

The role of reuse within the circular economy

SHIFTING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF CHARITABLE DONATIONS FROM RECYCLING TO REUSE WILL HELP EDUCATE CONSUMERS ON THE FUNDAMENTAL TENETS OF CIRCULARITY, WRITES OMER SOKER, CHARITABLE RECYCLING AUSTRALIA CEO.

Before we examine the role of reuse as a cornerstone of the circular economy, I have an admission.

I'm confused about the commonly accepted definitions of the words waste and recycling, and the limiting narratives this creates.

For example, if someone throws a brand new \$2800 Louis Vuitton handbag into the red bin, is it waste?

What if they donate it to a charity shop or put it in a charity donation bin? Is this waste or is it a resource?

And then, when a lucky shopper buys it for \$280 in an op shop, are they 'recycling', or is this actually 'reuse' in all its glory?

At Charitable Recycling Australia – where we champion the circular economy for a sustainable environment and an equitable society – we have a view on this.

Firstly, our credentials. We've been operating on circular economy principals for over a hundred years, since the first charity shop was opened in 1880 under the then progressive name of a recycling depot. Now, in 2020, our collective network of 3000 plus charity and social enterprise



Omer Soker, Charitable Recycling Australia CEO, says reuse creates up to 195 jobs per 10,000 tonnes of material.

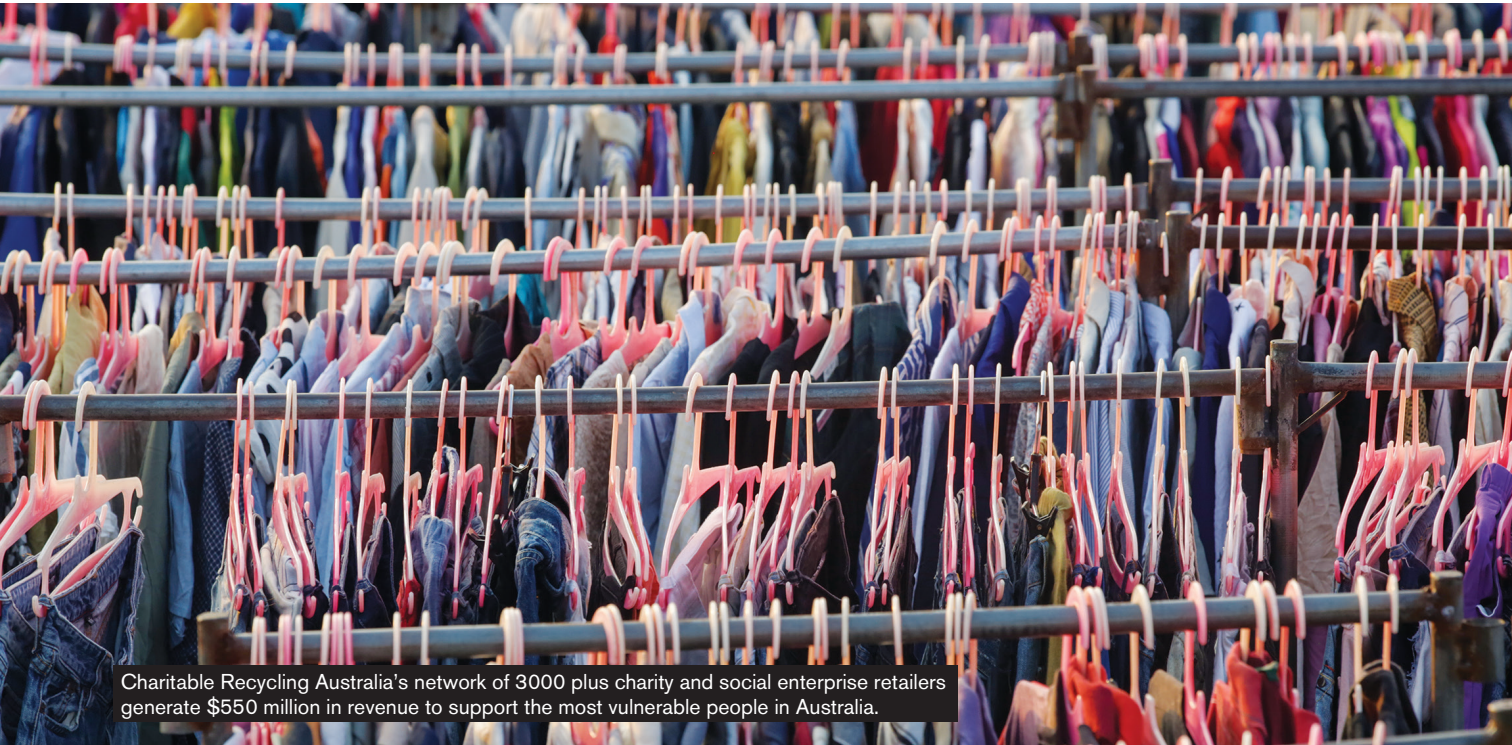
retailers reuse 285 million products a year, divert 642,000 tonnes from landfill and generate \$550 million in revenue to support the most vulnerable people in Australia. What we do, mostly, is reuse.

These 285 million products – clothes, toys and homewares – are simply reused again and again by different people to maximise the life of these precious resources.

75,000 tonnes of these resources are also exported to developing countries, where they are also reused – as the clothes, toys and homewares they are.

And yet, so many people define what we do in terms of waste or recycling. And that needs to change.

In our National Textiles Reuse Policy recommendations to the Federal Government, we've asked them to re-define donation behaviour to charities



Charitable Recycling Australia's network of 3000 plus charity and social enterprise retailers generate \$550 million in revenue to support the most vulnerable people in Australia.

as reuse instead of recycling. We've asked them to re-define donations to charity as a resource and not accept anyone suggesting this is waste.

Why? Because reuse is the cornerstone of any circular economy policy. And proper definitions of reuse and resources will help educate consumers and businesses on the fundamental tenets of circularity, just as defaulting from waste to recycling is simply an extension of limiting linear thinking. What you measure improves, so lets measure reuse and resources.

Doesn't it make sense to reuse products over and over again to extract the maximum value out of them, before we then break them down to their constituent parts and recycle them?

Reuse also creates up to 195 jobs per 10,000 tonnes, which makes it up to twenty times as effective in job creation than recycling. Did I mention the half a billion reuse dollars raised towards social welfare programs?

Recycling is absolutely essential.

We must create the infrastructure and end markets to make this a profitable business for all the smart companies out there creating technology solutions. Charities are 100 per cent supportive and ready to collaborate collectively on raw material, sorting and logistics capabilities.

We want to see more, better and cost-efficient recycling. All we're asking is that reuse is prioritised first – so everyone gets the maximum value – before we invest to accelerate recycling at end-of-life. A perfect example of this is the Federal Government's National Product Stewardship Investment Fund. It's a brilliant and much needed initiative. However, if a product stewardship scheme misses the reuse opportunity by jumping straight to recycling, we all lose. Especially on products like clothes that can and should be reused.

That's why we've launched our National Textiles Reuse Policy. To call for a government endorsed, multi-stakeholder policy to get clothes out of

landfill – where the national resource recovery rate is 12 per cent – and into the charitable sector system where our resource recovery rates can reach 80-90 per cent.

Charitable Recycling Australia is also investing directly in quality research and data-led recommendations. We have commissioned a major research project to identify the triple bottom line impact of the charitable reuse and recycling sector using clothes as a case study. In addition to this, we are the Partner Investigator in a Monash University led ARC Grant project to measure the benefits of charitable reuse in the circular economy, together with the Department of Environment and Science, Green Industries South Australia and Sustainability Victoria.

So, please let's get clear on definitions, because language matters. And because the transition to a circular economy is driven by behaviour change. So, let's change what we define and what we measure – and start talking reuse. ■