

PLAOC - Proyecto La Siesta Algodón Orgánico en Colombia

- Organic Cotton Project of La Siesta in Colombia

Background

[La Siesta](#) GmbH is a German enterprise which produces and markets hammocks worldwide. Since its creation 1991 it subscribed itself to the respect to the environment and to the people making its products.

2008 La Siesta introduced its first organic cotton hammock. It was made in Colombia and for producing it, the company imported organic cotton yarn from Tanzania to Colombia. Today 20% of La Siesta's cotton products are made of organic cotton. For producing them the company nowadays brings organic cotton yarn from Turkey to its production partners in Brazil and Colombia. Cotton fibre cannot be brought into these nations as local regulations require fumigating the fibre when entering the country. Such fumigations, however, consist of chemical treatments not permitted by organic standards.

Today all La Siesta organic cotton products made in Colombia are moreover [GOTS](#) certified.

2009 [Alexander Grisar](#), founder of La Siesta, transferred the Company to his three sons and started searching for organic cotton production alternatives in Latin America. He concentrated his efforts in Colombia. 2010 he launched the initiative [SOCiLA](#) for promoting organic cotton cultivation in Latin America. La Siesta has welcome, supported and financed this initiative from the very beginning. Since then Alexander has been in permanent contact with the main players of the cotton, textile and fashion scenery in Colombia. He has been traveling 2-3 times a year to the country, contacted potential investors and ignited many initiatives. His efforts contributed

- to an awareness creation on threats and opportunities to the agricultural as well as the industrial and fashion sector, especially in view of the export market potential of sustainably produced apparel and home textiles,
- to the implementation of three different organic cotton cropping tests, i.e.
 - in Uramita, Antioquia with the assistance of [Textile Exchange](#) and the departmental Government of Antioquia,
 - in Tolima under the leadership of [Corpoica](#), with funding from [FFA](#) and the Government of Tolima,
 - in Huila and Tolima promoted by [PTP](#) and [ANDI](#),
- to the undertaking of [Diagonal](#), the main cotton buying agency of the country, to buy organic cotton in transition resulting from further organic cotton test crops at premium prices,
- to getting small Colombian initiatives ([mglife](#), [Jungle Folk](#), [Textiles Proaltex](#), [Tienda Güi](#)) to produce organic cotton apparel with imported organic cotton material,
- to get further agricultural initiatives to apply for local funding for sustainable cotton test crops ([Sennova](#), [Pacto Agrario](#)).

In spite of rather promising results of the [PTP-test](#) and the encouraging pre-disposition of Diagonal, no proposals could be put together to get cotton farmers to embark on further projects. This made La Siesta decide to start this (its own) project.

The Project

The project consisted in cultivating organic cotton on a total of 21 ha in the department of Tolima (second most important cotton cropping region of the country), gin the produced seed cotton in a central location to the fields and spin the fibre to yarn in Medellín (centre of the textile industry and the fashion sector of Colombia) for utilizing that yarn in the factory of [Industrias Fatelares](#) for the production of La Siesta hammocks.

All project costs, including land rental, payments to farmers, coordinators and consultants, as well as all inputs and labour costs, ginning and spinning were borne by La Siesta and the company has at all stages of production been the owner of the outputs (seed cotton, cotton fibre, cotton seed, yarn).

Cropping was done in fincas which have not had any chemical contamination during the last 3 years, such that certification could already be obtained from the very beginning (for contaminated soils conversion periods of 3 years are required).

Central to the project were the concepts of [agro-ecology of Carlos Brigard](#). Carlos Brigard is a reputed and experienced totally organically oriented agricultural engineer with special emphasis on preparation and fertilization of soils, especially through soil covering crops, rotating cotton with leguminous plants (as crotalaria, 'lentejita', pigeon pea, cowpea, sorgo, mucuna, etc.), and supporting the soil structure by enhancing and activating soil biology.

The following fincas participated

- 'La Rochela' of Carlos Brigard in Espinal (5 ha),
- 'San Nicolás' of Miguel Brigard (brother of Carlos Brigard) in El Guamo (8 ha),
- 'Guanajuato' of Fernando Rivera, rented to Mario Arenas, neighbour agronomist of Miguel Brigard, in El Guamo (5 ha),
- 'El Balso' of María Olga Feria and Raúl Feria, administered by Miguel Verú, son of Olga Feria and leader of indigenous protection Pacandé, in Natagaima (3 ha).

Drop irrigation with groundwater was installed in the first three properties and gravity irrigation with water pumped from the adjacent river was installed in El Balso.

Ginning took place in the ginning plant of Fibras del Interior S.A. in El Guamo and spinning at [Ecohilandes](#) S.A.S. in Medellín.

Certifications were carried out by the French company Ecocert. Organic certification of the four properties and the ginning plant was done in accordance with the European standard [CE 834/2007](#) and the American standard [USDA/NOP](#). Certified were the fibre as well as the seed. Moreover we obtained the [GOTS](#)-certificate for the ginning and spinning units. GOTS looks into social as well as environmental standards and is nowadays considered the most rigorous global seal for organic textile products.

The Project Team

A working team has been formed under the leadership of Alexander Grisar in collaboration with Alberto Caro, ex-president of [ACIA](#) (Association of Colombian Agronomists) for the local coordination. Carlos Brigard acted as technical manager and the agro-ecological soul of the project. Acting as consultants to the farmers and the team were also the organic inputs suppliers, Edgar Blandón, technical director of [Gaicashi](#) and William Cardona, general manager of [Agrobiológicos Safer](#). [Jens Soth](#) of [HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation](#) of ample all-round experience on [organic cotton cultivation](#) in African countries and in Central Asia was the team's international consultant.

Capacity Building

The project was designed to include apprenticeship training and know-how transfers, especially most needed for the young agrarian population of the region. A cooperation programme was established with [Centro La Granja](#) in Espinal, one of the many rural apprenticeship centres of the renowned governmental [SENA](#). The programme foresaw

- monthly courses in the region on general topics of organic agriculture and on alternatives of producing cotton more sustainably (reduction of the use of pesticides, irrigation alternatives, mulching, crop rotation, etc.) and

- experimental organic cotton cropping on 1 ha on the premises of Centro La Granja along the concepts of Carlos Brigard with the participation of 25-30 SENA apprentices. A group of SENA trainees was assigned do the manual work and to observe the cropping under the leadership of an instructor. Carlos Brigard would accompany the group and visit this experimental and basically educational crop periodically.

Time Schedule

Soil preparation of the properties started September 2014, the installations for irrigation were concluded February and seeding was started at the beginning of March 2015. Harvesting took place in August, ginning mid-September and spinning at the end of September 2015.

The organic certifications were obtained October and the GOTS certification in November 2015.

The production of hammocks in the factory of Fatelares with the GOTS-certified yarn produced by Ecohilandes is foreseen for Decembers 2015.

The final agricultural report with all data, field observations, monitoring reports, photographic materials, yields and costs analysis is presently being compiled by the local project coordinator.

Mishaps

The project had some serious mishaps:

- due to unusual droughts in the period September-November no cover-cropping could be applied in the majority of the fields,
- seeding did only partially germinate such that re-seeding had to be done,
- one ha of El Balso had to be abandoned because seedlings dried out,
- two ha in San Nicolás had to be abandoned as they were gravely affected with a hormonal herbicide applied by the neighbouring farm,
- delays in the supply of the irrigation equipment at SENA's La Granja field and failing to weed on time forced an abandonment of the cropping there and the remaining programme which had been agreed with them,
- the river adjacent to El Balso completely dried out, this not having occurred for centuries before,
- the local coordinator of the project could not attend harvesting for personal reasons,
- Carlos Brigard had two heart attacks May and June 2015.

The heart attacks of Carlos Brigard during the most critical project time had very serious repercussions on the project. When not in hospital he was rather invalid at home. Moreover he had a car accident such that his brother Miguel took care of him. For the project that meant that it not only had lost its agro-ecological heart but also that it had cut in half its administration capacity.

Día de Campo (field day)

July 22, 2015, only days before beginning of harvest, La Siesta organized a field day for presenting the project to the interested community. We filled two buses, one leaving from Bogota airport, one from Tolima with representatives of all the value chain (cultivation through textile products), central and regional governmental representatives, [Conalgodón](#), NGO's, leaders of indigenous groups and local authorities. Specially surprising was the interest shown by visitors from other countries (Australia, Brazil, Germany, USA).

In particular Jorge Hernán Olarte, executive director of Diagonal, organization which buys and imports more than 90% of all cotton requirements of the country, categorically stressed his support of

the project and – generally – pointed out the need of further experiment with cotton cropping in Colombia.

The event was moderated by [Felipe Arango](#), partner of [BSD Consulting, Switzerland](#) and founder of [BSD USA](#), [BSD Colombia](#) and [BSD Mexico](#). The [video](#) shows some highlights of the day. It was filled with interchanges of ideas and discussions concerning the entire value chain, particularly

- bottom-up concepts for the future of cotton cropping in Colombia,
- the importance of family farming in the region, especially in preparation of the expected peace time,
- opportunities of Tolima in joining efforts between agronomist with agro-ecological background like Carlos Brigard (graduated in the US with many year [field experience there and in Colombia](#)) with old agricultural wisdom of indigenous groups and their respect for [Mother Earth](#).

Discussion on Results

Only a few days previous to the commencement of harvest Carlos Brigard and Jens Soth estimated manifold yields as were finally measured at harvest. Their estimates were lower as compared to what was actually expected when devising the project. In any case, we refrain at this stage from stating figures before not having a clear picture on the issue.

However it must be stated with clear conscience that the project contributed to apprenticeship and led to many lessons. Specifically it contributed to the creation of consciousness on problems affecting cotton cropping in Colombia and sketched challenges and opportunities for strengthening family farming in the zone. Moreover it has shown that it is possible to produce organic cotton in the country in accordance with European and American standards and even to produce yarn with this cotton in accordance with GOTS, nowadays considered the most rigorous certification for organic textile products.

Therewith signals were given to the textile industry and the apparel and fashion sectors of Colombia that they could enter into new sustainable export market niches, especially for serving the US market to which Colombia has a lead time advantage (an aspect especially important for the fashion sector) of 3-5 weeks with respect to its far east competitors.

Next Steps

The objective of the project was to present evidence to the potentially interested community that it is feasible to grow organic cotton in Colombia, get it certified in accordance with American and European standards and produce GOTS certified yarn from that cotton.

The idea behind this was that in a next step farmers would undertake cropping organic cotton on their own risk as long as La Siesta (and others!) would undertake to buy said cotton.

The objective of the project was, however, only partially reached: all the certifications have been attained but it could so far not yet been proved that growing organic cotton in Colombia is also economically feasible.

In this respect we would like to point out, that organic farmers like to stress that yields in organic crops are not reach from one day to the next. Contrary to conventional farming, which works with agricultural inputs and formulas that generate more or less the same results, no matter where they are applied, organic farming consists in observing nature, the ecological ambient, testing different approaches and applications, soil conditioning, etc. for attaining natural balances commensurate with prevailing local circumstances.

As Gonzalo la Cruz, Director Andes of the Dutch NGO [Solidaridad](#), told us at the presentation of the PTP project September 2013 in the premises of ANDI in Bogota, it took them with their organic cotton

project [Oro Blanco](#) in Peru 6 years observation and experimentation for reaching acceptable costs and yields.

Even if this might be a consolation for the first results of our project and a message for not losing patience, it presents no solution for giving continuity to our project. We acknowledge that

- farmers and indigenous groups are interested in doing further cropping,
- fincas and enterprises obtained certification which should preferably be further made use of,

but that

- the continuity of observations and field tests (for gradually approaching acceptable costs and yields) will require further initial investments La Siesta cannot come up with.

Following on its initial concept, La Siesta has, however, undertaken to buy up to 50 ton of certified Colombian organic cotton per year at pre-established prices for a period of 5 years. This [buying commitment](#) has been directed to a group of farmers in development in Tolima, might eventually also be split over various groups and be brought to other regions of the country.

For next steps we favour strengthening the participation of indigenous groups in the project. We visualize a wide variety of crop rotations, especially with leguminous products, and estimate that about 30% of the cropping area should be dedicated to cotton. Ideally the remaining would be dedicated to food security of the area. Moreover there is a growing market for organic food in Bogotá. Carola Prouteaux made a [market study](#) for us which impressively shows this. Moreover Leonardo Bruinsma, director of the de la cooperative [Huertos Verdes](#) which operates in the Sabana de Bogota even states that the demand for organic food in the capital area is close to [doubling year by year](#).

La Rochela on Sale

Recently Carlos Brigard had to move to a home for the aged. He is now in Caijca, just north of Bogotá and is selling his finca. He is still prepared to act as an adviser to an eventual continuation of the project. As team we would like to take this opportunity to publish that La Rochela, a beautiful spot with long organic cropping tradition, now also certified organic, has been put for sale, as we would very much like to see the finca in hands of someone who could follow-up on Carlos Brigard's example.

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06.12.2015



La Siesta team wishes its founder successful trip to Colombia



Fabio shows happiness about first seedlings in La Rochela



Seeding with equipment developed by Carlos Brigard



The art of weeding with rakes



First Seedlings at Guanajuato, El Guamo



End of a weeding day in La Rochela, Espinal



Apprentices at SENA's La Granja, Espinal



Cotton plants two months after seeding, El Balso, Natagaima



Consultant Jens Soth, Helvetas, discussing with Carlos Brigard



Miguel Verú joyfully showing his plants in El Balso, Natagaima



Discussion of action plan at finca La Rochela of Carlos Brigard



Alexander Grisar with Jorge Hernán Olarte, Diagonal



Visit at ginnery Fibras del Interior, El Guamo



Jens Soth happy with development of bolls in La Rochela



Compost preparation plant Gaicashi, Ibagué



Totally dried out river bed adjacent to the finca El Balso, Natagaima (has not occurred for centuries before)



Día de Campo (field day), finca La Rochela, Espinal



Group photo ending the Día de Campo in San Nicolás, El Guamo