

DTV comment on the EU strategy for sustainable textiles

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Key points

The European Green Deal and the Circular Economy Action Plan as well as the 2020 Industrial Strategy identify the textile sector as a priority sector where potential for circularity is high and therefore key for the transition towards a more sustainable and circular economy. The Recovery Plan also outlined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the industrial ecosystem for textiles in the EU, identifying its recovery needs in the light of current and expected weaknesses on both the demand and supply sides.

The EU strategy for sustainable textiles aims to help the EU shift to a climate-neutral, circular economy where products are designed to be more durable, reusable, repairable and recyclable, which poses a specific market potential for SMEs (laundries, drycleaners, tailors etc.) but also a need for standards along the textile supply chains.

This paper wants to highlight the role of the textile care sector, that already has a business model that incorporates principles of reuse, repair, recycle and shared economy and make respective recommendations to the EU strategy for sustainable textiles. Circular elements in the value chain, such as the design of textiles, reducing the environmental impact of textile production, promoting circular business models, guaranteeing repair services and the right to repair, should be addressed as a matter of priority.

About the sector

The textiles services sector is an SME driven sector where local and regional players – laundries, dry-cleaners, tailors etc. – play a vital role. They serve customers in their region with services and products that are often leased, and their business principle is, that these products should be re-processable as often as possible – a core concept of a circular economy. The economic success of these SMEs, therefore, goes hand in hand with the sustainable principle of using as few resources as possible and keep products in the process. Successful companies are those who can invest in textile products that have the longest lifecycle or which can clean and repair durable and reprocessable textiles.

The textile care sector:

- offers rental / leasing services
- provides repair and modification services
- retains local workers
- exchanges textiles among consumers (workwear from industry, hotels, hospitals, etc.)
- rents high quality and durable textile products
- takes back used textiles.

Standardisation

The lifecycle of textile products greatly varies and depends on the quality of the raw materials and manufacturing process. Thence, manufacturers in the future will have to take a more holistic approach to sustainability, addressing how to improve every aspect of the process, from raw materials and production to transportation and logistics to the customers. Standards and eco-design principles can simplify this process allowing for both manufacturers and service providers to ensure uniformity across a wide range of textile products in use by the industry.

Harmonized standards and certifications for sustainably produced textiles, including compliance with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the development of specific guidelines for textiles to complement the EU's horizontal provisions on due diligence in sustainable corporate governance would also be necessary.

Support of circular business models

Considering the potential that lies in the reuse of textiles in both the B2B and B2C sector, we want to stress that not only the value chains in production and the consumption of raw materials are important for the sustainability of textile products but that the usage cycle is of utmost importance. With respect to textiles, this is where the greatest sustainability potential lies. A recent study¹ has found that through repairing, the textile services sector cuts the carbon footprint of work wear into half. As a result, the service SMEs supporting more user cycles must be at the heart of this strategy.

The use of circular business models by consumers should be encouraged (e.g. product as a service, leasing). It is still common that employees themselves buy and clean their work wear (including personal protective equipment) which can result in reduced protective functions. There is a lack of clear regulations and control mechanisms to ensure the safety of workers. Specifically, Directive 89/656 / EEC should be mentioned here, which urgently needs to be revised and converted into a regulation. Work wear and personal protective equipment should be taken care of by professional service providers not only because they repair and maintain the textiles but also because they ensure that the textiles keep their protective functions.

At EU level, setting mandatory requirements to promote the sustainability of products and measurable mandatory criteria for public procurement through sector-specific legislation and monitoring its implementation should be a priority. Public procurement processes should include more elements of circularity and “products as a service” models. A procurement process focused on prices for products and services does not take into account the costs during a longer period of time such as the costs for the procuring organisation stemming from the limited lifespan of products when they have to be replaced earlier than products with longer lifecycles or with possibilities for repair and reuse. It also ignores the environmental costs and loss of resources along production chains. PPE clothing or disposable surgical drapes and gowns, which cannot be reprocessed properly, consume much more natural resources.

¹ https://www.cws.com/sites/default/files/2021-05/CWS_CAS_Hintergrundpapier_EN.pdf

Support sustainable product designs

With the production of long-lasting, recyclable and repairable textiles and clothing the number of usage cycles can be raised. Embedding eco-design aspects in product standards along the supply chain will therefore play a decisive role in sustainability. Textiles have to be designed for the circular economy.

We want to encourage that

- information on the technical durability and expected service life has to be shared by manufacturers (there are approaches here in the PPE regulation EU 2016/425).
- textiles are less susceptible to trends and more geared towards timeless design.
- information about the reparability of the product has to be shared by manufacturers and that the product design facilitates maintenance and repair work and availability of spare parts.
- upgradeability, modularity, flexibility in terms of size and shape is ensured in the product design.
- resource requirements for care and maintenance (e.g. less frequent washing, lower temperature, easy-iron / non-iron, etc.) is considered in the product design.
- criteria and standards for a clear recognition of repairable and recyclable clothing are available (similar to the EU energy labels).
- recyclability is considered in the production process already. This is the only way to get recycled fibres back into the cycle.