

# **How can socio-economics crisis promote sustainable behavior in rural regions?**

## **The case of the farm M. Libânio S.A. in Brazil**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, we aim to discuss what are the motivations that drive companies to adopt sustainable development principles. Precedent literature shows that the main motivations rely on contextual, organizational and individual factors that are directly related to the companies' leaders. In the production of cocoa in Brazil, a severe economic crisis linked to phytosanitary disease causes damage to crops but also to the social level by an explosion of unemployment of many small producers who have lost everything. The group M. Libânio took the initiative to propose partnerships contracts with 40 families to welcome them on the farm and to share the results of the production. This initiative also served the group to legitimize its commitment in sustainable production that has certified products by Rainforest Alliance and opened the North American market.

**Keywords:** Rural development, sustainable production, socio-economic crisis, cocoa, Brazil.

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### **Introduction**

Environmental and social certifications have increased in recent years (Faure et al., 2012). In the Cocoa sector, major firms have relied on demand from consumers in North countries to develop strategies that integrate certifications taking into account environmental and social criteria (Soto and Le Coq, 2011). These certifications are carried by the public sector (organic farming), by the voluntary sector (Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance), or by the private sector (thanks to real commitments to certified cocoa from manufacturers such as Mars, Ferrero and Hershey).

Certification provides a fair remuneration to producers for the efforts made to take sustainable development into account in their production (Nazaire, 2016). Although CTA's recent report shows that the positive impacts on the incomes of certified farmers are difficult to quantify, industrial customer pressure has fostered the development of the market share of certified cocoa (CTA, 2013).

The literature shows that incentives for public policies, expected benefits (brand image and customer loyalty) and the values of the organization's leaders are motivated by the adoption of sustainable development standards by organizations. In Brazil, cocoa production is ruled by conventional production sold in bulk to multinational industrial firms. Some certification initiatives have appeared in the northeast of the country, more precisely in the southern state of Bahia. Base on a single case study of the farm (M. Libânio S.A). We show in this paper that a context of agronomic crisis linked to the cocoa disease "witch broom" led some farms to introduce new ways of organizing production that legitimize an environmental and social certification of its Cocoa production that can open the US market. This new organization brings benefits for the enterprise and too for the planet.

After a literature review on legitimacy and sustainable development, we will present the context of the research and the methodology of the case study. Results analysis and discussion will lead to some recommendations and research avenues.

### **1. The different ways of legitimizing the sustainability of production processes**

Strategic decisions always involve choices and trade-offs between several dimensions, between multiple demands, a priori non-convergent. Sustainable development considers that it is possible to reconcile three essential but often unequal concerns in the value given to each: the satisfaction of human needs by the economy, the rational management of resources and natural ecosystems and the duty of social cohesion and inclusion. If the objective of sustainable development is unanimous, the question of how to achieve this aim remains to be under question Kahn (2015). Commonly, there are three major routes presented in the literature:

The first one is the path of political ecology. And it consists on changing more or less gradually the development model itself by moving towards a soberer economic model.

The second orientation can be described as production or industrial ecology. It does not advocate a radical change from the existing model to a different model, but a rearrangement of the current model.

The third major way to reach the objective of sustainable development is named market ecology. This orientation renews its confidence less in the virtues of technical progress than in those of markets and financial innovation to overcome the apparent contradictions between the three purposes. It claims the supremacy of economic rationality over the two other spheres and advocates pushing even further the market logic, by allocating a price to the services provided by nature. It sees sustainable development as an opportunity to carry out radical innovations that can offer new ranges of goods and services and generate new growth, now known as green growth.

It is this last path that agriculture has developed the most, thanks to numerous innovations that have been introduced to "green" production systems and move from intensive farming to agroecology. The goal is to transform the actual systems and also win the trust of customers and consumers.

### **1.1. Building the legitimacy of Cocoa producers in Brazil**

The companies of the Brazilian Cocoa sector are mainly recognized for manufacturing processes that do not respect the environmental and social good practices (Rangel and Tonella, 2013). They are recently engaged in the course of legitimizing their activities (Rhouma et al., 2014). The theory of legitimacy refers to neo-institutional approaches describing environmental pressure conveying a set of norms, beliefs, and rituals with which the company must comply if it does not want to face criticism and attacks from Stakeholders (Trébuq, 2006). A company may engage in a legitimization process to regain or extend its real legitimacy or to repair and defend its lost or threatened legitimacy (O'Donovan, 2002). Legitimacy is defined as the perception that "the actions of an entity - the organization, the brand - are desirable, proper or appropriate within a system of socially constructed norms, values, beliefs" (Suchman, 1995).

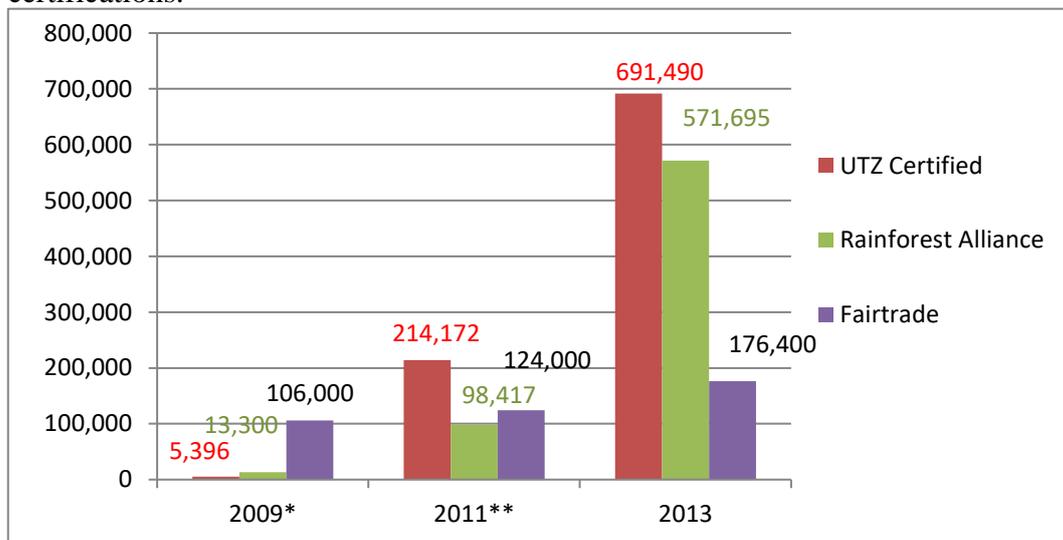
Legitimacy can be described as the behavior adopted by organizations, companies, and brands to improve the relationship between business and society, but also to ensure reputation and services in a social context (Weber, 1978, Chauvière and Godbout, 1992, Gabriel, 2003, Doney and Canon, 1997). Different typologies have been proposed to identify the multidimensional nature of legitimacy (Beylier et al., 2011). Suchman (1995) distinguishes between logical, moral and cognitive forms. In the field of entrepreneurship, Marchesnay (1998) proposed a typology that distinguished competitive legitimacy, based on efficiency and effectiveness, and territorial legitimacy related to the role of the organization in a territory.

The Cocoa market has made significant efforts to make the production processes more sustainable. Over the past decade, consumers have become increasingly aware of the issues surrounding sustainable cocoa production. Fueled by some campaigns focusing on child labor and trafficking, public and media awareness is now one of the main sources of motivation for the adoption of more stringent

standards and a certification system for the chocolate industry (Fountain and Hütz-Adams, 2015)

As far as socio-environmental certifications for cocoa are concerned, the three most important references are Rainforest Alliance, Fairtrade, and UTZ. Figure 1 shows the evolution of cocoa production certified by standardization bodies in recent years. One can say that a significant trend in the current cocoa market is based on two approaches: The social performance that engages in protection against slavery, child labor and producer poverty. The environment component is concerned with protecting and raising awareness towards production methods that are more harmonious with nature, bringing more and more knowledge and publicity to the stakeholders from the cocoa chain.

Figure 1: Cocoa production in tons certified by Organizations of the Ecolabels certifications.



Source: Fountain, et Hütz-Adams, baromètre du cacao 2015 \* Figures from 2010 Cocoa Barometer/ \*\* Figures from 2012 Cocoa Barometer

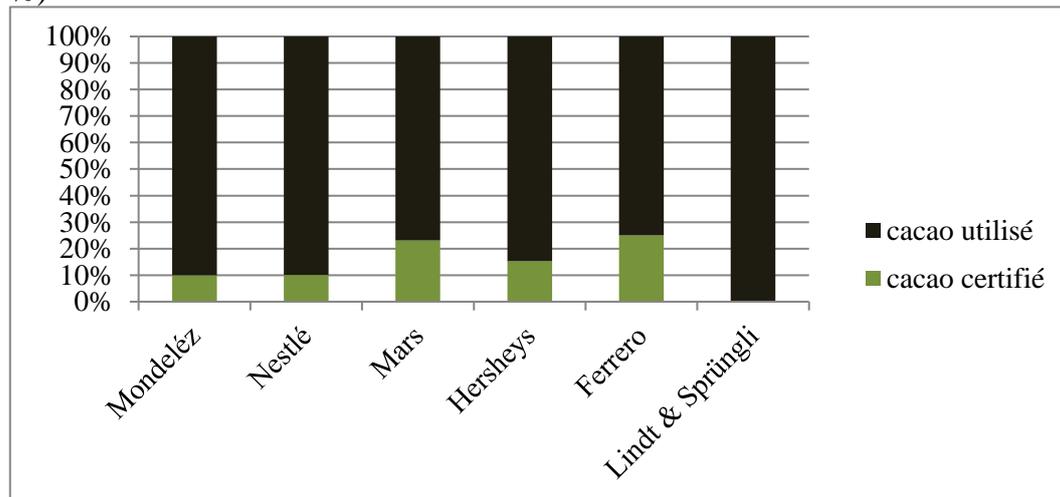
The growth of certified cocoa production is very rapid and sustained. Currently, there is a demand for the cocoa market associated to sustainable development, but the labels presented in figure 1 concern only the three international standardization bodies, Fairtrade, UTZ Certified and Rainforest Alliance, together they certify close to 1.4 Million tons of cocoa, about 30% of the world's chocolate market. There is a major predominance of Rainforest Alliance and UTZ certifications. UTZ is a certification originated in the Netherlands. It began certification of cocoa in 2007 and opened up the European market for sustainable cocoa. The UTZ certification was realized on its standards and traceability system for a sustainable cocoa. Rainforest Alliance is a North American certification that develops its sustainability label for cocoa. It is present in several countries of the world and is recognized by all consumers interested by sustainable chocolate. Fairtrade, which has its origins in the United Kingdom, has undergone a period of rapid development but has lost some ground today due to difficulties in attracting players in the Cocoa Sector and the slowing down of the dynamics of this label in the chocolate market.

Worldwide, 57 different companies manufacture chocolate. Among the leading players in the market, there are some multinationals such as Nestlé, Mondelēz, Mars and Hershey's; the others are local brands (Camargo and Nhantumb, 2016).

Most major chocolate manufacturers, except Mondelēz and Nestlé, have committed to using 100% sustainable and certified cocoa by 2020 (Fountain and Hütz-Adams, 2015). Figure 2 presents the percentage of certified cocoa used in the production of the leading industries.

It can be observed that only two manufacturers use more than 20% of certified products (Mars, Ferrero), the majority uses between 10% and 15% of cocoa with an eco-label. The company Lindt & Sprüngli has none at all.

Figure 2: Certified Cocoa share in the production of chocolate manufacturers (in %)



Source: Fountain et Hütz-Adams, Baromètre du cacao 2015

It is in this context of the growth of chocolate socio-environmental certifications in the world's market that some important properties in Brazil have perceived the interest to engage in the implementation of Eco-labels and thus position themselves on this niche of the cocoa market. Due to the economic crisis associated to the cocoa disease vulgarly named “witch’s broom” in Bahia, which resulted in significant production losses, and the need of producers to innovate in order to rebuild a new identity of the Brazilian product, some large farms are seeking to legitimize their commitments in sustainable cocoa production.

### 1.2. The economic crisis, driving the adoption of the principles of sustainable development

According to Labelle and St-Pierre (2015), sustainable development suggests the adoption of economic activities that respect environmental capacities and limitations and thus contribute to the social well being and human development. The literature shows that corporate sensitivity can be seen as a precursor of concrete and future commitment (Naffziger, Ahmed and Montagno, 2003, Moquet and Pezet, 2006, Kuckertz and Wagner, 2010). Labelle and St-Pierre (2015) propose to group the determinants of the adoption of the principles of sustainable development into three main factors (Table 1).

Table 1: the determinants of the adoption of SD approaches

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Determinants</b>
Contextual factors	Location, internationalization, sector of activity and tangibility of activities, position in the value chain
Organizational factors	Size, shareholding (ownership structure), economic performance, age, capacity for innovation
Individual factors	Gender, age, education (level), training (specialization), attitude towards profit, design of company performance (values)

The analysis grid here proposed distinguishes between external determinants that exert a real influence on the motivation of the company and its manager to integrate sustainable development proposals (contextual factors). The determinants that affect an organization's ability to adopt sustainable development practices (organizational factors). Finally, the personal determinants that act on the intentions of the leader towards the expectations addressed to him to preserve the legitimacy of his organization (individual factors).

The case study proposed in this paper circumscribes into the contextual factors on the adoption of more sustainable behaviors. Indeed, the economic crisis linked to the cocoa disease has not only resulted in the search for technical solutions but also for new organizational forms to limit their effects. To compensate the losses, the farms tried to differentiate the product through eco-labels, which opened up remunerative markets in the United States and Europe.

In the case of the Fazenda M. Libânio group in Bahia, Brazil. We show that this process led the company to welcome on its farm former cocoa workers dismissed because of the crisis with their families and to offer them a sharing of the Value created in return for their work, justifying a commitment in the social aspects demanded by the ecolabels.

## **2. Context and Methodology**

For more than 200 years the southern region of Bahia, was dominated by a cocoa monoculture implied towards the international market to strengthen the trade balance of Brazil (Chiapetti, 2009).

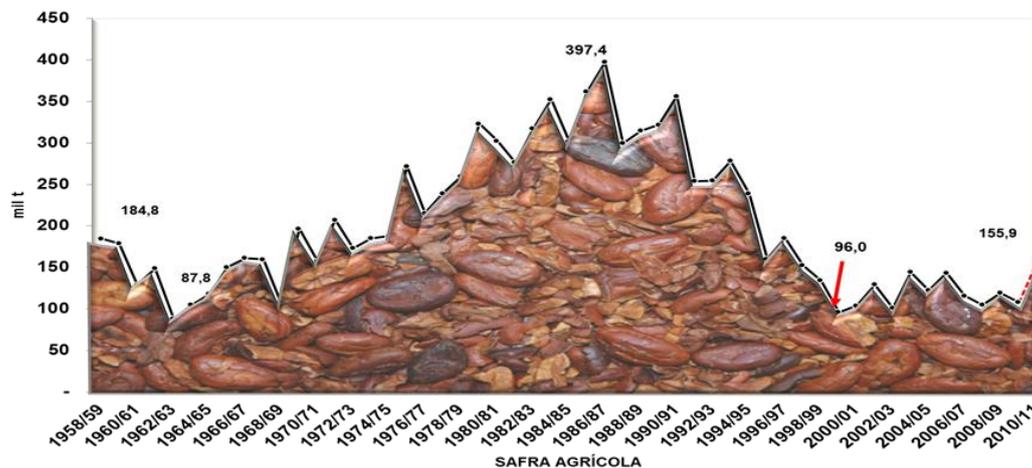
In this region, the cultivation of cocoa has always had an important economic and social role. Besides, it has also opened up for foreign trade. But a series of crises has severely undermined the prosperity of the crops. The most recent dating from the 80s is known as the "witch broom crisis." A disease that attacks cocoa

plantations and it is still present in the region (Menezes and Carmo-neto, 1993). In the late 1980s, in Bahia, cocoa was attacked by a fungus which reduced production by 70%, affected the image of the product on the international market, caused an alarming wave of unemployment, devalued firms and destabilized the regional economy (Vargens, 1999). In this context of crisis and in parallel with technological innovations in the process of cocoa production, a new contract system based on partnership is emerging. The principle is to barter the wages of small producers against participation in output cocoa product and income sharing. Motivated by these organizational innovations and by the possibility of beneficial effects on their productions, a group of farmers is engaged in a more sustainable production certified by international labels like Rainforest Alliance.

## 2.1. Economic crisis and rural exodus

The phytosanitary crisis in the south of Bahia has created a difficulty to three local government assets: cocoa, labor, and land. There has been a sharp drop in cocoa production, accompanied by a decline in the price of cocoa kernels on world markets (Chiapetti, 2009). Figure 3 show the moment of fall in cocoa production in the southern region of Bahia.

The cocoa production in Bahia – 1958 to 2011



Source: (CEPLAC 2012)

One consequence of this crisis is the emergence of changes in labor relations, and interpersonal relationships have been more strictly governed by the consolidation of labor laws (CLT). The workers, dismissed from the cocoa plantations, migrated to the cities or left the region. During the period between 1980 and 2010, there was a rural-urban migration in the cocoa-producing region, higher than that of the State of Bahia and Brazil (IBGE, 2016). According to Rangel and Tonella (2013), cocoa farmers who have left the rural area do not want to return, the old workers are now elderly, and their children have other ambitions than being cocoa producers. According to the authors, there is a shortage of skilled labor ready to work under the conditions and wages offered by the cocoa farmers. At present, the cocoa economy in Bahia shows a reorientation, which leads to the innovation and restructuring of certain production units but also to the emergence of new forms of work organization, including the system named "Agricultural partnership."

## **2.2. Agricultural partnership in Brazil indicator of social sustainability**

The structural crisis and mass unemployment of cocoa workers are the basis for the emergence of new forms of work organization. In Brazil, there are three ways of organizing agricultural labor:

- Traditional work relationship - the worker is an employee, and follows the work instructions determined by the owner.
- L'arista - The owner divides his property into small delimited parcels of cultivated land and delegates to the worker to manage the area that has been assigned to him. In this system, the employee is attached to a plot and remunerated by a fixed wage regardless of production performance.
- Partnership – The rural partnership was first regulated by the Brazilian Civil Code in 1916. The owner and the employer form a partnership by a contract recognized by the law. The landlord makes available delimited parcels of land for the worker and his family, and the income is shared according to negotiated and contractual rules.

Among these options of labor relations regulated by Brazilian law, the partnership is now privileged to land owners that pursue to overcome the cocoa crisis by proposing at the same time a socially responsible behavior that legitimizes a commitment to sustainable development.

The Law on Rural Partnership in Brazil was revised and regulated in 1964. Until that moment, the rural properties were proud of the employment relationship for showing their power over the rural worker and also for possessing the remuneration resources. These practices (the partnership and the arista) had gradually disappeared in the cocoa cultivation in the south of Bahia after the arrival of large properties based on agricultural wage labor and a growing international market.

After the advent of the phytosanitary cocoa crisis in Bahia, owners decided to take the opportunity to set up new working relationships in the framework of a more socially sustainable production and reinvested the context of the agricultural partnership.

The partnership is part of the more general Land Statute Law (1964 Acts that regulated the relationships, rights, actions of the state on agricultural labor in Brazil). It consists of a contract of a civil nature in which the rural workers and the land owner define a share of the results of the production intended for each of the partners. The amount is calculated basing on the results and the risks associated with economic and climate fluctuations. Unlike an “Arista” system, the partnership corresponds to a prospect of progress and social mobility. The former worker becomes a sort of social partner and no longer a conventional employee, which derives on a psychological outcome for the employee (Gomes and Couto, 2000).

Rural partnerships are instruments created by the "Statute of the land". This instrument has become a standard practice among stakeholders from the rural area, becoming the most efficient on reducing the distinction between worker and owner (Ribeiro, 2017).

The partnership contract in Brazil is ruled by the Statute of the Land and stipulates that:

- The minimum duration is three years, but the contract can be renewed annually according to the interests of the partners.
- The share of the partner or of the owner can alter between 25 to 75%, depending on the investments made in the area and the agreement between the parties.
- The owner must provide the partner with a residence on the rural property, including a small animal husbandry and breeding area
- The contract must be writing, signed and legalized
- The costs of purchasing the implanting material will be divided in the same proportion of the income's distribution.
- It is forbidden to have an employment contract with the land owner to carry out working activities in other parts of the farm.

This system of agricultural partnership has enabled many owners to resume their production activities by reducing the cost of labor, to reduce rural exodus and to improve their image. Welcoming workers' families in the farm is thus used as a mean to legitimize the commitment of large landowners with the principles of sustainable development. This system of agricultural partnership has enabled many owners to resume their production activities by reducing the cost of labor, to curb the rural exodus and to improve their image. Welcoming families of workers on the farm is thus used as a means to legitimize the commitment of large landowners in the principles of sustainable development.

We present the case of the Fazenda M. Libânio group to discuss the modalities of this partnership and analyze the results.

### **2.3. The experience of the Fazenda M. Libânio group in Bahia**

The case study is a widely used research technique in management sciences and marketing. Indeed, the use of a case to illustrate qualitative research is validated by the literature (Eisendhart, 1989; Gombault, 2005). Choosing the case study as a research method allows one to understand, describe, explain, predict and control individual or collective phenomena (Woodside and Wilson, 2003, Thomas, 2011). Merriam (1998) considers that the interest of the case study lies mainly in the research process which favors "discovery rather than confirmation" of new knowledge and provides a rich understanding of the realities considered.

According to Ait Mouloud, (2016), the use of the case method is justified on four grounds:

- The research question aligns with its standard questions;
- The case study associates the phenomenon and the context in the analyses, which suits our conception where the context is an integral part of the phenomenon studied;
- Finally, the case study is appropriate for explanatory research (Yin, 2008).

### **3. Results and discussion:**

The M. Libânio S.A. Group in Bahia, Brazil has set up a new working relationship on its territory based on the agricultural partnership. This organization has allowed the improvement of the relationship between the company and society and the legitimation of a more socially sustainable production posture. For Ballet and Adam-Lachéze (2012) the reflection on corporate responsibility aims to

question the place of the company in society. Corporate responsibility refers to the idea of obligations about global problems such as climate change or local problems as the impact of a productive activity on the local populations. More and more traditional firms are integrating Fairtrade into their social responsibility strategy.

The new working relationship adopted by the M. Libânio group has fostered a social improvement for workers and the adoption of a new philosophy of sustainable production with more socio-environmental attention in its properties. This innovation in the territory led the group to seek a socio-environmental certification, Rainforest Alliance, to enhance this sustainable commitment to foreign markets.

### **3.1. The Rainforest Alliance certification process in Brazil**

Sustainable certification in Brazil begins for Certification Body Imaflora, officially recognized and recognized in Brazil in 1995. It is becoming an important factor for international environmental certifiers, because the Brazilian Institute proposes a partnership with international sustainable labeling organizations. And this way of action the Imaflora helps the institutes that certify in Brazil to the harmonization of law and the national standards that allow the execution of certification throughout the national territory.

Rainforest Alliance is a non-governmental organization (NGO), founded in 1987 to promote productive activities (agriculture, forestry, and tourism); to conserve biodiversity and to improve social conditions (the welfare of workers and their communities). Based in New York, Rainforest Alliance Certified is present on all continents (Imaflora, 2016).

The rural properties are evaluated according to 90 criteria, divided into ten general principles:

1. Social and environmental management system.
2. Conservation of ecosystems.
3. Protection of wildlife.
4. Conservation of water resources.
5. Fair treatment and safe working conditions.
6. Occupational health and safety.
7. Relations with the community.
8. Integrated crop management.
9. Handling and conservation of soil.
10. Integrated processing of residues. Some of these criteria are essential.

Any property that does not fulfill an important requirement will have its certification canceled (Ferraz et al., 2000). This certification guarantees a production ethic close to Fairtrade. Since 1996, there has been a partnership between Imaflora Brazil, the FSC, and the Rainforest Alliance. Imaflora, a Brazilian certification body, is responsible for monitoring the FSC certification (Forest Stewardship Council, a US NGO specializing in forest management) and Rainforest Alliance.

### 3.2. The organization chosen by the Fazenda

In 1920 the group M. Libânio Agrícola S. A. was founded by two brothers, Durval and Manoel Libânio da Silva, who participated in the preparation and implantation of cocoa cultivation in several cities in the southern region of Bahia, Brazil.

The company is located in the heart of the Atlantic Forest, an area of extraordinary biodiversity and environmental preservation, protected by Brazilian law since 1965. The group owns a total area of 2,298 hectares and has currently 627 hectares of Cocoa plantation. Its political and institutional commitment has always been to satisfy its customers throughout technology that is supported by new practices and modern techniques. They promote a balance between soil, plant and man (clean technologies) for the emergence of sustainable development.

This group was one of the pioneers in the years 1998, on the implementation of the terms of employment relationship and partnership, benefiting more than 40 families who are assigned with plots from 5 to 10 hectares. These parcels were shared between the families according to the availability of agricultural family labor and land productivity.

The structure set up by M. Libânio ensures proper living conditions for the families who have adopted the partnership system. In such cases, families have substantial houses in good condition without paying rent and have access to a school, which offers training for adults and children and fights against illiteracy. There is also a health post located on the farm. The partnership system also enables families to improve their incomes, which relies in part on their involvement in production systems. Finally, on the psychological level, it increases workers's personal satisfaction through the feeling of responsibility and commitment alongside the big landowners.

On the owner's side, this partnership makes it possible to lighten the management and the negotiation of the wages, to better manage the economic crises and to share the financial and technical risks. The group's commitment with the poor workers enables the company to apply for Rainforest Alliance certification. Undeniably the protection of the environment is already ensured because of the geographical position of the company in the Atlantic forest certified FCS.

### 4. Conclusion and discussion

For the M. Libânio group, the crisis has encouraged the development of lasting behavior in an area used to producing cocoa extensively. The team M. Libânio succeeded on bringing back the reflection of sustainability and its importance in the cocoa region in Bahia and brought the theme of cocoa certification by the regional producers. The group showed the economic, ecological and social viability of sustainable cocoa production in the Bahia region of Brazil.

Table 2: Synthesis of production conditions before and after the phytosanitary crisis.

	M. Libânio before the crisis of the cacao	The posture of the group after the crisis
Production structure	1920: large land area 2,298	1989 - A serious moment of the

	<p>hectares. Between 150 and 200 employees Primary and seasonal contract wage</p>	<p>phytosanitary crisis. The trigger for a change of posture for the group M. Libânio 90 employees and 40 families under partnership contracts (certified plots).</p>
<p>Main internal impacts</p>	<p>Standard production of cocoa sold in bulk (cocoa bulk), quantity-oriented for the conventional market. Workers' income based on base salary.</p>	<p>Smaller quantity salaries to pay. Cleaner management of the property. The Technical innovation in cocoa production. The beginning of sustainable cocoa production towards quality. For a specific market. And get differentiated prices for their products. Increasing wages and employment Family income increases twice as much and increases self-esteem.</p>
<p>Relationship to work</p>	<p>Relationship of work, employer employed. Power and Conflict.</p>	<p>The innovation of the employment relationship, the rural partnership put in place ensures peaceful relations.</p>
<p>External Impacts</p>	<p>Attention to the minimum environment provided for by law. Mass unemployment and small producers in</p>	<p>Perception of the importance of sustainable cocoa production to overcome the regional crisis. Creation of the Possibility the work</p>

	difficulty	Improvement of the image of Bahia cocoa. Promotion of more sustainable behavior of all landowners. Soothe the social climate A stakeholder commitment to the protection of the regional ecosystem.
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Without going so far as to recognize the benefits of the pest crisis on Cocoa production in Brazil, we show in this paper that it served as a catalyzer for the development of more sustainable behavior for several reasons. On the one hand, through the need to value the quality of the product in order to compensate the decreases in quantity. For this reason, achieving a certification by an ecolabel was necessary. On the other hand, through the requirement of social responsibility from most ecolabels, more specifically the Rainforest Alliance.

Despite the limitations of this unique case study, which reduces its external validity, our research shows that sustainable development issues can be transformed into formidable opportunities for reviewing production systems for the benefit of environmental and social well being.

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