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Chocolate gets sweeter: How consumer outrage is reducing child labor in Ghana

There's no simple 'how-to' on getting kids out of slavery. But in cocoa villages in Ghana and, to a lesser extent, Cote d'Ivoire, the appeal is economic – and the results have been startling. Part 6 of a series on ending human trafficking.

By [Ryan Lenora Brown, Correspondent](#) November 30, 2015

WASSA-AMENFI WEST and ACCRA, GHANA – When he arrived in the village in Ghana's western region, Jack Dawkins knew who the trafficked children were before anyone told him. Among the other kids in the village, they stood out. They slept in their own isolated corners of family compounds and didn't follow the other children out to school or to play. Their eyes were sunken and exhausted. All 11 of them, he says, looked "tired, dejected, dirty."

A few weeks earlier, a local social worker had tipped off Mr. Dawkins, a long-time activist against child trafficking in Ghana, that a small group of children had been sold to this village to work on local cocoa farms. Could he pay a visit, she asked, and see what could be done to get the children out?

A series on human trafficking: [How to free Modern Slaves](#)

Bookish and bespectacled, with salt and pepper hair and a quick smile, Dawkins hardly looks the part of a swashbuckling rescuer. But that, he says, is exactly his advantage. Over the past several years, he's successfully gone undercover in the gold, fishing, and cocoa industries, posing as a priest or a traveling salesman to gather information on enslaved children – and then free them, more than 400 over the past two decades.

There's no simple 'how-to' on getting kids out of slavery, he says. Sometimes it takes little more than letting villagers know their actions are against the law. Other times, he dangles the threat of police intervention. But in cocoa villages, his appeal is economic.

That day, he says, "I gathered all the families in the village up and I said, 'Listen, if you don't stop bringing in these kids to work, the world is going to stop buying your cocoa.' "

It worked: The children went home. And the simple declaration that helped free them has in recent years become a uniquely potent weapon in the fight against child exploitation on West

Africa's cocoa farms. For the first time in history, activists like Dawkins can credibly warn, the world is watching what happens here.



Jack Dawkins shows photos of trafficked children he helped rescue, on Nov. 10, 2015 in Accra, Ghana. Trafficking and child labor are rampant in the cocoa fields, on fishing boats, and as house servants. Melanie Stetson Freeman/Staff

For more than a century, the rural cocoa farmers of Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire have stood at the far end of a long and punishing supply chain that transforms the bitter, slimy beans they grow on isolated farms here into one of the Western world's most beloved foodstuffs. By the time the bright yellow pods dangling from cocoa trees become a candy bar or a bag of chocolate chips, the farmers who grew them will have generally been paid just [3.5 to 6 percent](#) of the product's final value. Most are too poor to have ever bought a chocolate bar. Many, incredibly, don't even know what chocolate is.

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So it's hardly surprising to activists like Dawson that in the marginalized communities where cocoa farming takes place, child trafficking and other dangerous forms of child labor have long been part of a cruel bargain for survival. Part of the reason the exploitation of children has been difficult to stamp out is rooted in a fact of subsistence farming: Many children traditionally work with their families on cocoa farms, making it easier for abuses to slip by. Indeed, in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire, 42 percent of children in cocoa farming families – some 2 million in all – do “hazardous work” on cocoa farms, according to a [2014 study by Tulane University](#) in Louisiana.

Still, there's reason for optimism. Beginning with the fair trade movement that blossomed in the 1990s, media, advocacy groups, and governments in Africa and the West have pointed the world's gaze in the direction of cocoa's youngest producers, managing to transform the fight to end child slavery and exploitation here from a fringe cause to a global moral battleground.

It's a fight that's been fought – and sometimes won – on the strength of consumer anger. Chocolate, after all, is one of the West's most celebratory foods. Then how, many have asked, can we tolerate the miserable conditions under which it has long been produced?

On the ground, the results of this attention and consumer soul-searching have been modest and uneven, stunted by a range of factors, from the foot-dragging of major chocolate companies to the churn of two civil wars in Cote D'Ivoire, the world's largest source of cocoa. As activists and farmers continually stress, growing cocoa remains grinding and poorly paid work, and children are still a big part of it.

"Children have always worked on our farms," says Frank Ofori, a farmer in the village of Akyekyere, in western Ghana, as he sinks his machete into a freshly picked cocoa pod on a recent afternoon. "But now things are quite different." Children's work is largely confined to weekends, he says. Most are in school, learning to read and write, as their parents never could.



Farmers work on a cocoa farm on Nov. 11, 2015, in Akyekyere, Ghana. Melanie Stetson Freeman/Staff

Indeed, the cocoa industry's worst child labor abuses are beginning to be cleaned up. The changes are, in many ways, unprecedented. Each of the world's top five chocolate producers – from Nestlé to Mars to Hershey's – are now busy developing or expanding third-party inspection systems meant to, among other goals, eliminate child trafficking and child labor by 2020 on the farms they purchase from. Meanwhile Ghana and Cote D'Ivoire – together responsible for about 70 percent of the global supply of cocoa – have responded to international pressure by passing laws prohibiting child trafficking and overwork, and mandating primary school attendance.

"I think the chocolate industry is among the most advanced in the world in grappling with these issues," says Aidan McQuade, director of the human rights organization Anti-Slavery International. "Like many other industries faced with these kinds of accusations, their first response was outrage and denial that there was a problem at all. But since then, they really have begun to collectively respond, which is more than you can say for many other sectors."

What made the West pay attention

That sea change began with a single, startling revelation.

"There may be a hidden ingredient in the chocolate cake you baked, the candy bars your children sold for their school fund-raiser or that fudge ripple ice cream cone you enjoyed on Saturday

afternoon: Slave labor,” opened [a June 2001 investigation](#) by journalists Sudarsan Raghavan and Sumana Chatterjee for the Knight Ridder news service.

Trekking through remote corners of Cote d’Ivoire, the Knight Ridder reporters and several others, [including a BBC crew](#), had found young children, their small bodies gangly and scarred by machete wounds, toiling on thousands of smallholder cocoa farms. Most were working for their families, but as many as 15,000, [UNICEF estimated](#), may have been sold into slavery – some from as far away as Mali and Burkina Faso.

Quickly, the fuse was lit.

“We felt like the public ought to know about it, and we ought to take some action to try to stop it,” said now-retired Sen. Tom Harkin (D) of Iowa at the time, explaining the voluntary agreement he helped broker that year with major chocolate producers to gradually eliminate “the worst forms of child labor” – including trafficking – from their supply chains. “How many people in America know that all this chocolate they are eating ... is being produced by terrible child labor?”

In Ghana, Dawson watched these far-off rumblings of outrage with amazement from the office of the [Association of People for Practical Life Education](#) (APPLE), his small anti-trafficking NGO.

Ending child trafficking “was something we had been promoting for a long time, but it was always being overlooked” – both domestically and internationally, he says.

In Ghana, the problem was far more widespread in the fishing, gold, and domestic-labor industries than cocoa. But it was cocoa, he says, that brought eyes, ears, and – most importantly – cash to the movement. Four years later, in 2005, Ghana passed a comprehensive bill outlawing all forms of human trafficking. Cote d’Ivoire followed suit in [2010 with a bill](#) that barred child trafficking.

“It’s certainly not everything, but it’s lessened our work a bit,” Dawson says. “At least now we can report the crime to the authorities.”



Ekua Obinsuawo, a female cocoa farmer, stands beside cocoa beans spread out to dry, on Nov. 10, 2015 in Kwamang, Ghana. Melanie Stetson Freeman/Staff

With an estimated 2 million children working with their families on cocoa farms in Ghana and Cote D'Ivoire, the idea that you could ever stop all of them from working was at best aspirational, and at worst culturally tone-deaf, says Pauline Tiffen, a longtime consultant on cocoa supply chain sustainability. "This isn't about people [who send their children to work] being bad or morally bankrupt," she says. "It's a result of a combination of attitudes and opportunity – people don't change their attitudes until the opportunities change, too."

In recent years, West African governments, chocolate companies, and farmers seem to have taken heed, turning their anti-child labor efforts toward making cocoa-farming villages better places to be children.

And they are finding allies in many families. In Kwamang, deep in Ghana's largest cocoa-growing area, the Western Region, parents like Benedict Avinah Blay and Grace Mensah say they want their seven kids to have the childhood they couldn't. Both grew up around here, in a slice of Ghana where the rutted dirt roads regularly wash out in the rainy season and most adults cannot read.

"We went to school, but in harvesting season, the farm was first," Mr. Blay says. "If they needed you on the farm, maybe you didn't write your exams that year." On Saturdays, he remembers, he and his siblings were often working from sunup to sundown, hacking apart cocoa pods and scooping out their sticky white beans to ferment and then dry in the sunlight.

Education as the way out

But on a recent Thursday afternoon, the fields around Kwamang are empty of children. Instead, the local primary school is bursting, with kids spilling from its rickety classrooms onto the playing fields outside. Inside one, Blay and Ms. Mensah's 12-year-old daughter Boatema is hunched over a notebook, carefully copying out sentences from the day's English lesson. *Choose One: Ghana is free from/for colonial rule*, reads one.

Like most of the kids at this school, Boatema and his six siblings work on their family's farm, but only on weekends and school holidays, and they are largely kept away from the most arduous and potentially harmful tasks. Blay, who is also a teacher at a nearby secondary school, says this setup is now par for the course in this part of Ghana.

“Still, sometimes we find families who are working their children and not sending them to school, and when you come to them they say, ‘If my kids doesn’t work, how will we eat?’” he says. “I tell them, you will all eat better if your kids get an education and break this cycle [of poverty].”

Indeed, experts say education has been the single most influential element in breaking the cycle of child labor on West Africa's cocoa farms, for the simple reason Blay describes: It's a way out.



Cocoa farmers open up cocoa pods with machetes to extract the cocoa beans in a cocoa-producing village, on Nov. 11 in Akyekyere, Ghana. Child labor in cocoa fields was a problem for generations. Today, children are in school and most work on the farms only on weekends and holidays. Melanie Stetson Freeman/Staff

The change has been dramatic. The number of children not attending school in cocoa-growing communities across Ghana has fallen by 87.5 percent over the past five years, according to Tulane's surveys. And in Cote d'Ivoire – ground zero for child trafficking in the cocoa industry – the figure has been cut by 36 percent, even in the midst of a civil war and its aftermath. Earlier this year, Cote d'Ivoire took an important new step when it [passed a law](#) mandating primary school attendance for the first time. (Ghana already had a similar law).

Although statistics on trafficking are notoriously hard to come by, Mr. McQuade, of the anti-slavery coalition, says research suggests there's been a “modest decline” in children being transported and sold into slavery in the cocoa industry over the past decade, coupled with much wider gains on the issue of child labor.

How much of that change comes down to the interventions of the international chocolate industry itself is debatable.

The International Cocoa Initiative – the major umbrella body for industry, civil society, and governments working on child labor issues – estimates that less than 5 percent of farmers are being actively monitored for harmful child labor practices, including trafficking. But industry, civil society, and farmers alike point to a widespread trickle-down of knowledge about children’s rights – and the legal and economic dangers of ignoring them – over the past 15 years amid a continued global flurry of criticism and attention.

“Before, parents didn’t know the importance of education because they themselves hadn’t been educated,” says Alice Owusua, a farmer and head of the child labor oversight committee in Akyekyere. Then, about six years ago, a representative from a buying company – the middlemen who purchase from farmers and sell to major chocolate producers – led a series of community meetings on the need to keep children safe and in school. Now, she says, even if farmers don’t always follow those rules, they all know that they are supposed to.



A cocoa farmer opens up a pod with a machete to extract the cocoa beans in Akyekyere, Ghana. Most cocoa farmers are so poor they can’t afford to buy chocolate. Melanie Stetson Freeman/Staff

For their part, the five major chocolate companies – [Mars](#), [Mondelez](#) (Cadbury, Oreo), [Nestlé](#), [Ferrero](#), and [Hershey](#) – have all agreed to independent monitoring of their supply chains. The goal is to eliminate “the worst forms of child labor” – trafficking and other exploitation – by 2020 at the latest. These projects, though many are still in their infancy, will in theory make monitoring of child labor on cocoa farms more widespread.

“I don’t think we’ll make that, it’s very optimistic,” says Bill Bertrand, co-author of Tulane’s child labor studies. “But there’s no doubt the industry is moving in the right direction.”



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