

What is the Basel Convention?

The Basel Convention of 1989 has the following objectives:

- Transboundary movements of hazardous wastes should be reduced to a minimum.
- Hazardous wastes should be treated and disposed of as close as possible to their source of generation.
- Hazardous waste generation should be reduced and minimised at source (e.g. by using clean production technologies).

Trigger: Toxic waste scandals and ‘toxic traders’

Due to the toxic waste scandals of the 1980s many industrialised countries drew up strict regulations for the disposal of waste. However, more strict domestic controls called unscrupulous toxic traders to the scene. They exported the toxic waste to eastern Europe and to various developing countries on the cheap. Those countries abused as cheap waste sites resisted this waste tourism and demanded energetic counter measures from the international community. As a result, Switzerland together with Hungary provided the initiative for an agreement on the “Control of transboundary shipments of hazardous waste and its disposal”. In 1989 the delegates of an international conference agreed on the text of the Basel Convention which entered into force in 1992 thereby bringing an end to such irresponsible activities.

Difficult implementation

In many former Eastern Bloc states and developing and threshold countries important provisions are lacking to meet the requirements of the Basel Convention:

- technical know-how and financial resources;
- Facilities for environmentally sound treatment of waste;
- Functioning state control bodies.

Assistance through know-how and technology transfer

The Basel Convention therefore supports the establishment of regional training centres in 13 countries, including Slovakia, Nigeria, China or Uruguay. It is also envisaged that customs officials and waste specialists will be provided with training. The centres will also serve as contact points for firms seeking technical or legal advice to solve their waste disposal problems. As many regional centres currently lack funding, the Secretariat based in Geneva is bridging the gap by providing advisory services.

What is “hazardous waste“?

Under the Basel Convention, waste is deemed to be hazardous if it is toxic, explosive, corrosive, flammable, environmentally toxic or infectious. The Swiss ordinance on the movement of special waste of 1986 contains a list of those wastes considered to be special waste: e.g. solvents, used oils, paints, combustion residues (Filter ashes from waste incinerator plants), waste containing PCB, Asbestos, pesticides, etc. (http://www.admin.ch/ch/d/sr/814_610/app2.html)