#BeatPollution

UN environment programme

TRANSFORMING THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY

Creating Circular, Socially Conscious Businesses

The problem

The **current business model** for the fashion and textile industry is **almost entirely linear**, anchored in newness, immediacy and disposability. This has resulted in mass overproduction, overconsumption and waste, with the global trade of new textiles ever-increasing, alongside an expanding and often challenging secondary market in used textiles.

In addition, in some countries there is **little to no infrastructure to adequately reuse and recycle** all the textile waste the world generates during production and after clothes are used. In most cases, this leads to textiles being incinerated or discarded in landfills or the environment, exacerbating pollution and risks to human health. Companies are only slowly starting to see the **economic, social and environmental value of shifting to circular models**, including designing textiles to be reused, disassembled and recycled, thereby reducing the amount and pace at which new products are offered on the market.

Did you know?

The Kenyan textile industry contributes:

14% of national employment

Provides livelihoods for over
2.5 million people

Generates an annual turnover of
USD 564 million

What is InTex?

The InTex programme, part of the **UNEP Textile Initiative**, works with governments and SMEs in countries where textiles are a key economic driver, encouraging a shift from a linear take, make and dispose process to a more sustainable, circular model. The programme does this by supporting national-level policy changes that enable a shift towards circularity. It also helps companies understand the impact of the resources they are using, spurring them to optimize production processes, reduce environmental harms and change the way they do business. This gives businesses a competitive edge.

The textile industry is one of Kenya's major manufacturing industries and an important pillar of the country's economy. Yet, this is an industry with a big environmental footprint, from its use of land and water to the emissions it generates, as well as its impacts on human health. But positive change is happening, and there is a lot of opportunity for real impact.

By the numbers

To date in Kenya, South Africa and Tunisia

32 SMEs
applied UNEP's eco-innovation methodology

10 LCAs
conducted following the Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) method

230 company representatives
trained in LCA and circularity concepts

5,100 tonnes GHG
emissions savings estimated in Tunisia and South Africa

10% hazardous chemicals
reduction estimated in Tunisia

25% waste
reduction on average

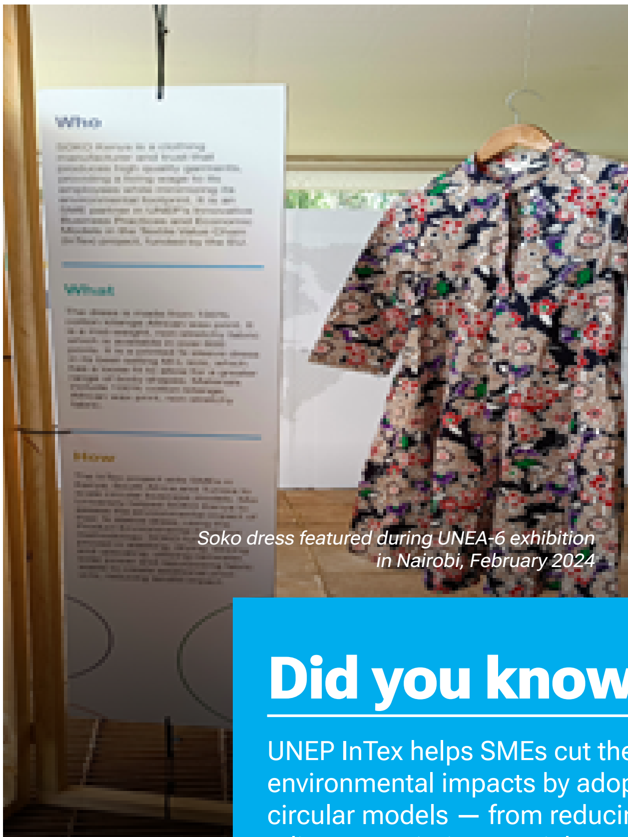
USD 4 million
estimated savings

The environmental and financial impacts are annual estimates, assuming full implementation of the measures identified through InTex.

What SMEs can do

Textile SMEs can shift to **circular business models** by focusing on keeping products, materials and resources in use for as long as possible at their highest value, disconnecting the use of natural resources from the company's economic activity. Examples include reducing the volume of new products made from virgin materials or shifting portions of the business towards services such as reuse, rental or repair. Implementing such circular models **could generate USD 700 billion in economic value by 2030**. In addition, each one per cent increase in market share of circular business models is likely to **reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 13 million tonnes**. Combining these shifts with an eye to human well-being and empowerment can multiply the positive effects, as socially conscious action is a key part of circular business thinking.

The implementation of circular textile business models requires a significant mind shift away from novelty and fast-changing styles. For small textile businesses, applying such thinking can mean **opting for the use of sustainable and safe materials to eliminate hazardous chemicals, transforming waste and offcuts into other items to sell or repurposing unsold inventory**. For example, with items such as school uniforms or children's clothing that are changed regularly, a company could start offering a rental subscription to customers.



Soko dress featured during UNEA-6 exhibition in Nairobi, February 2024

Did you know?

UNEP InTex helps SMEs cut their environmental impacts by adopting circular models — from reducing reliance on virgin materials to reusing offcuts, offering rental services, or repurposing unsold stock.

Case study

Reusable SOKO sanitary pads made from upcycled clothing fabric

"The InTex programme provided us with invaluable hands-on experience using the tools required for assessing our environmental impacts. The eco-innovation results have positively influenced our long-term strategy when dealing with our staff, our suppliers and our clients."

***Norbert Muya**, SOKO Kenya Factory Manager*

"Changing the way of doing business can be a big lift. But we are all learning through these processes that circular thinking can be applied in so many different ways, and that a business really can benefit."

***Prof. Charles Nzila of Moi University**, InTex Implementing Partner in Kenya*

Kenyan clothing manufacturer achieving environmental and social progress

SOKO is a Kenyan apparel business that works with designers and fashion brands across the globe to translate design concepts and fabrics into dresses, shirts, shorts and other items. Working with the InTex programme, SOKO staff were trained in **eco-innovation** and how to measure the environmental footprint of their products. One of the circular strategies explored was linking waste reduction with social action and empowerment, which SOKO committed to as part of its Zero Waste Strategy. It is now set to **upcycle 63%of its fabric waste** that was being sent to landfills into new designs, and to **repurpose 12% to produce certified washable sanitary pads** for schoolgirls in a nearby community.

To date, SOKO has reduced its waste generation from 2,800 kg to about 1,600 kg, out of which around 350 kg are used for the community-based projects. So far, the business has donated 30,000 reusable sanitary pads, and is providing trainings to educators, girls and families, on sexual reproductive health, rights and menstrual hygiene management.

SOKO's offcuts are also finding a second life at its Stitching Academy, where they are used for three-month sewing training courses. Over 460 students from vulnerable communities have completed the course since 2010, with two-thirds securing employment or starting their own businesses. With the intention of keeping materials in use for as long as possible, SOKO is creating new high-quality fabrics using thousands of small offcuts, with which it designs original pieces such as its Confetti Jacket, proof that responsible fashion can be both circular and beautiful.

How SMEs benefits

The SMEs that work with the InTex programme receive **trainings and technical support** to calculate their Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) and innovate their business strategy. Through this process, SMEs can generate new opportunities for partnering with others in the value chain while gaining a better understanding of how to reduce environmental impacts and do social good, through targeted strategies that could also reflect positively on balance sheets.

InTex assists companies in **shifting their mindset, helping to forge new strategic partnerships and enabling systemic change** through concrete solutions for participating SMEs and, by extension, the sector overall. SMEs also benefit from exposure to international networks and expertise, learning from the latest developments in circularity and sustainability. The programme results show the real-world potential of low-cost sustainability measures in textiles — proving that environmental action and business profitability can go hand in hand.

UNEP's InTex programme, funded by the European Union and the Government of Denmark, works with governments and textile SMEs to reduce the environmental impact of textile products and the way companies do business, using life-cycle approaches.

unep.org/intex

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