

## **Helvetas' response to claims of child labor in organic cotton production in Burkina Faso**

Bloomberg and other media reported on 12/15/2011 that the production of organic cotton used in the fairtrade collection of the American underwear brand Victoria's Secret involves child labor. Victoria's Secret sources its organic cotton from the national cotton producer union UNPCB in Burkina Faso, West Africa. UNPCB organizes all cotton producers in the country, organic as well as conventional ones.

Since 2004, the Swiss development NGO Helvetas promotes organic cotton production in Burkina Faso. Helvetas supports UNPCB in training smallholder families in organic production techniques. Organic cotton farming enables the producers to increase their incomes and improve their livelihoods. The entire organic cotton production in Burkina Faso is fairtrade certified by Fairtrade International (FLO).

Helvetas is much concerned about the reported cases of child labor. The organization is currently checking whether the cases are indeed linked with organic farming and fair trade. All involved stakeholders - Victoria's Secret, UNPCB, Helvetas and FLO – started investigations, and all are determined to initiate bold and sustainable measures if the claims are substantiated.

Fact is that child labor is quite common in cotton production in West Africa. One needs to distinguish between children who occasionally take part in farm work, and exploitative use of child labor. It is very common that children help their parents in farm activities – also in other parts of the world. Exploitative or abusive use of child labor, however, refers to work that is dangerous, that keeps children away from schools, or that jeopardizes the psychic and physical health of the child. The so-called “enfants confiés” are particularly prone to exploitative child labor. These are children whose parents cannot sufficiently look after them and therefore entrust them to other families, mostly to relatives. This reflects the extreme poverty in which 80% of the people live in that country. According to the Human Development Index, Burkina Faso ranks on position 181 out of 187. In this context, especially the right to education cannot be taken as granted for all children. Particularly in rural areas, schools and trained teachers are missing, and many families cannot afford to pay school fees. Through the organic cotton project Helvetas strives to improve the precarious living conditions of these people. In many cases, the families have only been able to send their children to school with the help of the considerably higher revenues earned from organic cotton. An impact study conducted by the University of Berne in 2008 confirmed that organic and fairtrade cotton farming had a positive impact on food security, health and education of smallholders and their children.

In order to investigate into the prevalence of child labor in organically managed farms, in 2008 Helvetas and UNPCB commissioned a comprehensive study by an independent consultant. While the study identified certain risks particularly in the case of the “enfants confiés”, it clearly showed that there is no systematic misuse of child labor in organic farms. The recommendations of the study, particularly concerning awareness creation and sensitizing work through the agricultural extension team of UNPCB, have been taken up and efforts to this effect were intensified.