A MANIFESTO FOR ORGANIC COTTON

Simon Ferrigno reveals what a ‘manifesto’ for the organic sector might look like

Governance: The formation of a fibre and farm lobbying organisation and trade group
To provide a voice for farm groups and those involved in fibre processing and trade that is now diluted by the interests and demands of others in the value chain, such as brands and retailers. Farmers need a pressure point to enable fair and frank negotiations and discussions. Currently, the voice of farmers is interpreted and mediated by third parties, who often have competing demands from other stakeholders. Farming represents a small portion of the total value of organic textiles, but without them, there is no market. Such an organisation would be an educator and address the lack of a ‘global policeman’. A global board would work with IFOAM, accreditation bodies, national governments, standards, promoters and funders. It would be an independent platform for farmers and their groups to build up a common voice and identity to deal with policy, trade, financing and regulation.

Guidelines for best trading and production practice
Cast iron guidelines would address concerns over integrity and sustainability of production that result from poor practices. It would provide a consistent set of rules or guidelines for growing organic cotton and address the needs of supporting services and institutions. International guidelines would cover sustainability – economic, social and environmental – of all the production stages up to, but not including, the spinning mill. We need ‘Liverpool Rules’ for organic cotton production, and contracts. A mechanism should be developed that sets and enforces trading rules and best practice and which makes it very difficult for an organisation not to follow these rules.

TRANSPARENT PRICING MECHANISMS
There needs to be new price mechanisms and the public quotation of lint prices. Although this happens for Fairtrade cotton with its minimum prices, this model is too rigid and cumbersome for the larger organic cotton market. A mechanism would provide a clear signal of offered, production costs and actual prices averaged over time, with a baseline price shown based on current production costs and costs of trade. This would include exchange and transport rates as well as the additional sustainability costs such as certification, extension and training, environmental and social investments etc. Transparent pricing is a first step to bringing stability to organic cotton by giving an indication of where the price at the bottom becomes insufficient to sustain the supply chain for the long term.

Price differentials for organic and Fairtrade need to remain
Expecting or trying to push organic and FT prices to the level of conventional is wrong. We live in a world of resource constraints, and prices need to reflect this. It is quite likely that long-term conventional averages will remain higher again in the next decade, and sustainable cotton needs to reflect a difference. Normal commodity mechanisms do not reflect the social and environmental costs of production.

FRAUD IN THE MARKET-PLACE
The organic cotton sector needs its own accreditation for certification of agents and recognised qualifications and career paths. In addition, there should be common rules for random inspections and also, perhaps, a monitoring body to oversee performance.

GLOBAL RESEARCH AND FUNDING
Big brands have access to, and influence over, big banks. They could use this influence to promote the development of a lending facility for organic cotton, to eventually reduce dependence on or need for donor funding. In addition, a trade and marketing planning structure could bring together the farm – fibre platform, with funders, financiers and industry/market bodies to forecast the market and manage governance.

Farm level research funding
Research should include seeds and breeding, production systems and methods, managing soils, investigating real social and environmental impacts of organic cotton farming such as GHG reduction and CO2 retention in soils.

These are some thoughts and ideas that have evolved through my work, field visits and discussions with farmers and traders, and many have since been raised again and again, especially in the Organic Cotton Community Platform, to which I am grateful for helping me express such ideas.

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