

UK Used Clothing/Textile Market – Report to the BIR - 24th October 2016 – Amsterdam.

Working in our sector can rarely be described as boring. This year has been no different.

Despite being the most sustainable aspect of the clothing supply chain, the used clothing sector is often subjected to a high level of scrutiny by the regular media and their reporters often jump to the wrong conclusion. The big issues around clothing are the fact that globally we are buying far too much new clothing, at huge environmental costs and which is often produced under slave like conditions. These factors led clothing magnate Eileen Fisher to describe the fashion industry as “the second dirtiest in the world”.

What we are doing with used clothing is responsibly addressing the huge issues that are created by other parts of the clothing/textiles supply chain and also by the public themselves.

So if anyone has a problem with the perceived over-supply of used clothing in places like Africa, well they should take responsibility for it themselves rather than resort to throwing stones in glass houses. They should:

- Buy less new clothing;
- Only buy clothing that has been designed to be readily recyclable at the end of its useful life;
- Buy more second hand clothing to support the national re-use market,;
- Pay more for your clothing from businesses that take steps to ensure that the garment producers are paid a decent wage and have decent working conditions;
- Buy garments made from organic cotton rather than conventional cotton; and
- Make sure that the dyes used in the garments are not toxic or carcinogenic.

The list could go on.

If people are not prepared to do that, then they should at least have the decency to let our industry seek the most sustainable outlet for their used clothing without trying to vilify us through ignorance.

I have also lost count of the number of times that journalist assume that because just they describe an item of clothing as a “cast off” or for one reason or another a charity has not been able to sell it in a shop that it must be low quality or even rubbish. The reality is very different.

As we know, most items collected via clothing collections are of sufficiently good quality to be re-used with some items still in their original packaging. Very often charities are not able to sell their donations simply because they do not have the storage space in their shops, they have too much of a particular type of garment or the garments are just out of season. Do people really think that those who purchase used clothing, wherever they are in the world, would part with their hard earned money for clothing that is worn, tattered etc.? The idea is ridiculous.

In various parts of Africa they use terms to describe used clothing which roughly translates to “dead white man’s clothing”. This does not represent a negative reflection on the standard of the clothing that we export to them. In fact it is the reverse, because many people believe that there is no way that the public in rich countries would want to get rid of these clothing items unless the owner had died. The term “dead white man’s clothing” actually reflects far more negatively on the wasteful attitudes of the public in developed countries.

It is erroneous reporting of this nature, which is then recycled so much in the media and on the internet that adds fuel to flawed arguments extolled by supporters of bans on used clothing exports.

The Textile Recycling Association is so frustrated by these types of misconception that we have teamed up with our equivalent trade association in North America (SMART) and issued a joint statement challenging these assertions and highlighting the really important benefits that our industry brings to the global economy, environment and to social wellbeing. This statement is available on our [website](#).

However, whilst we are not selling African's rubbish, that doesn't mean quality is not a problem. Quality is a problem for the majority of people who buy brand new clothing anywhere in the world. Many new garments only last a few wears. For sorters it means that they have to divert an increasing quantity of the low grade into recycling applications at a cost to them. They cannot and would not pass recycling grades on as wearable to the wholesalers. Otherwise they would go out of business.

If we are to seriously tackle the circular economy issue then retailers and manufacturers need to help by designing clothing that is fit for purpose and easily recyclable. However my personal mantra of buying durable products has been challenged recently, which adds to the soup of complexities that make this sector so interesting. If a product is so durable that it makes it very difficult to recycle at the end of its useful life, then is this the most environmentally friendly option?

With regards to the UK market, we have seen a slowing down in the decline of used clothing values, indeed some reports have indicated a small rise in values, but this is hardly surprising when you bear in mind the spectacular collapse in the value of the Pound that has occurred since the UK's EU referendum result. Such a decline has temporarily made British exports cheaper, but either inflation will follow or if retailers attempt to keep prices down, profit margins will be squeezed and businesses in the wider economy will go to the wall. Either way the economic outlook is bad.

My message to our Government is simple. We rely significantly on exports to the EU and on migrant workers from the EU. We need to maintain access to the single market and to the EU labour force.

It is in the interest of our country that the British Government employs skilful negotiation tactics and seeks to attain the best resolutions possible which mutually benefit both the UK and are friends and allies in the European Union. The Government needs to take advice from UK business leaders by addressing concerns about access to the single market and the EU labour force. If this can be achieved we may still be able create jobs, keep the economy going and help maintain our fair and sustainable society in spite of the adversity we currently face. If we continue to erect walls or either the UK Government or the EU pursue a course of action which forces the other party into a corner, then negotiations are doomed to fail.

Finally, I just wanted to highlight some of the great work that is being undertaken in the UK, European Continent and the World to promote used clothing/textile recycling, to develop new markets and promote sustainability. At a recent conference that we helped to organise in conjunction with the Environment Media Group we heard from a wide spectrum of industry experts including the BIR's own Ross Bartley and today's co-presenter Dr Einir Young from Bangor University. There were also presentations from Swedish retail giants H&M on their efforts to improve sustainability of their global supply chain, from Eco Tlc about the Extended Producer Levy on Clothes in France. In addition WRAP provided an update on the development of the European Clothing Action Plan. From the Textile Futures Research Centre (TFRC) and Textiles Environment Design (TED) we had a presentation on the importance that design has in determining a product's environmental impact and sustainability throughout its lifecycle. There were also presentations on the roles that local authorities, schools and door to door collections can have in promoting collections. Furthermore we also heard about issues around the emerging carpet recycling and mattress recycling sectors.

There are so many different and exciting facets going on in various parts of Europe and the World that relate to improving the sustainability of the textile supply chain. It would be great if we could draw these together and start developing a coherent international strategy.

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