



GREENPEACE
AFRICA



**#Break
Free
From
Plastic**

FACTSHEET:

DRAPED IN INJUSTICE — UNRAVELLING THE TEXTILE WASTE CRISIS IN AFRICA



01.

FAST FASHION'S FINAL DESTINATION: THE NEW FACE OF WASTE COLONIALISM IN AFRICA

Overview of Second-Hand Textile Imports to Africa: Key Trade Statistics



Each year, approximately 83 million tonnes of textile waste are produced globally – 65% of which are made from fossil-fuel derived synthetic fibres – with the equivalent of one garbage truck's worth of clothing being burnt or sent to a landfill every second ^(1; 2)



Africa – notably Angola, Kenya, DR Congo, Tunisia, Ghana and Benin, which imported nearly 900,000 tonnes of used clothes between them in 2022 – **has become a major destination for the global trade of second-hand clothing**, receiving 46% of the EU's used textiles in 2019. ^(3; 4; 5)



In 2021, Kenya imported over 900 million second-hand garments—mainly from Europe and the UK (though since then China has become the largest importer to Kenya). Shockingly, up to 50% were unsellable waste due to poor quality or damage, ultimately ending up in landfills like Dandora, burned in open fires, or polluting waterways such as the Nairobi River. ^(6; 7; 8)



Accra, Ghana receives approximately 15 million second-hand garments weekly, with up to half deemed unsellable and ending up in informal dumpsites or burnt, either in the open or as fuel, for example in public washhouses. 89% of this textile waste contains synthetic fibres, contributing significantly to microplastic pollution in the environment. ⁽⁵⁾



In 2023, Uganda imported approximately 100,000 tonnes of second-hand clothing, primarily from countries like China, the United States, and Canada. Estimates indicate that up to 48 tonnes of these imports become textile waste daily, ending up in informal dumpsites, open areas, or burned. ^(9; 10)

To highlight the severe environmental and social impacts of textile waste, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) supported over 240 events worldwide during International Zero Waste Day in March 2025. These global efforts aimed to raise awareness and promote sustainable

alternatives, emphasizing the urgent need for stronger policies and zero waste solutions. The initiative calls attention to the growing injustice of the Global South—particularly Africa—being used as a dumping ground for the Global North's discarded clothing. ⁽¹¹⁾

FRAYING AT THE SEAMS: THE IMPACT ON PEOPLE & PLANET



Greenpeace Africa has documented some of the detrimental effects of textile waste on African communities and its environments which has been summarised to provide a consolidated overview below.

Carbon Emissions and Climate Impact:

The fashion industry is responsible for 8–10% of global carbon emissions, mainly from energy intensive processes in the global supply chain which is further compounded by the wasteful business model of low-quality fast fashion. The shedding of microplastics by synthetic textiles also contributes to the disruption of the ocean's ability to absorb carbon, accelerating climate change. ^(12; 13)

Hazardous Chemicals:

The fashion supply chain is a major consumer of chemicals out of 3,000 chemicals used for washing and dyeing in textiles manufacturing, 250 are known to be hazardous with toxic, persistent or bioaccumulative properties. Hazardous chemicals are released at every stage of the fashion life cycle, from production to the dumpsite. ^(14; 15)



Air Pollution and Toxic Exposure:

In Accra's Old Fadama settlement, air samples from public washhouses where clothes waste is burnt as fuel to heat water, revealed dangerously high levels of toxic substances, including carcinogens like benzene and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), due to the burning of textile waste. ⁽⁵⁾



Health Risks from Burning Textile Waste:

In Kenya, discarded garments are sometimes used as fuel for roasting peanuts, exposing individuals to toxic fumes. Waste pickers in landfills often lack protective gear, making them susceptible to respiratory illnesses such as asthma, colds, flu, and lung inflammation from this burning. ⁽⁷⁾



Waterborne Diseases and Microplastic Exposure:

Large volumes of discarded clothes pile up in informal dumpsites in the open, where they block drains, exacerbating flooding, and wash into waterways, increasing the risk of waterborne diseases in vulnerable communities. The majority of discarded clothes contain synthetic fibres – at nearly 90% as shown by Greenpeace tests in Ghana, contributing to widespread microplastic fibre pollution in soil, air and water bodies and associated human health and ecological risks. ^(5;16;17)

Water Pollution and Ecosystem Damage:

Textile waste has severely polluted water bodies such as Ghana's Korle Lagoon and Kenya's Nairobi River. ^(5; 18)

Landfill Overflow and Environmental Degradation:

In Ghana, up to 500,000 items of clothing waste from Kantamanto Market end up in open spaces and informal dumpsites weekly, leading to the creation of 'plastic beaches' along the coast and smothering natural habitats including the internationally important protected Densu wetlands. ⁽⁵⁾



Economic Strain on Local Traders:

In markets like Gikomba in Nairobi, traders report that nearly half of the imported second-hand clothes are unsellable due to poor quality, leading to financial losses and increased waste. ⁽¹⁸⁾

Impacts on livelihoods:

Clothing waste that is washed out to sea has a negative impact on fishing communities. In Jamestown, Ghana, fishers report catching more clothes than fish, indicating significant ecosystem disruption and livelihood losses. ^(5; 19)

TANGLED THREADS: POLICIES THAT SHAPE THE TRADE

A snapshot of global, regional & local laws, policies and initiatives addressing the textile waste crisis in Africa [NB. Many of which fall short on effective implementation & enforcement]

Policy Level	Region	Law/Policy/Initiative	Details
International	Global	Basel Convention (1989)	There are currently no standards that require prior informed consent (PIC) for textile waste exports. France, Denmark & Sweden have urged the EU to propose stricter amendments to close this loophole. ^(20; 21)
		Global Framework on Chemicals (ongoing)	In 2023, governments agreed on a new Global Framework on Chemicals, covering the life cycle of chemicals, including products and waste, and aims to engage many industrial sectors on safer chemical management, including the fashion and textiles industry. ⁽²²⁾
		Plastics Treaty (ongoing)	In March 2022, governments officially adopted a mandate opening negotiations for a global, legally-binding Plastics Treaty to address the whole lifecycle of plastics, and all sources of microplastics. So far, negotiations have not been able to agree yet on a strong treaty that cuts plastic production. ⁽²³⁾
Regional	European Union	Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) (ongoing)	The EU Textiles Strategy approved in March 2022 proposed tighter rules on exporting textile waste to non-OECD countries. EPR regulation is being developed but has so far failed to include a clearer global accountability framework ensuring that EPR fees can effectively support regions heavily impacted by used textile exports from the EU. ⁽²⁴⁾ EPR is already implemented or under development in various countries. ⁽²⁵⁾
	Africa	Bamako Convention (1991)	Stricter than Basel but poorly enforced in many African nations, enabling continued influx of unusable second-hand textiles. ⁽²⁶⁾ Only 29 African countries have ratified the Bamako Convention, leaving the ports open to transboundary trade of hazardous waste and plastics, which has repercussions for the health of people and the environment in Africa.

Policy Level	Region	Law/Policy/Initiative	Details
Regional	East African Community	EAC Phase-out Plan (2016)	In 2016, the EAC aimed to ban second-hand clothes to protect the local textile market; owing to U.S. trade pressure citing 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 Act only Rwanda proceeded (2018) and its apparel industry has since grown. ⁽²⁷⁾
		EAC Cotton, Textiles & Apparels Strategy (2020–2030)	Aims to enhance regional textile value addition and intra-regional trade while addressing environmental challenges. ⁽²⁸⁾
		Draft EAC Standard	Regulates test methods, labeling, chemical usage, and product defects in textile products. ⁽²⁹⁾
		Standardised Waste Management Policies	Includes regional guidelines for waste, hazardous material tracking, and waste management infrastructure development. ⁽³⁰⁾
	AfCFTA [African Continental Free Trade Area]	AfCFTA Preferential Treatment Exclusion (2023)	Excludes second-hand clothing (HS code 63.09) from preferential trade under AfCFTA; no ban or duties yet imposed. ⁽³¹⁾
National	Rwanda	Import Ban (2018)	Banned the import of second-hand textiles; withstood U.S. African Continental Free Trade Area removal pressure. ⁽³²⁾
	Uganda	Proposed Ban (2023)	Ban announced by President Museveni; the Uganda National Bureau of Standards later suspended related inspection surcharges pending review in 2025. ^(33; 34)
	Zimbabwe	Import Ban (2015), Enforcement Reaffirmed (2025)	The government banned importation & sale of second-hand textiles and recently ordered confiscation and incineration of smuggled garments which is not an environmentally sound waste management practice. ⁽³⁵⁾
	Kenya	Environmental Management and Co-ordination Act (1999), Waste Regs (2006), Buy Kenya Build Kenya Policy	These laws govern waste handling and promote domestic production to curb dependency on second-hand imports. ^(36; 37)
	South Africa	National Environmental Management Act (1998), The Environmental Management and Coordination (Waste Management) Regulations (2008), Extended Producer Responsibility under Section 18 (2021)	Establishes frameworks for waste minimisation, recycling, and producer accountability throughout textile product life cycles. ^(38; 39; 40)
	Ghana	Environmental Protection Act (1994), Industrial Designs Act (2003), EPR Framework	Encourages responsible waste handling and innovation in eco-friendly textile design. ^(41; 42; 43)
	Lesotho	United Nations Develop Program-backed Circular Economy Project	Promotes textile reuse and recycling through regional collaboration with South Africa and Madagascar. ⁽⁴⁴⁾

RETHINKING THE THREAD: STITCHING A ZERO WASTE FUTURE



Recommendations from GAIA/BFFP Africa & Greenpeace Africa to Mitigate the Negative Impacts of the Global North's Textile Waste Dumping on African Environments & Communities.

Support for the Global Plastics Treaty to mandate a reduction in the production of plastic-based materials, including all sources of microplastics including synthetic textiles, to address plastic pollution at its source.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Implement strict trade regulations to prohibit the export of textile waste labeled as second-hand clothing. Advocate for the amendment of the Basel Convention & Bamako Convention to strengthen restrictions on export of textiles waste, including requiring prior informed consent (notification) for textiles waste, building on the current proposal by France, Sweden and Denmark.^(46; 21)

Hold fashion brands accountable for the entire lifecycle of their products, including post-consumer waste management, by implementing mandatory EPR policies whilst engaging with Global North citizens about the consequences of fast fashion overproduction and overconsumption on Global South countries, and promoting the need for sustainable fashion practices as the solution.⁽⁵⁾



Enforce a strict eco-design and Detox strategy by banning hazardous chemicals in textile production and final products. Policymakers and industry must also phase out synthetics, cut clothing volumes, and boost quality and durability to shift from fast fashion to a truly circular, sustainable model.⁽⁴⁷⁾



Enact interim legislation to address the unintentional release of microplastic fibres from synthetic textiles, while a phase out based on the precautionary principle is implemented. This should include regulatory tools and standards to measure, limit and contain emissions of microplastic fibres throughout the life cycle of textiles. ⁽⁴⁸⁾



Invest in and promote local textile production and encourage upcycling and repair of clothing through community workshops, educational programs, and support for local artisans to extend the life of garments, to reduce dependence on imported clothing and manage textile waste effectively. ⁽⁵⁾



Develop waste collection, sorting, and recycling infrastructure and facilities for the management of used clothes and fabrics in order to handle textile waste more effectively and prevent environmental contamination. ⁽¹⁸⁾

Foster partnerships between African nations and international organisations to share best practices, resources, and technologies for managing textile waste. ⁽¹⁸⁾



Launch educational campaigns to inform, engage and empower African citizens about the environmental and health impacts of textile waste. ⁽⁵⁾

Invest in research to understand the full extent of the ecological and economic costs to African countries from the negative environmental, social and economic impacts of textile waste, to claim reparations under the **Polluter Pays Principle**. ⁽⁵⁾



REFERENCES

- 83 million tonnes a year globally is calculated from figures in Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017) A new textiles economy: Redesigning fashion's future, (p.37, ref 61); https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/assets/downloads/A-New-Textiles-Economy-Full-Report-Updated_1-12-17.pdf
- Textiles Exchange (2023), Materials Markets Report 2023; <https://textileexchange.org/app/uploads/2023/11/Materials-Market-Report-2023.pdf>
- Fundira, T., 2022. Trade in Used Clothing in Africa. [online] TRALAC. Available at: <https://www.tralac.org/documents/idrc-publications/4553-idrc22tb012022-fundira-trade-in-used-clothing-in-africa-26062022/file.html>
- European Environment Agency, 2023. EU exports of used textiles. [online] Available at: <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/eu-exports-of-used-textiles>
- Greenpeace Africa, 2024. Fast Fashion, Slow Poison. [online] Available at: https://www.greenpeace.org/static/planet4-africa-stateless/2024/09/925601ff-fastfashionslowpoison_reportbygreenpeace.pdf
- TradeMap, imports of worn clothing (6309) to Kenya; <https://www.trademapp.org/Index.aspx>
- Changing Markets Foundation, 2023. Trashion: The Stealth Export of Waste Plastic Clothes to Kenya. [online] Available at: <https://changingmarkets.org/report/trashion-the-stealth-export-of-waste-plastic-clothes-to-kenya>
- Mitumba Consortium Association of Kenya, 2023. The Global Production Networks SHC Report. [online] Available at: <https://www.humanaitalia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/The-Global-Production-Networks-SHC-report-Mitumba-Consortium-Association-of-Kenya.pdf>
- World Bank, 2023. Uganda Imports of Used Clothing (HS: 6309). [online] Available at: <https://wits.worldbank.org/trade/comtrade/en/country/UGA/year/2023/tradeflow/imports/partner/ALL/product/630900>
- The Exchange Africa, n.d. Second-hand clothing: Good for Africa? [online] Available at: <https://theexchange.africa/sustainability/second-hand-clothing>
- UNEP, 2023. Zero Waste Day shines light on fashion and textiles. [online] Available at: <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/zero-waste-day-shines-light-fashion-and-textiles>
- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340635670_The_environmental_price_of_fast_fashion Ellen McArthur Foundation (2017), A new textiles economy: Redesigning fashion's future; <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/a-new-textiles-economy>
- Syama Sunil et al. (2024), Microplastics and climate change: the global impacts of a tiny driver, Science of The Total Environment, Volume 946, 2024, 174160, ISSN 0048-9697; <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2024.174160>
- Swedish Chemicals Agency (KEMI)(2014), Chemicals in Textiles, page 55; <https://www.kemi.se/en/publications/reports/2014/report-6-14-chemicals-in-textiles>
- See Greenpeace reports from 2011, listed on the [Detox My Fashion](https://www.greenpeace.org/international/act/detox/) campaign website; <https://www.greenpeace.org/international/act/detox/>
- Scientists' Coalition for an effective Plastics treaty (2024), Human Health in the Global Plastics Treaty; https://ikhapp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Human-Health-Policy-Brief_26.11.2024.pdf
- Aswin Thacharodi et al. (2024), Microplastics in the environment: A critical overview on its fate, toxicity, implications, management, and bioremediation strategies, Journal of Environmental Management, Volume 349, 2024, 119433, ISSN 0301-4797, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2023.119433>
- Greenpeace Germany, 2022. Poisoned Gifts Factsheet. [online] Available at: https://es.greenpeace.org/es/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2022/04/220421_S03961_gp_poisoned_gifts_factsheet_en07.pdf <https://www.greenpeace.de/publikationen/220421-greenpeace-factsheet-textile-waste-east-africa-english.pdf>
- The Guardian (2023), How Ghana became fast fashion's dumping ground, 5th June 2023; <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/jun/05/yvette-yaa-konadu-tetteh-how-ghana-became-fast-fashions-dumping-ground>

20. Basel Convention, n.d. Homepage. [online] Available at: <https://www.basel.int/>
21. Council of the European Union, 2024. Document ST 7881 2024 INIT. [online] Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7881-2024-INIT/en/pdf>
22. [Global Framework on Chemicals - For a Planet Free of Harm from Chemicals and Waste](https://partnership.who.int/iomc/global-framework-on-chemicals) <https://partnership.who.int/iomc/global-framework-on-chemicals> See also: Greenpeace Germany (2023), Tackling hazardous chemicals, a “must have” for shifting to a Slow Circular Economy <https://www.greenpeace.de/publikationen/ICCM5-Hazardous-Chemicals-Slow-Circular-Economy.pdf>
23. UNEP (2025), Second part of the Fifth Session, [Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee](https://www.unep.org/inc-plastic-pollution/session-5.2) to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution 5th - 14th August 2025; <https://www.unep.org/inc-plastic-pollution/session-5.2>
24. EEB (2024), Member States advance on textile waste, fall short on food waste and greenwashing; <https://eeb.org/member-states-advance-on-textile-waste-fall-short-on-food-waste-and-greenwashing/>
25. European Union (2024), Mapping Global EPR Schemes for Textiles, 4th April 2025;; <https://transition-pathways.europa.eu/library/mapping-global-epr-schemes-textiles>
26. African Union, n.d. Bamako Convention on Hazardous Wastes. [online] Available at: https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/7774-treaty-0015_-_bamako_convention_on_hazardous_wastes_e.pdf
27. Fibre2Fashion, n.d. Second-hand clothing in Africa: Opportunities and challenges. [online] Available at: <https://www.fibre2fashion.com/industry-article/9422/second-hand-clothing-in-africa-opportunities-and-challenges>
28. InforMEA, n.d. EAC Cotton Textiles & Apparels Strategy. [online] Available at: <https://www.informe.org/en/content/legislation/east-african-community-cotton-textiles-apparels-strategy-and-implementation>
29. Fibre2Fashion, 2023. EAC proposes standardisation for garments. [online] Available at: <https://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/apparel-news/east-african-community-proposes-standardisation-for-garments-291843-newsdetails.htm>
30. EAC, n.d. Pollution and Waste Management. [online] Available at: <https://www.eac.int/infrastructure/115-sector/environment-natural-resources-management/pollution-and-waste-management>
31. DD Customs Law, n.d. AfCFTA: Ministers exclude second-hand clothes from preferential rules. [online] Available at: https://www.ddcustomslaw.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=770:afcfta-african-ministers-exclude-trade-of-second-hand-clothes-under-the-afcfta-preferential-rules&catid=1:ultime&Itemid=50&lang=it
32. The African Dream, 2024. Rwanda's Ban on Second-Hand Clothing. [online] Available at: <https://theafricandreams.com/a-look-into-rwandas-ban-on-the-importation-of-second-hand-clothing-junks-a-guide-for-africas-indigenous-clothing-industry/>
33. Associated Press, 2023. Used clothing ban hits East Africa. [online] Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/used-clothing-ban-uganda-east-africa-301e546cdf5c231c2c06508a652d4501>
34. Kikubolane, 2024. Uganda suspends verification fees on second-hand imports. [online] Available at: <https://kikubolane.com/2024/10/30/uganda-government-suspends-verification-fees-on-imported-second-hand-clothes-cars>
35. Bulawayo24, 2024. News article. [online] Available at: <https://bulawayo24.com/index-id-news-sc-national-byo-249944.html>
36. Kenya Law, 2024. Legal Notice 178 of 2024. [online] Available at: <https://new.kenyalaw.org/akn/ke/act/ln/2024/178/eng@2024-12-06>
37. Ministry of Industrialization, Kenya, 2017. Buy Kenya Build Kenya Strategy. [online] Available at: <https://www.industrialization.go.ke/sites/default/files/2023-08/Buy%20Kenya%20Build%20Kenya%20Strategy%20June%202017.pdf>
38. South Africa Government, 1998. National Environmental Management Act. [online] Available at: https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/a107-98.pdf
39. South Africa Government, n.d. National Environmental Management: Waste Act. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.za/documents/national-environmental-management-waste-act>
40. South Africa Government, 2021. Government Notice 400 of 2021. [online] Available at: https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202105/44539gon400.pdf
41. Parliament of Ghana, 1994. Environmental Protection Agency Act, 1994 (Act 490). [online] Available at: <https://ir.parliament.gh/bitstream/handle/123456789/1819/ENVIRONMENTAL%20PROTECTION%20AGENCY%20ACT%2C%201994%20%28ACT%20490%29.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
42. Parliament of Ghana, n.d. Act 660. [online] Available at: <https://ir.parliament.gh/bitstream/handle/123456789/2478/ACT%20660.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
43. Ellen MacArthur Foundation, n.d. EPR for Textiles in Ghana. [online] Available at: <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/epr-for-textiles-in-ghana>
44. Global Environment Facility, n.d. Project 10543 Overview. [online] Available at: <https://www.thegef.org/projects-operations/projects/10543>
45. <https://www.breakfreefromplastic.org/plastics-treaty/>
46. EnviroNews Nigeria, 2023. Zero Waste Day: GAIA seeks ban on dumping unusable clothes in Africa. [online] Available at: <https://www.environewsnigeria.com/zero-waste-day-gaia-seeks-ban-on-dumping-of-unusable-secondhand-clothes-in-africa>
47. Greenpeace Germany, 2023, Greenwash Danger Zone, <https://www.greenpeace.de/publikationen/Greenpeace-Report-Greenwash-Danger-Zone.pdf>
48. Changing Markets, 2024, Fashion's Plastic Paralysis: How Brands Resist Change and Fuel Microplastic Pollution <https://changingmarkets.org/report/fashions-plastic-paralysis/>



The Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) is a network of grassroots groups as well as national and regional alliances representing more than 1000 organizations from 92 countries. The organisation envisions a just, zero waste world built on respect for ecological limits and community rights, where people are free from the burden of toxic pollution, and resources are sustainably conserved, not burned or dumped. GAIA works to catalyse a global shift towards environmental justice by strengthening grassroots social movements that advance solutions to waste and pollution.

www.no-burn.org



Greenpeace Africa is a growing movement of people acting in protection of the environment. Its campaigns use peaceful, creative confrontation to expose environmental injustices around the world and develop solutions for a green and peaceful future. The organisation's vision is an Africa where people live in harmony with nature in a peaceful state of environmental and social justice. Greenpeace has always been more than an organisation. We have been, and are today, a movement. A diverse, multinational, multicultural movement of ordinary individuals determined to bring about extraordinary changes necessary to realise a greener, more peaceful future.

www.greenpeace.org/africa

**#Break
Free
From
Plastic**

The #BreakFreeFromPlastic (BFFP) Movement is a global movement envisioning a future free from plastic pollution. Since its launch in 2016, more than 13,000 organizations and individual supporters from across the world have joined the #BreakFreeFromPlastic movement to demand massive reductions in single-use plastics and to push for lasting solutions to the plastic pollution crisis.

www.breakfreefromplastic.org