

News / World**10 toxic pollution success stories**

Report highlights successful cleanups, including an e-waste zone in Ghana, a contaminated Mexican oil refinery and a lead-battery dumpsite in Indonesia.



Agbogbloshie in Accra, Ghana, was the world's largest e-waste processing site and among the most toxic places on earth as boys and young men would burn the plastic sheathing off precious copper wire. Now mechanical wire strippers have been introduced.

By: [Raveena Aulakh](#) Environment, Published on Tue Jan 27 2015

Until a year ago, Agbogbloshie in Accra, Ghana, was the world's largest e-waste processing site and among the most toxic places on earth.

Boys and young men stripped down discarded electronics, burned sheathed cables to recover copper — when plastic is burned off copper wire, the smoke is extremely toxic. They suffered frequent burns, battled chronic nausea, debilitating headaches and respiratory problems.

All that just a year ago.

Now, a [new report](#) says Agbogbloshie is cleaning up its act, turning a corner on toxic pollution. It is an astonishing success story, along with nine others around the world, including a contaminated oil refinery in Mexico, a lead-battery dumpsite in Indonesia and a hunt for thousands of tonnes of old but still toxic pesticides abandoned in the former Soviet Union.

The report was released on Tuesday by Blacksmith Institute for a Pure Earth, a New York NGO, and Green Cross International.

All these sites are in poor or mid-income countries, and in the poorest neighbourhoods.

This report proves that even the most contaminated places can be cleaned up, Richard Fuller, president of the institute, said in an interview.

The technology to clean up or manage pollution at toxic sites already exists. Hand-held detection tools can instantly pinpoint hot spots and removal of hazardous pollutants can cost as little as \$20 per resident of a contaminated zone.

But pollution has not been a top priority for governments “because of lack of knowledge and lack of resources,” Fuller said. “But this issue (of toxic pollution) is now beginning to be understood. Part of what we need to do is draw attention to how much this is impacting the countries and their people so they can deal with it.”

Pollution kills almost nine million people worldwide every year; 8.4 million of those lived in the developing world — that’s 35 per cent more than deaths from smoking, almost three times more deaths than malaria. Despite pollution’s toll, not enough worldwide attention is being paid to the poisoned poor, says the report.

China has done a detailed assessment of its toxic sites and is now beginning to invest in the cleanups. “They are in early stages . . . but others have not even done an inventory,” said Fuller.

The 10 success stories comprise barely 1 per cent of all contaminated sites in the world, said Fuller. “But these are some of the few shining lights . . . of things going well and how they can.”

In Agbogbloshie, the dangerous burning of electronic waste has been replaced by wire-stripping machines that are safer in extracting prized copper. The noxious fumes had affected between 50,000 and 250,000 people.

The project can be replicated as a model for other e-waste sites in Ghana and Africa, says the report.

It is unclear how much it cost.

Now the contaminated soil must be cleaned up, said Fuller.

“The plan is to turn it into a park. That won’t take long and won’t be too expensive. When (countries) focus on it, it doesn’t take much and it can really happen.”

Meanwhile, Hazaribagh, the tannery district in Bangladesh that multiple NGOs have called among the [most toxic places in the world](#) has not changed in the least.

The densely populated, filthy neighbourhood on the banks of the Buriganga River in Dhaka, Bangladesh’s capital, is a [smorgasbord of lethal chemicals, toxic fumes and the unmistakable taste of death](#). A World Health Organization report says most of Hazaribagh’s tannery workers will die before they turn 50.

There is a plan to move those tanneries to a place away from the river and the city but Fuller says the move seems to be stuck in internal politics and bureaucratic limbo.

“I wish it would finally happen because that place is just . . . scary.”

Four cleanup projects:

- In the Philippines, the Marilao, Meycauayan and Obando river system is a major hub for aquaculture but is contaminated by untreated waste water from used car battery recycling, precious

metal refining shops and tanneries. Water samples reveal worrying levels of cadmium, copper and lead. A four-year project sponsored by HSBC and carried out by Blacksmith Institute is testing innovative water filtering in fish ponds, enhancing monitoring of water quality and providing comprehensive training to fishermen.

- In Mexico City, a contaminated oil refinery is now an urban park with a million visitors a year. For 58 years, the refinery in the city's urban core spewed lead, benzene and heavy metals into the air. The grounds were saturated with toxins metres below surface and the groundwater was contaminated. Working with industry and the university, the Government of Mexico successfully cleaned it up.
- In Russia's Tomsk region, the race is on to hunt down thousands of tonnes of old but still toxic pesticides discarded and forgotten following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Pesticides like DDT and lindane were buried at hundreds of largely unrecorded sites. They have been leaching toxins into nearby waterways for the last 20 years. Now experts from multiple agencies are working with a local group of experts in Siberia to uncover these toxic sites for remediation.
- In Cinangka, an Indonesian village, a soccer field was being used as a lead battery dump site. Locals dismantled car batteries in backyards, smelted the lead and dumped the remains. Soil contamination levels at the local field were 500 times higher than the U.S. safety limit. A project completed in April 2014 safely encapsulated contaminated soil at the soccer field, allowing children to safely use it again.