Maxime Ouoba is committed to growing organic cotton. He explains, “It has no adverse effects on [the] health of the producer. Organic farming also allows me to sustain the fertility of my land. I chose to produce organic cotton because this production method is right for me.”

Mr. Ouoba is a farmer in the Eastern Region of Burkina Faso. He began growing cotton when he heard about a program promoting organic cotton. This program, led by the Swiss NGO, Helvetas, began in 2004.

At that time, 72 producers produced about 12 tonnes of seed cotton. By 2008, almost 7000 farmers were producing 2200 tonnes of seed cotton. This rapid expansion encouraged producers and project staff.

But today, producers and project staff are worried about the future of organic cotton. What concerns them is the jump in plantings of genetically modified or GM cotton. By 2009, genes from GM crops had been found in organic cotton. At that time, only 10% of conventional cotton farmers were growing GM varieties. But with the massive spread of GM cotton in 2010, almost 90% of conventional producers now grow GM cotton.

Organic cotton can be contaminated in many ways. Organic cotton seed can be mixed with GM or conventional seed before planting. Cross-pollination is possible between neighbouring fields of GM or conventional and organic cotton. Contamination can occur through mixing (whether unintentional or intentional) during storage, transport or processing.

Many supporters of organic cotton believe that the program in Burkina Faso is threatened. Pierre works for the organic project. He laments, “Today, it is virtually impossible to produce 100% organic cotton. What we want is to reduce the level of contamination.”

Another staff member adds, “Only two years ago, our mission was to recruit more and more farmers to produce organic cotton. Today, our priority is to retain those who have invested in recent years.”

By 2010, the number of organic cotton producers had dropped to around 2,400. One explanation for this drop could be the stringent measures that farmers are required to take to minimize contamination. George Giébré is responsible for the Helvetas organic cotton program. He explains, “On advice of the National Institute for Environment and Agricultural Research, we asked producers to observe a safe distance of at least 100 metres between the organic cotton fields and GM cotton fields.” But it is difficult for farmers to comply due to the size and layout of their plots.
A second way to prevent contamination is to ban the cultivation of organic cotton and GM cotton on the same farm. But the effect of this restriction is to exclude women from growing cotton. Mr. Giébré explains: “Before, in the same farm, men would grow conventional cotton and the women would grow organic cotton in the field next door. But with GMOs, this coexistence is not possible. If there is already a field of GM cotton on a farm, it is no longer possible to grow organic cotton. Thus, many women have been excluded.”

Forced to abandon organic cotton, Moustapha, a farmer in his forties, views his situation with a dose of fatalism. He says, “I was told that I could not grow organic cotton because my field is surrounded by fields of GM cotton. If they say you cannot produce, and you insist on harvesting, they downgrade your cotton.” Cotton downgraded from organic to conventional receives a much lower price.

There is fear that the production of organic cotton will come to a standstill in Burkina Faso in the coming years. Georges Giébré acknowledges the pressure on farmers: “The threats posed by the introduction of GM cotton are real and taken with the utmost seriousness. But this does not undermine the viability of the program.”

Some farmers suggest creating separate zones for organic cotton and GM cotton. This proposition would need state support. At the moment, there are three major cotton production areas in Burkina Faso. Organic cotton is grown in the eastern zone.

While waiting for a solution, the only thing that program staff can do is raise awareness. Pierre says, “We encourage our producers to talk to their neighbours before the start of the season to see who plans to produce what and where. Then they can negotiate with GM cotton farmers to plant on another side of their land.” But even Pierre is not sure if this is a sustainable solution.