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A Brief Introduction to the Requirements of the BCI Principles and Criteria (P&C) Standard

1. What is Better Cotton certification?

- It is a voluntary programme based on third-party auditing that aims to improve environmental, social and economic sustainability in cotton production.
- Auditing at the cotton production level is carried out according to the Better Cotton Principles and Criteria (P&C).
- The P&C focus on the following six Principles: Management, Natural Resources, Crop Protection, Fibre Quality, Decent Work and Sustainable Livelihoods. In addition, the P&C emphasise the importance of both gender equality and climate change across all Principles and include them as cross-cutting priorities that must be respected throughout.

2. Farm categories and organisational structure:

There are three farm categories: Large Farm (individual or group), Medium-Scale Producer Unit and Small-Scale Producer Unit.

- **Large Farms (LF)**, typically operate as farms with cotton fields larger than 200 hectares, either with mechanised production or with a structural dependence on a permanent workforce. While Large Farms join Better Cotton individually, others participate through the Large Farm Group Certification Model. In this approach, a number of farms are audited by a dedicated Group Manager and the certification covers all farms in the group. Only farms with fewer than 30 employees and mechanised harvesting qualify for Large Farm Group Certification.
- **Medium Farm:** These are farms typically with 20 to 200 hectares of cotton-planted area that are structurally dependent on a permanent paid workforce. Medium-Scale Farms are grouped into Producer Units for licensing purposes. They consist of approximately 100 farmers.
- **Small Farms:** Farms that typically have a cotton-planted area not exceeding 20 hectares and are not structurally dependent on a permanent paid workforce. Smallholders are grouped into Producer Units for licensing purposes. Within Small-Scale Producer Units there are “Learning Groups” (LG) as a sub-group.

In Producer Units, farmers are organised into Learning Groups; Field Facilitators are responsible for training and the record-keeping system.

- **Producer Unit (SH/MF):** A Producer Unit (PU) can be brought together under a common management structure to join the Better Cotton Programme. Smallholders (SH) or Medium-Scale Farms (MF) can be organised in this way. The Producer Unit management is responsible for establishing an internal management system, carrying out internal audits and keeping farmer records up to date. Each PU is overseen by a dedicated PU Manager who is responsible for implementing an internal management system to support, train and monitor farmers. The local size of a PU depends on context, but the ideal size is 3,500 to 4,000 farmers for an SH PU and approximately 100 farmers for an MF PU. Farmers in an SH PU are further divided into Learning Groups.
- **Learning Groups (SH):** A Learning Group is a group of Better Cotton Farmers who come together to take part in training and learning activities and to learn about more sustainable production practices. All Small-Scale Producer Units may be divided into learning groups of approximately 35 farmers, each managed by a Field Facilitator to improve learning. Typically, each Field Facilitator in a Small-Scale Producer Unit works with approximately 10 Learning Groups or a maximum of 350 farmers.
- **Field Facilitators (SH):** Field Facilitators are part of the management structure of BCI Producer Units. They are trained field staff who help to organise farmers, collect data at farm level and continue to build capacity within producer units. Field Facilitators are usually employed by Programme Partners or by Local Partners affiliated with them.

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The number of farmers, workers and groups to be visited during the audit is determined according to the producer type; the sample must be representative*:

Sample type	Large Farm Group	Medium-Scale Producer Unit	Small-Scale Producer Unit
Farmer fields to be visited	The square root of the total number of farms in the group	At least 3 farmers	At least 9 farmers
Worker interviews	5–30 workers (with fewer than 5 workers, an attempt is made to interview all of them)	5–30 workers (with fewer than 5 workers, an attempt is made to interview all of them)	5–30 workers (not dependent on a permanent paid workforce.)
Learning Groups to be visited	—	—	At least 3
Farming households interviewed	—	At most 2 other household members;	15 people from at least 3 producer units should be interviewed, of whom at least 9 must be farmers and the remainder may, where appropriate, be other household members.
Management interview	Large Farm Group management	All PU Managers and, where possible, all Field Facilitators (Producer Unit management only)	Producer Unit management only (All PU Managers and, where possible, all Field Facilitators)

**Large Farms are subject to 100% auditing.*

In risk situations such as a previous suspension, the use of temporary labour, the exceptionally permitted use of hazardous pesticides, or issues identified in internal audits, the sample size is increased. The farmer or management play no role whatsoever in the selection of the workers, farmers or groups to be visited.

3. Principles and Criteria

3.1. Management

Programme Partners: BCI's Programme Partners are organisations with local expertise that oversee the establishment and management of Producer Units within the assurance model. Programme Partners assume full responsibility for project delivery at field level, including establishing the management structure of Producer Units, recruiting and training Producer Unit Managers/Field Facilitators, and providing ongoing oversight (depending on audit results), preparation (for 1.5–2 days before certification of new PUs) and support (in the 2nd or 3rd year of the certificate) visits, as well as regular field-level engagement with Producer Units.

Producer Unit: A group of Smallholders or Medium Farms brought together under a common management structure to join the BCI Programme. Each PU is overseen by a dedicated PU Manager who is responsible for implementing an internal management system to support, train and monitor farmers.

Producer Unit Manager: The main person responsible for implementing the BCI Principles and Criteria at Producer Unit level.

*Leads the PU's internal management system. The main records that the Producer Unit Manager must prepare are:

- Written Cooperation Agreements (between the PP, PU, Group Manager and member farms).
- Farmer List: Identity information, estimated cotton area, permanent worker and sharecropper data.
- Activity and Monitoring Plans

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- Training and Capacity-Building Records: Attendance lists, topics, materials and facilitator data by gender.
- Self-Assessment Reports (Self-Assessment - PU & LF): Annual self-assessments against the current P&C criteria.
- Results Indicator Reporting (RIR): Pesticide, fertiliser, water use, yield and profitability data.
- Corrective Action Plan and Evidence (CAP): Root-cause analyses for audit non-conformities and evidence of correction.

3.2. Natural Resources

a. Water Management

BCI aims for both the efficient use of water and the qualitative and quantitative protection of water resources:

- Water Management Plan: Producers/farms must establish a Water Management Plan that identifies water resources and their use and takes local water risks into account.
- Efficient Irrigation Techniques: It is essential to promote irrigation methods that minimise water loss (drip irrigation, sprinkler irrigation, etc.) and to adjust irrigation timing according to need.
- Protection of Water Resources: To prevent contamination of ground and surface water resources, pesticide and fertiliser mixing/application areas must be kept at a safe distance from water sources.

b. Soil Health

Protecting and improving soil health is one of the cornerstones of sustainable cotton production:

- Soil Health Management Plan: A plan-based approach is followed to improve soil structure, prevent erosion and maintain nutrient balance.
- Soil Structure and Organic Matter: Practices that increase the amount of organic matter in the soil (use of compost, cover crops, crop rotation) are supported.
- Erosion Control and Tillage: Techniques such as minimum tillage or contour ploughing are applied to reduce soil erosion.
- Balanced Fertilisation: Fertiliser use is planned, as far as possible, according to soil analysis results and the plant's actual needs.

c. Biodiversity and Land Use

The aim is to protect natural ecosystems and to support biodiversity in agricultural areas:

- The location information of areas newly brought into cultivation or planned to be, is documented with coordinates, parcel number and a map.
- Protected Areas (PA), Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA) and Intact Forest Landscapes (IFL), as well as High Conservation Value (HCV) areas such as wetlands, natural forests and habitats of protected species, cannot be destroyed or converted into agricultural land.
- Verification is carried out through reliable geographic information sources such as Global Forest Watch and Protected Planet (WDPA).
- If land conversion has taken place or is planned, the Better Cotton Land Conversion Assessment must have been completed.
- During the audit, evidence such as satellite images, maps and coordinate records, land-use records, official permits and correspondence, and risk assessments prepared by the producer may be requested.
- Potential areas and activities for protecting biodiversity are identified at farm and PU level and a Biodiversity Management Plan is established.
- To increase the population of beneficial insects and pollinators (bees, etc.), the preservation of natural vegetation along field boundaries or in fallow areas is encouraged.

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3.3. Crop protection and pesticide management:

The active substances of all crop protection products used are compared against the Better Cotton lists.

During the audit, purchase documents, stock records, application records and the products in storage are examined together.

List	Meaning	Expected from the producer
Prohibited Pesticides List	Prohibited Pesticides: Their use is strictly forbidden.	Must not be used under any circumstances; must not be present in storage.
Highly Hazardous Pesticides (HHP) List	Highly Hazardous Pesticides: Must be phased out.	Risk-mitigation measures, monitoring and a phase-out plan; valid approval under the Exceptional Use Process for use. Applications that must be made using the BCI Exceptional Use Process Form must be submitted at least 90 calendar days before the sowing date. They must be gradually phased out after no more than 5 production seasons. ⁷
CMR Pesticides List	Carcinogenic, Mutagenic and Reproductive-System-Toxic Pesticides	Risk-mitigation measures and phase-out activities. A phase-out plan must be implemented to completely end their use by 2028.
High Environmental Hazard List	High environmental hazard	Risk-mitigation measures and monitoring

- ❖ Where an exceptional-use approval exists, the conditions specified in the approval, risk-mitigation measures, training activities and monitoring and reporting obligations must be fulfilled.
- ❖ Unlabelled pesticides or pesticides transferred into other containers must not be kept; packaging and label information must be consistent with the records.
- ❖ Pesticide-use records, stock quantities, purchase documents and field observations must be consistent with one another.
- ❖ The core approach of the BCI standard is the implementation of an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) strategy that is sensitive to the environment and human health and does not rely solely on the use of chemical pesticides for pest control.
 - **Written IPM Strategy:** Producer units must establish a written IPM strategy defining all crop protection processes to be applied in the field and review it annually.
 - **Preventive Measures and Resistant Seed:** To suppress pest populations, crop rotation, soil/water management, cultural measures and the selection of certified seed adapted/resistant to the region should be prioritised.
 - **Field Monitoring and Economic Damage Threshold:** Before chemical spraying is carried out, regular field observations must be made; the ratios of predators (beneficial insects) and pests must be monitored.
 - A spraying decision must be taken only when the pest density reaches the threshold level. Calendar-based/periodic spraying is prohibited.
 - **Priority of Non-Chemical Control:** Biological, physical and mechanical control methods must be applied before chemical spraying.
- ❖ All chemical products used in agriculture must comply with the legal legislation and label requirements. All pesticides used must be officially licensed at national level for the cotton crop.
- ❖ Pesticide packaging must be labelled in an understandable language; the dosage and usage instructions on the label must be strictly followed.
- ❖ Unlicensed tank mixtures (pesticide cocktails) must never be used. Mixtures may only be made where the official legislation or the licence permits.

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3.4. Fibre Quality

3.4.1. Overview of Fibre Quality

- Against challenges such as the use of seed unsuitable for the region and incorrect planting density, certified and high-strength seed is selected and row-spacing standards are followed.
- During the growing period, integrated pest management (IPM) is applied and during the boll-maturation period regular weeding is carried out.
- During harvest and transport, contamination from polypropylene (sacks/twine) and plastics is prevented.
- Picking is done in the 8–10% moisture range after the dew has lifted, and seed cotton is stored so that it does not come into contact with the ground.

3.4.2. Cultivation Practices that Optimise Fibre Quality

- Climate-appropriate seed is selected, the correct sowing date is determined and plant density (population) is adjusted appropriately.
- Fibre strength and micronaire values are supported by applying plant growth regulators (PGR) together with balanced irrigation and fertilisation programmes.

3.4.3. Good Practices in Harvest, Storage and Transport

- During picking, 100% cotton aprons and sacks are used, and coloured plastic waste is prevented from entering the site.
- Storage is carried out under a canopy in dry conditions, vehicle beds are cleaned, and covered-transport standards are followed during transport.

3.4.4. Capacity Building, Adoption and Field Verification

- Farmers and agricultural workers are given regular training on preserving fibre quality and preventing foreign-matter contamination.
- Whether good practices have been implemented is verified through field visits and interviews with farmers and workers.

3.4.5. Addressing Barriers

- To address a lack of awareness, demonstration plots are set up and hands-on training is organised. Technical guidance and support processes are provided for access to quality inputs and materials.

3.5. Decent Work

Audit teams and accompanying interpreters must make it possible to interview Small/Medium-Scale Farm farmers or Large Farm management and workers in settings where Large Farm Group management, Field Facilitators, Producer Unit management or Programme Partners are not present. Exceptions may be considered in situations where the diversity of languages spoken makes this impossible and assistance with interpretation is needed.

- All workers employed (including seasonal, temporary and migrant workers) must have an employment contract that they understand, in writing or verbally; working conditions, wages and working hours must be clearly communicated.
- Child labour is not permitted. Children below the minimum working age must not be employed; young people under the age of 18 must not be employed in hazardous work (for example, pesticide application and heavy physical work).
- Forced labour, bonded labour and any form of modern slavery are prohibited. Workers must be free to leave their employment; their identity documents, wages or personal belongings must not be withheld.

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- There must be no discrimination in recruitment and employment; no different treatment may be applied on grounds of gender, age, ethnic origin, religion, marital status or similar. The principle of equal pay for equal work must be observed.
- Wages must be paid at least at the legal minimum-wage level and on time; payments must be recorded and no unlawful deductions may be made.
- Working hours must comply with the applicable legal limits; overtime must be voluntary and properly remunerated.
- Workers must be protected from violence, threats, harassment and any form of abuse. Workers' freedom of association and collective bargaining must be respected.
- There must be an accessible grievance mechanism through which workers can raise their complaints without fear of retaliation.
- The specific risks that women workers and vulnerable groups (including seasonal and migrant workers) may face must be assessed and the necessary measures taken.

3.6. Sustainable Livelihoods

This principle covers the consultation, planning and improvement processes carried out by Producer Unit (PU) staff to increase the income and resilience of farming communities.

- PU staff must identify the main barriers and needs relating to income and resilience by engaging directly with people involved in cotton production, farming communities and local stakeholders.
- It must be verifiable that the gender officer/committee is involved in the consultation processes and that the views of women and vulnerable/excluded groups are taken into account.
- Consultations must not be a one-off; they must be conducted regularly as a tool for continuous learning and monitoring.
- The improvement measures taken must be based on the priority issues emerging from consultations with the community and on removing the main barriers.
- All measures taken and general activities must be fully reflected in the "Activities and Monitoring Plan".
- Potential adverse-impact risks must be identified in advance and the necessary measures applied.
- Focus areas and measures must be reviewed at regular intervals, updated according to needs, and this process must be documented within the Continuous Improvement Plan.

4. Producer Unit Set-up and Readiness Check:

This section applies only to Producer Units (PU); it does not apply to Large Farms or Large Farm Groups.

- Producer Units (re)joining the programme must complete a **set-up season** before the season in which they will undergo certification; the aim is to prepare for the programme requirements and to establish the necessary infrastructure and practices.
- During the set-up season, the Programme Partner must, as a minimum, complete the following: recruiting and training the Producer Unit Manager and Field Facilitators; establishing a management and monitoring system in line with the Principles and Criteria; establishing a baseline through an internal assessment that also includes farmer and community consultations and developing corrective actions for shortcomings; preparing capacity-building materials and delivering phased training; completing and submitting the self-assessment using the BCI template; and collecting field-level Results Indicator (RIR) data for a group of farmers and submitting it to BCI.
- Once these activities are completed, the Programme Partner carries out a **Readiness Check** using the BCI template. The Readiness Check must last at least two full days for a Small-Scale Producer Unit and 1.5 days for a Medium-Scale Farm Producer Unit.
- The Readiness Check includes, as a minimum: an opening meeting with the Manager and Field Facilitators; farmer interviews (for Small-Scale, at least 15 farmers from 3 different Learning Groups; for Medium-Scale, at least 3 farmers); field observation at at least 5 farms; worker interviews as far as possible; observation of staff daily roles (training, focus groups,

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farmer visits); review of key documents (internal assessment, management plan, continuous improvement plan, training programmes); and a closing meeting at which the findings are discussed.

- Records of the above activities must be kept in an easily accessible form.
- The Readiness Check may be carried out from sowing to harvest during the first set-up season, or at any time during the second sowing period.
- Before applying for certification, the Producer Unit must plan and implement the corrective actions identified in the Readiness Check; readiness is determined according to the relevant decision tree. (Corrections may be implemented after the CB visit; this means that an incidental non-conformity may still arise.)
- The Programme Partner notifies BCI of the Producer Units that will undergo certification by the end of sowing and provides a copy of each of the following: the Readiness Check report, the corrective action plans and (if any) evidence that corrections have been implemented.
- If all of certain conditions are met (the Producer Unit having been established well before the season; the Manager and all Field Facilitators having been recruited and trained before sowing; the internal/baseline audit having been completed within 2 weeks of the start of sowing; readiness having been determined), the Programme Partner may submit a change request to BCI for a certification audit in the first season.

4. Records and documentation:

Key records that must be available before and during the audit:

Record / document	Description
Self-Assessment Report	Completed before the audit; must reflect the actual situation in the field.
Results Indicators Report	Includes soil and/or irrigation-water analysis reports, fertiliser and regulator input-use records, and data on planted area, yield, pesticide and fertiliser use.
Worker and farmer data	Includes cotton areas and estimated yields.
Farmer list and farmer data	In Producer Units, must be up to date and complete.
Farmer field diary	Farmer / Field Level: Farmer Field Books (FFB): records in which inputs, outputs and agricultural practices are kept regularly. For producer units (PUs), keeping data at farm level supports Results Indicator Reporting at PU level.
Land/farm map	Shows parcel boundaries, water resources and protected areas. The map must enable the auditor to locate the plots without the farmer's help (including for an unannounced audit), clearly show the actual size and boundaries of each plot, and include parcel boundaries, water resources, natural habitats, protected areas and other important land features. Official cadastral maps are applicable in countries where a reliable system exists. Hand-drawn maps must include GPS readings for key points; they must be precise enough to allow the size and boundaries to be verified.
Pesticide and fertiliser records	Purchase documents, stock and application records (to assess compliance with the IPM strategy)
Production and harvest/sales records	Quantities produced and sold. May be kept at farm level as part of the farm-level data requirement (for example, fresh fruit bunches), but the PU must ensure that receipts are accessible when needed. BCI cotton sales records / invoices — documents containing sales volume, date and buyer information — must be retained for at least 2 seasons.
Training records	Training provided to farmers and workers

5. Audit process:

- Audit planning is completed no later than 1 month before the audit takes place.
- The audit begins with an opening meeting covering mutual introductions, the purpose of the audit and a summary of activities, the availability of documents, the reporting method and non-conformity classification, confidentiality and conflicts of interest, and the language of the audit.
- The audit consists of field visits, inspection of storage and farm buildings, interviews and document review. Farm structures that belong to the operation but have not been declared pose a serious risk to certification; all farm buildings must be declared.

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- The findings are shared at the closing meeting; a Corrective Action Plan (CAP) is requested for non-conformities.
- Better Cotton and the certification body reserve the right to carry out short-notice audits; for these audits, notice is given at least 48 hours and at most 3 working days in advance.

6. Information and training:

- The producer must keep a copy of the Better Cotton Principles and Criteria and be familiar with their content.
- Farmers and workers must be given regular training on the safe use of pesticides, occupational health and safety, labour rights and good agricultural practices, and this must be recorded.

Please note that this is only a selection from — that is, an introduction to — the core requirements of the Better Cotton Principles and Criteria. The producer must of course learn and fulfil all the requirements of the relevant standard. For the current requirements and pesticide lists, the documents published on the official Better Cotton website must be taken as the basis.