

# Circular textiles

## Knitting the way to a sustainable future

### Key messages:

- Used textiles should be seen as a valuable resource to create new business opportunities and must be designed in a way that fosters repair, re-use and recycling, longer use, with a low impact on the environment.
- Guidance on how to ensure high levels of separate textile waste collection should be developed by the Commission, together with cities and other stakeholders, and a clear definition of textile waste should be included in the EU Textile Strategy.
- The Commission should introduce extended producer responsibility (EPR) schemes for textiles, where producers finance the eco-design of textiles, take-back schemes, the collection and sorting of used textiles, and recycling infrastructures.
- EU and national funding programmes should prioritise supporting cities to facilitate the creation of new circular businesses, invest in skilling and upskilling people into new circular jobs and test innovative economic models in partnership with local businesses, innovation stakeholders, academia, and SMEs. The EU should also support large-scale projects in pilot cities, including all the value chain actors, jointly engaging the public in large-scale collection efforts.
- The Commission could create an EU-wide platform to sell, buy and exchange reused/recycled textile fibres to stimulate secondary materials markets and help entrepreneurs.
- Economic and policy instruments should offer several opportunities to reduce virgin material use in textile products and influence the markets in favour of sustainable textiles.

Textiles are becoming an important issue for cities, as people generate more and more textile waste. City authorities are required to ensure separate collection of used textiles but have limited possibilities to put the textile waste generated to good use. This leads to 87% of these textiles ending up as waste in landfill or being incinerated at a considerable cost for the local authority.

Fashion is the second most polluting industry in the world, consuming 1.5 trillion litres of water annually, producing wastewater containing toxic substances and causing 20% of global clean water pollution.<sup>1</sup> 20,000 litres of water are needed to produce just 1kg of cotton. Plastics, used in synthetic fibres, end up in the oceans,

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/656296/EPRS\\_ATA%282020%29656296\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/656296/EPRS_ATA%282020%29656296_EN.pdf)

contaminating the food chain with microplastics, ending up in our plates. This industry has a reputation for poor working conditions, violation of human rights, excessive working hours, low wages and gender inequalities.<sup>2</sup>

Improving sustainable design for repair, reuse and recycling, promoting sustainable consumption, and circular business models, raising awareness and banning harmful substances, can ensure a more sustainable and environmentally-friendly fashion future.

## Better sorting and collection systems

As from 2025, cities will be obliged to ensure separate collection of textile waste. Many cities are already testing different collection systems such as door-to-door collection, recycling centres, separate containers, closed bags together with cardboard and paper or kerbside collection in separate bags. Once collected, cities have set up different revenue streams for textile waste: some sort and directly sell the used textiles to private contractors, some give it to Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), others reuse or recycle it themselves, and several export the used textiles within the EU or beyond. In countries where NGOs play an important role in collecting textiles, the new EU Strategy should not impede this. However, getting any revenue from these collected used textiles becomes more and more complex due to the decreasing quality of collected textiles.

We recommend that the European Commission works with city authorities and other stakeholders to develop guidance on how to increase separate collection of textile waste levels as well as on how to deal with these textiles as part of the EU Strategy for Textiles.<sup>3</sup> We also recommend better defining of textile waste, giving more clarity to cities. Finally, the Commission should support large-scale projects in pilot cities, including industry and retailers, collecting/sorting/reprocessing actors, and jointly engaging the public in large-scale collection efforts. These pilot projects should be carried out as public-private initiatives, demonstrating the value of collected streams.

## Better designed and cleaner textiles

Used textiles should be seen as a valuable resource to create new business opportunities. Textiles should be designed in a way that fosters repair, re-use and recycling. The Sustainable Products Initiative should include textiles to develop rules and requirements for durable and quality clothing. It is essential that new textiles are of high quality and can be used for a very long time. The EU Ecodesign directive should be strengthened: new criteria such as the number of washes that a 'durable garment' should last before being damaged could be considered. Requirements for producers to encourage products derived from recycled fibres should be included either in the extension of the Ecodesign directive or in the Sustainable Product Initiative.

Promotion of fibres that do not release harmful substances and microplastics in water should also be included in the Sustainable Products Initiative. Adding microplastic filters to household devices (washing machines) and industrial devices or adding extra treatments to wastewater are costly and not always effective. End-of-pipe solutions must only be temporary until textiles no longer release harmful substances. Preventing pollution at source must become the way forward. And when pollution remediation is still needed, the polluter pays principle should apply.

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<sup>2</sup> "Methodological overview of the social hotspots analysis used to identify the social risks Hotspots", 2020, Sustainability and Circularity in the Textile Value Chain - Global Stocktaking, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

<sup>3</sup> [Eurocities policy statement 'Circular Economy Action Plan: speeding up the green transition of the EU's economy'](#) (July 2020)

## Polluter pays principle

The Commission should introduce Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes for textiles, in which producers finance the eco-design of textiles, take-back schemes, the collection and sorting of used textiles, recycling infrastructures and the development of new processing methods. Given the growing volume of used textiles generated and the increasing pressure on sorting facilities, large shops should take back used textiles and provide space in their premises to rent, repair and/or sell second-hand clothes as well as promote these possibilities, to prevent a large fraction of used textile from being labelled as waste. A company offering these services could receive a reduction in its EPR fees.

EPR schemes are a driver for innovation and would incentivise industries to develop innovative solutions to reduce the harmful impacts of their products on the environment. EPR schemes already exist in French cities, which can serve as inspiration for action at European level. These schemes should always be developed in cooperation with local authorities and other relevant actors to ensure transparency and efficiency. EPR schemes could also provide strong financial incentives for upstream change and innovation. They can stimulate new economic activities and new circular business models for local repair, sharing and reuse instead of encouraging the export of used textiles.

## Circular textile business models

The new EU Sustainable Textile Strategy should support the development of circular business models and resource management systems that keep textiles in circulation. Cities can become circular labs: a space to share, experiment, test new ideas, new solutions, new business models, and create new jobs, also for people the furthest away from the labour market. Cities can implement systemic approaches and connect environmental goals with economic and social objectives, including fighting social exclusion. EU and national funding programmes should prioritise supporting cities to facilitate the creation of new circular businesses, invest in skilling and upskilling people into new circular jobs and test innovative economic models in partnership with local businesses, innovation stakeholders, academia, and SMEs.

The European Commission should promote and support dialogue and close cooperation between all the stakeholders of the textile value chain, e.g. cities, textile industry, retailers, NGOs, small businesses, citizens and social enterprises, to share knowledge and boost innovative solutions.

Economic and policy instruments such as taxes, levies, or value-added tax (VAT) adjustments on repair and reuse services or product-as-service models, can offer several opportunities to reduce virgin material use in textile products and influence the markets in favour of sustainable textiles. Any fabric entering the EU market should fulfil the new sustainable EU-standard for textiles to avoid unfair competition.

## Market dynamics

Many circular business models also depend on the capacity to stimulate demand for reused and recycled materials. Some cities are already making clear commitments to use more recycled inputs in municipal purchases, often using sustainable public procurement. Cities can be actors of change through their purchasing power and public buyers. But more guidance on sustainable public procurement is needed. The Commission should consider not only the ways in which public procurement can accelerate the development of environmentally responsible business models, but also of socially responsible ones.

The new EU Textile Strategy must support the demand for used textiles in Europe by creating a market for secondary materials. Finding stable suppliers of reuse/recycled fibres can be complex for local entrepreneurs. The Commission could create an EU-wide platform to sell, buy and exchange reuse/recycled textile fibres to stimulate secondary materials markets and help entrepreneurs. One option would be to oblige producers to use a percentage of recycled/recycled fibres in their products. More research should be undertaken on high-grade recycling to avoid downcycling of materials and products (e.g. textile fibres being downcycled in insulation), and the Commission should drive R&D investments towards high-grade technologies to bring them closer to the market.

The definition of 'sustainable textiles' is still open to debate and while it currently considers the impact of textile on the environment, a more holistic definition (social impact, health issue, sustainability, reparability, durability) is needed to ensure that textile products are fit for circularity.

## Sustainable consumption

The average EU citizen consumes nearly 26 kilos of textiles every year and throws away about 11 kilos, with 40% more clothes bought in the EU per person since 1996.<sup>4</sup> To encourage more sustainable textile use, reduce production and consumption, use garments longer, and better maintain clothing, four actions are needed:

- **Raising consumer awareness:** campaigns should be run by the Commission with cities to inform consumers about the impact of their consumption behaviours to shift from the fast fashion 'buy-use-discard' shopping habits to more sustainable behaviours. Consumers should be informed about the available options within their cities to promote exchange of clothes and reuse, repair and recycling, e.g. repair cafés, textile-as-service shops, flea markets, correct disposal methods.
- **Citizen participation and behavioural change:** citizens want user-friendly solutions and be involved in developing them. This ownership could also enable behaviour change. Some cities have put in place local pilot projects to encourage more sustainable behaviour: a project was launched in Sweden challenging citizens to consume only sustainable fashion.<sup>5</sup> The Commission should support behaviour change projects related to sustainable consumption of textiles.
- **Increase transparency and labelling:** consumers should be able to access clear and transparent information about the footprint of their textile products, e.g. origins, components, production processes and production sites, water use, working conditions. Such labelling would help trace the origins of garments and help the sorting of materials. The Commission should envisage standardised quality criteria and labelling of textile products in the same way as the energy labels on household appliances and nutrition labels on food products, taking into consideration the environmental, social and health impact on the whole value-chain. The EU ecolabel can then be further developed and used as a minimum standard for production or import of textiles.
- **Better laundry instructions on washing and drying options:** maintaining textile products in good condition to allow longer use can have a huge impact on the use of raw materials and resources. In the future EU Textile Strategy, the Commission should put forward requirements for textile products to contain information on care, e.g. airing, washing and drying, but also on repair.

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<sup>4</sup> European Parliament 'The impact of textile production and waste on the environment' (March 2021)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.swedishfashioncouncil.se/fact-movement>

## Export of used textiles

Used textiles should, as far as possible, be handled within the EU's borders. The infrastructure must be optimised to establish capacity for pre-sorting, sorting and recycling of textiles. Keeping the materials in Europe via reuse and recycling is crucial and would foster local demand and create local jobs.

European countries should not export textile waste to any third country. As a last resort, minimum quality requirements of foreseen use should apply when exporting, so the textile burning issue in Europe is not exported beyond EU borders.

The EU should work closely with trusted partners to support the receiving countries with the adequate recycling systems if it is to lead the circular transition on a global scale, as announced in the new Circular Economy Action Plan (2020).