

Cotton workers in southern India: standing up for their rights

India **direct** funding target: £100,000

In southern India, cotton workers' livelihoods are under threat. Drought forces poor farmers to borrow money for expensive pesticides and fertilisers. High prices and power-looms jeopardise the incomes of handloom weavers. And women in garment factories experience appalling working conditions. Oxfam and our partners are working with people in the cotton supply chain to change this situation, helping them to become more empowered and take control of their lives.

This is the first year of a three year project. Our projected spend this year is £100,000. In the second and third years, we plan to spend similar amounts, building on and continuing the activities of the first year.



Co-operative members spread the word about organic farming. © M.Manoj/Oxfam

The Project

Why Oxfam is working on this issue

Cotton-industry employees in southern India work in poor conditions for unstable wages. Few support networks exist for them to fall back on. Oxfam is supporting the livelihoods of cotton-industry workers involved in various stages of production, from farm to factory.

We are working with our partners to improve the livelihoods of three groups of people: cotton farmers, handloom weavers, and garment workers. We aim to provide appropriate solutions to the different challenges they face.

Project aims

- Encourage cotton farmers to take up organic farming through training sessions and local campaigns. This will help them to escape the 'chemical treadmill' – the name given to the cycle of debt that poor farmers often find themselves in, due to the prohibitive costs of expensive pesticides and the health risks of handling them.
- Support the creation of a farmers' trading company, to give farmers better access to markets where they can sell their goods.
- Support a handloom trading company and weavers' community groups, so that weavers have the opportunity to buy and sell at a fair price.
- Work with female garment workers' organisations to help women workers understand their rights and negotiate more effectively with employers and other authorities.
- Ensure that women have a greater say in decision-making throughout our work, and make sure that gender concerns are fully addressed in the project.

Supporters, communities, local partners and Oxfam – working together to change lives

Background



A handloom trading company. © M.Manoj/Oxfam

Cotton farmers in southern India have had to live with severe drought for many years. In an effort to grow more on poor soil, many have borrowed large sums of money to spend on expensive pesticides and fertilisers. Some have been driven to take their own lives after becoming

caught in a desperate spiral of debt. And the toxic pesticides they use damage both the environment and the health of those who handle them – usually women.

Handloom weavers also struggle financially, mainly because of competition from big weaving

companies using large power-looms. The rising cost of yarn and dyes adds to the problem, jeopardising the weavers' income and quality of life.

And in the factories, where the cotton is made into clothes, people – again, most of them women – work in horrendous conditions. Pay is low, hours are long, and many workers suffer from harassment. There are no support networks, and employees must work without adequate health and safety provisions.

Oxfam has worked with farmers, weavers and factory workers in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka since 2003, helping them to establish greater livelihood security. The project was designed in consultation with communities and local organisations, and was introduced following a study conducted by Oxfam on the local cotton supply chain.

The Plan

Oxfam is working with six partners to support cotton farmers, handloom weavers and garment workers.

Activities

- In Warangal district, we will work with four partner organisations to train cotton farmers in organic farming methods. Organic farming can improve the quality of the land, so that farmers no longer need to spend money on expensive pesticides. With your support, 3,000 cotton farmers can be trained in organic farming, and new partners will be identified to extend the programme into neighbouring areas.
- We will continue to support four farming co-operatives. This year, members will encourage farmers in

other villages to adopt organic farming methods. The four co-operatives also oversee a farmers' trading company, which enables farmers to reach more markets with their produce. We will help to develop the company, so farmers can continue to bring high quality cotton from the co-operatives to market.

- We will work with partner organisations to create a handloom trading company and to train small-scale handloom weavers, especially those who have been marginalised and are not co-operative members. We will also help our partners to run training courses and share information on handloom issues, and ultimately encourage 800

weaver families to organise and get better access to markets.

- This year we hope to help the Women Workers' Social Organisation (WWSO) to build a membership base of 5,000 garment workers. The WWSO provides legal counselling and assistance for women garment workers, and runs a Workers' Resource Centre to offer support and training. In total, these activities should help 15,000 garment workers to stand up for their rights.
- Oxfam will also undertake research and advocate for improved working conditions for handloom weavers and garment workers.

The Impact

Achievements so far

Considerable progress has already been made. Farmers are converting to organic cotton production, leaving behind the expensive chemicals that put them in debt. Handloom weavers have new designs and new orders to help lift themselves out of poverty. And factory workers are challenging their working conditions and speaking up for their rights. But much more needs to be done.

This year:

- 3,000 cotton farmers' lives will be significantly improved in Warangal district and surrounding areas, by introducing environmentally sustainable farming methods.

- 800 weaver families will be encouraged to organise and make a secure living.
- 15,000 Bangalore garment workers – 98 per cent of them women – will be given help to stand up for their rights and improve their working conditions.
- Women garment workers and their families will be less susceptible to job insecurities.
- Families employed in the cotton industry will be better able to cope with financial and other insecurities, through the introduction of community support groups. These include

farmers' groups, weavers' groups and a female garment workers co-operative.

Monitoring and evaluation

Partner review meetings take place four times annually, after which action plans are developed for the following quarter. An annual review takes place in February.

Sustainability

At the end of the project, local Oxfam staff will stay on the boards of the trading companies for four years, to ensure the smooth transfer of ownership to the local co-operatives.

The People



All images © M. Manoj/Oxfam

I am expecting a good price for my cotton

"I used to invest a lot on buying pesticides. Then I attended a few awareness meetings by a local Oxfam partner and decided to take up organic farming. I was shocked to know that some insects which I used to consider as harmful – like the ladybird beetle – are actually very beneficial. Now my farm is full of beneficial insects and the incidence of pests is almost nil. In my first picking alone I got three quintals of cotton. I am expecting a good price as it is organically grown."

Nakka Puspa, Damera village, Andhra Pradesh

We have more confidence

"Our lives have really changed since we started working together as a co-operative. Our income has increased because we are able to negotiate prices now; we have more confidence when we act together as a group. We discuss all the ideas with group members – both wives and husbands are equal members – and if there are disagreements, we discuss it. We feel empowered."

Mangama, handloom weaver, Andhra Pradesh

We approach our work together

"I've been working on this programme for two years now. The first thing we did was to listen to the farmers, weavers and garment manufacturers. Now we are approaching their complex problems together, by helping them to bring about their own unique and sustainable solutions. And the programme works precisely because it brings appropriate solutions to the diverse problems faced by these three groups."

Sudha Kishore (in red), Oxfam Programme Officer

The Partners

Oxfam works with a range of local partners: MARI, PSS, CROPS and SYO (for the farming components of the project); CHIP and Sangimatra (for the weaving components); and CIVIDEP (for the garment workers' components). We also work with the farmers' trading company and the handloom trading company. All have extensive experience and are actively involved in project planning and development.

About **direct**

By supporting **direct projects** you're joining a global network of supporters, local people and partner organisations, all working with Oxfam to end poverty and suffering for good. From helping whole communities to protect themselves against disaster, to working with national governments to transform a country's schools, to helping individual families to earn a living, all **direct projects** offer you the chance to change lives.

Our commitment to you:

- One hundred per cent of your money is invested in your chosen project.
- You'll receive 6 and 12 month progress reports on your project.
- Email alerts when new information is posted on the website.
- A dedicated account manager to answer questions and keep you informed.

Other countries needing your support

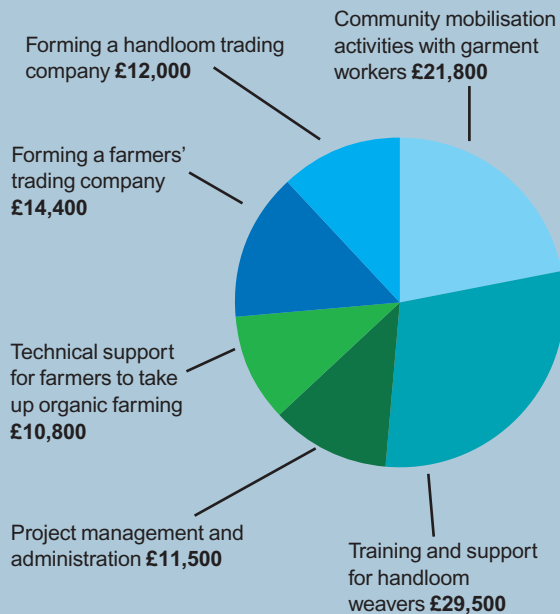
Albania, Armenia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Honduras, India, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritania, Nepal, Philippines, Peru, Sudan, Tanzania.

The Budget

Your money will pay for:

- Training and technical support for cotton farmers and handloom weavers
- Creation of a farmers' trading company and a handloom trading company, to improve access to markets
- Community mobilisation activities to help women in the garment industry address their basic labour rights

How we'll spend your money: **Total £100,000**



India: country profile



Population	1,136 million
Development	126th (of 177) on the HDI ¹
Life expectancy at birth	63 years
GDP per capita	\$3,139 (UK GDP per capita \$30,821)
Percentage of population living on less than \$1 a day	35%
Percentage of population living on less than \$2 a day	80%
Percentage of workforce employed in agriculture*	60%
Percentage of GDP accounted for by agriculture*	20%

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2006 except * which is from the Economist Intelligence Unit 2006.

¹ The UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite measure of three dimensions of human development: life expectancy, education and standard of living.

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Contact:

Sarah Thomas
Oxfam House
John Smith Drive
Cowley Oxford OX4 2JY
Telephone +44 (0)1865 47 3915
E-mail sthomas@oxfam.org.uk

Contact:

Annie Lewis
Oxfam in Scotland
207 Bath Street
Glasgow G2 4HZ
Telephone +44 (0)141 285 8873
E-mail alewis@oxfam.org.uk