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Electronics: Disposal programmes are in need of some fine-tuning

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One obvious sign of "progress" in the past 30 years is the increase in the amount of consumer electronics in the house of today compared with its 1979 counterpart.

As well as multiple television sets, DVD players, a microwave, tumble dryers and fridge-freezer, today's home will have a range of MP3 players, a desktop computer, maybe a laptop, computer games console, broadband connection and a digital video recorder.

Disposing of all these gadgets, as well as the IT equipment thrown out by businesses as it becomes obsolete, is becoming an increasing problem. The United Nations estimates that up to 50m tonnes of electronic goods are discarded globally each year, while in Europe "e-waste" is increasing at 3-5 per cent a year – three times faster than the total waste stream.

The EU's WEEE (Waste from Electrical and Electronic Equipment) directive aims to ensure that the waste created by consumers buying 9.3m tonnes of electrical gadgets a year does not end up in landfill.

WEEE was a groundbreaking law but it had a troubled development. Agreed in 2004, the directive was subject to long delays in its introduction in many member states and the European Commission said in 2008 that only a third of e-waste was being treated in line with the legislation, with the rest going to landfill or sent abroad.

The directive, which called for EU countries to ensure that 4kg of e-waste per person was collected each year, has been heavily criticised and poorly implemented. The focus on weight has meant that collectors have not concentrated on collecting energy-saving light bulbs, for example, but on bulky, heavy items such as washing machines and refrigerators that are more difficult to transport and have little value.

Another problem is that the 4kg requirement is the same for all EU countries, even though for some newer entrants it is close to 100 per cent of the e-waste they produce, while for some of the older member states it is about one-fifth of the total.

The European Commission is revising the directive, and wants to introduce new collection targets equal to 65 per cent of the average weight of goods placed on the market over the previous two years.

"We have a [new] target that is much more ambitious and reflective of a member state's circumstances," says the Commission. It also wants to increase the responsibility of producers to collect the waste.

This will be unworkable, says Dr Kirstie McIntyre, of Hewlett-Packard's EMEA Environmental Compliance department, because so much e-waste is illegally disposed of outside the producer compliance system.

E-waste is not just a European Union problem, of course. Similar regulations are in place in Japan, while China and Korea are among countries looking at introducing their own regulations. A number of US states also have "producer take back" laws. However, just 18 per cent of computers and TVs were recycled in the US in 2007 – and only one in 10 cell phones.

Globally, the Basel Convention seeks to minimise the movement of waste across international borders. Under the Convention, the export of hazardous waste from rich countries to poor ones is illegal, unless the receiving government has given explicit consent, says Charlotte Steel, of Impax, an investment company. However, it can easily be circumvented by relabelling e-waste as second-hand goods.

E-waste is becoming a problem in African and Asian countries, where it is sent for recycling.

Electronic equipment contains a significant amount of heavy metals that can contaminate groundwater, impair air quality and cause health problems if not dealt with properly.

HP, which collected 1.5m products last year in the EMEA region, has been working on a project in South Africa, looking at ways communities can handle e-waste safely and create employment at the same time.

"We have no control over how this waste ends up in Africa, but it is not good for our products to be dumped in other countries," says Ms McIntyre of HP. "However, there is a demand for e-waste in places such as Ghana, South Africa and Morocco because the raw materials can be used."

She says the company's South African project has shown that with proper training, e-waste recycling can provide good jobs and protect the environment. Some of the company's products, such as printer cartridges, are made entirely from recycled plastic, she says. "Waste will become more important, as commodity prices go up and up."

IBM, which has been recycling e-waste since 1989, says early action on e-waste has created business opportunities. In 2003, it became the first company to have collected more than 1bn lbs of e-waste, says Wayne Balta, vice-president, corporate environmental affairs and product safety. It has a target of sending no more than 3 per cent by weight of its waste to landfill or incineration.

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"If you anticipate regulation, you have opportunities instead of having to react," says Mr Balta.

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