

COVID RELIEF FOR INDIAN COTTON FARMERS



In 2020, the world felt the impact of Covid-19. Across the Global North, retailers and businesses were forced to close, and many people faced job losses and redundancies. In the Global South, supply chains were disrupted through factory closures and restrictions on exports. Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that fashion and new clothes were de-prioritised, and the apparel sector suffered as a result. Whilst some brands and retailers were able to shift their production to essential items (like masks), many clothing orders were cancelled - \$2 billion worth of orders were cancelled from Bangladesh alone - and no new orders were placed for some months in 2020.

Even before the pandemic, climate change and falling market prices had left many cotton farmers vulnerable, often without any economic or social safety nets. These farmers faced further pressures as Covid-19 threatened their livelihoods. To protect against food insecurity, some cotton farmers considered replacing their cotton production with food crops for themselves and their families.

As a whole, the Fairtrade system has secured more than €15M in Covid-19 relief and recovery funding.¹ From a cotton point of view, Fairtrade has been working with its colleagues on the ground in cotton growing regions to support farmers to respond to and mitigate the short, medium and long term impacts of Covid-19. As an early response to the pandemic, the Fairtrade Foundation worked with GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH) to implement an emergency relief project to support farmers in India to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on their livelihoods and incomes.

¹ <https://www.fairtrade.net/news/fairtrade-partnerships-secure-more-than-15-million-in-covid-19-relief-and-recovery-funding-for-producers>

This project, which ran between June 2020 and October 2020, reached over 1,500 cotton farmers in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu and provided them with cotton seeds, agricultural inputs and technical training to support ongoing sustainable cotton cultivation during the pandemic.

1,650 packets of non-GMO cotton seeds and organic inputs (Neem Oil; nimbecidine) were distributed to farmers, across the three regions. Farmers also received packets of vegetable and crop seeds (millet, moong pulse, sesame) and training on cultivating vegetable gardens to provide additional food security for their families and to diversify their production. This activity provided security and protection for farmers, as explained by Mr. Vanjibhai from Dhrangadhra, "It is a very great help from Fairtrade [to receive] vegetable seeds for our day to day home consumption of vegetables, so that we can avoid visits to the market in this Covid-19 crisis."

The next phase of the project aims to construct 15 biogas units to support farmer households across 5 communities in Madhya Pradesh. Each unit will provide biogas fuel to support 100 households.

Biogas is the gas produced through the anaerobic digestion of waste materials, largely comprising methane and carbon dioxide (60:40). Methane provides a source of smokeless fuel, thus preventing the types of respiratory infections associated with other fuel sources, such as firewood.

At Fairtrade we are continuing to support cotton farmers to respond to the ongoing impacts of Covid-19 and are also looking at ways to help farmers build resilience so that they are better able to respond and adapt to other threats, such as climate change.

As the world continues to recover from the pandemic, we hope that consumer purchasing will increase and support economies and industries to recover. It remains to be seen how these changes will impact the apparel sector, the cotton supply chain and, ultimately, the farmers growing the cotton.

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Image of Shantiben Charda, a Fairtrade-certified cotton farmer picking cotton in Rapar district, Gujarat, India.
Photo by Sean Hawkey, taken in 2017.