

Second-hand clothing in Africa: Opportunities and challenges

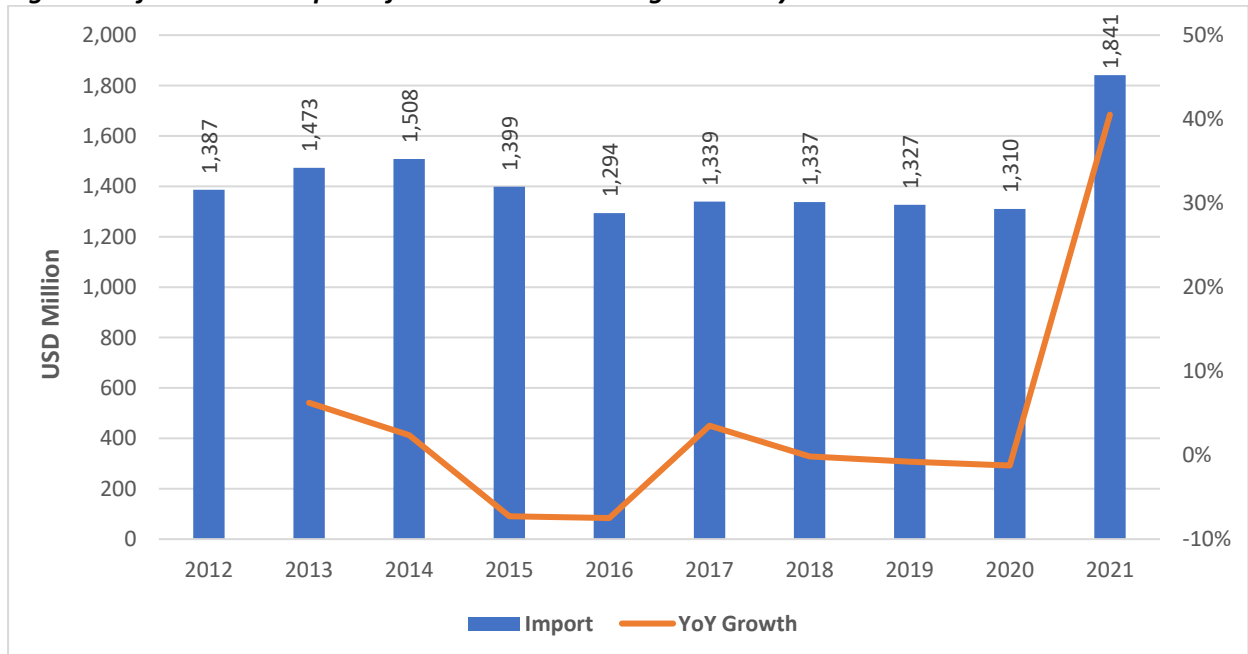
Clothing consumption all over the world has increased over the years primarily due to the introduction of fast fashion which provides consumers with low-cost apparel that is produced quickly and up to date on high-fashion trends, often at the expense of the environment. These clothes are mostly manufactured in East and South Asia and then sold in Western countries, where they are hardly worn and are quickly discarded.

Exporting second-hand clothing products to developing economies for further consumption, a concept usually called 'global reuse', provides utility to people in developing countries, but it can have negative economic and ecological consequences. In 2021, more than 40 per cent of the world's used clothing exports came from three countries—China (17 per cent), the United States (16 per cent), and the United Kingdom (8 per cent).

For developed economies, Africa has become the primary destination to export second-hand clothing. The second-hand clothing industry has emerged as a major sector in Africa's economy as it creates jobs involving handling, alterations, refinements, and distribution of second-hand clothes and helps in increasing consumer purchasing power. It helps to strengthen the demand for clothing in African countries by raising fashion awareness.

The second-hand clothing industry can be a continuous source of employment, tax revenues, and wealth creation if the governments of African countries provide a competitive operating environment that is conducive to the sector's long-term development. The global environmental benefits of such reuse are also considerable.

Figure 1: Africa's total import of second-hand clothing over the years

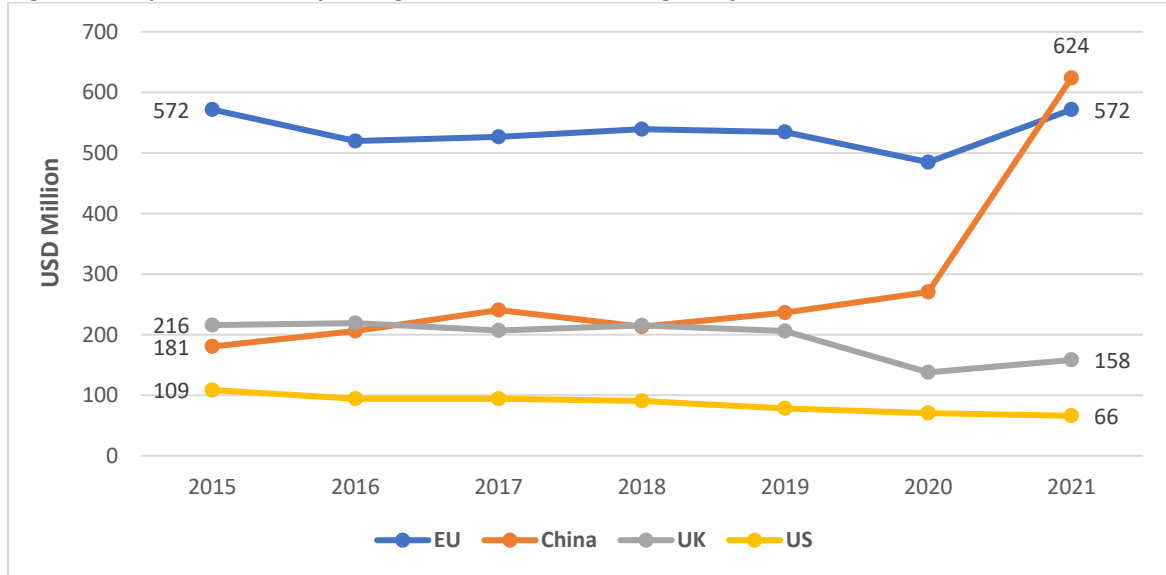


Source: TexPro

Africa's import of second-hand clothing has grown 28.84 per cent in one year to reach a value of \$1.84 billion in 2021. Major exporters of second-hand clothing to the continent include China, European

Union (EU), and the United Kingdom, followed by the United States and South Korea. China’s exports of second-hand clothing to Africa increased over 131 per cent during the period 2020-2021 and it became the largest exporter by exporting \$624 million worth of second-hand clothes to Africa in 2021. The EU, which is also always criticised for dumping second-hand clothes in the African market, exported \$572 million worth of second-hand clothes to Africa in 2021.

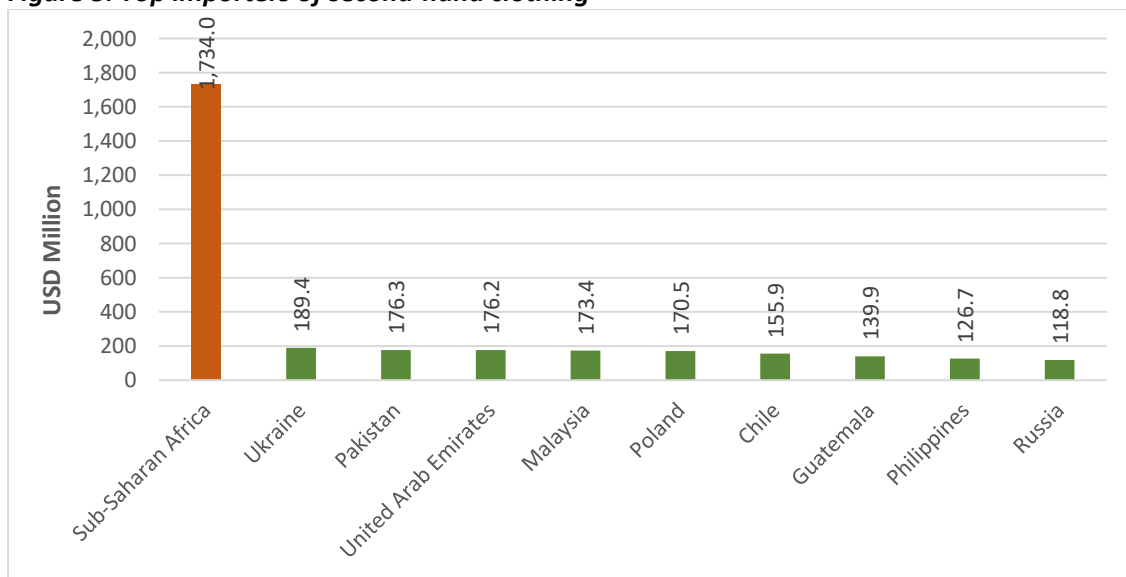
Figure 2: Top countries exporting second-hand clothing to Africa



Source: TexPro

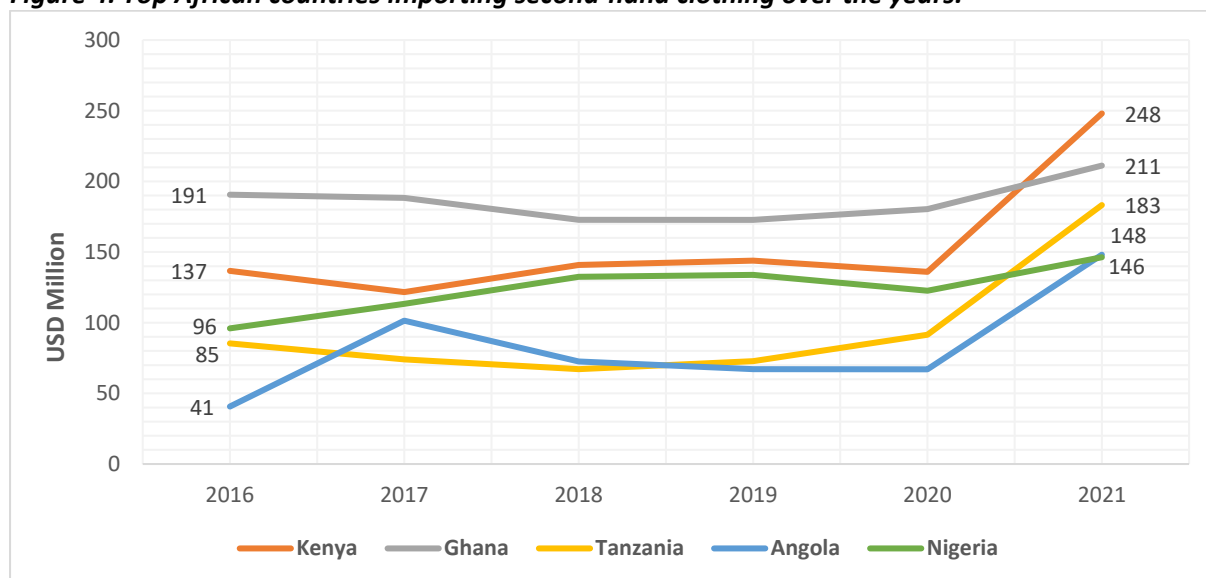
The Sub-Saharan region in Africa is the world’s largest destination for second-hand clothing articles, and it received close to 34 per cent of total world exports in 2021. Second-hand clothing consumption practices in Africa are shaped by import regulations as well as regional conventions and cultural norms concerning bodies and dress. In Muslim-dominated Maghreb countries, second-hand clothing constitutes a smaller proportion of total apparel imports than in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2021, the total imports of second-hand clothing in Maghreb countries were approximately \$107 million, while in Sub-Saharan Africa it was over \$1,734 million.

Figure 3: Top importers of second-hand clothing



Source: TexPro

Figure 4: Top African countries importing second-hand clothing over the years.



Source: TexPro

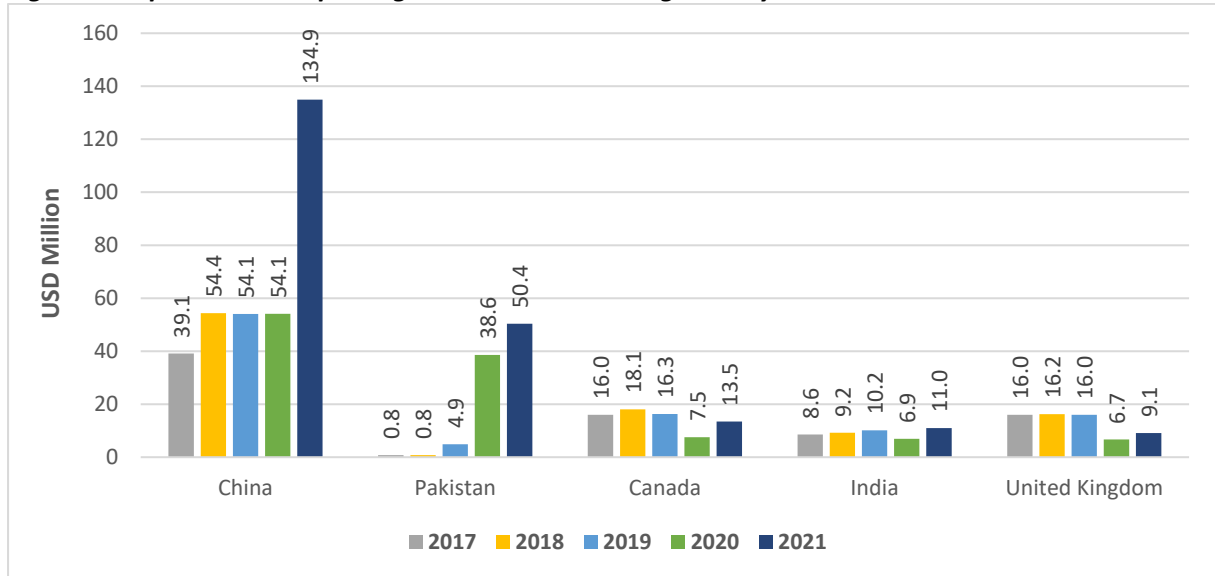
Kenya

In 2021, Kenya was Africa’s leading importer of second-hand clothing and imported some 183,500 tonnes of second-hand clothes, out of which China had the largest share of over 40 per cent and exported some 73,880 thousand tonnes of second-hand clothing. The second-hand clothes are called ‘mitumba’ in Kenya. Kenyans are huge fans of mitumba because it gives them uniqueness, style, and affordability. According to Kenya’s Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) analysis in 2019, most households buy new clothes only when needed, such as school or workplace uniforms. 91.5 per cent of households buy second-hand clothes worth Ksh 1,000 and below, and 8.5 per cent buy second-hand clothes worth Ksh 1,000 and above. On the other hand, 74.5 per cent of all households bought new clothes priced below Ksh 1,000, and 25.5 percent bought new clothes priced above Ksh 1,000, confirming the price sensitivity of second-hand clothes.¹

The mitumba industry is an important source of revenue for the Kenyan government as taxes raised from this sector generate more than \$6 million every month. Kenyan government imposes a tax of 35 per cent or \$0.40/kg (whichever is higher) on worn textiles and used shoes intended for importation into Kenya. These imports are subjected to physical examination and certification under the Pre-export Verification of Conformity to Standards (PVoC) requirements. As per Kenyan import law, used clothing must be cleaned and fumigated before baling. They shall be accompanied by a fumigation or treatment certificate issued by a competent authority in the country of supply.

In 2021, China was the leading supplier of second-hand clothing to Kenya and exported \$134.9 million worth of second-hand apparel. It was followed by Pakistan, India, Canada, and the United Kingdom with export of \$50.4, \$13.5, \$11.0, and \$9.1 million of second-hand clothing, respectively. Pakistan’s supply was noticeably higher in 2021, landing it in the second position in second-hand clothing exports to Kenya.

Figure 5: Top countries exporting second-hand clothing to Kenya

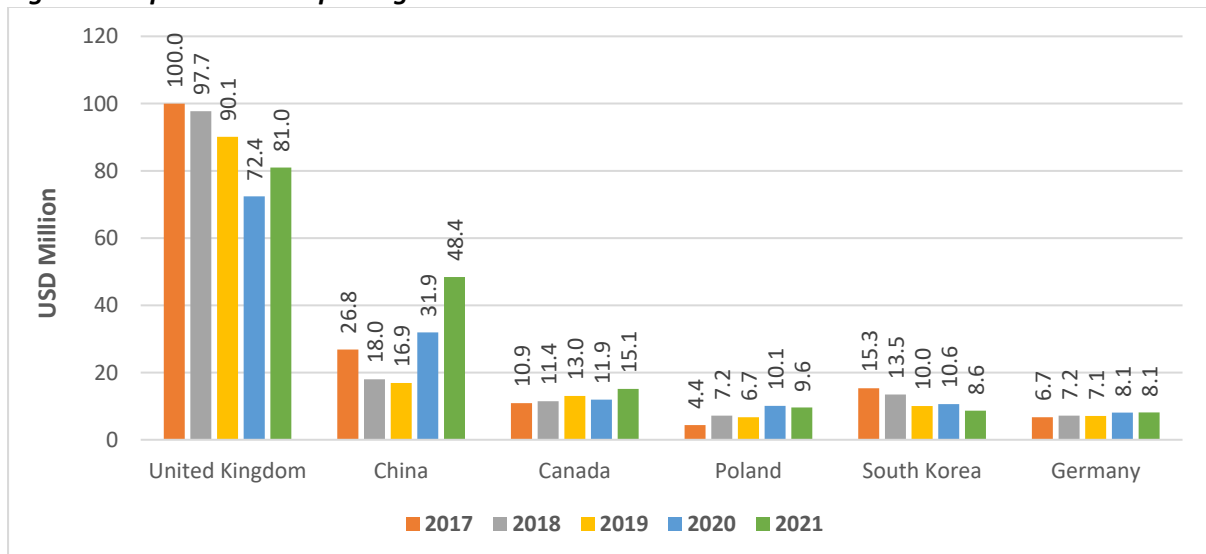


Source: TexPro

Ghana

Second-hand clothing in Ghana is known as ‘Obroni Wawu’ which means ‘Dead White Man’s Clothes’. The belief behind this name is that since the concept of excessive accumulation is alien to the locals in Ghana, they imagine that someone would surely have died to give up so much of their stuff. The Kantamanto market in Ghana’s capital Accra is West Africa’s largest second-hand clothing market. Over the last two decades, the Kantamanto market has contributed to economic growth and productivity in Ghana. It is home to more than 30,000 traders, who sort through tonnes of second-hand clothes daily to grab the best bargain. Every month, an average of 6,000 tonnes of second-hand clothing arrives in Kantamanto from the West. In 2021, \$211.21 million of used clothes were exported to Ghana and major suppliers were the UK, Germany, South Korea, and China.

Figure 6: Top countries exporting second-hand clothes to Ghana

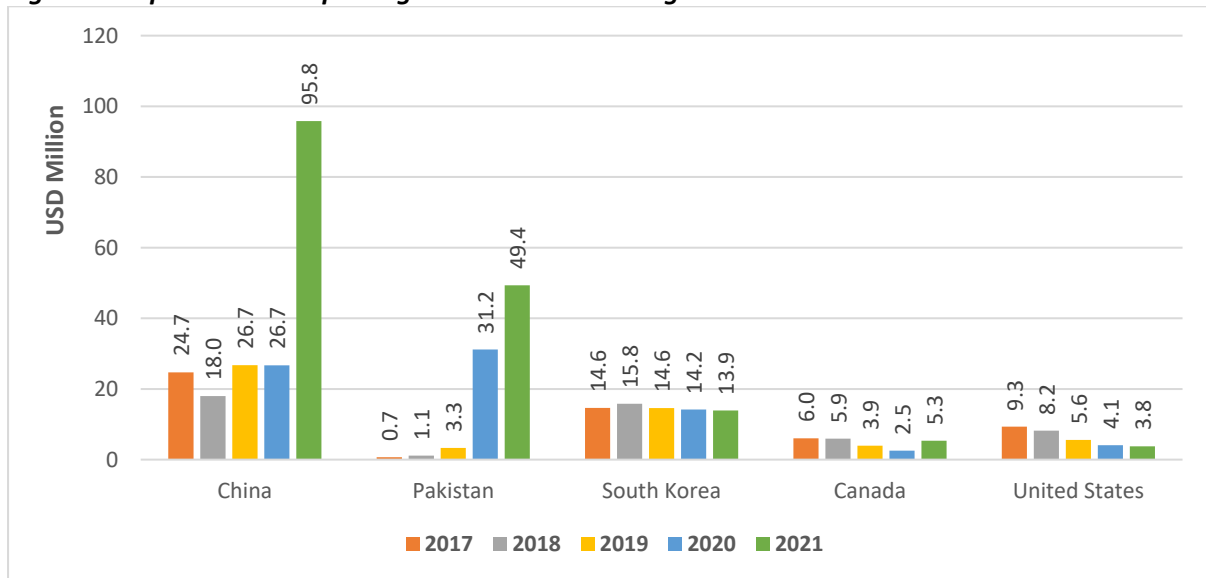


Source: TexPro

Tanzania

The Manzese market in northern Dar es Salaam city is the largest market for the second-hand clothing trade in Tanzania. In 2021, Tanzania imported almost \$183.24 million worth of second-hand clothes. Tanzania’s second-hand clothes imports have increased over 3-fold in the past 20 years, from \$30.77 million in 2000 to \$91.43 million in 2020. In 2021, Tanzania imported \$183.24 million worth of second-hand clothing. China and Pakistan were the main sources of second-hand clothing, accounting for almost 80 per cent of Tanzania’s imports in 2021.

Figure 7: Top Countries exporting second-hand clothing to Tanzania



Source: TexPro

Is second-hand clothing responsible for the apparel industry’s decline in Africa?

There have always been concerns about the second-hand clothing trade that it may be undercutting local manufacturing and may suffocate the domestic textile industry. The increased import of used clothes has raised pressure on the African apparel industry which is already struggling to adapt to changing fashions. Domestic production of apparel has been found more expensive than imported second-hand or new clothing from Asia, and as a result, some of the major factories could not compete with the cheaper prices offered by the second-hand clothing industry.

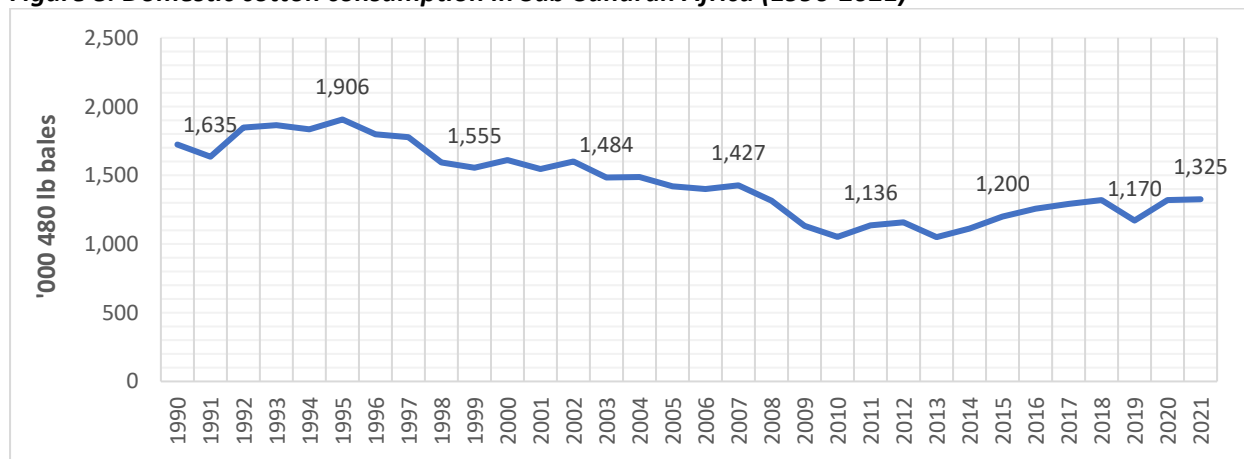
The African textile and apparel industry is highly dependent upon the export of primary commodities and the import of manufactured goods, even though the sale of raw materials fetch a lower rate in the world markets. African countries export more than 90 per cent of the cotton lint they produce. Such dependence on raw cotton export represents the inactive or absent cotton-to-textile value chains in the continent. In 2021, out of 1,565,000 tonnes of cotton lint produced in Sub-Saharan Africa, only, 287,000 tonnes were consumed domestically. Domestic cotton consumption in Sub-Saharan Africa has declined over the last decades. Between 1990-2001 the average cotton consumption in Sub-Saharan Africa was 412,940 tonnes which decreased to 326,540 tonnes during the period 2001-2011 and it further reduced to 290,420 tonnes during the period 2011-2021. From 1990 to 2021, domestic cotton consumption in Africa has decreased by over 23 per cent.

African countries exported \$1.76 billion worth of raw cotton and imported \$5.76 billion of finished cotton apparel in 2021. This vast gap between the export of raw cotton and the import of finished apparel indicates the inability of the African textile industry to fulfil domestic demand. Over the period, Africa’s apparel industry has shifted from catering to local demand to focusing more on

exports. Export of readymade apparel from Africa has grown from \$7.28 billion in 2000 to \$11.84 billion in 2021. FDI from Asia, Europe, and the US and their preferential trade agreements with Africa have been a key driver of growth in Africa’s highly export-oriented garment industry.

However, it is not clear that the domestic apparel industry has declined in Africa as apparel exports have increased over the period. But production for the domestic market has reduced as the majority of African people find second-hand clothing relatively cheaper, durable, and highly fashionable than those made in Africa. The reason behind this is that the cost of production in Africa is high compared to Asia as inflation is persistent in most countries in the African continent. Real wages fall due to the higher local cost of living and people are left with less disposable income to spend on clothes.

Figure 8: Domestic cotton consumption in Sub-Saharan Africa (1990-2021)



Source: US Department of Agriculture

Second-hand clothing imports may have played a significant role in damaging the local apparel production in Africa; however, such imports have not been the only cause. Supply-side constraints such as unreliable and expensive infrastructure, outdated capital stock, lack of access to credit, and unskilled labour force are also constantly undermining the efficiency of the domestic industry. Second-hand clothing imports grew more in the 1990s after the trade was liberalised in Africa. The old quota system, known as the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA), had limited the exports of textile and clothing. Its principal aim was to protect developing countries’ domestic textile industries from more efficient producers in Asia. But with the end of the MFA, African countries got exposed to giant, highly efficient competitors from countries such as China and India. Additionally, trade liberalisation policies in African countries also resulted in a decline in the value of their currency thereby limiting consumers’ ability to buy new clothing. Since then, cheaper second-hand clothes have met most of the demand for clothes in the African continent.

In 2016, the East African Community (EAC) agreed to a complete ban on second-hand clothes imports by 2019. The contention behind the ban was to give a boost to the local textile and apparel industry and help the economy. However, the ban was challenged by the United States as a suspension 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 Act (AGOA). To get around the difficulties in implementing the ban, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania have raised their taxes on imported second-hand clothing with the aim of protecting the region’s textile industry. In 2018, Rwanda raised the tax on imported second-hand clothes from \$0.20 to \$2.50 per kg.

The US suspended Rwanda from the AGOA in July 2018 following a protracted battle over the sale of second-hand clothes mainly from the US. This proclamation suspended the application of duty-free

treatment for all apparel products from Rwanda to the US. But despite suspension from AGOA Rwanda's textile and apparel sector has been performing well since 2018. Its export of textile and apparel grew by 83 per cent between 2018 and 2020. Statistics show that in 2018, Rwanda exported \$5.9 million worth of textile and apparel and by 2020, that value increased to \$34.6 million, as per media reports in the country.² The validity and effectiveness of a ban on second-hand clothes to generate growth in the textile manufacturing sector remain a highly questionable policy.

Positive impacts of second-hand clothing

Making clothing more accessible- Buying second-hand clothing has become an economically practical choice for many Africans provided their limited disposable income. In addition to affordability, second-hand clothing is preferred because it allows consumers to buy the latest designer clothing that cannot be found anywhere else, at a cheaper price.

Contributing to employment- In Africa, second-hand clothing has an organised and long value chain that employs at various stages. It creates employment in terms of transportation, cleaning, repairing, restyling, etc. Other employment exists through vendors who sell clothes and people who rent out spaces for sellers. Second-hand clothing has also promoted the work of businesses in the fashion industry, who repurpose and up-cycle second-hand clothes to produce new products of higher value. In Kenya, second-hand clothing creates employment for 2 million people while it is estimated that it creates hundreds of thousands of jobs in other African countries.³ According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) Manpower Survey, mitumba traders fall under the second-hand clothing and footwear industry, which employs an estimated 10 per cent of the extended labour force.¹

Generates revenues- Second-hand clothing is an important source of revenue for East African countries. Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania have raised their import tax to 35 per cent or \$0.40/kg (whichever is higher) on the import of worn clothing. In 2021, Kenya imported 183,500 tonnes of second-hand clothing and the tax revenue collected must be around \$73.4 million. It means the sector contributes at least \$6 million to the Kenyan government's revenue per month. The traders also pay business license fees, among other payments to national and county governments.

Negative impacts of second-hand clothing

Stifling domestic industries- The increased import of second-hand clothing has resulted in reduced demand for domestic clothing, an issue that hinders the recovery of the African textile industry. While the quality of domestic clothing is good, local companies have limited capacity to compete with second-hand clothing on price. East African countries such as Kenya and Rwanda have tried to ban second-hand clothing but the fear of suspension of AGOA benefits has stopped them from implementing the ban.

Environmental degradation- Many environmentalists have concluded that the fashion industry has a disastrous impact on the global environment. The fashion industry is responsible for up to 10 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions and is a major cause of water pollution worldwide, with over 80 per cent of its supply chain impacts on the environment taking place in Global South countries where most clothes are manufactured, but only 10-30 per cent of used clothes are resold in the country where they were collected.

In Ghana, some 15 million used garments pour into the capital Accra every week from the UK, EU, US, and Australia. As per a Greenpeace report, an estimated 40 per cent of garments are of such inferior quality that they are considered worthless on arrival and end up eventually being dumped in a landfill. This means that about 6 million pieces of apparel leave Kantamanto Market every week as waste.⁴

In Kenya, 184,000 tonnes of second-hand clothes were imported in 2021, and according to Africa Collect Textiles, a Kenyan start-up that upcycles textile waste, 30 to 40 per cent of mitumba is of such bad quality that it cannot be used anymore. This amounts to about 150 to 200 tonnes of textile waste each day. These waste clothing pose a threat to the environment through land pollution and contamination of water sources among other challenges. Without properly structured mechanisms for managing excess second-hand clothing, it continues polluting the environment at the cost of future generations.⁵

Issues of dignity- Used clothing is viewed as the dumping of discarded clothes on African consumers. It is because second-hand clothing is majorly sold to Africa as it is considered no longer valuable to the consumers in developed countries. The decision of governments of Rwanda, Kenya, and Tanzania to raise their taxes on imported second-hand clothes was not just about money but also for reclaiming dignity. In an official statement, the Rwandan government mentioned that they are seeking to limit the import of second-hand clothes, not only on the grounds of protecting local industry but also because wearing second-hand clothing compromises the dignity of its people.⁶

Conclusion

The increasing production of fast fashion apparel has led to increasing amounts of second-hand clothing being exported to African countries. Domestically produced clothes are mostly expensive and low-quality while second-hand clothing imported from western countries fulfils the demand of the African people by providing them with affordable, trendy, and good-quality clothes. Banning the second-hand clothing trade in Africa is a complex decision as there is no proof that even in the absence of second-hand clothing, local apparel production and employment would improve. Second-hand clothing imports can be made profitable for Africa's textile value chain through up-cycling and repurposing of old clothes. With the required investment in the recycling industries, the African fashion industry can produce new products of higher value, which can be exported at competitive prices to markets in the developed world.

References:

¹ https://media.africaportal.org/documents/1614939275_State_of_second-hand_clothes.pdf

² <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/rwandas-garment-export-revenues-hit-record-high>

³ https://fashionomicsafrica.org/en/blog/post/1321_second-hand-fashion-its-impact-on-the-african-fashion-industry

⁴ ABC news (2021), Dead white man's clothes, 11th August 2021, updated 21st October 2021; <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-12/fast-fashion-turning-parts-ghana-into-toxic-landfill/100358702>

5. Cobbing, M. et al., 2022. *Poisoned Gifts From donations to the dumpsite: textiles waste disguised as second-hand clothes exported to East Africa*, Greenpeace International. <https://www.greenpeace.org/static/planet4-international-stateless/2022/04/9f50d3de-greenpeace-germany-poisoned-fast-fashion-briefing-factsheet-april-2022.pdf>

6. <https://agoa.info/news/article/15277-used-clothing-trade-causes-contention-between-us-and-east-african-nations.html>