

Mars Signs Memorandum of Understanding with Cote d'Ivoire

Cocoa is grown and harvested in much the same way as it was in pre-Columbian times. Small farms operated by farmers and their immediate families, using traditional methods to plant, harvest and dry the cacao bean. Yields have been flat for decades and deforestation and land degradation are increasingly undermining production. Neither ambitious colonial powers nor big business, or even well-intentioned producer-country programs for that matter, have significantly changed the day-to-day lives of West African cocoa farmers – a life increasingly comprised of hard work and low reward.

As one of the world's largest chocolate makers, Mars buys much of our cocoa from Côte d'Ivoire and the West African region. We have watched with increasing concern as the quantity and quality of the cocoa has steadily diminished. For too long, efforts in the sector have fallen short of improving not just the yield of cocoa but, much more importantly, the quality of the lives of the men and women who produce the cocoa. Today, that changes. Today, with this Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), we make a promise to the people of Côte d'Ivoire that we, along with many others, will commit technology, experience and money to help build a vibrant and sustainable cocoa sector in their nation and, we firmly hope, beyond.

The economic, social and political challenges within Côte d'Ivoire are well known and today's promise should not be construed as a solution to these issues. Instead, it commits us to working with the Ivorian government to identify the skills, resources and actions necessary to build a framework for future economic, social and environmental improvement. We call this effort "Farmers First" because it is intended to work at the grassroots level – directly with the farmers.

In the spirit of transparency we intend over the next few weeks to release even more information about the MOU and we will soon launch a website where we will be able to keep people informed of the progress we are all making.

Please keep in mind that this is a pilot program, one in which we'll learn from all our successes and failures and apply them throughout Côte d'Ivoire's massive cocoa sector (and the larger West African region). Likewise, we view this effort as being "pre-competitive," meaning we believe it comes before any competitive interests. To that end, we have welcomed our competition - many of which are already working on their own sustainability activities - to join us in this program.

No matter where any of us may be in tackling this issue, the fact is that only together can we hope to begin to transform not just the cocoa industry but the very lives of the farmers and families at the heart of it. It is, after all, to them that we make this promise.

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