

Kenya urgently needs a policy on e-waste

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Staff at the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Centre dismembering a computer at the centre on March 26, 2015. PHOTO | FILE | NATION MEDIA GROUP

In Summary

- E-wastes are a subtle and dangerous enemy to the integrity of the environment and plant, animal and human health.
- Despite the many challenges with e-waste disposal, options include recycling and repairing.

Where did you dispose of your last mobile handset? Is it lying somewhere in your office or home drawer or did you throw it into the rubbish bin?

When your computer acted up and your *fundi* could not bring it back to life, how did you dispose of it? Is it forgotten in your store or you threw it out into the children's playground?

Most mobile handsets in Kenya go out of use within three years of purchase, but mostly less. Home

computers could serve you for five years on average while some companies have a policy of replacing PCs within three years.

When these go out of use, they are given out as donations to schools and community organisations or resold to business people, who refurbish and sell them second-hand. But they all ultimately end up as electronic waste, or e-waste.

The average home or office generates more e-waste than we care to know — television sets, cameras, refrigerators, light bulbs, washing machines, cookers, iron and electronic toys ... name them.

DANGEROUS

With rapid advances in technology, technology becomes obsolete much earlier. This, coupled with increased sales as the middle class chase after fashion, has led to a rapid increase in e-waste, particularly in urban areas. But what happens when these wastes find their way into landfills, garbage dump or your backyard?



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E-wastes are a subtle and dangerous enemy to the integrity of the environment and plant, animal and human health. As a percentage of all waste, it may not be significant but the numbers are growing and the danger is real. They poison drinking water and interfere with long-established ecosystems, thereby destroying the balance of nature.

When electronics end up in the environment, toxins leach into the soil and water. Dangerous components of electronics include heavy metals, toxic gases and plastics. Mercury can cause kidney and brain damage, lead can cause brain damage and cadmium cancer and kidney damage.

E-WASTE POLICY

Unfortunately, little has been done to stop e-waste from coming in through our borders. Half of Africa's e-waste comes from the continent and the rest from elsewhere. China, for instance, discards 160 million electronic devices every year.

We recently witnessed the ban on polythene bags in Kenya. Challenges aside, as long as the government stands firm and continues to offer support, I believe we shall see a plastic-free generation.



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In the same vein, the government should develop a policy on e-waste management and have Parliament pass laws so that we have a framework for the management of e-waste.

Despite the many challenges with e-waste disposal, options include recycling (by the good producers) and repairing (with the benefits of creating jobs).

For the repair business, however, many electronic devices come with scant information on how to fix malfunctions, even minor ones.

INNOVATION

Worse, spare parts may not be available locally and importing them, especially in small bits, can be costly and not viable.

The solution lies in innovation. I hope the policy will hold manufacturers ultimately responsible for their waste, providing outlets for disposal. This will also mean blocking illicit imports.

I also hope manufacturers will do more in using less toxic materials when making electronic products.

When we all become conscious of the serious effects of e-waste on the environment, we shall be more sensitive when purchasing stuff we may not even need.

Ms Boomsma is the project coordinator, Sustainable Inclusive Business Kenya (SIB), a partnership between the Kenya Private Sector Alliance and MVO Nederland with the support of the Embassy of the Netherlands. karin@sibkenya.com.

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