

## The colonial legacy

For some, it might seem excessive to consider the colonial legacy as one of the causes of hunger today. This may be because some governments of former colonies have too often used colonialism as an alibi for their inaction or as a reason for them not being able to really develop the economy and solve the social problems they face.

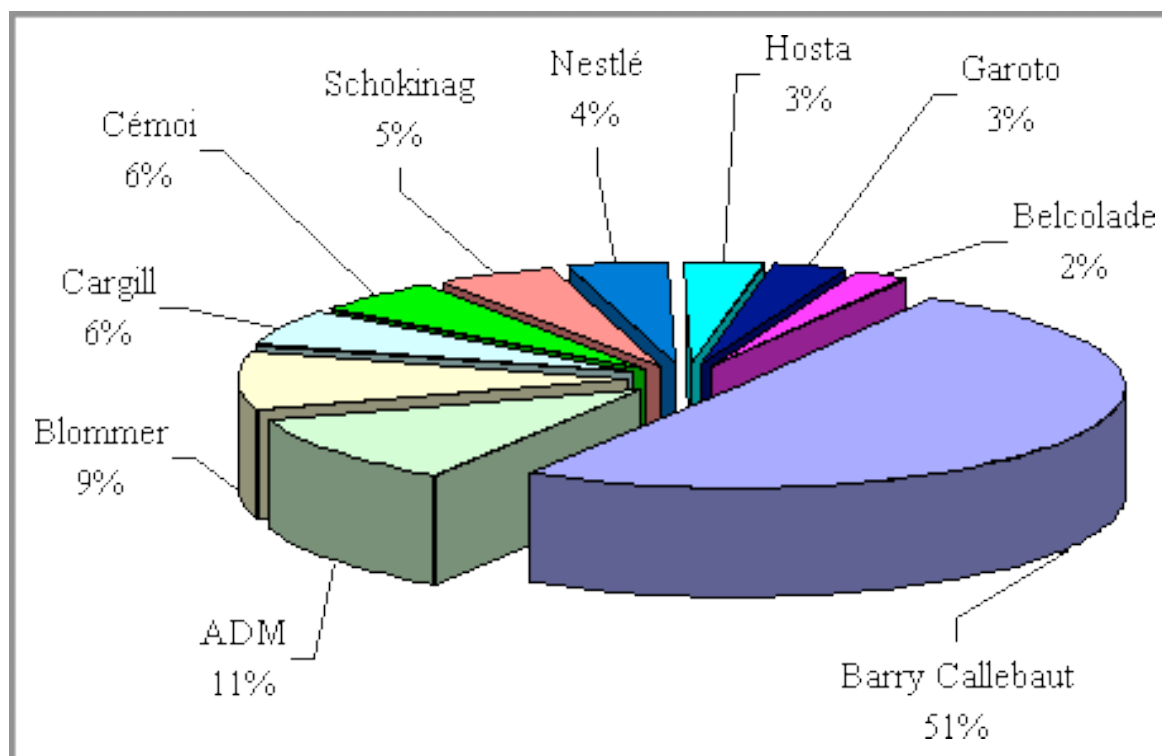
However, we have to accept that we are all heirs to our history and the former colonies are no exception. They have inherited a number of characteristics that are a direct consequence of their past colonial history and that make them less able to move towards to a well-balanced approach to development that would result in the eradication of hunger and poverty. Let's review these characteristics and see how they reduce opportunities for small farmers, the very people who are most affected by hunger, to improve their livelihoods.

The colonial period was a very favourable time for the **promotion of tropical export products**. Colonial powers established a system that had the goal of supplying tropical products for consumption in colonial «mother countries» (cotton, coffee, cocoa, tea, sugar, spices, jute, rubber, etc.). All efforts were geared to increasing the production of these commodities often to the detriment of food production for the local which did not benefit from any support. This resulted in a heavy dependence of producers (and of countries after independence) on a limited number of commodities with markets that had only very limited development prospects and which were under the control of companies based in former «mother countries». Moreover, this system left virtually no space for local processing of commodities, an activity that would have created jobs and given a basis for industrialisation.

This system largely survives today as the custom and excise policies in industrialised countries remain in favour of importing primary products and penalises the import of processed products through the imposition of high import taxes. Moreover, today, **trading and processing of tropical products is still largely in the hands of a few multinational corporations often with origins in the former colonial powers** (e.g. CFDT/Dagris/Geocoton, Louis Dreyfus and Cargill for cotton; Barry Callebaut and ADM for cocoa; Nestlé, Phillip Morris/Kraft and Sara Lee for coffee; Chiquita, Dole and Del Monte for bananas), or of corporations that have a strong foreign participation or, even, are under foreign control. The case of the chocolate industry illustrates this point very well, as there is only one company coming from a former colony and producing country (Garoto in Brazil) among the main companies controlling this commodity; all the others major players are from industrial countries such as Switzerland, Belgium, France, Germany or the United Kingdom (see diagram).

The domination of the market by these companies has been to the detriment of producers, as monopolies or cartels enabled them to capture a considerable rent.

### The main industrial chocolate producing companies (2003)



Source: UNCTAD

The promotion of the production of tropical products went along, in many countries, with the **development of plantations and the confiscation of land** from former users. This policy was often supported by the grabbing of the best land by settlers originating from the «mother country» (in particular but not exclusively in Northern, Eastern and Southern Africa) or by multinational corporations (Central America and Asia), depriving local communities from their land, and condemning them to marginalisation by giving them the choice between cultivating poor and marginal land or becoming agricultural labourers. At the time of independence, this majority of this was not given back to its former users or owners. Much of it remained in the hands of those who had grabbed it during colonial times; some resulted in the creation of large private properties belonging to representatives of the local elite; and the rest was assigned to public enterprises which have since been largely privatised.

The emphasis given to export crops impacted the local economy, causing for example the establishment of **communication and marketing infrastructure oriented towards the outside of the country**. This led to the development of port cities, which, in many cases, became the economic capitals of the concerned countries (the post-colonial period saw many countries try and create more centrally located political capitals, like Brasilia in Brazil, Dodoma in Tanzania, Yamoussoukro in Côte d'Ivoire or Abuja in Nigeria). The road system, often quite rudimentary, was limited to road linking the ports to the main tropical

commodities producing areas close to the coast. The result today is that it is often easier and cheaper to supply the large coastal cities from the world market than from the production areas located in the hinterland. This has put local producers, for example of rice in West Africa, in a situation in which they are unable to compete with imported products.

*These few characteristics (specialisation, land ownership issues and the difficulty of competing with imported products) constitute **major constraints to the development of rural areas of non-industrialised countries**, the very place where most of the undernourished people live.*

Another major consequence of colonial times that deserves mention is the political heritage. The case in point is the **establishment of non-democratic regimes at the time of independence**. Indeed, in most countries where independence was gained peacefully, the colonial authority found ways to transfer power to a local elite, often military or bureaucratic but sometimes economic. The heirs to colonial power were often closely related to large landowners and the new authorities were in most cases authoritarian or even dictatorial. Many of these new governments have financed their administration with taxes on export commodities and implemented policies unfavourable to the rural areas [\[read\]](#). They also sometimes engaged in alliances with foreign companies which financed them, officially or through corruption, and used them to handle and control industrial action by their local employees or their raw material suppliers. In exchange for such financial support, governments also ensured political stability. A typical case of this type of collusion was that between some dictators in Central America and United Fruit, the dominant producer of bananas in the region.

Materne Maetz  
(September 2012)