

Original Research Article

The Dynamics of Civil Society Organisations and Cooperative Societies around Cocoa Governance Based on North-South Cooperation in Côte d'Ivoire

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Abstract: The cocoa sector in Côte d'Ivoire has around 3,000 cooperatives, whose stated objective is to fight for an improvement in the living conditions of producers by acting for a better marketing price for their produce. Despite their large numbers, these cooperatives struggle to integrate and influence decision-making bodies so that the needs of producers can be taken into account. It is against this backdrop that two non-governmental organisations, INADES [1], and INKOTA-Netzwerk, launched a collaborative initiative in 2019 involving international civil society organisations, human rights organisations and cooperatives, with a view to helping them build an advocacy framework to have a greater impact on decision-making in the sector through the establishment in 2020, of the "Ivorian platform for sustainable cocoa". And this desire to bring together agricultural cooperatives as well as the Ivorian civil society (south) and their partners (north) so that they can play their full part in the decision-making process within this sector has been the subject of a study. The results, findings, observations and information gathered as part of this research are set out in this article. The data was collected through documentary research and semi-directive interviews with Inades-Formation managers, civil society organisations that are members of the platform, cooperative group managers and trade union structure managers. In terms of results, the pooling of synergies between civil society organisations in the north and south, which began in 2020 under the slogan "Ivorian platform for sustainable cocoa", has led to the development and publication of an advocacy guide. This activity has also helped improve the administrative and economic organisation of cooperative structures. In addition, the information and capacity-building sessions carried out by international civil society organisations have enabled cooperatives to revitalise their influence in the process of political and social dialogue in the cocoa sector.

Keywords: International and local NGOs, Collaborative Advocacy, Revitalization of Participation, Agricultural Governance.

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INTRODUCTION

The governance of the cocoa and coffee sector in Côte d'Ivoire, specifically in terms of the interactions between producers, their associations and the rest of the stakeholders in the value chain, continues to provide food for thought both at national and supranational level, taking into account the consultations of the European Parliament and the European Council with a view to drawing up the provisional agreement on the scope of the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive

(CSDDD, 2023). With this in mind, under the leadership of the European Union, a collaborative project has been set up around the theme: "*Alliance for Sustainable Cocoa: For the economic, social and environmental sustainability of cocoa production and trade*".

The themes contained in the title of the said project are a virtual update on the historical challenges surrounding agricultural public policies in Côte d'Ivoire. The elements addressed in this statement emphasise the persistent nature of the sector's governance challenges.

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In synonymous terms, the changes in Côte d'Ivoire's system of societal governance, in this case the turbulent transition from a single-party system to a multi-party system in the early 1990s, had very little impact on the collective bargaining practices of agricultural organisations, whatever their legal form. The detailed history of agricultural organizations in Côte d'Ivoire proposed by S. A. Yapi, 1997, p. 555 reveals that the single-party system also participated in some way in strengthening the organizational capacities of producer collectives. However, Vanga, (2012 p.147), highlights the demotivation and even demobilisation of cooperative members despite the reform transforming Cooperative Groups into real Cooperatives in a multi-party context. In addition, the restructuring of the regulatory framework for agricultural organisations in 2015 through Law No. 2015-537 of 20 July 2015 has not also helped to iron out the organisational dysfunctions of producer groups, associations and unions. Regarding these observations, the author's thesis at the level of other production zones could find an illustration in the content of law n°2015-537 of 20 July, 2015 dealing with the agricultural orientation in Côte d'Ivoire according to a Co-operative Alliance –Africa report led by G. J. GBEDE. He points out in the report that the above law derives from the *Uniform Act relating to Cooperative Societies. The most recent, the ninth of OHADA, which now groups 17 countries including Côte d'Ivoire, aims to give them the dimension of real economic players.* In terms of the state of play, after seven (7) years of application of law n°2015-537 of 20 July 2015, which focuses on the dissemination of the Cooperative Society, it emerges that producers' cooperatives, their associations and their unions continue to struggle to strategically influence negotiations at the level of the value chain in general and in particular in the cocoa sector, which brings together nearly 3,000 agricultural organisations out of the 4,000 in Côte d'Ivoire (Cooperative Alliance -Africa led by GBEDE. 2020 p. 5).

Given the persistent weakness of the influence of cocoa producer organisations in the political dialogue, this article aims to question the way in which collaboration between civil society organisations in the North and South impacts the positioning of the latter in the political dialogue. With this in mind, the study was carried out with a view to understanding the ongoing interactions and dynamics between these professional groups and the other various stakeholders. The research activities carried out, in particular the methodological approach used, the results and the discussion arising from the products obtained, are presented below.

2. METHODOLOGY

Data collection was organised on a purely qualitative basis, using techniques such as interviews and documentary research. The Individual and semi-directive interviews were conducted with Inades Formation managers, civil society organisations that are members of the platform, cooperative group managers,

bloggers interested in cocoa farming and union leaders. The interviews were conducted using an interview guide structured around five (5) themes: i- the presentation of the organisation to be interviewed; ii- the orientation of the advocacy towards the government and other organisations, iii- the strategy put in place as part of the advocacy, iv- the knowledge of the interactions between national umbrella organisations and international organisations, v- the identification of the international campaigns or platforms in which the various organisations participate.

As for the documentary research, it focused on the documents exchanged by the players during the preparation or during the training and information meetings. The aim was to go through them to identify the themes addressed and the nature of the interactions between the stakeholders in the advocacy project in favour of cocoa producers in Côte d'Ivoire.

The information collected was processed using a thematic content analysis. The results show that the training provided through the international collaboration platform and the sharing of information on cocoa news enable Ivorian organisations to be more active in advocacy and action for cocoa sustainability.

3. Revitalising the Participation of Cocoa Civil Society Organisations in Political Dialogue in Côte d'Ivoire

The establishment of an advocacy platform at the level of cocoa value chain from 2019, has facilitated the revitalisation of cocoa civil society organisations. Indeed, the intensity of the exchanges of strategic information and training with civil society organisations in the north is helping to gradually improve producer involvement in the cocoa value chain. The key players in this collaborative project are local civil society organisations and cocoa cooperative organisations under the leadership of Inades-Formation and INKOTA-Netzwerk.

3.1. The Gradual Co-Construction of an Advocacy Framework in the Cocoa Sector

Under the leadership of international civil society organisations, an advocacy mechanism focusing on the challenges surrounding the European legislation is gradually being strengthened. Indeed, this innovative process in terms of social participation restructures in small doses and sustainably the influence of small-scale producers in the cocoa value chain. This advocacy mechanism, entitled "International cooperation of civil society in the cocoa sector", is based on facilitating access to strategic information and offering training to local civil society organisations active in cocoa farming, under the guidance of international (mainly European) NGOs, most of which are involved in agricultural or sustainable development issues. This collaboration mobilises digital resources as a space for disseminating information and holding training meetings. To this end,

over the period from June 2021 to January 2023, on average, four (4) themes recur regularly in the initiative to co-construct an advocacy framework. Based on a content analysis specifically of the occurrences, the

following themes or topics of conversation emerged in increasing order: traceability (3), producers' income (4), child labour (11), sustainability (18) and deforestation (22).

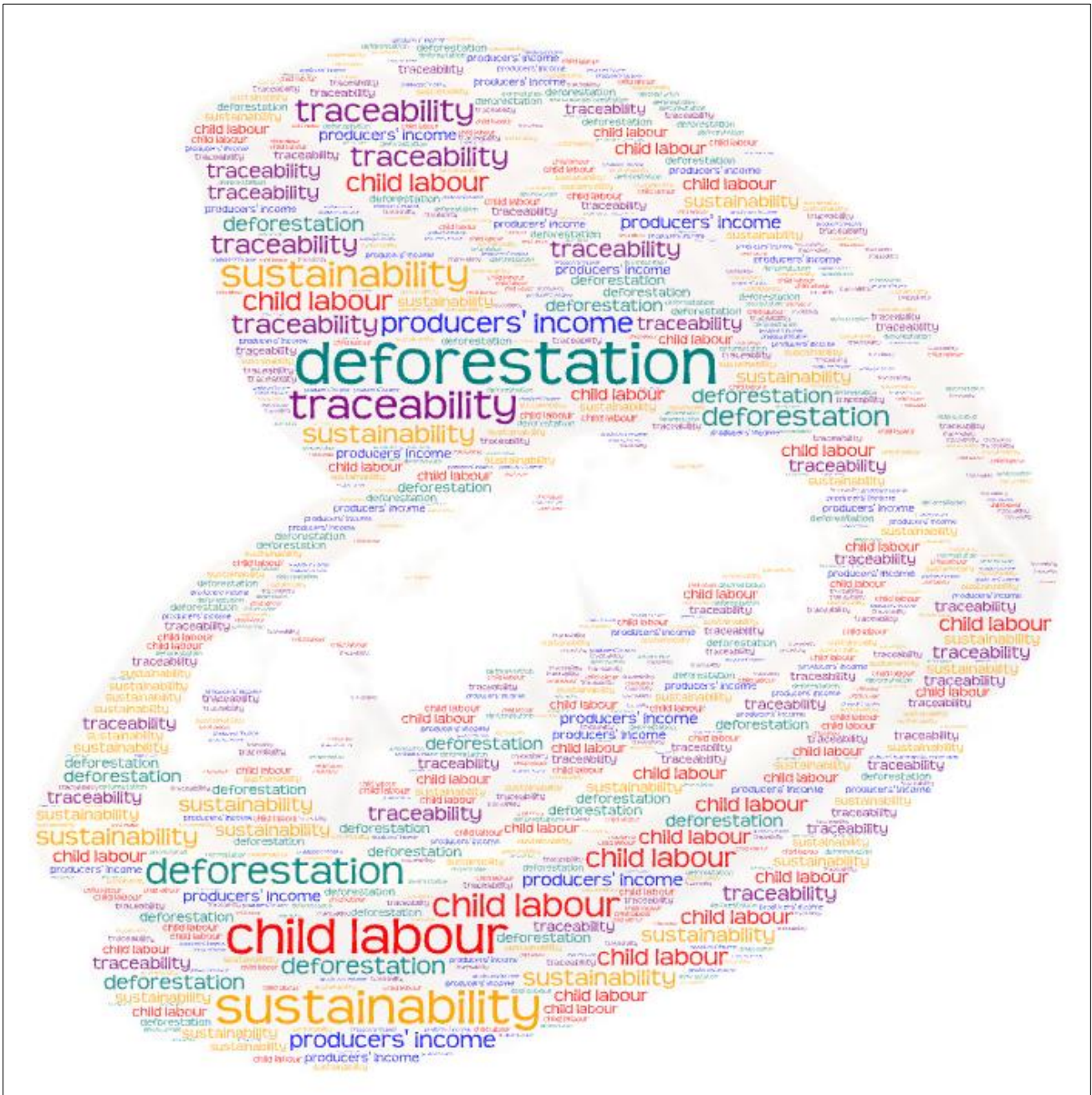


Figure 1: Cloud of words on the most discussed topics during training sessions

The themes of sustainability and deforestation were given greater prominence in the discussions because of fears and debates in cocoa-producing countries about the European Union's regulations on products from forested areas. But also, under the initiative of international structures such as the French Initiative for Survival Purpose (FISP), CISCO for Switzerland, GISCO for Germany, NISCO for Japan, VISCO for Belgium and DISCO for the Netherlands.

Child labour is a particular focus for some member organisations of the collaboration platform.

In practice, the training sessions take the form of Webinars with specialists presenting a situation related to farming activities. Afterwards, participants are invited to ask questions for further information. On certain topics, discussions also focus on the strategies to be developed to ensure the availability of information to cocoa farmers. By way of illustration, here is the speech

reported by the organisers of an information session in this collaborative framework:

"We will be providing training on the content of the regulation on December 3 from 11am to 12.30pm West African time (12 to 1.30pm CET) during our regular NGO coordination call, with sufficient time for questions and answers as well as a discussion on how we can collectively ensure that this information reaches farmers and other NGOs."

This mechanism thus encourages European NGOs to make information resources available, in this case: i) the understanding of the production contexts in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, ii) the sharing of experiences on lessons learned from actions to defend producers' rights, and iii) the adoption of action strategies to improve producers' living conditions and their ability to conduct advocacy to defend their rights. In addition, the involvement of international organisations in setting up the advocacy mechanism fertilises exchanges and constitutes a pragmatic strategy for reaching export structures, which for the most part are based in Western countries.

Once these experiences have been acquired, this in turn enables Ivorian civil society organisations to deploy their mechanism to support producers in setting up more effective advocacy actions at the level of the social dialogue.

3.2. Skills Transfer to Enable Local Civil Society Organisations to Take Charge of Advocacy

In addition to the framework for interaction with international civil society organisations, which enables them to share and capitalise on their experience of agricultural issues, a national framework called "La Plateforme Ivoirienne pour le Cacao Durable [2]," has also been set up under the leadership of Inkota-Netzwerk and Inades-Formation Côte d'Ivoire to support producers in developing advocacy in the cocoa sector. This platform brings together around ten (10) civil society organisations and some thirteen (13) cooperative societies spread across all cocoa production areas in Côte d'Ivoire. The aim of this initiative is to encourage producers to play a pivotal role in decision-making at all levels of the cocoa value chain, in order to improve their living conditions and ensure the sustainability of the sector.

The policy dialogue strategy adopted at the international level, based on the sharing of information, training and strategy, is reproduced at the national level, with somewhat different operating methods due to the illiteracy level of the cocoa-producing population. Here, the meetings are more in presence than virtual. They are structured on two levels.

At the first level, knowledge and information are shared between civil society organisations and the heads of cooperative organisations via WhatsApp platforms and the organisation of workshops every two or three months. The issues regularly addressed are: child labour, producers' incomes, deforestation and cooperation between cocoa-producing countries (Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana) and exporters/consumers for a decent price.

At the second level, these organisations use delegates as intermediaries to pass on information and training results to producers in the various zones by means of posters and picture boxes. Follow-up studies are then envisaged to ensure that the content is properly understood by producers. Ultimately, the aim is to make it easier for producers to access information on the dynamics of the global cocoa value chain, and to enable them to take charge of advocacy to defend their interests. This is a real challenge, especially as the representatives of producer organisations have very little access to information on the development of the cocoa value chain at global level, and are not very involved in discussions on technical issues such as the price-setting process, the prevention of deforestation and respect for human rights.

3.3 Cooperative and Human Rights Organisations More Active in the Fight for Cocoa Sustainability

The objective of the actions undertaken by civil society organisations is to improve the influence of cooperative companies in the cocoa value chain so that they engage in advocacy for the benefit of small producers. Even if the actions initiated since 2019 have not yet led to major impacts, there are nevertheless some changes in the political commitment of producers. For example, regarding the new EU requirements on forest products, producers through the heads of the platforms' member organizations were able to follow the development of this news and benefit from information on the issues and consequences of these new laws on their activity. Thus, rather than remain inactive, their managers in collaboration with other member organizations of the platform work to put in place actions or strategies to avoid disastrous consequences. When they have easy access to information on their activities and means of action, producers' managers are much more reactive in order to anticipate strategies for the continuity of their activities.

In addition, by taking part in online training sessions, local NGOs - especially those not focused on the cocoa sector - now have a better understanding of the cocoa industry and the issues that regularly arise around it, such as child labour, deforestation and living wages. As a result, they are more effective in their commitment to the cocoa sector. For example, the expulsion of the populations illegally settled in Mont Péko was made possible thanks to the actions of the human rights

² The Ivorian platform for sustainable cocoa

organisations members of the platform Regroupement des Acteurs Ivoiriens des Droits Humains and Mouvement Ivoirien des Droits Humains [3]. This type of infiltration helps to reduce the reputation of Ivorian cocoa.

Even if things are starting to move in certain areas, it emerged from the interviews that the impact on farmers' incomes is still less perceptible, and their living conditions are still precarious.

DISCUSSION

The observation that producers were not very committed to taking action to defend their rights in the cocoa value chain, or that they had little capacity to influence decisions in the sector, led Inades-Formation to broaden its field of action with a view to guiding these social players towards the development of an advocacy mechanism. This commitment, materialised by the project "Strengthening civil society organisations and cocoa producer organisations in political dialogue in Côte d'Ivoire", has resulted in a permanent framework for consultation, exchange of information and training on the major issues in the cocoa sector between local civil society organisations and international NGOs. The crowning achievement of all these actions was the drafting of the advocacy manual, which will serve as a guide for the advocacy activities of the organisations involved. As a result, there are now some prospects for political commitment on the part of CSOs and certain cooperative leaders who are more dynamic in their approach to cocoa-growing issues. This support model facilitated by Inades-formation and Inkota-Netzwerk, in which Ivorian organisations benefit directly from the experience and strategies of international organisations fighting for producers' rights in terms of advocacy, appears to be a reinvention in the face of the institutional and political obstacles identified by Affou (1997). The latter, in a historical analysis of farmers' organisations, showed that the involvement of politicians at certain levels of the management and operation of these organisations, whether under the single-party system or in the early days of the multi-party system, makes them ineffective for actions to demand better living conditions for producers.

Despite the significant progress made in setting up an advocacy system, the permanence of the actions initiated and the influence of producers in decision-making within the cocoa value chain also depend on the removal of certain constraints that have persisted for several years. In this regard, Vanga (2012) mentioned the low level of education among producers and the lack of a real system of communication between cooperative organisation managers and members, most of whom are small-scale producers who are unaware of the group's

objectives. According to him, the crisis in communication about the real prices of products and the redistribution of profits has led to the demotivation and resignation of some members of cooperative groups (p.147) in the Sassandra context. The platform's communication model must be able to incorporate the diversification of profiles (age, level of education, place of residence, etc.) in the design of information and training tools.

The second constraint, which is seen as a cause of the previous situation, is highlighted in the work of Ruf *et al.*, (2018), which indicates that the mechanism for implementing cooperatives has an impact on their operation and the commitment of cocoa farmers. According to the author, *"barely 20% of cooperatives can still be considered as created by a nucleus of farmers wishing to group together. Nearly 50% of cooperatives are run by former traders who still manage the cooperative structure as their own personal or family business"*. In such a context, financial gain and above all the certification premium is the main motivation for the creation of these cooperatives, which are less and less interested in actions aimed at improving the living conditions of real producers.

Thus, in order to achieve their advocacy objectives, the cooperative organisations that are members of the platform must work to encourage producers to support the cause being defended. As Bonjean and Chambas (2001, p47) have pointed out, real producers are less active within cooperatives and less involved in actions to defend their rights, claiming that they do not see the benefits of joining these organisations. Having the feeling that they are being exploited by cooperative managers for their own benefit, producers show no willingness to implement the decisions taken, even if these could improve their production (Ruf, 2021, p 8). This indicates how the involvement of producers in the development of the advocacy is an essential approach to the success of the program. Efforts must be made to encourage them to take ownership of the commitments that have been made within the collaborative platform as well as international and national organizations.

Furthermore, the focus on sustainable development activities tends to overshadow social actions, which are an essential part of the commitment of producer groups, who take part in the development of producer communities by building socio-economic infrastructure (schools, dispensaries, water pumps) to give cocoa farmers and their families easier access to basic social services (Zou and Nassa, 2022, p.91).

³ Grouping of Ivorian Human Rights Actors and the Ivorian Human rights Movement

CONCLUSION

With a view to enabling Ivorian producers to multiply their efforts to improve their living and working conditions, the national organisations, in collaboration with their European partners, have set up the Ivorian platform for sustainable cocoa. This framework facilitates the transfer of knowledge and skills from international NGOs to human rights and producer organisations in terms of advocacy and cocoa-related issues. This enables them to revitalise their participation in political dialogue and to be more active in the fight for sustainable cocoa production. The strategies adopted to promote the appropriation of advocacy ideals are based on the organization of training sessions and the provision of information on developments in the field of cocoa farming in a simple and accessible format. This initiative mobilises cooperative managers and delegates with a view to reaching producers and involving them in dialogue.

This organizational system, which is part of collaborative relationships between organizations in the North and the South, encourages the transfer of advocacy skills to make local organisations more effective in defending producers' interests. Sharing information and knowledge within the platform enables local organisations to be more active in the fight against illegal occupation of classified forests and, more generally, to take action to ensure the sustainability of cocoa production.

Beyond the development of advocacy, it would be important on the one hand to gather the means for effective lobbying of government authorities to take into account the proposals that will be made, and on the other hand to intensify information campaigns in cocoa-producing communities with a view to effectively mobilising real cocoa producers and involving them in actions to defend their rights.

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