



Vision for a New Fashion Season: Social and Circular



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RREUSE is an international non-profit network representing social enterprises active in the field of re-use, repair and recycling. Over half of RREUSE's 27 members work with used textiles, collectively managing 260 000 tonnes across Europe annually¹. With local re-use at the heart of their activities, social enterprises running textile collection, sorting, repair, resale and upcycling operations provide job and training opportunities for people distanced from the labour market or at risk of socio-economic exclusion.

Each EU citizen consumes a staggering 26 kg of textiles per year on average with the textile supply chain responsible for 15 % of primary raw material consumption of EU households². The 'fast fashion' phenomenon shapes the way we consume clothes and has soared per capita sales³. Overconsumption and insufficient regulation on circularity has led to increased volumes of low quality textiles, unfit for re-use let alone recycling.

With textiles rightly rising as a key priority under the new European Commission⁴ this document outlines RREUSE's vision on how to achieve a more inclusive and circular textile sector⁵ that prioritises re-use and emphasises the role of social enterprises in the value chain as part of the solution. This paper also provides a number of key recommendations as to what specific actions the Commission should address when developing policy initiatives for the sector.

Challenges in managing used textiles today

Increasing amounts of low quality textiles put on the market are not fit for re-use. This is a major factor disrupting the current economic model of used textiles management. Today, the collection and treatment of used textiles is principally financed by the sale of second-hand clothes. Costs incurred through disposal of non-reusable textiles combined with limited markets for textile recycling are important factors affecting the ability of used textile operators to make ends meet.

Over the coming years a number of major changes, challenges and opportunities will present themselves as a result of updated EU waste law. From 2025, EU Member States will be obliged to collect textiles separately⁶, which is a positive step towards capturing their value and putting it back into circulation. However, without improving garment quality, addressing consumption levels (i.e. quantity) and cost of non-reusable textiles, mandatory separate collection will increase economic challenges and continue disrupting current business models focussed on re-use.

In this ever-changing landscape it is clear that the role of producers in financing change towards circularity must be significantly enhanced. What is equally clear is that within future legal frameworks for the textile industry, that may include the use of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), the role of social enterprises in used textiles management must be clearly supported and recognised to preserve re-use activities and associated social benefits.

- *Between 2000 and 2015, global clothing production doubled from 50 bn units to 100 bn units. More than 50 % of 'fast fashion' produced is disposed in less than a year⁷.*
- *On average, textiles collected in Europe have a local re-use potential of 5 - 15 % and a further international re-use potential of at least 30 – 40 %. Another 30 - 40 % is destined for recycling and 10 – 15 % must be disposed of at the cost of collectors⁸.*

Our vision: Fashion with a future

Social actors are here to stay: Textile collections by social enterprises should be promoted as an integral part of the circular value chain. Social enterprises provide a unique capacity in developing local re-use practices while creating tangible social and economic benefits for communities around them. They reinject profits made to further develop their operations and create job opportunities for individuals at risk of socio-economic exclusion. Furthermore, citizens strongly link textile donations to social objectives, boosting their motivation to hand out unwanted clothes rather than throwing them away⁹.

- *Textile collection, sorting and sales of second-hand clothes can create locally 20 jobs per 1,000 tonnes of used clothes and shoes. Rather than landfilling or incinerating, collecting and sorting the 6 million tonnes of clothing waste in Europe would create about 120,000 local jobs in this field¹⁰.*

Re-use first: We cannot recycle our way out of the waste problem. Current possibilities to recycle textiles into high value products are scarce and in most cases the mechanically recycled fibres can only be recycled once¹¹. However, garment lifetime can increase by incentivising quality products, promoting their longer use, supporting donations and buying second-hand. These practices provide far greater environmental benefits than recycling and incineration, and are effective in reducing our carbon footprint¹².

- *Buying a used clothing item instead of a new one reduces its carbon footprint by 82 %¹³.*

Outwearing a throw-away culture: Consumers are increasingly concerned about conditions in which their clothes are made and subsequent impacts. However, complex consumption patterns maintain the gap between awareness and action, making it difficult to adopt new habits. Buyers need a strong impetus to re-discover the value of clothes through convenient and affordable alternatives inspiring them to buy less.

- *Different surveys show that 51 % of consumers plan to spend more on second-hand textiles in the next 5 years¹⁴ and 75 % of consumers view sustainability as extremely or very important when buying fashion¹⁵.*

Business must change: Current business models based on fast fashion should be phased out while resource efficiency should become the new norm. Future business models will have to respect the planet's boundaries to help avoid a 'trajectory of the industry that points to the potential for catastrophic outcomes.'¹⁶

- *It is estimated that globally, the full lifecycle of clothing has an annual carbon footprint of 3.3 billion tonnes CO2e which is close to the combined carbon footprint of all 28 current EU members (3.5 billion tonnes)¹⁷.*

Joining forces: Partnerships along the textile value chain together with social enterprise should boom and connect actors with different know-how to maximise sustainable production and consumption.

A stitch in time saves nine: Let's fix the system together

We encourage the EU institutions to

- **Maintain Textiles as a priority in a new Circular Economy Action Plan¹⁸**
- **Create a Textiles Action Plan** containing concrete measures on waste prevention and its financing by producers. Aiming at boosting re-use, primarily in cooperation with social enterprises and municipalities, these measures should include support for separate collection, cost-coverage of non-reusable textiles, innovation for local re-use, increased consumer participation in maintenance and creativity, management of textile over-stock and customer returns. Special attention should also be given to ensuring durability and quality of textile through binding eco-design type measures at EU level as well as economic measures including reduced taxation favouring the sale and donation of used goods¹⁹.
- **Carry out an impact assessment concerning separate collection obligations for textiles** under the new Waste Framework Directive, taking into account associated environmental, social and economic impacts on used-textile management operators.
- **Create an Expert working group on the textile chain**, potentially by extending the scope of the existing European Commission's Expert Group on Textile Names and Labelling²⁰. The group should involve all actors of the value chain and focus on both product design and end-of-life solutions for textiles. Similar groups should be installed at national level.
- **Continue work on Social and Green Public Procurement** that also focuses on textile collection and management services, in particular to promote the use of social clauses and reserved contracts to social enterprises in public tenders²¹.
- **Insist on transparency in the textile chain**, from production through to re-use and recycling, so clarity is given to the consumer about where products come from, under what conditions, and where donated clothing and profits end up.

Social enterprises are key in addressing a circular fashion culture

RREUSE and its members are well-placed and ready to engage with EU institutions, policy makers and key stakeholders on making fashion more social and circular, both through policy and practice. Of particular note social enterprises active in used textile management are already delivering significant environmental and social impact and can contribute to the paradigm shift that is needed through:

- **Offering a readily available alternative consumption model** clearly showing citizens how to contribute to a better world by donating to social enterprises and buying second-hand.
- **Having a wealth of hands-on experience** including specific know-how on logistics, technical aspects of re-use and repair, local policies, consumer and community engagement in various countries across Europe.
- **Managing existing textile collection and re-use activities** can help fulfil the upcoming collection obligation together with municipalities, simultaneously boosting local employment.
- **Adding a social dimension to emerging businesses models** including take-back schemes, repair, sharing and repurposing, with various RREUSE members involved in pilot partnerships with private brands and retailers on textile waste prevention.

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About RREUSE

[RREUSE](#) is an international network of social enterprises which put service to the environment and community at the heart of their activities in re-use, repair and recycling. RREUSE currently federates 27 member organisations across 25 European countries and the USA. RREUSE members are primarily individual social enterprises or their regional and national networks, whose aim is to create training and employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups of people through activities in the circular economy.

References

¹ RREUSE 2018 Impact & Activity Report – Available [here](#)

² European Environment Agency (2019) Textiles in Europe's circular economy – Available [here](#); 'Textiles' includes clothing, footwear and household textiles (carpets, curtains, bedlinen, towels, etc.) 'Textiles supply chain' includes all activities in industrial and service sectors in the production and supply chain of textile products up to purchase by households. It excludes the use of textile products and end-of-life.

³ Ellen McArthur Foundation (2017) A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning Fashion's Future – Available [here](#)

⁴ European Commission COM (2019) 640: The European Green Deal - Available [here](#); Ursula von der Leyen (2019) A Union that strives for more: My agenda for Europe – Available [here](#)

⁵ This vision paper considers 'textiles' primarily as clothing, home textiles, work wear, shoes and accessories.

⁶ According to the revision of the EU Waste Framework Directive (EU) 2018/851 of 30 May 2018 amending Directive 2008/98/EC on waste – Available [here](#)

⁷ Ellen McArthur Foundation (2017) A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning Fashion's Future – Available [here](#)

⁸ Based on experience of the RREUSE network, data from EcoTic and the OUVERT project

⁹ TRAID (2019) Taking stock – Available [here](#)

¹⁰ RREUSE (2016) Ethical principles for the clothing re-use sector – Available [here](#); RREUSE (2015) Re-use has higher employment potential than recycling – Available [here](#)

¹¹ UK House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (2019) Fixing fashion clothing consumption and sustainability – Available [here](#)

¹² Norden (2016) Gaining benefits from discarded textiles: LCA of different treatment pathways – Available [here](#)

¹³ ThredUp (2019) Resale report – Available [here](#)

¹⁴ ThredUp (2019) Resale report – Available [here](#)

¹⁵ Global Fashion Agenda (2019) Pulse of the Fashion industry 2019 Update – Available [here](#)

¹⁶ Ellen McArthur Foundation (2017) A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning Fashion's Future – Available [here](#)

¹⁷ UK House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (2019) Fixing fashion clothing consumption and sustainability – Available [here](#)

¹⁸ European Commission COM (2019) 640: The European Green Deal - Available [here](#); Ursula von der Leyen (2019) A Union that strives for more: My agenda for Europe – Available [here](#); Council of the European Union (2019) More circularity - Transition to a sustainable society: Council conclusions – Available [here](#)

¹⁹ RREUSE (2017) Position paper on Reduced taxation to support re-use and repair – Available [here](#)

²⁰ Commission Expert Group on Textile Names and Labelling (E02773) – See [here](#)

²¹ RREUSE (2019) Social public procurement for environmental services: examples from the RREUSE network and beyond - Available [here](#)

Further reading:

European Parliament (2019) Environmental impact of textile and clothes industry – Available [here](#)