

Collaborating to close the loop on textile waste

Clothes to Good (CTG), the local textile recycling and disability empowerment organisation, hosted its 'Closing the Fashion Loop, Collaborative Conversations' conference in Constantia, Cape Town recently.



Source: Supplied

Senior role players from some of South Africa's top fashion houses, manufacturers, government and academic entities, the NGO sector, small business and social enterprises in the waste management and recycling industries were in attendance as they sought to explore the opportunities and challenges present across the local fashion waste landscape.

Speaking at the event, Gary Erasmus, MD of full-scale textile recycling company Connacher said, "This is the first time in my 27 years in the industry that so many of the industry role players are in the same room. About 99% of textile waste can be recycled. There is no reason for textiles to end up in landfills."

Connacher, which is based in Hammarsdale, KwaZulu-Natal, recycles 800 tons of fabric waste per month. "To put this into perspective this is 400 x 20-foot containers per month that would otherwise go to landfill. Imagine the next month adding another 400 containers. And this is just what our plant recycles. That should be a scary picture for everyone!" said Erasmus.

He was joined on stage by Jesse Naidoo and Tammy Greyling from CTG, H&M country manager Caroline Nelson, Dr Noredine Mahdjoub from the South-African Research Chair Waste and Climate Change Chair hosted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Jonathan Welch from AfriEco and Durban Green Corridor, and Michelle Quintyn, president and CEO at Goodwill Industries in Canada.



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Pathway out of poverty

Jesse Naidoo, founder and MD of CTG explained that the aim of the conference was to make a meaningful contribution in exiting people from poverty through enterprise development, inclusive job creation and collaboration through fashion waste.

“Our focus will always be on taking care of our planet through responsible and ethical clothing collection drives to re-use, upcycle or downcycle items in the fashion cycle. We do that with a deliberate and focused approach to assist mothers of children with disabilities and by job creation and education drives for people with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities and Autism, as 99% of this population is unemployed in South Africa,” he said.

Tammy Greyling, occupational therapist and operations director at CTG, added, “Through our enterprise development programme, CTG currently empowers 108 micro-businesses of which 56 are owned by mothers with children with disabilities.”



Textile waste upcycled into new products. Source: Supplied

Diverting clothing from landfill

The conference included success stories on H&M's and Levi's fashion take-back projects, innovative and impactful material development from recycled items and locally designed and manufactured machinery for the waste industry. One of the highlights was a presentation on best practices by Quintyn of Goodwill Industries, one of Canada's largest national clothing recycling operations.

According to Naidoo, 60% of all the clothes CTG receives are women's clothing, 30% are children's clothing and of those,

some are brand new and some still have the tags on them. “Without collaborating with organisations, industry leaders and the entire South African fashion industry (local and multinational fashion brands), these items will end up in landfills,” Naidoo noted.



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South Africa can keep our landfills functional by supporting companies and organisations with responsible and ready-to-go, homegrown solutions,” said Welch. “We have many success stories. As an industry, we have enough people, enough waste and enough energy and passion to have an inclusive, solution-driven plan. We can and should act now.”

Mahdjoub commented, “I hope we can move swiftly as an industry to do more research, develop more local solutions, and create local jobs from waste that includes all people...”

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