

Oxfam and Marks & Spencer:

Finding common ground.

Summary: Closing the cotton supply chain loop

The Oxfam and M&S relationship is about understanding each other's businesses, which in turn identifies common ground. This case study will share two activities – one supply chain and the other consumer focused – which developed out of a history of constructive dialogue between the two organisations. The activities demonstrate how joint objectives can be achieved by developing a closed loop model, starting and ending with some of the world's poorest people in mind.

Oxfam GB (Oxfam) operates in Mali, one of the world's poorest countries, where two-thirds of the population – mostly in rural areas – live on less than a dollar a day. Mali is also the second largest cotton producer in sub-Saharan Africa after Burkina Faso. Marks & Spencer UK (M&S) buys tens of thousands of tonnes of cotton every year, and since 2007 they have been the biggest retailer of Fairtrade cotton on the High Street. **Cotton is the common ground.**

Background: Identifying common ground

Oxfam recognises the importance of cotton in reducing poverty and supporting the economy of countries such as Mali. In 2007 Oxfam launched a five-year programme to promote lasting gains in farming livelihoods with a specific focus on Mali. Farmers' livelihoods can be severely undermined by depressed and volatile cotton prices, and supporting farmers to scale-up and produce

organic and Fairtrade cotton can help them to mitigate market uncertainties.

Businesses also need these communities to remain economically strong and stable. M&S recognises this more than most and have developed an M&S cotton sourcing strategy, setting out their aspiration to improve the sustainability of all cotton used to make M&S clothing. Working together to develop sustainable cotton and textile production that supports small-scale producers and workers in developing countries is common ground.

However, this is only one side of the coin. M&S also recognises that the linear retail consumer model is not sustainable. In the UK alone, 400 million tonnes of waste is thrown away each year, the majority produced by construction and industry. Thirty-five million tonnes of waste is produced by households, of which 1 million is clothing needlessly destroyed or sent to landfill. M&S is determined to improve their waste performance as well as encouraging their customers to do the same.

Why is this common ground for Oxfam? Oxfam too is a High Street retailer, with a turnover of more than £80 million, principally derived from second-hand clothing, an increasingly difficult commodity to source. Encouraging M&S customers to donate their unwanted clothes to Oxfam strengthens Oxfam shops' core business and returns a significant income for Oxfam. As well as rewarding customers' sustainable behaviour, the scheme provides significant additional funds for Oxfam's programme work.

Detailed activity summary: M&S Mali Cotton Initiative

Oxfam aims to have 70 per cent of the 8,250 farmers supported by the Mali Cotton Initiative, producing Fairtrade and organic cotton in mixed production systems at sustainable yields by 2011 (est. 600kg/ha). This is alongside promoting rural women's empowerment in cotton-producing areas as well as increasing, at a national level, farmer organisations' autonomy and effectiveness.

Marks & Spencer have supported Oxfam in achieving these aims by:

1. Purchasing 80 tonnes in 2007, 160 tonnes in 2008 and 120 tonnes in 2009 of Fairtrade organic cotton which was used to make clothes in their Childrenswear departments
2. Through its trading relations, M&S have influenced the cotton marketing and trading companies – as well as UK and EU fashion and textiles industry - to engage in long term partnerships promoting sustainable cotton globally
3. Committing to the continued use of Fair Trade cotton and development of partnerships with organisations such as Oxfam and Helvetas, a development co-operation in Switzerland, to improve the sustainability of all cotton used in M&S clothing.



Aminata Coulibaly and friends picking cotton in the fields around Ballan village near Fana, Mali. Photo: Helen Palmer/Oxfam

The Oxfam Clothes Exchange Programme

Astoundingly, there are approximately 2.4 billion items of unworn clothing in the British wardrobe, and one million tonnes of these clothes are needlessly destroyed or sent to landfill each year. The Clothes Exchange Programme, since its launch in January 2008, has saved over 2,000 tonnes of M&S clothing from landfill, and raised over £2 million for Oxfam.

The concept is simple. M&S customers who donate an M&S item to any Oxfam store will receive an M&S voucher which entitles them to £5 off any £35 spend. The customer needs to visit the M&S store within the same month as donating the clothing to Oxfam to receive the £5 discount. It's a triple win:

1. It's good for people in developing countries (they benefit from Oxfam's work)
2. It's good for the environment (less clothing goes to landfill)
3. It's good for customers of both shops (M&S customers are rewarded with M&S vouchers, and Oxfam customers get an even wider choice of clothes).

Donations of M&S clothing to Oxfam have nearly doubled, and therefore increased the amount and quality of clothing brought into Oxfam shops, which helps us raise more money to combat poverty and suffering.

Two million pounds for Oxfam could pay for Oxfam's entire Rwanda programme for one year. This would help people make a better living from agriculture, work to tackle the spread of HIV and AIDS and help national reconciliation, as well as fund Oxfam's mobile schools for farmers' children in Kenya for four years.

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