

Press release 07 October 2004

Ref.: Common Threads



Imagination, innovation and idealism

New approaches to business and consumption *CAN* change the world

'Individual action makes a world of difference', says Gina Moore of London Organic Company Texture. In London, Common Threads (November 11th, The Old Truman Brewery, Brick Lane, www.common-threads.net) will be showing how recycled fashion is not about virtue - but first about fun and frivolity, a sentiment with which Bénin organic cotton farmer Evelyne Atekokale heartily agrees. Now, she says

'when I get paid for my crop, me and my friends can jump in a taxi and go on a shopping spree'

(as well as pay school fees and other needs previously out of reach); previously, she would have been worrying about whether the money would cover the costs of the expensive chemical pesticides she used, the same chemicals that caused her to miscarry after using them before she converted.

Organic cotton in Africa transforms the lives of poor rural people suffering under the twin coshes of dangerous and expensive chemicals and cotton subsidies paid in richer countries. The increased incomes organic farmers enjoy have led to farmers paying for teachers, building health centres, sending children to secondary school and investing in the development of their own communities, taking us from a situation where aid subsidises a distorted trading system to 'self-aid' where farmers earn enough to move from subsistence to controlling their own futures.

PAN UK has been helping businesses increase their use of organic cotton and advocating the adoption of a target for 10% of all cotton used to be organic by 2010, with some success. It is now possible to buy at least some organic textiles from Aberdeen to Lands End, and the consumer guide 'Dress Sense' is now available including the details of all retail outlets selling organic textiles.

PAN UK has been surveying market trends, and the organic textiles market grew 38% in 2003.

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Background:

At least 20,000 people in developing countries die every year from poisoning by agricultural pesticides, and 3 million suffer acute or reproductive after effects. In the small West African state of Benin, one of the world's poorest countries, cotton pesticides killed at least 61 men, women and children between 1999-2001. Poor, untrained and ill-equipped farmers are using some of the most hazardous pesticides available. More deaths have been recorded this year. But it doesn't have to be this way. The organic cotton market offers major opportunities. Some farmers are obtaining higher yields than conventional farmers, and organic farmers are clear that they will not go back to using chemicals. Farmer Gera Paul says: *'while organic farming is more difficult, it saves lives from not using pesticides. We no longer have debt problems. Income is all profit at the end of season. Land and soil are preserved.'*

For women, the prime motivations for organic farming are improved family health, and their children are not at daily risk of fatal poisonings. Their food supply is also safer, and more plentiful. *'2 adults and 3 children died on successive days when their maize store was contaminated through a leaky pesticide container'*, Simon Ferrigno, PAN UK's cotton project

officer was told on a recent trip to Benin. *'in an 8 day field trip, we learnt of seven so far unrecorded pesticides-linked deaths this year'*.