

What Is Extended Producer Responsibility in Textiles — and What's Missing From Current Policies?

 consciouslifeandstyle.com/extended-producer-responsibility-textiles

July 30, 2022

Blog, Education, Ethical Fashion

Learn what extended responsibility in textiles and garments is, how current EPR schemes perpetuate waste colonialism, and how we can build a justice-led circular fashion economy.

Just because clothing is not being worn anymore, doesn't mean it disappears.

It always ends up *somewhere* — often somewhere far away from the people who created the waste in the first place.



Photo by Nana Kwadwo Agyei Addo, Courtesy The Or Foundation

We've seen the shocking images of piles of clothing in the Atacama desert in Chile.

And heard the stories of overflowing secondhand markets such as the Owino Market in Kampala, Uganda, and the Kantamanto Market in Accra, Ghana — where clothing waste from the Global North ends up.

If we are going to create a shift toward a more just circular fashion economy, we need **everyone involved to acknowledge, engage, and take action on this waste crisis**. This includes *the businesses creating clothing, the people wearing clothing, and the institutions regulating clothing*.

Since fashion brands are the ones creating the clothing that often ends up as waste, many people believe we should hold them responsible for this waste.

But *how* do we incentivize brands and fashion producers to factor waste management into their product design processes?

One attempt to answer this question is the introduction of **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)** policies in countries in the Global North.

What Is Extended Producer Responsibility in Textiles?

Extended Producer Responsibility when it comes to fashion and textiles are **regulatory measures that hold fashion producers accountable for the waste they create when introducing new products into the world**.

The concept of EPR was first introduced over 30 years ago. And EPRs exist across many industries and waste streams — from mattresses and carpets to paint and pharmaceutical waste. But EPRs have recently become popular in the fashion industry as discussions around circular fashion — and what this entails in practice — become increasingly urgent.

In the fashion industry, **EPR policies ideally ensure that fashion producers are responsible for the waste management** of their garments once people are no longer wearing them and they become waste. “*In practice, they’re paying for collecting, sorting, transportation, and recycling,*” says Joanne Brasch, Special Projects Manager at the California Product Stewardship Council.

This is done by mandating an EPR fee from brands for each garment they create to a waste management organization. The fee is built into the cost of the garment that we’d purchase.

How Could EPR in Textiles Help Tackle Fashion’s Waste Crisis In Theory?

Widely adopted and globally accountable legislation and policies are **essential levers for accountability** when it comes to helping fashion clean up its act and creating systems change.

There are many circular fashion practices that each one of us can take part in to ensure that we are limiting our fashion waste. But instead of placing the responsibility for circularity solely on how consumers utilize clothing, **EPR policies shine a light on producers as the main culprits of fashion's waste crisis.**

This is done through the EPR fee. This EPR fee is designed to push brands to consider their waste and waste management as a part of **the true cost** of a product.

“If you take responsibility and incorporate the cost of end-of-life management in the true cost of your item, that’s the most holistic approach,” says Brasch.

“France’s textile EPR policy charges retailers **roughly €0.01-0.06 per clothing item** based on the type of garment, durability standards for specific items, and the incorporation of recycled fibers,” says Liz Ricketts, Co-founder and Director of The Or Foundation, a nonprofit based in the U.S. and Ghana aiming to catalyze a justice-led circular economy.

In theory, EPRs aim to **incentivize garment design that promotes circularity** — ensuring that they are *reusable, repairable, and durable* — and takes the end of life of a garment into account.

EPR policies also aim to **reduce the amount of clothing sent to landfill while incentivizing and subsidizing the development of recycling infrastructure** in countries with EPR policies.

Have Any Countries Adopted Extended Producer Responsibility in Textiles?

In 2007, France was the first country to declare a legal framework for managing textile waste. Their EPR policy intends to hold textile producers responsible for the collection and recycling of end-of-use clothing, linen, and footwear.

Refashion is the French nonprofit organization responsible for implementing France’s EPR Program since 2007. Brands operating in the French market pay Refashion a small levy per garment to help meet costs, including textile waste collection and sorting and textile recycling infrastructure development.

“According to The European Union’s Waste Framework Directive, **by January 1, 2025, all members of the European Union will be required to set up an EPR system.** France is rather ahead of the rest of the European Union in terms of end-of-life management of textile waste, as it’s still the first and only country to have set up an EPR for textiles and shoes,” explains the Refashion team. According to the Refashion team, draft EPR systems are beginning to emerge in Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, and Spain.

What Happens With EPR Policies in Reality?

At the heart of fashion's waste crisis is **fast fashion's business model** that encourages constant overproduction to drive neverending economic growth.

Ideally EPR policies would help to curb overproduction by encouraging an increased focus on quality and reduced volumes. For example, as the recent "Wellbeing Wardrobe: A wellbeing economy for the fashion and textile sector" report explains, "*EPR fees **could** be increased when certain volume thresholds are reached*, to encourage brands to supply high quality and lower volumes of clothing into the market."

But as it stands, **the EPR fee is too low to enable any meaningful reduction in production**. The "EPR tax is so low that companies are not deterred from more harmful design decisions, and instead view €0.01-0.06 per item as a **negligible amount**," says Ricketts.

While facilitating the collection and sorting of waste is a key step, what happens **after** these steps is what truly matters for circular fashion.

"In France, **39% of textiles placed on the market are collected** thanks to the 44,000 voluntary drop-off points installed throughout France. Of the 200,000 tons collected, 156,000 are sorted in the 64 sorting centers located in France and [elsewhere in] Europe," explains the Refashion team.

In reality **textile recycling technology is not yet operating at a scale that can handle the volume of clothing waste**. Many recycling initiatives are not yet operating at an industrial scale and won't be for several years. It takes extensive time to progress from lab scale to first industrial plant.

"Today **90% of textiles and shoes collected in France are exported outside the European Union for recycling or reuse**. For recycling, this reality is explained by *the lack of industrial solutions in Europe*," says the Refashion team.

In other words, **EPRs are funding the increased collection and sorting of clothing, but *not* their end-of-life management**.

"If you increase collection but you don't have the infrastructure to deal with it in your country, then you are going to be left with one option: to export it out," says Ricketts.

Extended Producer Responsibility in Textiles and Waste Colonialism

The truth is that — as with the rest of the world's clothing waste — **a lot of the clothing collected in EPR schemes ends up in the global secondhand trade**. And as a result, the waste becomes the burden of communities in the Global South.

“While these funds increase clothing collection and supply into the global secondhand clothing trade, ***none of the money collected followed the clothes abroad to the end markets such as Ghana***, where critical infrastructure to manage clothing waste is lacking,” says Ricketts.

When we talk about fashion waste and waste management, we can’t ignore the global power dynamics that operate on colonial lines. The **legacy of colonialism** still exists in **unequal power relations**.

This power imbalance and exploitative system that upholds the notion that countries in the Global South are dumping grounds for waste created in the Global North, *causing them to shoulder the burden and the consequences of a problem they did not create*, is known as **waste colonialism**.

EPR policies in European countries have yet to take accountability for *where* the majority of fashion’s waste ends up when it is exported outside of the European Union — which is in countries in the Global South. While EPR policies require brands to pay a fee for waste management, *this money is not used to compensate the communities where the waste often ends up*.

“Right now, EPR is ineffective in tackling overproduction. It is just increasing the quantities of clothing that is collected, sorted, and exported into what already exists as waste colonialism,” says Ricketts.

EPRs are another Global North attempt at circularity that does not engage with the complex power relations that govern fashion’s waste crisis, as well as refuses to acknowledge the communities that are doing the work of the circular economy in the Global South.

About **15 million garments** enter the Kantamanto market in Accra, Ghana every **week**, despite the country having a population of just 30 million people. The sheer volume of waste has devastating ecological and social impacts.

“Without intervention to ensure that EPR policies are globally accountable we are headed in a direction where EPR will be used to fund the development of recycling infrastructure in the Global North. This is fine, except these recycling technologies can’t handle everything. So the Global North will continue to export the clothing that does not serve as optimally profitable feedstock. This will then further create this divide that is not only about waste colonialism but also about development opportunities,” explains Ricketts. **“True circularity is about the redistribution of wealth and power.”**



Kantamanto Market \ Photo by Joshua Ganyobi Odamtten, Courtesy The Or Foundation

Fashion systems and waste systems are globalized. *So even if you have an EPR policy in your country, it doesn't mean that the waste is being dealt with there.* If the money generated by EPR policies remains in the Global North, it's **ultimately unjust** if the true burden of the

waste is being shouldered by communities in the Global South.

How Can We Rethink Extended Producer Responsibility in Textiles To Create a Justice-Led Circular Economy?

This is exactly the question we need to grapple with.

One recent EPR development was the announcement of the **EPR fund between fast fashion company Shein and The Or Foundation**. Shein will be dedicating **\$50 million** over the next five years to an EPR fund that benefits communities impacted by textile waste.

While this isn't considered "*true*" EPR — it's not a policy — this is exactly the kind of EPR framework that The Or Foundation has been advocating for. "We asked Shein to practice EPR. ***In doing so, they are acknowledging that they don't have a solution for the clothing that they are putting out into the world and it's communities like Kantamanto that are doing that work.*** We asked them if we could figure out the impact we could achieve if we put money into those communities to support them," says Ricketts.

For EPR schemes to be rooted in justice and truly tackle fashion's waste crisis, *money needs to go towards the people that are actively doing waste management work.*



Kantamanto Market | Photo by Nana Kwadwo Agyei Addo, Courtesy The Or Foundation

Kantamanto, which is an already existing fully-operational circular economy, is **proof of this**. The market is a whole ecosystem of people using innovative and creative methods to save waste — waste that was *not* created by them in the first place — from being

sent to landfills.

“We have known some of the people we work with since 2016 and they have been asking us every single week, ***‘When is someone going to acknowledge us? When are these brands going to support us? When are the exporters going to support us?’*** We are so lucky that people have trusted us for this long. Being able to say that someone has finally acknowledged and put some money into supporting the change that they want to see is a relief for the people we work with and for us,” shares Ricketts.

This kind of acknowledgement and financial commitment from a fast fashion company is the first in history.

“People have commented and called it reparations. But we don’t see it as reparations. On our website, we have the motto of *‘reckoning, recovery, and reparations’*. **For us, this is a reckoning. We are far from reparations.** It’s *simple*: Shein is paying a waste management fee and acknowledging the communities that are doing that work. We hope that more brands will step up to make similar commitments,” Ricketts explains.

As the initial grant recipient, The Or Foundation will receive \$5 million for three years. The Or Foundation will be using the money to facilitate specific changes raised by people that work in the Kantamanto market.

These include stable connection to electricity, looking into solar energy, widening the aisles so that the Kayayei no longer have to carry bales on their head, and restructuring floors with permeable pavers to help with flooding. Generally the funds will be used to make the Kantamanto market a safer and more dignified place to work.

The Or Foundation also aims to establish community businesses that turn textile waste into new products and pilot fiber recycling projects with Ghanaian textile manufacturers.



No More Fast Fashion Lab | Photo by Alhassan Fatawu, Courtesy The Or Foundation

And the nonprofit is already using the money in their Chiropractic Research and Treatment Program which provides healthcare treatment and emergency support for women suffering extreme health risks from carrying bales of clothing on their heads. The program also

involves six months of a paid apprenticeship for a woman formerly working as a kayayo and the wraparound programming to ensure she can plan for her future.

Beyond the work happening on the ground, **this kind of EPR fund challenges the issue of global inequality and unequal power dynamics in fashion's waste crisis.** “One of the most exciting aspects of this fund is that **we can use it as a negotiating tool.** \$5 million is a lot of money. It's an empowering amount of money for The Or Foundation and it's a lot of money for the people we work with. But it's *nowhere near* what is necessary.”

“If we compare this to what's circulated in the Kantamanto community — \$30 million of clothing is recirculated every week. **So helping people working in the market to understand how they can use that as a negotiating tool to leverage the power they already have is important.** A beautiful outcome of these conversations has been seeing *how empowered they feel to leverage the resources they already have,*” Ricketts shares.

So What Role Does EPR Have In Creating A Just Circular Economy?

Rather than waiting for the eventual scaling of complex recycling technology, **let's advocate for and invest in those people who are actively doing the circularity work in the present.** *If properly restructured and reimagined as tools to facilitate a transition to a justice-led circular economy, EPRscan play a role in this.*

“We view EPR as a transition policy to a circular economy. The linear economy is highly subsidized. EPRs are a subsidy for the circular economy. If we don't achieve EPR as a subsidy to help communities like Kantamanto accompany themselves out of debt and be more aware and empowered in the role they already play, then the circular economy is going to amount to disaster capitalism and echo the injustice of the linear economy,” explains Ricketts.

“For us, sustainability is about challenging power dynamics,” she adds. If Extended Producer Responsibility in textiles is going to bring about positive change amid fashion's waste crisis, it will need to do the same.

About the Author

Stella Hertantyo is a slow fashion and slow living enthusiast based in Cape Town, South Africa. Stella finds solace in words as a medium for sharing ideas and encouraging a cultural shift that welcomes systems change and deepens our collective connection to the world around us. She is passionate about encouraging an approach to sustainability, and social and environmental justice, that is inclusive, intersectional, accessible, and fun.

Stella holds a B.A. Multimedia Journalism from the University of Cape Town, and a PGDip in



Sustainable Development from the Sustainability Institute. She currently works as a writer, editor, and social media manager. When she is not in front of her laptop, a dip in the ocean, or a walk in the mountains, are the two things that bring her the most peace.



Join The Conscious Edit

A weekly newsletter with sustainable
fashion reads & recommendations.

LEARN MORE



Pin this post for later:



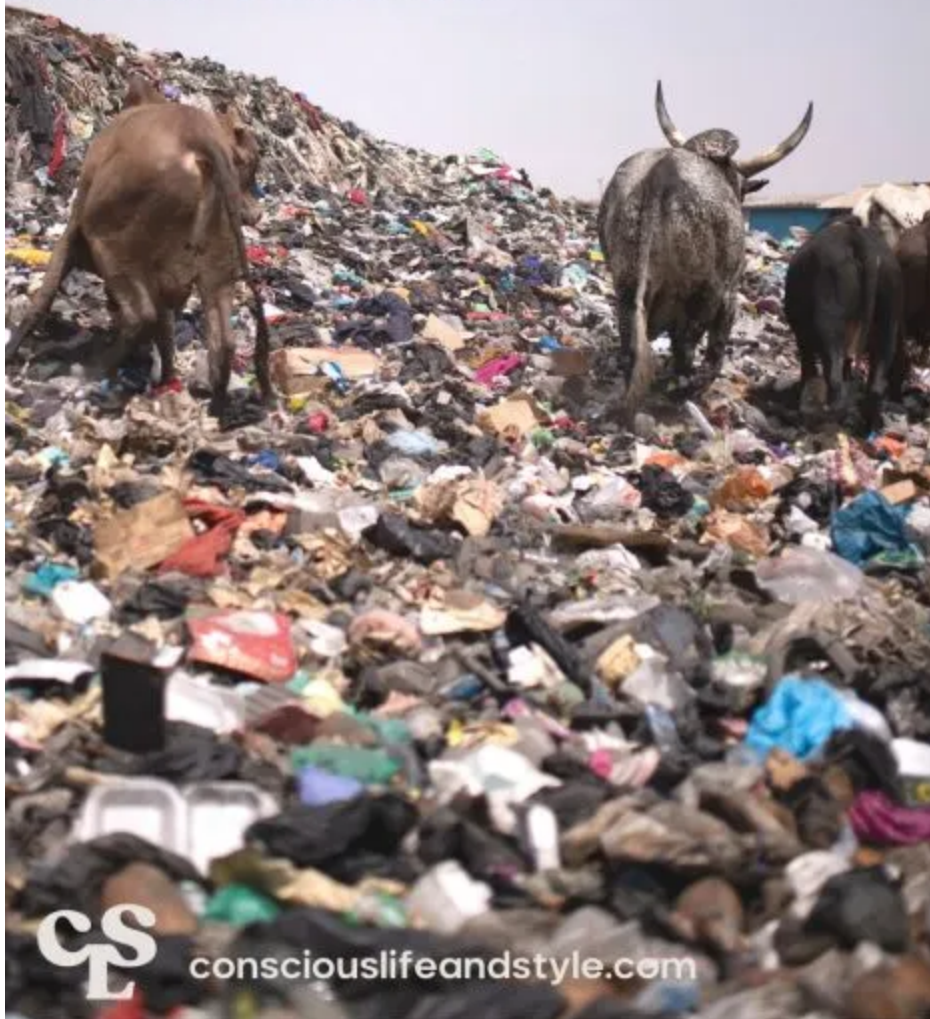
WHAT TO KNOW: **Extended Producer Responsibility in Textiles**



consciouslifeandstyle.com

Extended Producer Responsibility in Textiles

WHAT TO KNOW!



consciouslifeandstyle.com



Welcome!

Conscious Life & Style is a mindful digital media destination with resources and curated guides for thoughtful living.

[READ MORE](#)

Subscribe to The Conscious Edit

Get sustainable fashion and lifestyle recommendations in your inbox each week.

Listen to the Conscious Style Podcast!

A show exploring what it will take to create a sustainable & ethical future for fashion.

TUNE IN NOW

Sign Up for The Conscious Edit

Plus get access to a 10-Page Sustainable Fashion Resources List!

You'll receive a weekly dose of conscious recommendations for reading, listening to, watching, supporting, and more.

Curious to check it out? [Preview previous issues here!](#)

By signing up, you agree to our [Terms](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).