



COTTON
MADE IN
AFRICA



Cotton made in Africa

Complaints Policy and Procedure

Version 1 (February 2022)



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This document has been issued in the following languages: English and French. In case of any discrepancy between the English and the French versions, the English version prevails.

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Document History

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AbTF	Document created	2022-02-28	1

Associated Documents

Guidelines and other documents related to the setting of policy and procedures:

- I. AbTF/Atakora Code of Conduct
- II. Assurance Manual for Cotton made in Africa (CmiA) and Other Cotton Standards of the Aid by Trade Foundation (Version 1)
- III. Setting Social and Environmental Standards - ISEAL Code of Good Practice Version 6.0 December 2014 (with special reference to clause 5.11)

Definitions

Allegation

A claim or assertion, made by any interested party or stakeholder, that a Certificate Holder (Managing Entity) or candidate has violated the requirements of the CmiA or CmiA Organic standards. Any third party, person, or entity with first-hand information about infringements by Certificate Holders can file an allegation with the Aid by Trade Foundation (AbTF).

Appeal

A request by a Managing Entity or CmiA candidate for the formal reconsideration of any decision made by AbTF's assurance provider regarding the appellant's verification status or the issuing of a CmiA or CmiA Organic certificate by AbTF.

Complaint

A formal expression of dissatisfaction by any person or entity relating to activities of AbTF or of a third party operating on behalf of AbTF, such as an assurance provider. A response to a complaint is expected.

Grievance

An issue raised by a worker through an internal channel at the place of employment, e.g. through a suggestion box or verbally or in writing to a supervisor, human resources department, workers' representative, or union.

Incident

Any reported activity, observation, stakeholder comment, or concern that threatens the integrity of AbTF's assurance systems or the spirit of AbTF and its standards, including the authorised use of the CmiA and CmiA Organic seals. Any interested party or stakeholder may report an incident to AbTF.

1. Introduction

1. The Aid by Trade Foundation (AbTF) has established a complaints procedure designed to find meaningful resolutions that address stakeholder concerns regarding Cotton made in Africa (CmiA) and CmiA Organic.
2. All interested parties may convey their concerns regarding an AbTF position, policy, standard, or decision or concerns regarding the behaviour, actions, decisions, or procedures of any actor in the CmiA standards system. AbTF will endeavour to address concerns and conduct appropriate follow-up actions as defined in this procedure in order to ensure consistency in managing complaints, resolving disputes, and determining outcomes in an equitable, objective, and unbiased manner.
3. This procedure outlines the process by which interested parties may submit concerns to AbTF.

2. Scope

4. The scope of this procedure is to provide a formal process for addressing complaints or allegations related to one or more of the following:
 - I. Management of the CmiA standards system
 - II. Personnel conduct or adherence to assurance programme requirements
 - III. Incidents of fraud or potential fraud
 - IV. Activities of an independent assurance provider, a verified Managing Entity, or a candidate for a CmiA or CmiA Organic certificate, where the complaint has not already been satisfactorily addressed by the party concerned
 - V. Allegations regarding any violation of a CmiA or CmiA Organic standard requirement or issues like violations of labour rights or worker protections, lack of transparency, or faults in payments or traceability
 - VI. Licensing decisions taken by AbTF
 - VII. Potential misuse or misrepresentation of AbTF or the CmiA or CmiA Organic seals by any entity; any such allegations may be reported to AbTF
5. Feedback about AbTF's activities outside the scope of this procedure may be submitted to AbTF using the contact form available at <https://cottonmadeinafrica.org/en/contact/> or via email (info@abt-foundation.org).
6. No claims for direct financial compensation from AbTF are accepted.

3. Principles

7. Complaints are accepted from any company, organisation, or individual.
8. Complainants are not required to be party to the violation or complaint; they may be third parties submitting a complaint as an interested stakeholder or on behalf of an affected or involved party.
9. AbTF accepts both anonymous complaints and complaints in which the complainant is identified. Nevertheless, anonymous submission may hamper AbTF's ability to fully understand and resolve the complaint. Complainants are encouraged to disclose their identity to AbTF. In order to avoid negatively impacting complainants by revealing their identities, AbTF will respect the confidentiality of submitters who wish to remain anonymous to the party about which the complaint has been made.
10. By submitting a complaint, the submitter accepts the provisions of this CmiA Complaints Procedure. All parties involved in a complaints process are required to engage in the process in good faith and with a genuine desire to seek resolution. AbTF commits to engage in the resolution of any complaint in good faith and to take the necessary corrective action to resolve complaints made against AbTF itself.
11. AbTF seeks to investigate complaints in a fair, balanced, and objective manner in order to resolve the issues at hand efficiently and effectively.
12. AbTF seeks to resolve complaints at the least formal level. Thus, complaints should be addressed at the most direct level possible. Only if resolution fails at that level should the next level be engaged. In cases where reporting the complaint at the most direct level might endanger the person reporting, the complainant can opt to use the CmiA Complaints Procedure prescribed in this document without first approaching the subject of the complaint directly.
13. Complaints will be treated with procedural fairness:
 - I. The respondent, i.e. the person or entity that is the subject of a complaint, is given adequate notice that a complaint has been received. Respondents are informed of the process AbTF will use to address the complaint and of their right to provide information to support the process.
 - II. A person managing the complaint case or approving a decision should declare any personal interest that he or she may have in the proceedings, should run the process and review information in a fair and unbiased way, and should act in good faith to reach a resolution.
 - III. Each party to a complaint case is entitled to ask questions, provide evidence, and submit a request to AbTF for additional information from the other party.
14. The CmiA and CmiA Organic standards require that Managing Entities have grievance procedures in place to provide a transparent communication mechanism that allows workers and other affected stakeholders to make comments and complaints without retribution.
15. Any person or entity that is party to a complaints process refrains from any form of retaliation against other concerned parties. AbTF reserves all rights to sanction any participant in the complaints process who is found to have engaged in retaliatory action. Submitters may provide information to AbTF on any concerns about retaliation and on how to mitigate such concerns.

16. Submitting a complaint through the CmiA complaints procedure does not affect the right of the submitter to pursue other forms of remedial action if necessary once the CmiA complaints process has been concluded.
17. All parties involved in the complaints process are requested to refrain from commenting publicly on a complaint until a decision is made.

4. Complaints Process

18. Submission. Complaints must be submitted in German, English, or French either:
 - I. by email to complaints@abt-foundation.org;
 - II. by mail to Aid by Trade Foundation – Complaints, Gurlittstraße 14, 20099 Hamburg, Germany; or
 - III. via the online complaints form on the website of Cotton made in Africa (www.cottonmadeinafrica.org).
19. Assessment. To be accepted and classified as a complaint, a submission must include:
 - I. a detailed description of the complaint and a list of any allegations;
 - II. evidence to substantiate the complaint; and
 - III. the steps taken thus far to address the matter (e.g. complaint submission to the Managing Entity).
20. AbTF will assess whether the complaint is eligible to be addressed through the CmiA complaints procedure. A complaint is considered eligible if:
 - I. it is within the defined scope (see section 1 of this document);
 - II. the complaint submission includes the correct information (as set out in paragraph 19); and
 - III. a solution at an informal or lower level has been sought through the appropriate channel (as set out in section 2 of this document).
21. A complaint against a licensing decision by AbTF based on third-party verification results is considered an appeal and will be dealt with as described in the CmiA Appeals Procedure (as set out in separate documents available here: <https://cottonmadeinafrica.org/en/assurance/>).
22. Pre-investigation. AbTF acknowledges receipt of any complaint and will inform the submitter within ten working days of receiving the complaint whether the complaint is deemed eligible. If the complaint is deemed eligible, AbTF will appoint a complaint manager to handle the complaint in accordance with this procedure. The complaint manager must have sufficient contextual knowledge to handle the case and be as impartial as possible, which includes being free of any conflict of interest in relation to the complaint and the parties involved. If the complexity of the case so requires, AbTF may appoint a committee of up to three persons, including one complaint manager, to handle the complaint.

- 23.** Investigation process. Within ten working days after informing the submitter that the complaint was deemed eligible, the assigned complaint manager will:
 - I.** Inform the submitter in writing of the name and contact details of the complaint manager and the process for handling the complaint
 - II.** Inform the respondent, i.e. the subject of the complaint, in writing that a complaint has been received, including the subject matter of the complaint and the name and contact details of the complaint manager
 - III.** Invite the respondent to send in a written response and supporting evidence within ten working days. At the request of the respondent, and if a valid reason is given, the complaint manager may decide to extend the ten-day period for submitting the response and the supporting evidence
- 24.** The complaint manager first reviews the submitted information and determines whether a formal investigation is needed or whether the issue can be resolved through dialogue and/or training.
- 25.** Following the receipt of any evidence in support of the respondent, the complaint manager may request additional information (e.g. supporting paperwork, additional interviews, or employment documentation) from either party in order to develop a full picture of the situation. Any party requested to provide further information will be given ten days to submit this to the complaint manager.
- 26.** Depending on the nature of the complaint, AbTF may also assign external verifiers and may conduct follow-up or random verifications as a component of the investigation. The Managing Entity's certificate may be suspended while an investigation is taking place, depending on the severity of the complaint.
- 27.** Resolution. Within 30 working days of the deadline for receipt of information, the complaint manager will inform the parties of AbTF's understanding of the situation and the proposed resolution. Where an informal resolution is deemed possible, the complaint manager will contact both parties to attempt to resolve the issue by mutual accord (if applicable). Where this is not possible, AbTF will make a decision and inform both parties by email of the decision.
- 28.** The decision is presented in an investigation report consisting of a summary of the investigation, an overview of the evidence, and a conclusion supporting or refuting the complaints as well as a resolution plan consisting of recommendations and/or follow-up measures to be taken by defined parties within set timeframes.
- 29.** AbTF reserves the right to extend the period for making a decision as required by the complexity of the case or other specific reasons, with the complaint manager informing the parties of any such extension in writing.
- 30.** Appeal against a resolution. Any party may appeal the decision within 30 days by written notice, sharing its reasons for the appeal and including a counterproposal for follow-up measures. The assigned complaint manager shall inform the AbTF Managing Director about the appeal. The AbTF Managing Director shall provide guidance on the acceptance of the appeal and/or alternative follow-up measures. These shall be shared with the involved parties in the form of a binding "Resolution Plan by the AbTF Managing Director".
- 31.** The decision of the AbTF Managing Director shall be binding on all parties, and no further complaint or appeal on the same matter will be accepted.
- 32.** Closing. Once the deadlines set in the resolution plan have passed, the complaint manager shall assess to what extent the cause for the complaint has been remediated. In case of incomplete remediation, the assigned complaint manager shall stipulate recommendations for alternative or additional actions to resolve the initial complaint.



5. Confidentiality

33. Due to the sensitive nature of complaints, the results are not made public. Rather, decisions are communicated directly to both the complainant and the respondent.
34. If the decision involves suspending or revoking a party's CmiA certificate, this status change is made public, but the reason for the status change is not.
35. AbTF will not share with other parties that are not part of the complaints process:
 - I. the identity of the parties involved in the complaint;
 - II. the details of the complaint; or
 - III. the measures taken to resolve the complaint.
36. Nevertheless, AbTF may share this information if there is a legal obligation to do so or if an involved party makes a public statement regarding the complaint. AbTF reserves the right to share information from complaints and appeals processes in an anonymised form, whether within the organisation or for external reporting, in order to support the continuous improvement of the standards system.
37. All steps in the process described above are documented, with the records and communications being saved in the files for the relevant partner. All records regarding complaints or allegations are maintained for ten years.

6. Integration of Lessons Learnt

38. Taking the provided feedback into consideration, AbTF shall regularly evaluate the content, application, and outcomes of its CmiA Complaints Policy and Procedure in order to improve its standards system.
39. Comments on this document count as feedback to be addressed during the next revision.

