

Govt must rethink its plans around e-waste

As gifts are unboxed in the next few days, with the festive season and its attendant activities set to reach a crescendo, a spike in the amount of electronic waste or e-waste generated is, lamentably, to be expected.

From batteries and electrical devices being supplanted by new gifts to empty plastic bottles of beverages guzzled, landfills in urban areas are undoubtedly bracing themselves for the worst—our failure to dial down our consumption over the festive season.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that discarded strings of battery-powered gadgets over the festive season significantly contribute to the 40,000 tonnes of e-waste the country generates annually per a 2021 dataset (up from 17,000 tonnes in 2017).

The issue:

E-waste

Our view:

With anecdotal evidence showing that sales of electronic gadgets such as computers, TVs, monitors and console game platforms soar in Uganda's major cities in the run-up to holidays, it is imperative that responsible authorities ensure that old electronics rarely see the light of day.

Part of the reason why Ugandans have grown into the habit of exacerbating the digital dumping problem is because the country has not been proofed against old electronics that find its borders rather permeable. The shelf life of the aforesaid gadgets is, unsurprisingly, short. So, they keep being replaced when festivities—such as the ones we are currently revelling in—loosen the purse strings.

Since the trade-in programmes around old electronics that come with discounted rates for Ugandans are not without grim implications, the government ought to rethink its plans. If Ugandans are to make a difference when it comes to e-waste, both in their decisions about what to buy, hold on to and dispose of, government officials must stop giving them enough rope to hang themselves.

It is also quite evident that the bark of the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal is worse than its bite. Uganda is a party of the international treaty that came into effect in 1992 and started frowning upon e-waste in 2006. It has barely helped matters that the treaty's provisions are unambiguous about the adverse effects of digital dumping.

As a result, a great deal of Christmas and New Year gifts that the vast bulk of Ugandans will receive during this festive season will in many respects have a constricted shelf life.

With anecdotal evidence showing that sales of electronic gadgets such as computers, TVs, monitors and console game platforms soar in Uganda's major cities in the run-up to holidays, it is imperative that responsible authorities ensure that old electronics rarely see the light of day.

If this is too much to ask for, Uganda should at least pull all the stops to ensure that it increases the number of e-waste hubs it has under its belt.

Currently, the country has only a couple of e-waste hubs domiciled in Kampala and Nakasongola. Both facilities are located in industrial areas, with Nakasongola's overseen by the army's National Enterprise Corporation in tandem with the National Environment Management Authority.

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