

Reading the Label

Our T-shirts can talk!



Complexity



10-13 years



60 minutes



4-30



Environment



Poverty



Human Rights

Type of activity

Group discussion, drawing, writing

Overview

Children look at the labels on their clothes and personal belongings, and discuss what lies behind them.

Objectives

- To develop an understanding of trade, globalisation and the environment
- To encourage responsible and sustainable consumption
- To develop ideas on how to promote human rights

Preparation

Make copies and cut out the cards at end of this activity. You will need one set of cards for each small group.

Optional: Internet research regarding the life cycle of a T-shirt, or read the handout of the activity 'Beware, we are watching!' in www.coe.int/compass.

Prepare some images to support the children's understanding of growing, picking and making cotton. These can be displayed on an overhead screen or given as handouts.

Materials

- Flipchart or board, paper, markers
- A map of the world
- A plain T-shirt
- Cards at the end of this activity (Life Cycle of a T-shirt)

Instructions

1. Tell the children that in this session, the group will try to use the labels on their clothes, personal belongings and other objects in the room to investigate the story behind them. Ask the children if they know what a label is, and why it is useful. List their ideas on a flipchart or board. If necessary, explain that a label is a form of identification for an object: it tells us where it is made, from what material, and so on.
2. Divide the children into small groups of four or five people each, and give them a piece of paper and a marker. Ask them to look at all the labels they can find in their group – for example, on their clothes, shoes, or on other personal belongings, on food, etc. Ask them to find out the country of origin of each item. They should write down all these countries on the piece of paper.
3. When each group has finished writing down the countries, bring the large group back together and mark on a world map each of the countries the children have identified.
4. Now show them a plain T-shirt and explain that this is one of the most commonly worn items of clothing around the world. Almost everyone has a T-shirt! In their groups, ask the children to

imagine the different stages needed to make a T-shirt, up to the point where someone buys one in a shop.

5. After a few minutes' discussion, distribute the handout 'Life Cycle of a T-shirt' to each group. Ask the children to think about what needs to be done at the different stages and to make an illustration for each card. Finally, they should think about all the natural resources that are needed to complete each step – for example, soil and water for growing the cotton. Ask them to use their imagination!
6. When the groups have finished, ask them to present their results. Draw up a general list on the flipchart or board of all the resources needed at the different stages. Then ask for the children's reactions to the list, such as:
 - Did you know that so many things were needed to make a T-shirt?
 - Are you surprised?
7. Give the children some information about how T-shirts are made and tell them that different stages in the process are often carried out in different countries, partly because companies often want to find the cheapest labour possible so that T-shirts cost less to produce. Often this means using children as part of the labour force.

Debriefing and Evaluation

1. Discuss the activity using questions such as these:
 - Did you enjoy this activity? Did you find it difficult?
 - Before this activity, had you ever looked at the labels in your clothes?
 - What do you think about the number of countries that your clothes and other possessions are likely to have visited?
2. Relate the activity to issues of human rights and the environment, asking questions such as these:
 - Why are these products made in these countries?
 - Do you think it's important to know how, and where, your clothes are made? Why?
 - What are some of the human rights or environmental problems connected with the clothing industry? How could we make sure that our clothes are not produced under conditions that violated human rights?
 - What can we do to make sure that we (the children) do not inherit the environmental problems being caused today, such as climate change?

Suggestions and follow up

The activity 'Modern Fairytale' can be used to explore the questions of child labour. 'Take a Small Step Forward' looks at the conditions of children in different countries around the world.

Ideas for action

You can support children in organising a small campaign at school or in the community to encourage fair and sustainable consumption. They could visit local producers or fair-trade shops and produce their own report of what they find.

Children could write letters to the companies of their favourite brands, asking for assurance that no children are exploited or used as part of the labour force, and that environmental rights are respected. There are a number of international campaigns that children could find out about, and then become involved with:

- Clean Clothes Campaign: <https://cleanclothes.org>
- Fashion Revolution – Who made my clothes: www.fashionrevolution.org
- Change your shoes Campaign: <https://labourbehindthelabel.org>

Tell the children about the annual Fair Trade Week organised in Belgium, at the Trade for Development Centre. In 2017, children from the primary school of Rosières in Rixensart, Belgium, in partnership with artists, spent some time learning about fair trade, and then created a short video available on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsUQ7Z6dEgQ). Use this to encourage your group to write their own song!

Tips for facilitators

You may want to show children some images – for example, of cotton plants – to assist them in understanding the stages. Angel Chang’s TED-Ed video on the life cycle of a T-shirt is an excellent resource with subtitles in 25 languages (www.youtube.com/watch?v=BiSYoeqb_VY). You might want to show this clip to the children during the activity at Step 5 if you can.

When the groups list the things necessary at each stage, prompt them in case anything has been missed out. For example, they may say that a boat is needed to transport the T-shirts, but they may forget the fuel needed to power the boat.

Be aware that labels are not always easy to understand, and sometimes they may be in a foreign language or countries may be unfamiliar – for example, PRC, for the People’s Republic of China. Even though it is common to label clothing with the country of origin, it is not mandatory in Europe to do so!

Adaptation

You could choose other products to discuss. For example, chocolate is a ‘globalised’ food, as are many children’s toys and technological gadgets – which also have enormous environmental and human rights footprints. You could contact fair-trade organisations or a network in your country to get more information and products with a “different” story.



Handouts

Life cycle of a T-shirt

Growing	Picking
<i>How is the cotton grown?</i>	<i>How is the cotton taken from the plants?</i>
Turning it into thread	Weaving
<i>How do you make the long threads of cotton?</i>	<i>How do you make the thread into sheets of cotton?</i>
Making T-shirts	Transporting
<i>How do you turn the material into T-shirts?</i>	<i>How do you get the T-shirts to the shops?</i>
Selling	Using
<i>How do the T-shirts reach the customer?</i>	<i>How do we look after them at home?</i>