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THREAD TO THREAD

ENHANCING EU CLOTHING LABELS FOR SUSTAINABLE CHOICES

SUMMARY

This policy brief introduces the ***Thread to Thread*** **initiative**, which aims to reduce the negative environmental impact of the clothing industry through **improved ecolabelling**. Currently, the global clothing industry is one of the most **environmentally intensive** sectors, responsible for 4 to 10% of global carbon emissions - more than the combined output of the aviation and shipping industries[1]. Ecolabelling has emerged as a **significant policy tool**, promoting emissions reductions by influencing consumer behavior, guiding market trends, and supporting regulatory frameworks (Nakaishi & Chapman, 2024). Thread to Thread advocates for the development and harmonisation of a **standardised ecolabel** for garments across the European Union (EU). This label would empower consumers to make **informed and sustainable choices**, reinforcing the shift toward a more environmentally responsible clothing industry.

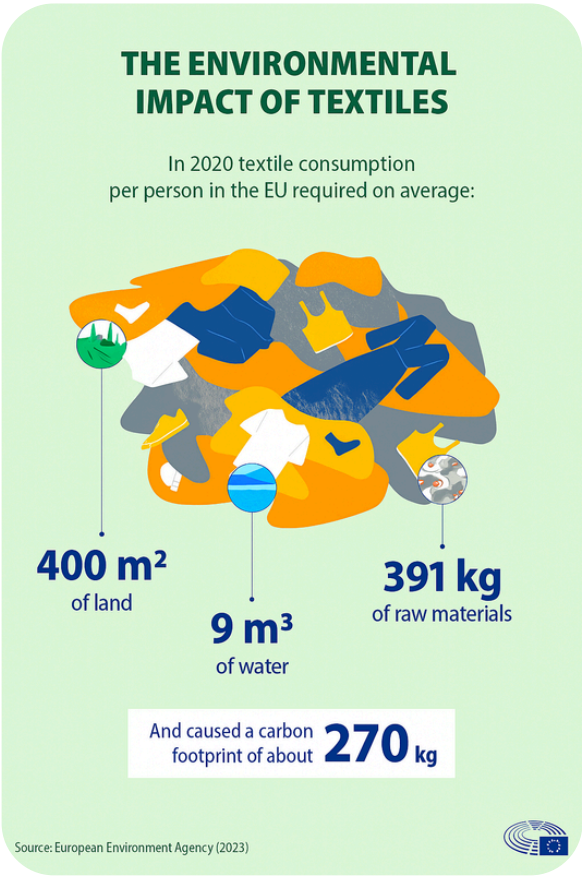
Campaign concept logo. AI generated.

ISSUES

Emissions from the clothing industry are rapidly increasing. Without policy intervention, emissions are projected to rise from 879 million metric tonnes CO_2 in 2022 to over 1.2 billion by 2030 (Statista, 2024[2]).

The EU lacks effective textile waste management. In 2020, the EU textile consumption generated 121 million tonnes of greenhouse gases, yet only 1% of used clothes are recycled - most are incinerated or landfilled (European Parliament, 2020[3]).

The impacts extend beyond carbon: Textile production is responsible for around 20% of global clean water pollution due to dyeing and finishing, and is the third-largest contributor to water degradation and land use globally.



The younger generation cares but struggles to navigate sustainability claims. Gen Z are sensitive to social and environmental issues (Gazzola *et al.*, 2020), however express frustration and doubt concerning sustainability claims (Li *et al.*, 2025).

[1]https://unfccc.int/news/un-helps-fashion-industry-shift-to-low-carbon
[2]https://www.statista.com/statistics/1305696/apparel-industry-co2e-emissions/
[3]https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20201208STO93327/the-impact-of-textile-production-and-waste-on-the-environment-infographics

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RECOMMANDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

To promote transparency and informed consumer choice, we propose the adoption of a labeling system inspired by **Nutri-Score**[1], widely used in the food industry. Nutri-Score has been favored across many European countries for its simplicity and ease of interpretation, and has been shown to support healthier consumer decisions (Song *et al.*, 2021).

A similar **ecolabel for garments** would feature a colour-coded **A to D (or E) scale**, offering a quick, intuitive assessment of a product's overall environmental and ethical footprint: an A rating (paired with a **green colour**) would signify leading practices in sustainability and ethics, while a D or E rating (in **orange or red**) would indicate a higher environmental and social impact, as determined by the scoring algorithm.

To ensure full accountability, each label would have an **embedded QR code** directing to a detailed **digital product sheet**, disclosing key lifecycle indicators used for scoring the product, such as carbon emissions, water consumption, or end-of-life recyclability.

Ecolabel concept for sustainable clothing, AI generated and inspired by the Nutri-Score system.

FOCUS

Garments are graded from A to D based on seven sustainability criteria as listed in the column to the right. Each item is assessed across these factors, with higher scores reflecting better environmental and social performance. Grades offer a quick, reliable snapshot of overall sustainability.

CURRENT ECOLABELLING CERTIFICATIONS

Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), Bluesign, The Cradle to Cradle certificate, Oeko-Tex® 100 (1000), Textile Exchange, EU Ecolabel, Blue angel.

Scoring Criteria

- Ethical Labor and Social Responsibility
- Sustainable Textile Fibre Composition
- Air Emissions Limits
- Water Pollution Control
- Toxic Residue Restrictions and Accessories
- Sustainability of Components and Accessories
- Energy Consumption

[1]https://www.foodwatch.org/en/about-us/our-work/sugar-fat-and-salt/how-the-nutri-score-works

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IMPLEMENTATION PATHWAYS

Establishing a standardised, sector-wide ecolabeling system for the garments market across the EU would lay a strong foundation for implementing complementary **policy instruments**. We propose the use of tools such as **taxation and targeted incentives** to encourage more sustainable consumption behaviour.

Consumer-Side Measures

- Reduced VAT for A & B-rated garments, scaled by environmental score.
- Eco-tax on C & D-rated garments, with higher rates for D.

Producer-Side Measures

- Fiscal penalties for using non-certified virgin fibers.
- Incentives for using recycled or sustainably sourced materials.

Additional Measures

- Repair and reuse schemes should be supported through direct subsidies[1,2].
- Vouchers or additional discounts linked to student ID cards for A & B-rated garments[3].

"Informed choices, sustainable futures"

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

2027 Voluntary labelling + strong consumer incentives

2030–2040 Mandatory labelling + VAT/eco-tax rollout + producer penalties

2040–2050 Full enforcement: only A/B-rated garments sold without additional taxation

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The policy brief is grounded in the **legitimacy theory**, propounded by Dowling & Pfeffer (1975). The theory advocates that organisations align their actions and operations with evolving societal expectations to gain and maintain social acceptance and support (Suchman, 1995; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975).

The new ecolabel empowers consumers and firms to proactively manage legitimacy pressures, contributing to a broader institutional shift toward a **sustainable clothing industry by 2050**. Also, the theory highlights environmental advocacy, consumer, and regulatory pressure as the drivers demanding policy intervention. The ecolabelling solutions map perfectly to Suchman's legitimacy classifications: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy. Finally, the legitimacy theory explains why ecolabelling works as a policy intervention through **information asymmetry reduction** to enhance transparency, market signaling legitimacy to differentiate between various companies and regulatory compliance to maintain legal legitimacy.

[1]https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/actualites/A16951?lang=en
[2]https://www.apple.com/shop/trade-in
[3]https://www.myunidays.com/GB/en-GB

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