

Clothing the Planet Within Limits: A Degrowth Approach to Fashion

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Context

The fashion industry plays a major role in the global economy. **Over 100 billion clothes are produced annually**, surpassing global demand by far. Yet, the industry is only set to grow in the coming years. This does not come without cost:

- The industry is **responsible for 10% of global emissions and 20% of global wastewater** while **41 million hectares of land** are being appropriated.
- It is also extremely wasteful: **40% of purchased clothes are rarely or never worn** and around **80% of end-of-life garments end up in landfills or incinerators**.

The growth of the industry will only exacerbate these issues, exemplifying the unsustainable trajectory of our growth-driven economic model.

Problem diagnosis

A study conducted by *Research & Degrowth* and *War on Want* found that fashion-related consumption in the EU in 2021 alone required:

- close to **230,000 square kilometers of land**
- close to **190,000 kilotons of minerals and 46,000 kilotons of metals**
- over **4.5 million years of human labor** in wage hours

The report reveals a stark geographical asymmetry: fashion for the EU is not produced locally, but rather through large-scale appropriation of land, resources, and labor largely from Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Today, there are a number of national and international policy frameworks aiming to regulate the fashion industry and its impacts. However, these are often limited to voluntary commitment and self-reporting by corporations or consumer awareness strategies. These are insufficient. **Strong regulation is required to incur a material and a mental shift away from clothing systems based on colonial extraction and exploitation.** This brief proposes the adoption of a degrowth lens to transform the fashion industry.

Policy recommendations

Consumption side

- **Limit purchases** to only 5 new garments per year.
- Launch **public awareness campaigns** to incentivize clothing swaps, rental services, and second hand shopping.
- Create **standardized labels** to convey a product's sustainability credentials and incentivize sustainable purchase.
- **Prohibit extravagant fashion weeks** that promote seasonal overproduction and excessive consumption.
- Impose **strict regulations on high-end shopping streets** (e.g., limits on luxury brand store density, mandatory sustainability audits, or caps on product volume per store).
- **Ban public or all advertisement**, discount sales and free returns.
- **Regulate online shopping** through delivery logistics, dynamic taxation and limits on free returns.

Production side

The pace and scale of production can be reduced by:

- Creating a **fashion cap and share system** to limit garment production.
 - revenues from the scheme can be redirected toward initiatives that support disproportionately impacted communities, through activities like regenerative agriculture and waste management.
- Adopting **seasonless fashion** and **banning planned obsolescence** within the industry.
- Government **support for local production** through subsidies and tax breaks for local producers, support for cooperatives, certification programs and support of local fairs and markets.

Intersectoral policies for a just transition

Principles of a just transition should be embedded in fashion policy design, including:

- The right of **workers to participate and decide on the future** of the fashion industry and the right **to join and to form trade unions**.
- Radical **redistributive policies** that limit the share of profit for shareholders while requiring a minimum portion to be reinvested in socially and environmentally beneficial initiatives throughout the value chain.
- **Educational and training programs** for workers towards alternative practices like repair, re-design and re-use.
- Monitoring and transparency: robust **due diligence and independent public auditing** across the supply chain can improve labor conditions and standards within the sector, with high **penalties for non-compliance**.

Next steps...

Find out more

Read the [full policy brief on the R&D website](#).

Further reading on degrowing fashion :

- Hoskins, T. E., & Lemos, M. H. (2025). *Extraction Fashion: unequal exchange and degrowth explored*. Research & Degrowth International.
- Niessen, S. (2022). *Defining defashion: A manifesto for degrowth*. International Journal of Fashion Studies, 9(2), 439–444.
- Cosciemee et al. (2022). *Unfit, Unfair, Unfashionable: Resizing Fashion for a Fair Consumption Space*. Hot or Cool Institute
- Tomé, C. (2025.). *Fashion Commons: A Cap-and-Share Model to Tackle the Fashion Industry's Overproduction Crisis*. Equal Right: Economic Justice Without Borders.

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With this document, our aim is to position the issue of degrowing the fashion industry firmly on the political agenda.

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Contact us !

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