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Essays

The Sustainable Cocoa Debate: Key controversies

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Abstract

The sustainability of agriculture has been a topic of public debate over the last twenty years. The cocoa sector has been at the centre of this debate because of the large demand for chocolate in the Global North, which was one of the first sectors to begin to adopt sustainability standards. In this article, we focus on the actions taken by Northern and Southern actors to try to achieve cocoa sustainability over the past five years. Based on interviews and observations in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and European countries, complemented by document analysis, we map the controversies in the sector. Three issues emerge from our analysis: fair remuneration for producers, child labour and deforestation. We note differences of views between the actors of the North and the South, especially around the question of the fair remuneration of small producers. Emerging concerns are the single ingredient labels and the European regulations on zero imported deforestation and human rights due diligence.

Keywords

sustainable cocoa; controversies; fair remuneration; child labour; deforestation

Introduction

Almost all agricultural value chains are faced with the harmful effects of climate change. In recent years consumers have noted a particular deterioration of the quality of products on the one hand, while on the other, producers have noticed a drop in production linked to the consequences of unpredictable weather patterns caused by climate change (e.g., rising temperatures, devastating rains). Social and economic problems are also recurrent in countries of the Global South: problems of agricultural land management, sharing of responsibilities, fair remuneration for producers, child labour and the consequences of deforestation, just to name the most frequently cited ones. These difficulties are clearly seen in sectors such as cocoa, which is the focus of this article. For example, most cocoa farmers live on less than \$1 per day. In addition to the fact that prices have been reduced by a third over thirty years, this sector is no longer synonymous with development for farmers' families. Beyond these difficult livelihood conditions, the cocoa sector is considered responsible for a significant part of deforestation in West Africa where producers are encouraged to clear the forest in search of more fertile land with the prospect of obtaining better yields (CEF, 2024). Cocoa was one of the first products to be brought into the Fairtrade system and remains one of the largest Fair Trade products, representing 27% to 47% of global production in 2019 (Bermúdez, Voora, Larrea & Luna, 2022; Meier et al., 2021).

Despite widespread recognition of the social, economic and environmental issues associated with cocoa production, there is controversy over which policies are the ones that can best resolve the problems. Because of the differences of opinion between the actors in the Global North and the Global South, we focus our analysis on this vibrant public debate. Indeed, we note controversy in opinion between actors in the Global North and South despite the recognition of the social, economic and environmental issues associated with cocoa production. Specifically, the harmful effects of cocoa monoculture are increasingly discussed in the international arena, as is the problem of deforestation, which has become a pressing political issue for both Northern and Southern governments. At the same time, alternative perspectives and solutions are being proposed in non-governmental and public technical bodies at national and EU levels. For example, since 2015, we have seen the emergence of the French Initiative for Sustainable Cocoa (IFCD, 2022), the Café-Cacao Council in Côte d'Ivoire, the Ghanaian Cocoa Board (COCOBOD) and European-level voluntary and regulatory initiatives (e.g., the Amsterdam Declarations Partnership and the Regulation (EU) 2023/1115 on deforestation-free products) (Rajão, Loconto & Gautreau, 2020). These policy-focused debates have raised questions about the pertinence and effectiveness of private and voluntary certifications, the emergence of regulatory approaches to fight 'imported deforestation' and the more general ambition to move towards sustainable cocoa (for example, the Cocoa4Future project financed by the European Union and the French Development Agency and led by the

French Research Centre for Agricultural Development (CIRAD)). The question that is consistently formulated by the range of actors involved in these debates is: *How to achieve sustainable cocoa?*

In this short article, we seek to shed light on these debates by identifying actions undertaken by actors on the ground in cocoa-producing countries of the South and those that have been undertaken in the cocoa-consuming countries of the North. We followed a qualitative approach to data collection in the field through participant observations in cocoa industry events and expert dialogues, semi-structured interviews and document analysis of the markets for Fair Trade cocoa. Our analysis involved highlighting points of convergence, divergence, and new directions that have emerged over the past five years to answer the abovementioned question. This analysis brings a critical eye to these debates and highlights the work of actors to find solutions to the problem of unsustainable cocoa. It also offers insights into the scholarly debates about just transitions (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013) and what is considered just, and for whom?

Methodology

The choice of a qualitative, case study-based approach, is explained by our objective of understanding a phenomenon (Yin, 1984). We seek to understand the actions undertaken by actors on the ground in the South and initiatives in place and the actions undertaken in the North. The data collection for this article was thus conducted between 2017 and 2023 as part of a mix of research projects that were carried out in parallel by the two authors (Loconto Arnold, Silva-Castañeda & Jimenez, 2021a, Loconto et al., 2021b; Ten Hopen & Coulibaly-Ballet, 2023). The focus of these research projects was on sustainability certification, including Fairtrade, and it was through a reflexive analysis of our respective fieldwork that we were able to consolidate our findings into the over-arching themes that are presented in this article (certification and traceability in sustainable yarns, cocoa, etc.).

During this period, we used a mix of qualitative methods that enabled us to interview producers, traders, certifiers and actors in both the cocoa and Fair Trade industries in the North and South. We summarize here the variety of interviews and observations that were carried out at different points in time over the past five years that have informed our presentation of the debates. Between 2017 and 2023, the authors conducted about 70 focus groups and interviewed 60 actors in the Fairtrade system including producers in Latin America and West Africa auditors, traders and representatives of Fairtrade organizations. Participant observations were conducted at trade shows and during the Café-Cacao Council meetings. All interviews were carried out with prior informed consent and personal information is protected according to GDPR requirements.

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, observation notes and documents enabled us to conduct a preliminary controversy mapping

(Venturini, 2010). Seurat and Tari (2021) offer an operational definition of a controversy as a

situation in which a dispute/disagreement between several parties – each party employing specialised knowledge and none managing to impose certainties – is staged in front of a third party. A controversy is characterised by a tangle of varied issues, facts and values, as well as by the fact that a definition of the technical and the social are simultaneously at stake. (p. 28)

In order to trace the controversies that have emerged over the past five years, we thus identified the key actors bringing specialized knowledge in specific international and national arenas. We then situated the debates through a confrontation of the issues, facts and values that were debated at specific points in time. These three components of the controversies were then regrouped thematically in order to provide a thematic overview of the debates. The results of this analysis are presented in the following section.

The Sustainable Cocoa Debate

Our analysis highlights that three topics have dominated the debate over the past five years. These are fair producer remuneration, child labour and deforestation. We explore each of these themes in turn.

Fair remuneration of producers

The issue of fair remuneration has always been a federating value within the Fair Trade movement, particularly with regard to determining the fairness of market prices (cf. Steinrücken & Jaenichen, 2007). However, over the past few years, the definition of what is fair in terms of remuneration has become a topic of debate among different actors in the movement. Beyond the minimum prices set in the Fairtrade standards, other initiatives have emerged in both producing and importing countries to encourage and achieve the payment of a decent income to both farmers and farm workers. In Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana this has been a key initiative of the Le Conseil du Café-Cacao, while the French Initiative for Sustainable Cocoa (IFCD) also treated the question of a decent, or living, income.

Within this context, the first debate that we discuss in this article emerged from a historic concern about the transparency of the distribution of value among actors in the cocoa value chain. A quarter of the traders that we interviewed mentioned that traceability and transparency in the supply chain were the most important benefits of engaging in Fairtrade. Indeed, 65% of our respondents claimed that after joining the Fairtrade certification, they increased the prices that they paid to producers. Small-scale traders and cooperatives were the most likely to go beyond Fairtrade's commodity-specific minimum price by paying a higher price to farmers. Why was this? In general, traders across Europe believed that producers are seen as being paid too low with cocoa being the worst offender (Loconto et al., 2021b).

Efforts to differentiate small brands and new labels based on direct purchasing and full traceability are some of the market opportunities that were discussed during the Salon du Chocolate in Paris in 2019 and the Chocoo 2020 Conference in Amsterdam in 2020. While some of the largest traders and processors have claimed to increase their traceability to the cooperative level, it is mostly small and medium chocolatiers who are engaged in the bean-to-bar movement that are finding alternatives to Fairtrade certification. An increasing number of these companies are based in the countries of origin and seek to sell locally processed chocolate in Europe. Quality differentiation is part of the bean-to-bar movement, but also captured in the new 'Cocoa of Excellence Programme'¹ that is being rolled out by the Alliance of Bioversity International-CIAT, the ICCO, private traders and chocolatiers and the Salon du Chocolat. This programme was described by traders as a new certification system that encourages the producers to improve the quality of their cocoa.

The governments of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana are taking a stronger stance to protect their producers' prices and provide a decent income. This was seen at the end of 2020 when they suspended the sustainability programmes of Hershey. This company had purchased 30,000 tonnes of cocoa beans on the New York Stock Exchange rather than through the publicly regulated and traceable supply chains to which they had committed (including some Fairtrade-certified producers).² This enabled the company to avoid having to pay the higher price that was required by these West African governments. More than 80% of the bulk cocoa that is traded globally comes from West Africa and the majority of this cocoa reaches Europe through the Port of Amsterdam, where the largest importers process the beans into paste, liquor and other intermediate products that are then sold to secondary processors and brands across Europe, which remains the largest market for cocoa. The Port of Amsterdam imports 700,000–800,000 metric-tonnes of cocoa beans per year, making it the largest importing port for cocoa in Europe.

It is with respect to the price and distribution of value that we see concerted action on the part of actors from the Global South to ensure the fair development of the cocoa sector. This effort has taken form as an initiative of the Ivorian and Ghanaian governments named Le Conseil du Café-Cacao. This council asks industry actors (traders and processors) to pay a 'decent' price to the producers, by introducing the *decent income differential*. The council also seeks not only to guarantee a remunerative price, but above all to ensure sustainability in the cocoa sector and thus reduce poverty among producers (Le Conseil du Café-Cacao, 2021). According to their calculations, an income differential of \$400 per tonne above market price) can reduce poverty among producers (Blanchet, Coulibaly-Ballet, Fournier & Righi, 2023). So according to the council 'There will be no sustainable cocoa if producers

1 <http://www.cocoaofexcellence.org/>

2 2021 année décisive pour le Différentiel de Revenu Décent sur le cacao. Accessed 6 March 2024, <https://www.agencecofin.com/dossier/0502-84908-2021-annee-decisive-pour-le-differentiel-de-revenu-decent-sur-le-cacao>

are not well paid; there needs to be a floor price; let the planter decide' ([Le Conseil du Café-Cacao, 2021](#)).

There is a rather large consensus among Fair Trade actors that in order to also ensure fair remuneration to producers, it is necessary to maintain 'a floor price, regardless of the season, a price that must be communicated in advance' (Certification Support Consultant, FloCERT Bureau in Africa, July 2018). Fair compensation for producers also means taking into account their living conditions and their families. For example, for Fairtrade-labelled products, next to the price set by the state, there is the premium set by the chocolatier. The setting of the Fairtrade price at the level of each producer cooperative, passes through their General Assembly (GA), where there is a management committee that manages the cooperative. Within the GA, which is a supreme body, a development plan is submitted and adopted. For the Fairtrade premium: the development plan adopted must be respected and linked to the consensus of all producers. Local specificities are prioritized (for example, where there is a lack of pasture-land) and according to the needs of the local community a fair distribution of funds is carried out (producer, chairman of the management committee of a simplified co-operative, January 2019). The use of the Fairtrade premium therefore depends on the needs of the producers and a principle of fair distribution across community-level projects. It was explained that when the fixed price is higher than the national price, the difference is returned to the producer (assistant export, and treasurer of a Café-Cacao co-operative, January 2019).

A key factor in enhancing the price received by farmers is the ability of their organizations to negotiate on price. Broadly, this has been a problem for producer co-operatives in the cocoa sector, according to a Fairtrade staff member: 'Fairtrade supports producers who want to have certification, some cooperatives are not structured' (regional director of operations, Fairtrade Africa, West Africa Region, November 2023). Thus, producers are increasingly supported by Fairtrade Africa through their cocoa programme to better structure their co-operatives and negotiate for better prices.

A key factor in enhancing the price received by farmers is the ability of their organizations to negotiate on price. Thus, over the past five years, we can note efforts to render farmer remuneration more transparent. This move towards organizations that were better organized and autonomous in their decision-making was a key finding of research related to the use of the Fairtrade premium ([Loconto et al., 2021a](#)). We are indeed witnessing stronger producer cooperatives that have been able to make investments in negotiations with national governments, but also with companies to advance projects on issues that they are concerned about. We see this clearly in how the debates around child labour and deforestation have also developed.

Child labour

The question of child labour first appeared in debates around the definition of Fair Trade as part of international trade agreements ([Bhagwati, 1995](#)). Within

the Fair Trade movement, concern was raised over child labour in the textile industry and in large plantations, resulting in broad stroke banning of the practice in the certification standards. Today the focus of the Fair Trade movement has shifted to raising awareness about fighting against child labour through projects in producing countries and accompanying producers through training, preventive measures, and financial assistance to families in order to reduce one of the socio-economic drivers of child labour. These types of initiatives are the topics of debate in the cocoa sector as well.

The recent updates to the Fairtrade standards take into account the worst forms of unconditional child labour, as described in the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention 138 on the Prohibition of the Hiring of Children under the Age of 15. The requirement for producer co-operatives is that: 'You and your members do not employ children under the age of 15, or under the age defined by local law, at the highest age'. Organizations are requested to include safe schooling for children in their Fair Trade Development Plan. During the past five years a number of 'projects such as internal management systems [that] make it possible to effectively fight against child labour' have emerged (regional director of operations, Fairtrade Africa, West Africa Region, November 2023). Indeed, most certified cocoa co-operatives have put into place communication campaigns with images about what type of work children can do in the fields, versus what they should not be doing (e.g., holding machetes, carrying heavy sacks) (Loconto et al., 2021a). A number of engaged cooperatives have also increased their engagements with the schools that have received investments from the Fairtrade premium to ensure that parents are aware of the importance of education and complying with the national-level regulations that require school attendance in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. In this way, the cooperative unions support their producer members to identify children working on the farm in order to ensure their well-being: 'Basic needs are assured with the premium such as access to school, water, identification of children and names of producers are made, which makes it possible to support producers' (sustainable development and procurement manager, January 2019).

In addition, a reminder of the ban on child labour is made by co-operatives to producers. This action is followed by financial support, as illustrated by the instructions given to inspectors: 'Child labour is prohibited; parents are encouraged to send children to school. Check if it is a financial problem and help the producers' (assistant in charge of producer and customer relations, Association of Honey Producers, January 2019). If there are no schools in the area where the children live, collaboration is requested with national authorities and/or other relevant partners to build schools for children or provide a safe means of transport for children to attend the nearest schools (Fairtrade, 2019). An important aspect of these efforts in Côte d'Ivoire is the ownership of these projects that is taken by the producer members themselves. The contributions to the schools are made in the name of the producer 'parents' of the enrolled students, which has changed the relationship and increased the respect of the

producers in the eyes of the educational authorities (Loconto et al., 2021b). This approach to providing additional financial assistance is further promoted by Fairtrade International, which recommends that producer organizations partner with governments, businesses, civil society organizations and other organizations, to help eliminate child labour, forced labour and human trafficking in their countries and within their supply chains. These producers are also informed of funds and other resources available to achieve this goal (Fairtrade International, 2023). The recommendations also address countries that import cocoa and recent studies have found that an increasing number of certified chocolatiers (e.g., Mars, Ferrero Rocher, Ritter) invest in additional projects that provide scholarships and additional financial support to producers who send their children to school (Loconto et al., 2021a, 2021b).

Le Conseil du Café-Cacao, which is a national-level multi-stakeholder advisory committee set up by the Ivorian government, has recently brought in an additional mechanism to fight child labour. It 'involves young people in the fight against child labour' (Le Conseil du Café-Cacao, 2021). Thus, in collaboration with the municipalities of cocoa-producing communities, they will elect a committee responsible for steering and monitoring the various activities to combat child labour. This committee will be responsible for organizing trainings on children's rights for the members of the municipality. In co-operation with the members of the community, the committee develops its own guidelines in order to better protect the communities' children. In addition, the committee delegates young adults (aged 18 to 25) from the municipalities to conduct a household survey. The objective is to determine the number of children living in the municipality, their age, whether they can go to school and whether there are dangers or risks in their immediate environment. To these actions is added the promotion of schooling for children (Fairtrade Max Havelaar, 2024). Moreover, a national plan to stop child labour and work on the issue of deforestation has also been proposed (Dosso, 2021).

What the authors observe is that cultural issues must be taken into account in the fight against child labour. Firing children from their employment (Tallontire, 2002) or taking them from a family and entrusting them to the State are not long-term solutions. The increased autonomy of producer cooperatives, as well as the stronger national-level government engagement on this issue, are recent developments that point to emerging possibilities to address this issue in West Africa.

Deforestation

The issue of deforestation is one where the cocoa sector is often caught in the middle of public debate. In the interviews with certified traders that we conducted, the question of zero deforestation was clearly on their minds—but they were not the drivers of industry concerns and responses. When asked what were the key motivations for joining the Fairtrade system, traceability, living wages and eliminating child labour represented more than a third of the responses (37%), the moral obligation to do the right thing (34%) and company

reputation (32%) completed the range of company motivations. That means that national commitments (like zero deforestation or human rights due diligence) were the core drivers for dealing with environmental issues in only about 5% of the companies. In other words, the companies are not looking to Fairtrade as a means to reduce deforestation, other initiatives have taken on this responsibility. This is particularly true of the national-level sector-wide initiatives, like Le Conseil du Café-Cacao³ in Côte d'Ivoire. On their own initiative, members of this council have been able to plant 10 million trees in 'unprotected' forests (Le Conseil du Café-Cacao, 2021).

Alongside these initiatives put into place by actors in producing countries, consuming countries have also been focused on deforestation. For a number of years, there have been industry efforts to try to curb deforestation through the use of sustainability standards, like Fairtrade, but the evidence shows that these voluntary approaches have not been very successful (Bager, Persson & Reis, 2020; Garrett et al., 2019; zu Ermgassen et al., 2020). Thus, because these industry and multi-stakeholder efforts have been weak, and the tendency to increase public regulation remains strong in France, there is also a national strategy against imported deforestation (SNDI) that will impose restrictions on the products placed in the French market. The French Initiative for Sustainable Cocoa (IFCD) was established in preparation for this law and it brings together all the players in the cocoa sector (manufacturers, distributors, NGOs, researchers), where the subject of deforestation is the subject of a dialogue with importing countries and their consumers (IFCD, 2022). According to a representative of The French Initiative for Sustainable Cocoa, this initiative 'comes from the will of chocolate makers in France (private sector or actors in the cocoa sector in France) to develop a strategy to meet the needs of the national strategy against imported deforestation. Indeed, the sector is one of the most problematic in relation to this issue' (Ten Hopen & Coulibaly-Ballet, 2023).

Yet France is not alone on this point, there are nine signatory countries of the Amsterdam Declaration (Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and the United Kingdom), which set the target for zero deforestation.⁴ In July 2019, the European Commission adopted a plan for *Stepping up EU Action to Protect and Restore the World's Forests*, focusing on five priority areas. The first priority area aims to reduce the EU consumption footprint on land and encourage the consumption of products from deforestation-free supply chains in the EU. Within the scope of this priority area, the European Commission has committed to assessing additional (regulatory and non-regulatory) demand-side measures to increase supply-chain transparency and

3 'Le Conseil du Café-Cacao' is responsible for regulating, stabilizing and developing the coffee-cocoa sector. Among its main missions: the management of the activities of the sector, the control of the quality of the products, to ensure the financial participation of the State in CI and international organizations; to fix the purchase price to the producers, organize and control the domestic marketing of coffee and cocoa; help the government fight against child labour, promote the industrial transformation of coffee and cocoa, etc.

4 <https://ad-partnership.org/about/>

minimize the risk of deforestation and forest degradation associated with commodity imports in the EU. This commitment was further re-iterated in the *European Green Deal*, the *EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030* and the *Farm to Fork Strategy* where there are specific references made to the use of third-party standards and certification schemes that help to identify and promote deforestation-free commodities. A public consultation on this new commitment (3rd September–10th December 2020) attracted about 1.2 million public responses.⁵ The EU ‘Cocoa Talks’ were then carried out with industry experts in order to make sense of these efforts and guide the finalization of the EU-level strategies, which came into force in 2023.

Alongside these key converging areas, we also noted divergences in the initiatives carried out in the South and the North.

Tracing The Controversies By Seeing Where Actors Have Been Mobilized

In recent years, actors in producing countries who are better organized compared to twenty years ago, raise more questions related to problems in the field and of concern to producers that have not been addressed or show limited signs of improvement. These actors express themselves through a reluctance to continue discussions with stakeholders from the consuming countries in the institutionalized commodity-specific international dialogues (due to experiences of non-compliance with certain commitments): Le Conseil du Café-Cacao and COCOBOD had decided not to attend the annual World Cocoa Foundation negotiations in Brussels from 26–27 October 2022 due to lack of a clear response to the request on the livelihoods of their producers ([Le Conseil du Café-Cacao, 2022](#)).⁶ In addition, a number of issues have returned to the centre of the debate. However, rather than providing answers, this refocusing has served mostly to pose new questions about what it means to take action to make the cocoa sector more sustainable and it reveals how the interests of producing and consuming countries are diverging.

First, there is a return to the issue of imported deforestation, which is linked to other aspects of the cocoa economy. For example, Southern actors have reviewed the positioning of manufacturers and their failure to support small producers in these efforts. Tied to this, and to the issue of child labour, is the need to integrate the younger generations into production in Africa. The questions of child labour and deforestation are highly political, where there are many competing interests and resistances from a range of actors. Cocoa is a very strategic and political product in the largest producing countries of Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana, and as a result become a focus of national policy

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12137-Minimising-the-risk-of-deforestation-and-forest-degradation-associated-with-products-placed-on-the-EU-market/public-consultation>; <https://ec.europa.eu/environment/forests/deforestation.htm>

⁶ For more details, visit: <https://programme-equite.org/le-ton-monte-dans-les-pays-producteurs-de-cacao-dafrique-de-louest-etats-reseaux-de-producteur%C2%B7rices-et-societe-civile-sorganisent-pour-exiger-la-hausse-du-prix/>, accessed 6 March 2024.

debate. Over the past five years Fair Trade actors in these two producing countries have often withdrawn from the political debate, with a claim that they are market actors with the single objective of producing revenue and thus do not want to become involved in the political debates around these types of policy issues. However such policy discussions have implications for Fair Trade actors and their cause might be better served if they were to engage. We have noted that the Fairtrade-certified producer cooperatives or support organizations rarely mobilize as a coalition (Loconto et al., 2021b), especially not in country-level politics, often because they are not the cocoa unions that have historically been politically dominant in the sector. However, given that they are receiving quite a lot of money through the Fairtrade premiums, which is seen by some government officials as a possible new source of revenue for them, they are beginning to be solicited in political debates around rural, and social investments.⁷ However, there are very few national-level debates around the questions of deforestation and child labour. While the international campaigns in consuming countries focus consumer attention on child labour in particular, this is not the main concern of producers. They are concerned that there are not enough youth remaining in the cocoa-producing areas to ensure that production will continue into the future. Moreover, there are very few advocacy campaigns run by Fair Trade actors in the producing countries that are aimed at their governments and requesting them to take action on child labour, mostly because national legislation already exists.

We point out this first divergence in the positioning of producing and consuming countries to highlight how the advocacy campaigns in the consuming countries are often focusing on topics that are not the priority topics for producing countries. During the interviews with certified traders in the EU, the majority of companies also claimed that the advocacy campaigns carried out by Fairtrade International were not relevant to the concerns that they had in the cocoa sector. For example, in the emerging markets of Eastern Europe, the advocacy campaigns are not locally developed but rather imported from the rather active Fair Trade movements in Germany, France, the UK or from the international level. Thus, while bananas were receiving a lot of attention in Fairtrade campaigns at the time of the interviews, Fairtrade bananas were not yet available in emerging markets. However, local consumer understanding of the challenges in the cocoa value chain (particularly child labour and deforestation) was not well developed and the Eastern European traders felt that this message was not being adequately conveyed.

Indeed, we can illustrate these diverging interests through the example of a recent controversy in France, which has occupied significant space in the national-level political debates. The introduction of the ingredient label for cocoa (along with a few other products) has raised the question of consumer

⁷ Observations of a debate on this topic during a high-level roundtable on sustainable food systems organized by the Committee on World Food Security in Abidjan in October 2017

credibility and has marginalized Fairtrade in political negotiations related to the regulation of Fair Trade.⁸ Indeed, in the consumer markets, we see a fracturing due to what is seen as a weakening of the third-party labels. In 2018, the Max Havelaar France annual report⁹ noted a strong increase in chocolate thanks to the ingredient label which allows a product to be labelled Fairtrade Ingredient if it contains an ingredient of its composition from Fair Trade.¹⁰ Originally, in 2014, MHF had refused the implementation of this label instituted by Fairtrade International. Finally, in 2018 this label was adopted for products containing Fair Trade cocoa in order to stay in line with the practices in other European countries and in an attempt to avoid consumer confusion and unfair competition as imported products from Germany, for example, carried this ingredient label. This challenged the solidarity among Fair Trade actors collaborating through the Fair Trade France platform as key players began to disengage. Artisans du Monde, the first network of shops specialized in Fairtrade in France decided in 2014 to withdraw the Fairtrade label from their products following the implementation of the Fairtrade Ingredient programme by Max Havelaar. The Fairtrade Ingredient label allows products to be labelled if they present at least one Fairtrade ingredient instead of all the ingredients available in Fairtrade ('all that can be' rule). According to Artisans du Monde, this programme loses its meaning by reminding us that everything that can be Fairtrade in a product must be Fairtrade. In 2019, Ingénieurs Sans Frontières (ISF) decided to leave the Max Havelaar France board of directors for the same reason as Artisans du Monde and then withdrew completely from the association in 2019. This issue remains a thorny issue for the French Fair Trade sector as Max Havelaar has since stepped down from the board of Fair Trade France (CEF), as did the Association of Researchers (FairNESS), because of a number of political positions taken by the CEF with regards to their protection of their members' interests (i.e., being recognized as the instrument that can ensure an agroecological transition) to fight over the promotion of the broader principles of Fair Trade. For example, the current negotiations that are being undertaken with the French government are seeking the protection of the third-party certification model promoted by their members, even though there has been requests by producing countries to move away from these highly bureaucratic models towards more participatory guarantee systems.

8 In France, there is a national fair trade law, which regulates the use of the term and the definition of a label. These definitions were a topic of national political debate in 2022 as France negotiated its Climate Law and included a weakening of the definition of a label in order to be create a more inclusive definition of responsibility.

9 <https://programme-equite.org/le-ton-monte-dans-les-pays-producteurs-de-cacao-dafrique-de-louest-etats-reseaux-de-producteur%C2%B7rices-et-societe-civile-organisent-pour-exiger-la-hausse-du-prix/>, accessed 6 March 2024.

10 With the original Fairtrade label, an 'all that can be' rule was in place whereby all of the ingredients that could be certified Fairtrade for a given product were required to be certified in order to obtain the label. The Ingredient Label opened up the ability of companies to include only one ingredient in the product in order to use a specific label. This practice was common in the UK and German markets years before it was introduced in France.

This second divergence points to the difficulties that remain with a model that seeks to transition to a just society through the market (Taylor, 2005). The interests and political priorities of consuming and producing countries and supply-chain actors often do not converge. Building coalitions among them around a few salient issues has occurred in the past, but the diverging tendencies revealed in the debates occurring in the cocoa sector suggest that new alliances may be needed in order to address the question of 'justice for whom?'

Conclusion

Based on this analysis of the controversies circling around sustainable cocoa, we see a mobilization of both producing and importing actors in the cocoa sector. Actions to move towards the sustainability of cocoa have been carried out over the past five years in the South as in the North via Le Conseil du Café-Cacao (Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana) and sector-wide reflections like those of the IFCD in France. In addition, Fairtrade Africa also supports producers in achieving sustainability goals that focus on three major points: fair remuneration for the producer, child labour and deforestation. What these actors are currently agreeing upon is that there is a need to ensure the sustainability of the supply of cocoa to meet the large market demand. However, this is not a notion of sustainability in the more holistic sense of economic, social, environmental and governance sustainability.

While in the countries of the South the emphasis is on decent income alongside solving the problem of deforestation. In the North, the French Initiative for Sustainable Cocoa which 'comes from the desire of French chocolatiers (private sector or players in the cocoa sector in France)', seeks more to 'develop a strategy to meet the needs of the national strategy against imported deforestation' (Tenn Hopen & Coulibaly-Ballet, 2023). Thus, while there is an agreement about the problem of deforestation, the definition of what causes it and which levers to push in order to solve it diverge between producing and importing countries.

To achieve the sustainability of cocoa production and consumption, it is necessary to take into account the differences raised by each actor. In particular, the disagreement that has emerged between importing and producing countries on the fair remuneration needs is a point that will require further discussion and resolution in the future. The empowerment of producers' cooperatives and the opening of spaces for dialogue among multiple actors in producing countries offer new spaces for dialogue around the questions of fairness that the Fair Trade movement is meant to represent. However, this requires greater efforts on the part of actors to look beyond the controversies that are tied to their local politics and to begin to debate on a more equal footing among 'concerned actors' in both the importing and producing countries. Specifically, mobilizing collectively as a coalition of Fair Trade producers and importers in country-level policy debates would be pragmatic and would lend more weight to their arguments. The spaces for these debates are now there, ready to be used.

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