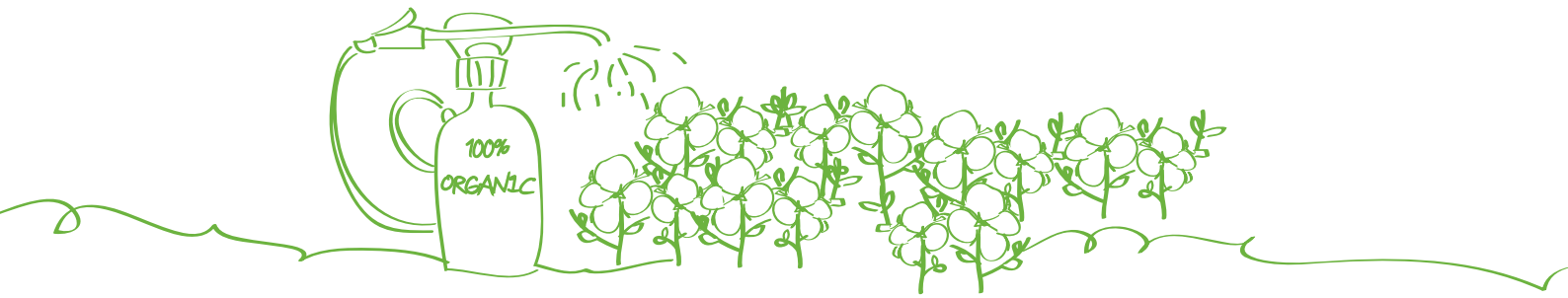


Organic in Action

OBEPAB, Benin:
Farmers contributing to technology that
improves yields



The Organisation Béninoise pour la Promotion de l'Agriculture Biologique (OBEPAB) is a civil society organization that promotes organic farming in Benin, West Africa. As one of the pioneers of organic cotton production in Africa, OBEPAB was established in 1996 under the scientific leadership of Professor Vodouhe. In the beginning OBEPAB enjoyed a fruitful partnership with PAN-UK (Pesticide Action Network-UK). During that time, OBEPAB entered into a sustainable development agreement with the Netherlands and three additional developing countries (Benin being one of them). During the last five years, OBEPAB has flourished without the need for as much donor assistance and is proud to be independently initiating its own technical innovations and achieving success.

OBEPAB's approach is to put people at the centre, via participatory approaches which value local knowledge, and build the capacity of farmer groups for self-help. For example participation in our Farmer Field Schools often leads to farmers improving the lint quality of their cotton.

vision for human health and environment

OBEPAB's number one motivation has been to reduce the heavy chemical use common in cotton farming in Benin, a country that earns about 80 percent of its export income from cotton. The Government policy is still geared towards conventional cotton; supporting the import of millions of litres of synthetic pesticides each season to Benin. The side-effect of this reliance on synthetic chemicals has been dramatic and severe, particularly during the 1990s and into the early 2000s. Many farmers, their families, and whole communities have suffered from intoxication and even death due to pesticides used in cotton, mainly endosulfan the organochlorine that remained a recommended insecticide to the industry in Benin till 2008 (year of it banning). Among a skeptical national scientific community, OBEPAB had to demonstrate that producing cotton without these harmful pesticides is a viable option.



PHOTOS: (Top) OBEPAB KPI exercise in Kandi. (Bottom) Farmer Vodouhe in cotton field, OBEPAB.



PHOTOS: (Top) OBEPAB farmers with their harvest. (Bottom) A happy OBEPAB farmer enjoying his harvest.



PHOTO: OBEPAB farmers harvesting in Kandi.

Technical Innovation

OBEPAB uses a participatory technology development approach combining traditional farming knowledge with modern scientific thinking. OBEPAB focus on identifying and promoting farmers' innovations, collaborating with scientists, and enabling innovations to be shared with fellow farmers.

For example, farmers have led on the development of natural agriproducts such as palm oil cake, guano fertilizers, and the successful adoption of 'enviro spray', a food spray to promote the growth of populations of natural enemies of cotton pests is now one of the latest biological pest management techniques around today – and farmers were at the center of its uptake. This technique was first developed by the Australian cotton researcher Robert Mensah and has been adapted locally with alternative local ingredients commonly available in organic cotton farmers' villages in Benin.

The thousands of OBEPAB farmers are particularly proud that most of their farm inputs are derived from local resources. This aspect of their farming is also a source of motivation behind the increasing number of women getting involved in organic cotton production. The key to success is based on systematic training at all levels (training of trainers, trainers training farmers, and farmers training farmers). The farmer field school (FFS) approach has proved a successful framework for strengthening the farmers internal control systems (ICS) – essential for organic certification - and has had spillover effects on the whole cotton sector in Benin in terms of improving the efficiency of farm practices and logistics.

Consistent yield improvement

The success of OBEPAB's model is visible in the improved yields (seed cotton produced per hectare of land). During the 2011-12 season, 640 metric tonnes (mt) of seed cotton was harvested on 1,100 ha of land, an average yield of 582 kg per ha. During the same season, the average yield of conventional cotton was around 800 kg per ha. But it appears that organic cotton is proving more adaptive to the changing climate conditions than conventional cotton is, and the yield gap between organic and conventional is closing. Over the last five seasons, the average yield of OBEPABs organic cotton has steadily increased by 105 percent, as shown in figure 1 below.

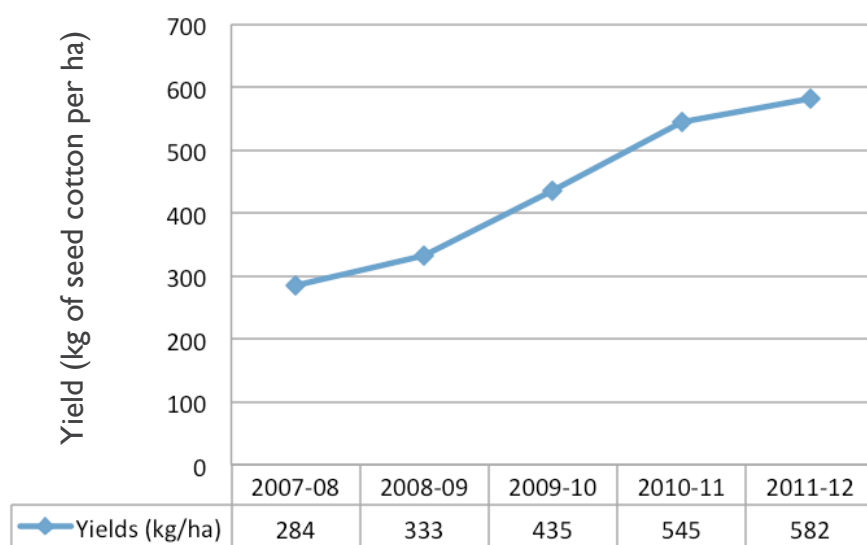


Figure 1: Increase in organic cotton average yield (kg seed cotton/ha), OBEPAB 2007-2012

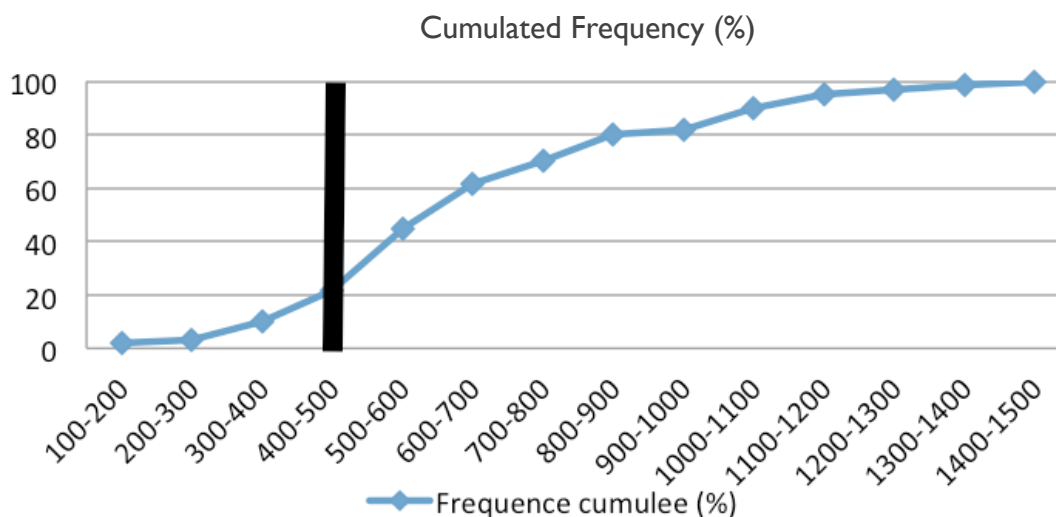


Figure 2: Cumulated frequency distribution of yields (Season 2011-2012)

The distribution of the yield achievement of farmers during the season 2011-2012 is shown in figure 2. This distribution in figure 2 curve shows that 80 percent of farmers have yields above the average of 500 kg and only 20 percent of farmers are below the 500 kg per ha average. The yields during the 2010-11 season range from 125 kg per ha to 1,470 kg per ha. From this, we can conclude that the majority of farmers are successfully following good organic cotton production practices and achieving higher yields as a result.



PHOTO: (Top) OBEPAB farming families (Bottom) Farmer Sion Ngoby and his wife.

Marketing strategies and business partnerships

Despite the technical success of OBEPAB's model, the business and marketing side still needs more investment and improvement. OBEPAB is in partnership with a French company that procures around 20 percent of OBEPABs production. But the project now needs to build its clientele for the other 80 percent and achieve better business security for its many farmers. In the main, OBEPABs – unreserved - certified organic and Fairtrade cotton has been sold to a variety of buyers informally. These informal, and as a result uncertain, arrangements prevents OBEPAB implementing a good investment plan and more permanently building in socio-economic capital, development and infrastructure, for their community of growers.

To increase, and make more visible, the benefits of organic and Fairtrade cotton to farmers and their communities, OBEPAB is seeking the right business partner(s) to take them to the next level of success.

For more information visit OBEPAB <http://www.obepab.bj/>

About OBEPAB

The “Organisation Béninoise pour la Promotion de l’Agriculture Biologique” (OBEPAB) was founded in 1995 in order to promote organic agriculture in Benin. OBEPAB’s focus is on cotton production where the health and environmental hazards of agricultural production are highest. Since 1996, OBEPAB has experimented with organic cotton production with groups of farmers. OBEPAB also runs an information and documentation centre on pesticides and their alternatives, it organizes workshops on pest and pesticide management, and it inventories the prevalence of pesticide poisoning in Benin.

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Designed by Evonne Tan

Textile Exchange inspires and equips people to accelerate sustainable practices in the textile value chain. We focus on minimizing the harmful impacts and maximizing the positive effects of the global textile industry. Our signature program focuses on organic cotton value chains; improving lives for farmers, stimulating markets, and supporting best practice.

Website: farmhub.textileexchange.org/

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