Commentary

A road map for a sustainable cocoa development in Togo, West Africa

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Abstract: Cacao production is one of the most important agro-forestry practice in West Africa. In Togo, cacao production is concentrated in the hilly area in the south-west of the country, close to the political border with Ghana. In this commentary paper, I summarize some of the main issues faced by cacao production in Togo, highlighting its connections with poverty alleviation and ecosystem management and conservation practices. A road map of future needs is also presented and discussed.

Keywords: West Africa, Togo, value chain, cacao production, poverty alleviation, sustainable development, ecology and conservation

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BACKGROUND

Cacao is one of the main agro-forestry economical commodities in rainforest ecosystems of Western Africa (Figure 1). Cocoa plantations are widespread in the Gulf of Guinea region, with considerable relevance for the economy of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire (the first exporter of cocoa in the world), Ghana and Togo (much less in Nigeria, where petrochemical industry and palm oil industry dominate the exportations).

Figure 1: Cacao pots in Kpalimé, Togo and location of the main cocoa area in Togo.

Talking about cacao production in West Africa would need an holistic approach, where ecosystem, conservation, economic, and social and health issues should be examined in depth as they are all interconnected. From the economical point of view, the main concern of actors in the cocoa value chain is the decreasing productivity, especially due to the high incidence of black pod disease. Although chemical control of black pod might be possible, the chemicals may be washed off in the rains and use of these chemicals will destroy any possibility of cocoa being marketed as organic cocoa. These would involve shade reduction, regular harvesting, and recurrent weed control. In addition, a good system for minimizing the black pod disease occurrence and spreading in plantations is improving air circulation within the canopy. Importantly for the local dynamics of the trade, there are hybrid cocoa varieties that are widely used in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, and an effort, especially in the latter country, to produce experimental seed gardens within a *full sun* production practice.

Another short-term priority area for action is quality improvement. It is just obvious from well known rules of the international market that there will be very little, if any, incentive to pay a better price unless an improvement in quality on the scale of a commercial consignment can be demonstrated. This improvement of cocoa quality is not easy to get in West Africa (with the sole exception of the Ivorian production) because the production of cocoa is currently atomized across numerous small-holders. Therefore, the available options are either to work through farm groups such as the co-operatives (an approach that has been widely used in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire but with divergent results achieved) or to invest in small-scale fermentations, localized in areas of production, where pods could be delivered and output consolidated at the earliest stage.

I advocate that, especially in areas like south-western Togo where cocoa production is made by relatively small groups of people, it is necessary to organize appropriate workshops and learning courses, as well as

shared experiences among farmers, in order to advice extension staff of Government and NGOs on post-harvest cocoa processing and to eventually equip governmental staff appropriately to bring processing knowledge to farmers.

I advocate that a plan must be developed in order to make a road map and to strengthen the export inspection process while providing adequate certification of sanitary and phyto-sanitary conditions. Of course, also potential systems of certification options should be explored. Consideration should be given to the possibility of graduate cocoa production in order to introduce price incentives for quality improvement, after consultation and agreement among traders and exporters. In this context, it is mandatory to make all possible efforts to raise the produced cacao quantity and value-added productivity in agriculture that is critical to poverty reduction. It is addressed on the increase of agricultural productivity, in particular among the rural poor smallholders that are the basic group working on cacao in Togo. These people certainly constitute one of the poorest segment of the rural Togolese society, and so their support (mediated through a variety of measures and actions along the entire agricultural value chain, from pre-planting to marketing) may promote diversified commercial agriculture through the private sector.

The improvement of cocoa quality represents the most important driver of house-holding income, and obviously rehabilitation of existing plantations and replanting activities will increase yields per hectare. Local farmers can then sell higher quantities of produce and thus increase their household incomes.

Agricultural exports offer the most important potential for a major increase in incomes in rural areas in Togo. Drying techniques need to be somewhat improved either through farm groups or through investment in small-scale fermentaries. A pricing system which offers an incentive for farmers to supply better quality cocoa would also help.

For all the above mentioned stuff, and even if provision of funds may encourage a start-up, chronic lack of financing remains a major issue in Togo, where most of the public investments are on tourism and on the port of Lomé development. This is especially true because of the long gestation period involved in planting cocoa trees (maturity reached after the fourth year of life). Indeed, many farmers do not have assets that are acceptable as collateral to the financial sector.

Figure 2. A cocoa plantation in south-western Togo

STATISTICS AND DATA

The Togolese production of cocoa during 2009-10 rose to 3,500 tons. Cocoa production in Togo increased 43%, reaching 5,000 metric tons, during the 2010-11 harvest. This substantial increasing in production was obtained after the government cut the price of fertilizer to increase use. The Togolese government reduced the fertilizer price for a 50 kilogram bag by 9% (to 10,000 CFA francs, $19.62) and made 1,000 tons available to farmers during 2010-2011.

From the ecological point of view, however, it should be noticed that no assessment of the effects of the blooming in the use of fertilizers and pesticides has ever been done. Thus, it is well possible that cocoa production blooming may be correlated with a devastation of the forest ecosystem.

Thus, I would like to urge, as a necessary step for further research on cacao production, to explore more in detail the potential negative effects that this type of industry may have on the forest ecosystems and biodiversity. For instance, in Cote d'Ivoire, reclamation of new lands for cocoa plantations, is threatening even protected areas, given that novel plantations have been continuously made within the borders of national parks and nature reserves. This is clearly evident in Tai National Park, in the south-western side of the country.

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