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“Promoting the sustainability of textile and fashion SMEs”



*Toolkit for trainers from
Civil Society Organizations and NGOs*

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Promoting the sustainability of textile and fashion SMEs

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• Abbreviations

CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility

EASME – European Agency for Small Medium size Enterprises

EFRAG – European Financial Reporting Advisory Group

ESRS – European Sustainability Reporting Standard

SWOT Analysis – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

ACSMI – Athens Chamber of Small and Medium Industries

CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility

SMEs -Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

VSEs - Very Small Enterprises

SE - Small Enterprise

ME - Medium Enterprise

● Executive Summary

Following the adoption of the Circular Economy Action Plan, the European Commission has also announced a new European strategy for sustainable and circular textiles, aiming to make textile and clothing products more sustainable.

The strategy includes, among other things, the issuing of a digital passport for these products, initiatives to raise consumer awareness, reduce overproduction and overconsumption of these products, prevent the destruction of unsold products, and address the problem of their waste.

By taking initiatives and awareness-raising actions that will highlight a range of sustainability and corporate social responsibility issues for clothing and fashion companies, the aim is to change the consumer behaviour of European citizens in terms of the criteria of their choices when buying clothing and fashion products.

In recent years, consumer choices in clothing and fashion have been based, to a very large extent, on the lower price of fast fashion products compared to sustainable fashion products, without citizens considering several other environmental and social factors that create this competitive disadvantage of sustainable fashion products compared to fast fashion products.

In the context of the fourth interim deliverable of the EcoFashionEU project, the present Toolkit was created as an aid and training tool for trainers for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), that would eventually take an active role in initiatives aiming to change the consumer behavior of citizens.

The tools of the toolkit are based both on the contents of the 35-hour training program for small and medium-sized fashion enterprises, which was successfully implemented focusing on the sustainability and corporate social responsibility issues of sustainable fashion, and on a series of specific tools, which were identified through archive research with the contribution of the special expert in sustainable fashion issues, Ms. Styliani Parasha, who as a partner of CSR HELLAS, had the scientific responsibility for the training and implementation of the above-mentioned program.

At the same time, it was considered appropriate to include in this toolkit, a brief reference to:

- ❖ the new framework for the functioning of the clothing and fashion market
- ❖ the factors and issues that directly affect clothing and fashion products, resulting in the creation of a competitive disadvantage of sustainable fashion products over fast fashion products in terms of production costs and final consumer price.
- ❖ the role, which is deemed appropriate, to be played by CSOs and NGOs within the EcoFashionEU project to inform and raise consumer awareness in the effort to change the consumption model.

Finally, the previous three intermediate deliverables of the EcoFashionEU project are also included in the Annex of the toolkit, aiming to provide more information on the main objectives of the project and to assist the staff of CSOs and NGOs, who will be called upon to undertake the task of informing and raising consumer awareness on the sustainability of clothing and fashion products.

1. The new operating framework for the clothing and fashion market

In the context of the European Green Deal and the commitment to tackle climate change problems by reducing greenhouse gas emissions to zero, the **European Commission (EC) has carried out a series of studies and surveys which**, among other things, have shown that **the textile and clothing sector is one of those that will need to implement new practices** in order to contribute actively and proportionately to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, by changing, as far as possible, the current production and consumption model, known as '**Fast Fashion**'.

The term "fast fashion" defines the increasingly widespread pattern of clothing consumption and the general culture of a very large proportion of consumers, with its main characteristic being the constant renewal of the wardrobe with the purchase of new clothes and their rapid depreciation as "out of fashion", often resulting in them ending up in landfills in a very short period, with a negative impact on the environment.

The element that has contributed - perhaps more than any other - to the prevalence of this consumer behavior of citizens is the **very competitive retail price of clothing and fashion products**, due mostly to **the great reduction in overall costs compared to the past**, as a result of globalization with the transfer of the production from the member states of the European Union (EU) and other countries of the developed world to third countries.

The great reduction in costs is mainly due to **labor costs**, which is a key factor in the total cost of labor-intensive products such as clothing and **is much lower** in countries where fast fashion products are now produced.

On a second level, **cost reduction is also achieved in other overheads and production costs, which are significantly lower**, as the legislative and administrative framework of the enterprises' operations in these new countries of production **is far from the current standards** in developed countries in terms of production conditions **both in the social field** (employment conditions, human and labor rights, workers' pay levels, etc.) **and in the environmental field** (use of water resources and chemicals, greenhouse gas emissions, pollution, overconsumption and overconsumption of energy, etc.), **resulting in the creation of a context of real social and environmental dumping**, which is often covered up by misleading declarations and actions (greenwashing) by large clothing manufacturing and marketing companies.

The substantial reduction in final retail prices led to a very large increase in the volume of sales of clothing and fashion products as consumers contributed to a real explosion in the consumption of clothing and fashion products, since the very competitive price is practically their only criterion of choice when buying, without considering or evaluating a number of issues relating to the conditions of production and distribution of these products.

At the same time, the large increase in consumer purchases of clothing has led to real overconsumption and an alarming increase in the quantities of clothing discarded, with all that this implies in terms of environmental protection.

Following the adoption on 11.03.20 of the Action Plan for the circular economy, the EC, **on 30.03.22, announced the EU strategy for sustainable and circular textiles**, under which, on 28 January 2023, the **ReSet the Trend Campaign** was also announced, aiming on the one hand to raise awareness among European citizens and consumers on the above-mentioned European strategy for sustainable and circular textiles and on the other hand to **make them more actively involved in tackling the problems created by the phenomenon of fast fashion**, as it has been already recognized at all levels.

With the new European strategy for sustainable and circular textiles, the European Commission seeks to:

- ☐ identify specific requirements for textiles to ensure that they have a longer life cycle, are easier to repair and are recyclable.

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- ② requires clearer information on textile labels and a digital passport for textiles.
- ② undertake consumer information and awareness-raising initiatives to tackle the problem of greenwashing by ensuring that companies' claims about 'green' products are true.
- ② reduce overproduction and overconsumption of textiles, while preventing the destruction of unsold or returned products.
- ② address the problem of unintentional disposal of microplastics from textiles.
- ② move towards harmonization of the EU Extended Producer Responsibility rules for textiles and incentives to make these products more sustainable
- ② address the challenges posed by the export of textile waste and develop a toolbox to tackle the production of counterfeit textiles.

At the beginning of December 2023 the agreement between the European Commission and the European Parliament was announced **on the revision of the 2009 Ecodesign Regulation on the framework for consumer information on environmental sustainability**, which will henceforth govern almost all products traded and sold on EU markets, including textiles, clothing and fashion products, for which specific provisions are foreseen.

According to the above agreement, with the revised **Ecodesign Regulation** it is ensured that **all products sold in the EU markets will be:**

- **more energy-efficient** in terms of the energy consumption required for their production
- **reusable, repairable, recyclable, and increasingly made of recycled materials.**

At the same time, the new Regulation establishes:

- **the New Digital Passport** that will allow consumers and businesses to be fully informed when buying a product about a range of environmental issues relating to its composition and production conditions
- a **complete ban on the destruction** of unsold textiles, including clothing and footwear, with the provision to apply this ban two years after the entry into force of the Regulation and exemptions for micro and small enterprises and a six-year exemption for medium-sized enterprises
- **mandatory reporting** on the quantities of unsold products destroyed, with justification of the reasons for their destruction.

2. Sustainable and Fast Fashion and their Products

The first and most fundamental issue to be highlighted in the necessary consumer information and awareness campaign is that of the reasons for the noticeable price difference between a sustainable fashion product versus a fast fashion product.

This difference is a commonly accepted fact and as a result consumers choices are based on the cheapest price, especially in periods of high inflation, such as the one we have been experiencing lately with large parts of society facing financial problems.

This is also the case for consumers, who, although they are aware of the sustainability issues created by the production and distribution of fast fashion products, cannot afford to pay the price difference between sustainable fashion products and fast fashion products.

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To the question of whether fast fashion products are as cheap as they seem, the answer is certainly yes in terms of the economic and monetary impact on the pocket of each individual consumer for the price they pay for each purchase.

How and why this price difference arises for the final consumer is due to several factors that have a significant impact both on labor costs in a labor-intensive industry and on the general conditions of production in terms of respect for environmental, human, and labor rights issues in the countries of production compared with those imposed on these issues in the countries of the European Union.

However, **the total cost to societies and planet Earth is significantly different, large and to a considerable extent invisible** if the reasons leading to the lower price are analyzed and taken into account and are due to the negative long-term impacts on currently burning issues such as climate change, the environment, natural resources and other very serious social issues such as respect for human and labor rights, fair remuneration of labor and other similar issues.

The **negative impact on the environment**¹ during the production, distribution and marketing of fast fashion products is perhaps the biggest problem, as according to a number of relevant studies and researches, this industry is one of the biggest polluters among the business sectors, due to the conditions and methods of production of textiles and garments with a large greenhouse gas emission footprint, use of synthetic fibers, chemicals and other substances, overconsumption of water, negative impact on the environment due to improper waste treatment especially in some of the producing countries but also an alarming increase in the waste of such products that end up in landfills or are incinerated.

For example, cotton production often uses fertilizers and pesticides harmful to humans and the environment, while the dyeing and printing of fabrics uses harmful chemicals and excessive consumption of water resources, as is the case of use of very large quantities of water for the production of each pair of jeans.

Human and labor rights are a second source of problems for fast fashion products as in the value chain of the garment industry there are frequent violations of basic human and labor rights such as forced labor, very low levels of worker pay, child labor, exhausting working hours, uninsured work, unacceptable by European standards safety and working conditions, etc.

The aforementioned two main categories of negative factors often lead to **greenwashing phenomena** by large fast fashion product companies due to weaknesses in transparency issues in the industry's supply chains, which are often complex and non-transparent in terms of environmental protection, health and safety and general production conditions, as characteristically has been demonstrated by the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Dacca, Bangladesh on 24 April 2013², with a huge number of killed workers in fashion clothing manufacturing companies that were subcontractors to almost all the major international fashion and clothing chains.

The level of quality in terms of their life cycle is another problem of fast fashion products as they are not produced to last in time and consumers consider them to be essentially disposable for short-term use and discarded as useless after a short period of time as they are no longer fashionable.

On the other hand, for **sustainable fashion products** the phrase "**the most expensive product is eventually cheaper**" in comparison to fast fashion products applies if one considers several factors that account for the difference in price.

A close examination and analysis of the production, distribution and marketing methods of sustainable fashion products reveals that for their production and manufacture

¹ <https://research.aalto.fi/en/publications/the-environmental-price-of-fast-fashion>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rana_Plaza_collapse

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- ☐ are used high quality raw materials and fabrics made from natural and/or organic fibers and/or recycled fibers (such as cotton, wool, silk), which are often certified, have a longer life and a lower environmental impact in terms of carbon footprint in their production and waste disposal, while avoiding the use of fabrics made from synthetic fibers or natural fibers produced with a high use of fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, chemicals and/or excessive use of water resources
- ☐ standards and provisions of environmental legislation are respected,
- ☐ respect for human rights and labor legislation is ensured without recourse to unsafe or child or forced labor
- ☐ workers' wages are at a satisfactory level in relation to the cost of living,
- ☐ the risk of creating large stocks of unused goods for disposal is avoided, as they are manufactured in small quantities,
- ☐ rules are applied to reduce up to zero waste with maximum use of raw materials
- ☐ the use of packaging materials and the generation of waste from them is minimized
- ☐ traditional production techniques and methods are also used and highlighted.
- ☐ innovation is also pursued by using new fibers from plants (e.g. pineapple) and/or innovative use of produced garments.

At the same time, **sustainable fashion products meet better than non-sustainable fashion products the four R's rule** (Reduce, Reuse, Repair and Recycle) because of the materials from which they are made and the quality of their production in particular:

- their greater durability over time reduces both the need for new clothing purchases and the volume of waste to be disposed of (Reduce) while increasing the possibility of using them in the second-hand clothing market, which has been growing in recent years (Reuse)
- can be easily repaired (Repair) or recycled (Recycle) if necessary.

3. The role of NGOs and Civil Society Organizations in the new framework of the clothing and fashion market

Alongside the decisions and initiatives for a new strategy for sustainable and circular clothing and fashion products, which will also address the problems created by the "fast fashion" model, the EU is strengthening initiatives and actions to promote another model of sustainable fashion.

One such initiative co-funded by the EU is that of the EcoFashionEU³ project, which seeks to support small and micro fashion businesses in integrating the principles and practices of corporate social responsibility, sustainability and responsible entrepreneurship in their strategy and operation to enhance the competitiveness of their products against fast fashion counterparts.

However, this integration does not imply a reduction in production costs, thus maintaining the competitive disadvantage of these firms compared to those in fast fashion in terms of the price that the final consumer has to pay.

A way to address this competitive disadvantage could be a campaign **to raise awareness and inform consumers** about the causes of this relatively high retail price of the final product, something that is included in the new EU strategy for clothing and fashion products.

³ The EcoFashionEU project is implemented with Community co-financing by a consortium of partners in which the Athens Chamber of Small and Medium Industries (ACSMI) participates as a leader, 4 small and medium-sized enterprises-members from the fashion sector (Athinaia-M. Karamichalis SA (Athinea), VARDAKOU CHRISTIANA (Christiana), PEPPER VALLY®-SPIROS FRAGOS & Co L.P. and Margarita Gali (A Place to Dress Strangers - APTDS) and CSR HELLAS (Hellenic Business Network for Corporate Social Responsibility) as a scientific partner on issues of corporate social responsibility, sustainability, and responsible entrepreneurship.

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The aim of this campaign towards consumers is to change their behavior when buying clothing products, a behavior that will not only be based on the criterion of low price but will also take into account sustainability criteria, highlighting at the same time the personal responsibility and contribution of each consumer to the achievement of sustainable development goals.

In this effort, **consumer associations, civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)** can and are called upon to play an essential role, with awareness-raising and consumer information activities to explain and justify, on the one hand, the reasons that contribute to the increased retail price of sustainable fashion products compared to those of fast fashion and, on the other hand, to highlight the negative social and environmental impacts of non-sustainable fashion products.

There is a need to take initiatives aimed at changing the general culture and consumer behavior of citizens with full and detailed information on these issues so that their choices as consumers when buying clothing and fashion products are not only based on the lowest price, as is currently the case for most consumers, but also on several other criteria and parameters for each clothing product.

The consumer information and awareness campaign on sustainability issues should also include highlighting the opportunity for every individual and aware consumer of clothing and fashion products to actively contribute to tackling global-scale problems such as climate change, overconsumption of goods and clothing, small-scale reuse of clothing products by discarding garments instead of supporting recycling and circular economy initiatives.

The corresponding experience from the marketing of agricultural food products, where organic products are significantly more expensive than their non-organic counterparts, is an encouraging factor in this effort.

Based on the above necessary campaign, the informed consumer will be able to obtain sufficient answers to reasonable questions about each clothing and fashion product he buys, such as:

- Why sustainable fashion products cannot be sold at prices competitive to those of fast fashion products.
- How and why do fast fashion clothing products differ from their sustainable fashion similar ones
- Where and under what working conditions and wages each individual product was manufactured in terms of respect for the environment, human rights, working conditions, etc.
- Is the clothing and fashion product purchased by the consumer recyclable and/or can be processed and/or repaired; and
- How durable is each individual clothing and fashion product so that it can be easily resold on the now emerging and rapidly growing 'second-hand' market?
- What is the overall actual cost of the clothing and fashion product to planet Earth and people?⁴

The need to inform consumers and make them aware of the above reasonable questions can be covered by initiatives and actions by consumer associations, civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (Non-governmental Organizations – NGOs).

For this purpose and within the framework of the EcoFashionEU project, this special toolkit was created for use by executives of these organizations who will undertake, as trainers, the task of informing and

⁴ https://www.fashionrevolution.org/?ecwd_event=documentary-screening-made-in-bangladesh

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raising awareness among consumers on the above-mentioned topics and comparing the clothing products of sustainable fashion versus those of fast fashion

4. The Power of Consumers

Raising consumer awareness and information on the above issues has already been identified as a priority by the new EU strategy for clothing products, as with the power of consumers it will be possible to change the current model in which fast fashion products dominate in very high proportions.

There is a need to significantly increase the percentage of all consumers who will now choose sustainable fashion products, following the example of consumers belonging to the millennials and Generation Z, who are already experiencing a markedly different consumer behavior when shopping for clothing and fashion products.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and **Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)** can be key players in the necessary consumer awareness and information campaigns to promote sustainable fashion products over fast fashion ones.

By taking a leading role in this campaign, these organizations are able to contribute substantially and significantly to changing the current pattern of consumer behavior in clothing and fashion by promoting the principles and standards of sustainable fashion, which help to address the negative impacts of fast fashion products on the environmental, social and other issues mentioned above.

The key issues that will need to be highlighted and where key messages towards citizens should focus on, to radically change their consumer behavior by taking into account other criteria when buying fashion products and not exclusively almost the lowest price, as is the case today, are:

- ☐ to make the average consumer understand the negative environmental and social impacts due to the production, manufacturing, handling, and disposal cycle of fast fashion products as a prerequisite for
- ☐ not to succumb to the dictates of fast fashion, buying fewer products, which
 - will be made from sustainable raw materials (organic cotton, linen, silk, or recycled fabrics)
 - at the same time, they will have been produced with respect for human and labor rights and for the environment, without compromising the accepted standards and legal and administrative regulations in force in the EU.
 - will be made for lasting more in time and repairable if necessary
- ☐ to carefully care for the fashion items they buy to make them last longer, using environmentally friendly detergents and/or cold water and minimizing the use of dryers,
- ☐ to learn to consider buying fashion products "second hand" as a normal consumer choice,
- ☐ to show responsibility when these products are no longer needed and not throwing them away as waste but to consider the possibility of donating them or recycling them or selling them in specific "second-hand" clothing shops.

Thus, in addition to the environmental and social benefits mentioned above, consumers:

- ✓ will also benefit individually by buying fewer and better-quality clothing products that will last over time.
- ✓ will create a more coherent and personalized wardrobe.

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- ✓ will be relieved of the problem of lack of storage space and/or organization that is currently observed due to the large number of fashion products available to the average consumer.
- ✓ will contribute substantially to creating a better and sustainable world.

5. Tools for consumer information

By playing an essential role in the necessary campaigns to change the consumer behavior of citizens when buying fashion products so that they choose sustainable fashion products over fast fashion ones, **Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) can make use of one or more of the following tools.**

1. Conduct a survey among members and their stakeholders to determine the level of understanding about the problem of fast fashion products versus sustainable fashion products, in order to adapt the awareness and information campaign according to the findings of the survey
2. Organization of events with
 - presentation and highlighting of case studies and good practices in the production of sustainable fashion products, with the participation of the four SMEs participating as partners in the project as well as other enterprises, whose good practices were highlighted at an earlier stage of the project's implementation (see relevant references in the Annexes)
 - screening of special films and documentaries on the problems caused by fast fashion (e.g. the documentary "The True Cost" and a number of others from <https://remake.world/stories/news/12-films-about-fast-fashion/>)
3. Organization of informative workshops on
 - the labels on garments and the information these labels should provide to consumers referring to the origin and materials and with an analysis as to what they really mean (e.g. made in Bangladesh = 100% polyester, i.e. from fossil fuels, 100% cotton = probably from cotton produced in China in the Uyghur minority area and/or using hazardous fertilizers and pesticides, etc.)
 - natural materials and their characteristics and why we prefer them in their organic version and many more things that can be said starting with some clothes and their labels.
 - the way to take care of clothing products (washing at 30 degrees Celsius, drying on a clothesline, etc.) as a wealth of relevant information is available on the internet and through search engines.
 - upcycling and highlighting the value of processing old clothing items such as making a handbag from an old t-shirt, so that participants can understand how an old garment can be transformed and given a new life, while there can also be demonstrations of many types and designs with varying degrees of difficulty for each (<https://youtu.be/fp61jjjGYbU?feature=shared>)
4. Organization of events on the topic of
 - the Clothes swap where all participants should bring some clothes that they no longer want, are in good condition and suitable to be worn again after an exchange with other participants' used clothes
 - the presentation by a fashion designer-producer about the process behind the garment, the man-hours needed, how complicated the production process is and what this means for the cost of fashion products versus those of fast fashion

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- the clothing repair (Repair cafe), with monthly meetings where participants bring in clothes to be repaired by available artisans (tailors/dressmakers), along the lines of similar events organized abroad.
- the presentation, in the form of an exhibition, of a small collection of books on sustainable fashion (unfortunately only available in English at <https://goodonyou.eco/ethical-fashion-books/>)

5. Organizing a visit to the premises of initiatives and collective actions through which sustainable fashion products are highlighted, such as the Ankaa Project in Athens and/or the Naomi Project in Thessaloniki or other similar place.

6. Promotion of minimalism as a guide when shopping for fashion products (indicatively by visiting the Marie Condo website <https://konmari.com/>) with an explanation of why it is good for everyone's mental health and wallet and for planet Earth not to accumulate material goods, but only those that give us real joy

7. Enriching presentations on sustainability issues and clothing and fashion with material from sustainable fashion related websites, such as <https://sustainablefashiontoolkit.com/>

8. Use of the training material and presentations of the Training Program, implemented in the framework of the EcoFashionEU project and available to the staff of the above mentioned organizations (CSOs and NGOs) at the following link

[Ecofashion Training Material](#)

From the material and presentations of this training program special attention is worth giving to:

- the issues of the definition of sustainability and the 3 pillars from Chapter 1 [EcoFashion EU - EcoFashionEU](#)
- some key elements of Chapter 2 such as planetary boundaries, degrowth, sufficiency, capsule wardrobe, etc. [EcoFashion EU - EcoFashionEU](#)
- the chemicals and dyes from Chapter 3. [EcoFashion EU - EcoFashionEU](#)

6. References

All bibliographical references are listed as footnotes.

7. Annexes

The Annexes include the texts of the first three interim deliverables of the EcoFashionEU project which are:

1. Sustainability challenges for fashion SMEs
2. Evaluation of business models for the sustainability of fashion SMEs
3. A guide to sustainability issues in fashion SMEs

as well as the training program of seven workshops, organized in the framework of the EcoFashionEU project's clothing and fashion SMEs training program, with a total duration of 35 hours.

The above texts are accessible via the website <https://ecofashioneu.com/> either in the Greek or in the English version.