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“Hey Google, who is the president of Ghana?” is a question you can utter if you are near a Google Home device, and you will hear in reply “The president of Ghana is Nana Akufo-Addo.”

I took one of these £50 devices with me on my first visit to Gyetiase in December 2017, and everyone loved it. We demonstrated it to the village elders, to school children and teachers, and to anyone that visited us. “Hey Google, how far is Mampong from Accra?”, “When was Lionel Messi born?”, and hundreds of other questions were shouted out by enthusiastic children and adults alike for a week.

Even though this speech understanding technology is relatively new and still developing, Google Home coped very well with a variety of accents and intonations, and quite a bit of coughing, spluttering, repetition, hesitation and deviation. The highlight for me was the moment that a child discovered a feature I didn’t know about. “Hey Google, sing me a song” said Kwabena, and Google dutifully sang a song, to the delight and merriment of all the children that were there.



We installed Google Home permanently in Gyetiase, as a resource for children and adults who might like to practise their English pronunciation and listening skills. Nicholas Aboagye, Ashanti Development’s Country Director, was invaluable for this, helping me design and procure the metal cage (above) to protect it from the elements, and arranging for the cage to be mounted at the back of the nearest church.

In the lead up, I organised a competition in which children would read questions and write down the answers. The children took it seriously, and were very good at it. I was delighted that even

seven and eight year olds loved this exercise, and were determined to succeed in it. I felt that the competition was probably more successful in Gyetiase than it would be in the UK, because the children were just so enthusiastic.



We’re still pondering whether Google Home really has a role in development strategy, or whether it’s just an interesting amusement. Actually, the same question has yet to be answered in the developed world. Google Home was one of the most popular 2017 Christmas presents, but we don’t really know whether it is a gimmick or something that will transform our lives as fundamentally as the smartphone.

Technology leapfrog is a known phenomenon in Africa: it's when a generation of old and relatively expensive technology is skipped, and new technology is adopted at great speed. The best example is how most of Africa skipped landline phones completely, and mobile phones have been adopted instead. When we visited Aframano, a village with no electricity, no latrines, and no fresh water, I asked "how many people have a mobile phone with WhatsApp?" I was impressed with the answer: half of the adults. Charging the phones is a challenge, of course. The best way is with a little 20cm by 30cm solar panel.



Unfortunately, Google Home is proving rather greedy with data bandwidth, and indeed this exposes the main challenge in equipping Africans with modern information technology. The only internet connectivity available in Gyetiase is via the mobile phone network. People can set up Vodafone wifi hotspots; the quality is quite good, but the data is expensive. Left unchecked, Google Home would consume about 30 Cedis (£5) of bandwidth per month, which is not really sustainable. Facebook have come up with a solution – of sorts. They offer free internet connectivity in Ghana, provided you're connecting to their site or one of a few dozen they have approved for you, and, as with any loss-leader, the expectation is that once you've learned to like it, you'll be willing to pay for it.

I'm interested in figuring out how to help Ashanti embrace IT, and I'd love to hear from anyone that has ideas about that and/or is interested in collaborating with me. You can find me at mark.d.ryan@gmail.com.

A Beginner Volunteer

By Sarah Stephenson. Sarah was a dancer with the Royal Ballet, and it wasn't immediately apparent how she could use her skills as a volunteer to Ashanti. But an answer was eventually found ...

Unlike memories of foreign holidays that fade the minute one hits British soil, my time in Gyetiase remained a vibrant part of me for weeks after my return. The grey days of a London December eluded me, as my head remained stubbornly in Ghana.

Waking to the sounds of cockerels and goats at day break; walking on the deep red earth of the lush countryside; sitting in the shade of giant mango trees; and the children rushing after us calling out, 'Obroni, obroni.' (white person, white person).

I'd been loosely involved with Ashanti Development since its beginnings: attending sponsored walks, Taste of Ghana days, and other events. Had always wanted to go, but knowing I had no skills they required - water engineers, teachers or medics - couldn't imagine how I might help.

When in the spring of 2017 Penny suggested finding me a task, I leapt at the opportunity. What was it to be, I wondered?

In the autumn I found out. A Latrine Inspector.

Despite travelling around some of the poorest parts of India, I confess to arriving in Ghana with some trepidation. How would I find it?

Immediately I was struck not just by the warmth of the people, but their tolerance, generosity, collaboration and courtesy; the ceremony of welcome as we entered each village and were greeted by the chief and elders. Rarely leaving without armfuls of yam, bananas or plantain.

The tolerance of the villagers towards those who'd travelled down from the north where global warming had damaged their ability to farm, was extraordinary. Families turning up speaking another language: bringing their different culture and taking over land to grow crops and feed their livestock. No one complained.

And they were always ready to help.

This lady had arrived (right) some months before without any belongings. Spoke an unfamiliar language and had been fed and housed by the villagers ever since. Her headscarf is filled with leaves but no-one knew why.

And finally collaboration, working together to build the eye clinic: two hundred villagers turning up every day to work, unpaid, until it was finished. The same happens with every project: water pipes, the Gyetiase museum and of course their own latrines.



Regarding latrines, I was excited to find my investigations productive. Here was an example where tolerance and lack of complaint let them down. A village, where in a particularly heavy storm the majority of latrines had collapsed. No one was aware of this, until the day I inspected them.

Another organisation, nothing to do with Ashanti Development, had installed them. They went on the list of villages needing sponsors, and one was immediately found. The latrines will be rebuilt with the correct materials.



Sarah Stephenson with Janet Amponsah Yeboah, aged 18. Training to be a graphic designer, Janet sells bowls in a nearby village to fund herself and her family while she studies.

'Shall you go back', friends ask? 'Of course,' how could I not? I only hope the team will be as wonderful as this first visit.

I was with the founders Martha Boadu and Penny David, Mark Ryan, Helen Cross and later, Kathy and David Reece who, as Ashanti's Chair, was replacing David Williamson as village development chief.

And now fund raising: we've been alerted to the problems of some of the larger charities, not only recent scandals but concerns over the percentage of money actually going to those everyone's trying to aid. But I am confident it will be easy.

People want to help. And knowing every penny of their donation goes directly to the cause, whether it's latrines, farm aid or the microcredit ladies, they should, hopefully, feel reassured.

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Gyetiase Village recently asked us to nominate someone to fill the vacancy left among their chiefs by the death of David Williamson, one of Ashanti Development's founders. We nominated our Chair, David Rees. The picture shows him at his enstoolment, when he was made a village chief and re-named Nana David Ris Boafo II.



Since January, the villages of Ebuso, Hwiediem, Nsuase (Mprim), Afromano, Domeabra and Timber Nkwanta Phase II have all found sponsors. This means that some 2,400 people will be helped to build their own household latrines as well as being taught about hygiene, and their village committees will be strengthened to the point where they are strong enough to maintain the improvements

At present, diarrhoea is a way of life for these communities. Most people suffer from it for five days out of seven. This will stop with the sanitation and the villagers will be left with a lot more energy to work their way out of poverty.

Early last week, 480 solar lamps arrived in Ashanti, a donation from Swiss NGO BasAid. The aim is to eradicate kerosene lamps from the area.

Using a kerosene lamp for a year is estimated to have an effect similar to inhaling the black carbon from smoking around three hundred cigarettes. Kerosene also involves the risk of fire, lung damage, eye strain and toxication. By contrast, solar light provides clean, safe, reliable light and cost savings.



Also arriving soon will be a whole lot of pencils and biros from Malcolm O'Brien at Pens4Kids. Not only will these improve the quality of school lessons, but they will also be used as prizes. Ashanti Development's Ghana Director runs an annual tree-planting project, and children who successfully look after a sapling for three years are awarded prizes.



We've recruited three new Patrons for Ashanti Development - the three Paramount Chiefs of the part of Ashanti where we work. Their names are Nana Okotwasue Buaman Kwabi IV, Paramount Chief of Beposo; Nana Barimh Abayie Ntori Nimpa II, Paramount Chief of Kwamang; and (in the picture above) Nana Adu Agyei Bonsafo III, Paramount Chief of Nsuta.

Our sister organisation in Bologna, Ashanti Development Italia, is collecting poems by women from Sub Saharan Africa.

Please visit their website at
<https://afrowomenpoetry.net/>

They also have a crowdfunding platform at
<https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/afrowomenpoetry-africa-women>.