

Can organic cotton feed Africa?

A short guide to the issues



1 Can we have our cake and eat it?

Since Band Aid, Bob and Bono brought the food crisis in Ethiopia into our living rooms in 1984, images of emaciated women and children with distended abdomens have scarcely left our screens. Both the local political and international development agendas use the term 'food security' a lot.



The question on everyone's lips: can the world produce sufficient food to meet the needs of a growing population?

But what does food security even mean?

Food security is about much more than just whether sufficient quantities of food are being produced to feed a population. The World Health Organisation explains that food security depends on 3 factors:

- Food availability;
- Food use: do people have the knowledge to make the right nutritional choices?
- Food access: do people have the resources to acquire food that is good for them?

While the situation differs from one country to the next, Africa as a continent seems to be faring the worst in food security, and remains most in need of trade to develop.

This reality has created two new grey zones for the ethical consumer:

- Should we in the West be buying food at all from poor producers in developing countries?
- Should we be buying cotton from Africa, even if it is organic? Or should we encourage African farmers to grow food for themselves rather than cash crops?

This leaflet by **PAN UK** will answer those questions with a little help from the farmers we work with Benin, West Africa.

2 Sink your teeth into the issues – what's the problem with cotton?

Conventional cotton production in West Africa relies heavily on the use of expensive and hazardous pesticides – many of which now banned in Europe – and on synthetic fertiliser.

PAN UK's partners in Benin, Senegal and Ghana documented serious pesticide contamination of food crops and dangerous, sometimes fatal, misuse of empty pesticide containers to store food and drink among cotton and cowpea farming communities.

As well as being disastrous for health and the environment, conventional cotton does not earn farm families enough income to buy all their food needs, nor does it enable them to grow enough food.



In 2002-2003 in Senegal's Velingara region, a major cotton growing zone, 82% of households in Nemataba village viewed themselves as having severe difficulties in meeting daily food needs.

With rising prices for agrochemicals and low prices for their cotton (as subsidised cotton from China and the US flood the market), African smallholders are squeezed ever tighter in trying to make ends meet in an unfair and unpredictable world market.

3

Food for thought...

Buying food from communities who are constantly portrayed in the media as starving doesn't seem ethical, nor can buying organic cotton which cannot be eaten and is grown purely for export – on land that could be producing food.

However, our partners in Africa and the farmers they work with take a different view. After all, organic farming is *not* just about leaving out agrochemicals. It aims to build a farming system that is more in balance with nature and better able to meet human needs. Organic cotton farmers also grow a wide range of food crops, for household and local consumption. This is essential to the organic system and helps to reduce pest and disease attack on all their crops, and is achieved by growing a series of other food crops around the farm and rotating crop types in different years.



Farmers in Senegal for example, practice one of five different 'crop rotations' across their fields. A popular one is peanut in year 1, followed by cereals in years 2 and 3, then cotton in year 4, with the field left fallow in year 5, allowing the soil to rest.

The fact is while Africans experience the benefits of organic cotton production (debt-free farming, health and environment protected), the market for it exists in the West. Marketing some of their certified organic and fairly traded food crops through responsible food companies can help cotton families earn enough to 'plough back' into their farms, improving production and longer-term food security.

Exporting organic cotton helps poor rural communities to trade their way out of poverty.

4

Chew on this! - An introduction to the typical Beninese diet



Farmers in Djidja, Benin grow the following food crops as part of their organic cotton rotation system: maize; yam; cassava; cowpea; peanuts; cashew nuts; soya beans; and pigeonpea. Cashew, grown along field boundaries, is mainly for sale. The other crops can be for home use or for sale if farmers produce a surplus. Vegetables and spices are grown in 'kitchen' gardens.

Farmers don't own large numbers of cattle but some families own an ox or cow. They all rear poultry (almost always free range) and many keep goats, while one or two have branched out with ducks and rabbits.

Breakfast in Djidja is a porridge made from millet. For lunch, farmers may eat beans and *gari* (cassava flour 'dumpling') with a peanut galette (a type of fritter). Dinner can be *talibo* (fermented cassava paste) with a spicy tomato sauce, fresh vegetables or a sticky sauce made from okra.



5

De-bunking the myths: what organic cotton farmers in Benin have to say

Unfair assumptions: consumers in the UK do not themselves produce all that they need; instead they work in different ways to earn money to buy what they need. Mr Parfait Adjakossa, an organic cotton farmer, wonders why the same cannot be true of cotton farmers in Benin:

“ That question is not fair. It s a way to exclude us from international markets...I can t meet all my needs just by having a full granary. We grow crops to make a profit [to buy goods] for our own family’s well-being. ”

Selling organic cotton allows farmers to earn money to buy the things they cannot grow: an education for their children, tools for their field, medicines and a way out of poverty.

Quality is just as important as quantity: In conventional farming, it is the farmers themselves who are most at risk of pesticide poisoning from the food they grow. Organic cotton farmers will invariably grow organic food crops which are safe to eat.

Mrs Agbomadomale Vigue explained that “Our food staples are healthy and don’t represent a danger in terms of consumption. All my crops are organic due to the fact that I use the same land.”

Organic cotton farming improves the quality of food produced.



6 Hungry to know more and take action?

Action Points:

-  **Buy organic cotton!** From cosmetic pads to towels, t-shirts to wedding dresses, the UK has probably the largest range of organic cotton consumer goods in Europe. Plan your shopping on PAN UK's Wear Organic Directory www.wearorganic.org
- **Cook with sesame, cashew** and the less familiar hibiscus flowers and fonio grain. Recipes can be found on the FFB food crops leaflets www.pan-uk.org/food/fibre-food-beauty
- **Ask your retailer** to stock organic and fairly traded hibiscus and fonio products from African organic cotton farmers.
- Become a **PAN UK member**. Register your details at our web site www.pan-uk.org



Info Points:

Read more about the food crops grown by organic cotton farmers in Africa on PAN UK's Fibre, Food & Beauty web pages www.pan-uk.org/food/fibre-food-beauty

Find out more about the pesticide problem in Africa. **Download** 'The Chemical Trap: Stories from African fields' www.pan-uk.org/publications/other

Download 'My Sustainable T-shirt' and learn about the environmental, economic and social claims of different eco-labels. www.pan-uk.org/publications

Be inspired by the experiences of new and established fashion designers using organic cotton. **Download** 'Moral Fibre: a guide for students of fashion and textile design' www.pan-uk.org/publications/moral-fibre

See how the top UK supermarkets compare on pesticide issues. www.pan-uk.org/supermarkets



Fibre, Food & Beauty for Poverty Reduction is a joint project of PAN Germany, PAN UK, OBEPAB from Benin and Enda Pronat from Senegal. It aims to raise awareness about the many different food crops grown by organic cotton farmers in Africa and help them to find better marketing options for these, in local or export markets.

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<http://www.pan-uk/foodAfrica> AND <http://www.pan-germany.org>

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