



Fashion and the SDGs: what role for the UN?



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The fashion industry in numbers

The fashion or apparel industry has an often underestimated impact on the development of our planet. This \$2.5 trillion-dollar industry¹ consumes large amounts of water, and is responsible for 20 percent of industrial water pollution². The production of one cotton shirt requires on average 2700 Litres – the amount a person drinks in 2.5 years. An estimated 10 percent of the global greenhouse gas emissions are emitted by the fashion industry and cotton farming consumes 4% of worldwide nitrogen fertilizers and phosphorous, 16% of all insecticides, and 7% of all herbicides³. As far as waste is concerned, 73 percent of materials used for clothing end up in landfills or are incinerated⁴. Beyond the environmental impact, the fashion industry is closely linked to labour, gender and poverty issues. An estimated 1 in 6 people in the world works in a fashion related job, and up to 80 percent of the labour force throughout the supply chain are women⁵.

While the impact of the fashion industry is already significant today, it is likely to increase even further in the upcoming decades. The average consumer is now purchasing 60 percent more items of clothing compared to 2000, but each garment

¹ McKinsey (2019). FashionScope analysis 2019.

² Kant, R. (2012). Textile dyeing industry an environmental hazard. *Natural Science*, 04(01), 22-26. doi: 10.4236/ns.2012.41004; cited in Ellen McArthur Foundation (2017). *Circular Fashion - A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning fashion's future*. Retrieved from <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/publications/a-new-textiles-economy-redesigning-fashions-future>

³ Global Fashion Agenda and Boston Consulting Group "Pulse of the Fashion Industry" Report, 2018

⁴ Ellen McArthur Foundation (2017). *Circular Fashion - A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning fashion's future*. Retrieved from <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/publications/a-new-textiles-economy-redesigning-fashions-future>

⁵ Stotz, L., & Kane, G. (2015). *General Factsheet Garment Industry February 2015*. Retrieved from <https://cleanclothes.org/resources/publications/factsheets/general-factsheet-garment-industry-february-2015.pdf/view>

is kept half as long⁶. By 2030, there will be an estimated 5.4 billion people in the global middle class, up from 3 billion in 2015⁷. This will lead to an increased demand for clothes and other goods that define middle-income lifestyles. If consumption continues at its current rate, there will be three times as many natural resources needed by 2050 compared to what was used in 2000.



The link to the SDGs

Having these numbers in mind, it becomes clear that the development of the fashion industry has a significant impact on the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). **SDG 12** in particular commits to ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns and is structured over eight targets, addressing the use of natural resources, chemical waste, fossil fuels and the integration of sustainable practices into the production cycles – all of which apply to the fashion industry. However, it is not only producers who can make a difference. Target eight under this goal addresses the consumer's right to be informed so as to be better aware of sustainable development issues – an area almost untouched by the fashion industry.

Improving the working conditions of 'fashion workers' is an important starting point for the achievement of **SDG 8** – to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. With respect to the environmental dimension, numerous targets under various SDGs are directly affected by the apparel industry: **SDG 6** relates to water pollution, the release of hazardous chemicals and materials, treatment of wastewater and water-use efficiency. **SDG 13** stresses to 'take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts'. With textile production generating more greenhouse gas emission than all international flights and maritime shipping combined, the fashion industry is a key sector for this SDG. **SDG 14** addresses the issue of marine pollution such as microfibers and microplastics released into the oceans from cloth washing. Furthermore, cotton production across the globe severely degrades soil quality, which calls for restoration as committed to by target three under **SDG 15**.

The social dimension of the fashion industry is directly linked to **SDG 5** on gender equality, but also **SDG 1** on eradicating poverty is influenced for instance by the

⁶ McKinsey (2016). Style that's sustainable: a new fast-fashion formula. Retrieved from: <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/sustainability/our-insights/style-thats-sustainable-a-new-fast-fashion-formula#>

⁷ Kharas, H. (2017). The unprecedented expansion of the global middle class – an update. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/global_20170228_global-middle-class.pdf

salaries paid to millions of people working in the apparel industry in developing countries. Further linkages between the fashion industry and the SDGs can be drawn by looking at the health impacts of chemicals used in the production process on workers as well as communities affected by environmental pollution (**SDG 3** on good health and well-being) or by looking at the recycling of clothing (target six on waste management under **SDG 11** on Sustainable Cities and Communities). In short, the majority of the SDGs are directly linked to the fashion industry.

What the UN is doing

Within the UN system, several organizations have addressed certain aspects of the fashion industry. For instance, the International Trade Centre (**ITC**) founded the Ethical Fashion Initiative in 2009, which connects marginalised artisans from the developing world – the majority of them women – to international fashion houses for mutual benefit. Furthermore, ITC's Clothing and Textiles Sector provides assistance to developing countries' small and medium enterprises to compete in changing and challenging markets. **UN Environment** addresses the fashion industry in the areas of Sustainable Consumption and Production, sound chemicals management, sustainable lifestyles and circular economy (which cover a range of sectors). The International Labour Organisation (**ILO**) advocates and actively works on improving working conditions in the textiles, clothing, leather, and footwear sector. The **UN Global Compact** launched in 2012 the first industry-specific sustainability initiative for fashion by collaborating with the Nordic Fashion Association, who published a Code of Conduct for the fashion industry. They are now working with apparel companies on water, supply chain and health issues, among others. The UN Economic Commission for Europe (**UNECE**) organised, in cooperation with **FAO**, on the occasion of the 2014 International Day of Forests, a well-attended panel discussion and fashion show that highlighted the importance of forest products for the sustainability of the sector. Discussions were supported by an expert study on the sustainability of forest fibers. In addition, the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business has produced background papers and events on the topic of transparency and traceability in the textile sector. With respect to human rights, the **UN Human Rights Council** endorsed in 2011 the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights – a set of guidelines to prevent, address and remedy human rights abuses committed in business operations – which addresses all States and companies, thus including the apparel industry. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (**UNFCCC**) convened stakeholders from the fashion industry at a Dialogue on Fashion and Climate Action to explore the establishment of collaborative approaches necessary for the industry to contribute to global net-zero emissions by 2050. Other UN agencies and organizations have conducted research and published studies on certain, specific impacts of the apparel industry.

Despite the variety of efforts by different UN institutions, so far, the UN has not taken a comprehensive approach to address all aspects of a sustainable fashion industry. This is surprising given the importance of this industry in reaching the SDGs as outlined above. Changing the production and consumption patterns of the fashion industry, would have a domino effect on many aspects of development and provide a visible and meaningful contribution to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Objectives

Gather the UN organizations that address issues related to sustainable fashion to brainstorm and discuss how the UN could reach a comprehensive, coherent and coordinated approach towards the development of a sustainable fashion industry in order to contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Who is invited

- Representatives of different UN organizations
- Representatives of countries including ambassadors and participants from Permanent Missions
- Stakeholders from the private sector
- General public (registration needed)

Expected results

- A clear link between the fashion industry and the SDGs is established with the ultimate aim to create a UN sustainable fashion partnership to address this issue in a coherent way.
- Recommendations for next steps on how to coordinate action at the UN level



Programme

Thursday, March 1st 2018, 1:15- 2:45 PM

Sandwiches and light drinks will be served at 1:00

You will be welcomed by models wearing sustainable clothes from **the PEFC certified Forest 4 Fashion collection**. Models will be happy to explain to you how innovative and sustainable their clothes are.

Welcome and opening remarks

Olga Algayerova, Executive Secretary, UNECE

Moderation

Paola Deda, UNECE

Setting the scene

How fashion is linked to the SDGs
Birgit Lia Altmann, UNECE

Expert Panel – Pitch Presentations:

Panellists will be asked to answer two questions with a 3min pitch presentation

UN Panelists

1. *How does your organization address sustainable fashion?*
2. *How can the UN work more coherently to address the issue in the context of the SDGs?*

Irena Zubcevic, Chief, Small Island Developing States, Oceans and Climate Branch, Division for Sustainable Development, UNDESA

Simone Cipriani, Head of the Ethical Fashion Initiative, ITC

Maria Beatriz Mello da Cunha, Sector specialist: Textiles, clothing, leather, footwear, Manufacturing, Mining and Energy Unit, ILO

Michael Stanley-Jones, Programme Management Officer, UN Environment

Lilian Liu, Manager of Partnerships, UN Global Compact (joining via skype from New York)

Niclas Svenningsen, Manager of Strategy and Relationships, UNFCCC (joining via skype from Bonn)

Stakeholders

1. *How does your organization address sustainable fashion?*
2. *How can the UN help you more in the pursuit of your goals on sustainable fashion in the context of the SDGs?*

Xenya Cherny-Scanlon, Founder and CEO, Green Stilettos

Paolo Naldini, Director Cittadellarte, Fashion B.E.S.T., Italy

Sarah Price, Head of Projects & Development, PEFC

Panel Discussion:

Panellists discuss recommendations for next steps on how to coordinate action at the UN level

Conclusions

Monika Linn, Principal Adviser & Chief, Sustainable Development and Gender Unit, UNECE

Closing remarks

Marie Chatardová, President of ECOSOC