

In traceability we trust

→ BY JENNI KOUTNI

“That organic cotton T-shirt may not be as organic as you think” – this was the headline from a New York Times article published in February 2022 that didn’t just send shockwaves through the cotton industry. Reporting on forged certificates and fraudulent pricing in cultivation regions in India, it stated that the “organic” cotton sold each year far exceeds the amount that is actually grown. But the article was criticised for overgeneralising as, in Central India in particular, both organic and conventional cotton cultivation are up against huge challenges. Changeable weather conditions and pest infestations are the result of climate change and intensive conventional cultivation. Due to seasonal fluctuations, natural fibres are facing stronger price competition from synthetic fibres than ever before. And the Indian government is also fighting an ongoing battle against systematic fraud in the certification system for ecological cotton cultivation. Cotton standard GOTS discovered evidence of this back in autumn 2021, when it found around 20,000 tonnes of cotton that were wrongly certified as organic. As the only way to distinguish organic cotton from genetically modified, so-called **Bt cotton**, is through time-consuming genetic tests, this is being seen as a particularly dramatic breach of trust. Too few companies are prosecuted on these grounds and there seems to be little enthusiasm for improvement. So, according to the conclusion of the New York Times article, the only way for a brand to ensure that its organic cotton is actually organic is to invest in farmers directly through credible organisations before a single seed is even sown. One such organisation is textile trading company Remei. ▶▶

BT COTTON

Bt stands for **Bacillus thuringiensis**, a species of bacteria that lives in soil and is used as an organic pest control method. Gene-manipulated cotton contains the isolated active ingredient Bt protein. In other words, the plant itself produces the active ingredient that is toxic to pests. But the problem is that pests can develop resistance to it. And larger populations of so-called secondary pests such as aphids can also emerge.



PHOTO: BÖTHLING FOR REMEI

REMEI



ORGANIC

Remei harvests most of its organic cotton in Tanzania. Thanks to its locations in Africa and India, the company can delay cultivation to suit the seasons.

Pioneering work

Remei was set up in 1983 by organic cotton pioneer Patrick Hohmann. Back in 1991, he established the organic farming company of the same name in India, followed by a subsidiary in Tanzania three years later. Basically, in a nutshell, the Swiss textile company provides its trading partners with guaranteed stocks of organic cotton from reliable sources and ensures that the finished textiles are traceable. The fact that they can count major companies like Coop Switzerland, Greenpeace Media, Gerry Weber, Grüne Erde and Wöhrle among their customers is testament to the success of the concept, which puts them head and shoulders above the other players on the market. A particularly close relationship with the farmers on the ground, participatory development, comprehensible certification systems and transparent textile traceability have been on their agenda for 30 years now.

So why doesn't everyone do that? Because it requires massive investment and perseverance. Organic yields can be lower than conventional ones and the development efforts and monitoring systems for sustainable cultivation are also costly. Their willingness to make long-term investments and take responsibility for the raw material is not the only thing that sets Remei apart from much of the global market. It is also their ability to know when enough is enough. According to the New York Times, the market for organic cotton production in India grew by 48%, despite the pandemic. But not for Remei: back in 2012, the textile company anticipated the growing challenges and since then, has been producing smaller quantities of organic cotton in India.

Solutions to the problem

So for Remei and its Indian and Tanzanian subsidiaries, the key is not only to work on the organic cotton itself, but also to constantly improve

the entire system and make it more efficient and appealing for farmers. To help the cotton farmers cultivate their fields without any chemical or synthetic pesticides whatsoever, Remei supports the research and production of GMO-free seeds. A sophisticated monitoring system has been set up on site to ensure that no contamination makes its way into the seeds or supply chain. "We are noticing that Indian farmers tend to struggle a lot during the first two years when they switch from using the huge amounts of chemicals required in conventional practices to controlled organic cotton farming," says Remei. This is why, since the late 90s, they have been giving registered farmers a purchase guarantee for organic cotton to offer them planning security and help them make the transition to ecological farming. Another important project is the promotion of other profitable crops like moringa, wheatgrass or garlic in a bid to reduce reliance on the cotton harvest.

Full transparency

For organic cotton to survive, a trusting relationship with farmers and partners throughout the production chain is key. At the end of the day, a supply chain with systematic checks on raw materials, yarns and finished textiles is the foundation for the traceability of the end products. Supply chain information for every finished cotton textile can be traced back to its origin via a QR code using the my-trace by Remei technology – from all stages of its journey including cotton cultivation and ginning, spinning and manufacturing of the fabric and assembly-line production. Or in Remei's words: from fibre to fashion. ■

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