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Kouame Fasseri, Fair Trade Cocoa Farmer, answers my questions :)

1. Have you always been a Fairtrade cocoa farmer? If yes, for how long now and if not: how did you become a Fairtrade producer and what made you decide to change to Fairtrade status?

We have been Fairtrade since 2004. I have been farming cocoa for twenty years at least. Our co-operative became Fairtrade because we saw the information about Fairtrade and saw that it could bring benefits to the small producers like us. Kavokiva (our co-operative) wants to improve the living conditions of all the growers. We think we were the first certified Fairtrade farm in the Ivory Coast – many others have followed since, so they can also benefit from Fairtrade.

2. How has your business changed since the introduction of Fairtrade?

Yes, the co-operative is much more professional well, we have had a lot of training. We understand the global market much better and how cocoa is consumed in other countries. We have more income and are growing our business.

3. What was your business like before Fairtrade?

The co-operative existed but it wasn't professional like it is now. We didn't know what would happen with prices each year. In 1993, the price for cocoa fell really low and that was bad. With the minimum price, we know that won't happen again.

4. Does Fairtrade chocolate production actually change the way you pick, process or prepare the cocoa?

We have had training since Fairtrade so now we know more about how to grow more, better cocoa. There are also some chemicals which are banned by Fairtrade, so we no longer use those, which is better for the environment and the quality of the cocoa.

5. What was your life like before you had Fairtrade on your farm?

I used to worry about being unable to provide healthcare and education for my children. I never could be sure about my future income

6. Does Fairtrade really make a difference? If yes, how and to whom has this made a difference in your farm and in your local community?

Yes, Fairtrade makes a difference. We have all the social projects: the health insurance, new schools, hospital, ambulance, technical training... so many things because of Fairtrade. And also in our relationship with Nestle, we have new cocoa plants! It has made a difference to everyone in the community because the benefits have been shared with everyone. We have all benefited from the new schools – for small children, bigger children, and also adult education programmes. We have benefited from all the health care improvements. We have much better access to clean water, as well, which we did not have before – this caused illness, as you can imagine.

7. Do you know of any forced labour or child slavery that goes on in other farms, how frequent do you think is the occurrence of child slavery in Ivory Coast cocoa farming, in your experience? Since we became Fairtrade, all the children of the members of the co-operative have to go to school – they do not work in the fields. I only know about the people where I live – we are all very happy for our children to go to school and get a good education. The co-operative has worked to raise the awareness about the rights of the child and the importance of children going to school. Now all the growers know that it is compulsory for all children to go to school and not to work in the fields.

8. What would you say to someone who was not sure if Fairtrade really makes a difference?

It has made a big difference to me, and to my community. I would love to show you all – we have made a video, so there you will be able to see yourself. We have also been able to use Fairtrade money to build new wells, to make sure we have clean drinking water for everyone. Before there was not enough drinking water, and people would walk a long way to get water.

9. I am very interested to know about the social premium benefits Kavokiva provides to its members, their families, and people in the area. Please could you tell me more about the investments that have been made, for example in education, health care and improvements to cocoa farms? Since Nestle has been involved in some rather unsound practices in the past (which have meant that I tend not to buy any Nestle products), it is encouraging that they are embracing better systems. I am curious to know how much better it is for cocoa farmers to be members of Kavokiva?

Nestle has also invested in providing new cocoa trees for us, as many of our trees were old, and they are expensive to replace. Being a member of Kavokiva is very important for us. It allows us small farmers to have a voice, and to influence things at the top level. As a co-operative, we decide democratically how to run ourselves and how to invest our Fairtrade premium money. Being a co-operative makes us more organised and means we have access to training and information we wouldn't have as individual farmers. The co-operative also organises new schemes for the farmers – the health insurance was the first big programme, but recently the co-op has also organised a big microfinance programme which encourages all growers to have their own bank accounts so they can save more money, not carry lots of cash around, and plan for the future; it also provides low interest loans for school fees.

10. If you could say something to the school children that I visit about Fairtrade, and how it has affected your farm, workers and community, what would you say?

I would say: thank you for your support, and please continue to support Fairtrade. Fairtrade has really helped me, my family, and everyone in my village and other villages in our region. I would love for other farmers to also have the opportunity to benefit from Fairtrade.

11. For years I have only bought Fairtrade chocolate, do you think it is OK to buy non Fairtrade chocolate, as people on non Fairtrade farms still need the work?

I don't know! I think it is better to buy the best, Fairtrade chocolate!

12. How many of the farms in your area are now Fairtrade?

All the growers in our co-operative (6,000) are Fairtrade. There are also other co-operatives near us that are Fairtrade.

13. What do you think helps Fairtrade farms to succeed and grow in numbers?

Fairtrade works for us the growers because it brings us so many benefits and helps our lives and the lives of our families. So we all want to be part of Fairtrade. But we also need partners like Nestle to buy Fairtrade, and for everyone in the UK to support Fairtrade.

14. Do you have any stories about individuals or families whose lives have been improved since the introduction of Fairtrade in your community and farm?

We have been talking a lot with our friends at the Fairtrade Foundation about all the stories! There are so many. My neighbour's wife called the ambulance in the middle of the night last week, because she was very ill – before Fairtrade, there was no ambulance, no health centre, and she would have had to wait until morning and then make a long journey (at least 20km) to the nearest hospital. As well as my family, there are the families of all the Kavokiva members. Since we've had the health centre, we have many few people who die every year – before it was 60-70 people every year who died – many from hernias which were left untreated – now only 2/3 die each year. Women giving birth also benefit a lot from having healthcare now.

15. I have heard that many cocoa farm workers and farmers never get to see the chocolate that they produce the cocoa for, is this true? Do you or any of your workers actually get to eat any chocolate?

It's true that chocolate is a luxury. We never buy chocolate, though it is sold in shops in the big towns. The first time I had chocolate was when Nestle and Fairtrade came to visit me in the Ivory Coast and they brought over some Kit Kats – I like it! Eating chocolate is not really part of our culture.

16. Sometimes I hear bad things about the Nestle company, how have you found them as a company, and do they give you the support and regular help that you may need? What do you think they need to do to improve their reputation?

Since we have been Fairtrade, we have had many commercial partners. The last two years with Nestle, they have been our best partner and given us a lot of support, for example by providing the extra trees. No partner has been better in terms of social projects, environmental work, communications and marketing. Our co-operative is always talking with Nestle to find ways to do things even better. We have a shared objective with Nestle of making life better for the small growers. Things are not always perfect, but it's a good relationship.

