EXPERT’S INSIGHT - CHINA

Ying (Martin) Ma, Managing Director of the REC, Solidaridad manages a program to improve the workplace conditions of Xinjiang cotton farmers. He is simultaneously seeking to remedy the environmental problems of pesticide application and the deep poverty of the farm workers...

“Three decades of economic reform has fundamentally changed China. China is now the world’s third biggest economy - this phenomenal rate of growth has brought with it many problems and stresses. The most visible of these are heavy pollution, a significant income gap, and poor working conditions in millions of factories and plantations. More that 150 million people live below the poverty line.

Xinjiang is the world’s most productive cotton growing region, but to achieve this farmers rely on intensive cultivation and high inputs of pesticides and fertilizers. In 2007, we started working with cotton cooperatives, promising support with planting techniques, market information, seed supply and microfinance. Despite these resources, farmers were unwilling to take the ‘risk’ of converting to organic, even when Solidaridad promised to buy their first harvest.

In 2008, we decided to work in partnership with the two big state cotton companies, Korla and Kuqa, hoping that they would take up the opportunity of converting some of their farmers to organic cotton. In the co-operation framework with these two companies, they are required to provide better conditions for workers, such as increasing winter heating, to pay workers a monthly wage from 200 yuan to 500 yuan, reaching a minimum wage level; and to give the more literate migrant workers 2 hours a day of leave, so they can provide education to the children. As an additional benefit, Solidaridad would provide some funding subsidies to the farm, provide technical advice on a regular basis, and be present during the peak period at the start of the project.

Luck was not on the side of the project - Korla was hit by storms which destroyed the harvest. However, we remains convinced that the hardworking and innovative Chinese farmers will benefit from our approach. In Xinjiang, cotton can even grow in the desert, so nothing is impossible."

Martin Ma, Managing Director of the REC, Solidaridad