Cocoa sustainability initiatives and the environment: mapping stakeholder priorities and representations

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Abstract
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Given growing concerns regarding the chocolate sector’s long-term future, ever more private-sector, public-sector and civil-society stakeholders have become involved in initiatives aiming to make cocoa production more ‘sustainable’. However, despite the omnipresent term, stakeholders’ understandings of associated environmental, commercial and socio-economic priorities diverge: while transforming cocoa into a more attractive livelihood for farmers is paramount for some, others prioritise links to global environmental challenges. A third dimension encompasses commercial concerns related to securing supply, an increasing qualm given projected cocoa shortages and ever-rising concentration in the marketplace.

This research argues there are considerable tensions between different stakeholders’ commercial, socio-economic and environmental priorities in cocoa sustainability initiatives especially in light of the sector’s intensifying challenges. Further tensions emerge between underlying drivers and representations, as public-facing communication continues to emphasise altruism rather than commercial necessity, locating engagements in ‘nice-to-have’ rather than ‘business imperative’ territory. Based on documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation, this thesis aims to capture how cocoa-sector changes have driven shifts in stakeholder priorities and representations, incorporating voices from across the initiatives ranging from cocoa producers to chocolate consumers.

Utilising a modified global production networks lens to represent the full spectrum of stakeholders involved, the research maps three cocoa sustainability initiatives incorporating conservation or carbon measures in terms of power and embeddedness, stakeholder drivers and representations. While identifying tensions, it also argues that acknowledging divergent understandings of the polysemic ‘sustainability’ concept constitutes an opportunity for a much-needed redressing of power and embeddedness asymmetries to address systemic issues threatening the sector’s future. However, the thesis also observes that despite protestations of partnership, few actors are willing to contemplate the systemic changes in favour of more equitable treatment and power distribution which would be required to safeguard the sector’s long-term viability.

This thesis’s contributions include its unprecedented critical exploration of the diverging socio-economic, commercial and environmental drivers which diverse stakeholders associate with cocoa sustainability, the meanings they create towards the public, and the link to underlying power and embeddedness structures. These analytical foci have proved instrumental in unpacking emerging tensions, which are likely to grow more marked as cocoa shortages become more acute and understandings of sustainability continue to diverge.

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If you would like more information beyond this abstract, please contact me: judith.krauss@manchester.ac.uk Thank you!