

The moment to Build Circular Electronics Through Regional Cooperation

Dear guest, dear representative of EACO member states, dear colleagues from across the region and beyond, good morning.

It is a privilege to be here, even online, for this 8th Regional Awareness Conference. Eight editions already! This is not a small thing. In this world that often moves on before it has finished, EACO stays in the course, and that deserves to be said. ***

I am here representing STEP, a global platform that has spent over 20 years connecting people who care about more sustainable development and management of electronics. I will have the opportunity tomorrow to present what STEP is specifically doing on the African continent. But this morning, I want to take a step back from the specific and have a more general view.

Those next 3 days, we are meeting under the theme of building a circular e-waste economy. The word “building” is important and it’s spot on, but it’s only correct if we actually mean it!

Too often, in our field, I believe we confuse talking about building, with actually building. We produce a lot of strategies, we write roadmaps, and we leave declarations. These are of course all necessary but let’s not forget the other part of building, the actual building. ***

In terms of e-waste management, the African continent knows what managing this resource in a creative way means. One of many examples, the informal sector that we sometimes discuss as a problem to be solved, is also a system with high potential. It’s a system with real knowledge, dedicated people, and resilience. Any circular economy worth building here will be built with those people, not around them.

From the side of policy, the EACO region has, in this room I’m sure, people who have spent years translating global frameworks into local realities. The question is not whether the foundations exist, but whether we are willing to build on them, with the urgency they deserve.

That urgency is real, we must not forget. The volume of electronics entering African markets is growing much faster than the infrastructure to manage them. Every year, we delay coherent EPR frameworks, every year producers remain unaccountable for end-of-life of their products, and the problem compounds. And this, exponentially.

Now the positive thing behind exponential problems is that the solutions, when they come, can also move very fast! Regional cooperation is one of those solutions which I believe has a lot of potential. Harmonised standards reduce costs for businesses. Shared infrastructure make investments viable. A region that speaks with one voice on EPR attracts the kind of private sector that individual countries, acting alone, might struggle to get.

This is what EACO is all about. That is why this conference matters. It’s a place where the people who need to trust each other enough to act together, actually meet.

My call to you this morning, as we are kicking off this 8th edition, is “leave Kinshasa with one commitment that fulfils 3 things: leave Kinshasa with a commitment which is concrete, that is time-bound, and that you will be accountable for at the 9th conference next year”.

The circular e-waste economy we want for this region will not be built with one conference, but it will also not be built without them either. What happens in the spaces between the conference, that’s where it gets built! So let’s go out there and let’s build it!

Thank you and enjoy the next days!