

That Organic Cotton T-Shirt May Not Be as Organic as You Think

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By Alden Wicker, [Emily Schmall](#), [Suhasini Raj](#) and [Elizabeth Paton](#)

5 Michael Kors retails its organic cotton and recycled polyester women's zip-up hoodies for [\\$25 more](#) than its [conventional cotton hoodies](#). And Tommy Hilfiger's men's organic cotton slim-fit T-shirt is \$3 more than its conventional counterpart.

10 "This product contains independently certified organic cotton grown without chemical pesticides, chemical fertilizers and genetically modified seeds," the product description reads. With the fashion industry trumpeting its sustainability commitments, those labels are both a means of value signaling and a lure to consumers willing to pay more to act better.

15 There's only one problem: Much of the "organic cotton" that makes it to store shelves may not actually be organic at all. The largest single producer of the world's organic cotton supply is India, which accounts for half of the organic cotton sold globally, and where the organic cotton movement appears to be booming. According to Textile Exchange, a leading organic proponent, organic cotton production in India alone grew 48 percent in the last year, despite the pandemic. However, much of this growth is fake, say Indians who
20 source, process and grow organic cotton.

At the heart of the problem is an opaque certification system rife with opportunities for fraud. Consumers are assured of "organic" material by brands, which rely on official stamps of approval from external organizations. Those in turn rely on reports from opaque local
25 inspection agencies that base their conclusions on a single planned yearly inspection (in the case of the facilities) or a few random visits (for farms). In recent months, the credibility of these inspection agencies has been destroyed. In November, the European Union voted to no longer accept Indian organic exports certified by the main companies responsible for organic cotton: Control Union, EcoCert and OneCert. And in January, the international
30 agency that provides accreditation to organic inspection agencies, IOAS, withdrew OneCert's ability to inspect and certify cotton processors for these labels.

Crispin Argento, founder and managing director of the Sourcery, a small consulting firm that helps brands source organic cotton, has spent the past year hunting down organic
35 cotton with his team only to see suppliers disappear when they start asking for proof of authenticity. He estimates between one half and four-fifths of what is being sold as organic cotton from India is not genuine. And almost the entire supply chain is implicated in what he calls a game of "smoke and mirrors."

40 For at least a decade, in reports and at conferences convened by agitated large brands and the network of nongovernmental organizations that serve them, the organic cotton industry in India has been described as in "crisis," but the problems have been kept largely out of the public eye. N.G.O. workers worry exposure would lead to the total collapse of the industry and harm the small subset of farmers who are, in fact, growing organically.
45 They also fear the wrath of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, which has come down hard on those who dare to criticize the country. Others are profiting handsomely from the certification system. (500 words)