

Growing organic crops for export – an ethical approach in Africa?

PAN UK and African partners have been promoting organic cotton as a way to provide safer and more sustainable livelihoods in the West African savannah lands for over 15 years. However, with current concerns about food security, should we be promoting cotton, or other cash crops, grown for export to Europe? PAN UK interviews field agent Mr Emmanuel Dossoumou from the Beninese Organisation for Promotion for Organic Agriculture (OBEPAB) on his views.

Organisation Béninoise pour la Promotion de l'Agriculture Biologique (OBEPAB), PAN UK's partner in the Fibre, Food and Beauty project, is exploring ways to improve market prices for the cashew and sheanut grown by Beninese organic cotton farmer associations as part of their crop rotations [PN83pp4-6]. To understand better local views on the pros and cons of organic farming and issues of food security and export versus local markets, PAN UK interviewed three OBEPAB field agents, who work with village-level farmer groups, and five organic cotton farmers in March 2010. Here are the views of Mr Dossoumou, a field agent, and Mrs Martine, a farmer.

When and how did you become involved in organic cotton production?

OBEPAB recruited me after the death of the supervisor of the organic cotton farmers in Sêto village. But I was already interested in organic production as a way to eliminate the high number of poisonings among cotton farmers.

What do you like about organic cotton production and why?

The health of farmers and their families is not affected. OBEPAB bodies are well organised and committed to paying cotton producers on time, in contrast to the disorganisation of the conventional cotton supply chain.

What are its drawbacks?

There are arguments between organic cotton farmers and conventional cotton farmers due to issues of field borders. Also, organic cotton farmers are not represented in national farmer groups and do not profit from subsidies or other benefits provided by national bodies specifically dedicated to the development of cotton production in Benin. All the work in organic production is manual and finally organic cotton farmers do not cultivate large land surfaces.

What do you like most about your job?

The total absence of extremely toxic products which are very dangerous for us as supervisor agents, and also for farmers and their families. I also appreciate the money I earn which allows me to supplement my small pension.

Do you think that organic farmers should focus on export crops, such as cotton?

No, because there are other crops such as food staples. The market for these is not as organised as the cotton market. The latter benefits African farmers only to a limited extent because of subsidies given to



American and Chinese cotton farmers which lowers the cotton price on the international market. So it is vital that organic cotton farmers become interested in other crops.

Has food security improved in the last five years in the village where you work?

Yes, because now farmers even try to sell their food. However, they do not find favourable markets because the prices fixed by traders do not help them.

What could be done to improve food security and the well-being of your village?

It is a matter of modernising the production methods of the farmers in this village and

View from a farmer

Mrs Martine Okou grows cotton, cowpea, maize, soya, cashew, cassava and yam and keeps chickens on her small farm in the Djidja region of Benin. She converted to organic production in 2000, mainly because of the huge debts she and other farmers accumulated under conventional production and the frequent poisonings suffered by those handling pesticides. She recognises that yield per hectare is lower compared to when she used synthetic fertiliser but appreciates the health security that organic production means for her family and workers, and that the food she grows is safer to eat. Martine described the fair price at which her organic cotton is bought as one of the real benefits for her family from converting their farming system.

More food has been grown in Martine's area in the last five years, partly due to government purchase schemes for cereals, motivating more farmers to plant food crops as well as cotton. To increase food provision further, she says that organic farmers need partners who can make available tractors, ploughs and other means to cultivate land more efficiently. Martine feels that the capital city, Cotonou, and external markets are the most promising for organic produce. When asked about concerns of some European consumers about the ethics of exporting cash crops from African smallholders, Martine replied 'I need to sell my product to a client who will buy it at a fair price. The market where we can obtain this price is obviously the external market'.

