

Proven: Sustainability fashion management tool a way to reach the SDGs

One third of the fashion companies today use the sustainability management tool Higg Index, but does it really contribute to reaching the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? The master's thesis "Managing for sustainable fashion", made in collaboration with GANT, shows that it could, but that it is important to use it wisely in order to get real sustainable results.

In 2009 the Sustainable Apparel Coalition was launched. Their greatest outcome is the sustainability management tool the Higg Index, measuring the sustainability performance of fashion brands, products and facilities. The resulting benchmarking score will be consumer facing in 2020, allowing people to make more informed choices.

Many people today are aware of the fashion industry's contribution to unsustainable practices, for example chemical pollution, large water use and inefficient use of raw materials. Consequently, the fashion industry are therefore also a part of the solution for increasing the sustainability performance. But are there any frameworks describing what, how and when to address sustainability challenges? The UN has created 17 SDGs, aiming to reach a more sustainable world by 2030.

With 30% of the sector using the Index, it is an important task to evaluate if the Index could be used to reach the SDGs. The question therefore stands, is the Index a way for the fashion sector to reach the SDGs ?

The answer is... Yes! But only partly. The master's thesis investigates the alignment of the Index and the SDGs and shows that the Index can be used by a fashion company to work strategically towards the SDGs. This result was achieved by comparing the two frameworks, the SDGs and the Index, with Life Cycle Analysis (LCA) impact

categories. These LCA impact categories were identified by the authors as relevant sustainability challenges for the fashion sector and the thesis thereby also notes the most crucial fashion industry SDGs.

Differences between the two frameworks are that the Index focuses to a larger extent on chemical usage and the safety and health of workers in the supply chain. The SDGs focus to a larger extent on preventing climate change and increasing biodiversity. So, by using the Index, does the benchmarking score make fashion companies put their resources on sustainability challenges that are crucial for the sector?

Well, sustainability challenges are complex and the thesis shows that the two frameworks approach them very differently. The SDGs put their focus on systemic, long sighted solutions such as giving all people equal opportunities while as the Index has a more hands-on approach, vouching for people's safety in the factories and reducing chemical usage.

There are some limitations to the Index that are important to be aware of. For instance, the life cycle perspective of the Index can be challenged, as the Index focuses to a large extent on manufacturing of garments rather than cultivation of for example cotton. The Index is also partly aligned with existing EU law, which could question the Index's importance when it awards companies for being compliant with the already established law. Furthermore, the Index lacks focus on both corruption and animal welfare.

In conclusion, it is important to continue to align the fashion sector's sustainability work with the SDGs to create a common ground for nations and business to cooperate on the most crucial sustainability challenges.

Reference

Master's thesis at Environmental and Energy Systems Studies, Department of Technology and Society, Lund University
Hansson Reuter, M. & Zetterlund, L. (2018) *Managing for sustainable fashion - A comparative review of the Higg Index 2.0 Brand and Retail Module and the UN Sustainable Development Goals* miljö.lth.se/publikationer/examensarbeten