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Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS)
Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award - Field Report

Cocoa Cultivation and Forest Conservation in Cote d'Ivoire

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Thanks in part to the generosity of the IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award, I had the opportunity to spend 9 weeks in Cote d'Ivoire in June and July of 2018 conducting fieldwork on the cocoa sector for my master's thesis. Cote d'Ivoire has a rich history of cocoa production, dating back to French colonial rule in the mid-1900s. Cocoa is credited with much of the national economic development in the latter half of the 20th century, and today Cote d'Ivoire is the world's largest exporter of cocoa. However, the production of cocoa, the main component in chocolate, comes at a significant social and environmental cost. Despite the wealth of the large agribusinesses that source much of their cocoa from West Africa, the vast majority of smallholder cocoa farmers live in extreme poverty. Furthermore, Cote d'Ivoire, once a richly forested hotspot of biodiversity, has seen dramatic deforestation as a consequence of its cocoa boom. The remaining forest cover is a fraction of what it was only a few decades ago. To combat this ecologic crisis, in November of 2017, 21 of the major chocolate companies and cocoa exporters signed on to a joint agreement with the national governments of Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana to stop buying cocoa sourced from deforested areas or protected forests. Furthermore, chocolate companies are increasingly turning to certification programs – sustainable sourcing standards by organizations like Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, or UTZ – as a strategy to mitigate the environmental consequences of the cocoa they buy. My thesis work aims to understand cocoa

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supply chain dynamics and the influence that these relationships have on environmental management and agricultural practices. Furthermore, I plan to explore the potential of sustainable cocoa initiatives, specifically through the lens of agroforestry programs.

I spent the first and last weeks of my summer fieldwork in Cote d'Ivoire in the capital of Abidjan, where I conducted interviews with government officials, policy-makers, researchers and NGOs involved in forest conservation and/or cocoa policy. This phase of fieldwork provided insight on the current state of the policy, likely obstacles to implementation, and the role that cocoa plays at a national level. The majority of my time abroad was spent in Soubré, a department in Southwest Cote d'Ivoire that is an important hub of cocoa cultivation and export. Here I conducted interviews with planters, representatives of agricultural cooperatives, traders, and cocoa buyers. While in country, I partnered with an international NGO, The Forest Trust (TFT), who has offices both in Abidjan and in Soubré. This affiliation provided me with valuable connections to important players in the industry and the TFT staff was a wealth of local, expert knowledge on all things cocoa. I also hired a local research assistant who helped facilitate communication and conduct interviews.

In Abidjan, I conducted a total of nine unstructured interviews with a diverse set of key informants, including cabinet ministers, researchers, government advisors, representatives of certification programs, and NGO staff. While based in Soubré, I spent time in two villages – Dobré and Baleyo – where I conducted a total of 48 individual planter interviews and 5 group interviews. During this time I also

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did 18 interviews of individuals one step up the supply chain from farmers: representatives of agricultural cooperative and large, independent buyers.

I will use this data to address the research questions that form the basis of my thesis:

- 1) What factors influence farmers' selling patterns? What factors influence whether or not farmers choose to be certified?
- 2) What do certified farmers understand of the rules related to agroforestry? How do certification programs monitor agroforestry and how do farmers think agroforestry is monitored? Do certified farmers have more trees?

Overall, I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to spend two months engaged in meaningful fieldwork, and my time abroad was both productive from the standpoint of my thesis and intellectually challenging. Thanks to the generous support of the IRIS award I made valuable progress in my academic and research trajectory, for which I am so very grateful.