

Made for kids... by kids?

With organic and Fairtrade baby clothes there's an alternative to the human and environmental cost of the cotton trade. **Dan Welch & Mary Rayner** investigate.

In November last year activists published an open letter calling for a boycott of Uzbek cotton, over the systematic state use of child labour. The Uzbek government empties schools in the picking season, forcing nearly half a million children to work. According to one school teacher, "Kindergartens are closed... It's never been as hard as this time." The children, some as young as seven, inhale dust saturated with the residues of chemicals, pesticides, and defoliants used on the cotton crop.

Of the big retailers on our table M&S, Debenhams and H&M have joined the boycott. The appalling situation in Uzbekistan has put a spotlight on what is a global problem – unsustainable, un-ethical cotton production. It's a story of child labour, environmental degradation and a million cases of serious pesticide poisoning a year.

It doesn't have to be that way. The boom in organic and Fairtrade cotton offers an alternative, sustainable model. Sales of organic garments in the UK have doubled in the last couple of years; and following the launch of Fairtrade-marked cotton in 2005 there was a twelve-fold increase in demand over a single season.

High Street Revolution

Things are changing fast on the high street. M&S has been at the forefront of promoting Fairtrade cotton in mainstream retailing, and currently offers

Fairtrade organic baby-grows. Debenhams also now offer a range of good value organic baby basics, while babyGap have a new organic range too. H&M have baby basics carrying the EU Eco-label or Flower

logo. In order to be certified with the Flower logo products have to meet strict criteria for all the main environmental impacts across their whole life cycle. Credit is also due to H&M for using a 50% organic cotton blend in some of their baby garments. It's a refreshing antidote to the claim that marketing always drives corporate responsibility. These blended items aren't labelled organic - but they are part of a drive that's seen the company use more organic cotton in its spring 2008 collection than in the whole of 2007.

At the same time there are a growing number of small ethical labels joining the pioneers – like Bishopston Trading and Gossypium – that have shown the way. What makes our best buys stand out is the depth of commitment they demonstrate to ensuring social and environmental standards in their supply chains. Organic and Fairtrade labelling are hugely important, but they don't tell the whole story.

Frugi's Lucy Jewson explained that the company had been working with the same group of Indian cotton growers for several years. "They're working towards Fairtrade certification," said Lucy. "But it can take quite some time, and obviously we want to support them in that process rather than turn to other sources that are already Fairtrade certified."

Similarly, Hannah Evans, founder of Piccalilly, explained that the company did sell a small number of garments not yet accredited as organic. In order to 'go organic' small producers stop using pesticides, and as a result see their crop yields drop for some time before they can claim the organic label. Without the financial support of committed ethical businesses it would be impossible for small producers in the developing world to make that difficult transition.

A genuine commitment to conditions in the supply chain is costly and complicated for small businesses. According to Hannah, knowing every step in her supply chain ensures she can guarantee the ethics behind her label. But a single chain from grower to spinner to factory can lead to a stop-start



Pudding Clothing (02084040952), **Cut4Cloth\Frugi** (01326221930), **Gossypium** (08708509953), **Little Green Radicals** (08451301525), **Bishopston Trading** (01179245598), **Natural Clothing Co.** (0845 345 0498), **Organics for Kids** (01865 725730), **Piccalilly** (01729841088), **Green Baby** (02072269244), **Greenfibres** (01803 868001).

supply. In a bid to expand her sources she travelled to India last year to research the possibilities. Despite visiting five factories producing organic cotton garments she could not find one that met her exacting ethical standards of trace-ability back to the growers.

Bishopston Trading Company, a pioneer in the field, is a not-for-profit with a long-standing commitment to its Indian supplier factory, and the community it supports. For founder Carolyn Whitwell maintaining the integrity of conditions in the supply chain is far more important than growth for growth's sake. "We really do believe small is beautiful," says Carolyn, "We've actually turned down several large orders, because it would mean sourcing beyond our partner factory."

Converging Standards

You'd be forgiven for thinking Fairtrade=People, Organic=Planet. In reality just as the Fairtrade code has minimum environmental standards, organic labelling can guarantee social standards.

The Global Organic Textile Standards (which include the Soil Association), cover manufacturing as well as agriculture, including a commitment to a 'living wage'. The Fairtrade Foundation mark applies to cotton production, while the International Fair Trade Organisation's logo covers conditions in production. The code



covers production by Bishopston, Gossypium, and Green Baby.

Paying the price for your ethics?

Comparing Debenhams organic range to its 'junior' non-organics, two organic vests retail at £8, against £5 for non-organics. Of our best buys, Natural Clothing Company, Green Baby, Bishopston Trading compete well with these high street prices on baby basics. Of course 'luxury brands' are expensive whether organic or not, and our pricier best buys range for baby grows from Frugi at £6.50 to Gossypium or Pudding at £15.

New mum Anna Dawton says, "I've not tried all the best buys, but I can really recommend Cut4Cloth and Organics for Kids for quality."

Company Profiles

It may surprise some that Gap gets our best rating for supply chain policy. Controversies remain, but campaigners 'Labour behind the Label', while noting "there is still room for improvement" say Gap has built "positive relationships with

trade unions and NGOs, dealing quickly and effectively with problems in factories when they emerge".⁵

Mothercare on the other hand were notable for their poor level of social and environmental reporting.

As well as an organic range, all of **Katvig's** collection is Oeko-tex certified – a standard that guarantees the absence of an extensive range of harmful substances.

Earth Collection, an international franchise operation, produces its garments in China, but claims that long-standing relationships mean they have significantly improved conditions in supplier factories.

H&M are subject to a boycott call for animal testing from BUAV over their own brand cosmetics. The Boycott Israeli Goods campaign call for a boycott of **Mothercare** and **M&S**.⁶

Katvig narrowly missed Best Buys over supply chain policy. A relatively new company, they are visiting supplier factories this year, so may be eligible before long.

Vegans note: **Green Baby** retails leather shoes; **Bishopston**, **Natural Clothing** and **Greenfibres** sell silk, and the latter two wool.

LINKS

Environmental Justice Foundation
www.ejfoundation.org/
 Pesticide Action Network
www.pan-uk.org
 'Sustainable Fashion & Textiles: Design Journeys'
 Kate Fletcher, Earthscan 2008

Brand key
 F = Fairtrade, O = Organic

BRAND	Ethiscore (out of 20)	Environment					Animals			People				Politics			+ve		COMPANY GROUP	
		Environmental Reporting	Nuclear Power	Climate Change	Pollution & Toxics	Habitats & Resources	Animal Testing	Factory Farming	Animal Rights	Human Rights	Workers' Rights	Supply Chain Policy	Irresponsible Marketing	Arms & Military Supply	Genetic Engineering	Boycott Call	Political Activity	Anti-Social Finance		Company Ethos
Frugi & Cut4Cloth [O]	17																	★	2	Cut4Cloth Ltd
Gossypium [F,O]	17																	★	2	Vericott Ltd
Little Green Radicals [O,F]	17																	★	2	Hug (UK) Ltd
Pudding [O,F]	17																	★	2	Pudding Clothing
Bishopston Trading [O,F]	16.5								○									★	2	Bishopston Trading Company
Natural Clothing Co. [O,F]	16.5								○									★	2	Schmidt Natural Clothing
Organics for Kids [O,F]	16.5																	☆	2	Organics for Kids Ltd
Picalilly [O,F]	16.5																	☆	2	Picalilly Ltd
Green Baby [O,F]	15.5								●									☆	2	Green Baby Co. Ltd
Greenfibres [O]	15								○									☆	1	Greenfibres Ltd
Katvig Organic [O]	15											●							2	Katvig ApS
Earth Collection [O]	12	●							○			●				○			1	BCC Pacific Ltd
BabyGap Organics [O]	10.5	●			●				○	●	●				○	○			1	Gap Inc
M&S organic [O,F]	9.5					●	●	●	●	●	○			○	●	○	★		2	Marks & Spencer plc
H&M Eco-label	7	○			○		●	●	●	●	●	○		○					0.5	Hennes Mauritz AB
Next	6.5	●		○	●	○	●	●	●	○				○		○				Next plc
Debenhams organic [O]	6	○			●	○	●	●	●	○	○			○		○	●		1	Debenhams plc
Mothercare	6	●			●	○	●			○	○	●		○	●	○				Mothercare plc

KEY ● bottom rating ○ middle rating □ top rating (no criticisms found) Company Ethos: ★ full mark ☆ half mark

Product Sustainability: companies can receive a maximum of five positive marks for this category. Ethiscore: the higher the score, the better the company across the criticism categories (see www.ethicalconsumer.org/magazine/ratings/ethicalratings.htm or "Introduction to Ethical Consumer" booklet for more details).

References 1 www.rferl.org/Uzbekistan: Call For Boycott Over Uzbek Child Labor 21/11/07 2 www.ejfoundation.org/page327.html viewed 3/3/08 3 personal communication, Pesticide Action Network UK, 29th November 2007 4 Redressing a global imbalance: the case for fairtrade certified cotton. Fair Trade Foundation, November 2005 5 www.cleanupfashion.co.uk viewed 3/3/08 6 www.bigcampaign.org/pdf/boycotted_companies viewed 1/3/08