

East African Community Intends to Phase Out Imports of Second-Hand Clothing

Some countries considered used clothing to be a product generated by expert sorting operations according to well-recognized market specifications.

However, there is disagreement within EU member states as to whether used clothing/textiles should be considered waste in different circumstances and when such items cease to become waste. In addition, some countries in other parts of the world regard used clothing as a threat to new clothing production, thus giving rise to calls for a ban on used clothing imports.

According to the information provided at the meeting of the Textiles Division at the BIR World Recycling Convention in Berlin, the East African Community (EAC) intends to phase out imports of used textiles and footwear by 2019. "Second-hand clothing is a product and new clothing is a product – this needs to be understood," division president Mehdi Zerroug of Framimex in France insisted. The EAC comprises six countries, namely Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and South

Sudan. Guest speaker Jalia Nabukalu Packwood, Business Development Officer at Bangor University's Sustainability Lab in the UK, explained that used textiles traders numbered in the many tens of thousands in Uganda and Kenya, for example. As reported, more than 80 percent of all clothing purchases in Uganda were used clothes; the country imported 80,000 tons of used clothing in 2014 (value: 70 million US-Dollar). Kenya collected 54 million US-Dollar in tariffs on used clothing imports (100,000 tons) in 2013 alone.

But despite the evident social and economic benefits derived from used clothing imports, EAC leaders considered the trade to be a threat to their plans to develop the local textiles manufacturing sector and to grow high-value jobs, Jalia Nabukalu Packwood emphasized. They also wanted

to "increase the taxable base" given that people engaged in the second-hand clothing trade were "not paying that much tax".

The widespread perception in EAC countries was that used clothing imports represented "dumping" and so it was important to change this mindset by emphasizing the benefits of this trade, she argued, and called on exporters to the region to develop "win-win" strategies that took account of the needs and goals of EAC countries.

Eric Stubin of the Secondary Materials and Recycled Textiles Association (SMART) in the USA confirmed in a submitted report that his organization was keen to collaborate with BIR in its response to the proposed EAC import ban. It was important to develop such a partnership approach, agreed Mehdi Zerroug.