

Dealing with e-waste in Ghana

While we advocate the importance of computers and technology gadgets in the socio-economic development of Ghana, it is equally important we take the issue of e-waste seriously, lest Ghana becomes a hub for dumping e-waste instead of a technology hub. As we upgrade at an ever faster rate, we need to put proactive measures in place to prevent toxic waste resulting from technology in Ghana.

E-waste is another name for electronic waste. Discarded electronic including gadgets like televisions, personal computers (PCs), telephones, cell phones, and electronic toys can be said to be e-waste. We can also include appliances such as lifts, refrigerators, washing machines, air conditioners, dryers, kitchen equipment or even air planes.

The United Nations believes we generate between 20m and 50m tonnes of e-waste around the world each year. In Ghana, e-waste continues to pile up and is increasingly becoming a menace around the country. BCC reporter in Ghana, Will Ross writes that the Agbogbloshie dump site is a computer graveyard. But these discarded PCs including Compaq, Dell, Gateway, Philips, Canon, Hewlett Packard are not well controlled, exposing people to toxic waste coming out of them especially when they are burnt. These large technology firms must be responsible for hardware they sell once they become obsolete but even if they are what policies are there to ensure that these machines get back to their plants.

It is important that we develop technologically as a nation but not at the expense of the health of the very people we intend to take out poverty through the use of technology. Will Ross interviewed one environmental expert who said about 90 percent of computers brought into the country are junk. But how do these computers get into the country without the immigration authorities knowing. That there are international laws banning the export of computer waste and that people still get round this by labeling the shipments "usable second-hand goods" is unacceptable. What then happened to law enforcement? It is reported that unscrupulous waste dealers are involved in a lucrative but illegal racket sending goods abroad to the developing world.

Tougher rules on electronic waste do exist in other parts of the world. Can we say that we have tough import policies on second-hand computers which in most cases are aimed at helping charities and schools? Even if they exist, are they not being abused? Well, your guess is as good as mine. If only about 10 percent of these second hand computers can be put to good use then we have a serious problem in Ghana.

In most cases, children of school going age scavenge dump sites like the Agbogbloshie one to look for any reusable parts like lenses from the disc drives and circuit boards, and with global scrap prices soaring, metals are in high demand. They do this by breaking down PCs and monitors which is dangerous enough. Thick smoke coming from burning these discarded gadgets on the dump sites also affect the respiratory tracks of human beings and causing serious health complications. Inhabitants claim they suffer from nausea, headache and respiratory problems.

Environmental campaign group Greenpeace have made some analysis on soil and water samples from the scrap market in Accra and found high concentrations of leads, phthalates or plastic softeners and dioxins that are known to promote cancer.

Studies show that children are especially affected by very dangerous chemicals like lead. They affect the brain when it is developing and therefore cause a lower IQ when they grow up. Other chemicals we found cause cancer or disrupt your hormone system. These chemicals in general affect the nervous system and intelligence.

Greenpeace is calling for an end to what it calls "poisoning the poor". It wants electronics manufacturers to stop using hazardous materials and to take responsibility for the whole lifecycle of their products. This is not feasible as it will be expensive to track where all of their products end up. The only way however, is to sensitize consumers to return goods to manufacturers and representatives of manufacturers when they become obsolete. Still, it is expensive to ship all these products back where they came from. It will therefore make much more sense for these companies to build manufacturing or recycling plants in these areas.

The hope is that the sheer expense of making producers pay for the disposal of their computer equipment wherever it is sold or used across the world, will spur the industry towards making "greener" machines.

To bring a quick end to the spectacle of children scrabbling around in toxic waste dumps in Africa, Europe's regulators and more importantly its consumers and businesses need to take responsibility for disposing of their computer equipment.

Waste management policies must be enforced, in our disposable age of frequent computer upgrades, else this poisonous supply will not be drying up soon. Companies like Zoomlion with enough capacity should be contracted to deal with e-waste. Also, these government policies must encourage recycling if Ghana is to avoid leaving an unwanted legacy.

One thing government must do is to strengthen laws that allow second hand goods into the country. In any case, prices of electronic appliances are increasingly becoming cheaper and cheaper, therefore it becomes the more imperative to stop these goods from berthing the

country. One way is to strengthen the local computer assembly industry. Under the pretext of bringing usable second hand products into Ghana, these unscrupulous dealers ship in all sorts of bad products that only end up as junk on dump sites like the Agbogbloshie dump site. Goods that are brought into the country must be properly checked by the Ghana Immigration Service (GIS) and the Customs Excise and Preventive Service (CEPS).

Finally, we need to do a lot of e-waste policy advocacy in order to tackle this problem head-on. NGOs with an e-waste focus must be set up to push forward solutions to the problem of e-waste.

By Charles Amega-Selorm