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India sorely needs e-waste regulation

By [Inter Press Service](#)

Bangalore, October 2 (By Keya Acharya): India's lack of safe electronic waste-disposal is growing to a crisis situation, needing strong laws to control the situation, say experts.

The country's e-waste generation is expected to grow from a current annual 380,000 tonnes to a billion tonnes by 2012.

"These figures account for only televisions, mobile phones and computers; there is an entire spectrum of unaccounted-for e-waste that is going into the unorganized sector in India, causing health and environmental problems," says Ramapati Kumar, Greenpeace campaign manager for toxic wastes in India.

India currently has no official law on restricting the use of toxic chemicals from electronic manufacturing or controlling its discharge. Since pollution occurs mainly in the discharge and recycling of electronic waste, we want legislation that covers this entire field, says Kumar.

Electrical and electronic goods use a wide spectrum of highly toxic metals, including lead, cadmium, dioxin, furan, chlorine, bromine, polyvinyl chloride and others, the incineration of which releases toxic fumes.

Trade in electronic waste is controlled by the Basel Convention, but the convention exempts repair and refurbishment of used electronic goods.

An entire 'cottage industry' has now grown up on extracting re-usable chemicals from discarded electronics in crude, open-fire smelters which release toxic fumes and contaminate soil and water.

"They work under primitive conditions, using acid bathing, open cooking and burning to recover a mere 30-35 percent of metals. The best solution to this situation is to have 'brand' responsibility", says Abhishek Pratap, Toxics campaigner at Greenpeace.

Greenpeace says its campaign has hence focused on the industry to manufacture clean products as well as have a 'take-back' policy wherein they take back old products from consumers and send the goods to authorized recyclers.

The global organisation's 'green ranking index' for the electronics industry, monitored quarterly, put electronics giant Nokia in first place for going 'green' and 'PVC free'.

"The company previously had 'double standards' on its take-back policy where the system worked elsewhere but not in India. But since our ranking guide and our campaign, Nokia now has the largest collection centre for its discarded products in India which they recycle", says Kumar.

Indian IT giants Infosys and Wipro are equally aware, while Dutch multinational Philips is 'strongly resisting' individual responsibilities, says Greenpeace.

Since most electronic goods, especially notebooks and computers, are made for global markets, the industry is responding fast to efforts at chemical-free production and environmentally sound re-use of its products.

Seventy-five percent of large IT firms in India are compliant with 'ROHS', or the EU's restriction on use of hazardous substances, specially meant for the electronic industry. The Korean multinational Samsung has 31 collection centres across India, while Apple recently made its new products vinyl-free, thus eliminating the release of dioxins through incineration.

But large companies account for just 30 percent or less of India's e-waste.

"Less than five percent of waste generated reaches the organized recycling sector", says P. Parthasarathy (single name) director of India's first e-recycling firm, the Bangalore-based E-Parisara.

Currently there are only 8-10 authorised e-waste recyclers in India, leaving a huge gap in the need to clean up this sector.

Parthasarathy says India faces yet another disposal problem from an official 50,000 tonnes per year of obsolete electronic goods, though unofficially "much, much more", is dumped by western nations, that are refurbished and re-used in India.

"Which in itself is not the problem, since developing nations cannot afford expensive new technologies; it is their disposal that is the problem, as much as exporter nations who do not specify these goods as wastes."

In 2007, a report by the British Environment Agency said there were several companies exporting e-waste from Britain to India, Pakistan and China.

The issue of toxic dumping into India from western nations was brought to national notice in 2003 by New Delhi-based organisation, Toxics Link. The organisation said the commercial city of Mumbai generates a shocking 19,000 tonnes of e-waste annually, a good amount of it through clandestine imports from the developed world.

Kolkata, the eastern metropolis, is also fast emerging as a major centre for hazardous e-waste recycling, while Delhi has been tipped as the largest e-waste recycler in the country.

But both Greenpeace and E-Parisara's Parthasarathy say they are anxious that the informal sector is retained as the country tries to find ways to recycle safely.

"We want the informal sector to retain their livelihoods and are looking to involve them in collection and transportation of these wastes in a mutual benefit scheme", says Kumar.

Parthasarathy's ISO 14001 model, developed with help from Germany's GTZ and Switzerland's EMPA uses a simple, indigenous method that manually dismantles goods like computers, printers, cartridges and other peripherals, segregates and pulverises, all in an environmentally benign manner.

E-Parisara's 50-odd customers are all major corporates, including IBM, Lucent-Alcatel, Hewlett Packard, Intel, Infosys and Motorola.

All players in this field, NGOs, activists, e-recyclers and agencies are now preparing to go to the Indian government to request a comprehensive, law on e-waste generation, manufacturing, importing and exporting.

“The guidelines issued by the central pollution control board earlier this year on e-waste management is not mandatory. We want a separate law,” says Parathasarathy.



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