

The Production of Conventional Cotton

Cotton is cultivated in over 60 countries and covers an area of more than 80 million hectares which is equivalent to 5 per cent of all cultivated land. The production of cotton uses 25 per cent of all pesticides consumed annually by the world's agriculture. Of the 300 million kilogrammes of pesticides used in countries in the South every year, half is used for the production of cotton.

A range of pesticides is used in the control of a whole variety of insect pests attacking the plant during its vegetative stage and being a non food crop, cotton has attracted the most deadly and highly toxic pesticide formulations. Due to the high toxicity of these formulations and the regularity of application, the natural predator population in cotton areas has been greatly reduced.

The cost of production has been rising steadily but neither cotton yields nor income is increasing at the same rate. Cotton farming is becoming a more risky business as profit margins for the farmers decrease.

There are many environmental, health, socio-economic and structural problems associated with cotton production. Empty pesticide containers are being dumped around small farmers' households even in the remotest locations.

Other indirect problems caused by the use of pesticides are created through contamination. For example, when cattle are put to graze on the leaves of cotton after the harvest or when cattle are fed on the oil cake - a high protein feed - made from the cotton seeds, the livestock can be poisoned and may die.