

TACKLING POLLUTION FROM THE APPAREL SECTOR: WATER STEWARDSHIP WITH ETHIOPIAN COTTON FARMERS

Article by Aid By Trade Foundation and Alliance for Water Stewardship



INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) helped fund a multi-stakeholder project to tackle water pollution caused by the apparel sector. The project is a collaborative consortium between Aid by Trade Foundation (AbTF), Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS), CDP, Solidaridad East & Central Africa, and Water Witness International.

Each partner brought a specific area of expertise to the project. AbTF and Solidaridad led on creating meaningful change in the Ethiopian cotton sector, Water Witness focused on engaging with Ethiopian manufacturers and industrial parks, AWS concentrated on brand engagement and providing overall guidance on water stewardship globally, and CDP worked on engaging investors.

The goal of the project is to improve health, livelihoods and environmentally sustainable growth through preferential investment, purchasing, policy and practice for water stewardship throughout Africa's apparel supply chain.

This article provides a snapshot of learning from the project, focusing on the collaboration between Aid by Trade Foundation and the Alliance for Water Stewardship within the Ethiopian cotton production context. The two partners undertook a comparison (led by AWS with input from AbTF) between their respective standard schemes – the AWS Standard and CmiA Standards. This involved a water security scan to identify current practice and opportunities on water in Ethiopian cotton production (led by AbTF and Solidaridad) and combining their findings with existing expertise to create new water training modules for the CmiA system.

ALLIANCE FOR WATER STEWARDSHIP

AWS works to ignite and nurture global and local leadership in credible water stewardship, that recognises and secures freshwater's social, cultural, environmental and economic value. It does this through two avenues, one is the global membership collaboration which convenes businesses, non-governmental organisations, the public sector and others, working across a variety of industries, including textiles and apparel.

The second avenue is through the custodianship of the International Water Stewardship Standard (AWS Standard). The AWS Standard offers a credible, globally applicable framework for water users to understand their own water use and impacts and to work collaboratively and transparently with others towards sustainable water management within the wider catchment context. In short, it drives, recognises and rewards good water stewardship performance.

THE AWS STANDARD

The AWS Standard was first launched in 2014 in response to the question, 'How do you do credible water stewardship?' Since then, over 250 sites have been certified worldwide to the core, gold and platinum criteria. The AWS membership has grown to include over 170 organisations from major brands and suppliers to NGOs and local governments. AWS members contribute to the sustainability of local water resources through their adoption and promotion of the AWS Standard.

A workshop held in a cotton farming community in Tigray region of Ethiopia hosted by Solidaridad.

Source: Aid by Trade Foundation.





COTTON MADE IN AFRICA STANDARD (CmiA)

Since its inception in 2005, CmiA has been committed to environmental protection and improved living and working conditions for smallholder cotton farmers in sub-Saharan Africa. CmiA-verified cotton is cultivated in 11 countries and is used to manufacture yarn, fabric, clothing and home textiles in all of the major global production markets, reaching a total of 51 countries. Roughly 40% of cotton produced in sub-Saharan Africa is CmiA certified. This includes around one million smallholder farmers.

AID BY TRADE FOUNDATION

The AbTF strives to sustainably develop value chains in countries where raw materials are produced in order to generate maximum added value, promote environmental protection and secure the livelihoods of future generations. It does this by engaging two Standard systems, one on cotton (Cotton made in Africa – CmiA) and the other on cashmere. Through these standards an alliance of textile companies and brands has been formed that represent the entire value chain – they purchase the sustainable raw material at market prices and pay a licence fee to use the seals.

The CmiA Standard applies to Managing Entities – usually cotton companies with one or more ginning facilities – operating in sub-Saharan Africa with a direct link to small-scale farmers. Managing Entities must adhere to the CmiA standard and demonstrate that the CmiA unit operates according to standard requirements. Based on self-assessments and third-party verification, they are required to design and implement ‘continuous improvement’ plans to maintain or advance performance against CmiA standard criteria. This model, based on stakeholder engagement and continual improvement, follows the same approach as water stewardship and the AWS Standard.

AWS AND CmiA STANDARDS COMPARISON

A gap analysis was carried out to compare the AWS and CmiA standard systems and help identify the different roles that AWS and CmiA play in sustainable cotton production. The comparison looked at the core indicators of the AWS Standard V 2.0 with CmiA Vol. 4.

It found that 60 of the CmiA requirements are almost fully compatible with the AWS Standard core indicators, eight are partially compatible and none are non-compatible. It also found that the AWS Standard adds additional value through the stakeholder engagement process, with many of the AWS requirements for stakeholder engagement being partially met. The Managing Entities had a significant amount of information

for this, but CmiA is not as rigorous in this respect. This suggests that the AWS Standard can help CmiA-certified Managing Entities take the next step along their journey to water stewardship by providing a framework for engaging with external stakeholders and working to improve the context at catchment scale.

ETHIOPIAN COTTON WATER SECURITY SCAN

In water stewardship it is important to gather and fully understand as much information as possible about the local context. For this reason, before beginning their project work with cotton farmers in Ethiopia, AbTF and Solidaridad undertook a detailed [Water Security Scan of Ethiopian cotton production](#) (2021). The water security scan provided an overview of key water-related issues and practical guidance on implementing water stewardship in cotton production systems.

The findings demonstrate the importance of cotton for the Ethiopian economy and the number of water risks facing the sector. The Government of Ethiopia envisions the country as the textile manufacturing hub of Africa, with cotton forming a core pillar of this ambition. As part of their efforts to support the sustainable growth of the sector, they launched the National Cotton Development Strategy to run from 2017 until 2032. The strategy has been instrumental in the promotion of sustainable production practices.

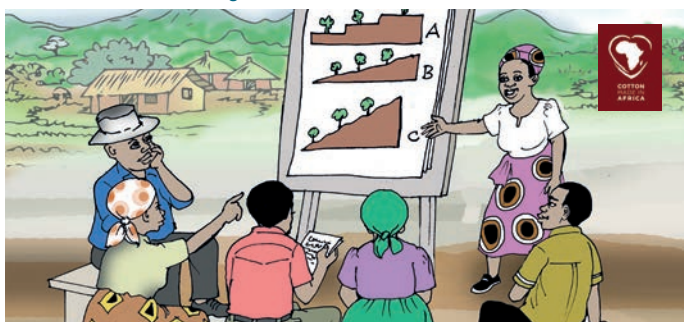
Ethiopia has a diverse cotton sector that supports the livelihoods of more than 600,000 people, from cultivation, harvest, ginning and spinning to further downstream with handloom production. Rain-fed cotton is the dominant type of production, practiced by small-scale farmers and large commercial farms. Over the coming years, water usage in cotton production is expected to grow. However, climate change is leading to more unpredictable rainfall patterns and longer periods of drought, and water availability will become increasingly variable. These risks are compounded by water pollution, invasive species, lack of sufficient clean water and sanitation, inadequate water governance and inequitable distribution of water. For Ethiopia to advance their cotton production and meet their ambitions, it is essential to mitigate these risks.

The water security scan looked at cotton production and water-related issues by region and hydrological boundary. It focused on three river basin case studies – Awash-Basin, Omo-Gibe Basin and North- and North-West Ethiopia. For each basin the report identified specific requirements for sustainable cotton production, the impacts of climate change and water-related challenges and potential opportunities. The findings were used to develop water stewardship plans that will be implemented with producers on the ground.

TRAINING MODULES

AbTF used the water security scan findings, along with the AWS Standard requirements, to develop two water management training modules for the sustainable production of cotton.

The modules focus on homestead water management, WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) and water management for smallholder farmers working under rain-fed conditions. They include awareness on biodiversity at landscape level and compliance with safe use of (organic) pesticides to ensure good water quality. The first module, 'Coach the Farmer in Sustainable Water Use Practice', is a picture book to train smallholder cotton farmers directly. The second module, 'From Farm to Ginnery – Water in Smallholder Cotton Systems', is an illustrated manual for both farmers and the government extension service.



An illustration showing a farmer group discussing the best methods to retain water and prevent soil erosion on slopes.

Source: An Illustrated Training Manual For Sustainable Smallholder Cotton Production, CmiA.

The two training modules were reviewed during a stakeholder consultation that brought together experts from government institutions, SDC project partners and other relevant stakeholders, so that they could be validated and aligned with recommendations from the Ethiopian Government on water management. The final versions of the two training modules will be made available to the Ministry of Agriculture so that the training can be rolled out by the government extension service across Ethiopia.

The first versions of the modules were piloted by Solidaridad in October 2021 in a practical training-of-trainers workshop in a cotton farming community in Tigray region. AbTF cooperated with Solidaridad to incorporate the training feedback into a revised, second version. A target was set to train 300 farmers throughout 2022 using the training modules.

LESSONS LEARNT

During the project, it became evident to AbTF that it was important to involve national and regional government representatives in developing the training modules. By engaging with water governance, the module content could be aligned with national guidelines on water stewardship and it helped increase the level of ownership felt by local representatives.

AbTF also found that developing practical guidance on water stewardship for smallholder cotton farmers created high interest and demand amongst CmiA partners from other African countries. The practical recommendations in the training modules show how cotton can be cultivated in a way that mitigates negative impacts on nature while increasing the resilience of cotton farmers.

AWS will continue to seek ways to share the learning from this project with its global membership network and to ensure that opportunities for strengthening water stewardship in cotton farming are shared and acted upon.

CONCLUSION

The SDC project highlighted many learning points for its partners and their networks of stakeholders. The Ethiopian cotton water security scan led to the development of a robust framework to support cotton extension services, helping them to understand water stewardship and translate it into tangible actions for smallholder farmers. As a result of the project, key stakeholders are much better equipped to implement water stewardship and tackle major, inter-linked challenges for the African cotton sector, including climate change adaption and mitigation and biodiversity conservation. Applying the lessons learnt from this project to other regions of the continent will help secure a more sustainable future for the sector whilst embedding the water stewardship approach at its core.