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Second-hand Goods in Global Trade

Affordability, Small Business and Cross-Border Modernization

The trade of second-hand goods, further enabled by digital marketplace platforms and cross-border logistics, has become a core feature of modern commerce rather than a niche economic activity.

It supports outcomes that matter for economies large and small: household affordability, small business export promotion, resource efficiency and the reduction of waste by extending the useful life of products.

Current customs laws were designed with a focus on bulk container shipments of new goods moved by professional importers. While these methods are still used by major companies, this model is not suitable for second-hand goods, which are typically long-tail (unique, single-unit inventory) and decentralized (mostly direct-ship to consumers from both individual sellers and small business sellers). These characteristics make compliance with standard customs requirements—especially country of origin (COO) information and tariff classification—more difficult for well-intentioned sellers and buyers.

Global policy is shifting quickly in ways that disproportionately affect this segment:

- The **United States** suspended duty-free de minimis treatment for most non-postal shipments (effective August 29, 2025) that previously cleared under Section 321, making low-value parcels subject to customs duty collection and more formalized entry processes.[1, 2]
- The **European Union** has adopted legislation to eliminate the €150 threshold-based customs duty relief, effective starting July 1, 2026, with a temporary €3 customs duty applicable per item to low-value shipments.[3] In addition, a handling fee of €2–€4, also applicable per item, will be introduced no later than November 2026.[4]
- The **United Kingdom** consulted on removing its £135 customs duty relief for low-value imports, with removal taking place October 2028.[5]

These changes to customs rules were motivated by legitimate concerns, including consumer safety, product compliance, illicit trade and system capacity. But most of all, they were made in response to a massive increase in low-value, new goods shipped by high-volume China-linked platforms to consumers worldwide.[6] However, if applied without tailored policies, these reforms risk imposing disproportionate friction on the small parcel trade of second-hand goods while introducing harmful effects to the global economy and its participants. These effects include higher consumer costs and reduced export participation by small businesses.

Governments can strengthen enforcement and avoid unintended harm by modernizing the customs treatment for second-hand goods through targeted solutions. International alignment, including through the Group of Seven (G7), the World Customs Organization (WCO) or the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), can reduce friction and compliance complexity.

Policy Recommendations

- Recognize second-hand goods as a distinct classification category
- Build modern, risk-based enforcement around better digital data
- Promote trusted trader programs

Definitions and Scope

This paper uses the term "second-hand goods" to mean "goods or components/parts that have been in service (leased, loaned or owned) and that are re-entering a market for sale, lease or use by a second user or an end user."[7] This includes both C2C (individuals selling items from households), as well as B2C (business-to-consumer sales), which involves small businesses and professional resellers sourcing and selling second-hand inventory.[8] In cases where the paper uses the term "refurbished" or "refurbishment," it is used to mean actions to "prepare, clean, test, service and, where necessary, repair a product or a discarded product in order to restore its performance or functionality."[9] It is important to highlight that the burgeoning trade of second-hand goods not only involves resellers, but also a growing ecosystem of refurbishers, remanufacturers and repairers.

Why Second-hand Goods Matter in the Global Trade Context

Affordability

Affordability is the number one reason consumers globally choose to buy second-hand goods. It is a valuable, successful strategy to help offset persistent cost-of-living pressures, leading "value retail" and second-hand purchasing to be an increasingly mainstream behavior. In fact, the second-hand product market is estimated to have reached over $475 billion in 2025.[10] It is also expected to hit a market size of $854 billion in 2030, growing at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 12.4%.[11] In second-hand apparel alone, one industry estimate placed second-hand clothing at $227B (9% of global fashion sales), after 15% growth the prior year.[12] The European Refurbishment Association (EUREFAS) also estimated the surge of the global refurbished electronics market from $27 billion in 2019 to $67 billion in 2023.[13]

On a global scale, we are seeing both sellers and consumers increasingly turn to second-hand goods. The ease of accessing second-hand inventory from their computer or smartphone has made purchasing these items easier than ever before. Coupled with the expansion of delivery networks and product refurbishment services, these trends are not slowing down. The rise of peer-to-peer marketplaces to meet this demand has allowed local economies to be increasingly interconnected with one another, reducing traditional pain points in cross-border trade and delivering new opportunities to consumers around the world.

According to eBay's **2025 Recommerce Report**, these trends are only accelerating and becoming more deeply embedded in consumer behavior. 89% of consumers surveyed were expected to spend the same amount or more on second-hand goods in 2025, with Gen Z shoppers leading with 59% of their generational cohort.[14] In terms of the underlying motivation of these consumer trends, 81% of surveyed consumers indicated "reducing spending" was the top reason for buying second-hand goods.[15] Enabling households to stretch their budgets promotes flexibility for emergency situations, as well as long-term savings goals for the future.

Small business and export participation

Diving deeper into the economics of the second-hand goods trade, the growth of this sector has lowered barriers to entry for millions of small businesses, as many of them begin their entrepreneurial journey as everyday consumers selling second-hand items around their house. Online marketplaces have made this achievable for individuals in both urban and rural communities alike. According to eBay's 2025 Impact Report: "Globally, 97% of eBay small businesses export and reach consumers in an average of 17 different international markets."[16]

According to 2025 eBay data, the prevalence of second-hand goods was substantial among eBay sellers and small businesses in key markets around the world, as shown in Tables 1 and 2, below.

Table 1: eBay Second-hand Goods Seller Participation & Sales (2025)[17, 18]

Country	Percentage of All Sellers Selling Second-hand	Percentage of Small Business Sellers Selling Second-hand	Second-hand GMV as a % of Total GMV
U.S.	75%	89%	53%
Canada	74%	85%	57%
U.K.	78%	52%	39%
EU	77%	46%	33%
Australia	69%	60%	27%
Japan	73%	92%	68%

Total Second-hand GMV from Listed Countries	~$31B
Second-hand GMV as a % of Total GMV From Listed Countries	~46%

Table 2: eBay Second-hand Goods Trade & Cross-Border Exposure (2025)[19, 20]

Export Flow	Percentage of Second-hand GMV from Low-Value Shipments
U.S. to EU	38%
U.S. to U.K.	44%
Canada to U.S.	72%
U.K. to U.S.	74%
EU to U.S.	67%
Australia to U.S.	65%
Japan to U.S.	71%

Second-hand GMV Across Listed Export Corridors	~$1.5B
Percentage of Second-hand GMV from Low-Value Shipments Across Listed Export Corridors	~62%

Environmental and strategic benefits of second-hand goods

In addition to the core economic benefits, the sale of second-hand items can also reduce waste by extending the useful life of products and keeping items in circulation. In fact, according to eBay's 2025 Recommerce Report, nearly half of surveyed responses indicated that "sustainability/environmental benefits" were a top reason to shop second-hand.[21] Furthermore, the sale of second-hand goods can reduce resource extraction by displacing products that may have otherwise been purchased new. According to a study conducted by Eunomia for eBay in 2025 on the Benefits of Global Second-Hand Trade, extending garment life can reduce carbon emissions by 12–30%, depending on the scenario. In a completely different sector, the study also shows that using second-hand car parts, instead of new, can result in approximately 53% lower carbon emissions for a typical car collision repair. Both of these also contribute to supporting local businesses and skilled jobs, with small businesses thriving in vintage fashion and remanufactured car parts everywhere in G7 economies.[22] In addition, a key pillar of the EU's Clean Industrial Deal is "ensuring access to a skilled workforce," focusing on the remanufacturing market's circular potential of creating 500,000 new jobs.[23]

Consumers are also increasingly searching for refurbished goods, especially for electronics and smartphones. According to the same Eunomia/eBay study, second-hand phones that are repaired and refurbished have 80–90% lower carbon emissions than new phones. Extending the life of phones also crucially reduces demand for raw materials (e.g. lithium and cobalt): with 43% devices kept as a backup or lie unused at home after their first life, there is still huge untapped potential to feed the G7's reuse and recycling industries, thereby supporting the objective of reducing dependence on other economies' mining reserves.[24] Further, according to eBay's 2023 Refurbished Products Survey specific to smartphones, "when the refurbishment process swaps out old batteries with a new one, and sources that battery locally, the overall environmental impact of refurbished over new can be up to an 88% improvement."[25]

What Makes Second-hand Goods Trade Structurally Different

Long-tail inventory and single-unit, low-value consignments

Second-hand goods often do not move as uniform pallets in large containers with identical SKUs (Stock Keeping Units). Instead, millions of individual products reflect unique combinations of brand, model year, wear condition, and item description. This "long-tail" structure creates two practical realities. First, issues surrounding tariff and customs classification can become quite complex. Second, small parcel shipments take on added costs and compliance requirements that make cross-border shipping or purchasing decisions more difficult to make.

However, when trade and customs policies increase fixed compliance costs per shipment, small sellers face the highest effective burden because these costs are not able to be spread across a high-value shipping container. The large majority of these small shipments of second-hand goods are direct-to-consumer sales.

In the United States, de minimis imports surged over the last decade, surpassing more than 1 billion annual shipments in recent years.[26] In the EU, 4.6 billion parcels valued under the de minimis of €150 were imported in 2024 (from 2.3 billion in 2023 and 1.4 billion in 2022).[27] The same trend is observed in the UK, where HM Treasury estimates these low-value imports have also increased substantially between 2021 and 2024, rising to approximately 600 million shipments in 2024.[28] However, these surges had nothing to do with sales of second-hand goods, but instead were overwhelmingly low-value shipments directly shipped to consumers by Chinese e-commerce platforms. In response, the United States, the European Union and the United Kingdom made structural policy changes to curb the flow of these small parcel shipments. Though intended to increase domestic revenues and prevent harmful, cheap products from landing in the hands of consumers, these policies have created hurdles for individuals and small businesses selling legitimate second-hand inventory. Given the nature of this inventory, these goods cannot be forward-deployed in bulk shipments to warehouses in other jurisdictions.[29]

Country of origin, conformity and labeling limitations

Many product-related conformity and origin requirements assume that the item can be reliably traced to its original producer or manufacturer. This is predicated on the product always being clearly marked and labeled accordingly. But second-hand goods, in fact, frequently lack intact labels, original packaging, or product documentation—especially if manufactured many years earlier and resold multiple times during the product's lifecycle. Very often, the original manufacturer is also either no longer in business, or unresponsive to requests from reuse operators pertaining to older products.

The EU's General Product Safety Regulation (GPSR) requires original manufacturer contact details, or that of its appointed responsible person in the EU, for any and all products placed on the market, whether new or second-hand.[30] Other legislation may also require some specific design features[31] which by definition cannot be added in a product that is already second-hand when imported, thus heavily disrupting global secondary markets.[32]

If new customs rules require precise origin declarations and conformity documentation equivalent to those of new goods for every second-hand good shipped in a small package, error rates will surely rise. This often is the result of missing information rather than intentional fraud. In the apparel industry, one report focused on blended textiles estimated that 30% of apparel were missing their labels when entering recycling channels.[33] The negative effect of inadequate customs and market surveillance rules for second-hand goods will be further compounded by regulations imposing one-size-fits-all checklists that online marketplaces would have to request from their sellers to meet the new requirements.

Tariff classification complexity for non-trade experts

Tariff classification is complex even for sophisticated experts in the field. The World Customs Organization's (WCO) Harmonized System comprises 5,000+ commodity groups, identified by six-digit codes, used by more than 200 economies worldwide and covers more than 98% of world merchandise trade.[34] Harmonized tariff schedules at the national (or country) level then add additional digits and rules.[35] For second-hand goods, classification is often harder because item condition, composition and modifications are not easily obtained, making it much more difficult for individuals and small businesses to list these items in the first place. As one might expect, many small businesses and individual sellers are struggling to comply with new obligations as reforms take effect around the world.

To further complicate matters, new customs frameworks are placing direct customs responsibility on these small businesses and individual sellers. In the second-hand goods context, there may be various owners—and even years—between the original manufacturer and today's seller. Details such as fabric composition or where the garment factory was located are simply not available and it would be impractical to demand the same level of diligence from small business or individual sellers as from large importers or manufacturers of new goods. In the online shopping context, the buyer usually acts as the importer of record and s/he is equally at a loss when it comes to confirming fabric type and/or product origin. Putting the onus on individuals and small businesses will create a chilling effect as the burden relative to the underlying value of the goods is excessive.

Policy Frictions and the Current Regulatory Environment

Small parcel trade is being targeted

Across G7 economies and key markets, customs laws centered on small and low-value shipments are being reworked and implemented at a quick pace, given the large-scale increase in low-value shipments from high-volume, direct-to-consumer retail platforms in recent years.

United States. Effective August 29, 2025, all goods entering the United States are no longer eligible for duty-free de minimis treatment under 19 U.S.C. §1321(a)(2)(C), regardless of shipment value or origin.[36] The U.S. first eliminated the $800 de minimis threshold in May 2025 for items of Chinese or Hong Kong origin, and later eliminated de minimis treatment on a global basis in August 2025. Following full elimination, Universal Postal Union (UPU) data showed U.S.-bound postal traffic slowed down approximately 70% as foreign posts adjusted to new duty collection requirements and the on-boarding of new, qualified parties.[37]

European Union. The European Union has also followed suit in making changes to its de minimis regime. The EU adopted Council Regulation (EU) 2026/382 eliminating the €150 threshold-based customs duty relief, starting July 1, 2026, with a transitional approach including a €3 per item duty structure for specified low-value cases during an interim period.[38] Additionally, the EU is expected to roll out a €2–€4 per item handling fee on all inbound shipments regardless of value, taking effect on November 1, 2026. These added costs, in addition to several EU Member States already implementing or considering their own national handling fees, only add to the overall transaction and shipping costs for those engaged in the cross-border trade of second-hand goods. Moreover, as the EU customs authorities roll out the new "importer for distance sales" regime, this will disproportionately impact second-hand goods as platforms will be forced to impose extensive documentation and information requirements.

United Kingdom. In response to these global trends, HM Treasury launched a consultation announcing the removal of the £135 customs duty relief for low-value imports, with the 2025 Autumn Budget indicating removal by March 2029, though the U.K. government has now accelerated de minimis removal to October 2028.[39]

Canada. Canada's de minimis framework sets a reasonable threshold that balances efficient revenue collection with the need to avoid unnecessary trade disruption for low-value shipments. By maintaining a commercially workable threshold, Canada helps protect its national tax base while preserving stable conditions for domestic retail and legitimate cross-border commerce.

Principles and Recommendations

In an increasingly interconnected world, national customs authorities are responding to real challenges: undervaluation, mis-classification, prohibited goods and illicit trade flows. International standards increasingly emphasize advance electronic data, shared messaging formats, and pre-arrival risk assessment.[40]

At the same time, the rapid growth of high-volume, individual parcel trade warrants a more differentiated approach. Customs frameworks should enable authorities to target higher-risk flows effectively, while applying proportionate and operationally feasible requirements to lower-risk categories such as second-hand goods.

Recognize "second-hand goods" as a distinct classification category

- Create a clearly defined "second-hand" classification in global tariff schedules where not already present and recognize product condition as a relevant data point in customs declarations and risk profiling.
- For items classified under a second-hand provision, allow importers to exercise reasonable care in determining country of origin, or in instances where the information is unattainable, allow importers to certify the country of origin is unknown.
- Preserve enforcement capacity for customs authorities while reducing friction for small business sellers and consumers.
- Avoid application of multiple duty regimes on top of unique second-hand goods treatment.
- Streamline the entry process for second-hand goods and enable carriers and customs brokers to file simplified data for low-risk items.

Build modern, risk-based enforcement around better digital data

The WCO and UPU have developed joint guidance that emphasizes how electronic advance data (EAD) supports risk assessment and revenue collection while maintaining service standards.[41]

- Scale requirements to risk (value, product category seller history).
- Prioritize interdiction capacity on high-risk categories (controlled goods, high-value counterfeits, repeat offenders), not on routine second-hand goods sold online.

Promote Trusted Trader Programs

Trusted trader policies are designed to speed up cross-border trade for businesses and shipments considered to be low risk, while still maintaining high security and inspection standards for customs authorities. These frameworks could be further adapted to reflect the realities of platform-enabled trade and data-driven compliance.

- Develop innovative trusted trader frameworks to include platforms and other e-commerce supply chain stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

Second-hand goods are deeply intertwined with consumer affordability, small business trade and promoting sustainable economic activity that fully values and extends the lifecycle of high-quality, well-made products.

However, recent changes to trade and customs policy in key markets, in response to massive surges in small parcel shipments of new goods from China, have undermined the tangible consumer and small business benefits of the cross-border trade of second-hand goods.

These goods disproportionately fall under the low-value and individual shipment categories. When systems shift from simplified clearance to full duty collection, second-hand goods frequently face higher landed costs (duties, fees, brokerage costs) relative to the item's value, resulting in higher friction per shipment (required data elements, classification, country of origin). This can unintentionally push consumers back toward cheaply made, mass-produced goods, or toward informal, off-market channels without appropriate safeguards.

The key policy challenge is not whether to enforce customs rules, but how to enforce them in a high-volume, decentralized trade environment without imposing disproportionate friction on low-risk, second-hand goods. A coordinated approach centered on risk-based targeting while making cross-border trade more accessible for small businesses and individual sellers offers a credible path forward.

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