Social Impacts and Labor Conditions on the Cotton Farm

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Background

- Sustainable agriculture respects workers’ rights and needs, respects the environment, provides a fair income to the farmer, and supports and enhances rural communities.

- Social issues relate to both working conditions – labor standards – and socio-economic development. The issues associated with cotton are the same as those found throughout agriculture. The relative importance of each particular issue and means of improving conditions will vary from region to region and community to community.

- Global standards for labor rights exist: the challenge is how to effect the change needed.

- Organic and Fair Trade are effective in achieving their goals, but there is room for other supply chain players to be engaged in efforts to promote better practices.
Decent labor conditions must be built on a foundation of basic human rights.

The right to development is the measure of the respect of all other human rights. That should be our aim: a situation in which all individuals are enabled to maximize their potential, and to contribute to the evolution of society as a whole.

-- Kofi Annan, Former United Nations Secretary-General

Labor issues have been identified and programs exist to facilitate basic human rights in a labor context.

International Labour Organisation

Core Labour Standards
- Effective Abolition of Child Labour
- Elimination of Discrimination in Employment and Occupation
- Elimination of All Forms of Forced or Compulsory Labour
- Freedom of Association and the Effective Recognition of the Right to Collective Bargaining

Decent Work is work that:
- Is productive and safe work
- Ensures respect of core labour standards
- Provides an adequate income
- Offers social protection
- Incl. social dialogue, trade union freedom, collective bargaining & participation

Ethical Trading Initiative

Base Code
- Employment is freely chosen
- Freedom of Association and the right to collective bargaining
- are respected
- Working conditions are safe and hygienic
- Child labour shall not be used
- Living wages are paid
- Working hours are not excessive
- No discrimination is practiced
- Regular employment is provided
- No harsh or inhumane treatment is allowed

National Laws
Social justice is one of the three pillars of sustainability.

How do we address labor and broader social issues on the cotton farm in all regions of the world?
At a minimum labor laws should be enforced. Entitling workers to a collective voice is empowering.

Proper working conditions can lead to additional social benefits while under protected workers can suffer additional ills.
Improved conditions on the cotton farm can lead to improved livelihoods while poor labor protections can lead to lack of basic human rights.

Smallholders may benefit from a collective voice when negotiating inputs and cotton prices.
Increased income allows growers to send children to school (if available), amongst other benefits. Limited income can be a downward spiral for a smallholder.

Through expansion of wealth and a collective voice, grower communities will benefit. High interest rates and/or crop failure can contribute to indebtedness.
Different approaches must be applied to achieve different objectives.

Formal Employee/Employer Relationship

- Improved Livelihood
- Decent Work
- Limited Labor Protections
- e.g., FOA, Labor Standards
- e.g., Child, Bonded, Forced Labor
- Lack of Human Rights

Smallholder

- Improved Livelihood
- Increased Income
- e.g., Market Access
- Access
- Increased Income
- Lower Income
- Indebtedness, Lack of Human Rights

This all has to be supported within a complex supply chain.

Note: Region C’s government establishes quotas of domestic cotton consumption of spinners/mills

Note: Region D does not have spinners or mills
Peace can only last where human rights are respected, where the people are fed, and where individuals and nations are free.

HH The Dalai Lama