



ISEAL Community Member System Overview

Organisation Name	Better Cotton Initiative
Year	2022
Version	V 1.0

Better Cotton’s mission is to help cotton farmers and communities survive and thrive, while protecting and restoring the environment.

1) The **STRATEGIES** our system employs to meet its sustainability objectives

Better Cotton’s strategic strength is derived from being a Multistakeholder Initiative that reflects the breadth and diversity of the cotton sector – a community that understands the mutual benefits of sustainable cotton farming, the need to invest in more-sustainable cotton production, and who understand the importance of actively contributing towards setting and supporting the objectives of the Better Cotton Standard System (BCSS).

Elements of the BCSS are specifically designed to work together thereby ensuring the credibility of Better Cotton. Furthermore, the system is designed to ensure the exchange of good practices, and to encourage the scaling up of collective action to establish and maintain Better Cotton as a sustainable mainstream commodity.

Our strategy includes working across all farm sizes, types and contexts - from smallholders to large-scale mechanised farms. We aim to:

- Embed sustainable farming practices and policies so that on cotton farms the soil is healthy, and land, water and other resources are managed for the good of local communities and the planet.
- Enhance the well-being and economic development of cotton farmers by helping to make cotton farming economically viable for them and their communities, with improved working conditions, good health prospects and a better quality of life.
- Encourage and drive global demand for more-sustainable cotton.

The strategies which our system employs to achieve these objectives include:

- Farmer focus: Our programmes focus on farmers’ needs and are designed to equip them to continuously improve. This is substantially achieved by deploying our Standard through a network of Programme Partners who organise and train farmers and farm workers on the ground.
- Impact: We strive to deliver and demonstrate impact – progressive, measurable change for the better, at field level, in line with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

- Innovation: We create new opportunities and value for farmers through sharing of best practices and the use of data to enable them to farm more profitably. Moving forward, we will look to create access to financing and bundled services.
- Collaboration: We continue working with and expanding our broad network of stakeholders to inspire, influence and learn.
- Transformation: We remain determined to transform cotton production - deepening our impact on cotton farming and communities while catalysing systemic change to support more-sustainable cotton.
- Driving Demand: Direct engagement throughout the complex cotton supply chain enables us to make more-sustainable cotton the preferred choice for both growers and buyers.

To illustrate our strategic approach, Better Cotton has developed a [Theory of Change](#) (ToC) which defines our vision, and through causal pathways, connects activities with outcomes and impacts, including assumptions and contextual influences.

2) A description of the **STANDARD** that our system has developed

The BCSS covers the most urgent social, economic, and environmental issues that cotton production is facing with a unique approach. It includes six elements: the farm-level standard - our Principles and Criteria (P&C); Capacity Building; the Assurance Programme; Chain of Custody; Claims Framework; and our Results and Impact (Monitoring and Evaluation) system.

The P&C are a fundamental element of the BCSS, as they lay out the global definition of Better Cotton and define the requirements that Better Cotton farmers must comply with before they are licenced to sell 'Better Cotton'. The P&C is organised into Principles, Criteria, and Indicators, which cover climate change, soil health, water, biodiversity and land-use, crop protection and pesticide use, fibre quality, decent work, gender, livelihoods, and management systems. The P&C are designed to align with international sustainability and labour standards, and to support national and local legislation around cotton farming sustainability, where they exist.

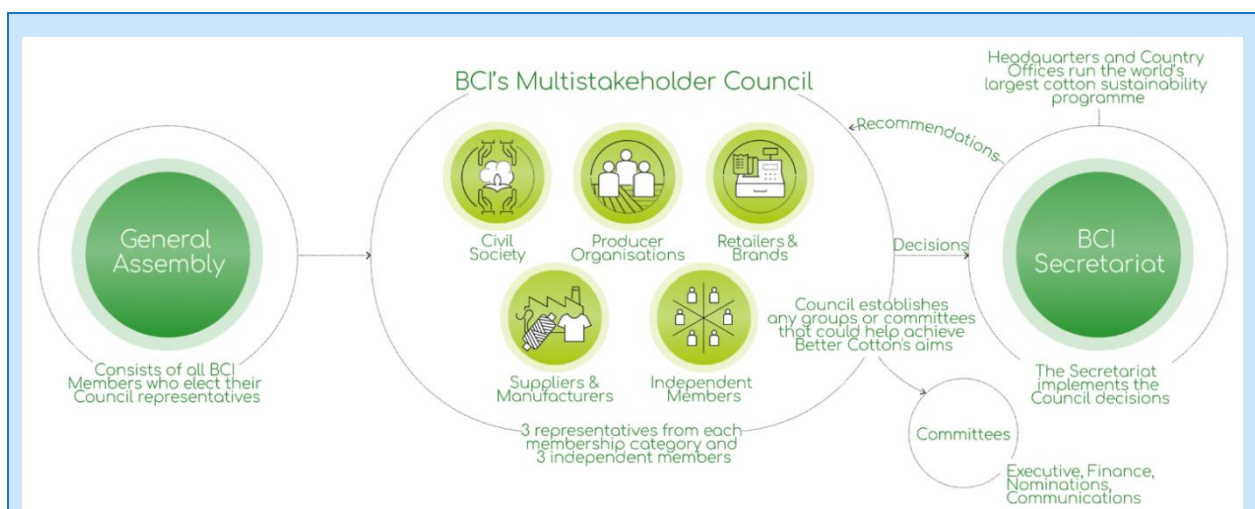
The P&C apply to producers of all sizes, with respective indicators applicable to smallholder, medium or large farms. This strong, localised implementation guidance and the incorporation of a continuous improvement approach into the P&C makes them applicable for a wide range of cotton farms irrespective of their baseline – from those who are just starting to understand the benefits of sustainability, to those who are on the leading edge of environmentally and socially-responsible farming.

The Better Cotton P&C are reviewed periodically in a stakeholder consultation process – enabling Better Cotton to set the bar at the right level between ambition and feasibility of implementation, thereby driving real sustainability impacts on the ground.

Compliance with the P&C is verified via our [Assurance Programme](#), while our [Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Programme](#) ensures that we collect relevant and purpose-driven data to track, progress, communicate results and ensure the standard is achieving the desired outcomes.

Collecting and analysing data on the reach, outcomes and impact of Better Cotton helps us understand what is working and what needs to improve. It is also used to directly inform partners and farmers, thus enabling them to independently adjust and improve their work on sustainable cotton farming practices.

3) How we maintain **RESPONSIBILITY** for decisions taken about and by our system



The General Assembly, comprising all Better Cotton Members, elects two Better Cotton Council representatives from each of the four major Better Cotton membership categories: retailers and brands, suppliers and manufacturers, producer organisations and civil society.

The Better Cotton Council functions as a board and consists of elected and appointed members. It is responsible for our establishing our strategic direction, shaping policy, and for approving key decisions related to the Better Cotton Standard System and its component parts (e.g. the [Principles & Criteria Revision](#) process).

Our Council also establishes any groups or committees that could help achieve our aims. Currently, there are two permanent committees in place: the Executive Committee and Finance Committee. There is also a Nominations Committee established during each election round to oversee fair and transparent elections.

Implementation of policy is the responsibility of a dedicated and global group of Secretariat staff, including an Executive Group and a broader Leadership Team – collectively overseeing adjustments of each of the standard system's components. They are the conduit between Council decision-making and ground-level action. As required, the Secretariat may itself establish dedicated working groups to provide expertise, focus and direction on high-priority areas.

4) How our system's design demonstrates a **COMMITMENT TO IMPROVEMENT**

We recognise that sustainability is a journey of continuous improvement. Working with a wide variety of predominantly smallholder farmers around the world, we put a strong emphasis on supporting them towards sustainability improvements. Producers, as part of the licensing requirements, are required to identify priority areas for more-sustainable practices and demonstrate continuous improvement progress over time. Assessments focus not only on compliance but also on identifying areas where further support or capacity building is needed.

Better Cotton's multi-level assurance structure ensures that knowledge from assessments can be more easily fed back and used to inform our capacity-building priorities and system improvements.

We also participate regularly in research in order to drive improvements – this is either commissioned by us or by external organisations, using a variety of methodologies ranging from Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) to outcome evaluation and case studies. Published studies and reports can be accessed via our [website](#) or on [evidensia.eco](#).

Better Cotton reports annually on its results. The primary changes we seek to drive are at farm level and the results framework reflects this. The latest report on 2020 results and impacts was published in December 2021 and is available [here](#).

5) How our standard or tool is monitored and reviewed to ensure its **RELEVANCE**

The Better Cotton P&C is reviewed periodically (at least every 5 years) in a broad, complex multistakeholder process to ensure it remains relevant and effective in all dimensions - tackling the most pressing sustainability issues; considering the key challenges facing cotton farmers; being based upon the latest scientific and technological knowledge; aligning with globally agreed sustainability efforts; and finally, remaining relevant for the value chains and consumers` needs - thereby ensuring that Better Cotton remains a mainstream commodity of choice. For more information, see: <https://bettercotton.org/better-cotton-principles-and-criteria-revision/>

Better Cotton ensures the effectiveness and integrity of its assurance model through [periodic system reviews](#) - these are performed at least every 3 years, most recently in 2020.

Other components of the standard system are also subject to periodic reviews through a multi-stakeholder consultation process – this has included the [Claims Framework](#) which was updated and released at the end of 2021, and there is an ongoing review of the Chain of Custody Guidelines to include new traceability models which are under development.

6) How the standard or tool is **IMPLEMENTED**

Better Cotton is implemented by a global network of Programme Partners who engage directly with the farming communities in each country. These experienced, locally-expert, field-level partners organise farmers and work with them on the Principles and Criteria of the Better Cotton Standard System – ensuring they receive the support they need to implement the standard effectively in a particular context.

We provide a comprehensive train-the-trainer programme for Programme Partners to ensure that the standard is appropriately implemented. In addition, we build connections with local experts, civil society, and research groups to deliver further capacity building to Partners on key hotspot sustainability issues – such as Integrated Pest Management or rainwater storage.

Our [assurance approach](#) combines assessments by approved independent third-party verifiers along with assessments by trained Better Cotton staff members, support visits by Programme Partners, and regular self-assessments by the producers themselves.

Better Cotton also provides a process whereby independently run cotton standards can be assessed and ultimately aligned with the Better Cotton Standard, enabling a one-way recognition by Better Cotton. Better Cotton currently recognises equivalent standards that operate in Australia, Brazil, Greece, Israel and several African countries. This benchmarking approach reduces duplication at the farm level, enables greater efficiency in sourcing sustainable cotton, and promotes local adaptation of our standard system.