

21116 France : the country rejecting throwaway culture

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The combination of enthusiastic amateurs, repair cafes and new laws could help tackle the world's growing mountains of broken electronics, and the French capital hosts a dozen of these so-called "repair cafes" – free, monthly initiatives that allow local residents to fix household objects and electronics with the help and advice of enthusiastic volunteers. Pioneered by journalist Martine Postma in Amsterdam in 2009, hundreds of similar workshops take place across Europe.

The world produced nearly 45 million tonnes of e-waste in 2016 as consumers and businesses threw out their old smartphones, computers and household appliances. Only 20% was properly recycled. In Europe, where the problem is particularly acute, researchers estimate only 12% to 15% of mobile phones are properly recycled – despite around 90% of the population owning one.

E-waste, which is often shipped illegally from the West to sprawling, toxic dumpsites in countries like the Philippines, Ghana, Nigeria and China, is expected to grow to more than 52 million tonnes by the end of 2021, and to double by 2050 – making it the fastest growing type of domestic waste in the world. The environmental impact ranges from huge carbon emissions to pollution of water sources and food supply chains.

But significant amounts of that waste could be avoided through repairs. According to a study by the French Environment and Energy Management Agency, only 40% of electronics breakdowns in France are repaired. But surveys have found nearly two-thirds of Europeans would rather repair their products than buy new ones.

In an effort to defuse this vast amount of avoidable waste, France's National Assembly last year voted to introduce an index of "repairability" ratings for appliances such as washing machines, lawnmowers, televisions and smartphones. In doing so, the French government hopes to increase the electronics repair rate to 60% within five years.

Those rules came into force in January and require manufacturers to display ratings that are calculated using five measures: ease of repairability, price of spare parts, availability of spare parts, availability of repair documentation and a final measure that will vary depending on the type of device. After the first year, a fine of up to €15,000 will be given to producers, distributors and sellers who don't comply. The bill also includes a "durability" index from 2024 that will have new criteria such as product reliability and robustness.

The ratings scheme has been heralded as the first of its kind in the world, laying the groundwork for other countries to follow.

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