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Source: Geoffrey York

Slumdog engineers of Suame magazine

Slumdog engineers knocking on multinational doors

Geoffrey York

Kumasi, Ghana — From Thursday's Globe and Mail

Last updated on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2009 02:56AM EDT As he pours dangerous molten metal from a home-made furnace at a ferocious 600 degrees, a worker flings a skimpy T-shirt around his head for protection. Another worker grabs a chunk of mud and shoves it into the makeshift foundry to plug the flaming lava flow of molten metal.

None have safety helmets or other equipment. Their neighbours at nearby industrial workshops are wearing plastic flip-flops and shorts. Their welding cables are ripped and exposed, risking a high-voltage shock, and few of the welders wear safety glasses.



Safety is an afterthought for the 200,000 people in horrific conditions in one of Africa's biggest industrial slums. Survival comes first, and they need to eat.

The slum, known as Suame Magazine because of its origins among the artillery-makers at a local armoury, is a 180-hectare cluster of 12,000 repair shops and small-scale metal works on the outskirts of Ghana's second-biggest city, Kumasi.

At first glance, it seems like a vast wasteland of tin shacks and wrecked cars and impoverished mechanics, where the dust-choked air is filled with hammering, banging, pounding and shouting.

But some look at this post-apocalyptic junkyard and see hope for the future. If the small-scale artisans and repairmen can be linked into the supply chain of multinational corporations, could they escape poverty and work in safer conditions?

That's the experiment a Canadian group has launched. With a new aid philosophy that aims at business-oriented solutions, the Canadians are marketing the skills and ingenuity of the slum-dwellers, connecting them to foreign investors and helping them bid on valuable contracts that could transform their lives.

"My heart beats faster just thinking about this," says Florin Gheorghe, a 21-year-old engineering student at the University of British Columbia who has been immersed in this giant scrapyard for the past seven months.

"I've come to believe that what poor people need most is a way to make more money," he says. "Many development projects treat the poor as if they were incapable of fending for themselves, just sitting around waiting for whites to give them free food and clothes. It creates dependency and crushes local capacity The difference in our business-like approach is the dignity that comes in choosing to live a life that you value."

Though the mechanics and metalworkers of Suame Magazine are poorly educated and 98 per cent lack any Internet access to help them seek customers, many are astonishingly skilled.

Some build entire buses or fuel tankers from scratch, or design drilling rigs or foundries. All they need, the Canadians believe, is a helping hand to market themselves.

Mr. Gheorghe, supported by a Canadian non-profit group called Engineers Without Borders, arrived at the slum in January to work for its industrial development organization. He put on a suit and tie and began knocking on the doors of multinational companies around the city, giving out his business card and sending a deluge of e-mails to companies around Ghana.

After weeks of going door-to-door, he and his colleagues began to persuade some companies to award business to slum-dwellers. They won contracts at several major U.S. companies, including Newmont Mining Corp., Coca-Cola, and the cocoa division of Archer Daniels Midland Co.

Under the first Newmont contract, valued at \$30,000, the Suame Magazine artisans and repairmen were hired to build stairways, railways and platforms for massive Caterpillar trucks at the mining company.

It was followed by agreements on further contracts from Newmont, providing the much-needed prospect of steady revenue for the workers.

Newmont's executives were amused when a group of the slum-dwellers first arrived at their mine in Ghana to offer their wares.

"We drove through the gate in a beat-up truck that gargled as it changed gears," Mr. Gheorghe remembered. "It even broke down halfway through the gate When we got inside, the eight of us looked like a colourful circus crew in our rainbow of unmatched coveralls, aprons and torn lab coats."

He recalls a conversation with one Newmont employee who snickered at the very mention of Suame Magazine. When Newmont executives visited the slum, they were appalled by the poor safety conditions among the workers. But amusement and disdain soon gave way to respect as the mining company saw what the artisans could produce.

One group of 10 workers earning less than \$4 a day were able to double their income when they landed the Newmont deal, with the prospect of further revenue from profit-sharing at the end of the contract.

The contract helped them learn new skills, including the ability to read computer-aided engineering drawings. And it encouraged them to invest some of their profit in safety equipment. For the first time, they have switched to steel-toed boots and safety glasses, instead of flip-flops and bare eyes.

"When we went to Newmont, our guys came back flabbergasted at the safety equipment there," Mr. Gheorghe said. "Now they are always reminding me to put on my equipment."

The workers say they've benefited from the marketing efforts and the multinational contracts. "We're getting more experience and more jobs," one worker said. "Since we started wearing the safety equipment, we don't get injured any more."

George Roter, the Toronto-based co-founder of Engineers Without Borders, says the project in Suame Magazine is an innovative approach that could produce broader lessons for the foreign aid sector.

"The concept of stimulating business development using demand from international resource-extraction operations could be powerful in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa," he said.

"It's certainly a contrast to traditional aid-based approaches, and fits well with EWB's philosophy of development that sees successful African businesses and entrepreneurs as the

engine of development.”

As for Mr. Gheorghe, he is returning to the University of British Columbia this fall to finish his engineering degree after seven months of toil in the slum. But he's already planning a life of activism. He is convinced that he can find more capitalist innovations to help the developing world.

“My ambition,” he says, “is to become incredibly rich, and to lift a million people out of poverty. I don't think you have to be poor to help people.”

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