Chocolate from Children by Deb Dunn

Have you had some chocolate recently? Most Americans eat about 12 pounds of it each year! But many people don’t know that children in West Africa pick most of the world’s cocoa beans. (Cocoa is the main ingredient in chocolate.) People who buy chocolate are becoming more and more worried about child labor.

Imagine this. Ten-year-old Sametta lives in Cote d’Ivoire (or Ivory Coast), a country in West Africa. She wakes up at 4:00 a.m., eats millet porridge, and then walks two miles to her family’s cocoa bean field. For the next 12 hours, she picks cocoa pods and then breaks them open. She scoops out the 30 to 50 seeds, or “beans,” that are inside the pods. (About 400 beans are needed to make one pound of chocolate.) Sametta does not have time to go to school. Her family needs her to work in order for them to survive. Her health is also at risk. The cocoa pods are sprayed with poisonous pesticides.2 She also uses a knife with a long, sharp blade when she works. This is not a story from long ago.

This is happening right now. Every day in Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, and Cameroon, about 300,000 children pick cocoa beans that will be sold to big chocolate companies. Most of the children work on their families’ farms. They need to sell every bean to make money for their families to survive. School is out of the question. Worse, about 6,000 of these children are slaves. They sleep in dirty rooms, work 12-hour days without pay, are fed very little, and are sometimes whipped.

In 2001, THE U.S. GOVERNMENT CREATED AN INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENT WITH MAJOR CHOCOLATE COMPANIES. IT SAID THAT CHOCOLATE COMPANIES SHOULD HELP ELIMINATE CHILD SLAVERY AND CHILD LABOR BY JULY 2005. SO FAR, HOWEVER, THE AGREEMENT HAS NOT ENDED CHILD SLAVERY AND CHILD LABOR.

Still, there is hope, as organizations around the world work to eliminate child labor. For example, a group of farms in Africa and South America are called Fair Trade Certified. Companies that buy cocoa beans from these farmers sign an agreement. They promise to pay the farmers a Fair Trade price. This is enough for them to buy food and clothing for their families and send their children to school. There are about 45,000 farmers in this program. Any chocolate made from these farmers’ beans is labeled Fair Trade.The Rainforest Alliance is also working to improve life for farmers, teaching them ways to protect soils, waterways, and wildlife while increasing their yields,3 ensuring that their children go to school and eliminating child labor. Farms that meet strict standards designed to protect the environment and ensure the well-being of farm families, workers, and their communities can earn the Rainforest Alliance Certified seal.

You can help eliminate child labor too by looking for the Rainforest Alliance’s green frog seal and the FairTrade trustmark when you shop for chocolate.