E-Waste; an opportunity for digital industry

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E-Waste is one the most debated issues in the 21st century. The debate has often, however, had a very divergent points of departure. Sometimes e-waste is seen as a critical raw material issue, sometimes as an environmental concern. In Europe the evolution of two Directives: WEEE and RoHS have dominated the debate. In recent years other issues such as the export of e-waste and global solutions have become more critical. Digital industry is one of the most rapidly growing industries in the world and has been active in this debate and emphasized a holistic view on the management of electronic waste.

In order to find appropriate solutions it’s important that a holistic view will be understood by all the relevant stakeholders. The starting point is to have common view on the issues and potential approaches. We still are lacking critical technologies, management practices and regulatory environment that could provide a base for sustainable solutions to the e-waste challenge in the future. Experience has also shown that cultural differences and social behavior can have an important role in this endeavor.

For industry e-waste is an unused opportunity. In the main product categories less than 10% of the e-waste is collected and exploited. If fully exploited e-waste could provide a significant share of the total demand of critical raw materials changing the global trade patterns fundamentally. The industry that could provide services for e-waste reuse has not been able to develop primarily due to the shortages of existing technologies and the inappropriate regulatory environment, which has not been able to create sufficient scale for profitable business. At the same time social habits have played an important role in blocking many development efforts, in particular, in the developing world.