

"Sustainability Unwrapped," a conversational podcast about responsibility, ethics, inequalities, climate change, and other challenges of our times. Where science needs practise to think about the world and how to make our society more sustainable, one podcast at a time.

Hello, everyone. I would like to welcome our listeners to Henkel podcast. And today, we will discuss about the use of clothing for its original purpose and talk a bit more about future of secondhand clothing. Together with our guests, we'll try to figure out the vision towards the future in light of new regulation for separate textile collection. And of course, we'll talk a little bit more about the secondhand market for used clothing.

So I would like to introduce our guests. Today in the studio, we have Maja Makkonen, communication specialist at UFF, and Pia Tanskanen, senior circle solution specialist at UFF. And my name is Ana. I'm hosting this podcast episode today, and I am a researcher at Hanken School of Economics at HUMLAG Institute. Welcome.

Thank you. Glad to be here.

Thank you. My side too.

Good. So if we speak a little bit more about UFF to introduce your organisation slightly more to our guests. Can I ask you how the reuse and recycle system operate at the moment in Finland? And if you could please bring the UFF perspective on reuse of clothing? What textile faction are you interested, as a collector?

Well, UFF collects clothes for reuse and such. So a good rule of thumb is that the clothes you could give to a friend are also suitable for donating to UFF. You can give us clothes, shoes, and bags that are clean and intact so that they are reusable in their original purpose.

A missing button isn't a problem, as it doesn't prevent reuse. But a permanent stain, like oil or paint, does damage the fabric so that it can't be reused as clothing, or even as material.

Interesting. And if I ask you, how much clothing do you collect? So what are the quantities of textiles you operate with?

In 2019, the Finnish people donated over 15 million kilos to UFF. So that comes to about three kilos per person. And there has been an upward trend in the annual collection amount almost every year.

All the donations are then sorted either here in Finland by UFF or by our wholesale customers, which are mainly located in Europe.

The sorting is done to maximise the reuse rate of donations and to minimise textile waste. About 95% of the donations can be reused as such, or as material due to careful sorting.

Wow, Pia. You said about three pillars per person. So it's in for almost 15 million kilogrammes [INAUDIBLE]. Right? That sounds impressive.

Yes.

That sounds impressive. OK, so may I ask you to introduce your organisation in a bit more detail and tell us and our listeners about the position of UFF as an actor for textile collection?

Well, UFF stands for [SPEAKING FINNISH]. And since that is such a long name, the foundation just goes by UFF. And the organisation is almost 33 years old. It was established in 1987 by volunteer workers. And the purpose is to contribute, enable, and promote ecological, social, and economic sustainability in the world. UFF is a not-for-profit, nongovernmental humanitarian foundation.

And we have three operating lines. We do climate work in Finland-- that is that clothes collection service-- and then we do global development project support in Africa and Asia, and we also do communications and advocacy work about climate and global development matters. And today, UFF provides clothes collection service to all of Finland. And we have over 20 secondhand fashion shops, and we support about 30 to 40 global development projects yearly.

Wow, that sounds impressive. I'm especially impressed by the development work that you do, but also, as I understood, you have extensive experience in collection of textiles for reuse and per use. So at the end of our episode, I might ask you to give instructions to our listeners, speaking from your experience, on how they can donate their own textiles to UFF. So in a way they do it correctly as you would ask them to do so.

OK.

That would be great.

Yes. Of course.

For our listeners also to understand why we are talking about a use of clothing, so why reuse? As we understand reuse, direct reuse, for primary purpose, to wear that clothing again, why is it important?

Why do we care so much?

There are several reasons why reuse is the primary purpose for our clothes collection. Firstly, reuse is the primary goal for UFF, as we follow the Finnish-based legislation waste hydrology. And the environmental benefits of reuse are significant.

There are also great economic and social benefits to clothes reuse. By reusing textiles, we can reduce the need for virgin raw materials and the consumption of water and energy. By saving energy, we can help to mitigate climate change. Also, many chemicals, such as pesticides, are used in the production of textiles. So reusing clothing can prevent the chemicalization of the environment.

The cultivation of textile fibres binds large areas of land and preferring a used one instead of buying a new one saves land for food production. And also, reuse of clothes reduces degenerated textile waste. On the economic ladder, the secondhand clothes have created a sustainable clothing market that employs people in various fields. UFF has about 350 employees now in Finland.

We also employ drivers through our subcontractor chain in Finland. And when viewed in a broader perspective, the employment effects are global. The garment, which is collected in Finland and sold for retailers, employs a wide range of subcontractors, such as drivers and soldiers in Europe and Africa.

The sale of secondhand clothing is also a major employer in Europe and Africa. Especially in Africa, it provides an opportunity for small business with a low threshold. On the social level, the reuse of clothes benefits consumers that want a more affordable and environmentally friendly way to buy clothing.

Thank you very much for profiling on differing levels, such as economic, social, and environmental. That was very clear, I think. Something that really caught my ear was that you thought about consumers want to buy more affordable and environmentally friendly [INAUDIBLE] with more affordable environmentally friendly way to consume textiles and clothing.

And that, if we think about secondhand market, I'm quite sure that some consumers perceive secondhand market as something that is low quality, less fashionable, less desired. So if you could tell me more about the trends you observe in the secondhand market-- did the general attitudes toward secondhand markets have changed or not? What do you think?

Well, yes. Definitely. The general attitude has become more positive towards secondhand fashion in the recent years. It wasn't too long ago when shopping malls were even reluctant to have

secondhand fashion shops in their premises.

That's interesting.

Yeah. But now the public has become more and more accepting, and even demanding, of secondhand clothes as an option. And that change in the general mindset of the consumers has led to an increase in the amount of donated clothes and also has led to the expansion of UFF's shop chain. In recent years, we have been able to open two to three new shops every year. Well, this year is, of course, an exception due to the unusual situation.

But this means that the consumers see secondhand fashion already as a viable alternative and we need to be able to meet that demand. This increase in demand is a great sign, since secular economy is the key to sustainable development. And secondhand market in Finland has changed in the recent years as it has become more mainstream. The Finnish people are very good at reusing and recycling clothes. So it's something to be proud of.

A few years back, we asked clothes donors what they like to do with their used clothing, and almost 80% wanted to donate the clothes to charity. So even if there now are plenty of other alternatives, like businesses, online sale sites, and flea markets, people are very much in favour of giving to a charity like UFF.

And shopping malls, of course, also notice the change in the consumer mindset and the market, and are more open now to secondhand shops in their premises, which, of course, is a very positive development. It means a lot more people have the opportunity to choose secondhand fashion as a buying option. We just did a customer survey and 85% of our clients mentioned environmentally friendly shopping as one of the main reasons to shop at UFF.

Wow, Maja, that's fantastic to see such a shift in the consumer mindset. So I think it's a definitely positive direction where we are moving right now considering--

Very helpful.

Yes. Exactly. It's great. And I actually started to wonder about the regulations. And in Finland, we hear a lot about separate collections that will be introduced in Finland earlier than in the other European Union countries. So what we would change in the big picture? And maybe you can give us a flavour of perspective or organisation. So what do you think about the regulation from the European Union?

Well, the separate textile waste collection is not meant for you to reusable clothes and such. It's only

meant for textiles that are reusable as material. And this will hopefully diminish the amount of textile waste going to energy production, as people will sort their use reusable clothes to UFF and reusable textile materials then do this separate collection.

And hopefully, very little will change for UFF, reuse of clothing and such, as the consumers will become aware of the purpose of that separate waste textile collection. And we will, of course, be cooperating with the stakeholders who organised the separate waste textile collection so that we can maximise the environmental benefits and to ensure that the donors know how to sort their donations to the right collection box.

Exactly. That's also what I was thinking about. So now consumers will be aware about the environmental impact about the economic and social aspects. But now, it seems to put a bit more pressure on them, this new sort of regulation that we, the consumers, would have to figure out which textiles can be suitable for reuse as such, and reuse for materials. To me, it sounds like it's getting more complex, in a way, how we are doing things.

And if I can ask, do you think factors such as, for example, waste management companies, public sector-- do you all share a common understanding of that change in the system we are building for reuse and recycling of textiles?

Well, there are still some unanswered questions that the authorities would hopefully clarify as soon as possible. The questions that we have are, for example, who we organise the separate textile waste collection and how it would function in practise. Also, what is the role of charities like UFF? What happens due to donated textile materials?

And what happens to unusable materials? And will the clothes donor know what to donate to what collection box? What is the terminology used for the different kind of donations? UFF collects reusable clothing, so will the separate textile waste collection collect waste textile or reusable textile? And also, how will the separate waste textile collection be funded?

Exactly. And, well, in your opinion, to find out the answers to these questions that you just introduced, where do we need to put more effort to cultivate and ensure a common understanding between different stakeholders? Of course, not only collectors, but also thinking about donors and consumers of secondhand textiles.

Well, we need to raise awareness so that the donor knows how to sort clothes into the right collection box, as it is the consumer who will be making the initial determination whether a garment is suitable

for reuse as clothing, as material, or not reusable at all.

Therefore, it's very important to raise public awareness of the sorting criteria for reuse of clothes as such for their original purpose, reuse as material, or waste materials, which also, in the future, ought to be placed in the mixed waste collection. And the goal, of course, is to prevent resources from being wasted. The consumer's assessment of the condition of the clothes should be guided by a national standard.

Guidance from the authorities will help to maximise the reuse rate of clothes and minimise textile waste. Soon, the consumer will also have to assess the condition and quality of fabric for their reusability as material. And this can be challenging, even to the textile industry professionals.

So the consumers will need clear and consistent guidelines to follow. We need to increase cooperation so that terminology and responsibilities, such [INAUDIBLE] the collection, that they are all clear to all actors in the field.

Interesting. Seems like a very big change coming up, once we are going to have separate collection of reusable textiles as such and then a separate collection of clothing that can be reused as material. And in light of these changes, can I ask you, what would be the ideal world of UFF? How would it look like, maybe in Finnish context, of course, but if we think also in terms of global development, how would the ideal collection and sorting system perform? What do you think?

Well, I think if you're thinking about the ideal world of UFF, it would be ideal if the consumers could choose secondhand fashion as their first alternative. And nowadays, new is not automatically better, as it can sometimes be very difficult to judge the quality of clothes. And then also, we could include other criteria into the concept of better, have a wider concept.

We could think about the environmental and social impact of those clothes we buy. That would also mean that secondhand fashion chains like UFF would be able to open more shops. While donating reusable clothes to charity organisations like UFF should also be a given, and fortunately, it already pretty much is that in Finland, so I guess in that part, we are pretty much close to the ideal world there already.

But public awareness on how and what to donate should be raised. This should be discussed more widely, as we do get inquiries on how to donate and what to donate. And we, of course, are glad to help on that perspective, always. A cooperation with waste management stakeholders could be increased.

If stakeholders would cooperate more on a national and regional level, it would be more open and understandable to the consumer, and also easier to communicate to them about the benefits of reusing clothes.

Or to form their own network of partners. So if you could share to us-- to me, personally. I'm personally interested in that. So how we can donate our clothing to UFF.

Well, I guess, firstly, I'm going to ask you to think about your own closet, if this study kind of holds true to your own closet. There was a study in 2016. And according to that, people only use 12% of the clothes they own.

Oh, wow. That's impressive.

Yeah, only 20%. That means that there was over 50% of those clothes were not fitting them properly. They were either too large or too small. And the rest were either unusable for some reason, like the style or the colour was wrong, or the clothes were completely new, brand new, with tags possibly still on. They were just waiting for the right occasion to be worn.

So if you are an average person, according to that study, it means that 88% of the clothes you own are not being used. And if you want to donate some of that unused clothing to UFF, a good basic rule of thumb is that you can donate something you could also give to a friend.

So these kind of guidelines are kind of short and sweet for a reason, so that you can basically rather donate than throw the clothes away to the wastebasket. So we ask that the clothes you donate are clean, they don't have any permanent stains, such as oil or paint that cannot be cleaned then, and the garment is therefore not reusable. We ask that the donations are intact, so that they don't have any holes, so that they are reusable as such.

A missing button definitely is not an issue. A lot of clothes nowadays have extra buttons in them. So small defects like that are not an issue. But a bigger one that prevents reuse is an issue. And then we, of course, ask the donors to put the donations in closed plastic bags.

And that's just to protect them. The clothes donation boxes are not airtight, so dampness can get in. They can get dirty during the collection and sorting process, and that kind of prevents, also, reuse. So we want to protect the donations with the plastic bags.

OK, Maja, what you have said about the owned clothing, you said 88% was not--

Mhm. 88.

OK, oh my god.

88.

88? I have to think about my own closet, so how does it look like? I think, after this episode, I will come back.

That's a lot. But apparently only 12% gets used everyday, like your basic everyday wardrobe.

There is [INAUDIBLE], yeah. All right. OK, I really have to explore about my own closet. Thank you for that. So at this point, we are coming to the end of our discussion. And I would like to warmly thank our guests for being today in the studio and sharing their insights about clothing collection, change in the legislation, and also giving insights on how we can donate our clothing in the right way to charity collectors.

So I'm thankful to my Maja Makkonen, communications specialist at UFF, and Pia Tanskanen, senior circle specialist at UFF, who have been here together with us for this episode. Thank you very much.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[MUSIC PLAYING]