

Collaboration to power shift towards sustainable fashion



By [Caroline Nelson](#)

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If you listen to everything happening around us in South Africa and extend that listening to the rest of the world, it's easy to believe that the fashion retail environment hasn't much hope in the world. However, when you start to pay closer attention here in South Africa, you will see that there's a lot of fantastic things happening, especially in the sustainability space.



Caroline Nelson, CEO and country manager for H&M South Africa. Source: Supplied

People are starting to pay attention, and that's a great thing, especially for us here because sustainability will continue to be on the forefront of all industries for the foreseeable future, should we want to have one.

I believe that the difference now versus previous years, particularly in the fashion industry is that people are willing to listen, to collaborate and to finally take stock of the fact that nobody is an expert, and that we are all to blame for the past but can equally, together, be responsible for the future.

This was clearly demonstrated to me when we held a cross-industry sustainability conference in Cape Town in November 2022, where we came together, from farm to fashion and realised the potential we all have, not just to work together to change the fashion industry for the better but to also be world leaders in this effort.



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It is this sort of attitude that gives hope, and a unique selling point in South Africa is that we tend to have a naturally sustainable mindset compared to many developed countries because of the challenges we face daily. This, alongside the

abundance of natural resources we have here to create a sustainable fashion industry for the future, and some of the most innovative and creative thinkers globally give me hope that this can be done.

There are some incredible projects happening across the country. Farmers are paying attention to the land and how to preserve and protect it, there's a concerted effort to make hemp growth and production a global export, and retailers are becoming more deliberate in the consideration of what their garments are made of and in ensuring there are ways to avoid them ending up in landfill, with programmes such as garment collection initiatives run in partnership with [NGO Clothes to Good](#).



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This shift in attitude and the actions associated with it mean that the potential to change both the industry and the world is possible.

Can this happen overnight? Absolutely not, however, if we focus on the areas where we can have an impact, through practical skills development, simple biodiversity projects - like the one we are focusing on with [BKB in the Eastern Cape](#) - and the willingness for us to collaborate and succeed together as a retail fashion industry, I truly believe that South Africa can be the global leaders of the sustainable fashion movement, and this gives me hope.

ABOUT CAROLINE NELSON

Caroline Nelson is the CEO and Country Manager for H&M South Africa, responsible for overall strategy, sales, people, operations, sustainability and expansion of the South African organisation. Nelson has worked with the H&M Group across varying roles in the United States while also supporting expansion into Central and South America and New Zealand. She is currently based in Cape Town where H&M's South African Head Office is based.

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