



## BREAD & BRAINS with Janet Mensink

### ***From Field to Fashion – Working throughout the Supply Chain***

*Worldwide, around 100 million people work in cotton and textile production. Most of the work takes place in developing countries and 80% of the workforce is female. The garment industry thus generates many labour opportunities and empowers women as income earners. However, the flip side of the sector is also well known: pollution and exhaustion of the environment by extensive chemical and water usage and problematic wages and labour conditions are just some examples. Janet Mensink, international program manager cotton and textile at Solidaridad explained about the supply chain from field to fashion, highlighted some controversies as well as opportunities for a more sustainable sector. This Bread&Brains took place on Thursday 19 June.*

### **Introduction**

With an increasingly large world population, the demand for clothing is growing at a higher pace than the demand for food. The size of clothing production has increased in the recent past, and the prices have lowered; due to higher levels of efficiency, but also because of growing pressures from large international brands to reduce prices.



Cotton is produced all over the world, including places such as the US, Brazil, West Africa and Indonesia, among others. But the circumstances in terms of

scale and technology level under which cotton cultivation takes place vary enormously. To compare, in Brazil you can find large estates, monitored by small airplanes flying over them to check and spray pesticides. These same operations contain elaborate processing technologies accompanying the fields. On the other end of the spectrum, in Mali for instance, small-scale farmers utilize cotton as one of the few cash crops that can generate income and provide food and education for their families.

After cultivation, cotton undergoes a long series of treatments before it can be stitched into a garment or textile product. Ginning separates the

fibres from the seeds and often takes place close to the production fields. Spinning often happens closer to the next stages of the production process. The resulting yarns are either woven or knitted into fabrics by mills. Dyeing and finishing the fabrics (so that they contain the right colour and do not shrink after washing) is the last step before garmenting or stitching. Whereas many of these stages in the production process are highly technology driven and require a lot of capital [moreover, dyeing is energy and water intensive], garmenting is very labour intensive. Very few resources other than sewing machines and a physical space are needed to start a workshop. Many countries – such as Cambodia and Vietnam – specialize in stitching, importing fabrics, and exporting clothes. In turn, this provides very little value in terms of economic development. Many concerns that are often publicized in the media (particularly regarding labour conditions, wages, and sexual harassment) relate to this part of the value chain.

The pictures Mensink showed to illustrate the 'dark side' of this long and complicated value chain are impressive. First we saw a poor farmer spraying pesticides without wearing any protection. This was followed by the Aral Lake, which dried up because the water was channelled for irrigation purposes. Another picture helped shed light on the effects of chemical dyes, which in Bangladesh, pollute the same water which people rely on for drinking and bathing. The picture of rubble at Rana Plaza in Dhaka, Bangladesh speaks for itself. Mensink stressed that events similar to the collapse of the garment factories at Rana Plaza

were (and still are) regular prior to this particular incident; however, many of the tragedies do not end up in the international media. Probably because of this disaster, Bangladesh [which after China, is the second biggest international supplier of garments] has become a symbol of all bad things happening in the garment industry. Yet similar problems are prevalent in Vietnam, Pakistan, Cambodia, and many other countries.

### Hopeful

The cases highlighted are tragic for workers and communities involved, however, the presentation gave a nuanced picture of the sector. Cotton and textiles creates many jobs and opportunity to escape from extreme poverty. In many countries the sector has been an engine for development. Mensink is hopeful for change. However, this depends on the willingness of consumers, brands, and retailers to change. Are large companies willing to invest in sustainable means of cotton production? Are they willing to develop and pursue new business models based on, for instance the concept *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle*, or on leasing or sharing garments? Mensink suggested that many companies are already working on alternative business models – though not openly as they may undermine current business models. In turn, are consumers willing to pay a price that reflects all costs involved, including the social and environmental costs? Are producers willing to provide transparency about their supply chain? Moreover, is this possible when different factories, in different countries, carry out all the stages involved? Another necessary change is the business relation between buyer and supplier. Suppliers of garments are generally selected based on prices only resulting in ad hoc relations. A long-term commitment to a specific supplier, however, may lead to a secure environment to invest in fair wages and decent working conditions.

Mensink expressed her hope by showing a picture of Fatima, a girl living in a textile cluster in Bangladesh where Solidaridad is running a cleaner production program. She is attending school as her parents earn sufficient money in the garment factories to pay her education fees.

### Discussion

Are there good alternatives for cotton, and should we encourage their production and consumption? A well-known alternative is bamboo – which causes much less pressure to the environment than cotton does, because the yields are high and few chemicals are required. However, processing bamboo's hard fibres

into a soft and comfortable fabric requires extensive chemical usage, which outbalances the benefits gained from the cultivation process. Besides, Mensink argued that it is not necessarily desirable to avoid cotton, as in many places cotton is the only potential crop that grows and provides livelihoods for poor farmers. From a designer perspective, cotton is a unique fibre in its softness and suitability for humidity. It is therefore a better idea to focus on sustainable cotton production rather than only hunting after alternatives for cotton.

In matured economies, such as in the United States, clothing retail companies are vital for labour provision and the economy in general. How can we balance a new business model based on leasing, sharing, and reusing with the need for labour options? Mensink agrees that these issues are very sensitive – which partly explains why the development of new business models has often been limited to the board rooms only. On the other hand, the discussion on sustainable cotton production has been going on for years and is generally visible in the clothing labels (and in stores). Clothes made of sustainable cotton (can be organic, Better Cotton or Fair Trade) are marketed very well. There is much to gain in many areas of garment production, and Mensink stresses that collaboration of different parties involved is vital in obtaining success. Solidaridad, therefore, is not involved in activism itself, but leaves that to other NGOs.

Practically, when buying clothes, it is important to be aware of the conditions of the production. Mensink recommends us to ask the retailer about the background and production of the items in the store. Also she urged us to browse around the store's website and try to understand the company's policy. Changes are not achieved by buying one item composed of sustainable cotton; rather it is important to understand which company works fair and sustainable throughout the supply chain. The entire policy matters. Yet at the same time, do not forget the potential of the clothing industry to employ and empower huge numbers of people, improving livelihoods and generating income – i.e. education. Not all is bad in the clothing industry.

SID NL and the Humanity House organise monthly Bread & Brains lunch meetings on pressing issues in the field of international development.

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