Trashion: The stealth export of waste plastic clothes to Kenya
Executive summary

Our report exposes the hidden export of plastic waste to the Global South, fuelled by the growing production of cheap, synthetic clothing made by brands in the Global North. Despite restrictions on plastic waste export around the world, an overwhelming volume of used-clothing shipped to Kenya is waste synthetic clothing, a toxic influx which is creating devastating consequences for the environment and communities. Our estimates suggest that in recent years over 300 million items of damaged or unsellable clothing made of synthetic – or plastic – fibres are exported to Kenya each year where they end up dumped, landfilled or burned, exacerbating the plastic pollution crisis.

As the production of clothing has skyrocketed in the past two decades, an increasing proportion of clothing is made from cheap synthetic fibres. Synthetics account for 69% of all fibre production and have become the backbone of fast fashion. The Global North is using the trade of used-clothing as a pressure-release valve to deal with fast fashion’s enormous waste problem.

Our previous research exposed the links between synthetics and fast fashion and has taken us from the oil wells and refineries of polyester production to the brands lack of action on fossil fuel-derived fibres. Now we finally reach the end of the runway for fossil fashion. The used-clothing trade on its inexorable journey to becoming waste.
Key findings

The report finds that the system of used-clothing trade is currently at breaking point. It finds that export of used clothing is, to a large extent, the export of plastic waste, burdening communities and the environment in the receiving countries.

- Although exporting plastic waste is restricted by the Basel Convention and banned in the EU, our assessments suggest more than 1 in 3 of used clothing shipped to Kenya contains plastic and is of such a low quality that it immediately becomes waste. In 2021, over 900 million items of used clothing shipped to Kenya are estimated to be waste, and over 300 million of these are likely to contain plastic fibres.

- People employed in the trade report that the amount of waste (unsellable used clothing) in bales arriving from abroad has increased significantly in the last few years, reflecting the increase of cheap, disposable fast fashion.

- Traders that we interviewed are caught in a lottery where 20–50% of the used-clothing in bales they buy is unsellable. EU- or UK-based used-clothing exporters are packing bales with clothing unsuitable for the destination country, due to being damaged, too small, unfit for the climate or local styles, and sometimes even with clothing that is covered in vomit, stains or otherwise damaged beyond repair.

- Sorting at the source is failing, as it results in exporting companies skimming off the high-quality clothing for resale in Europe, while the rest is sent outside its borders. Despite this fact, the export of used clothing goes through substantial inter-European trade, likely for grading and sorting purposes, before being re-exported to its final destination. The investigation also revealed that some countries, such as Pakistan, act as sorting hubs due to lower labour costs, a fact that muddies the data and may be giving a false picture of clothing reuse and recycling from Europe.


B Calculations are based on annual total imports of used clothing to Kenya of 183,505,631kg for 2021 (UN Comtrade, 2021) and the following fieldwork investigation findings: a 40kg average bale weight, an average of 200 items of clothing per bale, an upper estimate of 50% waste per bale. Our calculation for synthetic content is based on market research of over 4,000 products showing an average of 67% of clothing contains synthetics, sometimes in blends with natural fibres or with other synthetic fibres (Synthetics Anonymous, 2021).
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Through this short report we first assess fashion’s problem with waste – how it has got to the current state of affairs and what the environmental consequences are. We look at the waste trade itself and analyse customs data to establish the main exporters and importers of used clothing. To illustrate the issue in an up-close manner, the Changing Markets Foundation commissioned Wildlight and Clean Up Kenya to conduct an on-the-ground investigation, inspecting and documenting the trade of used clothing in plastic-wrapped bales (referred to in Swahili as mitumba) through Kenya, from the port to the storeroom, to the market traders, fagia (waste textiles) workers and on to its final destination in dumpsites, backyard burning and spilling into waterways.

We have also, where possible, identified the names of exporting and importing companies implicated in the trade, and the brands of clothing we discovered (see Box 3). The latter reveals a roster of household names that will be familiar to EU and UK consumers and has been included to demonstrate the ubiquity of donated clothing in the waste trade.

BOX: The investigation

The aim of our investigation was to illustrate what happens to used clothing upon export from the EU and the UK and to identify what proportion may be going straight into landfill sites and the wider environment, for example, into rivers and other watercourses, bypassing reuse and recycling/downcycling sectors. Kenya was chosen as an investigation destination because it receives a significant volume of UK and EU used-clothing exports, which seem to contribute to domestic landfill and environmental pollution issues. National customs trade data also allowed us to connect the downstream end of the export supply chain to the upstream actors. Unlike previous investigations, this report contains a level of granularity and specificity as to the actors that have a crucial role in the supply chain. We also dig into the supply chain for used clothing to reveal a level of detail on elements such as design and quality, which can provide insight when creating good policy.

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WHAT HAPPENS TO USED CLOTHING

WIPING RAGS STUFFING RAW MATERIALS FOR OTHER INDUSTRIES

CONSUMER

SORTING PROCESS

SECOND-HAND CLOTHING STORES

VINTAGE SHOPS

CHARITY SHOP

FASHION BRAND TAKE BACK SCHEMES

LANDFILLED

INCINERATED

EXPORT

DUMBED

RECYCLING COMPANIES AND EXPORTERS

RESOLD CLOTHES

LOW QUALITY CLOTHING RAGS FUEL

FAGIA SELLERS

MITUMBA TRADERS

GODOWNS

IMPORTER

KENYA

LANDFILLED

DUMMED

BURNED OR USED AS FUEL

DOWNCYCLE

REUSE

STUFFING

FOR OTHER INDUSTRIES

WIPING RAGS

RAW MATERIALS