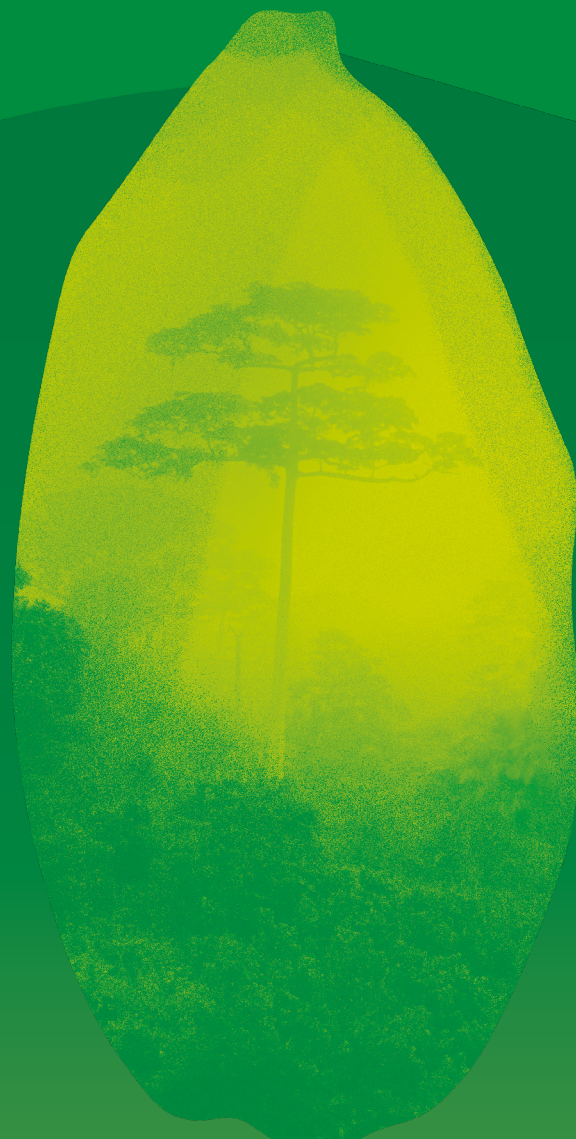


"No, problem... There is plenty of forest!"



REPORT ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL
AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS
OF COCOA FARMING AND TRADE
ALONG THE LIBERIA-CÔTE D'IVOIRE BORDER

WWW.SAMFULR.ORG
WWW.ONGIDDEF.ORG
WWW.FERN.ORG

OCTOBER 2026



Key messages

- Cocoa-driven deforestation pressure in Taï – Grebo-Krahn remained high despite a fall in global cocoa prices at the end of 2025. Declining cocoa productivity in Côte d'Ivoire (itself due in large part to massive cocoa-driven deforestation) and limited livelihood opportunities in Liberia are sustaining the expansion of cocoa into forested areas, including national parks. The long-term trend is for deforestation in Côte d'Ivoire to shift to Liberia, potentially with equally devastating consequences.
- Expansion is being facilitated by recent but well-established cross-border migration networks. Evidence suggests a structured system linking labour recruitment, land allocation, farm establishment and cocoa marketing across national borders.
- The encroachment in Liberia is at a relatively early stage and can be stopped. But many people do not regard it as a problem: *“no problem, there’s plenty of forest”*, as one elder in Garleo, Liberia put it, continuing *“if animals aren’t comfortable here they can go [to neighbouring counties]”*.
- There are strong governance challenges. Forest land is allocated to people who sponsor migrants to travel, promising them work on the cocoa farms. This land is provided via weak verbal contracts, while unclear boundaries between community land and protected areas create opportunities for encroachment and disputes. Approaches focused solely on protected area enforcement of forest, land, and immigration laws are unlikely to succeed unless accompanied by stronger land governance, livelihood support and infrastructure development.
- There are important traceability challenges for governments, exporters and cocoa buyers seeking to demonstrate deforestation-free supply chains. Effective responses will require long-term cooperation between Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, involving government agencies, local communities, civil society organisations and private-sector actors.

Tables of content

1 – Rationale	_____	P. 3
2 – Methodology	_____	P. 6
3 – Findings	_____	P. 8
<u>3.1 The modalities of cocoa farm expansion</u>	_____	P. 8
• Two categories of migrant • From forest to farm: the ‘sponsor’ system • Gendered access to land and revenues • Strong economic drivers • Falling prices are not slowing expansion		
<u>3.2 The impacts on protected areas</u>	_____	P. 11
• Cocoa farms inside Grebo-Krahn National Park • Wildlife decline and hunting • Côte d’Ivoire: Taï National Park and the threat of gold mining • The security response		
<u>3.3 Complex trading systems</u>	_____	P. 15
• Market structure • Controlled prices in Côte d’Ivoire, free-market prices in Liberia		
• Beyond price: networks, language and currency • Trade routes: To Monrovia or into the Ivorian supply chain		
4 – Analysis	_____	P. 19
5 – Conclusions & recommendations	_____	P. 19



1 – Rationale

The transboundary landscape comprising **Taï National Park** (Côte d'Ivoire) and **Grebo-Krahn National Park** (Liberia) forms one of the **largest remaining blocks of the Upper Guinean Forest**, a globally-significant biodiversity hotspot. Taï, a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage Site, is recognised for its primary rainforest and exceptional wildlife, including forest elephants, western chimpanzees, pygmy hippopotamuses and numerous endemic species.¹ Grebo-Krahn complements this conservation network, providing habitat for over 300 animal species, many of which are globally threatened, including western chimpanzees, giant pangolins and pygmy hippopotamuses.²

The landscape is increasingly threatened by agricultural expansion, particularly cocoa cultivation. Land scarcity and depleted soils –itself caused by decades of cocoa-driven deforestation– in Côte d'Ivoire have driven a recent “cocoa rush” into Grand Gedeh, Liberia and neighbouring counties, **including into designated protected areas where clearing land-clearing and farming is illegal** (Box 1). This expansion has been accompanied by a substantial influx of migrant labourers, primarily from Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, who come to work in cocoa cultivation. The Liberia Immigration Service recorded roughly 40,000 Burkinabè by mid-2025 (nearly 36,000 of them in Grand Gedeh), a number that climbed to about 55,000 by August 2025;

by 2026, government assessments estimated more than 140,000 Burkinabè migrants in Grand Gedeh and River Gee counties.³

The environmental implications are considerable: habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation in areas bordering protected forests.⁴ Recent media reports identify Grand Gedeh as one of Liberia's deforestation hotspots, driven largely by migrant labourers establishing new cocoa farms.⁵ Such land-use change threatens the ecological connectivity between Taï and Grebo-Krahn on which endangered species depend.⁶ While cocoa farming generates income and employment, the rapid influx of migrant workers is also transforming local demographics, increasing competition for land and creating governance challenges. Because ecological processes, migration dynamics and agricultural value chains extend across national borders, and land governance and conservation enforcement differ between the two countries, **a transboundary approach is particularly important**.

This is also important because cocoa supply chains will soon be under increased scrutiny. The European Union (EU) imports⁷ most of the world's cocoa: in 2027, it will start enforcing its new Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), which bans cocoa associated with post 2020 deforestation and/or produced illegally, according to laws of the producing country. The United Kingdom (UK) is also due to bring in similar legislation in coming years. Such developments will

1 - UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2022, *Taï National Park*; UNEP-WCMC, 2009, *World Heritage Datasheet – Taï National Park*. 2 - IUCN APES Atlas, *Grebo-Krahn National Park*, accessed August 2026; FDA, 2017, *Act Establishing the Grebo-Krahn National Park*. 3 - *Liberian Investigator*, 5 June 2026, *Liberia alarmed as Burkinabè migrant population tops 140,000*, *Boakai orders cabinet review*. 4 - IUCN,

2025, *World Heritage Outlook Assessment – Taï National Park*. 5 - Mongabay, 10 October 2025, *A cacao rush drives 'alarming' deforestation in Liberia*. 6 - PAPFor, 2021, *Fact Sheet – Taï-Grebo-Krahn-Sapo Landscape*. 7 - <https://www.cbi.eu/market-information/cocoa/what-demand>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-steps-up-action-to-tackle-illegal-deforestation>



Cocoa established on the Grebo-Krahn National Park boundary near Garleo Town
© SAMFU, 4 May 2026

put Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia cocoa supply chains under renewed scrutiny. There is therefore a large economic incentive for governments, companies and smallholders to ensure that their cocoa cultivation respects human rights and is deforestation-free.

This study documents the environmental and socio-economic impacts of newly established cocoa farms within this conservation landscape, to support governments, conservation organisations and cocoa-sector stakeholders to promote sustainable cocoa production while safeguarding the Tai – Grebo-Krahn landscape. **It addresses three research questions:**

- Are cocoa farms continuing to drive deforestation, and is this affecting protected areas?
- Are reduced cocoa prices having an impact on deforestation?
- What does the post-harvest cocoa supply chain look like?

Box 1

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK GOVERNING FOREST CLEARING IN LIBERIA

2016 NATIONAL WILDLIFE CONSERVATION AND PROTECTED AREA MANAGEMENT LAW:

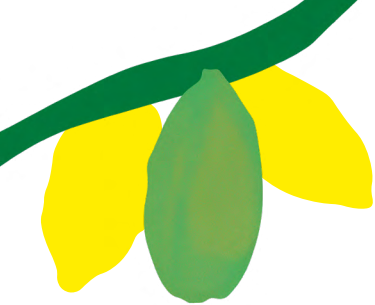
Tree felling in a protected area is illegal and punishable by a fine of up to US\$500 or 30 days' imprisonment.⁸

2006 NATIONAL FOREST REFORM LAW: Unauthorised encroachment or tree felling anywhere is illegal. Penalties can be imposed for, among other things, commercial use of forest resources without permission (§5.1(a)), encroachment in any forest granted exclusive licence to another licensee or owner (§7.2(a)), farming, hunting or extracting timber in a protected area (§9.10(b)) and shifting cultivation or constructing settlements in a protected area (§16.3). Penalties can be up to US\$10,000 or "twice the economic benefit the person obtained", whichever is greater (§20.7).⁹

Penalties under the two laws can be imposed cumulatively for a single offence.

⁸ - Government of Liberia, 2016, *National wildlife conservation and protected area management law*, Chapter 11.

⁹ - Government of Liberia, 2006, *National forest reform law*.



2 – Methodology

Independent Forest Monitoring (IFM)¹⁰ was implemented by two separate field teams. In Liberia, **Save My Future Foundation's (SAMFU) field team** researched the north-west section of Grebo-Krahn National Park, the adjoining Konobo Community Forest (CF) and neighbouring farming communities along the roads and tracks. In Côte d'Ivoire, **L'association Initiatives pour le Développement communautaire et la conservation de la Forêt (IDEF) field team** worked in the communities around Taï (Taï, Dahobly, Zaïpobli, Zagné), between Taï National Park and the Forêt Classée de Cavally, as well as at Cavally River crossing points around Tempo (Figure 1).

Fieldwork took place in **May 2026**, outside the cocoa harvest period (October–December for the main production period, January–March for the smaller

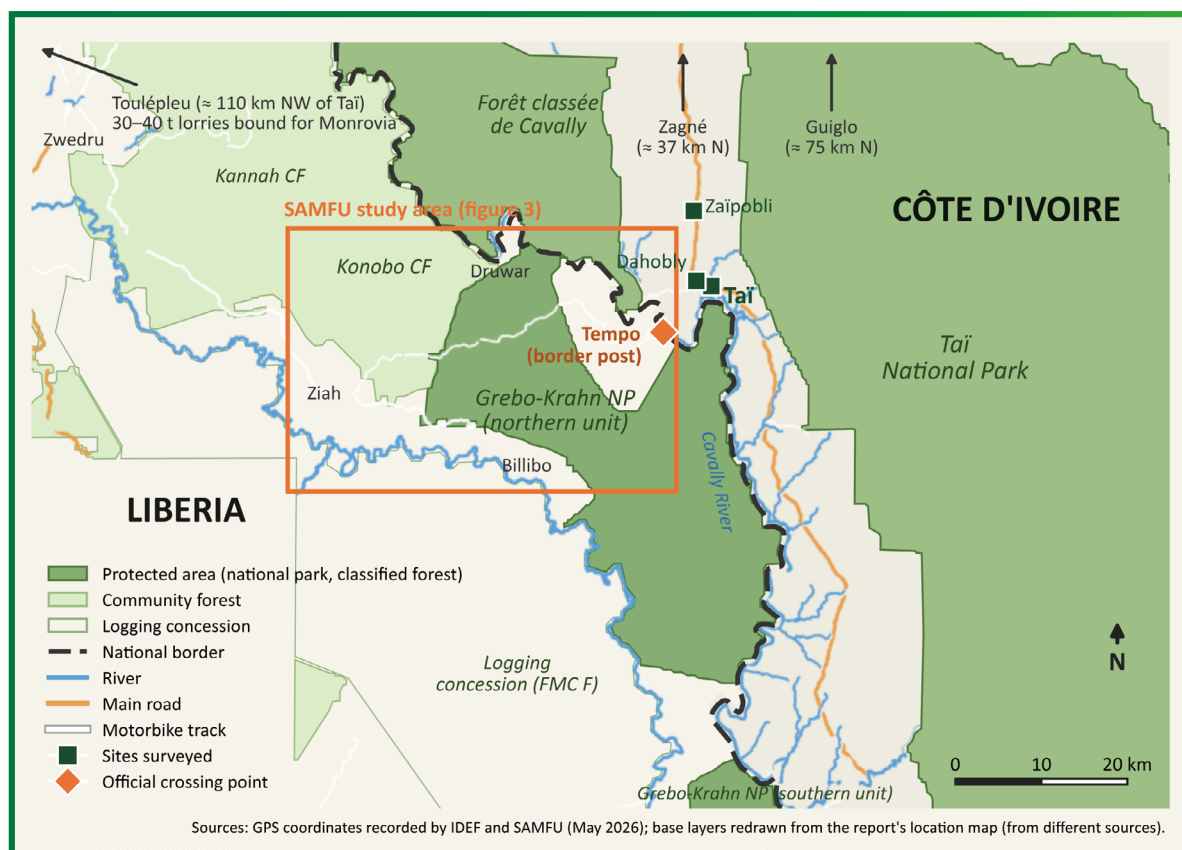
one), which particularly limited access to traders. In Liberia, **117 people undertook semi-structured interviews** across ten towns (Figure 2). Interviewees included town and traditional chiefs, women's and youth leaders, farmers and community members, security personnel. Whilst travelling between towns, the team pinpointed **26 cocoa farms close to or within the Grebo-Krahn National Park (detailed in Figure 4)**. We also conducted interviews with Granex, a major cocoa trader operating in Liberia.¹¹ All interviewees are anonymised for safety reasons.

Limitations

Fieldwork was conducted in the early weeks of the rainy season: roads deteriorated, travel was restricted to areas accessible by motorbike, and there was less time to conduct interviews or assess

Figure 1

Location of the study area and sites surveyed. The orange rectangle shows the area covered by the detailed map (Figure 3)



¹⁰ - According to IDEF, IFM “sheds light on how the products associated with deforestation and forest degradation are obtained” and provides objective

information on legal, environmental and social challenges through field research. ¹¹ - <https://granexgroup.com/>, accessed August 2026.



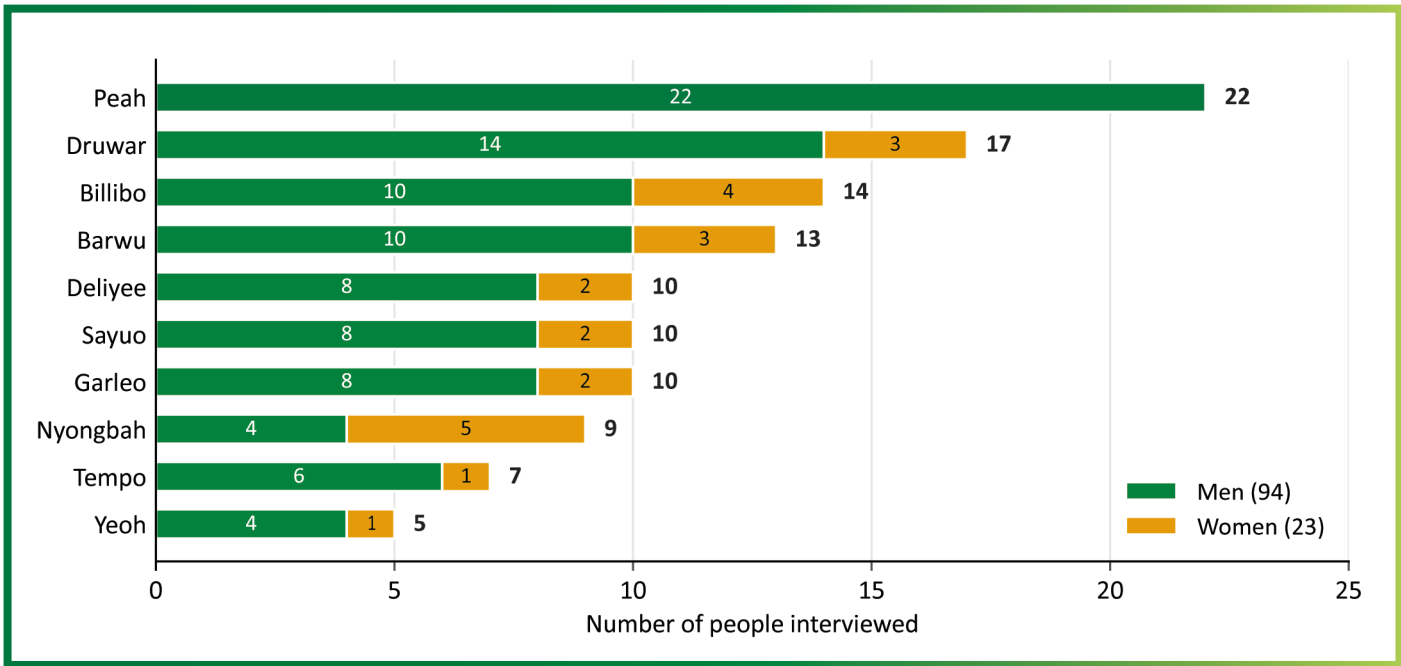
the size of the cocoa farms. **Above all, the team was actively prevented from reaching key sites in several places:** in Bao, Tarloken and Gbarwu, the community refused to take the team to the river crossing points, and in Billibo, a town under two kilometres (km) from the protected area, the team was prevented from visiting cocoa farms.

On the Ivorian side, the team could not enter Tai National Park and faced restrictions on its movement due to heightened security in the border area.

A Gendarmerie Nationale officer warned the team: *"We've been ordered not to let anyone go any further here. This is a border zone. And you know that a lot of things that aren't exactly legal go on in this sort of area."* The team identified two sites along the Cavally River where cocoa buyers await producers arriving from Liberia, but a massive deployment of law enforcement officers made the buyers who had agreed to explain the distribution chain reluctant to do so.

Figure 2

Interviewees in Liberia, by town and sex (total: 117, of whom 94 men and 23 women)



3 – Findings

The findings of both the field and desk research are presented in three sections: the **modalities of cocoa farm expansion**, the **impacts on protected areas** and **how Liberian cocoa is traded post-harvest**. As fieldwork took place in the low season for cocoa trading, few transactions could be observed; this trade has, however, been extensively documented previously by IDEF and Global Witness.¹²



Local Liberian community members at an informal border crossing point on the Cavally River near Druwar. At this time of year the water is low enough to walk across.
© SAMFU, 6 May 2026

3-1 The modalities of cocoa farm expansion

Two categories of migrant

Migrant labourers, predominantly from Burkina Faso, were observed on both sides of the border. They fall into two broad categories.

The first are those long established in Côte d'Ivoire:

They (or their parents and grandparents) set up cocoa farms there, but production is declining because of ageing plantations, poor soil quality (itself caused by cocoa's near-total destruction of forests in Côte d'Ivoire) and cocoa-related diseases. They now go to Liberia, as skilled and experienced farmers, to repeat the process. They do not abandon their Côte d'Ivoire farm, but leave it to be looked after by immediate or extended family, sometimes brought over from Burkina Faso. One migrant, who arrived in Côte d'Ivoire in 2009, said: *"I have a cocoa plantation that no longer produces as it used to, because the soil has become depleted. I've heard there's a new forest in Liberia. I'm going to have a look."* In the last six or seven months, some migrants have started bringing their wives and children to Liberia.

The second, larger category is young men (aged perhaps between 16 and 28) brought in from Burkina Faso by 'agricultural entrepreneurs': cocoa producers and buyers who have made a fortune of sorts in Côte d'Ivoire. Migrant labourers refer to

them as 'third parties' as they manage everything over the phone and through intermediaries. Some have never worked on a cocoa plantation and do not yet know what the work entails. *"All we know is that he owns several hectares of forest in Liberia and that he is going to grant us plots of land to enable us to set up our own cocoa plantations"*, said one.

A canoe owner-captain on the Ivorian bank of the Cavally River, described an organised flow: *"As for the workers who come from Côte d'Ivoire to work on the cocoa plantations in Liberia, there are specific days for their crossings: Fridays and Sundays. We've been told that a group is due to arrive. [...] On each crossing day, we can get at least 50 people across. They're all young people. There are no women. [...] Since the start of this year, [...] I'd say the figure is closer to 1,000."*

"Today we're here to cross the border and go to Liberia. It's only when we get there that we'll know what we're going to do. I've never worked on a cocoa plantation myself. But I know how to work. So I know I'll succeed. We're all motivated and very confident."

A migrant worker

¹² - IDEF, 2024, *Alert on the supply of cacao from Liberia*; IDEF, 2025, *Liberia: West Africa's future cocoa El Dorado – Characteristics and journey of a bitter chocolate*; Global Witness, 2025, *Chocolate giants fuel deforestation in West Africa's last rainforest*.

From forest to farm: the 'sponsor' system

Cocoa entrepreneurs, or '**sponsors**',¹³ access forest land through negotiations with local families. A family of five adult members might allocate 10 hectares (ha) each, providing 50 ha in total; a larger family might provide between 100 and 300 ha. Even family members who have settled in Monrovia or further afield have a sense of this land as their own. None of the interviewees spoke about payment for access to the land,¹⁴ but they said that **production-sharing arrangements** allocate 60% of the cocoa bean crop to the sponsor and 40% to the landowner, with the sponsor providing the cocoa seedlings and all the inputs, as well as the labourers' lodging, transport, food and healthcare.

The sponsor, typically a more experienced farmer arriving from Côte d'Ivoire, reports to a 'big big man' or investor who is rarely seen and is described as typically French or a well-established Ivorian or Burkinabè who may also be involved in trading cocoa beans. The sponsor manages a small group of young labourers, each of whom may be allocated a plot of around 10 ha; they do not yet have families to support, and depend on the sponsor for all their needs. The research team noted **significant movement of migrant workers at night** through the forest. Forest clearing relies on **slash-and-burn practices**, particularly in and around forest edges, and on **high concentrations of herbicides** to kill trees. The varieties planted, brought by the migrants, are faster, 'sun-grown' cocoa that fruits in just three years, unlike the older 'shade-grown' cocoa farms in Lofa, Bong and Nimba counties. Cocoa is planted as

quickly as possible after some clearing has been done, with more trees removed as the cocoa seedlings grow.

In Garleo, a **community committee** has been set up to resolve land conflicts since the 2018–19 increase in cocoa plantations: Prior to this, there were cases of families leasing overlapping plots and of cocoa farmers expanding their farms without authorisation. *"We do not indicate the demarcation line so the Burkinabè go beyond, into the bush", acknowledged a farmer in Deliyee. Many people do not regard cocoa farm expansion as a problem: "no problem, there's plenty of forest", said one elder in Garleo, for whom animals "can go... as far as River Gee and Maryland" and "after the cocoa is finished we will replant forest".*

There are various ways that the economic benefit from cocoa is shared between labourers, sponsors, and owners. Across this region, different systems were noted (for example production-sharing and plant-and-share). No written agreements are available, which raises concerns about possible future misinterpretation and disagreement.

Gendered access to land and revenues

Liberia's **Land Rights Law, passed in 2018**, enshrines equal land rights for women and men and recognises customary, community ownership of almost all Liberia's land - its definition of 'community' clearly embraces women as much as men (Box 2). Yet, although elsewhere in Liberia women are the backbone of agriculture, in these border areas this may not be the case. Traditional rules in some communities

Box 2

EQUAL RIGHTS IN LIBERIA'S LEGAL FRAMEWORK

IN THE LAND RIGHTS LAW (2018), ARTICLE 3 PROVIDES: *"Equal access and equal protection with respect to land ownership, use and management... regardless of [...] gender or otherwise".*

ARTICLE 2 DEFINES: A community member is a Liberian citizen *"irrespective of age, gender"* who was born in the community, whose parent was born there, who has lived there continuously for at least seven years, or who is the spouse of a resident community member.¹⁵

CONSTITUTION (1986), ARTICLE 22A OUTLINES THAT: Only Liberian citizens have the right to own real property.

ARTICLE 11A STATES THAT: All persons, irrespective of ethnic background, race, sex, creed, place of origin or political opinion, are entitled to fundamental rights and freedoms.¹⁶

¹³ - The term 'tuteur' ('guardian') is used in IDEF (2025) for the intermediary to whom the Liberian owner grants large areas of forest, who brings in workers and remains the owner's sole interlocutor. In this report, we use the term 'sponsor'. ¹⁴ - IDEF (2025) reported payments of 500,000FCFA francs (US\$900),

but these are likely to be facilitation payments (for example, to enable the community committee to conduct demarcation work) rather than a land purchase or lease. ¹⁵ - Government of Liberia, 2018, Land Rights Law.

¹⁶ - The Constitution of Liberia, 1986.

explicitly prohibit women from relationships with Burkinabè migrants, to prevent land claims via the citizenship of children born locally. Women's farms are typically located near villages, whereas men's farms are deep in the forest, so women cannot easily verify the actual area farmed by male relatives. Despite equality under the law, women may be denied an equal opportunity to benefit from the expansion of cocoa farms. In Yeoh, interviewees expressed concern that the town has only about 20 households, yet 350–450 migrants now also reside there.

Strong economic drivers

Liberian farm owners cite a **lack of comparable income sources** as the main driver of their switch to cocoa. Historically associated with the Mande people in Lofa, Bong and Nimba counties, cocoa is now taking hold among the Krahn people of Grand Gedeh, as the productivity of previous activities such as rice farming, hunting and fishing has dropped. Interviewees noted that cocoa cultivation results in a quicker profit than other activities. *"In less than six months, we can get more money from cocoa. Rubber or others do not give us that kind of money"*, said a youth leader in Druwar.

In Yeoh, six young farmers confirmed that the pace of cocoa farm expansion has increased significantly over the past five years, driven primarily by poverty, declining farming alternatives and growing market influence from Côte d'Ivoire. Residents expressed concern about the lack of government support and the poor sustainability of projects: *"All the fish ponds are all gone because they did not teach us how to*

"Even if the price is low, we will keep farming because there is nothing else we can do."

One interviewee told the SAMFU field team.

"Nothing to do, so cocoa is the only way we know to survive."

A woman farmer in Barwu

maintain them", a town chief in Tempo said of the Wild Chimpanzee Foundation, the only non-governmental organisation (NGO) that comes in with livelihood projects. A town chairperson added that, because there is no good road, it is hard for NGOs or even the government to bring livelihood activities to them.

Falling prices are not slowing expansion

Farm owners and community members consistently complained of **sharp declines** in the prices paid by local buyers (section 3.3). **Yet no significant shift away from cocoa was observed or reported.** On the contrary, interviewees in five of the ten towns visited said they are **expanding their farm acreage to compensate** for reduced per-unit earnings.

SAMFU field researcher beside a sign for Grebo-Krahn National Park, located between Garleo and Tempo © SAMFU, 2 April 2026



3-2 The impacts on protected areas

Cocoa farms inside Grebo-Krahn National Park

The SAMFU team followed **three tracks** (Figure 3):

- 1 – The track between Ziah and Tempo (50 km), the main local thoroughfare despite being inaccessible to vehicles, which crosses the north-west corner of the park and a portion of Konobo CF and runs through three villages reported to be unofficial crossing points (Bao, Tarloken and Yeoh), located up to 6 km outside the park and less than 3 km from the Cavally River;
- 2 – the road between Ziah and Billibo (33 km) and a path from there to Tempo (35 km), of which some

21 km runs directly across the park and could not be found on any publicly available map, suggesting it may be a new and possibly unauthorised route;

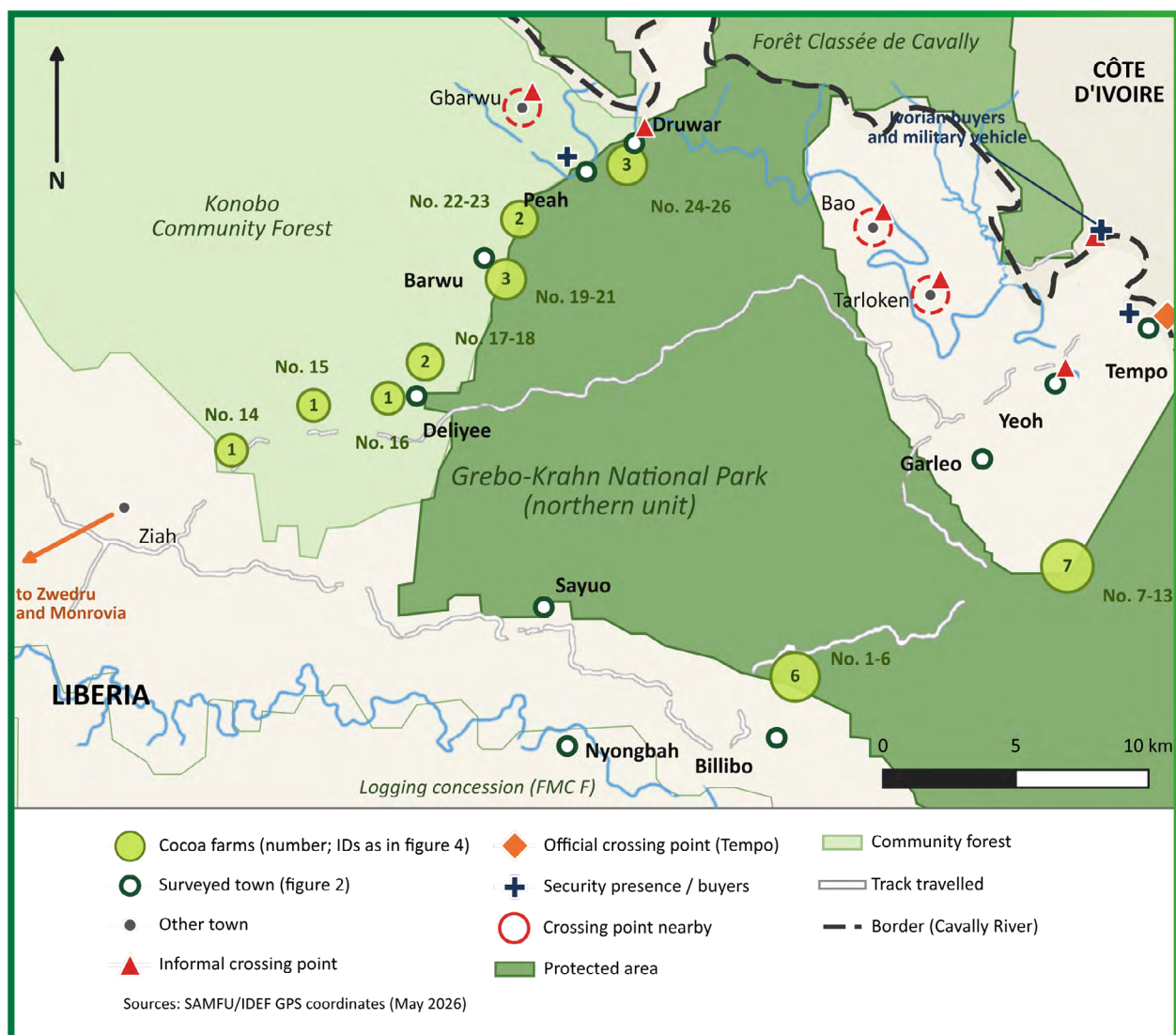
- 3 – a route some 25 km long between Deliye and the unofficial border crossing at Druwar, also absent from publicly available maps, which roughly follows the boundary between the park and Konobo CF.

Overall, the team researched an area of about **50,000 ha, of which 37,000 ha are within the park** (the park's northern unit covers about 97,000 ha).

Of the 26 farms identified¹⁷, **11 are inside the mapped boundary of the park**,¹⁸ between 160 metres (m)

Figure 3

Cocoa farms, towns, crossing points and security presence in the SAMFU study area (north-west Grebo-Krahn National Park).



¹⁷ - As a result of limited access into the interior of the protected area, the number of farms identified is intended to be indicative, not exhaustive.

¹⁸ - The boundary of Grebo-Krahn National Park used for this analysis is from a spatial dataset obtained from the FDA and dated 2020.

and 1.6 km from its edge; **nine are in Konobo CF**, including four that are 100 m or less outside the park boundary; and **six that are outside both the park and the CF**, on the northern side of the park beside the track to Garleo, between 2 and 930 m from its boundary (Figure 4). As typical plot sizes are 10 ha, which is approximately 320 m across, **any farm identified less than 320 m outside the boundary potentially extends into the park**. The farms were at different stages of establishment (new clearing, young cocoa, productive farm), indicating an **active frontier of cocoa farm expansion**.

The boundaries of the park and of Konobo CF do not have clear continuous markers such as rivers or roads. Although the demarcation process prior to the gazettelement of the park in 2017 included community representatives, such boundaries inevitably become less clear over time: painted marks on trees fade fast, as do people's memories.¹⁹

The attractiveness of cocoa has contributed to **increasing pressure to renegotiate the park**

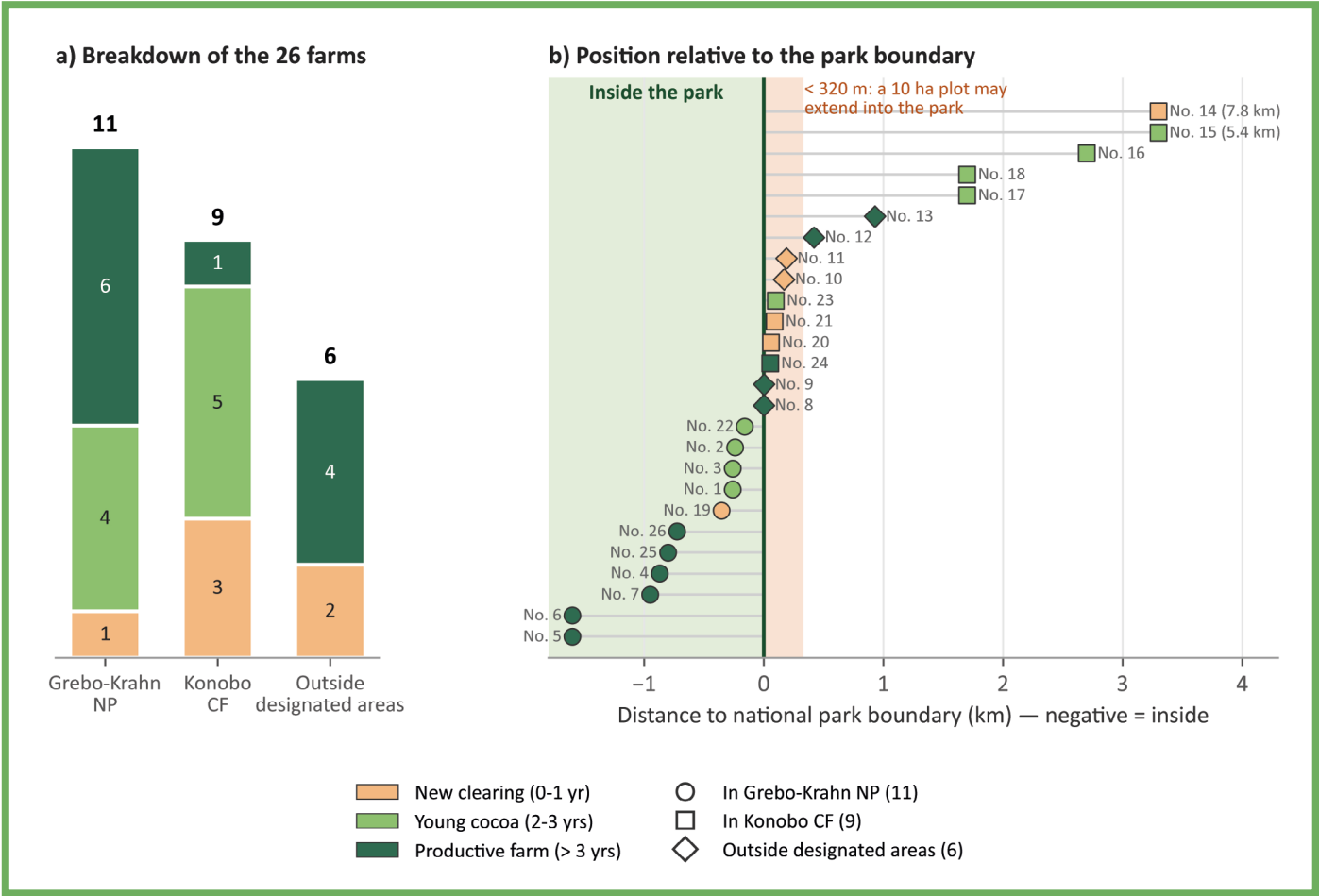
boundary with the Forestry Development Authority (FDA). In Deliye, less than 2 km from the park, people complained that the FDA boundary is too close to their farms. *"If we have the power, we would go beyond the Forestry Development Authority demarcation line"*, said one Chairperson. Another farmer justified his decision to *"make farm in the park, because every promise made has not been implemented by the FDA in opening the road"*. Even an FDA Auxiliary lamented the failure of efforts to support more environmentally appropriate cocoa farming in the buffer zone, where a nursery was abandoned: *"so when the Burkinabè came, we put them in charge"*.

"Because of the expansion of cocoa in forest areas, we do not see any wildlife like before in the forest, even us the hunters are finding it difficult to catch bushmeat."

A hunter in Deliye

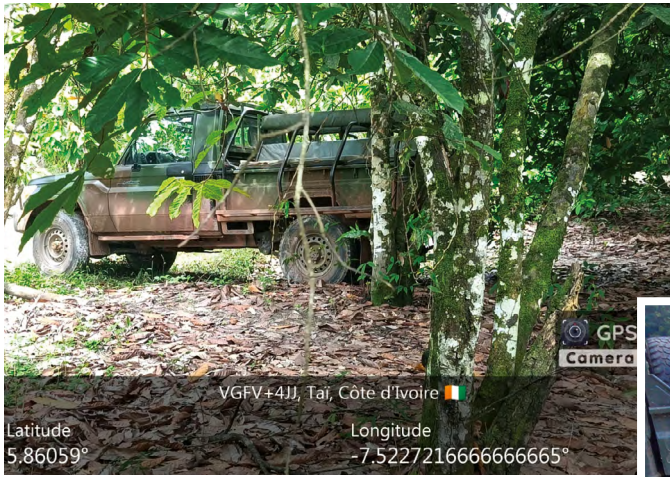
Figure 4

The 26 farms geolocated by SAMFU: distribution by area and stage (a) and distance to the national park boundary (b). Numbers refer to Figure 3



¹⁹ - In contrast, in Kwa proposed national park "in some areas the proposed boundary was pushed to ... fall behind some rivers" (FDA, 2026, Draft

gazettelement package for the establishment of Kwa national park).



Military vehicle and migrants in Peah Town, Liberia, 6 May 2026. Location is marked on Fig. 3. © SAMFU

Taken on 6 June 2026, at the location marked 'Ivorian buyers and military vehicle' in Fig. 3. © IDEF



Figure 5

Security forces on both sides of the border.

Wildlife decline and hunting

Wildlife hunting in protected areas is forbidden under both the forest and the wildlife laws. Of the 117 people interviewed, **50 reported fewer animal sightings than in the past**, and **25 of the 30 hunters** reported declining catches compared to five years ago. The relationship appears to be two-way; a fall in the availability of wildlife is pushing some into cocoa, while cocoa expansion is driving wildlife away.

Species mentioned as less frequently observed included elephants and monkeys.²⁰ In Yeoh, interviewees attributed this decline to the expansion of agricultural activities, increased human movement and habitat loss.

Côte d'Ivoire: Tai National Park and the threat of gold mining

The Ivorian team was not permitted to enter Tai National Park. An unofficial source familiar with the park told the team that there is no deforestation for cocoa inside the park, that regular patrols prevent farmers from moving into it, and that illegal gold panning is the biggest threat, with sites in several places outside the park but, to the source's knowledge, none inside it. Media reports have highlighted both the threat and the security forces' response in

several protected areas in Côte d'Ivoire.²¹ According to the local community leader, **the main threat to the park and to the Forêt Classée de Cavally is illegal gold panning** (Box 3), and sites that are often heavily guarded make access even more difficult.

The security response

The presence of the military was clear on both sides of the border. In Côte d'Ivoire, a military vehicle was observed a few hundred metres from an informal crossing point near the Forêt Classée de Cavally, about 4 km up the river from the official crossing point at Tempo. On the Liberian side, Tempo has a Joint Security²² post and a Liberia Immigration Service station. In Peah, on the border between Konobo CF and the park, a Joint Security operation had detained a group of migrants (Figure 5). According to one of the Joint Security personnel, the FDA has installed surveillance cameras in several parts of the protected area.

²⁰ - Forest elephants and colobus monkeys are both on the list of protected fauna species in Liberia (EPA). ²¹ - See for example *The Guardian*, 21 November 2022, *Gold, guns, gangs: on patrol with the elite unit saving Ivory Coast's forests*; Benin Web TV, 21 August 2026, Ivory Coast: 8,500 illegal gold mining sites

cleared, the phenomenon is spreading. ²² - Joint Security in Liberia is a multi-agency coalition comprising the Liberia National Police, the Liberia Immigration Service, the Drug Enforcement Agency and other auxiliary security outfits, tasked in particular with safeguarding national borders.

GOLD: A POTENTIALLY GREATER THREAT

In both Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, artisanal mining²³ and gold smuggling have grown exponentially as the international price of gold has increased from around US\$2,000 an ounce five years ago to over US\$4,500 an ounce for much of the last year.²⁴ Environmental impacts include forest destruction and degradation, diversion and sedimentation of river courses, and the increasing use of mercury, against a background of poor law enforcement and loss of state revenue.

Estimates of non-declared artisanal production are similar to those for the industrial sector: 4–10 tonnes per year in Liberia and 30–40 tonnes in Côte d'Ivoire.

Gold production and export ²⁵	Liberia	Côte d'Ivoire
Declared artisanal production	336 kilogrammes (kg) (Jul 2020–Jun 2021)	329 kg (2022)
Non-declared artisanal production (estimate)	4–10 tonnes/year	30–40 tonnes/year (early 2020s)
Industrial production	5.0 tonnes (Jul 2020–Jun 2021)	39.5 tonnes (2021)
Declared exports	13.1 tonnes in 2022 (US\$543 million), mainly to Switzerland, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates	47.6 tonnes in 2022 (value not reported) ²⁶

Both research teams observed at first hand **forest degradation due to illegal gold mining**, and found machinery and fuel cans, indicating increasing mechanisation. The muddy colour of the Cavally River is also an indication of mining activity in the vicinity. Mining machinery was found close to the informal crossing point near the Forêt Classée de Cavally; in Liberia, researchers saw mining operations on the Dugbeh River, which runs close to the southern boundary of the park. Gold mining and cocoa farming are closely interconnected: as cocoa becomes less profitable in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, farmers are discovering gold under their farms,²⁷ and gold mining can generate significant cash in a short time, which may then be invested in farm labour and inputs.²⁸ Whilst the value of the two products differ, the connection between gold and cocoa deserves a separate examination, especially in the context of changing economic outlooks and migration, and the impacts on protected areas and other forests.



Gold mining in a forest in Liberia
© FrontPageAfrica (reprinted with permission)

²³ - In both countries, gold is won by a mixture of mining in pits up to 25 m deep and panning in alluvial flats and rivers, at a small, human scale or with mechanised 'dredgers'. In this report the term 'mining' refers to all of these. ²⁴ - <https://goldpricez.com> ²⁵ - SwissAid, Africa Gold Reports, Côte d'Ivoire (2024) and Liberia (2025). ²⁶ - If declared, Artisanal and Small-scale Mining exports would equate to nearly 9% of the total value of Ivorian exports of goods and services in 2021 (Equal Access International, 2023). ²⁷ - Borgen Magazine, Gold vs Cocoa: The Battle Over West African Natural Resources; Montford et al., 2026, Resources Policy, Vol. 113. ²⁸ - International Growth Centre, 31 January 2020, West Africa's artisanal gold mining sector: An overlooked driver of development?

3-3 Complex trading systems

Cocoa grown in Grand Gedeh is traded both within Liberia, towards Monrovia, and across the border to Côte d'Ivoire, through multiple informal actors (Figure 6). **Price is only one factor** in decisions about where to trade. Relationships, language and preferred currency are also important.

Market structure

Farmers harvest and dry cocoa beans on farms or in villages, then sell them in bags to community-based buyers (such as Town Chiefs) or to traders who travel to remote communities; there are also fixed buying

points, such as one in Ziah. **The research team did not find any cooperatives.** Larger buyers aggregate the cocoa and transport it either to Monrovia or across the border. In addition to the official crossing point at Tempo, **30 of the 117 people interviewed** said cocoa is frequently transported outside Liberia via unofficial routes, primarily at night or during low-security periods. The researchers identified **six informal crossing points**: Gbarwu, Druwar, Bao, Tarloken, Yeoh and an unnamed site close to the Forêt Classée de Cavally (Figure 3).

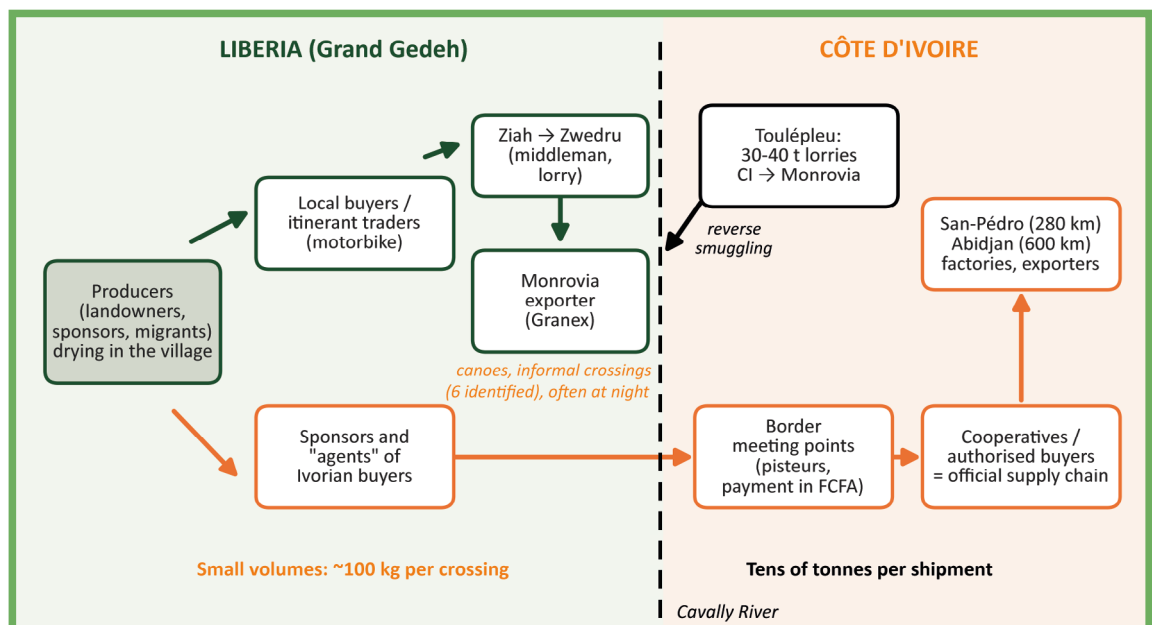


Figure 6

Trading routes for cocoa from Grand Gedeh, based on field observations and testimony.

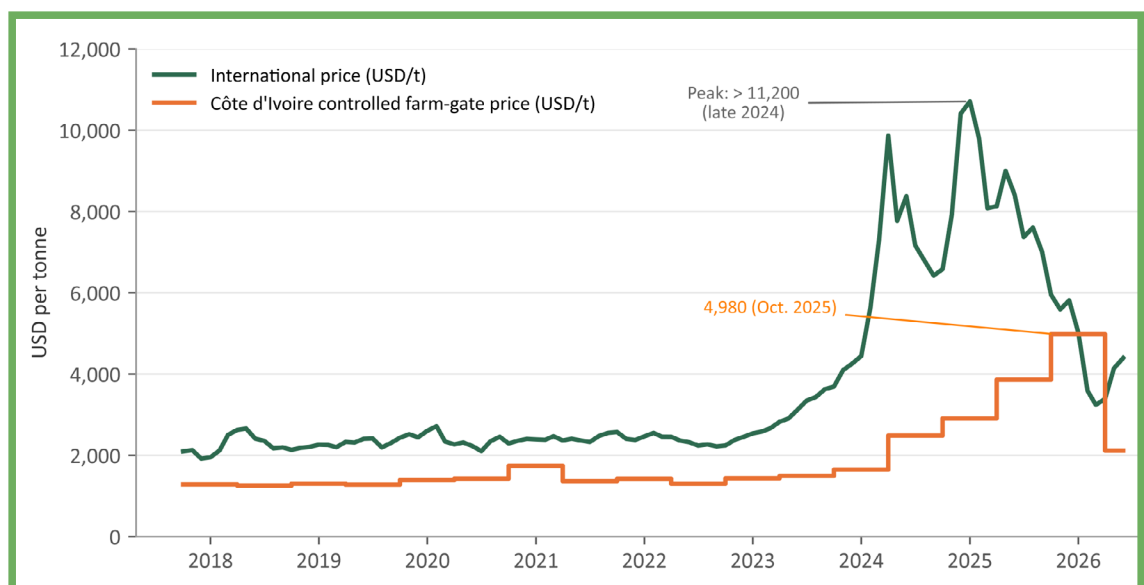


Figure 7

International cocoa price and controlled farm-gate price in Côte d'Ivoire (US\$/tonne, 2017–2026), wcompared with prices reported in Liberia in May 2026.

Controlled prices in Côte d'Ivoire, free-market prices in Liberia

In Côte d'Ivoire, the **Conseil du Café-Cacao** (Coffee-Cocoa Council) sets the farm-gate price twice a year: a main-season price for October to March and a mid-crop price for April to September. This price follows the international price, though to a lesser extent and with a delay. Having been stable at just under US\$3,000/tonne for half a decade, the international price rose steeply in 2023–24 (amid fears about ageing trees and a virus hitting crops in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana), peaking at **over US\$11,200/tonne by the end of 2024**,²⁹ before falling back to around **US\$3,200/tonne** during the field work; the medium-term expectation is further increases.³⁰ The Ivorian farm-gate price, which did not exceed 1,000 FCFA/kg (US\$1,700/tonne) between 2017 and October 2023, peaked at **2,800 FCFA/kg (US\$4,980/tonne) in October 2025**, then dropped sharply to **1,200 FCFA/kg (US\$2,120/tonne)** for April–September 2026 (Figure 7).

In Liberia, **there is no price control mechanism for cocoa**. In May 2026, farm owners cited prices of Liberian dollars (**LRD**) **250–350/kg (US\$1,360–1,910/tonne)**. They said Ivorian buyers paid LRD 500/kg (US\$2,725/tonne), although this would be 35% higher than the highest-ever farm-gate price in Côte d'Ivoire. *"If you sell your cocoa in Liberia, you will lose"*, said the Tempo Youth Group Chairperson.

Poor roads are the other leading reason:

"Because of the road, we cannot go into the town so we just sell our cocoa to Ivory Coast and even buy other things from there"

Town Chief of Tempo.

²⁹ - Macro Trends, Global Cocoa Price, accessed August 2026, citing IMF data. Ivorian farm-gate prices from the Conseil du Café-Cacao, collated by IDEF since 2012, converted to US\$ using the average exchange rate for each six-month period (www.fxtop.com). ³⁰ - Just2Trade, 30 May 2026, Cocoa Price Prediction: Expert Analysis Reveals Market Trends 2026–2030. ³¹ - For a loose comparison, IDEF reported in 2024 that in another part of Liberia transport over a similar distance to the river cost 2,000 FCFA, or about US\$3.50 (IDEF, 2024). The CFA franc (FCFA) is the currency used in 14 countries in West and Central Africa (which is not officially used in Liberia, but is being used by migrants and via cocoa traders). ³¹ - Granex Group Incorporated in Liberia is a licensed cocoa exporting company that focuses on sourcing, processing and exporting Liberian cocoa beans to international markets; <https://granexgroup.com/>, accessed August 2026. ³² - Media reports suggest the Atlantic Cocoa Processing and Export Company (ACPEC) specialises in premium and certified organic cocoa Liberia. See LACRA, 23 October 2021, [Atlantic Cocoa to get recognition for premium cocoa](#); And Atlantic Life Insurance, 20 January 2022, [Atlantic Cocoa Export & Processing Company receives organic certificate destination](#); There is no evidence it is linked to the Ivorian industrial cocoa processor Atlantic Cocoa Corporation.

Box 4

PORTRAIT OF A LIBERIAN TRADER

Liberian interviewees said there are three middlemen operating in the area, of which one, based in Ziah, was mentioned most often. He is Liberian and is a major operator, buying cocoa from communities, transporting it and selling it the companies. He was reportedly transporting 14 lorry-loads of cocoa beans to Monrovia even in July, well after the main harvest season.

He was interviewed in Zwedru and said he operates 'speed boats' across the Cavally River, but at different times they carry cocoa in each direction. He stated that there are several illegal points that are used to take the cocoa across the river.

He wants cocoa to be traded within Liberia, and he may even be prepared to buy cocoa from Côte d'Ivoire if the price is good. He accused others of using his speedboat to take the cocoa to the Ivorian side and that when he confronted them, he was attacked physically.

He said that Ivorians come and then *"push up"* the prices they are paying for cocoa. But he has a strong relationship with Granex, a cocoa exporter based in Monrovia.³¹ His main role as a middleman, he said, is to sell the cocoa to buyers like Granex, although he was unable to say who the company sells the cocoa on to. One cocoa farm owner in Barwu said, *"If we harvest the Cocoa, [this trader] is the only one that can come and buy it from us, Atlantic Cocoa³² and Granex used to come but they stopped"*.

The field team noticed frequent indications of Granex in the communities it visited, although often their trucks appeared to be broken and abandoned. Other farmers also reported that only this trader can buy large quantities of cocoa, suggesting the market may be constrained by limited access to financing for large-scale cocoa purchasing.

On the Tempo – Ziah track, transport costs LRD 500–600 (US\$6.70–8.00) per 50 kg bag.³³ In Billibo, two Town Chiefs said high transport costs significantly reduce net farm income. Farm owners also said that selling at the ‘farm gate’ to buyers who travel to the villages by motorbike further reduces the prices they receive.

The ‘road’ network in this part of Liberia, mainly too small for vehicles at any time of year, is largely impassable during the rainy season, May to October, but this has not changed in recent years, so should not in itself affect the year-on-year prices. The main cocoa harvest period is October to December, though it can continue at a lower level until March.

This might make farm-gate prices lowest when there is most produce on the market, yet farmers reported prices were significantly higher during the dry compared to the rainy season. One middleman, or local trader, reported being unaware of current world market prices, and the research team noted that no price boards or official market price postings were observed in any of the communities visited.

Beyond price: networks, language and currency

Relationships between buyer, seller, landowner and migrant strongly influence where cocoa is sold. In Deliyee, migrant sponsors facilitate cocoa collection from the farms where they supervise labour. In Billibo and Tempo, some workers receive **a receipt rather than cash** when the cocoa is transported to Côte d'Ivoire, with a promise to give them their money when the cocoa is sold, which indicates that a trusting relationship is needed. *“The big big white*



Local Land Authority representative near Tempo border crossing © SAMFU, 2 April 2026

"The majority of producers were based in Côte d'Ivoire before moving to Liberia. [...] On their phones, the news and social media pages they follow are largely from Côte d'Ivoire. They do not yet speak English [...]. It is as if they had never left Côte d'Ivoire [...]. The second point is that they are more comfortable with the currency of Côte d'Ivoire [...]. Not to mention that they continue to support their families who live in Côte d'Ivoire. [...] Finally, the third factor, which I believe is the most decisive, is the fact that we, the buyers, come to meet them right at the border. Many tell us[...] that there are no roads from their villages to the nearest town. And no buyer based in Liberia comes to their villages to collect the produce"

Ivorian pisteur.

³³ - For a loose comparison, IDEF reported in 2024 that in another part of Liberia transport over a similar distance to the river cost 2,000 FCFA, or about US\$3.50 (IDEF, 2024). The CFA franc (FCFA) is the currency used in 14 countries in West and Central Africa (which is not officially used in Liberia, but is being used by migrants and via cocoa traders).

French-speaking people send agents to get the cocoa from us”, said the Tempo Youth Group Chairperson.

Liberian farm owners reported that prices are set unilaterally by buyers, with no negotiation. An Ivorian intermediary buyer (known locally as a ‘pisteur’) gave three reasons for selling to Côte d’Ivoire:

The sponsors, labourers, inputs, investments and markets are thus all rooted outside Liberia, in French-speaking countries. The FCFA franc is used for many of the transactions, which has led to concerns in Liberia about currency instability and weakening local markets.³⁴ Sales negotiations are likely to be between a migrant sponsor – not the Liberian farm owner – and a buyer with whom he has a longstanding relationship. Buyers blame low prices on bad road conditions and rising fuel prices, but this may just be a convenient justification for wider price influences.

Trade routes: To Monrovia or into the Ivorian supply chain

The cocoa that remains in Liberia is taken to Monrovia, where Granex has a large warehouse. No references to the EUDR could be found on Granex’s website, but the company states that it aims to be the first organisation in Liberia to export “100% organic Liberian cocoa beans”, that it “sources cocoa primarily from Nimba County” and that it operates “rigorous traceability and transparency”. Its Sustainability Code of Conduct (c. 2021) set the goal of guaranteeing no supply of cocoa from forest reserves or protected areas in 2022, and of extending zero deforestation to its conventional cocoa supply channels in 2023.³⁵ In 2025, Global Witness reported that Granex claimed to have mapped “about 75–80%” of its supplier farms; it concluded that Touton, a major French trader and processor and the largest exporter of cocoa from Liberia,

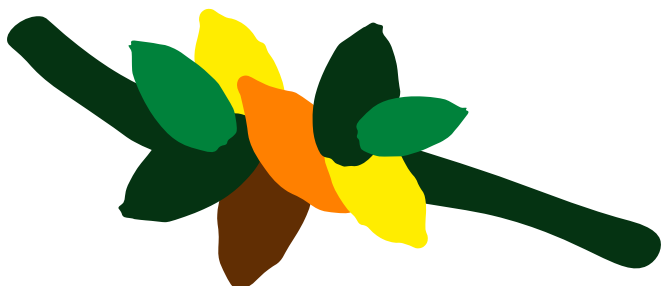
appeared to purchase in-country from exporters such as Granex before shipping under its own name.³⁶

On the Ivorian side, middlemen buy near the border and resell to other middlemen, who may act as agents of a cooperative or work with an authorised purchasing agent: **This is how cocoa from Liberia enters the official supply chain**, before reaching processing factories and exporters in San-Pédro (280 km from Taï) or Abidjan (600 km).

"I can just tell you that there are many co-operatives whose representatives are middlemen who come to the border here to buy the produce."

One self-described ‘small-scale freight forwarder’, whose payment capacity (50 million FCFA, or US\$88,500) is not even enough for a 40-tonne load.

Further north, in **Toulépleu**, the flow is reversed, in both direction and scale: large operators smuggle cocoa from Côte d’Ivoire into Liberia in 30–40 tonne lorries bound for Monrovia, constantly comparing the controlled price in Côte d’Ivoire with the free-market price in Liberia. **In one case, shipments contained up to a hundred kilos each; in the other, tens of tonnes.**



³⁴ - LAEJN, 16 October 2025, CFA currency surge threatens Liberia's cocoa economy as migrant farmers reject local payments. ³⁵ - <https://granexgroup.com/index.php/about-us/>, accessed August 2026; Granex (undated), Sustainability code of conduct. ³⁶ - Global Witness, 2025, op. cit.



4 – Analysis

Cocoa-driven deforestation pressure has not disappeared in the Taï – Grebo-Krahn forest landscape; rather, it has shifted. While no significant recent cocoa encroachment was documented inside Taï National Park, the research identified active cocoa expansion in and around Grebo-Krahn National Park, including within its mapped boundary. Farms at different stages of development indicate an ongoing frontier of forest conversion rather than a historical phenomenon.

This expansion is being facilitated by structured migration networks. Experienced cocoa farmers leaving ageing and less productive plantations in Côte d'Ivoire, and younger workers, often from Burkina Faso, recruited through intermediaries to clear forests and establish plantations. The evidence suggests that labour recruitment, land allocation, farm establishment and cocoa marketing form a single cross-border system.

Lower prices are not reducing pressure on forests; they may even increase it. With alternative livelihood opportunities extremely limited, farm owners are expanding cultivated areas to maintain their income. Poverty, inadequate infrastructure, weak market access and the absence of sustained rural development programmes appear to be reinforcing reliance on cocoa.

Land governance emerges as a critical factor. In the absence of customary land formalisation, large areas of forest land can be allocated to migrant sponsors, while unclear boundaries between community land and protected areas create opportunities for encroachment and disputes. The research also suggests that women may participate less equally in decisions on land allocation and in benefit-sharing from cocoa production, despite legal protections guaranteeing equal rights.

Cross-border cocoa trading is embedded in local economic systems. Higher prices, familiarity with the FCFA, social networks, language and easier market access all encourage producers and intermediaries to sell Liberian cocoa, including cocoa from recently deforested protected areas, into Ivorian supply chains through a succession of intermediaries, cooperatives and authorised buyers. Although the research team could not trace cocoa to specific exporters, this highlights the likelihood that **cocoa that is non-compliant with the EUDR will be impossible to distinguish from legally sourced cocoa** once it enters established supply chains.

5 – Conclusions

Cocoa expansion remains a **significant driver of forest loss** in the Taï – Grebo-Krahn forest landscape, particularly on the Liberian side of the border. It is closely linked to organised migration, local land allocation mechanisms and cross-border marketing systems. Declining cocoa productivity in Côte d'Ivoire and limited livelihood opportunities in Liberia are sustaining the expansion of cocoa into forested areas, including national parks. **Approaches focused solely on enforcement are unlikely to succeed** unless accompanied by livelihood support, infrastructure

Recommendations

development and stronger land governance. The research reveals important traceability challenges for governments, exporters and cocoa buyers seeking to demonstrate deforestation-free supply chains. Effective responses will require **long-term cooperation between Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire**, involving government agencies, local communities, civil society organisations and private-sector actors.

The following recommendations emerge from this analysis:

GOVERNMENT OF LIBERIA

- Join the group of countries committed to implementing the **African Regional Standard for Sustainable Cocoa (ARS 1000)** as well as the **EU Sustainable Cocoa Initiative**.
- Strengthen a **joint Liberia-Côte d'Ivoire transboundary monitoring mechanism** for cocoa expansion, migration flows and cross-border trade.
- Strengthen collaboration in land use planning between land, forestry, protected-areas, agriculture, rural development, immigration, customs and mining authorities.
- Improve **demarcation and public communication** of protected-area boundaries.
- Accelerate customary land governance reforms, for example transparent community self-identification, participatory land mapping, land-use planning (including boundary harmonisation), community-level land governance committees and land title registration.

LIBERIA FORESTRY DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

IN PARTICULAR THE WILDLIFE DIVISION

- Prioritise monitoring and enforcement in identified cocoa expansion hotspots around Grebo-Krahn National Park.
- Make use of remote sensing tools, including satellite image interpretation of forest canopy moisture, to rapidly monitor wider at-risk areas and respond promptly.
- Integrate cocoa expansion and mining risks into protected-area management plans.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE AUTHORITIES

- **Strengthen, together with Liberia, the joint transboundary monitoring mechanism**, dedicating more resources to tackling cocoa smuggling in both directions.
- **The Conseil du Café-Cacao (Coffee-Cocoa Council)** should open discussions with its Liberian counterpart (LACRA) to **work on supply chain traceability in Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia**. The aims would be to prevent Liberian cocoa linked to deforestation, including from protected areas, from entering the official supply chain; to prevent cocoa leaving Côte d'Ivoire for Liberia.
- **Continue efforts to professionalise cooperatives** and to **strengthen pre licensing checks**.
- **Accelerate support for rehabilitating ageing cocoa plantations and restoring soil fertility** in Côte d'Ivoire, a major reason why experienced farmers are leaving for Liberia's forests.
- **Work with Liberia and Burkina Faso to identify the networks that recruit and move young workers**, organised by 'agricultural entrepreneurs' or 'sponsors' operating from Côte d'Ivoire and, increasingly, from Liberia.
- **The Office Ivoirien des Parcs et Réserves and Ivorian security forces** should step up action against illegal gold mining around Taï National Park and the Forêt Classée de Cavally. They should also facilitate civil society's independent monitoring by allowing independent monitors to have supervised access to protected areas and nature reserves.

THE EU AND THE UK

- The EU and **Liberia should work together to ensure Liberia can formally join the Sustainable Cocoa Initiative.**
- The EU & the UK should **encourage an inclusive cocoa dialogue platform in Liberia** – a dialogue mechanism (like the Joint Implementation Committee), which brings government representatives, farmers, private sector, women's and youth groups together.
- The EU & the UK should **provide support to Liberia on developing deforestation-free supply chains for cocoa**, looking at the Team Europe Initiative approach and aiming for traceability, EUDR readiness and stronger legality.
- The EU & UK should **ensure that women, youths, and migrants are represented** in national cocoa roadmap processes and dialogue platforms. Data collected should be gender and age-disaggregated across the cocoa value chain, with the aim of strengthening women's access to land, finance, markets and the benefits of cocoa production.
- The EU should ensure that its **Forest Partnership with Liberia includes cocoa**, with the aim of protecting forests while backing smallholder farmers.
- The EU should continue **supporting the roll-out of a robust and smallholder-inclusive cocoa national traceability system in Côte d'Ivoire**, which would help curbing the illegal smuggling of Liberian-grown cocoa into Ivorian supply chains.

FUNDERS AND NGOs

- Quantify the volume of cocoa moving across informal border routes.
- Invest in **alternative livelihoods**, especially for youth and communities located near protected areas, as well as programmes that provide direct financing to forest communities to prevent deforestation (such as the [Payment for Stewardship programme](#)).
- **Support sustainable agriculture and cocoa intensification on existing farmland** rather than expansion into forests.
- Support community-based monitoring systems to detect new forest clearings and a **long-term independent monitoring programme** covering both sides of the border.
- Incorporate education on conservation laws into support for customary land formalisation.
- Assess the relative impacts of cocoa expansion and gold mining on biodiversity across the wider transboundary landscape.

COCOA COOPERATIVES, TRADERS, EXPORTERS AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVE BODIES

- Strengthen **farm mapping and traceability** systems in border regions.
- Undertake **targeted due diligence** in areas identified as expansion frontiers.
- Increase transparency regarding sourcing, intermediaries and purchasing practices.
- Collaborate with civil society and government partners to identify and mitigate deforestation risks within supply chains.

WWW.FERN.ORG

-  @fern-ngo
-  @Fern.NGO
-  @FernNGO
-  @fernngo

WWW.SAMFULR.ORG

-  @save-my-future-foundation-ngo
-  @samfu1987
-  @samfu1987

WWW.ONGIDEF.ORG

-  @ong-idef
-  @ongidef
-  @OngIdef
-  @ong.idef