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Nutritional status of cocoa in Papua New Guinea

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Nutritional status of cocoa in Papua New Guinea

Paul N. Nelson, Michael J. Webb, Suzanne Berthelsen, George Curry,
David Yinil and Chris Fidelis



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2011

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Published by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR)
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<aciarc@aciarc.gov.au>

Nelson P.N., Webb M.J., Berthelsen S., Curry G., Yinil D. and Fidelis C. 2011.
Nutritional status of cocoa in Papua New Guinea. ACIAR Technical Reports No. 76.
Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research: Canberra. 67 pp.

ISBN 978 1 921738 38 8 (print)
ISBN 978 1 921738 39 5 (online)

Technical editing by Biotext, Canberra
Design by Clarus Design Pty Ltd
Printing by CanPrint Communications

Cover: Sampling and sieving soil at survey site 2 for analysis of soil characteristics
(Photo: Mike Webb)

Foreword

Demand for chocolate, ‘the food of the gods’, is rising inexorably, creating opportunity for countries like Papua New Guinea (PNG), which has ideal growing conditions for cocoa in the coastal lowlands. PNG produces less than 2% of the world’s cocoa, but the crop is extremely important for many people’s livelihoods. An estimated 151,000 households rely on cocoa as one of their principal sources of income. Cocoa from PNG is known for its good and consistent quality, with particular flavour, high fat content and large beans.

Cocoa was introduced to PNG in 1880 by German traders, and the industry developed slowly until the 1950s when the Australian administration promoted its cultivation among villagers. It is now one of the four major export tree crops cultivated in the 14 coastal provinces of PNG. Cocoa plantings occupy approximately 27% of the total area of 476,000 ha under export tree crops. Approximately 80% of the crop is produced by smallholders and this proportion is likely to increase.

Despite the healthy market demand for cocoa, smallholder yields in PNG have generally been far lower than those potentially attainable, and recently they have fallen even further due to widening infestations of cocoa pod borer. For the cocoa industry to recover and prosper, it is essential that management of smallholder cocoa blocks improves dramatically. Many aspects of good management, such as pest control, are fairly well understood, and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) has been involved in partnerships with PNG organisations to carry out some of the necessary research. However, there is little information on appropriate nutrient management for cocoa in PNG. Therefore, ACIAR supported this study to identify possible nutrition-related constraints on productivity and recommend what steps should be taken next. I hope that the results of this detailed, nationwide study will lead to increased productivity of this important tree crop.



Nick Austin
Chief Executive Officer
ACIAR

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Abbreviations

Al	aluminium	Mg	magnesium
B	boron	mg	milligram
C	carbon	Mn	manganese
Ca	calcium	N	nitrogen
CaCl ₂	calcium chloride	NaHCO ₃	sodium bicarbonate
CCI	Cocoa Coconut Institute, Papua New Guinea	NARI	National Agricultural Research Institute, Papua New Guinea
CEC	cation exchange capacity	Ni	nickel
Co	cobalt	P	phosphorus
cmol _c	centimoles of charge	PBI	phosphate buffer index
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, Australia	PGK	Papua New Guinea kina
Cu	copper	PNG	Papua New Guinea
DTPA	diethylene triamine penta-acetic acid	PNGRIS	Papua New Guinea Resource Information System
EC	electrical conductivity	PSI	phosphate sorption index
Fe	iron	S	sulfur
ha	hectare	t	tonne
IPDM	integrated pest and disease management	Ti	titanium
K	potassium	VSD	vascular streak disease
KCl	potassium chloride	XRD	X-ray diffraction
kg	kilogram	XRF	X-ray fluorescence
M	molar	Zn	zinc

Acknowledgments

Several dozen cocoa growers generously gave their time and knowledge when participating in the survey upon which this report is based.

The Cocoa Coconut Institute (CCI) Agronomy staff contributed an enormous effort to carry out the survey, in particular Henry Tangbil and Peter Bapiwai, and also Susana Namaliu, James Hanson and Timies Karin. In addition to the agronomy staff team, a number of CCI staff gave valuable assistance: Alfred Nongkas, National Extension Liaison Manager, informed all the provincial managers of the sampling team's visit and activities; Daslogo Kula and John Joseph assisted the team in New Ireland province; Paul Nelau, Toby Wama and Joe Toumo assisted in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville; Peter Homu and Peter Daniels assisted in Morobe province; Winston Gore assisted in Northern Province; Yak Namaliu, Will Akus and

Mathias Faure assisted in Madang province; and Stephen Mombi, Casphar Haula and Jerom assisted in East and West Sepik provinces. The socioeconomic input to this monograph benefited greatly from the assistance of Gina Koczberski, Otto Kwimberi, Joachim Lummani, Graham McNally, Robert Nailina, Dr Eric Omuru, Esley Peter, Jack Pundu and Andrew Roboam.

Dr Samson Laup, Head of Cocoa Research, CCI, assisted greatly, particularly in preparing the two workshops.

The PNG Oil Palm Research Association, particularly Dr Murom Banabas, provided assistance during the survey in Northern Province.

Many people contributed their time and expertise in the two workshops.

The PNG Cocoa Board contributed PGK30,000 towards holding the second workshop.

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Summary

Cocoa is grown by approximately 151,000 households in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Smallholders, who produce 80% of the crop, have annual yields far below the potential of 4.4 tonnes/hectare. Yields are low for many socioeconomic and agronomic reasons. The aim of this study was to determine the nutrient status of cocoa grown in PNG, and to recommend further steps to determine if there are nutrient-related constraints on productivity and how they might be overcome.

Leaf and soil nutrient contents were measured and grower practices were recorded at 63 cocoa blocks (smallholders, on plantations or on research stations) across the country. A wide variety of plant species were present in blocks, with *Gliricidia* being the most common shade tree. Based on published 'critical' levels for cocoa leaf nutrient contents, nitrogen and iron deficiencies occurred in more than 89% of the blocks and phosphorus deficiencies in about 25%. Leaf magnesium concentrations were mostly adequate, except in East New Britain, where 64% of the blocks were deficient. Deficiencies of potassium, calcium, manganese, boron, copper and zinc were encountered in 2–15% of the blocks.

However, the 'critical' levels must be regarded with caution, as the micronutrient (manganese, boron, copper, iron and zinc) values were based on surveys rather than manipulative experiments, and the macronutrient (nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, magnesium and calcium) values were established in different places with different planting materials. Leaf potassium and phosphorus contents were related to soil type and nutrient contents. In blocks that are being well maintained and regularly harvested, it is likely that yield is being constrained by nutrient deficiencies.

Management of cocoa blocks in PNG must improve dramatically for the cocoa industry to prosper, and perhaps even to survive, particularly with the recent spread of cocoa pod borer, which is drastically reducing cocoa yields. To improve management and yields, the industry requires reliable critical levels of leaf nutrient concentrations, and nutrient management recommendations appropriate to different regions, based on trials. Effective means of facilitating adoption of improved practices must also be developed.

Background and aims

Cocoa (*Theobroma cacao*) is one of the most economically important cash crops in PNG. It is the primary cash crop in most coastal areas of PNG, being grown on an estimated 100,000–130,000 hectares (ha) by around 151,000 smallholders or 16% of the households in the country. Just over one million people in PNG depend on cocoa for their livelihood (Omuru et al. 2001).

In 2009, exported cocoa was estimated at 51,000 tonnes (t), bringing in annual export earnings of around PGK331 million. However, the industry is threatened by cocoa pod borer (*Conopomorpha cramerella*). Until 2008, the Gazelle Peninsula of East New Britain province was the most important cocoa-growing region, producing about 20,000 t or 54% of national production. In 2009, annual production from East New Britain fell by over 60% to approximately 8,000 t (C.S. Parik, economist, Cocoa Board, pers. comm.) because of losses to cocoa pod borer. This loss in production was offset by increased production from the Autonomous Region of Bougainville and East Sepik province. Cocoa pod borer is present in both these provinces and in Madang province, and poses the most serious challenge to the industry in the coming years.

Plantation production of cocoa has been declining since the mid 1970s mainly because of rising production costs and the closure of the Bougainville plantations in 1988–89 with the outbreak of civil war in that province. In contrast, smallholder production has been on the rise from about 6,800 t in 1972–73 to its present level of approximately 40,000 t.

Despite the importance of cocoa to the economy, the industry is plagued by poor management

practices that result in low yields. Most PNG smallholder cocoa is currently produced using a ‘foraging’ production strategy with virtually no management inputs. Yields are very low, generally in the range 0.3–0.4 t/ha of dry bean annually. Yield potential is much higher, with yields of up to 4.4 t/ha observed in research trials, and between 1.5 t/ha and 2.5 t/ha obtained in plantations.

Given the size of the smallholder contribution to the industry, it is clear that even a small increase in smallholder productivity could have a substantial effect on export income and increase growers’ cash income. For the industry to survive and prosper, management inputs to smallholder cocoa blocks must improve substantially. This is particularly important with the recent spread of cocoa pod borer, because the pest can devastate crops unless levels of management are high. Good nutrient management is an important part of the picture; however, there is little information on nutrient management to guide PNG cocoa growers. Even if nutrient management were improved, no lift in productivity would be expected without improved management of cocoa and shade trees, pests and diseases, weeds and harvesting.

The purpose of this study was to determine the nutrient status of cocoa trees and cocoa-growing soils throughout the key growing areas of the country. The information is intended to help assess whether or not productivity is constrained by nutrition and related factors, to help design future research activities that address possible constraints, to provide recommendations to overcome possible nutrition-related constraints on productivity and to implement solutions.