

BIR – UK used textiles market report update – Berlin – May 2016.

Since my last report to the BIR textiles division the membership of the Textile Recycling Association in the UK has reached a milestone of significant note. It is now official that since the beginning of the crash in the value of used clothing which started in 2013, 25% of collectors and processors that were members of the UK association at the time have now gone bankrupt or simply closed.

Yet despite this, I still have to answer questions from the public, media and charities themselves about how much profit used clothing collectors are making and whether they could be paying more to charities. How much more evidence do they need before they can accept that charities are not being taken for a ride and that our members are not making excessive profits (if any profits at all)?

Charities and local authorities also need to maintain a realistic expectation on the prices that they can expect to receive for their clothing. For over 15 years the Textile Recycling Association has published the Charity Shop Grade specification. This has been made available through various recycling trade publications and is available on our website. To put it simply, this is the grade that charity shops should be striving to achieve if they wish to receive a value for their clothing that is in line with market prices quoted in the recycling trade press. It is perfectly understandable that charities may wish to try and maximise the income they receive for their donations by rotating their stock between stores so they can sell more clothing through the shop front. However, they need to realise that in doing so, it will affect the quality of the clothing that they sell to used clothing collectors and where it doesn't meet the grade, they cannot expect to receive the market prices.

I also have another really simple request to make to charity shop managers. Please weigh your clothing before you sell it on to any collector. Even if you can only afford to buy a set of hand held scales costing £10 GBP, at least you will have a reasonable idea of how much clothing has been collected. Through the Textile Recycling Association code of practice we recommend that our members carry a set of calibrated scales with them whilst collecting from charity shops.

On matters relating to the market we will hear from Jalia Nabukalu Packwood and Dr Einir Young from Bangor University (UK) about the proposed ban on imports of used clothing in East African Community Countries by 2019 and discussing the introduction of the new "entry price" mechanism on all imports of used clothing into Ukraine which is due to come into force on 1st January 2017.

Some politicians wrongly seem to believe that banning or restricting used clothing imports will help to protect local textile production industries and choose to ignore the fact that such a move will only serve to threaten the jobs of hundreds of thousands of people in places like East Africa who are employed by the used clothing sector. And let us not forget that the used clothing sector is ***by far the most sustainable part of the clothing supply chain.***

If politicians want to protect and support textile producers in developing countries these businesses need to be competitive in the global market and produce items that are desired both locally and internationally.

Let us be realistic though, if governments in Africa want to support textile producers they need to invest more in infrastructure including the electricity supply network, which is often highly unreliable, costly and puts African textile producers at a huge disadvantage compared with their Asian counterparts.

But we should also question whether increasing textile production anywhere in the world is desirable. Last year, clothing magnate Eileen Fisher said that “the clothing industry is the second largest polluter in the world ... second only to oil”. We are buying five times more clothing than we did in the 1980s and, even putting sustainability issues aside, if textile production is increased, say in Africa, presumably this will have a huge negative impact on jobs in places like Bangladesh, which is one of the world’s biggest textile producers and one of the world’s poorest countries. Is that really what we want?

Better solutions and better ideas are being developed by the team at Bangor University and I urge politicians, which have the power, to make things happen and to make the right decisions. East Africa might be better off pursuing a goal of promoting and supporting manufacturing jobs in the textile and fibre recycling industry, and becoming global leaders in this burgeoning and really important sector, rather than spending their time, efforts and resources on trying to prop up a sector that is already awash with textile producers globally and unsustainable in its current form.

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