

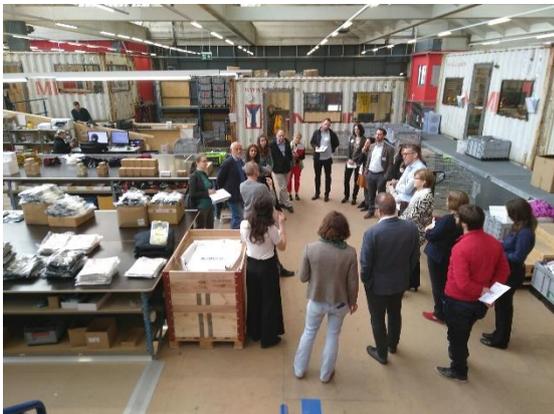
*SDSN Switzerland Conference 2019 Learning Journey Blogpost*

## If buying a garment is an emotional process, enhanced awareness leads to responsible choices

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The focal topic of the Learning Journey I guided at SDSN's 2019 Annual Conference was SDG #12, responsible consumption and production, and more specifically clothing and textile. Our inquiry was guided by the following question: *How do we foster resource-efficient production and responsible consumption?*

Our Learning Journey was at FIZZEN ReWork, an upcycling warehouse that turns second hand clothing into stylish vintage pieces. Before embarking on the guided tour of the warehouse, I briefly introduced some of the conceptual frameworks that underpin Learning Journeys (find out more [here](#)). It was fundamental to establish this basis because sustainability transformations require a paradigm shift. As Einstein famously said, "we cannot solve a problem using the same kind of thinking that created it." These conceptual tools served as anchors of a different paradigm rooted in enhanced awareness. In other words, applying these tools increased awareness of our own self, of others and of the whole. They can be simplified into the following guiding principles:



- Be present
- Listen actively and without judgement
- Be open to dialogue
- Trust the process

Once our epistemological foundation was established, our host Kaspar Schlaeppli offered us a warm introduction to his business and daily work, taking the time to explain the logic and functioning of all its operations. We always use Storytelling as a tool for information sharing and knowledge co-creation simply

because it is common to all cultures, therefore one of the oldest and most effective forms of education and learning. Then followed a guided tour of the warehouse, where we had the opportunity to meet his seamstress colleagues who were part of a professional integration programme, as well as to browse through ReWork's latest upcycled collection. Something he said which was very eye-opening was: *we don't do these things to be "sustainable", we do it because it makes business sense.*

Our Learning Journey group was very varied, including profiles ranging from fashion designers and textile traders, to sustainability professionals working with multinational brands, academics, civil society organisations as well as government representatives. I noticed that a large portion of the participants, as in most knowledge economies, did not produce economic value directly as a result of their labour. It made me think of notions such as cost-benefits, profit-making, waste-as-resource, and how much minds are shaped by the constraints of their environment. Being immersed in the life and work of Mr. Schlaeppli turned out to be very eye-opening, as illustrated by questions and remarks that emerged such as "why

is sustainability not explicitly a priority for your business?" or "you say that fashion sells because youth follows trends, but my kids keep telling me how concerned they are about the environment".

After the visit, we proceeded to conduct a World Café, a participatory format aimed at harnessing collective intelligence from a large group to answer our guiding question. In order to craft a coherent and insightful answer to this, we had two sub-questions: (1) *Based on what we have seen and witnessed, what do we know NOW that we were not aware of before?* (2) *What do we feel called to co-create and what seems to be a priority or a point of attention?*

The group was divided into smaller teams to tackle these questions. A textile expert was present in each team to provide deeper insights, namely: Afsah Alumia-Khan, Senior Manager for Sustainability & Compliance in Supply Chain for Intersport; Nicole Ungureit, Teacher at the Swiss Textile School and CSR advisor to fashion brands; and Tobias Meier, Senior Project Manager for Green Economy at ecos.

Some of the key aspects that emerged were the following:

- Communication, awareness of the whole value chain (consumers should know the whole story of how a garment was made)
- Waste costs money and "cool" is important
- Consumer engagement is key for durable change
- Business model experimentation is necessary to come up with new ways to produce value without negative externalities
- Shopping as a subjective experience links the personal with the systemic



The multitude of discussions were eventually distilled into a Call to Action to be shared during the plenary in the afternoon, a statement that the participants were willing to put forward not only as a proposition for society but also as a commitment to themselves: **We invite governments to incite local production, business model experimentation and transparency of companies' social and environmental impacts, while harnessing the power of consumer behaviour to influence business practices.**

In short, our experience indicated the kind of mindset shift we invited participants to embrace, as well as the kind of mindset we were trying to shift *from*:

- From *siloed* to *systemic* view of societal challenges
- From *harm-diminishing* to *regenerative* approaches
- From *consumerism* to *conscious* consumption
- From *linear* to *circular* economy

Overall, it was a very eye-opening experience, atypical of sustainable development conferences in that it enabled participants to step out of their usual playing field and engage in collaborative, experiential learning. This enhanced their awareness about the invisible stories behind a piece of clothing, ultimately leading to wiser consumption choices in this domain.

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