E-Waste Generation in Nigeria

The Sustainability Cost of Digital Dependency



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Key Figures at a Glance

500,000 tonnes of E-waste generated by Nigeria (2022)

Up to 100,000 Informal e-waste workers in Nigeria

< 1% of formally recycled waste in African countries

More than 60,000 metric tonnes of used EEE arrive at Lagos ports annually, per UNEP

Over 52,000 tonnes (brominated) Toxic plastics, 4000 tonnes of lead, 80 tonnes of cadmium and 0.3 tonnes of mercury are burned/dumped annually

148.2 million Internet subscribers in Nigeria (2025)

Sources: UNITAR/ITU Global E-waste Monitor 2024; UNEP 2019; Basel Convention E-waste Africa Project; NCC 2025.

1. Introduction

The Scale of Nigeria's E-Waste Challenge

Nigeria generated approximately 500,000 tonnes (500 million kg) of electronic waste in 2022, ranking it as the third-largest e-waste-generating country in Africa, behind Egypt (690,000 tonnes) and South Africa (530,000 tonnes), according to the UNITAR/ITU Global E-waste Monitor 2024. While Algeria (330,000 tonnes) and Morocco (180,000 tonnes) ranked fourth and fifth, respectively.[1]

However, the domestically generated figure understates the true burden. Nigeria is also the largest e-waste importing country in Africa and the second-largest recipient globally.[2] An estimated 500 containers of used electrical and electronic equipment (UEEE) enter Lagos ports each month[3]. The true processing burden of Nigeria's e-waste is obscured by conflicting data; international benchmarks report[4] 500,000 tonnes of domestic generation, whereas the Raw Materials Research and Development Council (RMRDC)[5] asserts that locally generated e-waste reaches 1.1 million tonnes annually, even before accounting for incoming transboundary imports. Data from the Basel Convention Assessment and recent 2026 findings[6] indicate that 25% to 75% of imported 'used' electronics are entirely unmarketable or uneconomical to repair on arrival, suggesting that a sizeable portion of this second-hand trade operates as de facto e-waste dumping.

1 Adepetun, A. (2024, March 22). Nigeria ranks third in Africa with 500m kg of eWastes yearly. The Guardian Nigeria. https://guardian.ng/business-services/nigeria-ranks-third-in-africa-with-500m-kg-of-ewastes-yearly/

2 Anselm, O. (2022, May 3). Health implications of informal e-waste recyclers in Nigeria. Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK. https://cscuk.fcdo.gov.uk/nigeria-awareness-on-health-implications-of-informal-e-waste-recyclers/

3 Ogungbuyi, O., Nnorom, I. C., Osibanjo, O., & Schluep, M. (2012). E-waste country assessment Nigeria. Basel Convention Coordinating Centre for Africa (BCCC Africa) & Swiss Federal Laboratories for Materials Science and Technology (Empa). https://www.basel.int/Portals/4/Basel%20Convention/docs/eWaste/EwasteAfrica_Nigeria-Assessment.pdf

4 The Global E-waste Monitor 2024. International Telecommunication Union & United Nations Institute for Training and Research. https://ewastemonitor.info/the-global-e-waste-monitor-2024/

5 Ogunyemi, M., & Marinho, O. (2025, March 8). Unlocking Nigeria's electronic waste potential for industrial growth and sustainability. Raw Materials 360, Raw Materials Research and Development Council (RMRDC). https://360.rmrdc.gov.ng/unlocking-nigerias-electronic-waste-potential-for-industrial-growth-and-sustainability/

6 Uwaegbulam, C. (2026, February 16). E-waste import rises as Nigerians turn to second-hand products. The Guardian Nigeria. tps://guardian.ng/property/e-waste-import-rises-as-nigerians-turn-to-second-hand-products/

2. Digital Dependency
The Growth Engine Behind E-Waste

Nigeria's e-waste trajectory is inseparable from its accelerating digital growth. The country's digital ecosystem is expanding at an extraordinary speed:

- 235 million people as of January 2025[7], making Nigeria Africa's most populous country.
- 148.2 million internet subscribers as of December 2025, with broadband penetration at approximately 52%[8].
- Monthly internet data usage surged 168% between January 2023 and December 2025, reaching over 1 million terabytes.[9]
- Nigeria relies overwhelmingly on imported devices[10] - primarily from Asia - with negligible domestic electronics manufacturing capacity.

As the number of telecommunications subscribers continues to rise, so does the demand for electronic devices, particularly mobile phones. Given that fewer than 20% of Nigerians[11] can afford new electronics, a significant proportion of users rely on second-hand products, thereby contributing to the circulation of used electronic equipment within the country.

This growth creates a structural dependency loop; Nigeria's digital economy, financial inclusion (mobile money, fintech), governance, and education increasingly depend on imported electronic hardware with limited lifespans.

These devices are designed and manufactured elsewhere, with a planned expiration date that is determined by Global North consumer markets. When devices reach end-of-life, the waste management burden falls entirely on Nigeria, a country which lacks the infrastructure, technology, and regulatory enforcement to handle it safely.

7 DataReportal. (2025, March 3). Digital 2025: Nigeria. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-nigeria

8 Nigerian Communications Commission. (n.d.). *Industry statistics*. https://www.ncc.gov.ng/market-data-reports/industry-statistics

9 Ibid

10 Nwafor, A. (2025, November 20). Industrialists worry as raw imports from Asia hit N1.72tn. Punch Newspapers. https://punchng.com/industrialists-worry-as-raw-imports-from-asia-hit-n1-72tn/

11 Schulz, C. (2016, September 27). *Nigeria's e-waste imports: Environmental and health implications*. Urbanet. https://www.urbanet.info/e-waste-imports-nigeria/

The Dependency Loop

Global tech companies design devices with 2–4 year effective lifespans

Devices manufactured in Asia, shipped to Nigeria as new or “used”

Rapid digital adoption generates unprecedented device volumes

No domestic recycling infrastructure at scale

Informal sector absorbs **>90%** of e-waste

Environmental contamination persists for decades

3. Health and Environmental Impact

3.1. The Informal Recycling Sector

According to UNEP and the ILO, up to 100,000 people work in Nigeria's informal e-waste recycling sector, collecting and dismantling electronics by hand to reclaim saleable components.[12] The work is concentrated at major sites, including Alaba International Market and Ikeja Computer Village in Lagos, as well as markets in Kano and the FCT.

Workers use rudimentary methods, including open burning of cables to extract copper, acid baths to recover precious metals, and manual dismantling without protective equipment. UNEP estimates that annually in Nigeria[13]:

- Over 52,000 tonnes of brominated (flame-retardant) plastics are burned or dumped
- 4,000 tonnes of lead are released
- 80 tonnes of cadmium are released
- 0.3 tonnes of mercury are released

Informal workers suffer respiratory and dermatological problems, eye infections, and lower-than-average life expectancy.

3.2. Child Health Impacts

A 2024 World Bank Economic Review investigated the impact of major e-waste dumping sites in Ghana and Nigeria on infant and neonatal mortality using a difference-in-differences methodology with Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data[14].

The findings are severe:

- E-waste sites increased neonatal mortality by 4.5 percentage points and infant mortality by 6.5 percentage points for children living in proximity to the sites.

12 United Nations Environment Programme. (2019, June 19). Nigeria turns the tide on electronic waste. https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/nigeria-turns-tide-electronic-waste

13 Ibid

14 Lovo, S., & Rawlings, S. (2026). The health burden of e-waste: The impact of e-waste dumping sites on child mortality. The World Bank Economic Review, 40(1), 62–81. https://doi.org/10.1093/wber/lhae053

- Effects emerged 2–3 years after site openings, consistent with the gradual accumulation of contaminants in the environment.
- Water pollution appears to be a significant route of exposure.

A separate study of Alaba International Market found that groundwater quality was poor, with heavy metals, including cadmium, lead, and chromium, exceeding tolerable thresholds. The Health Index (HI) for both children and adults was above tolerable risk levels.[15]

15 Bankole, A. O., Ogunkeyede, A. O., Odionye, J. N., Giwa, B., Mbaoma, O. C., Akpeji, B. H., Fadairo, E. A., & Isukuru, E. J. (2023). Physicochemical properties and health risks of informal e-waste processing at Alaba International Market in Lagos, Nigeria. Journal of Geoscience and Environment Protection, 11(9), 176–202. https://doi.org/10.4236/gep.2023.119012

4. Nigeria's Regulatory Landscape

Nigeria has a regulatory framework for e-waste management, but enforcement remains the fundamental challenge.

4.1. Existing Instruments

a. National Environmental (Electrical/Electronic Sector) Regulations 2011 (NESREA)

The primary regulation governing e-waste. It prohibits open burning or disposal of e-waste at landfills/dumpsites and requires all manufacturers and importers to comply with the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) programme. The regulations were amended with support from a GEF-funded, UNEP-led Circular Economy project[16].

b. E-waste Producer Responsibility Organisation Nigeria (EPRON)

EPRON is a non-profit organisation set up by electrical and electronic producers in Nigeria. It is the designated Producer Responsibility Organisation (PRO) for the electronics sector. All manufacturers, assemblers, importers, and distributors of EEE consumed in Nigeria are required to register with EPRON. EPRON works with collection centres and accredited recyclers.[17]

c. Basel Convention

Nigeria ratified the Basel Convention in March 1991 and its Amendment in May 2004[18]. In 2008, Nigeria also signed the 1991 Bamako Convention on the ban of import of hazardous waste into Africa. Despite this, enforcement of import controls on used electronics remains weak.[19]

16 National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency. (2022). National environmental (electrical/electronic sector) regulations, 2022. Federal Republic of Nigeria. https://nesrea.gov.ng/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Electrical_Electronics.pdf

17 E-waste Producer Responsibility Organization of Nigeria (EPRON). (n.d.). E-waste Producer Responsibility Organization of Nigeria (EPRON) [LinkedIn company page]. LinkedIn. https://www.linkedin.com/company/e-waste-producer-responsibility-organization-of-nigeria/

18 Secretariat of the Basel Convention. (n.d.). Parties to the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal. Basel Convention. https://www.basel.int/Countries/StatusofRatifications/PartiesSignatories/tabid/4499/Default.aspx

19 Organization of African Unity. (1991, January 30). Bamako Convention on the Ban of the Import into Africa and the Control of Transboundary Movement and Management of Hazardous Wastes within Africa. African Union. https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/7774-sl-BAMAKO_CONVENTION_ON_THE_BAN_OF_THE_IMPORT_INTO_AFRICA_AND_THE_CONTROL_OF_TRANSBOUNDARY_MOVEMENT_AND_MANAGEMENT_OF_HAZARDOUS_WASTES_WITHIN_AFRICA.pdf

d. Basel Convention e-waste amendments (January 2025)

New international requirements that entered into force on 1 January 2025 now subject all transboundary shipments of e-waste and scrap, both hazardous and non-hazardous, to the Basel Convention prior informed consent requirements. This is significant for Nigeria as an importing country.[20]

e. NESREA Cooperative-Led EPR Model (May 2026)

NESREA recently announced a Cooperative-Led Model to formally integrate informal-sector workers — collectors, sorters, recyclers — into the EPR programme through structured cooperatives, providing governance, financing, social protection, and environmental compliance support.[21]

4.2. The Enforcement Gap

- Despite the regulatory architecture, the gap between law and practice is vast. NESREA itself has acknowledged that "despite the agency's efforts to curb the crude handling of e-waste, the high cost, inadequate recycling infrastructure, and lack of proper collection channels across the country continue to fuel the practice.[22]"

- Africa's documented e-waste recycling rate is less than 1% of total generation - the lowest of any region globally[23]. And in Nigeria, the informal sector processes over 90% of Nigeria's e-waste. Scavengers and informal recyclers outcompete formal channels on price, leaving EPRON-registered operators unable to secure adequate feedstock.

20 Secretariat of the Basel Convention. (n.d.). E-waste: Overview. Basel Convention. https://www.basel.int/implementation/ewaste/overview/tabid/4063/default.aspx

21 Olugbode, M. (2026, May 9). NESREA moves to integrate informal waste workers into EPR framework through cooperative model. THISDAY. https://www.thisdaylive.com/2026/05/09/nesrea-moves-to-integrate-informal-waste-workers-into-epr-framework-through-cooperative-model/

22 Ibrahim, M., & Nasiru, J. (2024, December 2). LIVING ON BORROWED TIME (I): How Nigeria's unchecked e-waste is poisoning residents, environment. International Women's Media Foundation. https://www.iwmf.org/reporting/living-on-borrowed-time-i-how-nigerias-unchecked-e-waste-is-poisoning-residents-environment/

23 International Telecommunication Union, & United Nations Institute for Training and Research. (2024). The Global E-waste Monitor 2024. https://ewastemonitor.info/the-global-e-waste-monitor-2024/

- Customs data also does not differentiate between new EEE and used EEE imports, making enforcement of import restrictions extremely difficult.[24]

- The system at Alaba International Market remains "fragile," according to reporting by TriplePundit, with middlemen earning over ₦200,000/month while informal collectors face unequal bargaining power[25].

24 Odeyingbo, O. A., Nnorom, I. C., & Deubzer, O. K. (2019). Used and waste electronics flows into Nigeria: Assessment of the quantities, types, sources, and functionality status. Science of the Total Environment, 666, 103–113. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2019.02.102

25 Jimoh, A. (2025, December 29). The fragile system taking shape to manage Nigeria's e-waste crisis. TriplePundit. https://triplepundit.com/2025/e-waste-pollution-nigeria-legislation/

5. Rights Implications

E-Waste as a Digital Rights Issue

E-waste is not typically framed as a digital rights concern. But it should be. Nigeria's e-waste crisis sits at the intersection of several rights dimensions:

Environmental Justice

The communities that bear the health and environmental costs of e-waste, namely the informal workers at Alaba and Ikeja, the residents near dumpsites, and the children exposed to contaminated groundwater, are not the primary beneficiaries of the digital economy these devices enable. The toxic externalities of digital consumption are displaced from the Global North (where devices are designed, marketed, and consumed) to Nigeria, where they are dumped. Even within Nigeria, the burden falls disproportionately on low-income urban communities.

Labour Rights

The approximately 100,000 informal e-waste workers operate without labour protections, social security, occupational health coverage, or meaningful safety equipment. NESREA's new Cooperative-Led EPR Model is an attempt to address this, but formalisation at scale requires sustained investment and political will that has not yet materialised.

Children's Rights

The World Bank Economic Review findings on neonatal and infant mortality are not abstractions. They describe children dying because of where they were born relative to an e-waste site. Child labour in informal e-waste recycling remains a concern, though precise data for Nigeria is limited. The broader point is that the digital transformation that is supposed to unlock opportunity for Nigeria's children is simultaneously generating a waste stream that is literally killing some of them.

Digital Sovereignty and Structural Dependency

Nigeria's position in the global electronics value chain is structurally subordinate. The country imports all of its electronic hardware; therefore, it has no meaningful input into product design or lifespan decisions. It bears the full environmental cost of disposal, and recovers only a fraction

of the embedded material value. This is a dependency relationship, analogous to historical patterns of raw material extraction, and should be understood as such in digital policy discourse.

The global e-waste governance architecture reinforces this asymmetry. The United States, a major source of e-waste exports, has not ratified the Basel Convention's Ban Amendment[26]. EPR fees collected in EU member states under the WEEE Directive do not follow the products when they are exported to Nigeria as "used electronics"[27]. The 2025 Basel Convention amendments on e-waste are a step forward, but enforcement depends on the capacity that importing countries like Nigeria do not yet possess.

26 Perczel, J. (2025, July 28). Toxic waste or treasure? Why e-waste flows south. LSE International Development Blog. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/internationaldevelopment/2025/07/28/toxic-waste-or-treasure-why-e-waste-flows-south/

27 Sadiq, A. U. (2025, August 26). *When Europe's electronics become Africa's waste: A Nigerian take on producer responsibility*. META (European Environmental Bureau). https://meta.eeb.org/2025/08/26/when-europes-electronics-become-africas-waste-a-nigerian-take-on-producer-responsibility/

6. Policy Recommendations

For organisations like Digital Initiative for Innovation and Development working at the intersection of digital rights and sustainability, including those advocating for African digital sovereignty, this data brief proffers policy recommendations:

- **E-waste must be integrated into digital policy frameworks.** Nigeria's National Digital Economy Policy, broadband plans, and digital inclusion strategies should be required to include e-waste impact assessments. Digital growth cannot be celebrated without accounting for its material costs.

- **Extended Producer Responsibility must become enforceable.** NESREA's EPR regulations exist on paper but have not achieved scale. Mandatory registration, auditable recycling targets, and penalties for non-compliance are needed. The EPRON framework provides a foundation but requires sustained institutional support.

- **The 2025 Basel Convention amendments create a window of opportunity.** The new prior informed consent requirements for e-waste shipments give Nigeria stronger legal tools to control imports. But exploiting this opportunity requires investment in port-level inspection capacity and customs training.

- **Transboundary EPR fee transfer should be advocated internationally.** As the Basel Convention Coordinating Centre for the African Region has argued, EPR fees collected in exporting countries should follow products when they are shipped to Nigeria. This would internalise the true lifecycle costs of electronics consumed in export markets.

- **The formalisation of the informal sector must be centred on workers' rights.** NESREA's Cooperative-Led Model is promising but must include genuine labour protections, health coverage, and livable income guarantees — not merely formal registration.

- **Health impact monitoring should be institutionalised.** The mortality findings from the World Bank study demand a policy response: environmental health monitoring around major e-waste sites, remediation of contaminated groundwater, and restrictions on residential development near active sites.

7. Conclusion

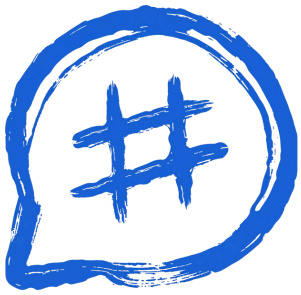
Nigeria's e-waste crisis is a direct consequence of its rapid digital growth and heavy reliance on imported electronic devices. While expanding internet access and digital adoption have supported economic and social development, they have also generated increasing volumes of electronic waste that the country lacks the infrastructure and capacity to manage effectively. The burden is worsened by imports of used electronics, many of which quickly become waste.

The impacts extend beyond environmental degradation to serious public health, labour, and social justice concerns. Informal recycling practices expose workers and nearby communities to hazardous substances, while vulnerable populations, particularly children, bear disproportionate health risks. Although Nigeria has established regulatory frameworks and participates in international agreements on e-waste management, weak enforcement and limited recycling capacity continue to undermine progress.

Ultimately, e-waste should be understood not only as an environmental issue but also as a challenge to digital rights and digital sovereignty. Achieving a sustainable digital future requires ensuring that the benefits of digital transformation do not come at the expense of public health, environmental safety, and social equity.

Note

What the Data Does Not Tell Us



The following significant data limitations should be noted:

- No precise count of used electronics imports. Nigerian Customs data does not disaggregate new from used EEE.
- The domestic generation vs import breakdown is uncertain. The 500,000 tonnes (GEM 2024) is the domestically generated figure. The RMRDC cites 1.1 million tonnes as locally generated e-waste, before imports, but its methodology is not fully transparent
- The prevalence of child labour in e-waste recycling in Nigeria is under-researched. While child labour in informal recycling is documented in Ghana (Agbogbloshie), data specific to Nigeria are limited.
- Health studies are geographically concentrated. The World Bank/DHS-based mortality study covers major sites; the situation at smaller, less-documented recycling sites across Nigeria is not captured.
- Projected e-waste growth rates for Nigeria specifically are not available in the GEM 2024. The global projection (82 million tonnes by 2030, a 33% increase) serves as a proxy, but Nigeria's growth rate may differ due to its faster-than-average digital adoption curve.

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