



## Waste not, want not in the £700m slum

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Extracts from Dan McDougall's article about Dharavi slum in Mumbai, where a recycling industry is helping thousands claw a way out of poverty

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Men work at tanning goat skins in Dharavi - India's largest slum. Photo: Adrian Fisk.

A 175-hectare maze of impenetrable dark alleys and corrugated shacks, Dharavi swarms with more than a million residents. If you have the patience to look closer, you will find here one of the most inspiring economic models in Asia.

Dharavi may be one of the world's largest slums, but it is by far its most prosperous - a thriving business centre propelled by thousands of micro-entrepreneurs who have created an invaluable industry - turning around the discarded waste of Mumbai's 19 million citizens. A new estimate by economists of the output of the slum is as impressive as it seems improbable: £700m a year.

For Dharavi's detractors, mainly Mumbai's city fathers and real estate developers, keen to get their hands on the prime land beneath the sprawl, the shanty is an embarrassing boil to be lanced from the body of an ambitious city hoping to become the next Shanghai.

But for a growing number of environmental campaigners Dharavi is becoming the green lung stopping Mumbai choking to death on its own waste.

All along Apna St, hundreds of barefoot street children, human recycling machines, scurry back and forward, hauling bundles of waste - plastic, cardboard or glass - retrieved from Mumbai's vast municipal dumps. From every alley comes the sounds of hammering, drilling and soldering. In every shack, dark figures sit waist-deep in piles of car batteries, computer parts, fluorescent lights, ballpoint pens, plastic bags, paper and cardboard boxes and wire hangers, sorting each item for recycling.

If India's biggest city is seen by economists as its great hope, Mumbai also embodies most of the country's staggering problems. The obstacles hampering India's progress - poor



infrastructure, weak government, searing inequality, corruption and crime - converge in Mumbai like nowhere else. Here, where £4m penthouses look over filthy slums, India's class divide is at its starkest.

'You in the West so easily see the slum as a negative concept,' said Sonu Badal, a spokesman for Chirag, a campaign to secure Dharavi from demolition. 'Yes, it is beset by deep poverty and neglect, but Dharavi has also been mirroring India's economic revival. These slum dwellers use their imagination and work hard to make something out of the day-to-day objects others leave behind, yet have been abandoned by the government; Dharavi is an extraordinary success story, its recycling industry employs over 250,000 people, yet thanks to its prime location it is on borrowed time.'

According to Friends of the Earth, which criticised Northumberland council for sending its waste to India for recycling, Britons should learn more from the developing world.

'In the UK we could do worse than looking to the recycling endeavour of slum-dwellers in places like Dharavi for inspiration. The level of recycling in the UK is deeply disappointing,' says Claire Wilton, of Friends of the Earth. 'There is a lot to learn from the developing world, where a scavenger mentality, grass roots recycling and sheer necessity can lead to imaginative leaps in redeploing waste.'

Yet survival in a slum rarely means adhering to the law. Barely 10 per cent of the commercial activity here is legal. There is just one lavatory for every 1,500 residents, not a single public hospital, and only a dozen municipal schools (and) cholera, typhoid and malaria are common.

The average household in Dharavi now earns between 3,000 and 15,000 rupees a month (£40-£200). The new money through recycling has in effect spawned a new slum gentry. Certain corners of Dharavi have even gone upmarket with bars, beauty parlours and clothing boutiques. Last week a major bank opened the slum's first ATM.

But the future of the slum is uncertain. The government has provisionally approved a plan called 'Vision Mumbai' - to create a world-class city by 2013. Demolition work has begun and police are forcing out inhabitants, leaving thousands homeless.

Author and architect Neera Adarkar is among hundreds of activists who see Vision Mumbai as impractical and inhumane because it ignores both the industry and hope of the slum.

'Why wreck the homes and lives of people who have built the city and lived in it for decades?' he said. 'Because from your luxury high-rise apartment you don't want the humiliation of India's poor in your line of vision as you make your money and succeed. Forcing them out is the only option. You simply can't wish them away.'

For a full version of the article click [here](http://environment.guardian.co.uk/waste/story/0,,2026280,00.html). (<http://environment.guardian.co.uk/waste/story/0,,2026280,00.html>)