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FAST FASHION SLOW POISON



THE TOXIC TEXTILE
CRISIS IN GHANA

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Author

Sam Quashie-Idun

Contributors

Mike Anane

Madeleine Cobbing

Hellen Kahaso Dena

Yannick Vicaire

Viola Wohlgemuth

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Greenpeace Africa, 158 Jan Smuts Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg, South Africa. Press Office M +254 722 505 233, Press Desk Greenpeace Africa Pressdesk.africa@greenpeace.org.

Responsible for content Greenpeace Africa Text/Editor Sam Quashie-Idun Contributors Mike Anane, Madeleine Cobbing, Hellen Kahaso Dena, Yannick Vicaire, Viola Wohlgemuth Photos Kevin McElvaney / Greenpeace; Google (p. 12) Photo Editor Jana Kühle Layout Twoshoes Design Cape Town 09/2024

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FAST FASHION IS AT THE ROOT OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL AND PUBLIC HEALTH DISASTER THAT IS UNFOLDING IN ACCRA, GHANA





1

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fast fashion is at the root of an environmental and public health disaster that is unfolding in Accra, Ghana, as a result of increasing volumes of exports from the Global North of discarded clothing, mainly second hand and unused clothes. Nearly half of these clothes are of poor quality and many are made from synthetic fibres including polyester, nylon, acrylic and have no resale value.

Greenpeace researchers have documented their fate once they are thrown away by stallholders at Accra's largest second hand market, *Kantamanto*. While the majority of these waste clothes end up in several of the informal dumpsites in the city, we found that significant volumes of textile waste are also collected from Kantamanto Market and burnt as fuel to boil water for a number of public washhouses in the neighbouring informal settlement, *Old Fadama*.

Air samples collected by Greenpeace show that the ambient air of the three public baths was contaminated with numerous dangerous chemical substances, many far above European safety standards. These included carcinogenic compounds like benzene and Poly Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAHs), thus exposing workers and customers in the washhouses as well as people living nearby to toxic chemicals.

Fisherman at Jamestown Beach in Accra, Ghana.



Nearly half of these clothes are of poor quality and many are also made from synthetic fibres including polyester, nylon, acrylic and have no resale value.

Infrared testing by Greenpeace of the clothing waste collected from Kantamanto Market and on the informal dumpsites shows that almost all of the items are made with plastic which does not biodegrade, but will eventually break down into microplastics and together with the other dangerous chemicals could contaminate soil, water, air, and the food web.

It is estimated that every week up to about half a million items of clothing waste from Kantamanto Market end up in open spaces and informal dumpsites in the city and further afield in the countryside. Piles of clothing waste are increasingly encroaching on wild areas, smothering animal habitats and biodiversity and filling the air with toxic plumes of black smoke from the fires that often break out. These dumpsites also release toxic leachate which contaminates groundwater, the soil, agricultural land and runs off into lagoons and the nearby Densu wetlands. Old clothes are also washed out to sea in heavy rains.

This evidence of fast fashion waste exposes the neocolonialist mindset behind the cynical overproduction of disposable clothes by fashion and sportswear brands and their avoidance of taking responsibility. It also reveals the reality of their “circularity” claims as absurd false solutions such as the promotion of recycled Polyethylene terephthalate (PET) from bottles instead of phasing out plastics from textiles which should be the priority.

It's time for responsible fashion. Brands and regulators in the Global North need to examine the evidence of the devastating impact of fast fashion in Ghana and elsewhere, listen to the voices of people in Ghana and develop pragmatic solutions with them that break away from neocolonialism. There is a wealth of experience and expertise on repairing and upcycling, and creative African solutions for sustainable fashion. Ghana does not need any more unsuitable and poor quality items made with synthetic fibres. The flood of such items is also pushing the second hand clothing system in Europe to the point of collapse.

Fashion brands are showing no signs that they will truly reinvent themselves. Effective regulation on Extended Producer Responsibility and the application of the Polluters Pay Principle cannot come soon enough.

EVERY WEEK HALF A MILLION ITEMS OF CLOTHING WASTE FROM KANTAMANTO MARKET END UP IN OPEN SPACES

Textile waste at Jamestown Beach, Accra.
© McElvaney / Greenpeace.



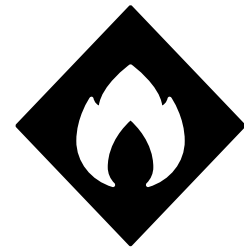


2

FINDINGS AND RESULTS FROM AIR SAMPLING

In the narrow spaces in parts of Old Fadama there is a pervasive and permanent atmosphere of acrid smoke, a sign that one of its many public washhouses is nearby. These washhouses provide hot water for bathing and other hygiene needs of residents. The washhouses heat barrels of water above an open hearth fuelled with textile waste. Waste clothes that can't be sold, along with other waste textiles, are collected from Kantamanto Market to fuel these hearths.

Smoke over landfills and Old Fadama. Greenpeace investigates the burning of textile waste from the global north to heat tanks of water for use in the public baths.



The results of the air sampling show that the ambient air of the three public baths was contaminated with numerous dangerous chemical substances, most of which exhibit one or more CMR (carcinogenic, mutagenic, toxic for reproduction) properties.

WASTE CLOTHES THAT CAN'T BE SOLD FUEL THESE HEARTHES.



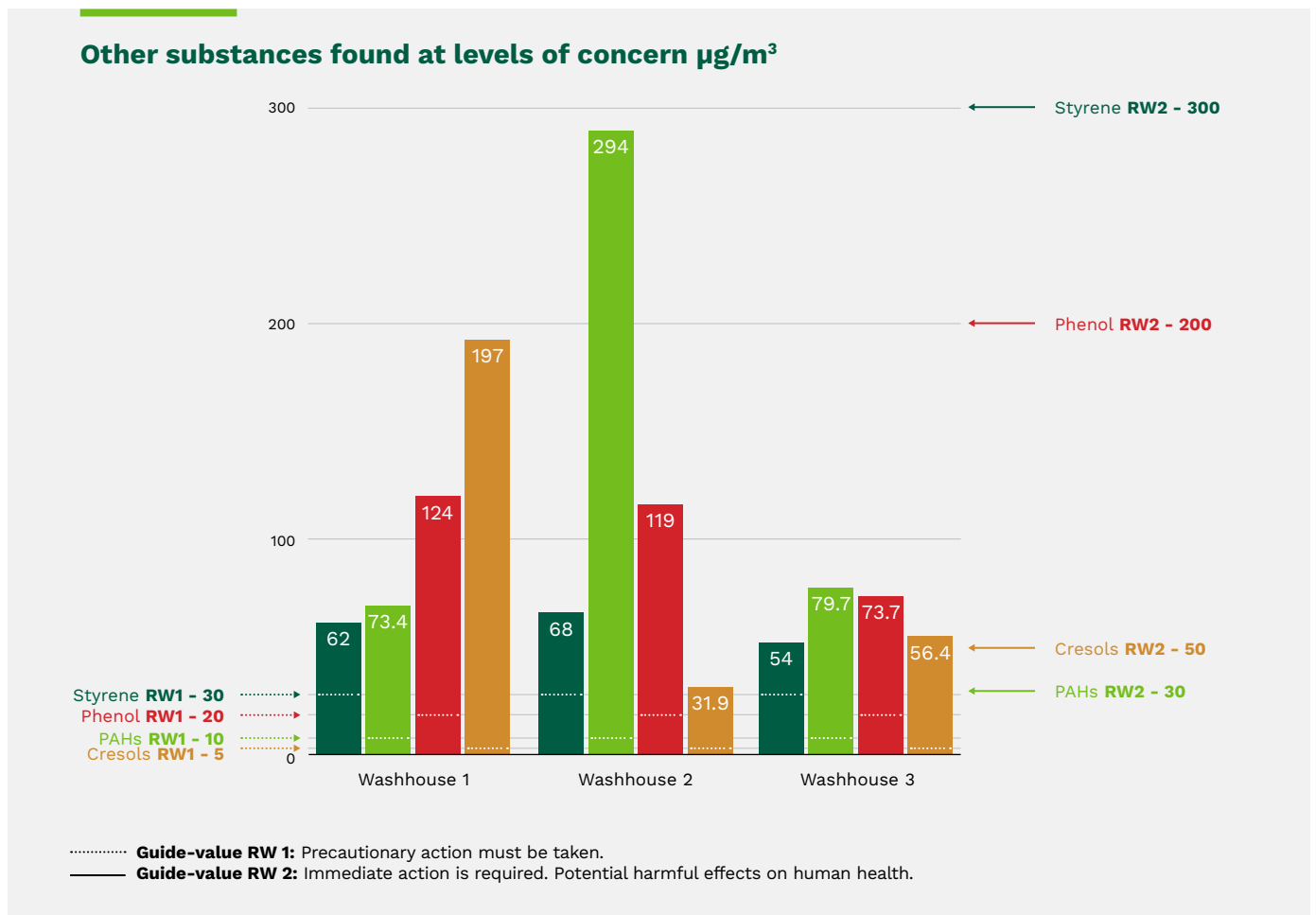
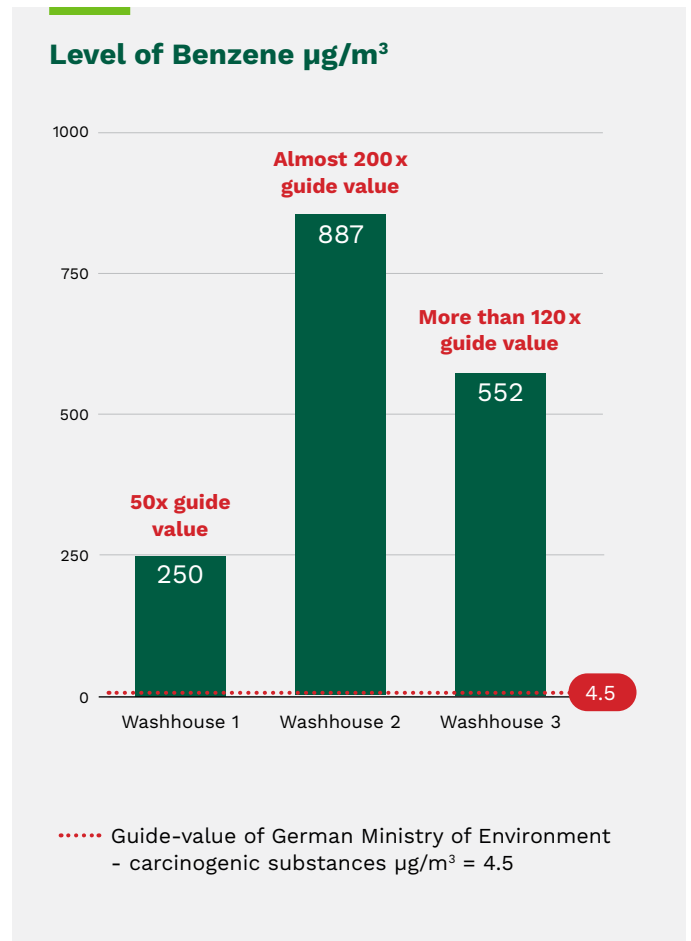
Washhouse in the informal settlement of Old Fadama in Accra: Greenpeace investigates the burning of textile waste from the global north to heat tanks of water for use in the public baths.

© McElvaney / Greenpeace.

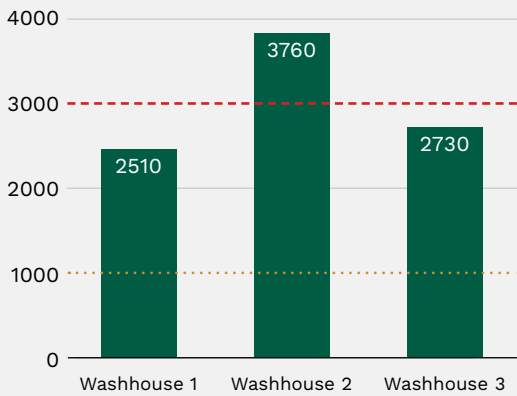
Greenpeace researchers have conducted a preliminary study of the air quality in and around these washhouses. Three public bathing establishments were identified for our study in Old Fadama. With the permission and assistance of the owners, sampling devices were set up in order to measure air quality parameters. A combination of active and passive air sampling was used, and samples of soot deposits were also taken with wipes.

The results of the air sampling show that the ambient air of the three public baths was contaminated with numerous dangerous chemical substances, most of which exhibit one or more CMR (carcinogenic, mutagenic, toxic for reproduction) properties. Those found at levels of greatest concern, exceeding the German Ministry guide values for air, (see Annex 8.1), include:

- Benzene, a carcinogenic substance, at levels far in excess of the German Ministry of Environment's indoor air guide value.
- Styrene, which is toxic to human reproduction.
- Many PAHs (poly aromatic hydrocarbons, including naphthalene), some of which are carcinogenic with chronic exposure.
- Phenol, which is mutagenic (causes mutations).
- Three isomers of cresol, which are possible carcinogens.
- Total Volatile Organic Compounds, at levels requiring immediate action.



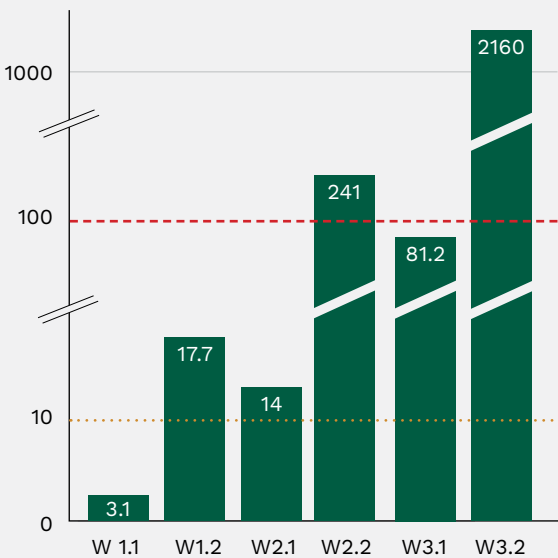
Total Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$



German Ministry of Environment: indoor air guide-value:

- hygienically noticeable (1000 – 3000 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$)
- hygienically alarming (3000 – 10.000 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$)

Samples of soot wiped from the walls of the washhouses, in log scale - sum of 16 PAHs ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^2$)



Guide-value for the German Insurance Association

- Living & office spaces: remediation target < 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^2$
- Industrial sector: remediation target < 100 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^2$

The soot samples were found to contain hazardous PAHs at levels incompatible with a healthy living space.

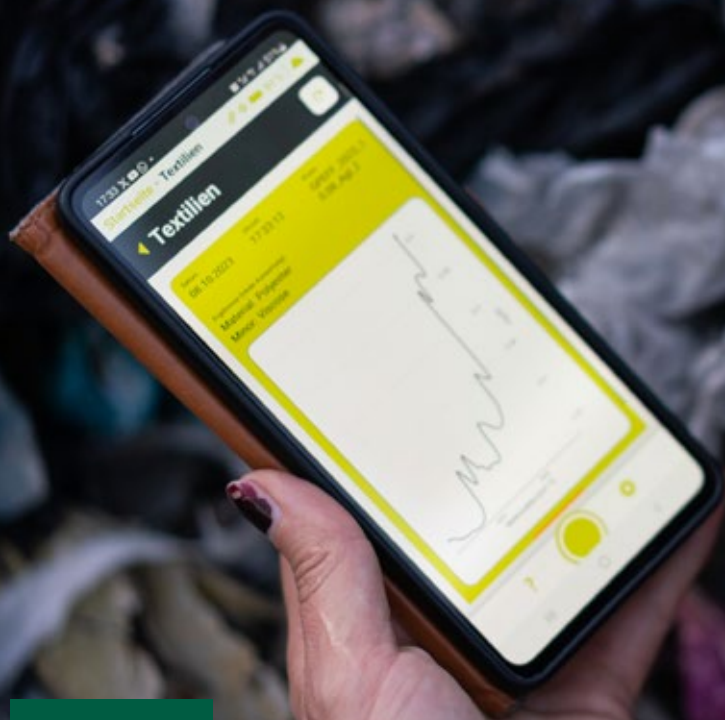
These substances are pollutants commonly measured during incomplete or inefficient combustion of various materials including plastics.

These results show that the open burning of textile waste is posing a risk to the workers and customers in the washhouses and people living nearby, exposing them to worrying levels of carcinogenic substances such as benzene or PAHs. (See Annex 8.1).

Located close to Kantamanto, Old Fadama is the largest informal settlement in Accra, with more than 80,000 residents. Much of the unsold clothing from Kantamanto Market and other markets spills over into Old Fadama. It also came to light that large amounts of clothes that cannot be sold or worn are also used at Old Fadama as a base for the construction of new buildings.



Air samples collected by Greenpeace show that the air and surfaces of the washhouses are contaminated with hazardous chemicals far above European safety standards.



Greenpeace researchers conducting IR scans on textile waste at the dumpsite near Mortuary Road, Old Fadama in Accra.

3

INFRARED TESTS SHOW: CLOTHING IS MAINLY MADE OF PLASTIC

To find out more about the materials in the clothes being dumped and how this could be causing serious problems, Greenpeace researchers carried out on-site infrared testing, using a portable scanner, to determine the types of fibres present in the clothes found on the dumpsite.

164 garments were collected and scanned on several occasions between the 8th and 15th October 2023, at a dumpsite close to the Mortuary road at Old Fadama and another dumpsite at Weija. Infrared tests were also performed on second hand clothes collected from Kantamanto Market that were returned to Germany (see 6. Background: our investigation journey).

The results show that the majority of clothing waste that ends up on these dumpsites is made from blends of fibres, with almost all (89%) containing fossil fuel based synthetic fibres, which will break up into microplastics (see Annex 8.3). As documented by Greenpeace's Detox My Fashion campaign, clothes can also contain hazardous chemicals that were added during their manufacturing, such as dyes, from treatments such as waterproofing with PFAS,¹ or contaminants in synthetic fibres such as antimony and Bisphenol A.² These hazardous chemicals and the microplastics will pollute the soil, the water, the air, and contaminate the food web and pose immense public health challenges.





3.1 Plastic mountains, leading to the plastic beach

This textile waste inevitably gets washed into surrounding waterways including the Odaw river and accumulates in the Korle Lagoon, where it can be seen building up. During the rainy season, the accumulated waste is released from the lagoon and washes out to sea. Ocean currents then deposit some of this textile waste onto the beach at Jamestown, while the rest remains in the sea. Over time, the tides wash over the textiles on the beach, so that they become embedded and even buried in the sand, creating long “tentacles” of textile waste which reach down beneath the sea’s surface.

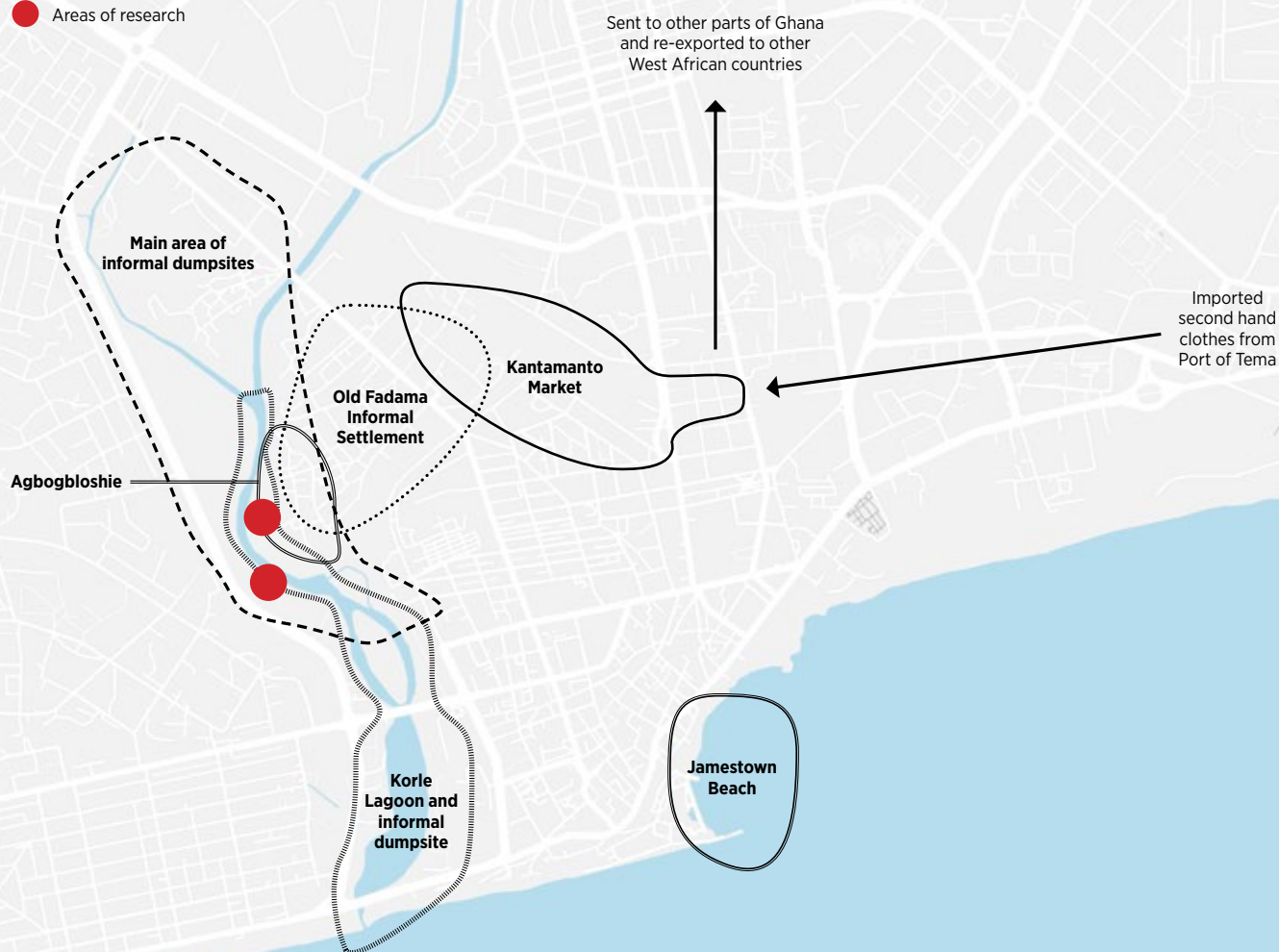
Within Accra, waste is brought to any of the several large and growing informal dumpsites, including the towering dumpsite which rises on the edge of the Odaw River at Old Fadama. These informal dumpsites spread all around the banks of the River Odaw and the Korle Lagoon. Greenpeace researchers focused on the dumpsites on the East side of the river for infrared tests.

THE TIDES WASH OVER THE TEXTILES ON THE BEACH, SO THAT THEY BECOME EMBEDDED AND EVEN BURIED IN THE SAND, CREATING LONG “TENTACLES” OF TEXTILE WASTE WHICH REACH DOWN BENEATH THE SEA’S SURFACE.

WITHIN ACCRA, WASTE IS BROUGHT TO ANY OF THE SEVERAL LARGE AND GROWING INFORMAL DUMPSITES, INCLUDING THE TOWERING DUMPSITE WHICH RISES ON THE EDGE OF THE ODAW RIVER AT OLD FADAMA.

Informal dumpsites for used clothes and other waste in Old Fadama / Korle Lagoon, Accra

● Areas of research



3.2

Walking on textiles

One of these is the dumpsite near the Mortuary Road at Old Fadama. Waste pickers earn some money by collecting useful items of clothing that have been dumped, which they wash in a stream near the dump. The stream is full of textiles and also smells of chemicals because run off from the dumpsites drains into it. The clothes are dried and are sometimes sent to Kantamanto Market to be dyed, and then returned to be re-sold in a local market. People that can't afford the prices in Kantamanto Market will buy these items.

Down river, in the Korle lagoon, the impact of years of accumulated textile waste is clearly visible, where old clothes have created numerous artificial mountains and cliffs. In some places the layers reveal the history of dumping, like geological strata. Plumes of black smoke are commonly seen as a result of the fires that often break out in these dumpsites. Inevitably the textile waste breaks up and gets washed down into the lagoon, where it accumulates, until heavy rains flush the waste out of the lagoon and into the sea.

Further to the West of Kantamanto, in Greater Accra, the Weija area has been the recipient of all types of waste including textiles for many years. Waste pickers collect old PET bottles to be shredded and shipped to China for “recycling” – a large proportion of the waste PET will be used to make recycled polyester for use in textiles, and ironically some of these could easily return to Ghana as textiles waste after a short lifetime.³

Recycled polyester is usually made from waste PET bottles. Thereby, the PET plastic leaves the closed loop of bottle recycling, which works well in a lot of countries worldwide. Instead of being remade into new PET bottles, recycling PET bottles into unrecyclable polyester for the fashion industry means that the journey of the PET plastic into the environment is simply delayed, and not prevented.

Waste pickers like Lucy collect used clothing from dumpsites around Accra to sell them after they have been washed and repaired.
© McElvaney / Greenpeace.



Waste pickers earn some money by collecting useful items of clothing that have been dumped, which they wash in a stream near the dump.
© McElvaney / Greenpeace.



RECYCLING PET BOTTLES INTO UNRECYCLABLE POLYESTER FOR THE FASHION INDUSTRY MEANS THAT THE JOURNEY OF THE PET PLASTIC INTO THE ENVIRONMENT IS SIMPLY DELAYED, AND NOT PREVENTED.



The collection of PET bottles at the Weija dumpsite.
© McElvaney / Greenpeace.



Waste pickers at one of many dumpsites in the area around Weija and the Densu River.
© McElvaney / Greenpeace.

3.3 Nature smothered by textile waste

There are many informal dumpsites in the Weija area, some closed, some still being used, releasing toxic leachate which contaminates the soil, agricultural lands and runs off into nearby waterways in the Densu River catchment area, groundwater and the nearby wetlands.

To the South of Weija, the Densu Delta Ramsar wetlands⁴ are designated as wetlands of international importance⁵ as breeding grounds for endangered and rare species of birds, turtles and other species. It's also an area where the women farm oysters, and thus is important for livelihoods. Run-off from these dumpsites enters the mangroves, which are also habitats and spawning grounds for fish.

Next to the Densu River, our researchers witnessed how the piles of waste are increasingly spreading into wild areas, smothering biodiverse plant and animal habitats. The area for dumping is expanding because they need more space, due to the quantities of overproduced fast fashion, used clothes and other waste.

Ghana is running out of landfill space. More landfills have to be identified to cope with the volume of waste, and the country doesn't have the waste management infrastructure to deal with the problem. There is a mismatch between the findings in a recent report that suggested that clothes and textile waste

make up only a small proportion of all waste in Accra, and the visible evidence in Accra as well as the history of waste management in the area.⁶ The Kpone landfill, the only one in Accra and funded with \$9.5 million from the World Bank, closed in 2019 nine years before its planned capacity limit, because of a fire – partly caused by the large amounts of textile waste – which burned for 11 months.⁷ So waste mostly ends up being dumped wherever there is space and when that runs out, new dumpsites spring up out in the countryside.

Our researchers on the ground observed many examples of degraded or semi-degraded textiles in the dumpsites and on the beach. As the majority of these textiles contain plastics they will be continuously degrading into microplastics. Therefore the people living and working at these dumpsites could be exposed to these microplastics in the air, food and water.⁸ In the rivers and the Korle lagoon, plastic textiles will become part of the sediment and get taken into the food web, while waste clothes make their way to the ocean where they continue to break down and contaminate the marine food web. 0.5 million tonnes of microplastic fibres are released into the oceans every year from washing synthetic textiles – this accounts for 35% of primary microplastics released globally.⁹

4

BACKGROUND: FAST FASHION IS FUELLING THE TRADE IN USED CLOTHING



A Market Seller at Kantamanto, showing a pair of jeans referred to as “borta”, because they are of bad quality and unsellable.

4.1 Fast fashion failure

The last two decades have seen the explosive rise of fast fashion. Global sales of clothing have nearly doubled from 1 trillion dollars in 2002 to just under 2 trillion dollars in 2023.¹⁰ Consumers today have a never ending choice of new styles, from up to 52 micro-collections per year¹¹ from fast fashion brands, to 6,000 new articles put online every day by ultra fast fashion brand SHEIN,¹² delivered within 3-7 days by air¹³ directly to customers.

This rapid changing of clothing lines and fashion trends is the “raison d’être” of fast - and ultra fast - fashion. It promotes increased consumption, reduces the lifespan of clothing,¹⁴ and is increasingly cheap. Between 1996 and 2018, clothing prices in the EU dropped by over 30%, relative to inflation. And since 2000, Europeans have purchased more pieces of clothing but spent less money doing so. They are treated as “disposable”, worn a few times, if at all - and thrown away.

The decreasing price of clothes also increases the likelihood of clothing waste being exported.¹⁵ In Germany, a party top is used on average 1.7 times and is then discarded, and are typically cheap, poor quality and disposable.¹⁶ So it’s not surprising that 59% of the unsold clothes collected by Greenpeace at Kantamanto Market were shirts and party tops; it’s also notable that the top 10 makers of the unsold clothes from the market were all fast fashion brands including H&M, M&S, Next, Zara and Primark (see Annex 8.2). Despite being a relative newcomer to the fashion industry, items from SHEIN were also found.

THIS RAPID CHANGING OF CLOTHING LINES AND FASHION TRENDS IS THE “RAISON D’ETRE” OF FAST - AND ULTRA FAST - FASHION. IT PROMOTES INCREASED CONSUMPTION, REDUCES THE LIFESPAN OF CLOTHING.

4.2 The global trade in used clothes

Meanwhile, the trade in used clothes has become a billion-dollar global business which has grown substantially in recent decades, and is predicted to increase from 96 billion dollars in 2021 to 218 billion dollars by 2026. This growth is due to the rising production and consumption of fast fashion products, resulting in the generation of waste, with exports from the European Union to African and Asian countries reaching 1.5 million tonnes (3 kg per person) in 2018.¹⁷

Many “used clothes“ are not necessarily fit for reuse and are sometimes not even sorted. Also, to avoid the extra regulations associated with waste exports, “textile waste” is often misclassified as “used clothes”.¹⁸ The trade in used clothes is “accompanied by smuggling and illegal trade practices, making it difficult to ensure its traceability.”¹⁹

The last two decades have seen the explosive rise of fast fashion.



\$2 TRILLION

Sales of clothing have nearly doubled from \$1 trillion in 2002 to just under \$2 trillion in 2023.



52 MICRO-COLLECTIONS PER YEAR

Consumers today have a never ending choice of new styles.



6000

New articles put online every day by ultra fast fashion brand SHEIN.

4.3

Used clothes exporters

Globally, the top three exporters of used clothes by volume between 2010–2020 were the USA, China, Germany and the UK.²⁰ Equivalent global figures for the main destinations are hard to find, with many clothes shipped via import/export hubs such as Pakistan and the UAE, however, EU data for 2019 (including the UK) shows that Ghana is the second biggest final destination of European used clothes by volume, after Tunisia.

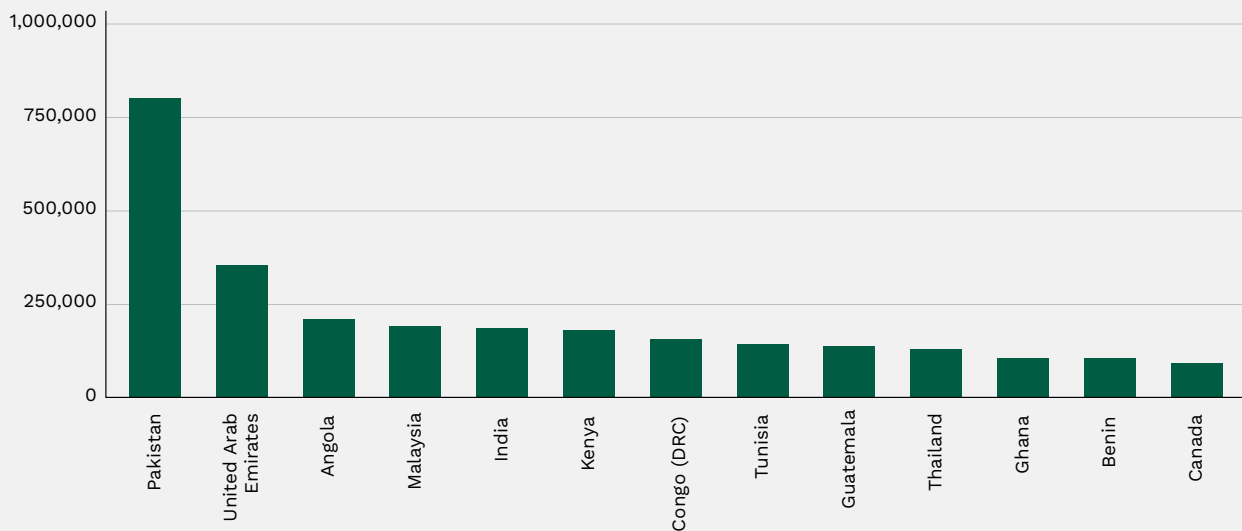
From the point of view of Ghana, the leading exporters between 2018 and 2022 were the Far East (124,326 tonnes), followed by the UK, Europe and North America,²¹ and, as reported by importers and

workers at Kantamanto Market, bales from the Far East mainly come from China and South Korea.

The textiles recycling industry in Europe has recently warned that the system for collecting used clothes in the Netherlands, Germany and the UK is on the brink of collapse, due to a glut of unsold second-hand clothing and inadequate business models for recycling, which mean discarded textiles are unlikely to be reused or recycled. A collapse would have a massive economic impact both in countries that import used clothes and within Europe, and the EuRIC trade association is calling for Extended Producer Responsibility to prevent this.²²

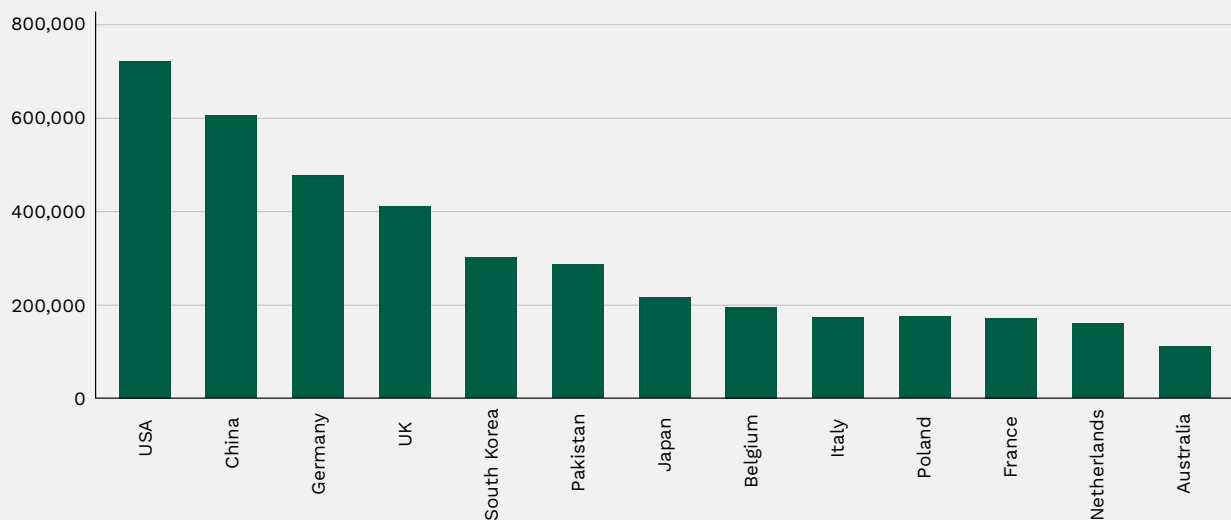
Top importers of second hand clothes in 2022, over 100,000 tonnes²⁰

Quantity in tonnes



Top exporters of second hand clothes in 2022, over 100,000 tonnes²⁰

Quantity in tonnes



Jamestown Beach

**JANUARY
2010**

©Google



**APRIL
2021**

©Google



**OCTOBER
2023**

© Kevin McElvaney / Greenpeace





5

The workers at Kantamanto Market work under difficult and hazardous conditions.

WEST AFRICAN SOLUTIONS IN ACTION

In Kantamanto Market, there is a dedicated area of tailors where used clothes that can't be sold are refurbished, repaired and upcycled into useful garments with market value. Many of the tailors have run established businesses from their workshops for many years, and some have customers from all over Ghana who buy in bulk to resell. The biggest problems they face are the high price of the clothes compared to their poor quality, and the difficult and hazardous working conditions due to the poor infrastructure, unreliable electricity supply, lack of security and the fire risk. Recently several tailors lost their businesses and their homes when fire destroyed their work spaces.

“The Revival” collects second-hand clothes, employs local craftsmen in Kantamanto and collaborates with fashion students from local universities.
© McElvaney / Greenpeace.



5.1 Upcycling and The Revival

The Revival is a “community-led organisation creating awareness, art, and jobs with upcycled global textile waste” based at Kantamanto Market,²³ which collects discarded second-hand clothes and employs local craftsmen from the market. The best known of many upcycling initiatives,²⁴ it started in 2018 and now has 6 full time workers, with about 60 workers under contract for various projects.

The Revival is planning an upcycling facility in Kantamanto Market to share skills, provide new technology and train people in how to use it to increase the number and types of garments that can be upcycled at the market. This will also be a space where people can visit to see the potential of what can be done by upcycling waste and a photo studio for workers to shoot their upcycled products to sell internationally.

It is also working on creating a new online ‘techno-innovation hub’, a marketplace where people with digital access can shop, buy and order upcycled clothes. A hub where data about clothes waste can be collected and shared, with a repair space where people can repair shoes, bags or anything, and a place where they can drop off unwanted clothing for example. Many people in Ghana have repair skills which are not used, so the country-wide online platform would connect them to people with items that need repairing, provide a service and bring income from these skills. The key problem is funding, so they are looking for institutions to support their projects.



5.2 “Made in Africa” fashion

There is also momentum from contemporary Ghanaian and Nigerian fashion designers to build on the long tradition of customised clothing in Africa, through the adoption of customised “prêt-à-porter” mass production.²⁵ This expansion of the African fashion market is also a proactive way of addressing unsustainable fashion practices, through limited-editions of ready-to-wear items in measured volumes, which allows more space for creativity and innovation and also promotes traditional methods to ensure the long lifespan of clothes.

Although the African textiles industry grew in the 1960s and 70s, this has since declined with the import of second hand and foreign-made clothes and as a result of trade liberalisation policies.²⁶ Pioneering African designers also face a huge challenge to source materials within Africa, despite two-thirds of African countries producing cotton, more than 81% of it is exported out of sub-Saharan countries, leaving little to be used locally and restricting the growth of the region’s textile and fashion industries, harming its economic opportunities.²⁷ So despite the recent revival of “Made in Africa” movements the high costs of importing materials – even those originally made in Africa – means that African fashion is inaccessible to most people.

There is a real opportunity to change this to the benefit of people and the local economy. With 7.3% of global organic cotton production already located in sub-Saharan Africa²⁸ and ninety percent of today’s African fashion sector composed of small and medium-sized enterprises, whose profits directly benefit populations, African fashion could be a powerful driver of creativity, economic development, and innovation, creating many jobs, especially for women and young people.²⁹



© McElvaney / Greenpeace.

6

BACKGROUND: OUR INVESTIGATION JOURNEY

In October 2023, Greenpeace Germany and Greenpeace Africa visited Accra, Ghana, on a research trip to establish the routes of used clothes into Kantamanto Market, Accra and beyond, and to find out what happens to the unusable and unsaleable clothes from countries of the Global North, including Germany, that cannot be resold, their environmental impacts and effects on the people, communities and businesses in Ghana. To achieve this we established relationships with the local communities, individuals and organisations living and working amongst the huge volumes of used clothes, and communicated the purpose of the research. We documented the situation on the ground through photos and video, and investigated the flow and ultimate fate of unsaleable used clothes (see Annex).

The potential environmental impacts of textile waste were also investigated through analytical techniques, including:

- The scientific investigation of waste textiles burnt as fuel in washhouses (Chapter 2, and Annex 8.1), and
- Testing the materials in the textiles waste discarded from Kantamanto and found on informal dumpsites, to determine the percentage of plastic (Chapter 4, Annex 8.2, 8.3).

The weekly flow of used clothes to Ghana and beyond, 2022³⁰

TO THE DUMP
Up to 0.4 - 0.6 million clothes from Kantamanto Market could become waste every week

Weija informal dumpsites by Densu River

Re-exported to other West African countries

25 containers
750 tonnes

To Kumasi and other parts of Ghana

15 containers
450 tonnes

Transported to other parts of Ghana

29 containers
870 tonnes

Kpone landfill (now closed)

Transported to Kantamanto Market Accra

50 containers
1,500 tonnes

Imports from Global North to Ghana, mainly Port of Tema

121,934 tonnes in 2022
79 x 40ft containers
a week

Kantamanto Market, Central Accra and rough area of detailed map (p.14)

Ghana is the second largest worldwide importer of used clothes after Pakistan, with 5.1% of the global market share (2020).³¹ The UK is the largest exporter of used clothes to Ghana followed by China. In 2022, a total of 121,934 tonnes of second-hand clothes,³² known as Obroni Wawu (dead white men's clothes) were imported into Ghana from around the world. Some is transported directly to other parts of Ghana, and the majority is sent to Kantamanto Market. From there, the used clothes are re-exported to other West African countries and to other parts of Ghana, with about 300 tonnes remaining at Kantamanto for sale in the market.

Kantamanto Market is the largest second hand market in Ghana and one of the biggest in the world, with 5000 shops and 30,000 individuals working among the wooden stalls and narrow walkways. Formerly known for its good quality second-hand clothes from the West, our research confirmed that imports of used clothes today contain increasing quantities of poor quality items and overproduced fast fashion. A recent survey of 370 retailers in the Market,³³ finds that the amount of textile waste in newly imported bales is on average less than 5%. However, in our research (see Annex 8.4) stallholders reported that as much as 60% of the used clothes in these bales are unsellable, and described as 'borla'.³⁴ Not all of this will become waste³⁵ as the clothes continue to circulate in the market, with about 10-40% of them eventually being thrown away.³⁶ Stall holders report that the quality and re-saleability of the items in bales has declined over the last 5 - 6 years, mainly because of their poor condition, but also unsuitable styles and lack of functionality for

the market in Ghana, so that the income they can earn from a typical bale is often insufficient (see Annex 8.4). Working conditions and infrastructure in the market are hazardous – in November 2022, one of the main re-manufacturing hubs where millions of secondhand garments are repaired, dyed, printed & upcycled was destroyed by fire.³⁷ Despite this, local tailors and designers continue to innovate and recreate usable clothes from items that are otherwise destined for the dump.

With the support of local people working in the extensive used clothes market at Kantamanto, we also collected some of the used clothes being thrown away during one week, because they had no market value. We loaded 4.6 tonnes of clothes into a 20ft container, brought them back to Germany, with the message "Return to Sender" – and placed this at the Brandenburg Gate during Berlin fashion week in February 2024,³⁸ with the demand to the fashion industry and governments to finally take responsibility for the dangerous problem that they have created.³⁹ One third of the overall volume of the 4.6 tonnes of garments was documented to identify the brands who made the clothes, their labels and the types of clothing (see Annex 8.2). A randomised subset was also analysed by infrared to identify the types of fibres in the used clothes and determine the percentage of synthetics. The results show that 89% of the clothes contain synthetic fibres made from fossil-fuel, mostly mixed with other fibres that would prevent any recycling in Europe, and potentially contributing to the pollution of the environment in Ghana by microplastics (see Annex 8.3).



The 19,000 items of clothing we collected made just a small dent in the up to half a million items that become waste every week at Kantamanto Market.⁴⁰ Much of this gets taken out of Accra in large trucks to informal dumpsites in the countryside, because managed landfills in Accra are all full, and the large trucks cannot access the informal dumpsites in Accra. Every night they drive for three to four hours on rough roads to these dumpsites, which frequently run out of space. Smaller loads of thrown away clothes are collected by carts pulled by motorbikes, which make their way to any one of the numerous informal dumpsites in central and greater Accra. Used clothes waste also makes its way directly to Old Fadama, to be burnt as fuel in the many washhouses in Old Fadama.



Greenpeace protest at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin (photo above) with the collected clothing from Kantamanto Market.
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7

CONCLUSION WITH GREENPEACE RECOMMENDATIONS AND DEMANDS

What was once a reasonable system of reusing second hand clothes that had value to the market in Africa has spun out of control, because of the fast fashion business model. The businesses in Ghana importing second hand clothes are struggling with ever tighter margins, because so much of the selection of clothes being imported is of such poor quality that it is unsellable. But it's not only the high volume of low quality clothes that is at the root of the environmental and health disaster that is unfolding in Accra. It's the fact that almost all of the clothes are made with plastic – mostly polyester, blended with other fibres.

The burning of these plastic clothes in washhouses is exposing people to hazardous air pollution well above European safety standards. Open air fires on the informal dumpsites are likely to release similar hazardous pollutants. These mountains of waste are also polluting the rivers, the lagoons and the sea with toxic leachate and microplastic fibres from the degrading clothes. As well as their health, and the difficulty of living in a place that has become an extended dumpsite, the livelihoods of many local people that were reliant on natural resources such as fisheries have been undermined.

The black smoke and the piles of waste clothes also represent a waste of the resources used to make them (the raw materials, energy, labour and transportation). Instead, these should be preserved through the redesign of the wasteful fast fashion system into an infrastructure where re-use, repair, upcycling, sharing, renting and truly circular recycling can take place.

The brands making the clothes have so far made little attempt to change their business model, preferring to make small changes that they can promote as 'sustainable', like recycled polyester. African researchers have proposed a "Limited-edition Production model" from Africa as a sustainable alternative to the dominant production models of the West.⁴¹ This makes use of the abundant resources of human skills and creativity to create garments that are both useful and beautiful while protecting and conserving natural resources by avoiding their over-exploitation or destruction through waste and pollution, and reclaiming for Africa a cultural reappropriation of fashion away from the neocolonialism of promoting western styles an overconsumption mindset.

The environmental and health problems from used clothes imports isn't confined to Accra, but is spreading to the countryside and beyond, to several other countries in Africa, especially Kenya, Tanzania and Nigeria.

Unlike some other countries in Africa that are controlling the import of used clothes such as Rwanda⁴² - in Ghana thousands of people depend on the used clothes economy. Simply stopping the import of these clothes would undermine their livelihoods and people we interviewed in Ghana have clearly expressed their opposition to this radical option.⁴³ Therefore, fashion brands and regulators in the Global North need to examine the evidence of the impact of fast fashion in Ghana and elsewhere, listen to the voices of people in Ghana and work with them to develop a solution where used clothes can be traded without including unsuitable and poor quality items made with synthetics which are being discarded in such high volumes.



More images from Kantamanto.
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7.1

Global demands for responsible fashion

THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PROBLEM LIES WITH THE PRODUCERS OF FAST FASHION, THE REGULATORS IN THE GLOBAL NORTH AND US, THE CONSUMERS.

We therefore need binding national, regional and global agreements on textiles for Extended Producer Responsibility, to make producers legally responsible for all resources, emissions, and waste throughout the life cycle of clothing, from the raw materials onwards – and progress towards a Slow Circular Economy, covering all of the following elements:

SHIFTING RESPONSIBILITY

- Ban the **export of unusable clothes** and **textile waste from the Global North**, setting up the customs infrastructures and a system of prior consent involving the local authorities and representatives of the second hand economy.
- Implement the **Polluter Pays Principle** for all past and future environmental and health damage globally, at any point in the supply chain and including impacts from waste.
- Adopt EPR schemes in the Global North which acknowledge the international trade of used clothes and mitigate the problems by dedicating a part of the fees raised to fund infrastructure and improve environmental, health and social conditions in the countries of import.
- To enable this, ensure that EPR fees follow used clothes to the point of final destination.

BUSINESS MODEL

- Slow down fashion overproduction and end the **fast fashion** business model as the root cause of the problem which is preventing sustainability and true circularity:
- Create a business model where re-use, repair, upcycling, sharing, renting and truly circular recycling makes up about 60% of clothes transactions, reducing the market share of newly made clothes to 40% by 2030.

- Set requirements on **durability repair, reuse and recyclability**, which are recyclable with existing technology, with mandatory information requirements in a **Digital Product Passport**.
- Ban the **destruction of products**, including as appropriate, unsold or returned textiles and include a requirement for companies to publicly disclose this data.

DESIGN AND MANUFACTURING

- Phase out of **fossil-fuel based synthetic fibres** in the manufacturing of clothes; products should be sustainably-sourced and biodegradable and pose no threat to the environment.
- Phase out the manufacturing of clothes made with toxic chemicals – by implementing a strategy to **Detox the textiles supply chain**⁴⁴ and prevent chemical pollution of Global South waterways.

TRANSPARENCY

- Track the **routes, destination and fate** of used clothes and provide full transparency.
- Ensure the **Public's Right to Know** by requiring **transparency** of the supply chain, including disclosure, through globally harmonised Pollutant Release and Transfer Register (PRTR) platforms, of suppliers' lists and publication of emissions and wastewater data tested for all hazardous chemicals, to be also included in the Digital Product Passport.

DUTY OF CARE

- Fair working conditions for all supply chain workers – from the farm onwards to the waste, a Duty of Care for workers in the informal economy to support their wellbeing.

ANNEX

www.greenpeace.org/static/planet4-africa-stateless/2024/08/7f4fb6d8-ghana-textile-report-annex.pdf

- 8.1** Burning textiles waste - testing the air in 3 washhouses of Old Fadama, Accra, Ghana
- 8.2** Data from the collection of used clothes collected in Accra's second-hand market
- 8.3** Infrared identification of fibre materials in used clothes collected in Accra's second-hand market and informal dumpsites
- 8.4** Analysis of second-hand textiles Ghana, collected from Kantamanto Market and from informal dumpsites by waste pickers

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FAST FASHION SLOW POISON



THE TOXIC TEXTILE
CRISIS IN GHANA

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