

For Immediate Release

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www.itvs.org/pressroom/photos
Program companion website, visit <http://www.pbs.org/tshirttravels>

INDEPENDENT LENS's "T-SHIRT TRAVELS"
EXPLORES HOW SECONDHAND CLOTHING FROM THE WEST
INFLUENCES ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOR AFRICANS

Film by Shantha Bloemen
Premieres Nationally on "Independent Lens"
ITVS's Acclaimed Series on PBS
Tuesday, March 23 at 10:00 P.M.
(check local listings)

(San Francisco, CA) — When filmmaker Shantha Bloemen found herself stationed in a remote village in Zambia as a worker with an international aid organization, she had to adjust to living in a different culture. She learned to cook “mealie meal,” the local staple, and carry water on her head from the river—over a mile from her home. But one thing struck her as oddly familiar: almost everyone in the village wore secondhand clothing from the West—from the village elder decked out in a Chanel knockoff jacket to women in AC/DC T-shirts to children sporting Adidas sneakers. Bloemen began to imagine stories about the people who used to wear the clothing, wondering if the original owners had any idea that the castoffs they had given to charities ended up being sold to Africans half a world away.

What began as an amusement, however, began to take on more serious overtones as Bloemen learned of the consequences of the secondhand clothing trade. She noticed more and more Zambians in the markets—teachers, nurses, civil servants, who, having lost their jobs, turned to selling secondhand clothes. How, Bloemen wondered, did all of these Africans end up selling used clothing? And where did all the t-shirts and jackets and hats come from? She decided to follow the trail of the secondhand clothes.

Traveling to the Jersey Shore, Bloemen interviews Americans who donate their goods to various charities but have little idea that their former wardrobes end up in Africa. She talks to export

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agents like Barney Lehrer from Brooklyn, who tells her that the Salvation Army doesn't even unpack most of the clothing donated, but sells it to companies for export to third-world countries. "The largest export item to Africa from the United States in general is used clothing," says Lehrer. "It's a huge business, a multibillion-dollar business."

Strapped and packed in bales like hay, the companies that export the goods sell them to commercial dealers in Africa, who mark up the bales of clothing a whopping three to four hundred percent. These dealers in turn sell to Africans like Luka Mafo, a 19-year-old Zambian who sells secondhand clothing to support his mother, brothers, sisters and cousins, hoping he can help them to stay in school and graduate.

But Bloemen still wondered: Was it always this way? What happened to all of the Zambian clothing manufacturers? Mark O'Donnell, spokesperson for Zambian manufacturers, reveals that in 1991, when the country's markets were opened to free trade, container load after container load of used clothing began to arrive in Zambia, undercutting the cost of the domestic manufacturers and putting them out of business. The skills, the infrastructure and the capital of an entire industry are now virtually extinct, with not a single clothing manufacturer left in the country today.

Following the trail even further back, **T-SHIRT TRAVELS** turns to the history of Zambia, from centuries of colonization to its independence. "In the 1960s, many African countries finally gained their political independence," says Bloemen. "But by then, their economies were totally dependent on the raw materials for which they'd been colonized. In Zambia's case it was copper."

In 1973, with copper prices falling, Zambia began to borrow from the World Bank and the IMF. Almost three decades later, Zambia is locked in a downward cycle of poverty, as the country struggles to pay the enormous interest on its debt. A once upwardly mobile nation in the 1970s, Zambia now has schools with no books, hospitals without medicine and buildings and roads falling into disrepair. Company after company has collapsed, and thousands of Zambians have lost their jobs. Many have ended up on the streets selling T-shirts from the West.

The World Bank and the IMF now direct the economic policies of Zambia with devastating effects, according to many interviewed in the film. Amongst other economic reforms, they demanded that the government stop subsidies to farmers and others so that those funds could be applied to the debt servicing. Now farmers, unable to afford fertilizer and seeds, cut back on the amount they grow. Today, more than 60% of Zambians are malnourished. The country was forced by the World Bank and the IMF to charge fees for health and education services, driving a poverty-stricken population to become more illiterate and more sickly. They demanded that Zambia open its markets to all comers, which drove local industries completely out of business, as they were unable to compete with the influx of cheap goods. The secondhand clothing that flooded the country today is practically the only affordable clothing in the country.

Sophi Phiri, a corporate investment banker, says: "We don't have a political colonialism in Zambia, we have an economic colonialism. If they [the World Bank] can control the shots that far then are we an independent state?"

“What hope do Africa’s creditors have of ever recouping their loans if Africa’s workforce is hungry and sick and uneducated?” asks Bloemen. “If we continue to bend the economic lives of poorer nations to suit our purposes and only make things worse in the process, whom will be left to make good on the debt? Do we want to live in a world where one sixth of humanity in these countries have no chance to even see their children grow up healthy?” By the end of the film, having followed the T-shirts on their travels, Bloemen is left with more questions than ever before.

Additional information and/or downloadable photographs from **T-SHIRT TRAVELS** are available at www.itvs.org/pressroom/photos.

The program’s interactive companion website www.pbs.org/tshirttravels features detailed information about the film, including an interview with the filmmaker, cast and crew bios, as well as links and resources pertaining to the film’s subject matter. The site also features a “talkback” section for viewers to share their ideas and opinions, preview clips of the film, and more.

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T-SHIRT TRAVELS Credits

Director / Producer / Writer	Shantha Bloemen
Editor / Story Advisor	George O’Donnell
Principal Director of Photography	Anna Backer
Director of Photography	Patrick Muiruri
Story Editor / Writer	Michelle Ferrari
Additional camerawork	Scott Ambroise
	Teboho Nyongeni
Sound	Teboho Nyongeni
	Alec Mugala
	Kenny Tonga

About the Filmmakers

Shantha Bloemen (Producer, Director)

Over the last ten years, Shantha Bloemen has lived, worked and studied in Africa. She worked in Zambia for six months in 1994 and spent 1997 working as a press officer in Liberia. She has traveled extensively in Africa and also undertaken a number of media trips to bring attention to children affected by war, polio, AIDS, and the plight of refugees. As a communications consultant for UNICEF, Shantha has worked on a number of different video projects and has been actively involved in getting media attention focused on children’s rights and third-world poverty. During her years with UNICEF, she assisted in the development of television materials for the organization’s yearly State of the World’s Children report and the international Children’s Day of Broadcasting. Both events had global outreach with programs being broadcast on over 2,500 TV stations in more than 190 countries.

About *Independent Lens*

Independent Lens is a weekly series airing Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement and unflinching visions of their independent producers. *Independent Lens* features unforgettable stories about a unique individual, community or moment in history, which prompted Nancy Franklin in *The New Yorker* to write “Watching *Independent Lens*...is like going into an independent bookstore—you don’t always find what you were looking for but you often find something you didn’t even know you wanted.” Presented by ITVS, the series is supported by interactive companion websites, and national publicity and community outreach campaigns. Further information about the series is available at [www.pbs.org/independent lens](http://www.pbs.org/independent%20lens). *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS, and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

About ITVS

Independent Television Service (ITVS) funds and presents award-winning documentaries and dramas on public television, innovative new media projects on the Web and the weekly series *Independent Lens* on Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. ITVS is a miracle of public policy created by media activists, citizens and politicians seeking to foster plurality and diversity in public television. ITVS was established by a historic mandate of Congress to champion independently produced programs that take creative risks, spark public dialogue and serve underserved audiences. Since its inception in 1991, ITVS programs have revitalized the relationship between the public and public television, bringing TV audiences face-to-face with the lives and concerns of their fellow Americans. More information about ITVS can be obtained by visiting www.itvs.org. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American People.

About PBS

PBS, headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, is a private, nonprofit media enterprise owned and operated by the nation’s 349 public television stations. Serving nearly 90 million people each week, PBS enriches the lives of all Americans through quality programs and education services on noncommercial television, the Internet and other media. More information about PBS is available at www.pbs.org, the leading dot-org Web site on the Internet.

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