Bearing the Burden, Striving to Thrive: Improving Livelihoods and Reducing Textile Waste among Second-Hand Clothing Traders at Gikomba Market

Policy Brief - Natálie Ferreira de Sousa | 2026

Executive Summary

the global fast fashion industry increasingly exports used clothing from the Global North to countries in the Global South, where it provides economic opportunities but also generates significant textile waste. Gikomba Market in Nairobi, Kenya, one of East Africa's largest second-hand clothing markets, illustrates this dual reality. Traders rely on the trade for income, independence, and employment creation, yet they also operate under precarious conditions characterized by poor infrastructure, low-quality imported garments, unfair trading practices, and increasing volumes of unsellable clothing.

This policy brief argues that banning the second-hand clothing trade is unlikely to improve livelihoods or reduce waste. Instead, policymakers should prioritize improving market infrastructure, strengthening waste management systems, promoting fair trade practices, and encouraging greater accountability among fast fashion companies. These measures can simultaneously improve traders' livelihoods and reduce environmental impacts.



Policy Problem

Global discussions on fast fashion and textile waste often focus on environmental impacts while overlooking the workers who manage unwanted clothing at the bottom positions of the global value chain. Traders at Gikomba Market play a critical role in extending garment lifespans by sorting, repairing, and reselling imported clothing.

However, they face several interconnected challenges:

- Declining quality of imported second-hand clothing, resulting in larger quantities of unsellable garments.
- Poor market infrastructure, including inadequate roads, drainage, storage, electricity, and internet access.
- Vulnerability to market fires, demolitions, and exploitative practices by larger distributors.
- Limited systems for recycling or repurposing textile waste.

Despite these challenges, traders consistently attempt to maximize the value of every garment rather than discard it. They should therefore be recognized as essential actors in circular economy efforts rather than simply as contributors to textile waste.

Evidence

Research conducted from March to April 2026 through interviews and participant observation at Gikomba Market demonstrates that:

- Traders process hundreds of kilograms of clothing every week.
- A growing proportion of imported garments are damaged, outdated, or unsuitable for resale.
- Most traders actively resell clothing or adopt other strategies (donation, upcycling etc.), before considering disposal.
- Second-hand clothing provides employment, income, social mobility, and entrepreneurship opportunities.
- The accumulation of textile waste is driven primarily by the declining quality and excessive volume of imported clothing rather than by traders' business practices.

The findings show that the second-hand clothing trade is neither entirely beneficial nor entirely harmful. It simultaneously supports livelihoods while exposing communities to environmental and economic vulnerabilities.

Policy Options

Option 1: Maintain the Current System

Continue existing policies without intervention.

Advantages

- No immediate public expenditure.
- Maintains current employment.

Limitations

- Textile waste continues to increase.
- Poor working conditions remain.
- Infrastructure problems persist.

Option 2: Restrict or Ban Second-Hand Clothing Imports

Reduce imports to limit textile waste.

Advantages

- Could reduce the flow of low-quality clothing.

Limitations

- Threatens the livelihoods of thousands of traders.
- Reduces affordable clothing options.
- Does not address overproduction by fast fashion companies.

Option 3: Improve Market Conditions and Circular Economy Systems (Recommended)

Invest in infrastructure while strengthening textile waste management and producer responsibility.

Advantages

- Protects livelihoods.
- Reduces textile waste.
- Creates additional employment.
- Improves environmental outcomes.
- Encourages more responsible practices throughout the fashion value chain.

Policy Recommendations

For Local Government and Municipal Authorities

- Upgrade market infrastructure, including roads, drainage, electricity, sanitation, and internet connectivity.
- Construct more affordable storage and warehouse facilities to protect clothing from damage.
- Improve fire prevention, safety measures, and market security.
- Establish textile collection, recycling, and upcycling facilities.
- Introduce pilot buy-back programmes for unsold clothing that can be recycled or repurposed.
- Strengthen regulation of distributors to promote fair trading practices.

For National Government

- Develop a national textile waste management strategy.
- Support research and investment in textile recycling technologies.
- Create incentives for circular economy businesses and local recycling enterprises.
- Improve labour protections for informal market workers.

For Fast Fashion Brands and International Stakeholders

- Improve the quality and durability of clothing entering second-hand markets.
- Expand corporate responsibility for textile waste through Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes.
- Support recycling initiatives and community-based waste management projects.
- Incorporate the experiences of traders into sustainability and corporate social responsibility policies.

Expected Outcomes

Implementing these recommendations would:

- Improve the livelihoods and working conditions of second-hand clothing traders.
- Reduce textile waste entering landfills.
- Strengthen Kenya's circular economy.
- Generate new employment opportunities through recycling and textile processing.
- Increase accountability throughout the global fashion value chain.

Conclusion

The experience of traders at Gikomba Market demonstrates that the second-hand clothing trade is both an economic opportunity and an environmental challenge. Rather than eliminating the trade, policymakers should strengthen the systems surrounding it. Investments in infrastructure, waste management, fair trade regulation, and producer responsibility can protect livelihoods while reducing textile waste. Sustainable solutions require

collaboration among local governments, national authorities, international organizations, and fast fashion companies, recognizing that responsibility for textile waste extends across the entire global fashion value chain.