BEHIND BARS:

INVISIBLE FARMERS AND WORKERS IN THE COCOA SUPPLY CHAIN

POLICY BRIEF

The majority of people who contribute to the cultivation of cocoa are currently not recognized by the cocoa sector, and do not benefit (automatically) from access to services and sustainability programs. In particular, the sector, including research, tends to prioritize outreach and data collection for registered farmers (i.e. with a passbook or member of a cooperative), which contain relatively older male land owners. There has been a blind spot for contributions of other household members (female spouses and adult children) and tenants (sharecroppers and caretakers), and for farmers that are not part of companies' direct supply chain.[1]

Consequently, the cocoa sector knows too little about the majority of people involved in cocoa production, from establishing and managing farms to providing labor.In this policy brief, we argue that companies, researchers, NGOs and policymakers must take measures to close this knowledge gap, and to prevent deepening inequalities in the cocoa value chain.

The brief is structured as a list of interlinked recommendations for the sector.

Raise awareness of the existence of large invisible groups in the cocoa supply chain

What is not measured is not managed. Datasets collected to support companies in their sustainability and procurement strategies usually only include data from registered farmers within their direct supply chain. Usually, only these registered farmers participate in interviews and focus group discussions, which are either farm owners or the ones selling cocoa. Without deliberate effort, this means that other contributors remain invisible and will not be targeted with outreach activities, which reinforces existing inequalities.

This unawareness starts with the commonly used definitions of cocoa farmers, which tend to be narrow and rather exclusive.

Use a more inclusive definition of farmers and workers as the standard in policy, outreach and research

Everyone who cultivates cocoa should be recognized as a farmer by the cocoa sector, irrespective of gender or landholding status.[2] This inclusive definition has not yet become the standard, with the result that little has been documented about the invisible groups of farmers and the conditions under which they contribute to cocoa production.

Recent segmentation studies shed some more light on cocoa farming populations that are usually underrepresented, such as female-headed households, youth and tenants.[3] Available data indicates that underrepresented groups have unique characteristics and do not automatically benefit from standardized programs.

Make deliberate efforts to reach invisible groups

Current data collection efforts and sustainability programs have had limited outreach. As a result, there has been a bias toward farmers in the direct supply chain, with a particular focus on registered

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[1] Indirect supply refers to cocoa being sourced from intermediaries and do not know their identity, farm location(s) and volumes produced). In 2022, it was estimated that between 40% and 75% of the supply of cocoa to the key supply chain companies was supplied as indirect (Laven and Ataa-Asantewaa, 2024).

[2] Cocoa for Generations - 2022 Annual Report_0.pdf

[3] For example, Demystifying the cocoa sector in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire by KIT (2018), KIT segmentation study for Nestlé (2022), Cocoa Household Income Study, developed by KIT and WUR, initiated by World Cocoa Foundation (2024).

farmers (typically older male landowners and household heads). This deepens existing inequalities within households and communities and hinders innovation. This is problematic as it limits the effectiveness of programs and services.

Develop dedicated programs and approaches that respond to the unique features of invisible farmers

Not everyone benefits from standardized programs. Available data suggests that invisible and underrepresented farmers are more likely to be subject to human rights violations and more likely to live in extreme poverty. On the other hand, invisible groups, such as migrant tenants, comprise motivated youth interested in a future career in cocoa. Their unique characteristics require deliberate efforts and targeted programs to ensure that these farmers can reach their full potential and are not left behind.

The details and risks of informal land tenure arrangements need to be better understood and mechanisms need to be developed that protect tenants and their families from being exploited

A lot of the information on the workforce in cocoa is hidden, particularly because land and labour arrangements tend to be informal and not everyone is registered as a farmer. This makes it difficult to make accurate living income calculations and to assess and address potential human rights violations in cocoa, and exploitation in informal negotiations.

Companies should map and formally include the invisible parts of their supply chains in their efforts to comply with the EU Corporate Due Diligence Directive and EU Deforestation Regulation to avoid the exclusion of invisible farmers from accessing global markets.

Mitigating adverse human rights and environmental impacts in companies' supply chains does not stop at the level of registered farmers. Companies will need to capture their impact on invisible farmers that are part of their direct and indirect supply chains. This involves identifying who is part of the supply chain, assessing how the legislation might affect these farmers, and finding ways to mitigate the unintended adverse consequences of the legislation.

The existing gaps in registration, formal documentation and access to digital services should be recognized and addressed

Increasingly digital payment, savings and services are part of company programs and traceability efforts. To prevent bias towards registered farmers from deepening, it will be important to recognize existing gaps in mobile ownership and the lack of formal documentation or farmer identity cards among many invisible farmers. Without doing so, standardized programs, traceability efforts and digitalization might deepen existing inequalities and push farmers further into informality.

Companies should develop responsive sustainability programs and procurement practices that reflect the diversity among farmers and their different interests

While many farmers are invisible to companies, often companies (particularly brands) are invisible to farmers. A more direct (and long-term) trading relationship and better communication allow for a more mutually beneficial economic exchange and better-tailored farmer support.

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