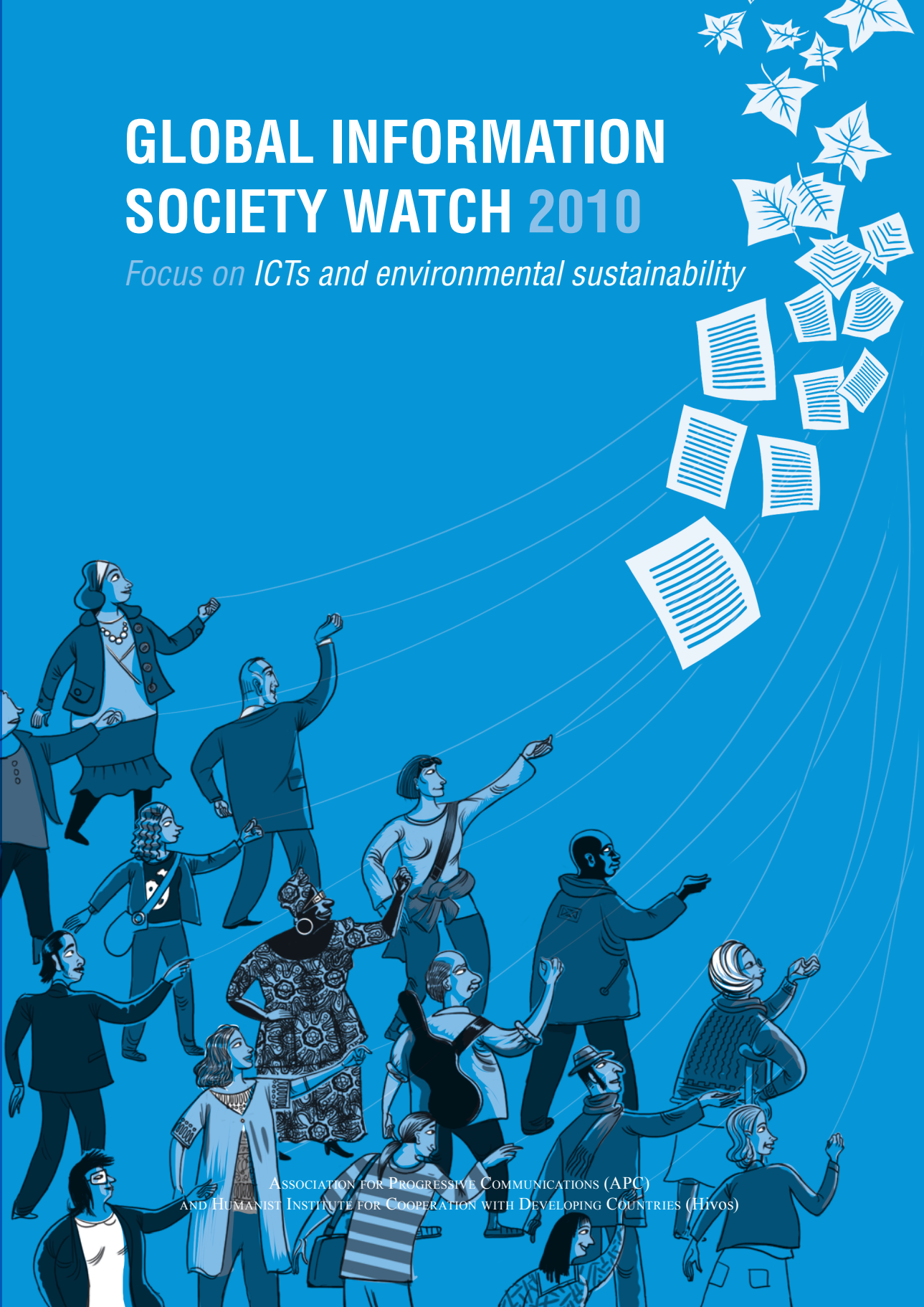
GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2010

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

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Introduction[1]

As is the case in the majority of countries in Latin America, Chile does not yet have specific regulations or laws related to electronic waste (e-waste). A crucial aspect to understanding this challenge is related not only to political will on this issue, but also to a lack of a national vision and strategy around recycling and disposal of dangerous and toxic waste materials and products.

Some steps were taken in order to prepare regulations for hazardous and toxic waste, which included e-waste. However, with the recent change to the new administration of President Sebastian Piñera, and the unexpected consequences of the earthquake of 27 February in central and southern Chile, it is not clear when this legislation will be ready to be adopted.

Since 2004, the Regional Platform on Electronic Waste for Latin America and the Caribbean (RELAC Platform),[2] a civil society initiative, has been working to systematise information, research and studies in this area, and has created a public-private working group to promote the implementation of an e-waste management system in Chile. This includes a voluntary agreement with international companies in order to reduce their e-waste and to help build recycling capacity as part of their "extended producer responsibility".

In this context, we have identified at least two e-waste recycling companies in Chile, two initiatives in the area of computer refurbishment, and some non-profit initiatives that are promoting mobile phone recycling to help charity organisations.

Policy and legislative context

The Chilean constitution guarantees the right to life, the right to health, and the right to live in an environment free of pollution, among other fundamental rights. The constitution also provides an expeditious judicial remedy against illegal and/or arbitrary conduct that jeopardises those rights. However, the absence of specific legal provisions on e-waste reduces the efficacy of the constitutional provisions on the matter.

In 2003, Chile adopted specific regulations for dangerous and toxic waste which set health and safety measures for the storage, transportation, reuse, recycling and processing of hazardous residuals. Later, in 2007, domestic waste regulations were adopted. However, Chile does not yet have specific legislation for e-waste. Therefore, any initiative that intends to work with e-waste must fall under the standards related to toxic waste, which seem inappropriate to handling the recycling of e-waste, and increase costs and paperwork for e-waste recycling initiatives.

In Chile there is no national public strategy dealing with domestic recycling (despite the regulations), but over the last twenty years the country has made important improvements in domestic waste disposal facilities, as well as at the level of treating industrial and hazardous waste, according to the National Environmental Commission (CONAMA).[3] Today about 60% of waste disposed is processed in appropriate facilities, both from an environmental and health perspective. Thanks to advances in solid waste management policy, the country is moving towards goals aimed at reducing waste generation and encouraging reuse. Since 2005, Chile has had an Integrated Solid Waste Management Policy. Its Plan of Action is implemented, evaluated and, if necessary, reformulated by the National Waste Executive Secretariat, an entity formed by various state agencies.

In addition, CONAMA has developed guidelines for processing waste. By 2010, guidelines were available for industrial oil waste, lead batteries, and hazardous waste. However, there are neither guidelines nor best practices available for e-waste.

Today, the e-waste management market is still limited, focusing mainly on the recovery of equipment to extend its use in social projects, and on disassembly and export of parts for recovery in industries outside the country. This waste is now legally classified as hazardous due to the presence of toxic components.

E-waste in Chile: Getting recycling off the ground

CONAMA has estimated that Chileans discard over 7.5 million units of electronic equipment (computers and accessories as well as mobile phones) every year – the equivalent of about 8,000 tonnes. It also estimates that since the 1990s, more than 13 million mobile telephones have become obsolete. Given an average weight of 200 grams each, this translates into 2,600 tonnes of e-waste.[4]

According to international statistics, with a growth of 407%, Chile is No. 13 in the world in the ranking of countries that have experienced the highest growth in number of computers per capita in the period 1993-2000. A study conducted by the RELAC Platform estimates that by 2010, Chile will have 10,500 tonnes of computer waste.

1 The authors want to thank Uca Silva, coordinator of the RELAC Platform project, for her time and collaboration in this report.

2 www.residuoselectronicos.net

3 www.conama.cl

4 www.conama.cl/rm/568/article-38368.html

One of the major obstacles to having regulations on e-waste is the lack of good alternatives for its collection and treatment. It is expected that during the coming years this challenge will became a central part of the environmental agenda of the country as well as digital development goals. Since 2009 Chile has been a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which demands the implementation of a legal framework that regulates the management of e-waste.

One of the major civil society initiatives to promote public and private work in this area is the RELAC Platform, coordinated by the Chilean NGO SUR. It has been working since 2004 all over Latin America. In Chile, RELAC, in collaboration with CONAMA, has made important contributions towards systematising information and conducting research and studies at country level, such as a report on electronic products and waste in Chile. As a result of its work, in February 2009 a voluntary agreement was signed by four technology companies that committed to an extended producer responsibility programme.

Uca Silva, coordinator of the RELAC Platform, says that although local legislation and regulation is very important, the major information and communications technology (ICT) companies have very specific corporate mandates in the area of e-waste, in line with global company policies. Any local legislation must be compatible with these global norms in order to have the commitment of these companies.

In relation to formal electronic recycling companies, only two have authorisation to operate, with good installations and professional processes according to international standards. The existing system of computer recycling involves disassembling them, thereby recovering valuable elements that have a national market or exporting fraction to treatment plants outside of Chile. Fraction that cannot be sold should be disposed of in line with current regulations in authorised landfills.

Recycla is one recycling company that has received many awards, recycling anything from mobile phones to industrial telecommunications systems. Their process includes collection, dismantling and classification according to different materials (especially aluminium and copper) and toxicity level. They have international partners (like the Swedish company Redoma) and promote education through their website.[5] Another recycling company, Degraf,[6] receives e-waste which is disassembled, then recyclable fraction is separated from hazardous components. It is important to note that both companies operate only in the city of Santiago.

There are also a number of initiatives that promote the refurbishment and recycling of PCs and mobile phones on a small scale. However, they need to be coordinated and supported in order to have an impact on a national level. There are two computer refurbishment initiatives (Chilenter Foundation and the Committee for the Democratisation of Information Technology) that recover computers with certain specifications. These are then donated to schools and other social and non-profit organisations, contributing to reducing the digital divide.

Chilenter Foundation[7] is a non-profit institution founded in 2002, and part of the Network Foundations of the Presidency of the Republic. To date they have refurbished over 15,000 computers, benefiting 1,200 schools, day care centres and social organisations of different types. Currently, they are working with Computer Aid International, a UK non-profit organisation that has years of experience in this area.

The Committee for Democratisation of Information Technology (CDI) Chile[8] is a non-profit organisation and a member of an international network of social enterprises, founded in Brazil in 1995. CDI works in digital literacy programmes for digitally excluded communities and sets up community telecentres as part of the Chilean Telecentre Association Network (ATACH). Through its campaign "Donate Your Computer", it collects computers that are no longer used to be refurbished in recycling plants located in educational institutions. These are then used in its own digital schools and telecentres, but also in other educational and non-profit projects. CDI Chile is also part of the Donatec Project,[9] an initiative of several Chilean NGOs that promotes technological donations, in software and hardware, by major companies.

In addition, the Children and Cancer Foundation,[10] another non-profit organisation, uses a local video club network to promote a recovery and recycling campaign for old mobile and computer equipment, as a means of raising funds for the organisation.

The Chilean branches of Movistar and Nokia collaborated recently to create a recycling programme for discarded mobile phones, no matter the brand. These are collected in boxes specially created for the purpose, which are located in Movistar offices around the country. The phones are sent out of Chile in order to recycle their components (displays, integrated circuits, speakers, microphones, cases, batteries and accessories). Another collaboration is that of the telecom company Entel PCS and the Hogar de Cristo Foundation.[11] They launched a solidarity campaign to raise funds to benefit the Foundation, encouraging all mobile phone users to donate phones that have become obsolete. These are collected at different branches of the company, shopping centres and community centres, amongst other locations.

5 www.recycla.cl

6 www.degraf.cl

7 www.chilenter.cl

8 cdichile.org

9 www.donatec.cl/about-pngoprogramme

10 www.ninoycancer.cl

11 www.entelpcs.cl/noticias/01foto.iws?id_noticia=55

New trends

An interesting experience in Chile has been the work of RELAC as a platform that opens up the debate around producer responsibility, and also is an opportunity to create trust and coordination among actors that generally do not work together in this area.

There are a growing number of initiatives and projects that promote the refurbishment and recycling of PCs and mobile phones. Although these are not enough to really create an impact at the national level, they show the willingness of companies to take action and also the interest from people in having more options to recycle their old technology.

Action steps

Given the size of the Chilean economy, it seems necessary to work on a common solution for the e-waste problem – at least at the Latin American level. This includes the adoption of harmonised legal frameworks and public policies across the region.

However, before the adoption and implementation of public policies and legal rules, it is necessary to work on capacity building in the civil society, public and private sectors. The number and capacities of actors in the country are still limited, which undermines the efforts and results of the few initiatives already existing. Organising seminars, conducting research, and developing guidelines, among other things, could still be appropriate initiatives given the level of the discussion in the country.

The continuity of the RELAC Platform project in Chile, as well as in the Latin American region, is crucial in order to promote and increase research and the coordination of the different actors that can work together looking for new and better solutions, beyond legislation. ■

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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