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Child labour threatens chocolate's sweet image

Swiss chocolate might not be so sweet if a key ingredient, the cocoa bean, comes from plantations that profit from forced child labour, a watchdog group says.

The Swiss non-governmental organisation Berne Declaration has launched a campaign to encourage the country's chocolate producers to do more to ensure the cocoa they buy comes from ethical sources.



The cocoa tree

The Association of Swiss Chocolate Manufacturers says it is working to ensure Switzerland's world-famous chocolate is produced under fair and ethical practices.

But the Berne Declaration says the raw material supply chain is not transparent enough for consumers to know for certain that the chocolate they buy is not tainted by child labour. In a cocoa market cluttered by politics, war and cut-throat competition, it can be extremely difficult to identify the conditions under which the beans were produced.

About 60 per cent of the worldwide cocoa production

comes from West Africa, with the bulk of the beans harvested from plantations in Ivory Coast, a particularly problematic country for child labour abuses.

The matter first caught the public's attention about nine years ago as media reports surfaced of forced child labour in West Africa. Officials from the United States-based International Labor Rights Forum investigated the issue and found that child workers laboured for long, punishing hours, using dangerous tools and facing frequent exposure to dangerous pesticides.

The motives for using forced child labour are largely economic. While cocoa prices have climbed from about \$718 a ton in 2000 to as high as \$2,600 a ton in recent years, cocoa producers in Ivory Coast are among the most heavily taxed group of growers worldwide.

Ivory coast farmers keep just 35 cents of every dollar's worth of beans sold. They have to employ children or forced labour because they can't pay anyone to work for them.

While most of Switzerland's industrial chocolate makers could not or would not divulge details on how they buy cocoa beans, at least one producer has taken steps to make sure its chocolate production is ethical and transparent.

Chocolats Halbas is one of Switzerland's top five chocolate producers and makes chocolate for Coop.

The company is phasing out purchases from Ivory Coast altogether since the market there - torn by war, political instability and dominated by several very large producers - makes transparent purchases difficult.

Instead the company is focusing on Ghana and Central America, where the company guarantees to buy beans for prices that exceed production costs.

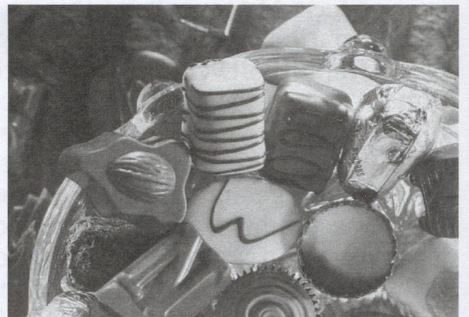
from swissinfo

Life is not so sweet for chocoholics

Who can resist... even with higher prices?

Chocolate lovers in Switzerland have received a shock with the news from an industry expert that prices for the finished product are set to rise 15-18 per cent.

Higher prices of raw materials are blamed for the expected rises. The price of cocoa is at its highest for 22 years. It has doubled within a year.



Chocolate temptations galore

The price of milk powder has also doubled. Cocoa beans and cocoa butter are the main raw materials for chocolate and so the price of chocolate naturally depends on the evolution of those prices.

The extremely steep increases in prices must be attributed largely to some market speculation on the commodity markets.

In previous difficult economic situations people might have consumed less chocolate in quantity but they remained faithful to quality. That may well be the case now.

from swissinfo

