

Week 4: Consumption

Information sheet for challenge A and B: production chain of clothes and sustainability

What do you think, how many clothes does the average German citizen buy in a year's time? It is 40-70 garments per year! A pretty high number, right?¹



2

The textile chain:

1. Production (eg. Cotton)
 - Production of the seed
 - Cultivation
 - Harvest
2. Ginning
 - Industrial separation of fibers, seeds and impurities from yarns
3. Spinning
 - Production of yarn
4. Weaving
 - Production of textiles
5. Finishing
 - Dying
 - Printing
 - Finishing
6. Connectorisation
 - Cutting
 - Sewing
 - Packaging
7. Trade
8. Usage
9. Disposal
 - Second Hand
 - Clothing Collection
 - Recycling

¹ <http://www.going-green.info/index.php?id=299>

² <https://saubere-kleidung.de/textile-wertschoepfungskette/>



Before hanging in a shop, our clothes travel around the world. Starting with the production of cotton, this journey causes many problems for the environment and our health. Cotton harvesting requires high amounts of water, which leads to the drying out of lakes and rivers in the growing areas. Moreover, large quantities of fertilizers and pesticides are used on cotton plantations. As a consequence, groundwater and soil are contaminated and the workers on the plantations become ill.

After the harvesting of cotton, it gets transported to spinning, followed by the dying process. Hereafter it goes to the sewing factories. The various stages of production take place in different factories that are often in different countries. This leads to long transport routes.

Mainly, clothes are produced in Asia or Latin America, because the average wages are relatively low and health and safety regulations weak. The example of seamstresses shows how bad working conditions are in the textile industry. They work in the factories for up to 16 hours a day for poverty wages and without any social security. The labor costs are just 1% of the selling price of a conventional jeans. For a pair of jeans that costs 50€, just 7€ are going to the jeans factory (for material costs, rent, machinery, profits and wages for the workers).³ Even high prices do not guarantee better working conditions or pay, but clothing with Fairtrade seals can support better conditions.

³ <http://www.going-green.info/index.php?id=299>



How can I reduce my consumption or make it more sustainable?

Pyramid of sustainable consumption:

1. Buy new things (regional, fair, ecological)
2. Buy second hand
3. Swap
4. Borrow
5. Do it yourself
6. Repair
7. Use what you have



This pyramid of sustainable consumption is a good start. Before buying something new, think of the alternatives. On the bottom, the pyramid shows the most sustainable alternatives. You can go through each step from the bottom to the top, to check whether there may be opportunities for your required item. If one is not possible in your situation, just check the one above.

The most important aspect regarding sustainable consumption is to only consume what is really needed, because each new object requires resources. A first step could always be to think about whether it is necessary to buy the object or not.

If an item breaks, many people immediately think about replacing it with a new one. Instead, it should first be controlled if the item could still be repaired. Some objects are uncomplicatedly repairable, maybe by using guidance of online videos. However, the safety risks are higher if you want to repair electrical appliances, such as a broken toaster. In repair cafés, volunteers are willing to help. In there you can get guidance and support while repairing your object yourself. Worldwide, there are over 1,500 of such repair cafes, so it is worth looking for a repair café nearby.⁴

Instead of buying a new item, check whether you can borrow it somewhere. Especially things that are rarely used

⁴ <https://repaircafe.org/de/neuer-meilenstein-1-500-repair-cafes-weltweit/>



are shareable. A drill for instance is on average only used for 12-15 minutes during its useful life.⁵ Here, sharing is a good option, while sharing an often-used item is much harder. However, you can find them second hand online or in a local shop instead of buying a new one. In general, buying second hand prolongs the usage period of an item. This requires neither new resources nor a lot of money. Eventually, it is not only more sustainable but also cheaper.

If you have a spare object in a good shape that you do not need, think about sharing, swapping or selling it. Often you can even find new things, which you need or like more, while swapping objects with friends or colleagues. Clothing swap parties are a popular event, where you can bring clothes and take a few others. But also bookcases enjoy great popularity in many towns. They are usually non-stop accessible and everybody can take or add books. It is a great way to find books you cannot find in common bookshops.

Sometimes it happens that you cannot repair an object. In this case upcycling can be a good option. Upcycling means to make something new out of objects that would have been trashed otherwise. Hereby, the waste is being upgraded, so a higher quality product is created. But be aware of the kind of waste you are recycling. If it is recyclable and an equivalent item is made anyways, it makes more sense to do that. This is for example the case with returnable plastic bottles. Out of a plastic bottle a new one can be made and therefore you should rather return them, instead of crafting something of them.⁶ This not the case with textiles though. If you cannot repair or share it, it is perfect for upcycling projects. Old clothes can be used to sew (shopping) bags, as textile yarn for knitting or crocheting, and for much more.

However, sometimes there is the case that you really need an object that you cannot get second hand or via recycling, upcycling or swapping. Even a new purchase can be made sustainable, if it is regional, fair and organic. But how do you know whether an item meets these requirements? There are many labels stating different what is organic, fair or regional. Fair refers to both, the

⁵ https://www.ted.com/talks/rachel_botsman_the_case_for_collaborative_consumption

⁶ <https://www.nachhaltiger-warenkorb.de/gutes-upcycling-schlechtes-upcycling/>



environmental and the social conditions of the entire textile value chain. Nonetheless, these labels have different requirements. Their standards differ enormously. For some of the labels, the basis is the ILO (International Labour Organization) declaration on fundamental principles and rights of work: freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of forced or compulsory labour, the abolition of child labour and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

Overview⁷ of the most common labels:



IVN BEST

- International Association of Natural Textile Industry
- Guarantees compliance with ILO principles in processing of cotton
- Guarantees minimum wage
- 100% organic natural fiber



GOTS (Global Organic Textile Standard)

- Guarantees compliance with ILO principles in further processing of cotton
- 70% organic natural fiber (Label Add-On “organic”: 95%)



Fairtrade Cotton

- Fairly produced and traded cotton
- Fairtrade minimum pricing covers costs of sustainable production for growers
- Producers receive bonuses for collective projects
- Higher standards than ILO principles
- Promotes organic cotton cultivation

⁷ <https://www.verbraucherzentrale.de/wohnen/faire-kleidung-das-bedeutet-die-siegel-7072>





Fair Wear Foundation

- The foundation and companies develop improvements in social conditions in the factories of producing countries
- The logo can be found on garments of companies that are members in the best category just one year after membership



Grüner Knopf (Green Button)

- State label
 - Includes 26 social and environmental product and business criteria
 - Covers only production, sewing, cutting and finishing
- May occur in combination with other labels
 - So far there are no measures in case of non-compliance



References

- <https://www.smarticular.net/nachhaltig-leben-und-konsumieren-einkaufen-pyramide-tipps-fuer-den-alltag/>
- <http://www.going-green.info/index.php?id=299>
- <https://repaircafe.org/de/neuer-meilenstein-1-500-repair-cafes-weltweit/>
- https://www.ted.com/talks/rachel_botsman_the_case_for_collaborative_consumption
- <https://www.nachhaltiger-warenkorb.de/gutes-upcycling-schlechtes-upcycling/>
- <https://www.verbraucherzentrale.de/wohnen/faire-kleidung-das-bedeutet-die-siegel-7072>
- <https://saubere-kleidung.de/textile-wertschoepfungskette/>

