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Africa: Inside The $5 Billion Plan To Keep Africa's Cotton Jobs In Africa

OMC

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO)

By Seth Onyango

Africa grows plenty of cotton. It just does not make much of it into clothes. A new $5 billion plan aims to change that, turning a scattered collection of cotton producers into a regional textile industry.

The road out of Koudougou in Burkina Faso is lined with cotton fields that stretch toward the horizon, broken only by trucks carrying bales toward the border. The fibre will travel hundreds of kilometres before reaching a West African port, and then thousands more on sea before arriving at a mill somewhere in Asia.

Months later, it may return to Africa as shirts, uniforms, towels or bedsheets. The value added along the way will stay abroad. So will many of the jobs.

West Africa's main cotton producers now want to change that pattern. The C4+ group, made up of Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali, with Côte d'Ivoire participating as an observer, is backing a plan to build regional processing capacity, keep more value from its fibre and expand industrial jobs.

A study supporting the World Trade Organisation -led cotton initiative found that transforming the region's cotton sector would require significant investment in spinning, textiles and garment production.

The broader plan aims to mobilise about $5 billion over a decade and could generate around 500,000 direct jobs across manufacturing, logistics and related industries.

WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala described the moment as an opportunity to build a modern textile and garment industry across West and Central Africa.

“We are on the cusp of creating a modern textiles and garment industry,” said the WTO chief at the plan's launch on March 25 in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

The initiative, known as the Partenariat pour le Coton (PPC), knits together governments, international organisations, financial institutions and private-sector partners to help C4+ countries move beyond exporting raw cotton and capture more of the value created after harvesting.

It also includes Africa Textile Invest, a platform designed to give investors access to industrial zones, country data and opportunities across the cotton-to-garment value chain.

Afreximbank President George Elombi sees the ongoing initiatives in the cotton space as part of a wider push to build Africa’s manufacturing base.

During a visit to Benin’s Glo Djigbé Industrial Zone in early August, he said cutting reliance on imported goods could free up billions of dollars for local factories and jobs.

“We think this particular industry (cotton), even though it is described as labour intensive, could be automated and still have a large amount of human intervention,” he said.

“At the same time, it is a $50 billion African import market. If we took that down by just 50%, it means a $25 billion saving each year.”

More than 10 million livelihoods in the C4+ region depend on cotton in some form, according to the Partenariat pour le Coton , pointing to what is at stake if the plan succeeds or stalls.

Building one regional textile chain

For years in West Africa, the challenge has been that cotton production and textile manufacturing have developed largely separately. While the region produces large volumes of cotton, much of it, about 98%, leaves the continent as raw fibre.

Africa as a whole accounts for between 7% and 10% of global cotton production but less than 2% of global textile and clothing exports, according to International Trade Centre estimates .

In the proposed model, rather than each nation going it alone, the plan wants to knit Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire together into what officials are calling a “Textile Corridor”.

That would let the countries pool resources, share supply chains and build one regional trade market instead of five small ones.

Capital from development finance institutions such as Afreximbank and UNIDO would support modern ginning, spinning, weaving and sewing plants set up near major transport routes to slice transit time.

The aim is to build a chain in which cotton grown in one country can be processed in another and turned into finished garments somewhere else in the region.

To run a chain this wide, Jean-Marie Paugam, WTO Deputy Director General, has floated a two year work plan to parcel out who does what among partners.

UNIDO will lead industrial development and value chain growth, while the International Trade Centre will focus on private sector outreach and market intelligence. The WTO Secretariat will handle trade policy, while Afreximbank, the African Development Bank and the International Islamic Trade Finance Corporation will support financing and infrastructure.

ARISE IIP, although not formally part of the Partenariat pour le Coton, is also building industrial parks that could provide some of the infrastructure needed as the chain expands.

Ultimately, cotton growing regions should also be able to produce yarn, fabric and finished clothing.

“The missing middle is where the value lies,” Katie Hall, Senior Adviser on Cotton, Textiles and Clothing at the ITC, said in background comments shared with bird story agency.

“Initiatives such as the AfCFTA Cotton, Textile and Apparel (CTA) Champions Initiative and the CTA Value Chain Report seek to address this gap by promoting stronger coordination across the value chain, from cotton production and processing through to manufacturing and regional distribution.”

Raw cotton has traded this year at roughly 75 to 86 cents a pound, close to $1,900 a tonne, based on benchmark data tracked by the IMF. But the largest returns come after processing. Ergo, every step skipped, from spinning yarn to weaving fabric and producing garments, represents value captured elsewhere.

The WTO estimates that moving up the value chain could allow African cotton producers to capture more of the economic benefits generated by their own raw materials.

The ITC sees Africa itself as the most immediate market for these products as the African Continental Free Trade Area gains ground, with sales to buyers outside the continent becoming more realistic as manufacturers build scale and experience.

Its assessment points to investment and shared skills between countries with existing capacity and those without it. The problem is therefore not simply a shortage of money but coordination.

Tellingly, Ethiopia’s Hawassa Industrial Park has already shown that African factories can attract major global garment orders. The park brought in international manufacturers and created thousands of jobs after opening in 2016.

But Hawassa also shows the risks that can accompany rapid industrialisation. A study of pay at the park found that most garment workers earned below a living wage measured against their starting pay, and that the share remained high even after bonuses and food subsidies were included.

Workers have also faced difficulties organising, with some relying on committees established by employers rather than unions of their own choosing.

The C4+ plan has not yet spelt out the labour standards against which its promised 500,000 jobs will be measured. The experience of existing industrial parks suggests that the quality of those jobs will matter as much as the number created.

From cotton fields to football shirts

The WTO and FIFA partnership aims to help create early demand for African-made textile products through sport.

FIFA wants to source sportswear such as T-shirts and polo shirts from the new West African manufacturing base for programmes including Football for Schools.

The idea is to give manufacturers an early anchor market while helping them build the production experience needed to compete for larger international orders.

That demand could become important in the early stages, when factories need buyers willing to commit to locally produced goods before they have built a global customer base.

According to Hall, the bigger prize, however, is the Africa market itself, as its population grows and more people come into money.

The continent imports large volumes of clothing and textiles, creating an opportunity for manufacturers that can meet the right price, quality and delivery standards. The AfCFTA could make it easier for those goods to move between countries once the necessary trade rules and infrastructure are in place.

Trade rules will decide the outcome

The African Continental Free Trade Area is expected to be the glue holding the regional model together.

A textile factory in one country does not need every stage of production within its borders. A regional chain can work if cotton, yarn, fabric and finished garments can move efficiently between neighbouring economies.

That makes rules of origin critical. They determine whether a product qualifies as African-made and can benefit from preferential trade treatment.

Without clear rules, imported fabric could enter Africa, undergo limited processing and leave with a “Made in Africa” label.

The AfCFTA rules of origin for garments generally require clothes to be made from fabric produced in Africa, according to the WTO. They do not require every earlier stage, such as turning cotton into yarn, to happen on the continent. Rules covering a range of yarns and fabrics have remained subject to negotiations.

“The broader challenge is that Africa’s textile and apparel sector is still developing the industrial capacity needed to compete at scale,” the WTO said in a statement shared with bird.

After years of negotiations, Egypt reached agreement on its rules of origin at the end of 2025, providing a step towards clearer regional trade rules. But moving goods across African borders remains slow and expensive.

The WTO has pointed to trade facilitation measures as one way to reduce those costs and make regional supply chains more competitive.

The C4+ countries have long argued that trade-distorting domestic support in major cotton-producing countries depresses world prices and weakens their competitiveness. Other WTO members have maintained that the issue should be addressed as part of broader agricultural subsidy negotiations.

That disagreement has helped keep the wider cotton debate stuck even as African producers try to build a different future at home.

For now, the C4+ initiative is moving ahead even as the wider politics of cotton remain unresolved. But with investment in spinning, weaving and garment production gathering pace, the trucks leaving Koudougou may soon start freighting towels, shirts and uniforms with “Made in Africa” labels to buyers across the continent and overseas.