Organic Cotton’s Threshold Moment:
Call for Collective Action to unlock the real potential of organic cotton

The Organic Cotton Accelerator
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Call for Collective Action 2017

The organic cotton sector stands at a crossroads. The crop is positioned to become a cornerstone of apparel brands’ sustainability and sustainable cotton portfolios, offering benefits to farmers and the environment, while meeting the growing market demand for sustainable clothing. However, the sector is faced by a number of enduring challenges which result in a weak business case for farmers, sourcing- and reputational risks for brands, and the scattering of initiatives between different sector stakeholders. If no action is taken soon, this situation will progressively erode the public image of organic cotton, the interest of brands and retailers, and with it the willingness of stakeholders to invest in the sector, sending organic cotton into severe decline.

We are willing to face these challenges to ensure the continued vitality and sustainability of the organic cotton sector. Therefore, we publicly commit to initiating and accelerating the development and realization of a unified sector vision and agenda.

We call on brands, retailers, supply chain partners, producers, governments, funders and civil society organizations to join us in this journey towards unlocking the potential for a robust, thriving and growing organic cotton sector.
Organic Cotton: a Cornerstone Sustainable Crop

Organic cotton offers a lower ecological footprint; and by reducing exposure to insecticides, pesticides, and other chemicals, improves biodiversity and benefits the health and safety of farmers and their communities. The protection and growth of organic cotton farming is therefore a critical step in turning around the negative externalities of conventional cotton, and is increasingly recognized for it:

- Consumer demand for organic products has increased rapidly and continues to rise. Following similar trends in the food sector, consumer awareness of the benefits of organic farming is maturing.
- Small and big fashion brands alike are making clear commitments to increasing the sustainability of their raw materials portfolio sourcing strategies by 2020, with organic cotton as an important pillar within these.
- Recent years have seen recurring and large-scale investments in civil society initiatives geared towards promoting organic cotton.

For consumers, farmers, and the apparel sector, organic cotton promises to become a cornerstone sustainable crop of the future—if we let it.

Four challenges crippling the organic cotton sector

Despite the rising demand for organic cotton, as well as private and public initiatives in the sector, organic cotton today faces four main challenges:

1. Increasingly more farmers are moving away from organic cotton because of its relatively unattractive business case compared to more lucrative alternatives such as organic food crops, conventional cotton or more accessible sustainability standards such as BCI;
2. The fragmentation of standards and a lack of supply chain transparency and traceability of organic cotton has resulted in serious integrity issues about the organic claims of certified products in some origin countries;
3. Governance and agenda-setting remains scattered between various national production standards, diverse chain of custody standards, as well as several industry platforms;
4. As a result, the reputation of organic cotton is at risk. If these underlying problems persist for much longer, critiques are likely to gain in public credibility. This could potentially lead to reduced consumer demand, causing investors, brands and farmers to lose faith in the standard.

In a very real sense, we are facing a closing window of opportunity within which to unlock the real potential of organic cotton—and to demonstrate its value to farmers, brands, and the world. In the next few years, the organic cotton sector must go up—or it may well go out. We are willing to take up this challenge.
A collaborative effort to safeguard sustainability of the organic cotton sector

We need to tackle the problems the sector faces by doing things differently. This starts with interventions in our own supply chains and collaboration on the issues that require collective action (e.g. seed development, technology solutions, training manuals). We want do so in line with a unified vision, one sector agenda and regular reports on the progress we make.

By signing this Call for Collective Action, we commit to:

• Engaging in the formulation of the vision for a long-term sustainable organic cotton sector, and the translation of this vision into an actionable agenda to get there, together with all relevant stakeholders;
• Holding one another accountable for our joint progress through a unified progress framework;
• Rolling out interventions in our own supply chains, and sharing learnings on best practices and impact;
• Investing in non-competitive initiatives;
• Organizing ourselves for successful realization of the sector agenda.

Invitation to join

Although we already represent a significant part of the industry’s demand for organic cotton and have the critical mass to start this movement, we require the participation and commitment of more brands, retailers, supply chain partners, governments, funders and civil society organizations in order to develop and realize a shared vision and actionable agenda for the sector. We believe in the potential of organic cotton and want to see it succeed. We call on all relevant stakeholders to join us in this movement. It is only through collective action that we will be able to capitalize on the existing enthusiasm for organic cotton—and to ensure that together, we can take this promising sector upwards and onwards.

You can join the movement by:

• Joining your fellow signatories to this statement;
• Sharing your thoughts with us in an interview;
• Attending our upcoming Berlin workshop, on May 15th.

Contact: Hilde van Duijn, Executive Director OCA, hilde@organiccottonaccelerator.org
Signatory Organizations

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About OCA

The Organic Cotton Accelerator (OCA) is a multistakeholder initiative, focused on creating a prosperous organic cotton sector which benefits everyone—from farmer to consumer.

This is one of a series of papers that explain the challenges the organic cotton sector is currently facing, and the proposed solutions that OCA and its partners are working on to come to structural sector change.

www.organiccottonaccelerator.org