## THE USED-CLOTHING MARKET IN MALAWI

Maxine James Johns
Naperville, IL 60565

Little domestic production and sales of new apparel occurred in Malawi in 1995. To meet the needs of most people in this small, underdeveloped African nation, imported used clothing was sold at the open markets. Discus-sions with members of the Peace Corps, Ameri-can Baptist Mission, and Habitat for Humanity, along with personal observations, led to several questions for further study.

Essentially two types of clothing were available in Malawi: new custom-made garments or used clothing. The expense of fabric plus the lack of knowledge and equipment restricted home construction. However, large quantities of inexpensive, used clothing were available in the open markets of the villages.

Most recycled clothing originated from charities in the United States and Canada. These non-profit groups sell their excess to for-profit companies which in turn export to Africa. Clothing was available in four conditions: unopened bales; unsorted piles; sorted piles; or clothing refurbished by laundering and ironing. Whole bales sold for approximately $100. Profits of $100 or more could result by reselling in small quantities; profits increased with greater processing. In a country with a very low annual per capita income, the used-clothing trade is an important source of income and employment. Large numbers of people engage in the selling, processing, and buying of the recycled garments.

It is tempting to question the ethics of charitable organizations that sell donations to exporters who profit from them. However, the used-clothing trade provided jobs and quality clothes for those who would otherwise go without. After "unofficial" sanctioning of the used-clothing market, the dress of Malawians noticeably improved. African countries engaged in domestic apparel production forbid the importation of used clothing. What impact does this have on their citizens? How does the dress in other African countries compare to that of Malawi? Further study may provide answers.