# Geneva talks target surge in global electronic waste amid rising health and environmental risks



More than 180 countries have convened in Geneva for talks under the Basel Convention to tackle a growing global crisis: the surge in electronic waste. The negotiations, which began on Monday and are scheduled to run until 9 May, also cover chemical pollution under the Rotterdam and Stockholm conventions. The discussions come at a time when the world is facing unprecedented levels of electronic waste, raising concerns over environmental and health impacts.

In 2022, global electronic waste reached 62 million tonnes – an amount equivalent to a line of trucks encircling the Earth at the equator. Projections indicate this will rise to 82 million tonnes by 2030. However, only 22 percent of this waste is properly recycled, according to the United Nations Global E-waste Monitor. The remainder often ends up dumped or burnt, leading to the release of hazardous toxins into the soil, air, and water.

Africa is one of the regions most severely affected by the influx of discarded electronics. Much of the waste shipped there is mislabelled as second-hand goods despite frequently being broken or near the end of its usability. Edem d'Almeida, founder of the Togo-based Africa Global Recycling, explained to RFI that "many Western countries continue to export hazardous waste by presenting defective equipment as second-hand appliances." Despite the Basel Convention banning such exports since 1992, loopholes and lax enforcement allow the practice to persist. He also noted that the volume of electronic waste entering Africa is "largely underestimated" due to informal channels used for its movement. "It's up to states to monitor what enters their territories, so that Africa doesn't become the planet's dumping ground," he added.

The informal recycling methods used in many African countries often involve dangerous processes such as open burning or acid baths. These techniques release toxic chemicals including lead, mercury, and dioxins, which can have severe consequences for human health. The World Health Organization (WHO) highlighted these risks in a 2021 report, warning that children and pregnant women are particularly vulnerable. It stated that "e-waste recycling activities may release up to 1,000 different chemical substances," and children are often directly involved in dismantling electronics at dumpsites, exposing them to serious health hazards.

The environmental consequences extend beyond human health, threatening water sources, crops, and land integrity in vulnerable regions. Oleg Zaitsev, who manages an e-waste recycling company in Kazakhstan supported by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), underscored these risks: "Hazardous materials in electronic scrap can contaminate soil and water, affecting the environment and food security."

Among the topics under discussion in Geneva are proposals to restrict the use of PFAS, so-called "forever chemicals," under the Stockholm Convention. These substances are persistent in the environment and found in items ranging from food packaging to cosmetics. Giulia Carlini, a lawyer with the Centre for International Environmental Law (CIEL), an NGO observing the talks, described listing PFAS as "a useful first step" but argued that "what's really needed is full prohibition." She pointed out that the current talks are a precursor to upcoming negotiations on a global plastics treaty, offering an opportunity to explore the interrelations between plastic and chemical waste.

The Basel Convention's decision-making process requires consensus, with each country holding a veto, which alongside industry lobbying, may slow progress.

Some African nations have begun implementing measures to better manage the e-waste challenge. Nigeria has introduced a system requiring electronics importers and manufacturers to help cover recycling costs. Ghana has imposed levies on imports of used and end-of-life electronics, and Rwanda has partnered with private companies to develop a national e-waste recycling centre. However, formal recycling in Africa remains extremely low, at less than 1 percent.

UN experts have emphasised the potential benefits of improving collection and recycling rates worldwide. If these rates were to reach 60 percent by 2030, the positive impact could exceed $38 billion, through enhanced public health, ecosystem protection, and job creation.

Jacqueline Alvarez, head of chemicals and health at UNEP, remarked on the broader issue, stating: "Chemicals are an integral part of the modern world. But too often, exposure to harmful chemicals through food, consumer products, and the environment can have severe consequences for people and the planet."

The current Geneva talks represent an important global effort to address the mounting electronic and chemical waste crisis, which has significant implications for environmental health, human safety, and economic sustainability across multiple continents.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/world-losing-battle-against-electronic-waste-un-finds-2024-03-20/> - This article reports that in 2022, about 62 million metric tons of e-waste were generated globally, marking an 82% increase since 2010, and projects this number to rise to 82 million metric tons by 2030, corroborating the article's claim about the surge in electronic waste.
2. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/boards-policy-regulation/policywatch-billions-dollars-materials-being-squandered-e-waste-mountain-says-un-2024-04-29/> - This piece highlights that e-waste comprises mainly metals and plastics, growing five times faster than the recycling capacity, expected to hit 82 billion tons by 2030, supporting the article's assertion about the environmental and health impacts of electronic waste.
3. <https://www.basel.int/Implementation/PublicAwareness/NewsFeatures/tabid/3000/Default.aspx> - This Basel Convention news feature discusses the upcoming 2025 Conference of the Parties (COP) and the implementation of e-waste amendments, aligning with the article's mention of the Basel Convention's role in addressing e-waste.
4. <https://www.basel.int/Implementation/PublicAwareness/Allactivities/tabid/7934/lapg-44400/1/Default.aspx> - This Basel Convention activity page details a regional workshop in Johannesburg, South Africa, aimed at assisting parties in implementing the e-waste amendments to the Basel Convention, supporting the article's reference to international efforts to manage e-waste.
5. <https://www.basel.int/Implementation/PublicAwareness/Allactivities/tabid/7934/lapg-44400/28/Default.aspx> - This Basel Convention activity page mentions the 16th meeting of the Implementation and Compliance Committee in Geneva, focusing on illegal traffic in hazardous wastes, including e-waste, corroborating the article's discussion on the Basel Convention's role in regulating e-waste.
6. <https://www.basel.int/Implementation/PublicAwareness/Allactivities/tabid/7934/lapg-44400/28/Default.aspx> - This Basel Convention activity page highlights the LIFE SWEAP project by IMPEL, which increased the effectiveness and efficiency of enforcement actions in support of the implementation of the Basel Convention, aligning with the article's mention of the Basel Convention's decision-making process and enforcement challenges.
7. <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMirwFBVV95cUxONS1wazBvQlBrT0tZWkxPRE1UcENYRHRhMXlCMDNKOEYyTnBSQUJpdy1wTWRmYVJNMWRTMTQ2UjZSWDBjcEpQc0NZcWJ3d1lBN3F5TnhuS29fVXcwQklhYXNNZThjVWpYLXlNNlRPb1ltVWJyOTZQSUVyLWZldXhkN1hkV05id1U1TEZtUkU2TlNqem9scWxGemJ4dzNEdWkyZnlJSFd2eTdZYjU2LUVZ?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data