

The bitter future of chocolate? How drought and a youth exodus threaten Mexico's prized cocoa

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- Think about your own chocolate consumption habits. How often do you eat chocolate? Have you noticed any changes in chocolate prices recently?
- What environmental conditions do you think are necessary for growing cocoa successfully? Consider factors like temperature, rainfall and soil conditions.
- Many young people are leaving rural farming communities for cities. What might be the long-term consequences of this trend for traditional agriculture?

2 Key words

a. Match the words below with their definitions. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context.

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| 1. bear fruit | a. grown and cared for on a farm or in a garden |
| 2. beverages | b. very severe or extreme |
| 3. cultivated | c. in a way that refuses to obey or follow others |
| 4. deforestation | d. changing quickly and unpredictably |
| 5. defiantly | e. making something less successful or effective |
| 6. denting | f. the amount of crops produced from farming |
| 7. drastic | g. a very large amount of something |
| 8. exodus | h. to show positive results or success |
| 9. evaporation | i. when water turns into vapour because of heat |
| 10. hectares | j. rich and important people in a community |
| 11. high society | k. becoming less strong or stopping |
| 12. letting up | l. drinks of any kind |
| 13. profusion | m. destroyed completely, usually buildings or land |
| 14. razed | n. a measurement of land (approximately the size of a sports field) |
| 15. volatile | o. cutting down large areas of trees |
| 16. yields | p. when large groups of people move away from an area, usually because of problems or to find better opportunities |

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b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. Government officials have introduced _____ measures to combat rising inflation
2. Several unexpected expenses ended up _____ the couple's savings more than they had anticipated.
3. This land had been carefully _____ for decades, producing some of the finest grapes in the region
4. The party leader spoke _____ in Parliament, refusing to back down despite heavy criticism.
5. After years of hard work, their efforts finally began to _____ when the company secured a major client.
6. New farming techniques have resulted in significantly higher _____ of corn and wheat this season.
7. The stock market has been incredibly _____ this week, making investors wary of taking risks.
8. There has been a(n) _____ of complaints from students about the withdrawal of funding for Arts degrees.
9. _____ of water from the reservoir has been accelerated by the unusually high temperatures.
10. The café offers a wide range of hot and cold _____, including herbal teas and freshly squeezed juices.
11. The wedding was an exclusive event, attended by _____ from around the world.
12. Political instability triggered a mass _____ of professionals seeking better opportunities abroad.

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13. Rebels _____ the village to the ground during the civil war.
14. _____ of the Amazon rainforest has far-reaching consequences for global biodiversity.
15. Our farm spans 50 _____, with fields of wheat, corn and beans
16. The rain showed no signs of _____, forcing the festival organizers to cancel the outdoor performances.

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As prices soar, farmers are facing the worst harvests in decades, while traditional production methods passed down for generations are being lost.

Mattha Busby

3 September 2024

- 1 Edilberto Morales has been farming cocoa, the key ingredient in chocolate, in southern Mexico for decades. Typically, he harvests about 1,000 kilograms of cocoa pods a year, but only produced half that last year, due to drought. It was one of the worst harvests of his lifetime.
- 2 "Climate change has affected us a lot," says Morales, from Chiapas, near the border with Guatemala. "Without rain, cocoa pods do not develop in seasons of intense heat. On this plot, we used to harvest 1,000 kilograms a year on average; the most drastic change was in 2024 when we harvested 500 kilograms."
- 3 Cocoa, a shade-grown crop, is native to Mexico and its consumption dates back more than 3,000 years to when the Maya, Toltec and Aztec peoples cultivated cocoa trees, although only the Aztec high society were allowed to consume cocoa beverages.
- 4 After the Spanish arrival to the continent in the 16th century, cocoa arrived in Europe, and the Italians created some of the first chocolate sweets with sugar. Later, countries such as Ghana, Ivory Coast and Indonesia began to produce the bean, along with Mexico, the 14th largest cocoa producer.
- 5 Centuries later, the future of chocolate is in doubt and a profusion of issues is significantly denting harvests worldwide. The climate crisis, which brings increasingly volatile and extreme weather, is hitting yields as rainfall patterns change and river levels shift, while hopes that genetically modified organisms (GMOs) could save chocolate have yet to bear fruit.
- 6 Even if such a breakthrough does happen a broader intergenerational crisis looms as young people increasingly migrate to cities, leaving farmers with fewer children to follow them and learn the knowledge of cocoa production.
- 7 The price of cocoa reached a 46-year high last year due to supply shortages and forecasts of further deficits. In August 2023, the price a tonne of cocoa on the international market was 3,400 US dollars.
- 8 By July 2024, it was almost 8,400 US dollars after rising to highs of about 10,000 US dollars the previous April.
- 9 The price rises show no sign of letting up, and the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration warned in 2018 that much of cocoa tree production could be eliminated by 2050.
- 10 West of Maravilla, outside Tapachula city, Eder Herrera, cocoa farmer and president of the Rayen co-operative of cocoa farmers, faces the same issues. "I feel that this year is one of the hottest years to date," he says. "We are in a pressure cooker."
- 11 Herrera says the dry seasons are longer, but even when the rain comes, the weather remains "very hot" after reaching recent highs of 42 degrees Centigrade. He also points to how rapid deforestation has negatively affected the evaporation of rain.
- 12 The farmers working on Herrera's communal land have produced cacao since the 1970s, when about 600 hectares was cultivated with cacao and fruit trees. Now, there is about 200 hectares. Farms were also devastated by a fungal infection that peaked in 2007 in Chiapas, and many farmers gave up after losses of up to 90 per cent.
- 13 Some switched to producing honey, coffee and fruits such as mangos and coconuts. Others razed their land to farm cattle. But Herrera is sticking to his father's profession and teaching his son, Denilson, the art of cocoa cultivation. "If we have good rains, then we will have good harvests," he says, defiantly.
- 14 On some metrics, it is a good time to be in the cocoa business. The price of cocoa for farmers like Herrera has increased 50 per cent from 2023 to 2024 and is set at a minimum of 70 US dollars a tonne – though this remains far off the international market price. Local people in Chiapas are still prone to haggling – or at least attempting to. "There is no more chance that it can be so cheap," Herrera says.
- 15 He has teamed up with the Rainforest Alliance to help move the farms in the co-operative towards smarter business practices and regenerative forms of agriculture that have less environmental impact. This includes using conservation methods such as replanting rainforest trees to provide cacao trees with greater shade, thus decreasing temperature and evaporation.

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- 15 However, the relative lack of interest of younger Mexicans presents a second issue, alongside climate breakdown, that puts the future of chocolate in doubt. In 2014, a report warned that the number of adults older than 60 could rise from 21 for every 100 children in 2005 to 167 for every 100 children by 2051.
- 16 "Young people in the communities where we work tend to migrate to the northern part of the country and to the US in search of better wages," says Julio Salazar, founder of Mexican chocolate brand Jangala. "If they agree to work in the towns where cacao is grown, they demand similar pay to what is offered in the cities to work as labourers."
- 17 To help ensure the knowledge involved in cocoa cultivation is passed down from generation to generation, Jangala holds workshops in Maravilla and Soconusco, closer to Tapachula. Maria Forero, a consultant to Jangala, says this helps forge bonds and continue family traditions of cultivation.
- 18 Back in Chiapas, however, Morales has yet to see any renewed enthusiasm among the younger generation to follow his trade. "There is little interest among the young people because they want to live in cities and don't value field work," he says. "They see it as a lot of effort."

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3 Comprehension check

a. Are these sentences True (T) or False (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. Edilberto Morales harvested more cocoa in 2024 than in previous years.
2. The cocoa tree is indigenous to Mexico.
3. All social classes in Aztec society were allowed to consume drinks made from cocoa.
4. Mexico is currently the largest producer of cocoa in the world.
5. The price of cocoa reached its highest point in 46 years during 2023.
6. The Rayen co-operative has been working with the Rainforest Alliance to improve their farming practices.
7. The area of cocoa cultivation on Herrera's land has increased since the 1970s.
8. Attempts to genetically modify cocoa pods have been largely successful.
9. Young people in cocoa-farming communities are demanding city-level wages to work in agriculture.
10. In 2024, the minimum price for cocoa was set at 70 US dollars per tonne.

4 Key language

a. Find the verbs in the text and match them with a preposition from the wordpool.

back

down

to

to

to

up

up with

1. stick _____
2. team _____
3. switch _____
4. pass _____

5. give _____
6. point _____
7. date _____

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b. Read the definitions and then complete the examples with a phrasal verb in the correct form.

1. to have existed since a particular time in the past
Their family's tradition _____ to the 15th century.
2. to transfer something (e.g. knowledge, traditions or objects) from *one generation to the next*
This recipe has been _____ through my family for generations.
3. to collaborate with someone to achieve a common goal
The artist _____ a famous producer to create her new album.
4. to change from one thing to another
After years of drinking coffee, he _____ green tea for health reasons.
5. to continue doing or using something, even when it is difficult
She's _____ her diet despite the tempting desserts.
6. to stop doing something, often because it is too difficult or no longer wanted
He _____ smoking after ten years and feels a lot better for it.
7. to indicate or suggest that something is likely to be true
All the evidence _____ him being the culprit.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- How has climate change impacted cocoa production in Mexico?
- Why is cocoa farming less attractive to younger generations in Mexico?
- How could governments or organisations encourage young people to stay in agriculture instead of migrating to cities?
- Have you ever considered where the ingredients of the food you eat come from? Does this text change your perspective? Why or why not?

6 In your own words

- a. Write a short story or script imagining a future where chocolate has become rare and valuable. Include vocabulary from the key words, key language and phrasal verbs from the previous activities.**
- b. Share your stories or scripts with your class.**