Global Journal of Arts Humanity and Social Sciences
ISSN: 2583-2034

Global Journal of Arts Humanity and Social Sciences
ISSN: 2583-2034
Abbreviated key title: Glob.J.Arts.Humanit.Soc.Sci
Frequency: Monthly
Published By GSAR Publishers
Journal Homepage Link: https://gsarpublishers.com/journal-gjahss-home/

Volume - 6 | Issue - 10 | October 2026 | Total pages 1141-1146 | DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.23646355

LEGAL AND PRACTICAL CHALLENGES HINDERING THE REGULATION OF ELECTRONIC WASTE IN TANZANIA

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Article History
Received: 15- 10- 2026
Accepted: 23- 10- 2026
Published: 26- 10- 2026

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Abstract

This paper examines the legal and practical challenges hindering the regulation of electronic waste (e-waste) in Tanzania. The country has no single law dedicated to e-waste. Instead, e-waste is regulated through subsidiary regulations made under the Environmental Management Act and the Electronic and Postal Communications Act, which are administered separately by the National Environment Management Council (NEMC) and the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA). The paper draws on legal materials and on interviews and questionnaires with thirty respondents in Mwanza Region. It finds that the regulatory framework is only partially adequate. The main challenges are overlapping institutional mandates, weak enforcement capacity, underfunding, a large informal sector outside legal oversight, low public awareness, incomplete Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), the limited role of local government authorities, and weak control of second-hand imports. The paper argues that the main problem is not the absence of law but the fragmentation, under-resourcing and limited practical reach of the law that exists. It recommends a single e-waste statute with a binding EPR provision, clear cooperation between NEMC and TCRA, stronger funding, the involvement of local government, and gradual formalisation of informal actors.

Keywords: Electronic Waste, Extended Producer Responsibility, Environmental Law, Institutional Fragmentation, Tanzania.

1.0 Introduction

The fast growth of mobile phones, computers, televisions and household appliances has created a fast-growing stream of electronic waste. E-waste means discarded electrical and electronic equipment that has reached the end of its useful life or has been abandoned by its owner.[1] It has a double nature. It contains valuable materials such as gold, silver, copper and aluminium. It also contains dangerous substances such as lead, mercury, cadmium and arsenic, which harm health and the environment if handled badly.[2] The Global E-waste Monitor 2024 reports that global e-waste keeps rising while formal collection and recycling remain inadequate, especially in developing countries.[3]

In Tanzania, the problem became clear in the early 2000s. The telecommunications sector was liberalised, imports of second-hand electronics increased, and the use of mobile phones and computers grew quickly. Old and broken equipment began to pile up in households, repair centres and dumpsites, while the country lacked systems to collect, recycle and dispose of it safely.[4]

Tanzania has responded with several legal instruments. It is a party to the Basel Convention and the Bamako Convention. At home, it has regulations made under the Environmental Management Act

[1] M Shahabuddin and others, *'A Review of the Recent Development, Challenges, and Opportunities of Electronic Waste (E-Waste)'* (2023) 20 International Journal of Environmental Science and Technology 4513.

[2] V Goodship, A Stevels and J Huisman (eds), *Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Handbook* (2nd edn, Woodhead Publishing 2019) 32.

[3] CP Baldé and others, *The Global E-waste Monitor 2024* (UNITAR and ITU 2024).

[4] Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority, Electronic Waste Final Report (TCRA 2012) 5–7.

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and the Electronic and Postal Communications Act.[5] Even so, e-waste continues to increase, and hazardous e-waste continues to pose risks to people and the environment.[6]

This paper asks what legal and practical challenges stand in the way of effective regulation. It combines doctrinal analysis of statutes, regulations and international instruments with socio-legal evidence. The evidence comes from thirty respondents in Mwanza Region: ten legal practitioners, ten government and regulatory officers (NEMC, TCRA and local government), and ten dealers, importers and informal-sector operators. The paper first outlines the legal framework, then analyses the challenges, and finally proposes reforms.

2.0 The Legal and Institutional Framework

2.1 International and Regional Instruments

The Basel Convention of 1989 is the main international treaty on the movement of hazardous waste across borders. Tanzania acceded to it on 7 April 1993.[7] Article 4 requires States to restrict the export of hazardous waste, to allow movement only with the prior informed consent of the receiving country, and to ensure environmentally sound management.[8] This matters for Tanzania because much of the electronic equipment entering the country is second-hand. If such equipment is broken, it may legally be a hazardous waste shipment.[9]

At the regional level, the Bamako Convention bans the import of hazardous waste into Africa from outside the continent. African States adopted it because they felt Basel did not go far enough.[10]In LIDHO and Others v Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights held a State responsible for allowing toxic waste dumping and failing to repair the harm.[11]Within East Africa, the Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community provides for cooperation on environmental matters,[12] and the East African Communications Organisation has adopted a Regional E-Waste Management Strategy for 2022 to 2027.[13]

2.2 Domestic Framework

Article 27(1) of the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, 1977 places a duty on every person to protect the natural resources of the country.[14] The Environmental Management Act, Cap 191 R.E. 2023, is the main environmental statute. It establishes NEMC and, in section 133, controls the import, export, movement and disposal of hazardous waste.[15] The Electronic and Postal Communications Act, Cap 306 R.E. 2023, gives TCRA power to set standards for communications equipment and to regulate its management at the end of its life.[16]

Several regulations sit under these Acts. They include: - the Environmental Management (Hazardous Waste Control and Management) Regulations, GN No 389 of 2021;[17]the Environmental Management (Control and Management of Electrical and Electronic Equipment Waste) Regulations, GN No 388 of 2021;[18]the Electronic and Postal Communications (Electronic Communications Equipment Standards and E-Waste Management) Regulations, GN No 919 of 2020, as amended in 2024.[19]Regulation 17(1)(b) of GN No 919 of 2020 requires manufacturers and importers to ensure collection of end-of-life e-waste, which is the closest Tanzania has to a formal EPR duty.[20]

2.3 Institutions

NEMC regulates environmental matters, issues permit for handling, transporting, storing and disposing of hazardous waste, and enforces compliance.[21] TCRA regulates e-waste from communications equipment. The Vice President's Office coordinates environmental policy, local government authorities handle frontline enforcement and waste collection, and the

[5] Environmental Management Act, Cap 191 R.E. 2023; Electronic and Postal Communications Act, Cap 306 R.E. 2023.

[6] National Bureau of Statistics, National E-Waste Statistics Report 2019, Tanzania Mainland (NBS 2019) 1.

[7]The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal (adopted 22 March 1989, entered into force 5 May 1992) 1673 UNTS 57; Secretariat of the Basel Convention, Status of Ratification (accession by Tanzania, 7 April 1993).

[8]The Basel Convention, Articleicle 4.

[9] S Arya and S Kumar, Global E-waste Management Strategies and Future Implications (1st edn, Elsevier 2023) 25–27.

[10] Bamako Convention on the Ban of the Import into Africa and the Control of Transboundary Movement and Management of Hazardous Wastes within Africa (adopted 30 January 1991).

[11] LIDHO and Others v Republic of Côte d'Ivoire (Application 041/2016) [2023] AfCHPR 21 (5 September 2023).

[12] Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community (signed 30 November 1999, entered into force 7 July 2000) Article 114.

[13] TCRA, EACO Regional E-Waste Management Strategy 2022–2027 (TCRA 2022).

[14]The Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania 1977, Articleicle 27(1).

[15]The Environmental Management Act, Cap 191 R.E. 2023, Section 16, 17 and 133.

[16] The Electronic and Postal Communications Act, Cap 306 R.E. 2023, Section 6.

[17] The Environmental Management (Hazardous Waste Control and Management) Regulations, GN No 389 of 2021.

[18] The Environmental Management (Control and Management of Electrical and Electronic Equipment Waste) Regulations, GN No 388 of 2021.

[19] The Electronic and Postal Communications (Electronic Communications Equipment Standards and E-Waste Management) Regulations, GN No 919 of 2020; (Amendments) Regulations 2024.

[20] GN No 919 of 2020, reg 17(1)(b).

[21]The Environmental Management Act, Cap 191 R.E. 2023, Section 16, 17 and 133.

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Tanzania Bureau of Standards develops product standards.[22] This is a shared system with no single lead institution, and that sharing is the source of many of the challenges below.

3.0 Legal and Practical Challenges

3.1 A Fragmented Framework and Institutional Overlap

The first challenge is structural. E-waste is regulated by subsidiary legislation under two parent Acts and two regulators. Most legal practitioners interviewed said that regulating e-waste through regulations instead of a dedicated Act weakens its legal force and makes enforcement harder.[23]One advocate explained that such regulations can be overridden or ignored when they conflict with other sector laws.[24] Officers from NEMC took a more moderate view. They argued that the regulations are legally sufficient and that the real problem is the lack of resources to enforce them.[25]

Both views point to the same weakness. The framework looks complete on paper but does not work as one system. Respondents from NEMC and TCRA admitted that no clear line shows which institution is responsible for what. One NEMC officer said the two bodies share responsibilities but have no formal memorandum of understanding setting out who does what.[26] A TCRA officer said each institution sometimes assumes the other is handling a task.[27]

The regulations themselves do not fix this. GN No 388 of 2021 gives environmental oversight to NEMC, and GN No 919 of 2020 gives oversight of communications equipment to TCRA, but neither sets out joint inspection procedures or information-sharing mechanisms.[28]Scholars note that when several institutions share a subject without clear coordination, the result is duplication in some areas and gaps in others.[29] The legal problem is therefore not that many institutions are involved. It is that the law does not say how they should cooperate. Further, GN No 919 applies only to communications equipment, so products such as household appliances fall outside its scope.[30] A person's legal duties can therefore depend on the type of device and not on the hazard it creates.

3.2 Weak Enforcement Capacity and Underfunding

The second challenge is that regulators lack the means to enforce the law. Government officers said that NEMC and TCRA do not have enough trained personnel, testing equipment and transport to inspect dealers and recyclers across the country, especially outside major cities.[31] There are few officers dedicated to e-waste, and no specialised equipment to test whether material meets the legal definition of hazardous waste.[32] Even when a violation is found, there may be no funds to send samples to a certified laboratory or to carry out follow-up inspections.[33]

This is a matter of financing as well as personnel. Scholars stress that effective e-waste regulation needs sustainable funding, collection systems, recycling facilities and monitoring bodies, and that many developing countries have laws but cannot implement them for lack of money and expertise.[34] Government respondents confirmed that limited funding directly reduces their ability to monitor and enforce compliance.[35]

The fee system adds to the problem. The Environmental Management (Charges) Regulations, 2021 set permit fees, which also fund regulatory work.[36] If fees are too high for small operators, they may stay out of the system, and the authorities then have less money for inspection. Without enforcement capacity, the legal framework remains largely theoretical for a large part of the e-waste stream.[37]

3.3 The Informal Sector and the Formalisation Gap

The third challenge is the dominance of the informal sector. Most collection, repair, dismantling and recovery of e-waste in Tanzania is done by small dealers, repairers and scrap collectors who are not registered or licensed.[38] These actors play a useful economic role by extending the life of products and creating jobs. However, they work with little legal recognition, weak safety standards and almost no environmental monitoring, which exposes workers and nearby communities to toxic substances.[39]

The permit system shows the gap. Under the 2021 Regulations, a person who wants to collect, store or transport e-waste must apply to NEMC for a permit.[40] Yet nine out of ten informal-sector respondents said they had never applied for one.[41] Some saw e-

[22] SK Kumar and V Kumar, Electronic Waste Management: Policies, Processes and Impact (1st edn, John Wiley & Sons 2024) 50–57.

[23]Field interviews with legal practitioners, Mwanza, 2026.

[24]Anonymous, Advocate, Mwanza, 2026.

[25]Anonymous, NEMC Officer, Mwanza, 2026.

[26] *ibid*.

[27]Anonymous, TCRA Officer, Mwanza, 2026.

[28] GN No 388 of 2021; GN No 919 of 2020; (Amendments) Regulations 2024.

[29] MNV Prasad, M Vithanage and A Borthakur (eds), Handbook of Electronic Waste Management: International Best Practices and Case Studies (Elsevier 2019) 95.

[30] GN No 919 of 2020.

[31] Anonymous, NEMC Officer, Mwanza, 2026; Anonymous, TCRA Officer, Mwanza, 2026.

[32] Anonymous, NEMC Officer, Mwanza, 2026.

[33]*Ibid*.

[34] A Priya, Management of Electronic Waste: Resource, Recovery, Technology and Regulations (John Wiley & Sons 2023).

[35]Anonymous, Government Officer, Mwanza, 2026.

[36]The Environmental Management (Charges) Regulations 2021, Regulation 6.

[37] PRASAD, Vithanage and Borthakur (n 29) 102.

[38] S Ntapanta, Gathering Electronic Waste in Tanzania: Labour, Value and Toxicity (Bloomsbury Publishing 2024) 35.

[39] C Little, Burning Matters: Life, Labour and E-Waste Pyropolitics in Ghana (Oxford University Press 2021) 10.

[40] GN No 388 of 2021, reg 8.

[41] Anonymous, Waste Dealer, Mwanza, 2026.

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waste as ordinary scrap metal and did not understand why a separate environmental authorisation was needed.[42] Most said that no government officer had ever inspected their premises or explained any legal duty to them.[43]

The law requires permits, but the findings suggest the path to compliance is not realistic for small operators. The permit requirement is a positive mechanism, but its practical value is reduced by low awareness, little inspection and the lack of any scheme that brings informal operators into the system through simple registration, training and basic safety rules. Stakeholder theory helps to explain why. Rules work better, and last longer, when the people affected take part in making and applying them.[44] A law that ignores informal recyclers, however well written, is unlikely to work.

3.4 Low Public Awareness

The fourth challenge is that many people do not know the rules exist. Several legal practitioners said that even educated members of the public, and some lawyers, do not know that Tanzania has specific e-waste regulations, and treat e-waste as ordinary waste.[45] Dealers confirmed this. Most said they handle e-waste as scrap metal and did not know separate environmental rules applied.[46]

The 2024 amendment to the TCRA regulations requires the Authority to carry out awareness and consumer education on e-waste.[47] TCRA has also published a notice on pre-inspection and advance eco-levy fees for importers.[48] But the field findings show a gap between official information and what reaches the community. Notices on regulatory websites may never reach dealers, households, repairers and informal collectors.[49]

This is a legal problem as well as an administrative one. A person cannot reasonably be expected to follow a specialised duty that has never been explained to them. Awareness is part of effective implementation.[50] National agencies could use local authorities, trade associations, markets, schools, telecommunications companies and radio stations to spread information.

3.5 Incomplete Extended Producer Responsibility

The fifth challenge concerns EPR, the idea that producers should carry responsibility for their products when they become waste.[51] This idea suggests that producers who profit from selling electronics are best placed to bear the cost of managing them, and that it also gives them a reason to design products that are easier to recycle.[52]

Tanzania has taken real steps. Regulation 17(1)(b) of GN No 919 of 2020 places collection duties on manufacturers and importers, and the 2024 amendment adds pre-inspection requirements, advance eco-levy fees and the option to establish take-back schemes.[53] It would be wrong to say Tanzania has no producer responsibility.

However, the field findings show that implementation is incomplete. Respondents pointed to limited awareness among importers and dealers, uncertainty about how eco-levy funds are used, few working take-back schemes, weak public access to collection points and limited monitoring of manufacturers and importers.[54] Without a properly enforced EPR scheme, government institutions carry the full financial and administrative burden of e-waste management, which most developing countries cannot sustain.[55]

Extended Producer Responsibility also has limits in Tanzania. It works best where producers can be identified and where the State can enforce collection systems. A large share of equipment enters as second-hand imports and is handled informally, so it is hard to say who the responsible producer is.[56] EPR therefore needs to be joined with import controls and informal-sector reform.

3.6 The Limited Role of Local Government Authorities

The sixth challenge is the weak involvement of local government. Much e-waste is generated and informally handled at ward and street level, so local authorities are well placed to spot non-compliance early.[57] Yet local officers said they rarely receive guidance, reporting formats or training from NEMC or TCRA. As a result, they tend to treat e-waste as ordinary solid waste.[58]

Scholars note that e-waste strategies succeed when national regulators extend supervision and capacity-building to the local level, and do not assume that national rules will be understood and applied locally.[59] The framework is nationally oriented. Local

[42] Anonymous, Waste Dealer, Mwanza, 2026.

[43] Anonymous, Informal-Sector Respondent, Mwanza, 2026.

[44] R. E Freeman, Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach (Pitman 1984).

[45] Anonymous, Advocate, Mwanza, 2026.

[46] Anonymous, Waste Dealer, Mwanza, 2026.

[47] The Electronic and Postal Communications (Electronic Communications Equipment Standards and E-Waste Management) (Amendments) Regulations 2024.

[48] TCRA, 'Implementation of Pre-Inspection of Electronic Communications Equipment and Advance Eco-Levy Fees' <https://www.tcra.go.tz> accessed 24 September 2026.

[49] Anonymous, NEMC Officer, Mwanza, 2026; Anonymous, TCRA Officer, Mwanza, 2026.

[50] Prasad, Vithanage and Borthakur (n 29) 110.

[51] T Lindhqvist, Extended Producer Responsibility in Cleaner Production (Lund University 2000).

[52] X Zeng, E-Waste: Regulations, Management, Strategies and Current Issues (Nova Science Publishers 2017) 25–27.

[53] GN No 919 of 2020, reg 17(1)(b); (Amendments) Regulations 2024.

[54] Anonymous, Government Officer, Mwanza, 2026; Anonymous, TCRA Officer, Mwanza, 2026.

[55] Prasad, Vithanage and Borthakur (n 29) 95.

[56] Ntapanta (n 38) 25.

[57] GN No 388 of 2021, reg 15.

[58] Anonymous, Local Government Authority Officer, Mwanza, 2026.

[59] Zeng (n 52) 5.

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governments need clear responsibilities, standard reporting forms, training on identifying e-waste, links with NEMC and TCRA, access to licensed collectors, awareness materials, budget support and data systems.[60]

3.7 Weak Control of Second-Hand Imports and Compliance with International Standards

The seventh challenge is at the border. International law requires a clear distinction between genuine second-hand equipment and waste, strong border inspection and cooperation between customs and environmental authorities.[61] This distinction is difficult everywhere, because waste can be disguised as reusable goods or donations.[62] TCRA and customs-linked respondents admitted that there is no reliable technical way at the border to tell reusable equipment from waste, so some of what enters as "used goods" may be waste.[63]

Tanzania has ratified Basel and Bamako, but ratification does not by itself give NEMC or TCRA the money or legal tools to enforce them. Legal practitioners described Tanzania's position as formal compliance without full practical implementation.[64] By comparison, the European Union's WEEE Directive places a clear duty on producers and importers to finance collection and recycling, backed by harmonised technical standards.[65] Tanzania has no equivalent binding duty. The documentary review also found that the regulations do not set detailed collection targets or technical recycling standards, and leave these to guidelines that had not been issued at the time of the study.[66]

4.0 Prospects for Reform

The challenges above reinforce each other, so reform must deal with them together. Seven measures follow from the analysis.

Parliament should consider a single Electronic Waste Management Act. It would define e-waste clearly, set measurable collection and recycling targets, and place institutional responsibility in one instrument, instead of relying on regulations under two parent laws. The Act should include a binding EPR provision requiring manufacturers and importers to fund collection and recycling, in line with international practice such as the WEEE Directive. Third, NEMC and TCRA should adopt a written cooperation framework, with joint inspections and information-sharing, under the coordination of the Vice President's Office.

The government should increase funding for both regulators, including trained inspectors, testing equipment and transport. Dedicated budget lines for e-waste enforcement would stop it from losing out to other priorities. Informal actors should be recognised and gradually formalised through simple registration, basic safety rules and training, so that the economic role they already play is kept while the risks are reduced. Furthermore, the law should extend clear statutory duties to local government authorities, supported by guidelines, reporting forms and training. The law on imports of used equipment should set clear criteria for telling reusable goods from waste, and ports should have basic testing capacity. At the regional level, Tanzania should work with East African Community partners towards a harmonised standard on e-waste.

5.0 Conclusion

Tanzania has made real progress in regulating e-waste. It has ratified the Basel and Bamako Conventions, and it has made regulations under both the environmental and communications laws, including producer duties introduced by the 2024 amendment. However, the framework is only partially adequate. E-waste is regulated through subsidiary legislation under two Acts and two regulators, with weak coordination between them. Enforcement is limited by lack of staff, equipment and money. A large informal sector works outside the law, awareness is low, EPR is incomplete, local governments are left out, and border control is weak.

The central problem is therefore not the absence of law but the fragmentation, under-resourcing and limited practical reach of the law that already exists. Improving regulation requires legal reform and also stronger coordination, steady funding, enforcement that reaches local level, and closer regional cooperation. Without these, the law will remain strong on paper and weak in practice.

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[61] The Basel Convention, Article 4.

[62] Arya and Kumar (n 9) 45–68.

[63] Anonymous, TCRA Officer, Mwanza, 2026.

[64] Anonymous, Advocate, Mwanza, 2026.

[65] Directive 2012/19/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council on Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE).

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