The hidden trade in our second-hand clothes given to charity

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*Andrew Brooks*

It is a common misconception that old clothes donated to Oxfam and others are freely distributed in developing countries. While they can provide jobs, they also prevent development.

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[38](https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/sustainable-fashion-blog/2015/feb/13/second-hand-clothes-charity-donations-africa" \l "comments)

Leaflets from charities and clothing recycling companies fall through the letterbox all the time asking for donations of old clothes. In supermarket carparks there are clothing banks for unwanted, wearable clothes, but where do all these clothes go?

Torn clothes are recycled and used again as things like insulation materials, and soiled garments end up in landfill or incinerated. Some go to high street charity shops, but [estimates indicate only 10-30% are sold in the UK](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-30227025). Most donated clothes are [exported overseas](http://www.zedbooks.co.uk/node/20804). A massive 351m kilograms of clothes (equivalent to 2.9bn T-shirts) are [traded annually from Britain alone](http://comtrade.un.org/db/default.aspx). The top five destinations are Poland, Ghana, Pakistan, Ukraine and Benin.

[[](https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/sustainable-fashion-blog/2014/nov/18/fair-wages-fashion-industry-expert-opinion)](https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/sustainable-fashion-blog/2014/nov/18/fair-wages-fashion-industry-expert-opinion)

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Globally the wholesale used clothing trade is valued at more than £2.8bn. Although it is more sustainable to keep wearing old clothes, proponents argue that exporting second-hand clothes around the world reduces waste. But this green argument often ignores one important question: what are the impacts of used clothing overseas?

It is actually a common misconception that organisations such as [Oxfam](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/donate/donate-goods/what-happens-to-your-donation) and the [Salvation Army](http://www.wear2bank.co.uk/faqs) distribute second-hand clothes freely in the developing world. To be fair to the major charities, they do not claim to give your old jeans and T-shirts away for free, but it is not readily apparent that donated clothes will be sold to traders who will then retail them.

Second-hand clothes from an array of developed countries dominate local market stalls in sub-Saharan [Africa](https://www.theguardian.com/world/africa). Across the African continent second-hand clothes are a mainstay of informal traders, even accounting for the majority of clothing sales in some countries. In Nigeria they are known as *kafa ulaya* (the clothes of the dead whites) and *roupa da calamidade* (clothing of the calamity) in Mozambique.

In Xipamanine Market, Maputo, Mozambique, a used pair of jeans will typically cost £2.90 and a T-shirt £1.50. Second-hand clothes are cheaper than new alternatives and normally better quality, but the average daily income in Mozambique is just £1, so even used clothes are difficult to afford. Selling clothes does provide some jobs but there are also negative impacts.

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Stallholders like Mario, who works in Maputo, can make a living and support his family selling second-hand clothes, but the variable quality of second-hand clothes make it a risky livelihood. Africans have little influence over what second-hand clothes are available for sale. Used clothes are also often in bad condition, which makes them difficult to sell and many foreign clothes just don’t match local fashions and body shapes. And donated underwear raises issues of human dignity, with some countries such as Zimbabwe [moving to ban imported underwear](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/09/zimbabwean-outlaws-sale-used-knickers).

In a trade that Mario and other market traders call a *totobola* (or lottery), it is difficult to escape poverty.

As well as the social and cultural effects, are the economic impacts of used clothing imports, which forge a relationship of dependency on the west and in many ways prevent Africa from developing.

After the end of colonialism the plan was for Africans to produce their own clothes and other basic goods to help industrialise and develop economies as happened in China and South Korea. Yet in the 1980s and 1990s, clothing industries declined and imports of used clothes increased.

[Clothing bin wars: the battle over your charitable used donations](https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2014/oct/02/recycle-clothing-donations-hm-goodwill-north-face-puma)

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African leaders were forced to liberalise their economies under political pressure from banks and governments in the west who had earlier lent them money, and to whom they owed massive interest repayments. Liberal economic reforms to the market meant the removal of barriers to trade, such as import taxes and quotas, which had protected new factories. Once fragile economies were open to imports – like cheap second-hand clothes – there was a wholesale collapse of vast swathes of local industry. Cheaper imported goods flooded African markets and workers in clothing factories lost their jobs.

Meanwhile, the debt crises as well as the long-term decline in the price of agricultural products, such as cotton, led to falling incomes across the continent. One of the sad ironies of today’s globalised economy is that many cotton farmers and ex-factory workers in countries such as Zambia are now too poor to afford any clothes other than imported second-hand ones from the west, whereas 30 or 40 years ago they could buy locally produced new clothes.

Stopping the trade of second-hand clothes will not enable the development of clothing industries in Africa alone, but your old jeans and T-shirts are often unwittingly part of the problem.

*Dr Andrew Brooks is a lecturer in development geography at King’s College London. He is the author of recently released*[*Clothing Poverty: The Hidden World of Fast Fashion and Second-hand Clothes*](http://www.zedbooks.co.uk/node/20804)*. He tweets*[*@DrABrooks*](https://twitter.com/DrABrooks)

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