

Organic Cotton Chain in Brazil

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Abstract

Over 15 years ago, the first organic cotton production started in Brazil. Since 1992, new organic textile supply chains have been built, which, despite their still small production, have already branched out beyond the country's borders. This study aims to identify the major players that exert influence to develop market chains offering Brazilian organic cotton.

In 2006, 361 family farmers cultivated 291 hectares of organic/agroecological² cotton in Brazil, the average size of the planted area being 0.8 hectare per grower. The northeastern region concentrates almost 95% (304) of farmers growing cotton organically, corresponding to 92.8% of the total planted area (270 ha). In the southern region, the state of Paraná counted 16 growers, who cultivated 21 ha.

In 2006, overall production amounted to 55.6 tons of seed cotton, or 20 tons of fiber, of which 36% was harvested in northeastern Ceara state, and 35.3% in Paraná.

A number of actors participate in the different segments—raw material production, industrial processing (spinning/weaving), and manufacturing, along with buyers and the organizations that provide technical and organizational support to groups of family farmers.

The main external buyers of Brazilian organic cotton are small-sized French companies, which, having started their activities under the fair-trade banner, later became aware of the need to work with organic cotton. The first such firm was Veja Fair Trade, which purchases the organic raw material from growers' associations supported by ESPLAR in Ceara in order to manufacture sneakers using natural rubber from the Amazon. The second is Tudo Bom?, a street-wear manufacturer supported by the NGO Onda Solidária, from the state of Rio de Janeiro, which organizes sewing cooperatives and currently buys its organic raw material from producers located in southern Paraná. More recently, surf-wear manufacturer Em Vão has started buying organic cotton grown by family farmers from the northeastern state of Rio Grande do Norte, who are supported by Diaconia, an NGO also actively engaged in organizing organic growers from the northeastern state of Pernambuco.

Three projects stand out among Brazilian buyers: Justa Trama, Natural Fashion, and Coexis. Justa Trama gathers cotton agroecologically grown in Ceara, seeds from the Amazon and Rondonia states, spinning and weaving from São Paulo, and sowing cooperatives from southern states. Natural Fashion is the brand under which a coalition of several small cooperatives of artisans from Paraíba (Coopnatural) manufactures clothing primarily made with naturally colored organic cotton. Coexis is a project by YD Confecções dedicated to producing pieces made with organic cotton and tinted with natural dyes.

The continued development of organic practices in cotton production can be fostered by NGO networks conducting projects with family farmers, like the one spearheaded by ESPLAR in Brazil's northeastern region. Their primary aim should be to disseminate technical information through regional meetings where experience is interchanged among farmers, researchers, and entrepreneurs involved in organic cotton textile production.

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² Agroecological cotton refers to noncertified cotton. Though meeting all requirements for organic certification, growers cannot afford it.