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This report was researched and written by the Changing Markets Foundation with fieldwork executed by Wildlight and Clean Up Kenya.

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Design: Pietro Bruni - toshi.ltd  
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# 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.





Layers of clothing and other waste at Dandora dumpsite



Burning waste clothing on Dandora dumpsite

## 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 of plastic waste is restricted under the Basel Convention and to be banned in the EU,<sup>A</sup> our assessments suggest more than 1 in 3 pieces 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 is estimated to have been exported to Kenya. Of these, up to 458 million used clothing items are estimated to be have been waste, and up to 307 million of these are likely to contain plastic-based fibres.<sup>B</sup>

A European Commission (n.d.) *Plastic waste shipments* [ONLINE] Available at: [https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/waste-and-recycling/waste-shipments/plastic-waste-shipments\\_en](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/waste-and-recycling/waste-shipments/plastic-waste-shipments_en)

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).

- 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.



- High volumes of imported lowest grade used clothing, colloquially referred to as *fagia*, were found strewn around markets or dumped in the Nairobi River, being used as fuel, such as for roasting peanuts, causing locals to inhale smoke from the burning synthetic clothing with the risk of damaging health impacts.

- Baltic Textile Trading, owners of Think Twice, were found to have sold tonnes of unsellable used clothing to *fagia* traders, who cut these into pieces which are then supplied as industrial rags and later used as industrial fuels, further contributing to air pollution and emissions.

- We found clothing from several global fashion brands among the *fagia*, dumped on landfills or burnt, including Guess, H&M, M&S, Next, Old Navy, Ralph Lauren and Superdry, among others.

- Many recycling companies are known to be involved in the used-clothing trade, and many of these are members of high-profile sustainability initiatives alongside fashion brands. For example, JMP Wilcox is part of Fashion for Good's 2021 Sorting for Circularity Campaign, and East London Textiles, JMP Wilcox, Nathan's Wastesavers, and Savanna Rags are all signatories of WRAP's Textiles 2030 initiative. Many of these initiatives and recycling companies make lofty claims about driving greater circularity, reducing waste or diverting textiles from landfill. These however sound hollow in light of the levels of waste clothing being exported by many of the same companies, which in turn is creating serious consequences for the environment and communities in the Global South.

- A large proportion of used clothing ends up dumped on continuously growing landfills in Kenya and polluting the Nairobi River, polluting the watercourse and eventually entering the ocean. As the lion's share of dumped clothing contains synthetics, the impacts of microplastic leaching and environmental contamination of water and soil are likely to be significant. In this way, waste synthetic clothing represents a less-recognised but substantial element of global plastic pollution.

- Recycling companies are often masking the trade of used clothing as a way to reduce waste and help the Global South by suggesting the clothing is re-worn or recycled. However, globally enough used clothing is sent to Kenya for 17 items of clothing per Kenyan annually, up to 8 of which are too damaged, stained or inappropriate to be used. Not only does the sheer volume constitute a surfeit of clothing on Kenya, but as 20-50% of this is waste clothing, it will end up significantly contributing to waste and plastic pollution.

With this investigation, we reach the end of the line of an enormously labour-intensive and fossil-fuel-reliant supply chain that produces fast fashion from cheap materials and finally disposes of it in the least responsible way possible. Abdication of responsibility for waste is not an accidental outcome of the fast-fashion system; it is integral to it. It is also clear that it cannot be effectively addressed by tokenistic voluntary schemes or symbolic projects. Clearing up the mess that the fashion industry has created and ensuring the sector is pulled onto a more sustainable track will require comprehensive legislation.

We are now at a critical crossroad. In its Textile Strategy, published in March 2022, the European Commission promised a significant overhaul of the fast fashion business model. Upcoming policies at the EU level create a critical opportunity to ensure that brands and retailers, which are profiting from cheap fast fashion, take responsibility for their fashion waste. Through well-designed Extended Producer Responsibility, producers must be made financially responsible for the management and cost of end-of-life treatments of the products they place on the market, which includes sorting. However, we also must

redesign the system, as it will not be possible to recycle our way out of this problem. While the EU must propose design criteria to encourage that products be reusable and recyclable from the start, and mandate recycling and reuse targets for the sector, we must also adopt measures, such as plastic taxes, to deal with cheap synthetics, which have become a major driver of the fast fashion industry. Strong EU legislation on the end-of life management is also the only way to put an end to the export of waste plastic-based clothing to the Global South, which as our investigation shows, is already at the breaking point and cannot be allowed to deteriorate further. The report includes a set of policy recommendations.

## 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.

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.

# WHAT HAPPENS TO USED CLOTHING



