

Africa: the dustbin of capitalism

Monday 23 January 2023, by [MARTIAL Paul](#) (Date first published: 20 January 2023).

As a result of a consumerist economic model, rich countries are faced with an ever-increasing mass of waste. To process it cheaply, the temptation is to ship them to Africa with serious environmental and health consequences for the people.

A few weeks ago, Spanish customs put an end to an illegal trade in computer waste to Africa. This dismantling highlights how rich countries dispose of their waste cheaply.

Circumventing international regulations

It was from the Canary Islands that containers filled with WEEE (waste electrical and electronic equipment) were transported to Africa. A traffic that had been going on for two years. It brought in 1.5 million euros for nearly 5,000 tons dumped on the continent. WEEE is considered hazardous due to the presence of mercury, cadmium, lead, phosphorus or arsenic. The Basel Convention, which dates back to 1992, prohibits the export of WEEE to poor countries.

To circumvent this convention, these are notified as second-hand devices. As a result, thousands of tons of computer equipment are shipped to Ghana. The system is well established. Wholesale buyers supply the country's shops, working or repairable computer equipment is sold, and the rest, usually 70%, ends up at the Agbogbloshie landfill near the capital Accra.

Pollution of land and sea

The waste is processed by thousands of people who, to recover the precious metals, burn the components emitting thick fumes that are as dangerous for workers as for the environment. Soil analyses reveal heavy metal contamination one hundred times higher than the permitted limit.

Another polluting factor is textiles. They come from used clothing collections in rich countries or are sent directly by companies. Indeed, 40% of production is thrown away. These clothes, often of inferior quality, respond above all to an economic model of fast-fashion. Regardless of the quality, the idea is to produce new products as quickly as possible to encourage purchases. As with computer products, batches are transferred to retailers but only a small quantity can be sold. Other worn, damaged or soiled clothing is sent to landfills. Over time, they end up in the oceans forming chains that can reach ten kilometres preventing artisanal fishing activities. Other tissues end up in the sewers and cause flooding that promotes the spread of yellow fever mosquitoes.

An irresponsible policy

Twenty years ago, journalists revealed that the Calabrian mafia was unloading containers filled with toxic and radioactive products on the Somali coast. Massive pollution followed with dramatic consequences for the local people, including the increase in malformations during birth. A practice that continues. Trafigura, one of the first oil brokerage companies, has dumped toxic products into the lagoon of Abidjan, the capital of Côte d'Ivoire.

With the refusal of Asian countries such as China, Malaysia or the Philippines to accept the waste of Western companies, companies are turning to Africa. For example, the American Chemistry Council, which brings together the major oil companies in the United States, is lobbying the White House to export millions of tons of plastic waste to Kenya when this country already does not have the capacity to properly process its own litter. Whether for traffickers, the mafia or “honourable” business leaders, exporting waste to Africa is a way to earn or save money. But it is also and above all a way to perpetuate a system of overconsumption generating profits, whatever the consequences for the environment.

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- IVP. MONDAY 23 JANUARY 2023:

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- Translated by *International Viewpoint* from *l'Anticapitaliste*:

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