




Weaving a Transformative Circular Textile Policy Through a Socio-Environmental Justice Lens

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Policy Highlights To achieve the recommendation stated in the title, we propose the following:

- Tackle overproduction and overconsumption in the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles.

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- Address the impacts of EU Circular Economy Textile policies on the Global South from both SSH and STEM perspectives to ensure positive social and environmental outcomes.
- Make Just Transition policies globally accountable and alleviation mechanisms integral to the Textile Strategy rather than supplementary corrective measures.
- Include meaningful participatory mechanisms that ensure the democratic inclusion of different voices and actors.
- Reverse the burden of proof and provide educational, financial, and legal assistance accounting for multiple vulnerabilities (e.g., gender or type of worker).

Keywords Circular Economy (CE) · Planetary boundaries · Environmental justice · EU textile strategy · Sustainability policies

INTRODUCTION

The way we produce and consume has a significant impact on both the environment and society. We are already overshooting six of the nine planetary boundaries (Richardson et al., 2023), risking irreversible environmental degradation and jeopardising the well-being of current and future generations. To address this, the Circular Economy (CE) concept is

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becoming a crucial narrative guiding international, national, and sectoral sustainability policies.

As one of the world's largest economies, the EU significantly influences global environmental and social conditions. One critical sector targeted by the European Green Deal is textiles, given that this sector ranks fourth for the highest impact on the environment and climate change, the third highest for water and land use, and fifth for primary raw materials (EEA, 2022). Additionally, from extraction to end-of-life, the textile sector remains labour-intensive, providing millions of jobs to workers in Europe and the Global South, where most textiles are produced and most textile waste is exported (Köhler et al., 2021). Furthermore, the sector is highly feminised, as women are overrepresented in the lowest-paying jobs (Fletcher & Tham, 2014).

The European Commission has developed a new EU strategy for sustainable and circular textiles to address these critical sustainability challenges. It aims to harmonise the European Green Deal, the Circular Economy Action Plan, and the European industrial strategy to develop a greener, more competitive textile sector. Despite these ambitious plans, there is a lack of research on the socio-ecological implications of these policies from a social and environmental justice perspective. This study addresses this research gap by answering the following question:

How Can EU Textile Policies Enable the Transition to a Fair and Sustainable Circular Society?

To answer this question, we analysed the EU Textile Strategy and 9 of the 25 actions in its annex, namely the directives, regulations, or communications with direct policy relevance. The remaining actions were either still in development and thus unavailable or were reports and working documents that did not evidence the EU's current policy. Further, we included the Just Transition Fund (Regulation (EU) 2021/1056), even though it is not part of the annex of the EU Textile Strategy. We analyse in total 11 EU policy documents (see Appendix 1).

The insights from our analysis are particularly relevant for policy-makers at the European Commission and researchers interested in CE governance.

The analysis consisted of three steps:

1. **Literature review** of policy research on the circular transition in the textile industry in the SSH and STEM fields
2. **Co-development of an interdisciplinary analytical framework** based on environmental justice, CE, sustainability, and post-growth literature applied to the textile sector: The framework was developed during a co-production workshop, where all chapter authors combined the insights from their specific SSH and/or STEM fields in a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach. The framework considers four justice dimensions, namely cognitive, distributive, procedural, and restorative, as well as environmental boundaries. For each dimension, a set of questions was created to evaluate the policies, which can be found in Appendix 2.
3. **Application of the interdisciplinary framework** to the chosen policies: Each policy's findings related to each dimension were summarised in an Excel sheet and colour-coded based on adequacy. Through an iterative process, multiple authors collaborated to collectively analyse and discuss the policy documents (see Appendix 3).

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Our interdisciplinary analytical framework contributes to developing a transformative and just CE transition in the textile value chain. A transformative CE could become a driver for systemic change away from present unsustainable production and consumption structures. A technical shift and a shift in values, behaviours, and institutional structures are needed to create a more regenerative, democratic, and equitable system. A transformative CE should empower the most vulnerable people and allow all humans to shape their society and future equitably (Calisto Friant et al., 2023; Suarez-Visbal et al., 2024).

Academics studying social and environmental justice have identified four core dimensions, namely cognitive, distributive, procedural, and restorative justice (Abram et al., 2022).

Recognitive justice is about who is recognised in a socio-ecological transition. It seeks to ensure that the views of the most marginalised people are heard and recognised (Parsons et al., 2021). Distributive

justice looks at the distribution of benefits and harms resulting from socio-ecological change. Procedural justice asks what procedures can prevent the creation or reproduction of injustice in transitions or bring justice to harmed communities. Restorative justice is about repairing harm caused by specific behaviour both on the social and ecological sides (McCauley & Heffron, 2018).

We added a fifth dimension to reflect the environmental boundaries of the Earth and the key role that more-than-human nature plays in a just transition (Sharpe et al., 2023). The dimension recognises that human beings are an integral part of nature and that nature is a subject of rights. A just and sustainable CE transition occurs when all five socio-ecological justice and sustainability dimensions are integrated, revealing multiple tensions and trade-offs that must be addressed and negotiated.

ANALYSIS OF RELEVANT EU POLICIES

This section describes the main insights from analysing the 11 selected EU policies (Fig. 3.1).

Environmental Dimension

The environmental dimension is present through initiatives to promote greater transparency to consumers regarding the impact of production and consumption or through the promotion of strategies on the value-retention hierarchy. However, higher value strategies such as refuse and reduce are largely missing.

Furthermore, no policies address the root causes of negative socio-ecological impacts, like overproduction, overconsumption, and excessive advertising (Sharpe et al., 2023). Although the EU CE Textile Strategy acknowledges that textiles are overproduced and overconsumed, none of the policies underlying the strategy address this.

While some policies mention planetary boundaries, none recognise that the EU lives beyond its fair share of planetary resources. The policies lack clear targets and limits to reduce overall environmental impacts, so the EU's footprint would fall within sustainable planetary boundaries.

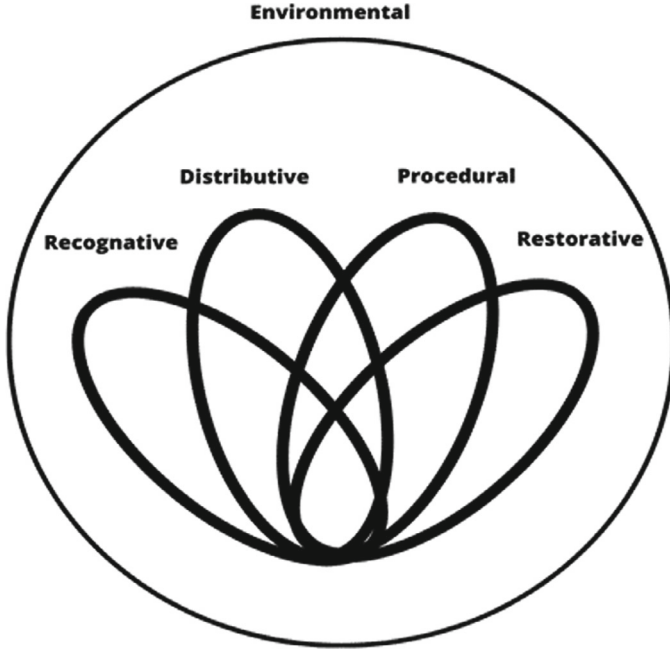


Fig. 3.1 Interdisciplinary analytical framework combining five interrelated and interconnected dimensions of socio-environmental justice (*Source* Modified from Härrri and Levänen [2024, 14])

Recognitive Dimension

Together, the policies will have a considerable impact on various stakeholders outside of the EU, as the majority of clothes sold in the EU are made in the Global South. Unfortunately, this is not adequately recognised in the policies.

Many people in the Global South are in vulnerable positions and lack resilience, especially workers in low-paying sectors (such as women and migrants) and people with limited access to education or upskilling. Some actors hold simultaneous vulnerabilities, such as being female, a refugee, or an undocumented waste picker. Furthermore, these vulnerabilities could be exacerbated depending on each country's labour security structure (Suarez-Visbal et al., 2024).

The Due Diligence Directive is the most inclusive of the analysed policies. It recognises the vulnerabilities of several actors but could benefit from explicitly recognising vulnerable countries, informal workers, ethnic minorities, and agricultural workers. These groups lack adequate recognition across all analysed policies. Informal workers are critical and need to be included as they are likely the most affected by e.g., the relocation of the industry to the Global North. Moreover, more provisions should include women across the different policies. In some policies, they are simply mentioned, but no tangible actions are taken to address their vulnerability.

Furthermore, most policies exclude Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) from responsibilities and risk the significant impacts caused by SMEs remaining unaddressed. Instead of exclusion, financial and technical support is needed to help them comply. The policies fail to account for the multiplicity of vulnerabilities and the multidimensional and contextual nature of discrimination, exploitation, and alienation. They provide an EU-centric idea of sustainable textiles that lacks alternative visions of the future, especially from affected peoples and ecosystems in the Global South.

Distributive Dimension

The policies have an unfair distribution of costs and benefits that will likely disproportionately affect the most vulnerable. Current policies focus mainly on severe social and environmental impacts (like forced labour) but do not challenge unsustainable business models and purchasing practices that foster social and environmental impacts in the value chain.

Although quality jobs are mentioned in 8 of the 11 policy documents, there is no comprehensive definition of what this entails, especially for workers outside the EU. Such a definition should include living wages, well-being, work-life balance, non-discrimination, collective bargaining, and inclusiveness.

The amendments to the Waste Directive underestimate the significant impact of implementing these policies on the Global South. EU policies risk negatively affecting their livelihood by not including SMEs or adequately recognising marginalised workers and textile waste pickers in the Global South. As textile waste currently ends up in the Global South, the eco-modulation of the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) fee should be increased to allow for the full and sustainable recovery of these

wastes, regardless of where they end up (Thapa et al., 2022). If textiles are exported for reuse or recovery in the Global South, they should be accompanied by financial and technical resources to ensure a second life or proper disposal.

The Green Deal considers the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) as a means to address the asymmetries of the zero carbon and circular transition. However, the EU Textile Strategy does not consider it an integral action. An extended globally accountable JTM could be incorporated into the policy package of the EU textile strategy. Additionally, a harmonised classification of “green activities” enabled through the “European taxonomy” should include environmental and social criteria in their evaluation, as the Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and several NGOs have already expressed.

Procedural Dimension

Our policy analysis revealed that throughout the 11 policy documents, there are very few participatory mechanisms to ensure that different actors are democratically included and given decision-making power in their transposition and implementation. There are also very few education and empowerment mechanisms that encourage greater understanding and participation of all voices.

Some policies establish consultation bodies, such as the eco-design forum of the Eco-design Regulation and the Committee established by the Directive on Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition. Moreover, some policies require third actors to carry out participatory mechanisms, such as the Due Diligence Directive, which asks companies to ensure stakeholder engagement while carrying out their due diligence duties. However, these participatory mechanisms are poorly described and defined in these policies. They may become simple ticking-the-box exercises and consultations that give very little tangible power for affected people to shape the decisions that affect them. The current policies are thus unlikely to ensure that the most marginalised voices are truly heard and have decision-making power.

Restorative Dimension

There is little to no support for the Global South to adapt to the multiple new provisions set by the policies of the textile strategy. Yet these policies

will likely significantly impact the most vulnerable suppliers, farmers, and formal and informal workers in the Global South, who will have to change their production practices and fulfil new administrative requirements. In addition to this, EU policies do not sufficiently encourage companies to transform their unsustainable purchasing practices and business models. Fast fashion strategies paying very low prices to producers and often forcing workers to overwork to fulfil short-term orders will thus likely continue. In these conditions, there will probably be little real transformation in textile value chains as the root causes of these socio-ecological problems are not addressed.

Furthermore, the legal liability for companies that commit social and environmental impacts is weak in the Due Diligence Directive because there are few tangible mechanisms to ensure access to justice for affected people, and there is no reversal of the burden of proof (affected people have to prove that a company has violated their human and environmental rights). This is especially problematic for the most vulnerable, marginalised, and discriminated people in the Global South, who often lack the knowledge, awareness, and financial resources to uphold their social and environmental rights.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 11 analysed policy instruments are an ambitious first step of policy commitment towards circularity. However, more emphasis must be placed on the scope, breadth, and depth of the actions proposed to generate tangible socio-ecological changes in the textile sector. This could be achieved with a transformative CE lens that redresses imbalances in the linear economic system, ensuring these legislations are truly fair, democratic, and sustainable. Though bridging the methodologies of STEM and SSH disciplines can pose communication barriers, the diverse perspectives ultimately cultivate synergies that drive progress and address complex challenges with depth and breadth.

More specifically:

The EU policies should acknowledge that current overproduction and overconsumption patterns are the root causes of current socio-ecological problems. The EU should establish clear targets and limits to reduce textile overproduction and ensure its ecological footprint stays within planetary boundaries.

There should be an increased recognition of the multiple lived realities and vulnerabilities of stakeholders affected by EU legislation (both within and outside the EU). This will help ensure that EU policies truly recognise the implications of their policies on marginalised, discriminated, and exploited people and establish sufficient mitigation measures to address them. A way to address this is by collecting disaggregated data on multiple vulnerabilities (e.g., gender, type of worker, etc.).

Since the current JTM fails to consider the global dimension, a globally accountable JTM should be incorporated into the policy package of the EU textile strategy. Moreover, the policies of the strategy are not sufficiently discouraging unsustainable business models and fast fashion—the key drivers of socio-ecological problems in the sector (Sharpe et al., 2023). It is thus key for the EU to provide greater financial, technical, and technological assistance and support for suppliers and countries in the Global South to transform their production practices sustainably.

Moreover, textile EPRs should have global accountability to cover all regions where EU textile waste is currently exported. This will ensure a collective Global responsibility to sustainably handle textile waste, regardless of where it ends up.

We found a general lack of sufficiently diverse stakeholder engagement and participation throughout all policies, especially including perspectives from marginalised people. EU policies should include meaningful participatory mechanisms to ensure that different voices are democratically included and given decision-making power (such as citizen assemblies and greater engagement with vulnerable people in the textile value chain). Such mechanisms should minimise asymmetries in power between different stakeholders and ensure the empowerment of the voices, interests, and visions of the most marginalised peoples from the Global North and South alike.

There is a general lack of access to justice and reparation for socio-environmental harm caused by EU companies in the Global South. To address this, EU policies should reverse the burden of proof so that affected stakeholders do not face unsurmountable legal challenges to prove their case. Moreover, the EU should provide educational, financial, and legal assistance to ensure access to justice for affected people.

APPENDIXES

Appendix 1

Suarez-Visbal, L., Calisto Friant, M., Corona Bellastos, B., Rosales Carreon, J., Härrri, A., Vermeyen, V., & Hendriks, A. (2024). *List of 11 analysed policy documents*. Zenodo. <https://zenodo.org/records/10783492>.

Appendix 2

Suarez-Visbal, L., Calisto Friant, M., Corona Bellastos, B., Rosales Carreon, J., Härrri, A., Vermeyen, V., & Hendriks, A. (2024). *Interdisciplinary analytical framework on the socio-ecological justice and sustainability implications of a circularity transition*. Zenodo. <https://zenodo.org/records/10847421>.

Appendix 3

Suarez-Visbal, L., Calisto Friant, M., Härrri, A., Vermeyen, V., Hendriks, A., Corona Bellastos, B., & Rosales Carreon, J. (2024) *Results of the interdisciplinary policy analysis*. Zenodo. <https://zenodo.org/records/10839063>.

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