

## Opinion Piece

### Second-hand Clothing Exports: A blessing or curse?



*(Stock Image)*

The textiles industry is a major contributor to climate change and creates significant environmental impacts through resource depletion, air and water pollutants, energy and toxic chemical use. Importing clothing, textiles, footwear, and leather (CTFL) products from one country to another can be both a blessing and a curse, depending on various factors. The International Solid Waste Association (ISWA) 2024 Global Congress was held in Cape Town between 16-17 September under the topic WASTE TO WEALTH: Solutions for a sustainable future. This platform allowed vital stakeholders to enter this heated Global North and South debate.

Trade and Industrial Policy Strategies (TIPS) Sustainable Development Researcher Elize Hattingh presented South Africa's position on second-hand clothing imports alongside panel members Pietro Luppi, working for informal second-hand waste traders in Italy, David Roman, the Sustainability Manager of the British Hearth Foundation (UK) and Anne Scheinberg from Springloop Cooperative U.A. – Work for Sustainability (Netherlands). The only other panel member from Africa who was invited was Alodia Ishengoma from Kenya. She is doing research with informal second-hand clothing traders on the ground to determine their needs for second-hand clothing imports from Europe. Dirk Nelen moderated the panel. Nelen is a Circularity Specialist working in Europe on solutions to find a new home for Europe's second-hand clothing waste.

The debate's point of departure was that a growing level of dysfunction in the used clothing value chain is interrupting a quite old and legitimate—if semi-formal—trading sector. Panel members from Italy and the UK indicated that they are looking for solutions to enter the African second-hand trading market and find a new home for post-consumer clothing waste.

The panellists gave insights into the responsibilities for transparency of the actors in global reuse value chains. There is a lack of data availability on export and import volumes and product categories and some developing countries might benefit economically and socially but the negative impact of increased textile waste to landfill is problematic to all. Elize's position was that the import of second-hand clothing into South Africa is currently not allowed for all

types of clothing items, only for two types of rebate items: WIPING RAGS REBATE (ITEM 311.18/63.09/01.04 and IMPORTATION OF USED OVERCOAT REBATE (ITEM 460.11/00.00/01.00). ITAC indicated in a report (dated) that the wiping rags rebate will fade out in the next two years due to this item being misused by exporters to South Africa that are hiding illegal second-hand goods in the middle of bales, and it is becoming increasingly challenging to monitor and police this because bales have to be cut open. Only 13% of textile waste in South Africa is currently recycled, and less than 1% of the waste is recycled back into clothing.

Elize's presentation provided a high level of confidence that South Africa's Retail Clothing, Textile, Footwear, and Leather sector is benefiting from local manufacturing of textiles and clothing that are provided to local retailers to provide high-quality clothing and textiles to South Africans. There is also a solid commitment to stimulate natural fibres like cotton. The second-hand clothing market in South Africa is growing steadily, and sufficient available quality and affordability are evident; in many cases, up to 30% of the clothing received from post-consumer donations to social enterprises like Clothes to Good cannot be used and then need to be down-cycled into fibre and also re-made into fabric tiles, paving blocks and furniture. South Africa (SA) already has a vibrant fashion industry with many local and international fashion retailers and brands. SA has millions of tons of clothes going into landfills and many millions of clothes made from plastic items being washed daily. SA has enough textile waste to deal with.

**"Importing post-consumer (used) textile will add to this challenge and would be irresponsible as SA has not got the infrastructure to deal with their existing challenge."**

(Jacendra (Jesse) Naidoo – Founder: Clothes to Good Programme, 16 September 2024)

Circular solutions are being undertaken by SMMEs active in waste management to provide textile waste to organisations that can shred textiles into fibre that have applications for the construction industry. This greater circularity within the second-hand clothing market is supported also by programs like the National Cleaner Production and Consumption's (NCPC) Intex-Program and Green Cape's Circularity initiatives with the City of Cape Town to look at diverting waste to landfill and provide infrastructure for household collection of post-consumer (second-hand) clothing items.

Hattingh was clear that South Africa is not to be seen as a dumping ground for Europe's second-hand textile waste. South Africa is already under pressure to manage its own solid waste challenges, and we cannot take on more waste from the Global North. The Global North should not take advantage of other developing vulnerable African countries by "donating" charitable second-hand clothing items to low-income populations; they should find alternatives to discarding their own volume of second-hand clothing and textile waste.

Dr Linda Godfrey from the CSIR also mentioned to Elize after the panel discussion that there is a need for "Sufficiency" to start entering debates.

## "When is enough truly enough?"

David Roman, the Sustainability Manager of the British Heart Foundation (UK), said during the panel that "the average UK citizen shops for one new clothing item a week". Thus, overconsumption of clothing is a pattern that needs to be broken, which could slow down the rate of fast fashion consumption, generating less clothing and textile waste that then needs to be managed.

Should the European consumer of textiles not be the key stakeholder on the stage who is driving the market demand for fast fashion items that is causing the problem of access amounts of second-hand clothing waste? Retailers in Europe should also take greater responsibility via the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) systems in the member countries to put a limit on the amount of clothing items that they are producing and the end-of-life cycle – who takes responsibility to the end destination of second-hand clothing items landing up in landfills in Africa where waste management systems are not yet that advanced. Is Africa then just seen as a large open landfill?

Elize Hattingh presented the work that TIPS conducted in 2022 to provide the Department of Trade Industry and Competition (the dtic) with a climate compatibility decarbonisation action plan for the Retail Clothing, Textiles, Leather, and Footwear sector. She is confident that South Africa's positive signs of greater circularity are evident in South Africa. "We have excellent sustainability professionals in our country who are equipped to look at large-scale industrial decarbonisation efforts across sectors. The most recent '6th biennial conference of the National Cleaner Production Centre South Africa (NCPC-SA)', held at the CSIR ICC in Pretoria, South Africa, 11- 12 September 2024, provided evidence that South African government and industry are collaborating and committed to our own net-zero carbon reduction targets. We will stand firm, and we genuinely hope that the ban on the import of second-hand clothing will protect our local industry – protecting local jobs in clothing manufacturing and protecting our environment by avoiding more solid waste from clothing ending up in landfills.

Download the TIPS research report on [Designing Climate-Compatible Industrial Strategies for South Africa: The Textiles Value Chain](#) on the TIPS website.

#TextilesValueChain

#ISWA2024CPT

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#secondhandclothing

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