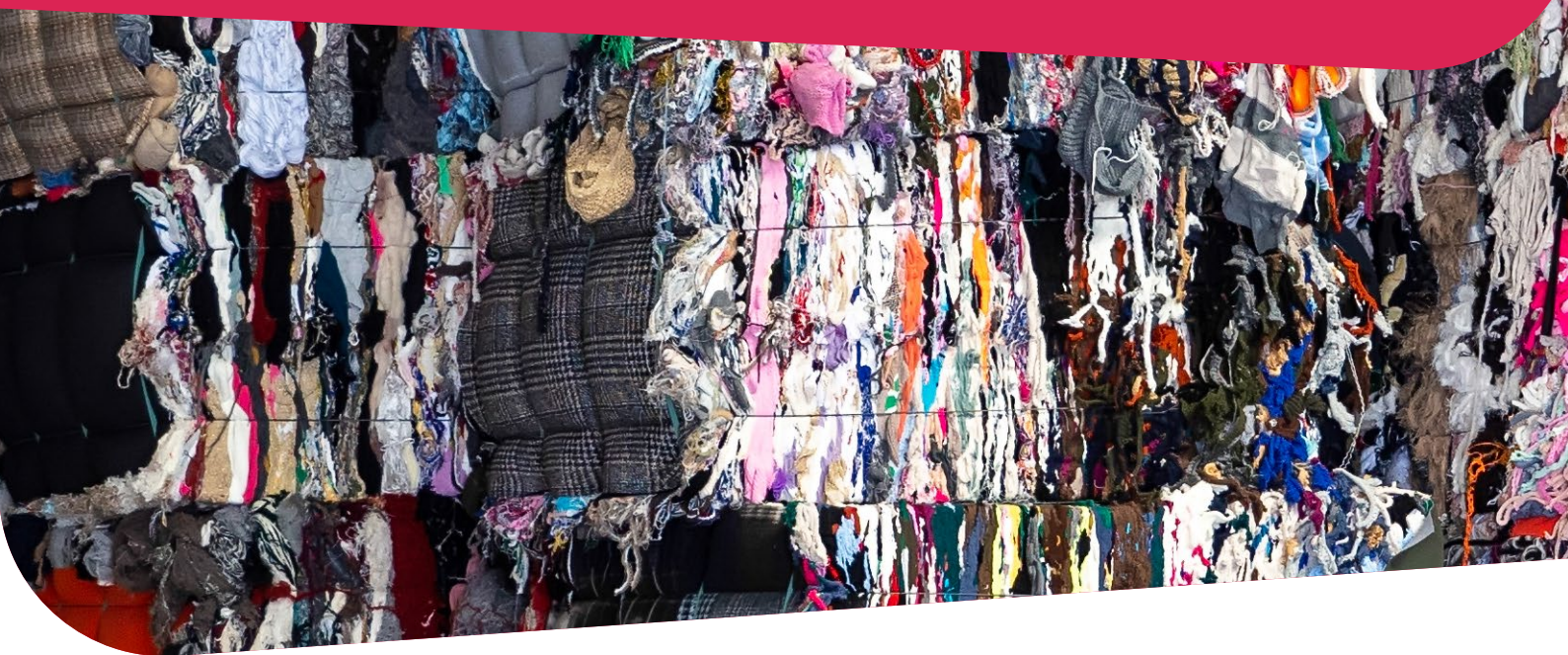



# The Fast Fashion Waste Mountain



Fast fashion is fuelling a global waste crisis. The Global Fashion Agenda estimated that in 2015 92 million tonnes<sup>i</sup> of textile waste was created – equivalent to filling one garbage truck with waste every second, and that this mountain of textile waste is expected to grow to 148 million tonnes for the year 2030.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, fast fashion created an impulse to buy more clothes, while the number of times they are worn has decreased. Most of us in high income countries do not even wear half of our current wardrobe.<sup>2</sup>

 Read on to discover how much clothing we consume and discard, what happens to your old clothes, where our textile waste ends up, and how you can help change the story.

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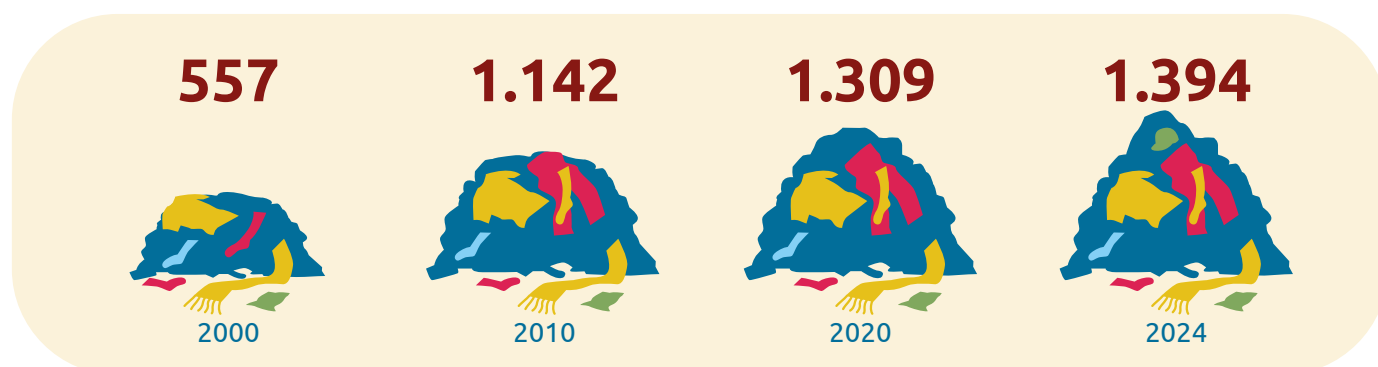
<sup>i</sup> The 92 million tonnes textile waste figure derived from the Global Fashion Agenda (2017) is widely cited but lacks publicly available methodology on how the number was calculated

## How has our love of cheap clothes created a waste crisis?

The average person in the European Union buys and discards more and more clothes and textiles every year. In 2022, we each bought 19 kilogrammes of clothing, footwear and household textiles on average, 3 kg more than in 2019. Each of us generated on average 16 kg of textile waste.<sup>3</sup>

Together, EU member states generate around 7 million tonnes of textile waste each year, which will reach an estimated 9 million tonnes annually by 2030.<sup>4</sup>

This growth in the quantity of clothes and textiles produced, bought and then thrown away results in the EU exporting increasing volumes of discarded clothing and textile waste to other countries. In the past 24 years, these EU exports of unwanted textiles have nearly tripled (see graphic).<sup>5</sup>



*EU exports of worn clothing and textile waste in thousands of tonnes (data source: UN Comtrade).<sup>ii</sup>*

The amount of waste we are responsible for in the EU is even more than the numbers in the graphic above suggest. This is because garment production generates a lot of waste during manufacturing,<sup>6</sup> and most production for EU markets takes place in non-EU countries, especially in Asia.<sup>7</sup> So the clothes we buy contribute to the generation of textile waste in various parts of the world.

## What's inside the EU's pile of clothing waste?

The 7 million tonnes of textile waste EU member states generate annually consists mainly (around 85 per cent) of private household waste – the clothes and textiles we throw away at home. The remaining 15 per cent comes from garment production in the EU, retail sector waste (including unsold stock and the clothes we return), and discarded clothing and home textiles from commercial enterprises.<sup>8</sup>

## When is my T-shirt really “waste”?

Different countries define clothing and textile waste differently. Most countries define donated, sorted, resold and reused clothing as textile products and not waste, but others classify all used textiles as waste, whatever the intentions of the consumer or collector. This makes it challenging to agree on waste statistics.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>ii</sup> Data include the United Kingdom for 2000 and 2010 but exclude the UK for 2020 and 2024, following Brexit.

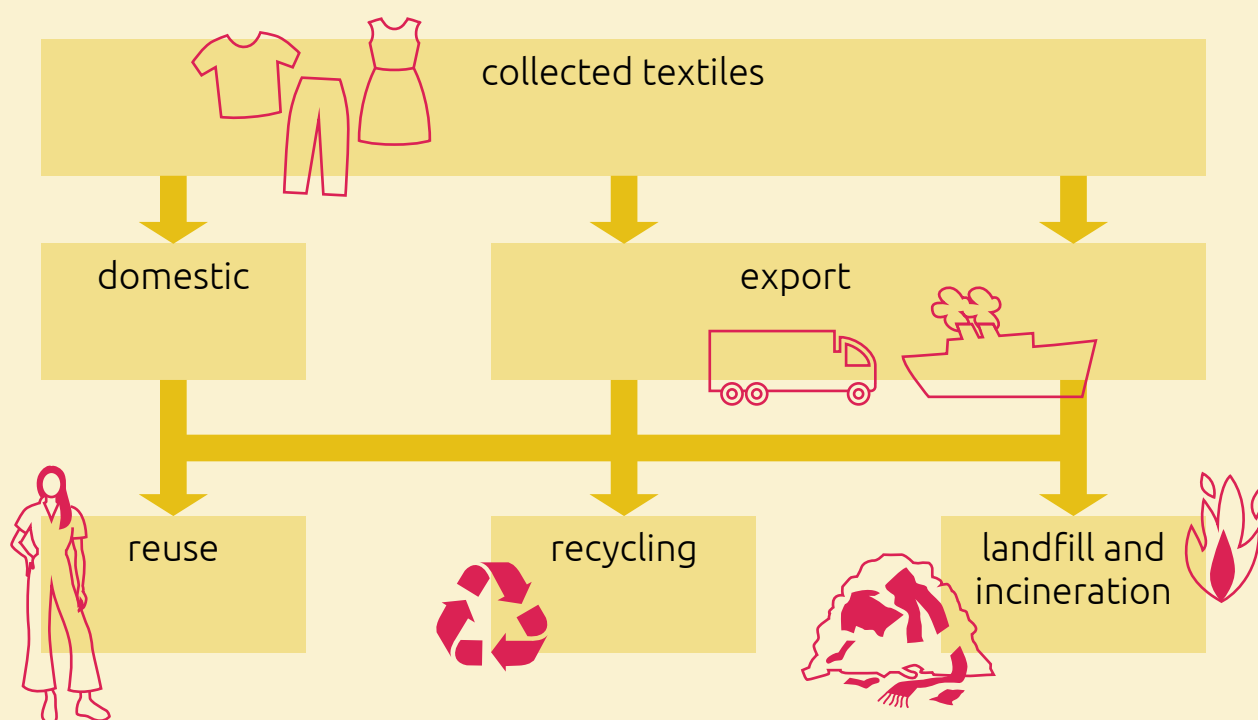
## What happens to textile waste?

When we zoom in on the largest contributor to textile waste – our private household waste – we find that in the EU only around a third of this waste is collected, although this varies a great deal by country.<sup>10</sup> The average collection rate in the EU is 38 per cent.<sup>iii</sup> But while Germany is estimated to have a collection rate of about 60 per cent, among the highest in the EU, Latvia's collection rate is just 4.5 per cent.<sup>11</sup>

All the garments and textiles that we buy that are not separately collected either are in use and part of our wardrobe or end up in household waste bins, which leads to them being incinerated (most likely) or landfilled.<sup>12</sup>

Textiles that our societies collect separately from general waste can enter a variety of pathways, of which reuse is said to be the main one (see graphic).<sup>13</sup> Percentages for reuse in the EU range from 50 per cent to 75 per cent, depending on the country. For example, 71 per cent of Denmark's separately collected textiles enter the global reuse pathway in contrast to 50 per cent in the Netherlands.<sup>14</sup>

### What happens to the separately collected textiles?



The reuse pathway includes both domestic reuse and the export of clothing for reuse internationally. However, there is much uncertainty about what ultimately happens to textiles exported as second-hand clothing outside the EU. While some items are genuinely reused, many may eventually be recycled or end up in legal and illegal landfills, polluting the environment. In fact, a large share of exported second-hand clothing is thought to ultimately find its way to landfill sites.<sup>15</sup>

iii The collection rate is the proportion of the total quantity of textiles sold as new that is subsequently collected separately as waste, per year.

One famous example is the textile landfill in Chile's Atacama desert, which is so large it is visible from space, and the United Nations has declared it a planetary "environmental and social emergency".<sup>16</sup>

Textiles that cannot be reused and are classified as non-rewearable are either recycled, landfilled or incinerated. The amount of textile waste landfilled in the EU has decreased, while incineration has increased, but the overall share of textile waste either incinerated or landfilled in the EU has stayed roughly the same for the last decade at around 30 per cent.<sup>17</sup>



## How do EU countries recycle textiles?

When we want to dispose of our old textiles, we can do this in a variety of ways in the EU. The most popular method is to take the used textiles to collection bins, often located in civic amenity sites. Kerbside and door-to-door collection are other methods of disposing of unwanted used textiles, although less common. Textile collectors are usually charities, social enterprises, commercial collectors, or municipal waste companies and contractors.<sup>18</sup>

Historically, charities and social enterprises have played a dominant role in the collection of used textiles, especially those fit for reuse, and in many European countries they still do.<sup>19</sup> They tend to pre-sort the collected textiles to remove the best-quality items, often called the "cream", to sell as second-hand clothes in their own stores (if they have them).<sup>20</sup>

In other cases, charities and social enterprises remove obviously unusable waste and then sell the remaining collected items to wholesalers that have specialised sorting facilities, often in other European countries. Countries with well-developed sorting capacity, such as Lithuania, Poland and others in Eastern Europe, generally import large quantities of used clothing. However, some collectors also have their own sorting facilities and engage in the next step of the recycling value chain.<sup>21</sup>

After pre-sorting to remove non-textile waste, wholesalers (and collectors with the same capacity) sort the textiles into more than 100 categories according to criteria such as garment style, size, type, season, material and colour, for sale to reuse markets worldwide.



Textiles that are not fit for reuse mostly go to recycling facilities located both in and outside the EU. Here the textiles are usually downcycled (e.g. made into rags, insulation material or blankets) or sent for landfill or incineration.<sup>iv 22</sup>

A certain amount of textile waste is turned into recycled yarn and often blended with virgin materials to improve quality. This recycled yarn then enters the value chain all over again and is used to make new products for brands.

In recent years, brands, such as H&M, Primark, The North Face and Zara have also started to collect used textiles. Multiple fast fashion brands have take-back schemes that collect our old clothes, promising to reuse or recycle these items and give them a new life. However, several investigations, such as this [one](#) from the Changing Markets Foundation, have shown that returned clothes that are fit for reuse are often quickly destroyed, stuck in warehouses for long periods or shipped to Africa, where they may well end up in landfill. Only a few items go for resale in stores as second-hand clothing.<sup>23</sup>

## Where in the world do our discarded clothes and textiles end up?

The majority of discarded clothes and other textile waste from the EU ends up in either Africa or Asia. Asia has replaced Africa as the largest export destination for this EU waste. In 2000, Africa received 60 per cent of the total, while Asia received only 22 per cent; in 2024, however, Africa received 42 per cent and Asia 47 per cent (see graphic). Most of the remainder (8 per cent) goes to European countries outside the EU.<sup>24</sup>



iv Downcycling refers to the recycling process in which the end product has a lower value than the original item.

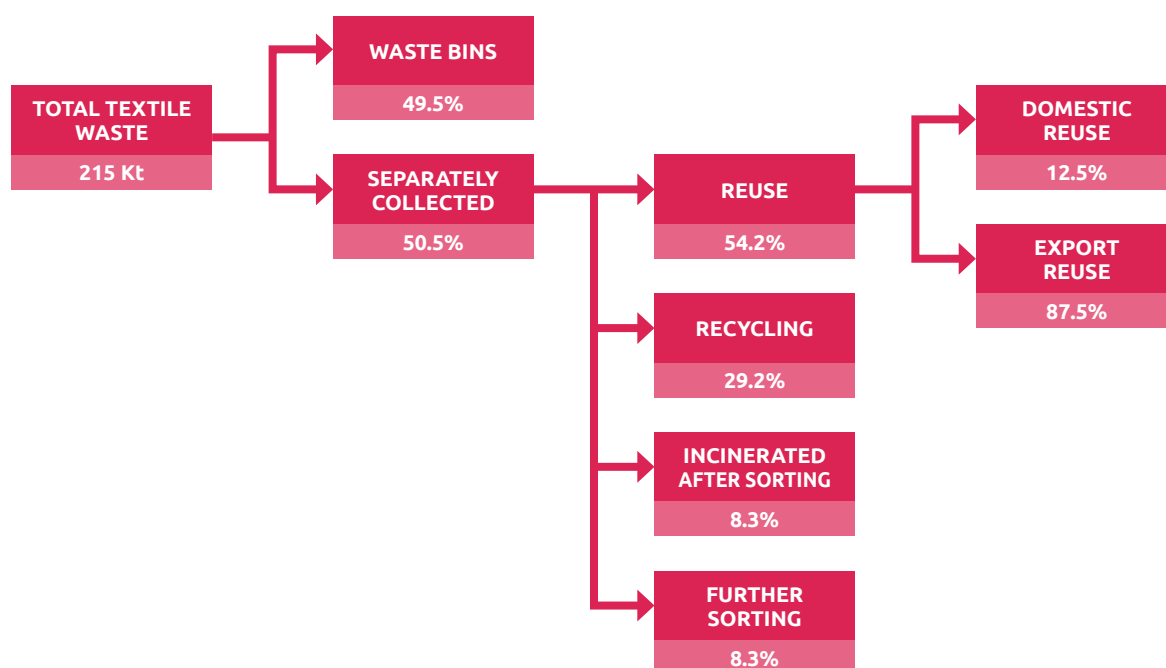
## Textile waste in the Netherlands

Some countries in the EU are particularly large exporters of textile waste and act as import-export hubs. One of these is the Netherlands.<sup>25</sup>

In 2024, the Netherlands exported 200 million kg of discarded clothes and used textiles, either to other EU member states or to countries outside the EU.<sup>26</sup> This waste comprised the used textiles separately collected in the Netherlands plus those the Netherlands had imported from other European countries and was then re-exporting.<sup>27</sup>

In 2022, the Netherlands set aside 50 per cent of its 215 million kg of textile waste and incinerated the rest, as this was thrown away as general waste. The previous year, the country had generated around 300 million kg of textile waste. While the decrease in the overall amount collected in 2022 vis-à-vis 2021 might seem to suggest progress, it was more likely a temporary effect of lower clothing sales in 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and wardrobe cleanouts. With clothing consumption rising again in 2022, textile collectors in the Netherlands have observed an increase in discarded textiles from the beginning of 2024, indicating that the decline was indeed temporary.<sup>28</sup> The graphic shows what happened to the Netherlands' separately collected textile waste in 2022.<sup>v</sup>

### Pathways for separated textile waste in the Netherlands, 2022



Information source: FFact, *Massabalans textiel 2022*

<sup>v</sup> For the "Further sorting" category, the final destination – whether reuse, recycling or the residual waste stream – is unknown.

The textiles the Netherlands exports for reuse are not limited to second-hand clothing; once abroad, they may be reused, recycled, or even landfilled or incinerated.<sup>29</sup> Textiles sent from the Netherlands to other European countries are often reused or further sorted and may be re-exported outside the EU.

For the largest export destinations for discarded clothing and textile waste from the Netherlands in 2024, see the graphic.



# What can YOU do to tackle fast fashion waste?

You can contribute to reducing the fast fashion waste mountain in several ways. The ideas below are inspired by resources from the [Schone Kleren Campagne](#) (Clean Clothes Campaign) and an [interview](#) with the author of the book *A Sustainable Wardrobe*. For more tips and inspiration, you can check out these resources yourself.



Buy less, choose well – Buying less clothing is the most effective way to be more sustainable! Think about your purchases: Do I really need or want this item or is it just a trend? Can I buy it second-hand?



**TIP** – Save clothing items you want on a personal wish list and check if you still want them a month later. Or create a Pinterest board for your style to make sure your new clothes match your personal taste, not just the latest trend!



Repair before throwing away – Is your clothing item damaged? Try to fix it before throwing it away! Or get creative: transform your jeans into shorts, patch up holes with fabric scraps, or search tutorials online to upgrade your old T-shirts.



Swap or sell – Organise a clothing swap with your friends and family. Or sell your clothing on second-hand platforms to prolong their life!



**TIP** – Check out [Schone Kleren Campagne Kledingruil](#) (Dutch version).



Ask questions – Research your favourite brands online and see if they are taking steps towards improving their environmental footprint and workers' conditions in their supply chains. You can use [fashionchecker.org](#) to see the living wage scores of your favourite brands. Do research on brands' sustainability claims: look for real proof, ask questions, and watch out for vague or greenwashing promises.



**TIP** – Have a look at [Vragenkaarten social media – Schone Kleren Campagne](#) (Dutch version).



Proper disposal – If you really need to get rid of your clothing, make sure to dispose of it in the designated bins instead of the residual waste bin at home.



Share your ideas – Take the opportunity to share your ideas for the [Fashioning a Just Transition Manifesto](#), and contribute to a renewed future of fashion. Open until November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2025.



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## The Fast Fashion Waste Mountain

Arisa, The Netherlands, July 2025

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## About Arisa

Arisa – Advocating Rights in South Asia – works to improve respect for human rights and labour rights in global supply chains. Working with civil society partners in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, among other countries, we expose human rights and labour abuses in the production of garments, leather, natural stone and vegetable seeds, and we call on companies and governments to ensure that rights are respected. We prioritise the position of the people in the most vulnerable situations in global supply chains and work to eliminate child labour, forced labour and caste discrimination. Arisa is member of the Clean Clothes Campaign.

For more information, see [www.arisa.nl](http://www.arisa.nl)

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