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# Societal dynamics of sustainability certification in Ghanaian cocoa producing communities: Assessing social cohesion effects and their implications for collective action

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## ABSTRACT

In the global cocoa-chocolate chain, sustainability certification became the most widely applied industry tool to respond to sustainability challenges, such as extreme poverty among cocoa producers, and related issues of child labor and deforestation. This contribution analyzes how sustainability certification shapes broader social dynamics in targeted communities by applying the concept of social cohesion. This framework allows for the discussion on the appropriateness of sustainability certification to foster the needed societal conditions for community empowerment and collective action, both of which often regarded as key for a broader sustainability transition. Insights from key informant interviews in two Ghanaian cocoa communities targeted by a Rainforest Alliance cocoa sustainability project indicate that there is an enhanced interaction between scheme participants leading to new ingroup-outgroup patterns among community members. Further, while some informal institutions and one particular societal group are negatively affected by the sustainability intervention, no broader effect on communities' overall social cohesion was measured. Finally, despite contributing to the greening of cocoa production, certification implements measures that risk to hamper the spread of collective action and may dilute the “societal glue” in targeted communities.

## KEYWORDS

Sustainability certification; social cohesion; community empowerment; cocoa; Ghana

## Introduction

Over the past decade, cocoa production and its myriad sustainability challenges, such as extreme poverty among many cocoa producers, and related issues of child labor and biodiversity degradation in producing countries (Fountain and Hütz-Adams 2020; Ingram et al. 2018; Ruf et al. 2019) have received increasing attention in sustainability debates. This has put the low sustainability of cocoa

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production on the political agenda of multiple actors on various scales. Particularly the two main cocoa producing countries, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, are targeted by a multitude of sustainability interventions from both public and private sectors (Odijie 2020). From the 2010s onwards, third-party sustainability certification became the most widely applied approach to foster sustainability in the Global Cocoa Chocolate Chain (GCCC). In 2016, the share of Voluntary Sustainability Standard (VSS) produced cocoa beans was around 30% (Voora, Bermúdez, and Larrea 2019). In 2019, the standard setters UTZ and Rainforest Alliance merged, with the resulting new Rainforest Alliance becoming the most influential standard setter in cocoa production.

Although participation in VSS has increased significantly over the past 10 years (Voora, Bermúdez, and Larrea 2019), sustainability challenges in cocoa production generally remain high. Many studies investigate the effects of certification programs on the immediate group of beneficiaries, the targeted cocoa farmers (Deppeler, Fromm, and Aidoo 2017; Gockowski et al. 2013; Iddrisu, Aidoo, and Abawiera Wongnaa 2020; Ingram et al. 2018; Waarts et al. 2015). Here, aspects gaining most attention in certification assessments comprise the economic benefits for targeted farmers (Folefack et al. 2021; Olumide Oseni et al. 2013; Victor 2010), increases in cocoa productivity rates (Dompseh, Asare, and Gasparatos 2020, Gockowski 2013; Waarts et al. 2015) or the general welfare situation of targeted cocoa farmers, including livelihood or food security situation (Iddrisu, Aidoo, and Abawiera Wongnaa 2020; Fenger et al. 2017, Dompseh, Asare, and Gasparatos 2021). However, findings vary and a vivid debate on farmers' benefits of participating in certification schemes remains ongoing. Some scholars criticize the "productivist rationality" behind certification (Lemeilleur et al. 2015) and its blindness toward root causes of cocoa farmers' poverty (Fountain and Hütz-Adams 2020) which critics consider to be more of systemic nature rather than predominantly farm-based. Often, sustainability certification and the linked processes of marketization are regarded as a pathway toward more sustainable commodity chains (Munasinghe, Cuckston, and Rowbottom 2021).

Another aspect that gains broader attention in research on cocoa sustainability certification concerns the reasons and degree of farmers' readiness to adopt certification requirements (Aidoo and Fromm 2015; Kleemann, Abdulai, and Buss 2014; Lemeilleur et al. 2015). However, there are almost no studies available going beyond the immediate level of targeted cocoa farmers and their farming or household conditions; thus, neglecting communal effects. For the case of Côte d'Ivoire, Ruf and colleagues (Ruf et al. 2021, 2019) shifted the focus away from the farmers' level to the effects on cocoa cooperatives, thus looking at a different societal entity. It is the purpose of the present study to broaden the research agenda by offering a perspective on underlying societal dynamics linked to the implementation of sustainability certification in cocoa producing communities. Acknowledging the

theoretically often described link between the degree of social cohesion, empowerment, and community collective action, we assess sustainability certification as a tool of rural development intervention and describe its effects on the degree of social cohesion in two selected communities.

Applying the concept of social cohesion in our research allows to include more subtle, underlying conditions and dynamics in societal relations to the assessment of community effects of a given development intervention (King, Samii, and Snilstveit 2010). Often called the glue that keeps a society together (Colletta, Lim, and Kelles-Viitanen 2001; Nowack and Schoderer 2020; UNDP 2009), social cohesion became broadly acknowledged as a key prerequisite for a sound and sustainable societal development (Cox and Sisk 2017; UNDP 2009). Over time, many different definitions and conceptualizations of social cohesion have been proposed, with authors referring to different components including social integration, solidarity and trust, equality and the motivation to contribute to the common good, all of which are attributable to a collective – namely a community, neighborhood, region, or society as a whole (Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein 2009; Ranci 2011). Importantly, two main spheres of social cohesion are distinguished: horizontal and vertical social cohesion, where the first refers to relations between individuals or groups, and the latter to the relations that individuals or groups have with their formal institutions such as the State and other state organizations (Chan, To, and Chan 2006).

Improving both horizontal and vertical cohesion – for example, through reducing inequalities and building social capital – has come to be considered a crucial factor for fostering sustainable development (Brown and Zahar 2015; King, Samii, and Snilstveit 2010). In our study, we focus on the horizontal level, hence, changing relations among community dwellers linked to the implementation of sustainability certification.

Many studies analyze the effects of social cohesion on economic growth and overall welfare (cf. King, Samii, and Snilstveit 2010, 337) or the likelihood of outbreaks of violent conflicts. Similarly, the present study acknowledges the crucial role of social cohesion for an emancipated and locally owned community development, particularly highlighting its importance for fostering community empowerment and collective action among community dwellers. Yet, the focus of the study is on the effects of certification projects on the level of social cohesion within the targeted communities – in order to understand if certification, as a case of marketization of rural development interventions, shapes communities' underlying developmental conditions

Accordingly, in our contribution, we reflect on sustainability certification's effects on the societal level in targeted communities using social cohesion as concept to appraise tendencies of certification schemes' impacts on factors like

trust, solidarity, patterns of community participation, and socio-economic inclusion.

In this context, the research question of this study is as follows: How does sustainability certification shape the societal relations in targeted cocoa producing communities in Ghana? In particular, how does sustainability certification impact on selected components that foster social cohesion? To answer the research question, a qualitative research approach was chosen. In 2021, we conducted focus group discussions and semi-structured key informant interviews among cocoa farmers and other stakeholders in Ghana's cocoa industry in the Western North region of the country. We complement the results with additional information from our own previous studies on sustainability certification effects in the same communities, conducted in 2015 and 2017. The aim of our study is to enhance the ongoing debate about certification's contribution to sustainability targets by shifting the focus to broader societal implications of industry-driven approaches to sustainability and linked marketization processes.

### **Context of the study**

Before spreading across all cocoa production areas in Ghana, sustainability cocoa certification was most widely conducted in the high production areas in the Western North and South regions. In the following, the background to the study is provided by giving brief insights into the functioning of Ghana's cocoa sector, key elements of the Rainforest Alliance Sustainable Agriculture Standard, and the main implementation steps of the studied certification project.

### ***The cocoa sector in Ghana and sustainability certification***

Cocoa beans can only be grown in the tropical forest belt, hence cocoa production is located in countries of the Global South while consumption predominantly takes place in the countries of the Global North. Ghana, right behind its neighboring country Côte d'Ivoire, is the second largest exporter of cocoa beans in the world with the two countries combined accounting for almost 60% of the world's cocoa production (Make Chocolate Fair n.y.). In Ghana, about 800,000 farmers cultivate cocoa (World Bank 2013), averaging five hectares each (Hainmueller, Hiscox, and Tampe 2011) and earning about 0.84 USD each day on average (Fountain and Hütz-Adams 2015).

Historically, cocoa production in West Africa is based on extensive farming. In their search for the "forest rent" (Ruf 1995), cocoa farmers migrated into formerly unexplored, highly fertile tropical forest areas to establish new cocoa farms (Ruf 1995). Today, these natural forest rents of cocoa farms are ending and existing farms need to apply intensification measures. Further, while the

global demand for chocolate products continues to rise, the increase in cocoa production through the extension of farmland into forest areas is internationally banned. A number of initiatives are being implemented aiming at a zero-deforestation cocoa, as for instance the public-private Cocoa and Forest Initiative under the roof of the World Cocoa Foundation.

In the context of a search for production intensification, the Ghana Cocoa Board (COCOBOD), the public institution in charge of regulating and supporting the sector, runs a number of projects to support cocoa farmers, for instance through extension services (cf. Ruf 2007). In Ghana, local Licensed Buying Companies (LBCs) are in charge of purchasing the beans from cocoa farmers (Ofosu-Asare 2011). They operate through local Purchasing Clerks (PCs) who work for them on a commission basis and who are mostly people from the community with a higher educational level (Ollendorf 2021). Because of the annually fixed producer price in Ghana, LBCs can only compete for the farmers through non-economic incentives (Owusu Ansah et al. 2017; Owusu Ansah et al. 2018). In this setting, the PCs assume a key position because they are in direct contact with the farmers, mediating between them and the LBCs.

The mainstreaming of cocoa sustainability certification in Ghana's cocoa industry started around 2010. However, some organic cocoa certification and Fairtrade projects already existed prior to the sustainability certification boom in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. From the outset, these projects were mainly run by lead firms from the processing segment of the GCCC and some chocolate manufacturers. Initially, the transnational corporations established certification projects through local LBCs. However, over the second half of the 2010s, partly due their engagement in certification, all lead processors have established their own subsidiary LBCs in Ghana through which they now run the certification schemes. Generally, local LBCs are not involved in certification because they do not have the necessary financial and logistical means to run it.

### ***The content of the new Rainforest Alliance standard***

After the merger of the two sustainability standard-setting organizations Rainforest Alliance and UTZ to the new Rainforest Alliance (RA) in 2019, the organization developed its new standard for sustainable agriculture for all RA certified crops. The complex standard consists of farm and supply chain requirements that is backed by an assurance and data collection system (Rainforest Rainforest Alliance 2021). However, the transition phase to the new standard is still ongoing in 2021; thus, it is too early to assess the changes this complex system may trigger in the cocoa sector. Therefore, the present study only looks at the farm requirements that are similar to the former versions of RA and UTZ cocoa sustainability standards and the effects of certification projects at the community level. The farm requirements encompass mandatory and optional elements in the fields of management,

**Table 1.** Farm requirement components of the Rainforest Alliance Sustainable Agriculture Standard.

Farm requirement component	Components' content relevant for cocoa production
Management	Group management collects data on members, workers, farm location, farmer training, risk assessment, and development of risk management plan
Traceability	Producers record their cocoa quantities at RA traceability platform, payment of sustainability differential (premium)
Farming practices	Renovation of tree crops based on a climate risk assessment, diversification and intercropping, prohibition of genetically modified organisms on the farm, optimization of fertilizer use, integrated pest management, improved weed management and regular pruning, use of agrochemicals in a safe, effective, and efficient way, as well as the application of efficient post-harvest practices
Environmental	Conservation and restoration of natural ecosystems and their services, no encroachment into forests, maintenance of on-farm vegetation, riparian buffers, protection of endangered species and native flora and fauna, efficient water use and waste management, biomass use minimizing effects on natural systems
Social	Respect of workers' rights in conformation with UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human and ILO conventions, measures to assess and address discrimination, forced labor, and child labor, establishment of systems to eradicate child labor, forced labor, and workplace violence, freedom of association, work time and safety, and assurance of decent housing and living conditions of workers

Source: (Rainforest Alliance 2020).

traceability, farming, social, and environment (Rainforest Alliance 2020) The standard aims to achieve farm sustainability through the increase of productivity, reduction of costs, and climate change adaptation. Further, farmers should be incentivized to improve their livelihoods and protect their environments (Rainforest Alliance 2020). The following Table 1 provides an overview of the elements most relevant for cocoa production.

### ***The implementation process of the studied RA project***

In Ghana, most RA cocoa certification projects are implemented by subsidiary LBCs of transnational corporations, as is also the case in the studied project. The project is based on a hierarchical administration system that reaches down from the top level to the communities, with project officers at each administrative level. At the targeted communities, those cocoa farmers who wish to participate in the project need to join the society of the respective LBC that runs a certification project. Participating farmers sign a contract in which they promise to only sell their beans to the project LBC. To obtain a certified status, cocoa farmers must attend a bi-weekly training on the standard requirements. It is the lead farmer of the society who is in charge of the trainings. The lead farmer is one of the more educated cocoa farmers from the community and who received a special training on the standard requirements. Once the group has made a good progress in adopting requirements, an internal inspection will be organized. If the result is favorable, the external audit is organized. Consultants from the contracted Certification Body visit sampled farms. If most of the participants have shown good adaptation, the whole group

receives certified status but the certificate is held by the LBC who acts as the group manager. If there are a few cases that farmers do not meet the requirements, the group is not validated. It may happen that producers who repeatedly fail are expelled from the group. If the audit was favorable, the cocoa farmers can sell their beans with a premium. How high the premium is, depends on the arrangement of the LBC and its mother company (for a more detailed description see Ollendorf 2021, 2017).

### **Theoretical background: social cohesion and its importance for collective action and community empowerment**

As an academic concept, social cohesion has a long history, going back to early sociological work in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most importantly Durkheim, who reasoned what keeps highly differentiated societies together (Larsen 2015). Today, the notion of social cohesion is widely applied, not only in social sciences debates but also in development policies and practice (OECD 2012; UNDP 2016; World Bank 2005). From a developmentalist perspective, social cohesion became famous because of its indispensable role for economic development; several studies indicate the influence of low levels of social cohesion on slow or negative economic growth (Easterly, Ritzen, and Woolock 2006; King, Samii, and Snilstveit 2010; Sommer 2019). Yet, there is another important, basic function of social cohesion for sustainable development and what is at the center of the present contribution: Social cohesion as a principle source of empowerment (Speer, Jackson, and Peterson 2001) that is needed to overcome obstacles for collective action (King, Samii, and Snilstveit 2010; Larsen 2015).

However, the exact meaning and content of social cohesion is still under debate and an abundance of definitions are proposed (Chan, To, and Chan 2006; Ritzen 2001). Yet, as Chan et al. point out, the ordinary meaning of the word “cohere” in the sense of holding together or forming a whole (Chan, To, and Chan 2006, 288) provides a good starting point. Social cohesion is seen as something that promotes harmony, a sense of community, and a degree of commitment to promoting the common good among members of a social entity (Colletta, Lim, and Kelles-Viitanen 2001), such as a community, neighborhood, region, or society as a whole (Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein 2009).

Due to the absence of one broadly recognized definition, concepts of social cohesion differ in what should be seen as enabling factors, substance, or outcome. However, a number of rather essentialist approaches have been proposed, thus allowing for some core ingredients of social cohesion to be set out. There is a general assumption that low levels of all forms of inequality, exclusion, and disparity (Mandonsela, 2017, 68) are key to fostering social cohesion and that, vice versa, social cohesion becomes undermined by



interventions that spread social and socioeconomic inequality within communities (Speer, Jackson, and Peterson 2001). Langer et al. (2017) apply what they call the “European approach” of social cohesion (pp. 323–324), where a focus is given to the ways how inequalities, social exclusion and marginalization, hence institutional factors, contribute to the weakening of social cohesion within societal systems. They combine this with what they identify to be rather part of North American approaches to social cohesion which emphasize the importance of individual behaviors and perceptions regarding their groups and others, namely individuals’ degrees of trust in others resulting in different levels of solidarity (as put forward by the influential studies of Putnam 2000 or Cole 1988). Building on both, European and North American approaches, and also including the element of identities, an aspect of social cohesion particularly relevant for the study of conflict-prone societies, Langer et al. conceptualize their triangular frame for measuring and comparing degrees of social cohesion among African countries (inequality, trust, and identity). Based on a large literature review, Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) suggest another essentialist approach to social cohesion reposing on similar elements: social relations, attachments/belongings, and orientation toward the common good.

What becomes clear from both conceptualizations is that social cohesion should be understood as a multidimensional construct (Schiefer and van der Noll 2017, 583) that targets aspects at the micro, meso, and macro levels of a given societal entity. This comprises, respectively, individual attitudes and behaviors, characteristics of communities and other groups, as well as individual and group relations with each other as well as with state and local institutions (ibid.). Here vertical and horizontal cohesion is distinguished (Cox and Sisk 2017). While relations among individuals or groups would relate to horizontal cohesion, relations between individuals or groups and formal institutions and the State/state institutions are often defined as vertical cohesion (Chan, To, and Chan 2006).

For an analysis of sustainability certification effects on broader societal dynamics in targeted cocoa producing communities, horizontal micro and meso, that is individual and local institutional elements of social cohesion are especially important. This is mainly derived from the aim to understand changes in local institutions as well as individual attitudes and behaviors which favor community members’ ability or readiness to engage in collective actions; an ability that is essential for community empowerment and transformative processes. This is supported by King, Samii, and Snilstveit (2010) who argue “More socially cohesive communities tend to solve collective action problems despite incentives for non-cooperation” (King, Samii, and Snilstveit 2010, 337).

Speer, Jackson, and Peterson (2001) have studied the relationship between social cohesion and empowerment, with empowerment comprising important aspects to foster elements of social cohesion, especially relating to the

willingness to contribute to the common good. Following Zimmerman and colleagues' (2000) work on psychological empowerment, Speer et al. distinguish between intrapersonal and interactional empowerment, with the first referring to aspects such as perceived competence, motivations to control, and self-efficacy, and the latter to a broader understanding of the social environment, a precondition for collective action. Here, aspects such as the ability to develop a critical awareness of the factors that shape the community's environment, as well as of the resources needed to solve persisting problems, and to develop methods and skills to create impact and transformative action are of relevance (Speer, Jackson, and Peterson 2001, 717). The authors further underline the cohesive nature of a high degree of participation that empowers stakeholders to shape and influence decisions themselves in community activities, an aspect also highlighted especially in work on the link between social cohesion and sustainable development (King, Samii, and Snilstveit 2010; Löhr et al. 2021; Stockins et al. 2010).

In their study on the contribution of development interventions to social cohesion in targeted African communities, King, Samii, and Snilstveit (2010) screen impact evaluations of development interventions in order to assess the ability of short-term interventions to enhance social cohesion (King, Samii, and Snilstveit 2010, 339). Thereby, they stress the intrinsic value of social cohesion, a key finding of the large research project "Voices of the Poor," which carved out the close relationship between lacking social fabric and peoples' powerlessness, lack of voice and exclusion (Narayan et al. 2000), a finding that supports the present argument to consider elements of empowerment in the assessment of social cohesion.

In the academic development debate referring to social cohesion, there is a broad consensus that any community development interventions would have to take into account its effects on social cohesion in the targeted areas. Social cohesion is now largely acknowledged to be core ingredient of economic development, solidarity and peace-building and even environmental protection. In this context, our study seeks to reveal if, and how, social cohesion in Ghanaian cocoa producing communities is generally impacted by the rapid proliferation of sustainability certification projects, which claim not only to foster more sustainable agrarian practices, but also to improve social and environmental conditions in targeted communities (Rainforest Rainforest Alliance 2021). Hence, the indicators proposed by King, Samii, and Snilstveit (2010), namely attitudes such as feelings of trust, harmony, and solidarity between community members, and behaviors such as participation in community initiatives, and other measures of community cooperation (p. 342), are key for the purpose of our study. We base our framework to assess certification effects on King et al.'s (2010) outcome measures but complement the elements with the aspect of in-/equality and the institutional domain, following hereby Langer (2017) and Schiefer van der Noll (2017). We also include

empowerment to our assessment, as it represents the psychological basis for recognized elements of social cohesion, especially a positive self-perception and motivation to contribute to the common good, and the awareness of the ability to do so and of the methods applicable for such an endeavor.

This leads us to the following indicators to appraise certification effects on social cohesion in the targeted community:

- Attitudes: trust, solidarity, harmony with other community members, motivation to contribute to the common good, positive self-perception
- Behaviors: patterns of community cooperation (real/pro-active), participation in initiatives
- Fragmentation: patterns of in-/exclusion, socio-economic inequalities
- Awareness: knowledge about problems, their reasons, and methods for change
- Local institutions: affected quality, acceptance

These indicators have a distinct focus on the micro and meso levels of community development and do not aim to cover all possible effects of sustainability certification projects within a societal setting. There are many other dynamics simultaneously taking place on the horizontal but also vertical level, when an external intervention hits the local context. This includes, for example, changes in trust in governmental institutions, economic actors, and other organizations. However, as much research so far concentrates on formal institutions and the meso to meta level, we confine the scope of this study to the community context. Thereby, the perceived effects on selected key aspects of social cohesion shall provide a good insight if sustainability certification interventions tend to foster or hinder social cohesion at the level of a targeted community. Based on this, we are able to discuss certification's support of local societal conditions that foster collective action and empowerment needed for transformative processes.

## **Methodology**

### ***Case study area***

The study took place in the Western North Region of Ghana. While certification projects have continued to spread over all cocoa producing regions in Ghana during the last 10 years, in 2015, when the authors started with their first research activities on cocoa certification effects in Ghana, according to the former Project Coordination Unit of COCOBOD (2014), this region showed the highest share of sustainability interventions. This is likely to be the case because by then, the Western North Region had the highest productivity rates among all cocoa producing areas in the country (COCOBOD n.d.). In fact, the

regions Western North and South together represent Ghana's last cocoa frontier where cocoa production spread over the country's Western tropical rainforests only from the 1970s onwards. Cocoa production was the key economic driver that triggered migration into the rural areas and still, as typical for many commodity frontier zones, the vast majority of the region's population lives in the rural sites (Ghana Statistical Service 2012, 21).

## **Methods**

As existing studies on sustainability certification mainly focus on farm-level effects, typically assessing productivity gains, effects on farmers' welfare, or effects on environmental practices (Addae-Boadu, Aikins, and Abu Safian 2017; Gockowski et al. 2013; Ingram et al. 2018), the present contribution expands the focus to broader societal implications. Therefore, new empirical data that applies to societal dynamics is needed. To obtain such data, a qualitative research approach was chosen combining semi-structured interviews with focus groups.

The present paper builds on research activities in August 2021 which were a follow up study on extensive field work activities undertaken in 2015 and 2017. In 2015 and 2017, the research focus was on institutional and governance effects of sustainability certification in cocoa production (Ollendorf 2017, 2021), but results gave strong indications that broader societal effects also occur at the level of targeted communities. This led to the design of the present follow-up study with a particular focus on social cohesion. The results presented are thus mainly taken from data collection undertaken in 2021 and complemented with selected findings from the previous studies.

In 2015 and 2017, we conducted five focus group discussions and 69 semi-structured key informant interviews among cocoa sector stakeholders as well as 51 with cocoa farmers in the Western North Region in Ghana. In 2015, during the first field work sequence, 42 cocoa farmers were selected for interviews on a mixed sampling basis, combining purposeful with random selection criteria: Five communities were randomly included in the sample based on the division of communities in three different types: 1) two communities of the type "very remote and difficult to access," 2) two communities of the type "remote but with good access to road," and 3) one community of the type "near town, close to main road." Finally, in these communities, farmers were selected for interviews, again partly purposefully based on their positions and farming characteristics, and then randomly within these distinguishing groups (Ollendorf 2021).

In 2021, two out of the original five cocoa communities were re-visited and 23 semi-structured interviews conducted with cocoa farmers participating (10) and nonparticipating (5) in a Rainforest Alliance (RA) project as well as with other industry stakeholders (8). Due to Corona induced mobility restrictions and prevailing social distancing measures, the follow-up study was conducted

in fewer locations and with a smaller sample size. To include most contrasting situations data was collected in one community of category 1) very remote, and one of category 3), near town.

In a first step, in each of the two communities, focus group discussions were conducted (category 1: 11 male and 6 female, and category 3: 8 male and 4 female participants comprising participants and non-participants in the RA certification project) to explore on a more general basis this study's themes and identify key points of discussion for integration in the individual interviews. The participants joined the meetings voluntarily after the official announcement by the respective community chiefs. During this occasion, cocoa farmers were registered purposefully for interviews in order to obtain a sample including all relevant positions: community chiefs (2 males), purchasing clerks (4 males), lead farmers (1 male), participating farmers (3 males, 3 females), and nonparticipating farmers (2 males, 2 females) in the RA certification project. Further, we conducted interviews with district managers (2 males, 1 female) and regional managers (1 male) of different local Licensed Buying Companies and with staff members of the Ghana Cocoa Board (3 males).

The interviews and focus group discussions comprised four main thematic blocks: 1) the personal cocoa story of the respective interviewee along with their current cocoa work and livelihood situation; 2) their experience with and perspectives on cocoa sustainability certification projects with a distinct focus on participation and understanding of the project; and 3) questions directing at the manifestation of social cohesion as, for instance, regarding interviewees' perceptions of trust, identity, cooperation, fragmentation, and latent conflicts. Focus group discussions and interviews both averaged 1 h. In both situations, participants were informed about the purpose and context of the study. The interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Twi language and simultaneously translated into English by a Ghanaian research assistant. Information of the focus group discussion was documented by personal note taken by the research team with notes later written up and compared to prevent loss of information. The interviews were recorded with a voice recorder upon participant's content.

The interviews were analyzed with qualitative content analysis applying a deductive approach. Based on theoretical consideration, a set of pre-defined indicators and codes guided both, the development of the interview guides as well as the subsequent data analysis. The following [Table 2](#) gives an overview on the codes derived from the theory-based indicators for social cohesion presented in the previous section.

### **Results: Local experiences with cocoa certification and perceived effects on community social cohesion**

Our findings indicate that the main motivation of cocoa farmers to join certification schemes is the prospect of benefitting from the premium and gaining

**Table 2.** Social cohesion indicators.

Components of social cohesion	Theory-based codes	Sub-codes
Attitudes	Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Confidence in fellow farmers and community members</li> <li>● Trust in not being cheated by fellows</li> </ul>
	Solidarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Readiness to support others</li> <li>● reciprocalness with assistance in times of difficulties</li> </ul>
	Harmony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Low levels of resentments</li> <li>● General good-will toward fellows</li> <li>● Perceived absence of community conflicts</li> </ul>
Behaviors	Patterns of community cooperation:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Activities and forms of cooperation</li> <li>● Frequency</li> <li>● Transfer to other spheres of community action</li> </ul>
	Quality of participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Inclusion in decision making</li> <li>● Balanced participation among members</li> <li>● Understanding of project (reasons, structure, actors involved, distribution of patterns)</li> </ul>
Fragmentation	Patterns of in-/exclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Inclusiveness</li> <li>● Selection criteria participants</li> </ul>
	Socioeconomic inequalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Access to material resources</li> <li>● Access to opportunities</li> <li>● Distribution mechanisms</li> <li>● Differentiated picture of reason of socioeconomic situation</li> </ul>
Awareness	Understanding socioeconomic environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Understanding of position in Global Cocoa Chocolate Chain</li> <li>● Ideas about existing alternatives</li> <li>● Ideas about strategies to change status quo</li> </ul>
Local institutions	Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Functionality</li> <li>● Efficiency</li> <li>● Appropriateness for local context</li> </ul>
	Acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Community agreement with practices</li> <li>● Use of practice</li> </ul>

Source: Own elaboration.

access to some other benefits, including the training activities and a number of services linked to the project, as the following quote underlines: *They told us that if we produce the certified cocoa and we sell to them they will also bring us some equipment and also some premium. That's what they promised us* (member certified group). Further, the focus of the training is mainly on cocoa farming practices with little recognition of possible communal effects. Above all, the effects of certification on overall social cohesion and relations among community members seem to mainly concern components such as equality and forms of community fragmentation, whereas deeper-rooted attitudes such as solidarity, harmony and trust seem to be only slightly shaped by the new marketization process yet, save for one specific group, the purchasing clerks of local LBCs.

Given the way of organizing cocoa farmers into certified groups (societies linked to a particular LBC) which are required to meet on a bi-weekly basis to receive training on sustainability standards,, new structures of cooperation emerge. Only group members are part of these meetings and, hence, certain ingroup-outgroup patterns were described as evolving that previously did not exist: *We have made an arrangement that in every two weeks we must hold*

*a meeting and is at this meeting that we do the training and sometimes different issues comes up so we come every two weeks (member certified group).*

When the program was launched, due to the market-based approach and limited demand from off-takers, participation was still preserved to a smaller number of cocoa farmers in a community. In the early stages of certification projects in both communities, selection was mainly done by local PCs who best know the farmers who are selling to them: *You know in every group we have like the PC he has some specific farmers that are loyal to him whether dead or alive and we have those who even when they harvest about 10 bags of cocoa they can divide into three for different PCs. That kind of person, the living dead, you cannot rely on him to join the group when there are others who bring all of their cocoa here. So first of all, the 25 people that we selected they were . . . (Interference) we know that they bring all their cocoa here (project staff member).* Next, to the preselection of participants often done by the LBC's purchasing clerks, especially in the early stages of project implementation, another selection criterion were the farmers' capacities. Since the groups' success is determined by the performance of all members, there was a trend that initially most efficient farmers were included. Yet, this did not mean that less efficient farmers were per se excluded. Nevertheless, the following quotes indicate some underlying selection dynamics: *If you don't do all these things, then it means you are not ready to join the group, but if you follow their instructions then you are accepted into the group (member certified group), or And with the cocoa too, before it will be accepted it must be very dry, and that the pruning is very neat before you will be added to the group (PC of a certified group).*

The limited number of participants in RA/UTZ certification projects until around 2021 caused a situation where many cocoa farmers were hoping and waiting to join a certified group in order to benefit from the premium and the other advantages. Both, participating and nonparticipating farmers expressed their discontentment with this situation: *It is a problem because when they [other cocoa farmers, authors' note] do not join the group they cannot learn anything (certified group member), or: . . . when we get our clothes and shoes we wear and show to them and then they will be eager to join the group (member certified group), or: I wish I could register today so that when they are sharing the bonuses I can get some (non-certified cocoa farmer).* Some statements indicate clear signs of frustration with the situation, such as: *The difference is that they give them bonus and other things but we don't get some. PBC [the public Produce Buying Company, authors' note] doesn't give us these things. The training they are now delivering I have already received it. So that doesn't bother me but the benefits they are receiving which I am not getting some is what pains me (non-certified cocoa farmer).* From this, it becomes clear that both, participating and nonparticipating cocoa farmers themselves experience the

new divide in material benefits and access to opportunities linked to the implementation of the project with a certain potential for conflict.

Those farmers who have the possibility to sell their beans as certified produce have the chance to top up their income and to benefit from other project components including the training, material incentives such as personal protection equipment, and to a certain extent improved access to chemical inputs. Compared to responses obtained in 2015 and 2017, in 2021, the numbers of group participants were higher and it seemed more easy now for farmers to become members and to sell their beans with a bonus. Hence, in 2021, we find less strong sentiments of discontent and exclusion among nonparticipating farmers. Further, interviewed cocoa farmers remain mostly indifferent regarding which LBC their fellow farmers sell beans to: they see it as a free choice for each individual farmer that does not impact their social relations.

Relating to societal impacts of certification, we find respondents did not give substantial indications that certification membership, coupled with the regular group meetings, would strengthen relations among the participants that go beyond their cocoa affairs or translate into a broader fragmentation with non-participants. In contrast, in several cases it was rather important to respondents to communicate the generally high level of harmony in their community. To what degree this might be due to a societal expectation bias in the interviews would have to be seen in follow-up studies. Some interviewees explicitly underlined that their participation in the certification project remains limited to the organization of their activities linked to cocoa farming and does not connect with broader issues within other contexts of daily life.

Whereas there were no significant indications of a general changes regarding deep-rooted societal attitudes such as solidarity, harmony and trust in the general context of the community environment, strong effects for one group of people in the community were found: the local purchasing clerks who are working for an LBC that is not in the position to run a certification scheme. Our research shows that these PCs are strongly affected by dynamics stemming from the increase of certification projects with possible negative mid- or long-term impacts on community relations and social cohesion among villagers. Specifically, farmers tend to leave their traditional LBCs behind, instead selling their beans to LBCs that run certification projects in order to benefit from the premium and other incentives: *If you don't have a certification program, you are doomed, because every farmer wants to have a premium* (LBC staff member). In the studied intervention, the LBC running the certification project pays a higher premium to participants compared to competitors, thus experiencing a high influx of farmers. PCs of local LBCs not running a certification project are often affected by this in two ways: First, they experience a sharp reduction in income or the LBC even stops purchases in the affected community, potentially leading to unemployment



of the concerned PC. Second, PCs of local LBCs often confront new forms of distrust from their fellow cocoa farmers. There is a wide-spread confusion among cocoa farmers regarding how the certification system really works, what is behind it, and, in particular, where the premium comes from. The fact that the newly entering LBCs, which are engaged in certification, due to the sustainability premium are able to pay a higher price to cocoa farmers than their traditional LBC turned out confusing for many farmers since traditionally, farm gate prices are set by the public regulator, COCOBOD. As result, PCs from local LBCs are increasingly confronted with accusations of dishonesty and of keeping the premium for themselves, as captured by the following two quotes: *Farmers are losing trust in me and tell me: Oh, we have been bringing you our cocoa for so long, it means you should have given us some [premium; authors' note], but you are not giving us ... Why are the other people giving us?* (interview with a PC from PBC), or *The chief came to me and asked me: You are the father of all PCs here. So what are you doing? The others are helping with premium and borehole. Look what your colleagues are doing and you are not doing any little thing for us* (interview with a PC from PBC).

Closely related to this are changes in the local informal economy and social support system, especially in remote communities. In these very remote communities, PCs from strong local LBCs, such as the state-owned Produce Buying Company (PBC), which are in the system since several decades, used to hold a special role, for both the informal economy and the social support system in a setting of widespread poverty and infrastructural deficiencies. In particular, interviewed LBC staff and PCs, alongside some farmers, point to the circumstance that PCs are important resource persons in communities. Between the seasons, when farmers are typically struggling with the few remainders of their savings or in the event of crises, PCs often lend money on the basis of mutual trust. They do so because they personally know their fellow farmers, trusting that they will bring bags of cocoa when the season starts. As reported by several interviewees, PCs from the subsidiary LBCs of transnational processors running certification projects are only allowed to buy the beans on a “see and buy-basis” – a practice needed in order to assure the purchase of standard compliant quality beans. Hence, the informal system of borrowing money is affected by the new practices.

Moreover, many PCs also fulfil a social function in their communities. They are often the only ones with a pickup truck who can be contacted in case of emergency or just give regular rides to nearby locations. Self-reports of interviewed PCs, district managers, and regional managers of the LBC PBC indicate that this system is currently breaking down. For several decades, PBC was the local market leader, with its PCs holding a longstanding strong position in remote communities. Between 2016 and 2019, PBC has lost about 50% of its market share (COCOBOD 2019), with many PCs either losing their jobs or on

the cusp of losing them; these individuals no longer fulfil their former informal social or economic functions.

The new forms of distrust and pressure faced by many local PCs is closely related to a general low degree of participation that goes beyond bi-weekly training sessions and the lacking awareness of the broader picture by participating farmers. While the group members have to appoint several functional positions of the society, such as secretary, treasury, child liaison officer, and the co-design of community action plans becomes increasingly part of the approach, there is a striking gap of understanding among members regarding the whole reason for the project and its overall functioning. There seems to be a general feeling of being a passive part in the project entangled in a top-down hierarchical constellation where farmers are incentivized to “learn” and apply so-called “good agricultural practices” which aim to green their production. In many cases, producers see their participation rather as a buying arrangement which they entered with signing the contract than an opportunity to engage in sustainable cocoa production and the improvement of their own livelihoods and living environment: *We signed a contract with them to even use a particular kind of chemicals. So they come and inspect every time on our farms to see that we are doing the right thing. They check everything that we do there* (member certified group), or *One was the registration contract that if you dry your cocoa well and you pluck it and use the chemicals you’ve been asked to and not any other, they would give you for one bag 8 cedis* [Ghanaian Cedi is the national currency, authors’ note], *that was the contract* (member certified group). The lack of ownership of the intervention is further accentuated by the following statement: *You have to be prepared always so that when they come they don’t see anything bad in your farm* (member certified group). These quotes, together with the mentioned confusion about the origin and delivery of the premium, give reason for the concern that there is a broad general absence of understanding of main project aspects such as the reason for its implementation and its mechanisms. Cocoa farmers seem to not have an active stake in the development and implementation of the project except the roles they were assigned with by the standard developers and project implementers.

### **Discussion: Sustainability certification and rural community empowerment**

Our research question addresses the broader societal dynamics induced by sustainability certification at the level of targeted communities and seeks to bring to attention the need of critically discussing what form of societal development such industry-led interventions are contributing to.

Market-driven sustainability certification, as practiced in the studied RA intervention in the GCCC, represents a highly complex socio-technical system

that establishes a tight jacket of mandatory sustainability requirements and external control mechanisms over local production. The focus of the trainings is on good agricultural practices, reducing environmental damage, and social challenges such as child labor and poor working conditions on farms. However, while claiming to aim for a socially more equitable production, the implementation of the scheme does not take the local societal structures and the risk of undermining social cohesion into account. It even shows direct negative effects on some parts of the rural society, as in the case of the local PCs.

The degree of farmers' inclusion in both development and practice of the standard is limited and targeted producers seem to lack ownership in the intervention. The strongly top-down nature of this form of sustainability intervention is inherent (Lemelleur et al. 2015; Uribe-Leitz and Ruf 2019) and is made clear by the language of the standard: mandatory improvements, mandatory smart meter, rules and core requirements. Social cohesion, as a key requisite for collective action needed for transformative processes and sustainable development (King, Samii, and Snilstveit 2010) appears to be partially shaped by the spread of certification projects across cocoa producing communities. While deeper-rooted attitudes, such as identity, and solidarity among community members, seem to not be affected, we find indications that aspects of the behaviors of community members do change with their participation in the project. In addition, given the ingroup-outgroup nature of the intervention, not only are new patterns of cooperation between participants established, but also new lines of inequalities in access to resources and opportunities are drawn between community members, causing a partial fragmentation. These new patterns entail the risk of undermining the ability of collective action within a community. While participants must organize themselves in a group, the top-down approach makes it unlikely that this requirement will contribute to actual emancipation that could have an impact beyond the group. The strongly hierarchical management system does not meet critical criteria of even a basic definition of participation that foresees "the participation and involvement of (ordinary) members of a group, an organization, etc. in both, setting and realization of its goals" (Fuchs-Heinritz 2013, 489, author's translation).

Interviewed farmers reported that the main reason for participation in the project is to obtain the premium and that the self-organization did not go beyond the requirement to gather on a bi-weekly basis. Thus, the formation of farmers groups in this structure should not be put on a level with emancipatory farmers' organization where farmers come together to assess their needs, deliberate on best strategies, take informed decisions, and represent themselves politically (Ollendorf 2021). However, for the goal of transforming the poverty-producing and marginalizing structures, this is what affected people need (Leal 2007, 539 f.). An improved understanding whether a broader

emancipatory collective action is actually hampered by the existence of such “non-participatory farmer groups” or if these may somehow serve as a “collective action-hub” is, therefore, needed and should be topic of future in-depth studies. Furthermore, the trend of decreasing relations of trust in the context of the local social support and informal economy systems can be regarded as a reduction in locally based solutions to the advantage of external market organization. This in turn benefits subsidiary LBCs of transnational corporations running certification schemes, since many cocoa farmers, in their need to increase their cocoa earnings, register for participation and commit themselves to selling their beans to the project organizing company.

While the farm requirements indeed have a strong potential to foster the greening of cocoa production, and thus impact on the ecological dimension of sustainability, effects on the social dimension is limited to “hard factors” such as child labor and poor working conditions, neglecting their structural underlying reasons. Productivity increase is seen as the main key to achieve economic advancement which in turn is simply assumed to positively impact to producers’ livelihood and thereby result in reduced rates of poverty, child labor and other socio-economic grievances.

Furthermore, in the Ghanaian context, new forms of dependencies of farmers from transnational lead processors are established. Whereas in the conventional chain farmers are free to sell their beans to any LBC, in the certified arrangement, they entered new forms of contracts where they commit themselves to exclusively sell to the project-running LBC – which are almost exclusively subsidiary firms of transnational cocoa processors (Ollendorf and Owusu Ansah, [forthcoming](#)). These findings are supported by other research that highlights current trends of data monopolization by transnational lead firms in global commodity chains. In the case of cocoa sustainability certification, too, this trend can be observed. Given the RA’s data collection approach, the project managing transnational subsidiary LBCs become the owner of farm data. This not only facilitates crop forecasts and monitoring of farming expansions into forest zones, but also augments the knowledge and, therewith, the power base of the mother company. In the GCCC, the trend of digitization of farming data is very recent and, to our best knowledge, is not yet studied. However, an emergent body of critical literature is analyzing such dynamics in global agri-food chains, including the studies of Hackfort (2021), Newell and Taylor (2018), and Prause (2020); further research on sustainability certification and cocoa production should address this highly relevant topic.

Furthermore, the auditing of implementation of the standards by certification bodies is criticized as a highly paternalistic process (Levy and Newell 2002). Auditors enter the cocoa farms to inspect and assess the degree of adaptation. They decide on whether the farmer has been successful in his or her efforts to adopt the requirements and whether he or she will be certified or not. Even if a standard can only work with some forms of independent

compliance control, this procedure represents a strongly asymmetric process in terms of power positions, elucidating the farmers' weak role in this system, with likely negative impacts on their self-perception.

The described developments indicate that the current approach reinforces the prevailing socio-technical system in the GCCC rather than triggering a broader socio-ecological change toward an improved position of cocoa farmers, as an agro-ecological approach, for example, would provide for.

Agroecology is both a socio-political movement and a scientific discipline, combining agricultural practices with political claims for societal change. It primarily bases on ecological principles, the political concept of food sovereignty, and the human right to food (INKOTA-netzwerk 2019). With this, it aims at establishing a diversified, organic agriculture that is socially integrated and fair, and that seeks to optimize the management of functional biodiversity (Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012). Agroecology has been broadly recognized as holding the potential to respond to the principle global sustainability challenges and to facilitate achievement of many of the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (FAO 2021). The major difference to other sustainability approaches is the focus on the local and the search for territorially anchored, contextualized solutions to global sustainability problems (FAO 2018). This means that agroecology is, *per se*, a bottom-up approach that allocates main transformative potentials to farmers and other participants in local food systems (IPES-Food & ETC Group 2021).

In contrast, as it stands, current mainstream sustainability certification schemes seem to foster a limited approach to sustainability that does not support a broader transformative process but rather fosters the prevailing agri-food systems' stability by increasing its robustness and adaptability to ecological and social crises. In the studied case, the focus of the certification project is on the proper functioning and future of cocoa in a sustainable way and the elimination of social and environmental grievances. However, in this endeavor, ownership is taken away from farmers and local institutions, while the power and control of strong industrial players in the GCCC are enhanced. A broader paradigm shift in cocoa production is unlikely to be supported with this approach and the potential of local community collective action may also be reduced. Therefore, while certification is mostly claimed as a neutral technical tool to enhance sustainability in agri-food chains, a review that is more sensitive to power and processes is needed.

## Conclusions

This study discussed the current practice of third-party sustainability certification in Ghana's cocoa sector in the light of its suitability to contribute to a broader socio-ecological transformation in West African cocoa production. For this, this study applies the lenses of social cohesion as a basis for collective

community action, analyzing how cocoa certification may shape its various elements and conditions .

Our research shows that the introduction of the studied certification project to the two cocoa communities in the Western North Region in Ghana triggered a number of changes above the immediate targeted level of cocoa farming. The study does not claim to show all possible effects on societal dynamics linked to sustainability certification in the targeted communities but carves out those aspects that were most often mentioned by the interview partners, thus, indicating a need for following up.

This study also finds a low degree of participation of members relating to insufficient information and understanding of the certification schemes' overall objective and implementation; as well as relating to possible spaces to actively contribute and influence implementation. Certification seems to be perceived solely as top-down approach to achieve more ecologically sustainable cocoa production, in exchange for knowledge transfer and premiums. Underlying social dynamics seem to be neglected in certification schemes and effects on them, apart from minor direct economic gain, almost non-existent.

However, our findings show that the study of societal effects is important as ingroup/outgroup relations change and also community relations deteriorate, especially in relation to local purchasing clerks who suffer from losses of trust and stigmatization due to their inability to support farmers with similar benefits as their fellows working with certification groups. The study also shows how local systems of informal economy and social security also weaken in this context. The concept of agroecology, combining agricultural practices with political claims for societal change, represents one avenue to overcome the current trend of focusing only on technical while neglecting systemic causes of sustainability challenges. Agroecology not only envisages a broader ecological transition but also puts a particular emphasis on societal issues, power relations, and needed spaces for social learning, largely neglected in current industry-led sustainability initiatives. Departing from the local perspective, the co-creation of knowledge and capacity development plays a pivotal role in the approach. However, in order to allow community dwellers to pro-actively decide on their way forward, from our findings we can derive that community empowerment and collective action also require capacity building with regards to communication and negotiation in order to allow for improved communication across actors group on horizontal but also vertical levels and to equip actors to deal with underlying causes of poor livelihood situations.

### **Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [Franziska Ollendorf]. The data are not publicly available due to containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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