



From the Cotton Field to the Wardrobe

By Alexandra Baier, supported by Heike Frese

The global textile chain

Before cotton textiles reach our wardrobes, they go on a long, eventful journey which takes them around the globe. They originate from the cultivated raw cotton and then they continue on through the processing and finishing of the fibre, respectively the material, to the clothing manufacturers and from there, via several retailer to the wearer's wardrobe. Many players are involved in the individual phases of production. The following is a rough outline of the present situation of cotton textiles in the textile industry.

Trade without barriers

For many years the international textile trade was strictly regulated by a complicated system of import restrictions. Industrial nations tried to protect their own textile industry from cheap imports. In January 2005, within the framework of negotiations on the liberalisation of world trade, the regulation (the Multi-Fibre Agreement) ended after 21 years of existence.

China clothes the world?

During the existence of the textile agreement, the global distribution of textile production has developed in such a way that for many poor countries in the South it has become an important export industry. For example, while China was allowed a low quota, other countries such as Bangladesh profited from the quota regulation. Now that quota implementation has ended, it is feared that developing countries will be forced out of the competition. Their main rival

is China: low wages, high flexibility and productivity, as well as the capability to mass production, are China's advantages and it is forecasted that China's share of the global textile trade could grow rapidly from 20% to 50%.

The textile chain

Besides the challenges presented by the global textile trade, the textile production chain from the raw product to the retail textile trade remains very complex and widely ramified. It is almost impossible to retrace a textile to its place of origin as supply structures in the textile and clothing industry are kept secret. In principle it is possible to retrace each production step. At each level of the production chain, power is divided among the various players and specific problems can be pinpointed. Good solutions have been found to some problems; however these solutions have not been put into practice widely enough or have not been imitated. Cotton plays a central role in the clothing and textile trade as it is used in a large proportion of production.

Cotton cultivation

Cotton cultivation takes place in many developing countries. Industrial countries such as the USA, however, are also involved. Their subsidies for growers and/or export subsidies put pressure on the world market price and obstruct Southern countries. Apart from low world market prices, the enormous use of pesticides in cultivation has drastic effects on the health of farmers and field workers and the environment. Cotton monoculture supplants food production. The problem of rivalry for the use of the land, health and environmental damage, as well as financial dependency can be counteracted by the cultivation of organic cotton. Organic cotton achieves a higher market price, health and ecological damage can be prevented and financial losses reduced. A variety of crop rotations replaces the usual monoculture of conventional cotton cultivation and simultaneously ensures that foodstuffs are also produced.

After the cultivation and harvest, the cotton is then separated. Seed kernels and impurities are separated from the fibre hairs. The fibre is then spun into

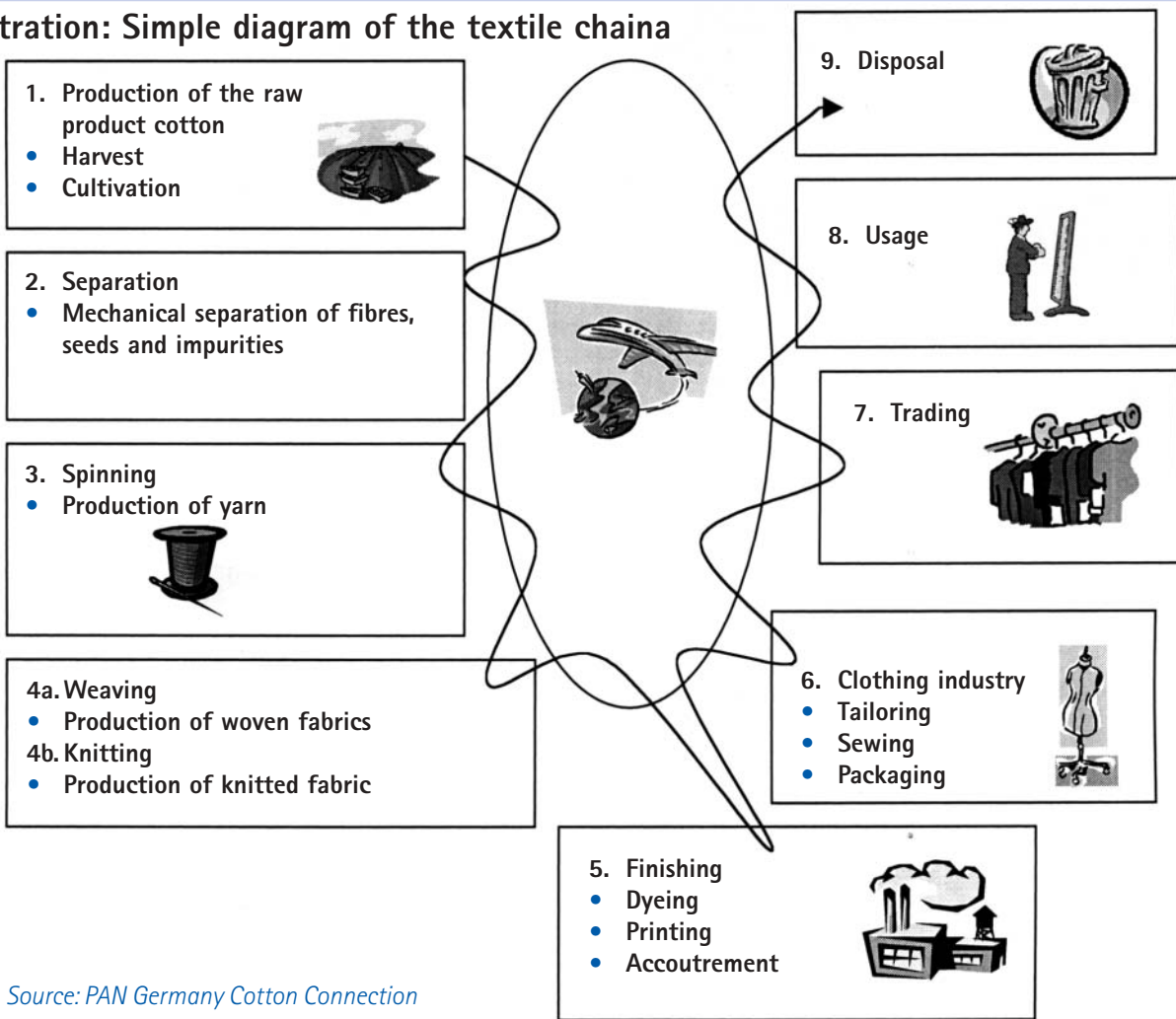
Data on the Textile and Clothing Industry

Number of producing countries	About 160
No. of official employed	23.6 Mio.
No. of informal employed	5-10 times the number of those officially employed
Gender comparison	80-90% women of those employed

Source: Ferenschild, Wick (2004)



Illustration: Simple diagram of the textile chaina



Source: PAN Germany Cotton Connection

yarn in a spinning mill. Separation normally takes place in the country of cultivation but the next steps, from the spinning onwards, can take place anywhere in the world. Whether the yarn is first dyed or woven respectively knitted, depends on the desired quality and the final product. The work involving textile finishing is, in almost every case, work associated with catastrophic working conditions mainly affecting workers' health.

Textile finishing
Textile finishing includes among other things, washing, bleaching, dyeing, printing and processing of textile fibres and fabrics. This work is often carried out in Southern countries as there the wages are lower and, above all, environmental regulations hardly play a role. In this way, costs for this type of work are kept to a minimum, to the detriment of the workers' health and the environment. It is hardly possible to judge what dangers

workers face. In Germany alone, 7,000 textile processing products are produced, and only a small proportion of these have been tested to find out their effects on health or ecology.

The Clothing Trade
Clothes production, meaning the tailoring and production of clothing, usually takes place in countries where the wages are very low. Clothing textiles are made most time in the so-called free



productions zones e.g. Bangladesh or El Salvador. Often unbearable working conditions exist in these zones. For the workers, it is mainly women who employed in the production process, this means unpaid overtime, working without a break, unions are not permitted and should a woman become pregnant, she risks losing her job.

Ecological and socially clean – it is possible!

Hess Natur, a German mail order company for natural textiles, shows that things can be done differently. Working together with the Clean Clothes Campaign, a consumer campaign which fights for better working conditions in the textile industry worldwide, Hess Natur has developed a standardized monitoring system for checking on working conditions. The system, which has been successfully put into practice, makes it easier for outsiders to understand how textiles can be produced in a socially acceptable manner. At the same time, Hess Natur envisages the possibility of giving small and medium-sized firms new controls with regard to maintaining social standards. At the end of the pilot project at the beginning of 2005, Hess Natur became the first German company to join the Dutch Fair Wear Foundation. The conditions for independent, transparent monitoring by means of a "Multi Stakeholder Initiative" are hereby fulfilled.

Other projects also see the possibility of combining social and ecological standards. The Catholic Land Youth (Katholi-

sche Landjugend) has run an extremely successful project since 1998. Organic cotton from Tanzania is manufactured in Kenya under Fair Trade conditions. Ready-made clothes, mainly t-shirts, are produced and during the processing phase ecological conditions have been steadily improved.

For every t-shirt sold, 50 cents go towards a social fund which is managed by the workers themselves. A Board of Directors, elected by the staff, administers the money in a trust account. The fund enables workers to take out small credits at good conditions for building houses, paying school fees or for credits for starting up small family businesses. This is often the only possibility of gaining access to capital as banks in Kenya do not give credits to plain workers and the 100% interest rates demanded by the money lenders are no alternative.

Joseph Munyao, dyer from the Bhupco company:

„With the money from the Eco-Fair Social fund I was able to buy a sewing machine for my wife so that she could start up a private tailoring business. We have already bought a rainproof roof, two metal windows and paid the school fees for my son with the income. We repaid the credit we took out long ago.

Source: LamuLamu (2004)



Transport

When one considers how many steps there are in the production chain, one can see that the cotton has travelled a long way from the field to our wardrobes which places a further burden on the climate. The following examples make this clear, whereby the steps from fibre production to the finishing process are not taken into consideration.



Conclusion

There are many problems associated with textile manufacture, however pilot projects show that there are alternatives. It is now up to the textile concerns to offer acceptable products and to the consumer to demand them.

Sweatshirt with print and stitching

Ordered from: Germany
 Fabric made in: India
 Production: Bangladesh
 Harbour of arrival: Rotterdam
 Distance travelled: 14,700 km

Trousers, pure cotton

Fabric: Taiwan
 Tailoring: Cambodia
 Materials: Hongkong
 Processing: Germany
 Harbour of arrival: Rotterdam
 Distance travelled: 17,400 km

Source: C&A (2004)

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