

Trade with Cocoa, coffee & Co.

Critical Comment

What do Germans like to drink most? Beer? Wrongly thought. Compared to the annual consumption of beer, about 100 liters per person, Germans consume about 166 liters of coffee. That means almost half a liter of coffee every day. But what is behind this mass consumption? Is our coffee at all sustainable or fair? As part of our Opening Week "Turning Points" at the University of Leuphana Lüneburg, we looked at sustainable supply chains for coffee and cocoa cultivation. Now, why is it important to discuss this turning point, or rather process, and why should it be relevant to all of us?

Indeed, the following dreadful facts are our reality: Every year, 300,000 square kilometers of tropical rainforest are cut down, roughly the area of Germany. 13 percent of this area is used only for coffee. For a decade, the amount of actually fairly produced ingredients in FairTrade labeled foods only had and still has to be 20 percent. Ten percent more children are working in the Ivory Coast and Ghana today than in 2015. 1.48 million girls and boys grow cocoa and harvest the beans. Two-thirds of the cocoa consumed in Germany (beverages and chocolate) comes from this region.

Throughout our discussion, we explored the topic of poor working conditions and violation of human rights, education for farmers in producing countries, labels and greenwashing for consumers in the Global North.

But the most pressing problem in the field of coffee and cocoa production and trade are the disastrously damaging agricultural methods. We deeply believe that with a small number of simple measures a lot can be changed and it is our responsibility to create awareness for this crisis as the Global North exhibits a long and continuous history of exploitation with the Global South. Changing these methods is of such urgency because they cause deforestation, biodiversity loss and land degradation alongside the intoxication and infertility of soil making food production for future generations impossible. This problem mainly results from extensive agricultural methods focused on creating profit such as monocultures, overuse of crop spaces and use of chemical fertilizers. Possible points of leverage to that problem could be the implementation of crop rotation and ecological fertilizers. However, when diving into them, one may not forget that the quantity of production would decrease and there would be a higher risk of harvest loss through parasites as ecological fertilizers are usually not as effective as chemical ones. It would take more time and effort to produce the same amount of coffee.

Despite all the environmental and social problems behind a simple cup of coffee, the majority of people in the Global North, continue to consume it. This raises the question: What should and could be done and by whom? Should just states, corporations and politicians suggest the rules, or can we also as normal citizens and consumers start the change?

Authors: Camilla Sodi, Caroline Franz, Elias Sari Effenberg, Antonia Fettke