

Poisoned Gifts

From donations to the dumpsite: textiles waste disguised as second-hand clothes exported to East Africa



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Greenpeace is an independent global campaigning network of organisations that acts to change attitudes and behaviour, to protect and conserve the environment and to promote peace.

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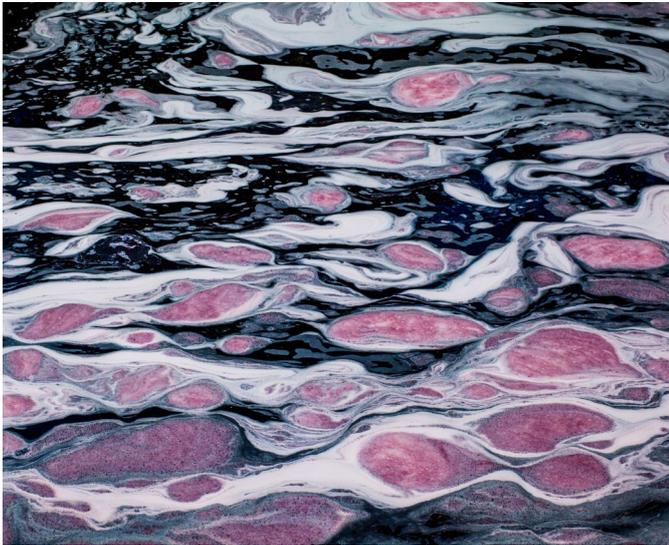
Introduction

Global fashion brands are promoting circularity, but reality shows that this is still a myth. Nowhere is the failure of the fast fashion linear business model more visible than in the countries where many of these cheap clothes end up once their short lives are over: on huge dump sites, burnt on open fires, along riverbeds and washed out into the sea, with severe consequences for people and the planet. Greenpeace Germany went to Kenya and Tanzania to witness the problem of imported textile waste in these countries and to find out about some of the many local initiatives trying to counter it through their own means. In this briefing, we reveal the role played by imported used clothes called “Mitumba” in East Africa, and how much of it is of such poor quality that it goes straight to the dumpsite.



Background: fast fashion fuels trade of used clothes and dumping of textile waste

The fashion industry is responsible for up to 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions¹ and is a major cause of water pollution worldwide,² with over 80% of its supply chain impacts on the environment taking place in Global South countries where the majority of clothes are manufactured.³ But this isn't even the only serious consequence of the fast fashion industry on the Global South, vast quantities of polluting textile waste from the fast fashion industry is increasingly making its way to Global South countries. Because of these massive negative impacts on the environment, "circularity" has become the buzzword among global fashion brands trying to clean up their image. But circularity is virtually non-existent in the fashion industry; while less than 1% of clothes are recycled into new clothes, garment production volumes are growing by 2.7% annually.⁴ Every second a truckload of garments is burnt or sent to landfill.⁵ If anything, the destructive fast fashion fad is speeding up, not slowing down. New players on the market like Shein are now pushing an "ultra fast fashion" linear business model which is built on environmental and social exploitation.⁶



After years of Greenpeace's successful **Detox My Fashion** campaign, global brands have started cleaning up their supply chains – now it's time to also shed light on what's happening to clothes after they have been produced, and put the problem of textile waste exports on the global agenda.

This briefing demonstrates how textile waste is often "disguised" as second-hand clothing and exported from the Global North to the Global South, to avoid the responsibility and costs of dealing with the problem of disposable clothes. While these exported used clothes and even brand new 'overproduced' clothes are mostly reported and recorded as "reused", in fact nearly half of them end up in dumpsites, rivers or are burnt in the open.

From donation to dumpsite: the journey of used clothes

Unfortunately, it is still not mandatory to report what happens to used clothes and textile waste anywhere in the world, and therefore the following summary is based on the little data that is provided on a voluntary basis.

In Germany alone, **about 1 million tonnes of used clothes are collected every year**. Since the middle of the 1990s the volume of clothes collected every year has grown by 20% and keeps growing along with the ever increasing speed of fast fashion.⁷ But **only a small amount of used clothes are actually resold in the country where they were collected**: about 10–30% in the UK and similar proportions in the US and Canada.⁸ Most of them end up being exported overseas. For example, out of the 11,000 tonnes of clothing donated to Oxfam in the UK every year, 3,000 tonnes (27%) is sold in its shops. Of the remaining 8,000 tonnes, 1,000 tonnes are disposed of and 5,600 tonnes (half of that donated) head abroad to Eastern Europe and East and West Africa. It is estimated that **more than 70% of all UK reused clothing heads overseas** – joining a global second-hand trade in which billions of old garments are bought and sold around the world every year.⁹

The global trade in second-hand clothing grew ten-fold between 1990 and 2004 to reach a value of around \$1 billion,¹⁰ and the market value of second-hand clothes was \$36 billion in 2021, projected to grow to \$77 billion by 2025.¹¹ In 2020 the **biggest net exporters** of used clothes were the **United States** (\$585M net trade value), **China** (\$366M net trade value), **United Kingdom** (\$272M net trade value), **Germany** (\$258M net trade value)¹² and **South Korea** (\$256M). On the other hand the **biggest net importers** were **Ghana** (\$181M net trade value), **Ukraine** (\$154M net trade value), **Nigeria** (\$123M net trade value), **Kenya** (\$122M net trade value), and **Tanzania** (\$102M net trade value).¹³



Before being exported, the used clothes are usually sold to a commercial clothing sorter or recycler. From an economic perspective, **only about half of these clothes can still be potentially reused as clothing**, the rest end up being downcycled (eg. used for rags, insulation, raw material for other industries) or thrown away. Available data varies depending on the recycler. About 45–60% is exported for reuse, about 25–50% is downcycled and officially 5–10% is waste.¹⁴

But this data does not consider that some of the clothes that are exported for “reuse” will also end up as waste, because they have no market value in the country that imports them. Either they are not adequate (sizes that don’t fit, or not useful due to the local climate), their quality is too poor, or they are broken or soiled and exporting them is just a cheap way to get rid of them. No official data is available on how much of the exported second-hand clothes is actually waste. As an example, in Ghana, some 15 million used garments pour into the capital Accra every week from the UK, Europe, North America and Australia, flooding the city’s sprawling clothing market. **An estimated 40% are of such poor quality they are deemed worthless on arrival and end up dumped in a landfill.** This means that about 6 million garments leave Kamanto Market every week as waste.¹⁵

In addition to these incredible amounts of textile waste that are being exported in shipments of “used clothes”, there is the problem of overproduction: a huge and unknown amount of clothing that is destroyed or dumped before it is even sold to consumers in the Global North. A recent report calling for an EU ban on this practice estimates that if all clothing and electronics shipments destroyed in Europe in 2020 were lined up one after the other, they would reach around the circumference of the Earth one and a half times, potentially rising to 6 times around the Earth by 2030.¹⁶



A successful campaign by Greenpeace Germany resulted in a ban on the destruction of unsold and returned goods being integrated into the German circular economy law in 2020, including a transparency obligation requiring large companies to publicly disclose the number of products they discard and destroy, including textiles.¹⁷ Pressure from many environmental groups including Greenpeace has now resulted in a new EU textile strategy released in March 2022 which plans to introduce a ban on the destruction of products and also proposes a transparency obligation.¹⁸



Figure 1 → From donation to dumpsite

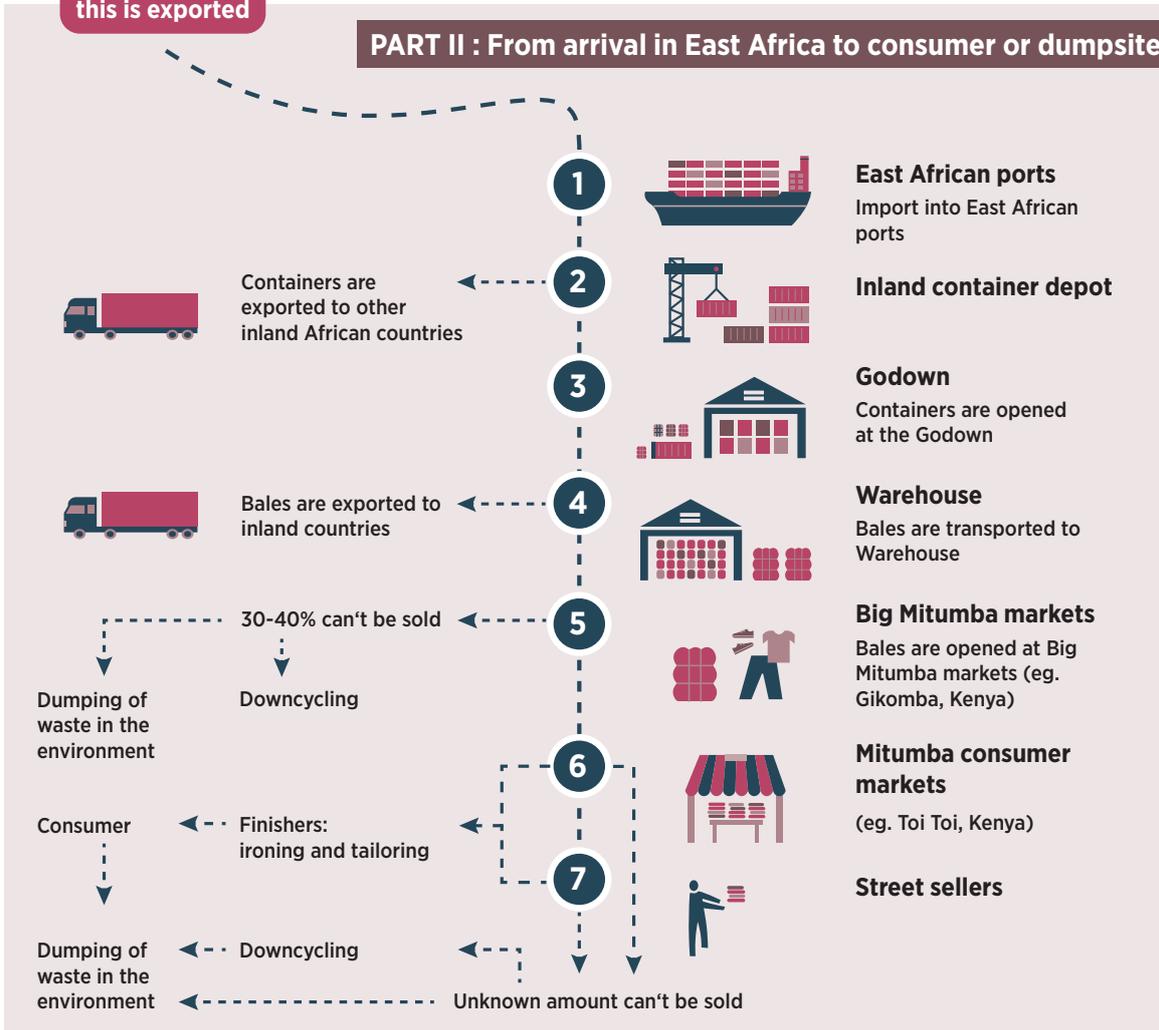
GLOBAL NORTH TO EAST AFRICA

The flow of second hand clothes and clothes waste from the Global North to East Africa

PART I : From Global North consumer to export



PART II : From arrival in East Africa to consumer or dumpsite



An overview of “Mitumba” in the East African Community Partner States¹⁹

Used and second-hand clothes exported to Africa are known locally as “Mitumba”, a Kiswahili word meaning bale or bundle, because it is typically sold to retailers in bales. Mitumba also refers to the export of second-hand clothes that have been donated by consumers in Western countries and “collected and packaged by textile recycling companies”.²⁰ It is said that the term Mitumba started to be used in the 1980s, while in the past the used clothes were called “Kafa Ulaya,”²¹ meaning “clothes from someone who died in Europe”.²² Mitumba can also include brand new clothes that have been overproduced by fashion brands but left unsold, due to unprecedented fast changing trends as well as the impact of COVID on the fashion industry, where there was no market for containers full of new clothing during the early stages of the pandemic.

Mitumba came to the African continent in the late 1980s, at a time when the local textile industry was booming, and high tariffs protected home grown garment and other businesses. However, with economic liberalisation programmes in the early 1990s, tariffs were lowered, and as a result, the textile industry had to contend with new competition.²³ The structural adjustment programmes and liberalisation policies that hit African countries from the 1980s onwards led to “both the decline of the textile and garment industry in Africa and the increased imports of Secondhand Clothes”.²⁴



Since the mid-2000s, the doubling of the number of garments purchased by the average consumer in the West, according to the Global Fashion Agenda’s Pulse Report,²⁵ led to rising volumes of second-hand clothing ending up in markets in Africa. As a result, it is currently estimated that at “Ghana’s Kamanto market, around 15 million items of used clothing from Western countries arrive every week.”²⁶ In East Africa, Kenya is the major importer of second-hand clothes and imported approximately 185,000 tons of used clothing in 2019.²⁷

Is this increase in used clothes imports useful for African people and countries, or is it problematic? Undoubtedly, there is a demand in Africa for affordable and trendy clothes, and imported second-hand garments are more affordable compared to new clothes which are perceived as expensive but not offering equivalent value in terms of quality.²⁸ Nevertheless, quality is one of the main challenges when assessing Mitumba: a consistent portion of the clothing in imported bales is such poor quality²⁹ that it is immediately dumped in landfills, often in the open air.³⁰

Whereas the common narrative is that donating clothes is a circular means of dealing with clothing waste, contributing to a circular economy, there are concerns being raised questioning this. For example, “the trade has been called “charity”, “recycling”, “diversion” and now many people call it “circular”, but none of these labels is accurate. Simply moving clothing from one place to another does not make it circular. Where initially these clothes would end up in dumpsites in the West, they now end up in dumpsites in Africa”.³¹



With mitumba continuing to drive the demand for used clothes, this has been at expense of locally made products and local textile industries, which are unable to satisfy the market and meet the demand for ‘trendy’ clothes. As a result, the East African Community (EAC) agreed in 2016 to a complete ban on used clothes imports by 2019. The argument behind the ban was to give a boost to local textiles manufacturing and help the economy.

However, the ban was challenged by the US as a blockage of free trade and threatened possible trade penalties, including losing eligibility for duty-free clothing exports to the US market, under the US African Growth and Opportunity Act³² (AGOA).³³

The reaction from East African states to Washington’s challenge to the used clothing imports ban was divided. Rwandan president Paul Kagame reiterated that “Rwanda and other nations under AGOA have to do other things, we have to grow our economies and industries”,³⁴ while the President of Uganda, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, emphasised that “the time had come

for the region to begin discarding the importation of second-hand clothes. (...) Uganda is spending over 880 million Dollars annually on textiles coming from outside the region".³⁵

Kenya, on the other hand, signalled at first that it would not respect the deadline of the ban *due to lack of capacity to meet both the domestic and export demand for textile*.³⁶ Later, the country withdrew from the 2016 agreement completely, following US threats.

To get around the difficulties in implementing the ban, Uganda, Rwanda and Tanzania³⁷ have raised the tax on imported clothes with the aim of protecting the region's textile industry.³⁸ However, this has also been met with challenges, including *consignments of used clothes lying uncollected at the port of Mombasa after the importers failed to comply with the new duty requirements*,³⁹ leading governments to further ease Mitumba import restrictions, acknowledging it as a critical part of the regional economy.



There is no doubt that Mitumba contributes to the economy of the East African Community Partner States, specifically for the countries that haven't implemented the ban on second-hand import clothes, as part of the *"East African Community's Vision 2050"* aiming at enhancing the regional manufacturing sector. Whereas some countries, including Uganda, Rwanda and Tanzania, have raised taxes for used clothes and offered incentives to manufacturers to invest in local textile sectors, there are still concerns that local factories will not be able to scale up in time to meet the deficit created by the ban.

Despite the effort in investing in local textiles, the main problem that remains underestimated is the impact of overproduction and textile waste being exported from the Global North to Africa. The fast fashion business model relies on never-ending growth and the ever faster consumption of "disposable" fashion, which is currently reliant on the Global South becoming a regional dumpsite for the growing mountains of discarded clothing. The current and future environmental, health and economic impacts of overflowing landfills and waste clothing and footwear strewn across the landscape in countries

such as Kenya and Tanzania are not considered in the linear business model of fashion today. Because much of the clothing is plastic which does not degrade easily, and may contain hazardous chemicals, this will be creating a long term problem that is difficult to clean-up. Past experience of water pollution in rivers around the world shows the immense difficulties – technical, economic and political – of cleaning up hazardous chemicals after release, including the very high expense of restoration programmes and the impossibility of total decontamination.⁴⁰



As a result, the Global North undoubtedly has a waste problem and is perpetuating a legacy of waste colonialism, as textiles waste exports are *"tied to historical colonising practices, where high-income nations exercise their privilege and power to attain their goals while undermining the rights of low-income communities to a clean and safe living condition"*.⁴¹ Colonialism is not only a force for shaping geopolitics, but its influence can be detected in the fashion industry over the decades, through the positioning of second-hand clothing exports as a way to help low-income countries rather than a convenient way to offload the problems of overproduction and overconsumption onto the Global South, along with the risks and the consequences of environmental pollution and damage to human health.



“Mitumba” in Kenya and Tanzania

With 185,000 tonnes of second-hand clothes imported in 2019,⁴² Kenya is the largest hub in East Africa, providing the government with revenues from customs duties and creating jobs.⁴³ Mitumba has been instrumental in creating employment in developing countries, including Kenya and Tanzania. In Kenya, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) Manpower Survey, *mitumba traders fall under the second-hand clothing and footwear industry which employs an estimated 10% of the extended labour force.*⁴⁴

The Mitumba industry is therefore an important part of Kenya’s economy, with *imports of second-hand clothes in the country constituting about 1% of all imports’ monetary value,*⁴⁵ corroborated by the Leading Economic Indicators of January 2022 by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics.

With a large proportion of the high volumes of imported second-hand clothes and footwear being unusable and immediately ending up as waste, it is essential to examine and identify the lead countries of export and the cycle of second-hand clothes. The domestic demand for good quality second-hand clothes among the Kenyan population also needs to be considered. At first, second-hand clothes were preferred because they were inexpensive, but more recently there has been an increase in demand for trendy styles from people of all socio-economic classes.⁴⁶



A study by Textile Value Chain shows China as the leading exporter, followed by Pakistan, Canada, and the United Kingdom, with the smallest amounts from the United Arab Emirates and South Korea.⁴⁷ This data is partly corroborated by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics,⁴⁸ which shows the main exporters as China, India, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, United States, South Africa, Germany, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and France. Not all of these countries represent the original source of the clothes, because large amounts of used clothes from Europe and North America are reprocessed in India and Pakistan and re-exported to Africa.⁴⁹



The Port of Mombasa is the main port of entry for second-hand clothes in Kenya, and the value-chain from the Port to the consumer is outlined in the report by the Institute of Economic Affairs on second-hand clothes and footwear trade in Kenya.⁵⁰

The relevance of Mitumba to Kenya’s economy is not only due to imports of second-hand clothes, but also their export to neighbouring countries, including Tanzania.

The Mitumba industry is also relevant in the United Republic of Tanzania, not just due to the imports of second-hand clothes from neighbouring Kenya: according to a 2017 report,⁵¹ *it is estimated that out of 720 million pieces of clothing consumed in Tanzania annually, 540 million pieces are second-hand. (...) These clothes are imported from countries such as the USA, Germany, and Australia, as well as China, India, and the United Arab Emirates.* While the Dar Es Salaam Port is the main port of entry for containers from overseas, Mitumba is exported from Kenya over the Namanga Border.

The value-chain of Mitumba in Tanzania is similar to the one for Kenya (see Figure 1): brokers oversee the coordination and distribution of garments in the different markets across Dar Es Salaam, Moshi, and Arusha. The big retailers are then responsible for selling to retailers and consumers. What is missing in this presentation of the value-chain is, potentially, the role of social media and how this has changed the way Mitumba is sold and bought. Another missing piece is any assessment of the damage that it causes once it becomes waste and is dumped in landfills such as Dandora in Nairobi, Kenya and Pugu Kinywamwezi in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Negative impacts of textile waste on people and the environment

The huge amounts of textile waste that countries like Tanzania and Kenya are flooded with on a daily basis have severe consequences for people and the environment. In Kenya, 185,000 tonnes of second-hand clothes were imported in 2019,⁵² and according to local sources, 30–40% of Mitumba is of such bad quality that it cannot be sold anymore. This means that 55,500 to 74,000 tonnes of it was actually textile waste. This amounts to about 150–200 tonnes of textile waste a day.

Up to 69% of the fibres used in clothes are synthetic (mainly polyester) and are therefore oil-based, non-biodegradable plastic.⁵³ After disposal, these microplastic fibres continue to leach into the environment and finally end up in the human food-chain. Microplastic fibres are also released into the air by burning the clothes. In the latest studies, microplastics have been found in the gastrointestinal tract⁵⁴, blood⁵⁵ and lungs⁵⁶ of humans. Especially troubling is the fact that unexpectedly large fibres were found in lungs. Plastic clothes waste will accumulate in the local environment and add to the existing plastics waste crisis in these countries – aggravated by the sheer amounts of textile waste.

There is no infrastructure to dispose of these massive amounts of textile waste, and official dump sites have been overflowing for years. This leads to textile waste being dumped everywhere,

along rivers or at settlement borders. Some of it is burned openly, which can lead to health problems for the people living nearby, and the clogging of rivers and drains can lead to floods. The decomposing clothes release methane, a harmful greenhouse gas that contributes to climate change; synthetic fabrics like polyester and lycra can take hundreds of years to biodegrade. In addition, many clothes contain hazardous chemicals, used during the production process.⁵⁷



East African solutions in action

Considering the serious impact of textile waste in African countries, as outlined for Tanzania and Kenya, it is also inspiring to see many examples of creative designers and community organisers who are addressing overconsumption by sensitising and empowering their respective communities. The

following is a brief summary of case studies to show how people in Kenya and Tanzania are creating positive solutions and developing their own form of circularity. These examples and the stories from the people working on them send a strong message to fashion brands and the EU, and should be an inspiration for an alternate approach based on the practical experience of innovations for the reuse, upcycling and repurposing of used clothes which are already in the system, rather than newly made clothing or attempts at recycling.



Anne Kiwia – Tanzania

Anne Kiwia, under the motto “Every Queen deserves a Crown”, designs headbands from second-hand textiles (Mitumba), while supporting women’s empowerment through upcycling fashion.

www.annekiwia.com

Background at [@makemsthng](https://twitter.com/makemsthng)



Suave – Kenya

An upcycling bag company inspired by Gikomba market, where clothes are brought to seek new life against the waste in landfills.

www.global.suavekenya.com

Background at [@makesmthng](https://twitter.com/makesmthng)



Mama Hokororo – Tanzania

Marilyn “Mama” Hokororo is the founder of Afrikan Wear Design Arusha, a charity organisation specialising in arts and crafts based in Arusha. The organisation hires women and people with different abilities with the intention to empower them.

www.afrikanwear.com

Background at [@makesmthng](https://twitter.com/makesmthng)



African Collect Textile – Kenya

Collects used textiles for reuse and recycling. Through their work, they are kickstarting a circular economy for textiles. This is done by diverting used textiles and footwear from the landfills, and by supporting the environment and creating jobs.

www.africacollecttextiles.com

Background at [@makesmthng](https://twitter.com/makesmthng)

Greenpeace recommendations and demands

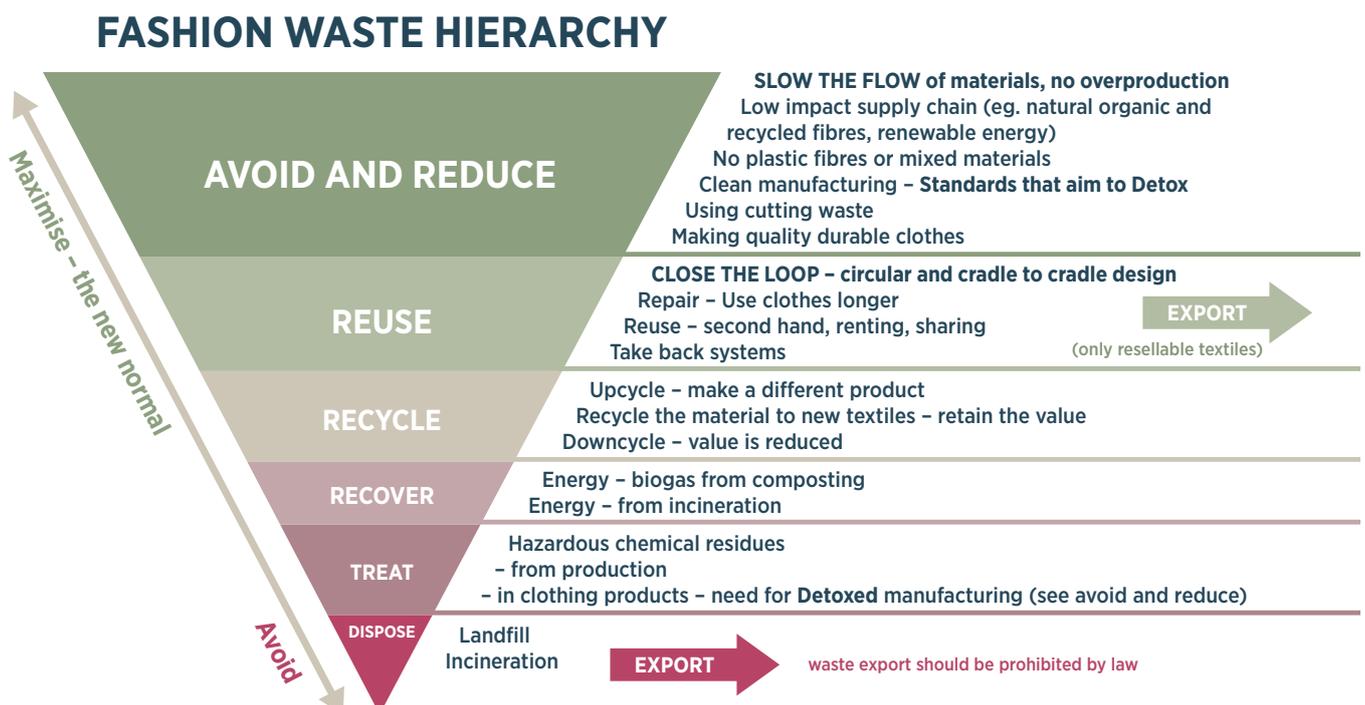
The fast fashion trend has turned clothes into throwaway items like disposable packaging. To stop the flow of textile waste being dumped on the Global South, there is no way around the need to massively slow down fast fashion. Global fashion brands need to completely change their linear business models and become service providers instead of only producers. They need to start producing fewer clothes that are designed to be better quality, long lasting, repairable and reusable and take responsibility for establishing take-back systems and services to maintain, repair and share items of clothing.

Greenpeace's latest report "[Self-regulation: a fashion fairytale](#)" has clearly demonstrated that while there is a trend for global fashion brands to talk about circularity, very few of them actually have effective measures in place to become circular and even less or none of them are taking steps to slow down the flow of materials. This is why global regulation is necessary and the report explains in detail the key points that are needed (see Part 1, section 3 for details).

Recently the new [EU textile strategy](#) has been approved and after many years of pressure from environmental groups it finally addresses some of these key points, such as:

1. A vision that "by 2030 textile products placed on the EU market are long-lived and recyclable, to a great extent made of recycled fibres, free of hazardous substances and produced in respect of social rights and the environment".
2. Plans for **binding requirements on durability, recyclability, repair and reuse**
3. **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)** schemes that will be dedicated to **waste prevention measures** and preparing for reuse
4. Commitment to develop specific **EU level criteria to make a distinction between waste and certain second-hand textile products** to avoid waste being labelled as second-hand goods, and thereby preventing companies sidestepping the EU's proposal for **tighter rules on exporting textile waste to non-OECD countries**.
5. A proposal for a transparency obligation, requiring large companies to publicly disclose the number of products they discard and destroy, including textiles, and the intention to introduce a ban on the destruction of products, including as appropriate, unsold or returned textiles. However, the definition of what is "appropriate" or not has not been made clear yet.
6. Commitment to introduce a "**Digital Product Passport** for textiles based on mandatory information requirements on circularity and other key environmental aspects". But unfortunately full supply chain mapping and facility disclosure is not included.

Figure 2 → Fashion waste hierarchy



Unfortunately it does not include:

7. A strategy to Detox the textiles supply chain and prevent chemical pollution of Global South waterways.
8. A phase out of synthetic fibres in the production of textiles; products should be biodegradable and compostable (Cradle to Cradle) and free from hazardous chemicals to prevent end of life impacts.

We welcome the positive developments in the EU textile strategy, but for them to be successful they need to be implemented effectively on the ground through legally binding measures. These measures also need to be developed globally:

- ▶ International legislation needs to be established through a global treaty, similar to the Paris Convention on climate change and the recently agreed UNEA plastics treaty, that would implement the aims of the EU textiles strategy globally, as well as the additional points mentioned above (7 & 8) which are not included.

From the perspective of Greenpeace, to improve the situation in countries like Kenya and Tanzania, this means that the following key demands are the most relevant and need to be implemented first:

- ▶ Only the export of used clothes that can actually be reused as wearable clothing should be allowed; the export of textile waste from the Global North should be banned.
- ▶ A guarantee that any unusable imported used clothing can be sent back to the country of origin.
- ▶ Extended Producer Responsibility legislation including a global tax on each product when it is placed on the market to fund the separate collection of textiles which is environmentally sound, to enable the professional reuse and recycling of textiles.
- ▶ This tax should also integrate the 'Polluter Pays' principle – ie. the producer is made financially responsible for the cost of cleaning up the environmental and health damage caused throughout the supply chain, regardless of the geographical extent of the damage
- ▶ The phase out of synthetic fibres (8 above) needs to be implemented as soon as possible to prevent them ending up in the environment in the Global South.
- ▶ Transparency on the materials clothes are made of (eg. the Digital Passport proposed by the EU for textiles should be in the form of a QR code printed on the product that contains the necessary information), which is not easily removed by users or recyclers.

Finally, there needs to be a shift away from neocolonial attitudes of Global North countries towards those in the Global South, which impose trading practices which are mainly beneficial for the Global North. This effectively turns Global South countries into dumping grounds for fashion industry waste, while doing little or nothing to support or develop the

clean manufacturing of local textiles and garment production that is needed in these countries, using the same high standards and best practices that are required in Europe.

Conclusion

The ever increasing overproduction of fast fashion has also led to increasing amounts of used clothing being exported from the Global North to the Global South. While imported used clothes called "Mitumba" are relevant for many people and the economy in Kenya and Tanzania, nearly half of the clothes imported are not even usable or sellable and quickly end up on dumpsites, in rivers and being burnt on open fires. So effectively, through the export of used clothes, the Global North has found a backdoor to get rid of its textile waste and is forcing countries from the Global South to deal with the consequences of fast fashion, even though they have no infrastructure to do so. To solve this problem, global fashion brands need to completely change their out-of-date linear business model, slow down the flow of materials massively, and switch to a slow, truly circular and fair production. As this briefing reveals, it's not enough for these brands to only focus on cleaning up their supply chains; Greenpeace is urging global fashion brands to step up their efforts to stop the huge end-of-life impacts of their products. In addition, the EU needs to ensure that its plan to ban the export of textile waste and promote long lasting, durable and repairable clothing of good quality is fully implemented through various regulations, which must also be urgently adopted as a global treaty. Fashion designed in this way could then take its proper place in the second-hand clothes economy in Africa, and bring the benefits of reusing clothing without the devastating consequences of the current system. The Global North should learn from the designers, Mitumba traders, upcyclers and waste pickers in East Africa who are showing how we should value and take care of the clothes already in the system, because the most sustainable garment is the one that doesn't have to be newly made.

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