



## Film Review: Why “The Dark Side of Chocolate” is a Useful but Insufficient Resource on the Ethics of Cocoa

Posted on [November 5, 2012](#)

*Elizabeth A. Bennett*

[The Dark Side of Chocolate](#) wants to know if your chocolate has a bitter taste. It encourages you to recall “rumors” about child labor and trafficking on cocoa plantations in Africa, and invites you to follow Danish journalist Miki Mistrati on an international—and sometimes under-cover—journey to investigate these allegations. The film is unquestionably successful in piquing interest about the ethics of cocoa production, but ultimately fails to provide the basic information about trafficking, child labor, and ethical sourcing that its intended lay audience is likely to require. A more comprehensive documentary would examine migrant smuggling as a social problem, discuss relevant international laws and organizations, and outline civil society initiatives for ethical sourcing of cocoa. The film should be considered an important element of a more comprehensive toolkit for educating ethical chocolate lovers.

We travel with Mistrati and his crew to Mali and the Ivory Coast, the sending and receiving countries of trafficked children, respectively. There, he follows the smuggling route from native village, to border crossing, to cocoa plantation. The coverage is satisfyingly comprehensive, and the images captivating. We meet children at various stages of trafficking, interview mothers of missing children, interrogate conspirators, and follow the busses, taxis, and traffickers that make it all possible. Mistrati also brings us to the offices of INTERPOL, the ILO, the Ivorian president, and chocolate manufacturers, where he questions officials’ awareness of and responses to trafficking and child labor. In the film’s final scene, Mistrati screens footage on a large surface outside of Nestlé’s headquarters. The message is clear: consumers should be outraged at the unethical sourcing of cocoa, and their activism should target the chocolate industry.

The film is successful in avoiding two pitfalls common to documentaries on developing countries. First, it delivers compelling on-the-ground footage without engaging in ‘poverty porn.’ (For more on exploitative images of poverty, see the [“Aid Thoughts” blog](#).) One exception is a short clip highlighting images of a girl’s leg wounds without explanation—Work with dangerous tools? Domestic abuse? Sexual violence? We can only guess. This scene is an outlier, however. The film is otherwise tasteful in using images of Africa and Africans to tell a story and evoke interest in working for change.

Second, Mistrati does not reduce actors to simple “heroes,” “villains,” and “victims,” but instead allows them to reflect the complexity he finds on the ground. For example, the General Secretary of the Malian bus drivers’ union could have easily been “the hero,” as he has “rescued” children for nearly a decade. However, a moving image of him weeping for the fate of these children is countered by a scene in which he vehemently censures a young girl for

crossing the border to find work. He threatens, “Never come back!” and sends her back to a family that she says will be angry with her for not earning money. The audience cannot help but wonder: Will she be punished for returning home empty handed? Was she wrong to seek work? Was he right in his decision to intervene? How do we adjudicate between a family’s need for income and labor of a child? Throughout the film, the audience is pushed to grapple with the idea that complex social and economic issues overlap to create the problems of child labor and trafficking. These debates, however, are rightfully background noise to the main message: Children should be at school, not work. They should not be smuggled across borders, nor misinformed about the terms of their employment. Most obviously, they should not be held captive and unpaid for their labor.

Despite its success in using images to tell a story, expose complexity, and evoke interest, the film falls short in two ways. First, it does relatively little to educate its audience about the issues of “child trafficking,” “child labor,” or “slavery.” It should define these buzzwords, differentiate between them, and place them in the broader context of international laws, organizations, and advocacy networks. The film also should have introduced the concept of migrant smuggling, as Mistrati’s story is clearly about the “*procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident*” (article 3, *Migrant Smuggling Protocol*). At a minimum, the audience should be exposed to the Trafficking in Persons Protocol, which lays out the definition of trafficking:

...the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

The second shortcoming is a misleading account of which actors are *able* or *willing* to change cocoa production in Africa. Specifically, the film underemphasizes the role of the state, overstates the efficacy of the private sector, and ignores civil society. It should be clear that labor rights and border security are the responsibilities of the state, and that the most effective way to regulate the cocoa industry would be for cocoa producing states to enforce these laws. That said, everyone knows that states—particularly those in the throws of development, or on the brink of failure—are often unable to command the rule of law. If that is the case, then we can accept *The Dark Side*’s argument that it is chocolate manufacturers, not states, that should be held accountable for the conditions under which cocoa is produced.

What the film gets wrong, however, is how change is made in the private sector. Mistrati explains: “the trafficking of children *should not actually be possible*” because the largest manufacturers of chocolate signed a protocol to prohibit “child labor and the trafficking of children...within the chocolate industry after 2008.” (Download the Harkin-Engel protocol [here](#)). This is misleading. An industry agreement *cannot* make illegal behavior “impossible,” and such protocols are often *aspirational*, serving more to placate critics than to change modes of production. These agreements offer no rewards for compliance, no consequences for deviance. The real engine of change—which is largely ignored in the film—is civil society. For the last ten years, consumer activism has put a formidable amount of pressure on global companies to transform their practices by adopting voluntary social and environmental standards (see Michael Conroy’s *Branded! How the ‘Certification Revolution’ is Transforming Global Corporations*, New Society Publishers 2007). Ethical supply chains are the result of civil society organizations developing voluntary ethical standards, and consumers creating demand for verified products. The film omits this critical piece of the story.

*The Dark Side of Chocolate* allows us to participate in an investigative adventure, and its message is clear: Consumers of conventionally sourced chocolate, your tasty treat is the product of child labor and trafficking. Although descriptions of these social issues and potential avenues for change are less clear, the film was likely intended to accompany additional educational materials. Indeed, several NGOs and campaigns include it in a broader toolkit (e.g., <http://www.globalexchange.org/fairtrade/cocoa/darkside>). My advice to the ethical chocoholic? Watch the film, but conduct more research while you eat your fair trade chocolate bar.

*Elizabeth A. Bennett is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Political Science at Brown University and a Visiting Research Associate in residence at the Center for Fair and Alternative Trade at Colorado State University. She is the author of several chapters and articles about the development and organization of ethical certifications.*