

Polluted aid

Rubbish dump - the Third World

It's good for their image if enterprises engage themselves in foreign aid and ship IT goods to the Third World. But this is not always good for the recipients, alleges a US environmental organisation, as most of the relief aid is in fact electric scrap.

Electric scrap is a growing problem worldwide. The World Wide Fund for Nature alleges that about 325 million PCs will be at least five years old this year, and will reach the point where they are normally taken out of service. Most of these appliances contribute to an IT mountain of rubbish that, in Germany alone, will bring more than 110,000 tons annually into the equation. But note, this figure is dated from 2000; there are no current figures yet available.

The growing avalanche of rubbish has led to the introduction of the "Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment" directive, in short WEEE, which commits manufacturers and dealers to recycling. As prescribed by the German Electrical and Electronic Equipment Act, or "ElektroG", by implementing the directive into German law, the level of utilisation from returns of appliances should grow by up to 75 per cent by the end of 2006.

However, this is not easy since IT equipment is quite challenging: "green PCs" are still quite rare and are offered only by a few manufacturers (such as Fujitsu Siemens). In general IT scrap is special waste that contains, in certain parts, horrific toxicity. The industry has exported these chemical bombs, without hesitation, in the direction of Southeast Asia for recycling in an eastern style.

A shocking report hit the headlines about three years ago, alleging that 50 to 80 per cent of all IT scrap collected for recycling purposes in the United States ended up in unauthorised rubbish dumps in China, India, Pakistan and other newly industrialised and developing countries. Photographs showing workers collecting re-usable materials from the scrap under mostly unregulated and unprotected, but also partly extremely harmful, conditions have gone around the world. From an industrial perspective it is a major accident waiting to happen.



Basel Action Network "Recycling" in the Third World: the Basel Action Network has provided a shock with its electric scrap report from the Chinese Guiyu region.



**You must be joking:
"RECYCLING": LIVING WITH ELECTRIC SCRAP**

The WEEE has effectively prevented cross-border IT scrap movements in Europe, but disposal in the United States has become severely expensive in the past few years. For this reason the United States is so far the only country in the industrialised world not to have ratified the UNO treaty of Basel, which should limit the trade in dangerous waste. However, this means that US companies may principally still ship their rubbish worldwide. And that is not healthy for the image of recycling.

The US environmental organisation, "Basel Action Network", which was responsible for the China report of 2002, at this point insists that more foreign aid is forthcoming, but all is not what it seems ("The Digital Dump: Exporting Re-use and Abuse to Africa"). What appears to be criminal still serves for the good image of exporting companies under the heading of aid. But what is also certain is that this method of disposal saves costs.

Three-quarters is scrap, one quarter is aid

Basel Action Network insists that this is not just a little problem: approximately 500 containers crammed with old computers arrive at the Nigerian port of Lagos each month. The Western Powers can supply Africa with approximately 400,000 computers each year. But unfortunately "75% of it" would be "unusable scrap" according to Jim Pucket of Basel Action Network. "And nowhere in Nigeria can this scrap be disposed professionally".

Industrial and government representatives in the United States do not consider this to be a problem: they admit that there is a massive export of electric scrap to the so-called Third World, partially under a fraudulent label. Upon a request from the "New York Times" the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) stated that the problem is not

so big as to prohibit the export of waste. Instead, the EPA would work on a regulation that would show that compared with previously, "exports of recyclable goods would be environmentally healthy"!

"And that is where the problem is" stated representatives of the waste export industry. "Disposal in the Third World" is out of question. Demand for the raw materials of which the electric scrap is composed is so great that no old monitor would lie around for long. Everything would be pulled out and utilised.

And that is exactly what Basel Action Network has shown in its Chinese Guiyu report from three years ago. Environmentalists do not deny that electric scrap is being recycled there. But they criticise the inhumane and environmentally harmful way it is being done.

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