

Dame Ellen MacArthur

by Silvia Bombardini



At the Copenhagen Fashion Summit earlier this year, Dame Ellen MacArthur took to the stage on behalf of the oceans. Having in a previous life sailed around the world faster than anyone else – setting a solo world record in 2005 – she’s undoubtedly the planet’s best advocate for the cause. *“Because plastic packaging is completely international, globalised and fragmented if you actually want to shift the plastic packaging industry to go from linear to circular, you’re not going to do that by cleaning up the beaches”* she had urged. *“That’s essential because there’s a lot of litter on the beaches, there’s a lot of litter in the sea. But you actually need to change the system”*.

Changing the system, as it happens, it’s easier said than done. But unlike those who content themselves with stressing the dangers of our condition, when MacArthur sets down to transform the entire economy it’s with all the confidence that it really can be done. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation published last year *The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the future of plastics*, and in May 2017, together with HRH The Prince of Wales’s International Sustainability Unit, has launched a \$2 million New Plastics Economy Innovation Prize. But if the

numbers for the plastic industry were staggering – “only 2% of 7-8 million tons of plastic packaging produced every year actually get recycled”, she had said – a newly launched report, on textiles this time, challenges the former with figures almost impossibly worse. ‘Less than 1% of material used to produce clothing is recycled into new clothing’, it reads. ‘This includes recycling clothing after use, as well as the recycling of factory offcuts. For recycling after-use clothing, expert interviews and some reporting suggest that the figure could be below 0.1%’.

But yet again, MacArthur seems to believe that the bigger the challenge, the more we stand to gain with systemic change. *A new textiles economy: Redesigning fashion’s future* is free to download from the Foundation’s website, and highlights four major ambitions to begin with:

‘1. Phase out substances of concern and microfiber release. 2. Transform the way clothes are designed, sold, and used to break free from their increasingly disposable nature. 3. Radically improve recycling by transforming clothing design, collection, and reprocessing. 4. Make effective use of resources and move to renewable inputs’

Below, Dame Ellen MacArthur tells us more.

S.B.: The Foundation’s previous work, the New Plastics Economy initiative, is cited as a successful example of how collaboration can lead to systemic change. I remember your warning in Copenhagen, that if nothing changed there would be more plastic than fish in the ocean by 2050. What change is underway? What would you say have been the achievements of the project to date, and what are still its future goals?

D.E.M.: We have seen a drastic change in the industry’s alignment on, and commitment toward, the vision of a circular economy for plastics over the past 18 months. Just a few examples: at the World Economic Forum in Davos 40 industry leaders endorsed our action plan for change, and at the Our Ocean conference in Malta, six participants of the New Plastics Economy initiative committed to making all their plastics packaging recyclable by 2025. In the public sector, the European Commission is about to come out with a strategy on plastics and the circular economy and France has committed to recycle 100% of plastics by 2025, while Indonesia wants to reduce marine litter by 70% by 2025. Of course, many people have contributed to these and they are not all a direct result of our initiative’s work, but that’s exactly the point of the role we aim to play as a catalyst for systemic change – helping unleash a broad movement that pushes forward by itself. Looking ahead we aim to continue to build momentum, and we expect to announce a number of major milestones over the next twelve months.

S.B.: You’ve spent a long time studying the plastic and textile industries, and there are obvious parallels between the two – aside from the pressing issue of the plastic microfibers in synthetic clothing, that from our

washing machines pollute our oceans and our food, they're both extremely vast, mapped out in global flows. If the plan is to reform them, how do the challenges the two industries face compare?

D.E.M.: Both industries operate in a very linear way. They produce high-volumes of low-value products and are very wasteful. But ultimately each industry faces unique challenges and opportunities. We are optimistic that if all actors rally behind a strong vision both will be able to transition to a circular model in which materials remain valuable to the economy and don't become waste.

S.B.: Out of the four ambitions for a new textile economy, the one that strikes me as perhaps the most challenging is the prospect of making clothes that remain desirable over time. So much of fashion as we know it is built on planned obsolescence, on replacing older products with new ones no better than the previous in any redeemable way. How can we go, consumers and designers both, about changing this way of thinking? Will making the older products into a new resource be the solution?

D.E.M.: It's mostly about new business models. Rental can fulfil the need for variety without having to *buy* new products all the time, and it's the same with resale and subscription models. The RealReal, for example, is an online marketplace that makes it very easy to buy and sell second-hand luxury goods. Started just six years ago, its sales are expected to reach \$500 million this year. YCloset is a Chinese start-up that offers a renting model for clothing, allowing people to choose at any time to use any 3 out of 150,000 available items for a fixed monthly subscription fee. Since starting in 2015, it has now over 5 million users and just raised \$50 million. Also, for some customer segments durability actually is a big win. There are, for example, also consumers who very much value consistency, don't like to go out shopping, and would prefer to invest in durable clothing.

S.B.: When you imagine a circular economy in our future, can you envision a moment when products of consumption, be these packaging or garments, will actually benefit the world in a restorative way? That is to say, a product the planet will be better off with than it would have been without? Or is it wiser to focus for now on damage control?

D.E.M.: The ambition of a circular economy is to be restorative and regenerative. While controlling damage and reducing harm is crucial in the short term, ultimately we need to move toward a system that is not just less bad, but good. The *new textiles economy* report provides a vision for how that could be done: designing out toxins and microfiber release, shifting to renewable inputs, ensuring clothes are designed to last, can be easily shared and re-sold, easily recycled at the same level of quality rather than simply be turned into products of lesser value.

S.B.: Moving on from plastics and textiles, do you already have a new project in mind – a next goal toward the biggest goal of all, that is the circular economy?

D.E.M.: The Foundation's mission is to accelerate the transition, and we work across a variety of sectors and areas. Our systemic initiatives, the New Textiles Economy and the Circular Fibres Initiative, are only a part of what we do. For example, we also work with education and public sector stakeholders, and look at topics including circular design, built environment and remanufacturing. Ultimately the goal is to transform the entire economy.

PRINTED IN [MODERN WEEKLY, CHINA](#) - DECEMBER 2017 - BY SILVIA BOMBARDINI