

Out of sight, out of mind – Second-hand is not yet the ultimate solution to all textile-related issues

07.06.2024



Many of us know what is said about collective responsibility; It is nobody's responsibility. We are aiming to drive the world towards sustainable consuming, but there remain huge gaps in the value chains, second-hand clothing being one example of these areas. Mountains of used clothes are gathered and sent away to another continent to clear our conscience about our consumer habits (Duijn et al., 2022). At the same time fast fashion and ultra-fast fashion are growing, and the garments they produce are not suitable for second-hand use because of inadequate quality (Huhtamäki, 2024).

Out of sight, out of mind. Is that the attitude we are showing with this kind of behavior? Let's dump our problem into somebody else's backyard and expect them to be grateful? A similar mindset is reflected in consumer behavior: it's convenient to declutter your wardrobe and purchase new items when there's a thriving second-hand market ready to take care of your "problem". Inexpensive clothing and fresh novelties here and there are undeniably attractive, but who takes responsibility for the downside of that?

As part of Baltic2Hand project we are mapping the value chains of second-hand clothes to and from Finland, trying to fill in the gaps between different operators. Our aim is to define, develop and maintain sustainable value chains with transparency and thus help consumers make more aware decisions about everyday life.

The main problem is that the task is not straightforward in any way. It is impossible to map the streams with information and numbers.

So, how can we enhance something if we don't understand how it operates? How do we measure improvement if there are no numbers to start with? If all the value chain links try to scapegoat other agents, the challenge remains collective responsibility, i.e., nobody's.

In our opinion, the first step is to increase transparency for all retailers, brands, collectors, and other operations. Consumers can choose to minimize their clothes' environmental impact only when they are provided with sufficient information about how to do that. In addition, textile materials can be designed to be durable, reusable, and finally recyclable. By establishing a digital passport for textiles both consumers and operators can get valuable information about a garment, retail prices, its path in the market and how to get the best value out of it.

It is time to initiate legislation and regulations for second-hand operators as well. EU and the governments can vastly help develop the textile industries towards a sustainable future. For example, France is already preparing legislation to restrict ultrafast fashion. There are tools like reporting requirements, reducing (multiple) taxations in second-hand operations, building effective collection and sorting stations, bringing in some new technology innovations for fiber characterization etc. Besides, when transparency and responsibility become a norm, it will be much more tempting for investors to jump in.

It is a positive cycle that we can initiate together. What are we waiting for? Let's get to work!

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References:

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Timo Huhtamäki was interviewed 16.4.2024 by Katriina Virtanen. Timo is the CEO of Emmy Clothing Company Oy.

These materials were created in the Baltic2Hand project which is an Interreg Central Baltic Programme 2021–2027 project that is co-funded by the European Union. [Read more about the Baltic2Hand project.](#)