

New study traces second-hand clothing pathways amid pressure on European collectors

Research reveals journey of clothing from Sweden to Kenya, countering false narratives and warning that pressures on European collectors threaten circularity.

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- A new study by IVL Swedish Environmental Research Institute, commissioned by HumanaLithuania, traces the journey of used textiles from Sweden to resale in Kenya, highlighting their economic and environmental benefits. The report debunks the myth that second-hand clothing exports constitute dumping, while underscoring challenges faced by textile collectors due to new EU waste regulations under the Waste Framework Directive.



Shoppers browse at Kenya second-hand shop

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As EU countries introduce new collection and EPR requirements, it's crucial to recognise that global clothing reuse is a key part of the solution to a circular textile economy.”

*Örjan Österdal, CEO of
Humana Lithuania*

The study finds that a prevalent criticism about exporting second-hand clothes to Kenya, amounting to dumping, is not supported by evidence. Kenya's high import taxes on mitumba, an East African term for second-hand clothes, mean that importing textiles to discard them in landfills would be economically unfeasible. The study also highlights the trade's positive socio-economic impacts, including job creation and local economic activity along the value chain from export country to import country.

The study comes as Sweden's mandatory separate collection of textiles from households, implemented in

January 2025, has already begun to increase volumes and reduce the share of textiles fit for reuse. Findings indicate that the shift is placing financial and operational strain on collectors operating with tight margins.

Cristofer Ståhlgren, Logistics & Sales Manager at Human Bridge, a collector of used textiles in Sweden, said: "As textile collectors, we support better textile waste management, but the new rules are placing logistical and financial strain on our operations. Collectors are being overburdened without adequate support, while systems enabling effective reuse are being disrupted. If we're serious about circularity, we must protect and strengthen the existing reuse infrastructure."

Sweden is a case study in the unintended consequences of insufficiently planned EU directive implementation. The IVL report underscores the need for separated collection systems for reuse and recycling to preserve high-quality reuse streams.

Karolina Skog, Chair of the Nordic Textile Network, added: "We have a responsibility to ensure that the clothes donated to non-profit second-hand organisations are reused, and it feels reassuring to know that there is a functioning value chain when the clothes find their market in other countries."

Commenting on the global value chain highlighted in the report, Amanda Martvall, a textile expert from IVL Swedish Environmental Research Institute and co-author of the report, added, "This value chain for reuse operates efficiently and ensures that garments which cannot be sold on the second-hand market within Europe are instead given an extended life elsewhere. In contrast, the rise of ultra-fast fashion and the accelerating consumption of new clothing is deeply concerning. This is where fundamental change is urgently needed. "

Key findings from the report include:

- Reuse and recycling require differentiated collection systems: Sweden's mandatory textile collection has increased overall textile volumes but also led to a higher share of items unfit for reuse. With only one bin currently in use, there is a risk of mixing textiles suitable for reuse with those destined for recycling, lowering the overall quality and value of collected textiles.
- Effective sorting and quality control are key: In 2024, approximately 38,000 tons of used textiles were sorted at Humana Lithuania's sorting centers in Vilnius and Oman, including 11,000 tons sourced from Sweden. 76% was sorted for reuse and 16% for recycling and only 8% was classified as waste. Textiles for reuse are sorted into over 400 categories based on quality and market needs.
- Economic and social value creation: The second-hand clothing trade supports jobs from collection and sorting in Europe to retail in Kenya. Retail chains such as Baltic Textile Trading (BTT) and Think Twice employ strategic pricing cycles that maximise reuse and reflect strong consumer demand.
- Dumping is not profitable: Given Kenya's high import taxes on mitumba, approximately 40% of shipment costs, or around EUR 0.62 per kilogram, importing textiles to discard them in landfills or incinerators would be economically unfeasible.
- Support for humanitarian causes: In the Global North, sorting and resale of used clothing is frequently carried out by charitable organisations and social-value businesses, with profits reinvested to support charitable causes in the Global South.

Orjan Osterdal, CEO of Humana Lithuania, concluded: "As EU countries introduce new collection and Extended Producer Responsibility requirements under the Waste Framework Directive, it's crucial to recognise that global clothing reuse, built on quality exports, is a key part of the solution to a circular textile economy."

The full report can be [downloaded here](#).

About IVL

IVL Swedish Environmental Research Institute is Sweden's leading organisation for applied research in the fields of climate, energy, environment, and sustainable growth.

About Humana Lithuania

Humana Lithuania operates one of Europe's largest used textile sorting centres, employing over 500 people and managing more than 280 stores across Europe. The company is committed to sustainability, economic efficiency, and social responsibility.

About the Nordic Textile Network

Nordic Textiles Network is a network that brings together non-profit organisations engaged in the collection, sorting, and resale of used textiles. The purpose of the network is to create as great environmental, social and economic values from preowned textiles as possible.

About Human Bridge

Human Bridge collects clothes and shoes that are either donated to relief efforts or sold in second-hand shops to generate funds to pay for hospital equipment where it is most needed. On average, two fully loaded trailers or 40'-containers leave Human Bridge's warehouse every week with donated hospital equipment.

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