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Research Sustainability

# Sewing Sustainability: The High Atlas Foundation's Zero-Waste Initiative

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Samira of the Achbarou Women's Cooperatives, planting an olive sapling grown from a seed in a biodegradable sack produced by her organization; the young trees are provided by the local Akrich nursery that her fellow community members manage (photo by HAF, January 2025).

## Bryn Galumbeck HAF Volunteer

Today, on the third annual we recognize the urgent need to transform waste management and promote sustainable consumption and production. This year's theme, *Towards Zero Waste in Fashion and Textiles*, highlights the pressing environmental and social challenges caused by the textile industry and emphasizes the transition to a circular economy.

Current production and disposal processes in the textile industry pose significant risks to the environment. Every year, approximately 92 million tonnes of textile waste are generated worldwide, accumulating in landfills at an alarming rate—equivalent to one truckload per second. The rapid increase in textile production and consumption contributes to increased non-renewable resource depletion, greenhouse gas emissions, and water and energy consumption.

The fashion industry contributes to resource depletion as it relies on non-renewable resources, which are projected to comprise three-quarters of all textiles within the next decade. Fashion production accounts for 10 percent of global carbon emissions, and textile manufacturing emissions are expected to rise by 60 percent by 2030. Furthermore, textile dyeing and finishing processes contribute to approximately 20 percent of global clean water pollution. The industry is the second-largest contributor to water contamination, as untreated wastewater is often discharged into rivers and streams.

In response to the global textile crisis, governments, organizations, and other stakeholders are working to transition from a linear to a circular economy for the textile industry. Adopting a zero-waste approach not only reduces environmental harm but also brings economic benefits. The circular economy focuses on minimizing waste, enhancing durability, reusing materials, and recycling.

The High Atlas Foundation (HAF) is dedicated to sustainable development initiatives in Morocco and actively supports zero-waste efforts across industries. HAF's Tree Sacks Project fosters sustainable production practices for textiles in the agriculture industry. This initiative not only reduces plastic waste and emissions through local production of biodegradable tree sacks, but also empowers women by providing hands-on training, cooperative development, and empowerment workshops.

Since its inception, HAF has registered three official cooperatives in the Al Haouz province, supplying them with 50 sewing machines and essential resources. In the two months testing and learning period, the program has produced and distributed over 14,500 tree sacks to nurseries around Morocco. HAF's vision is to produce 1.4 million biodegradable tree sacks in three years to promote enhanced sustainability in tree planting. With continued collaboration and investment, we can further reduce plastic waste in agriculture by expanding our production and distribution networks.

Youssef Mazdou, the program manager, shared his experience working on this project, "It was not easy to implement this project, especially in remote areas. In the beginning, I conducted a community meeting to explain the project's vision and scope. The women could not imagine undertaking this initiative. Understanding cooperative operations, management, and production was a major hurdle. I was with them through every step—from their first visit to Polydesign, which gave them inspiration and a vision for their own cooperatives, to the moment they submitted their legal documents at the court. I never thought that I would work with women, but it was a great experience. They were happy with the work and benefits from the empowerment workshop. I will have a lasting connection with them."

The shift toward sustainability requires commitment from governments, businesses, and individuals. By embracing circular economic models, investing in innovative waste management solutions, and making conscious consumption choices, we can reduce environmental impacts and build a more sustainable textile industry.

On this International Day of Zero Waste, we encourage all stakeholders to engage in local and national zero-waste initiatives and advocate for responsible production practices.

Bryn Galumbeck is a volunteer at HAF, first introduced through the University of Virginia's global internship program in 2020. Passionate about women's empowerment and economic

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