

37 million junk plastic clothes dumped in Africa - investigation

Clothes covered in vomit, stains and animal hair hidden in shipments to Kenya

Web of trade implicates most EU countries

16 February 2023 - EU countries are dumping 37 million items of junk plastic clothing in Kenya every year that are too dirty or damaged to be reused, creating serious health and environmental problems for vulnerable communities, an [investigation](#) of trade data and conditions on-the-ground has found.

The probe by [Clean Up Kenya](#) and [Wildlight](#) for the [Changing Markets Foundation](#) highlights fast fashion's dependence on cheap plastic fabrics to make clothes that are not designed for repair or recycling and are increasingly seen as disposable. Exporting junk clothes to poorer countries has become an "escape valve" for "systemic overproduction" and a stealth waste stream that should be illegal, the investigators say.

[VIDEO trailer](#)

For all images and video, click [here](#)

The team recorded shocking images of a sprawling Nairobi [dump](#), located near several primary schools, showing waste in some places piled as high as a four storey building and spilling into a river. Much is plastic clothing, with items made by H&M, Nike and Yves Saint Laurent found by the investigators.

The investigation found:

- Of the 112 million items of used clothing shipped directly from the EU to Kenya each year, up to one in three contain plastic and are of such a low quality that they are immediately dumped or burned to heat water, for cooking and even allegedly to fuel a power station. Soil, water and air pollution impacts are significant;
- Kenyan traders report clothing soiled by vomit, heavy stains and animal hair. A McDonald's uniform was found still with the name badge attached. An M&S item with the label "recycle with Oxfam" was photographed being burnt to roast peanuts;
- Recycling firms that are part of [Fashion for Good](#) and [Textiles 2030](#) are trading high volumes of junk clothing, exposing as "empty promises" the sustainability claims made by health, child protection and international development charities;

- The amount of junk clothing flowing to Kenya from global sources has grown significantly in recent years, a torrent that amounts to 17 items of clothing every year for each Kenyan, up to 8 of which are useless.

The true scale of the problem is likely much larger because the investigation focuses only on direct exports to Kenya. Many items of used clothing exported by European countries pass through a web of countries in and outside Europe that mix and sort clothing, making it impossible to track. Transparency should be improved to crack down on waste clothes 'laundering', Changing Markets said.

A report on the investigation, [Trashion](#), *the stealth export of waste plastic clothes to Kenya*, was published the day before the start of [London Fashion Week](#). Changing Markets blames the sector for creating an explosion of poor quality clothing [1] and trying to hide the consequences with largely [misleading](#) ethical claims. Brands should be obliged to pay for their waste, *Trashion* says, and clothing must be made sustainable by design. The EU is due to [propose](#) such measures by the summer.

Trashion concludes that the used clothing trade is an obvious loophole in a 2019 [legal agreement](#) stopping richer countries dumping non-recyclable plastic waste in less wealthy ones. More than two thirds (69%) of textiles are now made of plastic, such as nylon and polyester, which are almost never recycled.

[Trade data](#) shows that the largest direct exporters to Kenya of used clothing in Europe in 2021 were Germany, Poland and the UK. Most are donations and the trade has become an important revenue stream for some charities. The Netherlands and Belgium are acting as clearinghouses for large amounts of used clothes from larger European countries.

[Betterman Simidi Musasia](#), founder and patron of Clean Up Kenya, said: *"We went to the Ground Zero of the fast fashion world to unmask an ugly truth - that the trade of used clothing from Europe is, to a large and growing extent, a trade in hidden waste. This is known as waste colonialism and it is supposed to be illegal. A large proportion of clothing donated to charity by well-meaning people ends up this way. Why? Because the backbone of the fast fashion industry is plastic, and plastic clothing is essentially junk. Countries like Kenya are fast fashion's escape valve. Traders buy bundled clothing blind and understandably dump the growing percentage that turns out to be useless. In truth, our addiction to fast fashion is saddling poorer countries like Kenya with polluted soil, air and water."*

[George Harding-Rolls](#), Campaign Manager, Changing Markets Foundation, said: *"Unless the fashion industry is fundamentally changed, what we have seen in Kenya and around the world will be just the beginning. The solution is not to shut down the used clothing trade, but to reform it. We can't recycle our way out of this problem. Instead, this hedonistic industry needs boundaries and rules. As such, we welcome the vision proposed by the EU. This should be comprehensive and include strict recycling and reuse targets, as well as plastic taxes to shift*

fashion towards more high quality, sustainable fabrics. Recycling companies can not be allowed to hide behind their empty promises and should be banned from exporting junk clothing.”

ENDS

Notes

[1] Between 2000 and 2014, global clothing production doubled and is expected to nearly double again in the next decade. Globally, we are buying 60% more clothing than 15 years ago, but keeping each item half as long. Consumers treat the lowest-priced garments as nearly disposable, discarding them after wearing them just seven or eight times. Closed-loop recycling, turning old into new clothing, accounts for up to 1% of all textile waste. Sources detailed [here](#).

Learn more about Changing Market Foundation’s research into fast fashion and its plastic dependence [here](#).

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