



Background Information on Cotton Campaign's Work to End Forced Labor

This document provides the following:

1. A timeline of key moments in the Cotton Campaign's work to end forced labor and promote decent work for cotton workers in Uzbekistan;
2. An outline of the opportunities and challenges for sourcing from Uzbekistan; and
3. The key elements of the Framework for Responsible Sourcing, that the Cotton Campaign designed to leverage the unique opportunity in Uzbekistan while mitigating ongoing human rights risks and promoting strong standards across the industry.

Cotton Campaign Timeline

For almost 15 years, the Cotton Campaign has been at the forefront of human rights advocacy to end state-imposed forced and child labor and promote decent work in the cotton industry of Uzbekistan. The Cotton Campaign is a global coalition of international human and labor rights NGOs, independent trade unions, brand and retail associations, responsible investor organizations, supply chain transparency groups, and academic partners. A list of coalition members is available at:

<https://www.cottoncampaign.org/about/#coalitionmembers>

The Cotton Campaign used a wide range of policy, legal, economic leverage, and campaigning tools to achieve the end of state-imposed forced labor in the harvest of Uzbek cotton. To effectively utilize the influence of international stakeholders to push for reform in Uzbekistan, the coalition has continuously adapted its strategy to the evolving political and economic context.

Over the years, two key elements of the strategy have remained unchanged:

1) independent monitoring and reporting on the labor rights situation in the cotton fields and 2) organizing global brands and retailers to commit to excluding Uzbek cotton from their supply chains

At this new stage in Uzbekistan's development, the Cotton Campaign highlights the need for broader reforms to empower civil society, protect freedom of association, and promote responsible sourcing.

2007

- ▶ Over 1 million children and adults, including teachers, medical staff, public sector employees, schoolchildren and students, are forcibly sent to the fields to pick cotton. The annual forced mobilization of cotton pickers caused massive disruptions in society, had a devastating impact on the provision of public services, such as healthcare and education, and had long term impacts such as loss of education.
- ▶ Uzbek activists and international allies launch the Cotton Campaign.
- ▶ Cotton supply chains are almost entirely opaque, with brands and retailers failing to disclose even their finished goods suppliers. At the time, calling on companies to map their supply chains and exclude cotton originating in Uzbekistan was unprecedented. Since then, the Cotton Campaign has contributed to a growing movement for increased supply chain transparency and accountability for using forced labor in the harvesting of cotton and the production of apparel and textile products.

2008

- ▶ First meetings were held to refine Cotton Campaign objectives, develop strategies, engage brands and international stakeholders (including the ILO, which the Cotton Campaign urged to provide technical assistance to eliminate forced labor).
- ▶ NGOs, investors, and brands had a joint meeting in San Francisco, and brands started making commitments to exclude Uzbek cotton based on concerns over massive forced child labor.

2009

- ▶ Uzbek activists call on the EU, the US Government, global brands, and development banks for an international boycott of Uzbek cotton made with forced labor.

2010

- ▶ Uzbek Forum for Human Rights begins monitoring the annual cotton harvest
- ▶ Urging a boycott of forced labor Uzbek cotton becomes a core part of the Cotton Campaign's strategy, combining economic pressure with diplomatic engagement. This enables the campaign not only to raise awareness of the forced labor situation, but also to flag the forced labor risks associated with textiles retailed in Europe and the U.S.

2011

- ▶ After successfully pushing for removal from the official New York Fashion Week event, Cotton Campaign organized a protest outside of Gulnara Karimova's side-event fashion show held at Cipriani's restaurant in New York City.
- ▶ The Cotton Campaign launches its Uzbek Cotton Pledge Against Forced Labor; 60 brands sign on in the first year.

2014

- ▶ Under pressure from the boycott and the Cotton Campaign's accountability actions, and with the encouragement of the ILO as it begins monitoring, the Uzbek government stops forcing children to pick cotton. But the government continues to deny the existence of forced labor and attempts to prevent reporting. Adult forced labor intensifies.
- ▶ The Cotton Campaign files [complaints with the World Bank and IFC](#) over investments in the cotton industry in Uzbekistan.

2015

- ▶ Arrests and retaliation against labor rights defenders/cotton harvest monitors escalates
- ▶ Article published in the [UC Davis Journal of International Law](#) and Policy by Cotton Campaign co-founder that captures the history of the coalition thus far, and provides in-depth background information.

2017

- ▶ President Shavkat Mirziyoyev publicly acknowledges forced labor in a speech to the UN and pledges to address it, the first time an Uzbek official had ever done so. Since then, Uzbekistan has undertaken an ambitious reform program to end systematic, state-imposed forced labor.

2018

- ▶ First Cotton Campaign delegation visits Uzbekistan (May) to engage senior Uzbek government officials, civil society partners, and international ambassadors/institutions
- ▶ Cotton Campaign participates in the first public "roundtable" following the autumn harvest (November) with the ILO, GOU, and civil society activists to deliver the message "progress yes, success not yet."

2019

- ▶ At the Cotton Campaign's invitation, Deputy Prime Minister Tanzila Narbaeva meets with Cotton Campaign partners in Washington DC (February) to discuss progress and continuing challenges

- ▶ Cotton Campaign develops and delivers to the Uzbek government a Roadmap of Reform, a comprehensive document that sets forth specific recommendations to end systemic forced labor, implement structural reforms, and empower civil society. (June) The GOU accepts and begins to implement many of the recommendations.

2020

- ▶ Second Cotton Campaign delegation visits Tashkent to meet with senior GOU officials, civil society partners, and international stakeholders to encourage the consolidation and acceleration of reforms
- ▶ Cotton Campaign begins to develop a Responsible Sourcing Agreement (RSA) framework to encourage responsible cotton sourcing by brands to empower workers and farmers, protect labor and human rights
- ▶ Uzbek Forum monitors document no forced labor in some of the districts they reported on.

2021

- ▶ For the first time in Uzbekistan's history, monitors did not find government-imposed forced labor in the cotton harvest.
- ▶ Uzbek Forum founder and director Umida Niyazova visits makes her first visit to Uzbekistan following years of exile, joined by Cotton Campaign colleagues. (December)

2022

- ▶ March 10: Cotton Campaign announces the end of the Uzbek Cotton Pledge at Tashkent press conference with senior Uzbek government officials and Uzbek civil society partners. At the press conference, the Cotton Campaign:
 - Cites findings that no government-imposed forced labor was found in the 2021 harvest;
 - Encourages international brands to assess opportunities for responsible sourcing of Uzbek cotton yarn, textiles, and clothing; and challenges brands to invest in and commit to maintaining high labor standards; and
 - Challenges the GOU to improve the enabling environment for responsible sourcing by opening space for civil society and registering NGOs (to attract global brands).

Opportunities and challenges for sourcing from Uzbekistan

Achieving full traceability and transparency

- ▶ In 2020, Uzbekistan stopped exporting bales of raw cotton to complete its shift to value-added processing in the country

- ▶ Vertically-integrated cotton textile clusters control all aspects of production: cotton growing, harvesting (either directly or by contracting with local farmers), ginning, spinning, fabric production, and finished goods manufacturing (clothing and home goods)
- ▶ Some clusters are innovating, investing in state-of-the-art technology, upskilling, and working to meet international standards

Building a new kind of supply chain, in which labor rights are protected at all tiers of the supply chain

- ▶ Unprecedented opportunity for international brands, local cotton producers, labor groups, and the Uzbek government to work together to set and maintain strong labor standards across the entire Uzbek supply chain.
- ▶ Actors should implement the following principles to help turn Uzbekistan into a key sourcing country for sustainable cotton and textiles:
 - ▶ Creation of an enabling environment for labor rights by widening the space for civil society, promoting freedom of association, and allowing independent human and labor rights NGOs to register and operate freely in the country
 - ▶ Respect for labor rights in accordance with ILO conventions
 - ▶ The development of a responsible business model, based on fair purchasing practices to ensure decent work at all tiers of the Uzbek supply chain
 - ▶ Training and capacity building on international labor standards and industrial relations
 - ▶ Recognition that ensuring decent working conditions is the joint responsibility of all supply chain actors

While Uzbekistan has successfully eliminated state-imposed forced labor, there remain factors that seriously threaten the long-term durability of the progress achieved to date.

Key risks include:

- ▶ The lack of an enabling environment including freedom of association for independent monitoring and reporting of labor rights violations.
- ▶ Population density and shortage of labor that lead to insufficient voluntary pickers in some areas and some stages of the harvest.
- ▶ Persistent involvement or interference of government officials in the organization of the harvest that can lead to the use of coercion of farmers and cotton pickers.
- ▶ The lack of fair and independent recruitment systems and reliance on mahallas (neighborhood councils) to recruit pickers.

- ▶ The system of contract farming and unequal relationships between farmers and cotton clusters (companies) that hold monopolistic power in the districts where they operate and increase the risk of exploitation of farmers and government interference.
- ▶ Persistence of the "allocation" system, which sets the size of land allocated for cotton and wheat. The process is controlled by the Ministry of Agriculture and local hokimiyats, which set the cotton production quota for each farmer based on the size and yield of the land. Farmers are not protected from arbitrary inflated cotton production quotas and cannot reduce the amount of land allocated for cotton production.

The Framework for Responsible Sourcing

The Cotton Campaign developed a Framework for Responsible Sourcing to support brands in conducting their human rights due diligence. The Framework is designed to leverage the unique opportunity in Uzbekistan while mitigating ongoing human rights risks and promoting strong standards across the industry.

Through the Framework, brands, clusters, and labor groups can work collaboratively and at scale to establish and maintain strong standards in the emerging Uzbek textile industry. Tailored to the context of Uzbekistan, the Framework is based on international best practices to safeguard workers' rights and ensure compliance with mandatory human rights due diligence and other supply chain obligations. Examples include the Bangladesh Accord (with a focus on achieving health and safety at garment factories in Bangladesh), the Lesotho Agreements (with a focus on eliminating gender-based violence at a garment factory in Lesotho, and the Fair Food Program (with a focus on building mechanisms to respect labor rights at tomato farms in Florida).

Two interlocking agreements are at the foundation of the Framework: a cluster (supplier)/labor group agreement and a brand/labor group agreement. They work at different tiers and together, and they establish the core elements of a robust program for responsible sourcing, with co-governance by brands, labor groups, and clusters.

The scope of the program is to develop and operate credible mechanisms for traceability, monitoring and accountability, at all tiers of the Uzbek textile value chain.

Coordinated with the Framework will be the initiative [YESS: Yarn Ethically & Sustainably Sourced](#) to train yarn spinners and textile mills on due diligence processes and assess them for responsible purchasing of cotton inputs.

All brands interested in sourcing within the Framework are welcome to contact the Cotton Campaign to discuss the terms and next steps for implementation:

coordinator@cottoncampaign.org