



Grow Food, Not Bags

It was only 3 years ago that the Gleneagles G8 summit hailed biofuels as the new answer to all our energy concerns. Recently in Japan the truth hits home. This surge towards biofuels is a major direct cause of the current global food crisis. The World Bank estimates that \$10bn is needed to meet the short term needs of those hardest hit by the crisis.

Could the push towards eco – bags be causing an equally devastating impact?

Benin is a small West African nation that is ranked as one of the poorest countries in the World. In recent years cotton has been developed as a major cash crop to the extent that over 50% of households are dependent on it. It has undoubtedly paid for schools and medical facilities, but in **Benin, almost a quarter of the population does not get enough to eat.**

Benin loses around 100,000 hectares of forest every year as more land is turned over to cotton. To feed their growing families and produce enough cotton to pay off debt and buy necessities, people leave less agricultural land fallow and exhaust the soil, which forces them to clear more land the following year. In addition what little agricultural land is left is no longer offered the protection of the trees, leading to poor food crops.

And what of the major efforts of a number of charities in recent years who have made great advances in getting fresh water supplies to some of these poorest areas. Do we want to see this diverted to growing cotton? It can take more than 20,000 litres of water to produce 1kg of cotton; equivalent to a single T-shirt and pair of jeans.

It's worth taking a look at what happened in India

In the 1980's there was a major drive to encourage small farmers to plant cotton as a cash crop alternative to food. Up to this point cash crops had been grown alongside food. But cotton is particularly susceptible to disease and uses 8 times more pesticide than any other crop. In 2002 new strains of genetically modified (Bt cotton hybrids) seeds were introduced in an attempt to reduce pests and drive up yields. Farmers invested heavily in these and initial results were very encouraging with yields increasing by 50%. In the course of 4 years, the area devoted to Bt cotton more than quadrupled until 60% of the crop was genetically modified. But from 2006 the Bt cotton crop has been failing and prices have remained low, and the strain of paying off the initial debts incurred has driven hundreds of farmers to suicide.

In Africa, there is some resistance to the onward march of GM production, aided by an increasing Fair Trade movement.

Is Fair Trade The Answer?

A number of Fair Trade cotton producers have been established and this is going some way to satisfy the demand for organic clothing, but there is no scope to increase production on a fair trade basis for the amounts needed to fulfill the demand for eco-bags. Marks and Spencer alone bought one third of the entire World supply of fair trade cotton in 2007. Do we really want to drive up demand with another product that will only be satisfied with large scale GM production?

And even if you think the potential food crisis is overplayed bear in mind the current situation of the cotton farmer:

While widely perceived as a 'natural' commodity, cotton is one of the crops most heavily reliant on chemicals. Taking up 2.5% of the global land area, cotton uses 22.5% of the world's insecticides and 8-10% of the world's chemical fertilisers. Cotton farmers are exposed to high levels of pesticide and associated poisonings, especially in poorer countries where farmers lack the appropriate protective equipment and may not be able to read the instructions. The World Health Organisation estimates three million instances of poisoning each year, resulting in 20,000 deaths mainly among the rural poor of developing countries.

Do you still want a cotton bag?

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