



Improving Access to Education for Cocoa Farming Families in the Ivory Coast





Firmly embedded in the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, education has been globally recognized as a lynchpin to solving the most pressing challenges faced by society.



As a result, notable strides have been made towards increasing equitable access to education in recent years. However, even prior to COVID-19, 53% of children in low- and middle-income countries could not read and understand simple text by the end of primary school. The pandemic has exacerbated existing education inequalities in unparalleled ways; children from disadvantaged households, disabled students, and girls in particular encountered barriers to accessing remote learning.¹

According to UNICEF, persistent child labor is a symptom and self-perpetuating cause of poverty in the cocoa sector, and significant parallels between education rates and child labor continue to emerge. As the world’s largest producer of cocoa, the Ivory Coast

is familiar with these issues. Cocoa provides income for approximately 20 percent of the population,² and while an integral part of the economy, the cocoa industry is rife with disparities.

Fair Trade USA™ recognizes these disparities and works with its partners to drive system-wide impact goals related to resilient and sustainable communities, prosperity, mutually beneficial trade, and conscious consumption. This means that the farmers, workers, and fishers participating in fair trade, along with their families and communities, are prosperous, resilient, and thriving. A critical precursor to those goals lies in addressing the inextricable link between poverty reduction and education.





METHODOLOGY

Over the last three years, Fair Trade USA has carried out mixed methods studies with nearly 4,000 participants to quantify and qualify the impact of Community Development Funds (CDFs) and minimum prices. Workers vote on how to distribute the funds accrued through the program's unique premium that is paid for commodities bought on fair trade terms and are thus able to address the most pressing needs of their communities.

Through qualitative surveys, Fair Trade USA has gauged participants' levels of satisfaction with CDF investments, as well as the impact of increasing the cocoa minimum price. In interviews and focus groups, Fair Trade USA listened to participants' stories of the significant changes they have experienced due to their participation in fair trade programs. In some instances, responses are anonymized and in others, workers are happy to have their names shared along with their stories.

How Fair Trade Certified™ Helps Advance Education

The Fair Trade Certified program was found to be effective in ensuring that smallholder farmers, fishers, and hired laborers were able to meet their basic needs, withstand shocks (like the pandemic), deal with emergencies, enhance their communities, and provide for their families. Among other positive outcomes, the Fair Trade Certified program was found to be a driver of increased education. A variety of education-related initiatives resulted from Community Development Fund investments, including scholarships for participants' children, the provision of school supplies, as well as improved infrastructure for schools.

Education Access

In the Ivory Coast, Community Development Fund projects made significant impacts on expanding education. For example, CDFs have supported the building of schools, meaning that more children were able to go to school locally and avoid long treks to distant locations – thereby increasing the likelihood that children stay in school.

As one farmer from Coop Carefsi in Koffikro noted:

"I watch my children who go to school next door and that makes me happy. It's something that reassures me."



In a focus group, another cocoa farmer discussed which projects had the most significance. The participant stated that: ***"They (the cooperative) built a school...School is the most significant change. Between Oumé and Boténé, there are 8 kms. A 6-years old child walking up there, that's exhausting. He will probably drop school at some point. And I really care about school."***



Tuition Fees

Some participants credit the CDF with being able to afford their children's school fees, as this was not the case prior to becoming fair trade participants. Adakpada Pascal, a treasurer on the Fair Trade Committee in Minore in the Ivory Coast shared that:

"After the crop season, they give us the cash payout. Honestly, the cash payout saved me. For the back-to-school period last year, it's only thanks to the cash payout that I've been able to send my kids to school. Therefore, it's really good."

One of the participants also uses the cash payout to support her children's education. In her words,

"I'm a widow, and I have 10 children. All of them are going to school. Right now, one of them is going to elementary school, and the oldest one, she's in 4th grade ... I need to support them so they can succeed."

A cocoa farmer shared that:

When I am given the cash, I have nine children who go to school. That is where I take them, I am going to give them a little and then I pay for their transport and then they go to school ...

School Supplies

Most of the countries that were sampled in the study had projects that provided school supplies for the children of hired laborers and smallholder farmers. Some of the participants appreciated the school supplies because it saved them money that they could then invest elsewhere. A female participant talked about how the provision of school supplies encouraged school attendance.



"They had bought pencil sharpeners for their children, [and] pencils. Even to have chalk, was difficult but when the children went to school they got kits, they were really happy because these are things they weren't used to having so we pay them. It encouraged [the children] to go to school."

Another participant was able to pay for his own education from the cash payout:

"Besides here, I take a course. Every month and almost at the end of every time we get the bonus, I have to pay the monthly tuition. From there I pay my monthly tuition and any materials or things I need."

Scholarships & Grants

Reports of receiving scholarships came from the Ivory Coast, Honduras, Colombia, and the Philippines. In most cases, farmers expressed gratitude for being able to send their children to tertiary education institutions.

A 53-year old farmer in the Oume section explained that the cooperative was supportive, which ultimately made the children able to attend school. In her words:

“Before joining the coop, the back-to-school period, in September, was a tough period for us. We never had any money for it. But now we can go to ask the cooperative for some help, so we’re very happy with that. Our children can go to school...”

Empowerment Through Training

Smallholder farmers or fishers often credited cooperatives with their experiences of empowerment, regarding them as structures that members can turn to for trainings that build professional capacity or financial literacy, so they can improve their businesses or finances.

In addition to bettering the lives of their families by facilitating access to schooling for their children, participants indicated that formal trainings on topics like financial management, organic farming practices, and child labor led to skill development and empowerment for participants themselves. One woman said, for example, “before, I didn’t know how to manage my money and be able to send money to the bank, I wasn’t using a bank account. But now I know, and I recently opened a small bank account. Also before, I didn’t know how to take care of my farm. I used to cut the beans with my machete, but I learned it should be done with wood.”



Zate Virginie, a cocoa farmer in Oume in the Ivory Coast with the Coopatesa cooperative, reported receiving a partial scholarship, or grant, for her daughter.

“...my daughter received some [financial] support, the cooperative gave me some money to send her to college in Abidjan. If I wasn’t a member of the cooperative, where could I find the money [to send my daughter to college]? Nowhere. So that’s good for me.”



Summary of Findings

The ability for farmers and workers to autonomously invest their Community Development Funds to increase access to education and improve education infrastructure can be transformational. Cash payouts have assisted with managing education expenses, while in-kind goods like school supplies allowed workers and farmers to save their earnings for other things. CDF projects have included building new schools, as well as updating existing schools with toilets, chairs, and tables.

The rate of child labor in cocoa-growing communities is significantly lower when the quality of education is higher. Education not only has a positive influence on the future of communities but protects children from harm. Although significant progress has been made, it is vital that it remains a central focus among corporations, NGOs, and international entities concerned with sustainable development. Contributions like these to the Sustainable Development Goals are core to our mission and an important way that, along with our partners, we can quantify our contributions to global efforts towards a more equitable and sustainable world.



CONTACT

Fair Trade USA

E-mail: info@fairtradeusa.org

Website: FairTradeCertified.org

¹The World Bank. Understanding Poverty: Education. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/overview>.

²Molly Wyss and Jenny Robinson. Improving Children's Reading and Math at Large Scale in Côte d'Ivoire. Brookings Institute.