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Organic cotton - does it offer multiple benefits for farmers? A sustainable livelihood analysis in central India

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Abstract

India is the largest organic cotton producing country worldwide: more than 100 000 farmers are growing organic cotton on an average field size of less than 2 ha. For many of them, organic cotton is an important cash crop and a key income source. But the production of organic cotton can provide benefits beyond the income, such as ecological or health benefits. The sustainable livelihood approach offers a framework to look at the complexity of organic farmers’ livelihoods beyond the economic aspects. Different assets describe the resources people have at their disposal, and the combination of assets describes the individual livelihood. We conducted a livelihood survey with a total number of 90 farmers, 45 organic and 45 conventional farmers in the cotton-growing region of the Nimar valley in Madhya Pradesh, India. A project supporting farmers in growing organic cotton and providing further social support has longstanding engagement in this area. We have assessed factors of farmers’ physical, human, social, natural, and economic capital. Using descriptive statistical analysis we assessed the differences between the two farmer groups. Organic farmers were found to have a stronger social network, perceived increases in soil fertility, and increased on-farm diversity. Economic factors, such as costs for agricultural inputs often remained the distinguishing aspect between organic and conventional farmers. Differences in their social and human capital might be attributed to the effects of the project activities in the region. To develop projects that empower small-holder farmers, it is crucial to understand not only the economic but also the social impacts of these projects. More research is needed to develop a framework to guide such livelihood analysis.

Keywords: Cotton, India, organic farming, Sustainable Livelihood Analysis