

Threads of Change:

CONVERSATIONS

ON

TEXTILE

SUSTAINABILITY



**Generation
Climate
Europe**



CONVERSATIONS with



Sustainability is not a one way street. Big political players such as the European Union are key to setting regulatory standards, but how are such standards enacted in reality? Although certain regulations may appear to be effective, implementation of such legislations in reality can be challenging. In many cases, the voices of relevant actors are not provided with the space to express their views, such as those who are directly employed in the field of sustainable textiles. 2023 was lauded as the European Year of Skills, and Generation Climate Europe's Textiles Team wanted to hear from textiles change makers, and ask: which skills are important to their jobs? In conversations with innovators from Fibersort, United Repair Centre, Fresh Cuts, RReuse, and Banana Berry Design; we asked for insights into what they think are the most important new legislations, and the challenges of paving the way for a more sustainable textiles industry.



M: What does the United Repair Centre do?

We like to call ourselves social pioneers on a mission to repair the clothing industry. Our main business operations are repairs, recommerce, and some upcycling operations, but our heart is really on the social side. Our founder wanted to work on a mission to be able to provide employment opportunities to newcomers who are coming to the Netherlands. He really saw that there was a huge gap in society and that there were a lot of people (especially with newcomer or refugee status) who didn't get the same employment opportunities as most of us do in the Netherlands and all over Europe. So, he thought he could connect providing employment opportunities with saving textile waste.

I was really interested in working at United Repair Center because I think sustainability is a very broad topic and many young people care about but it may be overwhelming. In our work, we can see the results of repairs relatively quickly. You can also come visit us and see the newcomers who have employment opportunities. Especially on the social sustainability level you often don't really see the faces of the people who make your clothing and they're normally far away from you and you don't really know what's going on and I think that's in that level as well it's really unique to tangibly be able to show people what we're doing for the social side.

M: What are some of the biggest challenges of the model in general?

URC: Business model-wise we've noticed seasonality is something that is sometimes a struggle because a lot of the companies we work with especially outdoor brands or sportswear often have pieces that are repaired during winter. So, I would say that being able to keep operations always running during less repair-intense seasons is one challenge. To manage this, we try entering different types of projects e.g. pilots on recommerce. I think that's one of the most important skills in sustainable workplaces – adaptability. You have to be able to sometimes modify and quickly adapt to the changing situation. For example, repairs are not a new concept thing it's actually something that our grandmas have been doing back in the day all the time with their clothing but making this into a larger operation and a scalable business operation is something relatively new.

Maybe another point is finding ways to make repairs accessible to everybody so that it's not something that is only for the Patagonia clients. I would say a great type of support for that type of challenge is that for example if you look at governments they're able to subsidize this and help with being able to provide this as a viable solution for everybody. For example, the French government has created a subsidy for repairs so they will actually pay you to repair your clothing rather than to throw that away and I really think that that is something that can change the mindset of the customer becoming more interested in investing in more durable goods. That's something that I would love to see more governments in Europe doing.

M: The Netherlands is advanced on circularity in general. Do you have any form of support, not necessarily support in financial terms but just in trying to popularize these models or marketing campaigns that may be supporting you? Do you also see any impact of the EU circularity strategy on your organization?

URC: Yeah, on many different levels, we see that. One of the more obvious ones for our business operations is that we work very closely with the local governments in connection to hiring people so that's one of the ways that we are very connected with them - when newcomers are arriving in the Netherlands and are looking for these employment opportunities. At the EU level see that as well because a lot of companies



from all over Europe are reaching out to us and saying hey, we would really love to speak to you because of the EU legislations that are coming up in different areas, e.g. extended producer responsibility. They might also intrinsically think this is the right thing to do but of course, those legislations are pushing them to really take action. It's just something that most companies are going to need to get on board with if they want to survive in the long run.

M: From the perspective of URC what would you like to see more happening in terms of support that would be significant for you as a business?

UCR: Of course, there is currently the right to repair which is focused on electronics and electronics waste and we would love to see that being extended to textiles. That's something that affects the way that things are designed in the first place. So, when you look at the clothing industry if we create clothes that are made to be repairable and you think about the reparability already in the design phase you are creating something long-lasting. That also makes it easier for companies, that incorporate circular design into the process easier to jump into these different types of operations.

There are quite a few companies that have reached out to us asking for advice on the reparability of their certain products, so there's definitely a world to explore there and I think that there are going to be more, and more of these conversations between brands and service providers. I think that these exchanges are going to advance in the next and it will change how products are made. If you have brand partners who are very close to you, and they try to for example to collect data on repair that's a way of feeding back that repair information and spotting the weakest elements of their products. So, we are collecting of course a lot of data on products and this is also something that we can report on, so product development is something that is very important for making sure that in the future a product is built to last.

M: How many repair experts do you employ currently and/or how many newcomers?

UCR: I want to double-check this so I'm going to give

you the correct number over e-mail but currently, we have on the repair side around 12 tailors and we want to expand this to 60 in the coming year. Also, currently, we have around 20,000 repairs and we want to get in the next couple of years to 200,000 so we are set to scale.

M: In terms of employment and teaching the skills to the newcomers do you focus mostly or only on the repairing and tailoring skills, or do you also hire them in different areas of the business?

UCR: So we have of course our tailor team but we also have operations, quality controls etc. so that can be in different roles. Soon we are also launching a repair Academy because a lot of the tailors that we work with have e.g. 25 years' experience in tailoring in Syria so they are very experienced. But for the people who want to gain tailor experience, we are launching the repair Academy where they can join different modules, and this takes a little bit over a year to get the let's say the full education this is a free education and at the end of that they get a guaranteed job.

M: What would you advise young people wanting to work in the field of circular economy? How to get interested or how to get involved?

UCR: I don't think that there's one exact way to get there what I think is really cool is that when I was in university there were fewer opportunities actually to study these types of topics and less sustainability roles. These days I see a lot of young people coming into the company who have done super cool studies so that would be maybe one thing I would explore but there's even quite a lot of free courses online. One of the things that I did was volunteering at a green office in my university and that was a way that I also met a lot of people who were interested in the same field. Talking to people who also studied different courses, and who are going to work in different parts of sustainability, but all have a collective mission is very inspiring. I think that's a good way to expand your network to people interested in this field. But if you're no longer at university I would say you can still do a similar task by maybe finding people on LinkedIn who have a similar job to what you're looking for and just reach out to them. I also volunteered when I was on exchange in Argentina for an association called Eco House Argentina. It was an NGO that was working on raising awareness within companies' local governments and in schools for sustainability and it was also a place where I met so many interesting people with so many different approaches and ideas on sustainability. I think that can be really inspiring so as much as possible I would try to join these types of communities.



E: Can you explain a bit more about what your company does? What problem are you trying to solve?

FC: Sure thing! Fresh Cuts is all about bringing sustainability to the forefront of the textile industry. We're on a mission to create stylish and trendy clothing and accessories while keeping our environmental impact as low as possible. The fast-fashion industry has caused significant harm to our planet, and we want to be part of the solution. By using eco-friendly materials and ethical manufacturing practices, we hope to inspire others to make responsible fashion choices and contribute to a greener future.

E: Where do you think your company has the greatest contribution towards a more sustainable and circular textile industry in Europe?

FC: Our greatest impact lies in our commitment to a circular supply chain. We're passionate about using sustainable and recycled materials in our designs, which helps reduce the demand for new resources and minimises waste. Moreover, we've implemented recycling and upcycling programs that give our products a longer life. It's our way of showing the industry that circularity can be both fashionable and environmentally friendly.

E: What are the biggest challenges you are facing?

FC: Well, one of our biggest challenges is raising awareness among consumers. While sustainability is gaining traction, there's still a lot of work to be done in educating people about the importance of conscious fashion choices. Additionally, sourcing sustainable materials on a larger scale can be tough. We're constantly scouting for reliable partners who share our vision and can help us source eco-friendly materials more efficiently.

E: Do you feel the transformation to a more circular textile industry in Europe is happening? And do you believe that the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles has a positive impact on where the industry is heading?

FC: Absolutely! I'm thrilled to see the transformation happening before our eyes. Consumers are becoming more mindful of their fashion purchases, and brands are embracing sustainable practices. The EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles has played a crucial role in promoting sustainability. It has

encouraged businesses like ours to adopt more eco-friendly approaches and has created a ripple effect within the industry.

E: What policy support/institutional developments would you like to still see coming to help transition into a more circular and sustainable textiles industry?

FC: In terms of policy support, it would be fantastic to see more incentives for businesses that prioritise sustainability. Tax breaks or subsidies for companies that invest in eco-friendly materials and practices would be a game-changer. Additionally, I believe stronger regulations on waste management and extended producer responsibility could encourage brands to take more ownership of their products' life cycles.

E: In terms of skills: which skills are the most important in terms of Circular economy for textiles? And do you feel the workforce with those skills is available in the EU?

FC: For a circular economy in textiles, skills like sustainable design, knowledge of eco-friendly materials and sourcing, expertise in recycling and upcycling, and a deep understanding of ethical supply chains are crucial. While there's a growing pool of talent with these skills in the EU, we could use more educational programs and training opportunities to nurture a workforce dedicated to sustainability.

E: What advice would you give to young people wanting to work in the Circular economy?

FC: To all the young enthusiasts out there, my advice would be to follow your passion! The circular economy is an exciting and rewarding field to work in. Educate yourself about sustainable practices and circular principles, stay curious, and always seek new ways to make a positive impact. Collaborate with like-minded individuals and organisations to drive change together. Remember, every small step counts, and your dedication to sustainability can shape a brighter and more responsible future for the fashion industry.



C: What kind of problems do you think you're trying to solve?

Jeanne: Our main overarching goal is to link the Social economy agenda and the circular economy Academy agenda.

C: So what do you think your association has the greatest contribution towards a more sustainable and circular textiles, textile industry in Europe?

Jeanne: So as I said, we have 32 members and half of them are working in textile waste management. Collectively, they collect 3.141,000 textile every year, out of which they managed to locally we use 10%. So that's the big contribution to the circular economy. They always try to maximise or respecting the waste hierarchy and the proximity Principle which is not the case of all stakeholders active in this field, so the social enterprises that we represent, collect, sort, reuse, prepare for reuse and develop initiative like recycling, upcycling, swap to maximise the local reuse potential and by doing so they preserve resources, create local jobs for vulnerable individual. And promotes sustainable consumption models, so they are the best alternative against profession. I will share with you an article that we wrote about it if you want to.

C: So what are the biggest challenges that you're facing?

Jeanne : And so I would say the biggest challenge is overproduction and fast fashion. So basically cheap textiles are extremely low quality and in giant amounts and on top of that, we will now have the obligation to separately collect textiles, which is good, but at the same time it's a challenge. Textile collector and sorters will receive increasing volumes of non reusable textiles that can represent an increasing cost for them and also it would be more difficult to reuse because. And with ever decreasing quality. So it's kind of a threat to the current model and to overcome the threat we need the financial and operational support to be able to deal with the new situation.

C: OK. And if I can add. On top of that. A challenge at advocacy level. Do you think there are some challenges also like for advocating?

Jeanne: Yeah, it's such a big challenge for all the stakeholders active in this field. So it's also an advocacy challenge because we have to not only deal with this situation, but also with many stakeholders that have very different interests and for example. Producers, their main interest is to keep producing always more, and so there is this narrative that recycling is the solution, but it's really not the solution. It's just a way to not deal with the essential problem, which is our product.

C: And do you think there are also differences within producers like for example, big companies versus small businesses?

Jeanne: I can give a very concrete example. Of course you have the the big companies and you also have, for example, in France a movement called. So those are small companies that have a sustainable business model and are not. Only promoting it by doing it, but also engaging at the national level. Yeah, at advocacy level.

C: This transformation to a more circular textile industry in Europe is happening. And do you believe that the new strategy for textiles has a positive impact or where is the industry thing? Do you have impression that you is very. These (companies) they are throwing (words) like sustainable circular as buzzwords everywhere, but concretely, to what extent does this happen?

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Jeanne: Well, concretely, actually we have a big change because before we only had like one regulation that was specifically targeted at textile with the textile Labelling Regulation. And now we have an overarching strategy, giving the direction for the industry. So that's an improvement as such. But the strategy, the Textile strategy has on limitations and and as I was saying since the essential problem is the over production, the production level and the quality of it, and that is not that is not really something that's being tackled enough by the strategy and the all the legislation that are related to the textile strategy. For example, we have now the ESPR. That's an improvement for sure, but as soon as you don't decrease the amount you will keep on having the same issues.

C: Yeah, even though actually like in the textiles strategy, it is also like mentioned that they want to tackle reproduction, but completely like there is.

Jeanne: it's words. There is no action to deal with it. There is some improvement, for example banning the destruction of unsold goods. There are good steps in that direction, but we need stronger action and I will think that's your next question. So I will not.

C: So yeah, the industry is not doing its homework. Let's say So what policy supports institutional development? Would you like to still see coming to help transition into a more circular and textiles industry? I think you kind of already answered, but if you want to. Elaborate a bit.

Jeanne: Yeah, I started answering but. We have also concrete ask like policy demands to help for the transition. So in general the idea would be to make production decrease and so make fast fashion more expensive and support the second hand social enterprises business models to do so. So there is under the vision of the WFD there is the introduction of harmonised. There is the introduction of an extended producer responsibility scheme at EU level and this instrument. In his like as such for the moment. Is not designed to deal with the problem of. The big amount of textile so an instrument could be to introduce progressive EPRfee that would depend on the number of goods that are placed by producers on the market. That's one instrument. Otherwise, there's also taxation, so tax the more unsustainable. And on the other side, reduced VAT rates for social enterprises active in secondhand and also for repair services, for example. And in general, we need the right support to reuse operators, for example setting separate reuse and recycling targets to make sure that we have the ambition and then also monitoring the targets to ensure that they are achieved. We need financial support for the reuse sectors to help opening new stores, enhancing research in the sector. We're mentioning in the beginning skills we need support in training and

delivering skills and that's quite specific, but we also

C: Thanks a lot. All right, so now we'll switch to the, I mean this is the year of skills. So in terms of skills, you already a bit mentioned, but which skills are the most important in terms of circular Economy for textiles.

Jeanne: Some extract other report and skills that we published this year and yeah, I think I will answer this via e-mail because I have a couple of points to elaborate.

C: Do you think the workforce for those skills is available in EU or we still need to be developed a bit?

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Yes. So I have some recommendations. Sorry, I wrote that social enterprises play a key role in upskilling and reskilling activities. They also need more support to give us training. So an idea would be. As a follow up of the implementation of the EU Pact for skills to develop measures. Like certified training schemes, also guidance to Member States in terms of developing formal qualifications. Also guidance on how to include skills related to the prevention and sustainable management of waste textile in curricula to consolidate. Circular transition and also creating local jobs and plus consumer textile management.

Costanza: what do you think it's the role in youth in that. Because I mean there is a lot of studies saying that young people are more engaged in environmental environmental topics. So do you also really see it in? In terms of, for example, your social enterprises, do you see

Jeanne: That's difficult to say, but more in terms of involvement of use maybe in their conception practices, there's kind of two trends I would say like or awareness about the topics more and more engagement people more and like change their consumption habits and go more for our second hand but on the other way and we have a lot of competition, so. We need to make the youngest generation aware that they should support there's more traditional business models of social enterprises. For example, if you take the textile example, you have new online like private online platform like Vinted and I assume I don't know the statistics, but I assume that's more like young people that are using them and they yeah, we should really. They target them and address the issue that they shouldn't forget about the social economy model and they can be part of it, should be part of it, yeah. I said. Yeah. e-mail because. It was, yes. Like for example on the skill they. Have a lot to. Say but. Just easier for you to receive like. Alright, great. I'll. I'll share my e-mail with you and it's it's fine. So thank you very.



M:L: Can you explain about Fibersort's project? What problem are you trying to solve?

Jean-François Gryspeert: We are solving the problem of separation of waste streams. In textiles the waste streams are mainly based on fiber type and color. With the Fibersort we see the fiber(s) and color of each individual garment item.

Trimclean – After the Fibersort the garments still have impurities as buttons, zippers, labels, cords, patches, embroideries (= trims). Via the Trimclean machine we create pure textile feedstock by separating this stream from the stream with trims. The technology is based on a vision system that collaborates with AI. When detected, the trim is shot away via a pulse of pneumatic air.

L: Where do you think your company has the greatest contribution towards a more sustainable and circular textile industry in Europe?

JFG: Both the Fibersort and Trimclean are important as both machines help in bridging the gap towards text recycling (mechanical or chemical). Before there was no automated way to find the fiber composition or eliminate the trims.

L: What are the biggest challenges you are facing?

JFG: The yarn elastane, it is hard to detect.

L: Do you feel the transformation to a more circular textile industry in Europe is happening? Do you believe that EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles has a positive impact on where the industry is heading?

JFG: No, not very much now. Everybody is waiting on the EPR scheme from EU to come.

L: What policy support / institutional developments would you like to still see coming to help transition into a more circular and sustainable textiles industry?

JFG: EPR needs to come plus more help for creating more sorting capacity in the European market.

L: In terms of skills: which skills are the most important in terms of CE for textiles? Do you feel a workforce with those skills is available in the EU?

JFG: In our field of business, the problem is to find the people who want to do the job + keeping them in the company.





**BANANA BERRY
DESIGN**

Emmet in conversation with Sarah
Linskey

www.bananaberrydesign.com

E: Can you explain a bit more about what your company does? What problem are you trying to solve?

BBD: Oh, absolutely! So, Banana Berry Design is all about making sustainable and eco-friendly clothing and accessories. You know, the fashion industry has a pretty bad rep for being harmful to the environment with all the waste and pollution it creates. So, our main goal is to tackle that problem by offering chic and trendy fashion choices that are produced ethically and have a much lower impact on the planet.

E: Where do you think your company has the greatest contribution towards a more sustainable and circular textile industry in Europe?

BBD: Well, we're really proud of our closed-loop supply chain. We use organic and recycled materials as much as possible, which means we're reducing the need for new resources and cutting down on waste. And here's the exciting part: we've set up these awesome recycling and upcycling programs that give our products a longer life, so they don't just end up in landfills. It's our way of showing the industry that being sustainable doesn't mean compromising on style!

E: What are the biggest challenges you are facing?

BBD: Ah, the biggest challenge for us is finding a steady supply of eco-friendly materials. I mean, the demand is rising, but sometimes it's tough to get enough sustainable fabrics at reasonable prices. We're constantly on the lookout for partners who share our values and can help us source these materials sustainably.

E: Do you feel the transformation to a more circular textile industry in Europe is happening? And do you believe that the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles has a positive impact on where the industry is heading?

BBD: Definitely! It's so encouraging to see how people are becoming more conscious of their fashion choices. There's a real shift happening towards sustainable and circular fashion, and it's exciting to be a part of it. The

EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles has been a game-changer. It's given the whole industry a roadmap for positive change, and it's motivating brands like ours to step up and make a difference.

E: What policy support/institutional developments would you like to still see coming to help transition into a more circular and sustainable textiles industry?

BBD: Well, it would be amazing to see even more support from policymakers and institutions. Stronger waste management regulations and better eco-labelling would go a long way in encouraging sustainable practices. Also, some incentives for brands that prioritise sustainability could help speed up the adoption of circular practices. And, of course, more investment in research and development of eco-friendly materials would be fantastic.

E: In terms of skills: which skills are the most important in terms of Circular economy for textiles? And do you feel the workforce with those skills is available in the EU?

BBD: Circular economy skills are crucial! We need people who know the ins and outs of sustainable design, who can find and work with eco-friendly materials, and who understand how to reduce waste throughout the supply chain. As for the workforce, there's definitely talent out there, but I think there's room for growth. It would be great to see more educational programs and training opportunities focused on sustainability and circularity.

E: What advice would you give to young people wanting to work in the Circular economy?

BBD: Oh, I'd say go for it! The circular economy is the future, and we need passionate and innovative minds to lead the way. Keep yourself updated on all things sustainable, be curious, and don't be afraid to challenge the norms. Connect with others who share your vision and collaborate to make an even bigger impact. Remember, the fashion industry needs more eco-warriors, so if you're passionate about creating positive change, dive right in and be a driving force for a greener and more responsible fashion future.



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