

FairTrade cotton in Mali

It was 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Oumar had been talking for more than one hour in a meeting with the cotton farmers. The meeting had been organised by the NGO he worked for. Oumar was explaining how the farmers could get a Fairtrade certification. Then one farmer raised his hand. A tall, thin man looked at him: "But... what is Fairtrade?... Is it really fair?"

The meeting happened years ago. Oumar never forgot the farmer's question.

Oumar started to work with the N.G.O. because he wanted to make a difference. His NGO works in the Sikasso region, south of Mali, where he comes from.

Some years ago, the cotton farmers were desperate. The price of cotton was going down. The farmers could not get enough money for their cotton, so they could not buy enough food for their families. The children did not go to school, because their parents could not pay the school fees. People fell ill but the farmers had no money to buy medicine. The quantity and quality of their cotton was good, but the conditions were unfair.

The NGO helped some of the farmers to start growing Fairtrade organic cotton. Organic cotton gets a better price in the market. And being fair trade means the farmers work together in a cooperative to get a better share of the profits. They can have more money to buy food, medicine and clothes for their families. They can pay the fees to send their children to school. Some of the profit can then be used to help their communities.

Oumar watched things improve. He remembers when the water pumps broke down in one of the villages. They had no money to repair them so people had to walk long distances to get clean water. There was no maternity clinic in the villages. Many women died in childbirth. There was no place where the children could receive vaccinations.

In the cooperatives, the farmers shared the workload. They picked the cotton together, making the work lighter and quicker. They also shared ideas, talked about what needed to be done. They felt part of a community.

Together, the farmers bought carts and bicycles. They built barns to securely store the cotton they harvested. They built health clinics and wells where they could get fresh clean water. They built schools for their children. But they also built rooms where adults could learn to read and write. Many farmers were illiterate.

They could not read the contracts. They found it difficult to pass on the information about products and production processes.

The pesticides that are used to grow cotton conventionally are very strong. The farmers used to feel sick, they suffered from headaches and stomach aches because of the pesticides. But organic cotton does not use pesticides, improving the health of the farmers.

More women are becoming organic cotton farmers too. Women farmers contribute to the family income. They can start their own little businesses. Their children are getting educated. When the children grow, they can have a choice if they want to continue working in the cotton fields or do something else.

Oumar knows life is still hard. There are lots of problems, including the change in climate. If there is little rain, there is less cotton. And they cannot control the international forces that affect the price of the cotton. But working together means people can find solutions together. If they have a better share of the profits, they can decide where to invest, what to do. They can have a say in their future. "And that is fairer" – he thinks.

New words for this article

| | |
|---------------|--------------------------------------|
| school fees | cost of school |
| Fair trade | trade that pays producers correctly |
| unfair | unjust |
| to break down | stop working |
| childbirth | giving birth to a baby |
| barn | large place to keep farm produce |
| well | hole in the ground to get water from |
| illiterate | no ability to read or write |
| pesticide | chemical to kill insects |

Comprehension Questions

1. Buyers didn't pay enough for the cotton
2. Farmers didn't produce enough cotton
3. Fairtrade farmers work in cooperatives
4. People had to walk long distances to get the pumps repaired
5. Women died because they had no vaccinations

| | |
|---|-------|
| 5 | False |
| 4 | False |
| 3 | True |
| 2 | False |
| 1 | True |

Comprehension questions

Answers