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Why agency matters for tackling food security and rebuilding legitimacy in multi-scale cocoa governance

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Abstract

Smallholder cocoa farmers produce over 90 % of the world's cocoa, but are in a paradoxical position in global food systems. Across Ghana, the world's second-largest producer and exporter of bulk cocoa, nearly half of cocoa farmers experience moderate to severe food insecurity, while 91 % do not earn a living income. Using a multi-sited ethnography and a tripartite understanding of agency involving voice, choice, and power, I examine this paradox, paying attention to how cocoa governance across global, national, and landscape levels strips farmers of the ability to make meaningful choices over their production systems. I show how state- and corporate-dominated cocoa governance undermines cocoa farmers' agency by extracting higher taxes from them than other workers, while (re)producing asymmetrical dependency relations that demand accountability of farmers without itself being accountable. The erosion of cocoa farmers' agency not only contributes to persistent food insecurity among cocoa farmers but also undermines the legitimacy of multi-level cocoa governance. Cocoa sector actors need to invest in more inward-looking initiatives to strengthen cocoa farmers' ability to influence cocoa farmgate pricing and integrate locally relevant crops in cocoa if they are to break out of the interacting food, liquidity, and risk-dumping lock-ins inherent in the current system. Overall, this paper contributes to reimagining global agro commodities governance not as instruments for extractive growth but as mechanisms for engendering food security, agency, and equity. It also supports the High-Level Panel on Food and Nutrition Security's call to expand the dimensions of food security beyond the availability, access, utilisation, and stability by revealing why agency matters if stakeholders are to make food security a non-negotiable aspiration in the multi-level governance of cocoa landscapes deliberately.

Keywords: Agro-commmodities, food security, food systems governance, forest-farm nexus

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