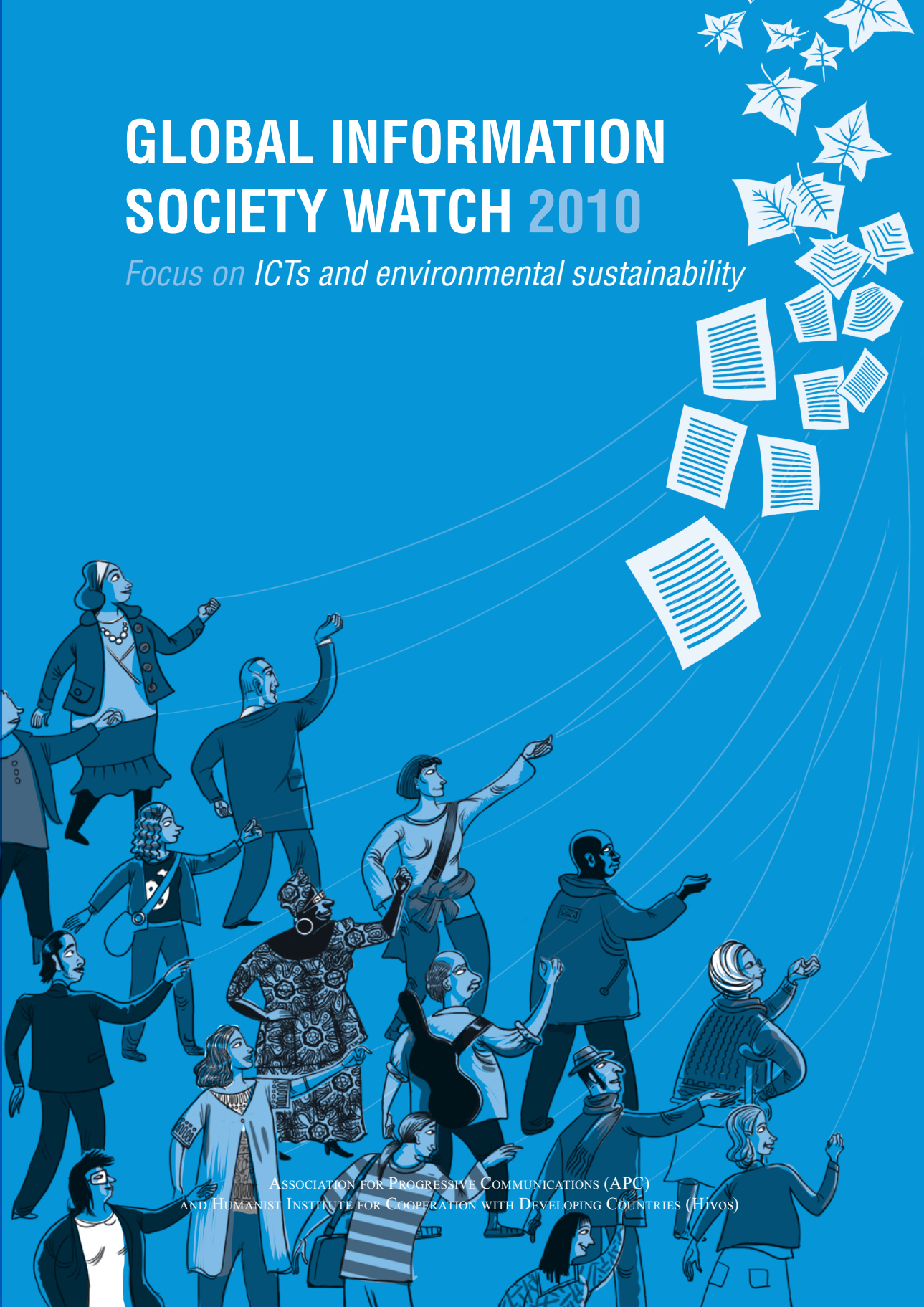
GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2010

Focus on ICTs and environmental sustainability



Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
and Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch

2010

Steering committee
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Karen Higgs (APC)

Project coordinator
Karen Banks

Editor
Alan Finlay

Assistant editor
Lori Nordstrom

Publication production
Karen Higgs

Graphic design
MONOCROMO
info@monocromo.com.uy
Phone: +598 2 400 1685

Cover illustration
Matías Bervejillo

Proofreading
Stephanie Biscomb, Lori Nordstrom, Álvaro Queiruga

Financial partners
Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos)
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Introduction

The latest advances in the information society are having consequences on public health and the environment in the Republic of Congo. As Africa makes progress in reducing the digital divide, electronic waste (e-waste) – discarded computers, mobile phones, etc. – is becoming a real concern. In the Congo, the concern is due in part to the lack of adequate management and treatment of e-waste, and in part to the lack of adequate policy in this area.

This report identifies problems relating to e-waste management in the Congo, and aims to raise awareness among policy makers and other stakeholders about the link between e-waste and environmental pollution in the country.

The methodology adopted for this research is a participatory approach. We first collected data relating to legislation on waste management and then held meetings with various government officials and private stakeholders, including managers of internet cafés and electronics repairers.

Policy and legislative context

The Congo, like other African countries, formalised the preservation of a healthy environment by including requirements in this regard in its Constitution of 20 January 2002. According to Article 35: "Every citizen has the right to a healthy, satisfying and sustainable environment and has the duty to defend it. The State shall protect and preserve the environment."

Section 36 in turn states that "the conditions of storage, handling, disposal and incineration of toxic waste, pollutants or radioactive waste from factories and other large or small-scale industrial entities on the national territory are governed by law."[1]

Internationally, the Congo has ratified and signed the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal.

Law 003/91 of 23 April 1991 on environmental protection undertakes, among other things, to "prevent and combat damage to the environment and the health of persons or their property."[2] However, this law does not address the issue of e-waste specifically. In fact, sections VII and VIII of the Act only address the issue in a general way, referring to municipal waste and hazardous nuclear and industrial waste, or other waste of a similar nature.

All this amounts to a legal vacuum in e-waste handling, exacerbated by the fact that the country must continually adapt to the progress of science and new technologies.

Definition of e-waste

The concept of e-waste in the context of this report includes all waste emanating from electronic and computing devices and their components; that is to say, it involves the disposal of things like PCs, printers and mobile phones, as well as other hand-held electronic devices and IT peripherals. One notable difference between electronic and other categories of waste is that it is composed of a complex assembly of different kinds of materials: a mixture of recyclable materials (plastic, glass, copper, aluminium, gold, silver, palladium or platinum, indium, tellurium) and hazardous materials (mercury, cadmium and lead, amongst others).

General waste management

The issue of e-waste management in the Republic of Congo cannot be addressed properly without prior review of general waste management, which is a municipal service. This service is offered both by the municipality itself and through public service concession. In the first instance there is direct intervention of the city in organising and financing waste collection, removal, disposal and recycling. Public service concession is an administrative contract under which the city delegates these activities to third parties.

Waste management in the country has been through several stages. Before 1980, management was under municipal control: appropriate vehicles were put to use for collecting rubbish in streets and local markets. After 1980, these activities weakened due to a lack of funding.

The outsourcing of waste management has existed since a 2008 agreement between the city of Brazzaville and the subsidiary of a privately owned German company to provide service for Brazzaville only. Other cities do not yet have specific policies: associations and individuals collect waste for disposal in landfills. Consequently, the tragic sight of piles of rubbish can often be seen in Congolese cities, out in the open, at entrances to lanes and next to public byways.[3]

E-waste in the Congo

The issue of e-waste in the Congo raises several questions: Where does e-waste come from and who are its main generators? What practices are encountered in this area? What is the point of view of governments and civil society?

1 Constitution of the Republic of Congo, 20 January 2002.

2 Law 003-91 of 23 April 1991 on the Protection of the Environment.

3 Odika, M. (2008) Presentation at the International Workshop on Waste Management in Africa, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 12-15 May.

Where does e-waste come from?

An analysis of e-waste in the Congo requires an understanding of how computer and electronic equipment is acquired and who the main generators of electronic waste are.

Firstly, to help reduce the digital divide between North and South, used electronic and computing equipment is exported from developed countries to African countries, including the Congo, sometimes in the form of donations to NGOs. Secondly, because of the high cost of electronic and computer products, consumers prefer second-hand devices of lower quality. This means that in general the life of hardware is reduced to a maximum of only two years, after which time the equipment becomes waste.

Moreover, the Congolese market for electronic devices such as mobile phones is supplied by counterfeit products whose shelf life is short, and there is no effective control over the quality of imported products. As a result, these devices are quickly reduced to waste, as consumers are estimated to only use them for a maximum period of two years.

No study has yet been conducted to determine the quantity of e-waste, but the use of electronic devices has become so widespread that quantities are expected to increase. Our study showed that to varying degrees, the primary users of low-cost second-hand electronic and computer equipment are internet cafés, schools, NGOs and households.

While the main suppliers or donors of second-hand hardware and electronics are the government, private companies, and agencies of the United Nations network, who generally do not need the equipment anymore, several private companies have moved into the growing business of ordering and reselling second-hand computer and electronic equipment at highly competitive prices.

What practices can be observed?

It is difficult at present to give statistics on electronic waste. Firstly there is the problem of a lack of knowledge about how harmful e-waste is. For example, 60% of people interviewed (internet café staff mostly) said they did not know that e-waste has negative effects on health and the environment. Others were surprised to hear of e-waste. This suggests that one of the reasons for poor disposal practices is a lack of knowledge of the harm e-waste can cause. However, the authorities, as well as other stakeholders, while recognising that e-waste is harmful, noted that no action has been taken in this area, as it appears not to be a priority.

Several practices can be distinguished in this area:

E-waste is simply thrown in the bin

Due to the lack of policy on management of this category of waste, people tend to mix e-waste with regular garbage and throw it in public bins. "The waste is mixed up and taken to the landfill without any pre-sorting," say internet café staff.

E-waste is kept in houses

Consumers in the Congo view old electronic equipment as in need of repair and find it difficult to dispose of it even when it is useless. While some throw the old equipment in public bins, the majority prefer to keep it in their homes, for several reasons, including ignorance of the consequences of e-waste and the health threat it poses, and a need for "luxury".

For most people, owning a computer is a luxury because they are so expensive to buy, so there is a sense of loss when it comes to throwing it away. According to one person we spoke to, it is better to keep it so at least "one has the feeling of having a computer at home, because one day we can repair it." Alternatively it must be sold, and at a low price.

E-waste is taken to a repair shop

The absence of a policy for managing e-waste properly is leading to a rapidly increasing problem of dangerous repair practices, sometimes by unqualified people, posing a serious environmental and public health problem.

Most of these devices are left in the homes of maintenance staff and repairers. Repairers' workshops are all full of old computers, ostensibly to recover parts that are still in good condition. Most people interviewed agreed that their hardware, including defective mobile phones, ends up in the houses of repairers, who after first trying to repair it, keep it to recover spare parts. It should be noted that in the Congo, it is not yet common to recycle these electronic devices.

The government and civil society point of view

The issue of e-waste concerns some authorities, particularly the Ministry of Environment which, via the departmental director of environment in Brazzaville, recognises that e-waste is hazardous, and is a growing problem. However, it seems that the issue is not yet viewed as a priority by the government. Indeed, no policy is envisaged for the collection of e-waste. According to the departmental director of environment, there is still no distinction between regular waste and e-waste, even though e-waste is classified as a hazardous waste in the Basel Convention.

Action steps

Waste issues in the Republic of Congo are showing several trends. Although waste in general has only been partially addressed, e-waste needs special policies with strict enforcement taking into account its special nature. These policies need to address collection, processing, disposal and recycling of e-waste.

These policies also need to target education and public awareness about the dangers of e-waste for a better understanding of how to dispose of it, due to a general ignorance of its problems. This waste is not separated and is often burned with other rubbish in houses or tips.

Moreover, the applicable Congolese law (on environmental protection) does not currently take into account the specificities of e-waste, so legislation needs to be put in place that not only takes into account these specificities, but also clarifies the responsibilities of actors in the field, so that the provisions of Article 35 of the constitution are respected.

It should also be noted that the implementation of sound policies in this area will contribute to job creation, because in the same way that computer usage has created jobs, so recycling them should create jobs as well. Skills transference should also be promoted and practical proposals created to deal with old technology once it reaches its end of life. Legal measures should therefore be accompanied by capacity development programmes.

To summarise, the following steps are necessary in the Congo:

Government and development partners need to:

- Develop a clear national policy for the collection and management of e-waste.
- Encourage private investment in recycling that takes into account both environmental and human health.
- Implement programmes to educate the public about e-waste management.

Civil society needs to:

- Develop projects to raise awareness about recycling and the dangers of e-waste. ■

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2010

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2010 investigates the impact that information and communications technologies (ICTs) have on the environment – both good and bad.

Written from a civil society perspective, **GISWatch 2010** covers some 50 countries and six regions, with the key issues of ICTs and environmental sustainability, including climate change response and electronic waste (e-waste), explored in seven expert thematic reports. It also contains an institutional overview and a consideration of green indicators, as well as a mapping section offering a comparative analysis of "green" media spheres on the web.

While supporting the positive role that technology can play in sustaining the environment, many of these reports challenge the perception that ICTs will automatically be a panacea for critical issues such as climate change – and argue that for technology to really benefit everyone, consumption and production patterns have to change. In order to build a sustainable future, it cannot be "business as usual".

GISWatch 2010 is a rallying cry to electronics producers and consumers, policy makers and development organisations to pay urgent attention to the sustainability of the environment. It spells out the impact that the production, consumption and disposal of computers, mobile phones and other technology are having on the earth's natural resources, on political conflict and social rights, and the massive global carbon footprint produced.

GISWatch 2010 is the fourth in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GISWatch is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

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