

# Stitching Together a Social and Circular Future for Textiles

JULY 2023



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## Stitching Together a Social and Circular Future for Textiles

RREUSE network recently gathered in Berlin for the “[Stitching together a Social and Circular future for Textiles](#)” conference that brought together leading experts, social entrepreneurs, policymakers, and social enterprise leaders. Together, we imagined a world where fashion is not just a means of self-expression but a force for positive change.

### ***State of the second-hand textiles market***

We kicked off the conference with opening words by Thomas Ahlmann, Managing Director of [FairWertung](#), a RREUSE member that co-hosted the event, and Neva Nahtigal, Director of RREUSE. They ignited the room with their unwavering belief in the need for a sustainable and just future in Europe's textiles sector.



The discussion that followed delved into the pressing issues and opportunities within the textiles sector. The panellists highlighted the role of social enterprises in shaping a circular textile market and shared inspiring initiatives focused on circular economy principles. The power of collaboration emerged as a recurring theme, including strong partnerships with the private sector. These are a

way to establish the necessary infrastructure for local re-use of textiles while supporting social projects. The panel also noted that exports are a prominent topic for the European Union.

Thomas Ahlmann pointed out that many of the issues observed in the current state of the second hand textiles market can be attributed to the contemporary trend of over-consumption and the low-quality clothing produced by fast fashion companies. He referred to a recent [FairWertung's report](#) that explores the ecological consequences of second-hand trade on the countries of the Global South. FairWertung's position is that no waste should be exported outside of the EU. To achieve that, full sorting within the EU should be required. The FairWertung label requires holders to comply with full sorting. Consequently, FairWertung members cannot export waste.

Alexandre Bohl, Senior Project Manager at [TESS GEIE](#), pointed to the rapid growth of the second-hand textiles market that has come along with new actors with different aims from social enterprises. A key challenge are unethical operators that export waste under the guise of second-hand clothing. Their practice has damaged the credibility of the entire traditional



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second-hand sector, and public authorities have struggled to control possible illegal waste trade practices. In an effort to meet these challenges, TESS GEIE has developed auditing services for their members to verify that the facilities located in third countries meet the standards of suitability for the market and are compliant with environmental and social criteria.

Maria Suau Font, the Manager of the Environmental Department at Fundacio Deixalles, spoke about valuable opportunities for social enterprises to develop their activities and increase local re-use by partnering with economic actors that are most successful in their local communities. For example, Fundacio Deixalles has recently started a collaboration with hotels in Mallorca aimed at promoting the local circular economy. Fundacio Deixalles collects re-usable materials from the hotels free of charge and provides certificates of CO2 emissions the hotels avoided through this practice. In one year, they collected 21 tons of textile, of which 70% could be reused. The project is attractive for private companies because it brings savings in waste management, it helps them meet legal obligations and demonstrate their corporate social responsibility.

The day continued with discussions in small groups called ConverStations. This interactive format allowed RREUSE members to initiate an exchange of views and ideas with their peers on topics they find especially relevant. Participants explored the following topics:



- Ethical export of textiles
- Textile Extended Producer Responsibility
- Enforcement of EU legislation to oblige producers and retailers to prioritise re-use
- The Impact of Charity Retail in Ireland
- The impact of automated sorting on social enterprises
- Making re-use and repair more affordable
- Increasing local re-use of textiles through partnerships
- What will the textile sector look like in 2050?



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## Policy developments and innovations in the second-hand textiles sector



The second day of the conference featured a keynote speech by Malte Gallée, MEP with the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament, followed by two panel discussions.

The MEP underscored the pressing need to address overconsumption and the environmental and health impacts of textile waste, with a focus

on achieving zero waste and implementing robust regulations. He also emphasised recent milestones, such as the endorsement of the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation, and the upcoming revision of the Waste Framework Directive. Expressing support for separate textile waste collection and for a ban on the destruction of unsold goods, Malte Gallée envisioned a sustainable future marked by a global circular economy without waste exports.

The first panel discussion of the day explored the topic of “Integrating social enterprises in the textile waste management policy”. The panellists shared crucial insights regarding overconsumption and its impact on climate change. They spoke about the importance of a circular economy and keeping products in use longer rather than relying solely on recycling, and reflected on the challenges that stand in the way.



In Italy, for example, the waste sector faces difficulties due to the gap between the formal requirement of separate collection and the reality of lacking infrastructure and the involvement of illegal actors. RREUSE member Insieme is trying to address this with “Social Fabric”, the non-profit oriented project focused on legality, ethics, traceability, connection with the local community, preparation for reuse and recycling plants. Marina Fornasier, President

of Insieme, reported a good collaboration with public authorities and success in raising the profile of re-use at both the national and the local level through concerted communication efforts with the main message: [“New is Over”](#).

The topic of data on both the quantity and the quality of textiles that social enterprises handle was brought up. Insieme is able to collect a considerable amount of data and



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perform their own analysis that enables them to better communicate the importance of waste.

Alberto Egido Viciano, the Environment and Sustainability Lead at the Spanish cooperative [Moda re-](#), pointed out that all their collection containers are sensorized which allows Moda re- to optimise collection routes and save more than 25% of polluting emissions. He added that using sensors to learn more about the composition of collected textiles is currently only possible in very large and specialised sorting plants, where clothes must first be transported. This technology is still expensive but crucial to recycle clothes that cannot be reused. Crucially, Moda re- operates in a context where 50% of public tenders related to the collection, transport, and treatment of second-hand products are, [by law](#), reserved for social and circular enterprises.

Looking ahead, the speakers focused on the role of social enterprises in sharing best practices, advocating for favourable legislation, and prioritising investments in re-use to address the challenges of the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) implementation and promote a circular economy. Matthias Neitsch, RREUSE's President and director of Re-use Austria, presented his vision for sustainable and inclusive EPR schemes for textiles in Europe. He cautioned against excessive harmonisation of EPR schemes due to the very different situation in Member States, calling instead for the development of minimum standards at the EU level to ensure the involvement of social enterprises and the prioritisation of re-use in any future EPR scheme on textiles.

The second panel of the day delved into the topic of "Innovations in used-textiles management" and shared examples of successful collaboration between social enterprises, public actors, citizens, and brands. This has resulted in increased visibility of the social sector and improved conditions for social employment and local re-use. Scaling up re-use emerged as a significant challenge, considering the substantial amount of clothing that returns to the market each year.

Among innovations that came up as potential solutions, Frank Dingemans, Director of innovation at De Kringwinkel Antwerpen, presented the project "[De Collectie](#)". It was first launched in 2016 with the City of Antwerp and a consortium of social enterprises including Kringwinkel and Oxfam. The project resulted in a tender awarded to the consortium because of conditions related to social employment and local re-use having been included in the tender. This was made possible thanks to efforts to increase the visibility of the social sector through branding and awareness campaigns funded by the city of Antwerp, as well as continuous attempts to foster collaboration between social actors, public actors, citizens and brands.

Mario Malzacher shared examples of innovation from his own experience as the CEO and Co-Founder of [Circular Fashion](#) whose purpose is to provide the know-how, data flow and



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interconnection to power circular systems of fashion. He spoke about the various aspects of circularity.ID. The platform launched in 2018 contains data in a standardised and machine-readable format. The circularity.ID works as a product passport with data that is relevant for sorters and is the world's first ID based sorting solution. Such augmented sorting systems detect product quality, product attributes and material composition and enable both re-commerce and fibre-to-fibre recycling.



Digitalisation remained in the spotlight as Rónán Ó Dálaigh, CEO of the second-hand online platform [Thriftify](#), touched on the massive opportunity for the social economy in the online market, as well as the potential for automated sorting and labelling. He talked about the new possibilities that can emerge through the use of technology in stakeholder collaboration, and the value of collecting data and

providing access to verifiable information on clothing quality and sustainability. With the help of innovative digital technology Thriftify enables charity shops to easily upload donated items and list them across multiple reseller marketplaces. It also focuses on convenience for consumers. In Ireland, where it originates, Thriftify is now used by 98% of charity retailers. The platform is now expanding its activities to other countries including Germany.

Emma Enebog, Researcher at Research Institutes of Sweden, presented [CISUTAC](#), which stands for Circular and Sustainable Textiles and Clothing – a Horizon project that RREUSE is part of and aims to increase textile circularity in Europe by removing current bottlenecks. The pilots within the project focus on fibre-to-fibre recycling, repair and disassembly via semi-automatic workstations, and sorting for re-use and recycling. Emma Engeborg stressed that there is a lack of data regarding waste as adequate digital technology is not yet there. She pointed to the need for a big shift from manual-based sorting and to data as key to unlocking consumer demand. Within the CISUTAC project, RISE is developing a software tool that will be used to guide sorting technologies in deciding which channel (repair, reuse or recycling) the material flow should be directed toward.

The conference concluded with visits to two local social enterprises – [Textilhafen](#) and [Rack 'n white](#) – that allowed attendees to witness some of the practices currently in place in second-hand textiles collection and retail in Berlin.



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The two days of meaningful discussions and close-up looks at the state of the textile sector as we know it generated new ideas, stimulated future collaborations and will hopefully serve as a catalyst for transforming the textiles market, fostering sustainability, and reducing waste.



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