



BACKGROUND PAPER:

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) ***E-Waste Export to the Developing World***

Introduction: Western nations have been producing tremendous amount of technological hardware but the burden of health and environmental problems from the recycling and scraping of the waste for precious metals is disproportionately placed on developing nations, to where the waste is exported. The critical question comes up, do we let this economic model of risky behavior continue or do we intervene with the free market and regulate the importing and exporting of toxic technological waste?

Background & History: Today we have seen an explosion in technology, both in quality and in quantity. Not only is technology extremely pervasive in our western lives, it is constantly being upgraded. Moore's law states that every 18 months the power of a computer doubles. What does this mean for UNEP? That every 18 months people are getting rid of their cell phones, computers, MP3's, etc. to keep up with the new technology. And this is no strange phenomenon; cell phones today are engineered to be disposable instead of upgradable (<http://motherjones.com/blue-marble/2010/11/what-happens-your-phone-when-you-recycle-it>). But where does the waste go?

Some e-waste is refurbished and sold as a 'used' product in the west or sold in developing nations where computing speed is less of a concern compared to just owning some tech. But once a piece of technology ends its life cycle, it will be scrapped and more likely than not, by a developing nation. The now useless piece of circuitry will be thrown into a fire to melt the plastic wire casing and then the circuitry will be sorted out to salvage the copper, gold, and other rare earth metals. Of course it is paramount to recover these limited metals, but the way in which the "recycling" is done causes terrible damage to both humans and the environment.

Currently in China, there are entire villages full of electronic waste. The United States exports 80% its electronic waste. In 2008 alone, the United States shipped enough e-waste to China to fill a football field a mile into the sky. The primary e-waste city in China is the city Guiyu located on the South China Sea coast. Workers in Guiyu work unmasked and ungloved, dipping motherboards into acid baths, shredding plastic off of monitors, and grilling components over open coal fires. Workers expose themselves to brain damage, lung burning, and birth defects. As many as 82% of children under 6 around Guiyu have lead poisoning. Most workers know the harm that their jobs have on them and their



families but stay for the \$1-\$3 a day wages. The U.S.'s export of e-waste to China is illegal and in violation of the Basel Convention of 1992, which states, "Dumping of toxic waste by developed countries onto developing ones is illegal." (<http://untreaty.un.org/cod/avl/ha/bcctmhw/bcctmhw.html>) The United States is bypasses the law by simply labeling their exports as "recyclable".

Brazil is also suffering from mass amounts of e-waste imports. Like China, Brazil's people work in unhealthy conditions for low pay. However, in recent years the Brazilian government has been working hard to find possible solutions to the e-waste problem in their country. As the world's fifth largest electronic market, many states in Brazil have initiated e-waste initiatives and have issued e-waste regulations.

In recent years, environmentalists have taken actions against exports of e-waste. Environmentalists from the NGO Greenpeace followed illegal containers of electronic waste from a port in Oakland, California, to the Sanshui district in Mainland China. Greenpeace activists demanded that Hong Kong authorities refuse the entry of the illegal container and return it back to the United States. Greenpeace is one of many organizations that have gone to great measures to protest the export of e-waste to developing nations.

Greenpeace has launched campaigns in India, China, and even Amsterdam. Activists from Greenpeace climbed the walls of an Amsterdam hotel where Dutch electronic group Philips' was hosting their annual meeting, in protest against the company's waste policy. Activists pleaded that Philips "Simply take-back and recycle." Greenpeace believes "Philips needs to take financial responsibility for its own end-of-life products and not put the burden on consumers, governments, or other producers" (Business Green). The activists are trying to make the point that wealthy nations should deal with their problems instead of shipping them away to third-world countries and forgetting about the troubles the waste causes.

Current Situation: The practice of e-waste continues without much decisive action in regards to it. Some countries are beginning to take action themselves. Rep. Gene Green (D-Texas) of the US has introduced the [Responsible Electronics Recycling Act](#) (H.R. 6252) but it has yet to pass the House. The bill would ban e-waste export in the US for the purpose of developing the e-waste export industry thus creating high-tech jobs at home. The EU has actually banned e-waste export, but inspection is underfunded and prosecution is weak (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-10846395>). European nations have taken huge strides forward in terms of managing nuclear waste, hopefully now they can tackle the problem of e-waste.



Developing nations, due to corruption, weak rule of law, and larger political concerns like economic development, have not taken bold action in this regard.

The Problem: Companies claim that waste export is just like any other import-export, it's just business. They claim that they are providing scrappers with a livelihood. They say the risk is worth the reward. If it was not, then no country would accept the waste.

Environmental activists and agencies claim that the environmental and human damages a nation will have to deal with is not worth whatever boost the economy may receive. They say the risk is not worth the reward, that corporations are exploiting the desperate situation of scrappers to save on costs.

Committee Mission: This committee's main priority is to manage limited resources in a sustainable fashion, provide future generations with a safe and clean planet to live on, and to minimize the health and environmental effects of pollution on current generations.

Questions to Consider:

- 1.) How does your nation handle e-waste? Is it an importer, exporter, or both, of electronic waste?
- 2.) If your country does process e-waste, how is it done?
- 3.) Are there any laws regulating the procedure?
- 4.) Is there a group of citizens that carry the burden of unsafely disposing of e-waste?
- 5.) Do scrappers have a choice or other options? Can other options be created?
- 6.) How does the rest of your population feel about the issue?
- 7.) Is this practice exploitation or legitimate? Does your country benefit in some way?
- 8.) Would engineering technology to be upgradable instead of disposable affect consumers in the West?
- 9.) Bottom line, is the risk of damage worth the money to be gained? Weigh this question carefully and with much research, for here in the UN knowledge is the only tool you have.

Sources for Further Research:

<http://motherjones.com/blue-marble/2010/11/what-happens-your-phone-when-you-recycle-it>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-10846395>



<http://storyofstuff.org/electronics/> (A very good site. Please look through it and the other first two links)

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2008/01/high-tech-trash/carroll-text/1> (A visceral portrayal of e-waste. Look at it if even for just the pictures.)

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2008/01/high-tech-trash/essick-photography>

<http://www.unep.org/>

<http://untreaty.un.org/cod/avl/ha/bcctmhwd/bcctmhwd.html>

<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/shipments/legis.htm>