Title

Labor Issues and Politics of Cocoa Production and Cultivation

Objective(s)

This research seeks to provide context to the realities of labor of cultivating the raw product of cocoa. For an understanding of the complexity of issues surrounding labor today, we look horizontally across time and vertically across the globe at the relationships between producers and consumers of cocoa. Using Cote d’Ivoire as a case study, this report will give a brief history of the cocoa industry in Africa while providing a description of the realities of labor that go into cultivation. This report will then look into the labor politics and issues of child labor, exploitation, and overall recent effects of the liberalization of the cocoa industry. Expanding to the macro stage, we will look at cocoa as an international commodity while understanding the United State’s relations and policies in connection to the labor issues of cocoa in West Africa.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

Chocolate is a delicious and pleasurable part of the American diet. Consuming this sweet and sensuous product may not inspire questions of its origins and manufacturing process like other problematic foods. The issues of chocolate must be hidden underneath that caramel center, or discarded with the wrapper. Through this research, I will look at the production context, process, and international relations to understand the realities of cocoa production. To trace the history and context of production, I will use Cote d’Ivoire as a case study. I will first look at what it takes to produce cocoa so we can understand the realities of labor and production. We can then see labor as an issue that has been forced and exploited to cultivate cocoa due to a multitude of factors, everything from historical implications to recent efforts to modernize. We are all linked together by this material commodity. However there is a huge disparity between the nations that export cocoa, and the ones that consume it. What are the realities of cocoa
production and what is the historical and present context in which production practices are perpetuated?

HISTORY

Cocoa production began in Africa in the late 19th century when the first cocoa plantations were founded on the islands of Sao Tome and Principe (see Figure 1). Slaves were imported from sub-Saharan Africa to provide labor in growing this foreign crop.\(^1\) Demand for chocolate grew overseas; realizing the growing market while simultaneously trying to keep up with it, cocoa production spread throughout the West African countries like in Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, and finally Cote d’Ivoire (see Figure 2) (Anti-Slavery International 2004).

The history of cocoa production in Cote d’Ivoire began in 1890 in the form of sharecropping plantations. Laborers would earn one third of the crop they produced; compared to many of the other first African countries to produce cocoa, Cote d’Ivoire had some of the best conditions. As the promise of fortune from producing cocoa for Europeans spread amongst the West African countries, many laborers migrated to Cote d’Ivoire for their better farming conditions. In 1946, forced labor was abolished in French colonies. This law showed an increase in production for that year in cocoa production, as there was an increase in labor migration to the cocoa farms. Cote d’Ivoire became the number one producer of cocoa (Anti-Slavery International 2004).

The rise of the small farms between 1920 and 1960 ultimately led to the explosive growth of cocoa. The French relationship to Cote d’Ivoire was purely exploitative and focused on production of coffee and cocoa; but their efforts to plunder and profit from the land were short lived. The French oversaw 200 plantations, each averaging 400 to 500 hectares. They forced labor from locals, and in from their other colony Burkina Faso, but the system was not sustainable. The African planters who learned to harvest cocoa migrated and expanded the success of cocoa with the rise of small family, indigenous farms (Boas and Huser 2006).

CASE STUDY: COTE D’IVOIRE

In this research, I am using Cote d’Ivoire as a case study because it is responsible for 70% of the world’s cocoa, while it is only responsible for less than 3% of its consumption. This implies a problematic dynamic. Recently, Cote d’Ivoire has been in popular media regarding child labor issues. This country therefore has the most information on cocoa production and

\(^1\) The cocoa tree, Theobroma cacao, is indigenous to South America. Cocoa was first introduced to the Western palette in 1528, and finally reaching Africa to facilitate production in 1880. (See The History of the ‘Food of the Gods’ by Kelsey Cox for more historical information)
labor issues, while also being the most relevant to look at in the context of the US’s involvement against child labor.

Cote d’Ivoire has a population of 21,952,093 (July 2012 estimate), 68% of which engages in agriculture and 42% of which are below the poverty line (CIA World Factbook). The majority of the population is young due to the low life expectancy and most inhabitants live along the coastal region (forested interior used for production). The economy is highly dependent on agriculture while commodity crops are exported to other countries. Some of Cote d’Ivoire’s export partners are the United States (accounting for 10.2% of exports), Netherlands (10%), and France (6.2%) (CIA World Factbook).

Cocoa was the first source of wealth in the country, and today it still holds as the most important crop; coffee and cocoa make up 20% of the country’s GNP. We also find that 56% of the agricultural land in the country is utilized to harvest cocoa (Boas and Huser 2006).

The production of cocoa in Cote d’Ivoire is most commonly found in family farms—there are over 500,000 such farms (Boas and Huser 2006). An average size for a cocoa farm is from five to ten hectares where there are, more frequently than not, other crops that are being harvested. However, in order to expand labor outside of the family and community unit to keep up their competition within the market, they rely on child labor and migrant labor. One major contributing factor leading up to labor issues was the continuous search for new land. In the rotating field system, cocoa needs to be relocated to a new field every 2-3 years (and the land must be left to re-grow for approximately 20 years). Searching and making land in the interior forest suitable for production becomes difficult in regards to time and labor, thus we see an increase in farmers searching for new sources of labor (Boas and Huser 2006).

‘The commodity problem’ is a phrase termed for the problematic dynamic that stems from the relationship between commodity crop producer and consumer. The dynamic mostly consists of a developing country rich in natural resources and a developed consumer demanding the product. This is reminiscent of an exploitative colonial past and problematic for explaining international relationships today. By using Cote d’Ivoire as a case study, we can see how history may mirror present day international relations when involving the cocoa commodity crop.

DETAILS OF PRODUCTION

The production of cocoa officially starts in January when the fields are cleared. The initial steps include weeding, cutting branches from the cocoa tree (Figure 3), and the application of pesticides. This process initiates the simultaneous cultivation of other crops as well, like maize coco yam, and the plantain. September is the main month for harvesting cocoa, and it may last until December. Each tree yields twenty to thirty pods a year, which holds about 40 seeds each that become cocoa beans (thinking of it in chocolate quantity, that is 3 bars of chocolate). The pods are cut off the trees with a machete tied to a long stick; a surprisingly delicate and skillful task where laborers are careful to not harm the tree whereby threatening the next productive
season. Once the pods are cut from the trees, they are split open by hand (Figure 4) and the beans are dried and fermented before exportation. The machete is also used to split open the pods and the beans are left to ferment for 5-7 days to bring out a chocolatey taste. The main harvest times are the most labor intensive. Logistically, farmers are only able to sell cocoa once or twice a year. When the price for cocoa is low on the global market, the grower ends up getting very little for their crop; which brings up controversies over labor (Boas and Huser 2006).

LABOR ISSUES

Child Labor

Child labor\(^2\) is present in cocoa production in Cote d’Ivoire. The family farms include their children as labor while additionally, families find extra hands during main harvesting time. Many children do most activities listed above. The children under the age of 18 who work for a salary who have no kinship connection to the family farm are the most vulnerable. It was reported that over 200,000 children are put to work on cocoa farms in Cote d’Ivoire doing work that is extensively labor intensive, or involving dangerous pesticides, without receiving significant pay and without being fed (Fell 2007). Mostly, workers work long hours in physically demanding conditions.

Cote d’Ivoire outlawed child labor in 1995 for children under the age of 14, but this law only applies to the formal business sector, not technically for family farms (Anti-Slavery International 2004). This becomes problematic because the majority of the farms producing cocoa are small and family based. In surrounding nations like Burkina Faso, Mali, Liberia and Ghana, impoverished citizens send their children to the cocoa farms to earn some money. This may lead to exploitative work, enslavement, and abuse (Anti-Slavery International 2004). There is a more recent, more serious issue of kidnapping and human trafficking for agricultural labor into Cote d’Ivoire from bordering countries.

Low wages/ exploitation

The farmers themselves continue to be exploited as it is postulated that they are only paid about 25% of the world market price of cocoa while the rest of it disappears among corrupted government actors. Farmers deliver their product to a middleman for cash who then sells the

\(^2\) “work that prevents children from attending and participating effectively in school or is performed by children under hazardous conditions which places their health and development physically, intellectually, or morally at risk” (Boas and Huser 2006, 11)
product on the global market on behalf of a conglomerate or the government. In 2004, the global market price for cocoa beans averaged at 78 cents per pound (Schrage and Ewing 2005).

**Neo-colonialism under neoliberalism**

Since production is most commonly found among family farms, small growers have limited power in the larger national and international market. In 1999, the cocoa market was officially ‘liberalized’. In addition to French influence on the cocoa market, liberalization allowed other foreign actors to enter the arena (Fell 2007). The continued foreign pressure and demand of cheap cocoa from Cote d’Ivoire prevents the country from diversifying its economy to gain more autonomy and independence. Instead, its economy is dependent on Western demand for commodities that fluctuate in price and are unreliable and insufficient to create a stable living for agriculturally dependent citizens (Fell 2007). Volatile prices were not felt by the farmers directly until 1999 when liberalization “shift[ed] the risks and costs of world prices from the government onto the individual farmers” (Fell 2007, 12). The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development listed cocoa among the most volatile and unpredictable commodities in the world (Off 2006). The financial security of the cocoa farmers’ diminished as they were left to hold up against foreign prices, newly emerging conglomerates and multinational companies. By the end of the 1990s, the entirety of Cote d’Ivoire’s chocolate production was owned by foreign firms, both European and American food conglomerates (Off 2006). An increasing amount of chocolate manufacturers bought directly from the cocoa exporter, thus making the value of cocoa highly “buyer-driven” and dictated by foreign actors and large conglomerates (Haque 2004). This limits the power of the grower and creates a chain of price determination where the grower consistently benefits the least. In the past twenty years, for circumstantial reasons, Cote d’Ivoire became one of the most indebted nations in the world even though it supplied the bulk of the world’s chocolate. Cocoa farmers became more impoverished and they turned to the same solution the European colonists once did to keep up cocoa production: slavery (Off 2006).

By keeping commodity prices low and by increasing the need for global competition, companies and Western demand necessitates child labor (Fell 2007). The world consumes more than 3 million tons of cocoa beans annually (worldfoundation.org) and yet the primary producers of the product receive minimal earnings for their global contributions.

**Role of the US**

By looking at the US specifically, we can evaluate how our demand has impacted or prolonged labor issues in West Africa, even in our case study of Cote d’Ivoire, and consequently how we are addressing the issues with policies and relations to the exporting countries. According to the Office of the United States Trade Representative’s website, US goods imports from Cote d’Ivoire totaled $1.2 billion in 2010, a 58% increase from 2009. The top import was for cocoa, which totaled at $770 million.
The US has however made efforts to combat labor issues. Specific chocolate companies have made steps away from the corrupted and issue riddled West African cocoa industry; companies like Cadbury’s Dairy, Mars’ Galaxy, Mars Bar, Nestle’s Kit Kat, and some of Swiss Noir and Verkade range have certified as non exploitative chocolate manufactures (Schrage and Ewing 2005).

Specifically, to address child labor issues, the Harkin Engel Protocol was signed in 2001 as an international stand against child labor, enacted by the World Cocoa Foundation (founded in the US in 2000). This protocol proposed a five step action plan to eradicate child labor in the cocoa context by involving a “partnership among the major stakeholders: governments, global industry…. cocoa producers, organized labor, non governmental organizations, and consumers” (Chocolate Manufactures Association 2001). The five steps included bringing together the global community to recognize and officially “develop and implement credible, mutually acceptable, voluntary, industry-wide standards of public certification, consistent with applicable federal law, that cocoa beans and their derivative products have been grown and/or processed without any of the worst forms of child labor”. Many international and US signatures went on this document including representatives from the Iowa US Senate, Wisconsin US Senate, and New York US Congress (Chocolate Manufactures Association 2001). (Refer to The Chocolate Revolution: The Meaning Behind the Movement and Ethically Certified Labels by Grace Quintana for more information on the revolution for organic and fair trade chocolate)

Signing the Protocol was an important first step by the US and several chocolate companies to accept the responsibility of production of their product, at the raw level, as it has also spread awareness to ordinary consumers about the problematic origins of chocolate. However, this is a complex issue to navigate. Chocolate companies depend so heavily on Ivorian production while the Cote d’Ivoire economy is equally dependent on this trade. A ban on cocoa would devastate the economy in Cote d’Ivoire; “the trick is to identify the fine line between human rights and economic necessity” (Off 2006, 142). The relationship the West has made with Cote d’Ivoire for this commodity is a precarious one; interdependent and complicated, the best response to the child labor issue may not be to sever ties, but what can be done? The prime minister of Cote d’Ivoire warned chocolate companies that manufacturers would have to pay about ten times more for their cocoa if they really wanted to end forced labor (Off 2006).

CONCLUSION

The recognition by international actors of labor issues taking place in West African countries, like Cote d’Ivoire, was made official by the signing of the Protocol. However, signed in 2001, has this changed or improved the labor conditions in cocoa production? According to the 2009 report from the International Labor Rights Forum, not all chocolate companies have made efforts to change their supply chain. Hershey, M&M/Mars, and Nestle have been the worst companies to uphold their agreement to improve labor conditions in their supply chains. Nestle, for example, has direct connections and control of their raw cocoa from West Africa, yet they
have made minimal efforts to address labor issues. The problem still remains that the cocoa farmers do not make enough profit for their product.

While farmers continue to make minimal money on their production of cocoa, they continue to exploit laborers, including children who are enslaved or captured to work for minimal pay and food. The colonial history in Cote d’Ivoire and the exploitative past of the French parallels today’s dynamic with child labor and low working wages to cultivate commodities for the Western world.
APPENDIX:

Figure 1: Locations of cocoa production in Africa

Figure 2: Time Series Comparison of Amount of cocoa production
Figure 3: Image of cocoa tree with cocoa pods

Figure 4: Image of a Cocoa Pod cut open. Inside are the ‘beans’ that will be dried and fermented and then shipped and processed
Sources


