotoku (Ghanaweb, 2021c).

Although, based on available sources, it is still impossible to determine exactly who is telling the truth, specific dynamics suggest that the scrappers were excluded from the negotiating tables until 30 July. A first element in support of this hypothesis is the supposed unawareness on the part of the Basel Convention workers who, a little over a month before the closure of the site, organised two days of webinars focused on improving e-waste management in Agbogbloshie (BRS Conventions, 2021). Even more significant is the workshop organised by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) that focused on improving safety conditions for trainers and workers in the recycling site's training centre, which, as Seidu and Kaifie (2022) report, was interrupted on 30 July after the authorities' eviction notice to GASDA representatives.

Another element supporting the scrapper's version is the timing of the operation to decongest the area. As Muntaka Chasant (2021) points out, the fact that three days scheduled for the relocation of the onion market were extended to a week and that the decision was made on the third day, when almost all the onion traders had already

moved out, suggests that the decision to demolish the informal recycling site was made in the process.

Whether the scrappers were warned or not, it is undeniable that since the 'Let Make Accra Work' agenda was launched, rumours had been flying about a drastic decongestion of the entire Agbogbloshie and Old Fadama site. Minister Quartey made it clear that with the relocation of the onion market and the demolition of the recycling site, the decongestion of the area continued. From what the minister announced, there will be two more decongestion phases, the second aimed at relocating the Konkomba yam market and the third aimed at relocating the residents of Old Fadama, whose relocation area has not yet been identified (Ghanaweb, 2021d).

The relocation of the inhabitants of Old Fadama is a long-standing one for the government of Ghana and the Accra Metropolitan Assembly, which have served eviction notices on all the inhabitants of the slum since 2002 without, however, achieving the goal. This state of inaction on the part of the authorities, coupled with continuous eviction proclamations such as that of Minister Quartey, places the inhabitants of Old Fadama in a state of continuous threat of eviction. This state of uncertainty, which has persisted over time, has meant that the efforts and ingenuity of the site's inhabitants have been directed towards preserving their urban livelihood space through actions of resistance against the evacuation pursued by the authorities rather than producing change by improving the living conditions on the site (Akormedi, 2013). The same can be said about working conditions at the recycling site where, despite the efforts of some NGOs in training workers in safer working practices, cable burning and scrap storage continued until the closure last July.

### ***5.1. Considerations on the Consequences of the Decongestion Measure***

Returning to the scrappers, it is worth noting that with the decongestion intervention of last July, they suffered the most significant eviction by the authorities since the formation not only of the recycling site but of the entire area of Agbogbloshie and Old Fadama.

Federico Monica (2022), who went to Agbogbloshie following the intervention, recounts how a year later, the recycling site, which a little more than a year before was one of the most chaotic places in Accra, is now a strip of wasteland protected by a wall built by the authorities to prevent reoccupation of the land. Minister Quartey claimed the extent of the intervention and expressed dissatisfaction that despite the reclamation of 80 acres of land, Agbogbloshie is still framed on the internet and Wikipedia as an electronic waste dump and one of the most polluted places in the world. As reported by Ghanaweb, the minister is reported to have said that 'the Agbogbloshie' we know is not long there today' and then stressed that it is time that this 'particular image for the country is expunged' (Ghanaweb, 2022b).

In the face of this narrative, however, it is necessary to emphasise how the intervention is mainly aimed not at the environmental redevelopment of the land, which, as Chasant (2021) points out, has not yet been planned, but rather at the authorities' desire to reappropriate the land and to redeem the city's image internationally. The exact implementation of the Korle Lagoon Ecological Restoration Project to remedy flooding, which was the most substantial claim the authorities made for evacuation for years, is less relevant today in the motivations behind the intervention. The choice by Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo to allocate part of the cleared area to the construction of one of the hospitals under Agenda 111 (Ghanaweb, 2021e; Ghanaweb, 2021f; Ghanaweb, 2021g) highlights how the narrative about the importance of the ecological restoration of the site is instrumental in gaining consensus around the toxic threat of the recycling site and legitimising interventions to the detriment of poor and marginalised populations.

Whether the Agbogbloshie land will be put to 'effective, efficient and sustainable land use' (Ghanaweb, 2022b) in the future, as stated by Minister Quarty, is yet to be seen. What is certain, however, is that this intervention tracks within a broader trend of African urban policies to perceive people with low incomes as a source of problems for cities.

In line with what Amazu (2018) pointed out a few years ago about past evacuation actions, the evacuation intervention produced a distributive injustice by depriving, rather than threatening, scrappers of their source of livelihood. As reported by Chasant (2021), many workers saw their jobs and homes destroyed in a few days, thus losing their livelihood within the Accra metropolis. Although all workers have suffered losses, those who have experienced the most problems are the young returnees with fewer socioeconomic resources to start over. As Chasant pointed out, many have been wandering around the site destroyed by the authorities for days, looking for scrap and equipment to resell. The absence of alternatives has driven some of these young people back to their places of origin.

In exacerbating the vulnerable condition of the already vulnerable scrap recyclers, the decongestion intervention has not solved the problem of e-waste pollution that has been at the root of the stigmatisation of these workers for years either. In fact, as Monica (2022) reports, informal recycling activities, although less visible, seem far from over, as well as the arrival of second-hand electronic and electrical equipment. What used to happen mainly in Agbogbloshie is decentralising to many other smaller locations around the city. While some workers have bought land in the metropolitan area to restart their scrap recycling and resale business, recycling activities at the adjacent recycling site in Old Fadama are increasing closer and closer to the slum, thus increasing the health risks for its inhabitants.

Concerns about e-waste management in Ghana have also been expressed by Marcos Orellana, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Toxic Substances and Waste,



who, in an official communication dated 13 December 2022 (United Nations Ghana, 2022), emphasised that exposure to toxic substances is primarily a cause of human rights violations within the country. In the communication, the UN expert emphasised that mercury and the disposal and recycling of electronic waste continue to pose a significant threat.

From an image point of view, the closure of the Agbogbloshie recycling site ended a profound environmental injustice resulting from the externalisation of the environmental costs of global electronics consumption. However, what is clear is that the decongestion action has exacerbated the precariousness and vulnerability of the scrappers. This situation makes clear the difficulty of combining different aspects of the sustainable development agenda in the urban contexts of poor countries in the global South, where environmental protection, economic development and the defence of the rights of the most vulnerable quickly come into conflict.

From this point of view, the experience of the Agbogbloshie clearance is emblematic. Demolition interventions that, at least in theory, prioritise environmental protection provoke far-reaching social crises if not accompanied by the construction of livelihood alternatives. This scenario paves the way for future research to analyse the local and global factors that drove the Ghanaian government to such determination in this demolition and neglect of the city's most fragile inhabitants.

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis contextualised the urban space of Agbogbloshie within the Accra metropolitan area and, more generally, within the African urban context.

In doing so, an attempt was made to identify the elements traceable to the global and local dimensions that have shaped and moulded the site's reality. Through a historical approach, four practical elements were identified that led to the formation and development of the urban space in question: the forced displacements conducted by the AMA in a logic of urban cleansing of the city centre, the relocation of the Makola market, the inter-ethnic conflicts in the northern regions, the resulting rural-urban migrations, and finally the process of economic liberalisation through structural adjustment programmes.

In addition to these elements widely recognised in the literature, an attempt was made to verify the presence or absence of a planning logic. In doing so, the work of Ato Quayson, "Oxford Street, Accra: city life and the itineraries of transnationalism," through which it was possible to trace the formation of Agbogbloshie within the process of expansive formation of the Accra metropolitan area, was of fundamental importance. Through its interpretation of distinct social ecologies, it was possible to identify the double track of spatial expansion between whites/natives and Ga/newcomers as the primary planning logic. This highlighted, on the one hand, the colonial urban planning

legacy at the root of the demographic and morphological conformation of the site and, on the other, the inability of the post-independence government to change course.

Through the experience of the scrap market and the associated mountains of e-waste, an attempt was made to identify the global dimension, which has strongly impacted the ecological condition of the site since the early 2000s. The focus here was on the international e-waste market and the consumerist logic of global capitalism, and ultimately on the informal circuit that marks the activities within the scrap yard closed last July.

Moving from the bottom up, it was possible to observe the social failures that this market causes without neglecting the positive factors that make the valuable depot to the entire urban context and fundamental to the livelihood of the washers who depend on it. This has made it possible to interpret the scrap metal workers as active agents who relate with the global market, carving out a space of survival that, however meagre, makes them much more than mere victims of the global capitalist system. Lastly, through the reality of Agbogbloshie, the paper sought to highlight how marginal urban spaces within the African urban context have much more to tell than the discomfort and degradation that is noticed at first glance.

Agbogbloshie, although an urban site of recent history, contains many historical and contemporary elements of African urbanisation. Within it, one can trace the roots of a colonial imprint of urban planning, the inability of independent governments to change their perspective, the inter-ethnic conflicts that have always punctuated power relations on the continent, the rural-urban migrations that characterise the current African revolution, the sad tendency towards self-exploitation to which African peoples are often subjected, the suffering of living at the limits of subsistence, but also the resilience of knowing how to live with what one has, through ingenuity and creativity. Such traits of a deep local history cannot be obscured by the capitalist system's tendency to decentralise waste disposal to low-income countries. Even this seemingly external and oppressive element is reflected in the local context's way of acting, which treasures all that is reusable and proactively relates to the outside world with the resources at its disposal. All this highlights the vital need to analyse and understand these places, which contain part of African culture and history. However, they do not represent the heterogeneous and modern African cities.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

This article is part of my PhD research at the University for Foreigners of Perugia. It does not present any omissions or false information motivated by conflicts of interest regarding the article's subject. I therefore declare that I have no economic interests or personal relationships that could influence the information in the article.



### **Notes on Contributor**

Michele Trassinelli is a PhD student in Diplomacy and Development Cooperation at the University for Foreigners of Perugia. After completing his master's degree in international relations and development Cooperation at the same university, he further enriched his academic career by obtaining a master's in African Studies at Dalarna University in Falun. This experience particularly catalysed his research interest in sustainable development and environmental justice in sub-Saharan Africa. During his PhD, Michele is dedicated to studying Kenya's off-grid solar market, applying a political ecology approach to the life cycle of off-grid solar technologies. His research project focuses on identifying and analysing critical issues that are often overlooked, challenging the optimistic and uncritical narrative that accompanies the expansion of this market in sub-Saharan Africa.

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