

Handouts

Tracking the true cost of cotton

Cotton T-shirts are the product of a number of different global industries, with production in almost every country in the world. Here is an example:

A typical cotton farm in Burkina Faso is a freehold, worked on by a family who cultivate the six or eight hectares of land. One kilo of Burkina Faso-produced raw cotton is worth €0.23. For many of the cotton producers the cash they get from selling the cotton is the only money they receive in the whole year.

From the farm, the cotton is transported to the ginning factory to make lint, a process which takes the cost per kilo to €0.56. Workers are paid €73.40 every two weeks.

The cotton is now transported for export to the Togo port of Lome, where it is sold to merchants at €0.88 per kilo. Over half of it is sold to China: it is loaded onto cargo ships for ports such as Shanghai, where it is sold to local spinning factories for €0.97 per kilo. Most of the workers on the line come from poorer areas, often in China's vast rural hinterland. They live in dormitories in the factory and work very long hours for low pay.

The garments themselves - made for many of the West's most famous brands, often in the same massive factory as where the yarn is spun - are now taken to a port and loaded for export. The average price of a T-shirt imported into the US is €1.10, but a downtown department store in Manhattan will sell two for €14.70.

Cotton that started in Africa costing €0.56 a kilo is now worth €18.40 a kilo.

This information is from the Internet: BBC news channel programme, "Tracking the true cost of cotton", 2 May 2007.

The true cost of one cotton T-shirt

- Water use: 2,157 litres (45% is used for irrigation)
- Energy use: 8 kilowatt hours (28,800,000 Joules) of electricity for spinning and sewing machines
41.6 – 110 litres of fuel for transport by land and sea
- Transport distances: 8,851 – 15,128+ km
- Gas emissions: NO_x, CO, CO₂, (greenhouse gasses) SO₂, N₂O, volatile compounds
- Toxins: 1-3g pesticides, diesel exhaust, heavy metals (dyes)
- Cost on import: €0.44 – 0.77
- Child labour: in 17 countries, the average wage is €0.37 per day
- Miscellaneous: 53-91 g of fertilizer

Source: Earth Intelligence Network,
<http://true-cost.re-configure.org/>
<http://forum.re-configure.org>