

Tropentag 2023

International Research on Food Security, Natural
Resource Management and Rural Development

Competing pathways for equitable food systems transformation: trade-offs and synergies

Book of abstracts

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Impressum

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

1. Aufl. - Göttingen: Cuvillier, 2023

Tropentag 2023: Competing pathways for equitable food systems transformation: trade-offs and synergies Tielkes, E. (ed.) - Witzenhausen, DITSL

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Online-Version: <http://www.tropentag.de/>

© CUVILLIER VERLAG, Göttingen 2023

Nonnenstieg 8, 37075 Göttingen

Telefon: 0551-54724-0

Telefax: 0551-54724-21

www.cuvillier.de

1. Auflage, 2023

Gedruckt auf umweltfreundlichem, säurefreiem Papier aus nachhaltiger Forstwirtschaft.

ISBN 978-3-7369-7880-5

eISBN 978-3-7369-6880-6

Realities of sustainability: Application of photovoice to identify locally and culturally relevant sustainability criteria of cocoa farmers in Ecuador

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Sustainability concepts are contested and inherently normatively charged. Given the high levels of complexity and uncertainty in sustainability studies, it is necessary to transition towards a transdisciplinary approach to collaboratively generate knowledge that is suitable for specific local and cultural circumstances. This study aims to explore the perspectives of cocoa farmers in the coastal and Amazonian regions of Ecuador on their definition of sustainability and the locally relevant criteria that must be met to achieve it. A total of 20 female and 23 male farmers were provided with photo cameras, and over a period of 4 weeks, they analysed the pictures taken within their group to identify the elements that contribute to sustainability in their lives as cocoa producers. The visual medium of photographs proved to be an effective way to overcome social and language barriers, as participants were motivated by the group setting to share and discuss the realities presented in the images, whether they depicted their own experiences or those of their peers. In both study regions, lists of approximately 40 sustainability criteria that are locally relevant were compiled. The importance, development, and influential actors for each criterion were documented, and the images were categorised according to the sustainability criteria they represented. The results indicate that the environment in which farmers operate greatly shapes their views on what is necessary for sustainable livelihoods. Thus, local perspectives should be considered when developing strategies to enhance sustainability. The key strength of this study was that the participants were responsible for selecting the topics of interest through their photographs and discussions, while the researchers merely facilitated the process.

Keywords: Cocoa, Ecuador, photovoice, sustainability, transdisciplinarity