

Plastic bricks cut waste and help build schools

IVORY COAST

Women gleaning trash enlisted by Colombian recycling company

BY ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS
The New York Times

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast — She left home before dawn. Her four children were still asleep in her concrete block house in Abobo, a maze of shops and houses occupied by dockworkers, taxi drivers, factory laborers and street sellers.

She and a friend crossed into the upscale neighborhood of Angré, home to doctors and businessmen. They tossed the plastic cast-offs of the consumer class into bags slung over their shoulders as the sun peeked over villa walls draped with bougainvillea.

Mariam Coulibaly is part of a legion of women in Abidjan who make their living picking up plastic waste on the city streets and selling it for recycling. Now they are lead players in a project that turns trash into plastic bricks to build schools across the country.

They are working with a Colombian company to convert plastic waste — a scourge of modern life — into an asset that will help women earn a decent living while cleaning up the environment and improving education.

She sees it as a chance to better her life, maybe even to rise into the middle class.

The new plastic-brick classrooms are needed. Some classrooms now pack in 90 students, according to the country's education minister. The company building the factory, Conceptos Plásticos, has a contract with UNICEF to deliver 528 classrooms for about 26,400 students, at 50 students per classroom.

In the village of Sakassou, people draw water from the well with a foot pump, raise pigs and chickens, and cook over open fires. Until this year, the children went to school in a traditional mud-brick and wood building. The mud brick eroded in the sun and rain, and had to be constantly repaired.

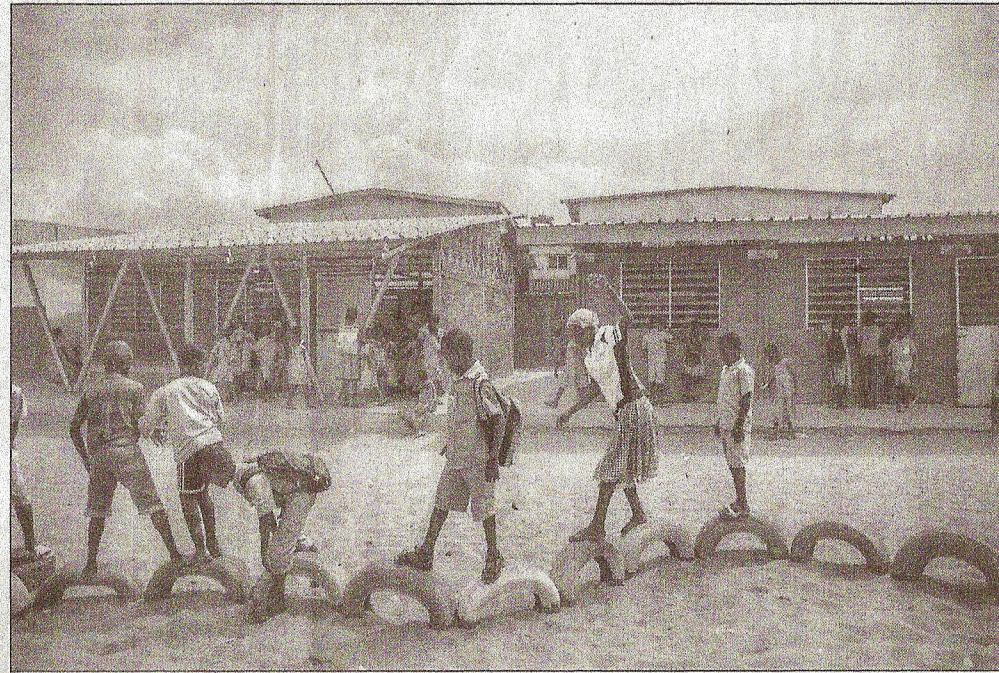
But the three new plastic classrooms could last practically forever. The interlocking bricks look like black and gray Legos. They are fire retardant and stay cool in hot weather. The other day, villagers used one of the brightly decorated classrooms to hold a village meeting.

"This is 10 times better," said Joachim Koffi Konan, the school director in Sakassou.

The project would be impossible without the organizing skills of Coulibaly, president of a 200-strong women's community association called "The Fighting Women."

She has been collecting trash for about 20 years, since she was 15. Her husband drives a woro-woro, a shared taxi.

After collecting trash re-



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Students play outside their school, where the buildings are made out of plastic bricks, in Abidjan, Ivory Coast.



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society and their contribution to the development of the country."

The project was the brainchild of Aboubacar Kampo medical doctor, who just ended a term as Ivory Coast representative for UNICEF. He recruited Conceptos Plásticos, a for-profit plastic recycling company with a social mission of building housing and creating jobs for poor people. The founders of the company, Oscar André Méndez and his wife, Isabe Cristina Gámez, agreed to work with Kampo after visiting Ivory Coast last year.

They were moved by the sight of women, carrying babies, picking up trash in Akouedo, a landfill notorious as a dumping site for hazardous waste, and thought they could help. "It had a big impact for us," Méndez said.

The couple moved to Abidjan in June to get the project up and running, and they plan to expand into other parts of West Africa.

They expect to employ 30 people at the factory and to buy plastic from about 1,000 women in its first year of operation.

The first few classrooms cost about \$14,500 each, compared with \$16,500 for a concrete classroom, said Méndez. He expects the price to drop about 20% when the bricks are made locally.

There is no shortage of plastic waste. Abidjan produces about 300 tons of it a day, but only 5% of it is recycled, the project organizer says. Each classroom takes about 5 tons of plastic trash

A member of the Abobo women's association sorts through plastics, in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, where it is collected and recycled into bricks used to build schools in the West African nation.

“For us, it’s not a

into private-school tuition

cannot sell now.