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# Cocoa production in Cameroon: From cash-crop plantations to agroforests

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**COCOA PRODUCTION IN CAMEROON:  
FROM CASH-CROP PLANTATIONS TO AGROFORESTS**

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Central and Southern Cameroon are known to form an old centre of cocoa cultivation, which was massively introduced in the beginning of the century by the colonial administration. Most of the plantations that are still in production today were created during 1920's and 1930's. Cocoa trees are old and yields are globally low.

Cocoa plantations of Central Africa have always been understood simply as cash-crop monocultures by agricultural services. This perception has served policies aimed at maximizing cocoa yields, via (i) rehabilitation of old plantations (complete substitution of old trees by juveniles, following precise agronomic standards) and (ii) intensification of plantation (adoption of selected high-yield cultivars, and elimination of any other tree susceptible to cause overshadowing). Agricultural policies are driven by international market rules, which assert that intensification is the only way of saving cocoa production in this region.

Nevertheless, farmers are reluctant to conform to such initiatives. Cocoa plantations of the old centre are in fact true agroforestry systems in which cocoa and dominant trees are closely intermingled. Some of these trees are remnants of the pristine forest and were maintained during the creation of the plantation, some are light-demanding species that established during the fallow period, and others were voluntarily transplanted or even introduced into parcels by farmers. Most of these trees - a mixture of native and exotic species - provide non-timber forest products.

Because the association of cocoa with trees is substantially reduced in areas where cocoa production began more recently (such as the western province of Cameroon), the ecological need for shade of old cocoa cultivars was stressed to justify such associations. Because this ecological "alibi" no longer applies for newly selected cocoa cultivars that are self-shading, the specter of fungal attacks favoured by over-shading is put forward to persuade farmers to eliminate the dominant trees.

The historical context of cocoa introduction in Central Africa shows clearly that the incorporation of trees was justified not only by ecological needs of cocoa. The presence of trees was mainly motivated by drastic changes concerning (i) the socio-cultural organisation (fragmentation of production units, from extended families to nuclear household) and (ii) land tenure (progressively, the temporary usage right on land has turned into permanent land ownership). These changes were directly induced by sedentarization, pacification, taxes and hard labour imposed by the colonial administration. Today, plantations do not exceed 2 hectares and are managed independently by households. The decrease in land availability, combined with a growing

monetary economy, have encouraged more individualist attitudes and have increased competition for land access.

Since their origins, cocoa plantations of southern Cameroon have combined three economic perspectives: that of cash crop (standing reserve in case of need for cash, payment of taxes and consumable goods), that of producing NTFPs (local and self-sufficient economy), and that of land tenure perspective (permanent land ownership). By maintaining such an integrated system, farmers reject the dictates of the market, which does not consider any of these perspectives. They express massively a preference for an optimized intermediate system, rather than a monospecific cash-crop plantation corresponding to productivist models.

**Box 9. Cocoa plantations of southern Cameroon (by: Edmond Dounias)**

Cocoa plantations of southern Cameroon are very old and their yield is low. Most of the plantations were created during the 1920's and 1930's. They are permanently rejuvenated by planting juveniles to replace old and unproductive plants or in gaps caused by dead trees. Average size of plantations is around two hectares and the basic production unit is the household. Cocoa plantations are generally established in mature swidden fields. Seedlings are transplanted into swidden parcels and grow among the post-agricultural regrowth. Cocoa trees have always been and still are associated with dominant trees that have diverse origins. Some are remnants of the pristine forest and were maintained during the creation of the swidden, some are light-demanding species that established during the fallow period, and some others were voluntarily transplanted or even introduced into the parcel. Most of these trees – a mixture of native and exotic species - provide NTFPs. The original shading function of the dominant trees is no longer justified, now that improved cocoa cultivars are “selfshading”. Agricultural policies that aim at encouraging the intensification of cocoa production push for a systematic elimination of shade trees, because excessive shade encourages fungal attacks that drastically affect production of improved cultivars. Farmers are reluctant to eliminate these trees and prefer to maintain older cocoa varieties which are more resistant to fungal pathogens. Farmers express their preference for an optimized intermediate system (justified by socio-economic choices and land tenure strategies) rather than a maximized yield of a monospecific and cash-crop plantation.