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**African Textiles: A Credible Alternative to Asian Textiles**

Faced with the dominance of Asian textiles in Europe, African cotton is emerging as a credible, sustainable and competitive alternative. For the EU, supporting this sector is also one of the most cost-effective levers to strengthen its strategic relationship with Africa.

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On June 30th, at the invitation of MEP François Kalfon, a panel gathered at the European Parliament in Brussels around a key theme: the African continent as a major opportunity for Europe's textile sourcing. Speakers included Ambassador Bruno Delaye, Virginie Cayzeele (Kiabi), Arvind Mathur and Létondji Beheton (ARISE/Panafritex), and Belinda Edmonds (African Cotton Foundation).

**The Asian textile invasion in Europe: a risk for the European textile industry**

Following an introduction by François Kalfon focused on Europe's responsibility to open its market to African textiles, Bruno Delaye opened the discussion by presenting unequivocal data. In terms of value, European external trade in textiles and clothing with third countries has grown steadily since 2012: +20% in exports and +24% in imports. However, this trend conceals a structural imbalance: the sector's trade deficit, already exceeding €35 billion in 2012, now surpasses €60 billion. Of the EU's €122 billion in textile imports in 2023, nearly one-third originated from China. The country accounts for 38.4% of European textile imports and 30.2% of clothing imports.

This Asian textile hegemony is hardly surprising. It began with the end of the Multi Fibre Arrangement in 2005, which opened the European market to Asian textiles without quotas. Later, U.S. tariffs (up to 145% on Chinese products) redirected volumes previously destined for the United States towards Europe. Added to this are the structural price competitiveness of Asian manufacturers and European regulatory and fiscal loopholes, exploited by ultra-fast fashion platforms, led by Shein and Temu.

This dominance comes at a direct cost for Europe. Economically, employment in the European textile sector declined by 10.7% between 2020 and 2025, representing approximately 144,000 jobs lost; the B2C (business-to-consumer) model bypasses distribution channels and local tax obligations, weakening the EU's economic sovereignty. Environmentally, overproduction and unsold goods that are not recycled contribute to growing pollution, whilst intensive air freight leads to growing emissions. Socially, the lack of transparency in supply chains makes monitoring working conditions practically impossible. Finally, China remains the leading source of textile counterfeiting in the EU: more than 86 million items originating from China were seized in 2022, with a value exceeding €2 billion.

**Africa, a credible alternative "beyond Asia"**

It is in this context that the local production model for African textiles is gaining relevance. The approach promoted by ARISE IIP through its subsidiary Panafritex, represented by Arvind Mathur and Létondji Beheton, is based on local processing: creating, within integrated industrial zones, a complete value chain ranging from cotton ginning (37 of Africa's 54 countries produce cotton) to the finished product. The group is currently developing 11 projects across 8 countries (Benin, Cameroon, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Tanzania, Kenya and Nigeria), with a target capacity of 900 tonnes per day, covering 320 hectares and creating 130,000 direct jobs at full capacity.

Benin already illustrates this "farm-to-fashion" model: within the Glo-Djigbé Industrial Zone, BTC and Btex facilities multiply the value of raw cotton by five by transforming it into finished products, supplying international clients such as H&M, Kiabi and C&A. Furthermore, the model is inclusive: women hold 44% of jobs and 70% of the workforce is under the age of 25.

The comparative advantages of this system are numerous. The Africa-Europe transport distance (around 15 days) compared with 70 to 80 days for shipments from Asia reduces delivery times and freight-related emissions. The value chain is shorter, and therefore more traceable; the cotton is predominantly non-GMO and harvested by hand. The social framework is based on francophone civil law systems (OHADA) and structured labour codes familiar to European buyers. Several African currencies, including the CFA franc, remain pegged to the euro, reducing exchange rate volatility. Finally, in a context of growing trade tensions, Africa offers a much-needed supply diversification, already facilitated by preferential access schemes such as AGOA (African Growth and Opportunity Act) and EPAs (Economic Partnership Agreements).

Integrated industrial zones are the vehicle for this transformation: they consolidate the value chain, reduce barriers to entry for manufacturers, and enhance the continent's attractiveness to international investors. The speakers particularly wanted to emphasize this point: perceptions of inadequate infrastructure, unskilled workforce and regulatory instability are outdated. The reality is one of increasingly structured industrial ecosystems, a young and rapidly trainable talent pool, and stabilized governance frameworks (17 African countries already apply the harmonized OHADA legal framework).

**The direct role expected from the European Union**

One point of caution was expressed unambiguously by the speakers: Africa's potential will not materialize without active EU engagement. The EU can mobilize financial capital to support African industrialization, create guarantee mechanisms for exporters, co-invest in port and logistics infrastructure, and support the emergence of circular textile ecosystems. Furthermore, the EU would benefit from encouraging brands and Member States to source more from Africa as a strategic diversification choice in a context of resurgent global conflicts. Investing in African textiles therefore represents one of the least costly and most tangible levers for building a balanced economic relationship with the African continent.

On another front, and in order to steer consumer behaviour through prices, the EU is also seeking to curb the surge in Asian textile imports through regulation. Since 1 July 2026, the customs duty exemption for parcels valued at less than €150 arriving from third countries has been abolished and replaced by a flat tax of €3 per item. Looking ahead to 2027-2030, the *Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation* (ESPR) will impose sustainability requirements and prohibit the destruction of unsold goods, while the *Digital Product Passport* will make the composition, origin and environmental footprint of textile products traceable from 2030 onwards. Finally, the revision of the *Waste Framework Directive*, expected in June 2027, will harmonize a per-item contribution across all Member State to finance the collection and recycling of textile waste.