Research findings and contributions

PhD thesis title: Cocoa sustainability initiatives and the environment: mapping stakeholder priorities and representations

Examined in March 2016, University of Manchester
Judith E Krauss

All results in this document are based on my PhD research – thank you ever so much to everyone who made a contribution to it in whatever way. This study would not have been possible without your generosity, your time and your expertise – I am deeply indebted to you! I cannot name you for reasons of confidentiality, but you know who you are.

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Research findings and contributions

PhD thesis title: Cocoa sustainability initiatives and the environment: mapping stakeholder priorities and representations

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1. Recommendations in a nutshell

- Identify different cocoa sustainability stakeholders’ diverse priorities in the socio-economic, environmental and commercial domains to be aware of divergences and tensions (cf. page 11/12)
- Use this identification process as an opportunity for engaging and encouraging all stakeholders to voice their own concerns
  - This is a crucial prerequisite to build partnerships on equal footing
  - This can help encourage innovation and ideas from stakeholders who may otherwise feel disempowered
- The severity of the challenges in the cocoa sector necessitates outside-the-box thinking
- This is also an opportunity: the uncontested nature of the crisis means outside-the-box thinking is necessary and can help question ingrained injustices
  - Promote a living income for all cocoa farmers irrespective of certification status
  - Do away with productivity-maximising, short-termist environmental degradation – given limited production surfaces, we cannot afford to waste any. Consider multiple socio-economic and environmental benefits of diverse cocoa agroforestry systems
  - Rethink what parts of the value chain receive what shares of the price of a chocolate bar: do retail and marketing consuming the vast majority help boost cocoa sustainability, or are they a hindrance?
  - Support greater value capture in the global South through infrastructure/production
- Use greater honesty in consumer-facing representations (i.e. commercial communication): share projected shortages to make consumers aware of the situation’s severity. Continuing altruism-based discourse masks the actual severity of the situation – allow consumers to engage with it and make their own contribution through consumption choices
- Promote more genuine communication between North and South: hire more staff with language skills permitting immediate exchanges with cocoa producers to increase their participation in public-facing communication and the chocolate production process (material and narrative)
- Rethink the premise and scope of certification: Who is it really for? Can the present manifestation of certification deliver the objectives you would define for certification?
- Examine the opportunities for national-level binding cocoa standards: safeguarding improved social and environmental production conditions across the board, not only for fragmented certified production sites
2. Abstract

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.

My doctoral 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.
# 3. Chapter structure

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4. Argument and summary

Fundamentally, my thesis argues that there have been two thrusts underlying the current rapid expansion of cocoa sustainability initiatives, with the first capitalising on responsive consumers, but the second stemming from a perceived business imperative. Firstly, there is a notion that companies showing themselves to be more ethically responsible will improve their embeddedness with the growing cohort of responsive consumers and stakeholders. This dimension has recently also acquired an environmental aspect given growing public awareness. This category inhabits, to a degree, the ‘nice-to-have’ sphere, capitalising on the business opportunity which responsive consumers constitute. However, a second thrust has recently emerged which has transformed ‘sustainability’ thinking into a business imperative. The second thrust stems from concerns about the long-term ability of cocoa production to meet demand, resulting on the demand side from emerging markets’ hunger for chocolate. On the supply side, socio-economic factors driving shortage fears include the increasing average age of cocoa farmers in West Africa and the livelihood’s lacking attractiveness for young generations, while climate change and spreading degrading practices on limited production surfaces are among the environmental causes for concern. Commercial challenges include the ever-contracting, oligopolistic marketplace, raising questions whether manufacturers will be able to source supply at their desired quality and price long-term.

This amalgamation of factors from the socio-economic, environmental and commercial dimensions is causing private-sector actors to question where cocoa which satisfies their price, quality and ethical standards is to come from in the long term. Consequently, supply security and thus a predominantly commercial impetus occupies a far more prominent place than before, justifying the following overarching research question:

How are cocoa-sector changes driving shifts in stakeholder priorities and representations in cocoa sustainability initiatives, particularly regarding the environment?

To answer this question, the study first mapped the cocoa sector in general before analysing three cocoa sustainability initiatives incorporating environmental measures from a global production networks perspective. A second step analysed stakeholder drivers in terms of socio-economic, environmental and commercial goals through the constellations of priorities model. Finally, the study investigated how the previously identified drivers related to the meanings created in stakeholders’ public-facing communication.

The research has confirmed several of my initial arguments. Firstly, empirical data from the three case-studies and beyond confirmed that cocoa sustainability initiatives have changed across low-end, mainstream and niche markets in response to cocoa-sector shifts. Secondly, all three initiatives confirmed the research’s second contention regarding different stakeholders’ framings of sustainability and thus socio-economic, environmental and commercial priorities partly
dovetailing, but partly diverging considerably, entailing tensions. Investigating different constellations of priorities proved that diverging stakeholder understandings require discussion. The examination of how stakeholders represented these priorities and their overall initiatives towards the public yielded interesting insights into the meanings created, which foregrounded not underlying commercial drivers, but altruistic, socio-economic and environmental drivers more likely to create embeddedness and incite support. The meanings created thus do not draw attention to fundamentally unsound socio-economic and environmental practices such as poor livelihoods and degrading productivity maximisation which have contributed to the shortage concerns. Instead, they emphasise that sustainability thinking is still nice-to-have and an altruistic pursuit which entails benefits for cocoa producers, mirroring the first thrust of sustainability as a business opportunity. In this way, Northern-dominated representations perpetuate the asymmetric power and embeddedness relations they purport to bridge, standing in the way of the systemic changes the cocoa sector’s challenges require.

Although my case-study initiatives pay cocoa prices exceeding world market levels, much to cocoa producers’ appreciation, it is noteworthy that they nevertheless do not fundamentally challenge the status quo and common socio-environmental shortcomings, confirming a continuing dominance of Northern-based actors. These shortcomings include most cocoa producers’ poor livelihoods and incentives favouring resource exploitation, the inability of fragmented smallholder producers to bargain effectively with oligopolistic buyers, and the absence of chocolate production infrastructure in the global South. Dominant actors tweak ‘business as usual’ only as far as necessary to promote long-term cocoa availability while maintaining power asymmetries and enhancing societal and territorial embeddedness for themselves. Evidence from research participants suggests that these observations apply even more markedly for other cocoa-sector cases, which show the hesitation against moving towards a multipolar sector and instead demonstrate centripetal, concentrating forces which do not address the industry’s fundamental problems.

At present, answers in the transformational spirit required by the cocoa sector’s systemic challenges are still in their infancy in the sector. Only few, marginal stakeholders are willing to rethink the flawed practices in trade relations between cocoa producers and cocoa buyers causing socio-economic and environmental issues. For most actors, society continues to be an adjunct of economic activity, with socio-environmental improvements only required to facilitate business’s continuation; however, this view still fails to recognise the magnitude of existing precarities and necessary changes to power and embeddedness constellations to address stakeholder tensions. With the majority content to tweak the symptoms rather than address causes, stakeholders are wont to represent recent measures increasing sustainability engagements as sufficient and considerable progress. The logic is that communication depicting them as necessity-based would fail to enhance embeddedness with Northern consumers. In theory, increasing cocoa shortages may augment collective power for cocoa producers. However, the fragmentation of producers and persisting successive oligopolies in the global North owning value-adding infrastructure mean that an actual shift of dominance is unlikely. Northern actors continue to control decision-making and communication channels, enforcing their priorities and communicating their
representations, thereby enhancing embeddedness and cementing power structures. The dynamic thus accentuates the North-South divide which initiatives’ ‘partnerships’ purport to bridge, with Northern stakeholders’ societal and territorial embeddedness thus outweighing other stakeholders’ interests. This, alongside many other tensions, complicates ‘sustainability’ thinking in the cocoa sector given stakeholders’ very different power and embeddedness positions in leveraging the concept, and their manifold socio-economic, environmental and commercial priorities and communication in relation to what they take it to mean.

If taken seriously, this engagement with the above-explained multitude of tensions offers an opportunity to question entrenched perceptions on existing vested interests and the ability to negotiate them with and between private-sector, public-sector and civil-society actors, from global North and global South equally. It offers the chance to recognise, for the cocoa sector and beyond, that socio-environmental circumstances are what economic activity is embedded in, bestowing genuine power unto whomever has the best plan for improving them rather than maximising market opportunities. Given the multitude of actors and tensions, the greatest likelihood of success again stems from a multi-stakeholder engagement with the very tensions creating complications, so as to increase the likelihood of resolving them collectively. Although this contravenes ingrained, vested power and embeddedness interests for stakeholders in supposedly comfortable positions of influence in the cocoa sector, resolving the sector’s precarious challenges will require enlisting outside-the-box solutions which go beyond any one actor, but distribute power and embeddedness more evenly. It would require recognising individual actors’ limitations and the need for genuine equal partnership to overcome them. It also would require that particularly Northern stakeholders acknowledge that socio-environmental improvements for the global South are not a privilege, but a right, not in the spirit of charity, but equity. The sector’s future hinges on private-sector, public-sector and civil-society stakeholders practising a collective socio-environmental engagement which recognises existing tensions and uses them as an opportunity to incorporate all stakeholders in a more equitable fashion, a principle worth applying also beyond the cocoa sector.

5. Necessary change

Overall, the meaning created so far in the analysed cocoa sustainability initiatives is that business as usual is fundamentally the right and sound approach, the only exception being the slightly scaled-up ‘sustainability’ efforts which individual sector actors will pursue. Beyond the first thrust of the business opportunity of consumer awareness, the business imperative underlying the second thrust raises more profound questions also challenging the sector’s long-term viability, which the sector is as yet unable to answer. Only few and generally marginal actors have a willingness to question and change the whole system in the way the second thrust would require it, in the spirit of recognising that economic activity is embedded in society and not vice versa. Most are content to doctor the symptoms rather than address the causes, as the causes would require fundamental alterations in operations and resources, such as paying much higher cocoa prices throughout the sector rather than to a few beneficiaries of ‘sustainability’ measures. While notionally, cocoa shortages would contribute to an increase in power for producers vis-à-vis
oligopolistic brand manufacturers, the smallholder-dominated producer structure, fragmentation of cocoa producers and Northern-controlled value-adding infrastructure renders a redressing towards a multipolar sector challenging. Through their powerful standing and their privileged access to communication channels compared with most cocoa producers, Northern stakeholders have the forum to enforce their priorities and communicate their messages, enhancing embeddedness and cementing power structures. However, with connections established on Northern actors’ terms, this dynamic functions to reinforce the North-South divide they purport to bridge. Safeguarding cocoa availability long-term, and thus socio-environmental benefits from it, is predicated on the sector at large moving towards a serious engagement with the changed socio-environmental practices necessary to protect their economic activity long-term.

To address systemic issues, I would argue changes far beyond the – already sizeable, and appreciated – price hikes all three buyers in my case-studies offered would be required. Addressing these inequities would firstly require the whole sector to increase cocoa prices significantly, rather than having a limited number of companies pay slightly higher prices to a limited number of beneficiaries of a well-publicised ‘sustainability’ measure. Far beyond that, addressing these issues would mean no longer prioritising selling an actual or ideational product through favourable representations of oneself. It would mean acknowledging the fundamental tenet of fairness, of treating other stakeholders across the production network as one would have others treat oneself, as a priority throughout the network to bring about actual long-term ‘sustainability’. It would mean accepting and applying a far-reaching sense of fundamental responsibility for environment and fellow network stakeholders, going further than my case-studies: this would also mean that buyers would no longer divert responsibility to certifiers through labels, but buyers, civil society and certifiers would acknowledge such measures’ inherent partiality and the importance of addressing issues holistically, even at the expense of saleable commodities such as labels or damning press releases. It would involve acknowledging and altering the power concentration in successive mostly Northern oligopolies, a concentration that is exacerbating shortage concerns and is increasing not decreasing. It would also involve addressing the degrading practices which have defined the cocoa sector for decades, conjuring up the very socio-economic and environmental issues causing the fear of cocoa shortages now. It would involve paying significantly higher cocoa prices to producers. More generally, it would involve designing networks which are mission-driven in the sense of establishing partnerships with shared benefits, power and responsibility for Southern actors rather than perpetuated Northern dominance, on the part of civil society, private sector and public sector alike. It would involve accepting rather than shirking responsibility for the environment and between humans, a principle which would merit application not only in cocoa sustainability initiatives, but much further afield.

6. Conceptual recommendations
My study established that different stakeholders’ socio-economic, environmental and commercial priorities diverge considerably. The addition of environmental concerns, while engaging and enthusing new clienteles and tapping into further beneficial potentials from cocoa agroforestry,
also adds another layer of complexity to existing tensions between socio-economic and commercial considerations. This thus compels stakeholders with greater power within the initiatives to take even greater care to analyse less powerful stakeholders’ drivers and objectives so as to avoid tensions. Self-assessing own drivers and assessing other stakeholders’ drivers can be an opportunity to take other stakeholders’ concerns seriously, and encourage their participation and contribution to directing and driving the engagement. My research developed a model which allows stakeholders to assess systematically their own and other actors’ drivers in socio-economic, environmental and commercial terms. The objective is to identify points of divergence as potential sources of tension between private-sector, public-sector and civil-society stakeholders across the initiatives, exploring drivers and their implications for different stakeholders’ realities as well as connections to the complex power and embeddedness relations established previously. Applying the model to different stakeholders, my research mapped the binary presence or absence of twelve priorities for stakeholders in three dimensions. The colourful dots represent presence of a priority, with the colourful lines connecting them for clearer visualisation:

Figure 1: Constellations of priorities model.

This visualisation, albeit tentative, with different axis designations is also applicable to other sectors in which competing stakeholders offer diverging and partly incommensurable priorities in relation to commercial, socio-economic and environmental terms. It shows different stakeholders potential tensions, needs for conversation and opportunities for engagement to encourage contributions and consideration from different stakeholders.

Judith Krauss
7. Recommendations for different stakeholder groups

The following section aims to bridge the divide between thesis and practice to feed back some insights to the research participants from whose expertise, generosity and time I benefited greatly. It will discuss different recommendations for different stakeholder types in turn, building directly on the results of the above analysis.

7.1 Cocoa producers

Various recommendations emerge for cocoa producers, although several of them are predicated on engagement with other stakeholders. Firstly, the study confirmed the research’s hypothesis of ever-growing commercial drivers from private-sector actors. On the one hand, this represents a risk as demonstrated by the thesis, with commercial objectives threatening to overwhelm environmental and particularly socio-economic goals in initiatives. However, increased demand can also entail greater collective power for producers. Producers’ fragmentation renders enacting it difficult; however, farmer organisation can improve bargaining power and standing, especially for cooperatives offering particular cocoa qualities. A key support would be breaking the continued Northern dominance of representations through own communication channels. Independent communication not under the auspices of Northern partners with own agendas, would help to remedy the existing shortcoming of Northern private-sector, public-sector and
civil-society stakeholders speaking for Southern producers, disempowering them. Resurrecting Fairtrade’s original premise of establishing direct politicised connections between Northern chocolate consumers and Southern cocoa producers to enhance social justice could promote greater equality between stakeholders. Small-scale ventures, particularly those transforming cocoa into chocolate in the global South, offer a high likelihood of power shifts to the global South, addressing one key criticism of this thesis. However, these ventures, ranging from chocolate production in a small-scale cooperative, to operations selling chocolate in-country and internationally, often struggle in setting up export channels to better-off customers in the global North. This finding harks back to the successive oligopolies dominating the chocolate sector, and the importance of legislation.

A final aspect, predicated on public-sector support, would be establishing national-level standards. The International Cocoa Organisation advocates this approach (Interview #125, government). This way, minimum standards for cocoa prices, health and safety requirements, working conditions and environmental conduct would not be conditional upon the somewhat haphazard ability of individuals or cooperatives to comply with standards. This would address my previous criticism of certification’s partiality on the country level by guaranteeing certain standards for all national cocoa producers and buyers. From a socio-economic point of view, this would not make better prices conditional on the somewhat fortuitous ability to sell the product at a good price and with a certification premium. Rather, the added certification benefits would be universal across a country, thereby also encouraging improvements such as eradicating exploitative child labour through improved livelihoods across the board rather than select audited farms. Environmentally and particularly from a biodiversity perspective, cocoa agroforestry on a landscape level outweighs the benefits of individual compliant farms. Incidentally, this also applies for ‘social’ diseases such as moniliasis which can spread even on a well-managed farm if adjacent plots are less well-kept.

7.2 Cooperatives
In the above-sketched recommendations for cocoa producers, cooperatives of producers play a key role in several suggestions. One such aspect is in providing financial and administrative resources to establish communication channels with the global North, with another being supporting national-level certification to address partiality and dependence on commercial certifiers. Even beyond their role in facilitating improvements for cocoa producers, cooperatives occupy a crucial conduit function for and between public-sector, private-sector and civil-society actors. For NGOs and public-sector actors, supporting cooperatives helps to demonstrate their support’s relevance to society at large. Donors frequently view cooperatives, being rooted and embedded in the local territory, as vehicles to safeguard long-term capacity-building and support structures even beyond the duration of project funding (Interviews #83, #123, development). For cocoa producers, cooperatives often provide a vital sales outlet for multiple crops, boosting household incomes and food security. If cooperatives fail to function for whatever reason, this dual socio-economic benefit ceases, removing training, capacity-building and access to finance while forcing producers to sell at lower prices elsewhere. For private-sector actors, cooperatives crucially make supply available, safeguarding quality and quantity. Against this backdrop, a key
A key further aspect is establishing alternative export channels, a more viable proposition for cooperatives than individual producers. All three initiatives investigated in my study saw producers and cooperatives in somewhat captive situations, with one primary commercial outlet available and all other options practically prohibitive by virtue of the considerable price delta. While all three buyers paid premium prices, there were still virtual monopsonies, dictating quality requirements which cooperatives partly struggled with. By producing cocoa with a unique selling proposition, be it a certain certification scheme or exceptionally high quality, cooperatives can establish an export channel providing premium prices. An example could be Green & Black’s Maya Gold chocolate, with the company contractually obliged to source the cocoa from one specific cooperative in Belize, with double certification providing a premium price. An approach which would safeguard further value shares for the global South would be constructing infrastructure to move further processing steps up to and including chocolate production to the South, although this is likely to exceed most cooperatives’ budgets. Export channels, and non-prohibitive import provisions, for this Southern-manufactured chocolate are a crucial requirement to safeguard adequate returns for processing and manufacturing. Approaches increasing incomes in the global South could strengthen fellow cooperatives’ bargaining position vis-à-vis Northern oligopolies, contravening Northern interests.

7.3 NGOs
One key recommendation for NGOs, akin to the recommendations for development agencies, concerns transferring knowledge to the local and producer level. Particularly for producers in rural settings, capacity-building from NGOs and development agencies by way of cooperatives is often the only source of knowledge to improve plantation management, cocoa cultivation and harvesting. While there is often no shortage of printed materials including manuals, the final step transforming this into practical application is crucial. A second key recommendation concerns cooperatives, a crucial link for NGOs and development agencies to safeguard their ideas’ rootedness beyond their own project funding cycles. Supporting and strengthening cooperatives through capacity-building can also help redress some power imbalances resulting from successive oligopolies which dominate the chocolate sector. The more strong farmer organisations can counteract this Northern dominance, the more likely are mechanisms which boost household incomes, support diversified agroforestry systems, improve food security and limit environmental degradation. A final recommendation for NGOs concerns promoting Southern incomes through project funding decisions and priorities. Chocolate being manufactured at origin by small-scale cooperatives or chocolate manufacturers can redress some power asymmetries. This requires industrial infrastructure and skills which cooperatives frequently cannot finance on their own.

7.4 Development agencies
While many NGO recommendations equally apply for this stakeholder group, a key point for the development-agency level concerns their long-term presence as their funding flows are often more stable than for smaller-scale NGOs. Firstly, their multi-year, government-supervised presence can provide the stability necessary for organic, gradual progression, while also lending themselves to multi-year crops such as cocoa. Government negotiations with bilateral and multilateral funding bodies can provide the partner governments with more of a say in the evolution of development-agency projects than some NGO or local-government initiatives following other objectives. Development agencies’ close collaboration with governmental institutions in both North and South also means they can lobby for national-level standards through established communication channels with public-sector, civil-society and private-sector stakeholders, rendering them uniquely placed to support national-level standards institutionally across multiple partner countries. Equally, their unique quasi-public-sector function also bestows upon them a gatekeeper function especially in public-private partnerships, and a responsibility when it comes to mitigating the rise of commercial drivers in the private sector.

7.5 Government

National-level governments, in global North and South, play a key part as gatekeepers, for instance as legislators and in establishing national-level cocoa standards. Southern governments would have to dedicate resources to developing standards with the International Cocoa Organisation and other stakeholders, and implementing them, while Northern governments as food importers and donors would also have to lend support. Moreover, their gatekeeping role involves safeguarding that companies’ activities entail palpable benefits short-term and long-term. With the above analysis showing ever-rising commercial drivers, especially national-level governments also have a role to play in promoting initiatives’ non-commercial benefits and potentially providing a counter-voice to unilateral private-sector communication. A further key point is the relevance of governments as legislators. In one of the cases explored, an Association Agreement between the European Union and Central America prompted a paradigmatic change in the lead firm’s certifier preference. For regulating food imports and setting taxes on cocoa-bean, semi-processed or chocolate bar imports, regulators have a key role in shaping where value-adding processes such as chocolate production can occur, affecting power constellations in the chocolate sector. Local governments’ role, beyond gatekeeping locally and feeding back to the national level, proved crucial regarding the framing of the North-South relationship in the municipalities’ initiative, which used Northern-dominated representations to frame the conversation and generate notions of partnership between Northern and Southern stakeholders, and consumers and producers. While focus group discussants and members of the public as witnessed by participant observation viewed direct links between Northern and Southern municipalities positively as an opportunity for direct contact, equal partnership is predicated on all parties being able to contribute priorities, a key prerequisite for equal footing.

7.6 Private sector

Retailers only played a secondary role in this analysis. Nevertheless, a key recommendation for them is promoting small-scale ventures to support initiatives not forming part of any cocoa oligopoly, which is vital to strengthen other actors and improve alternative export channels for
cooperatives and cocoa producers, thereby redressing persisting power asymmetries. By supporting ‘alternative’ products, retailers can also encourage a greater diversity of cocoa types beyond the commonly consumed high-volume Forastero quality. Similarly, a key recommendation for small-scale chocolate companies based in the global South is continuing to support a broad variety of cocoa genetic quality of interest to consumers willing to pay premium prices, as the spread of productivity-maximising standardised hybrid or genetically modified varieties threatens their business model. A broad genetic pool can contribute to long-term availability by promoting varieties more resilient to changing climate or biodiversity circumstances, being in all cocoa stakeholders’ long-term interest.

The primary private-sector actors examined were Northern-based chocolate companies, for whom, as demonstrated, commercial drivers and particularly supply-security concerns have grown in importance. All three initiatives rely on premium prices for high-quality supply, with these stable sales outlets appreciated by growers and encouraging expansion of a multi-year crop. This mutually beneficial measure both boosted supply security and household incomes. However, all initiatives are predicated on or driven by growing commercial drivers, which are set to increase further in importance, threatening to jeopardise other socio-economic and environmental goals. This tension will aggravate as demand continues to rise and climate change effects grow more visible. A key recommendation for private-sector stakeholders is thus not to allow short-term commercial considerations to jeopardise long-term supply security by reducing cocoa prices or switching predominantly to in-house production. Socio-economic measures to shore up long-term availability include continuing to pay premium prices, relying on smallholders to spread risk and support local economies, and helping diversify household incomes to safeguard socio-economic viability. Environmentally, this would mean continuing to implement biodiversity and climate change-protecting measures to boost household incomes and safeguard producing environments, while steering clear of the productivity-maximising, but surface-degrading practices used elsewhere. Commercially, shifting production power and ownership shares to the global South could help redress existing successive oligopolies in the cocoa industry, while also giving Southern actors a greater-than-miniscule share in production network gains to increase ownership and safeguard the sector’s long-term viability.

The analysis demonstrated that Northern stakeholders often omitted in communication commercial drivers in favour of altruistic and mission-driven depictions. This omission makes it highly improbable for responsive consumers to engage with the fundamental poor practices including low socio-economic returns and productivity-maximising degradation which are threatening cocoa supply long-term. A key recommendation would therefore suggest promoting ways for consumers to engage with underlying inequalities directly, e.g. through direct communication channels to cocoa producers rather than an engagement through the prism of Northern commercial communication. This would allow the informed choice for consumers which one NGO called for as a key goal, as well as encouraging companies themselves to engage with ‘sustainability’ as the business imperative it is to their own survival.
7.7 Consumers
A recurring question in the focus group discussions and in sessions organised to feed back findings to interested consumers was advice on how to support producers rather than other network stakeholders. Rather than recommending one certifier or initiative, my study prompted me to encourage responsive consumers to research certifiers’ and stakeholders’ concrete sets of priorities, and their compatibility with their own preferences, and thus assume responsibility for their own consumption choices. I emphasised that especially chocolate production in the global South and other initiatives which safeguard higher value-capture at origin ought to be considered. It highlighted to consumers that non-certified chocolate bars sold at less than half the price most brand manufacturers charge, will be likely to have instances of socio-economic or environmental bad practice somewhere. Certified or premium-price choices cannot eliminate that possibility, but reduce its probability. A key recommendation was encouraging individuals to go beyond communication provided by initiative stakeholders on public-facing websites, attempting to obtain information also from critical NGOs and Southern stakeholders directly. Clearly, this will be limited by individual capacities regarding language skills, research competencies, time and data availability. However, as this research established multiple senses in which the suggestion of immediate, bias-free producer-consumer connections through Northern-dominated representations was flawed, individual awareness and corresponding research can facilitate informed choice and can help ensure there is indeed a congruence between consumers’ and initiatives’ priorities.