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Ending the culture of waste

The right to repair will do more than safeguard Europeans' social rights — it is also a decisive step against unbridled capitalism

Consumer rights are social rights. And the destructive consequences that result from the totality of commerce for humans and the environment necessitate a defence of those rights. In this context, the European Parliament recently adopted common rules promoting the repair of goods. A law which will do more than safeguard Europeans' social rights, but is also a decisive step against unbridled capitalism, which has created a culture of consumption and a complementary mindset against making repairs.

Few bother to confront the convenience gained from throwing away a repairable toaster with such inconvenient queries, such as what happens to it among the 35 million tons of waste Europeans produce yearly. In the lives of children some 7 000 kilometres away in places like Agbogbloshie, instead of being in school, they have been seen scavenging through heaps of hundreds of thousands of non-functional and non-repairable electrical devices dumped in Africa. Along with their parents, they tread and trod daily, searching for precious metals, such as indium, palladium, gold and copper. This is how they make money from the 0.55 Mt of e-waste dumped in Africa in 2019 alone. They get sick from toxic fumes that result from burning devices to extract metals. And their food, such as chicken eggs, is contaminated with persistent organic pollutants. It would be cruel to suggest their lives contribute to global recycling. By putting obligations on producers, sellers, importers and distributors of goods sold in Europe, the right to repair will help end such social blights.

And so, the law aims at a high level of consumer protection. Firstly, the need for such guardianship responds to a change in social norms, after it was accepted to conceive of citizens of countries as global consumers, who then the public sector granted rights instituted in consumer laws to protect against social realities that an unregulated free market produces, including a sub-culture of waste. The second social context relates to the natural environment, a social space. Here, the right to repair will make three contributions. First by reducing environmental degradation from

natural resource extraction, such as indium used to produce semiconductors. Regarding goods produced within the EU, the right to repair will contribute to reducing the EU's yearly 261 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions. Finally, as the law applies to manufacturers worldwide, it aims at contributing to the global reduction of emissions, as manufacturers are unlikely to suffer economic folly by producing repairable goods for the EU and non-repairable ones for other regions.

A change in culture

With the right to repair and its contributions to converting the EU's Green Deal from hope to reality, Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament, showed colleagues how corporations, often putting profit ahead of much else, can be tamed into being part of climate change solutions. In this way, the law feeds a seed of hope that it is possible to turn back the tide set flowing by the raving insatiable beast of commerce that has for too long been sweeping through human societies, turning them into marketplaces. Where some contend with reconciling exponential growth in human population, now at eight billion, with planet Earth's finite capacities for sustaining life, commerce instead conceives of a growing market.

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And so a protest was heard earlier in the European Parliament. 'Europe is not a market, it is the will to live together', insisted former Spanish MEP Esteban Gonzáles Pons. That 'will' is expressed in the right to repair, as the law would structurally and culturally transform European societies by enhancing neighbourly social engagements in more 'repair cafes'. With a certain warmth to his voice, René Repasi, rapporteur to the right to repair, says cafes will be 'a combination of being a communal place where you get together and, at the same time, meet experts that empower you as a citizen to actually make repairs.' Repair cafes will also make available spare parts.

The right to repair makes meaningful and practical contributions to the question of 'how must we live'. A query laced with deep moral undertones. But by changing the unsustainable throw-away culture for one dominated by practices of sustainably the right to repair will do precisely this. And so the parliamentary group that secured the right to repair – the Committee for Internal Market and Consumer Protection – has responded well to the critical question of balance that results from

the need for us to live within the limits of the Earth's resources by harmonising social rights, economic growth and environmental protection. It's the same group, acting to reduce waste in consumer electronics, that ignored claims by a US computer and tablet manufacturer that a common charger stifles innovation and that passed a rule adopted by the parliament and coming into force last month, requiring USB-C to be the standard port for all smartphones, tablets, cameras, headphones, portable speakers and handheld video-game consoles — thus reducing roughly 1 000 tonnes e-waste yearly.

Others must follow Europe's lead

The environment is not local. It is global, to state the obvious. This means net benefits, which could be gained from addressing environmental problems, are only possible when those problems are simultaneously solved worldwide. So, similar policies must now come into force, particularly in countries with disproportionate rates of consumption. Considering its global impacts, the right to repair provides a template for developing similar legislation in other countries. Such measures are urgent because differences in national economies are increasingly converging towards collective human suffering wrought on by global environmental problems that do not recognise national borders. Therefore, rules and ways to enforce them that are aimed to reduce waste and help change human behaviour so that a repairable washing machine with a worn water tube is not set on a trans-Atlantic journey to a dumpsite in Africa. This must be discussed during the United Nations' Summit of the Future in September.

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The right to repair is timely to overcome a common mistake that contributes to a culture of waste, and that is habitually conceiving technological innovations as progress. The law comes six years ahead of the time when some 74 Mt of e-waste is expected to be produced in countries where such a mistake is common. Technological 'progress' must not produce unnecessary waste, such as is possible when a coffee machine, built with a software, will crash. As no consumer will relish the prospects of trouble-shooting a piece of software their will may not have access to at 6 am, the logic of the manufacturer takes hold in the mind of the consumer — who then simply buys a new machine. Such waste generation can hardly be described as innovative progress, especially

considering that there's no improvement possible to the taste of a piece of bread from it being toasted on a machine equipped with a touchscreen. The right to repair confronts such planned obsolescence — the wasteful practice by manufacturers to determine the life span of a product and integrate that into their product in the guise of technological innovation.

Now that this social right has been restored, Europeans have a duty to it that borders on moral obligation. Such rights are like laws, which, unless exercised, over time become dormant and dead. This means that Europeans must allow changes to behaviour and attitude sought by their right, even as exercising this right goes against social norms such as convenience. That task must not be daunting. Ultimately, every consumer is obliged to act on environmental protection, and so, it is good that close to 80 per cent of Europeans 'feel a personal responsibility to act to limit climate change.' Assuming responsibility implies a moral obligation to the environment. But the burden of hypocrisy on moral claims, such as to environmental norms and shared humanity, is only relieved when they are universally valid.



Michael Davies-Venn
Berlin

Michael Davies-Venn is a public policy analyst and communication expert. He works on global environmental governance with focus on climate mitigation and climate adaptation measures between developing and developed regions. He is Junior Fellow at Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam.