

The Political Economy of Mitumbaism and Its Implications for Kenya's Economic Development

Mark O. Okowa, PhD

Department of Social Sciences, Tom Mboya University, Homa Bay, Kenya

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1915-1891>

Corresponding Author: Mark O. Okowa

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1307000123>

Received: 20 July 2026; Accepted: 26 July 2026; Published: 31 July 2026

ABSTRACT

Mitumbaism – the importation, distribution, consumption, repair and recirculation of second-hand goods – occupies a contested position in Kenya's development. It expands access to affordable goods, sustains informal-market activity and prolongs product life, yet can reinforce import dependence, intensify competition for domestic producers and transfer end-of-life waste costs to Kenyan communities. This article develops a multi-level political-economy framework to explain this tension. It uses an integrative review and documentary analysis of peer-reviewed scholarship, Kenyan and East African policy documents, trade records and institutional reports, with second-hand clothing as the principal empirical case. Kenya imported approximately 197.8 million kilograms of worn clothing valued at US\$187.3 million in 2023, confirming a market of substantial scale, although estimates of employment, household-income contribution and unusable waste remain contested. The analysis shows that realism and critical international political economy explain external constraints and asymmetric bargaining; welfare, institutional and industrial economics explain simultaneous consumer gains and productive-sector pressures; and behavioural economics and cultural consumption explain persistent demand through affordability, perceived durability, habit, risk and identity. These levels interact as trade rules and state capacity shape prices, market organisation shapes quality and information, and consumer and trader interests feed back into policy. The article recommends sequenced reform rather than prohibition: verified data, risk-based standards, conditional industrial support, beneficial trader formalisation, circular infrastructure, competitive local production and coordinated East African action. Its contribution is an integrated transition framework that reconciles immediate welfare with long-term productive and environmental objectives.

Keywords: Mitumbaism; second-hand clothing; political economy; behavioural economics; Realism; industrial policy; circular economy

INTRODUCTION

Markets for second-hand goods are a visible and consequential feature of everyday economic life in Kenya. In open-air markets, roadside stalls, specialist shops and digital platforms, consumers purchase clothing, footwear, vehicles, electronics, furniture and other durable goods that have already circulated elsewhere (Brooks, 2013, 2015; Hansen, 2000; Mitumba Consortium Association of Kenya [MCAK], 2023). The Kiswahili term *mitumba* literally refers to bales or bundles and is most closely associated with imported used clothing (Brooks, 2015; Hansen, 2000). In this article, Mitumbaism is used more broadly to denote the institutionalised economic and cultural system through which imported second-hand goods are acquired, sorted, distributed, repaired, reworked, consumed and discarded. This conceptualisation reflects the interconnected global networks through which used goods are collected, commercially graded, exported, redistributed, reused and eventually discarded

(Brooks, 2013; Herod et al., 2014). Because consistent trade and household data are most readily available for worn clothing, that sector provides the article's principal empirical case; used vehicles and household durables are treated as related manifestations rather than collapsed into a single statistical category.

The policy debate is commonly presented as a binary choice. Defenders emphasise affordability, consumer choice, entrepreneurship, fiscal revenue and livelihoods (Hansen, 2000, 2004; MCAK, 2023; Mhango & Niehm, 2005). Critics emphasise deindustrialisation, dependency, unfair competition and the externalisation of textile waste (Brooks, 2015; Frazer, 2008; Herod et al., 2014; Niinimäki et al., 2020). Both positions capture important aspects of the market, but neither is adequate by itself. A low-income household may obtain a durable garment at a fraction of the price of a new alternative, while a domestic manufacturer may face weak demand in a market saturated with imported clothing (Frazer, 2008; Hansen, 2004). A trader may generate income by sorting and retailing bales, while a county government bears the cost of collecting and disposing of unsellable synthetic textiles (Herod et al., 2014; Sandin & Peters, 2018). The same transaction can therefore produce welfare gains, distributive conflict and environmental costs.

The scale of the clothing trade makes this more than a marginal informal-sector question. World Integrated Trade Solution data drawn from UN Comtrade record Kenyan imports of worn clothing and other worn articles under HS 6309 at approximately US\$187.3 million and 197.8 million kilograms in 2023 (World Bank, 2025). An industry-commissioned study estimated roughly 185,000 tonnes and KSh 197.5 billion in national clothing and footwear expenditure, while KNBS records the dominance of informal employment and the continuing significance of apparel output (Mitumba Consortium Association of Kenya [MCAK], 2023; Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2025, 2026). These indicators establish scale but do not reveal consumer welfare, trader profitability, employment quality, displacement of domestic production or the proportion ultimately becoming waste (Brooks, 2015; Frazer, 2008; Sandin & Peters, 2018).

The central puzzle is how a market that expands immediate consumer welfare and exchange can simultaneously reproduce structural dependence, constrain particular forms of domestic production and create environmental liabilities (Brooks, 2013, 2015; Frazer, 2008). A related puzzle is why demand persists when policymakers promote local alternatives. Lower prices interact with perceived durability, quality uncertainty, reference prices, risk aversion, habit and cultural meaning (Akerlof, 1970; Hansen, 2000; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Thaler, 1985). The article therefore asks how structural constraints, market organisation and consumer behaviour interact, and what policy mix can preserve affordability and livelihoods while strengthening Kenyan productive capability and preventing the importation of low-quality goods and waste.

Existing scholarship offers partial answers. International political economy and global production-network research locate second-hand clothing in unequal circuits of production, consumption and redistribution (Brooks, 2013, 2015; Herod et al., 2014). Studies of African clothing markets demonstrate their importance to identity, household welfare and informal enterprise, while also documenting pressures on local apparel industries (Frazer, 2008; Hansen, 2000, 2004; Mhango & Niehm, 2005). Research on the proposed East African Community restrictions further demonstrates how international trade preferences, external commercial pressure and domestic political coalitions shape African industrial-policy choices (Wolff, 2021). Environmental research shows that reuse can reduce environmental impacts when it displaces new production and genuinely extends product life, but the benefits are conditional on quality, transportation, additional use, substitution rates and end-of-life management (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Sandin & Peters, 2018). What remains insufficiently developed is a framework linking external constraints, market organisation and consumer behaviour to concrete policy design.

This article makes three contributions. First, it integrates realism and critical international political economy, welfare and industrial economics, and behavioural economics within a macro–meso–micro framework (Akerlof, 1970; Morgenthau, 1948; Rodrik, 2004; Waltz, 1979). Second, it consolidates quantitative indicators while identifying the limits of advocacy and official data. Third, it translates analysis into an implementation matrix assigning institutional responsibility, resources, timelines, indicators and risk mitigation. It argues for sequenced capability-building and circular-economy governance rather than abrupt prohibition or unregulated continuity.

The remainder of the article explains the method, profiles the trade, examines its historical foundations, develops the multi-level framework, applies it to international political economy, socio-economic and industrial effects, and environmental governance, and presents an implementation framework before discussing the wider theoretical and policy implications.

METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

The article adopts an integrative-review design combined with documentary political-economy analysis. Searches were completed in June 2026 in Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar and supplemented by the official repositories of KNBS, the EAC, WTO, USTR, the World Bank and Kenya Law. Database strings combined “mitumba,” “second-hand clothing,” “used clothing trade,” “Kenya” or “East Africa” with “informal economy,” “apparel industry,” “consumer behaviour,” “AGOA,” “industrial policy,” “textile waste” and “circular economy” (Bowen, 2009; Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). English-language material published through June 2026 was eligible; foundational theoretical works were retained regardless of date, consistent with integrative-review and documentary-analysis guidance.

Screening followed a documented sequence: duplicate removal; title and abstract or executive-summary screening; full-text eligibility assessment; quality appraisal; and coding. Sources were included when they measured trade or economic significance, explained market evolution or organisation, identified theoretical mechanisms, or established the legal, institutional or environmental context. Untraceable, purely promotional and irrelevant records were excluded. The final corpus comprised 55 works: peer-reviewed scholarship, books, official statistics, legislation, institutional reports and limited stakeholder evidence. A source log recorded inclusion grounds, evidence type, analytical level and limitations. Stakeholder reports were retained only where representative evidence was unavailable and are identified as non-representative (MCAK, 2023).

The empirical core is worn clothing and other worn articles under HS 6309 (World Bank, 2025). Used vehicles, electronics and furniture are discussed only where they illuminate the wider logic of Mitumbaism because each has a distinct classification, regulatory regime, product life and environmental profile (EAC, 2022). The temporal emphasis is the liberalisation period from the late 1980s onward, with contemporary indicators drawn from accessible records through 2026 (Brooks, 2015; Frazer, 2008; KNBS, 2025, 2026). Each source was appraised for authority, traceability, methodological transparency, relevance, comparability and potential institutional interest.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive indicators were triangulated across trade, manufacturing, employment and expenditure sources (Bowen, 2009; KNBS, 2018, 2025, 2026; World Bank, 2025). Second, a source log was coded deductively against macro, meso and micro mechanisms and inductively for recurrent themes, contradictions and evidence gaps. Third, policy options were assessed against affordability, livelihood protection, productive capability, administrative feasibility and environmental integrity. The review does not claim causal identification: manufacturing outcomes also reflect energy, finance, exchange rates, infrastructure, new low-cost imports, technology and firm capability (Frazer, 2008; Were, 2016; World Bank Group, 2015). Employment and waste estimates are likewise non-comparable when they count different units or use different definitions (Brooks, 2015; Herod et al., 2014; MCAK, 2023).

The Scale and Economic Significance of Mitumbaism in Kenya

Available evidence confirms a large market but also illustrates why careful definitions are necessary. WITS/UN Comtrade data show that Kenya imported 197.8 million kilograms of worn clothing worth US\$187.3 million in 2023. China accounted for more than half of the reported value and volume, followed by the United States, Pakistan, Canada and Germany (World Bank, 2025). The origin field does not necessarily identify where garments were originally manufactured or first consumed; it may identify a sorting, consolidation or re-export hub. The data therefore describe trade routes rather than the full biography of garments.

Table 1. Selected quantitative indicators of Mitumbaism and the Kenyan production context

Indicator	Period	Reported magnitude	Interpretation and limitation	Source
Worn-clothing imports (HS 6309)	2023	US\$187.26 million; 197.82 million kg	Direct trade measure. Does not capture informal flows, quality, final use or original place of manufacture.	(World Bank, 2025)
Major reported source	2023	China: US\$96.48 million; 106.73 million kg	May represent sorting/re-export as well as original supply; source concentration creates logistical and exchange-rate exposure.	(World Bank, 2025)
Earlier industry estimate	2019/2022 report base	Approximately 185,000 tonnes	Useful corroboration of scale, but methods and years must be read carefully; industry-commissioned evidence.	(MCAK, 2023)
Clothing and footwear expenditure	2015/16 survey base, reported later	KSh 197.5 billion	Covers both new and used goods; does not equal mitumba expenditure.	(KNBS, 2018; MCAK, 2023)
Informal employment	2024	17.4 million jobs; 83.6% of employment outside small-scale agriculture	Economy-wide context only; not an estimate of mitumba employment.	(KNBS, 2025)
Apparel and clothing output	2025	KSh 63.3 billion	Shows continuing domestic output; requires subsector and real-growth analysis before drawing displacement conclusions.	(KNBS, 2026)
Sector livelihoods	Recent stakeholder claim	Up to 2 million people supported	May combine direct traders, workers and dependents. Not yet validated by a representative labour survey.	(MCAK, 2023; Waki, 2024)

Note. Monetary values are nominal. Indicators differ in coverage and should not be combined into a single estimate of sector size.

The figures reveal four features. First, the market is too large to be treated as a residual charitable flow. It is a commercial global production network involving collectors, charities, commercial graders, exporters, shipping and clearing agents, wholesalers, transporters, market brokers, retailers, repairers and consumers (Brooks, 2013; Hansen, 2000). Second, the market is closely connected to Kenya's informal economy. Yet the often-cited figure of two million livelihoods should be used cautiously until KNBS or a representative independent study distinguishes direct employment, self-employment, intermittent activity and dependent household members.

Third, domestic production has not disappeared. Kenya's apparel sector includes export-processing firms, local textile mills, fashion enterprises, school-uniform producers, tailoring and micro-enterprises. KNBS's reported apparel and clothing output of KSh 63.3 billion in 2025 indicates productive activity, while the country remains a significant apparel exporter under AGOA (KNBS, 2026; USTR, 2024). The analytical issue is thus segmentation. Export-oriented apparel may operate through imported fabrics, global buyers and export-processing arrangements while local firms compete for a price-sensitive domestic market. Success in one segment does not automatically create competitiveness in another.

Fourth, household-expenditure evidence confirms that affordability matters but does not provide a clean national split between new and used purchases. The 2015/16 Kenya Integrated Household Budget Survey measures household well-being, while EAC price-statistics regulations specify treatment of second-hand clothing, footwear and motor cars; neither supplies a complete national account of mitumba expenditure, margins, repair or disposal (EAC, 2022; KNBS, 2018). Future household and labour-force instruments should distinguish new and second-hand expenditure, frequency, quality, trader margins, household-income contribution and end-of-life outcomes.

Historical and Institutional Context

Kenya's contemporary second-hand clothing market expanded during structural adjustment, trade liberalisation and reduced protection for domestic industry. Across sub-Saharan Africa, the removal of import controls, currency reforms, declining real incomes and restructuring of state-supported manufacturing opened space for imported used clothing (Brooks, 2015; Hansen, 2004). These processes interacted with domestic weaknesses rather than operating alone. Kenyan textile production was constrained by obsolete machinery, expensive credit and energy, inconsistent cotton supply, weak value-chain coordination, smuggling and competition from both new and used imports (McCormick et al., 2001; Were, 2016; World Bank Group, 2015).

Second-hand clothing developed into a differentiated market rather than a uniform mass of cheap garments. Bales are graded by garment type and anticipated quality, yet retailers may purchase sealed or imperfectly known assortments, shifting quality risk downstream. Higher-value garments move through curated shops and digital platforms, while lower grades enter street markets, repair or upcycling. This organisation enables small-scale entry but exposes traders to information asymmetry, working-capital constraints, fire, eviction, harassment, seasonal demand and price volatility (Akerlof, 1970; Brooks, 2015; Hansen, 2000; Roever, 2014).

Consumer acceptance also evolved. Second-hand clothing can convey affordability, quality, distinction, fashion knowledge and identity. Research in Zambia and Malawi demonstrates that imported clothing is locally reinterpreted rather than passively consumed and that second-hand distribution supports differentiated forms of retail enterprise (Hansen, 2000; Mhango & Niehm, 2005). Mitumbaism is therefore not simply a residue of poverty. Income constraints are fundamental, but consumers also exercise aesthetic judgement, search for quality and combine new, locally tailored and second-hand garments.

Government responses have oscillated among revenue collection, standards enforcement, industrial support and proposed import restrictions. This reflects competing constituencies: consumers and traders benefit from access; manufacturers seek productive support; the state collects revenue; counties manage markets and waste; and trade partners defend commercial interests. Policy has consequently been incremental and contested rather than consistently protectionist or liberal (MCAK, 2023; Wolff, 2021; WTO, 2019). This historically produced tension motivates analysis across structural, market and behavioural levels.

A Multi-Level Theoretical Framework

Mitumbaism cannot be adequately explained through a single theoretical tradition because it is simultaneously embedded in international power relations, unequal exchange, market allocation, industrial capability and culturally mediated consumer behaviour. A critical framework must therefore move beyond problem-solving theories that accept existing market structures as given and instead interrogate how those structures are historically produced, whose interests they privilege and how their costs are distributed (Cox, 1981). The framework developed here connects macro-level structural power, meso-level market institutions and micro-level consumer practices, while recognising the recursive political relations linking them.

At the macro level, realism highlights power, vulnerability, state interests and strategic choice within an unequal international system (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). However, realism alone insufficiently explains how global capitalism structures the options available to peripheral economies. Critical international political economy, dependency theory and world-systems analysis locate Mitumbaism within a hierarchical global economy in which high-income states retain higher-value production, consumption and regulatory power while lower-income economies absorb residual commodities and environmental costs (Amin, 1976; Cox, 1981;

Wallerstein, 2004). Second-hand clothing is therefore not merely exchanged between equal market actors; it moves through historically constituted global production, redistribution and disposal networks shaped by unequal bargaining power (Brooks, 2013, 2015; Herod et al., 2014).

At the meso level, secondary markets generate genuine welfare benefits by extending product life, differentiating prices and expanding access to clothing among income-constrained households. Nevertheless, markets are politically and institutionally constructed rather than neutral allocation mechanisms (Polanyi, 1944). Information about bale contents, garment quality and contamination is unevenly distributed, reflecting Akerlof's (1970) problem of quality uncertainty. Importers, wholesalers and retailers consequently occupy unequal positions in the value chain, with opaque grading and sealed bales transferring commercial risk towards less-capitalised traders.

Industrial economics adds a dynamic concern. Immediate consumer surplus may coexist with weakened incentives for domestic production where Kenyan firms cannot compete with the landed prices, variety and distribution networks of imported clothing. However, industrial decline cannot be attributed to mitumba alone. Productive capability also depends on technology, finance, energy, skills, managerial learning, input coordination and market access (Lall, 1992; Rodrik, 2004; Whitfield et al., 2015). An import ban introduced before these capabilities develop may increase consumer prices without generating competitive manufacturing. Conversely, unregulated trade can lock Kenya into low-value circulation while environmental and disposal costs remain socialised.

At the micro level, behavioural economics explains why consumer choices cannot be reduced to price optimisation. Buyers use reference prices, experience, perceived durability and quality cues under conditions of uncertainty. Loss aversion may discourage consumers from paying more for unfamiliar local goods, while low mitumba prices become anchors against which domestic alternatives appear expensive (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Thaler, 1985).

These choices should not be dismissed as irrational. Clothing embodies identity, distinction, status and cultural meaning (Bourdieu, 1984). African consumers actively reinterpret imported garments rather than passively receiving foreign commodities (Hansen, 2000). Demand will therefore not shift through patriotic appeals alone; local goods must compete in affordability, quality, design, availability and trust.

The levels interact recursively: structural rules shape supply, institutions distribute value, and consumer practices reproduce demand. Three propositions follow. First, dependence makes regulation incremental or reversible when trade preferences are threatened. Second, restrictions improve industrial outcomes where productive capability and affordable supply exist. Third, demand persists unless alternatives improve price, quality, availability and trust. These feedbacks make Mitumbaism path-dependent. The next section applies the macro proposition before examining meso- and micro-level effects.

The International Political Economy of Mitumbaism

Mitumbaism connects Kenya to a global system in which garments are produced through transnational value chains, consumed disproportionately in higher-income markets, collected, commercially sorted, exported and recirculated. The language of donation can conceal a chain in which charities sell clothing to graders, exporters sort for destination markets, importers purchase bales and retailers bear market risk. Kenya consequently occupies an export position in new-apparel chains and an import position in used-clothing chains (Brooks, 2013, 2015; Gereffi & Frederick, 2010; Hansen, 2000; Herod et al., 2014).

AGOA is central to that dual position because it grants eligible sub-Saharan African countries preferential US market access and has supported Kenyan apparel exports (USTR, 2024). During the 2016–2018 EAC initiative to phase out used-clothing imports, US industry actors petitioned USTR. Kenya reversed tariff increases and abandoned a ban, while Rwanda maintained restrictions and lost eligible apparel preferences. AGOA did not liberalise used-clothing imports into Kenya; dependence on export preferences raised the cost of restricting American used-clothing exports. The episode demonstrates policy autonomy constrained by asymmetric

interdependence, export interests and unequal capacity to absorb retaliation (USTR, 2018a, 2018b; Wolff, 2021).

WTO membership matters without eliminating all policy space. Kenya applies tariffs through the EAC customs framework and is bound by non-discrimination, tariff commitments and disciplines on technical and sanitary measures. Health and environmental standards remain possible when evidence-based, non-discriminatory, transparent and no more trade-restrictive than necessary. Safeguards and industrial measures therefore require careful legal design, while divergent national restrictions can encourage trans-shipment, smuggling and regulatory competition (WTO, 2019).

Global buyers and export-processing firms create employment and learning opportunities, but value capture depends on domestic linkages. Assembly based on imported fabric and buyer-controlled orders can expand exports without rebuilding cotton, spinning, weaving, design and branding. Global-value-chain policy should therefore support supplier development, skills, local services and regional sourcing rather than equate export volume with comprehensive industrialisation (Gereffi & Frederick, 2010; McCormick et al., 2001; Whitfield et al., 2015).

Development actors support trade facilitation and private-sector development, while environmental actors contest textile exports. Yet the evidence does not show that donors or international financial institutions directly determined Kenya's mitumba policy; domestic coalitions and AGOA exposure are more immediate explanations (Wolff, 2021; World Bank Group, 2015). Kenya needs an integrated position linking trade, industrialisation, decent work and waste governance. Regional cooperation can strengthen bargaining through quality definitions, interoperable customs data, coordinated enforcement, recycling capacity and EAC textile value chains (EAC, 2020).

Socio-Economic and Industrial Effects

The clearest benefit of Mitumbaism is expanded access to clothing for households facing low or uncertain incomes. Clothing is a basic need but also a requirement for school, work, worship and social participation. Second-hand markets allow households to purchase differentiated items in small quantities and at negotiable prices. This improves material welfare and can release scarce income for food, housing, transport, education and health (Hansen, 2000; Mhango & Niehm, 2005; Sen, 1999).

The benefits are distributional. Lower-income consumers are likely to gain more from low prices, while skilled traders capture returns from information, sorting and market location. Importers with capital and logistics relationships may capture larger margins than retailers who bear bale-quality risk. Women and young people are strongly represented in many forms of informal retail, but this does not guarantee decent work. Market fires, insecure tenure, harassment, inadequate sanitation, lack of insurance and expensive credit can convert apparent low-entry entrepreneurship into precarious survival activity (Bonnet et al., 2019; Chen, 2012; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018; Roever, 2014).

Policy must therefore distinguish welfare from job quality. The relevant counterfactual is not simply "mitumba jobs versus factory jobs." It is whether reforms create affordable clothing and better work across manufacturing, repair, logistics and retail. Formalisation should provide secure space, finance, insurance, skills and legal recognition rather than merely expand taxation (ILO, 2015; Roever, 2014).

Research across Africa has linked the rise of used-clothing imports to pressure on domestic apparel production. Frazer (2008) found that used-clothing imports were associated with reductions in apparel production and employment in African countries, while Kenyan policy and industrial studies document the competitive and capability constraints facing local producers (McCormick et al., 2001; World Bank Group, 2015). These findings matter, but causal interpretation requires caution. Liberalisation exposed firms simultaneously to used garments and new low-cost imports; domestic cotton and textile chains also faced energy, finance, technology and coordination problems (Brooks & Simon, 2012; Lall, 1992).

The effect varies by market segment. Basic garments, uniforms, workwear, institutional procurement, fashion design and export apparel face different demand and cost structures. Used clothing competes directly in some segments but less in others. Local tailoring can also complement mitumba through alteration, repair and styling. A productive strategy should therefore identify contestable market niches rather than assume that all imported used clothing displaces an equivalent Kenyan product (Brooks, 2015; Hansen, 2000; World Bank Group, 2015).

Innovation effects are similarly ambiguous. Intense low-price competition may discourage investment in mass-market manufacturing where expected returns are weak. At the same time, second-hand markets create capabilities in sorting, repair, styling, digital retail, logistics and upcycling. The policy challenge is to move these capabilities toward higher value added without destroying the market before alternatives exist. Recognition of Prior Learning, design and technical training, common repair facilities, digital market access and affordable finance can connect circulation to production (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Lall, 1992; Niinimäki et al., 2020).

Industrial support must be conditional and performance-based. Subsidies without learning requirements can create rent-seeking and permanent dependence. Effective support should be time-bound and linked to investment, unit-cost reduction, product quality, worker training, domestic sales, export performance and environmental standards (Rodrik, 2004; Whitfield et al., 2015). Public procurement for uniforms, hospital textiles and government supplies can provide predictable demand, provided contracts remain competitive and transparent (World Bank Group, 2015).

The trade attracts customs duties, value-added tax and market fees, but no public series was located that isolates HS 6309 revenue across tax instruments. Published claims combine the whole clothing market or different years and are not comparable. KRA should publish disaggregated collections before fiscal magnitude justifies imports or controls. Revenue existence, not an unverified amount, remains a plausible source of policy ambivalence (Brooks, 2015; WTO, 2019).

Governance problems occur at borders and within markets. Misclassification, under-valuation, inconsistent inspection and informal payments can disadvantage compliant firms. County licensing may impose costs without secure infrastructure. Digital customs documentation, risk-based inspection, published valuation rules, trader identification linked to benefits and grievance mechanisms would improve legitimacy. Enforcement should target fraud, contamination and waste rather than criminalise small-scale retailers (Roever, 2014; World Customs Organization [WCO], 2023; WTO, 2019).

Environmental Implications and the Circular Economy

Reuse is frequently described as inherently circular, but its value is conditional. Textile production consumes energy, water, land and chemicals and generates emissions and pollution. Extending garment life can reduce impacts when a second-hand purchase displaces new production, although the magnitude depends on collection, transport, sorting, washing, durability and substitution (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Niinimäki et al., 2020; Sandin & Peters, 2018).

International transport is only one component of the footprint and may be smaller than fibre production and manufacturing per use, but quality is decisive. A durable garment used for several years differs from a damaged or climate-inappropriate item that becomes waste. No representative Kenya-wide audit establishes the unusable share of imported bales. Reported fractions use non-comparable samples, definitions and positions and cannot be generalised nationally. Independent bale and waste audits across grades, ports, markets and disposal sites are required (Brooks, 2015; Herod et al., 2014).

The end-of-life burden is unevenly distributed. Unsellable synthetic textiles can enter dumps, drainage systems and rivers or be burned, but the national frequency and volume of these pathways remain unquantified. The resulting local health and environmental risk represents potential displaced residual waste rather than

demonstrated circularity. Kenya's Sustainable Waste Management Act and Extended Producer Responsibility Regulations establish the waste hierarchy and producer-responsibility basis, but textile implementation requires traceability, collection and recycling capacity (Republic of Kenya, 2022, 2024).

A circular approach should distinguish reusable goods from waste, establish transparent grades, require importers to contribute to end-of-life financing, support repair and fibre recovery, and develop markets for recovered materials. Standards should be consultative and apply consistently to comparable domestic and imported products. Importer responsibility should not become a barrier only large firms can meet; collective compliance can distribute costs while preserving competition (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2016).

Environmental policy can also support industrial development through repair, wiping cloths, insulation, fibre-to-fibre recycling, creative fashion and material recovery. NITA and TVET institutions can build competencies in sorting, fibre identification, repair and circular design, while procurement can specify recycled content where technically appropriate. The objective is to retain genuine reuse benefits while preventing Kenya from absorbing non-reusable material (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Republic of Kenya, 2022).

Table 2. Environmental balance of second-hand clothing

Dimension	Potential benefit	Potential cost	Required evidence	Policy response
Product-life extension	Avoided or delayed new production	Rebound consumption; short additional life	Years/uses added; substitution rate	Durability grading and consumer information
Transport and sorting	Efficient global redistribution	Shipping, inland transport and sorting emissions	Origin, distance, mode and energy use	Lifecycle assessment and efficient logistics
Residual material	Inputs for repair and recycling	Dumping, burning, drainage blockage and microplastics	Independent waste fraction and material composition	Quality thresholds, traceability and importer responsibility
Local circular enterprise	Jobs, skills and value addition	Low-value work and unsafe processing	Enterprise income, safety and material diversion	Finance, standards, training and common facilities

Note. Analytical synthesis based on Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017), Niinimäki et al. (2020), OECD (2016), Republic of Kenya (2022, 2024), and Sandin and Peters (2018).

Policy Options and Implementation Framework

The analysis rules out two simplistic responses. An immediate comprehensive ban risks price shocks, livelihood losses, smuggling and retaliation before domestic supply is ready. Unregulated continuity preserves affordability but leaves capability constraints, quality uncertainty and environmental costs unresolved. The appropriate strategy is sequenced reform: data, standards and market infrastructure first; productive and circular capabilities over the medium term; and trade measures reviewed against measurable supply and welfare conditions (Lall, 1992; Rodrik, 2004).

Budget figures should follow feasibility studies rather than be invented. Each intervention should be costed from beneficiary numbers, unit costs, institutional capacity and a defined funding source. Options include budget reallocations, competitive industrial funds, county market budgets, development finance, private matching contributions and collective producer/importer-responsibility fees. Subsidies should be disclosed, conditional and evaluated (Rodrik, 2004; Whitfield et al., 2015).

Table 3. Policy implementation matrix

Intervention	Responsible institutions	Resources / financing	Timeline	Outcomes and indicators	Risks and mitigation
National data and traceability system	State Department for Trade; KRA; KNBS; KEBS; counties; trader associations	HS-level data integration; representative labour/enterprise survey; digital registry and dashboard; survey and analyst budget	0–18 months	Annual import volume/value; direct employment; margins/income; waste fraction; registered actors; public report	Distrust and exclusion: co-design, data protection, low fees and service benefits
Risk-based quality and environmental standards	KEBS; NEMA; KRA; Ministry of Health where relevant; counties	Bale-sampling protocol; laboratories; inspector training; digital certificates; appeals and disposal system	0–24 months	Inspection coverage; rejection rate; complaints; unusable fraction; verified disposal and recycling	Disguised restriction or corruption: evidence-based rules, publication, random audit and appeal
Conditional textile/apparel competitiveness Programme	Industry ministry; National Treasury; KIE; EPZA; KAM; NITA; TVETs	Competitive grants/credit guarantees; energy and machinery audits; technology, design and workforce training; matched finance	1–5 years	Unit cost; capacity utilisation; jobs; wages; domestic sales; exports; firm survival; local sourcing	Capture and permanent subsidy: sunset clauses, matching funds and published performance
Affordable local-market development	Industry and trade ministries; manufacturers; retailers; Competition Authority; KEBS	Product testing; common sizing/quality labels; e-commerce; distribution partnerships; procurement reform	1–4 years	Price-quality gap; retail availability; repeat purchase; complaint rate; local market share	Campaign without competitiveness: improve product and distribution before promotion
Trader upgrading and beneficial formalisation	MSME agencies; counties; KRA; financial institutions; trader bodies	Secure market space; simplified registration; insurance; working-capital products; business and digital skills	0–4 years	Formalised enterprises; finance access; income; safety; reduced harassment; business survival	Tax-only formalisation: link compliance to tenure, services, credit and representation
Repair, upcycling and recycling programme	NITA; TVETs; NEMA; counties; MSME agencies; universities; private recyclers	RPL and curricula; common equipment hubs; seed finance; occupational safety; market linkage	1–5 years	People certified; enterprises created; tonnes diverted; value added; 24-month survival; decent-work measures	Weak demand and unsafe work: procurement, design partnerships and enforceable safety standards
Phased trade-policy review	National Treasury; Trade Ministry; KRA; KEBS; EAC institutions	Legal and economic analysis; poverty/price impact modelling; customs capacity; annual review mechanism	2–6 years	Consumer prices; local output; jobs; compliance; smuggling; import quality; export impacts	Price shock and retaliation: regional coordination, pilots, safeguards for vulnerable consumers
EAC regional compact	EAC Secretariat; partner-state ministries; customs and standards agencies; private sector	Negotiating capacity; harmonised definitions; interoperable data; regional industrial and recycling feasibility studies	2–7 years	Common standards; joint enforcement; intra-EAC textile trade; investment; reduced diversion	Divergent interests: staged commitments, peer review and adjustment assistance

Note. Author’s implementation framework informed by EAC (2020), Lall (1992), OECD (2016), Republic of Kenya (2022, 2024), Rodrik (2004), Whitfield et al. (2015), and WTO (2019).

In the short term, government should establish the evidence base, improve market safety and introduce transparent risk-based inspection. A national survey should distinguish importers, wholesalers, retailers, repairers, upcyclers and dependants; measure turnover separately from profit; and disaggregate by sex, age, county and enterprise size (OECD, 2016; Roever, 2014).

In the medium term, policy should reduce the price–quality gap facing local production and expand circular enterprise. Industrial assistance should target diagnosed constraints and remain conditional on learning. Trader

formalisation should proceed through benefits, while environmental obligations should begin with traceability and collective schemes before fees or restrictions escalate (Lall, 1992; Rodrik, 2004).

In the longer term, Kenya and EAC partners can adjust tariffs, standards or other instruments when domestic supply meets defined affordability and quality benchmarks. A public scorecard should track prices, output, employment, wages, firm survival, import quality, waste diversion, customs compliance and distributional effects. Independent evaluation every two or three years should determine whether measures continue, change or end (EAC, 2020; WTO, 2019).

DISCUSSION

The contribution explains Mitumbaism as a recursive institution rather than a choice between welfare and protection. Global-network accounts reveal unequal circulation, while market and cultural studies explain consumer welfare and agency (Brooks, 2013, 2015; Hansen, 2000). The framework connects them through three claims: external dependence narrows regulation; industrial gains require productive capability; and demand changes when price, quality, access and trust improve jointly. Rules shape incentives, institutions distribute value, and aggregated behaviour reshapes rules.

The first rival explanation attributes apparel decline primarily to used-clothing imports. Frazer's (2008) cross-country findings support competitive pressure, but Kenya's evidence does not permit a single-cause inference. New low-cost imports, energy, finance, technology, input coordination, managerial capability and segmented export arrangements also shape outcomes (McCormick et al., 2001; Were, 2016; World Bank Group, 2015). This supports the proposition: mitumba pressure varies by product segment and firm capacity, not a sufficient explanation for deindustrialisation.

A second rival account treats demand as poverty alone. Budgets matter, but preferences for durability, variety, identity and trusted quality support the micro proposition that income growth or patriotic campaigns alone will not redirect demand. The framework predicts strongest effects where incomes are constrained, retail extensive, manufacturing weak, waste capacity limited and governments depend on preferences. Effects weaken where producers match price and quality, protection eases affordability, or circular infrastructure internalises disposal costs. The EAC-US dispute supports the macro proposition: preference dependence intensified constraint (USTR, 2018a, 2018b; Wolff, 2021; WTO, 2019).

Comparatively, the framework can analyse other secondary-goods markets and import-dependent economies, but its propositions require testing. Trade records do not reveal quality or disposal; employment estimates conflate workers, traders and dependants; and household surveys rarely separate new from used goods. Future research should combine customs microdata, representative household and enterprise surveys, manufacturing panels, consumer experiments, lifecycle assessment and political-process tracing. Policy should meanwhile align affordability, capability-building and circular governance rather than rely on isolated tariffs, subsidies or information campaigns (Rodrik, 2004; Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Mitumbaism is embedded in Kenya because it responds to structural inequality, market demand and cultural practice. It supplies affordable goods, sustains trading networks and can extend product life, yet also reveals an economy that imports residual value while struggling to deepen productive capability and manage residual waste (Brooks, 2013, 2015; Hansen, 2000).

The article's central contribution is an integrated explanation of this tension. International political economy identifies external bargaining constraints; institutional and industrial economics explain welfare and capability effects; and behavioural and cultural approaches explain persistent demand. Their interaction produces path dependence and shows why effective reform must alter incentives and capabilities across structural, market and consumer levels.

The appropriate response is neither abrupt prohibition nor laissez-faire acceptance. Kenya should protect

immediate welfare while building verified data, beneficial formalisation, transparent standards, competitive production, repair and recycling capacity, and coordinated regional action. Success should be measured by affordability, decent work, productive capability and environmental performance, but not import reduction alone (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Rodrik, 2004).

Mitumbaism is ultimately a governance problem of transition: moving from the capture of residual value and waste toward a system in which reuse, production, repair, design and recycling reinforce one another. That transition remains contingent on evidence, state capacity and policy learning, and on treating consumers and traders as participants in development rather than obstacles.

DECLARATIONS

Competing interests: The author declares no competing financial or non-financial interests.

Funding: The study received no external funding.

Ethical approval: Not applicable. The study analysed publicly available secondary literature, statistics and policy documents and did not involve human participants.

Data availability: The article uses publicly available data and documents cited in the text. No new dataset was generated.

Author contribution: The author was solely responsible for conceptualisation, analysis and writing.

REFERENCES

1. Akerlof, G. A. (1970). The market for “lemons”: Quality uncertainty and the market mechanism. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 84(3), 488–500. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1879431>
2. Amin, S. (1976). *Unequal development: An essay on the social formations of peripheral capitalism*. Monthly Review Press.
3. Bonnet, F., Vanek, J., & Chen, M. A. (2019). *Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical brief*. Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing. <https://www.wiego.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Women%20and%20Men%20in%20the%20Informal%20Economy%20-%20A%20Statistical%20Brief%20-%20for%20web.pdf>
4. Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
5. Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
6. Brooks, A. (2013). Stretching global production networks: The international second-hand clothing trade. *Geoforum*, 44, 10–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.06.004>
7. Brooks, A. (2015). *Clothing poverty: The hidden world of fast fashion and second-hand clothes*. Zed Books.
8. Brooks, A., & Simon, D. (2012). Unravelling the relationships between used-clothing imports and the decline of African clothing industries. *Development and Change*, 43(6), 1265–1290. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2012.01797.x>
9. Chen, M. A. (2012). *The informal economy: Definitions, theories and policies* (WIEGO Working Paper No. 1). Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing.
10. Cox, R. W. (1981). Social forces, states and world orders: Beyond international relations theory. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10(2), 126–155. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298810100020501>
11. East African Community. (2020). *The East African Community leather and leather products strategy and implementation roadmap 2020–2030*. <https://www.eac.int/documents/category/leather-and-leather-products>
12. East African Community. (2022). *EAC regulations for compiling harmonised consumer price indices (HCPI)*. <https://www.eac.int/documents?controller=download&file=96589cc7-2c84-43e0-ba16->

- bf293f73781a&name=EAC+_+REGULATIONS_+FOR+COMPILING+HARMONISED+CONSUME
R+PRICE+INDICES+MARCH_+2022+-+web.pdf&task=download.file
13. Ellen MacArthur Foundation. (2017). *A new textiles economy: Redesigning fashion's future*. <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/a-new-textiles-economy>
14. Frazer, G. (2008). Used-clothing donations and apparel production in Africa. *The Economic Journal*, 118(532), 1764–1784. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0297.2008.02190.x>
15. Gereffi, G., & Frederick, S. (2010). *The global apparel value chain, trade and the crisis: Challenges and opportunities for developing countries (Policy Research Working Paper No. 5281)*. World Bank. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/100641468339015732>
16. Hansen, K. T. (2000). *Salaula: The world of secondhand clothing and Zambia*. University of Chicago Press.
17. Hansen, K. T. (2004). Helping or hindering? Controversies around the international second-hand clothing trade. *Anthropology Today*, 20(4), 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0268-540X.2004.00280.x>
18. Herod, A., Pickren, G., Rainnie, A., & McGrath-Champ, S. (2014). Global destruction networks, labour and waste. *Journal of Economic Geography*, 14(2), 421–441. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbt015>
19. International Labour Organization. (2015). *Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204)*. <https://www.ilo.org/resource/r204-transition-informal-formal-economy-recommendation-2015>
20. International Labour Organization. (2018). *Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical picture (3rd ed.)*. <https://www.ilo.org/publications/women-and-men-informal-economy-statistical-picture-third-edition>
21. Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1979). Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica*, 47(2), 263–291. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1914185>
22. Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. (2018). *Basic report on well-being in Kenya: Based on the 2015/16 Kenya Integrated Household Budget Survey*.
23. Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. (2025). *Economic survey 2025*. <https://www.knbs.or.ke/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/2025-Economic-Survey.pdf>
24. Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. (2026). *Economic survey 2026*. <https://www.knbs.or.ke/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/2026-Economic-Survey.pdf>
25. Lall, S. (1992). Technological capabilities and industrialization. *World Development*, 20(2), 165–186. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X\(92\)90097-F](https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(92)90097-F)
26. McCormick, D., Kimuyu, P., & Kinyanjui, M. N. (2001). *Kenya's garment industry: An institutional view of medium and large firms (Working Paper No. 531)*. Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi.
27. Mhango, M. W., & Niehm, L. S. (2005). The second-hand clothing distribution channel: Opportunities for retail entrepreneurs in Malawi. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 9(3), 342–356. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13612020510610462>
28. Mitumba Consortium Association of Kenya. (2023). *The state of second-hand clothes and footwear trade in Kenya*. <https://mitumbaassociation.org/>
29. Morgenthau, H. J. (1948). *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*. Alfred A. Knopf.
30. Niinimäki, K., Peters, G., Dahlbo, H., Perry, P., Rissanen, T., & Gwilt, A. (2020). The environmental price of fast fashion. *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment*, 1, 189–200. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0039-9>
31. Office of the United States Trade Representative. (2018a, July 30). *President Donald J. Trump upholds AGOA trade preference eligibility for Rwanda but suspends apparel benefits*. <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2018/july/president-donald-j-trump-upholds-agoa>
32. Office of the United States Trade Representative. (2018b, March 29). *President Trump determines trade preference program eligibility for Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda*. <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/fact-sheets/2018/march/title>
33. Office of the United States Trade Representative. (2024). *2024 biennial report on the implementation of the African Growth and Opportunity Act*. <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/2024%20AGOA%20Biennial%20Report%206-27-2024%20PDF.pdf>
34. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2016). *Extended producer responsibility*:

- Updated guidance for efficient waste management. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264256385-en>
35. Polanyi, K. (1944). *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time*. Farrar & Rinehart.
36. Republic of Kenya. (2022). *Sustainable Waste Management Act* (No. 31 of 2022). Kenya Law. <https://new.kenyalaw.org/akn/ke/act/2022/31/eng@2022-12-31>
37. Republic of Kenya. (2024). *Sustainable Waste Management (Extended Producer Responsibility) Regulations, 2024* (Legal Notice No. 176). Kenya Law. <https://new.kenyalaw.org/akn/ke/act/ln/2024/176/eng@2024-12-06>
38. Rodrik, D. (2004). *Industrial policy for the twenty-first century (KSG Faculty Research Working Paper No. RWP04-047)*. Harvard University. <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/industrial-policy-twenty-first-century>
39. Roever, S. (2014). *Informal economy monitoring study sector report: Street vendors*. Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing. <https://www.wiego.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/IEMS-Sector-Full-Report-Street-Vendors.pdf>
40. Sandin, G., & Peters, G. M. (2018). Environmental impact of textile reuse and recycling—A review. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 184, 353–365. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2018.02.266>
41. Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Alfred A. Knopf.
42. Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333–339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>
43. Thaler, R. H. (1985). Mental accounting and consumer choice. *Marketing Science*, 4(3), 199–214. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.4.3.199>
44. Torraco, R. J. (2016). Writing integrative literature reviews: Using the past and present to explore the future. *Human Resource Development Review*, 15(4), 404–428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484316671606>
45. Waki, N. (2024, March 25). Kenya's second-hand clothes traders lobby against EU export restrictions. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/kenyas-second-hand-clothes-traders-lobby-against-eu-export-restrictions-2024-03-25/>
46. Wallerstein, I. (2004). *World-systems analysis: An introduction*. Duke University Press.
47. Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Addison-Wesley.
48. Were, A. (2016). *Manufacturing in Kenya: Features, challenges and opportunities: A scoping exercise*. Supporting Economic Transformation Programme. <https://set.odi.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Manufacturing-in-Kenya-Anzetse-Were.pdf>
49. Whitfield, L., Therkildsen, O., Buur, L., & Kjær, A. M. (2015). *The politics of African industrial policy: A comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316225509>
50. Whittemore, R., & Knafl, K. (2005). The integrative review: Updated methodology. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 52(5), 546–553. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2005.03621.x>
51. Wolff, E. A. (2021). The global politics of African industrial policy: The case of the used clothing ban in Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda. *Review of International Political Economy*, 28(5), 1308–1331. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2020.1751240>
52. World Bank Group. (2015). *Kenya apparel and textile industry: Diagnosis, strategy and action plan*. <https://doi.org/10.1596/22782>
53. World Bank. (2025). *Kenya imports of worn clothing and other worn articles, 2023 (HS 630900) [Data set]*. World Integrated Trade Solution. <https://wits.worldbank.org/trade/comtrade/en/country/KEN/year/2023/tradeflow/Imports/partner/ALL/product/630900>
54. World Customs Organization. (2023). *WCO customs risk management compendium*. <https://www.wcoomd.org/en/topics/facilitation/instrument-and-tools/tools/risk-management-compendium>
55. World Trade Organization. (2019). *Trade policy review: East African Community (EAC) (WT/TPR/S/384)*. https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/tptr_e/s384_e.pdf