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Côte d'Ivoire decides to work with chocolate majors for a more sustainable management of tropical forests: should we be concerned?

In September 2015, we had written on the “[dark side of chocolate](#)” on the basis of a study conducted by [BASIC](#) (Bureau for the Appraisal of Social Impacts for Citizen Information) in Côte d'Ivoire and Peru. We had then seen that ‘sustainable’ and ‘fair trade’ chocolate value chains suffered from a competitive handicap, largely because of the lack of enforcement of strict social and environmental rules that made way for multinational chocolate companies and deforestation.



One of the dramatic consequences of the expansion of cocoa production is deforestation. In Côte d'Ivoire, the top producer of cocoa (more than 2 million tons in 2017 - almost 40% of total world production), it is estimated that “*in the past half-century, ...more than 80 percent of its forests are gone, most following an illegal invasion by as many as a million landless people into national parks and other supposedly protected forests*”, as writes [Fred Pearce](#) in a [paper](#) published on the [Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies](#). Most of the invaders cut down forests in order to grow illegally close to 40% of Côte d'Ivoire's cocoa.

In his paper, Pearce presents the policy change envisaged by the government of Côte d'Ivoire with regard to the protection of forests and its paradoxical intention of handing at least in part the management of forests to chocolate traders! This sounds a bit like asking drug dealers to combat the expansion of poppy plantations!

Considering its current failure in protecting forests and preventing the development of anarchic poorly managed cocoa plantations in the country's forests, the government's idea - supported by the World Cocoa Foundation - is to turn these plantations in part "*into agroforestry reserves, to be run by international chocolate manufacturers*". The state objective of this plan is to increase productivity on existing illegal plantations with the hope that it will reduce pressure on forests and thus protect them. In the process, the policy will legalize existing forest encroachments and officially recognise the rights of illegal settlers whose eviction could only be implemented at a very high political, financial and economic cost.

For many this may sound like a pragmatic option. Others believe that the change will put settlers in the hands of the major cocoa companies, with serious implications on their income and standard of living and contribute to trigger further deforestation.

This new policy can for sure be related to the Cocoa and Forest initiative signed in July 2018 between Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Colombia and leading chocolate firms, under the aegis of the Sustainable Trade Initiative - a typical alliance of governments and large private companies [read] -, of the Prince of Wales, of Global Forest Watch Pro and of the Davos World Economic Forum's New Vision for Agriculture [read our article on the New Vision]. This initiative is funded by the UK (through its Partnerships for Forests that aims at "*catalysing investments in forests and sustainable land use*") and the Netherlands through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BUZA).

Etelle Higonnet, Senior Advisor at Mighty Earth, an international NGO, and her co-authors have doubts on what the chocolate industry will do and expect them to greenwash their activities in the two main cocoa producing countries, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. In their paper "Behind the wrapper: Greenwashing in the chocolate industry", the picture of deforestation they present is devastating. Results of the monitoring of deforestation in those two countries show that the commitment made by the cocoa majors in 2017 has so far had very little impact, as deforestation continues, although at a slightly reduced rate. This casts serious doubts on the short term effectiveness of the policy adopted by the Côte d'Ivoire government.

In concrete terms, the government's plan is to categorise forests into three zones: (i) fully protected classified forests with less than 25% degradation from which encroaching population will be evicted; (ii) the intermediate classified forests with 25 to 75% degradation that will be progressively restored; and (iii) the most degraded forests (more than 75% degraded) that will be progressively organised into "Sustainable Management Agroforestry Concessions" managed through partnerships with the cocoa majors whose role would be to help increase productivity of plantations.

It is not yet quite clear what will exactly happen in these three zones, and many have doubts on how operational the whole plan will be, as evicted population groups, if not provided opportunities to earn a living, are likely to move back, triggering potentially a cycle of violence and massive bribery.

At hungerexplained.org, we can only agree with Youssouf Doumbia, president of the Ivorian Observatory for the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (OI-REN), a civil society organization who says, according to Pearce: "*There is a great risk that the*

private sector industrial actors put their economic interests above the restoration of forest cover.” He would prefer settlers to be organised in cooperatives able to negotiate with government and chocolate companies.

Yes indeed, it is unlikely that private corporations that are short term profit-oriented will care much about long term sustainability and natural resources conservation, unless they are put under a strong pressure. And it is not the government of Côte d’Ivoire who will do this, given that cocoa and relations with the cocoa majors is for them of huge economic importance.

There is some hope, however, that other types of pressure exerted on the chocolate majors could oblige them to adopt a better behaviour. Such pressure could, for example, arise from the fear, if things turn bad, of negative publicity on the world media that would affect these companies’ image and/or from pressure by the EU if it imposes, pushed by Germany, a new regulation on sustainable chocolate covering “*everything from deforestation to child labour*”. Let’s remind readers here that there are around 2 million children working in cocoa value chains, often in dangerous conditions because of the use of machetes and toxic chemicals. Some of these children are even victims of forced labour.

If the approach tested in Côte d’Ivoire happens to show even the slightest signs of success in reducing pressure on forests, it is likely that similar approaches will be used in other countries. Brazil’s ultra-conservative pro-private sector and anti-indigenous peoples government could be one of the first candidates...

In that case the power balance between producers and traders will be even more to the detriment of the former, with huge social and environmental consequences as well as potential political implications, unless consumers decide to change their consumption habits and increasingly opt for *really* sustainable and fair chocolate.

To know more:

- Pearce, F., The Real Price of a Chocolate Bar: West Africa’s Rainforests, Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, 2019.
- Higonnet, E. *et al.*, Behind the wrapper: Greenwashing in the chocolate industry, Mighty Earth, 2018.
- Ministère des Eaux et Forêts, Politique nationale de préservation, de réhabilitation et d’extension des forêts, République de Côte d’Ivoire, 2018 (in French).
- World Cocoa Foundation website.
- Cocoa and Forest initiative website.
- Sustainable Trade Initiative, website.
- Global Forest Watch Pro, website.

Earlier articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- Privatisation of development assistance: integrating further agriculture into the world market, 2018.
- The World Economic Forum’s “New Vision for Agriculture” is moving ahead on the ground... 2017.