

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2020

*Technology, the environment and
a sustainable world: Responses from
the global South*



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

Global Information Society Watch 2020

Technology, the environment and a sustainable world: Responses from the global South

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APC would like to thank the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for their support for Global Information Society Watch 2020.

Published by APC

2021

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Global Information Society Watch 2020 – web and e-book

ISBN 978-92-95113-40-4

APC-202104-CIPP-R-EN-DIGITAL-330

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Removing the barriers to repair

Ugo Vallauri

The Restart Project and Right to Repair Europe
<https://therestartproject.org>; <https://repair.eu>

In the over-consuming North of the world, not only people have lost their repair “muscle” – the repair sector has also shrunk substantially, while the growth of electronic waste continues, unstoppable and accompanied by poor recycling rates. For many consumer products there are very limited – if any – commercial repair options past the end of the legal guarantee period. Combined with perceived obsolescence, this leads to fast rates of discard and replacement of electrical and electronic products.

This is, however, not a uniform trend, as communities have developed their own alternatives, with the flourishing in the last decade of Repair Cafes, Restart Parties, Fixit Clinics and other volunteer-run repair initiatives, in which normal people collectively resist the premature obsolescence of the products they own. Data from the Open Repair Alliance,¹ bringing together datasets of small electrical appliances and electronic devices repairs performed at these events from around the world, shows that plenty of people are trying to extend the lifespan of their products beyond the expectations of manufacturers. For example, 40% of laptops brought to these events are at least six years old, while manufacturers expect them to last only five years.²

Elsewhere, in the global South, a repair economy still thrives, in both informal and more established settings, and reuse is still the norm. However, product miniaturisation, design choices, and manufacturers’ approaches towards the provision of spare parts and repair information, are making the work of voluntary as well as professional repairers increasingly difficult, all over the world.

That’s how a movement for the Right to Repair has emerged and keeps gaining momentum. The approaches vary and complement themselves – ranging from a demand for consumers to have the freedom to choose where to repair a product, and for increased competition in the repair economy in the United States, to an environmental and consumer rights-driven push for regulations in Europe aimed at prolonging products’ lifespan, increasing material and energy efficiency.

The pillars of Right to Repair are simple,³ common sense and so obvious that they shouldn’t even require campaigning – but they do:

- Products should be designed to allow for ease of disassembly and replacement of key components.
- The right to repair should be universal: everyone should access spare parts and repair manuals for the entire lifetime of a product, including individuals, independent professional repairers and community repair initiatives.
- Repair should be accessible and affordable, priced in a way to incentivise extending a product’s lifetime and foster a thriving repair economy.

¹ <https://openrepair.org/open-data/data-downloads>

² Oldyrevas, E., & McAlister, C. (2020). *Long Live the Machine: How ecodesign and energy labelling can prevent premature obsolescence of laptops*. ECOS. <https://ecostandard.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/LONG-LIVE-THE-MACHINE-ECOS-REPORT.pdf>

³ <https://repair.eu/what-we-want>

Public support for these measures is strong: for example, approximately eight in 10 Europeans approve of them,⁴ yet policy progress is slow, met by effective resistance from industry. Progress at the European level – while positive – is very minor compared to the task ahead of us if we're indeed committed to addressing the consumption emissions linked to our voracious consumption of new devices, and the devastating social and environmental impact that manufacturing them involves. The recent mainstreaming of “right to repair” done by the media and by governments themselves in announcing approved measures seem to indicate that a lot more has been achieved than it actually has.⁵ Legislators are slow at regulating fast-changing markets, with increasing threats such as software barriers which could prevent repair more than ever before.

Yet the initial successes of campaigners in influencing policy makers are sparking debates on the introduction of similar, or better, pieces of legislation elsewhere, such as in India.⁶ And right to repair gives a concrete opportunity to civil society groups globally to come together and demand urgent solutions to defy obsolescence and waste, uniting a fight for climate justice and a push for digital rights.

The predominant narrative around e-waste has for years focused on the exports of waste, both legally and illegally, to hubs in Africa and Asia, denouncing the precarious conditions of those involved in the informal treatment of it, and often misrepresenting the issues and the dimensions of the problems.⁷ A right to repair lens helps to shift the conversation back to why it is that products become obsolete

prematurely, and what can be done to remove the barriers causing this.

While the initial aspects of the movement are rooted in North America and Europe, the problems are global. Whereas it is in the global North that most over-consumerism takes place, it is in the global South where the least sustainable extractivist practices of materials used in consumer goods, like gold in electronics. In Argentina, Artículo 41 – an NGO running the *Club de Reparadores*, a network of community repair initiatives – has been actively campaigning to stop deforestation and intentional fires and to prevent legislation reforms that would allow more open-pit mining for ore in several provinces of the country. We need to expand opportunities to connect the reality of manufacturing countries to that of consuming countries if we are to slow down the vicious cycle of our throw-away economy.

But there is more. Right to repair is also about right to access, and examples from the global South abound. Lack of access to repair documentation for medical devices has been well documented –for example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, thanks among others to the work of Frank Weithöner's Hospital Workshop.⁸ The problem is not unique to African countries; here, however, it presents itself in its true dimension, with barriers that make repair often impossible, or prohibitively expensive. Lack of widespread access to spare parts, alongside software locks,⁹ restrict support options to a few authorised service providers, often unaffordable or simply not available.

In Zambia, SolarAid has been denouncing¹⁰ the waste generated by unrepairable solar lights. It is a paradox of bad design: “green” technology designed without repairability in mind, and sold to communities who still value

4 European Commission. (2020, 5 March). Shaping Europe's digital future: Eurobarometer survey shows support for sustainability and data sharing. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_383

5 Restart Project. (2021, 9 April). Do we have a Right to Repair in the UK? Not yet. <https://therestartproject.org/news/not-yet-uk>

6 Vipra, J., & Rao, S. (2021, 13 March). ‘Right to repair’, the legislation India needs to save money, minimize e-waste. *The Federal*. <https://thefederal.com/analysis/upgrades-electronic-device>

7 Restart Project. (2015, 25 June). Representations of e-waste globally matter. <https://therestartproject.org/repair-economy/representations-of-e-waste-matter>

8 <http://www.frankshospitalworkshop.com>

9 Schwartz, L. & Lockwood, D. (2021, 10 March). Why it's so hard for a hospital in Tanzania to fix broken incubators. *Rest of World*. <https://restofworld.org/2021/why-its-so-hard-for-a-hospital-in-tanzania-to-fix-broken-baby-incubators>

10 Paisley, C. (2020, 29 September). Everyone deserves the right to repair. *SolarAid*. <https://solar-aid.org/news/everyone-deserves-the-right-to-repair>

repair and would love to repair their products, yet are unknowingly supplied with solar lights with irreplaceable batteries, or can't procure suitable spare parts. As part of its research, the organisation learned that 43% of solar lights owners attempted a repair, 60% didn't succeed, and those that did couldn't get a lasting repair.

Repair information is more than just accessing manuals from manufacturers. As a South African repair business which contacted the European Right to Repair campaign reminded us last year, it is the availability of schematics which can help perform component-level repairs to motherboards and other parts, the most efficient, planet-friendly and cost-effective option. Unfortunately, no repair regulation, whether approved or in development, includes provisions for requiring manufacturers to share this type of information – protected by intellectual property and valued by manufacturers as trade secrets. So campaigners need to step up their game, and make unrepairable products simply unacceptable.

Software is the final frontier. As more and more products require software to be supported and maintained to function, we're all

experiencing the threat of software obsolescence, most notably in the form of smartphones and other information and communications technology (ICT) products no longer supported by manufacturers with software and – more importantly – security updates. These products might well be discarded and too quickly replaced by people in affluent parts of the world, but they often end up reused in the global South, without any support for their users. It is estimated that 40% of all Android phones are no longer protected by security updates – over a billion devices.¹¹ And the threats of software barriers are only growing with time, with manufacturers increasingly adopting software locks, preventing non-authorised repair technicians from performing simple repairs, which is especially worrying in places where official support might be far from accessible.

While the growing movement for the right to repair has succeeded in giving a new name and visibility to issues affecting people and communities all over the world for a long time, it's time we unite efforts globally to achieve a universal right to repair, and ensure that repair, reuse and e-waste prevention become the norm everywhere.

¹¹ Laughlin, A. (2020, 6 March). More than one billion Android devices at risk of malware threats. *Which*. <https://www.which.co.uk/news/2020/03/more-than-one-billion-android-devices-at-risk-of-malware-threats>

Technology, the environment and a sustainable world: Responses from the global South

The world is facing an unprecedented climate and environmental emergency. Scientists have identified human activity as primarily responsible for the climate crisis, which together with rampant environmental pollution, and the unbridled activities of the extractive and agricultural industries, pose a direct threat to the sustainability of life on this planet.

This edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) seeks to understand the constructive role that technology can play in confronting the crises. It disrupts the normative understanding of technology being an easy panacea to the planet's environmental challenges and suggests that a nuanced and contextual use of technology is necessary for real sustainability to be achieved. A series of thematic reports frame different aspects of the relationship between digital technology and environmental sustainability from a human rights and social justice perspective, while 46 country and regional reports explore the diverse frontiers where technology meets the needs of both the environment and communities, and where technology itself becomes a challenge to a sustainable future.

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2020 Report

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