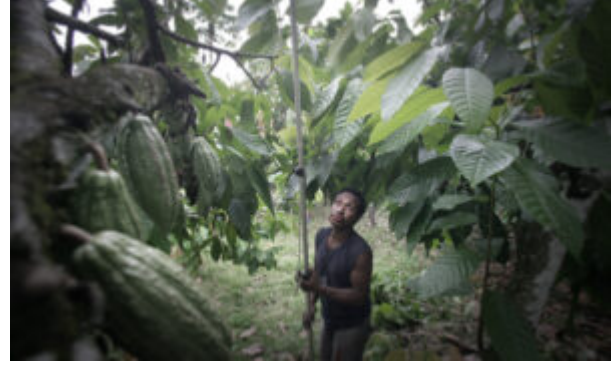


Cocoa farming in PNG for all generations

by Tom Swan, Josie Saul and Chris Fidelis

10 April 2024



ACIAR

Global demand and prices for cocoa have soared in the past few years with the price now the **highest it has been** in over 44 years – **US\$6,514 per metric ton** as of 27 February 2024. In Papua New Guinea, cocoa ranks third among agricultural export crops, following palm oil and coffee, contributing **around 14%** of national agricultural export revenue. Smallholder farmers are responsible for more than 80% of cocoa production, with cocoa farming serving as the primary income source for approximately **two million people**.

Since 2008, there have been warranted concerns for PNG's cocoa industry, particularly given its importance for the livelihoods of smallholder farmers. National cocoa production peaked at 56,000 tonnes in 2008, dropping to 33,000 tonnes in 2015 (Figure 1). This drop in production was largely attributed to the country-wide colonisation of the devastating cocoa pod borer (CPB) from 2006, resulting in the abandonment of many cocoa blocks and **significant social and economic impacts** for smallholder farmers. Since 2015, efforts to control the CPB, through the use of **integrated pest and disease management** and pest-resistant, higher-yielding clones, have led to a gradual rebound in cocoa production, resulting in the production of 43,000 tonnes of cocoa in 2019 – a trend expected to continue over time.

Figure 1: Cocoa production in PNG between 2009-2019



Source:

Nevertheless, challenges persist for the future of the cocoa industry, including the ageing of the population of smallholder farmers. A recent review of [cocoa farming systems](#) in 28 low-income countries showed that the average age of smallholder farmers is around 50 years, while the average life expectancy in [low-income countries is 62 years](#). In PNG, the average age of cocoa farmers [surveyed](#) at some farms across East New Britain, Madang, and Bougainville was 38 years, considerably younger than the global average.

In addition, life expectancy in PNG has steadily increased over time – 68.4 years for females and 62.9 years for males in 2021. However, a [2022 population pyramid](#) for PNG, shows a large “youth bulge”, with “youth” defined as people from 12 to 30 years of age. As of 2023, youth [accounted for 58%](#) of the estimated PNG population of 11.7 million people.

Globally, there is a growing recognition of the role youth will need to [play in agriculture](#) to help feed the growing global population. At the same time, research has shown [a lessening of youth interest](#) in agriculture. If indeed older smallholder farmers, which in the PNG context means farmers aged around 38 years on average, are predominantly involved in cocoa farming, what is the role of youth in this industry?

In PNG, youth and the family unit are critical to the success of smallholder farming and priority should be given to engaging and empowering both at all stages of cocoa production and export. Recent research on cocoa in Bougainville suggests that [labour shortages](#) (owing in part to health factors) rather than suboptimal farming techniques have limited the effectiveness of farmer training, reducing productivity and negatively affecting the livelihoods of smallholder farmers. Could youth and the family unit in general fill this gap in labour availability?

Throughout PNG, many youths from remote and rural areas dream of moving to cities to find employment. But given the [high unemployment rates](#) in cities like Port Moresby, we believe it needs to be better understood that there are viable economic opportunities for youth in cocoa farming (and for that matter agriculture in general). The future of cocoa in PNG lies in empowering youth, including by improving the status of women and strengthening the family unit.

Over the past seven years, the [Family Farm Team \(FFT\) program](#) has been implemented across seven provinces in PNG. This program integrates individual and family agricultural and cultural strengths, fostering equitable and effective collaboration among families. The [results to date](#) are encouraging, indicating significant potential to bring about tangible change for the benefit of smallholder

farmers.

Elisabeth Pisiai, who works with cocoa and other crops at the Bougainville Department of Primary Industries, had this to say after one [FFT Masterclasses](#) in Bougainville:

This training can bring about change in families. Especially distribution of labour to ensure no single member of the family, especially women, are overly burdened. For the young people who are also part of the training, these are skills and knowledge that they can learn and hopefully use when they have their own families.

Future FFT training programs will take place throughout PNG over the next few years as part of our Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) project, [Soil For Cocoa in PNG](#), in collaboration with the Cocoa Board of Papua New Guinea and many others.

One aspect of the FFT training approach is the use of [strengths-based approaches](#) to youth development. By focussing on the existing strengths of youths and proactively building skills and fostering resilience, we aspire to develop positive outcomes for youths, families, communities, and the cocoa industry more broadly.

In addition to the FFT program, innovative approaches to engage youth in agriculture are the focus of further research. Targeted technological innovations, such as the use of mobile applications for [smallholder cocoa farmers](#) in Bougainville, hold immense potential to involve youth — typically more technologically inclined than older generations — in all aspects of the farming process.

There is a view in PNG that growing cocoa and other cash crops, and subsequently controlling the flow of income, is [men's work](#), while women have concentrated on growing vegetables for domestic sale and consumption. There needs to be a paradigm shift that equitably integrates the wider family unit, especially youth and women, into cocoa farming systems. Without this, the survival and sustainable growth of the industry are at risk.

The authors would like to acknowledge the contribution of Graham McNally, Barbara Pamphilon, David Yinil, and Damien Field to this blog.

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