The real-life recycling horror show

O ne year ago, with our exposé ‘Exporting Harm: The High-Tech Trashing of Asia’, the world was presented with a non-fiction horror movie - the underbelly of both the electronics and recycling industries. For the first time, the world witnessed Chinese, Indian and Pakistani labourers breaking down the toxic electronic effluent of the affluent with medieval technologies and little regard to very real environmental and occupational threats. Revelation of these industries’ ‘dirty little secret’ shocked consumers, manufacturers and governments alike.

Sadly, one year later, little has been accomplished towards ending this ugly international trade that victimises the planet’s poorest while providing a counter-productive subsidy for manufacturers to care little about the end-of-life consequences of their products.

T he export of WEEE (Wastes from Electrical or Electronic Equipment) or e-waste to Asia remains a booming business both in Europe and North America as manufacturers and governments look on in deadly apathy. One year ago, recycling insiders estimated that, in North America, 80% of electronic waste collected for recycling was sent to developing countries and we see no evidence that this figure has decreased. This year, European recycling insiders have calculated the figure for their own continent at 60%.

Recipient countries such as China have reiterated the ban on their electronic waste import ban. They are cracking down on customs violations at their ports. But the countries exporting e-waste continue to let it flood offshore. Canada reluctantly sent a letter reminding all its electronics recyclers that exports to China were prohibited, but it lacks the ability to enforce this prohibition and there is nothing stopping an exporter from diverting wastes from China to other destinations such as Vietnam or Indonesia. Meanwhile, an unabashed U.S. government has gone so far as to indicate that export is part of its electronic waste management strategy, even though it violates the spirit of its established ‘environmental justice’ principle and the legal letter of a 1986 OECD treaty. Even in the EU, which has taken steps to ratify and implement the Basel Convention’s amendment banning exports of hazardous wastes to developing countries, WEEE still flows out due to poor enforcement.

P erhaps the most alarming trend, however, finds the very same electronics manufacturing industry and governments now engaging in a new phase of head-in-sand denial. The latest delusion rests on the notion that trade and technology are all good all of the time. Their stated belief is that, as long as we set up good facilities in Asia, then a free trade in hazardous waste to Asia can and should continue.

This is the apologists argument, often cloaked in the benign terms ‘environmentally sound management’ or ESM. It fails to visualise that, even if Asia employed the best computer recycling techniques in the world, and even if one could guarantee that a developing country possessed the resources to monitor and enforce the proper maintenance of such technologies (in fact an impossibility), export to Asia of all of our hazardous computer waste would still be a monumentally bad idea. As there is no such thing as 100% recycling, and as the waste in question is hazardous, the inevitable contamination, risks and residues will be transferred. Developing countries would become rife with landfills, incinerators and waste treatment facilities, as well as with the accompanying occupational disease and degraded environment.

T he so-called ‘ESM solution’ sounds lovely. However, since risk mitigation and liability are far more expensive in developed countries, and since labour is far cheaper in developing countries, virtually all polluting industries are likely to be driven by market forces towards developing countries. The ESM solution serves as a convenient excuse for the rich, developed countries effectively to clean their hands while wringing out industrial dirt on the poor. It means that the poorest regions would become the toxic waste colonies of the rest of the world. Is this the kind of world that recyclers want to create? No thanks!

While clearly victimising the poor with toxic, unsustainable jobs, the export solution contradicts the principles of ‘polluter-pays’ and ‘waste prevention’ since it allows real environmental costs to be externalised by those responsible for creating them - in this case, electronics manufacturers. Whenever a government allows externalisation of costs, in this case via exports, they create an unfair subsidy for industry to continue to create polluting products and wastes. This pollution subsidy then stifles the innovation needed desperately worldwide to implement preventative upstream solutions through ‘green’ design. Enough of this distorted economic system that hurts us all!

A two-step solution is needed. First, we must close off the ‘cheap and dirty’ escape route for all hazardous waste exports by simply banning them. The global community has already agreed to do this and so we simply need to ratify and implement the Basel Convention’s ban amendment.

Second, we must embrace the concept of ‘Extended Producer Responsibility’ which requires that all manufacturers bear financial and sometimes physical responsibility for the entire life cycle of their products, as has recently been adopted in the EU’s WEEE Directive.

Enforced responsibility for a product’s entire life cycle, without any chance to export the problem to foreign shores, is the combination needed to trigger market incentives for producing non-toxic, readily-recyclable goods. In this way, we can finally pull the plug on the real-life, e-waste horror show now playing at a theatre near you.

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