2018 BIR Spring Convention: With electronic scrap, it's complicated

Policy makers continue to regulate a recycling sector about which little concrete data has been collected.



June 12, 2018 Brian Taylor

[Pictured above: Katia Lasaridi of Athens-based Harokopio University.]

The Brussels-based Bureau of International Recycling (BIR) assigned Professor Katia Lasaridi of Athens-based Harokopio University a formidable task: aggregating mountains of disparate data of various vintages to try to determine how much Used and End-of-Life electronic scrap (UEEE) is generated and traded globally.

In a presentation at the 2018 BIR World Recycling Convention & Exhibition E-scrap Committee meeting, which took place in late May in Barcelona, Lasaridi provided an update on the scope and the findings of the study, titled "Statistics on the national arisings of e-scrap and the movement of e-scrap between countries."

The study's definition of electronic scrap included not only consumer electronics, computer and telecom equipment but also large household appliances such as refrigerators, washing machines and air conditioners. All categories "are changing quite fast" said Lasaridi, noting each year they incorporate "different materials and different products. It's a dynamic field, so [making] projections is difficult."

The study nonetheless forecast that by 2025, Asia-Pacific nations will be generating more UEEE scrap than anywhere else in the world, including North America and Western Europe combined.

Lasaridi also referred to a 2016 study of imported UEEE materials in Nigeria in which inbound units (computers, printers, etc.) were tested at two ports of entry. That study found that 81 percent of units tested worked (or at least powered on), and that materials were almost exclusively imported by Nigerian citizens and companies who repair and resell electronic equipment.

Regarding that finding, Dr. Thomas Papageorgiou of Greece-based Anamet SA (who also is chair of the BIR's E-Scrap Committee), commented, "To me, I think that 81 percent is certainly a good number, considering there is still some repair activity on site as well. So, if you have 81 percent coming in [plus the repaired units], it looks quite optimistic."

Committee member Surendra Borad Patawari of Belgium-based Gemini Corp. informed delegates that India has begun to allow imports of second-hand UEEE materials "for repair and refurbishment" as part of producer responsibility law for OEMs to also boost the recycling of UEEE generated within India. "It could be a game changer," said Borad. "I hope that Apple or similar large producers set up a large factory for the refurbishment and reengineering of second-hand goods."

BIR Trade & Environment Director Ross Bartley told delegates that individual countries and global agencies continue to struggle with "unclear definitions of used equipment as [either] waste or product." The lack of clarity can prevent the recycling of metal and plastic secondary commodities that "can increase resource efficiency, conserve energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions."

The 2018 BIR World Recycling Convention & Exhibition was at the Sofia Hotel in Barcelona May 27-30.