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# A Zero Waste Vision for Textiles

## Chapter 2: Circular and toxic-free material flows

Executive Summary

May 2024

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# Executive Summary

This second chapter of the two-part series 'A Zero Waste Vision for Textiles' sketches out what a truly circular and toxic-free system for textiles looks like. The report investigates the current barriers to circularity, identifies solutions, and makes recommendations for policy measures in the EU.

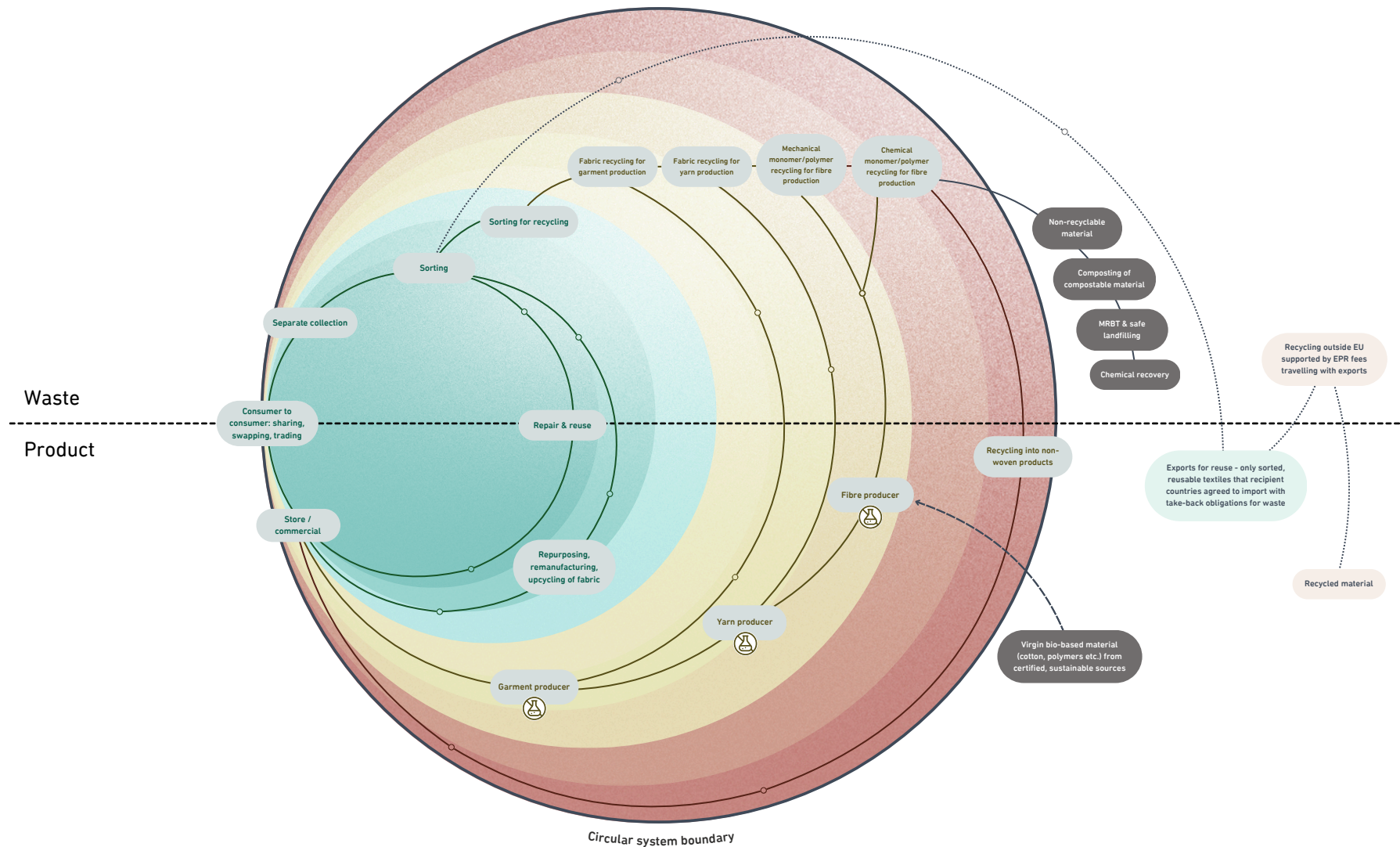
The European textile sector, characterised by its staggering waste generation and significant environmental impact, is at a crossroads and requires immediate action to transition towards the circular economy. Key challenges include the environmental impact of production and health risks for consumers posed by the use of harmful chemical substances, fossil fuel-based synthetic fibres, and the release of microplastics. Furthermore, the low rates of local reuse, repair, and upcycling of textiles as well as the insufficient separate collection capacity hamper circularity. Another significant obstacle is the insufficiency capacity for recycling in Europe; operations are often not economically viable due to a lack of design for recycling, investments in technologies for closed-loop recycling, but also the slow uptake of recycled content. Finally, the negative social and environmental impacts of exported second-hand textiles pose a huge challenge to regulators.

Key recommendations for policymakers are:

- **Strengthen the legislative frameworks** to curb the environmental impact of textiles, including bans on hazardous chemicals and implementation of circularity requirements under the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR) Delegated Act for textiles;
- Ensure that when virgin materials are used for **production**, they come from bio-based and certified sources, while the principle of the cascading use for biomass must be enforced for bioplastics—meaning the use of material for durable products that are reusable and recyclable. Also, recycled content requirements must ensure that safe recycled content is always preferred over virgin input;
- Increase demand for **local reuse** by introducing economic incentives for repair or labour cost reductions for repair and upcycling businesses. The role of social economy actors must be recognised by, e.g., ensuring priority access to public tenders for collection and combining social and circular benefits. Also earmarking Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) fees to support a fund for change and justice that allocates funds to reuse and repair operations can make the sector more profitable;
- Ensure better regulation of textile **waste exports** by amending the current EU Waste Framework Directive (WFD) and Waste Shipment Regulation (WSR) as well as the Basel Convention, including the introduction of Prior Informed Consent (PIC) procedure. Sorting for reuse must be enforced before exporting while support for the waste management capacity in recipient countries remains necessary;
- Introduce **recycled content requirements** and recyclability criteria under the EU ESPR and waste management performance targets under EPR schemes. Particular focus should be placed on 'closed-loop-recycling', including a new definition in EU-legislation as well as recycling targets.

The report concludes that the current lack of coherent policy measures must be overcome in the next few years to allow the sector to move towards operating within planetary boundaries. Still, the projected growth of the sector outpaces the shift towards circularity, risking to nullify circular advancements. Sufficiency and circularity must, therefore, work in tandem to alleviate pressure on resources and the environment.

Figure 1: A zero waste vision for a circular textiles sector, inspired by JRC 2023<sup>1</sup> and ZWE's work<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> JRC (2023) *Techno-scientific assessment of the management options for used and waste textiles in the European Union*.

<sup>2</sup> i: This infographic is an attempt to capture a complex system in a simplified manner. It presents a holistic vision of textiles' circularity and highlights which activities are preferable (green background) or less preferable (yellow or red). It also defines the boundaries of the circular system (i.e., the border around the circle) and indicates which activities are not considered circular (i.e., dark boxes outside of the circle—input of virgin material and residual waste treatment). The dark lines indicate the path textile products and waste travel from one step to the next. Placing waste exports in the circular system is still challenging due to the lack of data on the benefits and harm of this practice. If well-regulated, reuse and recycling outside the EU can contribute to circularity.





Zero Waste Europe (ZWE) is the European network of communities, local leaders, experts, and change agents working towards a better use of resources and the elimination of waste in our society. We advocate for sustainable systems; for the redesign of our relationship with resources; and for a global shift towards environmental justice, accelerating a just transition towards zero waste for the benefit of people and the planet. [www.zerowasteurope.eu](http://www.zerowasteurope.eu)



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