

# Forced Labor and Child Labor in Cameroon's Cocoa Sector



**Free the Slaves** (FTS) was founded in 2000 and has since committed to the mission of ending modern slavery. Today, FTS is widely recognized as a leader and a pioneer in the modern abolitionist movement. Through its work, FTS has assisted individuals in slavery to regain their freedom, has helped officials to bring slaveholders to justice, and has supported survivors to rebuild their lives and reclaim their future. To advance its mission further, FTS has developed a multi-dimensional strategy: policy and advocacy, to advocate for the reform of laws and regulations; engagement of local communities, to provide training and resources to vulnerable communities; movement building, to encourage knowledge-sharing and collective action; continuous learning, to produce research that enhances understanding and guides responses.

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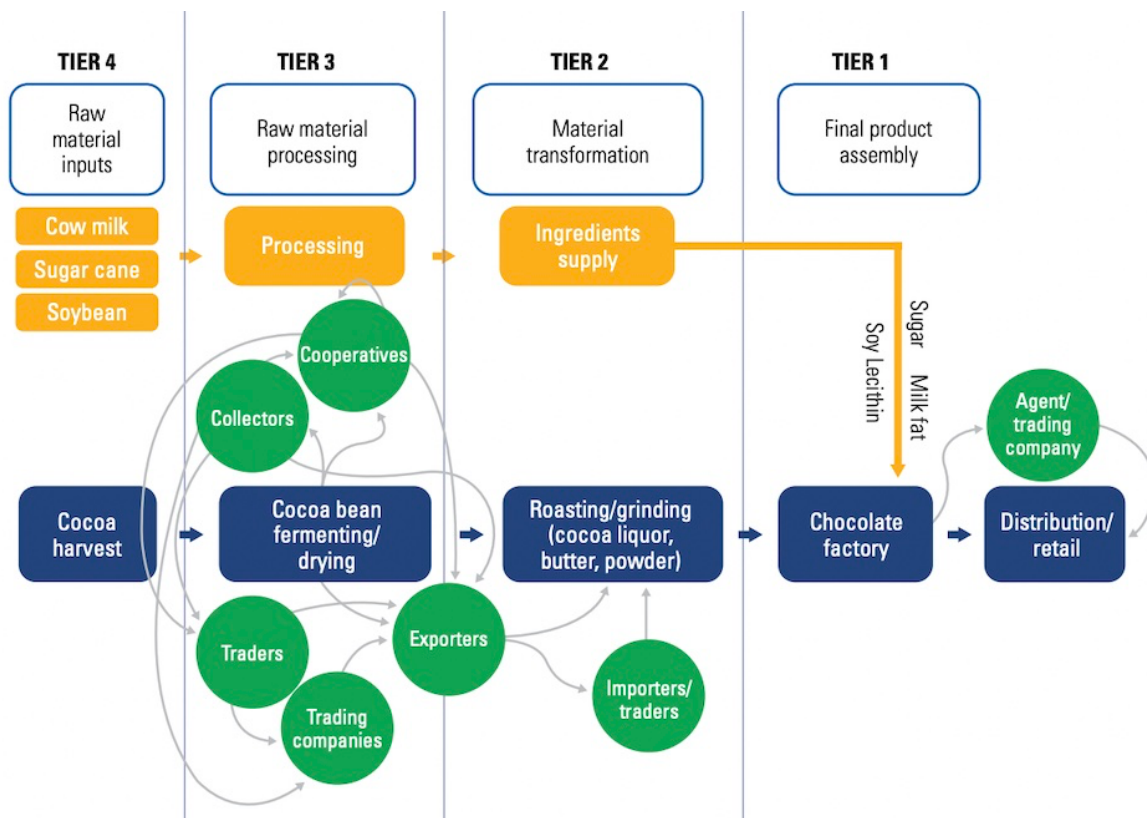
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# Introduction: forced labor and child labor in cocoa production

Chocolate, one of the most popular products worldwide, comes from a long and labor-intensive process.

First, cocoa farmers must clear the land, plant seedlings, weed their plantations, prune trees, and apply pesticides and fertilizers. Once cocoa pods grow, farmers must harvest them by hand, using machetes or hooks. They then open the pods, so that the beans inside can be removed. They let the beans ferment for several days and later spread them to dry in the sun. After storing the beans in sacks, farmers can sell their cocoa down the supply chain, where it goes through collectors, transporters, traders, grinders, manufacturers, and retailers. Finally, it reaches consumers, pleasing them with a great variety of flavors and aromas.

Figure 1. The cocoa supply chain <sup>1</sup>



Legend



the different entities involved at different stages



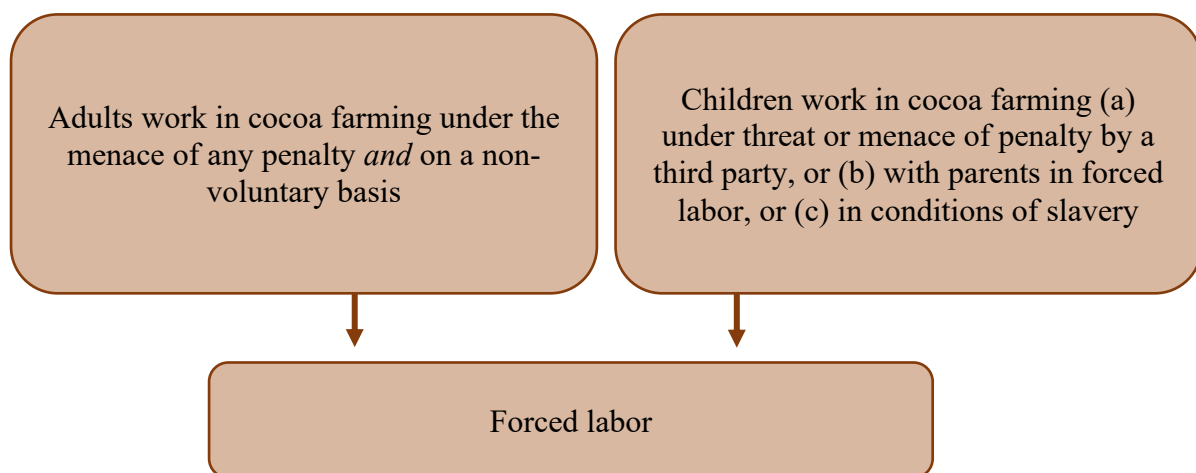
additional raw materials that will feed into the chocolate production

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, Mapping Child Labor Risks in Global Supply Chains (Geneve: UNICEF, 2020).

However, the sweet taste and the pleasant smell of chocolate hide a bitter reality. In fact, the production of cocoa beans is particularly vulnerable to the exploitation of adults and children into human trafficking, forced labour, and child labor.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No.29, forced labour is “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily”. The menace of any penalty refers to the means of coercion used to impose work on someone. This may take place during the recruitment process to force someone to accept the job. It may also take place once the person is working to force him or her to do tasks that were not agreed upon or to prevent him or her from leaving. Involuntary work refers to work or services that take place without the worker’s free and informed consent.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 2. Forced labor in cocoa production



Child labor, for its part, is referred to by the ILO as work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally dangerous and harmful and/or interferes with the children’s schooling. Permitted light work is up to 1 hour per week for children aged 5-11, 14 hours per week for children aged 12-14, and 43 hours per week for children aged 15-17.

Within child labor, the worst forms of child labor (WFCL) are defined in ILO Convention No.182 as all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage, and serfdom; the use, procuring, or offering of a child for prostitution or pornography; the use, procuring, or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs; and work that, by its nature or circumstances, is likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of the child, which is known as hazardous child labor.

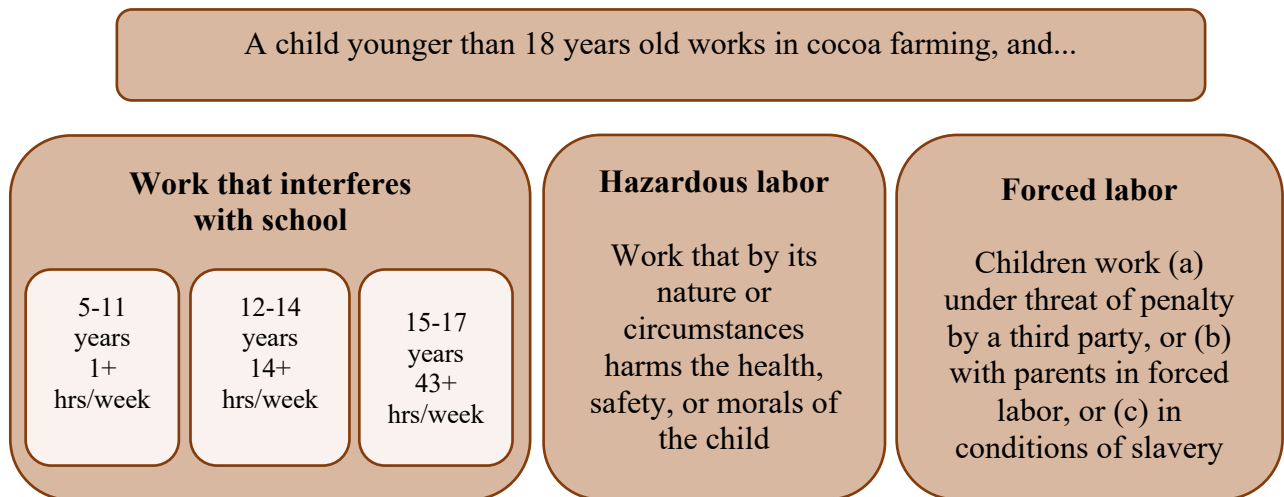
In the case of children, forced labor is work performed by a child for a third party, for the child’s parents, or with the child’s parents under a threat of penalty applied by a third party either on the child directly or on the child’s parents. It is also work performed alongside the

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<sup>2</sup> ILO Guidelines concerning the measurement of forced labor, Geneva October 2018.

child’ parents when one or both parents are themselves in forced labor. Finally, forced child labor is work performed in any one of the following worst forms of child labor: forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery; the use, procuring, or offering of a child for prostitution, the production of pornography, or pornographic performances; the use, procuring, or offering of a child for illicit activities.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 3. Child labor in cocoa production



While the past two decades have witnessed many promises to address forced labor and child labor in the cocoa industry, exploitation in cocoa farms continue to be widespread, representing a major source of concern when interrogating our capacity to meet SDG 8 and Target 8.7 by 2030. Oblivious to human rights, in fact, major cocoa companies continue to engage in exploitative practices and to unilaterally reap the benefits of an ever-expanding chocolate industry.

It is thus unsurprising that cocoa was listed in the latest 2023 Global Slavery Index as one of the products imported by G20 countries that is most at risk of modern slavery.<sup>4</sup> Also, in the 2022 List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor released by the US Department of Labor, cocoa was listed as one of the goods produced by child labor and forced labor as well as one of the goods “with the most child labor listings by number of countries”.<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, the reported risk of forced labor and child labor in cocoa is especially high in West Africa, which produces 70% of the world’s cocoa.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> ILO, Walk Free, IOM, *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labor and Forced Marriage* (Geneva: September 2022), p.14.

<sup>4</sup> Walk Free, *Global Slavery Index*, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> US Department of Labor, 2022 List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor.

<sup>6</sup> OECD, *Business Handbook on Due Diligence in the Cocoa Sector*, April 2023.



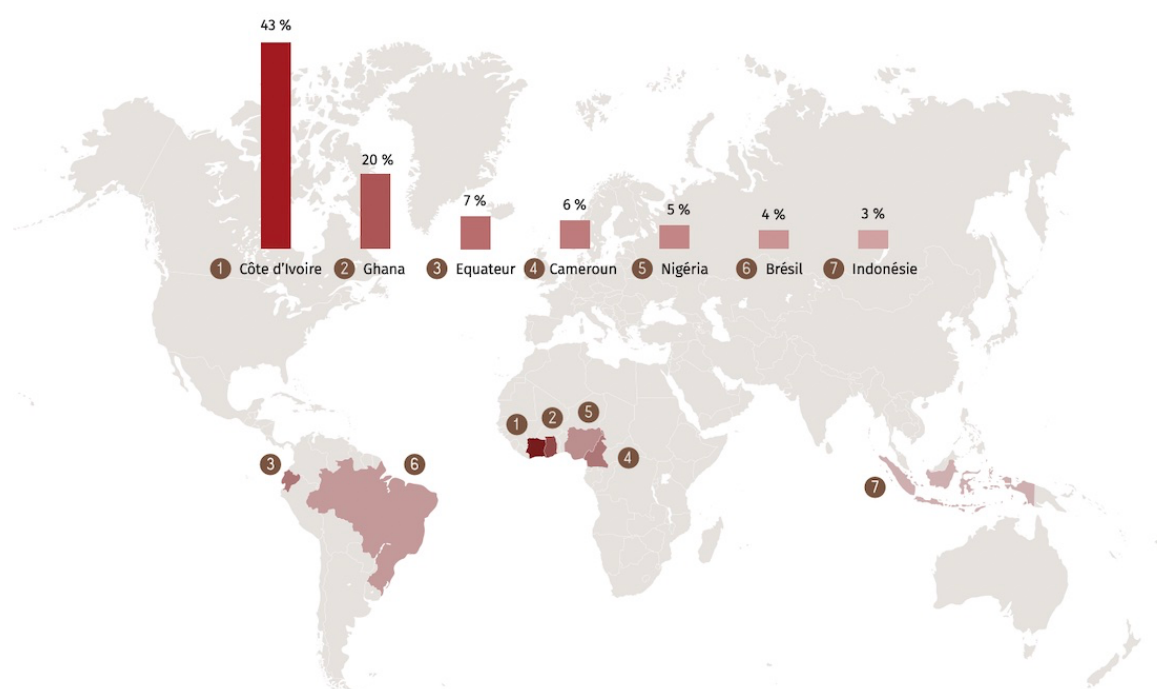
## Forced labor and child labor in the cocoa sector in Cameroon

The cocoa tree is indigenous to South America. From there, it was introduced by European colonial powers to the rest of the world. In 1855, Portugal brought cocoa to the West African island of São Tomé, where the tropical climate seemed optimal for cocoa cultivation. From the island, cocoa production rapidly spread to the mainland, in today's Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Ghana. In Cameroon, cocoa production was introduced as early as 1892 and has since grown into a vital factor in Cameroon's economic development.<sup>7</sup>

### An overview of cocoa production in Cameroon

Today, Cameroon is the fourth-largest cocoa-producing country in the world and cocoa contributes more than \$400 million to the national annual income.<sup>8</sup> It is also an important source of income for approximately 1.4 million people.<sup>9</sup> In fact, cocoa is the main cash crop and source of employment for more than 75% of Cameroon's rural population and the majority of rural households derives 90% of their income from cocoa.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 4. Production of cocoa by country<sup>11</sup>



<sup>7</sup> A.J. Armathé et al., "A comparative study of the influence of climatic elements on cocoa production in two agro-systems of bimodal rainfall", *Journal of the Cameroon Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 11, No.1 (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Agriculture in Africa Media, Cocoa in Cameroon.

<sup>9</sup> Republic of Cameroon, Department of Crop Science, *The Cameroon Cocoa Story*.

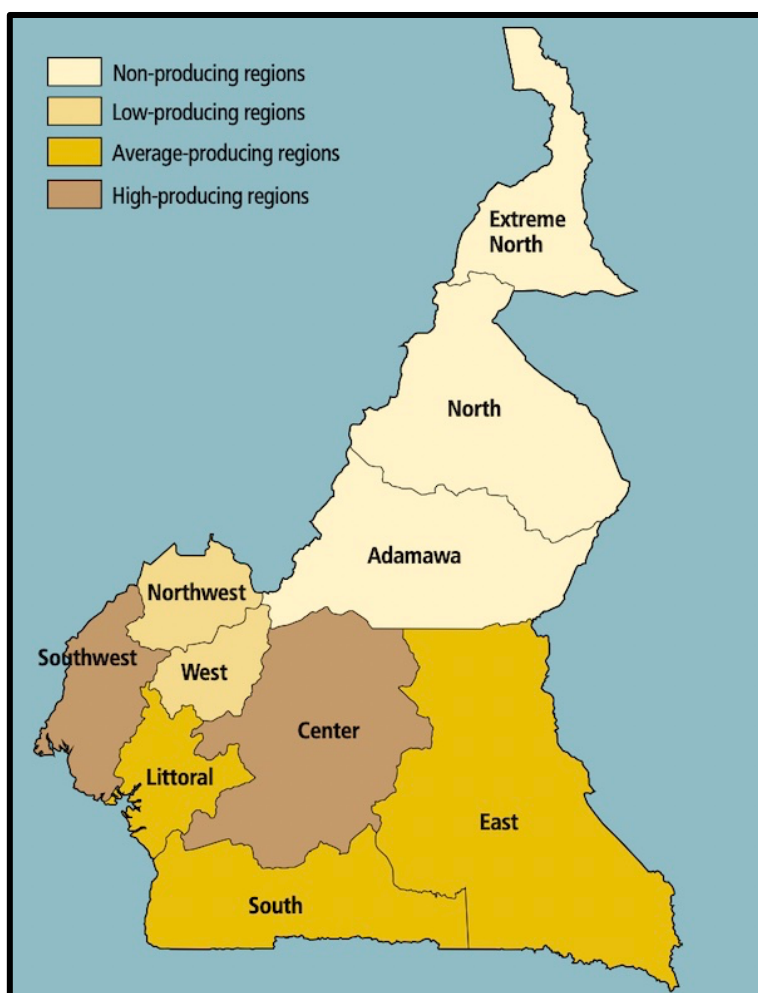
<sup>10</sup> Fair Labor Association, *Mapping Working Conditions and Child Labor Risks in Olam Cocoa Supply Chain in Cameroon*, February 2022.

<sup>11</sup> ICCO 2022.

Grown in 7 out of Cameroon's 10 regions, cocoa covers about 37% of the country's total cultivated soil.<sup>12</sup> As in other West African countries, cocoa production in Cameroon has been on a constant rise over the past few years, reaching 290,000 tonnes in 2019/2020.<sup>13</sup>

However, it is noticeable that this growth has not been driven by increased yields. Rather, it has been driven by the expansion of cocoa farming land under the pressure of large cocoa companies, which has caused a rapid, dramatic, and irreversible deforestation across cocoa-producing countries. Cameroon, for instance, has a great extension of untouched primary forest in the Congo Basin, some of which is at risk of being transferred into cocoa plantations. Some conversion of land is already happening.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 5. Cocoa production in Cameroon, by region <sup>15</sup>



<sup>12</sup> Fair Labor Association, *Mapping Working Conditions and Child Labor Risks*.

<sup>13</sup> Cocoa Barometer 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Fair Labor Association, *Mapping Working Conditions and Child Labor Risks*.



As in other sub-Saharan countries, in Cameroon cocoa is produced on small family farms, with a typical farm size of 2-10 hectares.<sup>16</sup> In an environment dominated by poverty, informality, state neglect, and harmful cultural practices, cocoa production on those Cameroonian small farms is often associated with multiple forms of labor exploitation for the adults and children involved. According to the US Department of Labor, in fact, cocoa from Cameroon is one of the goods (together with gold) at risk of being produced by child labor.<sup>17</sup>

**Cocoa production and slavery**

The development of cocoa in West Africa has been linked to slavery and forced labor since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Slaves were transported from Angola to the islands of São Tome and Principe to work on the new cocoa estates, and reports of forced labor there continued until the 1950s. In 1955, a prominent observer wrote that “some unlucky Africans [...] are deported to São Tomé and Principe [...]. Here they do forced, or directed, labor on the cocoa fields in circumstances barely distinguishable from slavery.”<sup>18</sup>

Cases of slavery and forced labour on cocoa plantations managed by local chiefs and colonial powers were also widely reported in Ivory Coast and Cameroon up to the Second World War. In Cameroon, the *Duala* elite set up cocoa plantations from the 1890s, using the wealth they had gained from their monopoly of pre-colonial trade. Slave labour was prevalent on *Duala* plantations. Here, slaves could cultivate their own plots in their free time and could combine to exert pressure on their master (something unheard of in other parts of the region), but they had little control over their own lives.<sup>19</sup>

After the First World War, the French took over Cameroon from the Germans and promoted the cocoa plantations, but they became unprofitable following the 1930s depression. Since then, cocoa in Cameroon has been mainly produced by African small-holders in the south-central cocoa belt. However, the practices of labor exploitation that have historically characterized cocoa production in the country continue to be observed to this date.

*Figure 6. Risks associated with cocoa production*





<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> US Department of Labor, 2022 List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor.

<sup>18</sup> Anti-Slavery International, *The Cocoa Industry in West Africa: A History of Exploitation*, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Y.D. Monga, “The Emergence of Duala Cocoa Planters under German Rule in Cameroon: A case study of entrepreneurship” Clarence-Smith, W.G. (ed.), *Cocoa Pioneer Fronts since 1800, the role of smallholders, planters and merchants*.

	<b>Forced labor</b>
	<b>Child labor</b>

**Adult forced labor**

Forced labor in agriculture is a persistent global issue. According to the latest estimates, agriculture is the fourth sector worldwide for prevalence of adult forced labor, accounting for 12.3% of all instances of forced labor. It is also one of the sectors in which child forced labor is most commonly observed.<sup>20</sup> Among the agricultural products that the US Department of Labor reports as being at high risk of forced labor are peanuts from Bolivia, sugarcane from Brazil, sesame from Burma, tomatoes from Mexico, cotton from Pakistan and Uzbekistan, fish from Thailand, and cocoa from West Africa.<sup>21</sup>

On West African cocoa farms, forced labor has been reported among women and men alike. Women reported having been forced to work in cocoa farming by their husbands, while men reported having been forced to work on cocoa farms by their family members (e.g., siblings and in-laws) as well as by “masters”, farm owners, and other non-relatives.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, it has been noted that the risk of forced labor seems to be higher in areas where cocoa farms have taken over protected forests, due to the illicit nature of those farms.<sup>23</sup>

In Cameroon, instances of forced labor have been identified among internal migrant workers who come from the remote North and East of Cameroon or from the areas of conflict in the Southwest and Northwest regions, where a secessionist crisis is ongoing.<sup>24</sup> Interviews conducted with some cocoa farmers revealed that those migrant families coming from remote, poor, and conflict-affected areas are desperate for work. They move between several cocoa communities in search for employment opportunities and are ready to labor under any conditions, no matter how exploitative. For instance, it was mentioned that they accept being paid in-kind only, such as in food. Faced with the lack of alternatives, those migrant families find themselves trapped in exploitation on the cocoa farms.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> ILO, Walk Free, IOM, *Forced Labor and Forced Marriage*, pp.31, 47.

<sup>21</sup> US Department of Labor, 2018 List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor.

<sup>22</sup> Tulane University, Walk Free, Chocolonely, *Bitter Sweets: Prevalence of Forced Labor and Child Labor in the Cocoa Sectors of Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana*, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Corporate Accountability Lab, *Empty promises: The Failure of Voluntary Corporate Social Responsibility Initiatives to Improve Farmer Incomes in the Ivorian Cocoa Sector*, July 2019.

<sup>24</sup> H. Kinkoh, T. Boudjekeu, “Time to resolve Cameroon’s persistent yet forgotten crisis”, Institute for Security Studies, October 3, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Fair Labor Association, *Mapping Working Conditions and Child Labor Risks*.

Instances of forced labor on Cameroon's cocoa farms are also reported among undocumented foreign migrant workers – mainly from Nigeria – who are recruited by informal labor contractors. Operating illegally beyond the control of the state, labor contractors establish the workers' terms and conditions of employment unilaterally and arbitrarily. Migrant workers who are brought to the cocoa farms by their recruiters have no written contracts and have no power to negotiate the terms, conditions, and compensation with the farmer. Unprotected by the law due to their illegal status, and afraid of deportation, they work under forced labor conditions and in hazardous circumstances, such as exposure to chemicals with no personal protective equipment.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, in Cameroon cases of forced labor on cocoa farms have also been connected to the use of prison labor. Here, cocoa farmers employ prison workers through an agreement reached between the farmer, the prison manager, and the legal prosecutor (since these forms of employment are only permitted to prisoners who stood out for good conduct and who are nearing the end of their prison term). Once the agreement is reached, the farmer pays the prison manager, who is then supposed to pay workers. However, there is no mechanism in place to guarantee that the prisoners-workers are paid for their labor on the cocoa farms or that they are paid the full due amount.<sup>27</sup> Forced labor situations in the case of prisoners is further facilitated by the fact that prison laborers lack freedom of movement and are not required to consent to the work on the cocoa farms.

### **Child forced labor**

Besides adults, forced labor on cocoa farms is also reported among children. Here, child trafficking is the most common pattern by which children find themselves in this situation of exploitation. Traffickers operating in regional countries such as Nigeria, Mali, Benin, Togo, and Burkina Faso pose as job recruiters or *locateurs*. They typically approach children from poor, uneducated rural families with promises of well-paid and legitimate job opportunities in Cameroon.<sup>28</sup> In extreme yet rare cases, some traffickers even resort to kidnapping children.<sup>29</sup>

After transporting children to Cameroon (either via land or via sea, through the Gulf of Guinea), traffickers sell them to cocoa farm owners in the cocoa-producing regions. There, children find themselves forced to work for the farm owner in the cocoa production.<sup>30</sup> If a sum was advanced by the trafficker to transport the child, the latter enters into a situation of debt bondage, whereby he cannot leave the cocoa farm until the alleged debt is extinguished.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Senator Engel, Congressional Record, June 28, 2001, pp. H3781, <https://www.congress.gov/crec/2001/06/28/CREC-2001-06-28.pdf>; ILO, UNICEF, World Bank, *Cameroon: Comprendre le travail des enfants et l'emploi des jeunes*, June 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Fair Labor Association, *Mapping Working Conditions and Child Labor Risks*.

<sup>30</sup> US State Department, 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report, Cameroon.

Notably, instances of child trafficking for forced labor exploitation in agriculture are also reported within Cameroon itself, as parents often entrust their children to intermediaries who promise to take them to urban centers for education and/or employment, only to end up in situations of forced labor on cocoa farms.<sup>31</sup>

Once on those cocoa farms, children are given very little food, work long hours every day, are whipped or beaten for working slowly or for trying to escape, and are locked up at night in small, windowless rooms.<sup>32</sup> In the words of a child who worked since the age of 9 on the cocoa plantations north of the Cameroonian capital Yaoundé, "I worked in the fields from sunrise to sunset for almost nothing, without rest and without eating enough."<sup>33</sup>

However, while certainly a cause for concern, forced labor does not seem to be a particularly widespread phenomenon in the Cameroonian (and West African) cocoa sector.<sup>34</sup> In the case of children, this is consistent with several findings according to which in West African cocoa agriculture it is the parents who are most commonly responsible for children's engagement in labor on the family's cocoa farm.<sup>35</sup>

### **Child labor**

Much more ubiquitous than forced labor is child labor within a child own's family.<sup>36</sup> As has been noted, "though the most sensational stories about child labor [in the cocoa sector] over the years have focused on boys and girls who've been held against their will and abused, the more common story is [...] that of [...] hundreds of thousands of children [who] are used as free labor by their own families and often asked to take on dangerous tasks like harvesting with machetes or hauling 100-pound bags of beans."<sup>37</sup>

While no official statistics exist on this, a survey conducted in 15 cocoa-producing communities across seven districts of Center, West, and South Cameroon revealed a high prevalence of children engaged in labor on cocoa farms, amounting to 55%. Of those children, 20% were found to be below the minimum working age and 44% were found to be involved in hazardous activities.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> US Department of Labor, Child Labor and Forced Labor Reports, Cameroon.

<sup>32</sup> Senator Engel, Congressional Record, June 28, 2001, pp. H3781.

<sup>33</sup> *Planete Afrique*, "Un projet du BIT por que les enfants échappent au travail forcé", May 9, 2006, <https://planeteafrique.com/actualites/cameroun/Index.asp?id=952>.

<sup>34</sup> World Cocoa Foundation, <https://www.worldcocoafoundation.org/blog/we-have-zero-tolerance-for-forced-labor-in-the-cocoa-supply-chain/#:~:text=The%20specific%20problem%20of%20forced,labor%20between%202013%20and%202017>.

<sup>35</sup> Tulane University, Walk Free, Chocolonely, *Bitter Sweets*.

<sup>36</sup> ILO, "The challenge to make chocolate child labor free", *YouTube*, April 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRG6NMVKHDs>.

<sup>37</sup> B. O'Keefe, "Bitter Sweets: A special on-the-ground report from West Africa", *Fortune*, Marhc 1, 2016, <https://fortune.com/longform/big-chocolate-child-labor/>.

<sup>38</sup> Fair Labor Association, *Mapping Working Conditions and Child Labor Risks*.

Concerningly, the use of child labor in the production of cocoa is part of a bigger trend that sees 152 million children engaged in labor worldwide, 70% of which (112 million) are exploited in agriculture.<sup>39</sup> The trend is even higher in sub-Saharan Africa, where 81.5% of children are employed in agriculture.<sup>40</sup>

As mentioned above, most children working on Cameroon's cocoa farms do so alongside their parents. Most Cameroonian farmers, in fact, report relying on family labor, which includes spouses, children, and other family members, for cocoa production – especially during the harvest months.<sup>41</sup> This observation is in line with global findings, whereby 72% per cent of all child labour is reported to occur within families, primarily on family farms or in family micro-enterprises.<sup>42</sup> Within sub-Saharan Africa, 82.4% of child labor occurs within the family.<sup>43</sup>

Activities in which children working in Cameroon's cocoa farms typically engage include the following:

- ◆ *land preparation* - land clearing, felling and chopping, burning, and stumping;
- ◆ *planting* - preparing seedlings, planting seedlings, and sowing at stake;
- ◆ *farm maintenance* - weeding, working with insecticides/herbicides/fungicides/other chemicals, and carrying water for spraying;
- ◆ *cocoa harvest* - plucking, gathering, or breaking cocoa pods;
- ◆ *post-harvest* - carting fermented cocoa beans, drying cocoa beans, and carting dry cocoa beans to shed.<sup>44</sup>

While not all instances of child work in cocoa production amount to child labor, in most cases they do, since working on cocoa farms harms a child's health and development, interferes with education, and exposes children to multiple hazards throughout all stages of the cocoa production process.<sup>45</sup>

Children working on cocoa farms typically use chainsaws to clear the land.<sup>46</sup> They also climb the cocoa trees to cut bean pods using machetes, large, heavy, and dangerous knives that are the standard tools for children on the cocoa farms.<sup>47</sup> A child who used to work in Cameroon's cocoa farms reported that he started using the machete when he was just 12 years old, which

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<sup>39</sup> ILO, UNICEF, *Child Labor: Global Estimates 2020* (New York, 2021).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Fair Labor Association, *Mapping Working Conditions and Child Labor Risks*.

<sup>42</sup> ILO, UNICEF, *Child Labor: Global Estimates 2020*.

<sup>43</sup> ILO, UNICEF, *Child Labor: Global Estimates 2020*.

<sup>44</sup> NORC, University of Chicago, *Assessing Progress in Reducing Child Labor in Cocoa Production in Cocoa Growing Areas of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana*, January 2020.

<sup>45</sup> International Cocoa Initiative, "Child labor in cocoa", <https://www.cocoainitiative.org/issues/child-labour-cocoa>; US Department of Labor, *Child Labor and Forced Labor Reports, Cameroon*.





<sup>46</sup> Tulane University, *2013/14 Survey Research on Child Labor in West African Cocoa Growing Areas*, July 30, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> ILO, UNICEF, *Child Labor: Global Estimates 2020*.

exposed him to several wounds and injuries on his legs, hands, and arms. However, he was never able to get proper medical treatment while working on the farm.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to the hazards of using machetes, children are also exposed to agricultural chemicals on cocoa farms in Cameroon. Once they cut the bean pods from the trees, children slice them open, scoop out the beans, spread them in baskets or on mats, and cover them to ferment. Then they uncover the beans and put them in the sun to dry. Afterwards, they pack them into sacks that weigh more than 45 kilograms and load them onto trucks.<sup>49</sup> Throughout the cocoa production process, children are often forced to work in extreme heat, as midday temperatures can average 30-35° Celsius.<sup>50</sup>

Figure 7. Hazards faced by children on the cocoa farms <sup>51</sup>

	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Land clearing</b> children clear the land by felling and chopping trees or by burning the land</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Exposure to agrochemicals</b> children spray insecticides and pesticides and work in farms when pesticides are being sprayed</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Use of sharp tools</b> children use machetes and other sharp tools for weeding, harvesting cocoa pods, breaking cocoa pods</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Carrying heavy loads</b> children carry wood during land clearing, cocoa pods after harvesting, and dry cocoa beans after fermentation and drying</p>

As a result, children working in Cameroon’s cocoa production are susceptible to various kinds of injuries, such as back pains, muscle pains, burns, skin itchiness or scratches.<sup>52</sup> Exposure to

<sup>48</sup> ILO, “The challenge to make chocolate child labor free”.

<sup>49</sup> P. Whoriskey, R. Siegel, “Cocoa’s Child Laborers: Mars, Nestlé and Hershey Pledged Nearly Two Decades Ago to Stop Using Cocoa Harvested by Children. Yet Much of the Chocolate You Buy Still Starts With Child Labor”, *The Washington Post*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/business/hershey-nestle-mars-chocolate-child-labor-west-africa/>.

<sup>50</sup> World Vision, “Chocolate’s bitter taste: forced, child, and trafficked labor in the cocoa industry”, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> US Department of Labor, Child Labor and Forced Labor Reports, Cameroon.

<sup>52</sup> NORC, University of Chicago, *Assessing Progress in Reducing Child Labor in Cocoa Production*.



pesticides, that are used widely in cocoa growing regions to control bugs and viruses that harm the cocoa plant has also been found to cause headaches, nausea, diarrhoea, liver and kidney complications, and even cancer. Significantly, exposure to these pains and injuries is higher among children working in the cocoa sector than those working in non-cocoa agriculture.<sup>53</sup>

### Drivers of exploitation in cocoa farms

Within cocoa-growing communities, forced labor and child labor are driven by a series of intersecting factors:<sup>54</sup>

**Poverty within rural cocoa-growing communities.**<sup>55</sup> Currently, almost no cocoa farmer in the main cocoa-producing regions of Cameroon earns a living income (i.e., the net annual income required for a household to afford a decent standard of living for all its members, including food, water, housing, education, health care, transport, clothing, and other essential needs).<sup>56</sup> While the global chocolate industry is expected to reach an annual value of \$263 billion by the end of the decade,<sup>57</sup> cocoa farmers often earn below the World Bank’s poverty threshold.<sup>58</sup> In Cameroon, farmers report that given their limited earnings from cocoa, they cannot afford to pay wages for adult labor. As a consequence, almost all farmers rely on their family members, including children.<sup>59</sup> Importantly, the poverty to which cocoa-producing communities are exposed is linked to two main factors:

- **Low international market price for cocoa.** Low cocoa prices, combined with poor productivity, often mean that farmers struggle to make enough income to cover production costs. At best, farmers will get only a small profit margin. Farmers who do not own their land must even give high proportions of their profits to the land owner, so that little is left to afford basic necessities like food, housing, and healthcare. In remote areas, the purchase price practiced by some buyers who source directly from farmers may be even lower than the international market price.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Tulane University, Walk Free, Chocolonely, *Bitter Sweets; Verité, Commodity Report: Cocoa*.

<sup>55</sup> NORC, University of Chicago, *Final Report: Assessing Progress in Reducing Child Labor in Cocoa Production in Cocoa Growing Areas of Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana*, October 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Cocoa Barometer 2020.

<sup>57</sup> A. Brudney, R. Taylor, *There Will Be No More Cocoa Here: How Companies Are Extracting the West African Cocoa Sector to Death*, Corporate Accountability Lab, September 2023, p.6.

<sup>58</sup> A. Brudney, R. Taylor, *There Will Be No More Cocoa Here*.

<sup>59</sup> Fair Labor Association, *Mapping Working Conditions and Child Labor Risks*; World Vision, “Chocolate’s bitter taste”.

<sup>60</sup> Fair Labor Association, *Mapping Working Conditions and Child Labor Risks*.

- **Price fluctuations of cocoa beans.** Cocoa prices in Cameroon have fluctuated over the past 3 to 4 years, ranging from 550 CFA francs (US\$1.10) to 1,210 CFA francs (US\$2.42) per kilogram, making farmers highly susceptible to price fluctuation shocks. When cocoa prices are low, farmers often have no savings to rely on, which exposes them to even greater poverty.<sup>61</sup> Because farmers bear the burden of market volatility, whether driven by commodity prices or by changes in demand, they are exposed to economic precarity and indebtedness.

**Limited bargaining power of farmers.** The inability of many farmers to arrange transportation for their beans means that they have limited marketing options and are forced to accept lower prices for cocoa set by local *pisteurs* (itinerant buyers) and transporters. Farmers who operate outside the cooperative system are extremely vulnerable to receiving very low prices for their beans, which they often sell directly to the *pisteurs* or on an ad hoc basis to cooperatives. Selling to *pisteurs* may provide benefits including immediate payment as well as credit, if farmers are in need of urgent capital. However, the *pisteurs* typically take advantage of their position and buy at a price below the farmgate price.<sup>62</sup>

**Lack of awareness** on the reality and the harmful consequences of child labor. Uneducated on the reality and the risks of child labor, Cameroonian farmers report that their children engage in all types of tasks including hazardous activities, such as those that require the use of sharp tools and chemical application. The same is reported among farm owners who employ young workers for any task related to the cocoa production.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, many parents (both within and beyond Cameroon) entrust their children to informal labor recruiters because they are unaware of the risk of trafficking that hides behind their appealing promises of job opportunities.

**Lack of access to essential services and infrastructure** such as education, healthcare, and social protection. In many cocoa-growing communities, parents report taking their children to the farm because they cannot afford to enroll them in school or pay for costs of school materials. Parents residing in communities where the nearest school is far from home also report having no choice but to take their children with them to the farm.<sup>64</sup>

**Gaps in law and weak law enforcement** capacity in rural, remote areas. Cameroon has ratified all key international conventions concerning child labor (e.g., ILO Convention No.138, ILO Convention No.182, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). It has also ratified the Palermo Protocol on Trafficking in Persons. On this same line, the government has established laws and regulations related to child labor, such as


<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Corporate Accountability Lab, *Empty promises*.

<sup>63</sup> Fair Labor Association, *Mapping Working Conditions and Child Labor Risks*.

<sup>64</sup> NORC, University of Chicago, *Final Report: Assessing Progress in Reducing Child Labor in Cocoa Production*.

Order No.17 on Child Labor and the Law Relating to the Fight Against Trafficking in Persons. However, human trafficking provisions do not meet international standards (e.g., they require threats, the use of force, or coercion to be established for the crime of child trafficking) and the types of hazardous work prohibited for children are not comprehensive. Moreover, gaps exist within the operations of enforcement agencies that may hinder adequate enforcement of existing child labor and anti-trafficking laws.

 **Gaps in social programs.** Cameroon has introduced a Support Project in Quality Management for Cocoa and Coffee Production/Forever Chocolate (2019–2025) that promotes labor standards in the cocoa industry, including the elimination of child labor. The project is implemented in cocoa production areas and aims to train cocoa farmers to produce cocoa that is free of child labor and utilizes environmentally friendly techniques. The project provides services to children at risk of child labor, including school-fee exemptions, school kits, and health services. Also it seeks to empower women and provide families with alternative sources of income to limit the involvement of children in child labor. In addition, the project includes monitoring and remediation systems aimed at ensuring the traceability of cocoa supply chains and eliminating child labor. However, the scope of the current program is insufficient to address the extent of the problem due to limited resources and insufficient geographic coverage.

## Conclusion & Recommendations

Over the past few decades, as the work of investigative journalists and human rights activists exposed the many violations of labor, children, and human rights taking place in cocoa-producing regions,<sup>65</sup> chocolate manufacturers and retailers have launched initiatives aimed at reversing the reported exploitation and abuses. These include Nestlé’s Child Labor Monitoring and Remediation System, Mars’ Protecting Children Action Plan, Hershey’s Cocoa for Good, and Mondelez’s Cocoa Life.

In 2001, major members of the cocoa industry, including big brands such as Nestlé, Mars, and Hershey, signed the Harkin-Engel Protocol,<sup>66</sup> an agreement aimed at eliminating the “worst forms of child labor” and adult forced labor on cocoa farms in West Africa by 2005. However, the deadlines for reaching the commitments contained in the Protocol have been repeatedly postponed, most recently to 2025.

Other mechanisms introduced to obviate the problem of labor exploitation on cocoa farms, such as fair-trade certifications and ethical certifications (e.g., Fairtrade International,

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<sup>65</sup> CNN Freedom Project, Chocolate Child Slaves, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2015/05/26/chocolate-child-slaves-ivory-coast-spc-cfp.cnn>.





<sup>66</sup> Named after US Senator Tom Harkin and US Representative Eliot Engel, who negotiated the agreement.

Rainforest Alliance, and UTZ Certified), have also had a limited impact on the ground. In fact, the third-party inspectors for these certifications typically visit fewer than 10% of cocoa farms. Those visits are also announced in advance, which enables farmers to hide evidence of human and labor rights violations.<sup>67</sup> As has been noted “these inspections have made child labor more hidden while remaining just as prevalent.”<sup>68</sup>

Thus, child labor in cocoa-producing farms is actually on the rise, deforestation in protected forests continues, farmers are earning less now than they were years ago, and farmers continue to have little bargaining power vis-à-vis the other parties of the cocoa supply chain (buyers, manufacturers, and retailers).

As we are approaching the 2025 deadline defined under the latest revision of the Harkin-Engel Protocol, as well as the 2030 deadline established in the framework of the SDGs, it seems that to reach the goal of ending forced labor, child labor, and the WFCL in cocoa-growing areas in Cameroon (and in West African more broadly), a whole-of-society approach is urgently needed. Some of the actions that could be effectively taken are proposed below.

### Companies that supply cocoa from Cameroon

-  Pay a **living income to cocoa farmers** and make sure that the full amount of the living income does reach farmers;
-  Implement a **holistic human rights (and environmental) due diligence policy**. Embed responsible business conduct into policy and management systems; identify and assess adverse impacts in operations, supply chains, and business relations; cease, prevent, or mitigate adverse impacts; track implementation and results; communicate how impacts are addressed; provide for, or cooperate in, remediation when appropriate;
-  Establish **long-term contracts at fixed prices with cocoa farmers** that distribute the risk of price fluctuations to supply chain actors who are better situated to absorb it, resulting in greater stability across the supply chain;
-  Design and implement **child labor monitoring and remediation systems (CLMRS)**. An effective CLMRS should raise awareness on child labor amongst farmers, children, and the wider community; identify children in child labor through an active monitoring process; provide prevention and remediation support to children in child labor; follow up with children in child labor to monitor their status;

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<sup>67</sup> P. Whoriskey, “Chocolate Companies Sell ‘Certified Cocoa.’ But Some of Those Farms Use Child Labor, Harm Forests”, *The Washington Post*, October 23, 2019,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/10/23/chocolate-companies-say-their-cocoa-is-certified-some-farms-use-child-labor-thousands-are-protected-forests/>.

<sup>68</sup> Cocoa Barometer 2020.

➔ Pursue **partnerships with other companies, the government, and civil society organizations** to design and introduce credible, sustainable, and effective initiatives aimed at addressing forced labor and child labor in cocoa-producing regions (e.g., programs targeted at reducing vulnerability in parts of the supply chain identified as “hot spots” for forced labor risk) as well as to engage in collaboration, share experiences and good practices, and accelerate progress.

### Government of Cameroon

➔ Implement a better **regulatory system for companies sourcing cocoa** from the country. This includes ensuring that the cocoa that companies buy is not from deforested areas and that farmers are paid fairly for their cocoa;

➔ Implement an **income improvement program for farmers**, for instance by improving farmer techniques to increase production and yields (good agricultural practices), by supporting diversification of income-generating activities at the household-level, and by setting up Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs);

➔ Support cocoa farmers to establish and control **farmer cooperatives** to improve the bargaining power of cocoa producers;

➔ Invest more in **rural infrastructure** to ensure that children and their families in rural areas have access to school, healthcare, and other necessary services;

➔ Increase the number of **labor inspectors**, ensure that the labor inspectorate receives sufficient funding and adequate training on indicators of forced labor and child labor, and expand inspections to all sectors including informal sector workplaces such as cocoa farms;

➔ Pursue **cooperation with other regional countries on community sensitization** on the risks of cross-border illegal migration as well as on the risks of trafficking and exploitation that hide behind the recruiters’ promises;

### Civil Society Organizations

➔ Launch **awareness-raising campaigns** on forced labor, child trafficking, child labor, and WFCL among cocoa-producing communities aimed at addressing misconceptions about child labor and what constitutes light work and hazardous work and aimed at encouraging an enduring cultural change;

- ➔ Carry out **research to improve understanding** of the causes of child labour and forced labour in the cocoa sector and to identify effective mechanisms to address these phenomena;
- ➔ Provide **technical assistance to government and cocoa companies** to support the development of culturally appropriate and effective outreach programs, monitoring programs, and remediation systems;
- ➔ Initiate **forums, conferences, and workshops** aimed at encouraging a constructive multi-stakeholder dialogue on successes, challenges, and failures in addressing the risk of modern slavery in cocoa supply chains.

### Countries where cocoa companies are registered

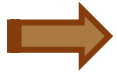
- ➔ Introduce **mandatory environmental and human rights due diligence** requiring companies to conduct due diligence to prevent, mitigate, and remedy modern slavery in their operations and cocoa supply chains, in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights;
- ➔ Provide **access to remedy for victims**, including a robust liability regime and strong enforcement measures that ensure accountability for harm arising out of human rights abuses caused, or contributed to, by a cocoa company or by entities with which the cocoa company has a business relation;
- ➔ Initiate a **dialogue on how Cameroon can be supported** in meeting its obligations under ILO conventions 138 and 182, to which the country is party.

### Investors in cocoa companies

- ➔ Engage with cocoa companies to encourage them – and help them – to develop and implement **better processes to proactively search their supply chain** for modern slavery (on the assumption that it exists), ensure remedy for those affected, and take meaningful steps to ensure that the situation of abuse does not continue;
- ➔ Establish **clear standards for investment**. Investors' considerations on whom to include in their investment portfolios should focus on factors such as (i) whether a company has (and enforces) a supplier code of conduct that reflects international labour standards, (ii) whether a company works with suppliers at all levels to improve their

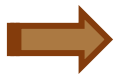


practices in relation to child labour and forced labour (iii) whether a company has a process in place for assessing modern slavery risk;



Launch a **shareholder action** against cocoa companies known to be oblivious to forced labour or child labor or those whose business models and tactics are associated with labour exploitation. If that does not yield results, consider responsibly divesting from those companies. In such cases, public disclosure of the divestment decision – and conditions for reinvestment, if applicable – will send a strong message about investors’ human rights expectations.

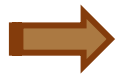
## Consumers



Exert **pressure on their governments** to implement mandatory due diligence laws that hold cocoa companies to account for failing to prevent and address forced labor and child labor in their supply chains and that provide routes for remedies to adults and children who have been affected by labour rights and human rights violations;



Strive to **learn about the issue of child labor and forced labor** in the cocoa industry and keep themselves constantly informed, so as to adjust their consuming practices accordingly;



Exert **pressure on cocoa companies** to take meaningful action to prevent, assess, and address forced labor and child labor in their operations and supply chains. When and as possible, buy cocoa-based products from companies that have shown to be responsible and proactive when it comes to the protection of human rights in their operations and supply chains.