

The Limits of Cotton: White Gold Shows its Dark Side in Benin

By Leif Brottem | July 14, 2005

According to World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz, it is an “extraordinary moment in history” i for Africa. World leaders have made a big step towards debt cancellation. If celebrity involvement is any indication, this is the largest upwelling of public concern in Europe and North America for African poverty in recent years.

One surprise theme of this movement has been cotton farming, an industry on which over 15 million Africans depend on for their livelihoods. Oxfam, a UK-based charity and development organization, has led an effective campaign to bring cotton subsidies in rich countries to the forefront of the debate on extreme poverty in Africa.

Eliminating the billions of dollars in handouts to some 25,000 American cotton growers would benefit countries in West and Central Africa that depend heavily on exporting the crop. However, the belief that cotton is a panacea for rural Africans ignores a huge problem: in the regions where the crop is grown, the land is being destroyed.

In Benin, a small West African nation that receives 80% of its export revenues from cotton ,ii life passes to the rhythm of that crop’s planting and harvest. In Benin’s largest producing region of Banikoara, decrepit trucks loaded impossibly high with white fluff rumble by every few minutes during the weeks of harvest. Just as hunting is etched into the collective identity of the local Bariba people, the community’s identity in recent times has been defined by growing “white gold”.

Banikoara’s cotton boom began long before the environmental impacts of growing the cash crop were considered. Now that most local forests have been cut down, residents point to the crop to explain why temperatures are rising, there is less rainfall than before, and all the wildlife has disappeared, including the elephants which attracted the area’s original inhabitants.

Losing the Forest

Benin loses around 100,000 hectares of forest every year ,iii a loss that is most pronounced in cotton producing regions. In practical terms, forest loss means fewer sources of medicine, wood for fuel and construction, and livestock forage. Rapid population growth has outstripped traditional natural resource management systems. To feed their growing families and produce enough cotton to pay off debt and buy necessities, people leave less agricultural land fallow and exhaust the soil, which forces them to clear more land the following year.

“Cotton production here will have to shrink eventually because the soil is being exhausted” reported Orou Guere, secretary of a local farmers’ cooperative. No one knows better than those who work the land but this statement is supported by recent research. A study conducted in Southern Mali, another important West African cotton belt, raised questions about the widely held belief that poverty is the main driver of environmental degradation in the region. Instead, it showed that cotton production is a more important factor in exhausting the soil . iv

A 2002 study conducted in Northern Benin found that 65% of farmers surveyed noticed that cotton was causing deforestation. And 75% felt that cotton was responsible for depleting the soil .v Unlike other cash crops grown in developing countries such as cacao, the raw material for chocolate, and coffee, cotton does not tolerate shade. In order to maximize production, farmers are obliged to cut down all but a few trees on their plots.

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Moreover, as virtually the only source of income in rural areas, cotton farming operates to a simple logic: the more planted, the more money earned. In many localities, clearing a new field merely requires the consent of neighbors. Until recently, locals were able to freely plant cotton within Regional Park “W,” a recently designated UN World Heritage Site and one of the last contiguous wildlands in West Africa.

Adapting to the new pressure of sustainable development is extremely difficult given that cotton receipts pay for schools, clinics, and other community infrastructure. Sabi Dingui, a student who has grown cotton all his life, commented that without the crop, farmers would be “in the dark” without money to pay for school contributions or medicine.

Growing Poverty

Africans have a more difficult time paying for such basic necessities than they did 25 years ago. In Benin, 22% of the population does not get enough to eat . vi As the wealth gap between Africa and the rest of the world has grown into an alarming chasm, the term “fourth world” has been broached to describe the continent’s position in the global economy. The subject was a top priority at the latest Group of Eight (G-8) summit in Gleneagles, Scotland. Concurrently, Bob Geldof organized the “Live 8” benefit concert as part of the “Make Poverty History” campaign.

West African cotton farmers have made some surprise media appearances in recent years. Countless articles have drawn a clear line between their poverty and the now infamous U.S. government handouts. “Dump poverty, not cotton” was the slogan on a flyer depicting Senegalese pop star Youssou N’Dour that Oxfam International released as part of its “Fair Trade” campaign.

Oxfam, working with other influential organizations such as CARE, has elevated trade policy to a high profile role in efforts to end poverty. As part of its mission to support “sustainable livelihoods,” Oxfam also supports work in natural resource conservation .vii Its involvement in small-scale organic cotton production in West Africa is a positive example of this. However, the group’s campaign to open global markets to West African cash crops will have a far greater long-term impact on the region’s landscape.

In support of this strategy, Oxfam reported that, in one year, Mali received \$37.7 million in aid from the United States but lost \$43 million in potential cotton revenue due to agricultural subsidies . vii The organization also asserts that a 1% increase in their share of global exports would generate \$70 billion for Africa alone . ix Such numbers are hard-hitting and direct but do not give the full picture of human development. Katherine Daniels, an Oxfam America trade policy advisor also said the organization is supporting “several initiatives to promote cleaner cotton using fewer chemical inputs, both in the U.S. and in Africa.” Organic cotton farming has great potential because it “fetches a higher price on the world market than conventional cotton, contributing to improved livelihoods for farmers,” she said.

Still, Oxfam hasn’t addressed the ecological limits of cotton as an export crop, in particular because cotton cannot grow in shade and triggers deforestation. The risk is great that expanding cotton monoculture will not only increase the strain on the local ecosystem but also on other land users, notably the large number of local pastoralists.

Cotton farmers in Banikoara must coexist on the land with the Fulani, an ethnic group that recently shared the media limelight with Wolfowitz during his trip to Nigeria. The Fulani have played an essential role in agricultural systems across West and Central Africa for centuries yet they are adversely affected by expanding cotton production. As the forests that herders rely on to feed their animals disappear, they move closer to farmers’ fields or into protected areas.

As a politically marginalized group, the herdsman and their cattle, which number over 100,000 in the district of Banikoara alone ,x usually receive the blame for ensuing conflicts. Commenting on this situation, a local Fulani chief stated, “We need to live too.”

Alternatives to Cotton

Alternatives such as ecoagriculture attempt to address this, and other issues, through more adaptive and diversified land use systems . xi One of the fundamentals of ecoagriculture is the use of native plants that hold economic and ecological value. Economic incentives to exploit and conserve native vegetation are essential but in Benin’s cottonbelt, such incentives

are practically nonexistent. Shea butter, a valuable ingredient in cosmetics, is an indigenous product that holds such potential yet there is no infrastructure for large-scale production in Banikoara. In some cases, male farmers cut down shea butter trees, which are exploited by women, to make room for their cotton.

In light of changing local conditions, diversification will be more important for farmers' livelihoods than improving market conditions for one single cash crop. The recent commencement of an international effort to conserve the biodiversity of Park "W" is radically transforming access to land. The park, which includes nearly 50% of the district of Banikoara within its boundaries, previously served as an unregulated resource pool and important route for cattle migration. Bans on grazing and hunting in the park are now strictly enforced under pain of a large fine or prison sentence. Herdsmen and farmers alike are driven even further into settled areas.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), a network of scientists based in Gland, Switzerland, is working to address this and other issues by promoting ecologically sustainable livelihoods amongst people residing near the park. What is the highest priority of the project? It is to diversify away from cotton farming.

Instead of working at cross purposes with conservation groups, development agencies and G-8 governments must match the rhetoric of sustainable development with policies that integrate poverty reduction and biodiversity protection. In cotton-dependent areas such as Banikoara, farmers would conserve the forest habitat that bees require if a viable market existed for honey.

But cotton is king in this part of the world and the ambitions of the international community are not always consistent. Proposals by park officials to reduce cotton production near the park are met with hostility and accusations of "worsening the peoples' poverty" by agricultural extension officials who are under pressure to ensure that the cotton piles high in the markets. Weeks after the park director repeats his warning to farmers that consequences of setting foot in the park will be grave, officials in the same agency arrived to tell the same farmers to double their output of cotton.

The forest that is giving way to cotton fields is also the source of traditional medicines. Such cures are still very important for rural residents who often lack the money to buy or do not have access to the modern varieties. Sitting under a mango tree in his courtyard, the chief traditional healer of Banikoara, Lotoro Theophile, described how he now must ask herdsmen to gather materials, which used to be abundant, during their trips deep into the bush.

Degradation of their local environment is not lost on those who live with it every day. Unlike policymakers in Washington and Geneva, the farmers of Banikoara know they cannot rely solely on cotton. Many are planting cashew and mango trees as alternatives. One cotton farmer stated enthusiastically: "These trees are our retirement!"

Leveling the playing field of global trade is a worthy goal, particularly vis-à-vis the poor who are currently shut out of the markets for their products. However, the real potential for market-based solutions to poverty in Africa is seriously constrained by growing populations that rely on shrinking areas of land for life's necessities.

As farmers in Banikoara harvest their cotton, the refusal of the Americans to practice what they preach and give up subsidies to their own is not the most important topic of conversation. The corn and millet crops are more likely on peoples' minds. If in times past, people thought cotton was the answer, no one is kidding themselves anymore. Africa can't escape poverty through single crop export solutions.

Leif Brottem is a Foreign Policy In Focus scholar (online at www.fpiif.org). He wrote this article following two years of grassroots conservation work with local people in the most productive agricultural district of Benin.

Notes:

- i. British Broadcasting Corporation. June 13, 2005. World Bank has a role' in Africa. <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk>
- ii. Heritage Index of Economic Freedom: <http://www.heritage.org/research/features/index>
- iii. Republic of Benin Ministry of Environment and Urban Habitat statistics
- iv. Logan, Ikubolajeh; Mosely, William, eds. 2004. African Environment and Development: Rhetoric, Programs, Realities, Ashgate: Burlington, USA.
- v. Bradley, Bill. 2002 Fair Trade Meets Farm Aid, Fulbright research statistical survey, Banikoara, Benin.
- vi. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). 2005. African Economic Outlook 2004-2005. OECD: Paris. <http://www.oecd.org/dev/pea>
- vii. McNeely, Jeffrey; Scherr, Sara. 2003. Ecoagriculture: Strategies to Feed the World and Save Biodiversity, Island Press: Washington, DC.
- viii. Oxfam International Release. October 1, 2002. Dakar, Senegal.
- ix. Oxfam International. 2002. Rigged Rules and Double Standards: Trade, Globalization, and the Fight Against Poverty Boston, USA. <http://www.maketradeair.com/en/index>
- x. Republic of Benin Ministry of Agriculture statistics
- xi. McNeely, Jeffrey; Scherr, Sara. 2003. Ecoagriculture: Strategies to Feed the World and Save Biodiversity, Island Press: Washington, DC.

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