

COTTON AT THE SOURCE.

A MEDIA TOOLKIT

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1.0

INTRODUCTION

Narratives about cotton have become narrow and simplistic. Cotton Diaries and A Growing Culture have united to create this media toolkit. Its aim is to equip journalists and storytellers, especially those covering sustainability in fashion, textiles, and apparel sectors, with the knowledge and tools to tell better stories about cotton.

We hope this resource will support journalists to tell stories that centre farmers, recognise their agency, expertise, and unique contexts, and address problems and solutions in cotton through more holistic narratives.

WHY FOCUS ON COTTON?

Cotton has indelibly shaped human history: It's central to stories of ancient civilisation, as well as slavery, colonisation, and early industrialisation. Even today, the sector is key to understanding sustainability and equity in ways that often go unrecognised: There are around 75 countries and 24 million cotton growers* churning out 25 million tonnes of cotton fibre on 30 million hectares. The industry plays a powerful role in the global economy – built on the labour of millions of small-scale farmers of the [Global Majority](#). To properly understand the fashion and textile industry, and the social and environmental issues around it, we have to grapple with cotton and the people who grow it.

*ICAC Cotton Data Book, 2022, report behind paywall.

WHY FOCUS ON STORYTELLING ABOUT COTTON?

There's an issue of underreporting on cotton, but there's perhaps a larger issue of sensationalism, misleading framing, and misinformation. Whether it's a viral story about vast bodies of water drying up due to "thirsty" crops (that fails to consider the context of local variations in water use), or a fast fashion brand praised for its most sustainable denim collection ever (that has no mention of farmer equity), we can agree there's more to the story of cotton and sustainability in fashion than what's portrayed.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THESE STORIES?

In short:

- The farmer voice is missing
- The context and local reality is missing (including local solutions)
- The cotton sectors' challenges are approached in a narrow, siloed way

WHAT IS IN THIS COTTON TOOLKIT?

You will find recommendations on why and how to reframe cotton stories ([Shifting Cotton Narratives](#)); concise, credible information on cotton's interconnected social and environmental impacts alongside story ideas and key takeaways ([Cotton in the Landscape](#)); condensed versions of original reported stories commissioned by our team, from farmer and community-led cotton-growing collectives in Benin, Brazil, and India to inspire your own reporting ([Stories From the Ground](#)); and additional resources. We've written the toolkit in bite-sized sections so you can read it in one sitting or come back to it again and again for fresh inspiration and insight.

IF YOU'RE SHORT ON TIME:

We know journalists are resource-strapped and have many priorities when it comes to reporting and storytelling. If you're short on time, we recommend that you focus your time on [Cotton's Broken Narratives](#), [Reframing Cotton](#), [Stories From the Ground](#), and the story ideas and takeaways in each thematic section.

SUPPORT FOR STORYTELLERS

As you work on your stories, we are available to support you with:

- Setting up introductions with any of our sources, including the cotton farming communities (from the three featured projects under [Stories From the Ground](#))
- Connecting you with cotton and sustainability specialists
- Providing you with additional resources to dive deeper into the topics covered in this toolkit

We're happy to support and invite you to reach out to us at:
josh@agrowingculture.org
marzia@cottondiaries.com

2.0

SHIFTING COTTON NARRATIVES: A NEW FRAMEWORK



2.1

COTTON'S BROKEN NARRATIVES

The relationship between cotton and sustainability is one of the most covered topics in the fashion industry. And yet, as you'll see in the following pages, these stories often aim to amplify well-worn scandals or to shock the conscience of Global Minority consumers with little mention of on-the-ground realities and solutions of the growers who cultivate the crop.

There is no doubt that cotton has massive social and environmental impacts, but fully understanding these issues requires connecting them back to farms and fields. By covering cotton in its context and engaging more fully in its landscape — the history, economics, climate, and terrain — storytellers have an opportunity to move beyond cotton's broken narratives and create something new and revelatory about one of the most important industries in the world.

The following pages show just a few examples of problems with some of the prevailing narratives around cotton, along with alternative ways to question or frame these issues.

CURRENT NARRATIVE

“COTTON IS UNSUSTAINABLE AND WORSE THAN OTHER FIBRES.”

(e.g. polyester, synthetics, viscose)

“Cotton is irredeemably ‘bad’ because it is rife with child and slave labor, and other forms of exploitation.”

“Cotton uses more water, land, and toxic pesticides, and has a higher carbon impact, than other fibres.”

MAIN PROBLEMS WITH FRAME

- Ignores the historical, cultural, and economic reasons why farmers grow cotton and the varied reasons farmers may use inputs like irrigated water and pesticides.
- Glosses over the huge variations in resource consumption and impact: water, pesticide usage and greenhouse gas emissions vary based on locality and what growing practices were used.
- Often puts the blame for systemic problems on cotton instead of discussing and addressing issues of power, inequality, and colonial legacies.
- Deprioritises the welfare and perspectives of farmers themselves.
- Makes irrelevant and unfair comparisons between cotton — an agricultural product — and a petrochemical or industrial product created in a closed system, like polyester.

QUESTIONS TO ASK INSTEAD

- What do farmers think about natural resource challenges and cotton’s social impacts in their own communities?
- What are the different ways that cotton is produced, and why do they have different social and environmental impacts?
- Who is being interviewed, and who has (or lacks) access to shape this conversation?

CURRENT NARRATIVE

“SUSTAINABLE COTTON IS BAD, TOO.”

“Consumers are being duped about ‘sustainable’ cotton. Even organic cotton uses too much land, water, and pesticides. Some third-party sustainable certifications are falsified.”

MAIN PROBLEMS WITH FRAME

- Sustainability, as defined by brands or NGOs, may overlook how farming communities define sustainability — and where they’re at in their own journey.
- Ignores the environmental, historical, and sociopolitical reasons why moving to more sustainable practices is difficult or takes time.
- Pursues consumer purity and stokes outrage. This can centre consumer “harm” over the welfare and experiences of producers.

QUESTIONS TO ASK INSTEAD

- Who is most impacted when sustainability initiatives fall short?
- Exactly how is “sustainable” cotton defined? What does this definition include, and what’s missing? Is farmer pay/agency included? Health and safety of farmers? Gender equity?
- Have farmers and communities been part of defining sustainability?
- Do farmers have the resources (e.g. land access and capital) to meet sustainability goals?

CURRENT NARRATIVE

“LESS OR NO VIRGIN COTTON AND MORE OF OTHER FIBRES IS THE ANSWER.”

“We should stop growing cotton and start growing more food and/or more ‘sustainable’ fibres, such as ‘next-generation’ materials, or move to recycled cotton and synthetics like polyester.”

MAIN PROBLEMS WITH FRAME

- Ignores the cultural, historical and economic reasons why farmers grow cotton (and why it’s central to local, regional, and global economies).
- Side-steps the issue of farmer equity. Switching to a different crop won’t necessarily get rid of systemic issues that farmers face (e.g. unfair pay and debt).
- Does not acknowledge that cotton can in fact be grown sustainably. More specifically, it can be grown in ways that enhance ecosystems and benefit farmers and their communities, which is not necessarily true of other synthetic fibres.
- Overlooks the fact that cotton is grown alongside food crops on many farms, so the “less of this, more of that” ignores how agricultural systems are arranged.

QUESTIONS TO ASK INSTEAD

- Are farmers and producers part of conversations around sustainability and the potential of transitioning away from cotton?
- Are we considering the ways in which growing and selling cotton allows communities to access economic means they wouldn’t be able to otherwise?
- Does substituting cotton for other crops/materials automatically make supply chains more equitable for workers?
- Are we looking at cotton in a silo, or are we considering that it is often integrated into holistic agricultural systems, including food crops?

CURRENT NARRATIVE

“SUSTAINABLE BRANDS AND CERTIFICATIONS ARE THE ONLY ANSWER.”

“Brands and retailers setting targets and sourcing more certified ‘sustainable’ cotton will solve cotton’s environmental problems and reach emission reduction targets.”

MAIN PROBLEMS WITH FRAME

- Often defines sustainability without including people, especially farmers. Separates social from environmental.
- Assumes that brands and retailers are appropriate parties to define sustainability in a sector where most of the work and value is created on farms and in factories.
- In popular sustainable initiatives, farmers frequently lack decision-making power and agency over how, or which, initiatives are pursued by brands.

QUESTIONS TO ASK INSTEAD

- Are farmers a part of actually defining and evaluating certification standards?
- What solutions are farmers putting forward?
- What solutions involve sharing and redistributing wealth and power?
- Who should be included in interviews about what sustainability looks like?

2.2

REFRAMING COTTON: HOLISTIC NARRATIVES

A holistic way to understand and cover cotton considers the entire landscape and places farmers and communities as central in a nexus of land, water, energy, trade, money, and power.

Improved reporting and more holistic narratives have the power to inform and influence solutions that:

- **Understand that the health of living systems is deeply interwoven with social, economic, and political systems**
- **Enable local communities to shape their own definition of sustainability in line with their environmental and social needs**
- **Restore decision-making power and autonomy to all stakeholders, especially small-scale producers and workers**
- **Build inclusive supply webs that balance power and retain wealth within communities**

So how do we incorporate this approach into cotton storytelling? As we seek to cover cotton, we can keep the following questions in mind:

VOICE

- How can we centre the voices and perspectives of farmers, including first-hand, eyewitness accounts?
- How do local communities understand and define sustainability for themselves?

HISTORY

- How can we factor in cotton's complex past and the political, economic and cultural forces shaping the industry today?

IDENTITY

- How can we better understand the interplay of factors that shape the lives of communities involved in the cotton industry, and how their identities interact with broader economic and cultural forces?
- How do we centre communities marginalised on the basis of their caste, class, religion, gender, or other factors?

CULTURE

- How do farmers relate to each other, and to their environments?
- How is this similar to, or different from, other cultures?
- How do farmers' worldviews and the value systems of their communities influence their relationship with farming?

ECONOMICS

- How do demand, prices, policies, corporate control, taxes, wages, subsidies, and access to finance, influence farmers' livelihoods and practices?

CLIMATE

- What are the strengths and challenges of the local climate and ecosystem (considering factors like rainfall, soil type, insects, and wildlife)? How are these unique? How are they similar to other communities?
- How have the climate and ecosystem shifted over time? What has been the impact? What's the future climate? How might it change?
- Are communities thinking about this? Are they prepared for or protected from potential disruptions?

LAND

- How can we take into account land access/ownership, considering whether farmers own or rent land?
- Has the government recognised their rights to land? Do they have land titles? If so, are they held individually or communally? How secure is their access? What threats do they face?

LABOUR

- Do farmers work the land themselves? With their families? Do they hire workers? How is labour valued?

GOVERNANCE

- Who makes decisions on behalf of a farming community? Internally? Externally? Are certain decisions made by individuals? Are others made communally?
- How do communities themselves think about governance? How is this similar or different from those on the outside?

POWER

- How do financial institutions, national and international governing bodies, corporations, development agencies, and fashion brands shape the cotton sector?
- To what extent are farmers able to shape the systems that directly impact their lives and livelihoods? How are cotton communities organising to build their power?

AGRICULTURE

- Are farmers only growing cotton? What other crops are they growing? For what purpose (e.g. food, cash)?
- How do they think about and value cotton in relation to other crops? Why? What agricultural system are they growing within? Why? Have they always been growing in this system? Or did they shift? If so, when and why?

[LEARN MORE](#)

3.0

COTTON IN THE LANDSCAPE



3.1

WHO GROWS COTTON?

STORY IDEAS & TAKEAWAYS

- The vast majority of cotton producers are small-scale farmers of the Global Majority.
- Global Majority communities don't have a single story. Their experiences are as diverse as they are vast.
- How can we shed light on the challenges faced by rural communities — debt, migration, trafficking — without reducing their experiences to mere labels?
- How can we prioritise showcasing their resilience, dignity, and agency? Additionally, how can we explore the broader global implications of these issues, considering their ties to politics, economics, and governance?

WHO GROW COTTON TODAY?

The Eurocentric picture of farming is often painted as one of big machinery, vast acres of monocultures, and white men in overalls. This portrait is far from typical. The vast majority of the world's food and agricultural producers grow in incredibly diverse communities, cultivating a range of crops, on small rain-fed plots of land, typically five hectares or less.

Today, cotton is the most-grown non-food crop in the world. In 2022, an estimated 23.9 million farmers grew cotton globally, and some sources report that it sustains closer to 100 million families. Global statistics on number of farmers vary from year to year and may or may not account for various worker statuses, like seasonal or informal workers, leading to discrepancies and uncertainties. Reporters might struggle to find a singular, precise figure due to factors such as part-time farming, the discounting of certain groups (like women), familial inclusion, and individual considerations among farmers.

About 90 percent of the world's farms are managed and owned by families, predominantly comprising small-scale farmers living in [Majority World](#) regions including India, China, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and African countries, who may identify as [peasants](#). In 2021, India alone was estimated to have over ten million cotton farmers, China upwards of eight million, and all cotton-growing nations of Africa over three million*. Compare these figures with the United States (8,000 cotton farmers) and Australia (under 2,000 cotton farmers).

TOP 10 COTTON-PRODUCING NATIONS (by hectares) (ICAC, 2022)

INDIA

UNITED STATES

CHINA

PAKISTAN

BRAZIL

UZBEKISTAN

MALI

BURKINA FASO

TANZANIA

BENIN

MAJORITY/ MINORITY WORLD

“Minority World”, or “Global Minority”, refers to countries often labelled as “developed”. This emphasises that while these countries have accumulated enough power through slavery, imperialism and colonialism to influence the rest of the world, in reality, they make up a minority of the world's population.

“Majority World”, or the “Global Majority”, refers to the countries often labelled as “developing” or more recently, “Global South”, who in fact make up the majority of the world's population. The term highlights that the people belonging to these countries and communities make up the majority of the world's population, its diverse cultures, and knowledge systems.

PEASANT

While the word “peasant” was first weaponised as a derogatory term by Britain's wealthy class, today's largest social movements such as La Vía Campesina (representing hundreds of millions of peasants) are reclaiming it. Historically, peasants operated in a commons/subsistence model, where communities shared access to forests, lakes, and pastures to tend their animals and grow their crops. With the boom of industrialisation in the 1800s, shared/common lands were privatised in Britain and across Europe through the Enclosure Movement, and later across European colonies. Many who lived in this subsistence lifestyle resisted the push to move to cities for wage work capitalism, because they could provide for themselves and had relative control over their lives. Today, global movements like La Vía Campesina embrace and redefine “peasant” as someone intimately connected to the land. They unite farmers, landless workers, Indigenous peoples, pastoralists, fisherfolk, and migrant farmworkers in advocating for food sovereignty, reclaiming control over natural resources, and restoring pride in their deep relationship with the land.

*Calculations based on ICAC Cotton Data Book, 2022, report behind paywall.

3.2

GLOBAL ECONOMIES, LOCAL REALITIES

STORY IDEAS & TAKEAWAYS

- Consider that cotton farmers have different aspirations. While some may be seeking full integration into the global marketplace, others prioritise goals like food sovereignty. Seek out the stories of how earning and controlling their own income has allowed women (and men) to break free of preconceived societal expectations.
- Consider how governments and corporations influence cotton farmers. What institutions are national governments influenced by? Whose interests are those institutions serving?
- Look at how farming communities define productivity and success. What do these mean in terms of food security, incomes, and community wellbeing?



GLOBAL ECONOMIES, LOCAL REALITIES

Cotton plays a critical role in the global economy, and in the livelihoods of communities in Global Majority nations. While polyester has recently claimed the title of the world's most produced fibre, a massive and growing amount of cotton is still produced every year: Some 25 million tonnes of fibre, enough to make 18 t-shirts for every person on the planet. Cotton is a commodity that flows into a well organised global infrastructure that is a legacy of colonialism and subject to global trade agreements and policies influencing its production, distribution, and consumption.

Globally, cotton is often cultivated as a cash crop, meaning it is grown primarily for sale rather than for subsistence. This provides farmers with a lump sum of cash, which can be beneficial for addressing financial needs. Millions of families, largely located in the Majority World, generate cash income from cotton farming. This is in contrast to growing food crops that might be consumed by the farmer's family or community (or also sold in markets).

As you'll see in the [Stories From the Ground](#), farmers use cash income from cotton in a variety of ways. Some use it to build houses, pay for their children to get married, or invest in education, their farm, or other businesses. Cash income can be particularly important for women, allowing them financial independence and the means to navigate patriarchal norms in their societies. This isn't to say that cotton farming leads to prosperity for all, or even most, farmers.

Not all farmers are aiming to work full-time growing cotton for export. Each farming community defines productivity and success differently. Most small-scale farmers often prioritise their subsistence and food security alongside growing cotton. This is highlighted in the [Benin story](#) when farmer Nicaise says, "What's the point of being a farmer if you can't meet the food needs of your family? It's a matter of honour".

Switching to exclusively growing cotton for export can come with great risk, as it can create dependence on commodity markets that farmers have little control over. Look beyond the figures around "yields". Low yields may reflect not inefficiency, but instead, the priorities of farmers. Perhaps they prioritise growing food crops to be self-sufficient, and only produce cotton according to the extent of their cash needs. Keep in mind that ideas of productivity and success for small-scale farmers might look very different than what we expect in the Minority World.

[LEARN MORE](#)

3.3

HOW IS COTTON PRODUCED TODAY?

STORY IDEAS & TAKEAWAYS

- Ask how farmers feel about the current industrial and commercial practices. Farmers may use chemical pesticides or genetically modified (GM) seeds. What are the larger forces shaping their choices?
- Agricultural technologies are often painted as silver-bullet solutions. Who is shaping research, development, and policy agendas around these technologies? Why do farmers access them, and at what cost?
- What were the power dynamics that allowed Green Revolution technologies and GM seeds to spread so quickly?
- How might the adoption of these technologies impact or displace local and cultural knowledge systems?



HOW IS COTTON PRODUCED TODAY?

Today, many nations have shifted towards mechanisation, chemical inputs, and the use of hybrid and [genetically modified \(GM\)](#) seeds in cotton production. This set of practices is often referred to as “industrial farming”. While industrial farming is a product of the post-World War II period, its influence spread in the 1960s and '70s with what’s known as [the Green Revolution](#), and with the development and spread of GM seeds in the 1990s. Through the Green Revolution, commercial “high-yielding” seeds, irrigation, mechanisation, and synthetic fertilisers and pesticides were often promoted or even imposed on farmers and governments in Global Majority countries. This “revolution” drove higher yields for many in the short term, but left a legacy of many well documented devastating social and ecological impacts, and a highly consolidated market. Today, industrial farming systems are marked by large-scale capital-intensive monocultural operations.

[LEARN MORE](#)

GENETICALLY MODIFIED (GM) COTTON

Genetically Modified (GM) crops are those whose DNA has been altered using genetic engineering techniques. They are created to display certain desired characteristics, generally to improve resistance against pests and disease. GM cotton emerged in the early 1990s (pest-resistant features came first, then herbicide-resistant features) and was marketed as a “miracle product”. The sector was quickly dominated by global giants, like Monsanto (now Bayer-Monsanto), Syngenta (now ChemChina-Syngenta), and BASF, with the big six companies globally controlling around [75 percent](#) of the seed (and pesticides) market. Economic concentration and privatisation has increased costs, debt, and dependence overall.

THE GREEN REVOLUTION

Started in the mid-twentieth century and funded by the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, this initiative promised to “modernise” agriculture through the introduction of “high-yielding” varieties of crops to the Majority World. However, this shift required the adoption of monocultures, the use of chemical pesticides and fertilisers, and for farmers to buy seeds, dramatically increasing costs and risks. Farmers often had to take out loans to participate in the new system, trapping them in debt when crops failed, as they often do. The Green Revolution was also marked by a period of private sector takeover of a previously public and university-dominated sector, with a narrow focus on short-term profit.

SEED BREEDING, SOURCING & SUPPLYING

The way in which farmers access seeds is a key part of any local cotton story. When writing stories about cotton, consider:

- **What seeds do farmers have access to, and where do they come from? Are they bred to have “improved” characteristics, like pest resistance or longer fibres? Are they vulnerable to pests or diseases? Do they have some resistance, or do they require additional inputs to protect the crop? Who and what determines seed price and availability?**
- **Can farmers access seeds that work in low-input or sustainable systems (organic, Fairtrade, traditional, or native cotton)? Are they productive? Farmers who lack access to organic seed may not be able to grow organically. A seed bred for high-input systems (which use chemical fertilisers and pesticides) but grown organically (without these inputs) are likely to yield less, due to their vulnerability to pests and disease.**
- **Are farmers struggling to access alternative seed varieties? If so, why? What routes do they have to seek change, such as local politics, farmers unions or other bodies? How well do these bodies work?**

Modern cotton production, even when done by small-scale farmers in remote areas and communities, is part of a global, organised industry. The local supply of seeds often showcases issues of power and control. It is unusual for farmers to have much, or any, control over seed, and they are becoming more and more distanced from decisions regarding seed development and supply. In some countries, researchers and breeders may consult them, but more often than not, other parties (e.g. ginners, spinners, cotton traders/merchants) have much more decision-making power.

In cotton production, most farmers buy “certified” seeds — selected and bred seeds that have been tried and tested, typically by governments or private companies, claiming to ensure reliable germination and quality. Seed supply can be delivered via fully private, fully public, or hybrid systems, involving gins, government agencies, cotton traders, or private entities. After the previous harvest is ginned, seeds are collected, reproduced, and then supplied to farmers, along with other inputs such as pesticides and fertilisers, and sometimes a contract with fixed prices for the next harvest. In some cases, such as for GM seeds, “new” seeds may be introduced, either through organised research and public services, or by seed companies.

The point of the global seed system is to provide a consistent fibre that will be valued by ginners, and especially spinners, to deliver the right strength, length and colour that the fashion and textiles industry want. Seed choice is rarely about helping farmers much beyond ensuring their harvest will meet market demand.

The widespread presence of American Upland cotton, comprising more than 90 percent of today's cotton seed production, strongly indicates the expansion of colonialism and the development of specialised Western industrial cotton machines tailored specifically for this variety. Since World War II, farming systems in the Majority World have been hit by waves of financial crises, the Green Revolution and Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s, and forced privatisation and a reduction in public research and farmer support in the 1990s, opening the door for private seed suppliers to consolidate control over the market. As a result, there are currently few farmer centered seed models that are supported by facilities for research, breeding, quality control, and multiplication of seeds. This matters because small-scale farmers are highly vulnerable to market changes and have limited access to capital; they need solutions that are reliable, stable, and meet their needs, as well as those of other stakeholders.

[LEARN MORE](#)



MILHO BRANCO

MILHO DOXO

MILHO IRÁ

M-DENTE BORRO

M-DENTE

M-ALHO

Algodão
EM CONSÓRCIOS
Agroecológicos

3.4

INTERCONNECTED IMPACTS

STORY IDEAS & TAKEAWAYS

- **What intricate connections exist between social, economic and environmental factors in cotton farming?**
- **How does the flow of impacts manifest across various dimensions of farming cotton? And what influence do they have in the broader landscape?**

INTERCONNECTED IMPACTS

It is a mistake to view the impacts of cotton in isolation. Cotton's impacts are part of a vast, interconnected global and local landscape where socio-economic and environmental issues are intertwined. By presenting better narratives, we have the opportunity to create more informed decisions, influencing solutions that bridge the gap between social justice and environmental stewardship. As we cover key impacts and issues on cotton, we invite reporters and storytellers to challenge the prevalent siloed perspectives of cotton's sustainability.

This section covers some key cotton impacts and issues, but it's not an exhaustive list. Each region, context, and landscape brings its own unique challenges and impacts.

LAND

Begin by understanding the concept of land rights and access. Is this access shared equally? Investigate the historical roots of land disparities. How do gender, race, class, and caste factor in?

When we think of cotton farmers, we think of landowners. Yet, most farming around the world is done by people who are renting, sharecropping, or hired for wages to work the land. This means that farmers, especially those with little or no land, are often in precarious, vulnerable conditions. The ownership over land can also take various forms, from enclosed properties that are privately owned, to commons that are collectively stewarded, or parcels that are allocated through institutional or traditional methods.

Land is the main way that people (and nations) build wealth and autonomy, both by using the natural resources from the land and generating capital from its increasing value. Landlessness among farmers is one of the main drivers of dependency and poverty globally. Working to own and protect lands — whether individually or communally — is a priority for many small-scale farmers and peasants, as you'll learn in the [Stories From the Ground](#).

Land rights and laws (like inheritance) differ from place-to-place. For example, land might be redistributed or broken into smaller parcels through institutional mechanisms by governments, allocated through customary laws, or guided by local leaders like tribal chiefs or elders. Communities may hold land rights communally, as “commons”, which is typically not recognised legally by institutions.

Land disparities are often taken at face value, but have their roots in historical processes like colonialism and the Enclosure Movement. More recently, these disparities have are being exacerbated by transnational land grabs, wherein corporations and/or governments acquire indigenous or common lands to extract profits — through agriculture, mining, or other activities — which are often sent outside the community.

Intersectional factors like race, gender, caste, and class shape the dynamics of how land is accessed and distributed.

LAND DISPARITY

INDIA

Women comprise over 42 percent of the agricultural labour force in the country, but they own less than 2 percent of its farmland. While over 71 percent of the Dalit community (a historically and presently oppressed caste) work as agricultural labourers, they own a mere 9 percent of agricultural land.

UNITED STATES

In 1920, Black Americans owned over 14 percent of US farmland. Today, white people own 98 percent, while Black people account for just 1.4 percent.

BRAZIL

An estimated 1 percent of the population owns 50 percent of all land in Brazil. Nearly five million families are landless.

AFRICA

Most land grabs by transnational corporations target Africa. Between 2010 and 2020 in sub-Saharan Africa, 7.3 million hectares were leased or acquired by private investors and corporations.

DEBT & DEPENDENCE

- Consider what conditions perpetuate farmer debt (e.g. the lack of access to credit can force them to take loans from opportunistic moneylenders). Growing just one crop is risky, and a season's failure or unfair prices can have dire consequences.
- Examine the stressors that push farmers to measures like suicide (e.g. as debt and loss in land ownership). Explore intersectional factors and how they disproportionately impact oppressed communities (e.g. Dalits in India).
- Costs of all farming inputs have spiked in recent years due to multiple crises. Why is farming so vulnerable to these shocks?

Many farmers who switched to industrial farming see initial financial gains through higher yields, only to be trapped by consequences: rising costs, soil degradation, and insect resistance, followed by declining yields. If yields decline, farmers may be forced to make a larger investment on inputs (e.g. seeds, fertiliser, pesticides, and herbicides) to try to recuperate, but any shocks (e.g. drought, extreme heat, flooding, pests) to this system can lead to a vicious cycle of debt. Increasing cotton production can come at the expense of food crops for household and domestic consumption, jeopardising food security and local food sovereignty.

Debt bondage, a form of modern slavery, is highly prevalent in cotton-producing countries. It constitutes farmers and/or their children working, essentially for free, to pay off debt. Informal mechanisms like coercion and violence can drive farmers into debt. For example, traders and moneylenders in India often target vulnerable populations (such as those in oppressed castes), offering loans with exorbitant interest rates. When communities can't pay back those loans, they may be forced to pick or pollinate cotton or send their children to do the same. Debt is often inherited and carried forward through multiple generations.

Farmer suicides are perhaps the most visible and disturbing symptom of the pressures that farmers are under almost everywhere. Farmers are dying by suicide at shockingly high rates in many countries, including wealthy nations like the US and Australia. But rates are highest in India, where in 2020, there were an average of nearly 30 farmer suicides every day. In just the state of Maharashtra, India, in the first half of 2023 — an average of 7 suicides took place per day. When reporting on farmer suicides, consider overlapping contributing factors, including drought and extreme weather, increasing chemical and seed costs, and decreasing control farmers have over their lives and livelihoods. Race, caste, religion, gender, and other intersectional factors must also be considered. For example, in India, suicides are largely happening within the Dalit community, a historically marginalised caste that represents the primary victim of debt.

LABOUR

- **Why is (im)migrant labour prevalent in agricultural economies, and what is the impact of migration on wages, prices, living conditions, and the rights or power of migrants on and off the farm?**
- **Differentiate between exploitative forms of child labour and situations where families are forced into this circumstance due to economic hardships.**
- **Shed light on untold stories of women in cotton. They hold crucial yet unrecognised roles in cotton farming, face gender-based violence, wage disparities, and other issues. What are the barriers that prevent women from being formally recognised as farmers, how does this impact their access to land and subsidies? Seek out stories of women and movements challenging these barriers and striving for equality.**

Millions of people earn their living in connection to cotton — more when you factor in textile and garment manufacturing. Cotton's value and its labor-intensive nature (especially picking) has fuelled the demand for labour for centuries. Today, many of the people who grow the world's cotton (and other cash crops) are vulnerable populations like seasonal (im)migrants, children, or people ensnared in various forms of forced labour and debt bondage.

Seasonal (im)migration is very common in many cotton-producing countries, including India and Turkey, with migrants travelling both within and across borders to plant and pick cotton. Migrant workers in cotton farming often face tough living conditions and the risk of exploitation due to lack of legal protection. Migration can also be gendered. Women who migrate frequently end up with lower-paying, more gruelling work. Women and children are also more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and trafficking.

Child labour in cotton is closely linked to migration as well, with preteens and teenagers conscripted to work alongside their parents or sent to harvest cotton, for example, to help pay the family's debts. This labour can take several forms. In certain contexts, it can be highly exploitative and harmful. In others, children work alongside their parents after school as a form of learning, or because their family cannot afford to hire more labour. Stories tend to demonise all who utilise child labour. What's more, many governments have strict laws against child labour, but there's a need to critically analyse why it persists and why families may participate. Without changing the economic conditions impoverishing farming communities, strict enforcement of child labour laws could drive farmers further into debt. For example, moneylenders prey on impoverished communities that need to meet household expenses. When those communities can't pay

lenders back, they may feel compelled to send their children to carry out work in fields or factories. Corporations can also be complicit through their supply chains. In India, for example, as many as 150,000 children under 14 were found to be working on cotton seed farms, mostly to cross-pollinate cotton plants to create hybrid seeds typically for large multinational seed companies and their subsidiaries.

Gender discrimination can be difficult to track, making storytelling about this issue more challenging and important. Although data varies, women comprise at least 40 percent of the global cotton workforce (with some data showing women making up the majority of cotton labour globally). Even though women are strongly involved in small-scale cotton cultivation, this role is seldom fully acknowledged or rewarded. Women often work for free as part of unpaid family labour, and when they do receive wages, they are often lower than those earned by men. They face barriers like violence and harassment, lower financial literacy, and the double burden of childcare and domestic duties. In India, for example, most women are not formally recognised as farmers. As a result, they can't legally own or inherit land, and are often denied access to farming subsidies. Also, consider how child labour disproportionately impacts women and girls: One in four victims of modern slavery are children, and over 71 percent of the victims are women and girls.

HEALTH

- **Examine the persistence of highly hazardous pesticides in Global Majority nations (often banned in the rest of the world). Why are they so widespread, and what are their environmental and health impacts?**

Pesticide-related illness, poisoning, and even death is shockingly common among small-scale farmers who use hazardous pesticides but lack protective equipment and healthcare access. A recent study found that 44 percent of all farmworkers and pesticide applicators (an estimated 385 million people globally) experience unintentional acute pesticide poisoning at least once a year.

What's more, many highly-hazardous pesticides restricted elsewhere are still widely used in Global Majority nations, especially across Africa and India and have a massive impact on health. This issue is still extremely underreported. Consider how pesticide regulations, labelling (or lack of), and access to protective equipment, training, education, and healthcare play a role in this issue.

ECOLOGY

- Investigate how climate change disproportionately affects cotton farmers. Challenge the one-size-fits-all narrative of cotton's resource consumption and environmental impact. How are some communities successfully mitigating and reversing cotton's climate impact?
- Water is also about power and politics. Cotton is not inherently water-thirsty. Understanding availability, access, competing uses, and management is key. How are farmers building water security based on local knowledge and context? How do they deal with conflict or resource management with other sectors?
- Address the threats to biodiversity caused by industrial farming practices (such as monocultures and synthetic inputs). How can farming systems prevent biodiversity loss?

The cotton sector has an undeniably large environmental impact. Cotton is grown on around 2 percent* of the world's agricultural cropland and, according to 2021 data, it makes up over 8 percent of all the world's insecticide and around 4 percent of all pesticide use. It is responsible for between 1-6 percent of global water withdrawals (water drawn from ground or surface water sources). And there's far more to the story behind these statistics than is often portrayed.

Climate change heavily impacts farmers, as their livelihoods are deeply vulnerable to shifts in seasons, water availability, and weather patterns. The emissions resulting from cotton farming vary widely based on factors such as the use of fertilisers and pesticides, mechanisation, irrigation practices, and energy sources. Emissions in cotton production can range from 0.15-4 tonnes of CO2 per hectare — a nearly 30-fold difference. Sustainable farming practices like agroecological cotton farming, with reduced input dependency, low-till ploughing, and cover cropping, can mitigate climate impact and even be climate beneficial. See the [Stories From the Ground](#) feature to explore projects that utilise many of these climate-mitigating practices.

*From latest 2021 calculations from ICAC. Sources: [FAOSTAT](#); [Data Structure, Concepts and Definitions - common to FAOSTAT and CountrySTAT framework](#); [ICAC](#). Cropland is land used for the cultivation of crops, both temporary (annuals) and permanent (perennials), and may include areas periodically left fallow or used as temporary pasture.

Water usage has been a widely covered concern in cotton reporting. While the focus often centres on excessive water use, there are many other factors to consider and stories to tell. For example, climate change is dramatically altering rainfall patterns and droughts, impacting farmers and their livelihoods. Farmers see climate change firsthand in ways reporters shouldn't ignore. What's more, many small-scale farmers face severe water scarcity. Without irrigation systems, reliant on unpredictable rainfall, they struggle to secure successful crops, vulnerable to droughts and untimely monsoons.

In the [Brazil](#) story, farmer Joana Dark describes her new drip irrigation system as a “miracle” that's helped her overcome a years-long drought in her semi-arid region. Joana's water consumption has increased as a result, but would we still paint Joana's cotton as water-thirsty? The story from [India](#) shows how community-led watershed management can enhance water security, preserve soil health, reduce runoff, and enable farmers to plant multiple crops throughout the year. In [Benin](#), a collective effort repaired a village well pump, ensuring water access for the community.

Biodiversity is often under threat in industrial cotton farming systems due to monoculture cultivation, land use changes needed to grow on an industrial scale, and pesticides use. These practices harm beneficial insects and aquatic life and have catastrophic effects on ecosystems. And yet, as you'll read in the [Stories From the Ground](#), farmers can actually protect and increase biodiversity, and many of these practices are integrated into the small-scale farm. Most small-scale farmers practice multi-cropping, growing food and plants alongside cotton. The organic and agroecological methods explored in the Stories From the Ground can attract beneficial insects and naturally repel pests. Explore stories around biodiversity through their relationship to farmers' ability to nourish their families, as well as ensure the long-term health of their lands.

[LEARN MORE](#)

3.5

LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT SOLUTIONS

STORY IDEAS & TAKEAWAYS

- Investigate the role farmers play in shaping sustainability programmes (or their absence).
- When reporting on sustainability, consider farmer equity. Are farmers fairly compensated and supported? Who benefits in these efforts and to what degree: farmers, certification bodies, brands, consumers? Is the wealth generated retained within farming communities?
- Delve into the structural changes needed to support a broader transformation in the cotton industry. How can farmers have a more influential role in shaping the sustainability initiatives that directly impact them? How can we ensure that the value generated is more fairly distributed among rights-holders? How can we develop more flexible and context-aware approaches to sustainability in the cotton industry?
- Seek out how community-centred sustainability models can inform best practices.



LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT SOLUTIONS

The problem with the way some cotton sustainability stories are framed is that they paint a picture as if all cotton is grown in an extractive way, or that the farmer or the plant is to blame. There are huge variations in resource consumption, which are shaped by history, power, money, and access to resources. What's more, conversations about sustainability are often separated from conversations about equity and justice, and communities are often portrayed as at odds with the environment. The fashion industry's tendency towards the endless and constant production of new trends is also at odds with natural cycles, as Earth's resources can't regenerate at the current pace of consumption.

Popular narratives surrounding the cotton industry frequently centre the strides made by major apparel brands in their pursuit of sustainability. These stories typically revolve around brands setting their own sustainability goals or participating in certifications and programmes like Better Cotton, Fair Trade, Cotton Made in Africa (CMiA), and organic. These initiatives aim to encourage farmers to adopt specific practices, with the promise of market access and additional profits, all while ostensibly improving environmental impacts and farmer well-being. However, as we delve into this complex landscape, it's important to acknowledge that these efforts, while reducing impacts and demonstrating improvements in some instances, also come with their share of inherent limitations.

The agency of farmers in many sustainability initiatives is rarely discussed, and often leaves farmers with little influence or voice in shaping sustainability programmes or decisions (when compared to large brands and corporate players). Sometimes, initiatives prioritise surveillance and monitoring of farming communities, rather than understanding and addressing their rights and needs. In the [Stories From the Ground](#) section – we've highlighted a few alternative examples that showcase the potential of community-led models and farmer-led cooperatives, where farmers are placed at the centre.

Certification schemes require farmers to show they have met certain standards and to keep records and documents demonstrating compliance. However, the standard may be shaped by people sitting far away from fields, and the verification done over a fly-in visit and only by reviewing paperwork. Farmers generally need support and training to meet the standard, but even more, they need to own it and understand the principles, which is hard if they aren't part of shaping the standard and the production system. Standards should ideally be developed in a process involving farmers, based on lived realities on-farm.

Funding in sustainability schemes significantly influences agricultural practices, warranting thorough scrutiny. A vital concern is how much support reaches farmers. Questions persist about whether farmers receive extra assistance for implementing schemes, and whether buyers, such as brands, are connected at all to the farmers producing their cotton. There is a risk funds may fail to reach the intended beneficiaries, perpetuating a system where sustainability becomes profitable only for those far removed from the farm. Additionally, the imposition of auditing, labelling fees, and additional costs on farmers can make these efforts less beneficial for those at the grassroots level. These systems can also be structured to prioritise “conscious-consumer” status and consumer purity over tangible benefits for producers and their communities.

One-size-fits-all solutions overlook the context-specific challenges in transitioning to more sustainable farming systems. Fibre- and cotton-specific programmes often fall into this trap, viewing fibre and food crops (a crucial link from a farmers’ livelihood and food security perspective) as separate problems. This can result in solutions that fail to consider the vital interconnections between land, crops, biodiversity, cultural knowledge, and farmers’ and farmworkers’ rights.

[**LEARN MORE**](#)

CO-OPTATION

Co-optation refers to the hyper-focus on specific techniques without embracing the holistic ecosystem-based approach crucial for true sustainability. When companies and organisations co-opt terms like “regenerative” in fashion and agriculture, they often dilute the original meaning. This can mislead consumers and practitioners, creating confusion about what truly constitutes “regenerative” practices. As a result, genuine efforts towards sustainable fashion and agriculture might get overshadowed or undermined by profit-driven, unsustainable approaches.

3.6

HOW COTTON'S PAST INFORMS THE PRESENT

STORY IDEAS & TAKEAWAYS

- Challenge the Eurocentric framing of cotton's history and narratives.
- What did cotton production look like pre-industrialisation? Which regions dominated cotton, and what caused their decline?
- Cotton has undergone a massive shift from localised, diverse cotton farming to the monoculture-driven, global industry we see today. How has this impacted traditional cotton farming practices and communities?
- Consider how cotton's history shaped the present distribution of labour, production, and manufacturing in the industry. How has cotton production shaped global economic disparities?
- Use stories to explore and elevate efforts to grapple with land redistribution, reparations from slavery and colonialism, and loss and damage from climate change. How do we begin to repair historical harm?



HOW COTTON'S PAST INFORMS THE PRESENT

For thousands of years, cotton has been at the centre of human civilisation, supporting the livelihoods of millions of farmers, and enriching fields and economies alike. Yet, the crop is also entangled in some of the darkest moments of modern society, including the mass enslavement of Africans in service of plantation cotton, the colonisation of Global Majority nations, and patterns of exploitation and extraction that continue to persist in the cotton industry today.

It's beyond the scope of this toolkit to recount the history of cotton in full. The purpose of this section is not to provide a thorough historical analysis, but to reflect on how the past informs the present, and ultimately, shapes the future. If we don't truly understand our past, we're bound to repeat it. If we're looking to break long-held patterns of violence, then we need to look closely at how these patterns came to be. Only by confronting cotton's difficult legacies and recognising accountability can we move towards healing, and begin imagining alternative pathways.

No one knows exactly how old cotton is. Humanity's relationship with farmed cotton, பரூத்தி (“parutti”) in Tamil, نطقن (“al qutn”) in Arabic, dates back to at least around 7,000 years to the Indus Valley (modern day Pakistan). The incredible adaptability of the plant led it to be widely and independently domesticated and traded by communities across the Levant, Africa, and Central and South America. Cotton quickly became integral to cultures, weaving itself into mythology, folklore, and everyday life.

Prior to industrial capitalism, there were no cotton monocultures anywhere in the world. Households grew, sewed, and utilised a diversity of locally adapted traditional varieties of cotton, alongside subsistence crops, on a small scale.

Before the 18th century, India (including modern-day Pakistan and Bangladesh) was the unrivalled epicentre of the global cotton trade and also the largest global economy, producing by some accounts 25 percent of the world's economic output. However, following the establishment of the East India Company and British colonisation, Britain implemented economic strategies such as taxation and price fixation. They also resorted to direct forms of violence such as imprisoning, flogging, and fining traditional weavers for practising their craft. These measures were aimed at crushing India's cottage industry*, while simultaneously scaling up manufacturing within Britain and banning Indian imports. In 1794, cotton accounted for 15 percent of Britain's total exports. Just a decade later, it accounted for 42 percent. By the end of the 19th century, Britain became the world's leading cotton textile manufacturer.

*Cottage industry refers to small-scale businesses run by families and small groups, often in homes, workshops or other informal spaces.

Meanwhile, cotton production was scaling up in the Americas, marked by the displacement of American Indians, and deforestation, to make way for plantations. The industry was further expanded by the establishment of large-scale plantations powered by millions of enslaved people from Africa. By 1860, over 1.8 million enslaved people (more than half of all enslaved people in the US) were producing over two billion pounds of cotton per year, comprising over two-thirds of global supply, most of which (over 75 percent) was exported abroad.

Cotton profits generated from enslaved labour helped to fund the factories, technologies, and infrastructure that propelled the Industrial Revolution and built disproportionate [Minority World](#) wealth, which in turn deepened the disparities between the Minority and Majority Worlds.

Cotton's dark chapter didn't end with the onset of industrialisation and the abolition of slavery in the United States. Reconstruction further institutionalised the exploitation through sharecropping arrangements, debt bondage, and the imposition of "Black Codes" that suppressed the rights of formerly enslaved peoples.

During the Industrial Revolution, many newly-arrived immigrants to the US, as well as British workers, toiled in textile and garment factories, often in sweatshop conditions with minimal rights, meagre wages, and unsafe workplaces. Many of these practices continue to persist in the fashion industry today, but mostly take place in Majority World nations.

Cotton's role in the economy also took a major turn. Before industrialisation, cotton prices were mostly determined by regional contexts and costs. But since the 17th century, cotton prices have been increasingly dictated by global supply and demand, and control of these prices is far out of the hands of most farmers. A good question for journalists to ask is: Why are London, New York, and Paris fashion capitals and not Dhaka, an ancient centre of cotton textiles?

[LEARN MORE](#)

A BRIEF, INCOMPLETE TIMELINE ON THE HISTORY OF COTTON

- 5000 B.C.** ● **First evidence of cotton farming in the Indus River Valley (Pakistan) and Huaca Prieta (Peru).**
- 3000 B.C.** ○ Earliest cotton textiles attested at a Nubian site, Africa.
- 2500 B.C.** ○ Cotton cultivation found in Southeast Africa and in Mexico.
- 1500-500 B.C.** ○ Evidence of spread of cotton cultivation in India, Mesopotamia, Persia, Arabia, Egypt, Central Asia, and South China.
- 300 B.C.** ○ Alexander the Great's army brings cotton goods into Europe following the conquest of the Persian Empire. However, cotton cloth remains expensive and its use is limited.
- 100 A.D.** ○ Arab traders bring two cotton fabrics, muslin and calico, to Italy and Spain.
- 800s** ○ The Moors introduce cotton cultivation to Spain.
- 1492** ● **C.Columbus finds cotton variety *Gossypium hirsutum*, in the Bahamas.**
- 1500s** ○ Denim "Serge de Nimes" ("fabric of Nimes") is initially produced in Nimes, France.
- 1500s** ○ Sailors from Genoa begin to wear denim trousers. The word "jeans" is derived from "Genes", the French for Genoa.
- 1530s** ○ Naturally-coloured cotton fabrics are among the first items collected from the Americas and are more technically sophisticated than fabric woven by European looms at the time.
- 1600s** ● **The East India Company brings rare cotton fabrics to Europe from India.**
- 1621** ○ Cotton first produced in parts of present-day USA.
- 1641** ● **First cotton spinning factory opens in Manchester, UK, marking the true beginning of Europe's cotton industry.**

- 1700s** ● **The world cotton industry develops dramatically as Britain acquires colonies suitable for cotton growing, whilst at the same time textile machinery improvements allow stronger yarn to be spun.**
- 1700s** ○ Cotton replaces flax and wool as Europeans' most popular fabric.
- 1760s** ○ UK overtakes India as the world's largest cotton processor (Industrial Revolution).
- 1764-67** ○ The "spinning jenny" – a multi-spindle spinning frame – (1764) and Arkwright's spinning frame (1767) are invented, enabling cheap, mass production.
- 1793** ● **US, Eli Whitney patents the cotton gin, separating cotton 50-times faster than hand methods. As a result, and with the advent of cheaper dyes, the white cotton species replaces coloured varieties.**
- 1920** ○ The US accounts for more than half of the world's cotton fibre.
- 1939-45** ● **During WWII, naturally green and brown cottons are again produced commercially to counter the lack of dyes available.**
- 1940s** ○ Denim's popularity becomes widespread as image shifts from durable cloth for blue-collar workers to everyday apparel for the general public, and youth.
- 1950/51** ○ World cotton demand and production levels each reach 7 million tonnes.
- 1980s** ○ Most native, coloured cotton varieties grown in Africa, Asia, Central and South America are replaced by all-white, commercial varieties.
- 1996** ● **Transgenic cotton varieties are first introduced, and begin to be adopted by the world cotton industry.**

STORIES OF RESISTANCE

Popular narratives suggest that the communities who suffered at the hands of imperialism, colonialism, and slavery were passive victims. But resistance was constant in the cotton landscape throughout these eras and continues today.

- **What lessons can we draw from stories of resistance and past movements? What were their successes and failures? How have their strategies, challenges, and impact influenced socio-economic and cultural landscapes?**
- **What's the link between global movements for self-determination and the enduring relevance of historical resistance in shaping contemporary narratives?**

The following are a few stories of resistance:

UK & US 18TH-19TH CENTURY

Recent papers, mostly written by female researchers, state how historically the abolitionist movement has been portrayed as a male-led effort, forgetting the role of women, who played a vital role in the Free Cotton Movement. The Free Cotton Movement was an important historical effort that emerged in the late 18th century and gained momentum in the 19th century. It was part of the broader Free Produce Movement. The movement was initiated in the US in the 1840s and '50s by members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the UK counterpart to the American Free Produce Society. It was led by Anna Richardson, a Quaker abolitionist and peace campaigner based in Newcastle. The movement aimed to raise awareness about the hidden costs of enslaved-labour-produced cotton and sought to educate the public about the ethical implications of their purchasing choices. They engaged in consumer advocacy, activism, fundraising, and other efforts to support the cause.

INDIA 1905-1947

Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi, while known as the lawyer and anti-colonial nationalist, also played a key role to encourage revitalisation of India's cotton sector. He was actively involved in the Swadeshi movement against the British for Indian Independence from 1905-1947. Central to Gandhi's vision was the principle of Swadeshi or "self-sufficiency". Recognising the significance of cotton as a symbol of India's colonial subjugation, he called for a boycott of British cotton goods and urged Indians to spin and weave their own cloth, embracing the traditional charkha (spinning wheel). This act served not only to revitalise India's cotton industry, but also to symbolise resistance and self-determination against colonial oppression, fostering a sense of national pride and unity, and ultimately leading India on the path towards liberation.

BURKINA FASO

1980s

Thomas Sankara was a Burkinabè military officer and revolutionary who served as President of Burkina Faso from his coup in 1983 to his assassination in 1987. Sankara pursued policies aimed at fostering economic independence, resisting imperialism, and promoting cultural identity. Under his leadership, the government prioritised sustainable and small-scale agriculture, nationalised the private cotton sector, and mandated traditional cotton clothing for government employees. These initiatives were intended to decrease reliance on foreign imports and aid while nurturing Burkina Faso's self-sufficiency. Sankara also rejected Western-centric fashion, by advocating for the country's domestic textile industry, aiming to create employment opportunities for local artisans and strengthen Burkina Faso's unique cultural identity. He was assassinated after only four years in office, limiting the chance to gauge long-term effects of his initiatives. Despite this, the example set by Burkina Faso during his leadership has served as inspiration for global movements striving towards sovereignty, dignity, and prosperity.

[LEARN MORE](#)

4.0

STORIES FROM THE GROUND



Farming communities have, over millennia, developed and maintained agricultural systems that harmonise people and ecology. Today, there are models of small-scale farmers and peasants building economic power while reviving their eroded landscapes (and with the support of the private sector and NGOs). Within these community-centred models, farmers have a larger role in shaping what sustainability means. They are growing cotton in ways that enhance their local sovereignty and retain wealth within their communities while restoring soil health, increasing biodiversity, sequestering carbon, and building water resilience.

Check out the [glossary](#) for more information on how different sustainable approaches are defined, such as agroecology, landscape approach, and organic farming.

Here we share three short-summaries from our Stories From the Ground booklet. Each of these stories — from Benin, Brazil, and India — highlight small-scale cotton-growing communities that are finding success in adopting holistic, sustainable farming programmes. These stories also provide critical examples of community-centered reporting that we hope to inspire your own storytelling. These models, however promising, aren't perfect. Nor can we expect them to be, because they exist as outliers within a complex and unjust landscape, and journalists are facing their own constraints. No one solution is a panacea, and greater social transformation is needed, but the stories that follow demonstrate potential pathways forward.

[READ THE FULL STORIES](#)

4.1 BENIN

BACKGROUND

The West African nation of Benin, where cotton has grown since ancient times, is one of Africa's most important cotton-producing countries. Benin was colonised by the French in the 19th century and regained independence in 1975. Our story from Benin features members of OBEPAB (the Benin Organisation for the Promotion of Organic Agriculture), organic cotton cooperatives spread across the remote, rural farming region of central Aklampa, whose members parted ways with conventional farming styles and have been producing organic cotton since the mid-1990s.

FARMING APPROACH

As organic growers, the collectives reject synthetic pesticides and genetically modified seeds. The farmers also practice crop rotation and intercropping (growing food crops alongside cotton). Planting, weed and pest control, fertilising, and storing cotton stocks must be done without synthetic chemicals. For example, on some farms, pest control is done with neem extracts and food spray to attract beneficial insects. Farmers weed by hand.

IMPACT

Organic cotton production is challenging and physically demanding work. And while it's a subject of debate locally whether organic or industrial farming is more profitable, growing organic seems to have more holistic benefits, providing peace of mind around issues like food security and health, as well as crucial cash income. Farmers like Alougba can grow their food alongside cotton "without any concerns", she explains, of pesticide contamination. Soil health has improved, which means the farmers can grow a larger variety of crops, and the farmers know their soil will be fertile for longer.

Farmers are able to sell cotton to invest in themselves and their families — buying land, expanding food choices, funding the building of homes, paying for their children's weddings, covering the cost of higher education, and career training. "For us, organic cotton is like a bank that serves as savings and investment", explains cotton farmer, Paulin.

CULTURE

The OBEPAB farmers pride themselves on supporting large families and being self-sufficient is core to their values. Enough food is grown for the family, and excess is sold off along with the cotton. "What's the point of being a farmer if you can't meet the food needs of your family? It's a matter of honour", says Nicaise, a farmer. Another farmer, Etienne, notes that acquiring a plot and building one's own home signifies social success, commanding respect and recognition.

LABOUR

Labourers are locals or domestic migrants. They are provided meals and housing, and are compensated either in cash or, often, in kind.

GENDER EQUITY

While a gendered division of labour continues to exist for certain tasks, the collectives are a path towards social and financial independence for many women. It's an OBEPAP requirement that every cooperative must elect at least one woman to its leadership board. With the income from cotton, women farmers are able to meet their own needs as well as contribute to household expenses. Within the household, women and men also increasingly share in decision-making about what to do with farm income.

GOVERNANCE

The farmers are organised into cooperatives that are self-governing and each has a slightly different organisation and goals. They're overseen by OBEPAB, which provides seeds and training and oversees certification, audits, and loans. By operating as a collective, farmers come together for bigger undertakings like planting and harvesting through "Assogbê", a form of work-based mutual assistance. Others pool their organic cotton earnings in a communal solidarity fund to use during unforeseen events. The cooperatives also help manage conflicts, such as with local herders that damage their crops, and contribute to infrastructure in the wider community through funding, for example, road repairs and school construction. One cooperative financed the repair of the pump that supplies the community with water.

[READ THE FULL STORY](#)



4.2

BRAZIL

BACKGROUND

Brazil, a former Portuguese colony, is today one of the largest producers of cotton in the world. The arid Pajeú region of Northeast Brazil — once a large cotton producer — was stricken by the impacts of colonialism and industrial monoculture farming, which depleted soil and drove up production costs, causing the industry to collapse. This story looks at several collectives practising agroecology within the region. Started in 2008 with the Agroecological Association of Pajeú (ASAP/PE), they have since evolved into the Agroecological Cotton Consortia Project, part of the [Regenerative Production Landscape Collaborative \(RPLC\)](#) in Brazil.

FARMING APPROACH

Agroecology dates back to the early 1990s, but it wasn't until 2008 that the model spread to the Pajeú backlands of Pernambuco, which founded the Agroecological Association of Pajeú (ASAP/PE). After a period of extreme drought, the Agroecological Cotton Consortia Project (Projeto Algodão em Consorcio Agroecológico in portuguese) was born. By the end of 2022, the project had involved the participation of over 1,300 farming families, of which nearly two-thirds are now capable of producing cotton in what's known as agroecological consortia (a system of intercropping multiple plant species to enhance biodiversity, improve crop yield, manage pests, optimise nutrient cycling, and promote ecological resilience as a sustainable alternative to monoculture) with organic participatory certification.

GENDER EQUITY

Patriarchal attitudes and domestic violence are commonplace in the region, and thus, the Consortia is heavily focused on gender equity. Attracting women to agroecology, empowering them, and making them aware of their rights are promoted through gender working groups present in the seven associations involved in the project. Women occupy almost half (47 percent) of all decision-making positions and are often the biggest proponents of agroecology. “We have to deconstruct the idea that women go to the fields to help their husbands. We go to work, so it is only fair that the income is shared between both”, says farmer Joana Darck.

LABOUR

Finding enough workers trained in growing agroecological cotton is difficult. The Consortia has worked with a local university to purchase and implement low-impact technology, like micro-tractors and rotary hoes, that protect the soil and eliminate the need for so much labour.

IMPACT

In Pajeú, agroecology focuses on multi-cropping, seed sovereignty, collectivist governance, and natural inputs. Growing a multitude of food and medicinal crops alongside cotton not only provides food sovereignty for the family but also enriches the soil and provides pest protection by attracting insects away from more vulnerable plants (e.g. sesame is always grown to ward off insects). One farmer, Seu Francisco, can count at least 23 cultivated species on his land, including dragon fruit, sugar apple, cashew plum, and medicinal plants like saião and fennel, as well as cotton. Branches and straws are used to enrich the soil, and seeds that are native to the semi-arid region and are free from any transgenic traits are used. “Each producer is responsible for their own seeds”, explains farmer Joana Dark, but some farmers operate as seed banks, sharing their seeds with others.

The Consortia project is still in its early stages, but is productive and growing. It now processes and sells cotton in addition to growing it. Processing combined with organic certification can increase the farmers’ profit margin for the same product by approximately 350 percent. The farmers are investing in targeted technology that enables agroecology and makes farming easier and more productive while protecting the landscape. For example, they’ve invested in micro-tractors, which protect the soil, capturing carbon and lowering greenhouse gas emissions.

GOVERNANCE

The Agroecological Cotton Consortia Project is collectivist, organised into community-based associative models that help them, for example, abide by national-level laws. The project provides training that helps farmers develop farming practices and achieve the participatory organic certification. The associations also carry out the ginning of cotton and the production of bales.

[READ THE FULL STORY](#)



4.3

INDIA

BACKGROUND

For over two decades, Indian farmers have grappled with issues such as farmer suicides, falling incomes, and growing indebtedness, with around 400,000 farmers having died by suicide since 1995. Some of the key problems include widespread land disparity, reliance on rainwater for irrigation, dependence on chemical input intensive monocultures, and climate instability. Self-Reliant Initiatives through Joint Action's (Srijan) Regenerative Production Landscape Collaborative in Chhindwara, India, sits as an outlier in the agricultural landscape of the country, formed in response to India's longstanding agrarian crisis. In a region marked by a history of monoculture farming and environmental degradation, the project aims to heal the landscape and revitalise rural economies.

FARMING APPROACH

The effects of industrial farming — market volatility, increasing input costs and soil degradation from intensive chemical use — was putting farmers in Chhindwara at risk. Among the worst hit are cash crop growers; mainly cotton farmers. Farmers in Srijan now grow organic cotton, alongside several local food crops. They use natural techniques for pest and weed control, growing marigold flowers, for example, to attract the bugs away from cotton. They also grow wheat, jowar, or toor to feed their families. Women lead the process of producing biofertilisers and pesticides using cow urine and five types of bitter leaves. Srijan's approach focuses on restoring watersheds to improve groundwater tables and soil moisture, diversifying farmers crops and income sources, providing access to fair markets through local producers' organisations like Chhindwara Organic Farmers Enterprise (COFE), and collaborating closely with local communities.

GENDER EQUITY

Srijan places a strong emphasis on gender equity, working to attract women in agroecology. Women occupy nearly half of all decision-making positions within the associations. They challenge patriarchal attitudes and strive for equal income-sharing among men and women. Many women participate in women's self-help groups (SHG), whose primary function is microfinance in the production and sale of biofertilisers and pesticides. Women also often manage their Village Level Collection Centres (VLCCs) and comprise the entire board of the Chhindwara Organic Farmers Enterprise (COFE).

LABOUR

To address the labour shortage for agroecological cotton farming, the project has incorporated low-impact technology such as micro-tractors, reducing the need for extensive manual labour while preserving the soil's integrity.

IMPACT

Switching to organic requires time and thoughtful planning. The project is still in its early phases (especially when considering the disruption from the pandemic) and farmers experienced a drop in output for the first few years. It also takes at least three years to get organic certification, which is when economic premiums kick in. Still, because their input costs are so low compared to industrial, and their soil health has increased, most of the farmers see it as a promising pathway forward.

“Everything about farming is getting expensive”, says Keshavrao Markam a Gond (tribal) farmer, “cost of seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, other chemicals, but prices (of commodities) aren’t going up — so I’d barely break even.” Now, with using Srijan’s new systems approach, Markam’s input costs have sharply fallen, his increased crop diversity provides opportunities for new income streams, and he has chances to create additional value from his crops — by ginning his organic cotton, crushing the seed to extract oil, and using the leftover de-oiled cake for his cattle.

By promoting multi-cropping and diversification, the project is not only enhancing food security, but also improving soil health and reducing the risks associated with monoculture farming. Srijan is making strides by establishing community institutions and cooperatives that enable small-scale farmers to collectively manage supply chains, processing, and marketing.

GOVERNANCE

The Srijan project operates on a collectivist model, organised into community-based associations that facilitate compliance with national-level regulations. These associations provide essential training, supporting farmers in adopting organic farming practices, while also taking on responsibilities like cotton ginning and bale production. With Srijan’s guidance, farmers have successfully set up Village Level Collection Centres (VLCCs) for their cotton produce. These centres serve as key hubs for collecting produce, providing marketing links with ginners at fair prices, and eliminating middlemen.

[READ THE FULL STORY](#)



4.4

GUIDELINES FOR INTERVIEWING AND REPORTING ON FARMER COMMUNITIES

Consider why farming communities might hesitate to talk to journalists

Subjects might not want to talk to outsiders because of experiences of false promises, being judged or portrayed in a demeaning way, or out of genuine fear of repercussions. Farmers might expect incentives or payments to participate. Have a protocol on this beforehand.

Recognise that your article/work is not designed to transform the everyday lives of farmers. They might simply not want to take time out to share their experiences. Keep in mind what's in it for your subject, how this work can impact the broader narrative, or how your work can be in solidarity with the community facing local challenges — and be respectful of everyone's time.

Communicate your intentions and the impact of the story

Don't overpromise on what your story can do. If it's a story about debt, for example, make it clear at the outset that you or your project cannot relieve that circumstance. Perhaps the story can be utilised to impact a cultural, policy, or other formal space locally or globally.

Lean on local partners and co-produce stories with a local guide

Lean on local groups/partners to build relationships in the community, address safety concerns (especially the safety of your sources), overcome barriers, navigate local languages and cultures, and understand the expectations of outsiders. In some cases, extension staff of local organisations can be hired to help with reporting.

Be prepared to communicate without 24/7 access to digital tools

Many reporters engage predominantly with individuals with some media expertise or those have regular and unrestricted access to email, social media, and messaging apps like WhatsApp. However, when reaching out to farming communities, one must be ready for a different dynamic. This entails establishing connections with individuals who may need to first be contacted via intermediaries and mostly via face-to-face meetings.

Some subjects might be more receptive to communication through phone calls, text messages, or platforms like WhatsApp than emails, but remember data might not be free or service consistently available — so be patient and flexible. It's also essential to accommodate the fact that people working in the fields for extended hours may be less inclined to commit to specific call schedules and might prefer a more flexible timeframe for discussions.

NAVIGATING THE FIELD

Do your homework before you interview farmers, but be prepared to challenge what you know

Read available literature (e.g. academic research, journalism, local news, this media kit) on your topic before conducting interviews, but don't take information at face value. Realities for farmers are always diverse and varied. Seek out and listen to the perspectives of farmers, workers, extension workers, and local communities. They are closest to the issues, and they are the knowledge holders and experts.

Be aware, open, and accommodating of local customs

When reporting on location (and even in phone calls), look for moments where you can embrace and acknowledge culture, build bridges, and find an opening to conversation. For example, in Benin, local journalist Léonce Gamaï interviewed many people in their homes, but only often after sharing a meal or water. Accepting food is “a symbol of open-heartedness”, he adds. Again, a local guide can help you prepare for this.

Listen and make time and space

Listening to farmers is how you locate and centre farmers' priorities and perspectives, find the overlooked storylines and details, and overcome your preconceived ideas about farmers' lives and beliefs. Good listening might start with sharing a coffee or a meal, engaging with or asking about kids in the community, meeting the spouse, or walking the farm, all the while gathering details of where the story lies. Build in ample time for your reporting, so you're not rushing the subject and can adjust to surprises and logistical challenges. The Benin story took a week to report, for example. And in Brazil, photojournalist Fellipe Abreu spent a full day with each farmer he interviewed.

Dig deeper into perspectives

In the Benin story, Leonce Gamaï interviewed subjects three times. First in conversation without a notepad or recorder, then with a recorder, and then afterwards when his recorder and notepad were put away. He also compared the answers he got with the farmer in those three different settings, noting which issues farmers might be concealing or changing their truth about, and their possible reasons for doing so. Double-check with sources what information you can publish publicly, that doesn't jeopardise their safety (i.e. which identifiers, locations, and details should be excluded).

Always be aware of power

Recognise the position of the different people and parties involved, and be aware of who holds power and why. Among the women, farmworkers, migrant workers, who are the decision-makers within cooperatives? In the larger web of relationships, power brokers can include buyers, traders, landowners, NGOs, and wealthy stakeholders. Seek out the voices of persons with different power vantage points. For example, the head of a cotton cooperative, or a major buyer, will have a different perspective in comparison to a participating farmer.

Learn how to approach – and when not to approach – sensitive subjects

Discussing issues such as gender inequality, suicide, child labour, domestic violence, and money (including wage gaps and dowry) can come with shame and risk. How can we approach these topics and overcome our preconceived ideas? Avoid narrow, judgemental framing (e.g. *Why do you send your children to farm? Why don't you share your farm income with your wife?*). Ask more open-ended questions (e.g. *Tell me about your children; How are finances organised in the community?*). In Benin, for example, journalist Leonce Gamaï asked a female subject to talk about what she hopes for her daughter, during which she revealed information about gender dynamics in the community.

Keep in mind that subjects might never directly broach sensitive subjects or fully “open up”, but you can creatively and carefully address them in your piece. In Brazil, a source shared that a neighbour was being abused by her husband. Fellipe Abreu left the specific story of abuse out of the story, but the detail helped him to realise that violence against women and women's empowerment was an important part of the story.

Diversify the voices and perspectives in your story

Include a breadth of viewpoints, including those with criticisms. Connect with women, migrant workers, Indigenous peoples and others who are often excluded from farming stories because of their positionality, and often because of their lack of power.

Let farmers shape the story

Last but not least, there are a million more stories to tell about cotton if we listen to farmers and ask the right questions. In developing storylines, ask yourself — *What do farmers want to see? What do they see and hope for the future? How do they think they could have more influence to change the trajectory of cotton's future? Make space for farmers to define what productivity, progress and success look like for them.*

REPORTING REMOTELY

Reporting on farming communities remotely presents unique challenges, especially when journalists cannot physically visit the field due to financial limitations, tight deadlines, or heavy workloads. However, it is still possible to approach this subject with nuance, sensitivity, and respect, even when facing logistical challenges. When remote reporting is the only option, consider the following strategies:

Research the local landscape

In cases where on-field reporting is not feasible, Indian reporter Jaideep Hardikar, says that meticulous research needs to become the priority. Take the time to thoroughly understand the on-the-ground situation of farming communities, including their farming practices, socioeconomic conditions, relevant policies, and more.

Adapt to remote interviews

Remote reporting often necessitates engaging with farming community representatives as intermediaries. While you may have to rely more heavily on these representatives to facilitate communication with farmers and their communities, make a concerted effort to reach out to them. Collect valuable insights for your stories through remote interviews and conversations.

Manage expectations of communication

Recognise that communication with farmers, farmworkers, and rural communities, especially when conducted remotely, can differ significantly from interactions with media-trained individuals or PR professionals. Be flexible and adaptable in your approach. Understand that communication preferences may vary, encompassing phone calls, text messages, or platforms like WhatsApp, and are subject to internet access. Additionally, take into account the working hours of farmers and farmworkers, which may differ due to their demanding fieldwork schedules. Accommodate their time constraints.

5.0

METHODOLOGY & RESOURCES

This toolkit draws heavily from a few key sources, namely Simon Ferrigno’s *The Inside Guide to Cotton and Sustainability 2020*, a paywalled industry resource to which our team has access to, as well as the qualitative expertise of Cotton Diaries’ Marzia Lanfranchi and Simon Ferrigno, researchers with extensive first-hand experience in both Global Majority and Minority cotton communities. Additional data and statistics and key insights are linked throughout the toolkit. Below you can find credible sources and further reading to dig deeper.

Please always apply your own critical thinking and do your own due diligence when using these sources.



COTTON TODAY FACTS & STATS

[ICAC Cotton Production Data Portal](#)

[ICAC Cotton Statistic Dashboard](#), updated frequently

[ICAC Cotton Data Book 2022](#), report behind paywall, 2022

[Cotton sustains more than 100 million families worldwide](#), article, 2023

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[Inside Guide to Cotton and Sustainability](#), book, 2023

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[How Cotton Remade the World](#), article, 2015

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COTTON PRODUCTION & SEEDS

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[Social Impacts of Cotton Production](#), report, 2011

[Roundtable on Human Rights and Cotton](#), meeting report, 2021

[Global Market Report: Cotton](#), Sustainable Commodities Marketplace report 2021

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Deconstructing Indian cotton: weather, yields, and suicides, academic article, 2015

When it rains, it pours misery, article, 2022

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The factory of life: why soil biodiversity is so important, summary on soil biodiversity

Climate Change

Cotton 2040: Half of all cotton growing regions could face severe climate risks by 2040 report summary press release, 2021

Solidaridad: Cotton and Climate Paper report, 2023

Cotton Connect: Listening to women's voices on the effects of climate change, industry report, 2020

Cotton Connect: Women in cotton: addressing the impact of climate change through climate-friendly practices, industry report, 2023

Limits to Current Solutions

Co-option of Terms in Regenerative Agriculture, article, 2021

Is Agroecology Being Co-opted by Big Ag?, article, 2021

COTTON HISTORY

Empire of Cotton by Sven Beckert (Full text, summary, interview to the author and critical review)

History of Cotton with Teju Adisa-Farrar, Sha'Mira Covington, video lecture, 2020

Cotton Colonialism, collection examining the social history of cotton cultivation in colonial Africa, highlighting experiences of African farmers, 1995

How British colonialism killed 100 million Indians in 40 years, opinion article, 2022

The East India Company: The First Multinational Corporation, article, 2006

Colonialism's Role in the Overexploitation of Natural Resources, article, 2019

[Britain took more out of India than it put in – could China do the same to Britain?](#), article, 2014

[How Slavery Helped Build a World Economy](#), article, 2003

[How a cotton sack and a mother’s love outlasted slavery](#), article, 2023

[Economic Impact of Colonialism](#), article, 2017

[The Age of Empire](#), book, 1987

[The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism](#), book, 2014 ([review article](#), 2019)

[A labour history of cotton picking: slavery, mass mobilisation, and machinery](#), (pg.22-23), article, 2021

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[The Fabric of India: Textiles in a Changing World](#), V&A exhibition summary

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[Peasant Resistance in Burkina Faso’s Cotton Sector](#), academic article, 2021

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GUIDELINES FOR REPORTING

[Toolkits for communicators interested in community reporting](#)

[Journalism with Inclusive and Plural Indigenous Voices](#), article, 2018

[Representation in News Outlets](#), Global Media Monitoring Project report, 2020

[Solution Journalism Tips and Insights for Climate Solutions Practice](#)

6.0

GLOSSARY

AGROECOLOGY

The “application of ecology in agriculture” — a holistic approach to agriculture that takes into account how farming practices are linked to ecological and social systems. It centres the relationships between communities, land, and broader systems as integral, interdependent parts of cultivating a sustainable food system. Agroecology emerged in the 1970s as a response to industrial farming. It is rooted in the reclamation of local knowledge and collective decision-making power.

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BIODIVERSITY

The extraordinary variety of living species and their complex interactions, including plants, animals, bacteria, and fungi, that come together to sustain life on Earth. It also refers to the ecological and cultural processes that sustain all life.

CONSORTIA

Generally referred to as intercropping systems (the term “consortium” or “consortia” is mainly used in the Latin American context), consortia is a type of agroecological practice where multiple plant species are intentionally cultivated together in the same field. The goal of a consortia approach is to create a synergistic and mutually beneficial interaction among the different crops involved in order to enhance biodiversity, improve crop yield, manage pests and diseases, optimise nutrient cycling, and promote ecological resilience.

FOOD SYSTEMS

The entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal of food products that originate from agriculture, forestry or fisheries, and parts of the broader economic, societal, and natural environments in which they are embedded. A food system is composed of sub-systems (e.g. farming system, waste management system, input supply system) and interacts with other key systems (e.g. energy system, trade system, health system). A “sustainable” food system is one that delivers healthy and culturally appropriate food for all in such a

way that the economic, social, and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised.

FOOD SECURITY

A state where all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. The idea of food security was popularised in the 1970s, at a time of food crises and price volatility. It was proposed as a strategy for countries to increase production to ensure that the world had enough food to feed a growing population. Powerful Minority World countries claimed that hunger was a simple problem of supply and demand, not a symptom of unjust systems. As a result, the dominant strategies for addressing food security were neoliberal policies of structural adjustment programmes, food aid, and surplus dumping on Majority World countries, which undercut local production, disenfranchised small farmers on a massive scale, and undermined their autonomy.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

A movement that emerged in the 1990s as a response to the failures of food security and a push to democratise control of food production. It is defined by La Vía Campesina as “The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.” Food sovereignty advocates for pluralistic and community-led governance systems that promote food self-sufficiency, local food cultures, traditional knowledge, and sustainable agriculture. It aims to centre communities in the process of food production, distribution, and consumption

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GENETICALLY MODIFIED (GM) COTTON

Crops whose DNA has been altered using genetic engineering techniques. They are created to display certain desired characteristics, generally to improve resistance against pests and disease. GM cotton emerged in the early 1990s (pest-resistant features

came first, then herbicide-resistant features) and was marketed as a “miracle product”. The sector was quickly dominated by global giants, like Monsanto (now Bayer-Monsanto), Syngenta (now ChemChina-Syngenta), and BASF, with the big six companies globally controlling around 75 percent of the seed (and pesticides) market overall. Economic concentration and privatisation has increased costs, debt, and dependence overall.

GREEN REVOLUTION

An initiative that started in the mid-twentieth century promising to “modernise” agriculture through the introduction of “high-yielding” varieties of crops to the Majority World. However, this shift required the adoption of monocultures, the use of chemical pesticides and fertilisers, and for farmers to buy seeds, dramatically increasing costs and risks. Farmers often had to take out loans to participate in the new system, trapping them in debt when crops failed, as they often do. The Green Revolution was also marked by a period of private sector takeover of a previously public and university-dominated sector, with a narrow focus on short-term profit.

INTEGRATED LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT (ILM)

Sometimes referred to as a “Landscape Approach”, this is a way of fostering resilient landscapes through long-term collaboration among multiple stakeholders. ILM explicitly recognises the social, economic and ecological complexity of landscapes, which makes sector-specific planning and design inadequate. Working towards ILM requires reaching agreement on a shared landscape vision and strategy among stakeholders who have different and sometimes competing priorities, often with diverse interests, perspectives, influence, cultures and languages, and sometimes with histories of conflict.

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INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT (IPM)

A farming practice that works to reduce reliance and harm from chemical pesticides and enhance ecosystems by carefully and proactively managing pests through a combination of identification, prevention, and control tactics. Examples include: the use of crop rotation, the selection of pest-resistant varieties, the use of pheromones to disrupt pest mating, and mechanical control, such as trapping or weeding. Pesticides are used as a last resort.

MAJORITY & MINORITY WORLD

Minority World, or the Global Minority, refers to the countries traditionally categorised as “developed”, and emphasises that while these countries have accumulated the power to impose their will on the rest of the world, they are, in fact, the minority.

Majority World, or the Global Majority, refers to the countries traditionally categorised as “developing”, or more recently, “Global South”, who in fact make up the majority of the world’s population. The term highlights that the people belonging to these countries and communities make up the majority of the world’s population, its diverse cultures, and knowledge systems.

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ORGANIC FARMING

A model that uses traditional farming techniques and natural inputs like beneficial insects, manure, and cover crops to control pests and build soil health. In many states, farmers can also get a certification for planting organic, which is often monitored by governments and multi-stakeholder initiatives, enabling farmers, in the best of situations, to earn a premium for their crop.

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PEASANT

According to La Vía Campesina, “A peasant is a man or woman of the land, who has a direct and special relationship with the land and nature through the production of food and/or other agricultural products. Peasants work the land themselves, relying above all on family labour and other small-scale forms of organising labour. Peasants are traditionally embedded in their local communities, and they take care of local landscapes and agroecological systems. The term peasant can apply to any person engaged in agriculture, cattle-raising, pastoralism, handicrafts related to agriculture, or a related occupation in rural areas. This includes Indigenous peoples working on the land.”

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SEED SOVEREIGNTY

A concept that is closely related to food sovereignty, and specifically focuses on the rights and practices related to seeds and plant genetic resources. It emphasises the idea that communities and farmers should have rights and control over the seeds they use, save, exchange, and breed, rather than being dependent on corporations or external sources.

SHARECROPPING

A legal arrangement with regard to agricultural land in which a landowner allows a tenant to use the land in return for a share of the crops produced on that land.

STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAMMES (SAPS)

Introduced in the 1980s, SAPs were a set of economic reforms imposed on Majority World economies as a requirement in order to access loans from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). SAPs forced countries to deregulate and privatise public industries, and cut public spending, resulting in catastrophic levels of debt. During the period in which these programmes were first introduced, agricultural research and extension services were slashed or eliminated, leaving farmers more vulnerable to distant markets and traders, including privatised seed and chemical companies.

SUPPLY WEB THINKING

Supply chains are the dominant concept for understanding the flow of goods and services. However, they operate under a logic that doesn’t exist in natural systems — as linear chains, with uni-directionality, and one-way extraction, concentrating power and wealth in the hands of a few. Natural systems, on the other hand, are complex, with many living beings contributing resources multi-directionally to support the health and wealth of communities and ecosystems. By shifting away from the logic of chains and towards complex webs, we can start to re-centre the idea that true sustainability is rooted in abundant, diverse, mutualistic relationships.

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CREDITS

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For further support, question and introductions to sources and subject experts, please reach: josh@agrowingculture.org and marzia@cottondiaries.com.

Photos

Thiago Trajano

page 4

Fellipe Abreu

pages 9, 29, 39, 43, 52, 59, 69

Apoorva Salkade

pages 19, 23, 26, 62

Gbèmèhò Elisé Fanou

page 56

Layout Design

Yolaine Codjovi

COTTON DIARIES

Cotton Diaries' mission is to transform the way we grow, source, and talk about cotton to build just and resilient fashion-farming systems. By promoting fairer, more nuanced, and fact-driven narratives around cotton, while amplifying farmers' perspectives and local solutions, we strive to realign the industry's priorities and actions towards addressing the most pressing social and environmental issues. Ultimately, changing the way fashion is farmed.

[website](#)

A GROWING CULTURE

A Growing Culture partners with peasant and Indigenous communities to develop strategic communication campaigns that amplify the food sovereignty movement and support all communities to reclaim agency over our food systems.

[website](#)

