

Government needs own Plan A to make sustainable clothing more fashionable

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Growing alarm at environmentally unsustainable clothing consumption can only be addressed by more government support for retailers and their customers, a University of Leeds academic has argued.

Taking Marks & Spencer's Plan A as an example, new research by Elizabeth Morgan from Leeds' School of Earth and Environment asserts that while the UK's leading [clothing](#) retailer has encouraged more sustainable consumption of clothes, such successes are unlikely to be replicated on a larger scale without more government stimulation for innovation in the way we make, buy, use and dispose of our clothes.

Plan A was launched by M&S in 2007, originally as a five-year plan with 100 social and environmental commitments, before being updated in 2010 with 80 more pledges. As well as aiming to increase the environmental [sustainability](#) of its business, M&S credited it with increasing the environmentally sustainable behaviour of its customers, through schemes such as its Shwopping clothing recycling campaign, run in conjunction with Oxfam.

A new paper by Ms Morgan, published in The Journal of Corporate Citizenship, points out that M&S's sustainability innovations in the clothing sector have rarely been scrutinised by academics.

"The clothing sector has been identified as having huge environmental impacts, but the big players are under-explored in terms of innovation for sustainability," said Ms Morgan, a former director of multinational firms Boots and Carlsberg.

Analysing seven years of Marks & Spencer reports relating to Plan A, she assessed whether the firm's innovations had increased environmental sustainability among its clothing customers.

M&S made a business case for Plan A in terms of cost savings, corporate reputation management and, to some extent, strengthening internal capabilities and risk reduction.

Ms Morgan set out a 'Use Chain' to examine the life cycle of clothing, from clothing's design, manufacture and distribution through laundering to disposal.

She argued that M&S was well-placed to influence the [environmental sustainability](#) of the whole of this use chain because, for example, its long-established textile design and sourcing expertise.

Examining initiatives such as Shwopping, sustainable textiles, fairtrade cotton and lower temperature washing, Ms Morgan finds evidence for positive outcomes from "learning by doing", rather than planning outcomes from the start.

"NGOs and activists expect big companies to get it right from the start, but the M&S approach refreshingly shows they were prepared to learn by doing and by experiment, and could be given credit for doing so transparently," she said.

"An established business can develop new business models in the interest of achieving long-term sustainability goals."

But she questioned how much an individual business, no matter how large and committed to sustainability, could be expected to drive innovation when it came to sustainability.

She concluded: "M&S's competitive advantages make it less valuable for competitors to imitate the initiatives, serving as barriers to those competitors participating in system change. For wider system change, it would be beneficial if these barriers could be overcome."

"Perhaps the role of government is to recognise when businesses have created a new business model for more sustainable consumption and to support continuing development for such innovation by finding ways to make it attractive for other businesses to adopt."

"There is only so much that even the biggest clothes [retailers](#) can do on their own."

Ms Morgan pointed to under-promoted initiatives such as Love Your Clothes, established by WRAP, which harnesses clothing companies and recyclers, as well as schemes to promote less environmentally-damaging

cotton production.

Why waste matters when it comes to fashion

Ms Morgan said the scale of the problems posed by clothing consumption was huge. In the UK, £41 billion was spent on clothing in 2011 (source: Mintel), making it the second largest consumer goods category after food and drink.

"The average UK household owns some £4,000-worth of clothes, but almost a third of clothing in the average wardrobe has not been worn for at least a year," she added, quoting figures produced by the [Waste and Resources Action Programme \(WRAP\)](#).

In a 2012 report, WRAP said that if clothes stayed in active use for just nine months longer, extending the average garment life to about three years, £5 billion a year could be saved from the costs of resources used in clothing supply, laundry and disposal, as well as more than 5% of the UK's total annual carbon and water footprints relating to clothing consumption.

Ms Morgan, who is a trustee director of the Energy Saving Trust, said the issue was exacerbated because consumers now replaced clothing more frequently, thanks to cheaper garments and "faster" fashion with extra, shorter seasons and shorter development cycles from drawing board to shop hanger.

The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs identified the clothing sector as one of ten priority areas for sustainable production and consumption, bringing together almost 300 businesses, charities and non-governmental organisations in 2010 to create a [Sustainable Clothing Action Plan \(SCAP\)](#), led by WRAP.

As a result, [72 SCAP signatories from the clothing sector](#) – including M&S, New Look, Next, Sainsbury's and Tesco – have pledged to reduce the carbon, water and waste footprints of clothing they supply or receive in the UK by 15% between 2012 and 2020.

More information: "Plan A': Analysing Business Model Innovation for Sustainable Consumption in Mass Market Clothes Retailing." [DOI: 10.9774/GLEAF.5001.2015.ma.00009](#)

Provided by University of Leeds

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