

OPEN LETTER

The COVID-19 recovery: time to speed up sustainability of the fashion, apparel and textile sector

This open letter represents a call on behalf of a coalition of leading actors in the fashion, apparel and textile sector and NGOs that work for a more sustainable fashion industry, to ensure sustainability remains central in the face of our collective recovery from COVID-19.

Severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the fashion, apparel and textile sector has seen unprecedented disruption to its operations and supply chains. Across the globe, thousands of factories and stores have closed. Many are now reopening, but millions of workers remain in a precarious position. As lockdowns are relaxed and textile facilities reopen, we believe that all of us must speed up the transformation of the sector – building back better and more sustainably. With governments in the process of considering stimulus packages to help re-invigorate their economies and with the textile sector resuming operations, we believe *now* is the time to ensure that this unprecedented disruption can act as the catalyst for a new sustainable era for the sector.

The fashion, apparel and textile sector has a significant impact on planetary systems. It ranks amongst the world's most polluting industries, while in 2015 the sector was responsible for the consumption of 79 billion cubic metres of water, the emission of 1,715 million tons of CO_2 and the production of 92 million tons of waste. Under a business-as-usual scenario, it is estimated these numbers will increase by at least 50 per cent by 2030.

Recognizing that planetary systems – from biodiversity to water to climate – are already failing and that future demand for apparel is likely to increase and place further strain upon our planet and communities, we are committed to improving sustainability across the sector.

Many actors have been working to increase the sustainability of the sector and we are starting to see encouraging results. Programmes from multi-stakeholder platforms, such as Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC), Zero Discharge Hazardous Chemicals (ZDHC), Textile Exchange (TE), Fashion Revolution India, Open Apparel Registry (OAR), Apparel Impact Institute (AII) and the OECD Due Diligence Guidance have contributed to raising the sustainability bar for suppliers, improving transparency, making discharge limits more stringent, and enhancing levels of pre-competitive collaboration. These sector-specific efforts are in turn supplemented with cross-cutting efforts, such as the WBCSD WASH Pledge, which calls for better access to water, sanitation and hygiene services in workplaces, CDP's disclosure efforts for companies on climate, forests and water, and the Alliance for Water Stewardship's Standard and training programmes. All of these represent progress that must be maintained as we build back better.

The important role of the sector in achieving international agreements such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement was demonstrated with the launch in 2019 of The Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action under the UN Framework

Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the United Nations Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, which intends to transform the sector to support the achievement of the SDGs. Another notable initiative launched in 2020 was the "The Fashion Pact", which was led by France and drives ambitious science-based targets for climate, biodiversity and oceans.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has launched a call to action "COVID-19: Action in the Global Garment Industry", which aims to catalyze action across the industry to support manufacturers through the economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and to protect garment workers' income, health and employment. This Open Letter, which is supportive and complementary to the ILO's call to strengthen human rights, has a focus on the environmental aspects that need to be taken into consideration by the sector.

Bearing in mind the above, we call upon actors in the textile, apparel and fashion sector to:

1) **Maintain and embed corporate sustainability commitments into the core of business strategy and operations:** We call on our partners, peer companies and suppliers to maintain sustainability programmes at pre-COVID-19 levels, with the intention of strengthening them in the future. While short term demand for apparel may decline, long term demand for apparel is projected to increase, making the issue of planetary boundaries and sustainable growth a central challenge going forward. We will work with our value chains and stakeholders to embed environmental sustainability and resilience into our linked business strategies, assessing and reducing the impacts that the sector has on landscapes, climate, water resources and biodiversity. To build further resilience, including those companies that receive long-term financial assistance, should also disclose risks and other climate-related financial information aligned with TCFD recommendations, and to set science-based targets in line with the goals of the Paris Agreement – in order to reach net-zero emissions by 2050, as well as other science-based targets in other areas as they emerge (e.g., freshwater, biodiversity, land, oceans, etc.).

2) **Recognize the importance of WASH and pledge action:** The global COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of clean water and sanitation for health. Accordingly, we call upon our partners and peers to enact policies and strategies that will continue to emphasize the importance of the provision of universal access to water, sanitation and hygiene to mitigate the risks of the spread of diseases. Not only will this help in the fight against COVID-19, but address other water-borne diseases that affect millions annually.

3) **Revisit and transform business models with increased, brand-led sustainability efforts**: We call upon all fashion, apparel and textile companies to continue to champion the importance of sustainability publicly across the value chain, from customers to suppliers and fiber producers. Purpose-led brands have an opportunity to take a leading role in reshaping the industry to a new normal where the impact of production is minimized, products and materials are made more durable, and these activities are promoted and practiced along the supply chain. In particular, we encourage our peers and partners to consider how they may use the recovery to transform their business models in ways that decouple production and consumption from the depletion of water resources and the emission of greenhouses gases, and work collectively with governments, other companies, investors and communities to enhance sustainable water management within the river basins upon which they depend. In pursuing greener production practices, including circular design and longer lasting products as well as reductions in the use of harmful chemicals, it will facilitate upcycling and recycling of garments at the end of a product's life.

4) **Support and encourage governments to deploy Green Economic Recovery Plans:** Governments should consider sustainability in their COVID-19 stimulus packages to help re-

invigorate economies. We encourage governments to employ both short- and long-term instruments for the recovery of the sector, which respect and support climate and environmental legislation, and are in line with the "do no harm" principle of the European Green Deal and the EU taxonomy. By attaching environmentally friendly 'conditions' to stimulus packages, governments can encourage those of us working in the sector to ramp up investments in more low-carbon and circular business models. This would also support us to incorporate greater environmental sustainability and resilience into our business strategies, including assessing and reducing pollution and therefore curbing the impacts the sector has on landscapes, climate, water resources and biodiversity. Governments should also work in partnership with other governments (particularly those of producing countries) to ensure an 'enabling environment' to support businesses to meet their environmental commitments, i.e., through multilateral engagement, trade agreements and legislations.

5) **Recognize the importance of nature, particularly freshwater ecosystems, in maintaining human wellbeing:** As emphasized by the increase in droughts in many river basins, freshwater scarcity is a growing threat to countries' sustainable development. We call upon our partners and peers to adopt standards that conserve the quantity and quality of freshwater resources and respect the science-based thresholds of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. In order to develop stronger resilience programmes to tackle future system disruptions – be they social or environmental – we call upon the sector to embrace Nature-based solutions, which will enhance resilience and human wellbeing. The development and implementation of comprehensive water stewardship strategies can help address the impacts that operations have on shared water resources, improve the conditions of the catchments these sites depend upon and preserve the livelihoods of communities in the area.

6) **Enhance and strengthen supplier relationships:** Recognizing that suppliers and their workers will be amongst the most affected by COVID-19, we call upon brands to build stronger connections with suppliers in these times. This may come through longer-term agreements that can enhance short and long-term sustainability efforts, more constructive two-way dialogues or the development of stronger resilience programmes to face future system disruptions. As these relationships are strengthened, we also believe will create an opportunity to revisit and address human rights concerns, as outlined by various groups.

7) **Enhance Traceability and Transparency:** Corporates should pay attention to transparency at all stages of the value chain. Processes like disclosure of suppliers could be utilized to improve the traceability, risk awareness and accountability of the sector. Reliable consumer information would empower consumers to make informed decisions on their purchases.

Together we can ensure that the return to operations will not mean a return to the old normal, but a step toward a more sustainable fashion, apparel and textile sector that is fit for the future.

Signed

Burberry
H&M Group
Primark
Tchibo
PVH
Tommy Hilfiger
Calvin Klein
LPP

Bon Ton Toys
Teemill
Vietnam Textile and Garment Association (Vitas)
Bottletop
Amer Sports (subsidiary brands include Salomon, Arc'teryx, Peak Performance, Atomic, Suunto, Wilson & Precor)
Drip-by-Drip
Archroma
Crystal International
Sustainable Apparel Coalition
Global Organic Textile Standards (GOTS)
Organic Cotton Accelerator (OCA)
Fashion for Good
Alliance for Water Stewardship
Fashion's Responsible Supply Chain Hub (FReSCH), University College Dublin
CDP
ZDHC
Water Aid
WWF

