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Move on e-waste good news for environment

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The National E-Waste Management Strategy, a five-year plan covering 2019 to 2024, has been rolled out

We have a crisis on our hands. And it is a crisis that is only bound to grow worse unless very drastic, deliberate measures are taken to deal with it.

First things first; what is e-waste? E-waste refers to all electrical and electronic equipment (EEE) and their parts that have been discarded by the owners as waste without the intent of re-use although those destined for reuse or recycling are also classified as e-waste.

Mobile handsets, universal remote, cameras, PCs, minicomputers and all sorts of electronics have flooded our markets. Virtually all of these are imported from elsewhere which means real jobs exist primarily in the markets of origin with developing economies relegated to a mere consumption role.

There is limited transfer of technical skills. We purchase, use, dump and buy new ones. Some of the devices are so poor in quality that they cannot be recycled or put to any other use once they expire.

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Governments have, in a way, aided the e-waste crisis by championing universal affordable access to information and communication technology without putting in place measures that ensure safe disposal.

It is therefore heartwarming that the Kenya government, through the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, has taken the first steps towards a comprehensive e-waste strategy.

Dubbed the National E-Waste Management Strategy, the five-year plan covering 2019/20 to 2023/24 is such a breath of fresh air coming just over a year after the ban on the manufacture, import, distribution and use of thin plastic carrier bags. Its goal is to achieve a sustainable e-waste management system in Kenya through policies, guidelines and standards.

It puts in place an e-waste management infrastructure, appropriate mechanism for collection, transportation and disposal and identifies or sets up institutions to facilitate the development of an up to date dismantling and recovery facility in specific zones of the country.

The draft strategy, however, acknowledges the dearth of capacity, skills, resources and infrastructure to deal with the challenges and opportunities presented by e-waste.

Consequently, the country needs a proper policy, legal and regulatory framework; physical, financial and human resources; strong structures at both national and county levels; continuous research and innovation in e-waste management.

As I write this piece, there are huge stocks of e-waste in homes, offices and in the general environment. Estimates indicate that only about half of total e-waste is collected and most of it is mixed up with other waste ending up at the Dandora dumpsite and other dumpsites around the country.

Most people, quite understandably, have no idea what to do with e-waste. After occupying valuable space for a few weeks or months, they eventually find their way to landfills or dustbins. What happens after that is anyone's guess.

The toxic chemicals get into the soil hurting soil health and soil life. They may leach into water systems poisoning terrestrial and aquatic life. Even if the e-waste does end up with recyclers we have to look at what is being recycled and how. Many e-waste items will have something valuable which can be used to make something else. Often, the more advanced the technology, the greater the gem.

In Kenya, we have barely scratched the surface in terms of retrieving the best out of e-waste items. For instance, businesses have been donating computers to schools but the refurbishment is done in Europe. Jobs which could be generated locally are shipped abroad yet capacity and skills can be developed locally. Thankfully, we have the WEEE centre which collects e-waste for free and adopts a circular economy approach in deciding whether to reuse, repair, refurbish or look at all fractions of the product and separate them for recycling. Close the Gap, a partner of WEEE centre is building a Circular Hub around E-waste and a plant to refurbish computers in Mombasa.

Ecosystem

The natural environment is sensitive. It has its limits and beyond a certain point, it starts to 'rebel' causing much damage to the ecosystem. There is only so much e-waste that can be disposed of into the environment. Something has got to be done, fast.

Everyone must participate because everyone is a stakeholder. At the policy level, the government must partner with electronics and telecommunication companies as well as with relevant firms to create an effective take back system with the end goal being reuse, recycling, remanufacturing or safe disposal.

A range of measures including incentives for consumers, tax exemptions for the private sector, especially those involved with take back schemes and recycling can be put in place to ensure no waste finds its way into the general environment.

It is gratifying that the Strategy for E-Waste is being developed and that it will incorporate E-waste Fund, EPR (extended producer responsibility) fees, ARF (advanced recycling fees) as well as individual and corporate contributions.

Nevertheless, the work ahead is huge and should drive everyone to do something about managing their own waste. The good news is that more and more people, businesses, NGO's and other organisations are taking responsibility. Let's take care of all the parts of e-waste and convert them into value. That will convert e-waste future into e-life future.

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