Is cotton grown organically more financially rewarding for growers than growing cotton conventionally? Most researchers agree the profit margin is indeed greater since expensive pesticides are not needed and economically significant ‘premiums’ are usually paid for the cotton. However, to do organic agriculture well farmers need to be well trained and well organized. Further, the costs of organising certification internal control systems and the cost of certification itself must be added to the farm input costs of producing cotton organically.

Researchers, sector bodies, NGOs, and other stakeholders will give different costing scenarios depending on the criteria used for evaluation. And whilst there has been some research into cost analyses of different methods; evidence in terms of economic data is difficult to collect and even harder to work into comparative studies. Even more complicated is accounting for the indirect impacts and longer term social and environmental costs and benefits (for farming communities). Yet it’s these expenses that contribute significantly to longer term sustainable economic improvements. These ‘externalities’ are inevitably much more challenging to account for and thus address. (Comparative Analysis of organic and non-organic farming systems: A critical assessment of farm profitability. FAO, June 2009).

Much depends on social, geographical and temporal variations; whether the externalities are accounted for; and how reward is measured. Variations in growing conditions include:

- climate and weather patterns,
- farmer experience and management skills
- support available (financial, technical and other extension services)
- market conditions
- farmers’ degree of participation in the value chain
- government support, domestic and export policy
- the cost of water contamination, soil erosion and soil fertility
- health and safety (including acute and chronic illness)
- food availability
- debt and financial dependency, investment opportunities

Overall, evidence from various studies favours the argument that organic (over conventional) is more ‘profitable’ for the small scale farmer situated in a developing country- even if lower yields are reported - because of the lower cost of inputs and/or an organic ‘premium’ being paid. Research also shows that organic comes out the winner in less favourable growing conditions such as dry and drought-prone environments. In these cases, yields are usually higher when growing organically. Once you look into the cost-benefits a little further one begins to see why ‘organic’, especially for smallholder farmers in developing countries, is a better option. The indirect and longer term social and environmental benefits (for farming communities) of organic growing - such as food self sufficiency, income diversification and healthier populations, indicate that encouraging and building the market for organic makes much sense from a global sustainability perspective.
The future of farming: The currently predominant agricultural practices continue to cause environmental harm, which places a considerable economic burden on society, whereas sustainable farming practices are neither supported consequently, nor remunerated for the public goods they deliver (IFOAM).

Due to increasing scarcity of fossil fuels and fresh water, expanding population, and rising costs of farm inputs it is almost certain that within the next 5 to 10 years sustainable agricultural practices (i.e. using less energy, water, and agrichemicals) will provide more cost effective food and fiber. “We cannot afford anything else than becoming more sustainable in an environment with growing demand and shrinking resources”. Tobias Bandel, Soil & More

For organic cotton farming to continue to flourish and succeed both farming and commercial support is necessary. Priorities recognised include: access to organic ‘field’ knowledge and knowledge exchange, support for managing internal control systems, teaching and tools for building business capacity, and the opportunity for farmers to connect to stable and equitable value chains and rewarding markets.