

Africa: On the road with Côte d'Ivoire's cocoa beans

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It's 8.40pm. A strong wind blows across the dark night sky, whistling through the large trees that protrude from the canopy formed by cocoa trees. Everything above this vegetal roof is doomed to die; everything below it is a treasure trove for cocoa planters. "In the time of my ancestors, there were rice fields and forests here [...] Me, I planted cocoa," says Jean-Baptiste, an old farmer of the Guéré people. We are in the Goin-Débé forest reserve in the west of Côte d'Ivoire, the new El Dorado of cocoa in a country that supplies 40 per cent of the world's production.

Large burnt trees stretch out across the fields as far as the eye can see. The four-metre-tall cocoa trees refuse to be overshadowed, so farmers bring the landscape down to their level by burning everything that stands above them (certain customs forbid cutting them down).

"When we were young there were monkeys everywhere. Now they are becoming rare," says Jean-Baptiste.

In 2018, Mighty Earth and Global Forest Watch [sounded the alarm](#) when they reported that 90 per cent of Côte d'Ivoire's primary forest has already been razed and that on a global scale, deforestation there was accelerating at a rate surpassed only by [neighbouring Ghana](#).

The next camp – which remains secret due to its location in a protected forest – is primarily made up of farmers of Burkinabe origin. Boukary is the camp's leader. Ten years ago, he and his brother were the first to leave the Soubré region to settle here. They know that the soil is being depleted and that in 20 years the cocoa will no longer yield much. "We will probably have to grow elsewhere. But in ten years' time we will be traders." The two brothers affirm their ambition to move up the cocoa value chain. For them, agrarian migration is no longer an option.

High-risk work that doesn't spare children

The two brothers are part of a trend that has grown over the last ten years of farmers leaving other cocoa-producing regions for the west of Côte d'Ivoire as formerly fertile lands such as Divo, Soubré and Sassandra have been depleted by deforestation and harmful chemicals in the soil.

The government has yet to pass laws regulating the use of [glyphosate](#) and its use continues to be widespread. "We know that it's dangerous but what are we supposed to do? Have you found an alternative in Europe?" asks a local seller. The [deadly cacao swollen shoot virus](#), known locally as choumenchou, has had a particularly devastating effect on crops this year, and farmers see no other solution than to spray their fields with chemicals. "It burns worse than chilli peppers," says Boris, 19, who we meet on his way back from spraying his father's field. "I was pumping on a slope and the wind changed direction, it all blew back onto me [...] it's going to sting for 24 hours," he explains through fits of coughing. In his hand he holds the rudimentary protective equipment typical of the area: a mask with filters that haven't been changed in ten years, normal reading glasses and a beret.

Further on in the fields, about 15 people stand in a circle opening pods. Among them is a child, Hamidou. He doesn't know his age but looks to be around 12. According to the field owner: "His parents are in the camp." In reality, they are in Burkina Faso, their country of origin.

Hamidou, [like many others, is a child slave](#). Likely brought in from Burkina Faso, he will have to work in the field for four years before receiving a piece of land. "I don't have any fields yet," laments a 19-year-old, who has gone through the same system, in hesitant French.

In 2015, researchers from Tulane University [revealed](#) that roughly 2.26 million children work in cocoa production in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, often under dangerous conditions. While the government officially prohibits child labour in the fields and has made schooling compulsory from the age of six, the implementation of these measures is unlikely to keep up with the frantic pace with which new camps are being set up. "They have already found Burkinabe planters in Liberia," says an official from the Bloléquin town hall, describing the migration of planters to the West.

One-hundred-and-fifty kilometres further east, in the Duékoué region, the crops are older and the land more scarred. Leaving behind damp, brown earth, our tyres roll over a red dust that fills the air and lines the lungs of those who breathe it. Well into the bush, we arrive at Papadougou ('Papa's town'), another Burkinabe camp. Here, the moisture has completely evaporated. You can smell and taste the burning earth. "You won't see the big burnt trees here anymore, they've all fallen," says Assan, a field owner.

Over its 40 years of existence the camp has grown into a village. While this has allowed the installation of a brick and mortar school thanks to cooperation between cocoa multinationals, the government and NGOs, electricity has yet to arrive. Planters find entertainment in a film shown daily in the courtyard of a stall on the main road or, for some non-Muslims, at the bottom of a bottle of *koutoukou* (distilled palm wine). When cocoa runs out, the planters turn to the rubber tree, which, in exchange for the total exhaustion of the soil, provides material until it is 99 years old. But the cocoa here is still holding up and when it does yield, it is dried and sold to generate an average income equivalent to US\$0.92 a day according to [a 2018 study](#) commissioned by Fairtrade, which is below the poverty line. The cocoa is then loaded onto trailers and taken to large warehouses in cities.

Migration crossroads and dangerous routes

Following the route of the cocoa bean, we arrive in Man, the capital of the Montagnes district and one of the points of convergence for shipments from the bush. A warehouse of a cocoa cooperative is the first indication of a well-oiled global supply chain. A group of 16 Malians move quickly and efficiently between the truck and warehouse, carrying bags that they empty on top of a mountain of beans as high as three of the workers making it.

Each bag is worth €0.10 and weighs 70 kilos. These workers earn a little more than the planters: between €10 and €12 a day at peak season. "I've been here for a long time. I was a farmer in Mali, but it's easier here," says Bahkary, 50, the oldest member of the group. While Bahkary stays in Man once the season is over, many of his colleagues do not. Internal migration within ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States) is a phenomenon we encounter at every crossroads on the beans' path, with seasonal workers arriving from Mali or Burkina Faso to perform what is often seen as thankless work.

At 7pm, Bahkary calls out "*Akagne!*" ("Alright!") to announce the end of work and the beginning of prayer. The workers unroll burlap sacks stamped with Conseil-Café-Cacao in the direction of Mecca and remove their shoes. The loaded trucks will leave just before dawn for San-Pédro, the world's

largest cocoa port in south-west Côte d'Ivoire.

At 5am, Soumaru turns the key and after a few sputtering noises, the diesel engine of his Super Euro 5 truck starts with a jolt. Two apprentices check the roping of the tarpaulin to make sure that the 40 tonnes of cargo are still firmly in place. The transporter's most trusted man, the conveyer, has already settled into the cab.

Every role is well defined in this team of four as they begin their 450-kilometre journey that will take almost 15 hours.

The truck tears out of the mountains and into the bush when the apprentice detects something wrong: "Stop, the brake is smoking." The repair stop lasts an hour and the truck won't reach the port before nightfall. They will have to stop on the way and wait for daylight. "The cargo is my responsibility and I prefer not to drive at night," says Soumaru.

The increase in the price of cocoa to 1,000 francs per kilo is no longer the only reason for the increase in the number of thefts on the road: violence following the [October 2020 presidential elections](#) has also resulted in banditry, and transporters are reluctant to send their goods on the road. "When there's work everything is fine, but when things are bad it's every man for himself," says Soumaru. He is making only his second trip this November compared to four at the same time last year. The security situation resulting from the election has weighed heavily on the small links in the cocoa chain. Despite the risks, drivers can only expect to earn €150 to €200 a month.

Uncertain wages for dockworkers at the port of San-Pédro

The next morning, as the sun begins to shine, the team can already smell the fragrance of the cocoa hub of San-Pédro. They unload the bags with exporters (Olam, Cargill, etc.) who then entrust them to the logisticians (Moovis, Bolloré, etc.) who load them on onto large cargo ships. It is a vast and well-oiled cocoa machine whose final small cogs are the 1,200 dockworkers employed by SEMPA, the syndicate of companies in charge of hiring the daily workforce.

Most of the workers live in Le Bardo, formerly West Africa's largest shantytown, and travel several kilometres every morning to reach their workplace. While they are obliged to clock in between 6am and 6.30am, it is uncertain whether they will find work. Some will stay all day hoping to find work on a cargo ship to pay for their transport, which costs them 10 per cent of wages they may or may not earn.

"The first time my wife gave birth was in the neighbourhood: the child was stillborn. For the second, we went to the hospital, but it was out of season and I didn't have the money to pay for the delivery, so the hospital kept my wife's ID as a guarantee," laments Marino, 27, who, like the majority of the dockworkers, has no health cover or minimum wage. Most of them work on the side to supplement their income. "He's a security guard at night, [...] Me, I'm a sheep seller," says Paré, a 50-year-old dockworker. The day labourers are covered for accidents but the rules do not work in their favour: "If the compensation for an injury at work is 100,000 CFA francs, the dockworker will only get a third of that," he adds.

Every day from October to June, dockworkers empty bags of beans to fill the bellies of the large cargo ships, the last links of a chain that represents 15 per cent of Côte d'Ivoire's GDP. This bustling port exports more than 1.8 million tonnes of beans per season with no signs of slowing down. Indeed little seems likely to upset the dynamics of the [lucrative cocoa and chocolate trade](#), not even the destruction of the forests or the poor working conditions behind the production of these much-loved beans.

This story has been translated from French.

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