

# SORTING TEXTILE WASTE

Who  
&  
How



PAKHUIS DE ZWIJGER



BMA-TECHNE  
Business Technology Development



## INTRODUCTION

Most people know that when they no longer need their textile products, they can drop them into a textile bin. However, it's not often clear what happens to products after they are donated to charity organisations (e.g. Sympany, Reshare/Salvation Army, Sam's Kledingactie) or to commercial textile collectors (eg. Curitas).

While the collection of discarded clothing falls under the jurisdiction of waste collectors (e.g. Twente Milieu, ROVA, Circulus Berkel) in some municipalities, the collected textile products are always sorted for reuse and recycling.

It's a common misconception that discarded textile products are given to poor people in Africa and Asia, but that's not the case. Most of the collected textiles are sold. Charity organisations then use those profits to support initiatives in both The Netherlands and developing countries.

In fact, homeless shelters operated by the Salvation Army may well be paid by the revenue generated from the collection of discarded textiles!

## SORTING TEXTILES IN SORTING CENTRES

Discarded textiles are always sorted to maximise the value of the collected items. Sometimes the organisations that collect the textiles also do the sorting, but more often than not, sorting is done by specialised sorting centres.

The sorting process is completed by skilled workers who are trained to recognise and separate valuable products suitable for reuse from products that must be recycled.

The first step is always to separate non-textile waste from textile waste. Unfortunately, the amount of non-textile waste disposed of in textile containers is increasing. Never put non-textile waste into textile waste bags or textile containers.

The second step is to separate and sort the products into 20 or more groups of reusable items and into at least 10 groups of non-reusable products.

In the third step, these groups are further sorted into different quality grades, which we will touch upon in the next section.

# SORTING

## REUSABLE PRODUCTS AND THEIR DESTINATIONS

All reusable materials are sorted into more than 200 categories, reflecting the needs of the final customers who will purchase these products. For reusable products, there are at least 3 quality grades: crème, first quality, and second quality.

- **Crème quality** products are sold at the highest prices to second hand and vintage shops in Western Europe. Crème products might include branded clothing like Levi's jeans or a Tommy Hilfiger sweater.
- **First quality** products are exported to countries in Eastern Europe like Romania, Ukraine, and Belarus. They are sold to traders who then sell the products to local shops. Due to the weather conditions in these countries, products in this group might primarily be composed of winter clothing, jackets, and workwear.
- **Second quality** products are predominantly exported to African countries (e.g. Ghana, Tanzania, and Uganda) and Asian countries. Once there, the products are sorted in further detail before they are sold on markets and in shops. This merchandise consists mainly of summer clothing, sports clothing, and trousers.

The export of reusable products to developing countries has reached its limit. Many Eastern African countries have decided to reduce the imports of these products to stimulate the production of textiles and clothes in their own countries. Nevertheless, it is estimated that 80% of African people regularly wear second hand products from Western Europe and North America.

# SORTING

## OF NON-REUSABLE PRODUCTS & THEIR DESTINATIONS

Some collected products cannot be reused, due either to their low quality or to market conditions. For instance, one can sell only a limited amount of winter clothing to developing countries. There is also always a mismatch between clothing collection and sales: winter clothing is usually collected in spring, but demand doesn't begin to rise until autumn. For this reason, goods often must be stored for 5-6 months. These products are sorted into a number of categories based on material composition (e.g. wool, cotton, polyester, blends of cotton and acrylic, etc.); structure (e.g. knitted or woven); and product category (e.g. bed linen or jeans).

The sorted groups are then sold to textile waste processors. Bed linen is predominantly sold to the wiper industry. Jeans are used (after they are shredded and processed through non-woven production) in the automotive industry for heat and noise insulation. Woolen products might be sold to Italian firms specialising in wool recycling (Prato is famous for this). Acrylic products are mainly exported to India, where they shred the product and use it to produce coarse yarns for blankets.



**Above:** 2.4 million kilos are collected monthly and processed by Sympany, a company that focuses on the collection and sorting of textile waste.

## ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF TEXTILE SORTING

There's a market for almost all the collected textile products. Only a small percentage of the collected products is too spoiled or contaminated and must be rejected as useless waste.

Due to the enormous amounts of textiles we use and the limited uptake of second hand textiles by developing countries, the financial margins of textile sorters are very thin. The focus, therefore, must be not only on recycling materials, but also on reducing the use of new textile products and on prolonging their use.

This is where the Reflow project comes in. We advocate the reduction, reuse, repair, and recycling of textile products!

**55%**  
**OF SORTED PRODUCTS**  
**CAN BE**  
**REUSED\***

**\*Reuse is mainly outside Amsterdam and the Netherlands**

**#facts&figures**