

# **Certification of organic cotton and textiles**

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## **Introduction**

The textile supply-chain is complex and global. Fashion changes fast and customer's preferable choices are volatile. The manufacture of organic textiles is therefore a very complex issue and actions need to be focused on various subjects:

## **The Fibre**

Starting point for any kind of organic textiles is the fibre. It is the basic principle that organic textiles need to be made of organic fibres, at least partly. Organic fibres are natural fibres and can be of plant or animal origin, such as cotton, wool, silk, linen, hemp and many others. The organic production of natural fibres is regulated by the general laws and regulations for organic production and no difference is made whether these products are intended for food purpose or textile use.

## **Manufacturing**

Processing of organic fibres to garments, home-textiles or hygienic products is not yet regulated by Government laws: Regulation (EU) No. 834/2007, the NOP National Organic Programme and JAS do explicitly exclude textile products from certification. This has led to the situation that there are presently more than 50 different private organic textile labels on the market, all with different standards, requirements and quality assurance systems, thus leaving the consumer in a quite confusing jungle of labels.

## **The answer: Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS)**

The International Working Group on Global Organic Textile Standard was formed as an initiative of leading standard organizations in 2002 with the goal to unify the various existing standards and draft standards which caused confusion with market participants and consumers and were an obstacle to free international trade with organic textiles.

After almost 7 years of combined efforts GOTS has become the leading organic textile processing standard. More than 2000 textile facilities are already participating in the inspection and certification system of GOTS. The first large-scale enterprise that committed towards the GOTS was the US based and world-wide largest retailer Wal-Mart. The participating entities include processing, manufacturing as well as im- and export companies of fabrics and garments from small-scale units up to the largest vertical integrated enterprises mainly producing for the North American, European and Japanese sales markets.

One major achievement of GOTS – and most probably one of the success key factors - is the publication of "Positive lists". Due to the fact that mass market retailers and nameable brands as well as their wet processing enterprises demand dyestuffs and chemicals that meet the related criteria of GOTS, the chemical supply industry cooperate closely with approved certifiers to create positive lists indicating the accepted products. For more than 25 chemical suppliers thousands of dyestuffs and chemicals have already been assessed especially by the certifiers IMO, Control Union Certifications, ICEA and OneCert and the accepted ones are listed on individual positive lists. Leading suppliers such as Huntsman (formerly Ciba), DyStar, BASF or CHT already actively advertise compliance of a range of their products with the GOTS and circulate their corresponding approved positive lists.

The GOTS key criteria for fibre production can be figured out as following:

- ✓ The two label system requires 95% respective 70% fibres certified organic (excluding accessories).
- ✓ Organic certification on basis of recognized international or national standards (s.a. EEC 2092/91, USDA NOP).
- ✓ Certification of fibres from conversion period is possible with restrictions.
- ✓ Certifier needs to be internationally recognized according to ISO 65 and/or IFOAM accredited.

The following key criteria for processing and manufacturing are valid:

- ✓ At all stages through the processing organic fibre products have to be separated from conventional fibre products and need to be clearly identified.
- ✓ All chemical inputs (s.a. dyes, auxiliaries and process chemicals) are to be assessed and must meet basic requirements on toxicity and biodegradability.
- ✓ Exclusion of critical inputs s.a. toxic heavy metals, formaldehyde and GMO substances.
- ✓ Restrictions for accessories (e.g. no PVC, nickel or chrome permitted, no plastic appliqué or inlays).
- ✓ The waste water of all wet processing units must be treated in a functional waste water treatment plant.
- ✓ Meeting social minimum criteria (based on ILO key norms) is compulsory for all processors.

The GOTS certification covers the entire processing chain: Operators from post harvest handling up to garment making (incl. ex- and importers) have to undergo an onsite annual inspection cycle. Additionally GOTS counts on a dual system consisting of on-site auditing and residue testing and works with a system of

In the field of inspection and certification GOTS is cooperating with approved certification bodies. Beside the requirement that certifiers need to be accredited ISO 65 and become approved by the IWG for GOTS certification, it is also a prerequisite that the organization discontinues to certify according to an own standard. This measure was chosen to support the goal of a harmonised Global Standard and led to the consequence that the certifiers Control Union Certifications (formerly Skal International), EcoCert, ETKO and ICEA dropped their own established standards and introduced to their clients the GOTS certification scheme. Names and contact details of all approved certifiers are listed on the website [www.global-standard.org](http://www.global-standard.org).

### **Social criteria in organic cotton production**

Social aspects have always been a sensitive issue in the textile sector. In recent campaigns NGOs have sharply criticized child labour in the cotton industry in Asia: “in Uzbekistan alone – the world’s 2nd largest cotton exporter – the government orders hundreds of thousands of children – some as young as seven – to harvest the annual cotton crop. In Andhra Pradesh, India, over 100,000 children have been documented working for 13 hours a day for just US50 cents. In West Africa, children are trafficked to work in cotton fields. It is understandable that consumers of organic textiles expect that minimum social criteria are fulfilled when it comes to the production of such products” ([www.ejfoundation.org](http://www.ejfoundation.org)).

GOTS is requesting minimum social requirements from their certified manufacturers (ref. see Chapter 3 of GOTS), however the farm level is currently not included. As organic certification does not necessarily comprise social criteria there is a concern about the social conditions on farm-level. There are private schemes such as FLOs Transfair and IMOs FairForLife, which offer comprehensive standards for all levels of the product chain, including fair trade aspects ([www.fairforlife.org](http://www.fairforlife.org)).

**Conclusion**

The global mechanism in the textile industry needed a common approach of leading standard setters in the niche market of organic textiles to create a considerable awareness in the retail market and to the end consumer. With IVN, Soil Association, OTA and Japan Organic Cotton Association four nameable organisations have taken the responsibility and committed to implement these standards in their schemes. Supported by the remarkable growth in consumption of organic fibre (especially cotton) worldwide the Global Organic Textile Standard is in an excellent position to become the basic tool for an international common understanding of environmental friendly production systems and social accountability in the organic textile sector. In order to strengthen the reliability of the programme more focus will have to be given to social and fair trade aspects in the near future.