

Circular economy: EU Commission must encourage sustainable design

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Opinion

Consumers have a great deal to gain from the circular economy and more sustainable product design, says Monique Goyens.



Products should be designed to be long-lasting and to provide good value to consumers. This means it should be easy to maintain, repair and upgrade the things we own.

Today, this is not the case. Consumers across the EU turn to our member organisations with complaints that products they have bought fail soon after the end of the guarantee period. Repair is, in many cases, not an option.

For instance, there are smartphone batteries which cannot be removed or too few and too costly spare parts. It is consumers that lose out when their products have to be replaced early.

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It is difficult to prove if manufacturers 'program' early failure deliberately (so-called planned obsolescence) or if premature failure is caused by the use of inferior materials or production methods.

The actual reason is irrelevant as far as the environment and consumers are concerned. The crux of the matter is that product lifetimes fail to live up either to consumer expectation or to what is technically feasible and possible.

The EU's action plan on building a circular economy contains elements that will help to make goods last longer. But the EU should develop more concrete measures to encourage sustainable product design, while consumers should receive clear information about product lifetimes and the availability of spare parts.

The EU should also look at the possibility of extending the minimum legal guarantee period of two years. If guarantee rights for a washing machine were extended beyond two years, manufacturers would have to think carefully about the durability of their products.

The circular economy package can only be the first step. Consumers have a lot to gain if the EU tackles the problem of early failure in products seriously.

About the author

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