

v. 02, n° 02 - jul/dec 2022

ISSN 2763-8685



# LATIN AMERICAN JOURNAL OF EUROPEAN STUDIES



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union



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# THE DUMPING GROUNDS FOR FAST FASHION CLOTHES:

an assessment of the environmental tragedy related to sustainable development in the European Union<sup>1</sup>

Andreas R. Ziegler<sup>2</sup>  
Amon Elpidio da Silva<sup>3</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims to evaluate the situation of dumping grounds in some regions of the world and to size its impact on the expectations of the European Union (EU) to achieve sustainable development. It traces intersections of international trade theory, European law, and the principle of sustainable development with the practice of major global players, focusing on the EU. The dumping grounds in third countries gives room for questioning the opportunities and threats that the European block faces to achieve environmental sustainability and how the very countries of Europe, as importers and exporters of fast-fashion clothes are co-responsible for the environmental drama faced by other countries that deal with these products, which become waste. The purpose of this research is therefore to analyze the effectiveness of the principle of sustainable development in the final stage of the production chain of fast-fashion clothing, seeking to bring an analysis centered on international and European law. As for the research method adopted here, it is developed through bibliographic and documental analysis and a case study. The development of the work is divided into three chapters. The

1. A.R. Ziegler; A.E. da Silva. *The dumping grounds for fast fashion clothes: an assessment of the environmental tragedy related to sustainable development in the European Union*, in *Latin American Journal of European Studies*, v. 2, n. 2, 2022, p. 19-48 et seq.

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3. L.L.M. in European and International at the Europa-Institut of the Universität des Saarlandes, Germany, (2021). Specialist in European Economic Law, Universität des Saarlandes (2021). B.A. degree in Public Policy and Management (2019) at the Federal University of Ceará (UFC). Research emphasis: migration policies; sustainable development; international relations; European integration law; and refugee law.

first seeks to compare environmental conventions on the subject. The second chapter analyzes the production cycle of fast-fashion clothing, the countries and entities involved, and the accentuated waste production in a panorama of international transactions. The last chapter seeks to examine the actions of the EU to curb similar practices, where there is accountability in the European and international market for damages committed to the environment also in third countries. It concludes that there is a possible European success in enacting a due diligence directive with a specific scope to curb market practices that continuously produce products and exempt themselves from responsibility for their final destination, thus disregarding the sustainability of the environment.

**KEYWORDS:** Fast-Fashion Industry; Sustainable Development; International Agreements.

### **OS ATERROS PARA ROUPAS DE FAST-FASHION:**

uma avaliação da tragédia ambiental relacionada com o desenvolvimento sustentável na União Europeia

**RESUMO:** Este artigo visa avaliar a situação dos aterros a céu aberto em algumas regiões do mundo e avaliar o seu impacto nas expectativas da União Europeia (UE) de alcançar um padrão de desenvolvimento sustentável. Traça interseções de teorias do comércio internacional, do direito europeu, e do princípio do desenvolvimento sustentável com a prática dos principais atores globais, centrando-se na UE. As zonas de aterros em países terceiros dão espaço para questionar as oportunidades e ameaças que o bloco europeu enfrenta para alcançar a sustentabilidade ambiental e como os próprios países da Europa, enquanto importadores e exportadores de vestuário do segmento *fast-fashion*, são co-responsáveis pelo drama ambiental enfrentado por outros países que lidam com estes produtos, que se tornam um desperdício. O objetivo desta investigação é, portanto, analisar a eficácia do princípio do desenvolvimento sustentável na fase final da cadeia de produção de vestuário de *fast-fashion*, procurando trazer uma análise centrada no direito internacional e europeu. Quanto ao método de investigação aqui adotado, é desenvolvido através de análise bibliográfica e documental e de um estudo de caso. O desenvolvimento do trabalho está dividido em três capítulos. O primeiro procura comparar as convenções ambientais sobre o tema. O segundo capítulo analisa o ciclo de produção de vestuário de moda rápida, os países e entidades envolvidas, e a acentuada produção de resíduos num panorama de transações internacionais. O último capítulo procura examinar as ações da UE para conter práticas semelhantes, onde existe responsabilidade no mercado europeu e internacional por danos cometidos ao ambiente também em países terceiros. Conclui-se

que existe um possível êxito europeu na promulgação de uma diretiva de *due diligence* com um âmbito específico para refrear as práticas de mercado que produzem continuamente produtos e se isentam da responsabilidade pelo seu destino final, ignorando assim a sustentabilidade do meio ambiente.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Indústria Fast-Fashion; Desenvolvimento Sustentável; Acordos Internacionais.

**SUMMARY:** Introduction; 1. Comparative analysis of the extent of the problems perpetuated by the irregular disposal of clothing in light of international law: the International Conventions of Bamako and Basel; 2. The dumping grounds for fast fashion clothes: the actual scenario under a critical perspective; 3. A European approach: alternatives and challenges for the European Union in a scenario of striving for sustainability; Final Considerations; References.

## Introduction

The consumption policy for fashion items is common in the global economy model we have today.<sup>4</sup> As part of what fuels market capitalism, the production of consumer goods follows as an indispensable element for the movement of the economy and capital of large corporations. As a consequence, the side effects of mass production practices generate chain effects, and, as for the production of the immense amount of clothes that serve the segment known as fast-fashion. Where the market repeatedly seeks, in an ever-faster cycle, to meet the cravings of fashion consumption disregarding, many times, any effects that this cycle may generate through its production chain unless especially those that are a threat to the profit margin.<sup>5</sup>

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4. M. Durovic, *International consumer law: what is it all about?*, in *Journal of Consumer Policy*, vol. 43, n. 1, 2020, p. 129.

5. X. Bai, B. Begashaw, M. Bursztyn, I. Chabay, S. Droy, C. Folke, K. Fukushi, J. Gupta, H. Hackmann, E. Hege, C. Jaeger, A. Patwardhan, O. Renn, G. Safonov, P. Schlosser, P. Skaloud, C. Vogel, S.V.D. Leeuw, Y. Zhang, *Changing the scientific approach to fast*

However, the dogma that has persisted and been accentuated as present in political, legal, and economic discussions is centered on the term “sustainable development”. Thus, it is notorious the presence of public discourse in the search for the adoption of measures at regional and global levels of a market economy that can grow and coexist with the environment, curbing the damage caused to it due to the existing factors for economic growth.

The scenario of the fast fashion industry today stands out as more and more details are reported about the cycle that generates the production of passing fashion clothes and the most worrying final destination of these: the open-air dumping grounds.<sup>6</sup> The catastrophe that is exposed by the deplorable situation of clothing dumps is, without a doubt, disrespectful and unprecedented environmental drama.

The promotion of the Green Deal<sup>7</sup> in 2019 sought to make clear the European bloc’s intention “on making Europe the first climate-neutral continent in the world”.<sup>8</sup> However, this goal is not so virtuously laudable if, to achieve it, other places on the planet will be used for unsustainable practices, such as open-air dumpsites.

It is noteworthy that the term “irregular disposal” used throughout this study refers to the practice of discarding fast fashion

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*transitions to a sustainable world, Improving knowledge production for sustainable policy and practice, in IASS Discussion Paper, 2019, p. 11.*

6. K. Niinimäki, G. Peters, H. Dahlbo, P. Perry, *The environmental price of fast fashion, in Nature Reviews Earth & Environment*, vol. 1, n. 4, 2020, p. 189.

7. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions the European Green Deal of 11 December 2019, COM/2019/640 final.

8. European Parliament, *Environment policy: general principles and basic framework*, available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/71/politica-ambiental-principios-gerais-e-quadro-de-base>.



clothes and scraps leftover from their manufacture and that is discarded at dumping grounds. The word "irregular" is given by the inappropriate nature of disposal, which should have its end in a place or process suitable for the treatment of discards of this type.

The garbage dumps that accumulate tons of fast-fashion clothes are thousands of kilometers away from the territories that correspond to the European Union (EU), the United States of America (USA), and China. These are the main exporters of such products that, due to their low quality, are discarded in piles every week to countries like Chile<sup>9</sup> and Ghana.<sup>10,11</sup>

With that, this is descriptive research with a qualitative approach since the work focuses on describing the problems arising from the export of fast fashion garments to open-air dumpsites in other territories, where they are sometimes burned, and also lead to marine pollution when these dumps are close to the sea, as well as the legal correlation of the problem in the spectrum of European and international law.

## **1. Comparative analysis of the extent of the problems perpetuated by the irregular disposal of clothing in light of international law: the international conventions of Bamako and Basel**

Humankind faces the most delicate period of history concerning the assurance of natural resources in the world. Global warming,

9. C. Dehn, *Chile: Mountains of discarded clothes in the Atacama Desert*, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/chile-mountains-of-discarded-clothes-in-the-atacama-desert/g-59855356>.

10. K. Amanor, *Developing a sustainable second-hand clothing tracer in Ghana*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Southampton, 2018, p. 40.

11. BBC, *Fast fashion: The dumping ground for unwanted clothes*, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-58836618>.

extinction of species, hunger, deforestation, and lack of water are some of the top issues that surround the situation nowadays. With that, it seems urgent to go deep into debates concerning the sustainability of life itself.

Environmental protection is, unquestionably, a goal to be reached by using all existing legal devices so that the environment is safeguarded.<sup>12</sup> There is a clear conviction that, when it comes to the Environment, this protected good must be observed in international law, since there is a serious threat to the quality of human life, natural resources, and the entire ecosystem, reverberating in other aspects such as economic and social.<sup>13</sup>

Likewise, it is important to explore the formulation of international agreements such as the International Conventions on Climate to understand the process to guarantee the environment protection, and the future challenges of it. It is clear the lack of progress in this regard when we chronologically work the concept of sustainable development in international law itself, specifically, in its roots presented in the Stockholm Convention in 1972<sup>14</sup> or the Rio Convention in 1992.<sup>15</sup> In the case in question, the need for nutrition for the textile industry's economic model to guarantee, through its negligence or technical incapacity, the right to pollute is very clear.

Of such need, the so-called developing countries are a highly viable primary answer, and this assertion has several factors that

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12. A. Rieu-Clarke, *International law and sustainable development*, in *IWA Publishing*, 2005, p. 91.

13. A. Rieu-Clarke, *International law and sustainable development*, *cit.*, p. 80.

14. Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment December 12, 1975.

15. Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, June 14, 1992.

make it attractive to the textile industry. There is the availability of land; ease of acquisition and receipt; weak legislation and its lack of effectiveness; and the incentive given by governments desperate to get foreign investment into their countries to generate income, economic growth, and improvements through technological modernization.<sup>16</sup> Thus, all of these efforts are aimed at ensuring growth in the hope that countries will achieve development, but, as the situation explicitly shows, disregard the essential relevance of environmental protection. Also, the process of globalization is part of the increasing waste around the globe.

It is important to point out that international efforts to control garbage and waste to avoid environmental pollution have brought significant results so that today we have a regulation for waste that is considered dangerous to the environment. The Basel Convention of 1989 stands out, whose content brought about the creation of a global treaty that seeks to control the international movement of waste considered hazardous.

Although, the Bamako Convention, January 30, 1991, that was also part of the movement following Basel is even more relevant to the current debate. This is because the Basel Convention was one of the reactions to the illegal movement of wastes that are considered hazardous to environmental pollution. And the Bamako Convention came to do what the parties to the Basel Convention were unable to achieve: ban the movement of radioactive waste.<sup>17</sup>

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16. A.V. Bathillon, *Colonialidade tóxica, descarte do lixo global e contra-narrativas socioambientais em África: uma análise das Convenções de Basiléia e de Bamako*, in UNILAB, 2019, p. 20.

17. United Nations Environment Programme, *Bamako Convention: Preventing Africa from becoming a dumping ground for toxic wastes*, available at <https://www.unep.org/press/press-releases/2019/01/20190123-bamako-convention-preventing-africa-from-becoming-a-dumping-ground-for-toxic-wastes>.

The immensity of the damage that is being caused to the environment by the indiscipline and impunity of the companies and industries that continually export fast-fashion clothing in droves are dangerous. Disregarding whatever their final destination may be when they land in other territories, as in the cases of Chile<sup>18</sup> and Ghana,<sup>19</sup> which have landed with miles of rot, fires, and other corrosive effects that harm the environment and the population.

Therefore, the Basel Convention is one of the arrangements that the international community was able to get right on the waste issue (even with its limitations regarding the specificity of the materials). And, thus, we can see that even the conventions and normative agreements, even if in favor of a greater good such as environmental protection, are unfortunately framed as spaces for the affirmation of interests and disputes, such as the subsequent need for the creation of another convention that could meet the demands presented by the African nations.

Consequently, the predominance of an environment of cooperation for agreements that are not based on interests that are listed in a top-down manner is urgently required, leaving room for a major violation of the right to have an environment that can be healthy, sustainable, and also existing for future generations. It is, therefore, a guarantee of the human right to exist.

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[unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/bamako-convention-preventing-africa-becoming-dumping-ground-toxic](https://unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/bamako-convention-preventing-africa-becoming-dumping-ground-toxic).

18. Oxford Analytica, *Ultra-fast fashion risks eroding sustainability gains*, in *Emerald Expert Briefings*, vol. 1, n. oxan-db, 2021, p. 56.

19. J.B. Skinner, *Fashioning waste: Considering the global and local impacts of the secondhand clothing trade in Accra, Ghana and Charting an inclusive path forward*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Cincinnati: 2019, p. 49.

Although such a reflection may still have been evaluated by some of the parties at the time, one should not overlook the intention of the Basel Convention in making evident its intention that cheap alternative sources should be sought in Eastern Europe and countries labeled as members of the “developing world”.<sup>20</sup> It is great nonsense to make official that such a move, prompted by the “Not in my backyard”<sup>21</sup> movement, could even today target the “backyard” of other less favored nations, which also do not have the necessary capabilities to solve the problem of imported waste on their own.

Even though both conventions (Bamako and Basel) have the purpose of regulating and controlling the transboundary movements of waste, and even though this is not the case of low-quality clothing in the fast fashion segment, their importance is due to the lack of assertiveness of an international instrument that could cover the problem that we have today.

This is because both conventions deal with regulating here what is already considered as “waste” in its origin. And, as their

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20. Basel Convention, *History of the negotiations of the Basel Convention*, available at <http://www.basel.int/TheConvention/Overview/History/Overview/tabid/3405/Default.aspx>.

21. “In the 80s, growing environmental awareness in the industrialized world created enormous difficulties for the construction of new landfills and incinerators for hazardous waste. What came to be called “Not in my backyard” [...] combined with stricter environmental legislation and new international commitments to no longer dump hazardous waste into the oceans, caused hazardous waste management costs to skyrocket in the industrialized countries. The trade in hazardous waste then presented itself as the alternative, because for low costs it was possible to find companies that would buy this waste and dump it in developing countries. Corrupt dictators in African or Central American countries authorized the dumping of barrels on deserted beaches and abandoned areas in exchange for bank deposits in some tax haven.” (Translated by the author). M.V. Lisboa, *Em busca de uma política externa brasileira de meio ambiente: três exemplos e uma exceção à regra*, in *São Paulo em Perspectiva*, vol. 16, n. 2, 2002, p. 44 et seq., available at <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0102-88392002000200006>.

texts precept, the States that commercialize these materials do so by mutual agreement. Therefore, we are faced with another problem: the clothes at their origin are not, logically, configured as garbage or waste. But they become so because of their exorbitant quantity and the simple lack of purpose for their disposal: they are too numerous even to be reinserted in local commerce.

The situation is so catastrophic that becoming garbage is the only alternative found at their destination. The overproduction of clothing that seeks to meet the demands of a fierce market has more than outstripped its demand. Thus, it is to be understood that in each fast fashion store we find today, we can be sure that a good part of what is there will already be considered garbage because this will be its final destination, as it has already been weekly. With this, it is vital to adopt actions that can either restrain the export of clothes whose origin is for reasons that tarnish their quality (as evidenced by the British Broadcasting Corporation – BBC,<sup>22</sup> and Deutsche Welle<sup>23</sup> reports) or by the interruption of large-scale production. But how to get there?

It is true that both the Basel and Bamako Conventions, as international instruments for environmental protection, play their role in the cross-border regulation of hazardous waste, but they are the closest we have to something that could shed some light on controlling the situation.

However, the current cycle itself does not correspond to what both conventions are intended to do. Moreover, just as there was

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22. BBC, *Fast fashion: The dumping ground for unwanted clothes*, cit.

23. C. Dehn, *Chile: Mountains of discarded clothes in the Atacama Desert*, cit.

a counterpoint to the Basel Convention's lack of assertiveness in highlighting what would be the hazardous waste or the lack of description to also specify the radioactive content, today we need a Convention at the level of what was done in Bamako to respond to a problem that is in line with the global movement of consumption that has no brake, but we need to find one.

## **2. The dumping grounds for fast fashion clothes: the actual scenario under a critical perspective**

It should be noted here that the economic dimension has as its purpose the improvement of people's quality of life through economic development. Allied to this, the social dimension refers to the balance that is sought to reduce inequalities that are between opulence and misery.<sup>24</sup>

Still, when entering into the analyses arising from economic activities, it is important to understand that these can generate positive and negative externalities for economic activity. Its concept can be dissected as "[...] when a person engages in an action, without paying or receiving any compensation for that impact. If the impact on the third party is adverse, it is called a negative externality; if it is beneficial, it is called a positive externality".<sup>25</sup>

The fast fashion industry has continuously made exploitation in its production chain. Whether in the disposal or production, this industry is characterized by poor and dangerous working conditions,

24. D.S.S. Garcia, *El principio de sostenibilidad y los puertos: a atividade portuária como garantidora da dimensão econômica e social do princípio da sustentabilidade*, Tese (Doctorado em Derecho Ambiental y Sostenibilidad de la Universidad de Alicante – UA), Universidade de Alicante, 2011, p. 210 et seq.

25. N.G. Mankiw, *Principles of economics, in Cengage Learning*, vol.1, 9<sup>th</sup> ed., 2020, p. 204.

especially in countries where the labor legislation or the inspection itself is not strong enough.

According to Remy, Speelman, and Swartz, clothing production doubled between 2000 and 2014 and consumers buy 60% more clothing items per year.<sup>26</sup> The impact of this increase has created a large production margin and consequent increase in waste materials that are moved to landfills. In addition, the fast fashion industry is now the second most polluting industry on the planet, second only to oil.<sup>27</sup>

The negative externalities of the production of fast fashion items are numerous and transcend the environmental issue. The exacerbated increase in irrational consumption, psychological dependence, illegally extracted raw materials, and slave or forced labor are some of the examples that are present in the industry, including fashion.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, more than US\$120 billion in fabrics are stored in warehouses and about 87% end up being burned or delivered to landfills.<sup>29</sup>

It is also emphasized that both industries in the fast-fashion segment and consumers can be considered key players in this process chain. This is because there is a concentration of poor

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26. N. Remy, E. Speelman, S. Swartz, *Style that's sustainable: A new fast-fashion formula*, available at <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/sustainability/our-insights/style-thats-sustainable-a-new-fast-fashion-formula>.

27. The Fashion Law, *Fast Fashion*, cit.

28. R. Bick, E. Halsey, C.C. Ekenga, *The global environmental injustice of fast fashion*, in *Environmental Health*, vol. 17, n. 1, 2018, p. 1 et seq.

29. S. Russel, *Reimagining the Fashion Industry by Designing Out Waste*, available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sap/2021/10/20/reimagining-the-fashion-industry-by-designing-out-waste/?sh=234fef4b9e08>.



quality or defective garments, as well as second-hand clothes that arrive in tons every week in the ports of Ghana.<sup>30</sup>

Consequently, the lots that cannot be used by the merchants to be marketed, whether for low quality, defects, or other characteristics that show the lack of attractiveness of the product, end up finding their way into a true “graveyard of clothes” that is stocked over the years with everything that is considered “undesirable” by the fashion market in the West and also in China.<sup>31</sup>

Not only is it estimated that about 40% of all the material that arrives in Ghana is sent to these dumping grounds, but this environmental nightmare also does not stop there. The clothes, because of their abundant quantity, are being washed out to sea as soon as they are abandoned at the dumping grounds and are gradually being carried to the shore and dumped on the sand, to the point of being washed into the ocean.<sup>32</sup>

Much of the material is made from polyester, a plastic fiber that will be in the capacity to contaminate the sea and all life forms there. This contamination by this material is worrisome because of the exponential damage that polyester can cause to marine biodiversity and also impact human life. However, the contamination still has no clear measurement of the damage it can cause to the environment and human health because there is a great lack of data on a

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30. K. Amanor, *Developing a sustainable second-hand clothing tracer in Ghana*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Southampton, 2018, p. 41.

31. BBC, *Fast fashion: The dumping ground for unwanted clothes*, cit.

32. BBC, *Fast fashion: The dumping ground for unwanted clothes*, cit.

global scale that can inform the design of additional policies and regulations for the prevention of contamination.<sup>33</sup>

There are numerous consequences generated by the irregular disposal of clothing, and here it is mentioned as irregular due to the lack of responsibility with which the decision is made so that: first, that too much contingent of garments is produced due to a veritable market; second, by the disturbance generated to local products and merchants who are harmed by the second-hand clothes that can still be commercialized, generating a precariousness in the generation of income, in the quality of dignified work and human rights as a present source for human subsistence through commerce; third, by the consequences unleashed to the environment, as for the fertile soil, the air pollution generated by burning, by air pollution that contaminates the workers present there to perform the management of clothes for the dumping grounds, and also by the contamination of the sea and its entire ecosystem.<sup>34</sup>

Still, these consequences are by far not enough to be considered the only ones measured by the effect of the waste generated by the production of fast-fashion clothing. A holistic technical analysis would be one of the preliminary steps to point out by study which are the chain effects generated in its totality.

The case of the Atacama Desert shows itself as another example of how fashion waste has made profound impacts on the environ-

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33. B.N. Diógenes, M.O. Soares, T.F. Mont'Alverne, *Rethinking the Environmental Quality of Brazilian Beaches: The Incidence of Microplastics as an Indicator for Sea Water and Sand Quality*, in *California Western International Law Journal*, vol. 51, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 2020, p. 155.

34. H. Dahlbo, K. Aalto, H. Eskelinen, H. Salmenperä, *Increasing textile circulation—consequences and requirements*, in *Sustainable production and consumption review*, vol. 9, 2017, p. 45.

ment. A desert that used to have predominantly dry tones now deals with a heap of colors of clothes that are being thrown away in piles because they have no other place to be discarded.<sup>35</sup>

Understanding how the cycle happens helps us to see the gravity of the whole process, comprehending that the resources and the final product can turn quickly into waste.

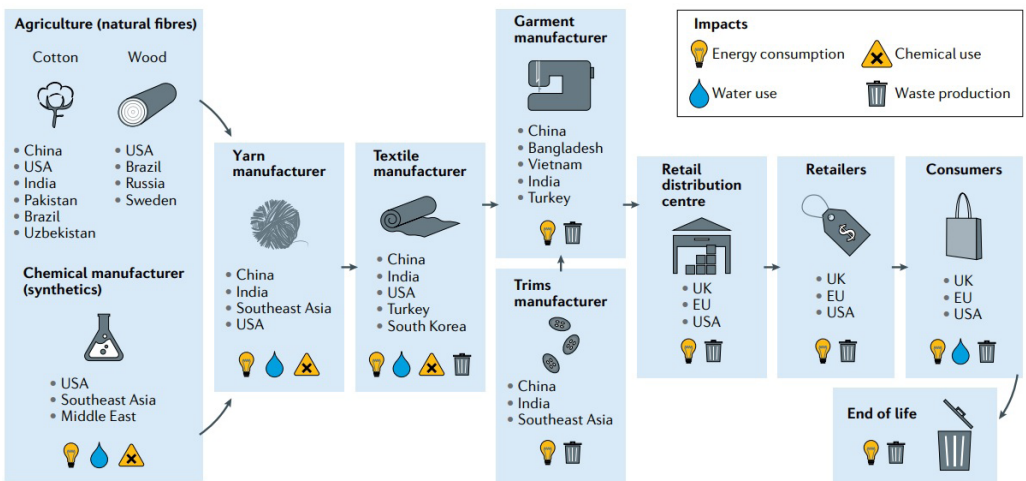


Figure 1 - Garment-manufacturing supply chain.<sup>36</sup>

The discrepancy between where we see where the raw material is extracted and where the consumption of fast-fashion clothes is.

35. C. Dehn, *Chile: Mountains of discarded clothes in the Atacama Desert*, cit.

36. "The key stages of the fashion supply chain with the geographic location and broad-scale environmental impacts (energy use, water use, waste production and chemical use) for each stage of the process. The garment supply chain is globally distributed, with much of the initial fibre production and garment manufacturing occurring in developing countries, while consumption typically occurs in developed countries." K. Niinimäki, G. Peters, H. Dahlbo, P. Perry, *The environmental price of fast fashion*, cit., p. 191.

It is located in the northern hemisphere, on the western side that does most of the consumption of fast fashion clothes.

Also, it can be concluded by the presence of the manufacturing of the items in countries that are not consumers, and the design and model of the pieces are thought and formulated at the base of the big fashion companies, which are not in these countries but the consumer countries. Therefore, the possibility of mistakes in the making of the garments is something that will certainly happen, and in great quantity.<sup>37</sup>

A whole chain of processes designed because of the need for large scale production of clothes that has been repeatedly followed over the years, disregarding any consequence or even taking into account what would happen to the leftover fabric. The clothes that were not produced as they should have been, or simply good clothes that are being discarded in piles by consumers because this same chain of processes already has a new model of clothing that was thought and designed today, and is already being produced this week.

Still, there is the other side of the process chain in that while it is the countries considered developed (in general, those in the northern hemisphere, on the western side) that are the main consumers of the final product, the countries that produce clothes end up bearing the costs generated by the production. These costs include environmental damage that is also imported by the

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37. K. Niinimäki, G. Peters, H. Dahlbo, P. Perry, *The environmental price of fast fashion*, cit., p. 191.

same importers of clothing: the developed countries (including most of the EU).<sup>38</sup>

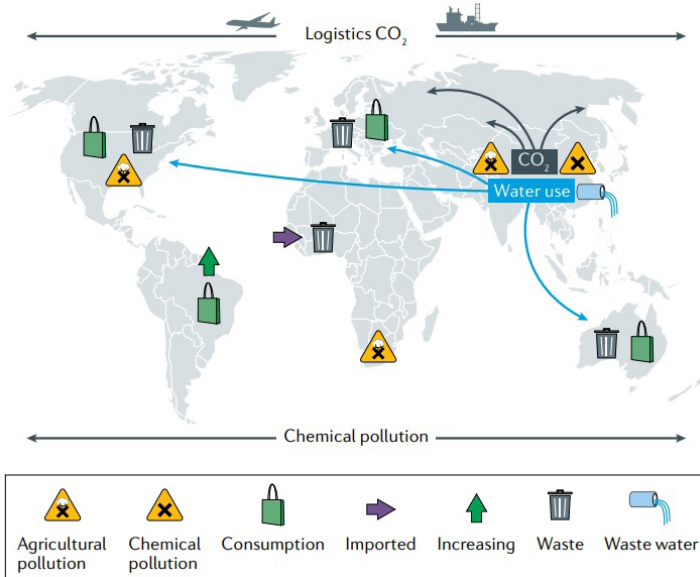


Figure 2 - Critical points in textile and fashion production.<sup>39</sup>

38. The Carbon Trust, *International carbon flows, in Clothing*, available at <https://prod-drupal-files.storage.googleapis.com/documents/resource/public/International%20Carbon%20Flows%20-%20Clothing%20-%20REPORT.pdf>.

39. "The geographic distribution of key environmental impacts from the textile and fashion supply chains. High volumes of fashion production and consumption and the logic behind fast fashion increase the environmental impacts by promoting unsustainable manufacturing, distribution and use of garments. Chemical pollution is greatest in countries where cotton is cultivated, but also in countries where waste water from the textile industry is not purified properly. Moreover, chemicals spread around the globe and they enrich (bioaccumulate) in the food chain, causing a risk to organisms, ecosystems and biodiversity. Water and energy are exported as garments from countries where they are produced (such as some Asian countries) to countries where they are consumed (such as North America, Europe and Australia). Waste is generated during both production and consumption, where it is either disposed of locally or exported, for example to countries in Africa". A. Ericsson, A. Brooks, *African Second-hand Clothes: Mima-te and the Development of Sustainable Fashion* in K. Fletcher, M. Than (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Sustainability and Fashion*, Routledge, London, 2015, p. 91 et seq, apud K. Niinimäki, G. Peters, H. Dahlbo, P. Perry, *The environmental price of fast fashion*, cit., p. 192.

Most of the clothes we find in the fast fashion market are made of cotton or polyester. And when these are dyed, there is the production of additional residues that also contaminate water when not treated properly.<sup>40</sup>

Another interesting fact is that within Europe the recycling rates vary significantly. While in Italy only 11% of textile waste is recycled, in Germany the rate is 75%.<sup>41</sup> Denmark has the second-highest rate, at 44%.<sup>42</sup>

Without neglecting to take into account that, due to the current covid-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic, we have a chance with two distinct paths: either, with social distancing, we will have a sustainable re-education in favor of improving environmental preservation and, consequently, the quality of human life; or, if we leave this aside or fail to give it the priority it deserves, we will have serious consequences to be borne by ourselves.

The very consumption and storage of items in homes by pandemic people generate a factor that can also be seen as an aggravating factor for environmental pollution.<sup>43</sup> Not to mention that the very supply of fast-fashion clothing is still driven by the online offer,

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40. S. Khan, A. Malik, *Environmental and health effects of textile industry wastewater*, in *Environmental deterioration and human health*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed, 2014. p. 61.

41. D. Watson, A.K. Aare, S. Trzepacz, C.D. Petersen, *Used Textile Collection in European Cities*, in *Study commissioned by Rijkswaterstaat under the European Clothing Action Plan (ECAP)*, available at [http://www.ecap.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ECAP-Textile-collection-in-European-cities\\_full-report\\_with-summary.pdf](http://www.ecap.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ECAP-Textile-collection-in-European-cities_full-report_with-summary.pdf).

42. D. Watson, A.K. Aare, S. Trzepacz, C.D. Petersen, *Used Textile Collection in European Cities*, in *Study commissioned by Rijkswaterstaat under the European Clothing Action Plan (ECAP)*, cit.

43. A.I.B.L.S. Leitão, T.F. Mont'Alverne, *The COVID-19 pandemic as an impeller for the aggravation of marine plastic pollution and economic crisis: the reserve effect of health protection measures on human lives*, in *Revista de Direito Internacional*, vol. 18, n. 2, 2021, p. 138.

which has increased on the Internet due to the social distance. Therefore, we will also start to analyze the obstacles that persist on the way to an adequate and precise regulation regarding the treatment of the problem of dumping grounds, so that they cease to exist as we know it.

### **3. A European approach: alternatives and challenges for the European Union in a scenario of striving for sustainability**

The EU is not pointed out as the main responsible for the environmental problem derived from the irregular disposal of fast fashion clothes. The objective here is precisely to draw a line of the relation of the European bloc to the problem, highlighting threats and opportunities with the problem.

The unique role of the EU as a global player for sustainable development is essential for there to be an international consensus.<sup>44</sup> Specially to achieve decisions to be taken to bring a green culture of consumption and production to companies not only based in Europe but to become a global standard.

Finally, the fashion consumption market in Europe is closely linked to the problem of overproduction and the irregular mode of fast-fashion clothing.<sup>45</sup> With countries of the European bloc being part of this, either by the headquarters of retail companies

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44. A. Poletti, D. Sicurelli, A.B. Yildirim, *Promoting sustainable development through trade? EU trade agreements and global value chains*, in *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, vol. 51, n. 3, 2021, p. 339.

45. K. Niinimäki, G. Peters, H. Dahlbo, P. Perry, *The environmental price of fast fashion*, *cit.*, p. 192.

or through consumers, which brings up the need to discuss the problem on a regional (European) level.

In other words, it is coherent to say that the EU is endowed with the capacity to regulate global markets through its legal institutions and its regulations, thus performing a kind of export of its regulatory influence to the entire world.<sup>46</sup> Precisely, the EU has put sustainable development as something to be promoted as one of its strategic commercial interests, occupying more and more space on the common commercial policy agenda.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, provisions such as the resolution of 25 October 2016 on corporate liability for serious human rights abuses in third countries of the European Parliament, which contains "whereas, however, these business enterprises may at times cause or contribute to human rights violations and affect the rights of vulnerable groups such as minorities, indigenous people, women, and children or contribute to environmental problems".<sup>48</sup>

This device calls attention because it demonstrates the Parliament's concern about human rights violations in third countries, including that these may also cause environmental problems in these countries. In short, the provision already brings insight from the awareness that the long chain of production in which transnational companies have violated the principles of human rights in third countries.

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46. A. Bradford, *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World*, n. 1, 2020, p. 01.

47. K. Hradilová, O. Svoboda, *Sustainable Development Chapters in the EU Free Trade Agreements: Searching for Effectiveness*, in *Journal of World Trade. The Netherlands*, vol. 52, n. 6, 2018, p. 1028.

48. European Parliament Resolution of 25 October 2016 on corporate liability for serious human rights abuses in third countries (2015/2315(INI)).



In addition, the lack of materialization is also noted for the victims of these violations, who face several obstacles in obtaining judicial redress, including procedural barriers in terms of admissibility and disclosure of evidence, often prohibitive court costs, and the lack of clear liability standards for corporate involvement in human rights and environmental violations.<sup>49</sup>

Ten years after the publication of the United Nations Guiding Principles on business and human rights, which brought the slogan of "Protect, Respect and Remedy"<sup>50</sup> in the field of human rights by transnational corporations, we had in 2021 the publication of a Resolution of the European Parliament giving continuity on the subject in the EU. Focused on the duty of care and corporate responsibility, the resolution comes at a pace that makes room for the inclusion of a proposed directive to introduce a general and binding regulatory framework in the EU to bring about the establishment of a common legal approach to corporate governance, social and environmental sustainability.<sup>51</sup>

The proposed regulatory matrix transcends by imposing the duty of due diligence as soon as such compliance goes beyond companies that are headquartered in the EU. Companies based in other countries that operate in the internal market, as well as their entire value chain that includes suppliers, third-party contractors,

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49. Resolution on corporate liability for serious human rights abuses in third countries (2015).

50. UN, *Guiding principles on business and human rights: Implementing the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" framework*, available at [https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr\\_en.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf).

51. European Parliament Resolution of 10 March 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on corporate due diligence and corporate accountability (2020/2129(INL)).

and partner companies also enter the spectrum of the resolution that seeks to propose a directive to the Commission.<sup>52</sup>

The proposed Directive also seeks to apply "to large undertakings governed by the law of a Member State or established in the territory of the Union".<sup>53</sup> And also "to large undertakings, to publicly listed small and medium-sized undertakings [...] operating in high risk sectors, which are governed by the law of a third country and".<sup>54</sup> The same article brings the finality of the companies when operating in the internal market: "are not established in the territory of the Union when they operate in the internal market selling goods or providing services".<sup>55</sup>

In these terms, it is to be affirmed by the European initiative that, in this proposed sense, is in a direction of progression in due diligence to hold companies accountable for damaging the environment or hurting human rights.

It is clear that this effort alone is not enough to deal with this problem that has a global dimension, but it is an avant-garde step by the European bloc in seeking to emphasize corporate responsibility. Relations between states and multinational companies are also intertwined in some scenarios, such as when they transcend their core business and cause damage to third parties, such as the environment.<sup>56</sup>

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52. Art. 2, of Resolution (2020/2129(INL).

53. Art. 2 (1), of Resolution (2020/2129(INL).

54. Art. 2 (3), of Resolution (2020/2129(INL).

55. Art. 2 (3), of Resolution (2020/2129(INL).

56. G. Sarfati, *The limits of power of multinational companies: the Cartagena protocol on biosafety*, in *Ambiente & Sociedad*, vol. 11, n. 1, 2008, p. 118.

The repercussions of companies' economic activities on human rights go beyond the boundaries of the local community and the scope of environmental law.<sup>57</sup> The responsibility of companies to observe human rights (since environmental protection, as a prerogative to ensure the future of coming generations, is a human right) in their business relationships stems from legal principles that assign social responsibility to the business.<sup>58</sup>

The very functioning of the EU in its article 208 (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union - TFEU) stipulates unique cooperation for the development of policies that can extinguish poverty. "Union development cooperation policy shall have as its primary objective the reduction and, in the long term, the eradication of poverty".<sup>59</sup> Also taking into consideration that these "are likely to affect developing countries".<sup>60</sup>

The relationship of sustainable development in the EU to the dumping grounds of fast fashion clothes represents a current discussion about the real nature of tackling climate change. It is undeniable that European participation in the production and disposal chain of these products is one of the largest, as we have already reviewed in the previous chapter. And, in an EU that strug-

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57. C. Renouard, C. Ezvan, *Corporate social responsibility towards human development: A capabilities framework*, in *Business Ethics: A European Review*, vol. 27, n. 2, 2018, p. 145.

58. B. Afsar, W.A. Umrani, *Corporate social responsibility and pro-environmental behavior at workplace: The role of moral reflectiveness, coworker advocacy, and environmental commitment*, in *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, vol. 27, n. 1, 2020, p. 118.

59. Article 208, of Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, December 13, 2007.

60. Article 208, of Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, 2007.

gles to show its commitment to fighting climate change, situations of this size cannot be tolerated.

However, where is the mechanism that will condemn the European bloc for its omission? Is it a problem as serious as the incentive that has been constantly given to the production of fast fashion, causing an enlargement in other parts of the world? Even more so in countries that do not have enough technical, physical, scientific, or financial resources to deal with the problem on their own? As already discussed, even if developing countries relax their domestic regulations to allow the import of products that become materials for dumping grounds, this does not exempt them from blame. But neither does it leave them alone in the space of those responsible for the catastrophe we are glimpsing today.

Even though the EU has been shaping the whole global scenario through the elaboration of a plan that aims at a sustainable model for growth as the European Green Deal,<sup>61</sup> there are still gaps present within the bloc itself that, although it is something superficially recognized that we need to improve, there are intolerable gaps.

The ambitions of the deal need to go beyond turning Europe into the first climate-neutral continent, as this will not happen if the continent is contributing to the continuing environmental disaster in other territories through the unbridled consumption of the fashion industry. All this represents a major risk for the European economy: either the transition will happen to a green economy or everyone will suffer an irreversible climate cataclysm.

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61. European Commission, *A European Green Deal: Striving to be the first climate-neutral continent*, available at [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en).

Therefore, the result that can be achieved through policies stipulated by the European block can aim at the transition from fast fashion consumption to slow fashion consumption, starting with the institution of rigorous controls that can curb the practice of European companies involved in this process of accelerated production and accentuated irregular disposal.

Herein lies therefore a range of opportunities for the EU to seek to build unique norms under hard law in cooperation with other global actors to achieve a cessation of the rampant production of clothing that is becoming waste in other parts of the planet.

### **Final considerations**

Understanding the dimensions that permeate the complexity of the internationalization of the right to the environment highlights different actors, factors, and contexts in conducting the processes of recognizing the right to a healthy environment.

The very issue that permeates the irregular disposal of garments and their leftovers in deserts or other areas that should be of environmental preservation already shows us how the authorities and the media see the cause. This is not a violation of a treaty or a law, because international law here lies with little support for the case. But rather an immoral practice that, unfortunately, brings onerous damage to the much sought-after and well-spoken sustainable development.

Sustainability shows itself as a practice that needs to achieve its status as established in society. The situation today is extremely serious and an effort to deal with the different legislations of each

state and understanding that development also needs to be stimulated by developing countries, which suffer from the duality of agreements in which they opt for financial compensation for objects that will become waste shows the apex of the disharmony that we experience in international trade today.

Furthermore, it is through the EU, its commitment to sustainability, and its role as a global player that one can glimpse opportunities to curb the practice of irregular disposal of waste, burning, and polluting the soil and the sea. The bloc ends up, even though it has not been widely held responsible, being a co-actor, as we have seen throughout the study, in a cycle that repeats itself weekly of production, consumption, and disposal of fast fashion clothing.

The expectations for due diligence in the EU are also seen as an opportunity to criminalize the commission by companies that are from or operate in the bloc when there are human rights violations in their process chain, which includes third countries.

Even if the dumping grounds are not, at least ascertained by this research, in EU territory, this does not exempt the EU from responsibility in the path of the items that arrive there. There is not much point in projecting itself as the "first climate-neutral continent" when it is responsible for exporting garbage, to be treated as a singular problem of the particular country that receives it when it does not have enough strength to do so.

Therefore, there are many opportunities for the EU to achieve its goals of sustainable development and commitment to climate change. But it must be emphasized that this will happen through a new ethos of our time, where there is a set of norms that can

establish greater protection of the right to the future, for the sake of the next generations.

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