

# Agrarian South Network Research Bulletin

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**EDITORIAL***'The Slow Violence of Dispossession and Extractivism'*

The contributions in this issue highlight on the one hand, the weakening of the traditional peasantry through ongoing processes of agricultural modernization, and on the other, sustained struggles by those who till the land to protect their ecosystems, livelihoods, and as a basis for survival. These contradictory elements that stress rural working people and communities in the global south are in some cases modified and in others intensified by the current situation of the pandemic.

Jagat's analysis of the twin processes of de-peasantisation and de-agrarianisation in Nepal illustrates the impact of state policies that systematically disincentivise, marginalize and impoverish peasant communities while strengthening its pact with middle and rich cultivators through discriminatory taxation that turn indigenous land users into agricultural labourers, intensifying labour tenancy, and illustrating a continuation of colonial primitive accumulation that historically defined land relations in much of the periphery.

Torvikey, Adomaa and Kyeretwir link the global level problem of the Covid-19 pandemic to the politics that govern cocoa in Ghana, highlighting the ramifications of the

crisis for producers and their households. They map the 'cocoa crunch' by linking the current crisis to the history of unequal exchange between Ghana and the multinational cocoa buying companies. The pandemic, which has affected global commodity prices, has had an adverse effect on Ghana, a commodity export dependent country. But cocoa farmers are also battling with the state bureaucracy and politics that governs the crop in the country. A combination of policy failures and lack of state support has also precipitated a social reproduction crisis, with few viable options for affected households.

Panados, Smith, Alexander and Gahman bring together local knowledge, grassroots insights, and social movement-generated data on what the pandemic has produced in relation to the food system shock, escalations in attempted land grabs, and state-sanctioned violations in Belize. Their aim is to raise critical consciousness about broader land and food system struggles that enjoin differing agrarian-based Indigenous, Afrodescendant, and peasant communities. The authors show how amidst multiple crises prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the authoritarian and militarised repression through which several

states have reacted, peasant movements and political activists from all over the Third World continue to both document and resist

the ‘slow violence of dispossession and extractivism,’ and violations of human and land rights they are experiencing.

We welcome enquiries and responses, which may be submitted to the editors at: [agrariansouthresearchbulletin@gmail.com](mailto:agrariansouthresearchbulletin@gmail.com).

## UNDERSTANDING PEASANTS AND DE-PEASANTISATION IN NEPAL<sup>1</sup>

Jagat Basnet<sup>2</sup>

This article, drawn from a longer doctoral thesis, examines the fate of the Nepali peasantry through a political economy perspective on peasants<sup>i</sup> and de-peasantisation<sup>ii</sup> that focuses primarily on the process of economic production, reproduction, capital accumulation, and the politics of ownership, access, control, and distribution of economic resources and property (Shanin, 1973). De-peasantisation occurs when capitalists control and own the means of production, smallholders, sharecroppers, and tenants are first dispossessed of any independent access to the means of production (most notably, through land expropriation), and then are compelled to enter into the labour market as proletarians for their own livelihood purposes (Wang, 2010).

In historical context, de-peasantisation may be seen as a feature of capitalism's advent in an agricultural society, and the consequent shift from a traditional agrarian economy to one where commercial agricultural products make up the majority of

agricultural output. A related concept is that of 'de-agrarianisation,' which is defined as a decline in the proportion of the workforce in a country engaged in the primary sector (i.e. in agriculture and other natural resource-based economic activities). A period of de-agrarianisation thus sees increases in the proportion of the workforce engaged in the secondary (mainly manufacturing) and tertiary (i.e. service) sectors. Furthermore, de-agrarianisation is marked by a decline in the proportion of agricultural output which makes up the total gross domestic product (GDP) of the country. Drawing on these conceptual stipulations, this article considers how the historical conditions of agriculture, and the Nepali state's land policies, acts, and agricultural development policies have shaped the phenomenon of de-peasantisation in Nepal.

The extent and form of de-peasantisation is not uniform, but varies over time and space. In this regard, only minimal scholarly work has been done on de-

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<sup>1</sup> This article covers the summary extract from PhD thesis Chapter 3: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DE-PEASANTISATION PROCESS IN NEPAL WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO THE ROLE OF STATE LAND POLICIES SINCE THE 1950S. Rhodes University, Sociology Department, South Africa 2019

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peasantisation in South Asia. My longer (PhD) study sought to rectify this situation with reference to de-peasantisation in Nepal. In Nepal itself, the characteristics of de-peasantisation during the pre-1990 period differ from the more contemporary characteristics. During the pre-1990 period, land grants were made by the government to the privileged at the cost of the bulk of the peasantry; but in the post-1990 period, the changes to the structure of landownership and thus the peasantry have been more fundamental, driven by the increasing commoditisation of arable land under the adoption of neo-liberal economic policies and the Agriculture Perspective Plan (APP). This shows that the process of de-peasantisation is not a linear process but is marked by diversity, contingency and tension. Because of this, claims about the inevitable ‘displacement of peasants from the land’ and ‘the death of the peasantry’ seem to be premature, as evidence of a continuing peasant way of life remains abundant in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Therefore, de-peasantisation is characterised by contradictory tendencies and trajectories, and also by deep contingencies.

The APP, which was drawn up with the support of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), was implemented in Nepal in 1995, for a period of 20 years. The contents of this plan

emphasised the development of groundwater irrigation; an emphasis which mostly benefited the *Jimidars* and middle class of the *Tarai*. Indeed, much of the support for agriculture under these development plans focused on ‘commodity production’ - a way of working that of course requires land ownership in the first place. Ghimire (1998:43) details how large landowners who owned large tracts of land benefitted the most from this ‘development’; in terms of irrigation, water distribution systems tend to have returns to scale with the increasing size of plots, so it was for large landowners that the systems were most efficient.

This uneven distribution of state support has persisted: even today in Nepal, people need land certificates for more than 0.2 hectares to receive discount rates for chemical fertilisers. *De facto* tillers, of course, do not have such land certificates. To add to the situation, local political power in rural areas is mostly controlled by middle or rich class commodity producers, who are able to influence development policy in these areas. For instance, in certain areas, local politicians who belong to the local middle class have collaborated with Government Irrigation Development Officials (who are also from the landlord class) to develop irrigation facilities in their areas where they have their lands, not in other areas where people of low castes/classes

work.

Caste and ethnicity, too, play a role in how taxes have functioned to restructure land ownership. In the year 1912, *Tharus*, the indigenous peasants of the *Tarai*, were recorded to be especially high land-tax taxpayers. But in 1960, *Pahadiyas* (Hill migrants) were the first to pay land taxes on lands in the region, resulting in 80% of *Tharus* being turned into tenants. Now 90% of all agricultural land originally owned and tilled by the *Tharus* has fallen under the control of *Pahadiyas* (Fusikura, 2006:189). Fraser Sugden (2013) also notes that taxation had developed into the primary mechanism of surplus appropriation by the twentieth century. The surplus accumulation strategy was compulsory for citizenship documentation and for land rights. Most people lost their land because they lacked citizenship cards or legal documents of tenancy (Sugden, 2013:3-5). In Nepal, 29% of agricultural land was tenanted and the rent varied from 25% to 67 %. On average, there is a high rate in the Hills and a low rate in the *Tarai*, but for the most part, it is dependent on the power of local landlords (Koirala, 1987:5). Tenancy rights require two documents: the contract between landlords and tenants, and an agricultural rent payment receipt. Most tenants are never even made aware of these requirements.

Moreover, agricultural policies are unfavourable towards marginal producers and smallholders. Ghimire (1998:44) writes that the top 5% of landowning households receive state support in agriculture to enhance their land productivity and production, whereas 66% of marginal and smallholders, who cultivate just 17% of the land, receive no significant support. This is indicative of the fact that state policy and the distribution of its support weakens the peasantry and disincentivises the poor. Similarly, the bulk of policy emphasis has been on the cultivation of cash crop farming, while cereal crop farming, the traditional focus of the peasant economy, has been ignored because it does not figure in capitalist 'development.' Finally, peasants continue to be exploited by moneylenders, who are able to force high interest rates on their loans during crises, often compelling peasants to sell their small plots of land in order to repay the loan (Shrestha, 2001:197).

With the adoption of neo-liberalism as a 'development paradigm' for the transformation of Nepali society, land, capital, and labour have been transformed into commodities and institutional initiatives have been set up to aim for profit maximisation over anything else. The traditional relationship between landlords and peasants - already in itself exploitative - has been transformed into a

commoditised relationship for capital reproduction. Ultimately, the smallholders, agricultural labourers, the landless, and indebted peasants (such as *Harawa*, *Charawa*, *Haliya*, semi-bonded labour, *ex-Kamaiya*, etc.) have been compelled to sell their labour power to the rich in order to sustain their livelihood. Peasants have been forced to abandon the traditional farming of cereal crops, and transform themselves instead into cash mono-crop producers for the market; in other words, peasants became 'farmers.' The onset of commodity-centred marketisation has therefore triggered these differentiations within peasants, and dissolutions of large parts of the peasantry; in other words, de-peasantisation.

Succinctly put, triggers of 'de-peasantisation' in Nepal include: the extractive economic and political institutions; land tenurial insecurity of the real cultivators; unfavourable state agricultural policies to the smallholders/subsistence peasants; penetration of capitalism into the traditional peasant economy in the rural sector (by making it non-competitive in the market); monopsony; commodification of agricultural land (triggered by financial capitalism); and failure of the peasant organisations to successfully fight against the injustice and inequity of land resources (due to weak mobilisation and

organisation of the movements). In a nutshell, the traditional peasantry has been considerably weakened by the process of agricultural modernisation on the one hand and 'de-peasantisation' on the other. No less important is the process of 'de-agrarianisation,' which promotes the growth of the non-agricultural sector and triggers the diminishment of the agriculture sector's contribution to the GDP.

Hence, in the context of Nepal, the process of de-peasantisation was accelerated by a number of significant transitions: the shift from cereals to cash crops; from the peasant economy to a capitalist mode of production; the expansion of the urban centres; and the growth of the private sector. More broadly, I have shown that 'de-peasantisation' is taking place on a global scale, facilitated by: extractive political economic institutions; the adoption of neoliberal economic policies by governments under the dictates of the IMF, World Bank and ADB; and the weak mobilisation of peasants against the neoliberal agenda. Both globally and in Nepal, these processes have basically converted peasants into resource-less dependents of capitalist farmers and markets. The values of family farming and independent farming are also disappearing, with people becoming highly dependent on markets for their subsistence and food. In the name of economic growth and poverty alleviation,

smallholders, tenants and sharecropper peasants are being pushed into the proletariat class.

In the case of Nepal, the macro-agricultural policies of the government (such as APP and ADS), crafted with the assistance of donor agencies, largely favoured commodity production and the commercialisation of agriculture. The support of both the state and of donors, therefore, fell upon rich and middle class peasants who had the motivation (and the capital) to invest in a way that would produce mainly for the markets. The commercialised farms that resulted from these policies, then, worked on the basis of wage labour. In 2017, the Government finalised the feasibility study for the establishment of special economic zones (SEZs) in seven provinces of Nepal: namely, Biratnagar, Simara, Panchkhal, Gorkha, Bhairawaha, Jumla, and Dhangadhi. While this proposed policy, too, is aimed at agro-based industrialisation, its full implementation requires the acquisition of substantial amounts of arable lands, displacing peasants and leading the process of area-

specific de-peasantisation.

In a nutshell, when Nepal came into democratic process in 1990, the democratic government handed over sustainable agriculture, land, seed, fertilizer, and water to the market, and even handed over peasants to the market and destroyed Nepal's sustainable agriculture. Democratic government policy separated agriculture and peasants and integrated agriculture in the market. Though feudalism is broken, peasants remained property-less or *nango kishan* (naked peasant). Peasants lost land, their seeds, irrigation, food and everything, but Government is promoting corporate commercial farming. The peasant became naked (*naggo*) though they are freed from landlords and a feudalistic system. Democratic government talked democracy, freedom, and poverty, but left out peasants and handed them over to monopoly capitalism. Due to this, Nepali agriculture is in crisis, has deepened market monopoly, and de-peasantized peasants and converted them into a working class.

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<sup>i</sup> In the nutshell, ‘peasants’ are people who have direct access to agricultural land, and who rely upon their own regular participation in agriculture for their livelihood and engagement with the market - regardless of the status of their *de facto* or *de jure* ownership of the land. This understanding of the term ‘peasants’ thus includes landholders (who are themselves engaged in regular agricultural labour), tenants, sharecroppers, and semi-bonded labourers who are involved in agriculture on a regular basis with secure land tenure. The term ‘peasant’ does *not* include ‘corporate farmers’, landlords who are not involved in agricultural activities, and wage labourers who work in agriculture on an irregular basis, and are characterized by irregular access to land.

<sup>ii</sup> ‘De-peasantisation’ refers to a process marked by a decline in the proportion of the peasant workforce over time; the conversion of independent or autonomous peasants into dependent ones (for example, by turning them into agricultural wage labourers through dispossession of land); and a decline in the proportion of the agricultural output by peasants in the total agricultural output of a country.

## COCOA CRUNCH IN GHANA: A COVID-19 PANDEMIC EFFECT AND OTHER FACTORS

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### **This is Unprecedented! Historic!**

It's 4pm GMT at Amoamang, a community in the Wassah Amenfi West district of the Western Region, a leading cocoa producing region in Ghana. A cocoa Purchasing Clerk (known locally as PC or cocoa krakye) received a call and told the caller "I don't have money to buy your cocoa!" and ended the call abruptly. The PC looked frustrated as he received many calls within an hour, mainly from desperate cocoa farmers seeking to sell their cocoa beans. He told us that this has been the situation since mid-December, 2020. There's no money to buy cocoa. According to him this had led to tensions involving PCs, farmers and Licensed Buying Companies (LBCs), thereby affecting social relations within communities. A Field Officer of an LBC in the district stated, "farmers often sit from morning to evening waiting for PCs to receive their cocoa and process payment, but the PCs decline, because they do not want to compound their problems knowing very well that they will not be able to pay for the cocoa. This situation has never happened before!"

### **Introduction**

Historically, export commodity dependent countries experience extreme disruptions in their economies due to the global crises. This phenomenon has not spared agricultural producers who have been shown to be vulnerable to such volatilities. Although the impacts of COVID-19 on economies mimic older crises such as the great depression, economic recession and the oil crisis, it is distinct in its character. Under the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, exporting countries are not only faced with declines in world

commodity prices, but also, shrinking of revenues generated internally which has deleterious effects on raw material export economies (Asante-Poku & van Huellen 2021). Such economies have had to endure a double whammy of both global and domestic level economic disruptions. Ghana earns an estimated US\$2 billion from cocoa exports annually. The sector also employs one million farmers among other contributions to the national economy. However, overall, a US\$2.5 billion decline in export earnings in Ghana has

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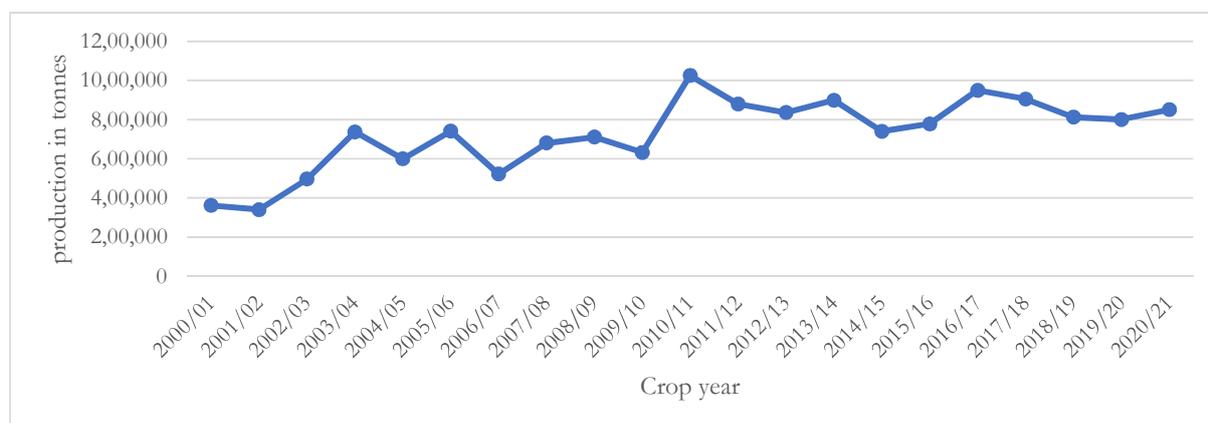
<sup>3</sup> Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana.

been attributed to COVID-19 related trade disruptions,<sup>i</sup> particularly cocoa and oil.

The ebb and flow of cocoa production is in tune with global and domestic events. One expects the decline in cocoa prices in the wake of COVID-19 to affect cocoa sector revenue negatively. While in earlier crises that affected prices, farmers responded radically by boycotting the sale of beans, the systematic

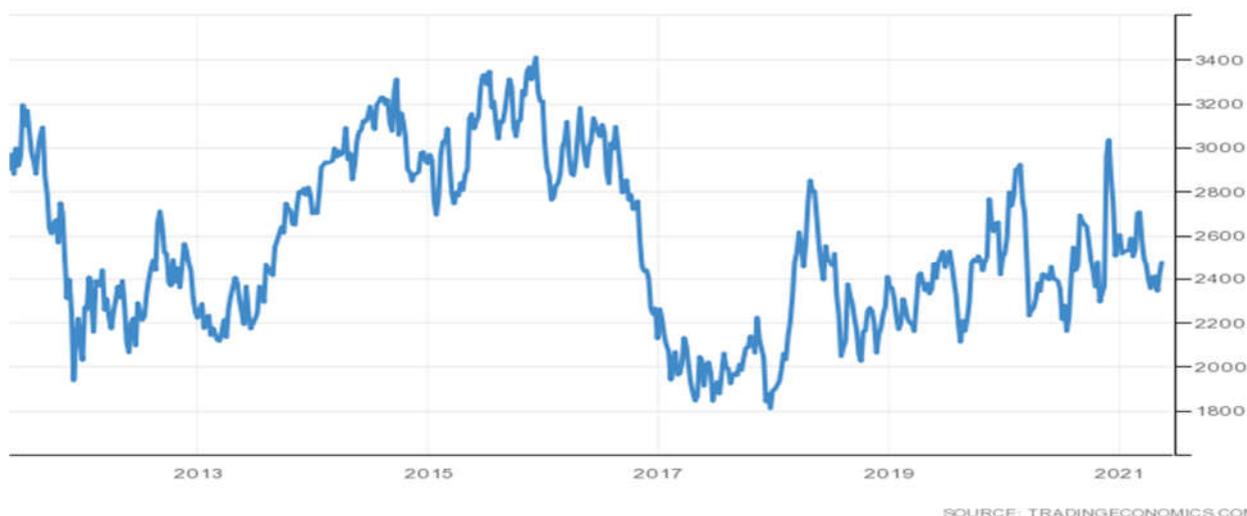
production squeeze, income deflation and general poverty has meant that farmers are unable to take similar actions. Over the past 20 years, cocoa production has fluctuated (see Figure 1). Revealing commodity dependent production syndrome, the 2020/21 production figure increased over that of the previous season (Figure 1) amidst world cocoa price instabilities (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Cocoa Production in Ghana (2000-2021)



SOURCE: GHANA COCOA BOARD

Figure 2: World Cocoa Price (2010-2021)



SOURCE: TRADINGECONOMICS.COM

The pandemic as a portal has triggered existing structural challenges in the cocoa marketing system which shook cocoa producing areas. The main objective of this piece is to link the global level problem of the pandemic to the politics that govern cocoa in Ghana and the ramifications of the crisis for producers and their households. We map the “cocoa crunch” within political economy perspectives by linking the current crises to the history of unequal exchange between Ghana and the multinational cocoa buying companies. We draw from Patnaik and Patnaik (2017) and Amin (1977) concepts on the perils of commodity production dependency in peripheral economies to explain the effects of COVID-19 on the cocoa sector and its wider ramifications on producing households.

### **Cocoa in Ghana: a crop with strong state presence**

Ghanaian state regulates its cocoa sector. Positive policies in the sector bring political gains while negative policies engender misfortunes. Successive post-independent regimes in Ghana overtaxed and relied heavily on cocoa for national budgets, sometimes to the detriment of cocoa farmers. Farmers received about 30-50% of the Free on Board (FOB) price of cocoa, reaching a low of 29% in 1983/84 season (Williams, 2009). This over taxation, coupled with corruption and bloated

cocoa sector employment with over 100,000 workers in 1980s, became a disincentive for production. Resultantly, during the 1980s, Ghana lost its position as the leading cocoa producer and fell behind Cote d'Ivoire and Brazil. Integral to Ghana's Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the 1980s was the restructuring of the cocoa sector which led to producer price increases of over 70% of the FOB price, reduction of employees in the sector, and the partial liberalisation of the internal marketing of cocoa.

The British colonial government instituted a Cocoa Marketing Board in 1947 to regulate and market cocoa in Ghana, with local and foreign firms buying cocoa internally. After independence however, the government revoked licenses of all buying firms, giving the mandate to state-sponsored United Ghana Farmers Council which involved farmer cooperatives in all cocoa growing areas as buyers of cocoa. The hegemony of the cooperatives later collapsed amidst claims of corruption, political interference and inefficiencies. During the 1992/93 season, Ghana again restructured the internal marketing of cocoa.

Since 1992, the Cocoa Marketing Board which metamorphosed into the Ghana Cocoa Board (Cocobod) is mandated with the issuances of licenses to local and foreign

buying firms interested in purchasing cocoa beans from farmers. The cocoa is purchased at a farm gate price fixed by the Producer Price Review Committee (PPRC). Licensed Buying Companies (LBCs) deliver all beans bought to the Cocoa Marketing Company (CMC), a subsidiary of Cocobod which is the sole exporter of Ghana's cocoa. CMC pays a fixed price to LBCs for the cocoa. Thus, LBCs do not compete on price; they maximise their profits based on turnover time and volumes of beans purchased. Foreign LBCs, largely multinational commodity trading companies such as Olam, Cargill, ECOM or subsidiaries of these companies such as Nyonkopa, a local subsidiary of the Barry Callebaut Group, are able to provide additional incentives to farmers. Thus, they buy more beans and currently dominate the internal marketing of cocoa in Ghana.

### ***New policies, attractive cocoa producer prices and new challenges?***

Since the 1993/94 cocoa season, Cocobod runs an effective international borrowing system called the cocoa syndicated loan. This loan, secured at competitive rates to use as seed funds to buy cocoa, allows Cocobod to lend credit at lower interest rates when compared to bank rates. LBCs receive seed funds at the beginning of the season when producer prices are announced. Beginning

2020, however, the government started implementing a bill passed in parliament and ceased to provide seed funds to all foreign LBCs, but rather provided the financial resources to Ghanaian-owned LBCs to enhance their competitiveness.

The governments of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, the two leading producers of cocoa, also introduced an unprecedented premium of US\$400/tonne on the export price of cocoa called the Living Income Differential (LID), to be paid to farmers starting from the 2020/21 season. Stakeholders in the sector heralded the potential of this LID to reduce farmer poverty and improve their living conditions. However, there were concerns about measures put in place to ensure that the LID is directly paid to farmers. Concerns were also raised suggesting that by raising prices of cocoa exports from the two countries, buyers will simply source cocoa from other areas. The LID took effect on October 1, 2020. Soon after, reports emerged that the US confectionary giant Hershey, had already begun buying cocoa beans from the ICE Commodities Futures Exchange which offered a cheaper price with another buyer known as Mars also adopting a similar strategy (see Stanbury & Webb, 2021).

On September 24, 2020, the government of Ghana announced a new producer price of GHS 660 (US\$115) per 64kg

bag of cocoa beans to take effect on October 1, 2020. The 28.4% increment, which is higher than the 8% increase over that of the year before, was as a result of the application of the LID. Occurring in an election year, the increment was expected to boost the electoral chances of the incumbent government in cocoa growing communities. However, the expectation was met with anguish, as reports of non-release of seed funds emerged from across the country. The Cocobod blamed the delay on constraints in accessing the pre-market syndicated loan due to COVID-19's effect on financial institutions globally. LBCs and purchasing clerks bemoaned the non-release of funds. This occurred in an environment where there was already mistrust in the sector with farmers accusing PCs of exploiting them through adjustments of cocoa weighing scales, under invoicing, underpayment of bonuses and premiums and usurious money lending (Baah, Anchirinah, Badger, & Badu-Yeboah, 2012).

### **Cocoa in a Global Health Crisis**

Agrarian political economists argue that peasants' integration into capitalist production engenders exploitation and is fundamental to the pauperisation of rural producers. Historically, commodity producers in the global South suffer economic decline in times of global crisis that affect commodity prices (Patnaik and Patnaik, 2016). While

COVID-19 has affected cocoa prices, in Ghana, the non-release of funds for cocoa purchase is the main problem affecting cocoa-dependent communities. The problem is unprecedented in Ghana's cocoa sector since the restructuring of the 1992/93 agricultural season. A cocoa Purchasing Clerk in the Western region of Ghana who has worked for 15 years lamented, "this is my worst cocoa purchasing experience." Farmers, field officers of LBCs, and the opposition National Democratic Congress party, shared similar sentiments. Media reports have highlighted the socioeconomic impacts of the crisis on communities.

The local LBCs which were intended to benefit from the new policy are weaker now because they are incapable of securing funds to purchase cocoa. A few wealthier LBCs such as Yonkopa, a subsidiary of the Barry Callebaut Group continue to buy cocoa in their operational areas despite government's indebtedness, while others rely on their relationship with their corporate clients to secure funds. The few foreign LBCs which have purchased cocoa and supplied to government are yet to be reimbursed, as highlighted by this field officer:

My company sent 500,000 bags of cocoa to CMC. We are yet to receive our money and

overhead costs. The funds are locked up at the port and because of this, the company would not want to continue to invest its funds into buying new cocoa beans until the ones sent are paid (Western Region, 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2021).

Now, loads of cocoa beans are stacked up in the port, depots, warehouses and homes. While farmers may have loyalty to specific LBCs and PCs, the current situation has triggered farmers' agency where loyalty is no longer considered, and cocoa is sold to whoever has money to buy. Longstanding ties between PCs and farmers are being severed, resulting in causalities in some communities as reported in Asmah Camp near Dunkwa On-Offin in the Central region.<sup>ii</sup> Agitations in cocoa growing communities across the country continue as farmers threaten to sell cocoa beans to Cote d'Ivoire, or their land to artisanal small scale miners.<sup>iii</sup> As a result of the payment crisis, the National Association of Ghana Cocoa Marketing Clerks has cautioned its members to stop buying cocoa on credit until the LBCs pay for the beans already bought on credit.<sup>iv</sup> The Association is also using the opportunity to push for better working conditions for members and to expand their role and prospects in the cocoa value chain.

While farmers are entrusting cocoa beans in the hands of trusted PCs, knowing they have no use for them, the latter must bear the risk of decline in quality. With poor storage facilities, PCs bear the cost of poor quality cocoa beans (Manikin-Babion, 2019).

### **The Social Reproduction Crisis in Households**

In 12 communities visited by the authors between February and March 2021, men confirmed the problem of cocoa production syndrome which made them one-stream income earners. Thus, amidst the payment crisis is also a social reproduction crisis, raising the question of how cocoa growing households reproduce themselves. In a Focus Group Discussion at Nkrankrom in the Wassah Amenfi District of Western Region, the men stated: "our wives are taking care of the households. We are not ashamed to say this." Female cocoa farmers are equally affected by the delay in the release of funds for cocoa purchase, however, the burden of feeding households falls on them, as has been in peripheral economies (Deere 1976; Mies, 1986). Women have now intensified their trading activities to feed cocoa reliant households. Farmers detailed hardships faced in households when they said "we suspended Christmas" and "when schools reopened in January, we were very hot."

A field officer of a LBC, indicated that the situation is pushing many farming households into extreme poverty and further argued that although there is Free Universal Compulsory Basic Education (FCUBE), Free Senior High School Education and School Feeding Programmes, these are not enough to replace real incomes that farmers need to improve their livelihoods. Parents still need to provide many items for their children to enable them go to school. The crisis is described as “a big blow” to farmers.

### **Conclusion**

The 2020/2021 cocoa season will remain in the annals of crop production as an “annus horribilis.” The COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected global commodity prices, has had an adverse effect on Ghana, a commodity export dependent country. While

this is generally the case, cocoa farmers are also battling with the state bureaucracy and politics that governs the crop in the country. The implementation of a new policy in cocoa marketing which was meant to support local LBCs has not materialised and the delay in the release of funds to LBCs has resulted in a social reproduction crisis. The long delay in release of seed funds has affected farming households that are already dealing with other weighty challenges in the cocoa sector. While the Ghanaian state has kept mute over the problem, cocoa purchasing clerks who aggregate cocoa on behalf of LBCs are blamed for the crises. Frosty relations are developing between PCs and farmers while in the meantime, women have to intensify their livelihood activities to provide for their households.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/business/Ghana-s-export-earnings-decline-by-US-2-5-billion-due-to-coronavirus-1213759>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://mybrytfmonline.com/angry-farmers-attack-cocoa-clerk-with-cutlasses-for-failing-to-pay-them/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Galamsey-or-Cote-d-Ivoire-Cocoa-farmers-threaten-govt-1243927>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/business/Suspend-cocoa-credit-Cocoa-Clerks-Association-to-members-1243495>

## RESPONDING TO THE CRISIS OF COVID-19 (AND CAPITALISM): LAND DEFENCE OF MAYA VILLAGERS IN THE FACE OF STATE-SPONSORED DISPOSSESSION AND FOOD SYSTEM SHOCK<sup>1</sup>

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This briefing provides a situated glimpse of the COVID-19 realities faced by Indigenous communities and land defenders in Latin America and the Caribbean. Via focusing on the experiences of Maya villagers and organisers in Toledo District, Belize, we bring together local knowledge, grassroots insights, and social movement-generated data on what the pandemic has produced apropos food system shock, escalations in attempted land grabs, and state-sanctioned violations of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent. We begin with a broad overview of how the coronavirus outbreak has affected food systems across Latin America and the Caribbean whilst recognising the prevailing role the corporate food regime continues to play in agricultural production and movements for food sovereignty. We then detail a recent flashpoint land conflict in rural southern Belize during which Maya farmers

and forest guardians documented government-sponsored encroachments onto communally held Maya lands without consultation. In sum, via a place-based vignette, our piece aims to raise critical consciousness about broader land and food system struggles that differing agrarian-based Indigenous, Afrodescendant, and peasant communities are engaged in across Majority World contexts.

### Indigenous Realities under COVID-19 and the Corporate Food Regime

Whilst there is more than enough food across the planet to feed the entire world's current population, food insecurity and struggles for food sovereignty continue to pose persistent challenges across a multitude of present-day societies. This is especially true for Indigenous,

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Afrodescendant, and peasant communities in the Majority World who have historically been the targets of colonial dispossession, institutionalised racism, and in more recent times, extractivist “development” agendas. According to the International Labour Organisation, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced nearly three billion people into either full/near unemployment, which has resulted in higher rates of food insecurity. Locking down a country, while necessary to mitigate spiking infection rates, can also cost a given nation up to three percent of its respective GDP per month, which negatively affects social welfare provisioning.

For the sake of simplicity, we are defining food insecurity as a lack of physical, social, and economic access to safe and nutritious food that meets the dietary needs of any given individual and/or community. Food sovereignty, on the other hand and drawing from *La Via Campesina*, is “the peoples’ right to determine their food and agricultural systems and the right to produce and consume healthy and culturally appropriate food.” Factors such as dispossession, poverty, lack of access to land and/or seeds, political-economic instability, armed conflict, forced displacement, extractivist-driven environmental degradation, disasters, and erratic seasonal changes related to shifting climate patterns all exacerbate food insecurity and foreclose possibilities for food sovereignty. Indeed, the

COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the corporate food regime’s inherent inability of to “feed the world” while simultaneously aggravating the enduring problems of food insecurity, hunger, and malnutrition. Subsistence-based rural communities, in particular Indigenous and Afrodescendant groups, are experiencing the deleterious upshots of the pandemic disproportionately.

For example, across Latin America and the Caribbean, numerous Indigenous communities are still not receiving the healthcare assistance and economic support they require to ameliorate the vulnerable conditions they have been placed in. COVID-19 has also led to lockdowns, which restricts the movement of people and hinders the practice of traditional agroecological farming techniques such as swidden agriculture. Lockdowns across the region have included strict health protocols, police enforcement, and the prohibition of freedoms to enter or exit certain geographic areas. While necessary to prevent spread of the virus, the level of lockdown intensity has varied across the region and the measures put in place by several governments have not taken the livelihood strategies and unique specificities of agrarian-based Indigenous and Afrodescendant groups into account.

In turn, there has been a pattern of lockdown implementations, relaxations, and renewals that have generated myriad hardships for rural subsistence-based groups

with community-based economies and who collectively organise to grow and share food and/or guard forests. Notably, Indigenous and Afrodescendant peasant groups across the heterogenous region, even prior to the pandemic, faced increased risk of ill health due to malnourishment as a result of living in isolated areas where once communally held lands have been privatised and access to government resources and medicine has always been low or non-existent. Some states have even used the crisis as an opportunity to grab land. Considering these realities will hold firm until a vaccine arrives across the Majority World and is distributed evenly to communities who have been placed at disparate risk, it is obvious that the virus poses a serious threat to the livelihood strategies of people who live off the land, as well as both local and global economies.

### **The Political Economy of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The impact of COVID-19 on the global political economy, regional food systems, and agrarian communities has been devastating. In several countries across the Majority World, including Latin America and the Caribbean, measures put in place to contain the virus have not only affected the supply of food products, but have also led to a shift in market structure, composition, and demand. Food system disruptions induced by the pandemic are being manifested in three direct ways: (1) impacts on production and

incomes; (2) shifts in demand; and (3) disruptions to supply chains.

Regarding the influence on production and income in Latin America and the Caribbean, limits placed on mobility due to lockdowns are contributing to labour shortages across the agricultural sector, particularly those characterised by seasonal labour demand or that require labour-intensive production. This carries impacts on harvesting processes and can lead to production and wage losses and/or market shortages. Moreover, the pandemic is negatively affecting the availability of necessary system inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, machinery, and capital. These losses are compounded by reduced off-farm incomes and restrictions that prohibit the collective work and exchange of seeds, crops, and food that is common amongst peasant societies.

In the case of consumption patterns, economic shocks induced by the pandemic are expected to reduce overall demand, particularly for higher-value products. The closure of restaurants and other foodservice providers has caused market contraction. Many anticipate these shifts will lead to long-term changes in dietary habits and consumer behaviour, as well as adjust production and distribution patterns. Notably, in Latin America and the Caribbean, these economic and food system shocks are more challenging for small-medium-size enterprises, cottage

industry owners and subsistence-based farming communities. Rather ironically, several global markets-focused organisations like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development have noted the hardships generated by pandemic also present “new business opportunities” for farmers to explore.

The pandemic and attendant lockdowns have caused disruptions to supply chains across both the global corporate food regime and localised social and solidarity economies. Detrimental impacts continue to be felt across differing workforces, ranging from the physical symptoms associated with COVID-19 to negative mental health effects spurred by isolation, depression, and anxiety. Economically, health-related impacts have led to reduced productivity and added costs related to the implementation of more strident health and safety requirements. Moreover, lockdowns are anticipated to have major effects on the provision of safety, quality, and certification checks that are required for trade and the shipping of produce. In addition, COVID-19-induced border closures and conveyance checks are causing delays to transport services, which is having ruinous effects on perishable products like seafood, fruit, and vegetables.

In short, the fallout(s) of the pandemic—and more readily corporate food regime—in 2020 began suddenly and continue to carry devastating repercussions.

Food insecurity, malnutrition, and hunger emergencies are raging across dozens of countries and food riots have already occurred in India, South Africa, and Honduras. Less attention, however, has been paid to state- and corporate-sponsored land predation that has coincided with the pandemic. On this front and amidst the multiple crises prompted by COVID-19 (and arguably capitalism), several states have reacted with authoritarianism and militarised repression. As a response, peasant movements and political activists from all over the Majority World continue to both document and resist the violations of human and land rights they are experiencing. The Maya communities of Toledo District, Belize provide one such example. Notably, even after the Maya’s watershed 2015 Caribbean Court of Justice land rights victory and during a global pandemic, the Government of Belize (GOB) is still attempting to grab Indigenous lands.

### **Crisis as Opportunity: Land Predation and the Capitalist State<sup>i</sup>**

According to a press release issued by the Maya Leaders Alliance (MLA) and Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA) in early November, during late October several Maya villages in Toledo District, Belize reported that speculators were illegally opening survey lines in an attempted land grab. Several of the lines, which were established without Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), cut

through forests, corn and cacao fields, and the living spaces and homes of Maya families. State-sanctioned FPIC violations against Q'eqchi' and Mopan Maya communities have been documented and ongoing for decades.

The most recent encroachments are occurring five years after the Maya won an unprecedented legal victory in the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) regarding the recognition of Indigenous land rights. The 2015 CCJ decision affirmed that communal land tenure of Maya communities is commensurate with property rights found in the Belizean constitution. Since the ruling, however, the GoB has been non-compliant and refused to engage in meaningful processes of delimiting and protecting Maya lands, which are conditions of the CCJ order.

Investigations led by Maya Alcaldes (traditional leaders) into the recent unauthorised surveying revealed that those involved include foreign parties, non-Maya individuals from outside of Toledo District, and speculators from southern Belize. Surveyors were claiming as many as 30 and up to 400 acres of land, which contravenes the 2015 CCJ order, not to mention the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), which the GoB voted to adopt in 2007. Land predation of this nature, which violates FPIC, has historically facilitated dispossession,

corporate extraction, and environmental damage to Maya lands.

### **Cease and Desist: The Maya Response**

Upon being alerted of the incursions by village leaders, the MLA and TAA issued a formal statement reminding the GoB that it is legally obligated to:

...cease and abstain from any acts, whether by the agents of the government itself or third parties acting with its leave, acquiescence, or tolerance, that might adversely affect the value, use, or enjoyment of the lands that are used and occupied by the Maya villages, unless such acts are preceded by consultation with [Maya people] in order to obtain their informed consent.

In an interview shortly after the encroachments were reported, Maya land defender and MLA spokesperson, Cristina Coc, pointed out that the spike in FPIC violations were coinciding with the run-up to the recent national election in Belize, stating:

There's always been incursions on Mayan land, this is exactly why we went to the courts (CCJ) to seek affirmation of protection. At the same time, however,

there is an alarm because there has been an increase in the volume and frequency of land surveying right now in Toledo District in the last hour before election. And so one has to ask the question whether or not it is politically motivated, and whether or not it is related to what we have seen historically in Belize, where around campaign time politicians offer land in exchange for votes...we hope that the government will address these ongoing violations, which are in direct conflict with the CCJ order and we denounce these actions.

Upon denouncing the attempted land grabs at a hearing before the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR), the MLA and TAA submitted a request for precautionary measures against the GoB to halt all illegal activity. Rather than being an isolated issue related to the ownership of private property, movement activists reiterated that grabbing communal Maya lands poses a grave threat to the material wellbeing and cultural survival of Q'eqchi' and Mopan people who are experiencing the slow violence of dispossession and extractivism.

In short, this is a story about Indigenous resistance to ongoing assertions of (post)colonial power, capitalist logics, and Western worldviews. Evidence of this is made clear given the GoB is based upon a Westminster model of governance imposed by British imperialists that has failed former colonies all over the world. Moreover, the GoB has a track record of abetting multinational corporations while repudiating Indigenous people's claims to communal land ownership, notions of complex tenure, and right to self-determination.

### **Denial and Disavowal: The State Response**

The GoB's response to the Maya came on October 30th. While Patrick Faber, leader of the then ruling United Democratic Party, admitted that, in accordance with the CCJ decision, the presence of surveyors without the consent of the Maya would indeed be illegal, he dismissed the allegations by the Maya and Coc by stating:

I listened very carefully as Miss Coc spoke and there is no evidence to that [surveying] happening...again, if indeed the land that she says people are surveying is the communal land that has been awarded to the Mayan people in that area as their customary

land, then that cannot happen. So, everybody would know that is the case and then they will have a case in court if that is the point if that is true. But I don't have any evidence that that is happening and it is apparent to all who is listening to what she said that she doesn't have any evidence. She is only telling you what she saw and what people reported is happening but no concrete evidence of anything happening.

Despite the Maya issuing written reports with photographs to both the Lands and Surveys Department and Attorney General, the GoB rejected the claims by suggesting there was no evidence. Incidentally, for nearly a year in 2015-2016, Coc, along with 12 other Maya activists, were detained, jailed, and dragged through the courts by the GoB after protecting a sacred heritage site against similar incursions. Despite the criminalisation, all the charges levied against the Maya environmental defenders were eventually dismissed.

Similar to Faber's response, on the same day, Belize's Attorney General, Michael Peyrefitte, made the following statement, directed at Coc:

...if you have a legal issue ma'am, go dah court. To me, you don't really have a legal issue because if you had a real legal issue, you would go to court, you wouldn't go to the media. But they are hoping that they could cast enough doubt on the situation that will make the government look bad...that [CCJ] consent judgment states in there clearly that no part of this consent judgment affects the sovereign authority of the GoB and the people of Belize. In short then, that area da noh wahn separate country, you know, that is still a part of Belize. They may not like to hear that, but that's the case. So, nothing can stop the executive of the country to do what it feels like it needs to do for the betterment of the country.

The Attorney General's response ignores the actual allegations being made against the GoB. Instead, Peyrefitte suggests the encroachment claims are irrelevant because "they want their own country," which is a rhetorical attempt to undermine both Coc's credibility and the validity of the reports issued by Maya Alcaldes. Not only

was the state's evasive response a divisive disavowal of Maya land rights, but it is also arguably hostile and dehumanising as it prioritises the desires of private capital over Indigenous people's self-determination and livelihood strategies, which the GoB has a history of.

### **Parsing the Rhetoric: State Authoritarianism vs. Indigenous Autonomy**

When we consider the GoB's response alongside the ongoing struggle for Indigenous land rights in southern Belize, three issues require urgent attention.

Firstly, good faith leadership is lacking given the government's refusal to investigate the claims of Maya Alcaldes. The GoB's insistence that, because the Maya used the media to raise awareness about FPIC violations, they do not have a "real" issue, is arguably as nonsensical as it is contrived. That is, when Indigenous people exposed state-sponsored land grabbing in the media, they were promptly met with baseless accusations that they had no evidence.

Secondly, when Indigenous people report violations to government agencies, agencies are slow to investigate – if state officials even take their claims seriously and investigate at all. Moreover, arguing Indigenous people must always operate (i.e. "go to court") *and exist* on the state's terms is colonial. This is not an uncommon refrain from the state,

though, as the GoB realises that going to court for rural subsistence-based Maya communities is an expensive and protracted process. Certain government agents also realise that, even if the courts rule against the state, it can get away with violating decisions and rule of law, as it has done before.

Lastly, the imperious tones of Faber and Peyrefitte's responses are not only dismissive, but dangerous—and not only for the Maya. In particular, Peyrefitte's concluding line: "...nothing can stop the executive of the country to do what it feels like it needs to do for the betterment of the country." This is authoritarian nationalism *par excellence* and should be disconcerting for the whole of Belize.

The GoB's lack of rights-based leadership and draconian posturing is nothing new. Back in 2015, when the CCJ ruling was passed in favour of the Maya, the GoB's Attorney General was quick to diminish Maya customary tenure by stating Indigenous land rights "cannot trump the constitutional authority of the government." Hence, it appears what the state is willing to take the lead on, consistently, is refuting the rights of Indigenous people and fettering Maya autonomy.

While the GoB's most recent statements continue to rebuke Indigenous customary systems such as the Alcaldes and communal land holding, they also reveal:

scepticism towards the word of the Maya people; state dereliction of the duty to consult; and even failure to follow its own statutes. In turn, the state's response to the recent land grab allegations raises pressing questions. Why, when under legal mandate to protect Maya land rights, are the claims discounted without investigation? Furthermore, in addition to photographs and reports, what would satisfy the state's need for and definition of "*concrete evidence*"?

The reports of incursions by Maya leaders afforded the GoB the opportunity to demonstrate good faith adherence to consent processes and strengthen its relationship with Maya communities. It was also a chance for state officials to denounce FPIC violations, prevent deleterious land encroachments, and uphold its obligation to protect customary Maya land rights, as ordered by the CCJ. Instead, the GoB doubted the veracity of the Alcaldes' reports, attacked the credibility of Maya people, attempted to turn the larger population against the Maya, and declared to all citizens of Belize it could impose upon them whatever it wanted, arbitrarily, for "the betterment of the country."

### **The Reality of Land Grabs under COVID-19**

In speaking to the realities of Maya families who must defend land whilst trying to socially reproduce themselves amidst a global pandemic, MLA spokesperson

Cristina Coc sums up the attempted dispossession as follows:

...not only are farms and milpas being affected, but even residential areas where we have our own villages living. This is concerning because it impacts our livelihood, and we have seen throughout the COVID-19 pandemic how valuable land is, and how valuable the production of land is for the food security of Mayan communities and Belizeans alike.

We recognise that the government cannot feed our people, they cannot employ all of our people, they cannot rescue us from this economic spiral that we're experiencing. But what we can do is provide full security for our people by protecting their tenure on the land...

...it is very alarming that the government would allow such actions – the Maya communities have been informed and are aware that there is a standing consent order that affirms our rights

and protects ancestral rights  
to lands and territories.

In sum, the authoritarian behaviour  
and contemptuous rhetoric of the GoB  
continues to disrupt Indigenous life and close  
avenues for Maya people to exercise their

rights and have their voices heard. It is also  
signalling to all Belizean people that the state  
is more than willing to sacrifice the rights and  
wellbeing of some (i.e. the marginalised) at  
the altar of “development.”

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<sup>1</sup> Part of this section first appeared on NACLA’s non-refereed site: <https://nacla.org/news/2020/12/13/maya-land-fpic-belize>

