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Inclusive governance and smallholder readiness for new regulatory requirements in Côte d’Ivoire’s cocoa value chains

MANUELA SAHIRY, FRANZISKA OLLENDORF, KATHARINA LÖHR

Leibniz Centre for Agric. Landscape Res. (ZALF), SusLAND, Germany

Abstract

Côte d’Ivoire, the world’s leading cocoa producer and heavily dependent on this sector for its national economy, has long followed a model of extensive agricultural expansion. This trend has led to massive land conversion and a loss of over 90 % of forest cover since the 1960s. Against an international backdrop marked by tightening policies to combat deforestation, the European Union, responsible for around 16 % of imported deforestation, adopted the European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) in 2023, banning imports of products linked to deforestation and requiring full traceability to the plot level. For Côte d’Ivoire, with 60 % of its cocoa exports destined for the EU, these regulatory changes are reshaping market access conditions. At the same time, Côte d’Ivoire has adopted the African Regional Standard (ARS-1000), reflecting domestic and regional efforts to regulate sustainability practices through agroforestry, traceability, and improved farm management.

While these regulations aim to promote sustainable land use, they also introduce significant costs and institutional requirements, raising critical questions about smallholder inclusion. This study analyses how these governance frameworks are transforming the cocoa sector and reshaping farmers’ access to markets. Using a mixed-methods approach based on surveys with 235 farmers and 34 qualitative interviews, the study compares cooperative and non-cooperative producers regarding their readiness for new regulatory requirements.

The findings highlight the central role of cooperatives as key governance intermediaries. They facilitate compliance by providing access to information, training, and traceability systems, effectively integrating farmers into regulated value chains. In contrast, non-cooperative farmers face significant barriers to compliance, including limited access to information and institutional support, placing them at risk of exclusion from formal markets. More broadly, the study identifies a gap between regulatory ambition and local implementation capacity, driven by structural constraints such as limited financial resources, land tenure insecurity, and competing livelihood priorities.

These findings underline the need for more inclusive governance mechanisms and policy innovations that balance environmental objectives with livelihood realities. Ensuring equitable access to compliance support, while integrating non-member farmers, and aligning incentives across the value chain are critical to achieving sustainability and social inclusion.

Keywords: Cocoa value chains, smallholder farmers, sustainability governance