Whether it is watered by rainfall or irrigated, cultivated manually or mechanically, cotton is a precious godsend for farmers. But growing this crop also has considerable social and environmental impacts, which organic agriculture and fair trade are trying to address.

Therefore, different guarantee systems have been developed. Here is an outline of how some of them work and the guarantees they provide.

ORGANIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL CERTIFICATIONS

GOTS

The Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) was created on the initiative of the International Association of the Natural Textile Industry, the Soil Association, the Organic Trade Association and the Japan Organic Cotton Association. This private certification comprises two grades: the stricter grade requires that 95% of the cotton used to make textile products should come from organic agriculture. The other, more tolerant grade accepts a minimum of 70% certified organic cotton.

The certification also covers the processing and manufacturing stages and prohibits, for example, the use of aromatic solvents and formaldehyde. Social criteria complete the picture, even though they are not a priority of the GOTS: they basically refer to the key norms of the International Labour Organisation. In 2008, GOTS replaced the EKO sustainable textile label, which no longer exists.

The Assisi group of organic producers, based in the Indian province of Maharashtra, is one of the organisations that comply with the criteria of the Global Organic Textile Standard.

To find out more: www.global-standard.org

BIOGARANTIE

Administered by several associations of farmers, processors and retailers, this quality label promotes products of certified organic origin. Household linen, decorative fabrics, rugs and clothes – any product containing organic cotton is eligible to display this certification. Besides guaranteeing the use of at least 70% raw materials sourced from organic farming, the little black stamp used as the Biogarantie logo bears witness to the compliance with environmental practices throughout the production process.

Processing must limit energy consumption to an absolute minimum, treat water and reuse it, as well as avoid the use of additives. Similarly, GMOs are strictly prohibited at every stage of the production process. Although environmental aspects are the dominant feature of this quality label, it also includes social criteria, such as freedom to join or form trade unions, maximum permissible amount of overtime and a minimum age of 15 for workers right across the sector. Nowadays, the Biogarantie certification is applied by just one clothing brand, De Geest, which sells trousers, shorts, shirts and T-shirts bearing the black Biogarantie logo.

To find out more: www.biogarantie.be
**EUROPEAN ECOLABEL**

The award of this label guarantees compliance with 40 environmental criteria that go beyond raw cotton, extending to the entire life cycle of a garment, from the harvesting of raw materials through to fibre cleaning, fabric dyeing and disposal. The distinctive flower logo is a clear signal to consumers that water use is limited during manufacture, printing pastes do not contain any harmful substances and products are made to last rather than be disposable. Note, however, that this quality label does not mean that a garment is made of natural fibres, as it also covers synthetic textiles.

Similarly, it should not be confused with an organic label, since – when it is displayed on a cotton garment, for example – it does not guarantee certified organic origin.

To find out more: www.ecolabel.be

**NATURTEXTIL**

The International Association of the Natural Textile Industry (IVN) issues this organic certification, which is found on both household linen and clothing. The quality standards cover every stage in the logistic chain, from cotton growing to the finishing process. At least 95% of the textile used to make a quality-labelled product must be of certified organic origin. At the washing stage, the use of chlorine and ammonia is prohibited, as is the use of dyes containing heavy metals.

This certification is presented to consumers in two different forms, corresponding to two distinct grades. The first, simply called Naturtextil, adheres to all the principles just mentioned. The second, Naturtextil Best, has stricter requirements: it applies to garments with 100% certified organic fibres in the textile fabric, and even the embroidery yarns, labels, elastic bands and other small accessories used are 100% natural.

Despite its name, which suggests the priority given to environmental principles, this certification also guarantees that certain social standards are met to ensure worker protection: no forced labour, a minimum living wage and the right to join or form trade unions.

To find out more: www.naturtextil.com

**DEMETER**

Managed and mentored by the Demeter association, this certification identifies cotton grown using biodynamic farming methods. It has much in common with organic farming, but incorporates other principles such as crop treatment based on the use of medicinal plants. Similarly, the rhythms of nature and the position of the planets have an important place in the sowing and planting calendar of farmers practising biodynamic agriculture. Lastly, mechanical harvesting of cotton is authorised only under certain conditions, with manual methods being encouraged.

As for the textile processing stage, Demeter sets its requirements at the same level as the Naturtextil Best certification, banning, for example, mercerisation (treatment with caustic soda to make the fibre swell) and the use of dyes containing copper, even in the lowest concentration. Obtaining the label is not dependent on compliance with social criteria. One of the associations of cotton farmers who comply with the Demeter requirements and supply the Belgian market is the Sekem cooperative based in Egypt.

To find out more: www.demeter.net
Despite its many virtues, organic cotton does not primarily seek to remedy the social impact of growing this crop, even though organic methods improve the working conditions of the producers: In particular, they do not have to handle hazardous products. Looking after the social dimension of this industry is more the prerogative of fair trade. Advocates of a fairer global trading system have their work cut out for them, as important social disparities remain. From the cotton field to the retailer, numerous economic operators ignore the basic rules advocated by the International Labour Organisation: The result is workers being banned from forming a trade union, failure to observe safety rules, insufficient income and unpaid overtime.

Fairtrade

Sporting an eye-catching green, black and blue logo, Fairtrade is the most common fair trade certification in the clothes business. Based on the observation that movements in cotton prices do not guarantee small-scale producers a decent income, Fairtrade aims to offer them fairer, more regular and more stable prices, as well as better working conditions. This trademark relies on a range of mainly social and economic criteria, compliance with which is guaranteed by an independent certification body.

That said, the Belgian association achACT warns consumers about some potential areas of confusion that may lead people to believe that this certification covers all stages of the production process.

In actual fact, only cotton production is guaranteed Fairtrade. Among the producers’ associations that meet the requirements of Fairtrade International, the Communal Union of Cotton Producer Cooperatives, in Mali, offers a good example of what fair trade can mean to farmers. Apart from an income 70% above normal, these fairer trading rules have enabled them to dig wells, build a health centre and improve their literacy programmes.

To find out more: www.fairtrade.net

World Fair Trade Organisation (WFTO)

Formerly called the International Fair Trade Association (IFAT), this organisation defends fair trade values, such as banning child labour, setting fairer wages, improving the quality of life of small-scale producers and ensuring transparency towards consumers. The membership of this association, which brings together fair trade operators from around the globe, includes companies at each stage of textile production, thereby ensuring that its principles are upheld throughout the industry.

On the other hand, however, the WFTO only provides very limited control of its members’ practices, as monitoring is based on self-assessment by the producers. The Agrocel network in India perfectly illustrates the profile of WFTO members: this fair trade cotton cooperative provides its producers with not only a decent livelihood, but also a fair trade subsidy and practical support to ensure the economic stability of the cotton farmers.

To find out more: www.wfto.com

Cotton growers of Yakaar Niani Wuli in Senegal
**TRANSVERSAL CERTIFICATIONS**

**ECOCERT ESR**

Initially established in the domain of organic farming in France, Ecocert has gradually diversified its activities in Europe and beyond, creating its own fair trade system, known as EFT: “Ecocert Fair Trade in the spirit of solidarity and responsibility”.

EFT claims to be very complete and includes requirements as diverse as compliance with organic farming standards, protection of biodiversity, energy efficiency, a ban on child labour, the payment of decent wages and voluntary investment in solidarity projects. Ecocert also gives priority to transparency and guarantees that consumers are kept fully informed about geographical origin and pricing, for example.

One of the main EFT-certified cotton suppliers is Biocoton, which brings together Indian producers. Each complying with the required environmental and social standards, they organised themselves into an association. Their prices include a subsidy for setting up projects to help the local community (school-building programme, sanitary facilities, etc.).

*To find out more: www.ecocert.fr*

**MADE BY**

Founded by the Dutch NGO Solidaridad, this certification aims to offer a comprehensive guarantee, both environmental and social, covering several stages of the production process, in particular cotton growing, spinning and garment making. The logo in the shape of a blue button guarantees that MADE-BY garments are made of organic cotton and that the clothing companies respect a code of social conduct consistent with the principles of the International Labour Organisation: workers’ health is not endangered, workers have the freedom to join a trade union and they receive a decent wage.

One of the farmers’ communities that supply organic and fair trade cotton for MADE-BY certified brands is called Mahima Organic Cotton. This group of farmers in northern India comprised just 300 families in 2000, but has expanded considerably and currently has 1,500 families. They all underwent training to revive traditional techniques without the use of herbicides or pesticides, and then began to put what they had learned into practice daily to enable them to convert to organic farming.

Note that brands affiliated with the MADE-BY label all use organic cotton, like that produced by Mahima Organic Cotton, but this does not mean that their clothes are made of 100% certified organic cotton. Some have not yet reached this percentage, and are merely making efforts to use an increasing amount of organic cotton.

*To find out more: www.made-by.nl*

**ENCORPORATE COMMITMENT**

**BETTER COTTON INITIATIVE**

The BCI association aims to promote measurable improvements in the key social and environmental impacts of cotton cultivation. It brings together stakeholders across the cotton sector, as well as NGOs such as the WWF and multinationals such as H&M and Ikea. Drawing on a multi-stakeholder consultation process, the BCI developed a support system (not a certification) comprising production criteria, a farm assessment procedure and monitoring mechanisms to measure progress. At the same time, the association set up a supporting communications platform to provide guidelines on best practices, as well as a document kit to enable members to communicate to others about the initiative. Efficient use of water, soil protection and reduced pesticide use are just some of the environmental recommendations of the BCI, which also promotes decent working conditions and a fair wage. Today, the BCI works with cotton farmers in four main regions: West and Central Africa, Brazil, Pakistan and India.

*To find out more: www.bettercotton.org*