

KS3 Geography. Africa.

7. Fast fashion, waste and upcycling

[TEXTILE DUMPS] Here in Johannesburg, there's a lot of textile waste. Tonnes and tonnes of discarded clothes that often end up in textile dump sites. You can find textile dumps in many African cities - like the Dandora Dump site outside Nairobi in Kenya, or on the banks of the Korle Lagoon in Ghana's capital, Accra.

[WASTE COLONIALISM] But this waste isn't exclusively an African problem. It's the last stage in a global process. These are clothes that are made mostly in Asian countries, sold to consumers in Europe and America. Then when they're thrown away, they are shipped off to other countries, like ours. It's sometimes called 'waste colonialism'.

[FAST FASHION] This is the result of fast fashion, where large companies make and sell clothes as cheaply as possible, and consumers are encouraged to keep buying more.

[RATE OF PURCHASE] Since 2000, the global production of clothing has nearly doubled. Individuals are buying more than ever. The average European uses 26 kilograms of textiles every year and throws away 11. That waste has to go somewhere!

[RECYCLING ISSUES] And that's a big problem because these are items that are made from synthetic fibres that can't rot or break down. They'll remain the same ways for hundreds of years. If we made all clothes from natural fibres, that wouldn't be a problem because the discarded clothes could be composted. But that still isn't *sustainable* because it takes 2,700 litres of fresh water to make just one cotton T-shirt!

[UPCYCLING] But our African economies aren't dumping grounds. We're too creative for that! We're finding ways to turn this waste into a resource. Using old clothes for new designs is called *upcycling*, and it's the first step in a circular economy, an economy in which all the resources used to make a product can be used again and again.

[INTERVIEW] That entrepreneurial approach is what we'll need to make sure that the fashion industry is really sustainable. I'm with Sicelo, a creative entrepreneur, and he's welcomed us into his amazing studio.

SICELO: After my graduation, I went into this journey of craftsmanship. It started as a passion project. Then I think the entrepreneurship part came in, so I learnt the ways of running a business. That's how I ended up here.

CHIOMA: How does the ethos of sustainability align with your entrepreneurship?

SICELO: Part of my ethos is actually mentoring youth. So I've had youth that are part of the skills development programme that we're doing, coming up with innovative ideas - like taking old denims from their neighbours, stitching them together to create a new fabric all together. And that was used to refurbish some of the old shoes.

CHIOMA: How does your company compare to a large fast fashion company?

SICELO: Our company is the total opposite of the fast fashion. Our product, very authentic, very unique due to the fact that they are handmade, and also with this idea of using off-cut. It's a very labour-intensive exercise. These products basically like communicate with our customer. They tell stories, they preserve our heritage, and they also speak to this whole concept of sustainable development.

CHIOMA: And with the youth in mind, what are your hopes for the future?

SICELO: To have this nice smaller training production house, not only to sell our product, but to teach, because that's what we have been doing ever since we started the brand. We can be able to tell these stories for the world to celebrate.

CHIOMA: In the future, scientists believe that we'll be able to make synthetic fibres that can be broken down into a liquid ingredient and then used to make brand new fabric as many times as we want. Or fabric using new natural energy techniques like weaving using fibres from mushrooms.

Those are both technologies that researchers are working to develop. But for now, entrepreneurs in places like this are taking action. They're repurposing, recreating. They're turning rubbish into high-value items that can be bought and sold around the world. They're building new companies, creating jobs, and reducing waste.