



A due diligence approach to communicating responsibly with consumers on the sustainability performance of products

14 February 2019, 11:30-12:45

Partners

UN Environment, Consumers International

Objective of the session

The session will explore how companies can communicate their due diligence efforts – including in relation to environmental impacts – on a product level throughout the supply chain to consumers in a way that enables consumers to make meaningful and fully informed purchasing decisions. The session will also discuss the main challenges that need to be addressed for organisations to best communicate their production processes and products' sustainability performance in the garment and footwear sector, and how due diligence tools can help address these and drive the sector forward.

Background

According to a report released last year, the global apparel and footwear industries account for an estimated 8% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions¹. Based on largely linear supply chains, the sector is resource intensive, as well as at high risk for pollution impacts, especially from wet processing and other upstream production processes. Changing consumption patterns favouring cheaper, lower quality goods in certain markets, as well as growing urbanised middle classes in emerging economies, will only cause these impacts to increase², exacerbating the environmental and social risks that workers and communities along the supply chain are facing, as well as the risks to consumers themselves. Actions to ensure a more sustainable garment and footwear industry are vital and companies are rising to the challenge.



On the one hand, companies in the sector are increasingly recognising a responsibility to follow due diligence in their supply chain: ensuring that consumers, local communities, workers and the natural environment are not disadvantaged in any way through the manufacture and commercialisation of certain fashion products. The challenge is how to communicate the impacts of this to consumers to help them make meaningful decisions on product purchase, use and disposal. On the other hand, companies have the opportunity to take another step and use their influence and marketing

¹ Quantis, Measuring Fashion: Insights from the Environmental Impact of the Global Apparel and Footwear Industries study, 2018

² KPMG, Textile Exchange, Threading the Needle, 2018

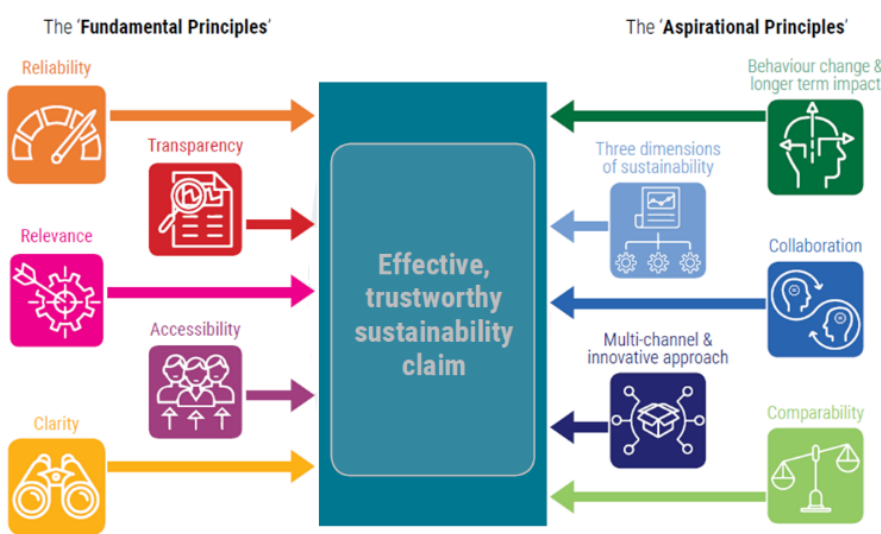
power to go beyond merely informing consumers, to encouraging behaviour change towards sustainability in the long term, for instance, countering fast fashion trends. Both approaches are crucial to the achievement of Goal 12 of the Sustainable Development Goals: Responsible Consumption and Production.

Consumer information tools, such as labels, voluntary certifications, and marketing claims, as well as audits and assessments are helpful tools for both companies and consumers. They can:

1. Guide consumers in making informed choices – which products they purchase, how they use/ re-use them and how they eventually discard them;
2. Help companies manage due diligence processes by ensuring information systematically passes through their supply chains and by communicating their efforts.

In this context, collaborative sector initiatives can help define common criteria for joint action along the supply chain.

At a time when many consumers feel confused and no longer trust or know how to act upon the information they receive, it becomes ever more important to ensure that messages favouring a sustainability approach are reliable, trustworthy and substantiated.



To guide companies on how to best communicate with consumers, UN Environment and the International Trade Centre developed **Guidelines for Providing Product Sustainability Information**³. The Guidelines aim to benefit both the consumer and the producer by outlining how companies can provide quality information to empower sustainable consumption decisions, and by serving as a reference for governments, standard setting bodies and NGOs. In 2018, 28

Picture 2: from the *Guidelines for Providing Product Sustainability Information* (2017)

organisations from around the globe and more than ten industry sectors - including garments and textile manufacturing and retail - applied and tested these Guidelines. These companies (“road testers”) acknowledged they gained practical insights on how they could improve their claims, especially new ideas on further engagement of relevant stakeholders and the importance of backing up information with reliable data analysis. The road testing also confirmed that reliable communication starts with a robust evidence base on products’ priority environmental and other sustainability risks, guided by due diligence tools. For instance, 87% of road testers affirmed that their claims comply with the Guidelines’ principle 1 on reliability, meaning that they are based on robust methodologies, data or standards. 97% of road testers affirmed their claims meet principle 2 on relevance, meaning that their claims provide information on relevant aspects, which contribute significantly to the sustainability profile of their products.

However, small and medium-sized enterprises still require support in this area; they often do not have the resources to access supply chain data, to get certified against standards or to identify priority intervention issues. Approaches such as ‘hotspots analysis’ can help but are not yet well known. Furthermore, conveying a holistic lifecycle approach in one single product-based communication claim, poses a challenge - not only informing purchasing decisions but also

³ UN Environment, International Trade Centre (ITC) [Guidelines for Providing Product Sustainability Information](#), 2017,

behaviour in the use and disposal phase of the product's life, which have been identified as environmental hotspots in the garment and footwear sector. The complexity of sustainability information, together with limited space on packaging and the lack of harmonized approaches and definitions - due to diversity of standards, for instance - seem to be the main challenges for organisations when communicating about their products' sustainability performance⁴.

In the session we will discuss these and other learnings from this project, how a due diligence approach might help companies in applying the Guidelines, and the role for collaborative initiatives and policymakers in supporting companies communicate better with consumers.

⁴ UN Environment, ITC, Ready to Drive the Market. Experiences from Road Testing the Guidelines For Providing Product Sustainability Information, *forthcoming*

Discussion questions

- How does due diligence help drive meaningful communication to consumers on the impacts of products?
- Which are the main challenges the sector faces when developing and providing product sustainability information?
- How can collaborative initiatives and certification schemes help?
- How do we see the role of companies in driving sustainable consumption behaviour, and which other measures are needed?

For more information

- UN Environment, International Trade Centre, Guidelines for Providing Production Sustainability Information, 2017, <http://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/resource/guidelines-providing-product-sustainability-information>.
- Consumers International, Case study: Aditya Birla Fashion & Retail Limited (ABFRL), 2018, <http://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/resource/case-study-aditya-birla-fashion-retail-limited-abfrl-guidelines-providing-product>.
- KPMG, Textile Exchange, Threading the Needle, 2018, <https://textileexchange.org/downloads/threading-the-needle>
- Quantis, Measuring Fashion: Insights from the Environmental Impact of the Global Apparel and Footwear Industries study, 2018, https://quantis-intl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/measuringfashion_globalimpactstudy_full-report_quantis_cwf_2018a.pdf
- French National Contact Point, On Implementation of the OECD Guidelines in the Textile and Clothing Sector, I-IV-Role of Consumers, 2013, <https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Ressources/File/398811>.
- OECD Environmental labelling and information schemes, Policy Perspectives, May 2016 <http://www.oecd.org/env/policy-persectives-environmental-labelling-and-information-schemes.pdf>