Electronic waste arrives in Africa in the form of 'donations'

A loophole sees rich countries sending e-waste over to the African continent. We speak to scrap dealers and upcyclers in Ghana and Zambia about what happens next, and what needs to change.

Temps de lecture : minute

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"Obviously we need equipment - our economies are not excellent - but at the same time, there is no control," says Towa Chilongo, director of <u>TCH E-Waste</u>. "So they'll just dump all this electronic stuff - some of it only has a lifeline of about a year - and obviously we'll receive it, because it comes in as a donation for our schools."

Speaking to me from Lusaka, Zambia, Chilongo is explaining a loophole in international law – one that allows countries to export <u>electronic waste</u>, rather than responsibly disposing of it.

"The UK or the States or anywhere else, they already have policies on how to get rid of electronic waste. So, instead of disposing of the waste in the UK, or wherever in the West, they send it to us as donations."

According to a _late-2017 report_ by NGO _Basel Action Network_, the global authority on the toxic waste trade, the repairables loophole 'allows anyone to simply claim used electronic waste as repairable and export it completely outside of the rules and obligations of the Basel Convention'.

The Basel Convention came about at the start of the '90s as an international treaty to quell the movement of hazardous waste between countries – normally from more to less 'developed' countries. However, as quantities of e-waste soar year-on-year, it's clear tougher measures and robust implementation are required.

Technically, the BAN report continues, 'No importing country would even [need to] be asked if it would like to receive container loads of broken e-waste destined for 'repair'.

Agudor Agabas heads up a social enterprise called _AppCyclers_, which focuses on innovative _e-waste_ management, in Tamale, Ghana. Like Chilongo, he acknowledges donated devices were something of a trojan horse for his country.

> _"In the year 2000, the government - to bridge the technology gap, to give us access to electronic appliances like mobile phones - allowed the importation of electronic appliances into the country."_

"But then we realised that we didn't have the capacity and the infrastructure to recycle most of these appliances, when they got too old or became obsolete. Since then, Agbogbloshie in Ghana has been the world's most toxic place."

Agbogbloshie has made international headlines in recent years as *the world's largest e-waste dump*. The slum in Accra, Ghana's capital, receives millions of tonnes of waste per year; screens and switchboards pile high on beds of now indiscriminate electronic parts. Ashy wires and cables spread like veins through the mass, punctuated by fire and black smog.

For many, including migrants from Agabas' native north, Agbogbloshie is a workplace – not a no-go zone. Burner boys set waste alight to recover copper, smashing screens and combing the ground for further precious metals. Anything they recover is passed onto older and more experienced scrap dealers.

In and beyond Agbogbloshie, working in e-waste salvage is a risky business. "If I don't go to work, I can't get my daily bread", scrap dealer Yakubu Adam, who has been in the trade since 2001, tells me.

"But we scrap dealers always get sick. It's risky work. You feel worn out all the time. We burn copper, we burn aluminium; when you burn it, the smoke makes you feel sick. If the smoke gets into your body plenty of times, you fall sick."

The improper processing of electronic waste has catastrophic consequences for human health and the environment. Chemicals such as lead, mercury, cadmium and CFCs seep into the soil, air and water, contaminating crops and poisoning animals that feed from the ground. Those working directly with toxic waste report cancer, respiratory illnesses, burns and liver damage.

Government action

Carried out in the right conditions, the work done by scrap dealers would form a key tenet of a circular economy. Extracting and reusing the precious metals in electronic waste - including gold, silver, platinum, iron and copper - should be common practice.

Other unsavoury alternatives to dealing with e-waste include digging holes in back gardens and burying rubbish, burning it at home, or hoarding.

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"It ends up in a storeroom somewhere", says Chilongo. "Hoarding is a big, big problem and, in fact, the biggest culprits are government institutions".

He reports warehouses filled with 20 years' worth of computers, which no one knows what to do with. "One of the biggest telecoms companies in Zambia is MTel, which is state-owned. I've had around six meetings trying to convince them that we have a solution [to hoarding]."

Exports from countries like the UK and US are only part of Africa's e-waste story. At least 50% (and some argue up to 85%) of the e-waste mined, burned or hoarded comes from the continent itself. Despite hosting the fewest electronics manufacturers of any continent, Africa's e-waste contribution is outsized – and rising as digital devices become more accessible.

Only very few countries (Uganda and Rwanda, for example) have formal policy on electronic waste. So while countries like the UK, which illegally exports 40% of its e-waste, must make changes – so too must governments in Africa. This is something both Agabas and Chilongo, who is working with the Zambian government on new legislation, are clear on. Agabas says,

> *"I think the government is doing great, but then there is more to be done".*

"Currently we do have regulations and policy in Ghana, but most of it's not being enforced. People are still doing what they do, irrespective of the health and environmental implications."

Making it safe

In the meantime, organisations like TCH E-Waste and AppCyclers are crucial in pushing for healthy and sustainable processing of e-waste.

The former collects, categorises and safely recycles old digital devices, while maintaining total data security. The latter is an online platform where people can request pick-up of electronic devices, which are then repaired or recycled - sometimes into items like jewellery and picture frames.

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Both Agabas and Chilongo are proponents of a circular economy; they see

huge opportunities in the world's fastest growing waste stream. As things stand, billions of pounds of precious metals are being chucked away rather than repurposed.

On top of their work on-the-ground, they continue to raise awareness and advocate for reform in Ghana and Zambia respectively. The end goal is to share solutions with the rest of Africa.

"People aren't very aware of what electronic waste is, let alone the negative effects it can have on human health and the environment", says Agabas.

> *"In 2020, we conducted a study and realised that over 60% of people didn't even know what electronic waste was."*

With this lack of awareness comes a resistance to behaviour change. Citizens are used to getting money from scrap dealers in exchange for their old tech. Agabas hopes to see more financial incentives from the government, to make it easy and equally lucrative for people to do the right thing with their waste.

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Rather than making their broken electronics someone else's problem, Agabas invites foreign countries to support solutions. He wants to see global recycling giants sharing their knowledge, and working alongside smaller recycling operations in Ghana and beyond.

For scrap worker Yakubu Adam, change can't come soon enough. With no choice but to continue in an unsafe trade, better access to protective gear and safe working conditions is an urgent need. "We need support through Accra," he says. "When we get people's support our business will go well."

This is the first part of The Repairability Report, a four-part article series from Maddyness UK and France on the mounting problem of electronic waste. Having started at the end of the product life cycle, we'll be soon be turning our heads to its beginning. We'll be looking at new policies in the

UK and France, and how we can urge Big Tech to take on extended producer responsibility.

Article écrit par Florence Wildblood