Faced with mounting warnings from scientists about the dangers of global warming and the threat of social and health problems, many of the fashion and luxury industry’s top companies have incorporated social and environmental commitments into their agendas. However, awareness is not the same as taking action. In Copenhagen, the fashion summit, which has been bringing the industry together for more than a decade, has now gone beyond raising awareness. In light of the increasingly urgent climate crisis, the summit held in the Danish capital on 15 and 16 May 2019 highlighted the need for the sector to change course.

In her opening address, Princess Mary of Denmark pointed out that half of the industry’s players have yet to implement a sustainability strategy.

“All players must put a plan into action, but we also need to better understand the expectations of consumers. With food, they expect healthy products. But when it comes to clothing, emotion and affection come into play. It’s more difficult to have a rational conversation. Yet it is very urgent! We cannot wait for the customer to demand the product as he does with food. The approach must be reversed. Be the inspiration!” the princess said.

Amid delicate economic and market conditions in Europe and the United States, and in the face of global geopolitical uncertainties, the pace of progress on social and environmental issues has slowed down compared to 2018, according to the ‘Pulse of the Industry’ report presented at the event. Small brands and entry-level labels, which had previously lagged behind on these issues, have made progress whilst gains from luxury brands and fashion giants have stagnated.

For players who have already taken the first steps and whose score is above 65 out of 100, progress is harder to achieve, according to the report. This often requires a deep review of a company’s value chain and a series of actions that need to be coordinated. That is why, throughout the summit, stakeholders are urged to take collective action.

**The urgency of taking action**

“All today there are structures, it is possible to move forward together. But companies must take action,” said Dorte Rye Olsen, director of environmental responsibility of Danish ready-to-wear group Bestseller (Jack & Jones, Only, Helena Helmersson, operations director at H&M believes that wage rises should happen at industry level
Rye Olsen, director of environmental responsibility of Danish ready-to-wear group Bestseller (Jack & Jones, Only, Vero Moda) at a round table discussing the sector's priorities.

In fact, the solutions are on the table, but “private players fighting for market share must learn to work together to make a significant impact,” said Paul Polman, chairman of the International Chamber of Commerce.

According to Carlo Capasa, president of the National Chamber for Italian Fashion, it is through collective work that initiatives can gain momentum. “In Italy, we have hosted two roundtables with companies to talk about sustainability. Even tanneries participated. Everyone presents their problems and shares information, creating an environment where every company feels safe to contribute,” he said.

This is roughly what François-Henri Pinault proposed too. On the first day of the event, the chief executive of Kering announced his intention to unite the CEOs of all major fashion and luxury brands to engage in a joint project within the framework of the next G7, which will be held from 24-26 August in Biarritz. This “fashion coalition” aims to set targets to reduce ocean plastic pollution, support biodiversity and combat climate change.
Climate change is also at the centre of the new United Nations Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action introduced last year. Martin Frick, who has been deeply committed to fighting climate change for more than a decade, has also urged brands to work with governments and policymakers to accelerate the implementation of new projects. All companies in the sector can join the United Nations charter and help drive climate action.

Everybody’s talking about climate issues, whilst social problems remain at the margin

On the social side of things, environmental leaders from Nike (Noel Kinder), Kering (Marie-Claire Daveu), PVH (Marissa McGowan) and H&M (Anna Gedda) believe the groups are already having a dialogue and working together. They say that the next step will be to improve cooperation with suppliers, but also with employee representatives.

And whilst global warming has been widely discussed during the Danish conference, there has been less emphasis on the social and ethical issues facing the fashion industry, which remain a major challenge for a sector that “is based on the search for the lowest wage” said Jenny Holdcroft, of IndustriAll, a global union which defends the rights of employees.

“An isolated project has no impact... If you work with a factory, a supplier, a product, it will make no difference. You have to work on a larger scale. Raising wages must be done at industry level because the same supplier can work for several brands,” said Helena Helmersson, director of operations at H&M.

However, the industry struggles to change old habits. “I recently visited some production facilities in Ethiopia, where many brands are now being produced. Conditions are really bad,” said the spokesperson of Bangladeshi trade union Sommilito Garments Sramik, who has extensive knowledge about the conditions of textile production.

The intention is there, but there is still long way to go before brands’ sustainability commitments have a real effect on the planet and the industry. Working together and making a joint commitment would help accelerate these efforts. After two days of talks and panel discussions, now is the time for brands and retailers to stop talking and start acting.

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