

Case Study: Closing the loop in apparel manufacturing by upcycling waste

Promoting Responsible Value Chains in India for an Effective Contribution of the Private Sector to the SDGs

(PROGRESS Project)

Sector: Apparel and Textile

Organization: Rimagined



Centre for Responsible Business (CRB) and Aston India Centre for Applied Research (AICAR), Aston University, UK have teamed up to explore and investigate *how private sector companies - as part of Global Value Chains (GVCs), production networks and FDIs in India have/could better contribute towards achievement of specific SDGs, particularly inclusive education and life-long learning (SDG4), employment and decent work for the youth (SDG 8), women's social and economic empowerment (SDG 5) and sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12)*. The generated evidence would be used to influence and support policy and practice (industry) level discussions and actions through multi-stakeholder processes in India, with various industry sectors that are part of GVCs, production networks and foreign investments, but continue to be vulnerable. The project is being undertaken with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada.

This case study has been developed as an example from the Indian apparel and textile sector on the contribution of industry-led initiatives towards some of the SDGs (indicated above).



Rimagined is a fully integrated upcycling products company. It works with consumer and industrial waste and transforms them into high quality lifestyle products. Some of the materials they use are fabric, wood, metal, yarn waste from industrial sources. Rimagined employs innovative designs to develop unique handcrafted products using in-house design and manufacturing teams. Their mission is to promote circular economic principles amongst consumers and give them zero waste product options.

Case Study – Rimagined

Title of the Case Study	Closing the loop in apparel manufacturing by upcycling waste
Nature of Organization	Micro-Scale
Sector Covered	Apparel and Textiles
Relevant SDG and related targets	SDG 8, SDG 12, SDG 13

Background and Motivation

Shailaja Rangarajan started 'Rimagined' in 2016 with an aim to provide an upcycled alternative to the everyday needs, endeavouring sustainability. The idea of using repurposed material as a primary input came from witnessing huge amount of untreated solid waste in the cities and from her previous work experience in the solid waste management sector. In addition, an ethical move to manufacture the upcycled products by providing a dignified source of livelihoods to the people from the underprivileged sections defines the work of Rimagined. It operates globally through the online platform www.rimagined.com and with an offline store in Bengaluru.

The Business Model (Details of the Initiative)

Rimagined is bringing a revolution in the Indian Textile industry with its range of upcycled products. The centre focus of the business model of Rimagined is to treat waste and reduce the negative impacts on the environment. Moreover, producing a high-quality product by employing people from the bottom of the wealth pyramid is aligned with centre focus. Rimagined has been focusing on employing first generation women workers whose successful stories are presented on the website providing an evidence of a movement towards gender equality. The production units are built in different states according to the waste available and the presence of labour specialising in handling specific kind of waste materials. For example, in Kolkata, an entire workforce is dedicated to working only with denims and fabric (pre and post consumer waste) and converting them into in carpets, rugs and bags. The required qualitative training is also provided on the need basis to the artisans and the team.

Impacts

The business has transformed roughly around 120+ metric tonnes of waste into 500+ varied, useful, and stylish products across categories. It particularly repurposed

- 15000 pairs of jeans
- 450Kg of non-denim fabric
- 1000Kg of yarn
- 350Kg of glasses, mostly coloured glasses which cannot be recycled
- And used 6 tonnes of small pieces of Teak and Pine Wood

This impact has been created with the talented team of 30+ members. It employs artisans pertaining to the economically weaker section of the society from the same state of business operations. Currently in-house team of 35 members with a presence of 22 women and 13 men with the external partners of 10 handloom weavers.

Rimagined is working to empower the women from underprivileged section in Kolkata by providing them livelihoods which has further supported their families though producing upcycled products. Being an equal opportunity enterprise, Rimagined also creates employment for men in the remote parts of the country, who otherwise are forced to migrate to the cities in search of employment. The enterprise now has production units also in Balasore district of Odisha, Kolhapur in Maharashtra. Indirect employment is also created to handloom weavers in West Bengal who have experimented and created Upcycled Sarees from cotton waste yarn. They have also collaborated with traditional Jamdaani weavers in West Bengal who have created interesting Stoles using their own waste yarn along with Lurex and Jute yarn waste.

Challenges

There are several challenges faced while expanding the business model of Rimagined

- The definition of the term 'upcycling' is not clear to the consumers. A mindset change to adopt the upcycled product as an alternative to a regular product produced with the linear system is required.
- Awareness about the impacts of linear textiles on the natural eco-system and unethical practices involved in producing a cheap textile is needed to encourage a shift to eco-friendly alternatives.
- Sourcing good-quality waste/feedstock in India specially from the unstructured sector of post-consumer waste is a big task. A good quality feedstock is hard to find from the untreated / unsegregated waste.
- There is no clear policy interventions / support to promote circular initiatives at the industry and state level.
- There is no clear sector identification for Upcycling. Currently, it is pegged under Waste Management (Urban Services) which does not help to create and promote Upcycling as a separate industry and bring into the mainstream.

- Not a single fund is being looked at the environment front. Even the impact funds and taxation policy are not prioritised for environment. Moreover, the emotional connect to people is considered worth a story to raise funds than the emotional connect to environment. This results in force fitting the business model to livelihoods promotion rather than focussing on the environmental impact as the key KPI.
- The key is to create a niche in the market amidst the larger players. The market has always been dominated by large businesses, but that shouldn't be seen as a barrier. Rather, the focus should be on differentiating products and services.

What stops to scale the operations

- Inconsistent supply of good quality fabric both from pre-consumer and post consume waste.
- Investment Intensive - a hurdle for a boot strapped Micro enterprise
- Non-existent market. The market can only be created by launching new products and creating awareness., which again calls for high investment
- Given that Upcycling is not yet a formally recognised industry, the regular manufacturers opt to collaborate with existing NGOs as it helps leverage the livelihoods angle rather than environmental impact as key.

Road Ahead:

Collaboration will be the way ahead for all enterprises who have to look at Sustainable means of operations. This is where Rimagined can be a key force by becoming a partner to regular manufacturers in their endeavour to be a zero waste enterprise.

Also, as an enterprise who is the first mover in the Upcycling space in India, we have created a strong production backend that can handle different types of waste.

The way ahead for Rimagined is to have strategic partnerships with garment manufacturers and fabric creators who will become our vendor partners for fabric waste supply.

This can be handled in two ways

- 1) Become Manufacturing partner for organizations – repurpose their waste and they buy it back from Rimagined
- 2) Becomes buyer partners for manufacturers – source the fabric waste and create a Rimagined label of products

Engagement with the Brands

- 1) RangSutra – we are working with their fabric waste and creating a Rimagined label of Apparel from the fabric waste
- 2) Exploring partnerships with other enterprises – be their zero waste partners (H&M IKEA, FabIndia)