

Circular textile solutions for community empowerment: The Clothes to Good (CTG) case

Submitting University: University of Pretoria

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Overview and summary of the impact:

Escalating volumes of post-consumer textile waste represent a critical sustainability challenge for the global fashion and textile industry. Each year, an estimated 92 million tonnes of textile waste are generated worldwide, with projections suggesting this could rise to 134 million tonnes annually by 2030.¹ With less than 1% of textiles recycled into new clothing², the transition toward circular economy models (prioritising reuse, repair, recycling, and closed-loop production) has become central to international policy³ and academic discourse.

In Africa, the issue is particularly urgent. The continent faces growing volumes of imported second-hand clothing, up to 50% of which is unusable, compounded by weak waste management systems and limited recycling capacity⁵. This context highlights both the environmental risks of unmanaged textile waste and the socio-economic opportunities inherent in circular solutions. Implementing sustainable textile waste strategies in Africa, and also more specifically in South Africa, could not only reduce landfill pressure but also stimulate enterprise, support livelihoods, and promote inclusive development in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Against this backdrop, Clothes to Good (CTG), founded in 2011 and based in Centurion, Gauteng, has established itself as a hybrid social enterprise tackling textile waste while creating inclusive economic opportunities. Operating through its hybrid structure - Clothes to Cash Exchange (Pty) Ltd and Life Link 24/7 Cares NPO - CTG collects post-consumer textiles from schools, corporate staff volunteerism programmes, and national partners such as H&M¹⁰ and Levi's¹⁴. Collected items are sorted into streams of reuse, upcycling, downcycling, and last-resort incineration. Good quality items are channelled to micro-businesses, many managed by mothers of children with disabilities, while other textiles are transformed into educational resources, rags, or shredded fibre for the automotive and insulation industries, ensuring minimal landfill contribution.^{6 13} Since its inception, CTG has diverted hundreds of tonnes of textile waste and supported over 300 micro-businesses, while partnering with organisations such as H&M¹⁰ and the SAB Foundation⁹. Its model demonstrates how environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and circular economy principles can converge.⁵

The collaboration between CTG and the University of Pretoria (UP) was initiated in 2021 following discussions between CTG's founders and the Department of Consumer and Food Sciences about managing growing volumes of textile waste. Under the leadership of Dr. Nadine Sonnenberg, CTG was incorporated into the Textiles (TKS 411) Clothing Retail Management module as a service-learning curriculum-based community engagement project, formally registered with UP's Community Engagement Office in 2022. The partnership has since flourished, giving students the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge to pressing sustainability challenges, while contributing directly to CTG's recycling and disability empowerment mission. At its core are innovative textile waste-reduction strategies and the integration of circular economy principles into reuse, upcycling, and downcycling^{7 8}.

Since 2022, the collaboration has generated societal impact across environmental, economic, and social domains. Environmentally, CTG diverts approximately 12,500 kilograms of textile waste from landfills weekly. Student-led proposals on sorting, resale optimisation, downcycling, and upcycling have informed and strengthened CTG's circular economy practices. Economically, CTG now supports over 300 micro-businesses, 80 led by mothers of children with disabilities, who benefit from student-informed strategies. Socially, inclusion is advanced through CTG's disability empowerment. One-third of CTG's workforce are individuals with disabilities, supported by student recommendations for accessible and inclusive workplace practices.

Underpinning academic work:

The causal link between academic work at the University of Pretoria and the resulting societal impact described in this case study stems from a service-learning curriculum embedded in the TKS 411 module that forms part of the B Consumer Science Clothing Retail Management programme. Underpinned by Dr Nadine Sonnenberg's research on sustainable clothing consumption and consumer behaviour, the TKS 411 curriculum was purposefully designed to integrate theoretical knowledge of sustainability and new developments in the textiles domain with community engagement.⁸ Commencing with preparatory research on the EU Waste Management Hierarchy and extant literature on sustainable clothing consumption practices, students undertake site-based engagement with CTG staff, management, and community members to analyse and refine textile waste management strategies. Through applied problem-solving projects, students are tasked with developing proposals to enhance CTG's operations across resale, upcycling, and downcycling categories.⁷ The students' proposals are critically assessed for feasibility and impact by CTG management, academic staff, and external moderators, thus ensuring direct feedback loops between academia and practice.⁸ Through this structure, theoretical content is explicitly linked to practical application, ensuring that the impact is grounded in the university's teaching and research expertise. The academic activity described in this case study is best classified under Humanities and Social Sciences, with strong intersections into applied sustainability and consumer studies.

Narrative description of the impact:

The collaboration between the University of Pretoria's TKS 411 students and CTG, formally registered with the University of Pretoria's Community Engagement Office in 2022, has verifiable outcomes in three critical domains, namely environmental sustainability, economic empowerment, and social inclusion.

Environmental sustainability has been a central achievement. South Africa faces a growing textile waste crisis, with limited infrastructure to divert post-consumer textiles from landfills.⁵ CTG processes approximately 12,500 kilograms of textile waste weekly, supported by students' work on sorting, reuse, upcycling, and downcycling strategies. Their proposals, ranging from optimising sorting through infrared material scanning to developing innovative upcycled products, have influenced CTG's practices, contributing to landfill diversion and circular economy solutions.¹ These outcomes align closely with global priorities for sustainable consumption and production.⁸

Economic empowerment has also been significant. CTG has developed an ecosystem of 300 micro-businesses, with 80 operated by mothers of children with disabilities. These women, often excluded from formal labour markets, gain access to second-hand clothing to sell within their communities. Students' recommendations for product development and marketing strategies have informed CTG's support programmes, strengthening entrepreneurial opportunities and household incomes.¹² By 2025, CTG's reach expanded from Gauteng to Cape Town and KwaZulu-Natal, thereby broadening its economic impact.

Social Inclusion and disability empowerment form the third pillar of impact. Between 2022 and 2024, CTG's workforce grew from 26 to 40 employees, with one-third being persons with disabilities.¹² The partnership with TKS 411 has prioritised inclusive practices, co-designing processes to ensure meaningful participation and recognition of diverse abilities. Such practices directly contribute to dignity, equality, and long-term employment inclusion, aligning with global frameworks for inclusive labour markets.⁴

The initiative's reach is broad. Key beneficiaries include:

- *Micro-business owners*, particularly mothers of children with disabilities, who gain access to products and business strategies.^{11 12}
- *Individuals with disabilities*, who benefit from inclusive workplace opportunities.^{12 15}
- *Low-income communities*, which have access to affordable second-hand clothing and benefit from economic ripple effects.¹³
- *The environment*, through landfill diversion and innovations in reuse.^{4 6}

Beyond communities, CTG collaborates with industry stakeholders such as H&M¹⁰ and Levi's¹⁴ to advance sustainable fashion. The initiative has inspired uptake at other South African higher education institutions, with institutions like the STADIO School of Fashion adapting aspects into their teaching.

In conclusion, the TKS 411–CTG initiative demonstrates multi-dimensional impact by addressing environmental sustainability, poverty alleviation, and disability inclusion. These outcomes align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production)⁸ By equipping students to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, the initiative highlights the societal relevance of higher education and the transformative potential of academic-community partnerships in South Africa.

References

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³European Environment Agency. (2022). *Textiles and the environment in a circular economy*.

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Evidence and sources to corroborate the impact:

⁵Sonnenberg, N.C., Patnaik, S. & Massyn-Romo, G. (2024). Pursuing Zero Waste in the South African Textile Industry: A Case Study of SMME Scaled Needle Felting Technology. In *Zero Waste Sustainable Apparel Industry*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland (pp.117-141).

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⁶Clothes To Good. (2023). *Micro-business development and disability empowerment programme*.

Retrieved from <https://www.clothestogood.com>

⁷ Sonnenberg, N.C. (2023). Post-consumer textile waste put to good use in collaboration with Clothes to Good (CTG). *Lentsu La Sechaba, The Voice of the Community*, Volume 15, February 2023, p. 7-8.

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⁹SAB Foundation. (2023). *Annual review: Supporting entrepreneurs and inclusive businesses*.

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Citations in media:

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¹¹May, J. (2022). Clothes to Good uses textile waste to change lives. <https://twyg.co.za/clothes-to-good-uses-textile-waste-to-change-lives/>

¹²SABC 2 Trendz visits Clothes to Good (2022)— upcycled denim products in partnership with Levi's South Africa https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzV9_uxVqPY

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDLqFg-45TY> Formal acknowledgments

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- Testimonial: CTG Founding member - Naidoo, J. (2025)



Testimonial - J
Naidoo (CTG Foundin

- Testimonial: TKS 411 External moderator – Kempen, E.L (2024)



Testimonial - Prof
Elizabeth Kempen (UN

- Reflections: TKS 411 Students (2022-2024)



2022-2024 TKS 411
Student Reflections.pc

Any other information considered relevant:

The TKS 411 Clothes to Good project received the 2024 UP Institutional Curricular Community Engagement Award⁸ and was further selected as one of ten programmes advancing to the second round of consideration for the 2025 MacJannet Prize for Global Citizenship. The initiative also secured significant funding, including ZAR 3.1 million from the DSI and CSIR Circular Economy Demonstration Fund. This collaborative effort, led by Prof. Sweta Patnaik (Cape Peninsula University of Technology), Dr. Güera Romo (Hernieuw (Pty) Ltd, industry partner), and Dr. Nadine Sonnenberg (Department of Consumer and Food Sciences, UP), focuses on piloting SMME-scaled textile recycling technologies to support micro businesses such as those who form part of the CTG community and other entrepreneurial initiatives tackling textile waste⁵.

Signed off on behalf of the University by:

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