**Zara fuels the climate crisis with tons of air cargo fashion**

**Faster and faster, more and more harmful to the climate: The fast fashion industry relies on short-lived fashion trends and is flying tons of clothes around the world. Due to its business model, the Spanish fashion giant Zara and global online retailers such as Shein especially rely on flying. Public Eye calls on companies to phase out climate-damaging flying fashion.**

DAVID HACHFELD AND ROMEO REGENASS

The venue is Aeropuerto de Zaragoza, the second largest cargo airport in Spain. A cargo jumbo of the airline Atlas Air, departed from Delhi airport, is on its way to land. On board: around 100 tonnes of clothing for Zara and other brands of the Spanish fashion giant Inditex. They are prepared in Spain for onward shipment to the 5815 stores worldwide, and a few days later large parts of them are loaded into one of the approximately 15 cargo planes that take off week after week for the main customer Inditex in Zaragoza and fly to destinations in North and Central America, the Middle East, Asia and also in Europe.

Oscar Garcia Maceiras is the head of Inditex, which operates 38 stores, 7 online shops as well as a trading company and a tax optimization company in Fribourg in Switzerland with its brands Zara, Zara Home, Massimo Dutti, Bershka, Pull&Bear, Oysho and Stradivarius. At the Annual General Meeting in A Coruña, Spain, Garcia Maceiras was able to present a net profit of 4.1 billion euros to his shareholders in July this year. With sales of 32.6 billion euros, this results in a profit margin of over 12.5%. In doing so, Inditex beats even Nestlé; the Swiss group reported just under 10% for 2022.

However, the Zara Group presented not only lavish profits, but also ambitious sustainability goals and climate promises. Among them: "even more eco-friendly clothes" and "net zero emissions by 2040". What the boss of the world's second-largest fashion group after Nike did not say: that Inditex flies tons of clothes around the world – climate crisis or not. But this is probably one of the 10% of greenhouse gas emissions that are "difficult to eliminate" according to the group's new [sustainability targets](https://www.inditex.com/itxcomweb/api/media/cdcf54dd-4c9b-4ee9-92ab-f55d28d65901/Inditex+New+Sustainability+Commitments.pdf?t=1690537968645), which Inditex wants to "neutralize or offset through carbon absorption initiatives".

**Painting ephemeral fashion green**

Inditex is doing a lot to present itself as a climate protection pioneer. Under the title ["Join Life",](https://www.zara.com/ch/de/z-join-life-mkt1399.html) the Group presents a wide range of sustainability initiatives. For example, in 2021, Zara announced the development of a [collection of recycled carbon emissions](https://fashionunited.ch/nachrichten/business/zara-und-lanzatech-entwickeln-kollektion-aus-recycelten-kohlenstoffemissionen/2021121728783) and is a member of a clean ocean freight initiative. Inditex likes to write about increasing the efficiency of transport, but the company prefers to remain silent about the climate-damaging flying around of its clothes.

Inditex is considered a pioneer of the fast fashion industry and boasts its 5815 shops worldwide (as of the end of January 2023) [twice a week with new clothes](https://www.pullandbear.com/ch/page/company.html). Brands such as Zara or Pull&Bear can design, produce and deliver a new part in three to four weeks; many competitors plan months for this. Short production and delivery times make it possible to reduce fashion cycles to a few weeks and give consumers the feeling that they constantly need something new in order not to miss a trend.

This is what Zara's sales strategy, which a former Inditex manager defined years ago, is based on: "We want our customers to understand that they have to buy something they like immediately because it may no longer be available next week. The supply in the shops must always be scarce, so that the opportunity to buy seems favorable." As a result, Inditex manages to sell 85% of all items at full price – a high value in the world of cheap fashion. However, the highly profitable business model is also based on low wages in production: [As Public Eye calculated in 2019,](https://www.publiceye.ch/de/themen/mode/der-preis-eines-zara-pullovers) Zara, for example, probably makes more profit with a hoodie sweater than all the workers involved in production earn from it combined.

**EU Commission wants fast fashion to go out of fashion**

The trend towards short-lived fashion has consequences: According to [a study by the British Ellen MacArthur Foundation](https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/a-new-textiles-economy), the production of textiles doubled worldwide between 2000 and 2015, and is expected to more than double again by 2030. That is why the [EU Commission](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/circular-economy/reset-trend/how-eu-making-fashion-sustainable_en) is targeting Zara & Co. when it calls for a ban on the destruction of unsold textiles and information on the ecological footprint of garments. With good reason: in 2022, Zara's parent company Inditex set a new record with 621244 tons of textiles produced; despite the discontinuation of the important Russian business, the volume put on sale increased by 10% compared to the previous record year of 2021. The Commission now wants [fast fashion to "go out of fashion"](https://www.watson.ch/international/wirtschaft/552183873-kampf-gegen-fast-fashion-eu-kommission-stellt-nachhaltige-strategie-vor): disposable fashion should no longer be en vogue.

Scientific estimates of the fashion industry's exact share of global emissions differ, but there is a consensus that urgent action is needed. To ensure that fashion ends up on sale more quickly and that short-lived trends can be better monetized, fast fashion brands such as Zara rely more heavily than others on the plane, both in the procurement of goods and in sales.

According to a study by the Swiss environmental consultancy Quantis, transport accounts for only around [3% of the fashion industry's greenhouse gas emissions on average](https://quantis.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/measuringfashion_globalimpactstudy_full-report_quantis_cwf_2018a.pdf)  ; by far the largest part is attributable to the production of raw materials and their processing. But in the case of air cargo fashion, this proportion is increasing dramatically: the greenhouse gas emissions of air freight are around 14 times higher than those of sea freight. This is the result  [of a study](https://systain.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Systain_Whitepaper_Carbon-Footprint-von-Bekleidung_de-2.pdf) in which the Hamburg-based environmental consulting firm Systain, together with the Otto Group, calculates the CO2 footprint of a long-sleeved shirt.

The long-sleeved shirt has come a long way: from cotton from the USA to yarn production, dyeing and sewing in Bangladesh to transporting the finished product by seagoing vessel to Germany and then on to the customer's doorstep. That's more than 35,000 kilometres – almost once around the world. Despite this distance, transports account for only 3% of CO2 emissions. If, on the other hand, the finished part were to come to Europe by plane, the transport share would rise to a remarkable 28% (see infographic). No wonder, the share of greenhouse gas emissions at the Zara Group is significantly higher than the 3% that apply to the industry. In 2021, the figure was 10.6%, and in 2022, after the discontinuation of business in Russia, it was still over 8%.

Aviation fashion is thus becoming a driver of the climate crisis. And this is completely unnecessary. After all, manufacturers such as Zara's parent company Inditex could massively reduce the proportion of air freight without major problems.

**Inditex's business model relies on the airplane**

The companies are very non-transparent when it comes to the emissions caused by aviation fashion. We have therefore analysed publicly available data as well as customs and trade data. We also came across other companies such as Nike, H&M or C&A, but we did not find evidence of a similarly high volume of air cargo as at Inditex.

Regardless of where they are produced, virtually all of Zara & Co.'s products end up in the large distribution centres that the group operates around Zaragoza Airport in Spain. There, the parts are smoothed, tested and assembled for worldwide shipment to the stores.

According to the 2022 Annual Report, around half of the production took place in North Africa, Turkey and the Iberian Peninsula, the rest in distant production countries (Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, China, India, Cambodia, Pakistan and Vietnam).

Many garments sold in countries that Inditex supplies by plane (and this includes numerous important markets, see infographics world maps) have seen the cargo hold of a cargo plane twice from the inside. Compared to other fashion brands, this also leads to a significantly higher climate damage of the transports.

**In Zaragoza alone, 1600 flights per year for Inditex**

The flagship of this business model is the central logistics centre "[Plaza](https://www.modaes.com/empresa/inditex-planea-centralizar-las-devoluciones-de-zara-desde-su-nuevo-centro-en-zaragoza)" near Zaragoza Airport, which operates in four shifts, 360 days a year. "Every piece of women's clothing that Inditex sells anywhere in the world goes through Plaza," says a [video from local TV station Aragón TV.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3fnNhukSoM) The video shows how an Emirates Skycargo cargo plane is loaded with 37 huge pallets of Inditex goods for the flight to Dubai. Inditex has a hub there where parts of the cargo are prepared for the onward flight to Australia and Asian destinations. Inditex employee Alberto Pérez, who is in charge of loading the aircraft, says that around 32 cargo flights with around 100 tons of clothes on board are handled in Zaragoza for Inditex every week. That's well over 1600 aircraft movements per year. [INSERT INDITEX'S RESPONSE HERE].

As a result, Zaragoza became the No. 2 among Spain's cargo airports in 2019; Inditex accounted for 90% of the volume of 183,000 tonnes according to the regional economic development agency. In 2022, the volume fell by a good 34% after a record high of 194,000 tonnes in 2021 as a result of the war in Ukraine, probably also because Inditex had closed its 502 stores and online shop [in Russia, its most important market after Spain](https://www.thenomadtoday.com/articulo/economy-business/spanish-fashion-giant-inditex-temporarily-closes-502-russian-stores/20220305190444016931.html). Previously, Inditex had flown to Moscow with two cargo jumbos of the Russian Air Bridge Cargo per week, the onward flight was to Hong Kong.

Not everything is flown; what can reach the shops by land from Zaragoza within 36 hours is more likely to be transported by large trucks. This means that shops and online shops in Europe are partly supplied by road.

**Tons of fashion are also flown within the EU**

But even within the EU, where air freight offers only a slight time advantage, fashion is flown: in 2022 it was at least 42658 tons (since goods are not cleared within the EU, the statistics here are incomplete). Strikingly, by far the largest proportion of these air transports come from Spain – specifically 64% or 27392 tonnes. The sender here is likely to be mainly Inditex. The main destinations were Greece with 8034 tonnes and Poland with 5132 tonnes. In both countries, the Zara Group is represented by numerous stores, and due to the distance, the clothes cannot be in the stores by land within the 36 hours requested by Inditex. Based on data from the airport operator Aena, these markets are not likely to be served by freight-only flights from Zaragoza, but will fly as cargo on passenger flights from Madrid and Barcelona, where Inditex is also a major cargo customer. In Barcelona, the fashion industry has been the largest customer of cargo handlers for years.

[From Sète in the south of France to Poznań in Poland, Inditex has recently started using the freight train to supply the warehouse for online orders in Central Europe.](https://www.lok-report.de/news/deutschland/industrie/item/39505-cfl-klog-start-der-neuen-intermodalen-verbindung-sete-poznan.html) On the return journey, Ikea uses the same train composition and uses it to travel furniture made in Poland to Spain. This saves a total of 12000 tons of CO2 emissions per year and is a good approach, but only a drop in the ocean.

**Lots of Inditex aviation fashion from Bangladesh**

In Bangladesh [In 2022, the Group awarded orders worth 1.25 billion euros to 170 factories](https://www.thefinancetoday.net/article/business/18100/Top-RMG-buyers-lobby-for-contracting-Maersk); this emerges from a letter from the head of Inditex Bangladesh to a local authority, which was published by the local financial portal "The finance today". According to trade figures, Inditex has dropped at least 16% of this at Dhaka Airport as air freight. From January to August 2023, the figure was as high as 22.7%.

But that's not all: According to a trade magazine, Inditex also transports finished textiles by truck to Delhi, India, where they are flown to Zaragoza with Atlas Air cargo jumbos. The reason for this is apparently recurring capacity problems at Dhaka Airport, where finished textiles account for 85% of freight volumes. Inditex flexes its muscles in such situations and buys up to 70% of the cargo capacity from Dhaka Airport,  [the trade magazine "The Loadstar" quoted a cargo company as saying in 2021](https://theloadstar.com/major-retailers-snap-up-peak-air-freight-capacity-leaving-small-firms-struggling/), without receiving a comment from Inditex.

A major producer of Zara clothing in Bangladesh is the listed Far East Knitting and Dying Industries, which employs around 6,000 people. The large factory in Gazipur mainly produces women's T-shirts for Zara, from January to August this year almost 10 million pieces, according to trade data. A quarter of them reached Spain by air, often via Doha or Dubai.

The whole absurdity of Inditex flight fashion is revealed by a look at the price level, which is also evident from the trade data: Inditex only pays around 1.90 francs (2.10 US dollars) per shirt to Far East Knitting. [INSTALL INDITEX'S RESPONSE]. If you send clothes in large quantities by sea, the transport costs per garment are usually a few cents. Air freight, on the other hand, is expensive. Due to the pandemic, prices have fluctuated greatly in recent years, but at least 1.50 francs per kilo are likely to be due. Keep in mind, that would only be the cost from Bangladesh to Spain. If, for example, the goods are flown from there to a US branch, freight costs continue to rise.

A popular argument for justifying air freight is the high value of goods. However, according to data from the Barcelona Tax Office, aviation fashion has a value of just under 18 euros per kilo when imported, rising to 41.50 euros in exports. This is in stark contrast to pharmaceuticals and chemicals, where the export value in Barcelona is just under 120 euros.

Even if Inditex, as a mega customer of the cargo airlines, can certainly knock out discounts, the additional air transport costs per shirt are likely to be at least 20 to 40 cents. [INSERT INDITEX'S RESPONSE HERE]. By way of comparison, the purchase prices that Inditex and other retailers pay to Far East Knitting are so tight that after deducting material and energy costs (about 70%), there is hardly anything left to distribute. The producer's latest annual report also shows that only 18% of the proceeds, i.e. just 34 cents for a typical Zara shirt, flow into direct labor costs.

The typical poverty wage of a seamstress in Bangladesh is currently the equivalent of 80 francs – per month! As we write these lines, workers in Gazipur and Dhaka are protesting for an increase in the minimum wage to 190 francs. But the employers' side is blocking, also with reference to the low purchase prices of the international brand companies. If Zara and Co. were to save the completely unnecessary air freight costs and pay more to Far East Knitting and the other manufacturers, there would be significantly more money for better wages in the coffers. However, in order for all wages to at least secure a living wage, a more comprehensive redistribution of value-added gains along the supply chain would be needed.

((Box on purchasing practices, also to be placed in the MAG near the Bangladesh Passage))

**Flying fashion increases the pressure on workers**

Fast fashion demands great flexibility from suppliers, price pressure is increasing, larger orders are being split into many small ones and standard delivery times are shrinking to a few weeks. This increases the time pressure in the factories, and the workers feel it. For the factories and the workforce, larger orders with long lead times are usually better, because they create planning security and enable an even distribution of working hours. The shorter the deadlines, the more partial orders are outsourced to subcontractors and overtime is scheduled.

Flying fashion makes splitting into small partial orders more likely. Companies then first look at how articles are received by customers. Those that run well are reordered at a rapid pace and, if it is particularly urgent, flown in. If an article does not run, the follow-up orders will not be placed.

This production model is particularly drastic for ultra-fast fashion companies such as Shein, where orders of 100 to 150 garments are common and factories are expected to be able to deliver in a few days. 75-hour weeks for the seamstresses are the result, as we showed in a report in 2021.

While companies such as Inditex and Shein plan with air freight from the outset and organize the capacities for it themselves, in other cases unfair contract conditions lead to unplanned air transports. Some fashion companies negotiate such short delivery times that there are practically no time reserves if change requests come in after sample inspection, production release is delayed or necessary material is not available quickly. The terms of delivery specified by the purchasers often provide for high contractual penalties as soon as the agreed delivery window is exceeded (see highlighted example below). In order not to lose even more money, suppliers switch to air freight under pressure, at their own expense.

**«If, for any reason [!] the manufacturer fails to meet the delivery date set by the Company, the Company may, in its sole discretion, either approve a modified delivery schedule, require shipment by air freight at the manufacturer's expense, or cancel the order without the Company being liable to the manufacturer."**

Excerpt from a production contract published anonymously by Human Rights Watch in 2019 in the report ["Paying for a Bus Ticket and Expecting to Fly](https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/04/24/paying-bus-ticket-and-expecting-fly/how-apparel-brand-purchasing-practices-drive#_ftn72) ".

((Continued main story))

Inditex also generates a lot of air traffic to the Americas: The aviation route with the highest volume is likely to be the one to Mexico City, with 383 stores in 2022 among Inditex's top 3 markets and at the same time a hub to South America. "Inditex flies five freighters per week with fashion, accessories and the facilities for the shops to the Mexican capital," [Lufthansa Cargo proudly wrote in a blog about its partner Inditex back in 2016](https://lufthansa-cargo.com/de/-/de/flying-boxes-71). "In addition, there are considerable quantities that enter this growth market in the cargo holds of passenger aircraft," it says. With 18565 tonnes, Mexico was the most important export destination at Zaragoza Airport in 2022, followed by Qatar and the USA.

**Shein sends tons of packages all over the world**

The data situation is poor for aviation fashion, which is not sent to distribution centers, but in the form of individual packages directly to consumers. The online retailer Shein, for example, sends huge quantities of fashion directly from China by airmail to private households all over the world, but the trade statistics are unfortunately fuzzy for this type of small goods shipment.

In November 2021, Public Eye published a [Report on working conditions in production](https://stories.publiceye.ch/shein/) published. Our research at the time had shown that Shein sends tons of packages from China by plane. As the television RTS in French-speaking Switzerland revealed in May of this year with GPS tracking, returns that arrive in China by ship are also sent to new buyers by plane. Almost a third of the almost 8 tonnes of fashion that comes to Switzerland by plane comes from China.

According to a trade magazine, online trade as a whole already accounts for 50% of air freight capacities from China.

Four China Southern Airlines freighters are constantly commuting back and forth on Shein's main routes between Guangzhou and Los Angeles, as well as Guangzhou and Amsterdam or London. In July 2022, the airline, the largest in Asia, celebrated a new [strategic partnership with Shein](https://www.just-style.com/news/shein-partners-china-airline-to-strengthen-logistics-capacity/) to increase its flight capacity. The fact that Shein can also be different is shown by a surprise find of our [research](https://www.publiceye.ch/de/themen/mode/shein-das-phantom-von-luettich): For the equipment of its new EU logistics center in Poland, the company also delivers some products by train from China. But the fixation on speed makes Shein continue to stick to direct shipping by air freight.

**Empty words instead of concrete measures to reduce aviation**

Inditex seems to want to hide the problem of climate-damaging air transport: In its [2022 annual report](https://static.inditex.com/annual_report_2022/pdf/Inditex-group-annual-report-2022.pdf), the company only vaguely writes about a "review of transports" and a "search for alternative means of transport" with regard to emissions. A presentation by the Zara Group's sustainability officer in February 2023 at an industry meeting in Barcelona had the same thrust, air freight was not an issue. The measures to reduce the ecological footprint focus on other areas of the value chain, such as the reduction of water consumption.

The air cargo industry, on the other hand, is relying primarily on technical innovations to combat the climate crisis. Minimal improvements are made by slightly more efficient aircraft. The rest is hope, because technical innovations such as fuels from renewable energies do not yet exist or do not yet exist on an industrial scale. That is why the industry is currently focusing on non-binding initiatives and compensation projects such as Corsia, the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation. However, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) does not see this as a suitable instrument, as it writes in its sixth report: "Corsia naturally does not lead to a reduction in emissions from aviation, as the programme mainly trades approved offsets. Corsia is, at best, a transitional arrangement that allows aviation to reduce its impact in a more meaningful way at a later date."

In short: At least as long as the hoped-for technical innovations are not there, it would be much more expedient and obvious to reduce air freight and only fly really urgent things such as medicines, express airmail, spare parts. Fashion is definitely not one of them: it would continue to be in stores even without air freight. Only fast fashion trends would take a few weeks longer to end up in the displays. Such a deceleration would not be a loss, but an opportunity for more conscious consumption and more durable designs.

Whether it's Zara, Shein or others, flying fashion halfway around the world is a completely unnecessary burden on our environment in view of the climate crisis. Flight fashion must be stopped.