

Out of Africa

Organic cotton has a firm foothold on the African Steppe thanks to Swiss textile manufacturer Remei AG, which founded a project here in 1994. John Mowbray reports from western Tanzania on the many environmental and social benefits that bioRe® brings to the Meatu region.

Niranjan Pattni, the managing director of bioRe® Tanzania squeezes himself into the company Land Rover along with myself, his family and our driver as we head out to see a family of hippos that has taken up residence in a dam close to the village of Mwamishali in the Meatu region of Tanzania.

As we pull up to the dam in a powder of dust on a beautiful African evening, it's an astonishing sight. Not just the family of obliging hippos who roll over lazily and flick their tails in the June dusk, but the fact there is a huge, glistening expanse of water so close to bone dry Mwamishali. Only a few kilometres away, local women are carving up scorched river beds in search of something to drink and young boys stagger over rough roads pushing hand-carts stacked with barrels of heavy river water – a precious commodity, ready for sale.

The lack of water is a challenge to everyone in Meatu and especially to the farmers who toil against the desertification of their soils. Here, cotton is the area's biggest cash crop, but yields and prosperity depend largely on local rain-fall. Irrigation is completely out of the question. And it is here in Meatu – southeast of Lake Victoria – that certified organic cotton was first grown on the

African Steppe back in 1994 with the help of Remei AG, a well-known Swiss textile producer.

"We first started growing organic cotton with 45 farmers in the village of Ng'hoboko in 1994," recalls Niranjan Pattni, who was working in Tanga for the Tanzanian yarn producer CIC. "We produced around 100 tonnes of organically-grown seed cotton at the time, which was something of an achievement back then."

It's not surprising that while knocking on village doors almost 15 years ago in the middle of Africa, the plans for organic cotton farming met with some surprise and even scepticism. Modern conventional farming was seen as the way forward, but their persistence finally paid off when a dozen or so farmers in the village of Ng'hoboko agreed to let field officers spend time with them during the harvest period. So they set up a small office in the village dedicated to educating locals about the benefits of organic cotton farming.

"We continued with this for a few years," he said, "but decided progress was not fast enough due mainly to problems with the spinning mill itself." CIC spinning mill went into receivership in early 1996 and could no longer work on this

project. This all changed in 2000 when Swiss-based Remei AG under the control of Patrick Hohmann took over from troubled CIC which was one of its suppliers. "Patrick Hohmann had always encouraged CIC to go down the organic route and source these fibres locally in Africa," said Pattni, "so his decision to take over the CIC project to start bioRe® Tanzania Ltd as an independent company in 2000 gave great confidence to the farmers and to the local communities. He's a true philanthropist in that respect."

When bioRe® Tanzania Ltd first took over from CIC it had two village offices and around 320 farmers under its belt. In its first year it produced around 550 tonnes of organic seed cotton and 200 tonnes of organic cotton lint. Nowadays, the project includes 15 villages and 2400 farmers. A typical organic cotton farmer will own around 80 acres of land, but will farm a variety of different cash crops in addition to organic cotton.

"Last year, we produced over 8,000 tonnes of seed cotton although this year's crop will be down due to lower seasonal rainfall in the critical planting and growing period," noted Pattni.

Yield estimations from the whole project in the 2009-2010 harvest will be around 200 kg/acre on average compared to last year's 270 kg per acre with most of the cotton produced to the stringent NOP (National Organic Program) and EU 834/2007 standard so that textiles made from this cotton can be sold as organic in the lucrative US and European markets.

"Our yields may be slightly lower than last year due to a dry winter but bioRe® farmers are better prepared for seasonal variations than conventional cotton farmers," said Pattni. "Their soils are improved due to organic farming and crop rotation which leaves them less exposed to crop failures, they have easier access to advice and agricultural expertise and the bioRe® premium also gives them greater financial security."



Niranjan Pattni (right), the managing director of bioRe® Tanzania Ltd briefs production manager Tuma Samson and Willbroad Mkwavi, Internal Control Systems (left), at the start of another working day in Mwamishali.

The bioRe® Tanzania Ltd senior management team. From left to right: Faustin Magallata, Tuma Samson, Niranjan Pattni, Willbroad Mkwavi, Justina Samson, Masanja Pambe.



Making a difference

bioRe® Tanzania has not only improved the quality and volumes of organic cotton available in Tanzania, it has made a big difference to the social and environmental well-being of local farming communities.

bioRe® production manager Tuma Samson and Willbroad Mkwavi, from bioRe®'s Internal Control System (ICS) team are bouncing around with Niranjan Pattni in the company's off-road vehicle as we drive across open scrubland on the way to see Magadula Masanja – a local organic cotton farmer attached to the Mwambiti village.

As we cross dry river beds and swerve past low branches of acacia, it seems that Masanja lives in the middle of nowhere. Like many farmers, his home is surrounded by a ring of Euphorbia, a succulent cactus like plant with huge thorns that serves to corral his cattle and protect them from any predators.

Peering at his cattle through the huge spikes, he mentions that he's recently converted his farm from conventional cotton production to organic, "our lives have changed since opting to produce organic cotton with bioRe®," he said swing around and pointing to a new Chinese 'Toyo' branded motorbike as evidence of his decision. These motorbikes cost around US\$1000, which represents a small fortune in Tanzania but it helps Masanja to move quickly around his farm to monitor crops and livestock whereas before he had to walk. "I only had a few cattle before joining bioRe®," he explained, [cattle are used as a measure of a person's wealth in rural Africa], but with the premium I

get for organic cotton and an improvement in my yields I managed to buy more cows." More cattle mean more calves, which can then be sold to raise money, "I sold 15 cows to pay for the bike. This in turn helps me to farm more efficiently since I can monitor crops more easily."

Masanja farms 19 acres of cotton and will harvest around 6,000 kg of seed cotton in July 2009. This is above average yields for the season and the same as last year, despite much lower seasonal rain-fall which has affected both organic and conventional cotton yields in the Meatu region. "He also intercroops with groundnuts," said Tuma Samson, pointing to the huge pile of nuts drying in the sun on the roof on his mud-built home. "As well as raising more money, the ground nuts help him to replenish the soil and return much needed nutrients back into the ground to ensure it remains fertile for the next growing season," she added.

Money talks

It's a fact that organic cotton farming is a much more environmentally responsible way of producing cotton and many more clothing retailers in the west are looking to make organic an integral part of their fashion collections. But putting the ecological arguments to one side, the reality is that it's the social benefits coming from bioRe®'s price premium for organic that really interests farmers in this region. Sometimes, in the marketing literature of western retailers, the talk about lower carbon footprints and product life cycles can often mask the real-life social benefits of organic cotton farming. These social benefits should not be overlooked and the



Magadula Masanja, a local organic cotton farmer from Mwambiti has been able to buy a motorbike thanks to the premium he receives for his organic cotton.

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premium price paid by retailers for organic, and the premium paid by bioRe® to farmers for the organic seed cotton is of vital importance to these farming communities.

Therefore setting the basic price of organic cotton at the correct level is so important. "The government announced prior to purchase that the floor price this season for seed cotton is set at Tsh360.00 per kg," said Niranjana Pattani, "In addition to this basic price, bioRe® Tanzania pays the farmer a premium for any kg of 'full organic' cotton delivered for the 2009-10 harvest season. Prior to this season (in May) the premium was agreed at Tsh 60.00 per kg."

bioRe® also retains Tsh 15.00 per kg for all its farmers. This money is retained on behalf of the farmer by bioRe® to purchase inputs for the next growing season such as seeds and botanicals. If a farmer decides that they do not want to go organic the following season they can opt out of the programme and are refunded.

Extension services

Sitting in the bioRe® office in Mwanbiti with supervisor Pilli James and local extension officer Rajab Mwanga we're surrounded by shelves stuffed with paperwork and hand-written farm records. It's easy to see how supervising organic farms in the area and providing them with specialist services is a huge job.

"In this village there are 101 farmers who produce organic cotton for bioRe®," noted Pilli James, "as with all bioRe® farmers, they are

organised in clusters based on location so we can supervise them and provide advice and special extension services more effectively."

James and Mwanga are part of a 45 strong team of 10 supervisors and 35 extension officers. Overall there are 65 people in the bioRe® production team that advise farmers and help them to improve yields, manage soil erosion and generally manage their land. Each visit is recorded in detail and a variety of observations are made on the cotton crop and how it is being farmed. Recommendations are given. This is all documented in pink farm books which are then counter-signed by the cotton farmer:

"There is a structured plan for each farm visit," noted Willbroad Mkwavi, "Farm visits are not just random. Each extension officer visits an average of five farms a day."

During these visits, extension officers typically scout for 'problems' such as pests and distribute botanicals to farmers which include sunflower seeds which are used for intercropping between the cotton crops. These plants act as natural hosts for certain pest species and divert these insects away from the vulnerable cotton bolls. "The problem is that when the cotton bolls open they can be attacked by 'cotton stainers' which discolour the harvested cotton fibre," said Mkwavi, "if this happens we can spray the crop with Neem oil!" The brown oil derived from the Neem tree is a well-known and widely used natural pesticide in Asia. It is mixed with surfactants and sprayed on cotton crops, but only if they become infested with the sap loving

cotton stainer bugs which are endemic beetles of the *Dysdercus* species. "This treatment is only carried out under the direct supervision of the bioRe® production staff based at Mwanishali, he added."

bioRe® staff based in local villages also give valuable advice to farmers on how to harvest the cotton most efficiently and to pick the cotton clean to minimise the amount of foreign matter and to give good quality seed cotton.

In addition to advice on soil fertility, manure application and crop yields, the regional bioRe® offices also offer financial incentives especially in terms of credit facilities. "Credit is available to bioRe® cotton farmers who have been with us for three years," said Samson, "if farmers need an interest free loan to buy botanicals, tools or other necessary equipment this is all available under the bioRe® programme. We also rent out tools such as the ox-plough for 200Tsh per acre (US\$0.15)." Other tools include water pumps for spraying Neem oil, planters and weeders. These are all available through the bioRe® offices at the village centres.

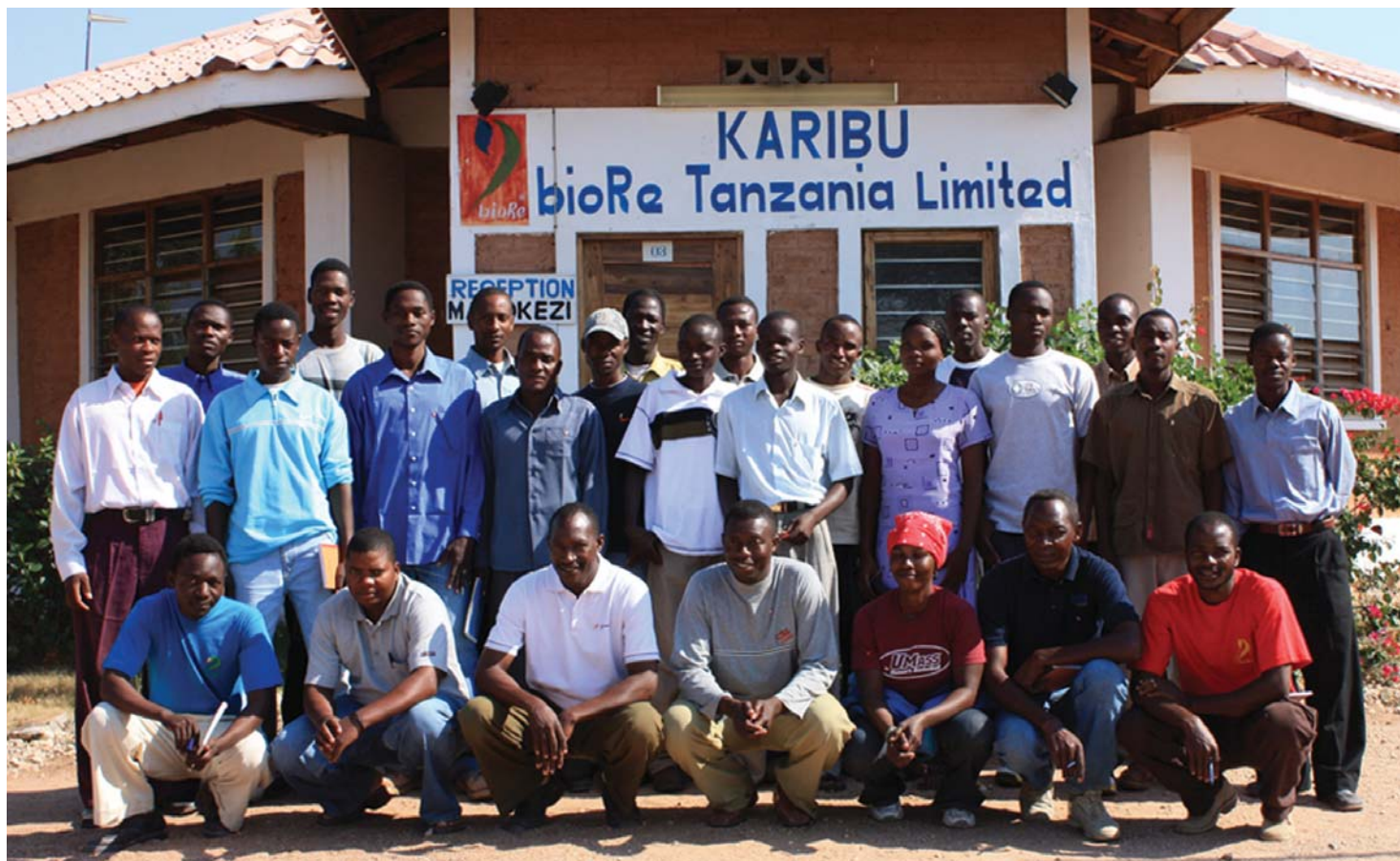
Training day

It's yet another bright, crisp, African morning and the hum of insects buzzing around a nearby water hole is muffled by the approach of tyres on dust and stone, which signals the arrival of over 30 bioRe® staff at its training centre headquarters in Mwanishali.

Today's training day has drawn all 27 field extension officers from the surrounding villages



Picking organic cotton on the farmer of Basu Jisega from Kabondo.



Extension officers and field workers gather for training day at bioRe®'s Mwanishali headquarters.

together with supervisors and those staff involved in the social and ICS part of the bioRe® operation.

Supervisor Hosea Magumba and field extension officer Kija Matango together look after around 200 organic cotton farms in Bulyashi. These farms are located within a 10 km radius of the village office and they are talking about their scheduled rotational visits to the farms. "Some of the most experienced organic cotton farmers now have yields in the region of 500 kg per acre," said Magumba, "One farm alone will produce 26 tonnes of organic seed cotton this year, which will provide the farmer with a significant income."

Kija Matango notes that his main job is to collect data from farmers and then enter this data in the bioRe® farm book. These books are then cross-checked by the supervisor. He also has a notebook where he keeps records of each farmer's activities to make sure all the organic cotton farms operate under complete transparency.

"The most common issues seen in Bulyashi include soil erosion, which is made worse during heavy rains in the wet season as soil health can deteriorate rapidly in this part of Africa if it is not managed correctly," said Matango,

"overstocking with cotton plants can also be a problem and for new farmers we need to educate them on the correct way to plough fields to optimise rain-fall and capture as much water as possible."

Other common problems that are often solved by the bioRe® field extension officers are largely related to cotton quality. Cotton fibre contamination with sand, dust and other plant material is a major issue. Water content is also a problem. "The practise of wetting seed cotton to make the fibre weigh more at point of purchase is a problem right across the cotton industry in the developing world," notes Tuma Samson, "this practise also has an adverse effect on cotton quality in terms of discolouring the fibre, and of course how much the cotton is worth. Once we point this out to the farmers it rarely becomes a problem again."

In addition, farmers are taught about the storage of their cotton and how to optimise the ambient temperature and humidity to improve the quality of the seed cotton and avoid contamination with other fibres. "Polypropylene bags often used to collect conventional cotton crop but are obviously banned from the organic farms. We educate farmers about the use of organic cotton bags when harvesting. Using

anything else would be a disaster for the farmer since bioRe® would have to refuse to buy the seed cotton."

The field extension officers have also been trained to identify problems with plants and possible illegal spraying of banned chemicals under the bioRe® organic programme. This is important for the integrity of the organic system and any transgressions mean an immediate ban.

Magumba notes that advice on planting at the start of the season is also critical: "the cut-off date for planting is after the second week in December," he said, "The six weeks prior to this are the key cotton planting times. Eight weeks after planting the cotton boll begins to form depending on the amount of rain-fall and cotton picking is between April to August. Most of the crop has been harvested by the end of the second week in July when buying activity is at its highest."

Production control manager Tuma Samson explains that the local bioRe® offices also run training courses for farmers here at the Mwanishali training centre. "For each farm area we identify 'location leaders' from the farms who act as representatives between one organic farm collective and the bioRe® team. They are trained in agricultural best practise

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and then disseminate this knowledge onto their fellow farmers ... in the west this is often seen as passing on information to a competitor but cultural values in this part of Africa are very different and it is seen as a way of improving the knowledge of the wider farming community."

The location leader in each village sets aside one acre of land for training purposes. The bioRe® team then uses this land to demonstrate examples of organic farming techniques and for solving common agricultural problems. "It's a sort of satellite training school and there is one in each bioRe® village," said Samson, "The training is always co-ordinated by a field extension officer."

Ginning

Once the cotton has been harvested and sold to bioRe® it is stored and eventually shipped to Bibiti Ginneries Ltd in the village of Manhuzi where finance executive Salleh Mohammed is showing us around. "We first started working with bioRe® in 2000 and as the volumes of organic cotton grew we decided to stop buying our own cotton in 2005 and become a completely organic cotton gin. We now only process seed cotton from bioRe® farms."

The huge double roller gin is made by Bajaj and was shipped and installed from the Indian manufacturer in 2005 with the help of funding and encouragement from Remei AG. At full capacity it can process 40 – 50 bales per shift which equates to 150 bales in 24 hours. "It is the largest cotton gin in Africa," claims Mohammed. Most of this is then shipped including part of the fibre to textile producer Sunflag based in nearby Arusha.

The organic cotton fibre that comes from this gin is medium length cotton fibre with staple lengths of between 26.5 to 27.5 mm. Cotton seeds are crushed and used for animal feed. "Even the molasses are re-used," said Mohammed, referring to the thick black sludge which is often discarded and can be an environmental hazard, "it's used to make laundry soap."

Average bale weights of ginned cotton lint are 205 kg. For every bale a 250 g sample is collected for the Tanzania cotton board for quality control and grading.

Seed collection also takes place at the gin. Recovered organic cotton seeds go through germination tests prior to planting and distribution again in October. "If 50% of a batch does not germinate then the batch is discarded," said Willbroad Mkwavi.

bioRe® Tanzania Ltd (Estimated harvest: 2009-10)

Total yield (EU): 6,000,000 Kg

Total NOP: 3,749,600 Kg

Total farmers: 2,000

**NOP requires a 3 year in-conversion period to organic. European (EU 834/2007) legislation requires land to have been farmed for two years as organic. During the in conversion season the land is left to lie fallow or used to produce maize or sorghum.*



Basu Jisega has improved yields moving from conventional to organic cotton farming.

Acreage

Over the last 6 – 8 years as productivity has improved on the organic cotton farms, bioRe® has noticed that the farmed acreage has also increased. Farmers are now getting the same cotton crop yield as before but are becoming more tempted to expand their acreage since they now have access to better farming equipment and improved techniques. This has been reflected in the general upward trend in volumes of organic cotton grown in Tanzania. "However, we are advising farmers to expand cautiously and to optimise their current acreage rather than expand," said Niranjana Pattni, "In 2000 farmers managed eight acres of organic cotton crop on average, but in 2009 this had risen to an average of 14 acres per farm.

Expansion needs to be careful and supply chains need developing to support this growth, so it's still important to focus on a high cotton quality and the education of farmers at the moment."

Another reason why bioRe® is asking farmers to concentrate on cotton quality as opposed to quantity is that the Tanzania government authorities are getting much stricter about the cotton that can be sold on the commodities market. "Trading licenses can now be more easily revoked if cotton does not come up to scratch," said Pattni.

This year bioRe® will further tighten its rules to ensure these new regulations are met. And although organic cotton yields will be lower, the quality, integrity and product transparency of the bioRe® operation are better than ever.

It's also clear that agricultural knowledge among farmers is improving year-on-year and organic cotton farmers are now taking many critical agricultural decisions themselves thanks to bioRe®'s practical and educational initiatives.

As we sat outside his home watching another astonishing African sunset, Niranjana Pattni remarked how "it's not just the farmers who are now more confident about their future. The European technical advisors who helped to set up and then run bioRe® Tanzania have moved back home," referring to the fact that bioRe® Tanzania is now a successful Tanzanian-based company managed by Tanzanian people.

At this point, the huge brick red sun seemed to sit perfectly on the Meatu horizon, illuminating the cotton fields in front of us with a soft but spectacular purple and reddish glow. There was a beautiful but brief moment's silence before the sun quickly set and the nocturnal insects chirped into life. I couldn't help thinking that this moment symbolised the change Niranjana was talking about. A change that could see Africa's farming communities become independent, self-sustainable, export-led and much more profitable. The continent has a long way to go, but companies such as bioRe® Tanzania provides a great example of how this might be achieved.

Clothing retailers and brands that want to shout about their environmental and ethical credentials will be impressed with what they see here on the African Steppe. If they are at all serious about sourcing cotton that can make a difference to the environment and local communities, then Mwanishali – 270 km south east of Mwanza in the Meatu District of Tanzania – should be the next stop on their sourcing itinerary.

bioRe® in the community

As bioRe® looks to develop its long-standing social standard for cotton it has entered into a new partnership with the FLO-CERT social certification body to set up a new auditing system.

On our way to visit a new well in the village of Mwayahina which provides clean drinking water for the locals, Justina Samson, the sister of bioRe® production manager Tuma Samson reveals that bioRe®'s long established social standard for contract cotton producers is about to step up another level.

"We are now working with the FLO-CERT social certification body to improve the existing bioRe® Social Standard for cotton," she explained, "just as our organic cotton is certified by the Swiss company bio-inspecta, we also want our work with local communities to be fully auditable and verifiable."

The reason for this new partnership is to improve the quality of bioRe®'s work on the farm level in terms of extension, training and loans), community projects and also on the level of the purchasing organisation to set fair market prices and organic cotton premiums.

This is a major new initiative for bioRe® Tanzania and shows how ethical and environmental considerations are almost inseparable. "The plan now is to develop organisational structures so we can benchmark the new bioRe® Social Standard for cotton against the FLO Contract Production Standard," she said – a huge challenge for bioRe® and for Justina's team in particular.

Yet the company is already heavily involved in a number of socially responsible initiatives such as the well we are visiting. Opened in March 2009 by bioRe® to ensure safe and clean community access to drinking water, the new well in the village of Mwayahina is 8 metres deep and taps into the water table of a nearby dried up river. The well was actually funded by Panoco Trading Co. and Nippon Organic cotton, Japan. The Japanese company buys bioRe® cotton and yarns from the parent company Remei AG. The well is facilitated



Villagers using the new well in the village of Mwayahina which was facilitated by bioRe® and paid for by some of its Japanese customers.



bioRe® paid for the desks at the local primary school in Mwamishali.

by bioRe® Tanzania and is one of five new bioRe® wells in the Meatu area and means a great deal to the villages. The bioRe® Foundation is actually integrating clients and involving them in the engagement to support the social projects in the communities where bioRe® grows organic cotton. "Before we had the well we regularly suffered from problems due to contaminated river water," said Njile Mandago a grand-mother of six, "Nowadays we all feel much healthier."

The villagers come from as far away as 3 km to visit the well and women carry the water back to the village in the traditional African way of balancing drums of water on their heads. There are 48 families in the surrounding area who pay a small amount of money into a fund which maintains the well and gives them access to the clean drinking water. This fund is administered by a

committee to ensure it always remains in a good working condition. "It is not just for bioRe® farmers but is for all the community in this area as long as they pay the very small up-keep fee," said Justina Samson.

After speaking to the locals at the well, we jump back into the Land Rover and head for Mwamishali Primary School where the head teacher Seth Mlemka and fellow academics David Mkumbo and Taus Said greet us outside their single story school building. It's clear from the one basketball hoop in the school yard – fashioned from an acacia tree branch and an old motorbike wheel – that the school needs financial help. "We don't even have a basketball anymore," lamented Mlemka, "the problems with this school are typical problems for all the schools in our region. There is a lack of water and resources. At the moment four children have to share one exercise book."

Basic furniture was also a problem for the school until bioRe® stepped in and bought 60 new desks so that the children had at least somewhere to sit while they are learning.

Smokeless stoves

Another bioRe social initiative has been to help its farmers to install smokeless stoves in their homes to promote well-being and reduce wood consumption. These stoves are also part of the CO₂ project of Remei AG and bioRe® to reduce the overall CO₂ emissions of its production.

Stirring a dish of rice and chicken, Esther Enock, wife of organic cotton farmer Constantine Enock said, "before we had this stove, smoke filled the house," and pointed out that, "the new stove also takes less fuel so it's easier, cheaper and quicker for us to cook for the family." So far, bioRe® has funded the building of 38 stoves for its organic cotton farmers, "We expect to build another 119

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stoves at the end of 2009," said Samson, "which provides another benefit to joining the bioRe organic system."

Like the clean drinking water projects, bioRe's social initiatives are not just aimed at the families of farmers who produce bioRe organic cotton. They are often aimed at supporting the wider community in villages where bioRe has an organic cotton farming presence and a bioRe office.

This includes the formation of two women's groups in Bulyashi and Mwamishali who generate income by stitching organic cotton bags for bioRe farmers. Felista Mikomangura is the chairperson of one such group of 16 women: "we receive sewing machines on credit," she said, "normally we would not be able to afford the outlay for the machines."

"They also make their own garments in addition to producing garments for sale at the market,"

noted Samson, "They undergo training twice a week and the building where they work is rented out through bioRe."

"Our aim is to support organic farmers and their communities in the fields of education, health and income generation, with the new bioRe Social Standard we aim to do this in a more transparent way which is audited and will attract more buyers to this area of Tanzania."

Women's groups in Bulyashi and Mwamishali generate income by stitching organic cotton bags for bioRe farmers and making their own clothes.



The bioRe social criteria for cultivation

Market price 15% premium on average price of the last five years
Purchase guarantee and five years contract
Education and training in organic farming for all the farmers
Regular and free advisory service to all the farmers
Individual projects and interest free loans
Community projects
Infrastructural development and capital creation
Farmer representative in the bioRe organisations
Non-discrimination, possibility for everyone to be a contract farmer
The principles of SA 8000 also apply for agricultural producers

bioRe®



bioRe® stands for the two organic cotton companies bioRe® Tanzania Ltd. and bioRe® India Ltd. and represents the origin of organic cotton in the products of Remei AG.

At the same time, bioRe® is a quality label and stands for Remei AG's socially and ecologically compatible chain of production in which organic cotton is processed into fashion items for brand manufacturers and trading companies.

Remei AG's approach is based on five principles underlying the entire controlled chain of production: organic cotton from bioRe® companies in India and Tanzania, dignified conditions of work in manufacturing, ecological processing, full traceability across the entire chain of production, and innovation through CO₂ neutrality.

All bioRe® products are marked with a traceability number which ensures traceability from farming through all processing stages to the finished product.

Remei AG manufactures organic-cotton textiles in a sustainable process covering the entire chain of production up to delivery of the products of your choice. Furthermore, Remei AG provides a vast range of fibres and yarns.

Our services include the making of collections and production management in the segments below:

Clothing for all members of a family, such as:

- jersey fabrics including elastane blends,
- woven fabrics,

- all colours, embroidery and prints, e.g. screen-printing and rotary printing.

Minimum volumes:

- Adults: from 500 units per colour and item.
- Children and infants: from 700 units per colour and item.

CONTACT: Contact Remei AG for ordering organic cotton garments: Diane Gerth, Email: diane.gerth@remei.ch, Phone: +41'41'798'3212

Remei AG offers bioRe® cotton yarns and fibres from certified organic cultivation with various qualities. Remei AG supports you in finding and selecting the yarn qualities you require as well as in terms of respective logistics involved.

Contact Remei AG for ordering organic cotton fibres and yarns:

Simon Hohmann, Email: simon.hohmann@remei.ch, Phone: +41 41 798 3254

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