Delivering the Roadmap

While the science and data on the impact of textiles on the environment has reached a consensus, the level of ambition has not. It is clear that we need to act in a more ambitious and urgent manner to reach not only the Paris Agreement but also the 2030 Agenda.

This document forms an annex to the United Nations Environment Programme report, Sustainability and Circularity in the Textile Value Chain: A Global Roadmap, which outlines the key priorities and actions needed to deliver a sustainable and circular textile value chain. This document outlines the role and actions that communication and consumer engagement actors can take in transforming the textile sector towards sustainability and circularity.

From the Roadmap report, three overarching and interconnected priorities to deliver system change emerge: 1) shifting consumption patterns, 2) improved practices and 3) infrastructure investment.

To deliver on the three priorities, UNEP proposes nine building blocks to achieve a sustainable and circular textile value chain. All building blocks consider the key drivers of environmental and/or socioeconomic impacts within the value chain, support the delivery of the existing industry goals, and require multiple stakeholders to act together.

While the Roadmap report specifically explores the cross-stakeholder opportunities for change, and how collaboration can be facilitated, in delivery against the nine building blocks, it is also important to recognize that each stakeholder group has unique challenges, and a unique role and contribution to make. For this reason, the annexes of the Roadmap report detail the barriers and opportunities, as well as specific actions for each stakeholder group.

This annex outlines the role and actions that communication and consumer engagement actors can take in transforming the textile sector towards sustainability and circularity.
DEFINITION OF COMMUNICATION AND CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT ACTORS

Several different types of organization and outlets engage with individual consumers, including brands, advertisers, print and digital media, social media and influencers and film and television. Media outlets are some of the most influential groups in reaching and driving demand in consumers and citizens. Moreover, brands and retailers, innovators, policymakers, NGOs and technical organizations also strongly engage in outreach to consumers or citizens as individuals, with media outlets and advertisers acting as a conduit. Therefore, all stakeholders communicating with consumers and citizens are relevant for this annex. The actions of specific individual consumers and citizens are not in scope, primarily because they are subject to the actions, systems and messages of other stakeholders. While consumers and citizens have an important role to play, the recommendations below focus on how they can be supported to take action by other stakeholders.

UNEP’s work on shifting the narrative

Messages and touchpoints with consumers and citizens influence values, behaviours and actions in terms of shaping what and how much people buy, as well as how they use and value those items. In recent decades, the dominant narrative for fashion has centred around newness, immediacy and disposability. Coupled with the extractive and exploitative basis of apparel production, this feeds into the triple planetary crisis, driven by huge volumes of unsustainable production and consumption.

Changing consumption rates, increasing consumer knowledge and shifting consumer behaviours are seen as crucial to reducing the sector’s overall impacts. Brands can help do this by repositioning consumer communications, using the power of marketing and storytelling to drive a shift towards more sustainable consumption and sustainable lifestyles at large.

Yet to date, consumer-facing communicators have largely been left out of sustainability conversations, leading to a disconnect between sustainability commitments and the dominance of consumption messages, as well as misleading claims known as greenwashing. UNEP’s Sustainable Fashion Communication Strategy aims to counter this, setting out a vision to build demand and inspire action for a positive fashion future, by changing the dominant narrative of the sector from one of extraction, exploitation and disposable consumption, towards regeneration, equity and care.

The development of the strategy and initial recommendations for the role of sustainable communication as a driving force in the fashion sector’s climate response, were recognized in the renewed UNFCCC Fashion Charter announced at COP26, where signatories agreed to a dedicated commitment to: “Align consumer and industry communication efforts to a 1.5-degree or Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi) compatible pathway, as set out by the Paris Agreement Goals, as well as a more just and equitable future.” This was the result of a consultation process undertaken with over 160 organizations from across the value chain, convened by UNEP and the UNFCCC in 2021.

This commitment serves as a common vision on how fashion communication must evolve to meet the sector’s climate targets and contribute to the SDGs. During COP26, UNEP also shared insights from the consultation and an outline of draft recommendations for how the commitment could play out in practice, tying in broader sustainability principles beyond climate impacts. This led to the UNEP and UN Climate Change Sustainable Fashion Communication Playbook, which outlines 9 principles under four themes (Lead with science, Change behaviours and practices, Reimagine values, Drive advocacy). Together they provide fashion communicators with: concrete insight on how to build a positive new narrative for the fashion sector aligned to key sustainability targets; tactical guidance and globally-relevant advice on implementation; and best practice case studies for inspiration and replication.
OPPORTUNITIES

Effective consumer and citizen engagement has potentially huge benefits for both individuals and society. For individual consumers, shifting mindsets, behaviours and habits can help to save them money and time, increase the awareness of key issues relative to sustainable lifestyles, and instil beneficial mindsets. For society, shifting consumer and citizen behaviour, perceptions, and engagement levels can help to encourage ambition among companies and policymakers, enable innovative and lower-impact circular and sustainable solutions to scale up, and potentially massively reduce overconsumption and environmental and social impacts from the textile value chain. Understanding the opportunity to shift the narrative in fashion and ultimately across the textile value chain and further industries, UNEP and UNFCCC have developed the Sustainable Fashion Communication Playbook to provide a clear guideline with relevant measurement and implementation recommendations.

For brands, retailers and innovators, effective consumer engagement can create positive brand value, higher sales and brand loyalty, open up new opportunities in business models and product offers, as well as helping to shift to a lower-impact and dematerialized value chain while maintaining business value.

For NGOs, technical organizations, and policymakers, engaged consumers and citizens are likely to positively shift behaviour in line with goals around low-impact and circular behaviour, as well as being more likely to support wider shifts and investments in infrastructure and policy change.

BARRIERS TO ACTION AND INTERDEPENDENCIES WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

Sustainability as a negative narrative: Many NGOs and policymakers – and even some brands and advertisers – frame sustainability messages to consumers and citizens in negative terms around the enormity of environmental and social problems, the negative impacts of their behaviour and the subsequent necessary sacrifices for change to be seen. Even for product-level narratives, more sustainable products are often advertised as niche products for a specific demographic of consumer, with the focus on the impacts reduced. This can be effective in raising awareness but can also lead to consumers having negative emotional responses or feeling overwhelmed, guilty or helpless in the face of major global challenges, thus reflecting an ineffective way to motivate people and change behaviour.

Underutilisation of consumer insights: Many communicators (including social media and website companies), brands and retailers collect data on current and targeted consumers’ habits, both in person and online, however only data relevant to encouraging consumers to buy more is collected and thus consumers’ aptitude for more sustainable and circular offerings are not collected nor reflected systematically.

Consumption and novelty are still framed as aspirational: Even when marketing more sustainable or circular solutions, many messages remain focused on continuing consumption levels in a more sustainable way, emphasizing making better choices rather than reconsidering or dematerializing the level of consumption. Novelty also remains a major driving force, with an increasing number of stories about people feeling the need to wear new outfits on Instagram, motivating them to take photographs in new clothes and then immediately send them back.

Business KPIs for communicators do not align with sustainability goals: communicators that work for or in brands and retailers mostly have a mandate from senior leadership to create messaging that encourages consumers to buy more, and more often. Communicators are perceived to have little scope to challenge this mandate, and their job security may rely on meeting it. Therefore, involving all levels, especially senior decision makers, in conversations on sustainable and circular messaging, is crucial.

Narrow focus on specific audience: Many actors – particularly in the fashion industry – target sustainability messaging to young, female, western, urban consumers. To truly drive change in consumer and citizen behaviour, it is important to adapt messaging for all ages, genders, locations and demographics. The perception by these groups that sustainable fashion and textiles are ‘not for them’ limits the opportunities for inclusive change at scale and could potentially alienate a large proportion of the population.

Overwhelming the consumer with information: In some cases, detailed sustainability messaging and a wealth of consumer information can become overwhelming and confusing for consumers. This may run contrary to the expectation that if sufficient information is provided to consumers they will be empowered to act responsibly. Consumers often feel they lack the expertise to make the complex trade-off decisions that detailed information can provoke and engage emotionally with a purchase thus their decision is also influenced by price, quality, style and identity, making it challenging to prioritize sustainability.
**Greenwash or lack of transparency:** Conversely, messaging that is perceived as ‘greenwashing’ can have a negative effect on both brand trust and consumers’ confidence in their own ability to select more sustainable options. In a recent study, 66 per cent of millennials and 79 per cent of Generation Z members thought brands are not sufficiently honest enough about environmental sustainability. A recent report finds 60% of sustainability claims by European fashion giants are “unsubstantiated” and “misleading”.

**Focus on individual responsibility:** While much of the messaging to consumers is focused on their own role in reducing their individual impacts, this does not reflect the reality of the textile value chain, where multiple actors are responsible for change. Participants in UNEP consultations pointed to the role of brands and policymakers in creating change, which is also mirrored in how much power and responsibility consumers believe that they have. Focusing on the role of individual responsibility can prevent the kind of coordinated shifts in policy and company strategies that are needed to pivot to a circular and sustainable textiles value chain. Further, information-led approaches are not sufficient to drive behaviour change without having a new vision of what that future could look like. By contrast, activating consumers and citizens to engage and advocate to those designing products, business models and policies can lead to a significant shift in the value chain over time.

**Lack of global alignment and coordinating structures:** While greenwashing and misleading environmental claims are gaining an increase prominence and legislative and regulatory focus, global agreement around standards and enforcement are lacking, leading to confusion for those actors who work across many markets. Working towards harmonization through for instance mutual recognition agreements or global standards that align and support current and planned policy actions would provide clear standards for all stakeholders to understand and adhere to.

### HOW TO PRIORITIZE

Communication and consumer engagement actors can leverage their unique role in the textile value chain in its transformation towards sustainability and circularity. While there are a range of key actions listed in the following section, the three ways that communication and consumer engagement actors should leverage their role and actions can be summarised as:

**“Make behaviour change aspirational.”**

**Reframe the narrative:** Use emotion-driven and aspirational messages and images linked to identity and culture to ensure that the consumer feels a gain rather than loss in adopting more sustainable and circular approaches, showcase new solutions, role models and positive futures, experiment with non-sustainability messaging to ensure other values are the driver, take into account emotional realities such as habits, decision fatigue and the primacy of other decision factors such as price, quality, and style and make sustainable solutions the easiest option, as well as being affordable and emotionally attractive.

**“Don’t assume that all consumers are the same.”**

**Understand the complexities of ‘the consumer’:** Carry out nuanced analyses of real consumer motivations while understanding that diversity across groups makes consumer behaviour difficult to predict, focus on inclusive storytelling for a more equitable industry, engaging beyond the ‘typical’ audience of western, urban young women and including men, different age groups, different geographical regions, different race and religions, and types of wear (e.g., workwear, sportswear), recognize that sustainability looks different to different people, and that some cultures have been reusing, redesigning or upcycling for centuries.

**“Convince many people to move away from consumption as the norm.”**

**Reduce the ‘consumptive’ mindset:** Reframe ‘consumers’ as users, clients, owners, entrepreneurs or sellers in a circular economy, including for reuse, recycling, resale and rental purposes, challenge whether ‘consumption’ is the only way to experience the social benefits and brand value of fashion and textiles, acknowledge the role of the media, communications, and advertising in driving consumptive behaviour, and engage with media and advertising stakeholders as well as brands and innovators to take responsibility for driving alternative narratives.
The following list of actions aims to offer a sense of the most urgent priorities for each stakeholder type, based on industry consultation and scientific analysis (i.e. actions that hold the most potential to address hotspots are prioritized). This does not mean that each stakeholder should undertake each action, but instead it is recommended that you further prioritize actions based on a number of key criteria, including:

- **What has already been done** by the actor (i.e. you might have already implemented some of the actions proposed). Further, identify existing goals or KPIs and evaluate whether they are sufficiently relevant and ambitious.

- **The degree of impact likely to be driven by each action**, based on your organization’s own specific impacts, scale and challenges or the possible influence in the wider value chain. Ideally your organization should have some overall sense or full analysis of impacts in different areas to make informed decisions.

- **Which actions are feasible within the policy, influence and physical limitations** of your organization. For example, rooftop solar panels might not be feasible in a location with no rooftop space, while purchasing renewable energy might not be feasible where private energy purchase is not legally permitted, or a lack of leverage with key stakeholders like the petrochemical industry might make it challenging to address impacts.

- **Whether an activity is likely to ‘unlock’ other actions** – e.g. an evaluation of company or country impacts, an on-site audit of potential investment opportunities, a reversal of a key legal barrier to activity, or infrastructure that unlocks impact reduction – for either your organization or your value chain partners.

- **Whether there are any potential trade-offs that could be problematic** based on the specific situation, if there are important sustainability disadvantages to implementing an action, e.g. a major increase in impacts in another area, or social trade-offs. This should ideally be based on a systems analysis of your organization’s structure and dynamics as well as an analysis of sustainability impacts. Engagement with key stakeholders should be prioritized when developing actions to avoid unintended consequences.

- **The outcomes of consultation with relevant and credible stakeholders** – e.g. NGOs, technical organizations, workforce, affected communities, suppliers, consumers, citizens – and what they would prioritize for your organization.

- **Practical implementation resources required and financial factors** such as available capital and return on investment. These should be considered as a secondary factor after the potential scale of impact of an action, but ‘low-hanging fruit’ with low implementation costs and positive impacts can be implemented immediately compared with large investments that might take more time to authorize or obtain investment for. If you are an SME, smallholder or another actor with lower access to capital, you might find that high-cost activities are not feasible without non-commercial financial support from another actor and thus you should prioritize identifying this financial support wherever possible.

- **The availability of collaboration mechanisms and resources** for a specific action – e.g. collective programmes that can be joined or supported, forums where issues can be raised, funding sources that could be applied for, collective advocacy or influencing opportunities – that can help to deliver either internal or industry-wide solutions.

- Based on all of these factors, you can review the relevance of the actions below – or identify additional actions – to create your own plan for circular and sustainable textiles. The Roadmap report recommends prioritizing **upstream and holistic actions**, such as on product design, business models or changing aspirations.
This requires a significant shift in perception of what ‘value’ means for consumers, brands and retailers. The focus must be placed on shifting the market and business revenue away from linear models towards circular models that have demonstrated environmental and social impact reduction across the life cycle, or focusing on selling experiences or other non-material goods rather than physical products:

Conduct nuanced analysis and surveys of real drivers for consumption and across the customer journey to identify the most suitable moments and medium to engage with audiences, while understanding that consumer behaviour is difficult to predict due to the huge diversity across groups, whereby creating ‘hard and fast’ rules may not be feasible.

Examine the economic dynamics at play with sustainable and circular solutions; for example, understand whether high prices exclude key demographics or consider whether popularizing resale cuts off access to second-hand goods for those who currently afford brand-new alternatives.

Engage consumers in a compelling way on the benefits of circular and sustainable business models using learnings from advertising, marketing and communications spaces, such as messages that are consistent and concise, positively frame sustainability and other benefits of the model and engage in visual and multimedia storytelling that deepens emotional engagement.

Demonstrate new ways for consumers to experience fashion beyond buying physical garments, such as building attractive digital experiences, digital products and in-store brand experiences, engaging consumers in the restoration of textiles or swapping items with other people.

A significant decrease in overconsumption is required, particularly in developed countries. This can be achieved through a combination of increased clothing utility (how long a product is used) and shifting consumer norms and aspirations towards lower consumption through engagement with the social and emotional aspects of behaviour. Reducing overproduction will be important for brands and retailers, and can be achieved through improved stock and demand management, as well as exploring new models such as on-demand production:

Reframe ‘consumers’ as users, clients, owners, entrepreneurs or sellers in a circular economy, including for reuse, recycling, resale and rental purposes. Challenge whether ‘consumption’ needs to be the only way to experience the social benefits and brand value of fashion and textiles.

Use emotion-driven and aspirational messages to link to the self-identity element of fashion and important cultural moments when creating engagement on sustainable and circular models, ‘make it aspirational, fun, and attractive’ and ensure that the consumer feels a gain rather than loss in adopting more sustainable approaches. Focus communications around desire, aspiration, positive messaging and reshaping what ‘fashion’ can be.

Showcase new solutions, role models and positive futures that can lead towards greater emotional resonance and thus changing beliefs, values and actions, with a view to evolve the textile industry from doing ‘less bad’ towards one that is actually doing good.

Leverage creative, emotional and visual storytelling techniques to develop and showcase positive beliefs, values and actions that align with sustainable behaviours, narratives, stories and examples of more sustainable lifestyles (e.g. only buying what is necessary). Experiment with messaging that has nothing to do with sustainability to ensure that other values are also drivers.

Design must be informed and intentional. Improved data and feedback loops will be critical to take into account knock-on effects of design at each stage of production, use and end of use. Products should be designed to consider the relevant circular business model (e.g. durability for rental), and with the assumption that they will be an input to closed loop recycling:

Create inspiring, aspirational and fun solutions and narratives around new designs offered to customers, highlighting how they offer new benefits for customers.

Where communications is required around reduced impacts from better design choices, reduce information fatigue by making information simple, positive and action-driven.

Engage with a range of customers to understand their needs and how updated design choices can more closely reflect them.
Better product care reduces impacts and improves product durability

The consumer ‘use’ phase for textiles has chemical, energy, and water impacts, alongside microfibre and product durability issues. However, most textile brands do not include the consumer use phase in their impact evaluations and there are no large initiatives working on this phase. There is especially a need for more data on product care impacts and behaviour, also considering that consumers are diverse and global.

Engage consumers to consider lower-impact product care behaviour (such as washing at a lower temperature and air drying), showcasing innovative and lower-impact approaches to product care (such as steam cleaning, UV cleaning, or spray cleaning), and normalizing and destigmatizing reduction in product care (such as only washing clothing after more than one wear).

Pivot away from guilt-based messaging around product longevity and focus on effective psychological drivers including providing creativity and empowerment, while maintaining high garment quality for resale, encouraging investing in skills for repair or customization and social outreach around designs and techniques, providing clear insights on options and approaches to care.

The textile value chain drives resource efficiency and eliminates production pollution, production waste, on-site fossil fuel use and chemicals of concern

Textile production sites – especially wet processing sites – require major support and investment to substitute machinery and apply circular production methods. This is particularly important for sites beyond tiers 1 and 2 of large multinational brands, or production countries without strong policy enforcement on cleaner production:

Shift the discussion around sustainability in production from a focus on problems to solutions, building a positive narrative and demonstrating the connections between different impact areas. Favour brand insights over product-level communication where possible.

If consumers need to choose a project or service based on value chain impact, reduce decision fatigue by keeping messaging simple and positive, and engage away from the point of sale where decisions are based on other factors such as price, quality and emotion. Consider the role of ‘choice editing,’ namely providing only better-produced options so that the consumer is not forced to make a choice based on complex sustainability criteria that they may not understand.

A just transition with skilled, safe, and empowered people takes place and social issues in the textile value chain are addressed

This includes collaborating with less-developed countries and previously marginalized communities, including – but not limited to – women, young people, indigenous and tribal peoples and persons with disabilities, which will help to avoid significant trade-offs and negative consequences:

Recognize that sustainability looks different to different people, and that some cultures have been reusing, redesigning or upcycling for centuries.

Consider potential trade-offs when designing consumer outreach, setting price points or engaging different consumers on different appropriate and accessible solutions. Think about global markets and the access of the less wealthy to the social good of fashion and textiles.

Focus on inclusive marketing and storytelling that encourages a more equitable industry. Increase engagement beyond the ‘typical’ audience of young women, creating messaging that is effective for men, different age groups, and consumers in all regions, or those in rural areas, of different races and religions, and users of different types of wear (e.g. workwear, sportswear). Showcase the heritage, craftsmanship and cultural connections inherent in product and services, paying tribute to their provenance. Tell the stories of local communities and grass-roots initiatives. Demonstrate the interconnectedness of fashion with people and communities, as well as with biodiversity and nature, for instance.

Ensure that messages are delivered by representative messengers in the appropriate context to resonate. Sustainable lifestyles and choices differ by audience type, region and demographic, making it imperative to fit into the appropriate cultural norms. Use ‘social proofing,’ demonstrating that more responsible choices are appealing/aspirational through the messaging of known and respected figures or by transmitting through social circles and being inclusive in storytelling and the selection of role models.
There is a need to rapidly scale new and more sustainable production and cultivation practices for virgin raw materials, and to mainstream fibre-to-fibre recycling through improved practices as well as investment in waste management systems and infrastructure:

Support consumers to understand the complexities of more sustainable and circular raw materials, taking account of the need for simple messaging in the right places and access to credible sources of information, providing explanations at both brand and product level where appropriate (e.g., brand-level explanation of closed loop textiles recycling, product-level explanation of the material chosen for that specific product) to avoid overwhelming consumers.

If consumers need to choose a product or service based on raw materials impact, reduce decision fatigue by keeping messaging simple and positive, and engage away from the point of sale where decisions are based on other factors such as price, quality and emotion. Consider the role of ‘choice editing,’ namely providing only better-produced options so that the consumer is not forced to make a choice based on complex sustainability criteria that they may not understand.

Take account of existing contributors to the ‘intention action gap’ around selection of sustainable products and ensure that other attributes are attractively highlighted alongside sustainability criteria.

This includes renewable energy, waste management and water treatment, as investment in shared infrastructure is essential to unlock the potential of individual actors to make changes in their own systems:

Engage the citizen rather than the consumer, and inform your audience about the relevant system-level challenges and solutions, including the approach of policymakers. Identify where citizen engagement would support increased action from policymakers, and direct citizens to mechanisms where they can positively influence policymaker investment in improved infrastructure.

Empower citizens to ask the right questions and engage through the right channels, and provide positive and action-based recommendations to support them in their efforts. Redirect them to trusted and credible sources of information to support their further engagement.

Shifting consumer behaviour and global dynamics are required to avoid the need for landfill and incineration; for example, through circular solutions that reduce waste outputs. Solutions are needed to avoid shifting responsibility for waste disposal, such as trade of used textiles to locations that cannot use them and lack the infrastructure to adequately process textile waste:

Understand current end-of-life and recycling behaviour and use psychological insights to create new incentives for optimal end-of-use behaviour, including resale, responsible donations, and recycling, framing these behaviours as the norm.

Understand that divestment of products is even more complex than purchasing, with a need to unpack key behaviour drivers at both the point of use and disposal. Consider factors that would keep clothing in use before divestment; for example, improving sizing and fit to help with durability.

Consider that habits can be the driving force where a consumer is uncertain, and therefore make sustainable solutions the easiest option, as well as being affordable and emotionally attractive. Frame recycling or reselling as the easiest option, for example, through road-side collections.
INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COORDINATION

Coordination is crucial in achieving a sustainable and circular textile value chain. Coordination actions that cut across all building blocks are outlined below.

Build internal capacity and systems

• Consider radical transparency: Some actors have been experimenting with a more transparent approach to consumer engagement, which includes an honest description of challenges, mistakes and what progress remains before they can be considered sustainable. This has the potential to build trust and educate consumers, and counter perceptions around greenwashing.

• Create a process to identify inconsistent or contradictory messages. For any entity communicating on sustainable and circular textiles, it is important to understand where messages may conflict or confuse stakeholders; for example, running an advertisement or public campaign around sustainable and lower-consumption behaviour while also maintaining traditional pro-consumption or profit-driven messaging. Organizations must review where messaging – even to different stakeholders such as customers versus investors – will create tension in stakeholders’ understanding of organizational goals. Where such tensions exist, organizations should aim to develop a strategy that will rationalize these messages into a more coherent position across stakeholders and channels.

Coordinate with other value chain stakeholders

• Acknowledge the role of the media, communications, and advertising in driving consumptive behaviour, and engage with media and advertising stakeholders as well as brands and innovators to take responsibility for driving alternative narratives. Work with a broad range of stakeholders including research and technical organizations to ensure that approaches are effective.

• Give consumers and citizens the tools to engage with policymakers and brands to increase their focus on incentivizing a change in textile business models and consumption, encouraging them to ‘demand better’ and increase dialogue between groups.

• Reframe the narrative from individual responsibility to collective responsibility and citizen engagement to avoid making change all about ‘what the consumer decides.’ Instead, reflect the journey and responsibilities of all stakeholders.

This document is intended for communication and consumer engagement actors within the textile value chain; for the full report, as well as annexes for other stakeholders, please visit: [www.unep.org/resources/publication/sustainability-and-circularity-textile-value-chain-global-roadmap](http://www.unep.org/resources/publication/sustainability-and-circularity-textile-value-chain-global-roadmap).

For more information on UNEP’s ongoing work on textiles, please visit [www.unep.org/sustainabletextiles](http://www.unep.org/sustainabletextiles).

Endnotes