

Growing demand for zero-deforestation cacao might not help Colombian forests

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Harvested cacao pods, near Gauchené, in the north of Colombia's Cauca Department. Credit: Neil Palmer / International Center for Tropical Agriculture

When Brazil refused soy grown on deforested land in the Amazon, the movement spread worldwide. Brazil's Soy Moratorium in 2006 became the first zero-deforestation agreement. And from cocoa in Ghana to palm oil in Indonesia, now companies would have to explain: Where was their product from? Did it contribute to deforestation?

But more than a decade later, there is little concrete evidence that zero-deforestation pledges have cut deforestation or carbon emissions. While zero-deforestation support has grown, companies still have no guidelines through which they may measure progress. The result is a vague nod in the direction of improvement, with little concrete evidence that it works.

"There are no one-size-fits-all, silver bullet solutions. Zero-deforestation supply chains is not one either," said Augusto Castro-Nunez, a scientist at the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT. "It just doesn't work as a blanket approach for all countries and all supply chains. The proliferation of

zero-deforestation pledges might creates uncertainty for small and large producers alike, without a clear roadmap to implement those pledges."

A smarter approach might be to include a raft of sustainability measures along every part of the [supply chain](#), embedded as value addition. This is because ending agriculture-driven deforestation requires global-level commitments—like zero-deforestation pledges—to be tailored to local contexts.

Colombia is a case in point. Here, cocoa does not appear to replace virgin forest. Rather, it is used to replace illicit coca plant used for cocaine production. The research led by Castro-Nunez also shows that in Colombia, cocoa production, even if it is only for local markets, offers a pathway out of conflict and poverty.

The research, which maps cacao production in Colombia and overlays it with deforestation hotspots, was published in *Applied Geography* and has been used by the Colombian Cacao, Forest and Peace Initiative. The study was funded by Germany's International Climate Initiative, or IKI, as part of its Sustainable Land Use Systems (SLUS) project led by the Alliance.

Yet even though the science tells us that cocoa is not a driver of deforestation in Colombia like palm oil is in Indonesia, small producers must still adhere to zero-deforestation practices. Indeed the top prices and niche markets it attracts, continue to sweet-talk cacao stakeholders across the country.

And yet, although 90 percent of those small farmers live in poor and post-conflict areas where cocoa is produced, they risk being cut out of supply chains if they do not comply with zero-deforestation requirements. The impact: to switch to other crops, like coca—leading to an exacerbation of the conflict from which these small producers are trying to

escape.

"The expectation is for producers is that because their [cacao](#) does not drive deforestation, it could reach new international markets and command higher prices," said Castro-Nunez. "This has not happened at a wide-scale but there is potential."

Castro-Nunez and colleagues say that instead of dropping producers from supply chains for not meeting zero-deforestation requirements, different value-addition strategies can be adopted along the chain. Relationships can be made and nurtured; producers can receive support, finance and information to build their businesses sustainably. Suppliers must work together to add value and help producers out of conflict and poverty.

Much of the burden for investing in zero-deforestation pledges would be carried by producers. Without access to finance, knowledge and the right networks, producers are often not in a position to invest in meeting these goals, reducing further any chances of creating sustainable markets and helping themselves out of the situation.

So investment in the value-chain approach to build peace and support zero-deforestation and other context-specific situations is critical. Since in Colombia, cocoa is promoted as an alternative to illicit coca, support must be given to help legal businesses develop and thrive, towards peace and transparency.

Reducing deforestation in agricultural production is undoubtedly a must. But first, the extent to which a product is contributing to deforestation in any specific location must be determined. We can't manage what we can't measure: we need more data about what is happening on the ground to define commitments.

In Colombia, demand for zero-deforestation cocoa might even drive up competition to produce cocoa for these high-end markets touting certification as a solution.

"Eventually, the laws of supply and demand tell us that this would drive up deforestation in the future, undermining the very goals the zero-deforestation

movement was set up to meet," said Castro-Nunez.

So, while we know that we must reduce deforestation caused as a result of agricultural intensification, we still don't know how to do it. Pledges with no roadmap for implementation cannot help us meet a raft of not only zero-deforestation outcomes but sustainability outcomes in general.

"I do believe that bringing about zero-[deforestation](#) and a sustainable future is possible. But it requires more than sweet-talk," said Castro-Nunez. "We need granular data, context-specific and peace-driven motivations. And a roadmap for implementation: one which makes a real difference for every person along a product supply chain, from smallholder farmer to chocolate lover."

More information: Augusto Castro-Nunez et al, Reducing deforestation through value chain interventions in countries emerging from conflict: The case of the Colombian cocoa sector, *Applied Geography* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.apgeog.2020.102280](#)

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