Chocolate industry still a long way from meeting its promises for child labor free chocolate

While people across the country celebrate Valentine’s Day by purchasing chocolate for their loved ones, the chocolate industry continues to be tainted by child labor on cocoa farms in West Africa.

In 2001, the world learned of the shocking problem of trafficked and forced child labor in cocoa harvesting in Ivory Coast, the world’s major producer of cocoa beans. The world's major chocolate companies, including Nestle, M&M Mars and Hershey, all promised to provide consumers with a “child labor-free chocolate” monitoring and certification program by July 2005. While it failed to meet that deadline, the chocolate industry is quickly approaching a new deadline of July 2008 negotiated with Senator Tom Harkin and Congressman Eliot Engel. The chocolate industry has promised by that date to publicly certify that 50% of cocoa in West Africa is grown and processed without any of the worst forms of child labor.

To date, the chocolate industry as a whole has failed to implement any programs to trace their cocoa beans to the farm level, to require suppliers to adhere to any labor standards, to monitor adherence to those standards, or to create any kind of product label or guarantee. Instead, the chocolate manufacturers have chosen to invest resources in the creation of a new ‘Verification Group,’ convened by the Amherst-based consulting group Verite, in a last-ditch attempt to suggest there is some form of credible public oversight to their efforts.

“We see the new Verification Group as a real step backward from what the industry promised in 2001 or even in 2005,” said ILRF Executive Director Bama Athreya. “Product monitoring and certification are no longer on the table, and none of the major cocoa exporters will be accountable for what happens in their supply chains. Instead, responsibility has been pushed off to a data collection process, and a forum at which industry representatives have a powerful seat at the table. Should consumers trust this fox-guarding-the-henhouse approach?”

While the chocolate industry has failed to take even the first steps toward product certification, or truly independent supply chain monitoring, some individual companies have stepped up to agree to separate and stronger certification programs. Cargill announced in October that they would work with UTZ Certified to develop a certification program that would reach the farm level. Other companies, like Kraft, have worked with Rainforest Alliance and other certifiers on programs that also reach the farm or cooperative level. ILRF applauds the companies that have agreed to separate certification programs, while recognizing that these programs are not designed to address child labor, and need to be strengthened. “Other
companies should embrace a similar commitment to farm or cooperative-level certification, and all certification programs should strictly prohibit the worst forms of child labor. We look forward to working with companies and certification initiatives to ensure these goals are met,” added Athreya.

Fair Trade-certified chocolate companies like Equal Exchange, Divine Chocolate and Sweet Earth Organic Chocolate continue to lead the way in ethical cocoa sourcing practices.

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**Links:**
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