



The importance of diverting e-waste to the correct facilities

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By **Staff Writer** 15th Mar 2023

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E-WASTE is any discarded products that “have a battery or plug and contain hazardous and toxic materials that can endanger both human and environmental health”, according to the UN.

Yet, according to the spokesperson for the producer responsibility organisation (PRO) Circular Energy, Patricia Schröder, e-recycling is not a priority for South Africans – despite the fact that about 95% of e-waste can actually be recycled, reclaimed, or treated and beneficiated.

“For instance, only 10 to 12% of waste electrical and electronic equipment and between 2.5% and 5% of waste lighting are recycled. This is extremely low,” she cautions. “Given that e-waste includes toxic substances, its effective material recovery and environmentally sound recycling are crucial – and our local service providers, including formal and informal recyclers, have a massive role to play to improve the situation.”

The problem: an e-pollution crisis

Schröder explains that e-waste that is not correctly managed, including that that is disposed of in landfills, can release harmful pollutants.

“These toxic materials, especially heavy metals like mercury and cadmium, can harm ecosystems, accumulate in food chains, and have immediate and very noticeable negative impacts on human health.”

Furthermore, Schröder says, by not recycling or reusing e-waste, new natural resources must be mined in order to produce electronics. This is as opposed to recouping what is already available in the market.

The solution: sound waste management

Due to its toxic and hazardous components, electronic waste can no longer be disposed of in landfills as of 2021. Instead, it must be treated by an authorised company that recycles waste electrical and electronic equipment (widely known as WEEE or e-waste).

This should be done by following sound e-waste recycling principles – the process of extracting valuable materials after shredding the e-waste into smaller fractions that could be reused in a new electronic appliance.

“The government is attempting to address environmental pollution by banning the disposal of WEEE and batteries – and these authorised facilities are equipped with the know-how and tools needed to securely dispose of e-waste and recover recyclable materials,” Schröder explains.

She goes on to caution service providers not to fall for the tricks of illegal, unlicensed dealers or businesses that buy the items at very cheap rates and claim to recycle them when the remainder is then actually illegally dumped with other waste.

The added benefit: financial gain

Schröder says service providers should not forget that effective e-waste management can also have financial advantages.

“Materials like gold, copper, glass, aluminum, lithium, plastic, and more can be recovered in this manner. One international study estimated that in 2016, the raw material value of e-waste was around 55 billion euros. Additionally, by recycling these materials back into the supply chain for the creation of new products, the manufacturing of new electronics is becoming more environmentally friendly. This releases fewer hazardous materials into the environment, and is generally more sustainable.”

She adds that there is also a significant social and economic impact, with recycling and reuse accounting for thousands of jobs.

“Of course, e-waste is only a portion of that, but as it is also the waste stream with the fastest growth rate, it is likely to become much more significant as our reliance on digital devices increases.”



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