

December 2024

A Public Eye Report – Executive Summary

One-Earth Fashion

33 Transformation Targets
for a Just Fashion System
within Planetary Boundaries

Public Eye

Executive Summary

How should we dress on a dying planet? The Earth is facing a climate emergency, but the fashion system is simply adding fuel to the fire. Textiles, clothing, leather and footwear are among the most polluting and unjust industries, built on widespread exploitation of cheap labour and the planet's resources. Despite this devastating track record, *more*, *faster* and *cheaper* continue to be the driving forces in fashion business models.

The fashion system clearly needs a radical overhaul. *Less* resource and energy use, *slower* production and consumption, and *fairer* distribution of economic value must become the new fashion trends for a liveable climate and a just future on Earth. This is not merely about a few tweaks here and there – it's about making a transition to a new operating system for fashion.

While there seems to be a broad consensus on the general direction in which industry should ideally move (less GHG emitting, more circular, more regenerative, fairer, less polluting), there is no agreement on the scale of the changes required to achieve a just fashion system within planetary boundaries.

This leaves us in a situation where small, positive steps – for example, reducing plastics in packaging, using more renewable energy in offices, or raising workers' wages just above the minimum wage – are presented as evidence that the industry is becoming more sustainable, even though the bigger picture shows that such changes are far too small, or are being cancelled out by increased production or other rebound effects.

PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The aim of this report is to advance the international debate on socio-ecological transformation and a just transition in the fashion system by proposing concrete targets for change and paradigm shifts. Meaningful and measurable transformation targets are essential for honest stocktaking and effective guidance.

We are addressing all those who believe that a better, more just and ecologically sound fashion system is possible: social activists and campaigners, organized workers and trade unions, discerning consumers and principled policymakers, responsible entrepreneurs and business leaders, designers and researchers with a sense of purpose, and the many others who are already spinning the threads of this transformation, or who want to contribute to this overhaul.

This report provides food for thought and action. Throughout the report, readers will find notes with concrete **ideas for effective regulation** and **first steps that companies could**

and should take. These do not constitute a comprehensive list of recommendations, but pieces of the larger puzzle of the socio-ecological transformation of the fashion industry.

FASHION'S HOT SPOTS

From a **social perspective**, the need for transformation arises from unrealized human rights in the fashion industry's sphere of influence. Widespread poverty-level wages, precarious employment, unsafe workplaces, violations of freedom of association and discrimination need to stop. However, transformation targets should go beyond a "do less harm" approach but aim to realize a holistic vision of social justice and wellbeing for all.

From an **environmental perspective**, most attention is currently focused on climate parameters. While these are important, this narrow focus risks our losing sight of other planetary boundaries that are being pushed even further: bio-

FIGURE 1 – PRIORITY AREAS FOR TRANSFORMATION OF THE FASHION SYSTEM



diversity loss, chemical pollution, land system change, freshwater use and altered nitrogen and phosphorus flows. Negative impacts on these boundaries are linked to the current fashion industry's intensive and unsafe use of chemicals, its reliance on unsustainable agricultural, forestry and livestock systems, and its preference for fossil-fuel-based and non-biodegradable plastic materials.

Most of the negative impacts of the fashion system are quite well known: a large and still growing body of research describes and quantifies issues. With this in mind, we are not aiming for an exhaustive new inventory covering all relevant issues, but are deliberately starting from a mapping of the most apparent main negative impacts and risks.

Through the mapping we identified twelve **hot spots** of outstanding importance and of strategic relevance within the fashion system. They all have either a heightened impact on one or more planetary boundaries, or they are of increased structural relevance in terms of social foundations, or they integrate crucial social and environmental aspects at the same time.

In developing a positive vision of a just fashion system within planetary boundaries, we turn the hot spots around. On their positive side are the **priority areas for transformation** (Figure 1). They go a step further and already indicate the direction of change needed for addressing the hot spots. They are interconnected and advances in one area will likely reinforce progress in others.

TRANSFORMATION TARGETS FOR FASHION

For each area, we first outline an overall transformation **aim**. This takes the form of a long-term vision of what a fair fashion system – within planetary boundaries – should look like in each priority area. The proposed **33 targets**, on the other hand, are specific and time-bound milestones intended to enable the vision. They set benchmarks for the scale of change we envisage for 2030. (See Table 2 on p.11 for an overview of all targets.)

Several of the proposals are modestly aimed at realising commonly agreed human rights or achieving widely recognized global goals. A living wage, for example, is not a radical aim, but a fundamental right. However, they are difficult to achieve by 2030, given the existing unequal economic, social and political power structures. It's fashionable today to talk about bold change in industry, but many of those currently in power implicitly or explicitly resist, slow down, or capture and redefine transformation to protect vested interests.

Economic transformation on the scale required here is rarely the result of a harmonious process of consensual decision-making by those in power. Organizing, building counter-power for change and refusing to adhere to the implicit boundaries between "reasonable" and "unreasonable" demands can shift power structures and discourses – and therefore perceptions of how realistic such targets are.

PATHWAYS FOR CHANGE: SHIFTING PARADIGMS

Today's global fashion system is the way it is, not because targets for change were missing or wrong, but because it is rooted in misguided, quasi-hegemonic **paradigms**. These include: the imagination of endless resources and growth; the normality of cheap, monotonous labour and its exploitation; the acceptance of extreme inequality and neo-colonial value distribution in global value chains; and the perception of unequal, undemocratic ownership and power structures as natural.

The power of paradigms lies in their ability to **shape what is considered “normal”**. Paradigms are not just theoretical and imaginary; they crystallize in regulation, economic structures and behavioural patterns. And as long as these paradigms prevail, there is an invisible gravitation holding the industry in the perceived normal state, while alternatives will,

in tendency, be considered experimental, risky, naïve or even hostile. Overcoming these flawed but powerful paradigms requires transformational shifts.

MATERIAL SHIFT

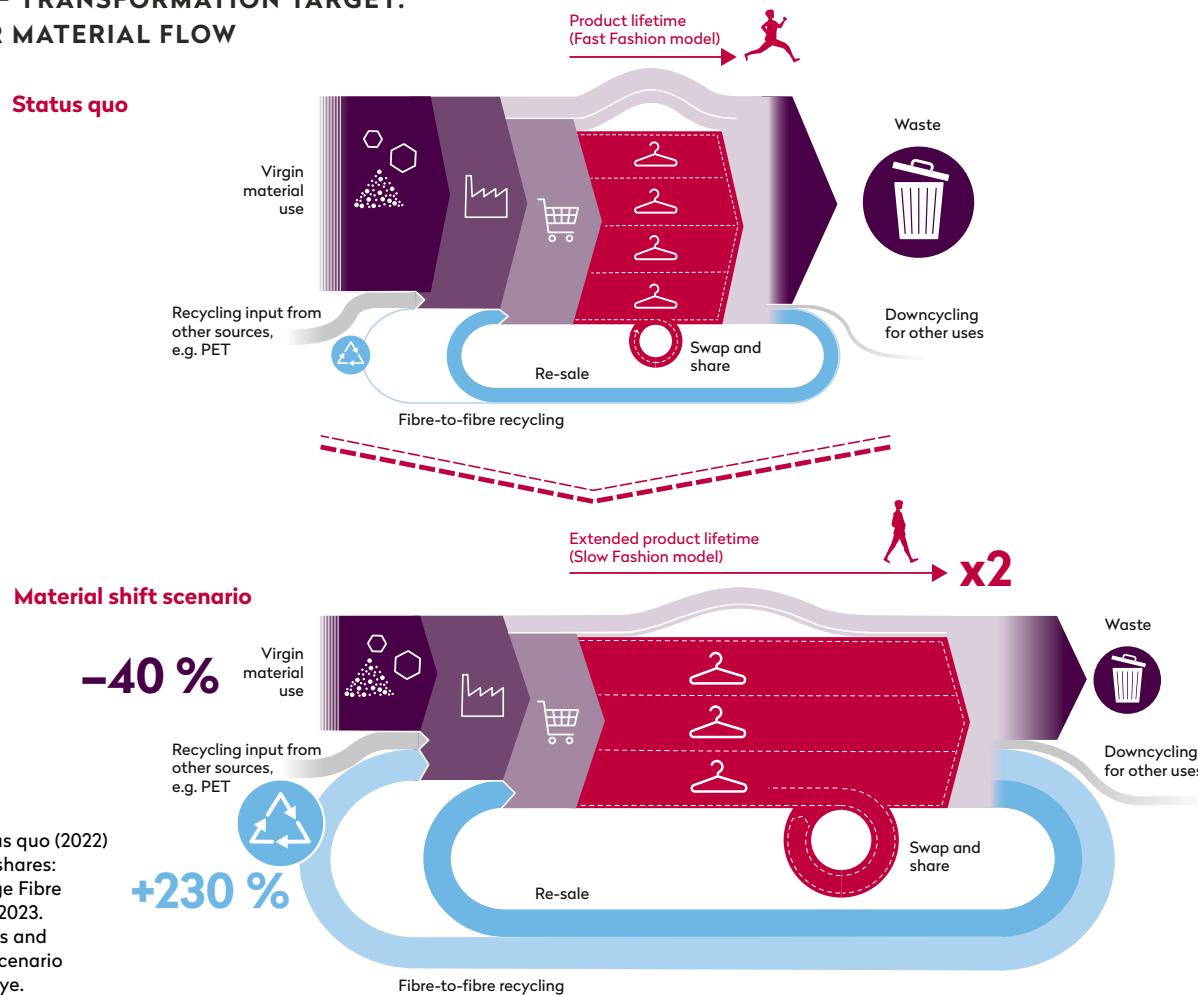
The paradigm that natural resources are endlessly available, and that continued growth is possible and desirable, has been a core element of capitalism over the last two centuries, and still prevails today. The expropriation of nature by the fashion system has two sides: the increasing use of material from natural and fossil sources, by far outpacing population growth; and the misuse of the environment as a dump for textile waste, greenhouse gases, microplastics, chemicals and other emissions.

Today, the negative impact of both these practices has become so concrete and undeniable that this paradigm is cracking at the seams. But so far, this affects just one part of the paradigm: the perceived endless availability of natural resources. The necessity and desirability of **economic growth** is still hegemonic, and many hold on to the vision (or myth?) that a circular material flow will still allow economic growth, or even become its new source.

The practical challenges of a material shift towards circularity are huge. Reducing the amount of material from virgin origin by about 40% is the most significant element, resulting from a 60% reduction in feedstock from fossil-fuel sources and a smaller 10% reduction in virgin feedstock from natural sources. A part of this gap should be compensated through recycled materials, predominantly from fibre-to-fibre recycling. Assuming an ambitious and steep volume rise of fibre-to-fibre, to reach 15% of total material input by 2030, the total volume of feedstock would still shrink by 28% in our material shift scenario. Only changing the fibres and fabrics and otherwise keeping the fast fashion “business as usual” won’t be enough.

Currently, many clothing items are highly **under-utilized**. Interestingly, the main reason for disposal of clothes today is not quality or sizing issues, but emotional: marketing messages

FIGURE 2 – TRANSFORMATION TARGET: CIRCULAR MATERIAL FLOW



SOURCE Status quo (2022) material input shares: Textile Exchange Fibre Market Report 2023. Other estimates and material shift scenario (2030): Public Eye.

let people assume some items are “out of fashion” while others a season’s “must haves”. Doubling the actual wear days and life-times of clothes is technically feasible. It would enable us to achieve the same use value with **half of the material resources** (Figure 2).

Abandoning the promotion of short “fashion seasons” and moving from fast-fashion marketing to raising awareness of the benefits of long use are more relevant in changing actual consumption behaviour, increasing appreciation for the clothes we already own, and reducing our craving for owning more and more items.

TABLE 1 – RESETTling THE PERSPECTIVES ON WORK IN THE FASHION SYSTEM

Produce and sell faster and more	→	Create quality and long-lasting use value
Stress and pressure to perform	→	Wellbeing and appreciation
Workplaces optimized for output, speed and control	→	Safe and healthy work environments
Repetitive tasks	→	Alternation and responsibility
Execution of orders and subordination	→	Co-decision and collaboration
Follow orders and instructions	→	Learning and personal development
Precarity and fear	→	Employment and social security
Anonymity and exchangeability	→	Care and attention
Discrimination and violence	→	Equality and solidarity
Profit maximization	→	Purpose

LABOUR AND KNOWLEDGE SHIFT

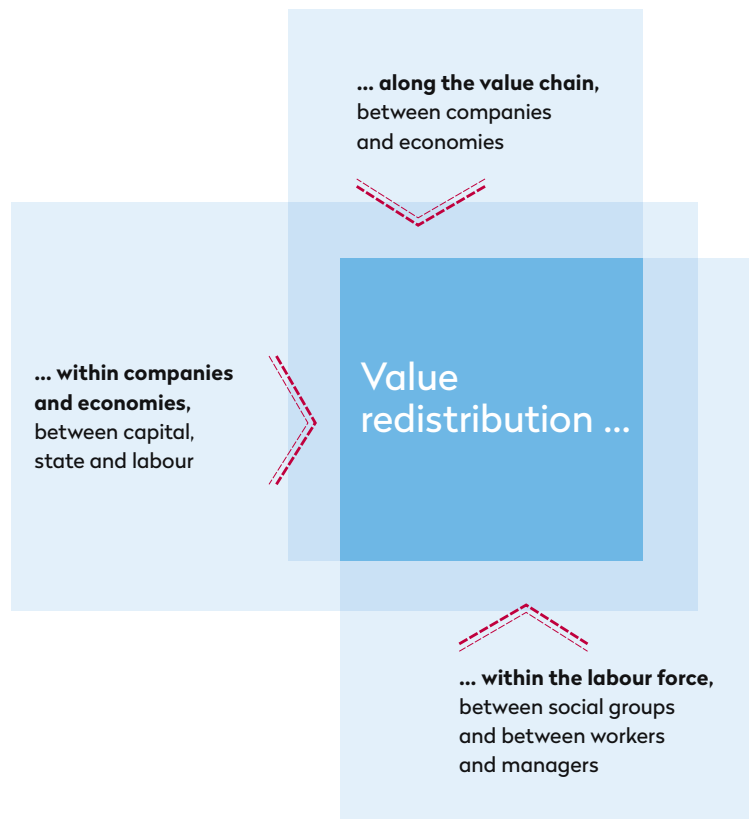
Many people working in the fashion system would like to see, and often call for, an overhaul or a just transition of the sector, but find themselves in their daily jobs with limited or no influence and trapped in a system that holds on to its flawed paradigms. A fashion system with **decent work**, quality, longevity and circularity at its heart requires a new perspective on labour and knowledge, going beyond resetting tasks at the different steps of the production chain.

For clothing articles of lasting quality, skilled labour, experience, sufficient time and accuracy in manufacturing are essential ingredients. These and similar qualitative factors are also crucial in other steps of the value chain, be it in the agro-ecological production of raw materials, in the development of long-dated designs, in retail and re-sale oriented towards helping customers with sustainable choices and product care or in sustainable post-consumer processes.

Today, there are countless codes of conduct, certifications and voluntary standards oriented at minimizing harm, preventing what are deemed “inhumane conditions”: a workplace should not kill workers or harm their health; a standard working week should not exceed 48 or 60 hours with overtime; wages should be sufficient to survive; and discrimination and violence should be absent. But decent (or humane, good, fair) work is much more than the absence of harm and human rights violations. On the other side of the coin, there is a positive perspective to work, asking how labour could be such that it also contributes to personal and societal **wellbeing, dignity and satisfaction** (Table 1).

A just fashion industry within planetary boundaries depends on holistic solutions. For this to happen, it’s crucial to extend perspectives and responsibilities and **foster exchange and collaboration** between roles that today are often kept apart from each other, and to actively engage the existing workforce, explicitly including those working in precarious settings and from more vulnerable groups, making them subjects rather than objects of change. This means giving them social and job security, as well as the power to co-determine transformation strategies.

FIGURE 3 – THREE DIMENSIONS OF REDISTRIBUTION



SHIFTING VALUE DISTRIBUTION

Reducing the excessive economic inequalities within the industry is a transformation goal in itself, and is an enabling factor for goals addressing social shortfall as well as excessive resource stress at the rich end of the societal divide. At the same time, it's also a practical necessity for financing the investments in transformation needed at company, personal and state level.

Redistribution of value needs to target at least **three connected layers of economic inequality**: The value distribution (1) along the value chain; (2) within companies and economies; and (3) within the labour force (figure 3).

Fierce competition for market share and economic survival is omnipresent in the fashion industry, and the dominant competitive factor is price. Retailers and brands are then passing on the low-price pressure upstream through the whole supply chain. Under these conditions, a social and ecological transformation is almost impossible: The narrow margins are insufficient to substantially increase wages, reduce working hours or otherwise improve working conditions. Raw material prices don't cover the costs of sustainable production. And investments in more eco-friendly energy sources and processes, especially at the stages with highest impact (agriculture, wet-processing) cannot be covered by the meagre incomes of producers and manufacturers.

For a more equitable fashion system, the main patterns of **value redistribution** should be: (a) more value kept in manufacturing and other labour-intensive parts of the value chain; (b) a shrinking value share of big brands and retailers; and (c) more value kept in raw material production, especially in sustainable agriculture. However, it would be

too short-sighted to simply keep the linear value-chain logic and only re-distribute in a win-lose game the existing value added more equally. The linear, extractivist value-chain logic from raw material to waste needs to be transformed into a more circular value logic with less virgin raw material input and with more loops, and respectively more value generated from re-sale, repair, recycling, etc.

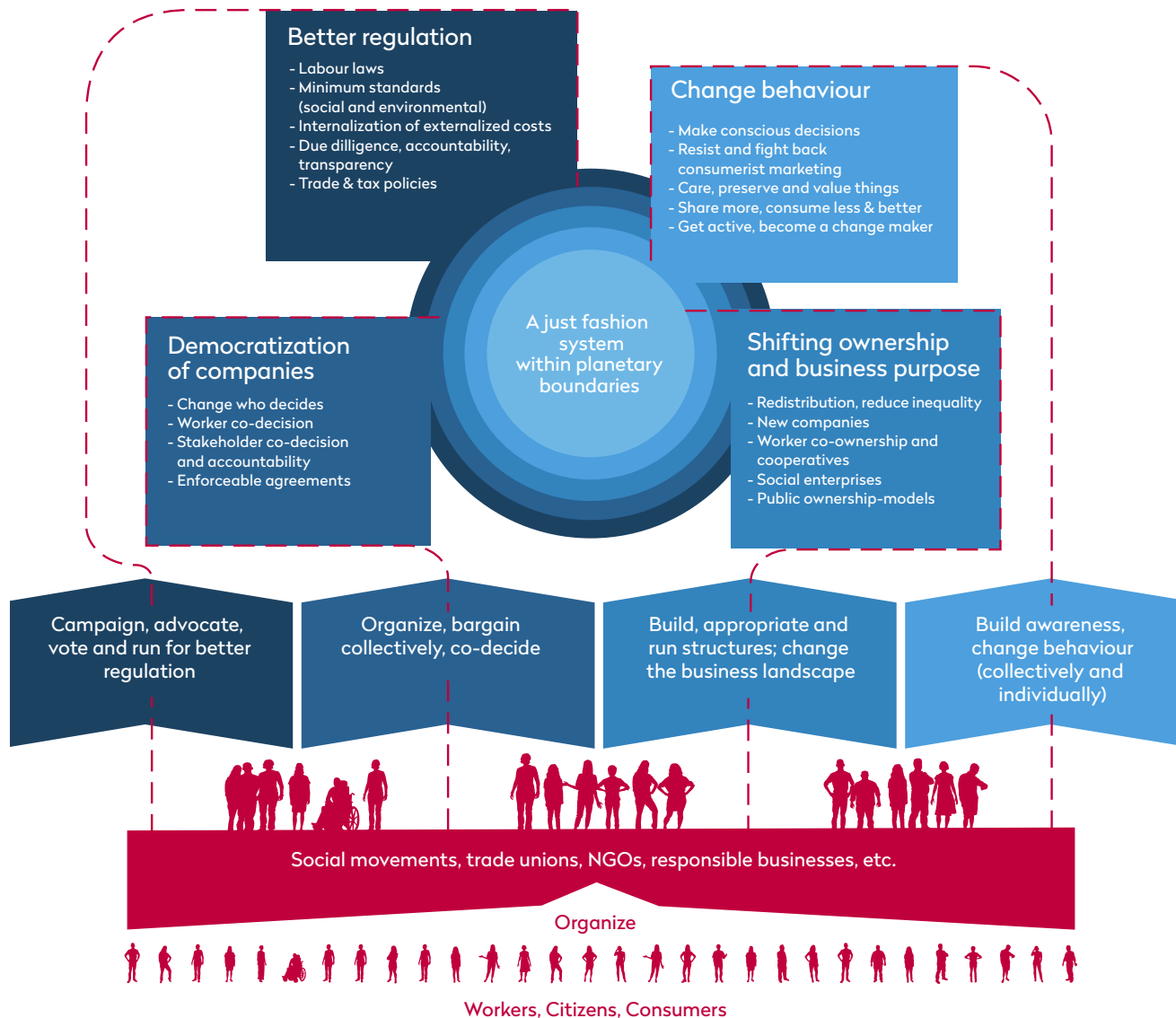
Collective bargaining for higher wages and social security is not only crucial to achieve more distributive justice within companies and at the industrial level, it also strengthens the individual resilience of workers and their families to adapt to the climate and other ecological crises. **Corporate income taxes**, together with strategies to tackle tax avoidance, are important tools for securing public resources in support of transformation. At their core, both approaches, collective bargaining and taxation, aim to redistribute some of capital's share of the value added from economic activity to labour and society.

The third dimension of value re-distribution addresses the huge inequality that divides the global workforce along the fashion value chain. Guaranteeing the right to a **living wage** for all workers across the fashion system is crucial in protecting rights, but it's only a starting point for achieving economic justice.

When garment workers in one country earn only a fraction of what their colleagues in a high-income country earn for the same tasks (and adjusted for local purchasing power), this is not an expression of "normal" differences between "advanced" and "developing" economies, but the result of the global economic, trade and finance governance that perpetuates colonial inequalities.

A just transformation of the fashion system will reduce the level of wage injustice across its value chains to a certain extent, but it can't overcome the underlying patterns of inequality that are enshrined across all economic sectors. However, it should at least alter the perception of normality and immutability of extreme income inequalities, help develop a vision for **global wage justice**, and pursue this objective through collective bargaining, political campaigning and regulation.

FIGURE 4 – POWER SHIFTS FOR A JUST TRANSITION



POWER SHIFT: REGULATE, DEMOCRATIZE AND RESET OWNERSHIP IN THE FASHION SYSTEM

As long as these power structures remain unchanged, it's naive, if not misleading, to see consumer-behaviour change as the main lever or driver of industry transformation. Obviously, patterns of consumption, use and value retention of clothing are important and must be part of fashion transformation. But consumerist fast-fashion lifestyles didn't just happen; they are the result of marketing and business strategies deliberately designed for that purpose. They are also the result of economic policies that make growth the overarching goal, allowing companies and investors to engage in destructive business practices and pass on the social and environmental costs.

The fact that many people are still fighting economic headwinds that impede progress, and trying to consume more sustainably, gives us hope. But instead of relying solely on the spirit of consumer resistance for a better fashion system, we should change the direction of these winds. First, by strengthening the **regulatory framework** around the industry. The current shortcomings in the industry's operating system are systemic and will not be fixed by voluntary initiatives or business self-regulation. Lawmakers and governments have the responsibility and the tools to set industry on a path of transformation. This includes not only setting and enforcing labour laws and other rules and standards to prevent harm, but also incentivizing transformation and better practices.

But political regulation is not the only lever. A **power shift** in fashion can be advanced on at least in three other levels: by fostering more participatory and democratic decision-making within the industry, for example through trade union organizing and collective bargaining; by rebalancing unequal ownership structures and business purpose; and by empowering ourselves and others to act more consciously, to change behavioural patterns, and to become actors in transformation. Workers, citizens and consumers can act individually, but when they organize in unions and other associations, their transformative power is amplified (Figure 4).

TABLE 2 – TRANSFORMATION TARGETS 2030 (SUMMARY)

This table shows summarized versions of the transformation targets 2030. The full targets are provided in Chapter 3, together with further explanations.



Reduce virgin material use and overproduction

- ▶ The total quantity of virgin material input shrinks by 40%.
- ▶ The share of fibre-to-fibre recycling material is increased to at least 15%.



Slow down fashion; reduce waste

- ▶ The number of days on which clothes are in active use is doubled, on average.
- ▶ All used clothes are collected separately, and at least 50% are re-used in proximity.
- ▶ The volume of non-recovered clothing waste is halved.
- ▶ The majority of sectorial and company policies include measures to guarantee decent labour conditions and environmental sustainability in the post-use and re-use phase.



Ensure decent working hours

- ▶ Regular working hours are limited to 40 hours per week, prospectively less.
- ▶ Long-term and reliable production planning becomes the norm in fashion supply chains



Guarantee safe and healthy workplaces

- ▶ Health and safety units operate effectively in all workplaces.
- ▶ Workers are protected by effective industrial safety programs.
- ▶ Workers are effectively protected from heat, cold and other climatic hazards in their workplaces and from loss of income in the event of climate-related emergencies.



Pay living wages

- ▶ Wages of all workers increase to at least living wage levels.
- ▶ Gender pay equality is achieved.



Protect trade union rights

- ▶ Freedom of association is no longer systematically violated.
- ▶ Collective bargaining is the norm, and at least half of workers are covered by CBAs
- ▶ Women, migrants, homeworkers and other groups of often discriminated workers are represented more equally in trade unions and their leadership.




Provide secure employment relationships and social protection

- ▶ All workers have formal and fair employment and contractual relationships
- ▶ Public social protection schemes are improved, at least 75% of workers enjoy social protection in line with ILO minimum standards (ILO C102).




End discrimination, gender-based violence and harassment

- ▶ All workplaces implement inclusive and gender-responsive policies and protection committees to prevent and eliminate discrimination, violence and harassment.
- ▶ All workers have access to a confidential complaint and grievance mechanism.



Foster an agro-ecological transition of fashion's agriculture

- ▶ No deforestation or other land-use change for fibre crops or leather.
- ▶ A shift of at least 50% of natural fibre production to agroecological systems.
- ▶ Reduction of virgin natural materials by 10%.
- ▶ Phase-out of highly hazardous pesticides, 75% reduction of remaining agrochemicals.
- ▶ Eradication of modern slavery and child labour in production systems.
- ▶ Living income reference prices for cotton established in at least 50% of cotton sourcing.



Mitigate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions

- ▶ Reduce absolute GHG emissions from fashion by at least 60% compared to 2019.
- ▶ At least half of the companies develop decarbonization strategies in genuine social dialogue with workers and trade unions.



End fashion's addiction to plastics

- ▶ Reduction of virgin fossil fuel materials by 60%.
- ▶ Halve the release of microplastics into the environment.



Ensure sustainable water and chemical use

- ▶ The most dangerous chemicals are banned across the industry (Detox and PAN HHP list).
- ▶ All wastewater and sludge from are treated, tested and transparently monitored.
- ▶ All workers have access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene at work and in dormitories.



The report «One-Earth Fashion: 33 Transformation Targets for a Just Fashion System within Planetary Boundaries» is available in English.



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IMPRINT One-Earth Fashion: 33 Transformation Targets for a Just Fashion System within Planetary Boundaries. Executive Summary of a Public Eye Report, December 2024. **Authors** David Hachfeld and Elisabeth Schenk | **Editor** John Durham, alphadoc.ch | **Publisher** Romeo Regenass | **Illustrations and graphics** Roland Ryser, zeichenfabrik.ch | **Layout** Karin Hutter, fundtastic.ch | **Cover picture** © Annabelle Chih/ Getty Images | Reproduction permitted with publishers' prior consent.

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