

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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COSTA RICA

A WOMEN-LED COOPERATIVE PLATFORM FOR REUSING ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT



Cooperativa Sulá Batsú

Kemly Camacho

www.sulabatsu.com

“A digital business model that has profit and accumulation as its purpose cannot be responsible with the environment. Women have to propose other ways of doing digital business that allow the continuity of life of all species on Planet Earth.”

Programa TIC-as

(<https://programatic-as.com>)

Introduction

The participation of women in the development of digital technologies that move the world has been very limited. For more than 40 years, the average of women studying technology careers around the globe has not exceeded 15%; and this percentage is decreasing if one analyses those who are workers in the digital industry and the percentage of women who own technological ventures.

This situation has two consequences. On the one hand, the vision of women has not been present in the technology that has been built: its business models, its purposes, its methodological approaches, and the exclusions it generates. These, among other aspects, have been led by a male, urban, white vision with a high purchasing power, that encourages excessive accumulation, the concentration of capital, the massive surveillance found in the digital society, and a negative impact on the environment.

On the other hand, this also means that there is a space of opportunity to integrate the vision of women in the construction of the technologies that sustain the digital society. However, this should not be done with the sole purpose of filling the deficit of human talent that the digital industry urgently wants to address, but rather for women to produce another digital technology, with other approaches, with other business models and other purposes. The important thing is not only that women join the digital technologies sector, but that digital technologies are transformed with the participation of women.

Letting women lead

Since 2013, our Sulá Batsú Cooperative has led an important Central American regional programme

called TIC-as¹ that aims to build female leadership in the digital sector in order to develop alternative visions of technology.

The TIC-as Programme network is made up of a diverse group of women from across the Central American territory: urban, rural, coastal, cross-border, migrant, Afrodescendant, Indigenous, young and adult.

Together we have created six principles that guide the creation of technology that we develop as women leaders in the digital industry:

- The feminist digital technology that we create serves the immediate environment of the women who develop it.
- The feminist digital technology that we create develops businesses that respect human rights and that do not turn work into precarious work.
- The feminist technology we create uses data with consent and transparency and uses *inclusive* data (that is, data that does not exclude people, whether marginalised people, or people from different cultures and territories, and that represents the diverse and pluralistic ways of being and living).
- The feminist technology we create uses algorithms that are transparent to all people.
- The feminist technology that we create is respectful of the Earth and is environmentally responsible.
- Our ventures should be collective (all the workers are owners) and self-managed.²

As can be seen, for us, the impact of the business model and way of conducting business on daily life is critical. Among other things, the business model behind the development and use of technology determines whether it is going to, for example, support data surveillance and disrespect for privacy and create job insecurity, or be environmentally responsible and create decent work. Given these principles, the Sulá Batsú cooperative promotes environmentally responsible digital ventures that address local problems, based on the circular

¹ <https://programatic-as.com>

² For more details see: <https://programatic-as.com/quienes-somos>

economy, and that place the platform economy in the hands of women and communities.

An example is the cooperative platform for young women from rural areas in Costa Rica that is dedicated to the reuse of electronic equipment, and is aimed at building economic social solidarity in the digital sector. The initiative was started two years ago, with the support of Mondragon University, the New York School and the APC network, and has the following basic characteristics:

- *A cooperative platform:* The platformisation of the economy in the hands of large corporations is generating an excessive accumulation of capital, precarious work practices and the non-renewable exploitation of the environment that puts life on Earth in jeopardy. However, there is an opportunity to take advantage of the collaborative economy with the development of platforms that are in the hands of workers, and organised in collective (the workers are the owners) and self-managed ways into cooperatives.³ The platform is the space for supply and demand; working people and consumers participate in the platform, working people are its owners and they manage it collectively.

In the case that we present, the platform is owned by young women from rural areas who have graduated from technical colleges with skills such as building networks, technical support, and software development. They make up the cooperative platform and are the workers. The families who use the equipment that the young women rebuild also participate in decision making on the platform.

The cooperative decides on the evolution of the platform, on issues such as the ethics of algorithms and data, on the distribution of surpluses, and on the organisation of their work.

- *An environmentally friendly technology business:* The cooperative's business is the reuse of electronic equipment. Agreements are reached with companies in the free trade zones and other multinationals, as well as with other entities, to donate electronic equipment, especially the computers that they regularly change for their employees. A first assessment is made by the young women in order to not accept unusable equipment, before the discarded technology is collected.

The young women rebuild computers by combining components and installing free/libre software (operating systems, productivity suites, and other complementary applications), and then sell them at very affordable prices to mainly rural families who require equipment for things like remote studying or for teleworking.

The women who are part of the cooperative can work at home or in a workshop that has been set up. In addition, there is an inventory of tools needed for repairs that they can borrow and that is also managed through the platform.

- This business solves multiple problems felt by the young, rural women who own the platform:
 - a. It addresses the issue of electronic waste by reusing and reconfiguring electronic equipment. This is based on the right to repair as a strategy to deal with planned and perceived obsolescence.
 - b. It addresses the problem of the precariousness of work in the digital society. On the one hand, it creates job opportunities for young, rural women who, after finishing their school training, have not been able to move to urban areas to work or study, and on the other, the working conditions are defined by the young women themselves as the owners of their production process.
 - c. It shows that there are other forms of businesses in the digital society that combine the platform economy with the social solidarity economy. This challenges the position that large corporations have of being the only developers of collaborative digital platforms.
 - d. It builds the leadership of women in the digital economy, proposing other ways of creating platform technologies that respect the environment, dignify work and are based on a self-managed and collective economy. In addition, it shows how women can be workers and owners of digital companies using alternative business models.

In the 10 years that Sulá Batsú has been working on creating women leaders in the digital sector, the issue of environmental responsibility and the use of digital technologies to guarantee life on Earth has been at the heart of the project proposals by women across the territories.

With this example of the cooperative platform for the reuse of electronic equipment developed by young, rural women, we want to demonstrate that the incorporation of women in the digital industry

³ For more information on cooperative platforms, see: <https://www.mondragon.edu/cursos/en/topics/strategy-entrepreneurship-and-innovation/platforms-cooperatives-now>

must involve new ways of developing technological products that address the problems that women see, with solutions proposed by women.

Because of this, it is necessary to create the conditions for women to propose alternative technologies and ways of using technologies and develop less predatory business models.

Action steps

Our project suggests the following action steps for developing environmentally friendly projects in Costa Rica and other countries:

- Explore new business models for digitally based companies whose primary purpose will not be for profit and accumulation. Without establishing other forms of digital economy, it is impossible for the industry to become less extractivist and more environmentally responsible.
- Create the necessary conditions in the countries based on national plans and policies that support digital-based ventures with alternative business models.
- Integrate women and Indigenous, Afrodescendant and rural populations, among others, who have been excluded from the digital industry in the construction of the technology that countries require, so that they are no longer considered solely as technology consumers.
- Incorporate reflection on the environmental responsibility of the digital economy in academia, the public and private sectors and civil society.

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.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

2020 Report

www.GISWatch.org

