From the Brundtland Report to the Global Organic Textile Standard

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This article is an essay that outlines the political movement towards sustainability in the context of the development of the sustainable fashion industry today.

Keywords: Global Organic Textile Standard, The Brundtland report, political power, business civil society

Sustainability

In 1983 the General Secretary of United Nations asked Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Prime Minister in Norway, to serve as President of an independent Commission to report on the important challenges facing society globally.

The main goal for the Commission was to recommend strategies to secure and enhance the environment of countries at different stages of social and economic development. These strategies should provide a realistic approach taking into account human needs, resource availability and environmental limits. The Commission finished their work in 1987 and the report is referred to as the "Brundtland report".

In the report, sustainability is defined as:

"...fundamentally a process of changes in which exploitation of resources, rules for investments, developments in technology and institutional changes all are in a correlated balance and enforce the presence and future possibilities in responding the needs and hopes of the human beings."

Since the release of the Brundtland report much has happened but the commitment of the Commission as well as between the Commission and civil and public society is one of the main reasons why the definition of sustainability in the Brundtland report is just as relevant as it was almost 30 years ago. It remains the official definition of sustainability to this day all over the world.

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development

In 1992 United Nations held the first Earth Summit in Rio. This summit represented the continuation of the Brundtland report. Some 178 countries signed up to Agenda 21 – a blueprint and a framework for a rethink of economic growth in the interest of social equity and to ensure environmental protection.
For the first time in history the United Nations addressed the important role of local governments and communities. Paragraph 28 of Agenda 21 – declared that local communities and government must be inspired to formulate local strategies for sustainable development. At the same time new processes in political thinking appeared, opening doors for NGOs to achieve their political goals.

Instead of the autocratic state acting on its own behalf, modern conceptions of sustainable development and political thinking take a more reflective approach towards dealing with the management of sustainable development. By inviting NGO’s and citizens’ groups to the table to help in discussing this development in Copenhagen, it was assumed that people would act by taking responsibility.

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The Fashion Industry in the Political Agenda

In connection with the Copenhagen Fashion Summit in May 2012, the Copenhagen Fashion Summit and the international fashion industry together with stakeholders and decision makers from all over the world. The group’s task was to formulate strategies and policy options for governments to encourage sustainable fashion by:

- Providing an appropriate regulatory and economic framework for businesses that produce goods.
- Promoting trade and innovation that protects the environment and ensures respect for human rights and labour standards;
- Ensuring that consumers are provided with accurate information about the environmental impact of their purchases.

Once again we are making history. One hundred delegates from the conventional and the sustainable fashion industry were together with government officials from the EU-Commission and the UN. Decisive recommendations for the future of the sustainable fashion industry were presented to society.

Twenty years after the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, the UN is again bringing together governments, international institutions and major groups including business to agree on a range of smart measures that can reduce poverty while promoting clean energy and a more sustainable and fair use of resources. This year the fashion industry will join the Rio+20 Summit in June 2012.

The fashion industry is one of the most innovative and dynamic industries in the world. It is also an industry associated with very poor conditions for large numbers of workers throughout the supply chain. From a normative point of view, sustainable fashion is in flux. In the 1980s and 1990s sustainable fashion was only a question of sustainability. Today most manufacturers of sustainable apparel are addressing the most important issues, such as quality, designs and price. But the sustainable fashion industry is essentially “slow fashion”, battling against conventional and unsustainable business practices. On the other hand this situation is due to the accepted view people have of sustainable fashion, which also includes recycling and second hand clothes. On the other hand, if the development agenda is not adequately effective and the demand for sustainable fashion is inadequately developed and for this to change some of the largest manufacturers in the conventional industry will need to lead the way.

From an economic point of view conventional businesses are losing competitive strength which is increasingly aware of the sustainable fashion sector as a new way to boost turnover and get noticed. For governments to encourage sustainable fashion by:

1. Ensuring that consumers are provided with accurate information about the environmental impact of their purchases.
2. Providing economic incentives for sustainable fashion products and services.
3. Supporting expansion, standardisation and accessibility of the RIO+20 Summit in the context of an emerging political agenda. Taking the definition of sustainability in the Brundtland report into account, all eight recommendations are important in order to safeguard sustainable development throughout the entire textile industry. As a concrete example of how it may be achieved, I will outline the work of the International Textile Standard Organisation which is a unique example of how to take action and be responsible for global sustainability. How to take action – the story about Global Organic Textile Standard

In August 2002, people from all over the world met at the Intercost Conference in Düsseldorf in Germany, where a workshop on the potential of organic cotton was launched with representatives of organic farmers, producers, the textile industry, consumers as well as standard society that defines itself as superior to nature. Now we are facing the end of nature’s patience and we have to cooperate with equal respect for nature before it is too late. The eight recommendations from the Copenhagen Fashion Summit 2012 effectively respond to the issues outlined above, brought together in a way that only the fashion world can present:

1. Encouraging the integration of sustainable fashion curriculum into pre-school, primary, secondary, university and vocational education.
2. Supporting consumer engagement and behaviour change campaigns.
3. Promoting transparency, standardisation and accessibility of transparency product disclosure.
4. Enforcing guidelines for product communications and marketing to discourage and penalize green-washing.
5. Stimulating voluntary agreements with industry covering extended producer responsibility.
6. Providing economic incentives for sustainable fashion products and services.
7. Restricting harmful substances.
8. Developing a multi-stakeholder platform and provide funding for the exploration and implementation of the recommendations provided in this document.

Writing this article in May 2012, it is too early to know what the political result will be when the European Climate Action Commissioner, Connie Hedegaard, presents the recommendations at the RIO+20 Summit in June. It is very important to monitor what actions are taking following the RIO+20 Summit in the context of an emerging political agenda. Taking the definition of sustainability in the Brundtland report into account, all eight recommendations are important in order to safeguard sustainable development throughout the entire textile industry. As a concrete example of how it may be achieved, I will outline the work of the International Textile Standard Organisation which is a unique example of how to take action and be responsible for global sustainability.

How to take action – the story about Global Organic Textile Standard

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enhancing people’s lives and securing a sustainable future for the environment.

GOTS mission is to develop, implement, verify, protect and promote the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS). This standard stipulates requirements throughout the supply chain for both environmental and labour conditions in textile and apparel manufacturing, using organically produced raw materials.

Organic production of fibres is based on a farming system that maintains and replenishes soil fertility without the use of toxic, persistent pesticides and fertilizers. In addition, organic production relies on the organization of the agricultural and livestock enterprise. This includes a more careful selection of breeding animals and improved animal husbandry, and eliminates genetic modification.

In developing GOTS, strict and binding requirements were established regarding ecological and social parameters. At the same time GOTS took into consideration the need for a standard and requirements that were practical for industrial production of textiles using organically produced fibres and appropriate to a wide range of products. Taking both aspects into account, GOTS defines organic textiles as being produced with the minimum possible environmental impact and with the lowest possible use of natural and synthetic chemicals that can lead to residues.

GOTS is a dynamic standard that fosters constant progress towards development of better textile processing methods. In this continuous improvement process, GOTS collaborates with international stakeholders, including the textile and apparel industry, chemical suppliers, organic farming and environmental organizations, workers’ rights groups and labour unions.

GOTS believes that a voluntary global standard established and kept under review in partnership with international stakeholder committees ensures a consistent worldwide certification system and that, as an international standard, GOTS removes barriers for international trade that arise from many different national standards.

GOTS reclaims the need for the textile industry to have one global standard with consumers’ need for transparency. It is therefore imperative that GOTS and its acceptance worldwide confirm that these needs are being met.

A standard is only as effective as it is credible. In addition to trust, verification is crucial in building credibility. The certification bodies regularly audit all parties involved in the manufacturing of GOTS certified textiles through comprehensive on-site inspections in order to verify that all GOTS environmental and social requirements are met. In order to further protect the credibility of GOTS any evidence of misleading use of the GOTS label or reference to GOTS certification is investigated and sanctions are imposed wherever necessary.

GOTS’ goal is to contribute to sustainable development and to become competitive in both existing and new markets. GOTS is open to any producer, vender, or other organization with a common interest in the textile industry and the environment.

At a stroke, GOTS was approved as the only accredited organic label for organic apparel in one of the largest markets of textiles in the world.

In the Nordic countries, the Governments rely on the Nordic Swan as the certification standard for organic textiles. This is why one of the keywords in the certification system of GOTS was the cooperation with the Nordic Fashion Association Sustainable Initiative of Clean and Ethical (NICE). GOTS sponsored a certification prize at the Copenhagen Fashion Summit in May 2012. The winner, Susanne Rützou, who is now invited to collaborate with GOTS-Scandinavia in making a GOTS-certified high fashion spring collection for 2013.

GOTS Meeting the Political Agenda

Scandinavia has in many ways been the pioneer in the field of organic production, but regarding organic textiles and apparel the US Government has provided a boost to the sector.

In spring 2011 the United States Department of Agriculture publicly announced that all organic textiles and apparel could only be sold as organic in the USA if the garments were certified by GOTS.

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Conclusion

For almost 30 years the discussion about how to secure a more sustainable world has been on political agenda at UN-level, at EU-level and at National Governmental level. The UN Sustainable Summit in 1992 had a major impact on shifting the direction of political thinking. Drip by drip the normative rules have influenced national governments and civil society alike.

As the former Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced: “It is the absence of broad-based business activity, not its presence that condemns humanity of suffering.”

It is time for business to take seriously their responsibility for the future of the next generation and it is possible to do this in a way which is not just smart, but also realistic from an economic point of view.

Taking the eight recommendations from the pre-meeting of The Copenhagen Fashion Summit we now have a framework for how the three-way partnership between governments, business and civil society can cooperate and work together to support a sustainable fashion industry in an exciting and modern way.

Political power can help to manage the demand for sustainable textiles and garments, for example when official institutions buy work clothes and uniforms. Already today almost 3000 businesses are ready to respond to the demand.

As a concrete step for a more visible and high profile position of GOTS towards civil society, GOTS entered the fashion scene by delivering the certification prize to the winner of the Nordic Fashion Association sustainable prize - a high-fashion designer.

By setting the standard that high fashion can be GOTS-certified GOTS clearly demonstrates that normative assumptions about the sustainable and good life will not be relegated to the ascetic way of life for latter-day Saints.

In line with that it will soon be smart to wear organic apparel among the fashion trend-setters. And the definition from the Brundtland report will be taken seriously in the fashion industry.

Dedication:

This article is dedicated to future generations, among them my two daughters Anne-Sofie and Katrine.

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Acknowledgement:

Thanks to Christopher Stopes, GOTS representative in the UK and Jacqueline Acatos at EcoS Consultancy for comments on this article.