

Denmark, Sweden and France call for new global rules on exporting textile waste to developing countries

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We must put an end to exporting our textile waste problems to developing countries. That is why Denmark, Sweden and France today are proposing new global rules for exporting textile waste under the Basel Convention.

Never before have more clothes been sold in the world. With over 100 billion new pieces of clothing sold every year, the growth comes with environmental challenges. The textile sector ranks as the fourth most environmentally harmful in the EU. The production of textiles requires large amounts of energy, water and chemicals. The use-phase of textiles is another source of pollution, including the release of increasing quantities of microplastics into the environment. The textile sector is also a significant contributor to climate change, as it accounts for 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions, more than air or maritime transport.

Over the past 20 years, the EU's exports of used textiles have tripled. In 2019 alone 1.7 million tons of used textiles were exported outside the EU, mainly to countries in Africa and Asia without the capacity to ensure proper waste management. Mismanaged textile waste frequently ends up in landfills or in nature, where it causes harm to humans, animals and the environment.

Urgent action is needed.

Denmark, Sweden and France have been implementing national policies to enhance the sector's sustainability. At the EU level, the recent adoption of the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive will provide a first response to these challenges by setting obligations for large companies regarding actual and potential adverse impacts on human rights and the environment for the value chain of their activities, including in the textile sector. The ongoing targeted revision of the Waste Framework Directive gives us another opportunity to reinforce textile waste processing and recycling within the EU.

However, the import and export of waste is regulated at the global level under the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal. The Basel Convention does not currently require an exporter to obtain prior informed consent from the importing state when exporting textile waste, which is the case for other highly problematic waste streams like household waste, plastic waste and electronic waste. There is also no requirement to

ensure that the importing country has the capacity to manage the textile waste in an environmentally sound manner.

That is why we, Denmark, Sweden and France, propose to subject textile waste to the control mechanisms of the Basel Convention. Following the approach taken to regulate electronic waste under the Basel Convention, this would mean 1) requiring prior informed consent to be obtained for the import and export of textile waste, and 2) banning the export of hazardous textile waste (e.g., stained with chemicals or paint) altogether.

We believe this approach could bring about significant environmental and health benefits in developing countries without impairing second-hand clothing tracks, and be a way for the EU to show global leadership and responsibility in alignment with the EU strategy for sustainable and circular textiles and in the framework of the ongoing negotiation of the treaty to end plastic pollution. The initiative would also provide more data on what types of textiles are exported and where they end up.

We call on our EU colleagues to support our proposal. The current practice and level of textile waste exports are not sustainable. There is a need for us as the EU to take responsibility, show leadership and introduce clear and effective global restrictions to tackle this pollution.

Let's act now.

Magnus Heunicke, Minister of Environment of Denmark

Romina Pourmokhtari, Minister for Climate and the Environment of Sweden

Christophe Béchu, Minister for the Ecological Transition and Territorial Cohesion of France