



BASEL CONVENTION

SUCCESS STORY #6

BASEL CONVENTION'S PARTNERSHIP FOR ACTION ON COMPUTING EQUIPMENT HELPS TO KEEP TRACK OF GROWING AMOUNTS OF E-WASTE ACROSS THE GLOBE

Practical guidelines and pilot projects ease burden for developing countries

One of the greatest changes over recent decades has been the huge strides that humanity has taken in technological innovation. In general, of course, this has brought great benefits, but such benefits come with responsibility. We are all now so used to accessing our PCs, laptops, tablets and mobile phones that we forget there is a cost that comes with using - and abandoning - them.

The raw statistics are shocking. According to the Global E-Waste Statistics Partnership some 53.6 million metric tonnes (Mt) of e-waste were generated worldwide in 2019. Worryingly, this trend is accelerating, and statistical models predict that by 2030 e-waste generation worldwide will have doubled that of 2014, totalling 74 Mt per year.¹

When the millions of computers purchased around the world every year become obsolete, those that are not disposed of properly leave behind lead, cadmium, mercury and

Brominated flame retardants. As acid can easily leech out these substances, they have a highly destructive impact on both the natural environment and human health when their extraction is conducted contrary to environmentally sound procedures.

That's why the Partnership for Action on Computing Equipment (PACE) was set up by the Basel Convention in 2008. PACE fully conforms to the overarching objective of the Basel Convention to protect human health and the environment against the adverse effects of hazardous wastes. From the outset, the approach of PACE was to tackle the problem of obsolete computer equipment at different levels, involving stakeholders across the full range of interests and needs.

The timing of PACE was crucial: when the partnership began, e-waste was on the verge of becoming overwhelming. But PACE was highly innovative in its approach, particularly

in developing countries. This is because it developed comprehensive guidance, legislation and policies, and implemented concrete projects in light of the guidance in countries that had not previously considered e-waste to be an issue or challenge in any way. This therefore had huge impact in creating awareness and in contributing to legislation and technical solutions where these previously did not exist. But PACE made a massive contribution as a catalyst for change in the legislative and policy frameworks of several countries. With real change stemming from the top, regulatory bodies are now obliged to incorporate all necessary activities into their programmes of work.

Both governments and the private sector - ranging from multinational telephone and IT companies to the local waste industry - made good progress on awareness-raising campaigns and PACE can be credited for part of this. In most of the PACE pilot projects there was substantial private sector participation, which opened highly interesting avenues and commitments for e-waste management. Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) – a policy scheme for extending the financial and physical responsibility for the waste phase of electrical and electronic equipment to the private sector – has become part of the legislation of many countries, and Corporate Social Responsibility standards have become commonplace for many industries.

At the grassroots, the impact of the guidance was notable for their success. Straightforward as it may sound, producing the guidance in local languages made a huge difference, as did the use of cartoons, animated movies and other media. Some of the pilot projects produced excellent spin-off products that have contributed considerably both to the spread of the

concepts and to Environmentally Sound Management (ESM) principles. Concrete and tangible e-waste efforts, such as the installation of collection points, events at schools and training in technology, have greatly enhanced the visibility of the issue and triggered a good deal of action. Such activities also help gain insights into what actually does and does not work. It is important to note that it was not the role of PACE to install or even encourage specific e-waste collection methods, but to create an excellent working environment for others to do so, an environment that is continuing well beyond the duration of the partnership itself.

And that, surely, is the single most obvious indicator of the success of PACE: that so many aspects of the project are still in motion, despite its cessation some time ago. Indeed, almost all the PACE-initiated activities have found continuation in one way or another, ranging from the development of regional strategies, sustainable partnerships with the private sector, the adoption of national legislation, rapid growth in systematic e-waste collection, and in general increased awareness about the issue even in remote parts of the countries.

PACE is now being followed by a successor partnership established by the Basel Convention in 2019. The new “Follow-up” partnership focuses both on computing equipment and mobile phones and was established to provide assistance to developing countries needing guidance and support in tackling the challenge posed by the rapidly growing - and changing - volumes of e-waste across the globe. One of the major tasks of the new partnership is to propose potential new e-waste types which may be included within its scope by the Basel Convention Conference of the Parties, in the biennium 2022-2023.

1 Forti V., Baldé C.P., Kuehr R., Bel G. *The Global E-waste Monitor 2020: Quantities, flows and the circular economy potential*. United Nations University (UNU)/United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) – co-hosted SCYCLE Programme, International Telecommunication Union (ITU) & International Solid Waste Association (ISWA), Bonn/Geneva/Rotterdam.



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