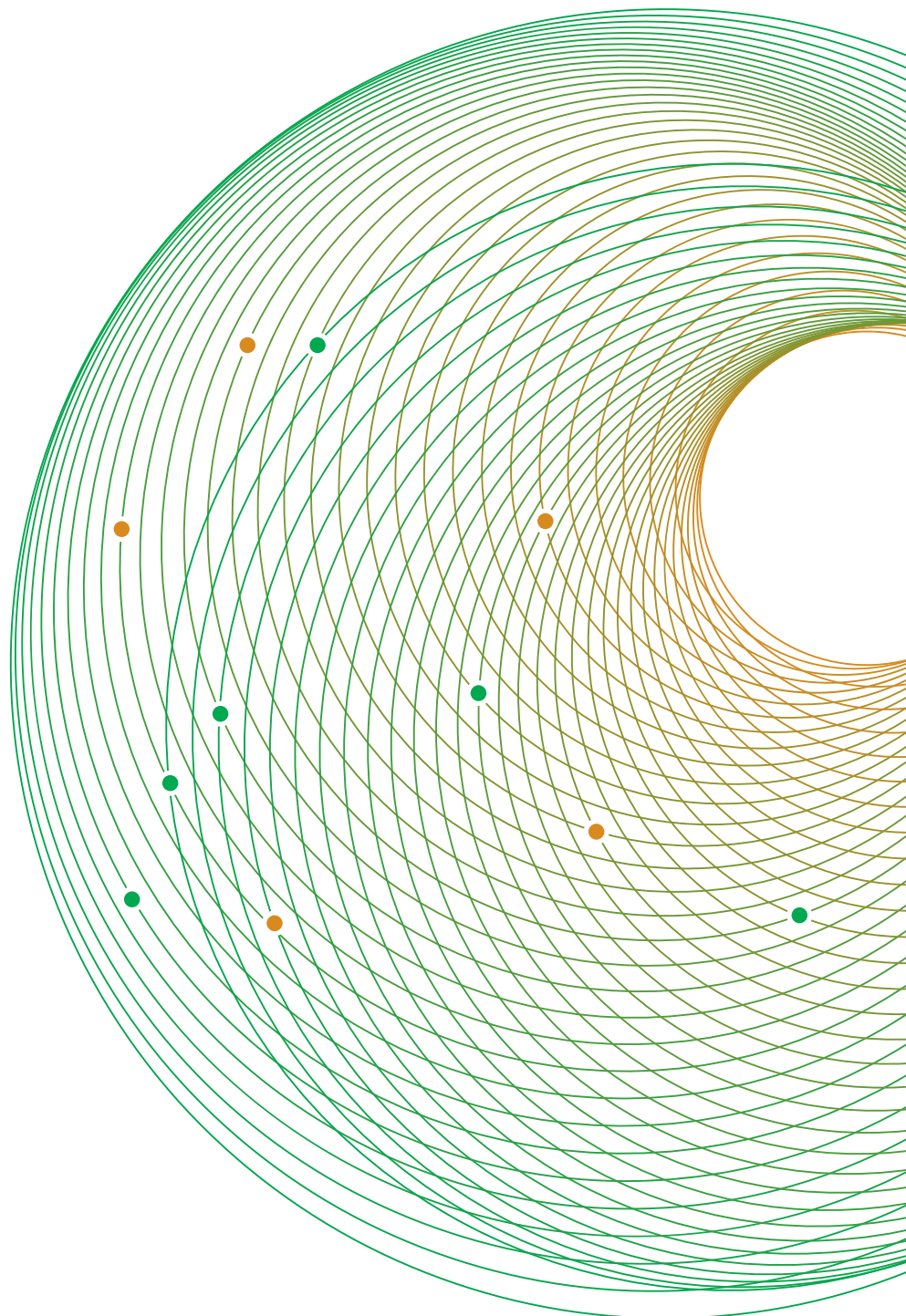




CONNECTING THE DOTS: Creating an Enabling Environment for SDG12 in ASEM

Stream 3: Sustainable Garments | **POLICY BRIEF**

Garments Sustainability in Asia and Europe



Introduction

Garments are a fundamental part of everyday life and an essential sector in the global economy. The global clothing industry is valued over USD 1.7 trillion and employs more than 300 million people along its value chains.

Negative environmental and social impacts characterise garments life-cycle in Asia and Europe. The fashion industry alone is the second-largest consumer of water in the world (1.5 trillion litres per year), responsible for ~20% of industrial water pollution from textile treatment and dyeing, and contributing to ~35% (190,000 tonnes per year) of oceanic primary microplastic pollution. Furthermore, the industry produces up to 10% of global CO₂ emissions (>1.7 billion tonnes annually) as well as vast quantities of textile waste (>92 million tonnes per year), much of which is landfilled or incinerated.

The number of garments produced annually in the world has doubled since 2000 with, in 2016, over 150 billion items produced, corresponding to nearly 20 new items of clothing per person on Earth. In the same period, clothing utilisation declined by 36% globally, and up to 70% in China. One of the drivers of these trends is the ‘fast fashion’ phenomenon, with a quicker turnaround of new styles, increased number of collections offered per year, and lower prices. This fosters overproduction, with around 30% of garments produced annually never sold.

The EU’s textiles industry is the fourth-largest cause of environmental pressures after food, housing, and transport. Much of this impact is attributed to a large portion of the textiles consumed in Europe, which are produced elsewhere in the world, mostly in Asia. Production of garments takes place, to a large extent, in Asia – accounting for over 50% of the world’s supply of fibres and fabrics - while much of consumption takes place in Europe and the US. In recent years, the shares of clothing exports have been growing exponentially in countries such as Cambodia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam and India, while decreasing in China. This geographic distribution implies that environmental impacts typical of the initial stages of fibre productions and garments manufacturing, such as water and energy use, are largely generated in Asia. On the other hand, impacts related to the use and disposal of garments are largely generated in Europe or exported.

More effective legislation for improved working conditions, as well as ensuring transparency throughout garment value chains is needed both in Asia and in Europe. Europe plays an important role to support Asia’s garment industry to shift towards Sustainable Consumption Production and a more circular economy approach.

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New business models in more circular textile systems have potential to reduce unsustainable manufacturing, distribution and use of garments while preserving economic benefits and employment opportunities. These models are based on a design for longevity, resource-efficient production, digitalisation, more durable products, maintenance and repair services, recycling and upcycling. Their implementation requires consumers education and behavioural change, as well as tailored policy options to be put in place. In the next section, we will outline the overall outcome of our policy discussions at the 2020 ENVforum Annual Conference. In the successive four sections, we will illustrate which positive trends in relation to Sustainable Garments should be kept or scaled up, and which negative trends should be improved or discarded altogether.

II. How to implement Sustainable Garments at the national level

WHAT TO KEEP

For implementing more sustainable garments production and consumption systems, these are the current trends that we need to keep. First of all, the rising interest on the sector to switch towards more sustainable and fair models is shaping up an environment where it is easier and more feasible to implement circular business models and find sustainable solutions to production and consumption needs. Researchers, institutions, and other organisations are focusing on sustainable garments and textiles both in terms of assessing and mitigating its impacts. Notably, the European Commission has identified textiles, including garments, as a priority product category in the new EU Circular Economy Action Plan, as part of the European Green Deal adopted in 2019. This ensures that separate collection of textiles will have to be implemented by EU countries by 2025. Positive trends on the promotion of technological innovation and eco-design to switch to renewable or sustainable materials are also to be kept and reinforced, in particular with regard to eco-design guidelines and durability standards. The rising trend in second-hand stores, rental services, and other circular models is signalling the potential for a transition to less impactful consumption modes and the economic opportunities that this transition can bring about.

WHAT TO DISCARD

Just as there is a range of current trends that should be kept to implement sustainable garment systems, there are also trends or features that should be completely discarded. First of all, the negative environmental and social impacts that characterise garments value-chains have to be reduced. Equally important is reversing fast-fashion trends that are driving rising consumption and overproduction of garments both in Asia and in Europe. With fast-growing middle classes and increasing portions of disposable income in Asia, the domestic consumer markets for textile and garments of formerly purely export-oriented manufacturing countries are increasingly moving in the interest of domestic and international brands. If not reversed, these trends would undermine advances in terms of eco-design and durability, sustainable consumers behaviour, as well as improved recyclability and more effective waste management. Furthermore, the myth of consumers as the only possible solution to the problem of unsustainable garment systems has to be exposed, highlighting responsibilities from producers across the value chain that can operationalise systemic changes in production processes, brand and retailers that can influence purchasing behaviour through value proposition and marketing, and to governments creating the right policies to enable conditions and incentives and ensuring regulations are implemented.

WHAT TO IMPROVE

There are several factors that require improvement in policy and practice in order to accelerate the implementation of sustainable garment systems. Increasing transparency along value chains is essential, as lack of data and traceability remains a major obstacle to impact assessment, effective regulation, as well as for providing consumers with the right tools for making informed purchasing decisions. Improved transparency would also enable more meaningful stakeholder engagement in all stages of the product life cycle. On the same vein, the business sector has to take further responsibility for purchasing practices and garments end-of-life through, for example, the implementation of extended producer responsibility schemes. Coherence across policy tools also needs to be improved, both in terms of coherence of tools that work at different stages of the value chain, and tools referred to different national contexts. Furthermore, there is an urgent need for improved product regulation, including enabling conditions and incentives towards more efficient production processes.

WHAT TO SCALE UP

Finally, some positive trends and initiatives, as well as effective policies with regard to sustainable garments, require scaling up to be a game-changer in the context of Asia and Europe. Existing inclusive dialogue structures across stakeholders could be extended to further value-chains. Similarly, scaling-up successful partnerships of stakeholders towards sustainable garment consumption and production along the value chain would inspire systems change by highlighting opportunities and synergies. With regard to environmen-

tal impacts, the adoption of eco-labelling schemes following international standards needs to be mainstreamed. With regard to social impacts, human rights due diligence regulations have to scale-up by means of cooperation and coordination of efforts. Scaling-up remedy systems for negatively impacted rights-holders throughout the value-chains and life-cycle of garments would provide further incentives and obligations to mitigate environmental and social impacts in the sector. Building capacity to adopt cleaner technologies and sustainable industrial practices, as well as increasing consumer awareness towards sustainable lifestyles, are needed for implementing circular and more sustainable garment systems.

III. How to implement Sustainable Garments at the global level

Due to the global scale of the garments sector, and the complexity of its value-chains, the implementation of sustainable garments at the global level is both a challenge and an absolute necessity. With most of the production taking place in Asia, and most of the consumption taking place in Europe, the allocation of impacts to consumers or producers returns a very different picture on who is contributing, and to what extent, to global issues such as climate change. In this context, international cooperation and coherent policies across countries are essential for producing sustainable models. The adoption of cleaner and more fair production systems in Asia could mitigate overconsumption in Europe by influencing prices, garments quality and durability. Taxing resource use and accounting environmental and social externalities would also act in this direction. Extending producers responsibility in the global market is one policy option with high potential, as well as the regulation on incineration, landfill, and trade of used garments and waste.

Taken together, these steps to keep positive trends, discard negative factors, improve certain efforts and scale up others at the national level should create a more receptive environment for implementing sustainable garments across the world, in Asia as well as Europe. As the participants of the ENVforum Annual Conference 2020, we strongly believe that this transformation is necessary as well as feasible through widespread cooperation across stakeholders and policymakers. Collective efforts from policy to practice are needed to address the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic and to build a more resilient garment supply chains in Asia and Europe. Current efforts in both regions should also be sustained and scaled up through cooperation and partnerships to accelerate the implementation of Sustainable Consumption and Production in the textile and garment industry in a post-COVID-19 world.

About the Asia-Europe Environment Forum (ENVforum)

Established in 2003, the Asia-Europe Environment Forum (ENVforum) is a partnership of: [Asia-Europe Foundation \(ASEF\)](#), Government of Sweden through the Regional Asia Environment Conference Support Programme administered by [Stockholm Environment Institute \(SEI\)](#), [Hanns Seidel Foundation \(HSF\)](#), [ASEM SMEs Eco-Innovation Center \(ASEIC\)](#) and the [Institute for Global Environmental Strategies \(IGES\)](#).

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined in “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” presents multiple challenges for countries to implement SDGs. One of the central issues impeding the success of the 2030 Agenda is unsustainable consumption and production pattern.

Consumption and production are the building blocks of the economy, and thus essential to economic growth and development. However, with the projected world population to reach 9.8 billion by 2050, current consumption and production pattern is detrimental to our environment. At this rate, the magnitude of natural resources required to meet the demand of the projected population is equivalent to almost three planets. As the shortage of natural resources looms, it is imperative to achieve SDG 12 “Ensuring Sustainable Consumption and Production” and transition from linear to a circular economy.

The ENVforum Annual Conference 2020, took place amidst a global pandemic. The conference titled “[Connecting the dots: Creating an enabling environment for SDG12 in ASEM](#)” took place 9-11 November 2020 virtually, brought

new perspectives on the topics of antimicrobial resistance (AMR); inclusive food value chains; sustainable garments; and single-use plastics, all with special consideration to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The 3-day conference provided a platform for representatives from various stakeholders including civil society organisations, governments, and businesses from Asia and Europe to exchange experiences, including challenges and best practices, on sustainable consumption and production (SCP) and the transition into the circular economy. The conference was designed to promote exchanges on regional and international levels and highlight different multi-stakeholder initiatives or partnerships, including from the private sector, in promoting the adoption of SCP practices.

These were the thematic streams explored during the conference:

- » [Stream 1: Health Agenda Post COVID-19— Example of AMR and “mindful eaters”](#)
- » [Stream 2: Inclusive Food Value Chains as a Way of Transition to Circular Economy](#)
- » [Stream 3: Sustainable Garment](#)
- » [Stream 4: The Plastic Initiatives – 3R in action](#)

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