



FROM THE PLANT TO THE T-SHIRT

WHY IT PAYS OFF TO BUY
ORGANIC COTTON FROM FAIR TRADE

◀ **helvetas** ▶
Leben braucht Wasser.



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Dear Reader,

Can you imagine your home without any cotton products? Think of all the things that would be missing: the tea-towel in the kitchen, terrycloth in the bathroom, bedclothes and curtains in the bedroom. Your wardrobe would be quite empty, because most clothes, even in the age of synthetic fibre, contain cotton. Cotton is the most important natural textile fibre in the world.

Why is it important to choose textiles from organic production and fair trade, when you buy cotton products? Most cotton production methods harm both humans and nature. Yet millions of families in developing countries depend on cotton as their main source of income. Conventional production methods and unfair global trade relations increasingly threaten this source. Organic cotton gives these families a chance to maintain their livelihood while cultivating their soil in a way that preserves its fertility for future generations.

On the following pages we will introduce you to how cotton is cultivated and processed today. We will show you that by choosing the right product you can make a difference and help to reduce poverty and preserve natural resources.

Thank you very much for your interest!

Helvetas Competence Centre for Organic Cotton

www.organiccotton.ch

The Cotton Plant



The cotton plant (*Gossypium*) belongs to the mallow family and is related to the hollyhock and the hibiscus. Initially the plant's blossoms are white or yellow and later they turn pink. When the bolls are ripe the seed vessels burst open and the hairy seeds spring up. The sun eventually dries the fibres and they can be harvested.

The fibre length depends on the species, the variety and the conditions of cultivation. It determines into which products the cotton fibre can be processed.

Cotton is grown between 37 degrees north and 30 degrees south in warm, frost free and very sunny zones. Cotton plants are very demanding, they require a lot of sunshine, balanced temperatures between 18° C and 28° C and plenty of water.



The Cotton Plant



Cotton is a very thirsty crop, the production of one kilogram of cotton fibre requires between 7'000 and 20'000 litres of water. Some particularly wasteful surface irrigation systems even use up to 30'000 litres of water for each kilogram of cotton fibre that is harvested. The quantity of water that is used for irrigation on cotton fields is almost as high as water consumption of all the private households worldwide. In many places this high consumption of water has led to sinking ground water levels and salinisation.

Cotton is usually cultivated as an annual crop. It is grown on various types of farms. On one side of the spectrum there are small farms with hardly any irrigation, with water shortages and seasonal rains. They yield 400 – 600 kilograms of raw cotton per hectare. On the other side of the spectrum, intensive and fully mechanised farming, uses particularly high-yielding varieties, mineral fertilisers and irrigation (as for example in Australia), yielding over 3 tons per hectare.

The total worldwide harvest amounts to roughly 25 million tons of fibre each year. This quantity would be enough to produce 60 billion T-shirts.

Cotton on the World Market

Cotton is the most important natural textile fibre in the world. Its commercial production began as early as the year 3'000 B.C. in what is now India, Pakistan and China. Today cotton is mainly used to produce clothes, textile products for domestic use, such as bedclothes and terrycloth, hygienic articles, besides a number of products that contain cotton, such as tyres, film material, varnish or even banknotes.

In spite of the great significance of cotton, world market prices have been decreasing considerably over the past years. One of the main reasons is that cotton growers in industrialised countries, mainly the EU, USA and China, are subsidized. For cotton growers in developing countries, who are not privileged in this way, it is difficult to be competitive. Their hard work yields less and less profit.

Many of the big state-run or partly state-run cotton companies that buy cotton from the farmers and sell it on the international market have come close to bankruptcy and pay the producers less and less. The collapse of prices on the world market poses an existential threat to peasant families in developing countries.

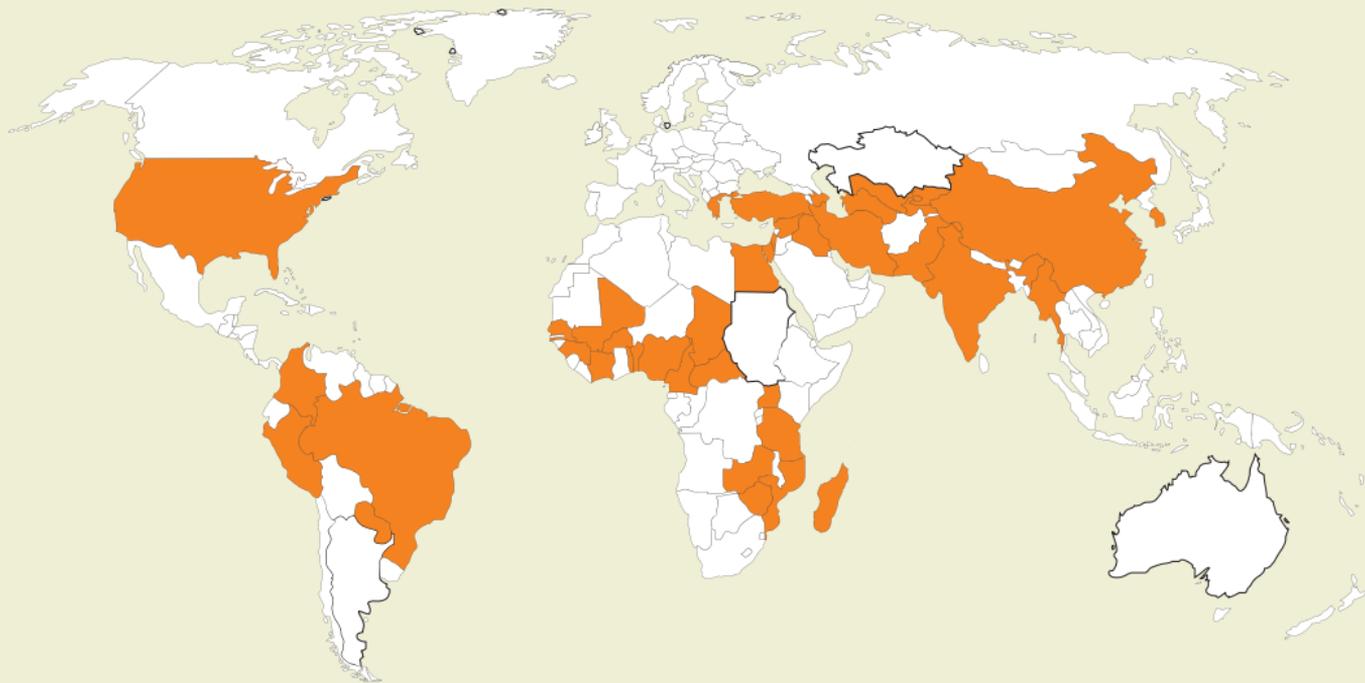


Cotton on the World Market

Some major cotton producing countries in Africa – Benin, Burkina Faso, Tchad and Mali – have attempted to create better conditions for African farmers on the world market. These efforts received great attention at the 2003 WTO Conference in Cancún. Debates on relief payments to African states have continued ever since, a reduction in subsidies in the industrialised countries, however, has still not been effected.



World Map of Cotton Cultivation



This map shows all the countries in which cotton is cultivated on more than 1% of the entire agricultural area (arable and grazing areas).

Adverse Effects of Cotton Cultivation

The cultivation of cotton, more than almost any other crop, relies heavily on the use of chemicals. Cotton is grown on 2.5% of the world's agricultural area, whereas 16% of all the insecticides used worldwide go to its cultivation. Hardly any producers of the countries in the south have access to competent advice on the storage and use of these chemicals. Many farmers who use the pesticides suffer from health problems, and in numerous cases men, women and children have died of pesticide poisoning.

Often the chemicals contaminate surface and ground water, so that it can no longer be used as drinking water. Furthermore, the pesticides in the cotton fields not only control pests, but also kill a lot of beneficial organisms. Finally, such severe interference with the agro ecosystem can even turn pests of formerly minor importance into a bigger problem.



Some years ago, the cultivation of cotton was very profitable for small farmers in many developing countries. A lot of them increased their cotton acreage at the expense of food production. Years of extensive cotton monoculture have severely reduced the biodiversity in many regions and leached the soil. As a result, in many places the soil's fertility has been greatly diminished, so that even the production of food for the farmers' own supply does not yield enough to secure their existence any more. In order to feed their families, farmers have to do reduce fallow periods that allow the soil to regenerate, and start cultivating land that is not suitable for farming. This causes problems such as desertification and erosion.

The cultivation of cotton also has an effect on our climate. The production of pesticides and mineral fertilisers that are used in the conventional cultivation of cotton consume high amounts of energy.

A well-known example of the adverse effects of cotton cultivation is the Aral Sea in Central Asia. In the times of the Soviet Union, irrigation canals of immense dimensions were constructed, and whole rivers were diverted. As a consequence, the Aral Sea, one of the world's largest inland water and Uzbekistan's main drinking water reservoir, was fed with hardly any water. Since 1960 the Aral Sea's area has been more than halved, and today it contains only a fourth of its original water volume.



Organic Cotton: Beneficial to Humans and Environment

The cultivation of organic cotton does entirely without synthetic fertilisers and pesticides. The use of genetically modified seeds is banned. Organic cotton is cultivated in rotation with other crops and is fertilised with manure and compost, which preserves and even increases the soil's fertility.

The crops which are grown in crop rotation with organic cotton and which serve the farmers' families as staple foods, are produced in an equally healthy way. Some of these crops, e.g. sesame, can be sold on the world market at a better price, just like organic cotton.

A lot of adverse effects on the environment and on people's health that result from conventional cotton production do not occur with organic production. Also, the financial risk that farmers run is considerably reduced, because they no longer need to invest in costly pesticides and fertilisers.

In organic farming, alternative methods are used to keep the pests in check. They include spraying plants with herbal extracts or the cultivation of trap crops in the cotton fields.



Most organic farmers are organised in groups. They can rely on an efficient network of advisers and are in close contact to other partners within the same cotton value chain.

In order to guarantee the organic quality of their cotton, the farms are checked annually by an independent auditing organisation. In addition to that an internal monitoring system within the small farmers' groups ensures that all the standards are met. The organic cotton produced in this way is called "Organic Cotton" or "Bio Cotton".

Although organic cotton is still a niche product on the world market, demand and production are growing continually. More and more cotton farmers are converting to the organic cultivation method.



Cotton Processing

Cotton is mainly manufactured in countries with low production costs. Bad working conditions and heavy work loads are common. Current processing technologies of bleaching, dying and imprinting the textiles are far from being environmentally safe and are often noxious. Workers are often not sufficiently informed about the health risks to which they are exposed.

Besides, the people concerned are not in a position to fight for better conditions themselves. They depend on their jobs and wages, even if they are below subsistence level. Their only chance is an increased pressure from the market. Consumers in the industrialised countries can support the efforts being made to improve the working conditions in the processing industries by their consumer awareness.

The manufacturing process from seed cotton to the finished garment includes numerous passes, which often send the cotton on a journey around the world. Perfectly transparent production chains from the farmers to the shelves can help to disclose and fight abuses.



Fair Trade

Fair trade is a strategy to reduce poverty. It focuses mainly on dignified working conditions and improved living conditions for families and entire villages. Through fair trade small farmers receive recognition and the right to make self-determined decisions.

Max Havelaar-certified small farmers receive a stable minimum price for their products, which covers the costs of production. Employees are guaranteed minimum wages, paid holidays, protective clothing and social security. Beside a fixed minimum price, small farmers also profit from a fair trade premium which is used for community projects such as the building of schools, subsidised medical consultations, or the construction of store houses. In return they commit themselves to meeting various conditions, such as social standards or environmental norms. The use of genetically modified seeds is banned. Any synthetic pesticides that might still be in use have to be decreased continually. The organic farmers receive an additional organic premium.



Max Havelaar-certified products have been certified according to the international standards of the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO). FLO is the auditing organisation of over 20 national fair trade initiatives and sets standards as well as minimum prices. A textile product that carries the Max Havelaar label originates from Max Havelaar-certified small farms.

Max Havelaar enables independent small farmers from disadvantaged regions in the south to access the markets in the north, and it promotes immediate, long-term trade relations. The entire textile production chain is transparent and meets internationally recognised social standards.

“Coop Naturaline”/Remei “bioRe” Projects

Naturaline – fashion that makes you feel good. For over ten years now Naturaline organic cotton textiles stand for kindness to skin, ecology and fair working conditions for producers and manufacturers in India and Africa. The organic cotton comes from the bioRe[®], projects in India and Tansania. Thanks to a long-term purchase guarantee, a price premium of up to 20% and support with local training, more than 8'100 farmers' families in India and Tansania have been able to secure their existence. The aim of this partnership is to make more and more peasant families convert from conventional production to organic cotton cultivation, so that they will be able to earn a more stable income and gain more financial security.

Each Naturaline product is produced under dignified working conditions and without any chlorous bleaching agents, poisonous heavy metals or allergenic chemicals. Remei promotes fair and socially acceptable working conditions in the processing industry. This creates a sustainable added value for all the partners in the production chain, from the farmers' families to the consumers. Today the Naturaline product range comprises over 5'300 articles, from attractive clothes and underwear for the whole family to hosiery and bedclothes, terrycloth and sanitary products. The latest Naturaline collection is available at every Coop City department store and at all the big Coop supermarkets.



Helvetas Organic Cotton Projects

The Swiss development organisation Helvetas has been present in Western Africa (Mali, Burkina Faso and Senegal) and Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan) since 2002. In these countries Helvetas supports projects that promote the cultivation and trade of organic cotton. Helvetas advises the producers, most of them small farmers, and the cotton companies. These buy, gin, transport and sell the cotton. Helvetas also closely cooperates with local research institutes and supports the farmers in creating and running producers' organisations, which in their turn also train the producers.

In Zurich Helvetas runs a competence centre for organic cotton. It develops new production systems, initiates longer-term partnerships within the textile value chain and administers public relations. For the early stage of the programme Migros and Switcher have guaranteed to purchase the harvest of cotton and to pay a fixed premium on the world market price. With these guarantees the project could be started in financially secure conditions.

A number of foreign companies such as Marks & Spencer, Elmertex and Hess Natur have guaranteed cooperation. In addition, the projects are financially supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC, the Dutch development organisation ICCO, the Liechtenstein Development Service LED, and above all by the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, SECO.

More and more fair trade organic cotton textiles and products from the Helvetas projects are also sold at the Helvetas FairShop.



Women Producing Organic Cotton



For example Djeneba Kone from Mali

A considerable part of the organic cotton producers in Africa are women. In Mali, for example, their number amounts to 40 percent. One of them is Djeneba Kone from Kolondieba. Together with four other women she cultivates organic cotton. Djeneba Kone reports:

“Thanks to the organic production method women can now grow cotton and earn money, too. We never used to grow conventional cotton because the chemicals are too expensive and they are hazardous to the health of the women, especially pregnant women, as well as their children. Today this has changed. In our group of women we plan the cultivation of the fields and assign the various tasks together. After the harvest we share the income. The money benefits our families, we use it to pay for clothes, school fees and medicine.”



Addresses of Swiss Retailer Selling Textiles Made from Organic Cotton

| | Coop www.coop.ch/naturaline | Migros www.migros.ch | Manor www.manor.ch | Switcher www.switcher.com |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Outerwear | LMCB | LCB | B | LMC |
| Underwear | LMCB | LMCB | | |
| Nightclothes | LMCB | CB | B | |
| Socks | LMCB | LM | LMCB | |
| Sports clothes | LM | | | LMC |
| Cotton wool products: | | | | |
| cosmetics / sanitary products | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Bedclothes | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Terrycloth/ waffle cloth | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Toys | | | | |
| Fair Trade Label Max Havelaar | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

Ladies **L**, Men **M**, Children **C**, Babies **B**

The products are labelled as of certified organic cultivation:
“organic cotton” or “Bio Cotton”

Note: This list is not complete and is based on the suppliers’ own declarations as well as investigation by Helvetas.
The criteria for organic cotton is the independent audit according to the EU regulation (EEC) 2092/91.

| Alkena www.alkena.ch | Helvetas www.helvetas.ch | WWF www.shop.wwf.ch | Hess Natur www.hess-natur.ch | Möbel Pfister www.moebelpfister.ch |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|--|
| LCB | LMCB | LMC | LMCB | |
| L | | L | LMCB | |
| LC | LM | L | LMCB | |
| | | L | LMCB | |
| LM | LMC | | LMC | |
| | ✓ | | | |
| | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| | ✓ | | | |

It pays to ask!

Organic cotton collections are also available at: H&M, Zara, Fidelio, Claro, Caritas Unica shops, Selana, Arco Verde, Levi's, Patagonia, Ruth Grüninger, Tarzan, Noir, American Apparel, Marc O'Polo, IDEO

www.organiccottondirectory.net

Further Information

Cotton:

www.fao.org

www.icac.org

www.wwf.ch

Organic cotton:

www.organiccotton.ch

www.pan-germany.org

www.organiccotton.fibl.org

www.organic-exchange.org

www.OrganicCottonEurope.net

www.remei.ch

Textiles from fair production and fair trade:

www.maxhavelaar.ch

www.fairtrade.net

www.swissfairtrade.ch

www.cleanclothes.ch

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