



General Assembly
Topic Guides



UNEP

THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF FAST FASHION

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UNEP TOPIC GUIDE



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Chairs: Maryam Akber & Erick Canastuj

Organ: General Assembly

Committee: UNEP

I. Letter from the Dais

Dear Delegates,

My name is Maryam, and I'm a senior here at Thomas A. Edison High School. I'm really excited for the experience and to hear all the ideas you all have for this committee. Model UN has been one of the best academic experiences I've had at Edison. Whether you're a first-time delegate or a seasoned one, I hope you all enjoy this conference as much as I have enjoyed putting it together for you. Outside of MUN, I am in the Medical Assisting track at school, and some of my hobbies include making jewelry, ribbon bouquets, and doing henna.

Our committee focuses on the impact of fast fashion, which is something not a lot of people stop to consider. The aim is to focus on what companies are doing and what roles countries play in the environmental pollution that results from the production of fast fashion products. Looking forward to hearing meaningful debate and to seeing how you all will work together to strengthen environmental sustainability. Email me at maryamakber.inventmun@gmail.com for any questions you may have.

Sincerely,
Maryam Akber

Dear delegates,

My name is Erick, but you can call me Edi. I'm a senior at Thomas A. Edison CTE HS for the automotive repair shop class. I am honored to serve as your chair and host for this year's InventMUN. I hope you all are excited for this conference and take advantage of the skills and connections you will make with other delegates. Fun fact about me: I play Sunday league soccer, listen to R&B and Latin music in my free time, and while studying. One impressive thing I do is rapidly snap my fingers (people think it's my wrist snapping, but it's not).

Moving further towards the topic guide, we strive to educate our delegates on the impact fast fashion can leave behind when neglected. Our next steps are not only to tackle an environmental challenge, but also to address water scarcity and low-cost laborers. We expect

all delegates to be prepared and knowledgeable about their country and their policies. I am greatly looking forward to the day delegates present their resolutions. Email me at ecanastuj.inventmun@gmail.com if you have any questions or need any support.

Sincerely,
Erick Canastuj

II. Introduction

Every year, the global fashion industry produces billions of garments designed to be worn briefly and discarded quickly. It is estimated that approximately 85% of textiles end up in landfills or are incinerated, contributing significantly to pollution, resource depletion, and climate change. The term “fast fashion” was adopted in the early 1990s to describe Zara’s business model strategy, which quickly marketed and produced fashion trends while selling them to consumers at a low price.

The model of fast fashion can be defined as the mass production of inexpensive garments that replicate current fashion trends and move rapidly from design to retail. This model relies on accelerated production cycles, global supply chains, and high consumer turnover. While it has increased accessibility to fashion, it has also intensified environmental degradation through excessive water use, greenhouse gas emissions, chemical pollution, and waste generation.

The fast-fashion model only then began to expand in the late 20th century as international trade became more easily accessible and companies could increasingly shift manufacturing to countries with lower production costs. This change allowed retailers to significantly produce larger quantities of clothing at reduced prices. Improvements in transportation and communication also enabled brands to coordinate global supply chains and restock stores more frequently. Instead of relying on a few seasonal collections each year, companies began releasing new styles continuously in response to changing consumer trends.

As fashion became more trend-driven and affordable, clothing gradually shifted from a durable purchase to a short-term consumer good. While interest in fashion itself did not change, the speed and scale at which it was produced and consumed increased substantially, contributing to the growth of what we see today as modern fast fashion. With brands such as Zara pioneering rapid production timelines. Over time, companies including H&M, UNIQLO, Forever 21, and Shein adopted similar practices, scaling production to meet rising global demand. As manufacturing often occurs in emerging countries, environmental regulation and oversight frequently lag behind industrial growth.

This issue is directly relevant to the mandate of the United Nations Environment Programme, which seeks to promote sustainable development, reduce pollution, and address environmentally destructive practices. UNEP initiatives, including the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, help to coordinate efforts between UN agencies, governments, and private industry to reduce environmental harm across the clothing lifecycle. The initiative focuses on promoting responsible production practices, improving transparency in supply chains, and encouraging more sustainable consumption patterns. Rather than creating binding regulations, these programs mostly serve to provide guidance, research, and international cooperation frameworks that Member States may choose to implement. Delegates will be expected to evaluate the responsibility of producing, consuming, and regulating states while keeping in mind the diverse economic capacities of Member States.

III. Topic History

Environmental Impacts

The fast fashion industry holds a growing pressure on natural resources through large-scale water and energy use. Fabric production and processing can contribute to water pollution and a lack of resource supply, particularly in regions where manufacturing is heavily concentrated. For example, a case study done by UNEP discovered that a dyeing facility along the Citarum River in Indonesia was discharged for dumping untreated chemical waste into waterways, which, in this case, hugely affected drinking water supplies and local agriculture (UNEP; World Bank reports on industrial water pollution). Similar concerns have been documented near major garment production zones in Bangladesh, where textile effluents have contaminated surrounding rivers used by nearby communities. These environmental impacts are not limited to the producing country. Chemical runoff from garment dyeing can enter major river systems and eventually end up in coastal waters, while greenhouse gas from manufacturing and transportation contribute to global atmospheric pollution. In addition, synthetic fibers released during washing can most likely travel through ocean currents, meaning garment microplastics generated in one region may accumulate in distant marine ecosystems and coastlines. In addition, the production, transportation, and disposal of clothing contribute to a significant amount of greenhouse gas emissions. As consumption continues to gradually rise, concerns have also grown regarding the long-term environmental sustainability of current production models in which raw materials are extracted, manufactured into garments, sold, and ultimately discarded as waste. This contrasts with alternative approaches such as circular production, where clothing is designed for reuse, repair, and recycling, and made-to-order production, which limits overproduction by manufacturing items only after purchase.

Another major concern is the waste of fabric. Clothing is most commonly treated as disposable, which results in a larger volume of discarded garments and limited reuse or recycling. This can also be shown to have a major impact in Australia, to which researchers conducted a collected amount of data to prove that about every 10 minutes 6,000 kilos of clothes are being thrown away onto the landfill, this all will persist and contribute to a broader pollution challenge, including soil contamination from synthetic materials and dyes, as well as wildlife animals ingesting small fabric particles. These fibers can block digestion, reduce feeding ability, and disrupt reproduction in both land and marine species.

Social and Economic Impacts

Fast fashion relies heavily on global supply chains that solely depend on low-wage labor. In major manufacturing countries such as Bangladesh, the garment sector employs around 4 million workers, the majority of whom are mainly women, yet minimum wages have been reported at roughly \$75 per month, often requiring workers to push themselves through overtime hours just to meet the basic living costs.

While the industry does create employment opportunities and contributes significantly to export-based economic growth, these benefits, however, have been limited by unsafe conditions, weak labor protections, and low earnings. Incidents such as the Rana Plaza factory collapse, which tragically killed over 1,100 workers, set an important example as to how work environments have not consistently shown effort into safe or stable employment.

Countries that are merging markets often endure the worst from the impact of pollution, poor working conditions, and instability. Economically, fast fashion does contribute to trade growth, but people aren't seeing the bigger picture when it comes to the priority public health risks and economic dependence on low-value manufacturing sectors, which set a downside limit to sustainable development. This raises questions about the concerns of equity and shared responsibility. Thus, delegates must therefore consider how to respectively preserve employment and economic growth while improving labor protections and environmental standards. This could include encouraging safer working conditions, fair compensation, cleaner production methods, and gradual transitions that do not destabilize economies dependent on garment manufacturing.

IV. Current Situation

Currently, the issue presents many different impacts worldwide. Economically, many countries rely on garment manufacturing and exports for a stable income and employment. Socially, concerns remain regarding worker safety, wages, and labor protections within global supply chains. Environmentally, continued high production and disposal rates contribute to an impact on pollution, resource strain, and growing waste accumulation. Efforts have been made by international organizations, governments, and private actors, who have begun addressing the impacts of fast fashion through a way of improving supply chain transparency, encouraging responsible production, and promoting a more sustainable consumption behavior.

They've also introduced a range of measures, such as broad sustainability frameworks, which encouraged reductions in waste and improvements in industrial practices. Some existing environmental agreements address certain chemicals and disposal practices associated with clothing production.

Alternative approaches such as reducing overproduction, extending garment lifespans, using recycled or organic fibers, improving recycling systems, and increasing supply-chain transparency have gained attention in recent years. Some governments have introduced installing rules and waste-reduction policies, while industry initiatives have promoted voluntary sustainability commitments.

However, these efforts still remain fragmented and largely non-binding, resulting in an uneven implementation across all countries. As a result, despite growing a structure for awareness and pilot programs, there is no single set of worldwide rules to control how fast fashion impacts the environment. While these efforts represent only progress of what could become a worldwide effectiveness, there is currently no real comprehensive global framework regulating the fast fashion industry. Differences in national capacity and regulatory enforcement have limited measurable reductions in production, pollution, and disposal rates. Consequently, global clothing consumption and waste generation continue to increase.

The current situation therefore demonstrates a gap between international recognition of the issue and coordinated regulatory action. Delegates are encouraged to evaluate whether enhanced cooperation, clearer standards, or new mechanisms may be required to address the environmental and social impacts of fast fashion.

Delegates must determine whether UNEP should expand voluntary sustainability frameworks into stronger international ones, how responsibility should be divided between producing and

consuming countries, and whether corporate entities should face clearer environmental accountability under international law.

V. Questions to Consider

- How to improve accountability across supply chains?
- How does fast fashion contribute to water pollution, air pollution, and soil degradation?
- How can textile-producing countries reduce pollution without harming economic growth?
- How can UNEP promote reuse, repair, and recycling at a global scale?
- Should UNEP promote a mandatory worldwide framework for the waste hierarchy?
- How does microplastic accumulation threaten marine food chains and human health?
- To what extent should producing countries versus consuming countries bear responsibility for environmental damage caused by fast fashion?
- Should international standards regulating garment production be mandatory or remain voluntary?
- Should emerging markets provide financial or technological assistance to manufacturing nations transitioning to sustainable production?

VI. Delegations

Argentina – Possesses domestic textile production and environmental protection priorities. Supports balanced regulation that protects industry while reducing pollution.

Australia - Australia faces significant textile waste challenges and advocates for extended producer responsibility policies. It supports stronger waste management and recycling frameworks.

Bangladesh - Bangladesh's economy heavily depends on garment manufacturing. It seeks sustainable solutions that balance environmental protection with economic development.

Belgium - Belgium plays a role in EU policymaking on environmental regulation. It supports transparency in supply chains and corporate environmental responsibility.

Bolivia - Bolivia is environmentally vulnerable and emphasizes sustainable development. It supports regulations that protect land and biodiversity.

Brazil - Brazil is both a producer of natural fibers and a biodiversity-rich nation. It emphasizes protecting ecosystems from agricultural expansion and pollution.

Cambodia - Cambodia relies heavily on garment exports for economic stability. Limited environmental regulation makes a sustainable transition a key challenge.

Canada - Canada emphasizes environmental protection and responsible consumption. It supports international cooperation and environmental reporting standards for industries.

Chile - Chile faces environmental vulnerability due to climate change and pollution. It supports sustainable production models and international environmental cooperation.

Colombia – Developing apparel manufacturing and retail sector. Promotes sustainable business practices and waste reduction programs.

China - China is the world's largest textile producer and exporter. It plays a critical role in reducing industrial pollution and transitioning to cleaner manufacturing practices.

Denmark - Denmark promotes circular fashion and sustainable design practices. It supports lifecycle-based regulation of textile production.

Egypt - Egypt is a major cotton producer with water resource challenges. It emphasizes sustainable agriculture and pollution control in textile processing.

El Salvador – Faces growing waste-management challenges and receives imported second-hand clothing. The country seeks sustainable disposal systems and international support for recycling infrastructure.

Ethiopia - Ethiopia is an emerging garment manufacturing hub. It seeks investment and technology transfer to avoid repeating environmentally harmful practices.

Fiji - Fiji faces threats from ocean pollution and climate change. Textile-related microplastics pose risks to marine biodiversity and livelihoods.

France - France has taken legislative steps to regulate fast fashion, including measures against overproduction and waste. It advocates for corporate accountability and sustainable consumption.

Germany - Germany emphasizes environmental regulation, recycling systems, and sustainable manufacturing. It supports strong environmental standards within global supply chains.

Ghana - Ghana is a major destination for global textile waste. The influx of discarded clothing strains waste management systems and harms ecosystems.

Guatemala – Has a developing garment sector and increasing landfill pressure from clothing waste. It balances industrial growth with environmental protection efforts.

Honduras – A major apparel exporter reliant on manufacturing employment. It prioritizes economic stability while gradually improving labor and environmental standards.

India - India is both a major producer and consumer of textiles. It must address water scarcity, chemical runoff, and sustainable cotton production.

Indonesia - Indonesia's textile industry contributes significantly to river pollution. It seeks international support for cleaner production technologies.

Italy - As a global fashion hub, Italy balances economic interests in textiles with sustainability initiatives. It promotes innovation in sustainable fabrics and ethical production.

Japan - Japan focuses on efficiency, technological innovation, and waste reduction. It supports sustainable materials and advanced recycling technologies in the fashion industry.

Jordan – Hosts export-oriented garment factories employing large workforces. Interested in maintaining trade competitiveness while improving labor and environmental safeguards.

Kenya - Kenya receives large amounts of discarded clothing through second-hand markets. This contributes to textile waste and landfill overflow.

Maldives - The Maldives is highly vulnerable to marine pollution and climate change. Microplastics and textile waste pose direct threats to its ecosystems.

Mexico - Mexico has a growing textile and manufacturing sector. It seeks sustainable industrial development while reducing pollution and waste.

Morocco - Morocco is an emerging textile manufacturing hub supplying European markets. It faces water scarcity and supports cleaner production technologies.

Netherlands - The Netherlands is a global leader in circular economy initiatives. It strongly promotes textile recycling, reuse, and sustainable design standards.

New Zealand – Focuses on environmental conservation and waste reduction. Advocates responsible consumption and extended producer responsibility in the clothing industry.

Nicaragua – Expanding textile production sector with limited environmental regulation capacity. The country seeks investment and sustainable industrial development assistance.

Nigeria - Nigeria is impacted by second-hand clothing imports and textile waste. It advocates for better waste management and environmental protection.

Pakistan - Pakistan's textile sector is a major water consumer and polluter. The country emphasizes the need for sustainable water management solutions.

Peru - Peru's biodiversity and water systems are vulnerable to industrial pollution. It emphasizes environmental protection and sustainable resource use.

Philippines - The Philippines faces severe marine pollution and is impacted by microplastics from global textile waste. It advocates for stronger international pollution controls.

Poland – Growing European textile manufacturing and recycling sector. Supports EU environmental regulations and supply chain transparency.

Saudi Arabia – A major consumer market with increasing sustainability initiatives. Invests in waste reduction and economic diversification strategies.

South Africa – Experiences growing clothing imports and waste accumulation. Advocates for circular economy models and responsible consumption policies.

South Korea - South Korea is a major fashion consumer market with growing awareness of sustainability. It invests in green technology and eco-friendly textile innovation.

Spain - Spain has a significant fashion retail market and faces growing textile waste challenges. It supports EU-led sustainability regulations and circular economy initiatives.

Sri Lanka - Sri Lanka is known for comparatively ethical garment manufacturing. It promotes sustainable production while remaining economically competitive.

Sweden - Sweden is a global leader in environmental policy and sustainable consumption. It advocates for strict environmental standards and innovation in textile recycling.

Thailand – A regional textile producer facing water pollution and chemical runoff concerns. It supports cleaner manufacturing technologies and regional cooperation.

Türkiye - Türkiye acts as a bridge between European markets and Asian production. It focuses on improving environmental standards in textile manufacturing.

United Arab Emirates - A global retail and trade hub with high clothing consumption rates.

Supports innovation, recycling technology, and sustainable urban policies.

United Kingdom - The UK has a high per-capita clothing consumption rate and has explored regulatory approaches to reduce textile waste. The country is increasingly active in promoting circular economy models in fashion.

United States - One of the largest consumers of fast fashion in the world. The US is a large contributor to overconsumption due to fast-changing trends and high purchasing power.

Vietnam - Vietnam is a rapidly growing textile manufacturing hub. It faces challenges related to water pollution and waste management from textile production.

VII. Glossary

Circular Economy Model

A system that keeps resources in use for as long as possible, extracting maximum value, then recovering and regenerating products and materials at the end of their life

Disposable Consumption

A consumption pattern where clothing is used briefly and discarded quickly.

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

The UN body responsible for coordinating global environmental action.

UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion

A UNEP-led initiative promoting environmental and social sustainability in the fashion industry.

Social Equity

The fair distribution of environmental and economic impacts between nations and communities.

Shared Responsibility

The principle that producers, consumers, and governments all share accountability for environmental impacts.

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