Cash crops as the cornerstone of food security: the case for cocoa

More than 70 per cent of the world’s cocoa comes from West Africa, accounting for US$8 billion in annual revenues for the region. The crop forms the economic backbone of many West African countries and provides a livelihood for nearly two million smallholder farmers.

Most cocoa farmers, including Kwabena Kwarteng, 49, from the Agona Nsabaa community in central Ghana, use outdated agricultural practices and are ill-informed about newer, well researched concepts for managing healthy cocoa farms. Trees produce well below their maximum potential and governments have been slow to capitalize on proper management and investment in resources. Consequently, Mr. Kwarteng, like many of his peers, usually harvests only a few bags of cocoa from his 1 hectare cocoa farm.

The cocoa tree (Theobroma cacao) thrives in the West African climate and is a reliable cash crop to many farmers, who know that they can usually produce at least a few bags of cocoa from their farms. Often, though, a few bags from one crop provide too little income for a farm family and certainly cannot feed either the farmer’s family or West Africa’s burgeoning population.

Global deficit

Especially troubling for chocolate lovers, such low rates of production are also forecast to contribute within the next few years to a global deficit in cocoa supply. Many development and cocoa experts are trying to help farmers increase production so that they can help meet rising global demand for chocolate and earn more cash to invest in their farms and on essential household expenses like food, healthcare and school fees.

For West African cocoa farmers such as Mr. Kwarteng it is important to ensure that any increase in production doesn’t only come from expanding the area of land they use to grow cocoa but that by improving productivity on existing farms and taking advantage of diversified cropping.

Cocoa farmers should be a focal point in any discussion about increasing productivity as a means of bolstering regional food security. They have already mastered concepts essential for producing crops and bringing a product to market, and cocoa trees are well suited for combining with other food crops. As such, cocoa farmers are uniquely positioned to form a cornerstone of food security strategies in large swaths of West Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America.

In West Africa, cocoa farmers own an average of less than two hectares of land. Increased productivity means that farmers can increase their overall cocoa yield, while growing additional food crops on the same property, right alongside their cocoa trees. One household thus relies on cash cropping to provide a reliable base of income and, importantly, looks to other food crops for both subsistence and to take to market for additional income. This improves availability, accessibility, and stability of food supply in the region, at the household level, and in the marketplace.

What works?

Through public-private partnerships, the World Cocoa Foundation (WCF) is working with governments, member companies, development funders, and others to better understand local realities faced by cocoa farmers and to find common solutions. New insights are giving rise to efforts that allow food to be grown using methods that incorporate modern practices.

The result is better food security for cocoa farmers and their neighbours, and national progress toward achieving global development objectives like the Millennium
Development Goals. The focus is on working with West African farmers, such as Mr Kwarteng, to ensure sustainable, food secure households in cocoa growing communities in two key ways:

- Teaching, and then following up, to ensure that farmers are applying what they learn about basic production and business practices, and

- Institutional strengthening.

Simply put, farmers who apply good agricultural practices (GAP) and use sound business models can improve their productivity and yields in as little as one or two growing seasons. These practices help to support sustainable livelihoods and food secure households in cocoa producing communities while also addressing environmental and social issues.

In the cocoa sector, GAP might include planting oil palm trees, fruit trees, plantain, coconut trees, and other shade trees at 10ft intervals to provide the right amount of shade to cocoa. Products from the other trees provide additional food for the household and extra income if brought to local markets.

GAP also includes proper application to cocoa trees of fertilizers and appropriate use of insecticides and fungicides that are transferable to other food crops. For example, a farmer who applies fertilizer to a cocoa tree will also be applying fertilizer to the shade tree growing alongside it.

Application of such GAPs to other crops has the potential to also improve productivity of the entire farm. These improvements occur on the same plot of land that farmers have always worked, and constitute a sustainable alternative to buying up more land (which most farmers cannot afford) and/or deforesting new areas to use for mono-cropping of cocoa.

Good agricultural practices

GAP also focuses on training farmers to use improved planting materials. This helps raise yields and incomes, ultimately impacting food security. For example, in Ghana, farmers begin to establish their own nurseries from improved seedlings accessed from Ghana Cocoa Board (Cocobod) extension agents. Coupled with other good agricultural practices, such as pruning, younger trees produce more cocoa than older trees. In Mr Kwarteng’s case, before being trained, he eschewed pruning any of his trees and had not properly applied fertilizer.

Farmer training also must include instruction in business management practices on and off the farm. Many smallholder farmers in West Africa fail to calculate farm costs as compared to earned income. With training, they manage business costs for the next growing season. This also helps farmers decide for themselves to diversify their income so that they can offset losses incurred, for example, when the cocoa crop is adversely affected by weather.

By employing business management concepts to their daily work, farmers are increasing their household incomes. The result: more disposable income to cover household expenses, including food, school fees, and healthcare. Studies have also demonstrated a strong inverse relationship between rising levels of income and the presence of the worst forms of child labour in West Africa’s cocoa sector.

Institutional strengthening

Cocoa-producing countries in West Africa have a vested interest in the crop’s growth and reliability. Revenue earned by cocoa exports is a significant counterbalance to the costs of other food imports (especially wheat and rice, which are highly desired by urban populations). Cocoa offsets by a ratio of more than 3:1 the value of those commodities.

Recognising cocoa’s national importance, Ghana, for example, is actively strengthening relevant institutions. Much of this support takes the form of private-public partnerships (PPPs), which increasingly are the vehicle for carrying out holistic cocoa sustainability programmes that focus on comprehensive production and business training for farmers, as well as increased literacy for cocoa growing communities.

With the support of private-public partnerships, cocoa extension work in Ghana has expanded to more cocoa growing communities. Production and business trainings like those described above are embraced by government, and interventions have also spurred on efficiency in government provision of inputs, such as fertilizer. The entire cocoa value chain benefits, from the farm to getting cocoa and other produce to market, to training and building capacity locally for cocoa logistics, such as land transport and shipping. These processes all reinforce the value of successful cocoa productivity for the farmer and the nation.

Food security calculation

Improved production practices in cocoa farming, supported by international development investments like those from USAID, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and from cocoa and chocolate companies, form an integral part of the long-term food security calculation.
Efficiencies in cocoa farming raise the average cocoa yield per household and encourage better land use and crop diversification, helping many smallholder farmers to withstand shocks in the cocoa market while still cultivating the cash crop to buttress their total income.

Importantly, in learning sustainable cocoa production practices, farmers see the value beyond fulfilling basic needs and instead see it as a successful business. Farmers see for themselves that there is a tangible link between their labour, increased yields, improved livelihoods, and food security as well as with the overall economic feasibility of their farming as a sustainable business and its links to a successful national economy.

Real results

WCF works with chocolate/cocoa industry partners, governments, and technical experts in a private-public partnership to provide production and business skills training to smallholder cocoa farmers in Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia and Nigeria. After an initial phase to foster capacity in existing training outfits, like agricultural extension, training modules are transferred to local institutions.

In Ghana, for example, Cocobod has assumed responsibility for some of the WCF programmes, renaming them “Farmer Business School”, and incorporating them into its agricultural extension activities.

Through such training, farmers learn how to view their farms as money-making business ventures that are capable of sustaining households and increasing food security. They learn to live off the land better, contributing to other ancillary benefits like increased soil fertility and water retention. Farmers come to know the advantages of saving and planning for future harvests of both cocoa and their other crops.

Training farmers can help them appreciate the value of sustainable production practices and see their farms as businesses.

Smallholders as businessmen

For Mr Kwarteng’s farm in central Ghana, results were dramatic: a more than three-fold increase in his cocoa harvest over the previous year. As another Ghanaian farmer explained to in-country WCF staff, “I now think of farming as a business and don’t sell my cassava and plantain for any price. I sell for the price that is best for me, for my farm and best for all my income. I plan money-in/money-out for my cocoa as well.”

In addition to Kwabena Kwarteng’s successes, the wisdom of this model was demonstrated recently when many farmers witnessed a reduction in income from cocoa because of heavier than normal rainfall, but saw their overall income increase as a result of crop diversification.

* by Sona Ebel, Mbafo Nlillye and Laura Ostenso. Sona Ebel is Lagos-based senior technical advisor, governance and policy, for WCF’s African Cocoa Initiative; Mbafo Nlillye is the Accra-based director for WCF’s Cocoa Livelihoods Programme; and Laura Ostenso is a Lending International Hunger Fellow, based in Accra.

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