



Textile Exchange Organic Cotton Round Table

Hong Kong 3rd October 2012

We were very pleased to have such a great turn out for the Round Table meeting in Hong Kong a couple of weeks back (if you could not make the meeting or wish to refresh your memory you can see more about this here: <http://farmhub.textileexchange.org/learning-zone/round-table-on-organic-cotton/meeting-in-hong-kong>)

NOTES FROM THE SEED DISCUSSION

The Textile Exchange Call to Action raised the issue of seed security for organic cotton agriculture, particularly in countries where GMO cotton has been introduced. In preparation for the Round Table, we spoke to a range of stakeholders on the subject of seed security and during the meeting we dedicated a great deal of time to the subject. Here is a quick summary based on our insights and highlights - concerning the challenges, potential solutions, and the role of the Round Table in addressing seed security for organic cotton growing.

CHALLENGES WE DISCUSSED

1. SEED SUPPLY

Seed supply or seed security refers to organic cotton farmer's access to appropriate and good quality seed for organic production.

INDIA In India seed production on farms is going down. Most cotton seed is hybridized and most hybrid seed is genetically modified (Bt). Seed supply is dominated by the private sector with only a small number of 'independents' working within the seed supply system i.e. agricultural institutions supplying seed directly to producers, autonomous producer groups tending to their own seed needs, and civil society projects (e.g. Oxfam) participating in seed multiplication projects. Alongside seed shortages and perceived poor quality of seed, the lack of a premium price for organic cotton is generally de-incentivising farmers and eroding investment.

AFRICA In Africa, agricultural research institutes dominate the seed development process and there is very little opportunity for farmer participation. Seed companies from the private sector are also working with research institutions – in particular on the introduction of GMO seed technology. Of big concern is the limited supply of foundation seeds, and the length of time it takes to improve seed quality through breeding and research.

Farmers' involvement in the seed system becomes greater when it comes to the multiplication and distribution of cotton seed. At this stage, there are two main issues:

- First, the storage and transportation conditions of cotton seed after ginning are very poor and part of the seed tends to rot before reaching farmers. This seed then have a very low germination power – leading to farmers increasing the quantity of seed to plant per unit of area.
- Second, with the introduction, or with the process of introducing GMO cotton, in some countries, seed contamination and impurity become an issue for organic cotton farmers (who are not allowed to use GMO and GMO contaminated seed according to organic standards).

CHINA Seed quality is said to be eroding (including issues with fibre length) and research takes a long time (5-7 years). Funding is a major barrier to improvement. Access to non-GMO seed is also a growing concern. There is a strong perception in China that GMO means no pests.

2. NON-GMO SEED – A NEED FOR POLICY AND PROTECTION

If organic cotton farming is to continue in countries where GMO has been introduced (or about to be introduced) there needs to be a way to protect crops from contamination, this will most likely involve policy frameworks, codes of conduct, or perhaps zoning for non-GMO seed production where realistic.

It would appear that GMO seed is now an established 'threat' to the livelihoods of organic cotton growers in many countries where it has been introduced – such as India and Burkina Faso.

Organic cotton growers in India have been struggling with the introduction of GMO seed for some years, but it is relatively new to Burkina (introduced in 2008). Reports suggest that organic cotton farmers in Burkina Faso are already experiencing difficulty in supply of non-GMO cotton seed and these difficulties will keep increasing without a proactive strategy put in place.

According to Sidi Moctar, MOBIOM, Mali, GMO seed is already crossing boundaries and increasingly there is potential for mixing within ginning and other processing channels. Plus, of course, many other African countries are on the brink of introducing GMO cotton, or have pro-GMO organisations lobbying hard for its introduction. At the same time there are organisations lobbying against GMO.

Heinrich Schultz, Organimark, explained how GMO technology was introduced to South Africa in 2002. It is now in its second generation. There are issues with resistance and increased spraying of pesticides. But possibly as big a concern is the dependency farmers have on seed supply.

Tong Yeung, Mecilla Group, also reported the high risk of contamination in organic growing areas in China.

SOLUTIONS WE CAME UP WITH

There were some good ideas floated during the meeting that can be picked up and developed in more detail by the RT seed task force (more about this soon). For now here is the list in short form:

Field Trials and Multiplication

- Participatory breeding
- Long term solutions
- Seed security at multiple levels (including grass roots)
- Can bring pilots to scale
- Build Producer group capacity and autonomy

Organic Zones

- Need to recognise threats to sustainability
- Creating zones – investment by public private partnerships
- Refuge areas (Investment in GM / Same investment in refuge / buffer zones)

Company collaboration

- Bayer has solutions that fit organic production - capabilities available to produce non-GMO varieties

Brands promoting demand / investment

- Some brands support or even have an objective of no GMO
- Partnering seed projects

Government power

- Lobbying / Advocacy – board for speciality cotton – organic
- Handloom Sector second largest after agriculture in India
- Policy / Active campaign
- Open access / public domain

OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH THE ROUND TABLE

The general consensus is that Textile Exchange can play a role in connecting and co-ordinating the work of the Round Table. The Next Steps for the Round Table will be decided upon by the members of the 'seed task force'. For starters, there was feedback from the attendees that there needs to be better integration of the organic sector and stakeholders – and that while advocacy is there, it is not happening well enough or fast enough to influence decision-making on the ground. Perhaps through the work of the Round Table this might be improved.