



Child Slavery on Cocoa Plantations

The Uplifting Africa Program

4/15/2021



Children working on the Cocoa Plantations in West Africa, Photo Credit: Raconteur

Windila Balbone
The Uplifting Africa Program

<https://www.upliftingafrica.org>

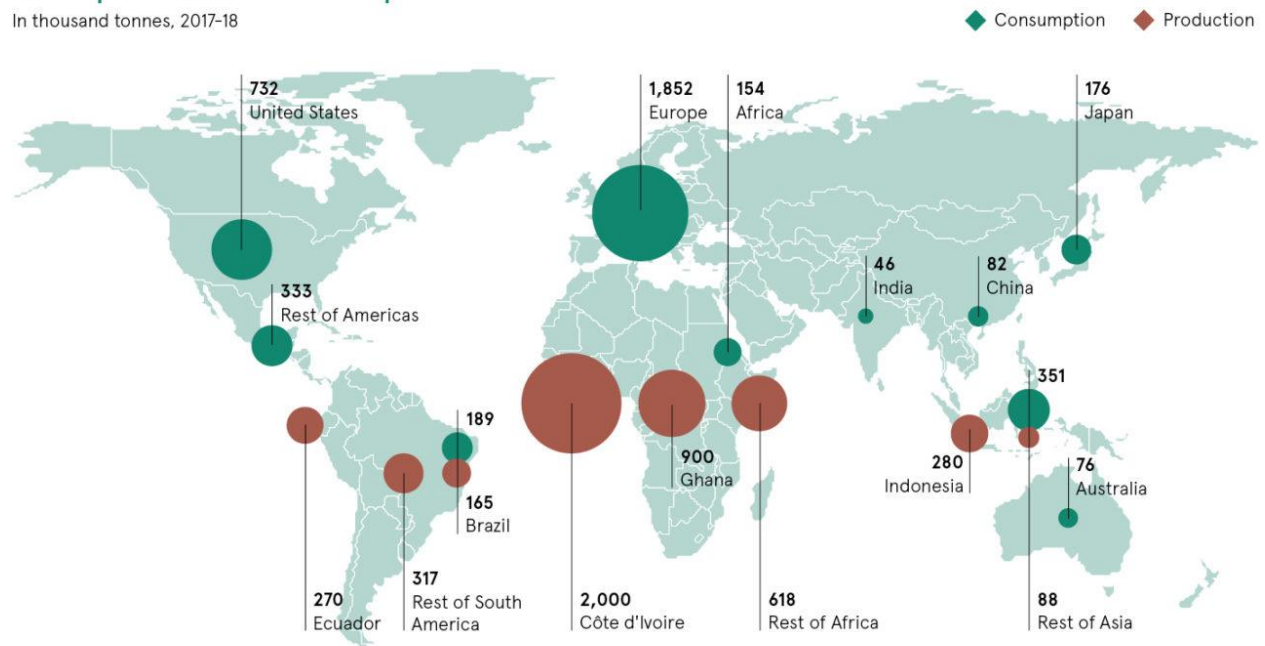
The Eurasia Center

Child Slavery on Cocoa Plantations

Did you ever wonder how your favorite chocolate brand makes its chocolate? Did you ever question where or who is in charge of producing all the cocoa so you can have your favorite gourmet chocolate?

Cocoa production and consumption

In thousand tonnes, 2017-18



International Cocoa Organization/Fountain, A.C. and Hütz-Adams, F. (2018) *Cocoa Barometer 2018*

Not many of us look to understand where and who are the workers in charge of cultivating cocoa for chocolate or other products. If I tell you that children, often victims of child trafficking and labor, are working under difficult conditions on cocoa plantations so we can afford chocolate, would you believe it? Yet the reality is that the chocolate and cocoa industries fail to be transparent and accountable for the treatment received by child workers in cocoa-producing countries. Many actors from the farmers, the European and American chocolate manufacturers, and even the consumers are all implicated in this dilemma. If we take the specific

case of the top cocoa producer in the world, Ivory Coast, observations have been made about the conditions of workers in these plantations. Cocoa is a commodity crop where more than 60% of the Ivorian population's revenue comes from, exporting or producing cocoa. With the chocolate industry growing so fast over the years in the economic system we live in, the demand for cheap cocoa has increased as well. Cocoa farmers earn less than \$2 per day, an income below the poverty line. As a consequence, they often resort to the use of child labor from neighboring countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and even Ivorian kids sometimes to keep their prices competitive. Those kids, who lived also under the poverty line in their native countries, are sometimes sold by parents for meager prices or sometimes run away from home in the hope to find a job in Ivorian plantations. This situation is remarkably similar to the industrialized era or with the clothing industry in third-world countries such as Bangladesh and Indonesia where high demands are needed and workers obtain extremely low wages in addition to poor working conditions. The difference, in this case, is that the workers are children sold by parents who unfortunately have to give up their education to work in cocoa plantations.

The history of child slavery and trafficking in the chocolate industry is nothing new. A UNICEF study reports that 200,000 children are trafficked yearly in West and Central Africa. Trafficking occurs across many countries including Cameroon, Nigeria, and Ghana. Some countries are mere transit points, while others are either the suppliers or receivers of the children (Salah, p. 3). According to Save the Children Canada, the Cocoa farmers in Ivory Coast are violating children's rights in two ways: they are involved in trafficking the children and are also the site of forced labor (Save the Children Canada). In addition to the very illegality of trafficking and hiring children workers, the implicated cocoa farmers subject the children to inhuman living conditions. Besides overworking them, the farmers do not pay the children or

feed them properly. The denigration also includes locking the children up at night to prevent escape.



Child laboring in cocoa field in West Africa

Some of the main reasons for this Ivorian child slavery racket stems from poverty, continuing dependence on the cocoa trade, and even culture. There is a cultural variable associated with the situation as well. The children of Ivorian farmers also help cultivate cocoa beans, so some farmers do not see why it is wrong to use the labor of other children (Raghavan, "Rescued"). Child labor in Africa is also quite common and not always looked upon as negative. The percentage of children between 5-14 years old in the workforce hovers between 40-50% (Grootaert, p. 22). Men have multiple wives and many children, so the kids start working at an early age to help their families. An education is expensive for many of them, so that the only alternative left is to work. The pattern that we can observe from the supplying country and

receiving country in terms of child labor is that most supplying countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Togo are some of the poorest countries in Africa while Ivory Coast has a higher GDP and a higher dependency for labor, therefore, making it the receiving country. With so few opportunities in their own countries, people often travel elsewhere in search of jobs. If people can secure work, then they could send money back home to help their families for daily needs. Therefore, families allow their children to go away with people who turn out to be slave traders (Save the Children Canada). This unfortunately has a significant negative impact on the children. Not only do those children have to deal with being sold, but there are also the physical scars of being beaten, inhumane living conditions, emotional and psychological trauma, even after they are no longer slaves.



Young child working in cocoa slavery

What are the Ivorian Government and international corporations doing to end child labor?

The solution to this dilemma is not a unilateral one because of the number of actors involved.

Actions were taken 20 years ago by the multiple parties involved to see a change. In fact, in

2000, Ivory Coast signed an agreement with Mali in response to the problem of child trafficking from Mali to Ivorian cocoa farms. The countries have pledged to punish people who use and exploit child workers and decided to send children back to Mali (Chanthavong, Samlanchith). Besides, a program addressing the trafficking aspect of the problem is being established in Ivory Coast, called the UN Global Program against Trafficking in Human Beings (Global March). The U.S.'s Chocolate Manufacturers Association initiated a new action plan called the Harkin-Engel Protocol, which was implemented with the support and cooperation of the US and foreign governments, and various NGOs around the world (Chanthavong, Samlanchith). Yet were these actions enough to eradicate child labor for good? Unfortunately, not. Capitalism does not allow it; the unawareness of people concerning the topic does not allow it; nor does the lack of accountability allow it. I hope that after reading this, more people become aware of what is going on. I could have been one of those children, as I am myself am from Burkina Faso, but I am instead writing this article to bring a greater awareness to what is still going on in these countries.



