

The Quality of Second-Hand Clothes Imported to Kenya and the Associated Environmental Impacts



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The sustained growth in imports reflects the growing demand among Kenyan households for second-hand clothing.

Recycling pieces of second-hand clothes as cleaning cloths mitigates the need for buying new cleaning cloths which are considered environmentally harmful to produce as textile garments.

The second-hand clothing (SHC) trade, commonly known as mitumba in Kenya, is a key part of the country's apparel market, providing affordable, quality clothing while supporting employment and government revenue. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), Kenya imported 183,830 tonnes of second-hand clothing in 2021, up 39% from 132,565 tonnes in 2017, with annual imports averaging 159,705 tonnes between 2016 and 2021¹. The sector generates approximately Ksh 12 billion in tax revenue and supports around 2 million jobs.²

Although allegations of textile dumping in Africa persist, there is limited evidence to substantiate these claims. The SHC trade involves significant investment in the cleaning, sorting, and importation of quality garments, making intentional dumping unlikely. To examine these concerns, the Mitumba Consortium Association of Kenya (MCAK) commissioned this evidence-based review combining empirical research and stakeholder interviews to assess how the sector manages waste.

Summary of findings

SHC imported into Kenya meets the required quality standards: Interviewed importers make clear that they have invested in internal quality control processes and benefitted from the external processes and infrastructure at sorting centres to ensure that the garments they import into the country are in good condition and generally meet the expected quality standards. It is not in the interests of importers to import second-hand clothes that cannot be sold on given the cost of the clothes, transportation, shipping and importation.

Established processes ensure the importation of quality SHC: Low levels of clothing waste are achieved through strict quality-control measures, collaboration between importers, suppliers, and stakeholders, and compliance with regulations. Standards such as KEBS EAS 356:2019 define the required quality of second-hand clothing imports, encouraging both importers and suppliers to maintain high standards and long-term business relationships. PVoC (pre-verification of conformity) inspections by KEBS-accredited agencies, including SGS and Bureau Veritas, further ensure shipments meet agreed specifications. Importers also minimise risks through supplier assessments, site visits, sample testing, and trial shipments before placing larger orders.

Waste in imported SHC retail trade is estimated at no more than 2%: Consistent with previous research on Nairobi's solid waste composition³, data from interviewed retailers indicate that only 4–12 items out of a bale containing 350–600 pieces of clothing (around 1–2%) become waste and are either incinerated or disposed of at the Dandora dumpsite. Traders seek to maximise income by selling as many items as possible and often separate damaged clothing for recycling rather than disposal. Some items are sold as cleaning rags, for which there is demand in the cleaning industry. This practice reduces waste, extends the lifespan of second-hand clothing, and decreases the need for newly produced cleaning cloths.

¹ Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. 2022. Economic Survey.

² Institute of Economic Affairs. 2021. The state of the second-hand clothes and footwear trade in Kenya.

³ Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). 2010. Preparatory Survey for Integrated Solid Waste Management In Nairobi City In The Republic Of Kenya. Final Report Volume 3 Supporting Report.

The global textile industry has overseen a doubling of clothing production between 2000 and 2015 driven by fast fashion, and is one of the most polluting industries in the world.

Textile waste accounts for only a small share of household waste in Nairobi:

Household survey findings indicate that the average household generates about 3.5 kg of textile waste annually, representing approximately 0.39% of total household waste. Although the study focused on one area of Nairobi, previous research suggests similar patterns across the city⁵. This is supported by Taka Taka Solutions⁶, which estimates that textile waste comprises around 1% of the waste it collects from households, commercial, and industrial clients. These findings suggest that despite growing demand for second-hand clothing over the past decade, textile waste levels have remained relatively stable.

A previous JICA⁷ study and our own household survey suggest that a negligible amount of textile waste from SHC (as a percentage of total waste) is deposited at the Dandora dumpsite:

Out of all the waste generated in Nairobi that ends up at Dandora, the amount of textile waste is no higher than 2%. This textile waste is predominantly from end-of-life pieces of clothes or other textile waste and cannot be directly attributable to second-hand clothing newly imported to Kenya.

Reuse of clothes as second-hand clothing significantly reduces waste and pollution from production of new clothes:

The global textile industry has overseen a doubling of clothing production between 2000 and 2015 driven by fast fashion⁸. The textile industry accounts for about 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions contributing to global warming, 35% of microplastics released into the environment, and produces 20% of global water waste.⁹ Reusing clothes rather than discarding them when no longer desired, significantly prolongs the life of clothing before it becomes end-of-life waste. It is estimated that the purchase of 100 pieces of second-hand clothing would save between 60 to 85 new garments.¹⁰ Thus, clothing reuse radically reduces waste, pollution and emissions from the textile industry.

Reusing clothes rather than discarding them when no longer desired significantly prolongs the life of clothing before it becomes end-of-life waste and radically reduces waste, pollution, and emissions from the textile industry

Importers contribute to the circular economy through reuse and redistribution of pre-owned garments thus supporting sustainable consumption of clothing:

Importers of SHC play a significant role in contributing to the circular economy by enabling the reuse and redistribution of pre-owned garments. This activity reduces the environmental impact associated with the production of new clothing items. By importing SHC, they indirectly reduce the environmental footprint associated with textile production. Furthermore, by offering affordable options, importers help reduce the demand for fast fashion and encourage a shift towards more sustainable consumption patterns. They also help to meet the welfare needs of the population as many households struggle to access relatively expensive new clothing while SHC offers attractive and affordable options.

Retailers contribute to the circular economy through prioritising repair, upcycling or downcycling of unsold second-hand clothing:

For the small number of unsold second-hand clothing items that are damaged or of low quality, retailers prioritise repair, mending, upcycling, or refashioning. Worn-out garments are often sold to traders or businesses in other sectors, such as manufacturing and upholstery. These practices reduce waste, extend garment lifespans, and support local economies by creating opportunities for tailors, seamstresses, and artisans. They also demonstrate the potential for stronger linkages between the mitumba trade and the textile manufacturing sector.

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⁵ Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). 2010. Preparatory Survey for Integrated Solid Waste Management In Nairobi City In The Republic Of Kenya. Final Report Volume 3 Supporting Report

⁶ Personal communication, 18 September 2023.

⁷ Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). 2010. Preparatory Survey for Integrated Solid Waste Management In Nairobi City In The Republic Of Kenya. Final Report Volume 3 Supporting Report

⁸ Ellen MacArthur Foundation. 2017. A new textiles economy: Redesigning fashion's future. <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/a-new-textiles-economy>

⁹ UNECE. 2018. Fashion and the SDGs: What role for the UN? https://unece.org/DAM/RCM_Website/RFSD_2018_Side_event_sustainable_fashion.pdf

¹⁰ Farrant, Olsen and Wangel. 2010. Environmental benefits from reusing clothes. The International Journal of Life Cycle Assessment, (15), 726-736. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11367-010-0197-y>