

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2010

Focus on ICTs and environmental sustainability



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (HIVOS)

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Introduction

The Arab States region, spanning most of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), is a relative newcomer to information and communications technology (ICT) waste. Nevertheless, in the last decade the take-up of mobile phones and computers has accelerated sharply, especially in high-income countries like the Gulf nations, Saudi Arabia and Iraq before the invasion. Countries with a large population, like Egypt, have also seen a sharp spike in mobile use.

The proper disposal of electronic waste (e-waste) is costly, and many developed countries have brokered deals with developing nations to dispose of their e-waste in foreign landfills or export old PCs and notebooks for reuse in developing countries.¹ Due to the short consumption-disposal cycle, ICT e-waste is one of the most rapidly growing hazardous waste categories.²

The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal is an international treaty to control and minimise the transfer of hazardous waste from the developed to the developing countries. E-waste is a sub-category of hazardous waste. The Convention has 172 parties and aims to protect human health and the environment against the adverse effects resulting from the generation, management, transboundary movements and disposal of hazardous and other wastes. The Basel Convention came into force in 1992. Most MENA countries are signatories to the convention.

Regional context

To be more attuned to regional needs and circumstances and to facilitate the Basel Convention's implementation, the secretariat created fourteen regional centres, the Basel Convention Regional and Coordinating Centres (BCRCs).³ These regional centres were the focal point of implementing the Basel Convention's Strategic Plan and policy priorities. The BCRCs allowed the Basel Convention to tailor its strategies and objectives according to the different regional differences

globally. That makes technology transfer, training for the reduction of hazardous, industrial and electronic wastes, and mechanisms for their environmentally sound management, disposal and recycling more effective. It also allows for a closer monitoring and communication process.

The BCRC for the Arab States has been located in Cairo, Egypt, since 1998. Since its establishment it has provided training in environmentally sound management of e-waste,⁴ disseminated information, and encouraged technology transfer for e-waste management. The BCRC further supports public-private initiatives to deal with e-waste and other hazardous waste and the development of regional strategies that assist in the implementation of the Basel Convention in the Arab States. The BCRC is especially important for the MENA because at present there is no regional policy and legislation for e-waste in the region.

A number of initiatives, but little regional cohesion

The establishment of national and sub-national ICT e-waste management initiatives is becoming an issue of national policy concern in the MENA region. Many governments are aware of the necessity of implementing e-waste strategies due to the increasing amount of e-waste in recent years and the expected acceleration of e-waste in the decades to come. Governments and the private sector have shown successful collaborative initiatives and are expected to continue along this path. In some countries, like Morocco, civil society has had some effect on demanding e-waste solutions, although overall in the MENA region the primary push factor comes from the private sector, with cooperation from the national and local governments.

Besides the Basel Convention, the Centre for Environment and Development for the Arab Region and Europe (CEDARE) has begun to look at e-waste, as well as climate change concerns.

The need for a recycling and "take-back" programme for end-of-life products is being addressed by national governments with the assistance of the private sector, mostly multinational companies like Nokia, Motorola, Vodafone, Dell, Hewlett-Packard (HP), Canon, Cisco, and others. What the region lacks is proper e-waste recycling technology that separates and offers proper disposal of e-waste with the recovery of raw materials to use in a new production cycle.⁵

1 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electronic_waste

2 Mueller, E., Schlupe, M., Widmer, R., Gottschalk, F. and Böni, H. (2009) *Assessment of e-waste flows: A probabilistic approach to quantify e-waste based on world ICT and development indicators*. ewasteguide.info/Mueller_2009_R09

3 www.basel.int/pub/BCRC-brochure.pdf

4 Among other hazardous and toxic waste; we are concentrating on ICT e-waste in this article.

5 Dyes, R. A. (2009) *Middle East braces to meet the challenge of e-waste*. ewasteguide.info/middle-east-braces-m

As far as the local private sector's involvement goes, the United Arab Emirates (UAE)-based EnviroServe⁶ is the only regional company that collaborates with MENA governments for e-waste management and recycling.

Yet there is an alarming lack of national legislation regarding e-waste, let alone ICT e-waste. A major legislative initiative was the passing of a law governing the recycling of mobile phones in the UAE in late 2008. Qatar's Ministry of Environment is presently drafting a law governing the safe management of its e-waste. The law should be made operational by the end of 2010.⁷

Morocco has been looking into embarking on a national e-waste management strategy, although the present legal and recycling infrastructure is not yet adequate for it. The Moroccan government is well aware of the present imbalance between the spike in use of mobile phones, TVs and computers, and the lack of proper disposal systems.⁸

Bahrain has, together with Saudi Arabia, the most advanced bylaws regulating e-waste policies and regulations in the region.⁹ The country's private sector, government and personal ICT equipment ownership is one of the highest in the region due to its strong per capita income. Bahrain has also adopted e-commerce and e-government policies. This is coupled with scarce land resources, making the management of e-waste a necessity as landfills are very limited.

Qatar's telecom operator, Qtel, is in the process of drafting a law on e-waste management, which is supposed to be completed by the end of 2010. This would be the first full law in MENA to deal with e-waste specifically. Qatari e-waste is expected to be collected by EnviroServe and then shipped to Singapore for recycling.¹⁰ In Egypt and the UAE e-waste is being collected and recycled manually, generating some income for small recyclers. This also means that it is a selective process and is mainly focused on recyclable (and

valuable) elements of ICT e-waste, without proper disposal of the non-recyclable parts.¹¹

During the Cairo ICT 2010 conference in February, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT) and the Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs signed the first memorandum of understanding (MOU) on e-waste management. The MOU is the first environmental policy involving ICTs in Egypt.¹² To regulate the influx of outdated ICT equipment, Egypt's Ministry of Industry and Trade put up a ban in 2007 on the import of computers that are older than five years.

HP, the Swiss Federal Laboratories for Materials Testing and Research (Empa), and the Global Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF) are collaborating with the Moroccan and Tunisian governments to assess e-waste management measures.¹³

As is evident from the above, there are growing national initiatives for ICT e-waste management that are driven by global concerns, national awareness of an increasing and hard to manage problem, and the eagerness of multinational ICT companies to be part of the "greening of ICTs" that has risen with the concern of climate change.

Still there is a marked lack of a comprehensive regional e-waste strategy and much to be done at the national level. The country initiatives cited above are a mere start. A more comprehensive and process-oriented e-waste management policy, strategy and implementation plan is needed at the national level than the individual initiatives offer. E-waste recycling is a high technology industry and will need more investment and management processes than are presently available. An international convention with regional presence like the Basel Convention could offer the needed regional technology hub for e-waste management. E-waste management is a complex and costly process. At present most of MENA's recycling is done outside the region. The collected e-waste, which is a fraction of what exists, is being exported to recycling facilities mostly in Asia and in Europe. To establish a collective recycling facility for MENA could be a possibility, if backed by a regional agency.

6 www.enviroserve.ae

7 Kanady, S. (2010) Qatar: E-waste law soon; draft in the works, *The Peninsula*, 15 June. www.zawya.com/story.cfm/sidZAWYA20100615050542/Qatar%3A%20E-waste%20law%20soon%3B%20draft%20in%20the%20works

8 Laissaoui, S.E. and Rochat, D. (2008) Morocco: E-waste country assessment, paper presented at the 19th Waste Management Conference of the IWMSA, Durban, South Africa, 6-10 October. ewasteguide.info/files/Laissaoui_2008_WasteCon.pdf

9 Bushehri, F. (2009) UNEP Role in Promoting Environmental Sound Management of E-Waste, paper presented at the Kuwait Waste Management Conference and Exhibition, Safat, Kuwait, 14-16 April. www.kuwaitwaste.com/papers/03.pdf

10 Toumi, H. (2010) Qatar drafts law on electronic waste, *Gulfnews.com*, 16 June. gulfnews.com/news/gulf/qatar/qatar-drafts-law-on-electronic-waste-1.641398

11 Allam, H. (2009) E-waste Management in the Arab Region: Status and Opportunities, presentation at the E-Waste Management Forum, Cairo, Egypt, 9-10 February. www.euromediti.com/presentations/Allam.pdf

12 www.cairoict.com

13 www.dsf-fsn.org/cms/documents/en/pdf/EWasteGB51.pdf; Amorim, C. (2007) Hewlett Packard to aid Africa's e-waste battle, *SciDev.Net*, 20 September. www.scidev.net/en/news/hewlett-packard-to-aid-africas-e-waste-battle.html

Finally, the MENA region lacks the public demand for ICT e-waste management due to the suppression of civil voices. Although this weakens the e-waste management movement, public involvement in the recycling process can still be part of the equation. The private sector has started several of its recycling initiatives in the region by offering incentives to consumers to bring back old batteries and equipment. A more educated public will be more cooperative and eager to do the same without the incentives.

Conclusion

Regional and national coordination and proper enforcement of e-waste management strategies will be at the forefront of successfully handling the increasing threat of ICT e-waste in MENA. The Basel Convention, with its regional office, could offer an effective site for assessment, reporting and overseeing the e-waste management systems in the region. The Basel Convention's emphasis on technology transfer could also provide an important input into national governments' plans for ICT e-waste management.

The BCRC is also a forum where communication, co-operation and best practices can be shared and reinforced, and where support can be sought by the individual countries of the region. For example, the BCRC has a regional landfill project. Although it is a general e-waste landfill and not specifically focused on ICT e-waste, it sets an important precedent that could be used and modified in the future for the specific needs of ICT waste in the region. Establishing a regional landfill is also cost and technology effective. It could also become the starting point for a regional e-waste recycling trade hub.

E-waste management in the MENA region is shaping up to be a multi-stakeholder partnership. At present a more active public awareness campaign would also be beneficial to give more impetus to the quicker establishment of an ICT e-waste management system that is backed by consumer support and potentially involves consumer recycling at source. ■

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2010 investigates the impact that information and communications technologies (ICTs) have on the environment – both good and bad.

Written from a civil society perspective, **GISWatch 2010** covers some 50 countries and six regions, with the key issues of ICTs and environmental sustainability, including climate change response and electronic waste (e-waste), explored in seven expert thematic reports. It also contains an institutional overview and a consideration of green indicators, as well as a mapping section offering a comparative analysis of “green” media spheres on the web.

While supporting the positive role that technology can play in sustaining the environment, many of these reports challenge the perception that ICTs will automatically be a panacea for critical issues such as climate change – and argue that for technology to really benefit everyone, consumption and production patterns have to change. In order to build a sustainable future, it cannot be “business as usual”.

GISWatch 2010 is a rallying cry to electronics producers and consumers, policy makers and development organisations to pay urgent attention to the sustainability of the environment. It spells out the impact that the production, consumption and disposal of computers, mobile phones and other technology are having on the earth’s natural resources, on political conflict and social rights, and the massive global carbon footprint produced.

GISWatch 2010 is the fourth in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GISWatch is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

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