

The unsustainable price of cocoa

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FOOD WAVE

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INTRODUCTION

‘It’s delicious!’
cries Amina, a woman in her forties who lives in a small village near Meaguì, a city along the ‘cocoa road’ that descends straight from northern Côte d’Ivoire to San-Pédro, one of the country’s main ports of export. From the oldest to the youngest people in the village, everyone hurries to grab a spot of cocoa paste piled on a small stone slab placed on the ground. The circle around the medium-sized pot, where the cocoa beans have just been roasted and then reduced to a soft paste using a mortar, is getting tighter and tighter. ‘I didn’t know what cocoa tasted like,’ says Daò, another villager who has tended to his plantation for forty years.

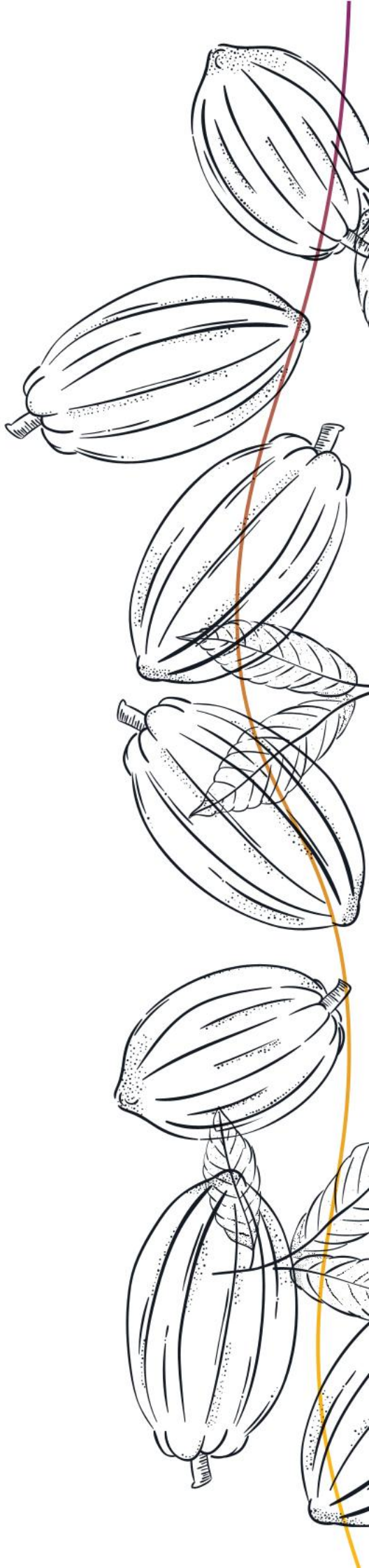
The history of cacao is full of paradoxes. And this collective ritual that we are taking part in around the country is a clear expression of it — from the point where the cocoa beans are collected to the chocolate bar, it is not the ‘flavour’ that matters. This is true for both the producers, who are often not familiar with the flavour, and ultimately the consumers, so the important thing is not to spend too much in satisfying a ‘vice’, a mechanism through which social and environmental sustainability pays the highest price. To Amina and Daò’s amazement, there is also and above all a lot of injustice, because that lack of knowledge about the taste — but especially the potential — of a plant that is so central to the producers’ family budgets is functional for the market, the system, the



interests of those who build economic empires for us based on those plantations. And they have no interest in making the thousands of farmers at the base of the pyramid become 'masters' of such precious knowledge.

'The cocoa supply chain tells us a lot about today's world, about the processes that take place. There is a clash between two visions of the world. There is, on the one hand, the child of neoliberalism, the vision of *standardization*, and on the other hand, the vision that instead enhances biodiversity, differences, and their harmonization.' This is the way the situation is explained by Andrea Mecozzi, a supply chain operator who has been dealing with Ivorian cocoa for over ten years. We talk with him while visiting the plantation of Bole Ndrikro, nicknamed 'Bioman', who won the award for best organic cocoa from the ECAM cooperative in 2021. 'I saw that so many diseases were spreading, both on plants and in us,' Nrdikro tells us. 'I abandoned pesticides and switched to organic production for myself, my family, and the environment in which we live.'

In this report, we tell the stories of those who, like Bioman, demonstrate that the 'vision of the world that enhances biodiversity' is already a reality. Across the country, cooperatives of various sizes are promoting cutting-edge agricultural practices, attentive to both environmental and social aspects. 'We have seen many innovative and high-level solutions,' says Eugenio Attard, Mani Tese mission head in Burkina Faso. 'From the use of biocompost to advanced techniques for collecting fruit and protecting organic plantations. It is really valuable knowledge.' This often risks being stifled by the 'cocoa system', however. Through meetings with producers, companies that export cocoa beans, companies that transform the finished product on site, and experts who have dealt with the subject for years, we have reconstructed the cocoa supply chain, from the plantation to the finished product. Here's what we discovered during our trip.





The Social and Economic ‘Price’ of Cocoa

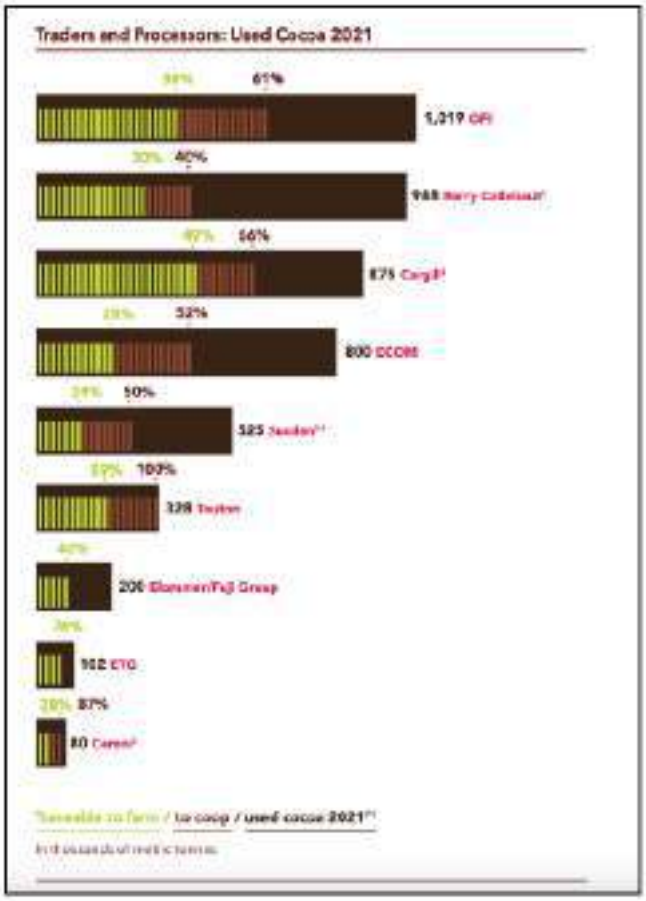
To fully understand today’s cocoa supply chain, it is necessary to take a step back a century. Cacao, in fact, is not a native plant but was imported at the end of the 19th century by settlers returning from Latin America. In fact, it is no coincidence that one of the most common varieties is amelonado, which is also found in Brazil. The effects of this are still visible today. Only in rare cases, therefore, is there a ‘cultural’ or identifying element. And the scene described at the beginning, of women and men who have been producing cocoa beans for forty years but are not familiar with its taste, perfectly captures this aspect. ‘There are two reasons why cacao is produced in Côte d’Ivoire. One is historical and one is tied to land law,’ explains Michele Nardella, director of the Economics and Statistics Division of the International Cocoa Organization (ICCO), based in Abidjan and funded by 53 countries with the aim of networking the countries that produce, distribute, and consume cocoa. ‘Only 2 to 3% of Ivorian territory has an owner. The rest belongs to the state, which allows anyone the right to use it as long as there is a perennial crop. Those who grow cacao, often small producers, do it exclusively to earn money, while the rest of the land contains the crops necessary for their livelihood.’ Nardella’s analysis is essential for understanding that if the price paid for cocoa is too low, the risk is that producers will gradually replace it with other crops that seem profitable at the time. In fact, around the country, kilometres of monocrops of palm oil and rubber cover the landscape. The former grew from 45,000 hectares in 1961 to more than 362,000 in 2021 (+ 700%), while rubber crops grew from 73,000 to 451,000. The numbers are not comparable to cacao plantations (more than four million hectares), but such crops are growing significantly.

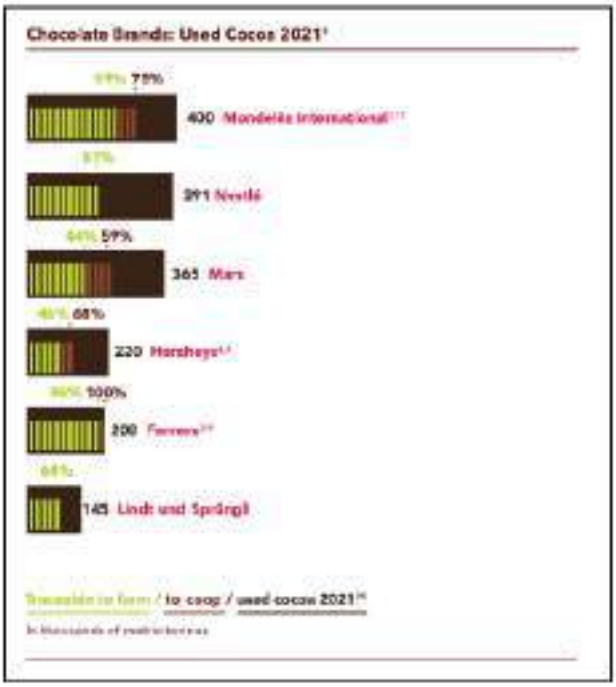
It is a sign of the times. Someone finds an identifying element in cocoa pods and cocoa beans — more on this below — while for others cacao risks becoming a plant like any other. Especially if payment for the work continues to be so low. ‘Social and environmental problems are tied to economic unsustainability and unfortunately, there has been no significant change on this in recent years,’ Nardella points out.

At the beginning of October 2023, the Coffee and Cocoa Council, the state-owned body that regulates the Ivorian domestic market and manages the entire production process and sale of cocoa beans in Côte d’Ivoire, set the price for producers during the main harvest of the season from September to December at 1,000 CFA francs per kilogram (€1.52). (The second harvest, called the ‘small harvest’, takes place between April and June.) Despite an 11% increase compared to 2021–2022, the amount remains very low. The price set on the futures market in London and New York, which is influenced by investor hedges, is the reference parameter used by the Ivorian authorities, who in turn establish the rewards for each person involved in the domestic supply chain: those who produce, those who manage storage warehouses, and those who export. ‘The price set by the Council refers to export licenses, not to the cocoa product. Customers buying the cocoa,’ Nardella continues, ‘participate in what are in fact bilateral negotiations in which they buy a volume of semi-finished cocoa beans at a certain price. The beans, however, do not yet “physically” exist. Because they are the beans that will be collected in the next harvest.’



This ploy allows the Ivorian government to have a constant income from year to year, but it is hardly transparent. It is not known how the price is set or, above all, how the income generated from taxes and export revenues, which remain in the Council's pockets, is used. 'Not everything that the CCC does is included in the state budget,' adds Francesca Di Mauro, the European Union Ambassador, whom we meet in Abidjan. 'This means that, unlike what happens with other issues related to the Ivorian government, we also do not have much information about how this income is used.' Concentration of the market in the hands of a few aggravates these problems even more. In 2021, more than 3.6 million tonnes of cocoa beans, about 75% of the total, were sold and processed by just four companies and large groups — Ofi, Cargill, Ecom, and Barry Callebaut — but the origin was traced for less than 50%. In other words, the origin of most cocoa that ended up in chocolate bars distributed in Europe was unknown. The objective is quantity, not quality. This is also because it is often the end consumers themselves who are not willing to spend more to purchase bars of chocolate or different cocoa-based products (for example, cosmetics).





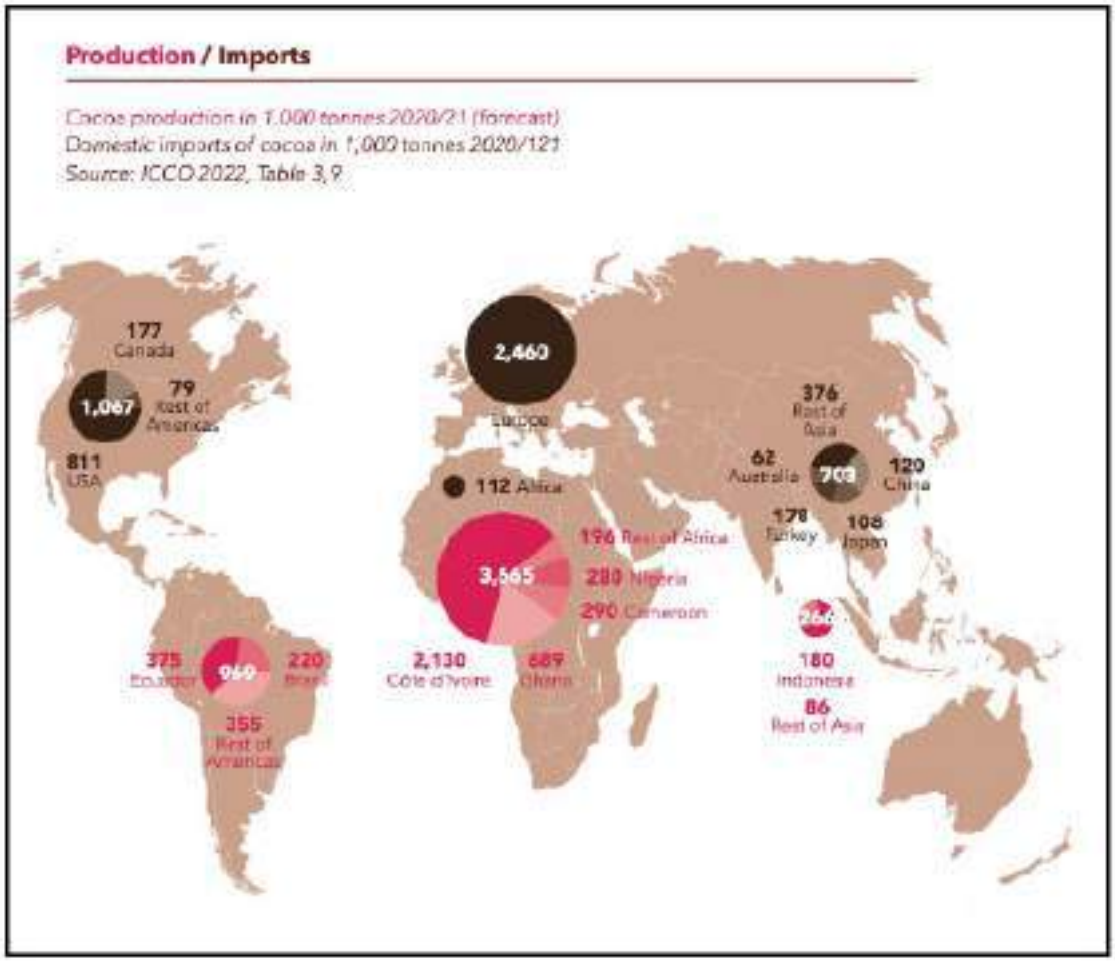


The Context: The Côte d'Ivoire 'Queen'

Outside the Ecam cooperative, which has more than 200 members in the Municipality of Méagui, in the north-east of the country, about fifty producers are seated near the entrance, under the shade of a large gazebo. They have come to collect the prize for the 2021–2022 harvest. Sondè Abdullahi, originally from Burkina Faso, has been growing cacao since 1980. He tells us about the great deforestation that has occurred in large areas of the country since the 1960s, mostly at the hands of European companies interested in wood, and especially in the possibility of cultivating those same tracts of land. According to a study published in Nature, Côte d'Ivoire has lost 90% of its forests from 1950 to today; since 2000, cacao has been responsible for almost 37.4% of this loss [1]. Today, however, the phenomenon, according to what was seen and heard during visits, is reduced and related to the events of individual producers who, seeing land that no longer produces, decide to move to the forest for better results. 'Today the problem is that the earth is dead,' Abdullahi continues. 'While I was the one planting cacao in 1980, now I am forced to abandon it, at least in part. A lot of things have changed. There are so many diseases and the ground doesn't respond the same as in the past.' The producer says that he initially did not put any fertilizer on the plants but then to increase production, he was even advised to start 'pumping' it into the ground. The goal was to produce more and more to meet export demands.

One result was achieved: Côte d'Ivoire is currently the first producer in the world with 2.2 million tonnes, followed by Ghana (750,000 tonnes in the 2021–2022 harvest), Cameroon (300,000), and Nigeria (280,000). Seventy-five per cent of the world's cocoa production is concentrated in Africa. The rest is found in the Americas (19.2%, especially Brazil and Ecuador) and in Asia and Oceania (just under 6%, with Indonesia and Papua New Guinea 'in the lead'). Returning to Côte d'Ivoire, the

growth reported by Abdullahi is also reflected in data from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Agency (FAO). In 1961, the year following independence from French colonists, the country produced 85,000 tonnes of cocoa a year, while 15 years later this had already risen to 303,000, becoming a world leader for the first time. The growth continued until 2018 when the figure began to reach about 2.2 million [2]. The increase in production had a very high environmental cost, however, both in terms of deforestation and consequences for the soil. 'Today, even if we increase the amount of pesticides, little changes. The earth is now dead,' Abdullahi finishes. And pathogens also have much more serious effects in weakened soil and plants.





Among Pathogens, Deforestation, and Child Exploitation



‘The sprouts were increasingly swollen, the cocoa pod, containing the cocoa beans, getting blacker, the leaves stained white … at first we thought it was caused by the drought, but then it started to rain and the problem didn’t go away. In a few months, the disease spread, taking away the entire plantation.’ Ouattra Bakary points to his cacao plants that rise behind the tiny masonry houses topped by sheet-metal roofs. We are in a small village a few kilometres from the town of Méagui. Since the beginning of 2020, swollen shoot, a pathogen present in Ghana since 1940, has started to infect plantations all over the country. ‘All you can do is go into the forest. There the soil is still fertile and there are no diseases,’ Daouda whispers, while pointing to the dry stems of the plants with a machete. The district of Soubré where we are located is one of those most affected by the virus. According to some estimates, there has been an average reduction of between 5% and 10% in the 2.2 million tonnes of cocoa produced throughout Côte d’Ivoire in 2021–2022.

In 2020, Bakary and his family — 25 people in all — earned about €6,000 a year (four million CFA francs); today they earn just €4,000. ‘And not only that: three years ago, when the plants died, the authorities came to verify the effects of this infection in person and sent a report to the relevant authorities,’ he adds. ‘But since then we haven’t seen anyone.’ The land remained uncultivated for four years. This led to a double loss in income, because without a green light from the regulatory authorities, it

was not possible to replace the cacao plantation with other crops. ‘A few months ago, we decided to start planting corn, taking the responsibility,’ explains Doumbia Assata, the president of the Ecam cooperative of which Bakary is a member. The Coffee and Cocoa Council (CCC) has promised forms of support to affected producers, although without following up on the promises. ‘One tries to pretend that the problem doesn’t exist, because it’s convenient that way,’ Andrea Mecozzi explains. This problem has enormous social repercussions. While Bakary tells us how an invisible virus put an end to his cocoa production, his grandchildren run around in front of him. Assata tries to understand how many of them attend school this year, which has just begun. None of the five yet. The 15,000 CFA francs (€22) needed for enrolment weigh too much on a struggling family budget, not to mention costs for the canteen. ‘They are children at risk of exploitation. We will note them and monitor the situation,’ the president explains as we move away from the village.

The cooperative he heads has 15 delegates who monitor child labour in each section. On paper, it is the state system that should be responsible for following up on reported cases, but NGOs and international partners often invest more in dealing with these situations through direct support to cooperatives. For the 2022–2023 harvest, Ecam identified 200 cases of exploitation; in the previous harvest there were 400. The International Cocoa Initiative (ICI), funded by all major players such as Cargill, Ferrero, and Barry Callebaut, note in its 2022 report that out of a sample of almost 800,000 producers, 26% of the children interviewed in Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire were identified as victims of child labour. ‘There is a lot of hypocrisy in public discourse on this issue. It is one thing not to let children study to make them work,’ Assata adds. ‘But what is worse is trafficking minors for the sole purpose of exploiting them at work. But a son who helps his father on the plantation after the school day must be set within the rural contest where we find ourselves.’

The experience of Bakary’s family, however ‘small’ — their plantations contributed just five tonnes out of the 2.2 million total produced that year in Côte d’Ivoire — helps to understand unresolved issues in the unsustainable cocoa supply chain. It provides concrete testimony of what Michele Nardella of the ICCO emphasized: almost everything revolves around economic sustainability, which, if it fails, has serious consequences from a social and environmental point of view. As mentioned, the majority of the product that arrives in Europe is ‘conventional’, meaning that it was cultivated without any attention to either the environment or product quality. But several companies in Côte d’Ivoire are moving to organic production, and not just to adapt — as well as possible — to regulations dictated, for example, by the European Union. This shift is mainly because they realize that the crop is now unsustainable. Telling their stories helps to better illustrate distortions in the system.



From Plantation to Bar of Chocolate: Alternatives to Conventional Production

The producers in the Yosran cooperative, which has 152 members for a total income of 250–300 tonnes per year on about 418 hectares of land, guide us through one of the plantations of Sokrogbo, a small village in the north-eastern part of the country, in the Tiassalé Department. We are in the heart of Côte d'Ivoire, which was founded by the inhabitants of this area. Before harvest, the cocoa pod, of different colours depending on the variety of cacao, have already been selected. The harvest takes place about every two weeks, with close attention to how ripe the fruit is. In organic farming, the machete, a sort of iron hatchet, is used only to detach the fruit from the plant but not to split it, which is usually done with a stick. At this point, the seeds — similar to clusters of white grapes — are placed on banana leaves and the cocoa juice is collected, which 'drips' from the trellis on which the beans are placed. They will be left to rest for about six days and are turned every two days from above or below. It is the fermentation process that gives the cocoa beans their typical brown colour. This can take place in different ways.

'Every producer knows each plant and its times,' explains Bole Ndrikro, winner of the 2021 award for the best organic cocoa from the Ecam cooperative in Méagui. In his case, for example, fermentation takes place outside the plantation. The cocoa beans are left to rest for about six days in a sort of 'enclosure', always on some banana leaves, and are moved every three days with bare hands from bottom to top. Once ready — smell is one of the indicators used to understand when they should be moved — they are placed on 'beds', once again covered with straw obtained from the core of banana leaves, about one metre high. They are left uncovered during the day, while they are

closed and protected from humidity in the evening. The whole area must be warm. In fact, by placing your hand over the bed of cocoa beans, you can feel the heat rising up. ‘The method of collection and type of fermentation is essential, especially in organic farming, because it affects the quality,’ Ndrikro explains.



He accompanies us on his plantation, which covers 2.5 hectares, with about 1,300 plants per hectare. He uses a cultivation method defined as an ‘agroforestry system’. This means that tall and short plants are placed side by side in the same space. This helps restore a shaded surface that absorbs more carbon dioxide and promotes greater soil vitality. In fact, next to cacao, there are also oranges and mangoes on the Ndrikro plantation. And then there is the poultry, which is free to move around the plantation. ‘I decided to go organic because I saw so many diseases affecting the plants and also us. It was the fault of the chemicals. I made the transition first of all for myself and for my family.’ This is why they call him Bioman, because in 2016 he stopped the conventional production he had used since 1983. ‘The producers are ready to take the same path as me and they understand the advantages for everyone, but there is a lack of adequate marketing.’ He then explains that the costs are often borne by the producer. For example, clearing the undergrowth, which is necessary to implement organic farming, is entirely at their expense and is not recognized by any prize. ‘I earn about 900 francs per kilogram. It’s not enough: it’s me, my wife and four children,’ he explains. ‘The government sets prices but it’s hard for me to understand where the problem is.’ The organic area is marked by a yellow-black band. Between these plants and the conventional ones there must be a buffer zone to avoid contamination. Before one can enter the area, the hands are sanitized with water and ash. Ndrikro then shows us the ‘fourmi rouge’ (red ants), guardians of the cocoa pods that ‘point’ at any object that comes close to the fruit. ‘One of the serious effects of pesticides is the death of even these ants, and it’s very serious,’ the producer finishes.



Alternatives to Chemical Pesticides and Nurseries

Caring for the environment as our ‘common home’ can also be seen in the very advanced techniques for creating biological compost that we encounter at different companies. The Yosran cooperative, for example, has implemented a collective composting site. One producer has provided land with five ‘zones’ where fertilizer made of fresh and dead leaves, cocoa pods, and goat and poultry excrement is covered with black waterproof sheets. It is mixed cyclically to ensure that any insects potentially harmful to the cacao are killed by fermentation of the compost. The producers use it from time to time before the cacao is planted and during the production phase: in both liquid and solid state. ‘The goal is for each producer to have their own,’ explains the cooperative director, Estelle Konan, ‘but we are still in the experimentation phase. We are training people who will in turn teach this technique to other members of the cooperative.’ Means of collaboration are also created. Those who contribute by making their poultry excrement available are paid for this activity. Even the Sceb cooperative, founded in 2010 by Ethiquable, a French fair trade centre in the Tiassalé Department along the banks of the Bandama River, has encouraged the creation of very advanced techniques for composting and organic repellents over the years. This is a real biofactory that has been operating since 2016 and today offers highly advanced solutions for producers. ‘We study the plot and the plant, which is our patient,’ explains a member of the cooperative, ‘and we create an ad hoc recipe based on specific needs. The base is always made of mushrooms that come directly from the surface layer of the forest. Then, depending on the product we want to obtain, we add different “ingredients”.’ There is only one objective: ‘We call this product insect repellent, not insecticide, because it reduces them rather than killing them. Some are useful for the soil.’ The ‘theory’ then becomes practice on the plantation, which has been divided into six different zones, each of which is treated with a different dose of biocompost. ‘We

determine the best dosage and which can be used,' explains George Kufi, head of the cooperative's durability projects. Still on the plantation, Kufi explains that they have planted several stems of albizia, a tree between five and twelve metres tall, because it creates shade and by enriching the soil with nitrogen, it enables chilli pepper to be planted, which in turn protects the soil from the sun and interrupts photosynthesis in weeds, so there is no need to clean.



For this reason, one of the most important activities of the cooperatives is to encourage the creation and care of nurseries for producers with different objectives. These include replacing cacao plants that might be weak; expanding the perimeter of the plantation; promoting the growth of other plants in agroforestry as in the Sceb cooperative, or, as we saw at the nursery of the Yosran cooperative, promoting the 'restoration' of ancient cacao species that have now been lost. Whatever the objective, these activities are also extremely important for promoting 'agroecological' systems aimed at the economic sustainability of the community. Both cacao, for example, and crops that produce food necessary for livelihood are cultivated on the same plot of land. The Ecam cooperative, for example, gives away plants grown in the large nursery next to the headquarters, precisely to help producers promote these sorts of systems.



Certifications and the Role of the European Union

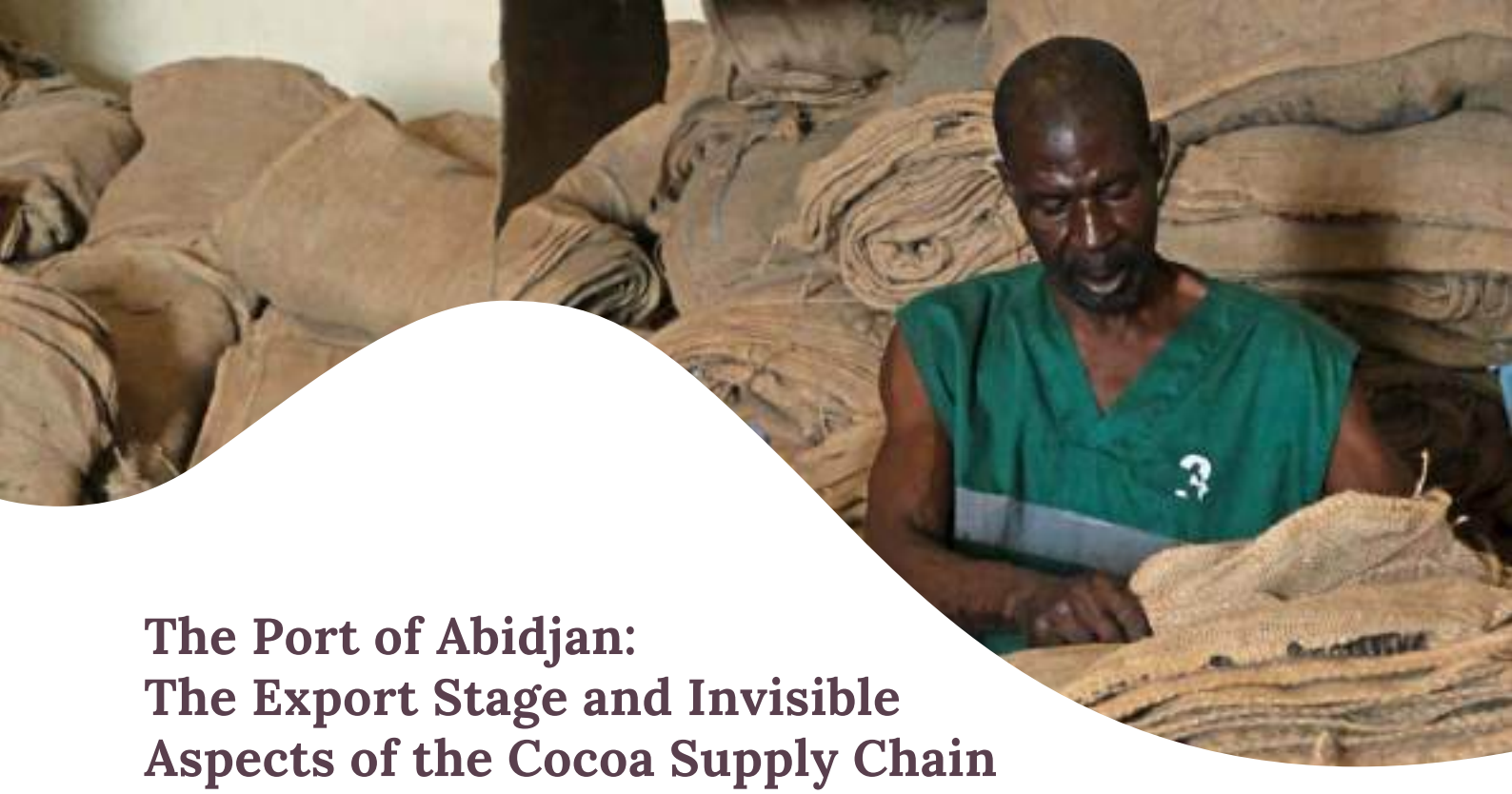
Unfortunately, the positive aspects presented here so far do not lead to adequate ‘rewards’ for producers, despite the extra work that organic crops require in terms of both labour and skills. The different ways of growing cacao are valued — but only on paper — through a complex certification mechanism that guarantees ‘prizes’ for producers depending on the way in which they grow cacao. These are private entities. According to cooperative reports, the reward for certifications (which do not check the product but rather the procedures followed in the production of cocoa beans), such as Fair Trade or Rainforest Alliance, is around 160 CFA francs per kilogram, but only about 80–120 CFA francs reach the producer. Fairtrade Italia, one of Ecam’s international certifications, has let Altreconomia know that ‘this sum’ (i.e. the amount of the prize) should be paid to cooperatives to create collective benefit and not to individual farmers. ‘In some cases, and only in limited percentages, can the money reach members of the cooperative directly in the form of cash. Overall, the Fairtrade Prize amounted to €34.6 million in 2021.’

For organic products, however, which instead require actual tests on the final product to assess quality, 400 francs per kilogram are awarded to the cooperative. These amounts are negligible even compared to the costs of the ‘stickers’ issued by Ecocert, the organic certification body authorized by the EU. The Sceb cooperative spent four million francs on the 2022–2023 harvest (twice as much as the previous one) to have its cocoa certified as organic. Another five million francs will be used to implement a tracking system. In fact, new European legislation requires that starting in 2024, producers must prove that the cocoa beans were collected in a territory that has not been deforested since December 2020. ‘Overall, these costs account for 15% of sales. It’s unsustainable,’ says Sceb CEO Mark Amon Tanouh.

Certifications cost a lot, though, and each importer can request different ones, even if the demands placed on producers are the same. Very stringent European legislation has meant that the Coffee and Cocoa Council, the regulatory body we talked about earlier that sets the 'price' for each part of the supply chain, has established a system for tracing cocoa. This is aimed at really knowing where cacao beans come from, in view of the definitive approval of the text of the new Due Diligence Directive (under negotiation upon publication of this report), which would include a ban on marketing for products that do not meet certain sustainability standards.



The CCC is conducting a census to distribute personal 'producer cards', each with an IBAN for receiving payments, to facilitate tracking from plantations to export ports. Etienne Konan Kouakou, from the Sceb cooperative, showed us his. 'The idea is to flush out producers and cooperatives that "resell" cocoa on informal channels, sidestepping the tracking. But there are big problems,' he explains, 'because the areas of competence of different Council offices do not always coincide with regional administrative areas. Some of our members cannot continue to be part of the cooperative.' At the end of September 2023, the CCC declared that it was well under way distributing the cards, but observations in the field depict a very different reality.



The Port of Abidjan: The Export Stage and Invisible Aspects of the Cocoa Supply Chain

The last step before arriving in Europe is passage through the ports. The Port of Abidjan is almost 15 kilometres long, stretching along the lagoon. It is the largest in Côte d'Ivoire but not the main one for the volume of cocoa that passes through it. This record is held by the port of San-Pédro, further west, towards the border with Liberia. For years it was the hub for wood, then coffee, and finally cocoa, for about forty years now. Some large Western companies, however, such as Olam and Cargill, prefer to keep the logistics hub in the country's economic capital, especially because the roads to reach it are in better condition. In this immense port, we meet Thomas De la Serna, general manager of Ocean Sa, an export company that manages about 15,000 tonnes of cocoa for each harvest. At least 11,000 tonnes are exported to Europe, while another 4,000 are sold locally. 'Our goal is to make sure we have the product so that it arrives in European ports on time,' De La Serna explains. 'It's a big challenge. Many farmers often live in remote areas of the country and transport their cocoa to the place where buyers can purchase it. Considering that there is a lack of adequate infrastructure, especially roads, this is always very complex.' Ocean is responsible for helping cooperatives precisely to ensure that every piece fits into a mosaic consisting of times dictated by companies in Europe waiting for cocoa beans. 'We are in constant contact with cooperatives to help them comply with the production standards required by certifications and also to carry out all the bureaucratic requirements necessary to obtain them,' explains Jean Louis Tanoh, the company's head of certification, planning and procurement. He accompanies us to the room in front of the warehouse, which can hold up to 6,000 tonnes of cocoa, where Hamadou is stamping the bags one by one before they are filled. 'We need clear indications on the contents they carry and their weight. The batch number on each bag acts like an identity card,' De la Serna continues. This is essential information, given the new rules related to the product marketing. 'Each producer also has a GPS system that

shows where the plantation is, and production can be monitored from one year to the next, along with how much product was given to the cooperative. This enables cross-checks to understand whether part of the cocoa has been smuggled, for example, sold to others, and so on.' The product is analysed when the lorry is unloaded and then a few days later, just before export, to assess the quality of the cocoa. In this case, the cocoa is examined by two different technicians: one from the selling company and the other from the Coffee and Cocoa Council. After this check, the cocoa is 'cleaned' in a large machine and then placed in stamped bags. Organic cocoa, however, follows a different process and is obviously not processed with machinery, in order to avoid contamination. For this same reason, the bags are stored in a separate environment.

As we saw, the cacao is first fermented after harvest and then dried for a total of about three weeks. Then it is sold to the cooperative, which must reach the amount needed to fill a 25- or 40-tonne lorry. About another three weeks pass before the lorry can leave for Abidjan. From here, the cocoa beans are loaded onto a container within 15 days before arriving at European ports in about two weeks. For this procedure, it is mainly port workers hired by port logistics companies that load and unload the bags. 'They are an invisible part of the cocoa supply chain,' De la Serna observes. 'Because if we talk about the conditions of the producers even a little, they are entirely forgotten, despite the fact that this is one of the hardest jobs in the supply chain.' They earn about 20 cents for each bag they carry, which weighs more or less 65 kilos. 'They are often foreign workers, especially from Burkina Faso, and there are also many minors with false documents attesting to their adult age,' De la Serna adds. Last year, after a series of protests at the two main Ivorian ports, the workers obtained a small pay rise. 'But it's not enough. The problem is that the Coffee and Cocoa Council sets the price for each "segment", from producer to export. If I wanted to give him a reward, I would have to take the money from my profit margin, and I wouldn't be able to recover it from European buyers,' De la Serna concludes. 'At the same time, I can't even hire them internally, because these are seasonal jobs. So they continue to work under shameful conditions.'





Decent Work: People Trying to Turn Things Around

In Ayamé, in western Côte d'Ivoire, a few tens of kilometres from the border with Ghana, the Magni Foundation, managed by Franco, a well-known entrepreneur from Pavia, first created a local association in 2010 and then broadened the activity and founded an agricultural company in 2018. The purpose of these activities is twofold: to guarantee a decent price for inhabitants in the town and support the activities of an orphanage created to welcome children with HIV who have been abandoned by their families. Today, the facility, which is managed by Emilie, the Italian nurse who started the project, houses 58 children, 20 of whom are under a year old. As many as 31 employees follow the children's activities.

'Everyone says that Côte d'Ivoire has become "great" thanks to cocoa, but few emphasize the fact that the workforce that allowed this growth was all foreign,' explains the general director of the agricultural company, Moussa Bannaba. Originally from Burkina Faso, he tells us about the dynamics of a very complex region, one of the poorest in the entire country, 30% of whose residents are from neighbouring countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea. 'Those who cultivate the land here often have very little knowledge of the crop, leading to very low yields in the long term. Because maybe the plants die,' he explains. So Agrimagni is trying to reverse the course: 25 workers have been hired through regular contracts, 81 to date. Eighty-five per cent of the people are from Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea. 'Not only do we guarantee adequate employment contracts, we also provide decent housing. This is essential for making people's lives more stable,' Bannaba adds.

And this also helps with respect to crop improvement. Just over ten hectares of cocoa were about to be abandoned in favour of rubber, but the meeting with the Choco+ cooperative, a company in Grand Bassam that transforms cocoa mass on site, turned the tide. ‘The idea of organic farming — so proceeding with a transition in our plantations — has pushed us to maintain a crop that many in the area are abandoning today because it no longer yields the product. The land is dead and they cannot live without income during the transition from conventional crops,’ continues the general director of Agrimagni. ‘And this is why it is possible in a context like ours that guarantees a stable salary.’ The company already aims to process cocoa beans on site to send a semi-finished product on to Choco+. And thus also improve the sustainability of the orphanage and social interventions in the town of Ayamé.





Choco+, Small Steps for Transforming Cacao in Côte d'Ivoire

'Until we can transform our raw materials into semi-finished or finished products, we are wasting time describing the deterioration of trading conditions.' There are those who have seriously adopted this famous phrase by the first President of Côte d'Ivoire, Felix Houphouet Boigny, who died on 7 December 1993. Centre Abel, managed by Fondazione Gruppo Abele in Turin, is located in Grand Bassam, the former French capital a few tens of kilometres from Abidjan and a symbol of colonization. Inside, a large 'Choco+' sign posted on the front door welcomes workers into one of the rare local companies that transform cocoa beans into finished products on site. The chocolate croissants sold in city cafés come mainly from France. The same goes for bars of chocolate, which are sold at unattainable prices. It is a useless round trip of thousands of kilometres. 'It's absurd,' Andrea Mecozzi says. The idea of a chocolate production workshop arose in 2012 when six students (three boys and three girls) were financed for a one-year training course that included two two-week periods in Modica, Sicily, for a specific focus on cocoa-related production, marketing, promotion, packaging, and tourism. Upon returning to Grand Bassam, their period of in-depth study in entrepreneurship ended. In 2018, however, thanks to support from the Waldensians and Ases, the necessary machinery was purchased for production, going beyond the 'artisan' stage that had characterized production up to then. This is how Choco+ was born, a benefit company owned by the Gruppo Abele of Turin. The company currently employs 12 workers, plus others at piece rate for commercial relations. Three of the employees come directly from the Carrefour Jeunesse mother-child home, having lived in conditions of serious marginality.

Inside the workshop, the first processing phase takes place in a room at the entrance. Here, only a few cocoa beans are selected, while the smaller or defective ones are discarded. They are then set on perforated trays and placed in a ventilated oven. Once roasted, some are peeled and the skin is also used to make tea. At that point, the whole cocoa beans are pre-refined. Other beans are not peeled by hand, but rather processed in a film shredder that mechanically separates the kernel and skin. The plant processes 30–40 kilos of cocoa beans per cycle, and 25% of the initial product (whole seed) is lost. The kernel is passed through a pre-refiner: two discs grind the kernels to produce the raw cocoa mass. At this point, the cocoa mass enters a stone refiner where sugar is added, It is then melted in a water bath, tempered, and, depending on the desired finished product, it is placed either in moulds or mixed with baobab to make a typical drink, produced only by Choco+.

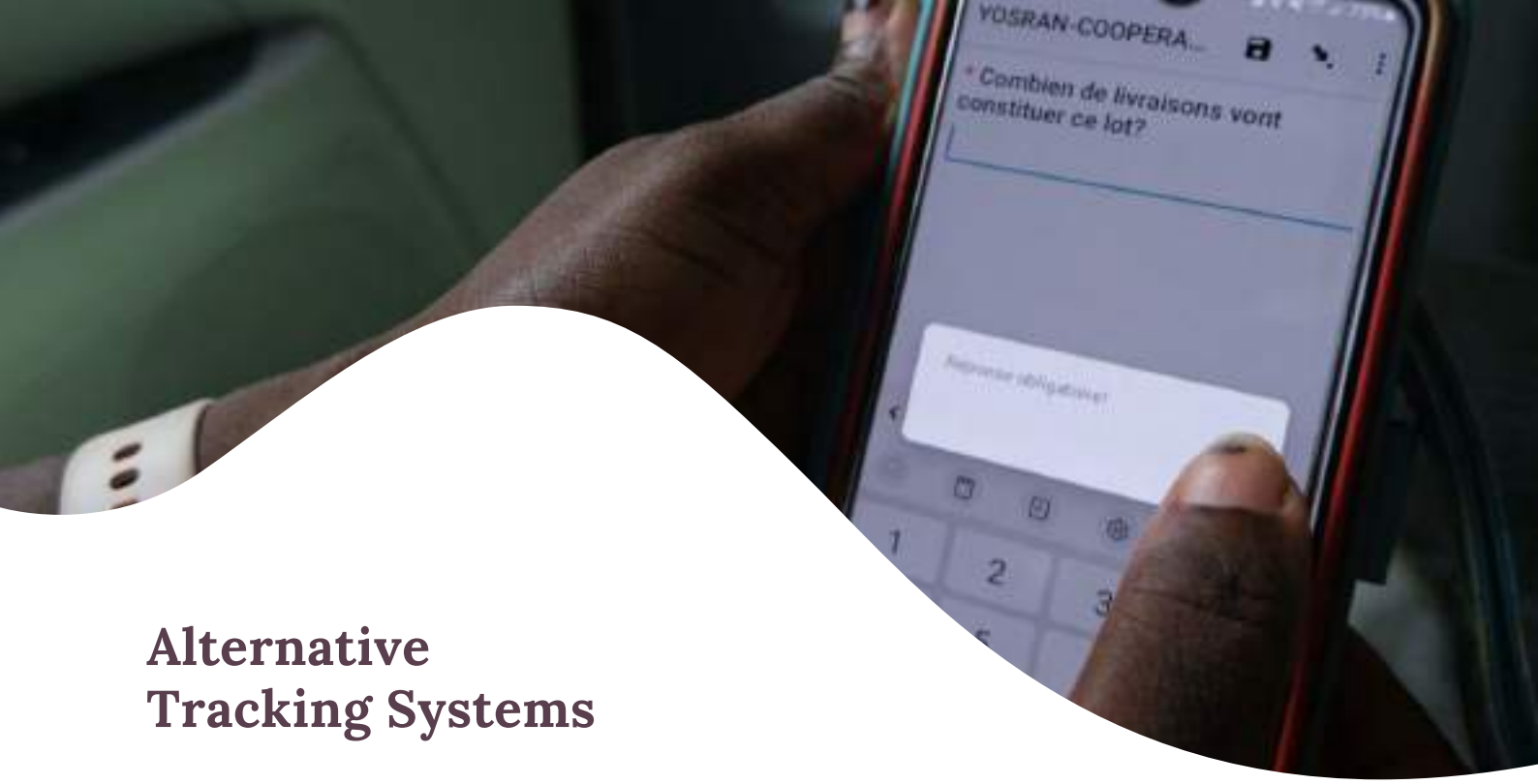
The cooperative's local retail point is located in the city centre at Carrefour Jeunesse, a public space managed by Gruppo Abele where various leisure and training activities for citizens are held. Welcoming us is Kone Aichatou, a young worker who has been involved in cocoa production for about a year. She shows us the same process as seen at the workshop in Grand Bassam, which does not cover all of the production, followed by the flavouring technique (orange and nutmeg). 'If the cocoa has already been refined, it is melted again and tempered. Then, depending on the "line" of production — bars, drinks, chocolates, chocolate cream — we continue in different ways,' Kone explains. 'Once ready, the finished product is then packaged by hand.' In recent years, a cosmetics line has also been developed, from cocoa butter, which can be used in various hair oil products, to soap. 'The goal is also to produce herbal teas with artemisia and lemongrass,' Aichatou adds. And not only that. Another cooperative project focuses on raising awareness from village to village in processing



cocoa mass as a high-energy food with good nutritional properties. ‘In rural areas, every person needs to know how to process chocolate. This is necessary. And also right. We need to increase the culture of raw materials,’ Mecozzi explains.

Choco+ produces about 2,000 kilograms of processed chocolate per year and pays €2 per kilo for the cocoa that comes from Agrimagni and Yosran, the cooperatives we talked about earlier. The price is clearly higher than average, which is about €1.60. And not only that. Choco+ workers earn 40% more than the guaranteed minimum wage in the country, which is 60,000 francs a month. This is a rarity, but even so, life is very difficult for the workers. ‘I earn 100,000 francs a month,’ says Roland, one of the employees, with a calculator open on a phone in his hand, ‘but unfortunately it’s still too little. Take 30,000 for rent, 10,000 for electricity and water, 12,000 for transport to get to work. The cost for weekly shopping, for three meals a day, is 15,000.’ The balance on the calculator is already negative. ‘Sometimes we try to save money on food,’ he says. ‘Young people leave here because they struggle to live. And it’s the fault of politics. Even with a decent, above-average salary, the cost of living is unattainable,’ he says.





Alternative Tracking Systems

A QR code printed on the package of the Choco+ chocolate bar brings up all the information about the product on a smartphone: where the cocoa beans come from, how long the fermentation process lasted, when they were taken to warehouses, when processing began. This system has a peculiar feature: the information is in the hands of the producers, the 'local people'. And these tracking methods have obviously also been implemented by the cooperatives that supply cocoa beans to the workshop. Yosran, in the north-east, uses a specific interface through which producers can upload information on the plantation, the number of cocoa pods, and all the necessary information. Agrimagni, in turn, has implemented an information recording system. 'The certification bodies are working against these systems, because everything would be controlled online and their role would be lost,' says an important executive with a cooperative in the country. This is true not only of certification bodies, but also large groups. Nestlé and Cargill have their own tracking systems, but in that case, the data is up to them; they decide if and when to release the information. In these cases, however, the ownership of the information is shared: by the cooperative, by the exporter, and perhaps even by the company that processes the raw material.



The Women of Cacao: Three Stories of Redemption. And Consumer Responsibility

‘The school saved me.’ Assata Doumbia has no doubts. Today, as the head of a cooperative with a turnover of $1 million, she recognizes the importance of access to education that is often denied to her daughters, seeming to prescribe the ‘path’ of home life at the outset. Assata has fought against such prescriptions all her life. ‘I resisted pressure from my family, who wanted me to marry when I was still very young. I resisted the envy of many and the disgruntled faces of men who did not agree that they should have to listen to me. A woman, even if she is the owner of a plantation, has no right to go and collect the money, the profits.’ So, from village to village, her eye is always very attentive to education, especially for girls. A few dozen kilometres away, Estelle Konan, CEO of Yosran, is an entrepreneur and courageous mother. Here, in the country, this is not expected. And in front of the producers, members of the cooperative who recognize her as a guide today, she traces the path of the future: ‘We cultivate organically not only because it respects natural methods, but also because it respects the land we live on. We want to leave things as and where we found them, in their natural habitat. And we’re here to make sure that happens.’ Abiba, the backbone of the Choco+ workshop, was working as a maid in 2018 for 30,000 francs a month, which was not enough to take care of her son, who is now nine years old. She did it because she had to. ‘Then I was hired at the workshop. Here, I finally learned a trade, and the first time I received my salary I started to cry. It’s still not enough — 95,000 francs — but it’s a sigh of relief for me and my son. I have also started my own small business to sell some products.’ In addition to working at the workshop, Abiba goes to the villages every week near Grand Bassam, where she lives, to teach women how to cook cacao beans. ‘I teach them why it’s important to consume this food as well. And one day, I dream of being able to produce chocolate bars that don’t cost a lot, at most 100 francs. So that

all the children can taste the cacao that changed my life.' These are not just three stories of courageous women capable of challenging local traditions, questioning the powerful role of their husbands, companions, and the men in their villages. They are opening the doors of justice in a supply chain — cocoa — that is unable to differentiate, to reward what is 'good', to give the right space to or recognize their great achievements. And the achievements of many like them, who continue on a path traced through an environment viewed as a common home to be cared for professionally and carefully. Chocolate with the right flavour is not only 'possible'. 'There are solid companies that are working in this direction,' Mecozzi concludes. 'It is therefore up to today's European consumers to stop being content and make the same choice that many producers have made for themselves, their children, and the environment.'



