West Africa's Cocoa Sector and Development within Africa-EU Relations: Engaging Business Perspectives

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The European Union (EU) has vigorously pursed Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries in line with the Post-Washington Consensus (PWC). The European Commission (2016) insists that trade liberalisation under EPAs will be conducive to development objectives enshrined in the ACP-EU Cotonou Agreement (2000-2020) and to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to EU officials, trade liberalisation will be win-win for both blocs, leading to growth, jobs and social prosperity. This optimistic outlook is, however, contested by numerous civil society organisations – and certain members of the European Parliament - who claim that EPAs will impose *premature* liberalisation upon former colonies (see European Parliament 2016 and NANTS 2015). Deprived of policy space to set robust tariffs to protect infant industry and sensitive agricultural sectors, ACP countries will, according to EPA sceptics, become losers of free trade. This debate is shaping negotiations for the successor treaty to the Cotonou Agreement and has prompted preferences among African states for intra-African trade liberalisation under the African Union and the African Continent Free Trade Area (ACFTA), as a precursor to EPAs.

This article examines the development implications of the EPAs in the case of West Africa's cocoa sector. In so doing it critiques the EU's embrace of private sector development (PSD) discourse to legitimise trade liberalisation. The European Commission (2015) promises that it will give aid to ACP private sector operations to ensure that they can compete on a level playing field in EPA liberalised markets (see Langan and Price 2015 for critique of EU aid modalities in West Africa). The EU is in strict alignment here with broader PWC norms of achieving 'pro-poor' free market reform via aid for developing countries' private sector actors, as is enshrined in UN SDG 8. As existing critical literature on the PWC and the UN SDGs highlights, PSD discourse is a crucial lynchpin of contemporary donor thinking (see Onis and Senses 2005; Orbie 2007; Langan 2011; Fine and Saad-Filho 2014; Mawdsley 2015; Selwyn 2016; Mawdsley et al 2018). PSD narratives enable donors to claim that poverty reduction will be achieved in free marketsin an egalitarian PWC phase of North-South ties.

This article makes an essential contribution to the existing critical literature on PWC free market reforms by examining Nigerian and Ghanaian cocoa business people's perspectives regarding the EU's PSD claims in the context of EPAs. Drawing upon twenty-six semi-structured interviews conducted in Ghana and Nigeria with business people – as well as civil society stakeholders and policy-makers surrounding cocoa production - the article demonstrates that while interviewees welcome the idea of donor PSD support, they have major misgivings.

With the application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the article specifically highlights interviewee concerns about a lack of tangible delivery of EU PSD support; their fears surrounding premature EPA liberalisation; their perspectives regarding state intervention; as well as their concerns regarding the lack of trickle-down poverty reduction. The article thus provides evidence of interviewee perspectives in a crucial ACP private sector industry. Crucially, these cocoa stakeholder perspectives corrobate the critical scholarly literature's existing scepticism regarding the ability of PSD modalities to bring about tangible pro-poor free market reforms in the PWC. As such, the article contributes original fieldwork findings to enhance and augment a primarily desk-based critical literature on PSD initiatives in relation to donor thinking in the PWC.

The discussion is structured as follows. The first section provides an overview of EU reliance upon PSD discourse to legitimise EPAs in alignment with PWC donor thinking, and provides justification of case study focus on West African cocoa and utilisation of CDA. The second section outlines key trends in the global cocoa sector, and in the national structures of Nigerian and Ghanaian production. The third section explores the views of business and civil society stakeholders gained during fieldwork in Ghana and Nigeria between 2013 and 2017. It underscores interviewees' scepticism regarding the tangible delivery of PSD support. The conclusion provides a summary and reiterates interviewee perspectives with resonance for EU ties with ACP countries, and for donor thinking in the PWC.

PSD discourse: marrying EPAs to 'development' in the PWC?

Since the mid 1980s, the European Commission has emphasised the private sector as an engine of growth within ACP development strategies. Aligning to Washington Consensus neoliberal norms regarding the need for privatisation of sectors such as cocoa, the European Commission stressed the centrality of private business in the achievement of 'development' within free markets (Brown 2000; Hurt 2003). The EU's discursive focus on PSD took on enhanced strategic significance with the publication of the 1996 Green Paper on *Future Relations with ACP countries on the Eve of the 21st Century* (European Commission 1996). Significantly, this document coincided with the launch of the PWC in response to criticisms of 'big bang' free market reforms in the 1980s and early 1990s (Onis and Senses 2005: 263).

The 1996 Green Paper was a landmark publication in that it explicitly laid the groundwork for a shift from 'non-reciprocal' preferential trade under the ACP-EU Lomé Conventions (1975-2000) to the 'reciprocal' free trade agenda of EPAs under the Cotonou

Agreement. This meant that ACP countries would have to 'reciprocate' open access to their markets via trade liberalisation in order to continue to enjoy low tariff access to European consumers. This contrasted with the Lomé Conventions which had granted ACP states preferential access to European markets while recognising their right to protect infant industry via tariffs(Brown 2000). The Green Paper claimed that in a Post-Cold War 'more open international climate', the partners could now state their 'respective responsibilities… less ambiguously' (European Commission 1996: 11). EU officials pointed to the alleged failures of non-reciprocity under Lomé, with the ACP share of total EU imports having fallen from 6.7% in 1976 to only 2.8% in 1999 (Dearden and Salama 2002: 905), and to World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules on trade reciprocity as being clear reasons for this paradigm shift (see Bilal and Szepesi 2011 for discussion of WTO regulations in African contexts). Hurt (2003: 174), however, argues that this latter justification demonstrated the EU's attempts to 'externalise responsibility' for its own policy preferences. He also rightly contextualises ACP countries' declining share of EU trade in the Lomé era in relation to structural adjustment and concomitant industrial decline (*ibid*).

The EU's launch of the EPA negotiations under the Cotonou Agreement can therefore be traced back to the 1996 Green Paper, which also clearly articulated PSD discourse as a means of legitimating this shift to reciprocal trade. Notably, the document called for an 'aid strategy centred on enhancing the competitiveness of the ACP economies and developing the private sector and trade'. It additionally explained that 'job creation and social progress are intertwined with private sector development', emphasising that poverty reduction could be achieved in a free trade environment (1996: x). This PSD discourse was soon confirmed by the European Commission (1998: 1-3), with the private sector hailed in neoliberal language as a 'leading actor in development' and as the 'engine of economic growth' within free markets.

Following this pattern, the EU's PSD discourse was then central in the text of the Cotonou Agreement itself. The agreement states that EU aid mechanisms will help ensure a level playing field in a post-EPA environment through overt support to PSD initiatives in ACP countries. In one notable passage, it promises that:

> ACP–EC cooperation strategies at national and, where appropriate, at regional levels shall aim at… achieving rapid and sustained job-creating economic growth, developing the private sector, increasing employment, [and] improving access to productive economic activities and resources (European Commission 2000: 38).

More recently, in the context of the UN SDGs, the European Commission (2016) has stressed that PSD will be crucial in achieving the post-2015 agenda.

It is important to recognise, however, that the EU's embrace of PSD discourse reflects a wider donor trend in relation to the PWC from the late 1990s onwards. Responding to criticisms of social malaise under 'big bang' reforms during the Washington Consensus, influential development thinkers – notably Joseph Stiglitz – advocated a paradigm shift (Fine and Saad-Filho 2014; Onis and Senses 2005). The ensuing PWC championed the idea that donor institutions could intervene to correct market failures and soften the social impact of free market reforms. In particular, Stiglitz maintained that donors should intervene to assist private sector actors, with a view to making markets work more effectively through technological innovation and improvements to supply-side capacities (Onis and Senses 2005: 278). Free market reform could thus be translated into poverty reduction through donor interventions to assist business. In this context, institutions such as USAID came to embrace PSD rationales from the late 1990s onwards (Schulpen and Gibbon 2002). And moreover, PSD as a crucial lynchin of the PWC has been recently confirmed within the UN SDGs. Goal 8 explicitly highlights the need for donors to assist PSD initiatives to make markets work for the poor (Mawdsley et al 2018).

A body of critical scholarly literature has however questioned whether PSD strategies can meaningfully 'square the circle' and translate free market reforms into poverty reduction in the PWC (see for instance Onis and Senses 2005; Orbie 2007; Langan 2011; Fine and Saad-Filho 2014; Mawdsley 2015; Mawdsley et al 2018). Donors' embrace of PSD discourse is perceived as a hollow attempt to repackage premature free market reforms as being advantageous to developing countries. In reality, liberalisation is to the benefit of donor nations and their corporate actors wishing to sell to developing countries' citizens or to invest in their lucrative extractive industries. A detailed overview of this critical literature undertaken by Mawdsley et al (2018: 40) succinctly encapsulates the main concerns as follows:

> private sector-led strategies for "development" may indeed produce improvements in "headline" growth figures… However, the evidence to date suggests that the overwhelming beneficiaries of this growth are, or are likely to be, corporate elites… Breezy [donor] statements about "inclusive growth"… are not backed up… Rather, current aid discourses repeatedly assert and assume a

confluence of interests between all parties, and a “natural” translation of “growth” into “development.”

This scepticism regarding ‘pro-poor’ free market reform in the PWC can be readily identified in the context of the EPAs. Despite legitimating EU PSD discourse, the shift to reciprocal free trade via EPAs has been the subject of fierce contestation, particularly in West Africa. Proposals for tariff liberalisation across 80% of total commodity lines has met with deep concern among West African civil society organisations (CSOs) such as the National Association of Nigerian Traders (NANTS) (Trommer 2011, 2014). Such entities are concerned that an EPA will threaten the region’s prospects for value addition and industrialisation. Specifically, many CSOs and industry associations, including NANTS, advance the argument that premature tariff liberalisation will ‘kick away the ladder’ of development, by flooding West African markets with cheaper European goods (c.f. Chang 2003). This, they claim, will lead to the closure of local manufacturing and stifle agro-processing opportunities.

Due in large part to such concerns, the Cotonou Agreement’s original EPA deadline of 31st December 2007 passed without conclusion of a regional deal. Instead, a number of national ‘interim’ EPAs were signed with individual West African countries. These arrangements safeguarded the signatories’ low tariff access into Europe in return for their commitment to eventual tariff liberalisation (Andriamananjara et al 2009). Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire for instance, both initialled interim EPAs to ensure that their exporters continued to enjoy low tariff access to the EU. Others such as Nigeria, however, refused and defaulted to the less-favourable Generalised System of Preferences (GSP). This disparity was keenly felt in the cocoa sector. Nigerian cocoa processors found that tariffs into European markets rose overnight, while their competitors in Ghana (and Côte d'Ivoire) continued to enjoy lower tariffs (*ibid*). This meant that, comparatively, Nigerian processed cocoa products became less competitive – providing a warning of what would be in store if a regional EPA was not signed.

Significantly, delays in the regional negotiations prompted the EU to issue an ultimatum in 2011 to relegate any state that had not concluded an EPA, or interim EPA, to the GSP (Agritrade 2011). This reignited the EPA process, with West African countries collectively agreeing to a regional EPA in July 2014. Their acquiescence was facilitated by the EU’s promise to finance an EPA Development Programme (EPADP), with €6.5 billion of Aid for Trade. The EPADP seemingly ensures that key export industries – such as cocoa - will receive

PSD support for their supply-side capacity in a post-EPA context (see Langan and Price 2015 for detailed discussion). The underlying rationale is that enhanced productivity will compensate for losses in import-competing sectors that struggle (or collapse) in the wake of tariff dismantling. Interestingly, however, inspite of the West African Heads of Governments' 2014 agreement in principle to the terms of an EPA, this has not yet translated into actual full implementation. Ratification is still underway in individual West African parliaments (*ibid*), with the interim 'stepping stone' EPAs signed with Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana continuing to be provisionally applied (European Commission 2018)

It is in this context that the article focuses on the case study of Nigerian and Ghanaian cocoa. The industry, involving both smallholder production and value addition via processing,provides an important example of a strategic export sector. Both Ghana and Nigeria have prioritised cocoa exports within their respective national development plans (Republic of Ghana 2011, 2015; Federal Republic of Nigeria 2013). In Nigeria especially, authorities in Abuja have recognised the dangers of over-reliance on oil revenues and have belatedly sought to rectify the beleaguered cocoa industry (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2013). As such its new Agriculture Promotion Policy 2016-2020 presents a 'Green Alternative' to develop agribusiness (FMARD 2018). The choice of Nigeria and Ghana as case study countries, moreover, is interesting in terms of understanding the position of West African states that either resisted or accepted an interim EPA arrangement. In fact cocoa was situated as a *cause célèbre* at the time of the original EPA deadline in December 2007 since Ghanaian cocoa exporters continued to enter the EU without encumberance whereas Nigerian cocoa counterparts suffered from the default to the GSP (ICTSD 2008; Solidar 2008).

Fieldwork in the cocoa sector in Nigeria and Ghana is therefore illustrative of controversies associated with the EU EPA agenda, and PSD discourse in the broader PWC. Twenty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted with business and civil society stakeholders. The interviews predominantly focused on perspectives regarding the ability of EU aid to tangibly assist the cocoa sector and the wider economy; as well as perspectives regarding EPA negotiations. This provided the authors with 'snapshots' of informed local opinion concerning the contribution of EU PSD efforts to poverty reduction – and the likely impact of the EPA. The interviews were conducted during a series of visits from late 2013 to summer 2017. This time period coincided with a number of landmark events in the ACP-EU relationship. Namely, the decision of the West African Heads of Government to agree in principle the terms of a regional EPA took place in July 2014. Meanwhile, the opening of negotiations for a successor to the Cotonou Agreement began in July 2016, with the European Commission's (2016) publication of its evaluation of Cotonou's performance. Additionally, engagement with business people also enabled informed questioning regarding government strategies, for instance national development plans. Anonymity was granted given the fact that interviewees addressed commercially sensitive issues, as well as controversies surrounding government and donor performance. The interviews help to mitigate excess focus on 'macro' trade structures with a more qualitative concern with the experiences of actors who comprise trade networks (Belfrage and Hauf 2015; Jessop 2012).

The analysis of the interviews was facilitated by a CDA perspective concerned with the role of language and discourse in the (re)construction of power relationships, in this case between the EU and its ACP 'partners'. A CDA approach allowed the authors to first problematise how PSD narratives helped to construct 'common sense' acceptance of ACP-EU trading structures as being legitimate, normal, or deserved despite the fact that PSD visions of 'pro-poor' economic growth may not bear out in terms of material realities for supposed beneficiaries (see Fairclough 1989; Fairclough 2003; Fairclough 2005; Van Djik 1993; Van Djik 2005; Wodak 2002). CDA then enabled the authors to systematically analyse the interviews transcripts, through keywords relating to the normative premise of donor PSD assistance. This included, for example, 'poverty', 'development', 'growth', 'prosperity', 'social', and 'equality'. With CDA's attention to the role of language in constructing legitimacy, the article itself thus sheds critical light onto official EU PSD discourse through consideration of the narratives of the cocoa interviewees in West Africa, deemed to be the ostensible beneficiaries of EU interventions. It also helps illuminate wider debates concerning the role of PSD in translating free market reform into pro-poor outcomes in the timeframe of the PWC.

Before examining stakeholder narrativesit is first necessary to provide a contextual overview of the macro trends of the global cocoa market, and the structure of the industry in both case study countries. In doing so, the article does not adopt a Global Value Chain (GVC) approach often associated with the analysis of commodities in North-South trade structures, but instead adopts the critical CDA lens to highlight the power of discourse within the North-South interactions that underpin structural inequalities in the global economy. The next section provides key empirical detail prior to the qualitative examination of cocoa stakholder perspectives on EU PSD rationales in the context of EPA negotiations.

Cocoa production in Ghana and Nigeria: global trends and national structures

Cocoa's position as a priority site of private sector activity is underscored by regional and global trends, as well as the bespoke structures of the Ghanaian and Nigerian sectors. The majority of world cocoa production originates from Africa, with the main producers being West African states notably Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, and Cameroon (Fountain and Hütz-Adams 2018; World Cocoa Foundation 2014). The global market has suffered turbulence. Cocoa prices experienced a significant shock in 2016/2017, which diminished the value of the export trade. Despite this, Côte d'Ivoire maintained its position as the world's largest exporter of raw and roasted beans, although with significant fluctuations in the value of its export trade between 2014 to 2018. Ghanaian export values have risen significantly securing its position as the world's second largest exporter of raw and roasted beans. However, Nigeria has seen the value of its export trade reduced by over half between 2014 and 2018 (ITC 2019). At the same time the position of EU member states as the leading importers of cocoa raw beans and products has been secured, led by the Netherlands and Germany, with the USA failing into third place in 2018 (ITC 2019). France, UK and Belgium, are the fourth, fifth and sixth largest importers respectively (*Ibid*).

Interestingly, trade between West Africa and the EU, the world's largest cocoa consuming region, is the most significant inter-regional exchange in the global cocoa marketplace. In total, over 80% of EU imports of cocoa and cocoa products originate from West Africa (International Cocoa Organisation 2012; CBI 2016: 6). Despite the strength of the EU market, however, there has been an overall stagnation of global demand for cocoa. Contrary to projections, demand stabilised rather than grew between 2012 and 2016, due to weaker growth than expected in potential Chinese and Indian markets, and a shrinking USA market (Fountain and Hütz-Adams 2018: 10). This stagnation,,coupled to a sharp rise in production,precipitated price shocks in 2016/17, with some smallholder farmers experiencing a 30% - 40% income decline (Fountain and Hütz-Adams 2018: 3). The effects in Ghana, however, were partially offset in relation to interventionist price mechanisms operated there. Increases in production, meanwhile, have had environmental costs, with Fountain and Hütz-Adams (2018) stating that over ninety per cent of West African original forests have been destroyed.

Within the sector as a whole, moreover, there has been significant corporate consolidation as a limited number of processors and chocolate companies have established themselves as lead firms (Barrientos 2014: 792). Large-scale European and US conglomerates now dominate the sector. In 2017 the largest chocolate producers were Mondelez International, Nestle, Mars, Hersheys and Ferrero, while the largest traders and grinders were Barry Callebaut, Olam, Cargill, Ecom, Sucden, and Touton (Fountain and Hütz-Adams 2018: 42). Although in West Africa smallholders lead in the production of raw cocoa beans, these major cocoa trading hourses dominate the intermediary trade in beans. Europe's influential confectionary body CAOBISCO is itself dominated by a few lead European conglomerates which also dominate the global export of chocolate (World Cocoa Foundation 2012).

The majority of the processing ('grinding') of West Africa's raw cocoa beans into liquor, cake, butter and powder largely takes place in Europe, which as whole comprises nearly 40% of the global processing market (CBI 2016:4). This accounts for the dominance of European member states in the import of raw cocoa. The largest grinders Cargill and Olam are located in the Netherlands, while Barry Callebaut is located in Belgium and France. The dominance of Cargill and Olam accounts for the Netherland's status as the biggest single processing country in the global cocoa market (CBI 2016: 4). These multinational processors subsequently act as key exporters of processed cocoa produce, mainly to other EU members (Port of Rotterdam 2016).

However, the potential value of increasing cocoa processing *within* the West African region should not be underestimated. Indeed, the 'origin grinding' of cocoa beans within the region itself has been increasing. State-led policies have supported this diversification, encouraging PSD in the export of semi-finished and finished cocoa products (Traore´ 2009). As part of this diversification, many West African states have proactively welcomed FDI into local processing capacity (International Cocoa Organization, 2012). FDI and adjacent technological inputs are seen to be of central importance for the development of West African origin grinding, and the region's ability to capitalise on the vibrancy of the global market.

Openness to FDI as part of PSD strategies in cocoa is reflected in the national plans of both Ghana and Nigeria (Republic of Ghana 2011; Federal Republic of Nigeria 2013). However, the two countries adopted distinctive approaches in terms of the structure of their cocoa production. Most noticeably, Ghana resisted full free market reform and has maintained significant government ownership within key stages. This is despite the wide-scale liberalisation that took place in sub-Saharan Africa via structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) implemented in the Washington Consensus (Gilbert 2009). Conversely, Nigeria followed the wider African trend and has pursued full liberalisation. As a result, the Nigerian government largely absented itself from direct investment and ownership in the sector (Ajetomobi 2014: 9).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that Ghana did embrace *partial* liberalisation of the cocoa sector. For example, there were reforms of the intermediary trade in raw cocoa beans from the farm-gate to the ports, with CocoBod (the government-owned cocoa agency) yielding this activity to private Licensed Buyer Companies (LBCs). These LBCs are mostly owned by Ghanaian entrepreneurs, who have sought to keep international trading houses at bay (Anang 2011: 465-468). CocoBod, meanwhile, has maintained control of cocoa marketing via its subsidiary, the Cocoa Marketing Company. Importantly in the context of the recent price shock, this ensured that the prices paid to farmers were maintained at pre-collapse levels (Fountain and Hütz-Adams 2018: 7) Moreover, since 2003, the Ghanaian state has invested heavily in domestic processing via the Cocoa Processing Company (CPC), a majority state-owned entity that possesses two processing plants, as well as a confectionary factory(GoldenTree 2016).

Even within the partially liberalised Ghanaian sector multinational companies have taken a lead role in the increase of origin grinding (Anang 2011: 465). Barry Callebaut invested in a new processing factory in Tema, while the German grinding company Host-Hammester entered into a joint venture with CocoBod. FDI ventures have represented the majority of cocoa processing activity in Ghana, facilitated through generous tax exemptions offered to foreign capital. The focus of Ghana's FDI projects has been *semi-processed* goods, in contrast to the strategy of the state-run CPC which prides itself upon the processing (and export) of *finished* produce such as the GoldenTree chocolate bar (GoldenTree 2016).

In Nigeria more extensive liberalisation has encouraged the entry of foreign-owned trading houses into the intermediary trade in cocoa beans. Nigerian entrepreneurs do operate in this sub-sector but the majority of co-operatives sell directly to foreign-owned trading houses (Ajetomobi 2011: 7). Critical scholars such as Cadoni (2013: 7-8) argue that this has brought about a decline in the quality of the raw beans. Smallholder producers have endured price declines, which Cardoni attributes to the dismantling of the Nigerian Cocoa Board, the entry of mutlinationals and the relaxation of export quality controls under SAPs (*ibid*). Moreover, there are concerns that multinationals have drove down the local price of raw beans in a hierarchical relationship with intermediary firms and producers. This is seen to have had a detrimental impact on the well-being of poorer smallholders (Cadoni 2013; Ajetomobi 2011).

Despite the unique structure of the Ghanaian and Nigerian cocoa sectors, both have converged around policy preferences for promoting strategic forms of private sector activity in cocoa agro-processing (origin grinding). The emphasis on diversification into semi-finished and finished goods has a stated developmental aspect to combat over-reliance upon the export of raw cocoa beans and spur poverty reduction. In terms of Cotonou and the EU-Africa relationship, this approach chimes with the EU's focus upon PSD interventions within strategic export sectors as the engine of ACP development in the PWC. Nevertheless, the impact of EPAs and Europe's PSD largesse requires closer analysis. Engagement with local stakeholder perspectives in the cocoa sector provides us with illustrative snapshots regarding PSD rationales..

Examining West African stakeholders' narratives: PSD and EPAs for poverty reduction?

Examining West African cocoa interviewees' narratives regarding the contributions of the sector to poverty reduction can shed critical insight regarding the strategic role of EU PSD discourse in the PWC. The authors conducted twenty-six interviews with West African cocoa producers, processors, sector officials and civil society representatives in December 2013, October 2014, June 2015 and June 2017. The semi-structured interviews asked participants about the state of the cocoa industry in Ghana and Nigeria, about ongoing government interventions to assist the private sector, about the impact of EU trade and development policies for cocoa production and processing, as well as about broader views regarding strategies for poverty reduction. In particular, the interviews gauged local perspectives on the imminent regional EPA, as well as legitimacy-enhancing EU promises of PSD in vital export sectors.

When analysing the interviews, it is immediately apparent that there was a degree of convergence between EU officials and West African interviewees. Interviewees broadly concurred with the underlying rationale of PSD discourse that flourishing business communities can contribute to poverty reduction in the PWC. However, a number of serious caveats were raised, for instance, in terms of the ability of smallholders to adequately benefit from cocoa production in systems dominated by largescale predatory firms. Moreover, there was much scepticism surrounding national government and donor (EU) efforts to support private sector actors. Interviewees' experiences in the cocoa sector left them unconvinced that

EU PSD monies (while welcome) would be tangibly delivered. And they queried the fundamental premise of EPA trade liberalization,which many viewed as premature and a threat to the cocoa sector and the wider economy. Accordingly, the article now considers three key themes emerging within the interviews: i. a qualified interviewee convergence with donor PSD rationales; ii. a cautious welcoming of government PSD assistance; and iii. scepticism surrounding EU PSD promises and fears surrounding the tying of aid to detrimental EPAs.

A qualified convergence with donor PSD rationales

West African cocoa sector interviewee's own narratives often aligned to EU PSD discourse on the importance of business growth for social prosperity. For example, one Ghanaian civil society activist involved in trade justice campaigns explained that:

> Cocoa… is a lifeline and bloodline to the economy… the cocoa industry helps people at the grassroots, to transform rural communities and dilapidated structures …in Kumasi [Ghanaian city]… cocoa holds the key to our poverty reduction (Interview A; October 2014).

This view was further expressed by a Ghanaian official from a cocoa industry body who welcomed the prospect of EU PSD support to assist private sector activity in cocoa:

> This region produces over 70% of cocoa…. [assisting the cocoa sector] makes more money for families and communities… Donors overs the years have [rightly] implemented many projects towards helping improve the livelihoods of smallholder cocoa farmers (Interview B; October 2014).

A representative from a multinational agricultural processing company in Ghana also articulated such a pro-poor PSD narrative. He explained that the presence of multinational processors brought genuine benefit for poorer people. In particular, he noted his own company's 'Cocoa Promise' scheme to promote poverty reduction:

> We have the Cocoa Promise scheme… we reward heroes of sustainability… we are encouraging people to stay in the villages… we are providing facilities… helping people to go into cocoa farming. (Interview C; October 2014).

Interestingly, however, there was tension in the ways in which these stakeholders advanced pro-poor visions of business growth in the cocoa industry. Some interviewees raised concerns about the plight of smallholders, particularly in terms of the behavior of intermediary companies who purchase cocoa at the farm-gate. A Nigerian processing manager noted smallholders' reliance upon these intermediaries and their high-interest loans. He contextualised this in terms of sometimes non-existent profit margins for smallholders:

> There is 100 Naira input [into the farm by the smallholder] and there is 102 Naira output…. It is really about [the smallholder] relying on the cocoa traders to survive, seeking loans... [However,] the traders are Shylock… [their loans are] double or triple the interest of the bank… they rip off the farmers (Interview D; December 2013).

Many stakeholders similarly emphasised that poverty reduction through private sector activity in cocoa was not necessarily automatic, and required active interventions. Many also recognised that young people were no longer attracted into the sector. One Ghanaian agro-processing official explained that 'agriculture is not attractive to any young person. If you want to make money then you create an [mobile phone] App, so why go to the field with a cutlass and a hoe?' (Interview E; October 2014).

Welcoming national government support for PSD objectives

Importantly in terms of alignment between interviewee narratives and donor PSD discourse, the Ghanaian and Nigerian stakeholders commonly emphasised the need for donor *and domestic government* assistance for private sector activity in the cocoa sector. Government support for origin grinding was seen as a particular priority:

> The [Ghanaian] government vision is to add value to raw materials, to cocoa… every company dreams of not doing [only] semi-finished but going right up to the finished product… [then] we can give back to the people (Interview; June 2017).

Nevertheless, interviewees were divided on the record of their own governments. One LBC official in Ghananoted the government's decision to suspend a seed fund which had bolstered raw bean production. The official complained that 'assistance and money is not sufficient in Ghana. We wish there was more money' (Interview F; October 2014). He also noted lack of government action to support value-addition: 'the President talks about it, his plans, but other than CPC there is no other [state-run] processor'. Lack of government support for diversification into origin grinding was deemed an ongoing problem:

> I would prefer that we process the cocoa in Ghana, here, so we benefit from it. We can process it to create employment so that the standard of living can be improved. Why should some [foreigners] enjoy the benefit? We should go sell the [processed] product instead of sending beans (Interview F; October 2014).

This LBC official did recognise, however, that the Ghanaian government had offered significant assistance in terms of fertilisers and pesticides at farm level:

> The Government of Ghana since 2002/03 is assisting spraying all farms…to prevent other diseases which would bring down production. There is a policy of assisting fertilisers and production (Interview F; October 2014).

In a similarly positive narrative, meanwhile, a multinational processing company official recognised the help offered by the Ghanaian government in terms of its EPZ regulations:

> [it] gave incentives to build a plant here… There is no tax here for 10 years - that attracted companies. Our $100 million investment started in 2008. It is a good thing for the country. [We] are paying back... there are 450 employed here… (Interview C; October 2014).

A Ghanaian civil society official augmented this positive perspective and praised the government's efforts to offer a fixed local price to cocoa farmers (Interview J; June 2015). This again reiterated the pro-poor PSD potential of the cocoa sector in partial alignment with the EU's own official discourse.

Interestingly, however, certain West African interviewees did raise queries about local incentives for processing and for the export of raw cocoa beans. With regard to the former issue, a civil society activist noted that foreign investors often found ways to maintain EPZ incentives long after their initial 'honeymoon' period had elapsed. He explained that investors could establish 'new' companies for legal purposes after the expiration of their initial ten-year tax exemption, to avoid contributing to government revenues. The stakeholder deemed the incentives offered to foreign corporations unfair in relation to the status of local Ghanaian businesspeople:

> There are always [tax] loopholes… If a foreigner is coming and gets a 10 year tax break, then why not give Ghanaian citizens the same?... If there are Ghanaian

> investors why can't we do [the same] and create local jobs, and have people making money here? (Interview A; October 2014).

Moreover, in Nigeria, an official in an export association lamented that the government continued to subsidise export of raw cocoa beans. The stakeholder explained that a wholescale ban on raw cocoa exports would not be feasible but that, nevertheless, the government should refrain from actively supporting colonial patterns of trade:

> [The government] should be adding value, not helping people export the raw material… there should be incentive for local capacity, for creating jobs… we need industrialisation and they are not supporting industrialisation (Interview G; December 2013).

Interestingly, a processing plant manager cemented this rather negative view. He explained that the Nigerian government's main instrument for assisting farmers – the Coffee Research Institute (CRI) – regularly failed to assist farm-level supply side capacity:

> The CRI are on strike… they are supposed to monitor the farms, the extension services… we lag behind Cameron, Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana… the grounding of cocoa is [also] supposed to be controlled [by government]… it's no longer being done as expected to standard… officials are much more interested in collecting their fee… (Interview D; December 2013).

Significantly, Nigerian interviewees often linked current industry woes to historical processes of liberalisation. In particular, one co-operative official explained that liberalisation had encouraged European firms to enter the intermediary trade in raw cocoa. Their entry, he stated, had resulted in lower quality production. (Interview H; December 2013). Even in the partially liberalised Ghanaian sector stakeholders noted the historical role of donors in sponsoring disadvantageous liberalisation. A Ghanaian civil society activistnoted how such reforms prevented the government from subsiding electricity and other inputs, limiting opportunities for pro-poor private sector expansion (Interview A; October 2014).

Welcoming EU PSD support, yet scepticism regarding aid delivery and the impact of the EPA

Crucially in terms of a critical understanding of EU PSD discourse in the context of EPAs, interviewees voiced strong concerns about trade liberalisation. Nigerian participants, in particular, condemned the EU for its apparent strong-arm tactics. The EU's decision to downgrade Nigeria to the GSP was especially deemed to have handicapped cocoa processing. A manager at a Nigerian processing unit explained that:

> Exporters [in Nigeria face] 7% tariff and in Ghana [they have a lower tariff at] 3.5%... it's affecting reinvestment to grow the farms... the processor is suffering… 40% are not profitable… [and so] it has become difficult to provide the social responsibilities for the farmers too… everyone [in Nigeria] is fighting for their own survival… (Interview D; December 2013).

A Nigerian stakeholder from an export association echoed this view. He noted the heavy tariffs placed by Europe on Nigerian value-added cocoa produce compared to tariff free entry for raw beans. He deemed this a cynical manoeuvre aimed at perpetuating asymmetric patterns of trade:

> The EU [wants] Nigeria to sign an EPA [which] Nigeria does not think is of economic benefit…. On our [processed] goods' entry to EU, they are implementing all kinds of discrimination, but if we export raw cocoa, a duty is not applicable. There is 4.2% [tariff] on butter and 6.1% on cocoa cake… it means that the [EU] is out to close local industry… the EPA is killing local industry… (Interview G; December 2013).

Ghanaian interviewees also shared this negative view, despite the fact that their processors had maintained lower tariff access due to an 'interim' EPA in 2008. An official from a Ghanaian LBC explained that he viewed the government's acquiescence to the EU's interim EPA in terms of attempts to maintain foreign aid. He stressed that this undermined sovereignty:

> I don't like it when you sign such agreements. You don't have your freedom as a sovereign nation… They will dictate to us what to do.… Ghanaians are against this [EPA] but the Government needs money… [and so] by force they give in to certain policies (Interview F; October 2014).

While condemning the EPAs, most interviewees were, however, welcoming of any EU PSD support. Processors and smallholders concurred that Europe's financial support would – if delivered - see major gains in terms of business growth. One interviewee viewed the EPADP as a potential gain– 'I'm very optimistic about the EPADP. SMEs have a lack of funds and they might have help' (Interview June 2017). However, many stakeholders expressed the need for monies to be delivered directly to businesses A Ghanaian civil society activist stated::

> If the EU gave EURO 5 billion to manage the cost of adjustment, this money, by the time it gets to the industries, will have shrank in weight and in volume. The only way is for the beneficiaries to apply for the money directly and to target how the money will be used (Interview A; October 2014).

A Nigerian processing stakeholder contextualised such positive views on potential donor PSD assistance in terms of the types of practical issues that EU monies might help with:

> we would like it [EPADP assistance]… We are crying out for research intervention… the butterfly moth… was about to ruin 70% of the pods last year… the stability of the sector is another issue… the power outages.. there can be four within eight hours… that's a lot of headache and we are losing 30% of capacity… (Interview D; December 2013).

Importantly, however, interviewees contended that the EU had failed to deliver earlier aid promises, and remained sceptical whether any future monies would genuinely be used for local business initiatives. One Ghanaian cocoa stakeholder explained that:

> we don't see any funds from PSD finance, these are only opportunities for consultants, the EU brings in its own people to disperse the money. They come in from the outside, but we don't have ownership of these policies (Interview K; June 2015).

This view was further expressed by a Ghanaian LBC representative who claimed that the EU had so far failed to deliver any meaningful assistance:

> If it comes, we would appreciate it [Aid for Trade], but it is not coming. If we had more money in the cocoa sector then we could increase the production of cocoa [which] is from the hand of the farmer. (Interview F; October 2014).

Interestingly, certain stakeholders also emphasised the possible benefit of EU PSD support for diversification into origin grinding. The Ghanaian LBC official, for instance, deemed value addition as a vital strategy to break away from overreliance on raw material exports:

> International organisations should come to Ghana to assist it in building more companies rather than commercialise [raw] cocoa, just buying and selling beans, which is not good! Instead they should come to help build factories here.

> Individuals will then be producing benefit from their sweat rather than always exporting cocoa to other countries (Interview F; October 2014).

A Nigerian civil society activist, meanwhile, emphasised that the EU's PSD assistance could usefully be delivered to smallholders at local level. He emphasised that many were still living in poor conditions:

> We need ECOWAS and the EU… [farmers] are living there in poverty… we need support from the Nigerian government and the EU to [fix] what is going on here. The middle people are enjoying cocoa products more than the owner [smallholder producer]. The middle-men come to buy at a cheap price then sell at a profit (Interview I; December 2013).

Unpacking interviewee narratives on PSD assistance in the PWC

Overall the West African interviewees were positive about the potential uses of both government and donor PSD assistance for poverty reduction. The stakeholders confirmed that they viewed private sector activity as being inevitably bound to wider societal goals regarding poverty reduction. In this sense they concurred with donor PSD rationales in the PWC, namely that appropriate nation-state or donor institution interventions could make markets work more effectively for 'the poor'. Crucially, however, there was a high degree of interviewee scepticism regarding the ability (and willingness) of both domestic government and the EU to tangibly deliver meaningful PSD assistance. In the case of Ghanaian and Nigerian governments, there was cautious support for greater state intervention in order to remedy many underlying weaknesses in the sector..

With resonance for a critical understanding of EU PSD rationales in the context of EPAs, meanwhile, the interviewees clearly welcomed potential EU support for business activities. Interviewees pointed to a number of possible interventions which the EU might make to improve cocoa supply-side capacity and the social condition of communities surrounding production. The interviewees, however, remained highly sceptical as to whether the EU would tangibly deliver on its promises and doubted, if the EU did deliver, whether such monies would channel downwards to private sector operators (or whether these monies would be captured by governments or by EU consultancy bodies). While concurring with the fundamental principle of PSD in the PWC, the interviewees therefore questioned whether the EU would be willing or able to bring about poverty reduction since aid monies were not likely to be forthcoming for cocoa despite its strategic position as a priority export industry.

Moreover, the interviewees raised concerns about EPA trade liberalisation, bringing the legitimising aspect of EU PSD discourse into critical light. The EU's pursuit of an EPA was widely seen by interviewees as a threat both to cocoa (for instance, Nigeria's default to the GSP) and broader national economic plans. In terms of origin grindings, meanwhile, the stakeholders questioned why the EU should levy differential tariffs on processed goods compared to raw beans, irrespective of whether an EPA will be concluded. Many viewed the EU as utilising cynical protectionist policies to maintain colonial patterns of trade. Furthermore, the EU's threat of escalating tariffs to an even higher level, if a regional EPA is not signed, was viewed by the stakeholders as an unfair strategy. It is important to reiterate, however, that stakeholders are welcoming of PSD assistance – albeit that this aid should definitely not be *tied* to EPAs.

A qualitative fieldwork approach – allied to a CDA perspective – thus sheds critical light upon EU PSD discourse in the PWC. It is clear from the analysis of the interviews that, contrary to PSD discourse, these ostensible beneficiaries of EPAs in West Africa view the EU's pursuit of free trade deals as developmentally questionable. As interviewees themselves emphasised, free trade negotiations pose a number of challenges to genuine PSD in West Africa, not least in terms of the EU's threat to escalate tariffs upon local exporters. Indeed, Nigeria's cocoa processors have already experienced the maleffects of tariff escalation. For many interviewees, therefore, the EU is engaging in disciplinary action,compelling ACP states to fall into line with liberalisation, or else face high barriers into European markets. Given the pro-poor language of EU pledges to PSD support this would seem highly questionable in normative terms. As stakeholders stressed, EU intervention in pro-poor private sector growth is welcome, but this should not be conditional upon EPAs. Given the importance of cocoa production and origin grindings for the Ghanaian and Nigerian economies, it would be particularly detrimental if sectors such as these were further negatively impacted by EU tariff escalations. From interviewees' standpoint, such key exports sectors must receive sufficient PSD support in a trade policy environment that supports West Africa exporters' low tariff entry into Europe, quite regardless of free trade reciprocity.

Crucially, the field engagement with West African cocoa business people corroborates the critical scholarly literature's existing scepticism on the role of PSD strategies within the wider PWC. While the existing literature has predominantly based this view on the desk analysis of donor policy documents, via grounded fieldwork this article has examined interviewee narratives as evidence of West African business actors' concerns regarding the lack of tangible PSD support. It is apparent therefore that while PSD discourse plays a crucial role in the PWC as a lynchpin of donors' claims to marry free market reforms to poverty reduction, that this does not seem to translate into genuine 'development' outcomes within strategic sectors such as West African cocoa. Instead, the business people interviewed report a lack of tangible donor PSD help, and remain highly sceptical about the willingness of the EU to deliver upon its promises. Moreover, they view the EPAs as a potential threat,not an opportunity, for pro-poor forms of private sector growth.

Conclusion

The above examination of the EU's use of PSD discourse in the legitimisation of EPA free market reform in ACP countries has drawn critical attention to wider problems associated with donor thinking in the PWC. Donorsfrequently deploy PSD discourse as a means of justifying extensive free market reforms in developing countries as being conducive to poverty reduction. Nominally learning the lessons of 'big bang' liberalisation in the earlier Washington Consensus, donors claim that PSD support for developing countries' priority business sectors will ensure that they can now deliver jobs, growth and poverty alleviation within open markets. Following PWC rationales about the necessity for nation-states' and donor institutions' interventions to make markets work more effectively for the poor, PSD support is viewed as a vital tool for aligning free market policies to moral goals of 'development' in the Global South.

The article's assessment of interviewees' narratives in the West African cocoa sector, however, corroborates the existing critical scholarly literature's scepticism regarding the willingness and ability of donor actors to meaningfully deliver PSD support (see for instance Onis and Senses 2005; Orbie 2007; Langan 2011; Fine and Saad-Filho 2014; Mawdsley 2015; Mawdsley et al 2018). While the interviewees were welcoming of any potential PSD assistance and concured that such support might engender forms of poverty reduction, nevertheless, they doubted that such monies would be forthcoming. And crucially they challenged the tying of such PSD support to disadvantageous free market reforms, in this case the EPAs. Indeed, the interviewees' narratives also corroborated the critical literature's overarching concerns regarding the premise that free market policies will lead to poverty reduction (even if PSD monies were to be forthcoming). Premature trade liberalisation via EPAs was viewed by interviewees as an underlying threat, not an opportunity, in terms of the flourishing of businesses in West Africa. Thus they believed that PSD monies should not, in any circumstance, be made conditional upon the implementation of free trade policies, in this case the EU's EPA agenda in West Africa.

Finally, the article has demonstrated the utility of a CDA perspective married to field engagement with the private sector in developing country contexts. The application of CDA to the analysis of interviewee transcripts has enabled the article to cast critical light upon the official discourse of the EU in its justification of EPAs and onto the wider premise of the PWC itself – namely that donor interventions for PSD initiatives in the Global South can make free market policies 'development friendly'. It is clear from the field engagement that such discourse does not appear to be matched by donor action in the case of West Africa's cocoa sector. While PSD discourse is utilised to justify the pursuit of far-reaching free market reforms, the interviewed cocoa stakeholders corroborate critical scholars' existing concerns about the strategic functions of PSD in the PWC.

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