

Key Takeaways: Cocoa Sustainability Workshop

The Cocoa Sustainability Workshop, held at George Washington University (GWU) on April 26, 2024, was co-hosted by the Institute of Corporate Responsibility (ICR) at GWU and the Cocoa Research Centre at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad and Tobago.

The event opened with remarks from John Forrer, Director of ICR, who discussed the Cocoa, Carbon, and Community (C3) project, a 3-year initiative funded by the Inter-American Development Bank. The C3 project aims to create a sustainable business model for impact investments in the Trinidad and Tobago cocoa sector while promoting improved farm management, diversified crop production, and more sustainable farming practices. It also seeks to identify strategies to decarbonize the cocoa sector and work with local partners to develop and finance projects that build resilience within cocoa communities.

Keynote speaker Ms. Venessa Ramhit-Ramroop, Interim Representative of Trinidad and Tobago to the United States, expressed her enthusiasm for the C3 project, highlighting the need for such an initiative in Trinidad and Tobago, given the importance of the cocoa industry to the country. She emphasized the importance of private-public partnerships for the continued growth of the sector.

Alejandro Escobar, from the Inter-American Development Bank Group, also spoke, updating attendees on the progress made since the project's initial funding. And he spoke about the importance of taking into account the environmental and social impacts of investing in agricultural production and expanding yields. Recognizing the importance of the many stakeholders affected by investments in the cocoa sector—among others—and engaging them to accommodate their priorities and shared interests represent best practices.

Pathmanathan Umaharan led a discussion on the impacts of climate change on cocoa production. He noted the significant reduction in cocoa production in Trinidad and Tobago over recent decades and emphasized the importance of sustainability in meeting Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) requirements. He also discussed the formation of the Good Will Chocolate Learning Community initiative, a collaboration between GWU and the University of the West Indies, which aims to connect sustainable cocoa producers to markets through an adaptive model that evolves as customer preferences for sustainable cocoa products expand and change.

Berkay Orhaner, a professor at Ted University, Turkiye, highlighted his findings about the sustainability of tree-to-bar and bean-to-bar chocolatiers based on interviews with them. He found strong evidence of the sustainability of cocoa and chocolate production in Trinidad and Tobago, largely due to the smaller scale of local producers and unique regional advantages. He suggested that the sector's global presence could be enhanced by creating a meta-brand focused on sustainability, adopting eco-friendly packaging, and developing innovative strategies to navigate market challenges. Despite their sustainable production practices, many chocolatiers struggle to communicate those attributes effectively within global market frameworks, indicating a need for better messaging.

Marisol Slater, owner of the DC Chocolate House, and Mark Christian, owner of C-Spot, discussed sustainable chocolate packaging options and the importance of storytelling on packaging. They noted the challenges of ensuring traceability, even for products labelled as 100 per cent organic.

Students from GWU's student organization, Compass, presented their findings from their research. First, they described various cocoa-derived products and their feasibility for implementation on farms in Trinidad and Tobago. They identified the potential to use cocoa pod waste—which is often discarded—to meet both financial and sustainability goals. Second, they discussed the development of a business model for the provision of business services to cocoa farms regarding farm management as a way of increasing cocoa farm yields. Third, they discussed the challenges chocolatiers had in knowing the options for selecting sustainable packaging based on costs and consumer preferences for sustainable chocolate.

Peter Koegler, Head of Programmes at the World Cocoa Foundation, discussed the World Cocoa Organisation's vision to create a thriving and equitable cocoa industry, with a focus on improving farmer income, ending deforestation, and combatting child labor. He elaborated on the Cocoa and Forest Initiative, the largest public-private partnership in the cocoa sector, aimed at stopping cocoa-related deforestation. Koegler also discussed the European Union's new regulation to prevent deforestation, which goes into effect on December 30, 2024.

The workshop concluded with a Chocolate Tasting, where participants sampled chocolates from Trinidad and Tobago. Dr. Naailah Ali guided the tasting, showcasing the country's diverse flavors that stem from its varied agroecological zones.

The Cocoa Sustainability Workshop ended with closing remarks by John Forrer, Director of ICR, who encouraged participants to follow-up if they wanted to learn more about the C3 project or the Good Will Chocolate Learning Community.