

# TOWARDS CIRCULAR COMMUNITIES

Tools for Community - Led Reuse and Repair

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Tools for community-led reuse  
and repair

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# Introduction

## Who is this toolkit for and what is it about?

This booklet is intended primarily for non-governmental organisations and informal groups interested in implementing volunteer, community-based reuse and repair activities. It is based on the experience of three organisations with significant know-how in this field: *Zelena akcija* (Croatia), *Ecorec* (Greece) and the *Volunteers' Centre of Vojvodina* (Serbia) and has been published as part of the Erasmus+ project *Towards Communities of Reuse Practice*, carried out from late 2022 to 2025.





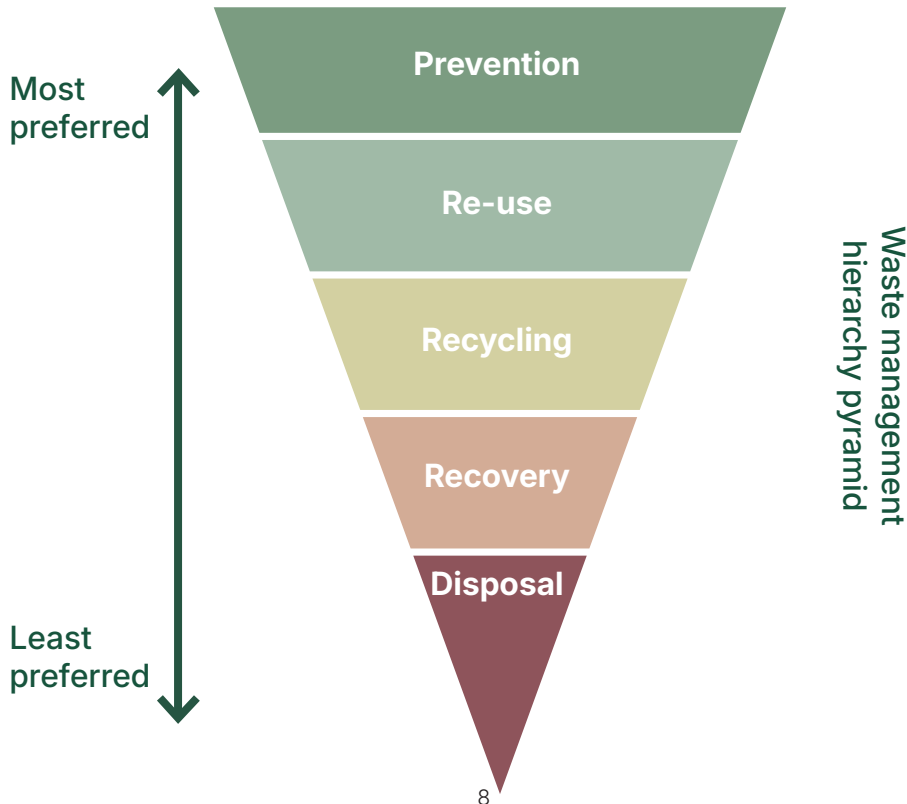
## Understanding the motto Reduce, Reuse, Recycle: definitions and differences

This toolkit focuses on activities that promote waste reduction and reuse. However, in public discourse, these terms are often imprecisely conflated with recycling. It therefore makes sense to define all these terms and explain the important differences between them.

### The waste management hierarchy

The waste management hierarchy concept implies that the greatest benefit for the environment (and

the economy) can be achieved by avoiding waste generation – **reduction** – then by extending the life cycle of goods and products through **reuse**, then by recovering and salvaging materials to create new goods and products by **recycling**. The principle of the waste management hierarchy is that final disposal should be the last resort. This hierarchy is prominent in the EU waste legislation, such as the Waste Framework Directive. However, despite being nominally prioritised in law, waste prevention and reuse are the areas where the least progress has been achieved so far.



## Reducing waste and reuse

Regarding waste, the greatest service to the environment we, as a society, can collectively work towards is reducing waste – avoiding its creation in the first place. The easiest and most effective way to achieve this is to avoid buying what we don't need, and beyond that to choose products based on their longevity, repairability and, if possible, recyclability at the end of their useful life. For the latter, the environmental impact of the recycling process should also be considered.

For products that we already own, we should try to use them for as long as possible. This includes repairing them, as well as not discarding functional and repairable products without good reason. When the replacement of a product is necessary, however, functional products can continue to be used by someone else.



Images: Pexels



**Reuse** includes any action that permits objects and materials to continue to be used multiple times, thus avoiding becoming waste. They can be used for their original purpose (conventional reuse) or for a new purpose, i.e. repurposing or upcycling (creative reuse).

Let's look at some practical examples. Reuse can be promoted at a systemic level by a DRS (Deposit Return System), which involves paying a deposit for your packaging upfront and bringing the empty container to the store to retrieve the deposit, instead of disposing of it and paying a new deposit fee. Or at an individual level, giving clothes that your child has outgrown, or toys that they do not use anymore, to your friend's child is also reuse. These are examples of multiple use of objects for their original purpose.

Other examples of reuse include (re) using an old (disposable) yoghurt container as a (multi-use) plant pot; using an old worn-out towel as a floor mop; or upcycling and upgrading a worn-out object to serve a new purpose, for example turning an old T-shirt into a shopping bag. These are examples of using objects for a purpose for which they were not originally intended, a.k.a. repurposing.

When reused items are creatively modified or upgraded, this is often called upcycling.

Although the examples mentioned above may seem trivial and self-explanatory, the practice of extending the use of products, repairing and reusing is not common enough in our consumerist society. Products are designed to be disposed of after a short period of use and are marketed primarily with the aim of generating profit. They also come in packaging that can neither degrade in the environment in any reasonable amount of time, nor be effectively and cost-efficiently recycled.

A few decades ago, most beverages, as well as products such as milk or yogurt, came to shops in packaging that was returned by the consumer and then reused by the producer of a product. Clothes used to cost significantly more than those from today's fast fashion stores, but it was common practice to repair and keep them for years. The same goes for shoes and items such as umbrellas and the like, not to mention furniture or electrical and electronic devices.



Today, fewer and fewer items can be repaired, for numerous reasons. Sometimes, this is due to rapid technological progress, i.e. IT equipment and mobile devices can no longer run new applications (software) with increased capabilities (and consequently increased requirements in terms of processing power, memory, etc.).

Other times, the poor quality of items in terms of design or materials results in a relatively short period of use, after which it is not possible to repair them at all. Another reason for frequent product replacements is simply fashion and trends. Finally, products are often intentionally designed to not be repairable – either easily or at all – or they are designed to stop working after a certain period of time. This latter practice is called **planned obsolescence**.



Images: Pixvets

## Planned obsolescence and the right to repair

**Planned obsolescence** is the practice of designing products with a limited lifespan, by using inferior hardware components, software incompatibility with older generation products or by discontinuing the repair of parts, services and software support. This practice is accompanied by **psychological obsolescence**, where functional products are perceived as obsolete due to fashion trends, or – sometimes minor – technological upgrades in newer models.

These practices, driven by producers' desire for repeat sales, waste valuable resources such as energy and non-renewable materials. Moreover huge amounts of electrical and electronic equipment waste (WEEE) is generated, consisting of materials and chemicals that are toxic, and posing a major threat to the environment if not properly managed. In the EU it is estimated that about half of the WEEE produced each year is separately collected for recycling and safe disposal. The average amount of separately collected WEEE in EU countries is 11 kg per inhabitant per year [1].

**The right to repair movement** has emerged as a response to these practices, defending the legal right of consumers to have access to spare parts, tools, and repair services to repair products they own. As a result of the momentum this movement has gained in recent years, in June 2024 the EU adopted Directive 2024/1799 on common rules promoting the repair of goods.

The Directive, which comes into force in 2026, establishes the consumer's right to have access to repair information and services and ensures that producers will not impose obstacles in the reparability of products.

Positive measures introduced by this Directive into EU – and, once transposed, national – legislation, include producers' obligation to offer timely and cost-effective repair for their products and access to reasonably-priced spare parts beyond the legal warranty. It also foresees an extension of guarantees for items that are repaired within the warranty period and fairer access to spare parts by independent repair professionals.

Among the Directive's limitations, the most obvious is that it is limited to specific product categories, such as household appliances and electronic devices, for which ecodesign regulations and reparability criteria already exist.

Currently a broader ecodesign framework is being developed, the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR). This will update existing ecodesign laws by extending their scope to include a wider range of consumer goods, focusing on enhancing product durability, reparability, and recyclability, and is expected to cover other products as well, such as textiles and furniture. As this legislation is currently only now being developed, the right to repair movement remains as necessary as ever.

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[1] EUROSTAT 2021 [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Waste\\_statistics\\_-\\_electrical\\_and\\_electronic\\_equipment](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Waste_statistics_-_electrical_and_electronic_equipment)

## Recycling

Recycling is the recovery of materials from discarded objects during which they, at least temporarily, completely lose their original shape: glass bottles are crushed, the glass is melted and new bottles or other glass objects are made from it; aluminium cans are melted down and used to make new cans or other objects; paper is shredded and becomes a source of pulp for new paper... It is, however, important to be aware of the limitations of recycling and its impact on the environment.

Although there are materials (e.g. glass) that can be recycled almost indefinitely, most degrade in quality each time they are processed, while some can be recycled only very few times, or not at all. Of the materials collected for recycling in large quantities, plastic is the most problematic.

## Recycling plastic

Many types of plastic exist, and although some can be recycled a few times, the amounts of plastic that are recycled are in reality very low, even in countries where separate waste collection and recycling systems are highly developed.

For plastic, which is often difficult to recycle, radically reducing its production should be the priority of any sensible waste policy.

In addition, the recycling process is always associated with energy consumption – though usually much less than manufacturing the same product again from the beginning – and very often with chemical pollution. The amounts of energy used and chemical pollution emitted vary considerably from material to material, but can be substantial. So, whenever possible, waste reduction and reuse must take priority.

## When recycling is, and when it is not a solution

YES

- ✓ yes, after a reasonably long use of the item / packaging / material
- ✓ yes, at the manufacturer's expense
- ✓ yes, with dignified working conditions
- ✓ yes, when subject to clear legal regulations
- ✓ yes, as one part of the solution

NO

- ✗ not as a justification for excessive production of disposable products and packaging
- ✗ not at public expense
- ✗ not in toxic working conditions and without operating permits
- ✗ not in polluting facilities built in marginalized communities
- ✗ not for products containing dangerous chemicals
- ✗ not as the only solution

## Incineration (so-called waste-to-energy) and landfilling

Incineration and landfilling are – for a reason – at the bottom of the waste management hierarchy. There is no need to waste words on landfilling: nowadays it is clear to (almost) everyone that disposal of unsorted waste in the open is simply not an acceptable option. The reasons are obvious: stench, groundwater pollution, risk of infections and landfill fires... Unfortunately, stances on waste incineration are not nearly as unanimously negative, either among decision makers or the general public.

In some countries, pro-combustion experts, who are often also lobbyists for companies interested in building and operating expensive incineration plants, have become prominent voices. They claim that new incinerators are completely safe and harmless, and even that they are the simplest, cheapest and most environmentally-acceptable solution. Such experts and other incineration proponents will very often use other, more attractive names, e.g. waste-to-energy plants, energy recovery, gasification or pyrolysis. However:

In order to be profitable, incinerators need a stable supply of fuel, meaning waste. So once these expensive facilities are built and integrated into the waste management system, they disincentivise waste prevention and separate collection.



1

Claims that new incinerators are completely harmless to health are false. It is impossible to stop all of the air pollution, particularly when mixed waste is burned. In the event of malfunctions and operating difficulties there is an increased possibility of emissions of so-called persistent organic pollutants (POPs). These chemicals are very toxic, they accumulate in the environment, and their release cannot be detected without very sophisticated analyses. Waste incinerators have traditionally been an important source of these chemicals in the environment.

Even if it was – as is often falsely claimed – completely 'clean' in terms of air pollution, incineration inevitably emits carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas. In addition, waste does not burn well by itself, so auxiliary fuel is needed – usually a fossil fuel like gas or diesel.

2

After incineration, a considerable amount of ash and filter residues inevitably remains, which needs to be disposed of somewhere secure. Fly ash and filter residues are toxic and require special disposal facilities. Not every country can ensure such facilities and properly monitor them.

Recycling waste that cannot be reused without exception. Replacing single-use packaging with other reusable materials commonly present in municipal waste. The only reason why this has not happened yet is the reluctance of the authorities to put health and the environment before alleged consumer convenience, and the interests of consumer goods wrapping almost retailers and the plastic industry.

Most plastic in municipal waste comes from packaging, and it is possible to eliminate it from typical consumer goods wrapping almost retailers and the plastic industry.

## 02 Practice: organising *learn to repair and reuse* events

Enough of theory. If you are reading this booklet, we suppose you (and your organisation or group) are interested in organising *learn to repair or reuse* events yourselves. Instructions follow below.



## Reuse (Swap) events

### What are they and why should you organise one?

Swap events or swap parties enable people to bring items to exchange with each other. They usually entail swapping clothes, but other items such as books, toys, etc. can also be involved. The swap parties referred to here are not limited to a narrow circle of acquaintances, family and friends: they are open to the whole community. They are most often organised by informal groups, civil society groups and other civic initiatives.

These events can be organised in various ways: free of charge or donation-based (usually to raise funds for a specific cause); limiting the amount of items every visitor can bring or take home, or not. Some set up an equal exchange system (where participants are allowed to take only as much as given in terms of quantity or value) using tokens, tickets or other props.

You will need to decide about the rules for your swap based on your specific situation: the profile of the participants you expect, type of venue where it is taking place, your ability to handle or dispose of the items left unswapped after the event, etc.

Swap events can contribute to various social and environmental causes, and NGOs and civic initiatives can use them as a tool for raising awareness and attracting public attention. The main aims of such events, as we understand them, are:

**1** promoting a culture of reuse and exchange as an alternative to ever-growing consumerism and its consequences. These range from exploitation of workers to environmental pollution, as well as unhealthy expectations and pressure exacerbated by consumerism and capitalism, especially among young people;

**2** supporting people in acquiring clothes (or other items) for free, which is much-needed especially for those with a small income or no stable income at all;

**3** supporting people in giving away unwanted clothes (or other items), where there is no systemic solution for textile waste;

**4** enabling reuse as a better solution, especially for items such as clothes, that are hard to recycle and are rarely properly recycled in practice.

### Suggestions on basic rules, principles and practicalities

You can start with a one-off event and then organise additional ones if the first one proves to be a success, and you feel that it makes sense organising them. At a certain point you will probably want to make these events happen regularly (e.g. once a month).

Until you hold your first event, you will not know how many people you can expect. The number of 'attendees' on social media announcements is a very unreliable indicator.

The only way to know in advance how many people will come is to introduce mandatory registration. This can be done, but we don't recommend it unless you are facing serious space constraints in your venue. One reason we don't favour this approach is because it can discourage those who failed to register for the event – either because they forgot, they found out about it at the very last moment, or are not able to use tools such as online forms, social media, etc.

At swap events, a plentiful supply of items usually corresponds to high demand, so high attendance is desirable in most cases. An excess of items left unswapped after the event, however, is indeed a possibility. So, if you want to avoid this, you can introduce a limit on the number of items people can bring (more on that later).

It makes sense to announce the event well in advance, so potential participants have time to dig through their wardrobes and bring some nice items to the swap.

At most swaps, people can bring their items only on the day of the event. If this is the case with the swap that you are organising, don't forget to stress this when promoting the event. Of course, if organisers have enough storage space at their disposal, as well as people ready to receive items, they can invite people to bring their goods beforehand.

In addition, although they are not events, 'swap places' also exist that are permanently open to the public – they are called free shops.



Swap Party Novi Sad

## Free shops

Free shops are places where people – just as at swap parties – can bring goods they no longer need, and get others for free. The difference between these and swap events is that the goods are not just brought to an event and (if left untaken) stored until the next event, but are put on display in the free shop until needed. Most free shops stock a variety of goods and are not usually limited to one class of items, such as clothes. Unlike swap events that can be organised in the open in fine weather, an obvious requirement for

a free shop is indoor space. Also, the volunteers in a free shop need to work in a different way – not all together as one team at the same time, but individually or in pairs, distributed over different shifts and days of the week. If their work is well adjusted to local needs, free shops are able to provide substantial material help to those in need. A free shop in Zagreb run by an NGO called Are You Syrious? which works with refugees, distributes between 3,000 and 5,000 items each month.

In most cases it makes sense to set a limit on the number of items each person can bring to the swap. Especially with clothes swaps, people will sometimes be tempted to use them to get rid of large amounts of unwanted clothes, or they may see them as an opportunity to dispose of their cheap fast fashion clothes on a regular basis. So, without a limit, you may end up with large amounts of clothes – sometimes in bad condition or of very low quality – that will not be taken by others. You probably don't want this to happen, unless you have considerable storage space, or other ways to use, distribute or dispose of large amounts of textiles.

Just as it is usually desirable to limit the number of items people can bring, you might want to limit the number of items people can take as well. Some people might want to take large amounts of the best clothes or other items, possibly for further resale, or just because they are attracted by many of the items

available. You can make exceptions to this rule if you are aware that someone is truly in need of clothes, or whatever is being swapped.

Another rule you may or may not want to apply is some form of reciprocity or proportionality – a requirement for participants to bring a certain number of items if they want to take a certain number away. This does not necessarily have to function on a one-to-one basis.

For example, participants in clothes swap parties organised by *Zelena akcija* in Zagreb are invited to bring up to ten items (clean and in decent condition) for which they will receive a token. This gives them the right to take up to ten items. This doesn't mean that they must bring ten items if they want to take ten away – but they should bring at least one and should not take away more than ten.

We would be happy if swap events would become as widely spread as possible, so if you want to throw one on your own, feel free to use the visual identity available on this link:



This QR code will take you to the file location with free visual materials and tokens for organizing (clothes) swap parties. Feel free to download them and start organizing!

Exceptions to this rule are possible for participants who are not able to contribute with decent quality clothes and who really need them.

The tokens that are issued in the process are also a good tool for keeping track of the number of people attending swaps.

Many swap parties, however, do not apply any reciprocity rule at all, for example, those run by the *Volunteers' Center Vojvodina* in the CK13 Youth Centre in Novi Sad. At most recent events, a 10-item limit was set on how much each person can bring, to help organisers reduce surplus items at the end of the event, but participants are free to take goods even if they haven't brought anything to the event. And there is also no limit to the number of items they can take.

The organisers chose this approach because some people are happy to give away clothes and are not looking

for new ones, but some people in need also can't bring anything to swap. They also see it as a way to overcome society's materialistic attitudes. So far they haven't had serious problems with participants abusing this flexibility.

Your specific set of rules will depend on your situation: the profile of participants, space at your disposal, availability of volunteers and your other resources. You'll probably be changing and tweaking the rules in response to what happens at the events in reality. Communicate your rules and working principles clearly and openly in advance on your social media outlets, web sites, invitations and announcements, and in media appearances.

We recommend organising swap events regularly, but not too often, as people in your community might lose interest if these events become repetitive or if the quality/quantity of clothes is poor. How often is too often depends on local demand, the organisers' capabilities and other factors. Bear in mind that people are more likely to look for new clothes and to give away used ones between seasons, when people tend to acquire or buy what they need for the upcoming weather conditions, and clear their wardrobe of unwanted items.

Aim for people from diverse social backgrounds when trying to reach potential participants/visitors at swaps. If only people who are in dire need of clothes show up, it is likely that they won't be able to bring goods to swap. On the other hand, if the only people who attend are those who want to donate unwanted clothes, there might be a lot of surplus at the end, and the local community's needs won't be met.

Some things you can do in order to reach different target groups, including those who do not usually attend your events, are:



Promote the event on your social media;



Use clear language, understandable to everyone



Adjust the language to the expected audience. If you count on an older audience, use few or no English words. If you are targeting a younger (Gen Z) audience, you can play with English expressions and slang (provided you are able to do it convincingly enough).



In many areas you might find local social media groups where swapping of various items is already happening. Try to get the groups' administrators to share announcements of your swap events.



Think whether there are other social media groups whose members might be interested in your events. These might be humanitarian, but also, for example, groups for those interested in fashion (if your event is a clothes swap event), etc. Try to have your event advertised in these groups too.



Think of any other organisations/collectives (regardless of whether they have a relevant social media outlet or not) that might be interested in the event, or that can reach people who might be interested. Speak with them and try to get them to spread the word about your event among their membership and beneficiaries.



Share information by word of mouth with anyone whom you think might be interested in participating.

## Clothes swap activities in Novi Sad and Zagreb

### Novi Sad

Clothes swap events have been one of the most regular activities at the CK13 Youth Centre in Novi Sad, where the *Volunteers' Centre of Vojvodina* (VCV) is based. Different groups have been organising swaps throughout the years – mainly CK13, the Rebuild Collective, and SPANS (Society for Protection of Animals Novi Sad) – with VCV taking on this format more recently.

One of the fundamental principles underlying these swap events is giving support to marginalised groups. They are a valuable resource for people who struggle to obtain decent clothes such as individuals experiencing homelessness without a permanent residence, those that for various other reasons live below the poverty line, or members of the queer community.

Various textile reuse activities have become quite popular among members of Novi Sad's LGBTQIA+ community, since finding clothing that aligns with their gender identity can be daunting. These events and projects go beyond just swapping clothes: by providing safe spaces where queer individuals can explore their style without judgement, they foster a more welcoming and inclusive society, reinforcing values of tolerance and mutual respect within the community.

Examples of such activities include Permanent Clothes Rack and Transmena. The former is run by a queer social club, Izadi, which has set aside a corner where anyone can freely donate or take clothing; while the latter is the name for events (gender-fluid clothes swap parties), organised collaboratively by Izadi and the CK13 Youth Centre, which promote inclusivity and sustainability by providing access to clothes and peer-support for people transitioning or exploring their identities.

Clothes are not the only thing that is being swapped in Novi Sad. Novosadska razmena knjiga (Novi Sad Book Swap) is an informal initiative started in 2017, with the goal of promoting literacy and cultural exchange. It allows books to be exchanged based on a unique points system.

The Pelcerijada is an event started in 2019, taking place in local cafés in Novi Sad. It encourages sharing of plant cuttings (pelceri in Serbian). Attendees bring their propagated plants to exchange with fellow participants. The event contributes to agricultural biodiversity by encouraging cultivation of heirloom plant varieties which for various reasons are currently not popular in commercial production and might soon become extinct.

### Zagreb

Zelena akcija started organising clothes swap parties in December 2021. For Zelena akcija, as an environmental NGO, waste has always been a crucial topic, and the primary reason for starting clothes swap parties was to raise awareness on the need for waste reduction and sustainable consumption, and about the environmental and social harm wrought by the fast fashion industry in particular.

The first swap party was a huge success, and after reports about it appeared in several prominent mainstream media outlets, the numbers of participants at subsequent events became quite impressive. Swap parties are now held in Zelena akcija every last Wednesday of the month, and are attended by 50 to 300 participants, with a group of about ten volunteers involved.

In addition to the clothes swap events, in 2023 Zelena akcija started a volunteers' collective organising clothes repair / repurposing / upcycling events. It currently consists of ten volunteers who have completed a tailor-made five-week training course.

In Zagreb too, the clothes swap parties represent a means of empowering the queer community, so during Pride Month, the regular swap parties are upgraded to LGBTQIA+ edition swaps, with an emphasis on swapping expensive, but very much in-demand items such as wigs or binders.

Most importantly, since 2022, clothes swap events have started spreading throughout Zagreb and Croatia and so far, dozens have been organised independently of Zelena akcija, by unrelated organisations and groups.

## Learn to repair events

### What are learn to repair events?

*Learn to repair* events are educational and environmental awareness events that promote sustainability, waste reduction and self-sufficiency by empowering people to repair their belongings rather than discarding them when they break or malfunction.

They are designed to teach individuals the skills and knowledge necessary to fix various items such as electronics, small electrical appliances, clothing, furniture, bicycles, dinnerware, homeware, toys etc. Participants have the opportunity to bring their items, get access to tools, and get engaged in the repair process – usually led by a skilled volunteer or technician – free of charge. Participants learn practical skills such as diagnosing problems, disassembling and reassembling items, identifying faulty components, replacing parts, and performing basic repairs on damaged or malfunctioning products.

Learn to repair events promote a culture of sustainable consumption, reuse and transition towards a circular economy, where damaged products are not simply discarded and replaced. Instead, through repair and maintenance, their life cycle is extended and their environmental impact reduced.

Such events also foster a sense of community and collaboration, by creating a supportive environment where people can learn from experts and fellow participants, ask questions, and gain confidence in their repair abilities. Often they are designed with an educational purpose, or at least include an educational component specifically targeting skills development and adult education, particularly benefiting vulnerable groups.

Finally, *learn to repair* events demonstrate to participants that repairing items can be significantly more cost-effective than buying new ones. Learning repair skills can help individuals save money by avoiding unnecessary purchases.



## Two examples of popular *learn to repair* activities: *Repair Cafés* and free bicycle repair workshops

### Repair Cafés

*Repair Cafés* are community-driven initiatives that bring people together to fix broken items instead of throwing them away. The concept was created in Amsterdam in 2009 by journalist Martine Postma as a way to combat throw-away culture and reduce waste

The concept is simple: volunteers with repair skills provide free assistance to help fix household items like electronics, appliances, furniture, bicycles, and clothing. *Repair Cafés* provide the necessary tools, materials, and expertise to empower people to learn to repair their belongings instead of replacing them. There is only one condition: whoever brings a broken item has to help with the repair and learn how it is done.

This movement has spread rapidly in many parts of the world and *Repair Cafés* are specifically mentioned in the new EU right-to-repair legislation, highlighting their role. Beyond just fixing things, they promote sustainable consumption, help divert waste from landfills and lower the environmental impact of overconsumption. *Repair Cafés* also aim to change societal attitudes to repair and serve as community hubs, bringing people together to learn new skills, share knowledge, and build connections.

If you want to use the *Repair Café* name for your activity, you should register at the Repair Café International Foundation ([www.repaircafe.org](http://www.repaircafe.org)) and commit to complying with a few basic conditions related to working principles, usage of the logo and a manual. They will then list you in their international database that includes more than 3000 *Repair Cafés* worldwide, and can provide support in the form of manuals for starting up the activity, templates for various forms and promotional materials, etc.

If you want to organise a learn to repair activity without using the *Repair Café* logo or name, you are of course free to do so without registering.

### Free bicycle repair workshops

Bicycles are particularly suitable for demonstrating the benefits of repairing: they are relatively simple and robust machines that can be fixed almost indefinitely, without expensive and dangerous electric tools. They are also suitable for raising awareness about other issues, primarily the environmental impacts of individual motorised transport.



If you are ready to make the effort to organise such events, before you start planning, carefully consider the following, which will influence whether and how the events should be organised:



What is the purpose of your event and what do you want to achieve with it? Are you focused on promoting environmental awareness, right to repair, skills development, social inclusion or something else?



How long would you like to continue with the activity and how often would you like it to happen? Would you like to have a one-off event, a series of events, or continuous activity? If you are not sure, it is fine to start with one event, or a small series of events, and organise more if the results are promising and you feel capable and enthusiastic enough to continue.



What type of items would you like to repair? Do you want to repair a broad range of household items, as in *Repair Cafés*, or focus on one type, like clothes, bicycles, etc.? This will depend on a number of factors, such as the availability of skilled volunteers, space and equipment, the interests of the organisation/group initiating the activity, and so on.



Do you think you'll be able to find sufficiently skilled and enthusiastic enough volunteers? This requirement is crucial for any event. Are there any organisations or informal groups in your area with people that might have the necessary skills, such as cycling clubs, CB radio clubs, makerspaces or similar, who might be willing to join?



Consider the requirements for equipment and space and whether you are able to fulfil them. Don't get discouraged, as you don't need to be able to fix all possible problems, even for only one class of items – you will never be able to do that. You can start modestly with basic equipment enabling only basic repairs, and buy more later as the activity develops. Bear in mind that basic repairs on some items (such as bicycles) can be done even in the open.



What kind of waste will be generated as a result of the activity and where can you take it in your area? What are the costs associated with it?

The following section contains more detailed step-by-step instructions on starting *learn to repair* and swap activities.

## Step by step instructions for organising *learn to repair* and swap events

### Before the event:

#### 1. Define the event objectives

Determine the specific goals of your *learn to repair* event(s):

Is the main focus on promotion of sustainability and environmental awareness, community-building, adult education and skill development, or something else? Are you planning to organise a one-off event, or are you piloting a potential long-term activity?

Identifying the scope of the planned events will help you to specify the needs and requirements explained in the next steps.

#### 2. Swap party or *learn to repair* event?

Decide whether you would like to have a swap party or *learn to repair* event. As discussed above, *learn to repair* events will need more skilled volunteers, as you will not be able to train them in a short time. At swap events you will be able to work with many more participants per volunteer (up to a factor of 10 or more).

#### 3. Define which types of items you'll be dealing with

Requirements in terms of equipment, type of space, and volunteers' skills differ greatly depending on the type of goods you'll be handling. Textile repairs, for example, will require different equipment and materials than furniture repairs and electrical and electronic repairs. The venue characteristics, or the way you set up the repair stations, might need to be different.

The type of items you'll be working with may also affect your target audience. Clothes swaps will probably attract a somewhat different audience than book or toy swaps. Though in general *learn to repair* events are focused on small repairs and easy fixes that can be performed by amateurs under the supervision of experts, the type of repairs pose some limitations on who can participate. A child might *learn to repair* a toy, for instance, but having them repair a blender would raise major safety concerns.

And in general for more complex repairs, like for electrical and electronic equipment, there might be safety considerations or legal requirements to consider, such as the profile of the repair experts. Don't forget to research whether insurance is needed to cover the event.

#### 4. Mobilise volunteers and help them organise

Having enough people committed to running the event is an essential prerequisite. The number of people required will depend on the type and size of the event, and the items being repaired or swapped.

These people can be volunteers or the organisation's own staff, but if you want to have an activity that truly involves the community, you'll want to have volunteers. Relying on organisations staff might make sense for one-off events, but if the activity happens regularly it is a drain on the organisation's resources. Engaging people to work on reuse activities professionally can make sense if the emphasis is on providing services – not so much on the educational and awareness raising aspect – and in that case it would be desirable to start a social enterprise (which is outside of the scope of this booklet).

When it comes to swap events, our experience is that four to ten people are needed for all the activities related to the event – from preparation to distribution of the surplus items. The good thing about swap events is that a few volunteers can work with many people – in our case, up to ten people are able to successfully handle events attended by several hundred people in a matter of three hours.

For volunteers at learn to repair events, educating them yourself makes sense only if you are certain that you will be implementing the activity for a longer period of time and if it is an activity for which future volunteers can be trained in a reasonable amount of time. Otherwise, you'll need to look for volunteers that are already skilled.

Try to reach out to local repair experts, active or retired professionals, amateurs, enthusiasts and teachers who are knowledgeable in the areas you plan to cover. Where you might find them will depend on your local situation. For example, if you plan to start a bicycle repair workshop you can present the idea to cyclist clubs in your area. If you aim to start a repair cafe, you can contact local CB radio clubs (if they still exist in your area), etc. Volunteers in *Repair Cafés* are often retired technicians – think about where you can find them in your area. If you're planning to repair electrical and electronic equipment, check the national regulations, as it may be mandatory for repairers to hold a licence.

After you have found volunteers, and before the first workshops take place, you should start building an organised volunteers' collective – this includes organising the first meetings, establishing ground rules, etc. For more detailed instructions see chapter III. of this toolkit. For successful execution of all the following steps, it's important that the volunteers' collective participates or is at least consulted.

#### 5. Identify equipment needs

Depending on the category of items to be repaired or swapped, specific equipment and materials will be needed. Some swap activities will require only elementary equipment, such as tables and benches (or not even these), while for some repair activities you will be able to benefit from very sophisticated equipment. However, it is O.K. to have a modest start – you can begin with a few very basic tools and buy more (and more sophisticated) equipment as the activity develops. When working with participants – especially in the context of *learn to repair* activities – it is O.K. to admit that you are not able to fix something because of a lack of equipment (or skills, for that matter). However, a certain minimum set of equipment will be needed for starting each specific activity.

Elementary equipment lists for some typical *learn to repair* activities are given at the end of this chapter. However, don't take them for granted – consider the specifics of your activity, the space you'll be using, the needs of your participants and volunteers, etc. and make a checklist of everything that will be required: essential equipment, tools and materials, spare parts, safety equipment like gloves and masks, first aid kits etc.

Tip: Don't forget to consult the volunteers' team before you finalise your checklist.

Some of your equipment needs may require time or funds to procure, so start planning early. To cover your needs without raising your event costs to levels that put a strain on your organisation, you can try to find partners ranging from public entities to private companies, professional associations, educational technical institutions, local repair shops or other civil society organisations that can lend or provide equipment for the event.



## 6. Choose your venue

Try to find a suitable venue that can accommodate the event. Besides its size, take into account the available infrastructure to support your needs, such as electricity (i.e. power outlets), ventilation, lighting conditions, toilets, running water, as well as equipment such as tables, chairs, shelves, hangers etc. Consider factors such as accessibility, parking, and possibilities for setting up any equipment that you need for your event.

After you identify a suitable venue, contact its owners or managers and try to make the necessary arrangements. The venue might be run by an organisation or entity that is sympathetic to the cause and that might want to get involved as a co-organiser. This could contribute to the event's success and further the cause, so you might indeed be interested to get them involved – it's up to you.

The position of the venue within the city or settlement is an important factor to consider. It should be positioned in an easily accessible place, near to where a lot of people already circulate. This is more important for swap events (which people often visit casually and do not necessarily stay for long) than for *learn to repair* events (where people come knowing they'll spend more time involved in the repair process). The position of the venue will also have an influence on the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants – they might differ significantly depending on the neighbourhood where the event is taking place.

The venue will obviously influence your event substantially. It's of course desirable to have a large, well-equipped space at an attractive location, but this doesn't mean that you can't do anything if such a space is not available. Many swap activities, and even some learn to repair activities, can be done in the open.

## 7. What to do with the surplus?

At the end of each event – whether a swap or *learn to repair* – you will almost certainly be left with a certain number of unswapped (or unswappable) and unrepaired (or unrepairable) items. You therefore need to have a plan for what to do with them.

Consider your internal capacities: in the case of swap events, are you able to store unswapped items which might realistically be taken at the next event? Will there be another event at all? If yes, do you know when, and are you able to store the surplus items that long? If not, what are the options? Are there organisations and groups that might make use of them? Where can you dispose of the items that are unusable?

For *learn to repair* events, your options are to require participants to take unrepairable goods back with them, to dispose of them yourself, or to store them as a source of parts for future repairs. What you will choose depends on a number of factors, such as the amount of storage space at your disposal, connections with charities that can distribute unswapped/unrepaired goods, arrangements with recycling companies, etc.

You can make a list of CSOs working with vulnerable groups that usually accept donations. Before planning the event, contact them, ask if they are interested in receiving clothes (or other items you might be swapping) in good condition after the event and how many items they can take. Assemble a list of organisations with their contact details and addresses and note the types and quantities of clothes/other goods that they can accept.

Besides making a plan for items that are in good shape, think about what to do with those that are unlikely to be used as well. At swap events, you should try to avoid such items being brought in the first place, but some will probably find their way in. Think about how you can use them outside their original purpose (for example, making cleaning cloths out of unusable clothes, if they are of the right material), or to whom you can give them for recycling or final disposal.

Some types of items are more usable for this than others, but in general you will not be able to use the majority of unrepairable and unswappable goods you are left with, and will have to come up with some arrangement to dispose of them as waste. Investigate what the options are for disposal of specific types of waste and how much they cost. If possible, partner with local waste companies or recycling centres and facilities to ensure proper disposal of items that cannot be repaired and will become waste.

## 8. Establish event rules

Once you have put in place all the important elements for the event, (a volunteer group has been formed, you know what equipment you will use and what the venue will be), get the volunteer team together and discuss event rules.

Try to answer questions such as:

- Will there be a limit on the number of items people can bring to and take from the swap event? If yes, what will it be?
- Will you stick to any kind of reciprocity rule?

- How long (if at all) will you be keeping unswapped items before you permanently dispose of them or donate them elsewhere?
- Will you require pre-registration for the participants for *learn to repair* events?
- What kind and what size of items will people be able to bring for repair?
- Will you take care of disposal of unrepairable items or will the participants who brought them need to do this themselves?
- How will you communicate the event rules to the participants?
- How will you keep track of the number of participants and repaired/ swapped items?

Also, try to define which tasks are essential for the event to take place, and who will be responsible for them.

You will probably not be able to predict all the issues that might arise in practice before the first few events. You'll likely have to modify the rules as you go, learning from mistakes and how things work in reality. However, it's important to try to foresee as many issues as possible, and define how to deal with them.

If you are, for example, concerned about too many participants attending your learn to repair event, it may be useful to set up a pre-registration system. Not all repairs take the same amount of time, so you can ask – as part of the pre-registration – about the type of device and what is not working. Pre-registration can be useful for gathering contact information as well, and communicating event updates or reminders, information about future events, etc.

Event rules are needed, among other things, so that participants know what to expect and to avoid chaos at the first events. You will need to communicate them in the event announcements, so they must be clear and straightforward. How exactly the rules will look will depend on a combination of factors: the type of activity you are planning, your (internal) capacities and (external) circumstances. This combination is always unique, so your event rules will be unique too.

## 9. Create a detailed scenario of the event

One of the last steps in the preparatory phase is defining a detailed scenario. Together with the volunteers' team, create a detailed schedule, including any additional activities that might be happening along with the main event. List all the necessary tasks, and assign them to individual volunteers. Allocate sufficient time for the event and bear in mind that volunteers will not be engaged only when you are working with the participants, but also during the preparation and clearing up after the event. Also, you should leave some time for casual socialising among the volunteers.

## 10. Promote the event

Promote the event to as many target groups as possible:

- Through social media platforms and online forums. Create engaging posts highlighting the types of items that will be swapped or repaired, and communicate the event rules. Of course, don't forget the date, time, and location. Mention any additional activities that might be happening along with the main event.
- Prepare a press release and distribute it to the media. If you have funding, announce the event through adverts in the local media.
- Reach out to the local community: inform local organisations and groups, schools, universities, and relevant businesses regarding the event. Seek their support in spreading the word, securing sponsorships or donations, and reaching interested people.
- For *learn to repair* events, make sure that you inform prospective participants that repair of the item may not be possible. Maybe it requires a special part or other materials that may not be at hand. In any case they will receive advice on what is needed for the repair or on replacing the item.

Importantly, a strong outreach strategy will not only increase participation but also create the opportunity for interested repair experts to come forward and volunteer their time and skills.

### Troubleshooting and contingency plans

Anticipate and prepare for potential issues that may arise during the event. Establish clear channels of communication among the team members to quickly address any challenges or emergencies. Have contingency plans in place for equipment malfunctions, unexpected participant surges, or other unforeseen circumstances.

### Prepare for accidents and medical emergencies

To ensure participant safety, especially for learn to repair events, organise a first aid kit to address minor accidents or injuries that may occur. On the day of the event, place the kit in a readily accessible location at the event venue and make sure your team and volunteers all know where it is. Compile a list of nearby hospitals or other medical facilities in case of emergencies.

### Data gathering and handling

During the event you may want or need to gather some data, so plan for this depending upon the event's nature and objectives. Some starting considerations are:



#### Consent forms and waivers

In case of learn to repair events, have participants sign consent forms that include waivers or disclaimers to inform them that repairs are not guaranteed and that event organisers are not liable for damage. Ensure participants understand and agree to the terms outlined in the consent form before proceeding with the repairs. According to EU legislation on personal data protection, such forms must clearly outline the purpose of the data collection.



#### Data collection

In order to measure your impact or acquire insights that will help you to improve future events, you might want to implement a system for tracking the number of items brought

to the events or even categorise them based on type, condition or – in the case of repair events – effort needed for their repair.

Data collection can be implemented through simple and humane tools such as a guest book (where participants write their name, the type of item they brought, and the result of the repair attempt) or something more elaborate, like a form where volunteers record the number of items repaired successfully, those that could not be repaired, items requiring further repairs etc. Additionally, it is useful to keep track of the number of items that were discarded and those donated for reuse or repurposing.

At swap events, people usually circulate much faster and in higher

numbers than at *learn to repair* events, so signing of forms or guest books by participants should be avoided if anyhow possible. If you decide to use a reciprocity rule at your swap events, and if you adopt a method such as tokens (see the approach taken at the Zagreb clothes swap parties described on page 21) you can use them to indirectly measure number of people that participated.

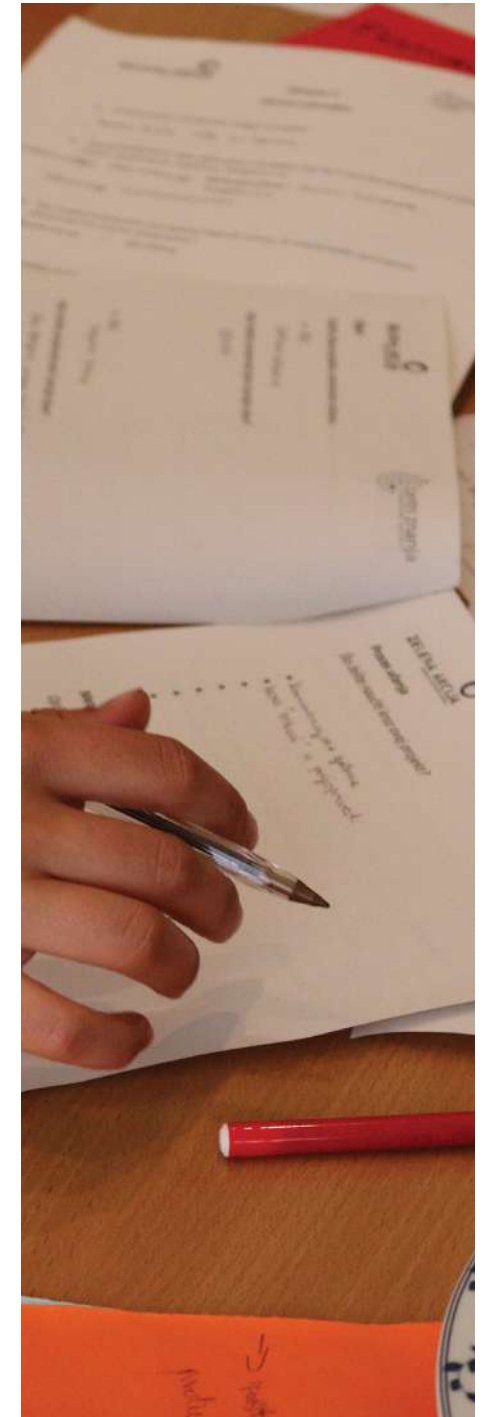


### Data Management and GDPR Compliance:

If you collect personal data such as their names, contact info, etc., and are located in the EU, then you are subject to EU legislation called GDPR.

This stipulates, among other things, that you may collect someone's personal data only based on their consent (unless there is particular legitimate interest), that you will not share data with others without the person's consent, and that you are responsible for ensuring that the collected data doesn't leak.

There are various reasons why you might need to collect personal data: maybe you need to ask participants to sign so-called signature lists in order to prove to your funders that you indeed had participants at the event, or there may be some other reason. Whatever it is, establish a good data management system, ensuring that the data collected is securely stored and protected. Make sure you comply with GDPR.



## On the day of the event:

### 11. Gather the team beforehand

Gather your team of volunteers sufficiently in advance, go through the tasks once again and check who is responsible for what.

### 12. Set up the space

For swap events you will need to arrange the layout so that there is enough room for people to walk, but also for items to be well displayed. If you want, you can prepare signs with categories (if it is a clothes swap party, for example: trousers, t-shirts, etc.) so you can place them in different corners of the room or space: this will help people to give away and find clothes more easily. At our events we prefer not to label clothes according to gender, but instead according to categories such as size, season or age (for children/for teens/for adults). Finally, you can also print some brief information for participants, such as where to place the items they bring, or just a quick description of the event itself.

In the case of *learn to repair* events you will want to organise the space in such a way that the areas where people will work do not obstruct access to the area where tools and parts are.

Different repair activities have different requirements. Some of them, such as repairing bicycles, can be done on the floor, including in the open, so participants and volunteers will be free to move around. For others, such as repairing small appliances, you will need to establish work stations – basically tables with two chairs (for the user and a volunteer), close enough to an electric socket with enough light, and possibly equipped with some of the most commonly used tools (for less commonly used ones, volunteers will take them from the tool boxes when they will need them).

It is desirable to have a few extra free chairs in a corner of the room so participants can sit while waiting their turn. It is, of course, good to have labels to mark the tool boxes and boxes with parts. If you are in a space suitable for using electrical tools which produce sparks, dust, or shavings, make sure that they are used only in a space where participants are not passing by, and, of course, that only trained volunteers have access to such tools. Safety equipment and the first aid kit should be in a visible and easily accessible place.

### 13. Music, lights, atmosphere!

You can play some music to set the atmosphere at the event, making it more upbeat or relaxing. It especially helps at swap events, where the music can be a bit louder – not too loud, though. At *learn to repair* events, music, if played at all, should be quiet, as repairing requires mental focus and a lot of explanations and communication between the user and the volunteer. Also, many malfunctions can most easily be determined based on the sound the device makes when it is working, so music can interfere with this.

Make sure there is enough light, especially during the winter months when it gets dark very early. For *learn to repair* events, that's basically the only requirement regarding illumination. For swap events, especially those involving clothes, you should also take care of the quality of the light. Avoid super strong, white LEDs, as they are less atmospheric and resemble fast fashion stores too much, which is something you want to avoid. Smaller lamps and lights attached to the wall are more desirable than strong ceiling lights.

### 14. Speak with the participants and show them around

Once people start arriving, help them by showing them around, tell them where they can place the items they've brought with them, and answer their questions. In our experience, people are very curious about events of this kind, but they are not necessarily familiar with how they function and have a lot of questions. On the other hand, some people are not interested in swapping, but just want to show their appreciation and thank you for organising such an event.

### 15. Wrapping up

At the end of the event, pack all the remaining items and tools according to whatever categories you decided on in advance.

### 16. Socialising

After all the participants have gone and all the items and tools have been packed, at least some of the volunteers will probably feel the need to socialise at the event location, and they should have the opportunity to do so. As explained below, this is essential for keeping volunteers motivated.

## Obtaining feedback from participants

Try to capture the participants' experience at the event and suggestions for improvement. You can use these insights to improve future *learn to repair* events. Many mechanisms are available to get feedback on the success rates and satisfaction levels for your events.

You can try to get feedback during the event or – if you have the contact details of the participants and their permission to contact them – after it is finished. Choose whichever feedback techniques are most appropriate for the purpose, audience and circumstances. In any case, simply speak with the participants on the spot and ask them to offer feedback.

Also, watch for feedback related to the event on your organisation or group's online communication platforms. Of course, if you have enough time, people to do it, or if it is needed for project reporting, you can create a more elaborate questionnaire that you can give participants to fill in on the spot or as an online form.

If you know that the events will be happening regularly, you can use more elaborate methods such as focus groups and interviews. Insights acquired this way can be very useful when planning a long-term strategy.



## After the event:

### 17. Distribute surplus items

As mentioned above, at the end of the event you will probably find yourself with a certain amount of goods that you either cannot store until the next event or they are unswappable or unrepairable. In the list of preparatory steps, we suggested that you create a plan for distribution of surplus items, and now is the time to execute it. Hand over the surplus items to charities that will redistribute them, to individuals in need, or to recycling sites.

### 18. Evaluate

After the event, whenever you feel it is the right moment, you can get the volunteers together and evaluate the success of the event. Some leading questions could be: How satisfied is everyone with the event? What went well? What could have been better? What should be repeated next time? What should be done differently? Was everyone comfortable in their role? When is a good moment to meet again and plan the next event?

### 19. Planning a long-term strategy

If you are interested in repeating your *learn to repair* event or making it a regular activity, consider the long(er)-term sustainability of your project. Start thinking ahead about infrastructure and equipment needs, personnel requirements, and long-term collaboration with repair experts. Explore partnerships with institutions, stakeholders, charities, and social enterprises. Plan for a gradual increase in overall capacity, considering the infrastructure, equipment, and personnel needed. Secure funding or sponsorships to support the event's growth. Explore opportunities to benefit vulnerable and marginalised groups by promoting inclusivity and accessibility.

## Elementary equipment lists for various *learn to repair* workshops

<b>Equipment and materials for <i>learn to repair</i> events for textiles</b>	
Sewing machines	A sufficient number of sewing machines to accommodate the number of participants, in good working condition.
Sewing tools	A range of essential sewing tools such as scissors, seam rippers, pins, measuring tapes, thimbles, and thread snips.
Needles and thread	A good variety of sizes and types of sewing needles suitable for different fabrics.  A selection of thread colours to match different garments.
Fabric and fabric scraps	Have a supply of fabric and fabric scraps on hand, or remnants for practising and sample repairs.
Other tidbits and accessories for replacements or fixes	A collection of buttons, zips, hooks, and other common items for replacements, seam sealers and fabric glues, safety pins, elastic.
Iron and ironing board	An ironing station may be set up with an ironing board and iron for pressing fabrics.
First aid kit	A well-stocked first aid kit for minor injuries or accidents that may occur during the workshop.
Work stations	Arrange work stations with tables and chairs, ensuring participants have enough space to work comfortably.
Lighting	Make sure the workshop area is well-lit to facilitate accurate stitching and repairs.
Garment racks and hangers	Gather garment racks and hangers to organise and display repaired items.

Cleaning Supplies	Keep cleaning supplies like lint rollers, fabric brushes, and spot removers handy for preparing garments before repair.
Extension leads	Gather sufficient extension leads with several sockets to ensure easy access to power outlets for sewing machines and other equipment.

<b>Equipment and materials for <i>learn to repair</i> events for furniture</b>	
Basic tools	Screwdrivers of different sizes and types for loosening or tightening screws, electric screwdrivers, hammers, different kinds of pliers, wrenches, allen keys, power drills, clamps etc.
Tidbits and other tools	Wood glue, sandpaper of different grains, wood filler for repairing cracks and putty knives.
Paints and varnishes	Paints suitable for wood surfaces, wood stains and varnishes, along with painting supplies such as brushes etc.
Upholstery materials	Upholstery needles, thread, and fabric scissors for repairing or replacing upholstery; upholstery fabric in various patterns and colours for patching or replacing damaged sections; foam and padding, to refill cushions; pins or staples.
Cleaning supplies	All-purpose cleaners, microfibre cloths and brushes for cleaning and preparing furniture surfaces.
Safety equipment	Safety goggles, gloves, and dust masks to ensure participant safety during repairs.

First aid kit	A well-stocked first aid kit for minor injuries or accidents that may occur during the workshop.
Work stations	Arrange work stations with tables and chairs, ensuring participants have enough space to work comfortably.
Extension leads	Gather sufficient extension leads with several sockets to ensure easy access to power outlets for electrical equipment.

Testing equipment	Oscilloscopes, function generator, etc.,
Other equipment	Rubber grommets, desoldering tools, assorted jumper wires, epoxy or adhesives, cable ties etc.
First aid kit	A well-stocked first aid kit for minor injuries or accidents that may occur during the workshop.
Work stations	Arrange work stations with tables and chairs, ensuring participants have enough space to work comfortably.
Extension leads	Gather sufficient extension leads with several sockets for each station.

### Equipment and materials for *learn to repair* events for electrical and electronic equipment

Basic tools	Screwdrivers of different sizes and types for loosening or tightening screws, including precision screwdrivers; different kinds of pliers; wire strippers; soldering irons for soldering and desoldering electronic components; multimeters for testing voltage, continuity, and resistance; IC extractors etc.
Replacement or spare parts	Try to have as large a variety of replacement parts as possible:  Assorted fuses, capacitors, resistors, diodes, transistors, connectors etc.; replacement power cables, heating elements, thermal fuses.
Cleaning supplies	Isopropyl alcohol, contact cleaner, lubricants, small brushes and cloths, pressurised air.
Safety equipment	Safety goggles, ESD safe gloves, antistatic ESD mats

### Equipment and materials for *learn to repair* events for bicycles

Basic tools	Pliers; spanners (5-24 mm); adjustable spanners (0-36 mm); screwdrivers; allen keys; files; a hammer; hacksaw; rubber mallet; scissors; scalpel; tweezers; vernier caliper.
Tools/equipment for repairing and changing bicycle tyres and inner tubes	Pump; water bucket; tyre levers; tube patches; vulcanising glue; sandpaper.
Tools for wheels	Wheel truing stand; cassette removal tool; freewheel removal tool; dish tool; cassette tool; cone spanners; spoke keys.

Drivetrain and cable tools	Cable cutters; crank extractor; bottom bracket removal tool(s); chain tool.
Spare parts	Brake and gear cables; cable housings; nuts and bolts; balls (for ball bearings); housing and cable ferrules.
Consumables	Rags; grease; chain lube; penetrating oil; heavy duty hand soap; electrician's tape; self-adhesive paper tape.
First aid kit	A well-stocked first aid kit for minor injuries or accidents that may occur during the workshop.
Work station equipment	Bicycle stand; working table with vice attached (if you have a permanent space for events).

## 03 Working with volunteers

An essential component of all the activities described in this toolkit is that they are based predominantly on volunteer work. Without the involvement of volunteers, awareness-raising by organising reuse and repair events can make sense only if they are one-offs or happen only occasionally. The critical part of efforts to start up a community-based reuse or repair activity is, therefore, to form a proactive and self-aware volunteers' collective. This is what we'll be dealing with in this chapter.



## What motivates volunteers?

What often puzzles new participants in such events, especially *learn to repair* activities, is the fact that people (volunteers) are ready to invest their time and effort in repairing other people's goods – for free! This is often attributed to the strong moral characteristics of the volunteers and their superior willpower (*Oh, you are all such wonderful people here!*). However, although we do not object to the idea that each volunteer is a small superhero, organisers of volunteering activities need to bear in mind that in order to keep volunteers motivated, the work should be meaningful, fun and provide opportunities to learn and develop new skills.

Making the work fulfilling is mainly the responsibility of the volunteer coordinator. Based on our experience, the main sources of motivation for volunteers are:

### The need to feel useful and to work in a meaningful way

To us it seems self-evident that people have an intrinsic desire to feel useful, and for their work to be meaningful. Unfortunately, many people today feel that their everyday jobs are neither useful to society, nor meaningful – in the sense that they are able to realise and develop their own creative capacities by doing them.

This is also an important reason why many people turn to volunteering,

which often provides an opportunity to do work that is useful to society as well as for the realisation of people's creative capacities.

In the context of the volunteer-based reuse and repair activities described in this toolkit, our experience is that volunteers generally feel useful when there is a demand for the activities being implemented and they receive positive feedback from the participants. In order for this to happen, the activity needs to be designed to respond to a genuine social need.

Concerning the meaningfulness of the work itself, it is of key importance that volunteers are not merely given tasks to be executed: They should have a high degree of control over the work process and be able to modify it and improve it collaboratively.



### The need for company and to belong to a community

In today's society, many people feel lonely and isolated for various reasons, or are discriminated against due to elements of their identity. Volunteering can be a very good remedy for this. In our experience, many volunteers got involved in our repair/reuse activities during periods when they didn't have too many friends or were feeling lonely, and they formed lasting friendships with other volunteers.

Spending time together, solving (other people's) problems in the company of people that share the same interest, is an inherently favourable environment for creating friendship bonds and building group cohesion. However, bearing in mind the importance of belonging to a community as a factor that motivates volunteers to continue investing their time and effort, volunteer coordinators should also create specific opportunities for volunteers to socialise (more on that a bit later).

## The opportunity to learn

Volunteering can often present a great opportunity to learn, and this is especially true for *learn to repair* events. For example, the initial group of volunteers at the free bicycle repair workshop in Zagreb started off with a very modest level of knowledge. Each of them knew some bits, so from the beginning they cooperated closely to solve concrete bicycle malfunctions, and intense diffusion of knowledge started happening naturally. As soon as one volunteer acquired some new knowledge or skill, it would be passed onto others simply by working together.

After 2-3 years, thanks to this collaborative learning process, the bicycle repair workshop became capable of performing even the most demanding repairs. Indeed, for some of the volunteers the opportunity to learn was a decisive factor for joining the collective.

There are, of course, many other motivating factors, but from our experience, these are the most important.



## How to keep volunteers motivated: tips for volunteer coordinator

### Define the relations between the organisation initiating the activity and the volunteer implementing the activity early on.

In some cases the volunteers' collective will be self-established, not initiated by an already existing organisation or a group. In this case, the initial members of the collective will be able to set up their own rules independently. However, if the formation of a volunteers' collective is initiated by an already established organisation, the collective's rules of functioning will need to be agreed upon between the organisation and the collective.

Also, the role of volunteer coordinator will in this case be taken by a member of the organisation, usually one of its staff. This person will then have a dual role as a member of the volunteers' collective and a representative of the organisation that initiated the activity. (In *Zelena akcija's* voluntary bicycle workshop in Zagreb this person is jokingly called the Commissar by the volunteers). The volunteer coordinator should be a bridge between the organisation and the collective.

Bear in mind that the volunteer may or may not have been previously involved with the organisation, and they might not be at all familiar with the organisation's mission and values. It is therefore crucial that

at the preparatory meetings, the volunteer coordinator presents these clearly and openly to the collective, along with the reasons for initiating the repair/reuse activity. Members of the collective should, at minimum, agree with the mission, values and rationale for the activity.

### Maintain a friendly and fun atmosphere among the volunteers

As mentioned before, finding friends and having a sense of belonging to a community is one of the main motivating factors for people to engage in volunteer work. It is thus very important that volunteer work is not only work, but also an opportunity to socialise – among the volunteers but also with the event participants.

In addition to socialising through work, reserve time exclusively for volunteers to socialise. For example, after the events are finished, they will probably just want to hang out together for an hour or so, and you should enable them to do that. Depending on the volunteers' preferences, it's also good to occasionally organise small parties, outings, barbecues, team building etc.

### Support the collective in becoming self-aware and self-managed

As we said earlier, in order for work to be perceived as meaningful and rewarding, volunteers need to be able to decisively influence the work process. The volunteers' collective should be self-aware and to a high degree autonomous. For this to be possible, decision making processes should be defined and volunteers should be familiar with them.

It is best if, at the very beginning, the volunteers' collective discusses and adopts ground rules about its functioning, decides how often meetings should take place and establishes a communication channel, such as a mailing list or messenger group.

It is possible that some, or even many, of the volunteers – whose main motivation is the joy of manual work and direct communication with the participants – will be turned off by the idea of meetings, due to a common perception that they are boring and futile. Try to explain to them that issues will certainly arise in the course of the work, as well as proposals to solve them and make improvements, and that there should be an opportunity for them to be discussed by everyone – which is best done at meetings.

Meetings should not necessarily happen often, and do not need to be long, but they should happen reasonably regularly. At which rate exactly will depend on your

specific needs and circumstances. You can, for example, have a short, operational, 15 minutes meeting before or after each event, and a longer meeting four times a year, or whatever you decide would be the best for you.

If some volunteers really have problems with participating in meetings, there is no need to insist that they do. But probably even they will feel the need to participate when a topic is discussed that is really important to them.

### Don't let the volunteers work long hours

If the volunteers work for a living or are studying, they should not be volunteering for more than 5-6 hours a week, because usually this is simply not sustainable. It is different, of course, with those who are, through various schemes, supported to volunteer (such as Erasmus volunteers), are on sabbatical, or for any other reason do not currently need to work for a living.



## The role and tasks of the volunteer coordinator(s):summary

Coordinators are responsible for establishing the volunteers' team and its coordination. They should gather volunteers, either from the people already associated with the organisation or group initiating the activity, or through a public call; organise training for them if needed, introduce them to the mission and values of the organisation/group that is implementing the activity and the reasons for organising the event(s), and help them manage themselves as a team.

Once the volunteers' team is set up, the coordinator is responsible for convening meetings, being available to answer the volunteers' questions, facilitating their participation, supporting their active involvement and valuing their opinions and suggestions.

If the volunteers' collective is not entirely self-managed and self-initiated, the volunteer coordinator should act as a bridge between the volunteers' collective and the organisation that initiated it.

The volunteer coordinator should also work on making the atmosphere in the collective pleasant, relaxed and friendly and should take care of the volunteers' needs.



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## Inclusion of underprivileged and underrepresented groups

When planning a volunteering activity, think about creating conditions that, at least in the long term, will favour the inclusion of volunteers and participants that are underprivileged or underrepresented.

When it comes to volunteering, the first precondition for participation is availability of free time. The sad truth is that those without enough free time will not be able to volunteer, and there is nothing you can do about it. However, there are various other reasons why people might be reluctant to engage in certain activities, in spite of being interested, where you can do a lot to help.

As for participants in the events, members of various underprivileged groups, especially those who are economically deprived, are likely to be your most faithful 'customers'. So, you should think about creating a setting where they too will feel comfortable.

### Women and gender diverse people in *learn to repair* activities

Women are often heavily underrepresented in most disciplines related to engineering and technology, and this will probably be reflected in the composition of volunteers in learn to repair activities. It may be that the vast majority or even all of the volunteers, especially in the starting phase, are male.

The first thing that can be done in order to even out the gender (dis)balance in this case is to make the workshops a space of zero tolerance to sexism. This is something that volunteer coordinators need to discuss with volunteers from the very beginning, before the first workshops take place, and also individually with volunteers who join later on, before they join in the activities.

What male volunteers should be particularly aware of are various forms of 'benevolent' sexism, i.e. so-called chivalrous behaviour, where male volunteers try to 'spare' female volunteers or female participants from doing tasks that are 'too hard', or jump into 'help' without being asked and without checking whether help is needed.

Besides this, coordinators should actively look for women that are already skilled in certain tasks and try to get them involved.

For some activities, you can organise training for future volunteers, specially targeting members of underrepresented groups. One way in which *Zelena akcija*'s bicycle repair workshop in Zagreb has tried to increase number of female volunteers is by organising free bicycle repair courses, with a mandatory apprenticeship (meaning that the participants are required to assist more experienced volunteers in their work with the participants during regular *learn to repair* events).

These can be held exclusively for women (where the course leaders are also women) or with a mandatory female quota (no fewer than 50% of the course participants should be women).

Also, if you deem this useful for allowing women to feel more comfortable to learn repair skills, you can organise occasional or regular female-only repair events. This approach is not uncommon among free bicycle repair workshops in Europe. But if you do this, all the volunteers must also be women. Otherwise, such events will likely be perceived as something where men fix stuff for women, whereas their purpose should be to get women involved in the repair process by creating a relaxed and encouraging atmosphere.

### **Intersectionality and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people**

When planning a volunteering activity, it is essential to create an environment that fosters the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people and recognizes the intersectionality of their identities, meaning that they may belong to one or more underrepresented and/or underprivileged groups, but don't necessarily have to. This not only enriches the diversity of your event but also ensures that everyone feels welcome and valued.

By being aware that members of this community have a higher chance of experiencing prejudice, and even verbal and physical abuse, there are several steps organisers can implement when planning and executing their activities.

- 1 In the planning and promotional stages, make sure to clearly communicate that your event welcomes LGBTQIA+ people.** This can be done through your promotional materials, social media posts, and during the event itself. Highlight your commitment to inclusivity and the steps you are taking to ensure a safe and supportive environment for all participants.

- 2 Involve diverse voices in the planning process.** This can include individuals from various backgrounds and communities who can provide insights into their specific needs and challenges. Ensure that your planning team reflects the diversity you aim to include in your events.

- 3 Ensure that your event venue is a safe and welcoming space for LGBTQIA+ individuals.** This can be done, for example, by displaying inclusive symbols, such as rainbow and other relevant flags, and by having clear anti-discrimination policies in place.

- 4 Educate your staff and volunteers on LGBTQIA+ issues and inclusive practices.** If you don't have experience in this, reach out to local organisations to support you.

- 5 Use gender-neutral language in your communications, including event materials, signage, and online platforms.** Avoid assumptions about participants' gender identities or sexual orientations. If the event is more intimate and the participants are more likely to engage in deeper conversations, encourage the use of preferred pronouns and provide opportunities for participants to share theirs, such as on name tags or during introductions.

- 6 Recognize** that LGBTQIA+ individuals may face unique barriers to participation, such as discrimination, lack of family support, or financial constraints. While you may not have the means to provide direct assistance, ensuring a more secluded and safe space for anyone who needs it (including people with social anxiety) can help people feel more welcome to try and participate in these events.

Creating opportunities for LGBTQIA+ participants and volunteers to connect and build relationships allows them to feel more integrated in their communities. Encourage allyship among all participants by promoting understanding and solidarity. Finally, it's important to continuously seek feedback from participants and volunteers to understand their experiences and identify areas for improvement – related to the LGBTQIA+ community, but also other underrepresented and underprivileged groups. Use this feedback to make your events more inclusive and welcoming. Educating the organisation's team and volunteers about how different aspects of identity (such as race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, disability, etc.) intersect and impact individuals' experiences can help them acknowledge that people face unique challenges and barriers and work to resolve them.

## Working with underprivileged and marginalised participants

As mentioned above, economically deprived people are likely to be your most faithful customers. The humanitarian component in repair and reuse projects can be more or less prominent. Some are primarily humanitarian (eg. free shops for members of particular underprivileged groups, or social enterprises which employ them), while some are focused on different issues, such as environmental awareness-raising – but this doesn't prevent tangible humanitarian assistance from being achieved in the process.

The reuse and repair activities implemented by the organisations who wrote this toolkit are not primarily humanitarian in character, but they have been providing valuable support to underprivileged participants – by providing certain material goods for free, but also by facilitating social integration and empowering them in other ways.

For example, the clothes swap parties in Novi Sad are well attended by those that cannot afford new clothes, while the bicycle repair workshop in Zagreb has donated more than 1,500 bicycles to refugees, homeless people, those living in areas affected by natural disasters, and many others that need but cannot afford a bicycle.

Regarding social integration, experience from both the Novi Sad clothes swap events and Zagreb bicycle repair workshop shows that the biggest benefit for marginalised people – and especially for refugees – is having an opportunity to spend time engaged in a meaningful activity, together with locals, in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. These events offer a sense of normalcy and belonging, and promote psychological well being.

Concerning empowerment, our experience shows that activities related to reuse of textiles and their creative upgrading have great potential to empower members of the LGBTQIA+ community. By offering a supportive environment and diverse clothing choices, they especially help those still transitioning or exploring their identities.

The most important advice for event organisers – if they want them to promote empowerment and social integration of marginalised and underprivileged people – is to ensure zero tolerance to racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. The volunteer coordinator has to seriously communicate these rules to volunteers in the induction process, and they should be ready – if need be – to communicate them directly to participants.

Creating an accepting and empowering atmosphere is something that requires continuous efforts, and is everyone's responsibility.

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