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If childhood poverty was a challenge for your growing-up years as it was for mine, you may be inclined to hoard clothes even after they have outlived their usefulness. One day you may undertake a major spring cleaning or downsizing, which leaves you with a pile of clothes you decide to donate to the local second-hand store.

Is this a problem? It is if you donate soiled, ripped, or threadbare clothing. Then your pile may end up in an African country as part of Africa's waste, its 'mitumba' problem, says a recent (May 24) article in the Washington Post by Kenya Wiley. Your cast-off clothing will be "among millions of items harming human health, marine life, and local economies," she writes, reminding us that, in 2021, the United States was the leading exporter of secondhand clothing, with Africa its main destination. "The intention is for vendors to sell at African markets, but the quality of the used clothing is often so poor and soiled that the items are dumped or burned as fuel."

This week, Kenyan President William Samoei Ruto is slated for an official visit to the United States, the first time in nearly 16 years that an African leader will do so. President Biden and Ruto will discuss trade and investment between the two countries, but "there's one part of trade policy that must not be overlooked: the billion dollars of used clothing we ship every year that ends up as textile waste in Kenya, Ghana, Tanzania and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa," writes Wiley.

Fabric recycling is a multifaceted process, observes Wiley, "requiring advanced chemistry for cleaning, funding for technological developments in artificial intelligence to identify and sort fiber blends, and mechanical engineering to transform old tees into new materials."

However, a "robust recycling infrastructure in Africa will demand support from both the public and private sectors."

For a bipartisan precedent that can guide the needed revisions, writes Wiley, "Look no further than the Save Our Seas 2.0 Act, the 2020 law Congress passed to combat ocean plastic pollution worldwide. That was followed by USAID's launch of the Save Our Seas Initiative, with support from U.S. and international businesses."

This blueprint can be used to reauthorize AGOA to tackle textile waste in Africa, foster innovation, and empower entrepreneurs.

Investing in talent across the continent is crucial to prevent future pollution. Young entrepreneurs are "leading the way in developing innovative products and materials across the continent — turning farm waste into biodegradable fabrics and fusing art and commerce to redesign secondhand items."

In 2023, entrepreneurs in Kenya “secured more than \$600 million in start-up capital across green energy, agri-tech and logistics — sectors that will be pivotal in addressing Africa’s waste problem.”

If used clothing is the problem, why not prohibit it? The answer is that countries tried. In 2016, a group of East African countries joined forces to ban secondhand clothing imports. In retaliation, the Trump administration threatened to remove the countries from the program that is at the core of U.S.-Africa trade policy if they followed through. Not surprisingly, a lobby group representing used clothing sorters backed the move. The only country that stood firm was Rwanda. To this day, its duty-free apparel benefits under AGOA remain suspended.

As the African Growth and Opportunity Act approaches its 25th anniversary, writes Wiley, “now is the time to ensure that its reauthorization upholds its original intent: Reduce trade barriers and foster economic development in sub-Saharan Africa, not stifle it.” Let’s start with addressing textile waste. American textiles often comprise synthetic materials instead of what’s produced in African countries. Africans may not like to wear them.

I have learned to be selective with the things I take to second-hand stores. If a piece of clothing is torn, I either repair and continue to wear it, cut it into rags, or ask a quilter if she has any use for it. If none of that works, I toss it in the trash, mindful that it’ll end up in a landfill. In turn, this helps me be careful with my purchases. I put anything I want to donate through the wash; if stains persist, it doesn’t go to the second-hand store.