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**On this first official UN World Cotton Day, the United Nations wants to raise awareness of the critical role that cotton plays in economic development, international trade and poverty alleviation**

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Cotton is a major source of livelihood and income for many rural smallholders and labourers. Photo: Reuters

**On 30 August 2021, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution recognising 7 October as World Cotton Day, following a proposition by Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali.**

The resolution reaffirms the relevance of the sectoral cotton initiative launched in 2003 at the WTO "to improve market access opportunities for cotton and cotton-related products from least developed countries and to substantially reduce any trade-distorting effects of undue measures in the international cotton trade and to intensify discussions on factors negatively impacting cotton trade and markets."

It also underlines the importance of development assistance programmes and efforts to improve cotton production capacity in developing countries.

The resolution should encourage donors and beneficiary countries to strengthen development assistance projects on cotton and foster new business opportunities by sparking collaboration between the private sector and investors in cotton-related industries. It should also help to promote technological advances and further research and development on cotton-related technologies and best practices.

Annual celebrations for World Cotton Day provide a unique opportunity to recognise the historic importance of cotton as a global commodity grown in over 75 countries across five continents and to highlight its central role in job creation and maintaining economic stability, particularly in several LDCs.

According to the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC), the annual revenue from cotton is estimated at \$41.2 billion, while the cotton trade amounts to \$18 billion every year.

World Cotton Day was launched at the WTO in 2019 in collaboration with the secretariats of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the International Trade Centre (ITC) and the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC).

The objectives behind the events and celebrations for World Cotton Day today (7 October) are to 1) raise awareness of the challenges and opportunities involved in the production and commercialisation of cotton; 2) support WTO members in their efforts to build more open, efficient, competitive, fair, predictable and resilient cotton international markets, including through WTO multilateral trade negotiations; 3) support the development of sustainable and economically viable cotton sectors in vulnerable economies, particularly in Africa, including through technical assistance and development projects; 4) ensure the support of governments and civil society in addressing the challenges and opportunities faced by the cotton and textile industries in vulnerable economies in particular; 5) provide information on the use of cotton fibre and cotton by-products such as oil and feedstuff; and 6) contribute to the promotion of the social and environmental benefits of natural fibres produced sustainably.

In addition to its fibre used in textiles and apparel, food products can be derived from cotton, such as edible oil and animal feed from the seed. Moreover, cotton-based filaments are more scalable than materials like wood.

As a crop resistant to climatic changes, it can be planted in dry and arid zones. Cotton occupies just 2.1% of the world's arable land, yet it meets 27% of the world's textile needs. Almost nothing from cotton is wasted. It is used in textiles, animal feed, edible oils, cosmetics or fuel, among other uses.

### **Cotton sustains over 100 million families worldwide**

Cotton represents so much more than just a commodity. This natural fabric is a life-changing product worldwide that sustains 28.67 million growers and benefits over 100 million families across 75 countries on 5 continents.

For instance, a single tonne of cotton provides year-round employment for five people on average, often in some of the most impoverished regions.

This means that, behind any cotton clothing, following back its trade chain, there is a personal story. It is true that cotton is really important to developed economies, but for least-developed and developing countries, it is a safety net.

Cotton is a major source of livelihood and income for many rural smallholders and labourers, including women, providing employment and income to some of the poorest rural areas in the world.

On this first official UN World Cotton Day, the United Nations wants to raise awareness of the critical role that cotton plays in economic development, international trade and poverty alleviation. The observance also aims to highlight the importance of sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

### **Challenges ahead (and solutions) for cotton production in Bangladesh**

Cotton production's carbon footprint is even better than neutral. Net on-farm emissions of GHGs in growing cotton are actually negative because the plant stores more carbon (for example, in the lint and seed) than is released from fuel and fertilizer during growth.

The future focus for cotton production should be sustainable cotton and to encourage other sustainable cotton initiatives in the value chain to ensure environmental, economic and social sustainability with a view to cater for the need for a clothing value chain that is responsible. This pertains to Labor Rights and Standards, Worker Health and Safety, Equity and Gender, and Farmer Organisations and their policies/values.

Moreover, transparent, traceable and sustainable production should be prioritised by using smart technologies suitable for Bangladesh.

The agricultural sector in Bangladesh is climate-sensitive and highly vulnerable to increasing weather variability and climate change and thereby, has become a major barrier to achieving food security and alleviating poverty in Bangladesh.

Several studies indicated that the production of major crops in Bangladesh could be significantly impacted due to erratic rainfall, increase in temperature, cyclone, tidal surge, saline water intrusion, flood and seasonal drought affecting crop production across the country.

The majority of the farmers in Bangladesh are still practising conventional agriculture. Additionally, they are producing cotton using conventional agricultural management practices (applying a high dose of fertilizers, pesticides and water etc.). Consequently, conventional cotton farmers have a higher cost of production and low resource-use efficiency.

In the case of sustainability, the agricultural practices and technologies considered climate-smart can help to achieve increased productivity, resilience to climate change and reduced greenhouse gas emissions. The cultivation of cotton in Bangladesh suffered multiple shocks ie market volatility, climate change and poor agricultural management practices resulting substantial decrease in crop production.

It has been observed that the implementation of Climate Smart Technologies significantly minimised the adverse effects of climatic stresses, and increase crop productivity, farm income and cropped area.

We advise farmers to adopt water-smart (raising seedlings on the bed, laser land levelling, conjunctive use of water and drainage management, foliar fertilizer application to manage late season drought), energy-smart (no tillage or minimum tillage), carbon-smart (less use of chemicals and increase of organic fertilizer and pest control measure) and knowledge-smart (inclusion of legume crop in the cropping pattern and improved ie use of digital technologies, varieties tolerant to drought, flood and heat/cold stresses) practices and technologies of Climate Smart Technologies (CST).

We are hopeful that with the appropriate policy, leadership and continued engagements with different stakeholders of the value chain cotton farming in Bangladesh would progress towards sustainability with smart technologies and meet the demand of the value chain.

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Sketch: TBS

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*Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions and views of The Business Standard.*

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**Why 'good' initiatives to make Dhaka citizen-friendly go in vain**

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