

UN takes a byte to save Africa from e-waste

The United Nations has called for policies to protect African nations from unregulated imports of electronic waste (e-waste) that release heavy metals and chemicals.



By [David Kezio-Musoke](#) 18 Jun 2007

New York - This call comes after the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) announced that over 50 million tons of electronic e-waste are produced globally, much of which finds its way to the African continent as charitable donations.

At the 8th meeting of the Basel Convention conference, which comes up this week in Nairobi the capital of Kenya is to discuss digital dumping. African governments are urged to adopt a framework to tighten shipments and disposal of all kinds of electronic wastes.

Some computers, cell phones and other gadgets going out of use within months of production, so-called e-waste is considered the fastest growing part of municipal waste in Africa.

Often left to rot in expansive dumping grounds, electronic waste may contain traces of the toxins cadmium, mercury and lead, which can contaminate water supplies, wreak havoc on once fertile lands and contain carcinogenic elements.

Most of it is shipped to the poor world, mainly Africa, under "refurbished" banner and end up in junkyards where they rot and release lead, cadmium, mercury and other deadly compounds that pollute the environment.

Awareness must be raised

The Basel treaty's executive secretary, Sachiko Kuwabara-Yamamoto, said there was a need to raise awareness of the dangers posed by the explosion of electronic wastes in African states. "Because you only manage what you can measure we need to shine a brighter light on hazardous wastes - on where they come from and on where they end up," Kuwabara-Yamamoto said.

This week, countries that have not yet ratified the convention and its associated provisions will be urged to come on board in order to effectively protect human health and the environment from hazardous wastes.

Experts speculate that anywhere between 25 to 75% of the e-waste that enters Africa - mostly through Mombasa, Lagos and Dar es Salaam ports, is useless.

It is also reported that in Nigeria alone, about 500 containers full of used electronic cargo pass through the Lagos port every month, according to a recent study by Seattle-based Basel Action Network.

Kenya's Environment Minister Kivutha Kibwana said that while Africa bore the brunt of e-waste, the entire world will have to face the aftermath of resultant pollution.

Short life leads to disposal problem

"Some of these computers, when they are coming here, they are already obsolete and so the countries do not ask the question: 'How will this computer be disposed after a very short state of life?'," he said.

The European Union (EU) recently passed legislation mandating phase-outs of toxic constituents in computers, as well as requiring all manufacturers selling electronic equipment in the European Union to take back equipment at end-of-life and ensure its safe recycling. A joint enforcement operation carried out last year in 17 European seaports examined 3 000 shipping documents and physically inspected 258 cargo holds and found that illegal trading was widespread.

The Basel Convention is the most comprehensive global environmental agreement on hazardous and other wastes. The Convention that came into force in 1992 has 170 Parties and aims to protect human health and the environment against the adverse effects resulting from the generation, management, trans-boundary movements and disposal of hazardous and other wastes.

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