

# **‘Informal Exceptionalism?’ Labour Migrants’ Creative Entrepreneurship for Sustainable Livelihoods in Accra, Ghana**

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**Abstract**

Intra- and inter-regional migration is widely described. Prior studies have attribute varied reasons for this development including the quest for greener pastures and unequal development in northern Ghana. What has escaped critical scrutiny is some migrants’ ability to escape extreme rural poverty, albeit in harsh urban environment. Such a missing gap can potentiate high policy failures, hence the need for academic attention. Using a mixed method, we focus on two informal daily livelihoods as exemplars – exceptionalism – in Accra. We see their embedded organisational vitality and dynamic networks as illuminating for good livelihood practices, proper city governance and fostering economic empowerment. We call on city authorities to take cognisance of such complexities and heterogeneity of production–labour relations, failure of which can

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spell doom for policies ostensibly initiated to curb migration, as they are likely to be underpinned by factual inaccuracies and may result in ill-fated interventions.

### Keywords

Urbanisation, globalisation, trade liberalisation, migration, livelihood, Accra

## Introduction

One key colonial footprint in Metropolitan Accra, Ghana administrative capital, has been its pole position as the veritable Mecca for most labour migrants particularly from northern Ghana (Asiedu and Agyei-Mensah, 2008; Awumbilla et al., 2014), but in recent times Kumasi and Sekondi-Takoradi have entered the fray though not sufficient enough to win the competition (Haug, 2014; Porter et al., 2012). Theoretically, most earlier studies were tied in 19th century concepts and models (Massey et al., 1998: 432), and also were divided about the causes of population mobility. Among the assigned causes range from economic motivation (Oberhauser and Yeboah, 2011) to organised or 'rhythmic' movements, normally underpinned by a way of life such as pastoral nomads, fishermen with seasonal rhythm (Kwankye et al., 2007). Recent scholars criticise earlier theories as being 'incoherent and isolated' (De Haas, 2010; Hagen-Zanker, 2008). To them, contemporary migration patterns and processes demand complex theory that embody variety of perspectives. These debates have produced a 'theoretical alternative' or the 'New Economics of Labour Migration' theory, which seeks to redress both the excessive structural emphasis and the theoretical insufficiencies of the standard neoclassical framework (Hagen-Zanker, 2008). The purpose is to allow for 'a greater variety of outcomes than would have been allowed from either the single aggregation of individual decision making or from the unidirectional imperatives of structures' (De Haas, 2010: 242).

Our objective here is not to dabble in the raging theoretical debates or provide exhaustive discussions on the varied causality of labour mobility. Rather, we want to contribute to existing literature on labour mobility outcomes by unveiling creative enterprises, often excluded from growth and development potentials and 'trapped in external dependencies' (Scholz, 2002 cited in Kulke and Staffeld, 2009: 25). We take as a point of departure, the fact that no country, community or economy can achieve its full potentials or meet the challenges of the 21st century without the full and equal participation of all its citizenry – women and men, girls and boys. We argue that although informal activities – or survival economies – are often associated with negative aspects including income insecurity and health risks (International Labour Office, 2003), some nonetheless do potentiate great opportunities for some migrants to escape extreme poverty although these have received less academic and policy makers' attention. Indeed, we concur with Maiti and Sen (2010: 2) that 'any regulations or laws introduced by the state or an attempt to recreate the informal sector as a mirror reflection of the formal sector is merely going to weaken the creative energies of the informal sector and bring the growth of informal enterprises to a grinding halt'. Using the experiences of some *Kayayei*<sup>1</sup> and waste pickers as exemplars, we argue that some cohort of menial jobbers may 'contribute little to the economy' (Kreutzmann, 2006), others nonetheless present decent living, and are indeed agents of change in local economies and beyond (Morrison, 2017; Oteng-Ababio, 2018).

These are revealing, considering the recent anaemic performance of the Ghanaian economy, the sluggish labour market and the long queue for job seekers (in a recent recruitment exercise, at least 84,637 people applied for a paltry 500 vacancies at the Ghana Immigration Service, with the bulk of applicants coming from the Greater Accra Region with over 15,000 people and consequently,

sparking renewed interest in the unemployment situation in the country; Myjoyonline.com, 2018). The authors opine that, even casual and low-paid jobs may still be better than being unemployed and destitute, making migration one of the biggest trigger of individual social and economic progress. The authors further maintain that city authorities are duty-bound to ease the self-inflicted regulations that criminalises informality and thus making the transition to formal sector fraught with uncertainty. In situations where city authorities pervasively exhibit high-level uncertainty and disdain about creative enterprises, social policies become socially explosive, generate ‘hot situations’ and breed ‘urbanism controversies’ (Oteng-Ababio, 2016a, 2016b). Our paper is organised as follows. The next section expands the creative entrepreneurship debate and situates the paper in the broader literature on migration studies, focusing on how emerging migration patterns are facilitated and perpetuated by urban poverty. This is followed by a discussion on the research methodology whereas the penultimate section discusses the research findings. The paper closes with conclusions on the potentials of informality, and recommendations on how policy makers can tap into these potentials to assist city in developing appropriate policy interventions.

### **Labour mobility and creative entrepreneurship**

The literature on the burgeoning urban population appears to be a tale of messianic hope and dejection, with some residents welcoming the new opportunities (Morrison, 2017), whereas others remain virtually chased away by congestion, pollution, squalid housing conditions and unemployment (Songsore, 2017). Such narratives see city management through developmental lens, generally defined in the narrow sense of economic growth and access to social services (De Sato, 2000) and the assumption that with development would come prosperity (or poverty reduction). The new opportunities are seen only as those enterprises that are largely represented as positive, wholesome and virtuous endeavour; and the entrepreneur as a hero (Burns, 2001; Cannon, 1991).

This stereotypically portrays labour mobility (such as rural–urban migrants) as generally comprising uneducated, unskilled labour who remain glued to live and work manually and informally for survival (Kwankye et al., 2007). These migrants are seen as unable to break through the barriers of social and legal marginalisation that trap them in client forms of political incorporation and contribute very little or nothing at all to the urban economy (Meagher, 2011). Such conventional approaches to, and mythical narratives about labour migrants’ entrepreneurial acumen are divorced from local realities, largely ignoring and undervaluing their contributions by city planners’ privileged rational-modernist model of enterprises based on capital-intensive technologies (Gough and Langevang, 2016). Regrettably and as rightly noted by Williams and Nadin (2010: 443), this has been glossed over for a long time, leading to a situation where

[...] those types of entrepreneurship that contradict this ideal-type are either located outside the boundaries of entrepreneurship, ignored, portrayed as temporary or transient, or simply asserted to have little or anything to do with what is viewed as mainstream entrepreneurship [...] legitimate entrepreneurs.

Additionally, such misconception leads to huge opportunity losses in understanding, appreciating and integrating informally different approaches, strategies and contributions as service providers in socio-technical systems (like collecting and recycling urban waste), as economic actors (critical to the value chain), as political actors (furthering social inclusion through collective action) and as drivers of social change (providing a source of income generation for less disadvantaged communities). In recent times, some ‘small tributary of entrepreneurship literature’ has been highlighting the indispensability of the informal sector if governments are to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) by 2030 (Gough and Langevang, 2016; Morrison,

2017). Governments are being urged to unpack and understand the realities of migrant labour enterprises and experiences on the ground by profiling their connectivity and value chains (Oteng-Ababio, 2017). The concept of livelihoods offers a promising lens, and as aptly articulated by Dias, (2016), it encapsulates a broader term than mere income generation, but includes

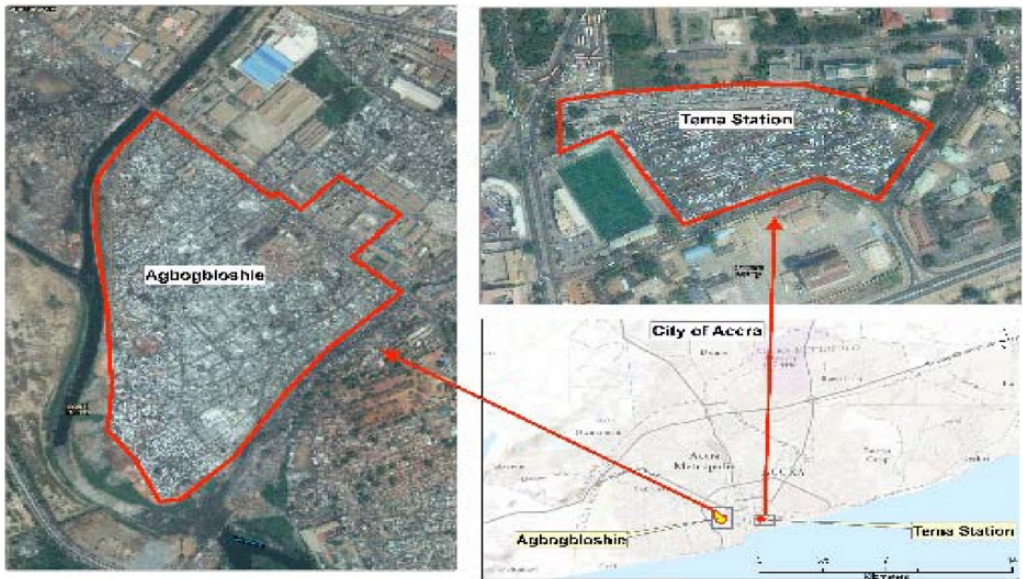
[...] gaining and retaining access to resources and opportunities, dealing with risk, negotiating social relationships and managing social networks and institutions within households, communities and the cities. (Dias, 2016: 376)

A focus on livelihoods involves 'highlighting the importance of human capabilities and agency' as well as enabling the conceptualisation of different models 'that are more in line with addressing critical dilemmas of our times: social inclusion and environmental protection' (Beall et al., 2011). This is in sync with the conceptualisation of Chambers and Conway (1992) of a livelihood as capabilities, assets and activities required for making a living that are derived from a 'sustainable livelihood' perspective, which privileges the means of living that are resilient to shocks and stresses, and do not adversely affect the environment. Consequently, individual asset status is fundamental in determining livelihood options, strategies to be adopted, outcomes to be expected and the level of vulnerability. Additionally, each individual has some capabilities (personal characteristics) and assets (including social capital and networks) that motivate him/her to move out of poverty and in so doing, contribute towards achieving the UN SDGs, particularly Goal 11 (Tanle, 2014).

Essentially, the visible lack of appreciation of the entrepreneurial role of labour migrants in the urban economy cannot be allowed to fester any longer, particularly when recent studies have abundantly shown that poverty, which has for long been uniquely rural has become urbanised, a trend that is unlikely to be reversed (UN-Habitat, 2009). The paper condemns such conceptualisation of entrepreneurial stint (role) of labour migrants' by proposing an integrated and inclusive city governance model with labour migrants as key stakeholders. We concur that short of proper planning within the remit of the socio-economic realities, poverty in sub-Saharan African cities will persist and perhaps, worsen access to social infrastructure and increase urban poverty, with disproportionate impact on women and compromising the attempts to eradicate poverty by 2030 (Gillespie, 2015; Turok, 2016). This case study presents enough evidence to suggest that most present-day labour mobility is no longer a desperate jump into the unknown, but rather a purposeful movement of networks of relatives, with improved courtesy transport and communication means, from low-wage to high-wage areas to 'test the waters' (Oteng-Ababio, 2016a). We see labour migration as part of the overall urbanisation process where members of an informed family strategically live and work geographically, decidedly informed by comparative advantage as a way of escaping poverty. This theoretically may not be an ideal family situation, but it nonetheless enables impoverished families to reduce their risk of the loss of urban employment or a poor harvest.

### **Agbogbloshie: Throes of informal exceptionalism**

The paper is partly culled out of a bigger research project (*E-waste processing, Health and Food Security at Agbogbloshie Market in Accra*) funded by the Global Development Network, and the Office of Research, Innovation and Development (at the University of Ghana) and conducted in Accra's 'concentrated camp' – Agbogbloshie, the largest informal settlement in Ghana (see Figure 1). The initial fieldwork took place between 2013 and 2014, and involved the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore e-waste scavengers' livelihoods strategies (see Grant and Oteng-Ababio, 2016; Oteng-Ababio et al., 2015). The open-ended and closed questions were structured to elicit information covering economic, political and social factors influencing respondents' migration



**Figure 1.** Map of the study area showing the two research locations – Agbogbloshie and Tema Station.  
 Source: Authors' Construct, 2018.

decision and the driving forces shaping their working conditions, local challenges and institutions that hinder their activities. Apart from its mixed methods, the research instrument was designed by the research team in conjunction with some members of the informal enterprises. This enabled an assessment of the key drivers – both positive and negative – that affect their lives, work conditions and coping strategies.

A later complementary study of the activities of *Kayayei* and e-waste collectors adopted a systematic qualitative investigation, relying on in-depth interviews and participant observations carried out through a non-continuous six-month period, between July in 2014 and January 2015. The observational methods allowed for gained insights into their modus operandi, power relations (formalised and tacit) and others, while in practice, a careful attempt was made to keep the field records focused and systematic in order to generate comparable data sets to aid the analysis. A total of 23 in-depth interviews with *Kayayei* were conducted using the snowball sampling technique because our interests lie in the experiences of interviewees who had been in Accra for over a year. Aside the fact that responses after the 23rd respondent were becoming too repetitive, the target population itself are characteristically homogeneous (that is gender, place of origin, same business, and so forth) and was more socially well-connected. The interviewees provided insider perspectives into their activities and ‘governance’ structure. Consistent with interview methodology (see Dunn, 2010), the semi-structured interviews were composed of the same primary set of questions, with prompts nested below each one, and follow-up questions to informants’ varied responses. Generally, the interviews lasted between one and two hours in length, mostly when the interviewee’s responses were seen to have reached saturation point and were no longer yielding novel insights, became redundant and were only reinforcing previously collected data. Further, a total of two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, one each for identified livelihood and these helped bridge the gap between the observed actions, motivational values and governmentality that underpinned some of their activities (Oteng-Ababio, 2016a).

Generally, the initial visits and contacts revealed quite clearly that the respondents exhibit signs of research fatigue. Hence, to earn their trust, the researchers invested lots of time in the leaders of Greater Accra Scrap Dealers Association, an umbrella organisation of squatters in Agbogbloshie. This complemented the many years of mutually beneficial relationship the lead author has established with the association, which figuratively opened all doors to the socio-economic spaces – *Kayayei* and e-waste scavengers – who hitherto appear hermetic to ‘intruders’. This unfettered opportunity enabled the conduct of the ‘life histories’ interviews. The responses were recorded with the interviewee’s consent and approval and later thematically analysed and incorporated in the general discussions. These did not only give valuable insights into their *raison d’être* and livelihood strategies of the respondents but provided information regarding their personal experiences and life stories. The analytic focus on livelihoods, along with macro-economic forces and the wider policy context for the Accra economy, allowed for a deeper understanding of the multiple dimensions of their activities, and the strategies of the working poor in improving their lives.

### **Informality: Scourge of city authorities and salvation of struggling migrants**

As already stated, this paper focuses on the motivation for and outcomes of intra- and inter-regional migration in Ghana. The findings indicate that the majority (about 90%) of the respondents migrate to seek greener pastures, and today, make more money on the basis of which they can lay claim to decent life, and stay much longer without disconnecting themselves from their native regions. Although Kulke and Staffeld (2009: 25) highlight two perspectives of the informal sector,<sup>2</sup> we restricted ourselves to, and sampled from, among the ‘survival economy’. Informing the logic of our model are the economic experiences of those who cover the lowest ebb of the prosperity ladder, who appear to have suffered different kinds and forms of exclusion; and how their activities illustrate the interplay between formal and informal sectors. The two case studies provide a microcosm of how economically challenged and struggling migrants mostly from the north are ‘rationally motivated mainly by economic considerations and gains’ (Kabeer, 1994: 97). To protect the identity of our respondents, pseudonyms have been employed in the discussions below.

#### **Case Study 1: The ‘Kaya business’**

Being a *Kayayoo* is seen as the short-term cost to be paid for a long-term gain – change to better occupation, marriage, or the purchase of capital goods necessary for training for a better occupation. (Agarwal et al., 1997: 257)

The interactions, interviews and participant observations revealed the *kaya* business as an immense source of hope for female migrants in particular, with some conspicuously scaling-up the prosperity ladder. This is in sync with earlier gendered studies that revealed head portering as, almost exclusively, an occupation province women adopted to leap off the poverty train (Hart, 1973). Although the dearth of statistical data constrained attempts to estimate the number of *Kayayei* active in Accra, their visibility in the Central Business District is unquestionably conspicuous (Morrison, 2017). Among the 23 head porters interviewed, 13 (57%) were aged between 11 and 17 and had been in the trade for less than three years. A further seven (30%), aged between 14 and 23, had been in the trade for at least three years but not more than seven years whereas only three (11%), who happened to be in their late 20s or early 30s, were over seven years in the business. Of the 13 early-stage respondents, 11 (85%) reported that head portering is their sole livelihood while the remaining two claim to offer occasional janitorial services to some stores for a supplementary fee. Additionally, all the seven respondents who had spent about seven years in the

'kaya-trade' were engaged in other multiple livelihoods with head portage acting only as a safety net – a last resort when other options are less lucrative. Unsurprisingly, all the participants who had been in the 'kaya-trade' for more than seven years had transcended the practice, and were engaged in other 'businesses' only remotely related to the 'kaya-trade'.

The findings suggest that a significant proportion of the early-stage female labour migrants operate solely as head portage with marked temporal livelihood entrepreneurial variations. Characteristically, all the respondents were school dropouts and none of them were on the radar screen of the state. They collectively evoke an ethnic occupational niche for female migrants from northern Ghana, all of whom claimed they entered the 'kaya-trade' as a way of accumulating capital that would not have been possible in the place of origin, to later invest in other less arduous but presumably profitable occupations. A discussant in a FGD remarked,

In the north, it is very difficult to earn even 5 [cedis] a day. Back there [in the North], we all work for our parents on the family farm, which today due to poor rains, has become financially un-rewarding. Today, most crops wither before flowering. But here [Accra], but for ill-health, you make at least, 10 [cedis] a day, get what you will eat and send some home [place of origin]. (Sallah, 21-year old Kayayei)

Sallah's comments, which resonate with many of her peers, also confirm the observation of Agarwal et al., (1997: 2) that

[*Kayayei*] exists within a socially occupational chaperoning context; an older sister, cousin, home town acquaintance or distant relative is involved in arranging accommodation, in ensuring that the girl child works and in enforcing savings activities on the part of the child in the interest of the larger family unit.

Another *Kayayo*, who has been in the trade for nine (9) years revealed,

As at[sic] now, I have about 15 girls from my home town under my tutelage. If you do not help them, the whole community will hold you responsible when they fail. In two or three years' time, they will have gained their independence and will be expected to extend same assistance to others up and coming. (Hawa; with a 9-year experience as Kayayei)

Operationally, the *Kaya-trade* is quite diverse, pervasive and spatially defined, and participants work briskly between 4:30 am and 6:00 pm. Business is however more intense between the early hours (4:30 am and 5:30 am) when the long buses and cargo trucks arrive from the periphery. It was observed that those operating at Metro Mass Terminals starts operations around 5:00 am, exhibit artistry traits of vigilance, social cohesion and orderliness, with each making frantic efforts to be the first to sight an on-coming bus. Typically, the first to sight a bus shouts 'No 1', while her compatriots continue the counting numerically with one's position on the roll-call consigning the one to a particular boot of the bus and its content therein in so far as the goods demand the services of a *Kayayei*. In terms of remuneration, from the results, a *Kayayei* earns between GH¢10 and GH¢20 or US\$2.50 and US\$5, with some occasionally earning about GH¢80 or US\$20 a day. With the country's formal sector flailing and the fact that they live on less than one US dollar a day in their home regions, almost 87% saw their remuneration as overwhelmingly satisfactory. Even the three who dissented are those who are over seven years in the *kaya-trade* and are aspiring for a 'more decent life'.

An interesting observation among the *Kayayei* is their high degree of social organisation. This manifests through the provision of working spaces and socio-economic support when illness strikes. We observed two financial savings units: the 'susu' and 'nobia' systems. The 'susu' describes an arrangement whereby an individual pays a daily contribution to an 'informal banker' (*susu* collector) who holds the savings in trust, usually for 30 days and pays them back the lump

sum, after a deduction of a day's contribution as 'administrative charges'. Although contributions are independently determined, most respondents (87%) averagely paid GH¢5.00 (US\$1.0) as daily saving. The 'noboa' system, on the other hand, is a semblance of the block system or rotating box credit system. In this instance, members form a group of between five and 10 *Kayayei* and each contribute an agreed daily amount. Then, the total monthly contribution is given to a member in accordance with a turn-taking rule agreed upon, although in times of emergencies such as in the event of sickness, a member can be lifted higher in the queue.

Incidentally, the findings show that most *Kayayei* are staying longer than previously reported (see Kwankye et al., 2007). Nonetheless, they adopt complex strategies to remain deeply embedded and be responsive to their kinsmen and obediently remit on demand (Agarwal et al., 1997). During the FGDs, some participants attributed this dynamics to their ability to engage in multiple livelihoods and diversify into 'more respectable professions' like operating food joints and mobile communication centres (which involves the use of mobile phones for commercial purposes and also includes the sales of mobile phone top-up cards), among others. Even those who give birth are able to send their babies to family members 'for care' when they are still toddling. To these 'new entrepreneurs', the improved transportation and communication services have been a great catalyst. The experience of Abiba, a native of Walewale (a town in the northern region), and a *Kayayo* turned a popular *Waakye* (rice and beans) seller in central Accra, is a microcosm of the emerging dynamics. According to Abiba, at the age of 19, she joined the *kaya* business in April 2001, with the aim of making some quick money for the impending Christmas. However, she got pregnant before that December and that frustrated her dream. After giving birth in January, she sent the baby to her grandmother (her mother was deceased) when the baby was six months old and came back to Accra to work. In an interview, Abiba's effusion, which is essentially the popular view of her peers (nouveau-riche) that we interacted with, smacks of Charles Dickens' 1838 *Oliver Twist*-ian approach to ask for more.

I needed to send him home so that I can come to continue my business... I just have to make sure I don't starve them since my grandmother is too old to farm, and this I do religiously [...] I send her [grandma] vouchers [call cards] regularly so that they keep in touch [...] I remit them regularly too. I currently live in a rented room; I own and drive [an] Ascona [Opel]. Better days are ahead. (Abiba, Personal Interview; July, 2015)

Equally promising emerging feature of the *kaya-trade* is how the use of mobile telephony has facilitated a continuum from purely commercial to purely social entrepreneurship, creating direct links between the *Kayayei* and some affluent housewives (loyal customers) affectionately called 'Madam'. During the FGDs, they recounted how their *Madams* could occasionally enjoy them through a phone call to do their routine weekly shopping on their behalf and send it to them in their respective homes (sometimes, with a hired taxi). A happy beneficiary reveals,

Your customer [Madam] can call and ask you to go to a particular trader for goods. When you get there, your Madam will speak to her [trader] and the goods will be parceled for onward delivery. Normally, the urgency of the situation determines the mode of transport. On arrival, you will be paid for your services. From there, you can go and "sleep." Some friends have become house-helps and store assistants of their Madams.

The results complicate earlier studies that stressed the immiseration that peasant migrant labour from the north go through (Awumbilah et al., 2014). It also runs counter to several other dominant conceptualisations of informality: as disorganised and deprived of agency (Davis, 2006; Kaplan,



1994); as sites prone to violence at the conflation of urban poverty, insecurity around land, lawlessness and social tensions (Beall et al., 2011; Lombard and Rakodi, 2016); as arenas of socio-political or economic homogeneity, or as occupied by those marginalised from globalisation processes (Williams and Nadin, 2010). This empirical study presents the *Kaya-trade* as part of the ‘formal transport structure’ whereby functions, performed by technology in other jurisdictions, are being performed by human energy due to the congested nature of the markets (Agarwal et al., 1997: 2). The case histories confirm the fact that today’s ‘economic migrant’ is earning more, not only focused on for bread and butter issues, but also in a search for a relatively better life.

### Case study 2: Creating wealth from waste

The capitalist knows that all commodities, however tattered they may look, or however badly they may smell, are in faith and in truth money, [. . .], and, what is more, a wonderful means for making still more money out of money (Marx, 1976/1867, 256)

The above is a classic vignette of how the current covariation of wealth and waste characterises urban informal societies in the contemporary developing world, with the Agbogbloshie recycling site providing an apposite case. The case study presents an even more puzzling situation: although per their current *modus operandi*, we cannot discount potential health risks, nonetheless engaging in e-waste recycling is a great economic leap out of poverty for peoples whose qualifications are hardly sufficient for any decent life (Grant and Oteng-Ababio, 2016). The findings portray e-waste recycling as a largely well-organised but ‘brittle’ activity, because each node in the value chain can be disrupted by state intervention and market forces (scrap metal price fluctuations, intermittent flows and intense informal competition) while formal firms entering the arena are intensifying pressures.

Be that as it may, the results present e-waste processing and collection activity as being undertaken by low-paid, low-skilled urban migrants from northern Ghana, aged between 15 and 30 years, who participate in the activities because they offer rapid cash flow as revenues materialise immediately (same day) when recycled elements are sold. Admittedly, the recyclers operate at the stage in the chain where profits are low, health risks high and occupational resources few. From the findings, the respondents were cognisant of this ‘injustice’, but their low education level and the allure of a starting wage that is upwards of five to seven times that of the monthly wages of a Ghanaian minimum wage employee is often too attractive to resist. Their work exceptionalism in regard to their contribution to the urban economy manifests itself to date in the public sector evidence of Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE), with a collection rate that is only around 1% (Höeltl et al., 2017), whereas the ‘informal scavengers’ operate at 95% (Grant and Oteng-Ababio, 2016). We observed that e-waste enterprise has expanded beyond Agbogbloshie to secondary sites in Accra, Kumasi, Koforidua and Takoradi, with over 400–600 ‘firms’ operating in Accra; subsets of these firms maintain links to larger formal firms, whereas the informal recyclers rely on the intermediators (see Figure 2). According to the World Bank (2015, 41) the e-waste economy contributed an estimated US\$416 million dollars in 2015 to the national economy, while Prakash et al. (2010, 38) quoted an equivalent of 0.55% of Ghana’s GDP.

Flowing from the findings, the ‘economic viability’ and vibrancy of e-waste enterprise is beyond dispute. The results present the respondents as the *breadwinners* in their families, with remittances ‘back home’ being a routine activity. Apart from these traditionally well-documented remittances (Awumbila et al., 2014), we uniquely unveiled a new network of émigrés using their acquired resources – technical, social and economic – to create their own business in related sectors including motor repairs, and *Okada* or ‘moto-taxi’ operations. Consider the case of Abukari, a 27-year polytechnic graduate who moved to Accra in 2008. Abu is a native of Savelugu (mainly a farming

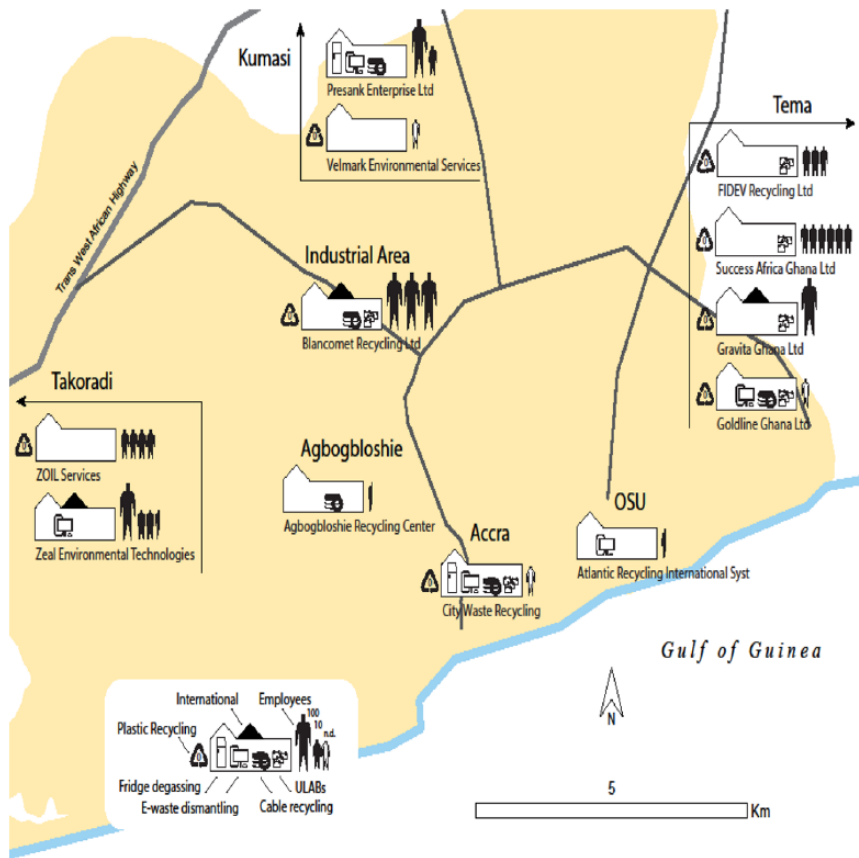


Figure 2. Subsets of formal and informal e-waste recycling firms operating in Accra.

community), 7 km from Tamale, the northern regional capital. While in Accra, he initially worked as e-waste collector (recycler) for four years before setting up his personal refurbishing shop in Accra in 2013. Abu insinuatingly remarks,

[...] In life, the beginning matters..., but the end is the most important. Nobody wants to know how it started. Everybody talks about today as if there was no yesterday. (Abu, Personal Interview; July, 2015)

In 2015, Abu managed to establish another shop back home not only for fixing people’s faulty appliances but also offering refurbished and spruced-up electronics for sale. He has also set up a ‘recording studio’ (with refurbished computers) where he duplicates music and films, albeit illegally, for his clients at a fee. More significantly, because the community is yet to be connected to the national grid, ‘Abu’s corner’ virtually serves as a community *rendezvous* where community members gather to listen to music or watch European sports scores via multi-choice pay TV. He operates with a generator for energy supply where residents charge their mobile phones for a fee. Abu employs two assistants, who are going through apprenticeship and manning the shop while he (Abu) concentrates on the Accra outlet and occasionally visits ‘home’ to attend to ‘emergencies’, where difficult cases are referred for Abu’s attention. Abu’s story is not only one of the innovative strategies we observed in Agbogbloshie, it is also a significant departure from what is known in pioneering literature that highlighted just monetary remittances.

Thus, as the world hurtles towards its urban future, with volume and content of waste, critical scholarship is abuzz with promises and perils of e-waste recycling: a practice in pursuit of opportunities, which has ‘made’ Agbogbloshie, has assumed international notoriety (Oteng-Ababio, 2016b; Prakash et al., 2010). From the study, much is known about the deleterious effects of e-wastes that are left behind and their drastic effects on environmental, aquatic and human health, and how it may have escalated cybercrimes (Warner, 2011). Despite an exploding rhetoric around e-waste, recent studies (Lepawsky, 2015) are increasingly recognising its strategic and lucrative nature, with Baldé et al. (2015) presenting WEEE recycling as part of the US\$52 billion global industry. Ultimately, the creativity and contribution of e-waste recycling to livelihoods, its achievements in reducing the digital divide, and the spontaneous ways it links informal and formal economies and contributes economic output, is under-acknowledged.

### Revisiting informal livelihood exceptionalism

This study profiles the activities of some *Kayayei* and e-waste scavengers that straddle city authorities’ quest for a ‘sanitised city’ and respondents’ pursuit for survival livelihoods. This creates a conundrum – how the available resources can be used to create inclusive opportunities for all including the ‘poor’ who need more than just an expression of sympathy and solidarity to recover from abject poverty. The study generally sees the case studies not only as viable sources of livelihood but a potential ‘game changing’ option as well as a youth mentorship and esteem-building endeavour. Being de facto breadwinners of their respective families, most participants work to overcome urban challenges in order to be ready to respond to emergency calls from home. By inference, we can tentatively conclude that our respondents engaged in their respective activities for reasons beyond just escaping out of poverty, but more importantly, as the easiest way of earning an income. Characteristically, the ‘Senior Kayayei’ like Abiba are diversifying their trade by retailing phone rechargeable vouchers and/or operating communication services. Similarly, although challenging, Abu and his cohorts engage in multiple livelihood activities, forming expanded ‘income-generating portfolios’, which due to increased job insecurity, may be a form of risk diversification. These are clear cases where ‘hopelessness’ inspire ‘innovativeness’ – *informal exceptionalism* – in a contested urban environment – *urbanism controversies* – where official aspiration parallels migrant labour concerns (Oteng-Ababio, 2016a). The respondents using their entrepreneurial skills are able to identify opportunities and invest in them accordingly.

The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that economic migrants’ motivations are based on their lived experiences in their places of origin and by their current economic stature and social responsibility. The respondents actively choose to be self-employed and ‘managing WEEE’ rather than looking for wage labour to ‘become someone else’s donkey’. By implications, they evaluate opportunities available to them and take decisions, emphasising the thin line between deprivation and strands of entrepreneurship of the respondents. Put differently, informality may be more of a symptom than a victim of urbanisation; it creates a platform for social integration and belongingness, and fills the void of state interventions (Obeng-Odoom and Ameyaw, 2014). Principally, informality assumes normalcy (offers better and greater earnings) than the public sector, which employs just about 20% of the active labour force (Ghana Statistical Service, 2008), where the government-sponsored take-home pay ‘cannot take people home’ (a Trade Unionist, undated). Hence, the *Kayayei* and e-waste recyclers exploit economic opportunities within reach to make money and these have become an integral part of Accra’s economy, albeit with their own internal contradictions. We concur that waste is a critique of modernity, but it nonetheless potentiates innovation, serves as a source of livelihood and creates environmental consciousness.

The life stories of Abiba and Abu demonstrate varying degrees of commitment to their homeland and kin; aside from helping their families, they do contribute materially to major community projects, and educating young members of their extended family, thus enhancing their prestige and social standing in their local community (Tanle, 2014). In other words, poverty may not be the sole motivation in the creation of a family welfare system. This study, although it may not represent the complete picture, exemplifies vibrant attempts by the marginalised to contest the failure of the state and its institutions, and their approaches are exceptional, conflicting the exit thesis of informalisation (De Sato, 2000). Their activities not only provide valuable services, they also exhume the poor's entrepreneurial acumen, service to society and economic space, in which they articulate their rights and impact city governance. Their exceptional livelihood strategies provide a conceptually useful tool for re-thinking the stereotypical belief that migrants engage only in menial jobs, because that comes short of illuminating the complexities of motivations for their activities. This paper agrees that urbanisation presents job opportunities, greater independence and motivations in what people have to do with the instrumentalisation of surviving. From the findings, we see a right to be part of an urbanising city as being contingent on your ability to carve out an innovative entrepreneurship, which normally abounds in the informal economy, which offers a 'ready' and 'easy' alternative.

### Concluding remarks

Based on the findings from the case studies, accepting the depiction of informality as 'survival activities' may be too simplistic. The respondents revealed that they specifically moved to Accra to engage in *Kayayei* and waste scavenging, implying that the issue of being stuck is not a universal characteristic. Examining their stated earnings against the socio-economic realities in the country, the respondents are not engaged solely in menial jobs, but are demonstrating their creative entrepreneurial skills and responding uniquely to the void of state provision of equal opportunities and access to basic urban services. The overall findings blur, complicate and raise legitimate questions about earlier supposed motivations for labour migrants to 'cities': Is migration being occasioned solely by climatic stress (van der Geest, 2011)? Chieftaincy conflicts or fear of certain cultural practices (Caldwell, 1969)? The results of the study sway heavily towards the new economics of labour migration model, which posits that in most cases, the decision to migrate is not an individual one, but rather one that is made by a group, such as a family or a household (Hagen-Zanker, 2008).

These results have significant implications not only for theorising livelihoods, but also for public policy towards the informal economy. In terms of theorising creative entrepreneurship, it is often assumed that informal entrepreneurs are entirely unsustainable. They are depicted as 'survival-seeking' economic actors without choice. However, this is an a priori assumption. The tentative conclusion is that the assumption that entrepreneurs are purely uneconomically driven now needs to be transcended. This is not to say, however, that one should now argue that many informal works are economically sustainable. Rather, there is a need to portray hidden entrepreneurs as existing on a spectrum from purely commercial to purely social entrepreneurship, with different combinations of logics predominating in varying populations. These findings, nevertheless, are based on a limited dataset. What is now required are further evaluations not only of where on the continuum hidden entrepreneurs are clustered in different populations, but also the contrasting directions of change in various contexts.

The UN SDGs recognise that cities can lead the way towards economically, socially and environmentally sustainable societies, but that a holistic approach to urban planning and management is needed to improve living standards of urban and rural dwellers alike. Our paper supports the position that sustainable urbanisation requires that cities generate better income and employment

opportunities; expand the necessary infrastructure for water and sanitation, energy, transportation, information and communications; ensure equal access to services; reduce the number of people living in slums; and preserve the natural assets within the city and surrounding areas (World Bank, 2015). To curb rural-urban migration and by extension, uncontrolled urbanisation processes, there is the need for a new, imaginative and bold vision tailored to this reality, one that brings opportunity to every corner of the city and beyond – a new strategy that is as much about Accra as it is about Kumasi, Sekondi-Takoradi, Tamale and indeed, all other global South urbanised cities.

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### Notes

1. Etymologically, the term *kaya yo* (plural *kaya yei*) is derived from two words, *kaya*, a Hausa word meaning ‘wares’ or ‘goods’, and *yo* (*yei*), a Ga word meaning ‘a woman’ (or ‘women’). Therefore, the term *kayayei* refers to female commercial head porters or persons who transport goods on their heads for a small fee. Although the term ‘kayayei’ refers to women engaged in transporting goods, the term includes both male and female.
2. On the one hand is the ‘survival economy’, which basically consists of self-employed activities with the primary objective of generating enough income to survive on a day-to-day basis; and on the other hand, the so-called ‘growth-oriented’ informal economy, consisting of dynamic and competitive enterprises, which can hardly be separated from the formal economy.

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