

Is the reduction of child labour in cocoa industries possible, and if so, what are the necessary steps we as the consumers should take to enforce this change?

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The Bitter Truth Beneath Its Sweetness

The production of one of world's most popular sweets – chocolate – is not a simple process. Chocolate is the final product of dried and ground cocoa beans. Cocoa trees, which best thrive in humid tropical climates are generally found in regions throughout West Africa. CNN statistics reveal that “up to 75% of world's cocoa beans are grown in small farms in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire” (Quest, 2012) alone. The harvesting of the beans itself involves much strenuous work. Cocoa pods, each carrying approximately twenty to forty beans, must first be picked off from the trees. The pods are then cut open, oftentimes with tools such as machetes, in order to extract the ripe beans within.

How Children Become Involved

Both Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire are highly indebted countries; while the demands for cocoa beans are high, farmers cannot employ workers while providing fair wages. Therefore, using children is the most preferred method towards earning maximized profit. Those who work in the cocoa farms range in age from twelve to sixteen, yet there are some that are as young as five. Many are trafficked into entering the labour forces; there are also occasional cases when a child may be abducted from roads and become isolated from their families. Children are usually smuggled from the poorest African countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Togo, and Benin. Trafficking then mainly occurs at the bus station in Sikasso, Southern Mali. Traffickers “use back roads for illegal transport” (Documentary: Dark Side of Chocolate, 2010) of each child across the border to various cocoa plantations of Ivory Coast.

Horrendous Working Conditions

The shift of a typical child labourer in the cocoa plantations begins at six in the morning and continues until the dark evening. As a consequence, “40% of the Ivory Coast's child population do not attend school” (Ornelas, 2016). Not only that, the standard tools used to cut down trees and bean pods are chainsaws and machetes; many have scars all over their bodies due to the use of such dangerous tools without any training. They also frequently carry burdensome loads of sacks – weighing more than 100 pounds – upon their feeble shoulders. Furthermore, many are exposed to noxious industrial chemicals. Farmers necessitate naive “children as young as five to spray toxins without wearing protective clothing” (Ornelas, 2016).

All the tasks assigned to a child in an average cocoa plantation violate the standards of ILO (International Labour Organization). Despite how the regulations ban “labour that jeopardizes the physical, mental or moral well-being of a child” (ILO: Standards, 2002), there was a 46% increase of “children working in hazardous conditions between 2009 and 2014 in the Ivory Coast alone” (Blackmore, 2015.).

Attempts Made Towards Eliminating Child Labour in Cocoa Industries

Reducing child labour in the cocoa industry is possible; it has been the lack of cooperation from the chocolate industries that has prevented the issue from being rightfully addressed.

Harkin-Engel Protocol (2001)

The Harkin-Engel Protocol was introduced in 2001 by the U.S. Representative Eliot Engel and Senator Tom Harkin on “mandating a label system for chocolate” (McKenzie, 2012). Many companies were embedding false certifications on their products’ wrappers to attract more customers. Major chocolate companies such as Nestle, Hersheys, Cargill, Ferrero, and many others signed the legislation. It required companies to “voluntarily certify they had stopped the practice of child labour” (McKenzie, 2012). The initial deadline to eliminate exploitative child labour was 2005, but then it was then extended to 2008 then once again to 2010. In 2010, companies established a new treaty, known as *The Declaration of Joint Action to Support Implementation of the Harkin-Engel Protocol*, which aims to reduce child labour in cocoa industries by 70% by 2020.

Involvement of Researchers and Journalists

Individuals have strived to reveal the underlying truth beneath the production of chocolate. However, numerous industries “keep secretive to disseminate the presence of child labour to the public” (Ornelas, 2016). Likewise, many who have investigated the cocoa plantations in Ivory Coast have been kidnapped, detained, or even murdered. Companies desire to gain the most profits through the use of child labour while also maintaining their influence in the chocolate market. Nonetheless, they fear of having their reputations besmirched; consumers may deny buying their chocolate once their prevarications are unveiled. The Ivorian government also faces a loss if the companies are no longer able to thrive. The country’s most abundant resource would be put to waste and their economy may have to encounter unnecessary problems.

Reasons of Failure

Addressing child labour in cocoa industries would be more successful if its manufacturers were to enhance the transparency of their supply chains and comply with the Harkin-Engel Protocol. Study by Tulane University, reported by CNN, delineates that the industries’ efforts to stop child labour have been “uneven and incomplete since 97% of the Ivory Coast farmers have never been reached” (McKenzie and Swalis, 2012) or informed about the protocol.

The external stimulus the chocolate industries receive from a mere legislation is very minimal. They will not choose to hinder or alter what they have been doing as long as their customers are buying and they are making reasonable profits. Since the West African governments are highly indebted, they are quite dependent on its foreign manufacturers for the export of their resources;

as a result, companies are able to prolong the period of time for them to use child labour while also interfering with those who aspire to eradicate them through the governments.

Breaking the Cycle of Child Labour in Cocoa Industries

Consumers should pursue to break the gruesome cycle of child labour, not eliminate it. David Mackenzie of CNN reports that “the children in Ivory Coast plantations are not upset, locked or chained up; [to them,] the slavery in cocoa farms is normal” (McKenzie and Swalis, 2012). Accordingly, from the perspective of a child living in a developing country, being hired to serve in a workforce may be the only opportunity to survive and support his or her family. When removed from the cocoa plantations, even more problems may arise for the child. For example, their extreme need for money is still not resolved. Consequently, some families – including the child – may starve to death. The children “may [even] be sold for sex trafficking, factory owners, labour traffickers” (Olivier, 2012) or other exploiters in another area for money.

Many people believe that buying products labeled with FairTrade or Direct-Trade logo is the most ideal method to minimize child labour. Nevertheless, the withdrawal of a small number of consumers does not traumatize a company with an average profit of sixty billion dollars per year. Consumers must physically take action in order for certain changes, such as increasing financial aid or prioritizing education for the child workers, to be implemented. Likewise, the only way to instigate the chocolate industries towards reduce child labour is through fear. The Harkin-Engel Protocol failed because neither of the companies’ sales nor the satisfaction of their customers were impeded. If consumers, however, do portray much complaint and disapproval, the results may be different. The possibilities of both the farmers and the child labourers receiving a fair living wage also increases when companies agree to provide greater economic assistance to its suppliers in West Africa. Farmers who no longer have to cut down costs will use fewer children on their farms. In addition, the financial aid could also be put towards the expansion of educational programs for the child workers. Education is critical in that it can be utilized for the rehabilitation and teaching of gainful skills for future employment for child labourers after they leave the cocoa workforces. As more people in the younger generations become educated in West Africa, the easier it becomes for the countries that are highly indebted to strive towards local and national development.

The reduction of child labour requires for all parties interlinked in the processes of the production of chocolate to be committed towards eradicating the issue. The only way to do so is through the party that casts ultimate influence among others: the consumers. Indisputably, consumers’ decisions, opinions, and actions have the potential towards initiating change in the cocoa plantations of West Africa.