

Responding to Material Issues in Sustainable Cotton Production

Cotton production is affected by many changing environmental, social, and economic issues. To fully understand the current material issues affecting cotton farmers, and how best to adapt its sustainable cotton programmes to meet these needs, CottonConnect surveyed stakeholders across the cotton supply chain.



In 2023, CottonConnect conducted a survey amongst farmers, implementing partners, ginners, and employees, in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and China, with a total of 106 respondents.

The survey sought stakeholders' views on the most important issues for sustainable cotton production, and their recommendations for strengthening the REEL Cotton Programme.

Due to CottonConnect's close connection with those directly involved in sustainable cotton production, the survey provided quantitative and qualitative findings of the real-world issues facing the cotton industry today.

KEY FINDINGS

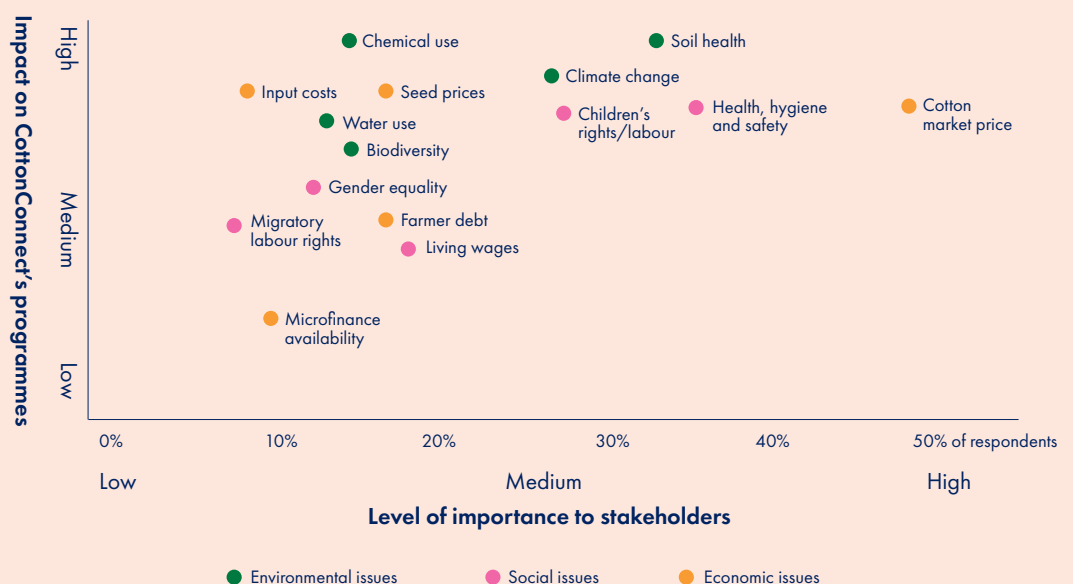
- Soil health has become the most important environmental factor for sustainable cotton, increasing from third place in a similar survey conducted in December 2020.
- Health, hygiene and safety remains the most important social factor, with children's rights/labour rising to second place, from fifth place in 2020.
- Cotton market price remains the most important economic factor, with farmer debt rising to second place, from third place in 2020.
- A lack of resources and rights compared with men continues to affect women farmers.

TOP MATERIAL ISSUES

The top material issues are those identified as the most important to stakeholders and also having a potentially high impact on CottonConnect's programmes.

The top five material issues are: **cotton market price;** **health, hygiene and safety;** **soil health;** **children's rights/labour;** **and climate change.**

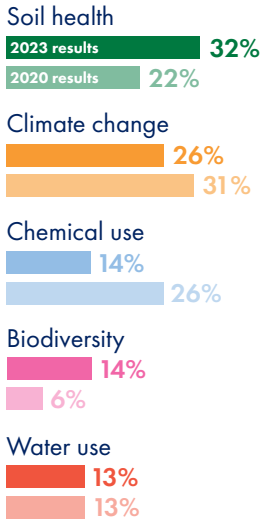
MATERIALITY GRID



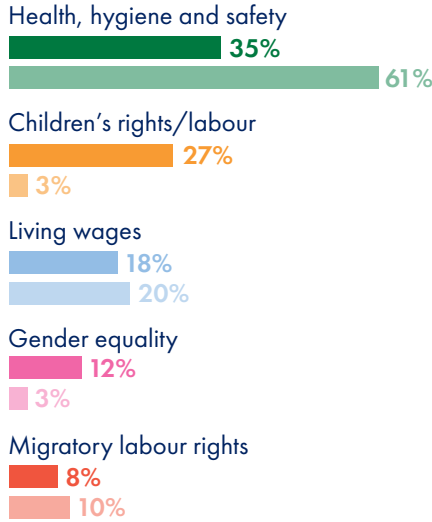
Environmental, social and economic issues

In the stakeholder survey, respondents were asked to rank environmental, social and economic issues in order of importance to sustainable cotton production.

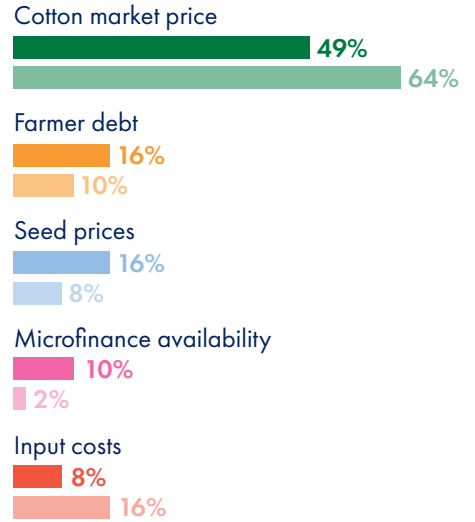
ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES



SOCIAL ISSUES



ECONOMIC ISSUES



% of respondents ranking these topics as 'most important'

EFFECTIVE METHODS TO ADDRESS MATERIAL ISSUES

Respondents were asked which were the most effective methods for addressing the issues affecting sustainable cotton production. Government regulation and policy were ranked as most effective. Corporate sustainable sourcing programs and initiatives were ranked as the second most effective, indicating the need for continued investment by branded manufacturers and retailers in sustainable cotton programmes as part of their sustainable sourcing commitments.



Ranked by % of respondents choosing each area

REEL COTTON PROGRAMME

The survey provided an opportunity to ask those closest to implementing the REEL Cotton Programme what aspects of the programme should be strengthened. The aspect receiving the largest number of suggestions, after farmer training, was soil health, mirroring its position as the most important environmental issue for sustainable cotton production.

Healthy soil with organic nutrients is needed to maintain the quality and yield of cotton cultivated. The deterioration of soil health due to climate change and excessive chemicals threatens the long-term production of cotton. The REEL Cotton Programme trains cotton farmers on how to maintain soil health sustainably, for example by using bio-diverse fertilisers, composting, intercropping, and water management. CottonConnect supports farmers with soil testing, and constantly pilots innovative and regenerative practices to improve soil health.

Health, hygiene and safety – reported as the most important social issue – remains a key priority for the implementation of the REEL Cotton Programme. In 2023, CottonConnect published the first-ever Responsible Gins Code of Conduct, following six years working with its ginning partners on health and safety (HSSE) practices and improvement programmes.

Stakeholders agreed that additional performance indicators should be set for the REEL Cotton Programme in the areas of climate change mitigation, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, traceability, sustainable livelihoods, soil health, and women's empowerment. Evaluation methods for these indicators are being established and CottonConnect has set goals for GHG emissions, biodiversity, traceability, smallholder livelihoods, soil health, and women's empowerment.

WOMEN IN COTTON PRODUCTION

Women are a crucial but frequently ignored stakeholder in global cotton production. In many growing communities, women play key roles in planting and harvesting that determine the quantity, quality, and sustainability of cotton farming. Women can face gender-specific issues or be more affected by certain issues. Survey respondents were asked which issues most affect women cotton farmers and workers.

Lack of rights/decision-making compared with men **61%**

Market cotton prices **49%**

Effects of climate change **45%**

Limited access to technology **43%**

Lack of training opportunities **36%**

Lower income compared with men **34%**

Ranked by % of respondents choosing each area

The survey respondents reported that the REEL Cotton Programme brings benefits for women cotton farmers and workers, to support them while facing these issues. This includes:

- Technical competence through training to produce quality cotton
- Awareness and protection of women’s rights and child rights
- Awareness of daily cotton price
- Increase in employment or starting businesses to improve livelihoods
- Increased cotton rates through introduction with local organisations
- Becoming self-reliant and empowered
- Knowledge leading to confidence in decision-making alongside men

GET IN TOUCH

For more information, or to find out how CottonConnect can support your organisation, contact us today:

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BRANDS’ ESG GOALS

CottonConnect identified the top environmental, social, and governance (ESG) goals of branded manufacturers and retailers sourcing cotton for their products. In the stakeholder survey, respondents were asked to rank these topics in order of importance, in relation to ensuring cotton production is sustainable.

Sustainable sourcing of raw materials **34%**

Circularity **25%**

Traceability **20%**

Climate action and emission reductions **12%**

Fair labour **9%**

% of respondents ranking these topics as ‘most important’

Sustainable sourcing of raw materials remains a key focus for brands and producers alike. By listening to raw material producers and responding to the material issues in sustainable cotton production in its programmes, CottonConnect supports a resilient and robust cotton supply chain.



CottonConnect’s purpose is to reimagine cotton supply chains in order to help textile producers and farmers enjoy better livelihoods.

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