



Rethinking business models and recycling: large-scale project to improve the textile value chain in the Northern Netherlands

FEB researchers Marijke Leliveld and Kim Poldner join forces with various external partners in a large-scale project that is aimed at scaling up and strengthening activities related to the sorting and recycling of consumer textiles and workwear in the northern Netherlands. The SORTED project is led by Sympany, an organization that collects and sorts textiles, and is funded by the Northern Netherlands Alliance (SNN). The aim is not only to strengthen textile recycling in the Northern Netherlands, but also to focus on technological and economic innovations that benefit the whole value chain.

The current textile market is dominated by fast fashion, driven by the low costs of new materials, inequality within the value chain and consumer demand for cheap and trendy clothes. With their involvement in the SORTED project, Marijke Leliveld and Kim Poldner aim to contribute to breaking the dominance of fast fashion. Poldner, Endowed Professor of

Regional and Circular Economic Development, explains: “We need to rethink business as usual and instead scale up circular business models such as rental, repair, second-hand sales, and circular design. Circular innovators and established brands must be encouraged to adopt these models and thus offer more sustainable alternatives to fast fashion.” That’s



why – as part of the project – the researchers will develop a collective transition path that moves away from the linear system towards a circular approach. This includes the development of collective business models that not only center economic value, but also take into account societal and ecological impact via true pricing. These models will be applied in new regional startups.

The SORTED project is especially relevant in the context of recent extended producer responsibility (EPR) laws. EPR laws are reshaping waste management by shifting the financial and operational burden of recycling and reusing textile to the producers of these textiles. This new legislation forms an important driver of the transition to a circular textile chain.

Consumer behavior

The SORTED project aims for an integrated and interdisciplinary collaboration between technological developments in sorting and recycling (the back end) and consumer knowledge (the front end). Leliveld, Professor of Consumer Ethics, leads the sub-project that is focused on consumer knowledge and consumer behavior. In this sub-project, FEB and the municipalities of Emmen and Groningen will collaborate to create behavioral interventions to reach consumers and encourage them to dispose of textiles correctly. The first aim is to significantly increase the collection rate of clean, separated textiles in the respective municipalities.

Leliveld: “We also aim to contribute to persuading consumers to buy – and thus waste – less.” There is already a positive development to be seen when it comes to reusing textiles, as wearing second-hand clothing is becoming increasingly popular. But what is the best way to put the textiles that can be reused back on the market when this waste is first dumped in

textile bins? That is a question that will be examined in this project. A big challenge is that though the second-hand market is growing, there is still a long way to go, as new (first-hand) clothing still dominates the fashion industry.

For consumers, price is a key factor when buying clothes. This is a challenge when it comes to promoting clothes made from circular textiles, as circular textiles are currently still more expensive than first-hand textile. This has to do with the fact that for new textiles, the ‘true costs’ are not included in the price. The actual costs and impact of raw material extraction and processing (e.g., depletion of agricultural land, water use, and CO2 emissions) are considerably higher. The fashion industry has long been associated with a lack of transparency, making it difficult to ascertain the true cost of garments. However, several factors, such as labor exploitation, environmental degradation, resource depletion and waste generation contribute to the hidden costs of first-hand textile.

PhD research

On behalf of FEB, two PhD candidates will also be involved in the SORTED project. One of them will focus on developing a strong circular textile market in the region. Through system integration, market development, and the removal of financial barriers, the project aims to build a northern ecosystem that creates value not only economically, but also socially, ecologically, and culturally.

The other PhD candidate will focus on the consumer psychology side of the project. Specifically, they will examine how consumers can be motivated to purchase their clothes second-hand, donate their garments after wearing, and most importantly, consume less fashion overall.



The Northern Netherlands Alliance (SNN)

On Friday, 31 October 2025, the provincial executives Erik Jan Bennema and Willemien Meeuwissen of the provinces of Groningen and Drenthe and Alderman Guido Rink of the municipality of Emmen awarded a grant of almost 15 million euros to the SORTED project. The subsidy was awarded by the Northern Netherlands Alliance (SNN) and comes from the European Just Transition Fund (JTF), including € 6 million in co-financing from the Ministry of Economic Affairs.

With this four-year project, the Northern Netherlands is taking a major step towards a circular textile chain. "This subsidy shows that the Northern Netherlands is serious about creating a sustainable economy," the provincial executives and the alderman state. 'With SORTED, we are investing in new technology, employment and behavioural change. That is exactly what the Just Transition Fund is intended for."



Marijke Leliveld is Professor of Consumer Ethics at FEB's Department of Marketing. She is a behavioral scientist and expert on morality and ethics within consumer and other stakeholder's behavior. After her PhD (2009; Leiden University) on the ethics of economic decision-making, she currently studies topics like sustainable consumer behavior in fashion, charity donations, cause-related marketing campaigns, and other forms of prosocial or fairness related behavior and perceptions in for-profit and non-profit (governmental, charitable) organizations. From 2019-2024, she was a member and chair of the Young Academy Groningen.



Kim Poldner is Endowed Professor of Regional and Circular Economic Development at FEB and the UG's Faculty of Spatial Sciences. As endowed professor, Poldner conducts scientific research into regional development, with a focus on the circular economy. From 2019 to 2024 she was Professor of Circular Business at The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS). Poldner obtained her PhD from the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland, where her research focused on sustainable entrepreneurship in the textiles industry. She has extensive research expertise in circular business, sustainability, entrepreneurship, and transition processes in businesses.