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E-waste a nuisance in Africa – environmental expert

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Albertina Nakale

Pretoria-An environmental expert says electronic waste has become a nuisance in Africa, and points at the overwhelming number of second-hand and refurbished electronic products dumped in African markets as a reason for concern.

It is estimated that in Namibia the Windhoek area alone produces approximately 300 tons of electronic waste every year, while the national electronic waste amounts to between 1,500 and 2,000 tons per annum. Electronic waste, or e-waste, is described as discarded electrical or electronic devices.

The environmental expert James Mulolo, who is the Africa Institute project coordinator, spoke to New Era on the sidelines of a workshop on improving chemicals management in English-speaking African countries last Friday in Pretoria, South Africa.

According to United Nations statistics, the global community produces a total of 50 million tons of electronic and electrical waste every year – if filled into trucks it would reach halfway around the globe.

Africa Institute is an environmentally sound management organization dealing with hazardous wastes and development of national plans or policy on various hazardous waste streams, including the disposal and storage of polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) waste.

It aims to strengthen the capacity of its members in implementing the conventions on chemicals as waste clusters by mobilising different academic and research institutions located in member states.

Countries served are Angola, Botswana, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

“E-waste is a challenge. There are new phones every year and you must get rid of them but you don’t know how to get rid of them. There are various precious metals in the phones that people who want to do smelting would want to extract – gold, palladium and all these rare metals. So, what they do is burn these products and in the process, they produce dangerous fumes called dioxanes. And this is where the problem is,” Mulolo said.

Many countries still handle broken electronic equipment as waste only, while others process it to the benefit of the environment and economy, proactively managing its volumes of e-waste.

He said since e-waste is a challenge, African countries should think of re-cycling such waste. He suggests that countries could restrict the importation of second-hand electronic equipment by specifying that products that are, for instance, five years old and above will not be allowed into the country.

This, he says, will help avoid electronic products being dumped on the continent that will only work for a short time and then be discarded into the environment.

Another intervention he mentioned is that manufacturers or companies selling these products could be encouraged to have a take-back policy whereby people return unwanted products to avoid dumping once they no longer need them.

“If you have a laptop or a phone and you want a new one, then you take back and get a discount when you buy a new one. That way you encourage consumers and those things can be given to re-cycling companies that can make money out of them. Those are some of the ideas that are available on the market. These things are done in Europe and several other African countries and they are working.”

Mulolo said caring for the environment is about things that don’t get headlines in the media, of course unless it’s a disaster.

Therefore, he called on the media to continue voicing their concerns regarding the environment. Transworld Cargo, a Namibian company, has decided to complement its expertise and logistical facilities by introducing e-waste recycling in Namibia.

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