Expedition Report

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My one month trip to Ghana was solely for the purpose of collecting secondary data for my research on electric and electronic waste management practices and their implications on local residents. Electric and electronic waste, also known as E-waste, is defined as obsolete or end-of-life, electric and electronic products. These can range from household electrical and electric appliances to IT and telecommunication equipment to consumer electronic goods and even to energy generating facilities such as solar panels and generators. Being in my third year of studying BA Geography, this research was conducted for my Independent Geographic Study that translates into a dissertation and laid the essential groundwork for it.

My primary role in this trip was conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews with marginalized populations that work with the disposal, management and recycling of Western end-of-life technological equipment. Here I was aiming to understand their educational background, their heritage and their family situations as to trace the reasons behind their working at the scrapyard. From there, I proceeded to find out more about their daily routines, their job and the work that they do as well as their accounts of the working environment amongst their peers. Finally, I took it on to investigate the emotions, feelings and opinions that the individual felt in relation to this job. I sought to understand what it meant on a personal level to work a job of such hazardous nature that bears with it wide ranging health impacts that may lead to mental retardation, cancer or respiratory diseases to name a few. Whilst the informal workers are largely aware that their work is dangerous and unhealthy, they would reinforce that they had no option but to ignore the warnings and continue doing whatever would create money. “Over here we have no choice but to do our jobs so there is no point in thinking about the damages it can do to us. If it brings money, well then that is all we can afford to care about.” (Informal worker on working at the scrapyard).

In addition to interviewing the locals, I further took advantage of the opportunity at hand to interview a range of officials on the topic of E-waste disposal as well. I therefore made a list of officials that matched my field of inquiry and contacted them beforehand to arrange to meet. With others I had to improvise and paid them many visits before they made time to speak to me. The officials interviewed included UNDP and UNICEF officers, Environmental Protection Agency of Ghana (EPA) workers, NGO founders and E-waste company managers. Here I sought to investigate the ways in which local officials as well as international institutions were currently addressing the problems that E-waste is inflicting on the environment and population. Each, I found, was addressing it from different angles and with different perspectives allowing for a multi-dimensional approach and understanding of the issue at hand. It was interesting that despite it being a relatively new phenomenon that has only really come to life over a decade ago, it had already created such notable problems that
in consequence a high level of awareness was raised within the environmental sector. Now, many independent NGO’s, journalists, companies and even ordinary citizens have joined them in their quest for stopping the illegal shipments of e-waste to their country by campaigning, setting up programs and organizing media coverage amongst other.

To gather this information it was crucial for me to be able to travel to the respective location where this violation against human rights is currently occurring and to speak to the people concerned individually and in person as well as to witness the circumstances and conditions myself. This enabled a deeper understanding of the wider picture and enabled my research to become as accurate and comprehensive as possible. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and analyzed and will now be used in the process of writing my discussion of my dissertation.

The reason for having chosen Ghana as my research location rather than any other country hosting Western E-waste such as China, India or other African countries was because I was already familiar with the country as I had spent my gap year there in 2010-2011. This meant that I already had picked up on some of the local language and was able to hold a basic conversation with the locals. Secondly, it implies that I knew my way around many areas, was familiar with their culture and felt safe in my environment. Moreover, I had an already existing network of established contacts that were willing to help me with my task and were there for support. I was accommodated in a hostel in Accra, the capital, and commuted in the local buses called “tro-tro’s”. Interviews and general research took place every day apart from Sundays. Fortunately, my trip as well as my research went fairly smoothly with only minor complications such as having to wait for interviewees to respond and agree to meetings, having to deal with minor tropical illnesses and having to overcome language barriers as well as gender related difficulties.

The Expedition Fund that was offered to me by Queen Mary University greatly helped me personally, as the trip inevitably required a certain amount of money which I would not have been able to fully cover on my own. It therefore enabled me to even choose this project as my research topic in the first place and to make my fieldwork possible. I had alternatives set up in the case that funding would not have been possible but having been on the trip I can only state how grateful I am for having been granted this opportunity and how it has made me able to choose a dissertation topic that I am truly passionate about.