

# Child labour and the cocoa trade

From the sweeties.net wiki

Most chocolate starts on small family farms in West Africa. Ivory Coast and Ghana together grow nearly 60% of the world's cocoa. For more than twenty years, the industry has faced evidence that much of that cocoa is harvested with the help of children, some of them trafficked.

## What the research found

In the 2018 and 2019 growing season, research commissioned by the US Department of Labor and carried out by NORC at the University of Chicago found about 1.48 million children in Ivory Coast and Ghana doing hazardous work on cocoa farms, such as using sharp tools and agricultural chemicals and carrying heavy loads. A major investigation published by Fortune in 2016 put the number of children in West Africa harvesting cocoa at about 2.1 million.

Most of these children work on their own families' farms, often kept out of school to save on labour costs. But researchers have also documented worse: children trafficked from poorer neighbouring countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso, promised pay and education, and made to work long hours for little or nothing.

## How it came to light

In 2000 a BBC documentary reported the use of enslaved children on cocoa farms in Ivory Coast, and other reports followed. The industry at first dismissed some accusations as false and excessive, then acknowledged that conditions for children were unsatisfactory.

## The promise: the Harkin Engel Protocol

In 2001, facing a proposed law for no child slavery labels on chocolate and the threat of boycotts, the industry agreed a voluntary deal instead. The Harkin Engel Protocol, signed in September 2001 by the heads of eight major chocolate companies among others, aimed to eliminate the worst forms of child labour and forced labour on West African cocoa farms. Deadlines were extended again and again. The industry's pledge to cut child labour in Ivory Coast and Ghana by 70% had not been met by 2015, and was pushed back to 2020. In 2018, the Cocoa Barometer, a report published by a group of campaigning organisations, said no company or government was anywhere near reaching it.

## In the courts

Lawsuits in the United States have tried to hold chocolate companies responsible. In 2015, cases against Mars, Nestlé and Hershey argued that their packaging should disclose the risk of child labour; they were dismissed. In 2021 the US Supreme Court threw out a case accusing Nestlé USA and Cargill of aiding and

abetting child slavery, ruling 8 to 1 that the relevant conduct had happened in Ivory Coast rather than the United States. That ruling was about where the case could be heard, not a finding that the claims were untrue. The same year, former child labourers from Mali brought a new case naming several major firms.

## What has been done

Companies point to real work: monitoring systems that visit thousands of farms, school building and support for families. A Nestlé pilot reported a 51% fall in children doing hazardous jobs, and a study for the industry found hazardous child labour cut by a third where company programmes operated. Critics reply that these efforts reach only part of the problem. The underlying issue is poverty: cocoa farmers earn very little, and until that changes, children's labour stays tempting.

## What you can do

Ask how a brand sources its cocoa, and look at the certification or programme it uses: see [Cadbury](#), [Fairtrade and Cocoa Life](#). For how weather and disease in the same region sent prices soaring, see [why chocolate got so expensive](#).

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