



Clothing procurement by the FHE sector relates mainly to the purchase of uniforms and other related work wear, corporate clothing, branded leisurewear and accessories. The majority of these will most likely be made of cotton or a blend of cotton and polyester. These two main materials have different sources and production impacts and the manufacture of clothing also has additional issues and implications.

The main issues relate to the human rights of workers at both farms and factories, but also to workplace standards and incomes. Local pollution is a relevant issue related to farming and fabric processing affecting local communities.

Clothing issues

Cotton farming and harvesting

Cotton is farmed and harvested in various areas of the world and accounts for 40% of global fibre consumption. Mainly grown as a monoculture, cotton plantations are often large, can be harvested by hand or mechanised means and as with most commercial crops are often grown with the aid of fertilisers and pesticides.

Over 80% of worldwide cotton production originates from nine countries. Some of the key cotton producing areas are those where workers are often poorly protected, badly paid and where community water sources are frequently polluted. Uzbekistan produces c. 4% of the world's cotton supply, but there is substantial evidence that the quotas harvested are done so at the cost of workers freedom, income and health.

Uzbekistani citizens must harvest cotton for two to three months per year without pay and without suitable housing or facilities; this includes children as young as ten working in the fields without protective equipment, adequate breaks, food, water or shelter. Uzbekistan's government has signed up to the International Labour Organisations core conventions, but this has not impacted on harvesting methods. Further to this the use of pesticides and fertilisers on cotton crops can pose a serious threat to the health of cotton pickers when no protective clothing is issued.



Creating garments

Low pay, lack of rights, and appalling conditions are standard for millions of garment workers according to many NGOs and campaign groups. Campaigning organisation *War on Want* has reported on the current situation for Bangladeshi workers, where the living wage has fallen by half in real terms in the last ten years. Despite a definition of a living wage set out by The Ethical Trading Initiative and campaigning by various NGOs, Labour Behind The Label and the Ethical Fashion Forum still report on the inadequate pay provisions for textile and garment workers.

Making clothes also entails dyeing and bleaching and other finishing processes that can create a polluting, hazardous discharge to local waterways and can leave communities without access to safe drinking water.

Polyester

Polyester is used to make mass produced clothes and can often be found mixed with cotton in uniforms and work wear such as tabards and aprons. Polyester is made by melting and combining two types of oil derived plastic pellet. It is non biodegradable and its production creates emissions of heavy metals, cobalt and manganese salts, sodium bromide, titanium dioxide, antimony oxide and acetaldehyde. All are potential pollutants if discharged into the environment. "polyester NEEDS factories with all the capital investment, machinery, and concentration of power and chemicals that entails" (WWF).

The following issues should be considered in relation to poverty awareness:

- The climate impact of an oil-based product, raw material collection and transportation impacts.
- The effects of synthetic dyes on the aquatic environment where no appropriate discharge controls are in place.
- Higher temperatures and therefore greater energy use are required to make and dye synthetic cloth than are needed for natural fibre textiles.
- Like cotton, garment workers are often subject to poor welfare and conditions.

Possible solutions

Many groups are working to raise the profile of poverty issues and other unacceptable current standards in the global clothing supply chain. Most campaigns focus on high street retailers and the influence of individual consumers. However, reports and evidence collated by these campaign groups are also relevant to commercial clothing.

Certification and labelling schemes are designed to provide assurance of better standards for workers and communities involved from seed to cloth. If suppliers of clothing are able to provide products with these certifications, it should guarantee a minimum standard at different points in the supply chain.

SA 8000

The SA8000 Standard is an auditable certification standard based on International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The official description of this audit and assurance standard is 'a credible, comprehensive and efficient tool for assuring humane workplaces'.

Fairtrade certification

The Fairtrade minimum price is the price that a buyer has to pay to a producer. This is not fixed, but set at a level that covers the cost of sustainable production. This means it acts as a safety net for farmers at times when world markets fall. Producers and traders can also negotiate a higher price, for example on the basis of quality or organic standards. Cotton is available with Fairtrade certification, however this applies to cotton producers and not to garment workers further along the supply chain.

Organic certified cotton

Organic cotton, grown without the use of oil based fertilisers and synthetic pesticides, is one way in which cotton farming can be made more sustainable and the health risks to farmers and cotton pickers reduced. Waterways will be free of synthetic pollutants and the risk of people being contaminated by hazardous chemicals will be minimised when these methods are applied. Clothing products are most likely to be certified by the Soil Association in the UK, see www.defra.gov.uk/farm/organic/standards/certbodies/approved.htm for all approved certifiers. It is important to note that organic cotton production takes time to implement and there is only a set volume available so it is not a solution to poverty reduction for all clothing supplied in the UK at this time.

Examples of the real life impact of pollution on communities

Taihu Lake China - phosphor and nitrogen discharges here were uncontrolled, resulting in reoccurring algae blooms rendering the lake poisonous. Among the unregulated local manufacturers were dyeing factories. An estimated 30 million people rely on the lake for domestic water use and 2.3 million were without drinking water for over a week as a result of one algae outbreak.

Savar region, Bangladesh - the establishment here of an industrial site or EPZ (Export Processing Zone) where garment and dyeing businesses are set up to export products around the world, has led to uncontrolled effluent discharge into the water system leading to poor harvests, increased water borne disease and a reliance on wells for domestic water needs.

Recommendations

- ◎ *Ask key questions of tendering suppliers about the auditing of factories in relation to working conditions and pay (i.e. SA 8000), the source of cotton and specifically if it comes from Uzbekistan, and the measures in place to prevent local pollution from dyeing and finishing processes.*
- ◎ *Is there scope to include 'fairly traded', organic (or equivalents) accredited cotton in the products being supplied? This measure could reduce the poverty impacts of the clothing purchased.*
- ◎ *Look for scope for supply of products that includes recycled content for man-made fibres? This measure could reduce the poverty impacts of the clothing purchased.*

REFERENCES/FURTHER INFORMATION

Labour Behind the Label - www.labourbehindthelabel.org
War on Want - www.waronwant.org
People and Planet Redress Fashion Campaign - peopleandplanet.org/redressfashion
No Sweat - www.nosweat.org.uk
International Labour Rights Forum - www.laborrights.org
Pesticide Action Network- PAN - www.pan-uk.org