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News | 22.04.2016

From seed to store, clothes production should be safe and sustainable

A blog by MEPs **Judith Sargentini** and **Pascal Durand**

How many different stages do you think it takes to produce your clothes? Two? Twenty? In fact, the average number is closer to six, from planting the cotton seed to distribution on the shop floor. Six is not a big number. So why it is that retailers often don't know the conditions under which the clothes they sell were made?

Admittedly, supply chains are often not as straightforward as they sound. Each individual step can be complex and can involve a geographical spread of thousands of kilometers, not to mention hundreds of workers. But this should not absolve companies of their responsibility to monitor who is involved in making their products. Nor should it prevent the EU from implementing binding measures to ensure due diligence in supply chains.

Many clothing brands are already introducing voluntary standards to make their operations greener and safer. But while they may share good intentions, there is a problematic lack of consistency. As each set of standards has been developed unilaterally, each addresses different steps of the supply chain and different social or environmental aspects. What's really needed is a consistent regime that covers the entire supply chain and all critical areas of concern.

The European Commission was due to launch a highly anticipated flagship initiative on the garment sector on April 25th, one day after the third anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster. However, after much discussion, deliberation and delay, we now understand the Commission is planning on holding an event, but not much else. Momentum to clean up the sector is growing, and the EU is well-positioned to take the lead and introduce legislation. So what's the hold up?

Some European countries have already taken the initiative on introducing measures at a national level. In March, the Dutch government - in cooperation with industry organisations, trade unions and civil society - presented the "Agreement on Sustainable Garment and Textile". This voluntary agreement binds companies to create detailed analyses of malpractices and potential breaches of human rights throughout their supply chains and to develop strategies to improve harmful situations. Unfortunately, the agreement does not allow for these analyses to be checked by an independent authority but instead leaves this up to its own secretariat, who will execute random checks. The agreement discusses the important topics of living wages and trade union freedom but lacks concrete mandatory performance targets.

France has also proposed a new law to introduce due diligence requirements for multinational enterprises with more than 5,000 employees in France or 10,000 employees worldwide. Currently under discussion, this law would oblige companies to implement a due diligence plan to prevent human rights abuses, corruption, and environmental or health-related harm along their production lines. Where companies fail to abide by the law, they could be fined up to €10 million.

In a resolution voted last year, the French Parliament also urged the European Union to adopt legislation on mandatory corporate social responsibility as soon as possible. It is clear that violations by multinationals would be most effectively tackled at the European and international levels. Thanks to a Green initiative, the French Parliament is in the process of building a coalition of national parliaments to demand the European Commission acts swiftly on this issue.

The EU is already taking steps towards mandatory due diligence when it comes to conflict minerals, another highly exploitative industry. The European Parliament has called for regulation that would introduce an obligation on companies all along the value chain - including manufacturers - to report what due diligence they undertake to improve transparency in their supply chains and to break the link with the financing of armed conflicts, in line with the standard set by the OECD.

The legislative initiative on conflict minerals shows the path to follow. We call upon the EU to also create mandatory measures in the garment and footwear industries to ensure that our clothes are made by workers who are paid a decent living wage, can freely join a trade union, and are working in a safe environment.

At the end of a week full of NGO, brand, and consumer action to raise awareness, it is clear that the time to act is now. No one should have to pay with their life for our fashion.

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- [See your MEP joining the Who Made My Clothes campaign](#)

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