



## MITUMBA: SECOND-HAND CLOTHING INDUSTRY IN KENYA. A BLESSING OR A CURSE?

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### Abstract

Kenya is one of the leading SHC importers in Africa. The aborted import substitution industrialisation, the liberalisation of the economy, and the failure of the domestic textile industry led to the SHC trade surge, which is the direct product of the global (ultra)fast fashion linear business model. SHC industry is beneficial for the economy and the people of Kenya due to job creation, income and revenue generation, and the provision of affordable clothing. However, it has detrimental impact on the environment and the local textile/fashion industry. To maintain the benefits and reduce the negative effects, it is important not to completely eliminate it. In the short run, quantity should be decreased, and the quality should be improved to reduce waste. In the long run, there should be a gradual decrease and eventually elimination of second-hand clothing imports, depending on the revitalization of domestic garment industry.

### Keywords

*Kenya, second-hand clothing industry, mitumba, waste colonialism, fast fashion*

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## Introduction

Since the 1990s, due to the rapid development of fast fashion, the second-hand clothing (SHC) trade has become an emerging industry, mainly in the less developed parts of the world. East Africa, especially Kenya, is simultaneously one of the fastest-growing destinations and export hubs. The main aim of this study is to a) reveal the leading causes of the SHC trade surge, b) highlight the significant economic, social and environmental implications with particular regard to the benefits and drawbacks, c) provide solutions to cope with the challenges and d) outline the prospects in the case of Kenya.

This fashionomics paper is based on the concepts of waste colonialism/imperialism, consumer colonialism, the core-periphery asymmetrical power relationship, neoliberal transformation, trade liberalisation with unequal bargaining power and the (ultra) fast fashion linear business model.

Apart from relevant theories, the article is mainly based on secondary sources: academic literature, books and articles, descriptive statistical data, and the reports of the *Mitumba Institute and Research Centre* (MIRC)<sup>1</sup> and the *Mitumba Consortium Association of Kenya* (MCAK)<sup>2</sup>. The author made numerous attempts to approach both institutions to conduct in-depth interviews with the stakeholders. Even though the interviews did not happen, the effort was not wasted. In November 2023, Teresia Wairimu, the chairperson of the Mitumba Association, kindly invited the author to a webinar where the latest Mitumba report was launched, and some ongoing issues were discussed. We hope that the above event and the thorough qualitative content analysis of academic sources with the triple bottom line sustainability method focusing on the economic, social, and environmental impacts<sup>3</sup> would result in meaningful and conclusive research findings. Additionally, the author's life experience while working, living, and travelling in Africa (Tanzania, Botswana, Namibia, Ghana, Togo, Benin, South Africa) contributes added value.

## Stylized/basic facts

SHC, by definition, is the use/reuse of unused/used/pre-owned/discarded clothing and footwear. Since its widespread existence, different names have been used for covering the term: it is called *mitumba* (meaning bundles or bales, as SHC arrives in bundles from the West) which replaced the stigmatized term of *kafa ulaya* (clothes of the dead white man) in Kenya and Tanzania; *mivumba* (bundles) in Uganda, *mutunda* (bales) in Rwanda, *salaula* (selecting from a bale) in Zambia, *obroni wawu* (clothes of the dead white man) in Ghana, *mupedzanhamo* (where all problems end) in Zimbabwe, *okirika* (bend down boutique) in Nigeria, *sola* (to choose) in Congo (Brooks, 2015), *ukay-ukay* (to dig) in the Philippines or *türkáló* (digging) in Hungary. As women in the North tend to buy much more clothing and discard it more often than men, the world supply of used women's clothing is at least seven times that of men's (Prashar, 2022).

Though the SHC trade is only a tiny segment of officially documented (= legal) world trade in clothing<sup>4</sup> (around 0.6%) (Brooks and Simon, 2012, p. 1275), or 2-4

million tons/year, trade value has increased rapidly, from USD 0.4 billion in 1980 to 1.4 billion in 2000, 1.8 billion in 2006, 3.7 billion in 2016 (Brady and Lu, 2018) and USD 4.2 billion in 2019 (UN Comtrade). Trade expansion has accelerated further in the 2020s as the trade value increased to USD 36 billion by 2021. It is expected to reach 77 billion by 2025 (Cobbing et al., 2022) and is predicted to grow to USD 218 billion by 2026 (ThreadUP, 2022).

SHC data should be treated with reservations (Brooks and Simon, 2012), especially in the case of Africa. Due to the shortcomings of the African statistical, registration, and border control systems, data lacks accuracy and completeness. Apart from legal and registered imports, some SHC shipments are traded semi- or entirely illegally (grey trade, smuggling, illegal import, illegal re-export) without any documentation. Sometimes, brand-new garments are registered as *mitumba* because of more beneficial customs treatment.

As the concept of SHC originates from donation, the main suppliers/exporters are the highly developed donor countries, namely the USA, the UK, the EU, and Germany. In 2016, the USA and the EU accounted for 65% of world SHC trade (Brady and Lu, 2018). However, the centre of the fast fashion industry has shifted towards the Far East and started to be practiced by the Asian tigers in the 1980s, followed by China in the 1990s. These countries, especially China, became emerging SHC suppliers: while in 2006, China’s SHC exports were only USD 0.32 million, by 2016, it increased to USD 218 (!) million (Brady and Lu, 2018) and up to USD 382 million in 2020. In 2017, China banned the import of SHC because the country became more affluent, self-sufficient, and a clothing exporter.

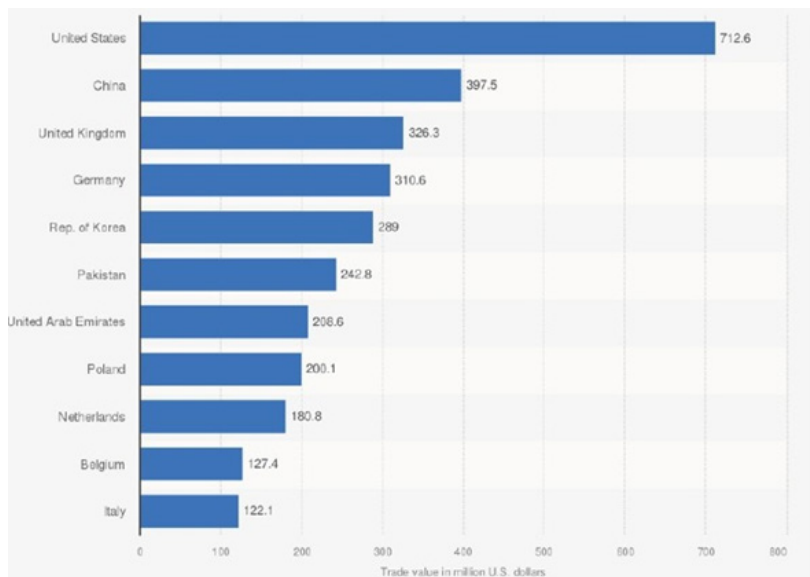


Figure 1. Leading exporters of used clothing worldwide in 2020, by country (in million USD). Source: Prashar, 2022, p. 9.

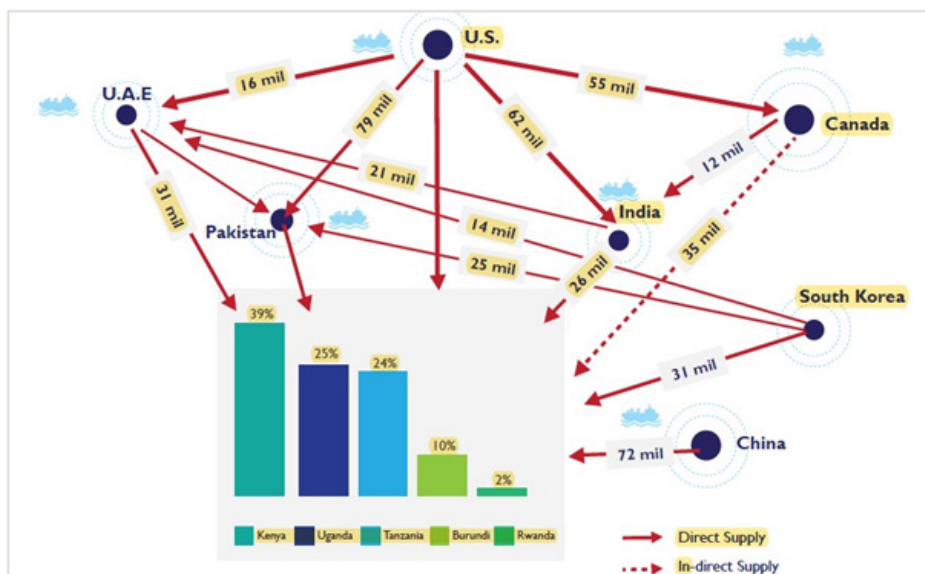


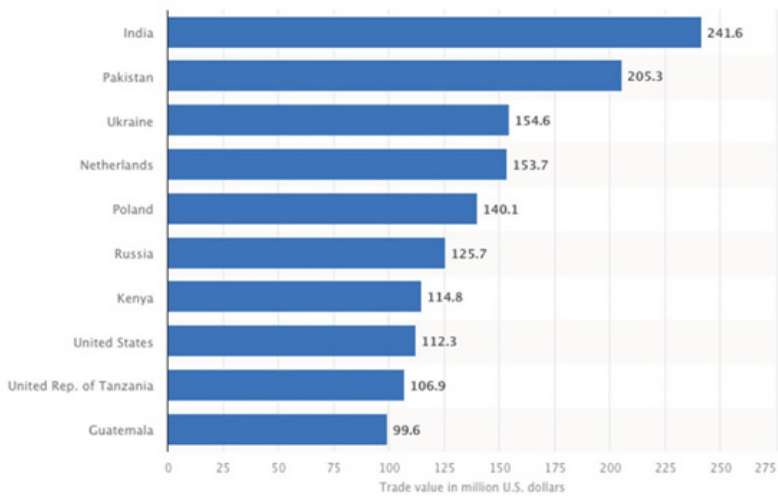
Figure 2. Imports of SHC from the USA to Kenya (2012-2016). Source: Overview...2017, p. 7

Apart from direct export between the producer countries and the final destinations, there is an increasing global circulation of SHC; for instance, the USA exports SHC to Africa mainly indirectly via Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, and India (Figure 2).

Due to the nature of the phenomenon, the main markets for SHC are the less developed recipient countries. In general, more than 20% of SHC exports are directed to Sub-Saharan Africa (Fields, 2003), mainly to Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania, meeting a significant portion of the effective demand for clothing. According to Prashar (2022), four-fifths of the African population wears second-hand clothes. As per Brookes and Simon (2012), in many African countries, SHC meets more than 50% of clothing demand in terms of volume. In Tanzania, 540 million of 720 million pieces (75%) of clothing consumed are SHC; in Ghana, 90% of clothing used is SHC as Ghana is the second biggest SHC importer after Kenya; in Uganda, the share is above 80%. According to the latest report of the Mitumba Institute and Research Centre, four-fifths of the population in East Africa wears second-hand clothes (Diamond, 2023b, p. 7).

### Theoretical background of SHC trade

The original idea behind SHC trade was a noble gesture, namely to donate unused and/or used garments to charity shops and to distribute them free of charge among those in need, as had happened in the Middle Ages or even in modern times among rural communities or within families<sup>5</sup>. In the mid-80s, foreign aid and international assistance evolved into a profitable endeavour for some donors. Donated clothing was no longer simply given away for free; instead, it became a commodity to be sold,



^ Figure 3. Leading importers of used clothing worldwide in 2020, by country (in million USD).  
Source: Prashar, 2022, p. 13

with the best items being sold in the country of origin or abroad. Often, the majority of the collected garments, around 70-90%, were exported overseas after sorting and grading, with Africa being a common destination due to its less demanding market. As a result, these shipments typically consisted of clothing and footwear considered unwanted, out-of-fashion, lower quality, or overused in the West. This is how the gift was “poisoned”, referring to the title of the German Greenpeace report entitled *Poisoned Gift* by Cobbing et al. (2022). The respectable act of donation has been commercialised (monetised), and the gift has been turned into a commodity and charity, resulting in waste disposal disguised by donations. This is how *waste colonialism* has evolved, where high-income nations use their power and privilege to exploit the least-developed countries by overflowing the used clothes markets with cheap and poor-quality fashion items (Huang, 2022). Global North uses Global South to finance and manage its textile waste disposal assignment under the disguise of donation and circular economy, discrediting the concepts.

The charge of waste colonialism can be proven by the poor quality, the composition, and the environmentally harmful nature of SHC shipments from the Global North to the Global South. According to case studies (Cobbing et al., 2022), around half of SHC consignments can be (re)used and sold as garments on the domestic market or in third countries. The remaining half is worthless due to poor quality, design, size, fabric, etc., so they are pure waste. Waste disposal is now the responsibility and the burden of African countries. Are they able to cope with the problem? (See later.)

The increasing waste imperialism results from the fast and widespread growth of the fast and ultrafast fashion business model.<sup>6</sup> This leads to oversupply, where profit is based on more and more production (Brooks, 2012, p. 54.); depressed prices are

associated with depressed wages and the avoidance of paying environmental costs. Oversupply and quest for profit result in forced and manipulated overconsumption, meaning that we are compelled to buy more clothing than ever<sup>7</sup>, purchase unnecessary goods, follow the frequently changing fashion, wear garments for a shorter time, and throw them away sooner, even before they are worn out. In order to get rid of surplus production and generate new markets and clean existing ones for the latest production - apart from a wide range of marketing means<sup>8</sup> -, exporting SHC to less developed countries is an obvious solution.

In addition, the supply side pressure – based on the *centre-periphery* asymmetrical power *relationship* between North and South (Brooks and Simon, 2012, p. 21) – coincided with the neoliberal transformation of Africa. The Washington Consensus and the World Bank's structural adjustment programs in the 80s-90s obliged African countries to liberalize their economies and open their markets under unequal trade terms and bargaining power conditions. Consequently, trade liberalisation had a detrimental impact on the emerging domestic textile and garment industries, which were struggling with the symptoms of underdevelopment, such as lack of capital, shortage of energy, deficiency of infrastructure, and lack of skilled labour and expertise. Consequently, they could not fully meet domestic demand, let alone conquer export markets. The SHC industry discovered the emerging market niche. For a significant part of the population, SHC has become the primary affordable, cost-effective source of clothing (Wetengere, 2018, p. 18) due to the deteriorating economic situation and low living standards. However, more affluent customers also opted to buy SHC due to the fashion's Western hegemony or “*white imperialism*” (Wetengere, 2018, p. 4). The demonstration effect transmitted via media, TV, Facebook, and the internet results in the preference and imitation of Western fashion and dress style, which is a sort of consumer colonialism.

### **Main features of SHC industry in Kenya**

Kenya is the biggest SHC importer in Africa and the 8<sup>th</sup> largest in the world (Hungary is the 15<sup>th</sup>). In 2021, the yearly import was 185,000 tons (= 8000 containers); between 2005 and 2021, SHC imports grew by over 500%, from USD 27 million to USD 172 million (see Figure 4). However, it accounts for only 1% of total imports. In comparison, the sector contributes 7% to the country's export earnings (Diamond, 2023b, p. 20), as Kenya is a global hub due to its geographical position (Prashar, 2022). Kenya exports SHC mainly to the neighbouring countries (Uganda, Tanzania, Congo Brazzaville, DRC, Somalia, Zambia and Lesotho).

China is the leading supplier, followed by Pakistan, Canada and the UK (see Figure 5). Between 2012 and 2016, the import of SHC from China increased from \$723,513 to \$28,757,351, which is almost 40 (!) times in 4 years (Overview...2017, p. 27). In 2017, China banned the import of SHC as the country became more affluent and a clothing exporter. In 2021, the leading EU exporters to Kenya were Poland, Germany, the UK and Hungary. Nearly 900 million SHC items were sent to Kenya from around the globe in 2021, and almost 150 million items came from the EU and the UK.

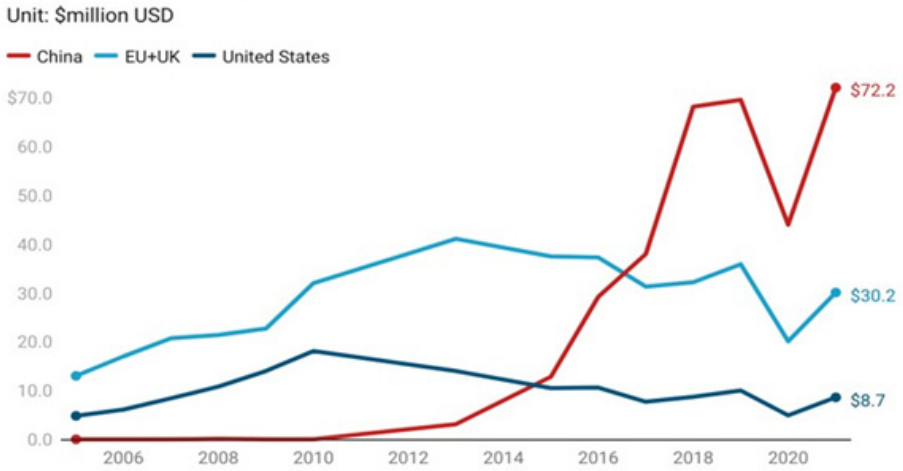


Figure 4. SHC inflow to Kenya.  
 Source: <https://shenglufashion.com/2023/02/26/used-clothing-trade-debate-continues-in-kenya/>

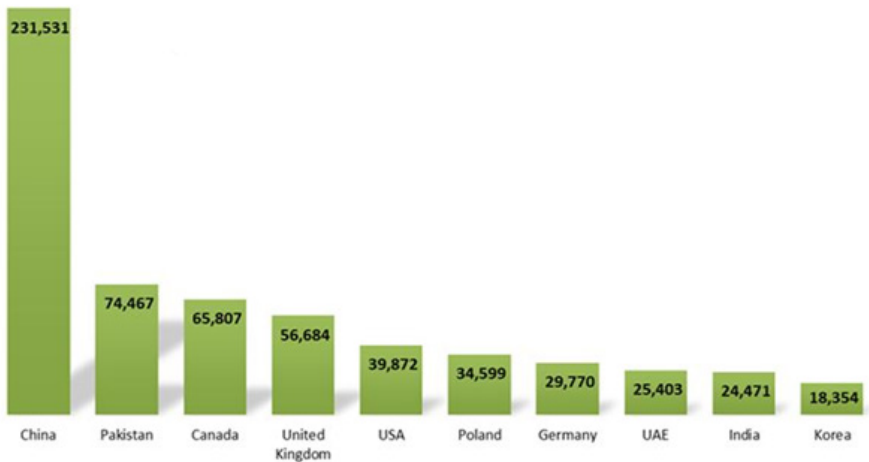


Figure 5. Top 10 countries which exported secondhand clothing to Kenya between 2016-2020 Q1.  
 Source: Bhanushali, 2021, p. 3.



## SHC industry in Kenya: benefits and drawbacks

### *a) Meeting domestic demand for affordable and trendy garments*

In 2019, 2.5% of private income was spent on clothing and footwear in Kenya (Bhanushali, 2021, p. 7; The state of..., 2021, p. 4), meaning that clothing is not a top priority. In principle, there are four options to meet the demand for domestic garments: homemade apparel, locally manufactured garments, imported manufactured clothing, and second-hand clothing.

Though Kenya is the most developed country in East Africa and has achieved significant development, it is still a low-middle income country with an income of 1940 USD per person (2019); the standard of living is low, and poverty is widespread (36% of the population, that is, almost 17 million people live below the poverty line), particularly in the rural areas. Consequently, a significant part of the population, especially rural dwellers, and low- and middle-income earners, cannot afford to buy new garments, irrespective of the origin of the product. The only product segment they can afford to buy is SHC. So for them, buying SHC is not an option to locally produced and/or imported goods; it is a necessity (Hansen, 2014). SHC is a staple primary source of clothing (Wetengere, 2018). Though large SHC markets are in large towns (like Kigoma market in Nairobi), there are also easily accessed SHC markets both in the urban and rural areas. As SHC-buyers are not conscious consumers in the Western sense of the word, they do not have any nostalgia for old clothes (vintage, retro) and probably the term “circular economy” is unfamiliar to them, however, they also are attracted by well-known brands and international labels<sup>9</sup>.

As this segment of the population is basically price-conscious<sup>10</sup>, they care less about the quality, fabrics, design, etc. They only look for affordable, acceptable quality, long-lasting, and fashionable products, preferably brand name (Wetengere, 2018, p.8). However, there is a more affluent and cosmopolitan strata of the population which prefers to buy trendy, good quality, durable, unique, and exclusive clothes, especially brands produced for more demanding Western customers (Brooks, 2015; Hansen, 2000; Wetengere, 2018, p. 8). They also buy SHC instead of purchasing new but less trendy, poorer quality, and less durable domestic or imported, mainly Chinese garments. That is why many Chinese vendors deliberately “degrade” their brand-new products to SHC<sup>11</sup> or mix new clothing with SHC. Albeit the most demanding and affluent customers go for imported branded western products. Sometimes they travel abroad to shop or ask their relatives living abroad (the diaspora) to meet their desire for the latest fashions<sup>12</sup>.

### *b) Job creation for the unemployed masses*

Though the official unemployment rate is not very high in Kenya, it was a bit above 5% in 2022, however, it was as high as almost 14% in the case of young people<sup>13</sup>, especially in urban areas due to outmigration from the rural areas. If we include the underemployed, then the unemployment rate is even higher. That is, Kenya, like other African countries, is struggling with joblessness, especially among urban youth, so



all industries with meaningful job creation are welcome and supported. From this point of view, the SHC industry seems rather valuable as it “employs” around 2 million people<sup>14</sup> (The state of... , 2021, p. 3), more than the entire local textile industry (Diamond, 2023b), and 10% of the total labour force (The State of...2021, p. 10), with a high share being women<sup>15</sup>. A long chain of people are involved in the SHC business (Chalhoub, 2012; Imo and Maiyo, 2012) such as importers, exporters, clearing and forwarding agents, wholesalers, brokers, medium and small retailers, distributors, merchants, formal and informal traders, transporters, loaders, sorters, market/street and food vendors, hawkers, security agents; value addition people who clean, dry, iron, tailor, sew, mend, alter, remake the clothes; helpers preparing tea and food for traders, and finally, *fagia* (waste textiles) workers and dumpsite waste pickers.

### ***c) Income and government revenue generation***

The SHC industry is a lucrative business as it provides jobs for around 2 million people and creates small businesses. Consequently, it contributes to the country’s GDP, generates income for the participants, and increases purchasing power. However, one should note that SHC business is quite risky due to currency fluctuation, instability of effective demand, and the unpredictable content of the consignments. That is why sorting upon opening the bales is crucial. In the East African Community, three quality levels and grades (*camera*-s) are applied: Grade A (first *camera*) – new or as good as new; Grade B (second *camera*) – stained, dripped strides, some bruises; Grade C – spoiled, serious bruises, holes, tears and stains (Katende-Magezi, 2017), while the rest is the *fagia*, meaning the lowest quality items destined for rags or fuel<sup>16</sup>.

Official income generation is modified by the fact that a significant part of the participants – being active/operating in the informal sector – are not registered employees, or they are self-employed; consequently, they do not pay income taxes, and their customers do not pay value-added tax either<sup>17</sup>. In the rural areas, trading is seasonal. However, the formal/registered SHC industry does increase budget revenues in the form of customs duties, import tax, turnover tax, sales tax, value-added tax, income tax, corporate tax, levies (import declaration levy), licencing and rental fees, and business permits.<sup>18</sup> According to the Mitumba Association of Kenya, SHC trade produces around 1 billion shillings in government revenue per month (The state of 2021, p. 9), and in 2021, SHC trade generated \$112,460,975 in government tax revenues (Diamond, 2023b, p. 20).

### ***d) Impact on the domestic garment industry and African fashion***

The most controversial issue is the interplay between the SHC industry and the domestic textile industry.<sup>19</sup> There are two main strands in the literature. According to one, the decline of the domestic garment industry is mainly caused by the increasing inflow of SHC and cheap imports, largely from Asian countries (Koyi, 2006; Majtenyi, 2010; Patel, 2004; Webster, 2003, cited by Brooks and Simon, 2012, p. 1284; Brooks, 2015; Frazer, 2008<sup>20</sup>; Wetengere, 2018). However, Prashar states that

“it is a myth that the second-hand clothing industry weakens the domestic production” (Prshar, 2022, p. 2) as the two sectors can work together for mutual benefit.

The other strand states that the local textile industry is doomed anyway due to decline and a great number of deficiencies such as lack of capital, raw materials,<sup>21</sup> inputs, skilled labour force, technical skills and management expertise, use of outdated technology due to expensive machinery imports (Hansen, 2004, p. 7-8), and unavailability of foreign currency, poor supportive infrastructure, unreliable energy supply, inefficient operation, poor management, low productivity, lack of tax and non-tax incentives, and poor business environments (Diamond, 2023b; Mangieri, 2006; Wetengere, 2018). The truth seems to be somewhere in between.

After independence, Kenya, like many African countries, decided to industrialize the economy in order to reach a higher level of development. In order to decrease dependence on external sources of supply, import substitution industrialization was a plausible option in the case of labour-intensive light industries, including textile and garment industries (Mangiere, 2006). Natural and economic endowments, like the availability of raw materials (cotton), an abundance of labour force, and an expanding domestic market, were conducive to building up and developing these branches of manufacturing. In the 60s and 70s, the process of industrialization started, and the contribution of manufacturing to GDP and employment increased significantly as the labour force moved from the less productive agriculture to the more productive manufacturing and services sector. By the early 1980s, the textile industry (mainly traditional African print textile production, *khanga* and *kitenge*) became Kenya's leading manufacturing sector in terms of employment and size, involving over 200,000 households and 30% of the industrial labour force (Mangiere, 2006, p. 5).

However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the structural transformation process was halted by the oil price explosion, the deteriorating world economic situation, and the debt crisis of the African countries leading to austerity measures, declining living standards, and shrinking domestic effective demand. In addition, the structural adjustment programs of the World Bank further aggravated the situation due to the liberalisation of the economies, including foreign trade and the neoliberal industrial development model (Brooks, 2015). The inflow of more competitive import products started to weaken the position of the “premature” domestic industries, leading to the process of deindustrialization and decay of local industries (Kiss, 2017), so the two parallel, simultaneous processes led to the decline of the domestic garment industry and opened the way for garment imports.

In the mid-1990s, the Kenyan textile industry faced challenges due to the increasing imports of clothing, including SHC. This influx of imports, both new and second-hand (Mangieri, 2006), outcompeted locally produced goods, leaving the industry with limited options for recovery. At that time, only 30% of the domestic clothing demand was being met by local production, while 20% was fulfilled by imports, and 50% was already being met by second-hand clothing<sup>22</sup> (Field, 2004; Imo-Mayo, 2012). So, by the 1990s Kenya became a clothing importer (Hansen, 2009) due to the failure of industrialisation. Since then, the share of local produc-

tion in meeting domestic demand decreased further,<sup>23</sup> all the more as larger textile firms owned by foreign (mainly American and Asian – Indian, Chinese) capital moved from impoverishing domestic to affluent export markets (Brooks and Simon, 2012, p. 1280; Mangiere, 2006) capitalizing on preferential trade agreements (like the multi-fibre trade agreement until 2005, or the AGOA (= African Growth and Opportunity Act) of the USA<sup>24</sup>).

We have concluded that the influx of SHC did not cause the failure of the domestic textile industry. The decline of local garment industries had actually started earlier. According to Brooks (2015, p. 61), the decline began even under colonialism, as cotton and ginned cotton started to be exported to the UK as an input into early industrialization. This opened the way for SHC influx, which accelerated the industry's decline. However, cheap import is a bigger challenge for the domestic textile industry as in 2019 SHC represented only 12.5% of the total imports of textiles (Diamond 2023a, p. 12).

Apart from the economic impact on the domestic garment industry, one should not ignore the subverting impact of SHC trade on *local fashion* and customers' behaviour. Imitating and giving preference to Western fashion crowds out traditional authentic fashion, design, and natural fabrics<sup>25</sup>. The oversupply of SHC promotes the bad habit of fast fashion and wasteful consumption, and it also destroys and/or distorts native societies' own fashion<sup>26</sup>. Fortunately, this is not the case everywhere and all the time. For occasions, like weddings, ceremonies, and diplomatic or international events, traditional African outfits reappear. It even happens that members of African high society wear luxurious, exclusive, sophisticated, and graceful traditional garments abroad. While travelling to Ghana recently, I met some young Ghanaians wearing beautiful, long, white silk robes (costing more than my air ticket) with genuine patent leather shoes with a matching suitcase (probably bought in Gulf-states).

### ***e) Environmental impact and health hazard***

The SHC industry's environmental impact is a hotly debated topic at both local and global levels. SHC products travel long distances from places like the USA or China before reaching Africa and circulating extensively (see Figure 2). The transportation of low-value but voluminous consignments has a relatively high negative impact on the global environment. Supporters/advocates of SHC trade (Diamond, 2023b; Farrant et al., 2010; Katende-Magezi, 2017; The state of...2021, p. 4. and p. 27) argue that importing SHC is less harmful to the environment than producing garments locally<sup>27</sup> because of high water and energy consumption, pollution, and high carbon emission.<sup>28</sup> The textile industry is one of the most polluting industries in the world, ranking just after food, housing, and transportation (Diamond, 2023b, p. 14). Many developed countries that claim to be environmentally conscious have shifted a significant portion of their garment production to emerging countries such as China, Turkey, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. These countries often have lower environmental standards, less strict regulations, and undervalued human life. As a result, the environmental impact of the textile industry is no longer a priority for these devel-

oped nations. Another issue is the excessive importation of garments, far surpassing what the market needs or can handle,<sup>29</sup> instead of supporting domestic production.

In the case of Africa, the environmental implications of the SHC trade are caused by the quantity/volume, the quality, and the decomposition of consignments. Though there is an increasing effective demand for SHC, it cannot keep pace with the oversupply of the linear business model of fast fashion production. Moreover, in order to reach higher profits for the salesmen, rapid stock turnover is needed. All the more, about half of the inflowing SHC is physically worthless (damaged, dirty, spotted, spoiled, ripped), unsaleable, and unsuitable for wearing by Africans due to the style, design (dress length, tightness) (Hansen, 2014), non-compliance with African tradition, religion (culturally inappropriate style), size (different body shape), and fabric (not suitable for hot and humid climate), etc. Consequently, every second item, 450 million out of 900 million items in Kenya, is *textile waste*. As there is no organised waste disposal system in Kenya, half of the second-hand clothing imports end up in landfills, dumpsites,<sup>30</sup> or rivers<sup>31</sup> causing contamination, and water and air pollution because most of the materials are oil-based, non-biodegradable synthetic materials full of harmful and toxic substances. This phenomenon is rightly called *toxic colonialism* (Trashion, 2023).

In Kenya, 1 out of 3 pieces of SHC (300 million pieces out of 900 million) is made of synthetic, plastic fibres (mainly polyester) with hazardous chemicals (Trashion, 2023)<sup>32</sup>. To dispose of textile waste, it is often burned, which results in harmful air pollution. This pollution includes methane and greenhouse gas emissions, which can lead to various health issues such as cancer, birth defects, respiratory diseases, and skin problems. It is ironic that Africa used to export natural raw materials like cotton and animal skins to the global North for the garment industry, but now many people in Africa are forced to wear unhealthy clothing made from non-natural materials and are exposed to contaminated water and smoke from burning synthetic clothes, leading to significant health risks (Wetengere, 2018).

In sharp contrast with the above findings, according to the latest report of the Kenya Mitumba Association (Diamond, 2023a), textile waste is *negligible* in Kenya, as “waste in imported SHC in the retail trade is no more than 2%” (?) (ibid p. 9), that is “4-12 pieces of clothing of SHC out of 350-600” is waste (ibid p. 9). This

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incredibly minimal clothing waste is explained by the fact that “SHC imported into Kenya meets the required quality standards” (ibid p. 8) as importers follow a series of quality control processes and measures (like sample inspection at the sorting centres) to ensure that they import only suitable and quality items. In addition, the sporadically occurring textile waste (that is 1-2% of total SHC inflow) is recycled (used as cleaning rags, stuffing, patching, etc.). The findings of the report are in full contradiction with the visible reality, but the arguments are rather weak as they are based on personal interviews with importers and retailers, who are the major stakeholders interested in continuing the SHC business. The other source of evidence is the household surveys, according to which “textile waste accounts for approximately 0.39% of the total household waste generated in east Nairobi” (ibid p. 10). The issue is that textile waste is created in the supply chain between importers/retailers and households, and ends up in landfills and riverbanks as unsold or unusable items. It is also a misconception that importing second-hand clothing replaces the environmentally harmful production of new clothing: it is unlikely that Africans would and could ever buy such a huge volume of new clothes.

### **Solutions – for shorter and longer terms**

The SHC industry has a strong presence in Kenya due to two main factors. Firstly, there is a high demand for affordable and trendy garments in the South, which also creates job opportunities and generates income. Secondly, the pressure of fast fashion overproduction, unsustainable overconsumption, and clothing waste accumulation in the North also contribute to this presence. However, it is important to consider the negative consequences of this phenomenon, such as increased dependence on the North, delayed structural transformation and re-industrialization in Africa, negative impact on local fashion, and escalating environmental degradation.

#### ***a) Short terms remedies: to ease supply pressure***

Due to the high profitability of the fast fashion industry, the oversupply of SHC and the escalating waste issue in the North, it is unlikely that supply-side pressure will significantly subside in the coming decades because of the unequal North-South power relationship. However, there are some options in Kenya for easing supply pressure by curbing the SHC inflow:

1. The most obvious and widely debated option is to *ban SHC imports*. All the more as banning is not without precedent in Sub-Saharan Africa: Zimbabwe prohibited SHC imports from 2015 to 2017, but later lifted the ban as the local textile industry could not meet the demand; Nigeria also had bans in place; in 2016, there was a ban proposition by the East African Community for boosting domestic textile industry and for health reasons, but the idea was abandoned; there are only two countries in Sub-Saharan Africa where SHC import bans are in place: Rwanda and South Africa.

In Kenya, the SHC import was banned between the 1960s and early 1980s when the government pursued import substitution industrialisation (Mangieri, 2006).

In the 1980s, SHCs were allowed into Kenya as long as they were donations for refugees from neighbouring countries, which gradually led to trade in SHCs. In the early 1990s, the government lifted the ban on SHC because of trade liberalization and export promotion. By 2000, most of the domestic textile companies had collapsed due to increased competition from SHC and Asian imports. As a result, there have been calls from the private sector and government to reintroduce the ban. Between March and mid-August 2020, Kenya banned SHC imports to prevent the potential spread of coronavirus. However, the high reliance on SHC by the majority of the citizens as affordable clothing and income for stakeholders has prevented the government from extending the ban. Currently, the government is considering eliminating SHC imports progressively over a longer period, however, there are serious reservations.

It is obvious that placing bans would be an unpopular measure among the consumers and all the beneficiaries as it would negatively impact the supply of affordable clothing, the income of the 2 million stakeholders (mainly traders), and the livelihood of many, in addition to government revenues (tax and tariff losses). Furthermore, unilateral banning – even if it is justified – is against the free trade principle of the envisaged African Free Trade Area and the preferential trade agreements (AGOA and the Economic Partnership Agreements of the EU) and implies a risk of loose preferential treatment<sup>33</sup> and resistance from the parties concerned. Additionally, the primary unintended beneficiaries would be the low-cost Asian textile exporters, mainly from China. Furthermore, an import ban would be ineffective due to inadequate customs control, fraudulent practices, malfunctioning registration systems, high levels of corruption, and a widespread informal sector. This would result in illicit trade and smuggling. Therefore, if a ban is implemented, it is crucial to establish strong *border control* to prevent uncontrolled, illegal, informal importation and smuggling of goods..

2. A more feasible option is a *slow, progressive phasing out* of SHC imports (over a 5 to 10-year period) (Wetengere, 2018) by imposing a gradual ban on all SHC or *selectively* (Katende-Magezi, 2017), meaning that first the poorest quality (Grade C and B) products will be banned. These measures in the transition period should be accompanied by subsidizing local apparel, textile, and leather industries (Brooks, 2016) which would boost domestic production and generate jobs<sup>34</sup> and incomes while maintaining a reasonable degree of SHC import until the emerging local industries are capable of meeting a part of domestic demand.
3. Another possibility is to introduce *import quotas, quantitative restrictions, and/or voluntary export restraints* in order to moderate the volume of SHC imports<sup>35</sup> because the problem is not with the inflow of SHC *per se* – as it meets real effective demand and provides a livelihood for a wide range of people – but with the unregulated, sometimes illegal, massive inflow of poor quality and worthless foreign garments (= waste). To introduce a *waste ceiling threshold* and/or *waste import* would be desirable. It is impossible to separate useable clothing from waste as they arrive, not by chance, in the same closed containers and bales.



4. To *increase tariffs/tax* on all SHC and/or only the best items (Grade A) (Katende-Magezi, 2017) and/or on the environmentally most harmful clothing (plastic tax) (Trashion, 2023) is also an option with the main objective being a restriction on SHC import.<sup>36</sup> However, it would increase the price of SHC, making it less affordable and less competitive vis-à-vis imports and/or domestic production. Furthermore, a unilateral tariff increase is against the stipulations of preferential trade agreements and might cause protests and countermeasures from signatory parties.<sup>37</sup>
5. In order to enhance the quality of SHC inflow and to decrease the share of waste, strict *quality inspection* and thorough, tailor-made *pre-sorting* prior to uploading the consignment should be applied. While the Mitumba Association agrees with the pre-sorting principle, they would prefer to do the job in Kenya after arrival. In the pre-shipment activity, migrants working abroad at the sorting hubs might be very helpful as they know the composition of local effective demand as far as style, size, fabric, design, shape, etc. are concerned. A well-organized pre-sorting for quality and suitability at the place of departure might moderate the volumes of shipments, increase the quality of goods, reduce waste (if, for instance, synthetic plastic clothing would be sorted out) and meet domestic demand better by avoiding mismatch. In order to reduce *waste* and *environmental* pollution, the inflow of dumped, unusable, unsaleable, toxic garments should be minimized, and compliance with sanitary requirements should be ensured.

The above agenda, however, cannot be accomplished without the consent and the action of the North. The “addiction” of the North to the (ultra) fast fashion linear business model and mega-consumption (Brooks, 2015, p. 33) and the consumption arms race (Brooks, 2015, p. 42) should be abandoned. Fewer, though better quality, long-lasting, repairable, and reusable clothes should be produced. In addition, take-back systems and services to maintain, repair, and share clothing items should be established. Slow fashion would reduce production leading to less oversupply and less pressure on consumers to purchase more and change their wardrobe frequently. Consequently, less excess waste would accumulate. As African countries are still suffering from asymmetrical power relationships, they will not be the first beneficiaries of any paradigm shift. Only *fair fashion* might provide a pleasing remedy.

***b) Medium-term solution: enhancing domestic clothing and fashion industries***

Even the regulated, controlled, restricted and upgraded SHC industry is not meant to substitute the domestic garment industry; rather it is supposed to supplement it as the two industries target different consumer groups. It is beyond doubt that SHC imports meet the effective demand of the less affluent segment of society and can generate jobs, income, and revenues. However, it cannot contribute to the diversification, structural transformation, and development of the economy as it has not been integrated into the domestic economy and lacks backward and forward linkages, though it is linked to transport, finance, insurance, and warehouses (*godowns*). Fur-



thermore, it is not capable of decreasing asymmetrical dependence. To revitalize and enhance the domestic textile and garment industry could help the country meet both domestic and export demand for garments. This could also lead to benefits such as improved backward and forward linkages, spill-over effects (Diamond, 2023b) on agriculture and agro-processing (cotton and skin producers), access to raw materials and labor force, technological development, increased GDP, economic diversification, job creation, and higher budget and export revenues.

As the main constraint to enhancing the domestic textile and garment industry is the lack of capital, the inflow of foreign investment is welcome; however, this is an ambiguous process. Foreign capital, mainly Chinese capital, is primarily interested in producing not only for the domestic market with limited purchasing power but also for regional and Sub-Saharan African market, and overseas destinations, in order to capitalize on the opportunities of the planned African Free Trade Area and on Kenya's preferential trade agreements. Furthermore, there is a complex relationship between the growth of domestic textile industries, SHC trade, and preferential trade agreements. SHC exporters are eager to maintain the current status quo, regardless of its detrimental impact. Therefore, any ban or restriction on SHC inflow would jeopardize their eligibility for preferential treatment, as seen in the case of countries that have banned SHC imports, such as Rwanda. As duty and quota-free excess to foreign markets is a significant competitive advantage, without their existence, any export attempt is jeopardized, and the interest of foreign capital toward Kenya's textile and clothing industry would decline or vanish. Consequently, the industrial modernization project is rather vulnerable.

The other issue is whether the domestic textile industry will be capable of developing under the conditions of free trade without applying protectionist trade measures and controlling unfair competition as the re-emerging local textile industry should compete not only with SHC imports but cheap imports of new clothes, too. That is why Wetengere (2018) idealistically suggests the "banning of new but cheap products from Asia and the creation of conducive and competitive business and investment environment through which the intended industries would grow" (ibid. p. 121).

According to the *Vision 2030* program for Kenya's<sup>38</sup> domestic manufacturing – which is taken as an instrument for economic growth and social transformation – should be enhanced in order to reach 15% of the GDP (The state of...2021, p. 6). The "Buy Kenya, build Kenya" slogan of the Big Four agenda is based on a protectionist industrial and trade policy principle which does not exclude the ban of SHC imports, which would be counterproductive. However, the gradual phasing out of SHC import is not inconceivable (Wetengere, 2018), provided that domestic cotton, leather, textile, and apparel industries have reached a certain level of development. It should be a gradual process in order to keep the "well-being" effect of cheap clothing without killing the re-emerging domestic garment industry. For a while, the two sectors – the domestic textile industry and the SHC industry – must work together for mutual benefit (Diamond, 2023b).

Idealistically, the revitalization of the local textile and garment industry might provide an impetus to local fashion designers whose products are better suited to African circumstances, like tradition, religion, climate, physical body, and social expectations concerning style. Returning back to authentic African fashion and identity might lead to increasing self-respect and might even attract foreign customers. I remember while living in Tanzania, I was a frequent visitor at a boutique-type shop called “Nyumba ya Sana” in Swahili (House of Arts), where Europeanized traditional clothing made from traditional African fabrics (like *kitenge* or *khanga*) was sold. These dresses were more pleasant to wear in Africa than clothing that originated from Europe. Even in Europe they became my beloved garments, especially amidst global warming. Nowadays, there are promising signs that African designers are getting to be known in Europe and other parts of the world.

### ***c) Handling environmental issues and health hazards***

Even if the above-mentioned regulating measures and industrialization strategies were realized, the African countries still would face the environmental impact of SHC inflow. While the paradigm shift of the global fashion industry brings the first results, countries of the global North do their utmost to protect their environment of disposed SHC (Wetengere, 2018) and continue to forward waste to the SHC importer African countries, which remain dumping grounds. We do agree with Diamond (Diamond, 2023a; Diamond, 2023b) that dumping is not *intentional*, however, it is “consequential”; it is the product of a fast fashion linear business model. A slight change can be expected from raising the producers’ and consumers’ awareness about the environmental impact of fast fashion and limitless consumption. The producers’ responsibility would be to decrease the share of clothing made from plastic, and synthetic fibres, as even in 2030, 73% of clothing is expected to be made from synthetics (Cobbing et al., 2022; Trashion, 2023). However, this change is a double-edged sword, as producing and transporting natural (organic) raw materials (like cotton by the present SHC importers) is not without environmental consequences (depleting water reserves<sup>39</sup>, use of chemicals for dyeing, deforestation, biodiversity loss). The consumers’ responsibility would be to abandon overconsumption, to turn more sustainable and eco-friendly patterns (self-made clothing, eco-design, down-cycling<sup>40</sup>, recycling<sup>41</sup>, upcycling<sup>42</sup>, reuse, repair, remake, repurpose) and finally, to accomplish ethical consumption.

The African countries face challenges beyond their control, so the best option is to minimize the waste that has already accumulated. One possibility is *upcycling, restyling, and refashioning* (Dissanayake and Pal, 2023, p. 10), which involves turning high-quality waste into new garments through repairing, cleaning, tailoring, altering, decorating, and redesigning (Brooks, 2015, pp. 210, 212). This approach is already being practiced in some European countries. One of the latest Hungarian good practices is the *Hint of Africa* managed by the Hungarian *Close to Africa Foundation*, where SHC or any other used items, unwanted clothing (like T-shirts, jumpers, denims, dresses etc.) are transformed into new ones by decorating them

with colourful or printed African fabric. All designs are for sale, and the revenue supports African women via the foundation.

The other possibility is *reuse* or *recycling*<sup>43</sup> when the unusable, worthless SHC is used as an input for producing other goods than clothing. There are already some promising examples in Africa: in Tanzania, Anne Kiwia, under the motto “Every Queen deserves a Crown”, designs headbands from second-hand textiles; in Kenya, a bag company makes bags from SHC. In the case of reuse, textile lives are multiplied without causing any harm to the nature and environment, while recycling is less environmentally friendly as it might generate carbon emissions and requires resources (Diamond, 2023b). The circular production model in the case of the clothing industry might lead toward a climate resilient economy.

Health hazards are the other unwanted consequence of SHC import. In Kenya, health certificates issued by the health authority in the country of origin should accompany the consignment, which should be packed in transparent materials with a weight ceiling.

## **Conclusion**

Kenya is one of the leading SHC importers in Africa. The aborted import substitution industrialisation, the liberalisation of the economy, and the failure of the domestic textile industry led to the SHC trade surge, which is the direct product of the global (ultra)fast fashion linear business model, resulting in overproduction and forced overconsumption.

It is beyond doubt that the SHC industry is noticeably beneficial for the economy and the people of Kenya due to job creation, income and revenue generation, and the provision of affordable clothing. However, one should not ignore the detrimental impact on the environment and the local textile/fashion industry, which might be the backbone of economic growth and social transformation.

To maintain the benefits and reduce the negative effects of the second-hand clothing (SHC) industry in Kenya, it is important not to completely eliminate it. In the short term, quantity should be decreased and the quality of SHC coming into the country should be improved to reduce waste. In the long term, there should be a gradual decrease and eventually elimination of the inflow of second-hand clothing, depending on the revitalization of domestic garment industry. However, even the less radical changes in the SHC industry of Kenya cannot be accomplished without a paradigm shift in the business model of global fashion, from (ultra) fast fashion towards less fast and later slow and sustainable fashion, meaning smaller volume, better quality, more durable, reusable, repairable, recyclable products plus shorter supply chains in order to produce less waste and lower environmental implications. The changing business model of production (slow fashion, sustainable and socially responsible fashion, circular economy) should be accompanied by a shifting pattern of consumption from overconsumption towards ethical, responsible consumption and, finally, post-consumption (Brooks, 2015), that is, responsibility should be equally taken by the producers and consumers.

Even if all the above idealistic changes were to take place, the African countries would not be the first beneficiaries of any paradigm shift as they are still the victims of asymmetrical power relationships. Only *fair fashion* (the equal distribution of the benefits of technological development and economies of scale, the minimization of waste production, handling environmental implications on the spot and not exporting to third countries etc.) might provide a pleasing remedy.

## Notes

- 1 MIRC is an independent and academic-led research institute commissioned by the Mitumba Association of Kenya to investigate the economic, social and environmental effects of the second-hand clothing sector (known as *mitumba*) in Kenya and the wider African continent.
- 2 MCAK was formed to protect the interest of its members and to promote and develop trade in SHC.
- 3 Dissanayake and Pal, 2023.
- 4 In this article the term clothing, garments, apparel are used interchangeable, meaning men, women and children clothing, footwear and accessories. Code 6309 is used for SHC by UN Comtrade.
- 5 For the century-old history of SHC see the famous book of Brook (2015), *Clothing poverty: The Hidden World of Fast Fashion and Second-hand Clothes*
- 6 Which is rightly called a „waste making machine” (Trashion, 2023).
- 7 60% more clothing has been bought than 15 years ago and has been worn for half as long (Why giving, 2022).
- 8 One of the latest and most successful means has been the widespread use of online shopping accompanied by home delivery, especially during the years of COVID pandemics.
- 9 Herjanto et al. (2016) provide a comprehensive overview about the consumers’ behaviour towards SHC on the basis of 131 researches published over the years 1990–2014.
- 10 In Kenya SHC is 3 to 5 times cheaper than brand new clothes and shoes (Katende-Magezi, 2017).
- 11 The other, more tangible reason, is to pay less taxes (Brooks, 2015, p. 166.)
- 12 When I was living in Tanzania and returned home for a holiday, I was always asked by the university staff – from the secretary till the faculty – to bring clothes from Hungary which was not a fashion country at that time, but was located in Europe.
- 13 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/808608/unemployment-rate-in-kenya/>
- 14 Between 2013 and 2021 the number of jobs in Kenya’s SHC industry increased from 577 000 to 1,38 million (Diamond, 2023b, p. 10).
- 15 Nearly 60% of the traders of used clothes are women in several African nations mainly because trade is accessible to anyone without formal training or initial capital, and thus entry barriers are low (Chalhoub, 2012).
- 16 For boiling water, washing clothing, drying and roasting peanuts at the mitumba market.
- 17 About the informal sector – which “employs” 70% of the working population in Kenya – see Chalhoub (2012).
- 18 That is why the Vison 2030 program of Kenya suggests the formalization of informal sector.
- 19 In this paper the term apparel, textile, garment, clothing, fashion industry is used interchangeable, covering the production of yarn, fabric, manufacturing of clothing, garments (including shoes), research and development, design and distribution.
- 20 According to Frazer’s econometric model 1 percent increase in SHC imports resulted in 0.61 percent reduction in apparel production over the period 1981–2000 (Frazer, 2008, p. 1780). Consequently, used clothing imports have a negative impact on apparel production in Africa,

- explaining roughly 40% of the decline in production and 50% of the decline in employment (Frazer, 2008, p.1767 and 2008).
- 21 Unavailability and/or shortage of cotton, raw hides and skins because 75-80% of the raw materials produced in the East African region is exported (Katende-Magezi, 2017).
  - 22 In Zambia – where domestic textile industry was less developed than in Kenya – in the mid-90s already 75% of clothing demand was met by SHC.
  - 23 In the early 1990s there were 110 large-scale garment manufacturers in Kenya. By 2006 their number dropped to 55 and by 2016 to 15.
  - 24 The AGOA (2000-2015) provided duty- and quota-free access to the US market for apparel items from Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2015 the agreement was extended till 2025.
  - 25 In Ghana the authentic *kente* cloth made by traditional weavers (and costing a fortune) is getting to be crowded out by *kente* pattern typically mass produced in China.
  - 26 A good example is the clothing of Masai tribes in Kenya and Tanzania. Though they still wear their toga type traditional cloth, the „shukas” (sometimes made in China) over their shoulder, they wear it with plastic shoes and synthetic T-shirts. The most astonishing outfit I have ever met was in Tanzania in the 90s, when a young masai put in his cell phone to his pierced and enlarged ear lobe.
  - 27 “The purchase of 100 second-hand items of clothing would save ... 60 to 85 new garments” (The state of...2021, p. 4).
  - 28 10% of all global carbon emissions are generated by the textile industry (Diamond, 2023b, p. 14) “Every 1 kilo of fabric produced generates 23 kilos of greenhouse gases” (Diamond, 2023b, p. 15).
  - 29 Every *week*, around 15 million items of SHC from Western countries arrive in Ghana, where the entire population is only 30 million [www.cbsnews.com/news/ghana-fast-fashion-environmental-disaster](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/ghana-fast-fashion-environmental-disaster)
  - 30 In the case of Ghana, 40% of SHC arriving to the country ends up in landfills.
  - 31 Nairobi river – which passes Gikomba market – is full of textile waste.
  - 32 Synthetics are the backbone of fast fashion industry as they account for 69% for all the production (Trashion, 2023).
  - 33 In Rwanda AGOA has been suspended after banning SHC import (Brady and Lu, 2018).
  - 34 Kenya textile industry once employed 500 000 people, now it has only 20 000 workers (Brooks, 2016).
  - 35 According to Frazer (2008, p. 18) less than 0.1 kg per capita SHC import do not have detrimental impact on the receiving countries.
  - 36 It should be noted that the present tariff rate (35%) is rather high and in principle could discourage SHC legal (documented) import.
  - 37 In 2016 the East African Community intended to increase the Common External Tariff (CET) rate for SHC from USD .20/kg to USD .40/kg or 35%, whichever is higher. The USA immediately questioned the further eligibility of the AGOA (Overview...2017).
  - 38 This is Kenya’s development program, launched in 2008 with the objective of transforming Kenya into a middle-income country, providing a high-quality life to all its citizens by the year 2030.
  - 39 11 000 litre water is needed to produce 1 kg cotton (Brooks, p. 29).
  - 40 Downcycling means the transformation of recycling textiles into products of lower value or utility compared to the original item. For example, use of SHC as wiping rags, stuffings, raw materials for other industries or fuel.
  - 41 A good example is the case of the South African PEPCO retail chain operating in Europe which nowadays offers t-shirts made from recycled fabric under the label „beloved”.
  - 42 Upcycling means the transformation of worn-out or old clothing items into higher-value products or garments.
  - 43 Recently not more than 1 percent of new clothes are recycled into new clothes.

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