Shifting the textile and fashion sector

Options for distributing a foundation's funds

by

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1 Background to this work

1:1 The brief

A foundation has funds which it plans to use to support sustainable clothing and fashion practices through grant and investment funding. It would like to distribute these funds to relevant projects, with a particular focus on social economy initiatives that have the potential to flourish. The foundation asked Ethical Consumer to advise it on how it could focus its efforts to ensure that its funding achieved maximum impact where it was most needed. In particular, the foundation requested research on sustainable clothing and fashion practices, infrastructures, and support systems, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the field and identify existing gaps.

1:2 What Ethical Consumer did

Research for this brief built on work carried out by Ethical Consumer researchers in late 2023 and early 2024 for its latest round of product guides to the clothing sector (EC207). Ethical Consumer's product guides are aimed at giving magazine readers practical options to switch to more ethical buying habits. Products included in our guides therefore need to be reasonably widely available. As such Ethical Consumer's guides don't necessarily capture the most recent innovations or radical steps in any given sector. However we have produced a detailed summary of our main findings from EC207 in Appendix 1.

To complement this magazine research, we attended the Oxford Real Farming Conference (ORFC) textile sessions; conducted eight interviews with some key stakeholders (some of whom were identified through the ORFC), and invited others to complete an online survey.

We also drew on learning from Ethical Consumer's five year review of the Spring Prize to create options for how the foundation could distribute its funds to maximise impact.

The report below is divided into two sections. In the first we summarise the main themes that emerged from the stakeholder interviews and surveys. In the second section we discuss possible approaches for distributing the funds.

A summary of our magazine research (Appendix 1), and a list of interviewees and survey respondents (Appendix 2) can be found at the end of this report.

2 Emerging themes

2:1 Visions for the future

Although our discussions covered a broad range of ideas, a common vision of what a sustainable textile and garment sector could look like started to emerge.

The vision is of a textile and clothing sector that is more circular in nature. Our consumption is much reduced and people have the desire and knowledge to use and repair their clothes throughout their lifetimes. Clothing is made locally, at a bioregional scale, from locally grown and processed materials, using regenerative approaches that build soil and ecosystem health.

Waste is reduced, but where clothing does reach the end of its life, it is compostable and plays a role in building soil health. The value created by fabric production and clothing manufacture is fairly shared by those involved and supports local communities.

Where the emerging common vision lacked clarity, or raised questions, was on how local initiatives might work in practice and whether and how these would be connected to global trade. The issue of how workers in global supply chains would fit into the vision was raised but not satisfactorily answered. Some ideas were shared for local and bioregional approaches to be globally connected in order to support knowledge and skill sharing and solidarity approaches. These are explored in section 2:2e Building connections and enabling debate and a shared vision).

2:2 How to get there

To achieve the above vision, respondents had different approaches and many ideas for what needed to happen, but there was also a lot of overlap in their suggestions. They ranged from education and local infrastructure projects to campaigning for international legislative changes, building global solidarity and connections across value chains and sharing stories of other ways of being and of relating to textiles and clothes. They covered work that was already being done and ideas for projects not currently happening. We have grouped these into the following themes:

- Local production
- Workers' rights and a just transition
- Legislation to curb corporate power
- Education
- Building connections.

We believe that all of these are potentially worthy of funding and could be topics on which the foundation chooses to focus its funds. However, this choice will depend on how the foundation decides to distribute its funds.

2:2a Local production

A number of respondents identified the need to shift to more local production and highlighted the factors that are preventing this. By local production people meant within the UK and also regionally, within smaller geographical areas than the UK as a whole.

Most respondents focused on the need to encourage and facilitate the production of materials such as flax, hemp and wool in the UK, using regenerative organic approaches, and potentially stacking fibre production within current farm models. Various networks could inspire and support farmers to adopt these approaches, including Pasture For Life, the Savory Institute and the 3LM network, the Soil Association, the Organic Growers Alliance and the Land Workers' Alliance, as well as the wider ORFC network and emerging regional equivalents (Wales Real Farming and Northern Real Farming Conferences). Funding to increase the capacity of these networks to support this work would be required.

However, the main obstacle to more local fibre production is the current lack of processing infrastructure which includes both machines and knowledge.

We heard that, while some processing facilities exist, they are very small and unable to process at scale. This makes them expensive and means that they don't have the capacity to produce fabric sufficient for commercially viable lines of clothing. As a result, materials are often sent abroad for processing. This was also highlighted through Ethical Consumer's magazine research which showed that even the most ethical companies were sourcing fabrics from outside the UK, often from Asia.

Respondents suggested that funding could be spent on scaling up existing small-scale initiatives or, more ambitiously, establishing regional textile processing hubs that not only provide infrastructure but also connect farmers with makers and designers as well as educating local communities about garment manufacture, sewing and repairs.

These hubs should ideally be collectively owned by farmers and makers to ensure that profits are shared fairly along the value chain. One respondent, Rosie Bristow, is in the process of designing and building flax and hemp processing machinery. Their project is open source and they suggested that funding could be used to create online resources in many languages that demonstrate how to build and operate machinery. This would allow, in theory, anyone to build their own textiles processing hub.

2:2b Workers' rights and a just transition

The exploitation of workers in international garment supply chains has been well documented over many years and it was touched on by all respondents whatever their area of interest. Respondents raised long-standing issues such as the right to be paid a living wage and the importance of freedom of association, however, many also emphasised the importance of addressing the impacts of climate change. This fell into two main areas. Firstly, climate change is now having a material impact on garment sector workers. They are increasingly working in excessive heat and in areas at risk of flooding. This presents new health and safety risks and may affect garment manufacturers' capacity to meet brands' demands. Secondly, there is a high risk that if we do move towards a less environmentally damaging sector, in which consumption is reduced, this will have a negative effect on the livelihoods of millions of garment sector workers.

Respondents were united on the need for a just transition for workers but did not really have concrete suggestions for what this could look like. They were clear, however, that the sector could not rely on brand-led voluntary initiatives (such as corporate social responsibility approaches) to address these issues and that without strong worker organisations who can represent their own interests in future discussions there would be no just transition. Anna Canning from the Worker-Driven Social Responsibility Network commented that worker organising takes time and that workers' rights organisations often struggle to find core funding and capacity-building resources. They also need funding to be physically present at international forums and in the brands' home countries so that they can effectively put their case.

Julie Tomlin from SHED and Victoria Frausin, an independent researcher at the new REF/USE lab, talked about the need to explore these tensions and potential solutions with all those affected, commenting that responses should build solidarity between workers locally and globally.

Work on reparations was also referenced by Julie Tomlin and Rebecca Burgess, Executive Director of Fibreshed. Specific organisations mentioned included the Or Foundation which has brought public awareness to waste colonialism, and ReMake, which has campaigned for reparations to those exploited by large scale corporate practices within global supply chains.

2:2c Legislation to curb corporate power

Most of the themes discussed here aim indirectly at challenging and undermining corporate power. But many respondents stressed the need to achieve this directly by placing legislative restrictions on companies. The research conducted for Ethical Consumer Magazine (see Appendix 1) demonstrated that big brands continue to cause significant social and environmental harm despite widespread public awareness of the issues and the existence of numerous corporate social responsibility initiatives.

Many interview and survey respondents commented on the overwhelming power of brands and expressed the view that they will not change their behaviour unless required to do so by law. They suggested that funding could be spent on ensuring that proposed legislation in the EU and the UK is strong enough to effectively change corporate practice.

Some respondents suggested that the EU would be the best place to focus these efforts as they already have an existing textiles strategy which has ambitions to introduce legislation requiring eco-design (i.e. manufacturing textiles which last longer, are easier to repair and recycle, and have a minimum amount of recycled content), mandating extended producer responsibility, restricting the export of waste textiles, and tackling greenwashing. These measures combined would drive the industry towards a more circular model of operation. As so many companies are based or at least want to sell their products in the EU, any legislation adopted there has the potential for global impact.

Urska Trunk from the Changing Markets Foundation commented that while there is a good chance that the EU will introduce effective legislation, there is also a strong possibility that it will not go far enough. Companies spend a lot of money on lobbying – in a way that is often not transparent – to ensure that new legislation is weak. She observed that the Chinese ultra-fast fashion brand Shein had just opened a large office in Brussels for lobbying purposes. Having well-funded organisations to counter this kind of lobbying is therefore essential.

2:2d Education

All respondents agreed that overconsumption was a fundamental problem in the garment sector and that it needed to be addressed in a number of ways. Many felt that we needed to shift social attitudes about clothing such that people can satisfy their desire for something new in ways other than making a new purchase.

The research we conducted for Ethical Consumer Magazine also showed that brands have already co-opted and perverted the processes of recycling and upcycling in a ways that suggest to consumers that they can continue to buy at the same rate as long as they recycle. It's therefore imperative that people have the capacity to differentiate between genuinely circular practices and greenwashing.

This entails providing people with the practical skills (such as sewing) to make the most of their existing wardrobes through repair and upcycling. This is already happening in a small way through repair cafes and sewing workshops (e.g. www.mendassembly.com/directory), however, several respondents suggested it should be scaled up and particularly targeted at young people for whom clothing is an important expression of a frequently changing identity. Clothing can become tied with self-worth and pressures can be put on people to look a certain way.

This could be done by taking it into schools. One respondent suggested that social media influencers could be used to promote changes in attitudes and behaviour and others discussed the use of creative responses such as animation and storytelling in sharing other ways of living and relating to clothes.

2:2e Building connections

It was clear from our research that there are lots of organisations and individuals doing effective and creative work to address the many issues afflicting the garment and textiles sector. However, most of them are focussed on a single issue and are not connected to others working on different topics or at different levels (e.g. political, practical, international, regional, local). One of the reasons for this may be that they lack the time and opportunity to think about what productive connections are possible. Funding opportunities for diverse people and organisations to build networks, share understanding and learning, and discuss the kinds of work and interventions that are necessary to shift the sector as a whole towards the shared vision, could be extremely valuable.

For example, when discussing local production with respondents, we didn't get a clear picture of how this could work in practice. Opportunities for those with an interest in local production including farmers, existing processers, makers, designers and clothing brands looking to source ethically could therefore be extremely productive. We also heard repeatedly about the need to improve the lives of workers in global supply chains and ensure that they aren't negatively affected by moves towards a more sustainable sector, however, it was again unclear what this would look like. It was a concern expressed by those advocating for local production but they did not really address the issue of how local production would affect global workers. This gap in the vision for a sustainable sector is something that could be a fruitful topic of discussion between diverse groups working in the sector.

We also heard from Branson Skinner at the Or Foundation about the need for forums at which those most affected by negative impacts of clothing sector (he listed garment workers, cotton farmers, PET recyclers, and second-hand retailers and up-cyclers from throughout the global second-hand trade) could build a joined-up advocacy network to influence policy and investment forums. Julie Tomlin from SHED and the REF / USE lab also shared the idea of “radical twinning” – connecting regional approaches together to build understanding and solidarity.

3:0 Approaches to distributing the funds

The foundation asked Ethical Consumer to advise on how it could focus its efforts to ensure that its funding achieved maximum impact where it’s most needed, whilst being mindful of the low administrative capacity at the foundation and the likelihood that this could be a one off funding round.

The foundation approached Ethical Consumer because of our experience of researching the clothing sector. As an organisation we also have experience of distributing funds through a number of projects including the LUSH Prize for non-animal testing and the Lush Spring Prize for environmental and social regeneration.

Through the Lush Spring Prize, a collaboration has also emerged with a range of partners to explore regenerative approaches to philanthropy, and we have used our learning to support The African Food Sovereignty Network and a REconomy initiative in Lancaster District to think through their approaches to distributing funds.

Below we set out what we have learned from a Spring Prize review about the impacts of different funding processes.

3:1 Sharing learning from the Lush Spring Prize

3:1a How funds are distributed can be as important as what they fund.

Applications and decision making processes can be designed to achieve multiple outcomes. For example:

- The application process can be designed to support groups and projects to self-reflect or encourage collaboration or holistic thinking from the outset, thereby making the process worthwhile whether or not a project gets funding.
- Running open application processes can act like a honey pot, attracting a diverse array of great ideas and work and in so doing, offering insights into the learning, innovations, connections and gaps in a sector. Categories or challenges can also be posed to focus the applications. If applicants give permission to use answers for research and communications purposes at the application stage, learning from the process can be shared publicly, for example by publishing case studies profiling

projects. These can be used for research purposes and this can in turn inform how best to use future resources to support generative shifts in a sector.

- Decision making processes on who should receive funding can be designed to allow for a diversity of views to come together from across a sector, movement, network or business, offering the potential for deliberation, relationship building and group-wide learning around a topic – in this case the topic could be regenerative textiles and what this entails. One way of achieving this is to invite people from across the sector to participate in the decision-making process and capture the insights and reflections that emerge from their reading and discussion of applications. The findings from this process can be shared and have the potential to lead to interesting collaborations and inform future approaches.

3:1b Unrestricted funding has a role to play in supporting more generative working

A five year review of Spring Prize work found that unrestricted funding promotes:

- Responsiveness – Allowing projects to respond quickly to changes and switch direction to address shifting needs.
- Empowerment – Allowing groups to focus on what they feel is important, and reducing reliance on forms of funding that are restrictive or disempowering or following the latest funding trends.
- Wellbeing – Reducing stress and the burden of providing excessive paperwork or having to ask permission before spending funds. This meant projects could focus more on the actual work they were doing.
- Resilience – Projects could use funds to invest in capacity building, for core costs or to keep as reserves. This has enabled some projects to gain more funding from elsewhere.
- Innovation – Allowing projects to experiment with new ideas and creative projects.

3:1c There is huge potential in collaboration

- Fostering approaches that build global solidarity and connections cannot be underestimated. Bringing decision makers or funded groups together to learn from each other can build feelings of solidarity, can offer motivation, and can lead to ongoing support and collaborations.
- Where capacity or resources within a specific funder organisation are low – for example where there are limited funds to distribute or where there is minimal capacity for administration or communications work – collaborating with a diverse array of partners that are united around common values can create an ecology of support where different partners offer different functions. For example, a media partner can benefit from sharing the stories and insights of grant funded groups (as can the funder); other funders may be interested in backing projects that have gone

through a vetting process they trust; research organisations may be keen to analyse applications and discussions to deepen their own understanding of a sector; organisations keen to support their staff to learn about a topic could offer shortlisters to screen initial applications.

4:0 Recommendations

We understand that the foundation has limited resources but on the basis of Ethical Consumer's Spring Prize experience and the research we have conducted, our recommendation would be an approach that fosters the sharing of learning, collaboration and understanding between different groups, and that has the potential to attract further funding.

The themes we have outlined in Section 2:0 are all important and inter-related. However, if the foundation wanted to focus its funding on a particular topic, we would recommend supporting forums or work that brings diverse stakeholders together to build a shared understanding, learnings and approaches. We would also recommend investing in local production.

Although we have not carried out a review of the programmes of other funding bodies, we think that it may be easier to find funding for policy and lobbying work and for work that focuses on a just transition for workers. We also think that work to fund local production could also support public education projects to change people's attitudes to clothing and give them the skills to ensure their clothes have longevity.

Finally, work to support local production could also engender business models that are currently not mainstream in the sector such as cooperatives and community ownership.

Appendix 1: Ethical Consumer Magazine research

Summary of research on the clothing sector carried out for the March 2024 issue of Ethical Consumer magazine.

The negative

The most recent edition of Ethical Consumer magazine contained product guides to high street clothing brands, ethical clothing brands, jeans, and underwear. In the process of researching the magazine, we gave ethical ratings to over 75 clothing companies.

When publishing a product guide, Ethical Consumer normally awards Best Buy status to the highest scoring brands, however, there were no Best Buys in the high street clothing guide, a reflection of the ongoing, appalling practices across the board amongst the mainstream brands. Instead, we told our readers that best practice was to buy second hand.

The high street clothing guide included not only brands with physical shops but also online-only sellers such as Shein and Boohoo. We found poor practice on climate, workers' rights, environmental impact of materials, animal rights and animal welfare, and financial matters such as tax conduct and excessive director pay. These findings aren't surprising or new. The sector is massively resource-intensive, polluting and exploitative: it emits vast amounts of greenhouse gases, requires huge quantities of water, sends tonnes of garments to landfill and seeks out the cheapest manufacturing locations where pay is low and respect for workers' rights poor.

Ultra fast fashion

Despite widespread public awareness of and campaigning on these issues, the situation only seems to be deteriorating. The sector has grown consistently over the last 30 years and further growth is forecast. In that same period, people's attitudes to clothing have changed. When Ethical Consumer last rated high street clothing brands in 2021, we focused on fast fashion and the negative impacts of its increased rates of production, consumption and disposal.

In our latest issue, we looked at the most recent development, ultra fast fashion, which is mainly driven by the Chinese brands Shein and Temu. In the distant past, fashion brands added new items seasonally. These companies constantly add new items to their websites, monitoring consumer trends through digital analytics, and swiftly escalating production on popular pieces. In 2022, Shein is estimated to have added over 300,000 new garments in the U.S. For comparison, Boohoo added 18,000 new items and Zara and H&M didn't reach 10,000. This level of production inevitably exacerbates the harms done by the garment sector.

Race to the bottom

Additionally, our researchers observed that the presence of these two Chinese brands in the sector is harmful in other ways. European and US brands have for years been subject to public and NGO pressure to improve their practices. These campaigns have not brought about radical change but they have resulted in some improvements such as increased transparency of supply chains and legally binding worker safety initiatives such as the International Accord. Furthermore, most brands have acted to exclude cotton from Xinjiang and Turkmenistan from their supply chains because of the high risk of the use of forced labour. Shein and Temu, however, have not taken these actions and don't even feign concern about the ethical issues associated with the sector. Given their size and success (both have turnovers of over £15 billion), there is a risk that the US and European companies will decide that the steps they have taken to improve their practices aren't worth the cost and they will begin to retrench.

Furthermore, Western companies do business in China and therefore take into account the concerns of Chinese consumers and the Chinese government. This introduces new factors into their decision-making that have the potential to reverse earlier good practice. For example, brands expressing concern about Uyghur forced labour and seeking to exclude Uyghur cotton from their supply chains faced a boycott in China and some, such as Zara's owner Inditex, removed statements on these issues from their websites, replacing them with statements less overtly critical of China.

New developments in greenwashing

Our researchers found that while clothing companies often used words like "responsible" and "sustainable", it was difficult to find concrete information on which to judge their claims. And yet, companies increasingly portray themselves as the solution to the garment sector's problems rather than their cause. The latest tactic of this kind is to move into the second-hand market and to offer return and repair schemes.

Many brands, including ASOS, Boohoo, H&M, PrettyLittleThing, Primark, Shein, and Zara, have launched their own resale marketplaces or take-back schemes. Whilst this could be seen as a positive development, our researchers were sceptical about their value. Many of the schemes reward people who return a garment by giving them a voucher for their next new purchase, thereby encouraging them to buy more clothes, rather than to reduce consumption. These schemes therefore don't represent a move to a more genuinely circular economy and away from the current model of over-production and over-consumption. Instead they encourage the continuation of the old model whilst giving the brands another income stream. It was also unclear, in most cases, what happened to the returned clothes and investigations have found that many end up in shredding, landfill and burning sites.

As well as second-hand marketplaces, some brands have introduced repair services. However, these are currently so small compared to the overall scale of the companies that they feel like a gesture rather than a transformative development.

The positive

As well as researching poor practice by the high street brands, we also produced a guide to ethical clothing which covered 29 companies (see summary table in figure 1. below). Our jeans and underwear guides also included some ethical providers alongside mainstream brands. In our ethical clothing guide, we defined ethical fashion as that which has as its goal the reduction of the negative impacts of the clothing industry on people, animals, and the environment and the safeguarding and enhancing of Earth's resources for future generations.

The brands that we looked at were making efforts to achieve this goal in a range of different ways, from use of low-impact textiles, to localised production, recycling, and payment of living wages. Below, we look at these practices in more detail.

ETHISCORE The higher the ethiscore, the better the company.
GOOD 60+
AVERAGE 25-59
POOR 0-24

CATEGORIES The more green bars the better *
CLIMATE, ANIMALS, WORKERS, COTTON, SUSTAINABLE MATERIALS, TAX CONDUCT, COMPANY ETHOS

Best Buys
Recommended
Brands to avoid

	BRAND	ETHISCORE (OUT OF 100)	COMPANY GROUP
	NEW CLOTHES		
Best Buy	MUD	90	MUD Jeans International B.V.
Best Buy	Rapanui	88	Teemill Tech Ltd
Best Buy	THTC	88	THTC Ltd
Best Buy	Where Does It Come From	84	Where Does It Come From?
Best Buy	Lucy and Yak	81	Lucy and Yak Ltd.
Best Buy	Kuyichi	80	Kuyichi BV
Best Buy	Ninety Percent	78	Ninety Percent Ltd
Best Buy	BAM	76	Bamboo Clothing Ltd
Best Buy	Nudie	76	Svenska Jeans AB
Best Buy	Earthmonk	71	Earthmonk Ltd
Recommended	Finisterre	71	Fitzroy Apparel Ltd
Best Buy	Greenfibres	71	Greenfibres Ltd
Best Buy	Brothers We Stand	69	Brothers We Stand
	Living Crafts	69	Living Crafts GmbH & Co. KG
	Outsider	69	Outsider
	Komodo	66	Yakit Rakit Ltd
	Pact	66	Revelry Brands
	Howies	60	Yokozuna Ltd
Recommended	Community Clothing	54	Community Clothing LLC
	Bibico	44	Bibico
	Nomads	21	Superhouse Limited
	SECOND-HAND CLOTHES		
Best Buy	Rokit	79	Rokit Limited
Best Buy	We Are Cow	79	Cow Vintage Ltd
Best Buy	Preworn	76	Preworn Ltd
Best Buy	Thrifted	76	Thrifted Limited
Best Buy	Oxfam	74	Oxfam GB
Best Buy	Beyond Retro	72	Bank & Vogue Ltd
Recommended	Vinted	64	Vinted Limited
	Depop	34	Etsy, Inc

* Each category is scored out of 100. The final Ethiscore is the average of the category scores. We consider Company Ethos particularly important and it covers the whole company group so it is weighted double.

Best Buys are decided by the editorial team based on the research we have undertaken, the scoring system and the unique insight into the issues that our editorial team has. 9 times out of 10 this will be the brand (or brands) that are top of the table but sometimes an ethical company which is truly innovative scores less well on our rigid scoring system and we use the Best Buy and Recommended section to acknowledge this.

Figure 1: Ethical Clothing Guide ethiscore table

Sustainable Materials

For this edition (EC207), we developed two new ratings looking at companies' use of materials.

Our cotton rating awarded the highest marks to companies using a high percentage of organic, Fairtrade or recycled cotton. Marks were also awarded if companies weren't sourcing cotton from Turkmenistan and Xinjiang, where forced labour is used in its production.

Our sustainable materials rating looked at all the materials a company was using and awarded the highest marks to companies using a high percentage of organic materials, recycled natural fibres, and closed loop plant-based fabrics. Companies also scored highly if they sold second-hand clothing. Marks were also awarded if companies were taking action to reduce chemical and water use in the production of their fabrics.

Almost all of the companies in the ethical clothing guide scored very highly in both areas. Most companies made most of their clothes from certified organic cotton while some used fibres such as organic hemp and linen. They avoided oil-based synthetic materials or used small amounts of recycled synthetics. Some used tree-fibre based fabrics such as viscose, which can be very polluting in their production, but all brands used closed-loop production methods in which the chemicals are recycled and not released into the environment.

We found little use of biodegradable or compostable materials. Organic fibres are routinely blended with oil-based synthetics to make clothes stretchy which means they will never fully break down. We found one underwear brand advertising a biodegradable range. It used a material called Roica in place of elastane, however, further investigation revealed that whilst there was evidence that Roica biodegraded to some extent, it had not yet been demonstrated to fully biodegrade. Compostability, even among ethical brands, therefore seems still to be quite a remote possibility.

We also found almost no use of locally-grown or processed fabrics. The highest scoring companies used mainly organic cotton which was sourced from Asia. One company specialised in hemp clothing but its hemp was sourced from China. We found no companies sourcing materials that are grown using regenerative or agro-ecological practices such as combining fibre and food production or growing regionally appropriate crops. One possible exception was Community Clothing which manufactures its garments in the UK and is seeking to source fabric in the UK – it is currently involved in a project with the North West England Fibreshed to grow flax in the UK.

Longevity and circularity

Over half of the companies in the ethical clothing guide and some underwear and jeans brands discussed trying to establish closed-loop, circular business models. Their efforts involve reclaiming fibres and garments, implementing designs that minimize waste, investing in innovative materials conducive to a circular textiles economy, and advocating against excessive consumption.

Some companies offered repairs (either free or paid-for), others made only seasonless clothes designed to last decades, and others offered return and resale schemes. Some of the return schemes could be criticised for the same reasons as those operated by the mainstream brands, for example, some companies offered vouchers to purchase new items in return for old. But overall, efforts towards circularity and longevity made by the ethical brands were more comprehensive and more transparent than those made by mainstream brands.

Second-hand

The ethical clothing guide included eight companies exclusively dedicated to selling second-hand and upcycled clothing. This reflects the growth in popularity of second hand clothing – Ethical Consumer's most recent Market Report found that second-hand clothing sales rose by 49% in the previous 12 months, following the upward trend of the past several years. It also reflects the entry into the market of large, online-only second-hand sales platforms such as Depop and Vinted. The second-hand companies mostly scored well. The two with the highest scores were Rokit and We Are Cow which also sell upcycled clothing; second-hand garments often don't meet their quality standards and rather than sending them to landfill, their in-house teams repurpose these items into wearable clothing.

Workers' Rights

We also found brands with good practice on workers' rights such as only sourcing from Fairtrade manufacturers and growers and ensuring payment of living wages in the supply chain. Ethical brands also showed an awareness of how their purchasing practices could affect workers in their supply chains. They discussed how they prevented negative impacts by, for example, avoiding last minute orders, collaborating with suppliers to forecast and plan production, choosing to manufacture in the UK so as to have greater oversight of who is involved and how they are treated, maintaining long-term relationships with suppliers, and not shifting production to for the sake of cheaper prices.

Information from brands about workers' rights focused mainly on the production of final garments rather than textiles. We did not find any examples of co-operative-owned garment and textile production or models of production based around community benefit.

Worker-driven social responsibility

It's rare to find good practice among mainstream clothing brands on workers' rights but the jeans guide identified a recent successful initiative to eliminate gender-based violence and sexual harassment in Lesotho garment factories.

Sexual abuse and coercion were exposed in Lesotho factories supplying Levi's and Kontoor Brands (which owns Lee and Wrangler). These abuses had been happening for years despite factories being subject to social audits carried out on behalf of the purchaser brands. Rather than recommending that brands cease trading with the garment factories in question, unions and workers' rights NGOs pursued legally binding agreements with the brands that made ongoing business with the factories conditional on progress towards the elimination of gender-based violence.

In 2019, a series of agreements were signed between brands, civil society organisations and factories which established, among other things, an independent body to receive and investigate claims of gender-based violence from workers. This body had power to issue findings and direct the factories to implement remedies, up to and including termination of the contracts of harassers. Critically, the agreements also included a binding obligation on the part of the signatory brands to use their economic leverage to ensure that the factories complied with their obligations, including implementing remedies. This means that the factories could lose their business with the brands if they don't comply.

So far, the initiative has had a significant impact, with women workers reporting trust in the complaint mechanism, a willingness to report to it, and overall a much safer workplace environment.

This is only the second such binding agreement in the garment sector – the first being the International Accord for Health and Safety in the Textile and Garment Industry which operates in Bangladesh and Pakistan (a development of the Bangladesh Accord). Given the long-standing and widespread abuses of workers' rights in the garment sector, such agreements, whilst still limited in application, represent significant hope for a transformation of the sector.

Price

We are aware that for many people, price is the most important factor in any purchase, and that there is a perception that ethical means "luxury". We therefore compare prices of brands that score highly in our research with those which don't and try to inform readers about brands which are both ethical and affordable.

Brands with the lowest scores tend to be the cheapest – Primark, for example, was selling a pair of women's knickers for 70 pence – and ethical brands can't compete with this. However, in an industry in which designer brands charge massive uplifts on the basis of their names, ethical brands are rarely the most expensive and we found many were reasonably priced. For example in the underwear guide, one of our Best Buys came within the top third for price and the most expensive brand was Agent Provocateur which received a very low score and was one of our brands to avoid.

Second-hand clothing is, of course, very affordable and prices are often competitive with those of the fast fashion brands.

Ethos

Ethical Consumer awards marks to companies with structures or policies which indicate that they are not solely profit-driven or that they have more democratic management processes. Some ethical brands scored well in this area as they were charities, B-Corps or were Living Wage-accredited. However, we did not find any co-operatives, community ownership or alternative finance models.

Appendix 2:

List of interviewees and survey respondents

Deborah Barker – Director South-East England Fibreshed

Tessa Beltrano – Development Manager at Remake

Lucy Brill – Private sector policy lead at CAFOD and trustee at Homeworkers Worldwide

Rosie Bristow – PhD student in engineering and textiles at Heriot-Watt university

Rebecca Burgess – Executive Director at Fibershed

Anna Canning – Director of Communications at Worker Driven Social Responsibility Network

Victoria Frausin, Sewing Cafe Lancaster Coordinator & independent researcher at the REF/USE lab and Closing Loops Project, Postgraduate researcher at Lancaster University around waste colonialism with a focus on textiles.

Lynda Grose – Professor, Fashion Design Program at California College of the Arts

Jennifer Morisetti – Founder at Defashion Dorset

Oli Rodker – Landworkers' Alliance

Branson Skinner – Co-Founder at the Or Foundation

Julie Tomlin – SHED & Necessity platform (funder that supports generative textile/clothing work), REF/USE lab.

Urska Trunk – Campaign Manager at Changing Markets Foundation

George Williams and Hannah Bruce – Just Transition Advisor and Head of Global Partnerships at Ethical Trading Initiative