



Tropentag, September 15-17, 2021, hybrid conference

“Towards shifting paradigms in agriculture
for a healthy and sustainable future”

Sustainability Certification, Social Cohesion, and Prospects of Agroecological Change in Ghana’s Cocoa Producing Areas

FRANZISKA OLLENDORF, KATHARINA LÖHR, STEFAN SIEBER

Leibniz Centre for Agric. Landscape Res. (ZALF), Sustainable Land Use in Developing Countries (SusLAND), Germany

Abstract

Departing from the persistence of major sustainability challenges in cocoa production such as severe poverty among cocoa producers and associated high rates of child labour and deforestation, we provide an empirical-based discussion of how sustainability certification shapes the prospects of a broader paradigm shift in Ghana’s cocoa production towards a more holistic approach to sustainability, which we capture combining the concepts of social cohesion and agroecology.

One of the core ideas driving the currently biggest cocoa certification scheme, Rainforest Alliance, is to overcome sustainability challenges with a sustainable intensification of production. In Ghana, most of the cocoa sustainability certification schemes are implemented by transnational corporations (TNCs) from the cocoa and chocolate industry, mainly the processing segment. While the share of certified beans has grown drastically over the past decade, researchers find sustainability effects in terms of farmers’ livelihoods improvement and biodiversity conservation to be only marginal. Moreover, studies depict unexpected side-effects of TNC-led sustainability certification schemes, such as new patterns of inequalities among cocoa producers, negative effects on upgrading opportunities of local firms, and an increased control of TNCs over smallholder production.

All together sustainability certification in its current form fails to mitigate sustainability challenges and even counteracts with the goal of a healthy and sustainable future of cocoa production. Our results indicate that sustainability certification endangers social cohesion in cocoa producing communities by fragmenting them into beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries and creating new disparities. Also, by privileging external top-down interventions over existing local knowledge and innovation capacities, and by prioritising intensification over diversification strategies, sustainability certification establishes new structures in the local cocoa sector which go opposite to agroecological approaches to agricultural change. Based on qualitative data we collected in the Ghanaian cocoa sector in 2021, our analysis offers an empirical insight in how different stakeholders perceive such hidden dynamics and how those shape their visions about alternative future pathways of cocoa production. The discussion aims to contribute to the understanding of institutional and governmental barriers to sustainable agricultural change.

Keywords: Agroecology, certification, cocoa, Ghana, social cohesion, sustainability governance

Contact Address: Franziska Ollendorf, Leibniz Centre for Agric. Landscape Res. (ZALF), Sustainable Land Use in Developing Countries (SusLAND), Eberswalder Straße 84, 15374 Müncheberg, Germany, e-mail: f.ollendorf@posteo.net