

## ***„The country sits on money, yet we are hungry.”***

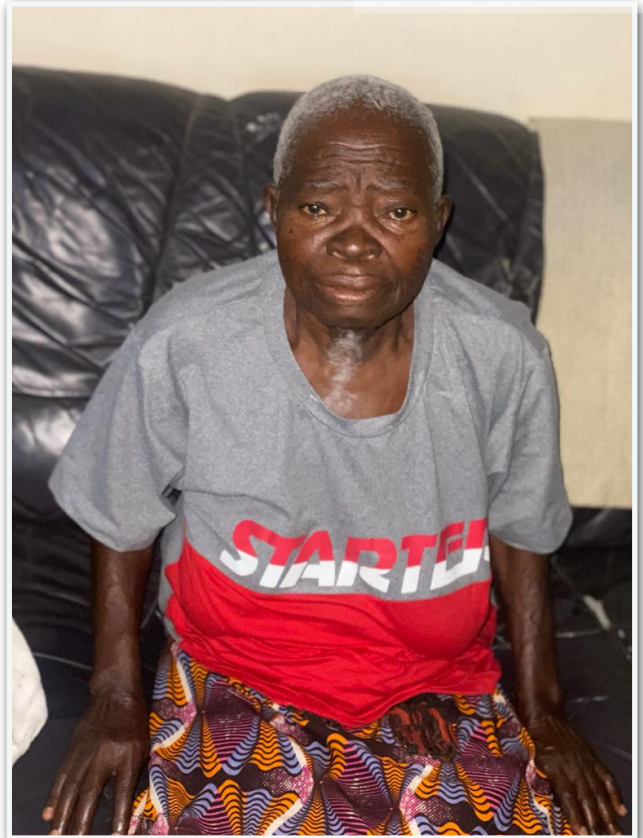
My friends call me Kofi, which means in our language that I was born on a Friday. That was on 15 March in 1979 in Berasi. 15 March in 1979 was a Thursday, so it must have been around midnight. Berasi is a small village of farming families. Among other things, they grow cocoa, cassava (manioc), palm oil and coffee here.

My village is located quite in the south of Ghana, very close to Kumasi. Kumasi, with a population of about two million, is an important, very old centre of Ghana, dating back to the 17th century. It is only about 250 kilometres to the capital Accra on the coast.



After unusual enormous rainfalls, due to the changes of our climate, the floods of our river were destroying parts of my village Benasi. Also my sister's house was destroyed.

My father died quite young after a serious illness. I am one of his youngest children. After father's death, my mother could not manage without the help of my four brothers and sisters. We had a small farm where we grew some vegetables for ourselves. But it was not enough for such a big family. That's why I had to leave school early to earn some money in coffee and cocoa farming. This was the same with my three brothers and two sisters. Our school education was also hardly possible because my mother would have had to pay almost one thousand Euros for each child per year.



On the left you see my mother. My sister is sitting next. She is 82 or 83 years old now.

So we brothers and sisters all provided for ourselves and our mother as best we could.

Of course, we still do that now. She is already 82 or 83 years old and lives alone now. My older sister is married; her husband works in the textile industry. My little brother makes a living repairing refrigerators and one of my big brothers works hard in house building.

At the age of 17, I stopped working as an unqualified worker in the plantations because I was given the opportunity to learn the profession of a furniture maker and an upholsterer. So I became an apprentice to an old master carpenter in Kumasi for three years. I had to pay him 80 Euros for my skills. I heard that in Germany it is the other way round - that apprentices get paid here. When my master left in 1999 to go to South Africa, my apprenticeship was over and I could take over the workshop from him. Of course, I had to pay him from my income bit by bit. I had six young apprentices who were now learning the craft from me. We manufactured brand new beds, wardrobes and sofas from timber and exhibited them in the showroom of my workshop.



### The Backside of my workshop

In addition to the pharmaceutical industries, there are also breweries and textile retailers in Kumasi. But even more so, smaller manufacturing companies produce footwear, soap, cosmetics and metal products. But more than half of all workers in Kumasi work in my sector, in wood manufacturing. However, sixty percent of the local value is generated in the service sector. This is partly explained by the fact that in Kumasi, in addition to twenty smaller markets for the locals, we have a huge open marketplace for trading in every imaginable kind of commodity. It is by far the largest in West Africa. Traders and buyers come here not only from our capital Accra, but also from Togo, Benin, Niger and Ivory Coast.

In addition to these domestic branches of the economy, Ghana has rich mineral resources such as oil, gold, manganese and bauxite. But these are exploited by US American, European and Chinese companies. The profits escape abroad, while our labour is miserably paid. There is also an extremely high number of deadly accidents in the mining and manufacturing industries. -

*A wise man from the University of Ghana once described our situation like this „The country sits on money, yet we are hungry.”*

But who do you guess he was meaning by "we"? "Of course" influential politicians of the ruling party and other Ghanaian profiteers also earn from the exploitation of our raw resources through corruption and individual deals with the multinationals. That is why there is a huge and ever-growing social injustice in Ghana. Although Ghana's economy has been growing in recent years,

it has not at all resulted in more jobs as a whole and not in a reduction of poverty. More than 90 percent of people with jobs have neither formal professional education nor social insurance. For years youth unemployment is 12 per cent and more than half of Ghana's population is under-employed. This can be seen, for example, in the ever-growing child prostitution, e.g. in the large Asafo Railroad slum of Kumasi.

To build and protect their privileges, pressure groups and the two powerful political parties fight with each other violently and take the law into their own hands. They recruit, train and finance "militias of citizens" who attack opposition groups and public officials, terrorize their rivals, "confiscate" their belongings and steal their possessions. This happens under the eyes of the police, who are paid to be blind and whose officers are themselves partisans of one side or the other.

In this situation, I was really very lucky to be able to take over the furniture workshop and upholstery from my old master. And it was going quite well until one day government officials came to our neighbourhood and announced its demolition to make room for a new highway through Kumasi. We were given six months to leave. My neighbourhood consisted mostly of very simple, lower-class residential streets with grocery shops. But the land was all owned by the government, so we wouldn't get any compensation for the destruction of our existences. During those months therefor we protested again and again and made demonstrations to the ministry with maybe five hundred people. But it did not help.



The new transit street and my homeless valuable readymade sofas

Our quarter with 160 businesses was completely destroyed and the motorway was built. I was absolutely broken and no longer saw any perspective for my life in Kumasi. At this point, I more and more imagined going to Europe to build a new life for myself and support my family in a better way.

My dearest friend, with whom I had grown up in our village, was at that time working at the Dutch Embassy in Accra. I visited him and asked him if he could help me to leave for Europe. Somehow, after three or four weeks I finally got a tourist visa for Holland for four weeks. Visa and plane ticket cost me, together with my remaining e-hand money for Europe five thousand Euros !

I could not have earned that much money from the work in my workshop. I transported all the machines and tools and all the furniture and sofas that we had finished before the demolition of my workshop to Accra. On a special street, used by many traders, I put them out on the back of my flatbed truck and sold everything one by one. That's how I got the money for my visa, the plane ticket and the rest of my savings for Europe. Also my younger brother had supported me a little. He contributed an amount that I was still missing.

It was only after I had taken the plane from Accra to Lisbon that my older brother told our mother that I had left to Europe. Our village is five hours away from Kumasi, so I couldn't visit my mother and she didn't have a mobile phone either. She was happy because she believed, like all of us, that I would make it in Europe. But I soon realized that you have to be much better educated in Europe than here to really do well professionally. Lisbon was only a stopover, and the very next day I flew on to Amsterdam. My friend's brother from the embassy in Accra welcomed me at the airport. He is a professional football player for Ajax Amsterdam. Here I stayed with him and his family for three days.

From here I took the train to Munich to visit a friend from Ghana. He was studying there, but he had just had a semester break and had left to visit his family in Ghana. During my time in Munich, my visa expired and I became more and more worried that the police, because of the colour of my skin, would catch me during one of their checks and deport me. If they had deported me, I would have killed myself because I had nothing left in Ghana. I was so desperate because we black people in Munich were constantly being checked and I always had to be careful not to fall in their way. Finally I decided to leave Munich and took the train to Hamburg.

When I got off the train at Hamburg Central Station in the early afternoon, the first person I approached in the Wandelhalle was a black man. He was probably from Nigeria or Burkina. "Can you help me, I asked him. I am from Ghana and I just arrived by train." The man said that there was a tent nearby where there were always many black people standing together, and he showed me the direction. I found it quickly and it was the tent of the "Group Lampedusa in Hamburg". The brothers there were very nice to me and especially an older one with a stiff leg took care of me. He now lives in Wilhelmsburg in a solidarity house in Mokrystraße.

He showed me a refuge for the homeless at Siemersplatz in Lokstedt. It was January and much too cold to sleep outside. At the tent I also met some brothers from Kumasi. They showed me the homeless house in Hammerbrook. When I couldn't sleep there because it was full, I often slept at the Hühnerposten in a hidden corner of this huge building. In the meantime I had no more money left. At the Lampedusa tent there was mostly old white bread. And frequently a very nice Turk came by and brought us hot water and tea and something to eat from his kebab restaurant.

On 26 March (2020) the authorities had our tent torn down early in the morning and justified it with the ban on gatherings because of the Corona pandemic. The older ones knew that it was just a



pretext, because it bothered the politicians that the tent had been there on Steindamm for seven years. The pandemic gave them the excuse to get us away from here, they said. All of us who had been there were totally desperate and some even resisted. But there was a lot of police in riot gear and they even arrested some.

The Corona Lockdown had already had quite bad consequences for us since the beginning of the month, because we were no longer allowed to meet at the tent. But we were also not allowed to meet anywhere else. The homeless shelters were closed and many of us on the street had nowhere to go. We could hardly find anything to eat either. Before, we could always go, once a week, to the International Centre B5 in Brigittenstraße, where a very great woman in solidarity, Asmara, provided us with food donations and on Saturday some of the Lampedusa group cooked for us. All that was over in a moment. It was desperate. In this situation, the group had a secret meeting, which was not allowed course not allowed because of the shutdown. About a hundred black people and some supporters came together to discuss how we could survive.

There emerged a demand to the Hamburg Senate to open empty hotels for the homeless. But the politicians did not care about us. In a self-organized way, we spread out to different quarters of the city and, together with four other brothers, I was sent to Harburg. Here there was a very solidary living commune who let us have their whole place and spread themselves to some of their friends' houses. We had it warm here and after a few days we also got to know Inge and Christian.

They had asked the Group Lampedusa if there were any of them in Harburg who needed help. They showed us places where other solidarity-minded people in Harburg were handing out free

food. We also got bicycles through the "Flüchtlingshilfe Binnenhafen" so that we didn't have to risk bus or U-Bahn without ticket. The risk of getting caught, of not being able to pay the fine, of ending up in jail and then being deported was far too big.

We were happy to stay in this flat for a full eight months! During this time, we all started looking for a new place to live. Comrades from the Harburg Sauerkrautfabrik also tried to help us. Finally Anni, Inge and Christian managed to find the small flat where we have been living for two years now thanks to your solidarity donations for the rent. I would like to thank everyone from the bottom of my heart. I often go to church and pray for you to have a healthy life.

My only dream is, of course, to get papers here in Hamburg and not to worry every day about being picked up and checked by the police as my visa expired long ago. I hope to find a way to get legal work as a creative craftsman, as a furniture maker and upholsterer, and finally live here with my wife and three daughters. I desperately hope for my children to get a great education and find good employment here. But now, in our village, my children's schooling is always in danger, because my wife has to pay the equivalent of 100 Euros in school fees for each of them every three months, as well as the money for the textbooks and notebooks, and even for a school uniform. So there is always the danger that they could end up like me, when I had to drop out of school and work in the coffee plantations to contribute to the living for all of us.

