

# Challenges of Smallholder Cocoa Farmers in the Bono Region

By IAPC

Chocolate is synonymous with cocoa, a product born and brewed from peasant cocoa farmers' labour, toil and sacrifice, predominantly from Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Cocoa beans are refined and manufactured into chocolate far away from the shores and greens that make up the habitat of these farmers. Chocolate is enjoyed by consumers all over the world, with a global industry worth US\$ 127.9 billion<sup>1</sup>. It also has a worldwide consumption in 2023 pegged at 7.5 million tons and, beyond the shadow of a doubt, a popular product. Despite the fact that chocolate trade yields great benefits to manufacturers and traders, small-scale and peasant cocoa producers face harsh material conditions. In this article, we explore the factors and challenges Ghanaian producers face.

## Background

Bono Region is one of Ghana's sixteen administrative regions, created from the previous Brong-Ahafo region. The Savannah region surrounds the Bono area to the north, the Ghana-Cote d'Ivoire international border to the west, the Bono East to the east, and the Ahafo area to the south.

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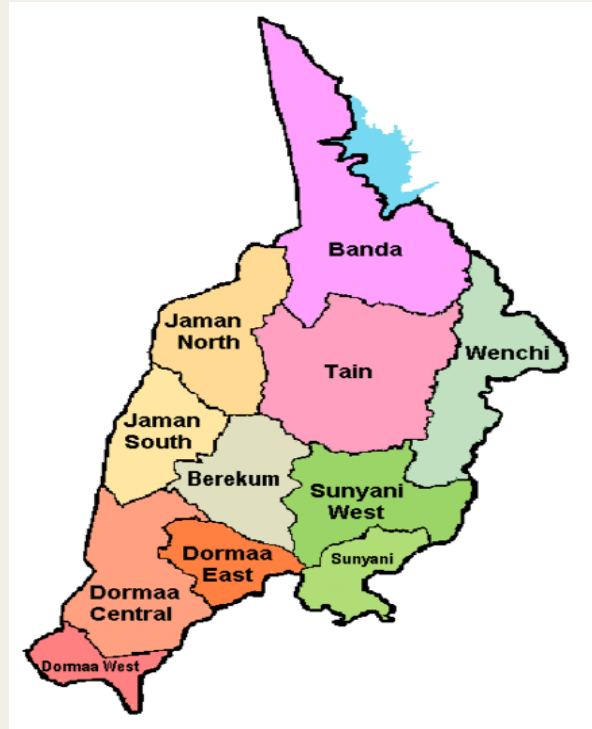
<sup>1</sup> 31 Current Chocolate Statistics (Market Data 2023)



**Map of Ghana with red highlight indicating Bono Region.**

**Source: NordNordWest**

The area's topography is mainly characterised by a low elevation not exceeding 152 meters above sea level. Its soil is relatively fertile and has a wet, semi-deciduous forest. The region produces cash crops like cashews, timber, etc. and food crops such as maize, cassava, plantain, cocoyam, tomatoes, etc. Its regional capital, Sunyani, is known as the green city. Cocoa cultivation in Ghana started in the Eastern region, then gradually moved to the Ashanti region and finally the western parts of the country. The primary indicator for the spread of cocoa farming in the country was highly dependent on the soil fertility levels in each region. Peasant or smallholder farmers in Ghana, specifically the Bono Region, produce cocoa on plots of less than three hectares.



Map of Bono Region. Source: Wikipedia

## Challenges

The nation's economy depends heavily on cocoa. The Ghana Commercial Bank (GCB) Strategy and Research Department's 2022 Cocoa Sector Report states that the cocoa industry employs six of Ghana's sixteen regions or about 800,000 farm families out of a total population of 30.8 million<sup>2</sup>. The crop significantly contributes to government revenue and the GDP, generating roughly \$2 billion in foreign exchange yearly<sup>3</sup>.

Speaking with cocoa farmers from areas like Sunyani, Dormaa Ahenkro, and Nkrankwanta, all in Ghana's Bono Region, it is common knowledge that low-income generation plagues their livelihood and cocoa production. Whereas manufacturers of chocolate reap profits, an Oxfam International report published in February 2023 states that “up to 90 per cent of Ghanaian

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<sup>2</sup> 2021 Population and Housing Census

<sup>3</sup> Sector Industry Analysis-Cocoa Sector Report 2022, By GCB Strategy & Research Dept

cocoa farmers do not earn a living income, meaning they cannot afford enough food or other basics such as clothing, housing and medical care. Many of the 800,000 farmers in the country survive on just \$2 a day”<sup>4</sup>. Since 2020, cocoa farmers' net incomes have decreased by an average of 16%, with women's incomes declining by about 22%. This problem is attributed to several factors discussed in this article.

## Attributes

### *Poor Agronomic Practices*

Poor agronomic practices such as insanitary farmlands, excessive use of chemicals, non-removal of mistletoe, over-tilling and lack of irrigation lead to a downfall in crop yield. The result of a limit in crop productivity is low-income generation. First, poor agronomic practices are associated with field crop production, including soil management, cultivation, and row cropping. Proper agronomic practices are techniques or strategies adopted by farmers in the quest to maximise yields while minimising damage to the environment. Best practices of agronomy significantly increase farming productivity. Poor farming practices such as the excessive use of chemicals, over-tilling, insanitary farmlands, and the lack of irrigation contribute to poor agronomy (Giller *et al.*, 2009)

- a. Insanitary farmlands: Insanitary farmlands characterised by improper shade trees, lack of pruning, weeding, and removal of mistletoes make farmlands a suitable breeding space for pests and diseases. Removing mistletoe ensures farmlands have enough space to access air and sunlight and keep farms weed-free to prevent water and nutrient competition. For instance, weeds can be a significant source of insects and conditions that will attack cocoa trees, as weeds affect the ability of

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<sup>4</sup> Oxfam International report published in February 2023

dispersing insects to locate crop plants. Keeping sanitary farmlands is an essential practice in crop and soil management. However, farmers in cocoa-growing regions in Ghana, not just the Bono Region, need the essential tools and equipment for pruning and spraying their cocoa farms, even in cases of pest infestation. The option available to those who can afford it is to rent a spraying machine or hire pruning services. Also, for smallholder cocoa farmers in the Bono Region, the ineffective use of machinery to keep farmlands and crops sanitary negatively impacts the growth of cocoa trees. Smallholder cocoa farmers use hand sprayers to apply liquid substances like fertilisers, herbicides, or pesticides to cocoa farms. Since it is operated manually by an individual, several complain that the chemicals used do not reach certain parts of the cocoa farm.

- b. Use of chemicals: Most farmlands in Ghana have been cultivated for about 25-35 years and have their quantities of nutrients in the soil depleted, hence requiring the use of several processes to restore, support and enrich the soil, like the use of fertilisers. The misapplication of chemical fertilisers and pesticides on the soil causes the decline in soil fertility of their farmlands. In cocoa growing areas in Ghana, due to poor access to information and lack of extension services, smallholder cocoa farmers apply chemicals, which make the soil lose organic matter and microorganisms, as well as produce soil acidification and soil crust, a reduction of the quantity of organic matter, humus, and helpful microorganisms. Additionally, the use of chemicals alters the pH of the soil, feeds pests, and even leads to the production of greenhouse gases. All these factors combined negatively impact the cocoa tree's growth, resulting in the loss of its cocoa pod and beans, which brings about low yield.

- c. Lack of irrigation: Smallholder cocoa farmers in Ghana do not have access to any form of irrigation. They rely heavily on rainfall in cultivating their cocoa trees and farm work. The long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns due to climate change have brought about a change in seasons and the timelines of rain. In periods that rain falls, the distribution of the rain owing to the vagary of weather becomes a concern as it impacts farmers' production. Hence, it requires irrigation as a regular, timely water supply to improve crop yield. Harvest production is likely to suffer when this is unavailable or carried out at a specific point in the crop cycle.

One dominant factor under poor agronomic practices among the many that lead to low-income generation is Pest Infestation. The bulk of losses of economic significance in cocoa production result from diseases and insect pest infestation. Pest infestation hampers smallholder cocoa farmers' production. Unsanitary farmlands and the excessive use of chemicals are significant causes of pest infestation. These poor farming practices create a conducive space for the breeding of pests in cocoa farms. Since 1908, mirids have been identified as insects that affect cocoa trees in Ghana with devastating impacts. Also, Cocoa Swollen Shoot Virus Disease (CSSVD), Black pod disease (caused by Phytophthora palmivora), and the toxic capsid/mirid (Skate) pest (Distantiella theobroma) are the primary pests affecting cocoa in Ghana<sup>5</sup>. In addition, in cocoa growing areas in Bono Region, it was observed that in the quest to control pest infestation of farmlands and crops, the drift of pesticides, herbicides, or other chemical substances into the soil also renders them infertile.

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<sup>5</sup> Cocoa Plant Protection- Major Stresses, Diseases and Pest of Cocoa

### *The increasing cost of farm labour*

Cocoa farming is a labour-intensive work from soil preparation, which includes ploughing, levelling, applying fertilisers, selection and sowing of seeds, irrigation (watering crops), weeding and crop protection, harvesting and storage. Smallholder farmers require chemicals like fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides, and human power for weeding, pruning, harvesting, and transporting.

The high cost of living in the country and the low-income generation of smallholder cocoa farmers make it impossible to pay for such services. It is elusive for smallholder cocoa farmers to hire the services of labourers to support them on their farms. Decades back, when farming was predominantly a traditional occupation, farmers had numerous spouses so that their offspring would assist with farm work. When you look at the age range of farmers in the Bono region and Ghana as a whole, they are within the ages of the late 30s - late 60s due to the unwillingness of the youth to get into cocoa farming, which affects the supply of labour. Again, competing products like cashews and plantains attract human power away from cocoa farming. Two experiences feed into this challenge; first, products like cashew requires three years for farmers to start generating income, making it much more lucrative for people to enter, while it takes about five years for a new cocoa farmer. The second is that because cocoa farmers do not earn enough income from their production, it makes it much more difficult to engage or hire the services of labourers whose charges for a day's work are expensive for them to afford.

### *The unattractive minimum price paid by the government*

Low-income generation by cocoa farmers is also due to the inability of government prices to catch up with inflation, resulting in the erosion of income. The increase in the Ghanaian economy's general costs of goods and

services has led to less value of the money generated from cocoa farming. The producer price of a bag of cocoa beans is GHC800 for 64 kg; this makes the work unlucrative and undignified, knowing that smallholder cocoa farmers channel a lot of labour and inputs. Also, cocoa clerks' adjustment of scales leads to further erosion of incomes paid to cocoa farmers. Farmers in the Bono Region have no option but to heed cocoa clerks for the demand of offering more cocoa beans other than a bag of 64 kg for the same amount.

## **Consequences**

### *Increase in poverty*

The farmers' primary and sole livelihood in Bono Region have been farming for ages. They have no other means of support or source of income. Most smallholder farmers acquired lands or farmland from patrilineal lineage, where farming was and still is a long-established traditional occupation. The extreme poverty levels among smallholder cocoa farmers primarily result from low agricultural income. They cannot support their families or themselves or meet their fundamental requirements. For example, their children may not complete their education to the fullest extent. In contrast, others struggle to afford tuition costs or may generally impact the low education levels of wards and the poor health of farmers.

### *The unaffordability of farm inputs*

Conventional farming is pervasive among Ghanaian cocoa small producers, a labour-intensive activity that, in its current forms, demands small farmers to incorporate numerous inputs in the production process, including machinery and labour, but also big amounts of chemical inputs, like fertilisers, weedicides and pesticides. However, it is complicated for smallholder cocoa farmers in the

Bono Region to access or acquire all of these inputs because they cannot afford them. This results from low-income generation and high labour and input costs because of inflation.

### *The unattractiveness of profession by young people*

One of Ghana's economic foundations is agriculture. The country depends on farming, a farmer's essential job, to achieve food and nutrition security. However, young people in the Bono Region do not in any way find farming appealing due to the minimal revenue it generates. Youth involvement in agriculture is a necessary component of national development. The late 30s to early 70s age range of the smallholder cocoa farmers in Bono Region supports the notion of an ageing farmer population in the nation. This significantly impacts the sustainability of agricultural production. To make farming a profession appealing to young people in the area, the poor image of farmers in the Bono Region needs to be eliminated.

### **Managing Strategies**

In conclusion, agriculture, specifically cocoa, is vital to Ghana as cocoa is the country's major cash crop. Cocoa is the primary source of foreign exchange and is the backbone of the economy. Low-income generation by smallholder cocoa farmers in the Bono region and Ghana beyond makes the profession unattractive to young people amidst the country's high unemployment levels. As smallholder cocoa farmers contribute to the majority of cocoa producers, their poor living and working conditions threaten Ghana's agricultural industry.

However, smallholder farmers in the Bono region and other areas in Ghana have established several smallholder farmer organizations and cooperatives to advocate for improved working conditions and develop means that benefit

their work. These cooperatives have been established to pool their resources. They serve as a group for supplying each other with fertilizers and basic machinery services specifically for pruning and applying chemicals to their farm. Due to their cooperatives, these farmers can access collective training on producing bio inputs like organic fertilizers and support each other regarding pest or disease infestation, as well as making it possible to have better access to credits and loans. They also encourage the government to provide adequate extension services and access to information and new agricultural knowledge through digitised means.

All in all, the story of Ghanaian cocoa farmers is one of a group of small producers joining forces and collectively working to improve their production and living conditions.

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