Module 6: The need for workers' rights in assembly and manufacturing

We need to demand respect for workers' rights and compliance with minimal workplace and environmental safety regulations in factories that make our digital devices.

Dirty in the beginning, shiny at the end

The manufacturing of market brands is usually done by original equipment manufacturers (OEMs). Working with these companies drives down the cost of production through economies of scale. Electronic components and what we call "assemblies" that are put together by OEMs are produced by electronics manufacturing services (EMS) companies, which in turn have suppliers of printed circuit boards and other electronics components.

Working conditions in electronics factories can be extreme. Workers sometimes migrate to different countries to work in factories, and may be deprived of their labour rights and rights of association. Some are even confined in the factories, under near slavery conditions.[1] The release of new products by top brands creates huge production peaks that can make working conditions even more extreme. Products may look shiny in the end, but are quite dirty in the beginning. As World Economy, Ecology and Development – WEED e.V. has noted

Over the past decades, the production process of PCs has been broken up into simple standardised steps and mainly relocated to low-income countries. In the Special Economic Zones of Asia and Mexico mostly female workers, who in many cases have migrated to the cities from the countryside, toil for very low wages.[2]

In many cases, a manufacturer's compliance with minimal work and environmental safety regulations does not appear on the product label.

What is being done?

The GoodElectronics Network, an international association of over 150 non-governmental organisations and trade unions, is demanding that the International Labour Organization's (ILO) "fundamental" conventions and additional ILO-based requirements for humane working conditions be implemented in the technology sector. Its demands include legal training for workers in the workplace, the abolition of informal working conditions, transparency throughout the supply chain, that brand-name companies take responsibility for their suppliers, and the complete avoidance of toxic substances in the manufacturing process.

Electronics Watch is an independent monitoring organisation that focuses on public procurement with public buyers in Europe, and on monitoring working conditions in Southeast Asia in collaboration with local labour organisations and individuals (see the case study for this module).

Footnotes

[1] Bormann, S., Krishnan, P., & Neuner, M. (2010). *Migration in a Digital Age – Migrant Workers in the Malaysian Electronics Industry: Case Studies on Jabil Circuit and Flextronics*. World Economy, Ecology and Development – WEED e.V. https://apmigration.ilo.org/resources/migration-in-a-digital-age-migrant-workers-in-the-malaysian-electronics-industry-case-studies-on-jabil-circuit-and-flextronics/at_download/file1

[2] Butollo, F., Kusch, J., & Laufer, T. (2009). *Buy IT fair: Guideline for sustainable procurement of computers*. World Economy, Ecology and Development – WEED e.V. https://goodelectronics.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2009/07/Buy-IT-Fair-Guideline-for-Sustainable-Procurement-of-Computers.pdf

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