

## Fairtrade Cotton, Kenya

This two-year project aims to improve the lives of small-scale cotton farmers in two of Kenya's poorest districts, Kitui and Mwingi.



### What is the problem or need the project is addressing?

The cotton sector in Kenya is struggling, with production at a mere 8.2% of national capacity. Most cotton farmers are smallholders with limited land who produce low yields of poor quality cotton fibre. Farmers' groups are not well organised, the cost of cotton inputs is rising, the seed used is of poor quality, and imports of second-hand clothing into Kenya (along with cheap imports from China and South East Asia) has dampened demand for locally-produced cotton.

The situation is particularly bad in Kitui and Mwingi districts, where the incidence of poverty is extremely high (as much as 76% in Kitui South). Cotton production is one of the few means farmers in these arid and marginalised areas have to earn an income for basic needs such as food, clothing, healthcare, and schooling. However, their earnings from cotton are low since their yields and cotton quality are poor, and they have limited access to markets.

### What is the project doing?

This two-year project is working to help smallholder farmers in Kitui and Mwingi to increase their income from cotton by helping them increase their production and improve their links with a local ginnery.

Originally one of the aims of the project was to establish a supply of Fairtrade certified cotton from the project area to international fair trade markets. However, recurring drought has badly affected cotton production so we have instead focused on helping the farmers to increase their cotton yields for the local market and implement drought mitigation measures. This has included training farmers on growing drought resistant crops (for example intercropping cotton with fast maturing legumes such as cowpeas, pigeon peas and green grams), and implementing water collection and conservation methods.

The main activities in this project include:

- Strengthening cotton producer groups in Kitui and Mwingi
- Improving linkages between the cotton producer groups and the local ginnery
- Provision of technical support and advice relating to cotton and other crops

It is helping people like Ngina Mwasya, who is in her 70s and has been farming cotton for about five years. She first began farming cotton because she thought it would give her a better return than other crops:

*" I heard there was money in it. When I started I was told there was money ." However her harvests have not been good and times have been hard. Asked why she continues to farm when she is in her 70s, she replies: " I go to the farm because of my stomach, because of my clothes and my husband's clothes. My family also depend on me. All of them eat from my pot."*

### What impact has the project had?

Now in its final year, the project has:

- Supported the formation of 70 farmer groups with a membership of 2,501 farmers
- Provided advice and training for the farmers on the best mix of crops to grow and on good crop and land husbandry. Topics have included the growing of drought resistant crops, (especially intercropping cotton with fast maturing legumes); good crop husbandry for cotton and other crops; and water collection and conservation
- Facilitated improved linkages between the cotton ginnery and the farmers
- Trained 43 service providers and 67 lead farmers on land preparation; intercropping of cotton and green gram; spacing; thinning, gapping and weeding; and pest and disease control
- Established 51 demonstration plots, where training has been carried out for farmers by the service providers and lead farmers on the topics above
- Facilitated the distribution of cotton and green gram seed through partnership with the government's Ministry of Agriculture and the ginnery
- Linked farmers to financial institutions so they can access credit for purchasing inputs



In 2008/9 Kenya suffered its worst drought in decades. This had a significant impact upon the project, with widespread crop failures and a very low cotton harvest. Many people in the project area were reliant upon food aid; were forced to utilise any savings and many assets built up over previous years; and had very few seeds (if any) to plant for the 2009/10 season. Rains were better for the 2009/10 season, but for 2010/11 the short rains (October-December 2010) were again very poor and the East Africa region is once again in the grip of severe drought.

Despite these challenges the project is having some good impact:

- Prior to the project, many cotton farmer groups had weak leadership and governance with most groups not meeting regularly, having poorly defined mission and/or goals, not carrying out elections regularly and not referring to their constitutions regularly. Now, 70 groups have strengthened their capacity in leadership and governance, they meet more regularly, have incorporated women into leadership positions and have a better defined strategy
- Better linkages have been developed between the farmers groups, the ginnery, and the Ministry of Agriculture in the coordination of seed delivery, training and collection of cotton. Availability of seed, although of poor quality, has enabled farmers to plant at the right time, enabling them to have a better yield of cotton. In the past seeds were often distributed late. Seed quality problems are now being addressed
- The intercropping of cotton with green gram seed has enabled farmers to have a second revenue stream at a time they require funds to purchase inputs for their cotton crop. The application of inputs and improved crop husbandry led to a better yield of cotton in the last season.

Our local partner

Our local partner in the project is BISEP (Business Initiatives Supporting the Eradication of Poverty).

How is this project funded?

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