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2009

Technical Paper No. 56

COMMON FUND FOR COMMODITIES

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SYMPOSIUM ON NATURAL FIBRES

Rome 20 October 2008



FAO, Rome
Supported by the
Common Fund for Commodities



The Symposium and publication of the Proceedings is sponsored by the CFC and FAO. This document is published without formal editing.

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Common Fund for Commodities



Stadhouderskade 55, 1072 AB Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Postal Address: PO Box 74656, 1070 BR Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Tel: (31-20) 5754949 E.mail: Managing.Director@common-fund.org
Fax: (31-20) 6760231 website: www.common-fund.org

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Foreword

The General Assembly of the United Nations declared the year 2009 to be the International Year of Natural Fibres. The central objective of the year can be seen as promoting the use of natural fibres in current and novel applications, thereby contributing to increased levels of income for fibre producers, processors and traders, while at the same time contributing to the increased use of environment friendly materials in those applications.

There is a diverse range of natural fibres, of both plant and animal origin, produced by farmers throughout the world. Total annual production is around 30 million tonnes, three quarters of which is cotton. Most countries produce some natural fibres. In some cases, such as cotton production in Burkina Faso, natural fibres are of major importance to the national economy. In other cases these fibres are of less significance at the national level but are of major local importance within a country, as in the case of alpaca fibre in the Andes and sisal in north-east Brazil. Proceeds from the sale and export of natural fibres often contribute significantly to the income and food security of poor farmers and processors in the least developed countries.

Consumers use natural fibres in a variety of ways. The biggest outlet is apparel, but other uses such as home furnishings and carpets are also significant. Some fibres have more industrial applications, traditionally in cordage and packaging, but increasingly more in a range of non-traditional uses such as pulp for paper and in composite materials. In most of these applications natural fibres are subject to competition from synthetic substitutes. The Common Fund for Commodities sees it as one of its tasks to provide assistance to commodity producers to enable them to strengthen the quality of their production systems and to develop new products which will enable them to effectively compete with these synthetic products.

The Common Fund is therefore pleased to have been able to assist FAO in organizing this Symposium, as one of the start-up events of the International Year of Natural Fibres in 2009. In helping to raise the profile of natural fibres, we are contributing, on the one hand, to the livelihoods of the farmers who produce them, and on the other, to the use of an environmentally-sound, sustainable product.

This Symposium brought together people from many of the natural fibre industries to share views on the economic and technical issues facing these fibres. While each of these fibres is unique, they nevertheless have much in common. All, being natural products, are sustainable and healthful products, but all are in competition with synthetic materials. To varying degrees, technological progress has facilitated efficiencies in production and improvements in product quality to better meet the needs of consumers, and thus has allowed these fibres to continue to compete with synthetic fibres. Ongoing technical progress will be needed to enhance the viability of these fibres in the future.

I do hope that the papers presented here provide a useful guide to the place of natural fibres in today's world, and to the path they may face in the future.



Amb. Ali Mchumo
Managing Director
Common Fund for Commodities