



Cocoa-nomics

Who benefits? Who pays?

Today, about 14 million people in over 30 developing countries depend on cocoa production for their livelihoods. Cocoa is a psychoactive plant that grew wild in the Gulf Coast of Mexico thousands of years ago. The Olmec, Aztecs, Mayans and others who lived there learned how to cultivate the plant. Like other psychoactive plants (e.g., tobacco or coca) cocoa played a key role in traditional spiritual practices, medicine and commerce. Cocoa seeds were even used as coins. Cocoa was first brought to Europe by the Spanish in the 16th Century. European demand for cocoa led the Spanish to plant cocoa in their colonies. Soon, the French, English, Dutch and other colonial powers were following suit.

Today the cocoa market involves a triangle of interested parties. Producers want high prices. Chocolate makers and consumers want low prices. Investors and traders don't care so long as the price is always changing. The traders seem to win because cocoa prices are relatively volatile compared to commodities like corn or wheat. This is because a lot of the world's production of cocoa is concentrated in a small part of the world so that local forces, such as the outbreak of Ebola, extreme weather patterns or political instability, can have a global impact on prices.

Particularly in West Africa, where over 70% of the cocoa comes from, the pressure to keep production costs low has led to the widespread use of child labour and even to child slavery described in the excerpts below from [Child Labor and Slavery in the Chocolate Industry](#)

The children of Western Africa are surrounded by intense poverty, and most begin working at a young age to help support their families. Some children end up on the cocoa farms because they need work and



A child's workday typically begins at six in the morning and ends in the evening. Some of the children use chainsaws to clear the forests. Other children climb the cocoa trees to cut bean pods using a machete. ... Once they cut the bean pods from the trees, the children pack the pods into sacks that weigh more than 100 pounds when full and drag them through the forest. Aly Diabate, a former cocoa slave, said, "Some of the bags were taller than me. It took two people to put the bag on my head. And when you didn't hurry, you were beaten." ...

In addition to the hazards of using machetes, children are also exposed to agricultural chemicals ... without wearing protective clothing. ... The farm owners using child labor usually provide the children with the cheapest food available, such as corn paste and bananas. In some cases, the children sleep on wooden planks in small windowless buildings with no access to clean water or sanitary bathrooms. ... Without an education, the children of the cocoa farms have little hope of ever breaking the cycle of poverty.

To date, relatively little progress has been made to reduce or eliminate child labor and slavery in the cocoa industry of Western Africa. ... Approximately 1.8 million children in the Ivory Coast and Ghana may be exposed to the worst forms of child labor on cocoa farms.

Recently, investigators have discovered children trafficked into Western African cocoa farms and coerced to work without pay. ... Cases often involve acts of physical violence, such as being whipped for working slowly or trying to escape. Reporters have also documented cases where children and adults were locked in at night to prevent them from escaping. ... Drissa, a recently freed slave who had never even tasted chocolate, ... [w]hen asked what he would tell people who eat chocolate made from slave labor, he replied ... "When people eat chocolate, they are eating my flesh."

