The Story of Chocolate
By Karen Kerrigan, IHM Associate

What are the true social and environmental costs of buying chocolate?
To start with, making my milk chocolate bar requires sugar, cocoa butter, cocoa liquor, milk or milk powder and vanilla.

Where will I find the cocoa beans? Get your passport. We’ll be going to West Africa. Come with me on my trip to find out!

When I arrived, I learned that cocoa is made from beans (seeds) found in melon-sized pods that grow on the theobroma tree. Our precious trees thrive in the lower canopy of a diverse evergreen rainforest. Cocoa is 10 to 99 percent of the total candy bar.

Some 70 percent of the world’s chocolate comes from the West African Countries of Cote d’Ivoire (the Ivory Coast) and Ghana. Both countries have experienced moderate to severe drought in recent years.

We will stay with a small farm owner. He will tell us that, growing cocoa is hard manual work and very labor-intensive. Caring for and harvesting the beans requires close and continuous attention. I felt really angry when I found out that he has to get by on less than $1.25 a day. How could he pay other workers to help him? Then, I noticed there were children helping to harvest the pods! I realized that this child labor is caused by poverty.

I found out that in Côte d’Ivoire the number of children working under hazardous conditions rose by 46 percent between 2008/2009 and 2013/2014. They perform tasks that are illegal for children under the age of 17 such as clearing land, carrying heavy loads and working long hours or with exposure to agro-chemicals. In Ghana, the number of children doing hazardous work fell slightly by 6 percent to 0.88 million. The Tulane report shows that 1.5 million children still have to be removed from hazardous work by 2020 in order to meet the promise of the chocolate industry.

I thought to myself, “Can I believe that the chocolate industry will keep its promise to reduce child labor by 70 percent in 2020? The only way they can do it is to get cocoa farmers out of extreme poverty!”

So, are you ready to pitch in and help harvest some cocoa beans? Let’s start! Grab your machete and come along.

First, I found the pods were growing on the trunks; we’re looking for the ripe orange ones. I needed to learn how to make a clean cut through the stalk with a well-sharpened blade.

Second, I opened the pod to remove the beans. I didn’t like the idea of carrying my precious seeds in a basket on my head! I was told that I have a week to 10 days after harvesting before I try to ferment them. I allowed my seeds and pulp to ferment by spreading banana leaves out on the small family farm. I needed to be careful about the sun and turn them over every two days.

Then we need to take our fermented seeds to be dried in a central location in the village. We have to wait for a buyer to come to weigh and purchase them. The buyer seems friendly enough
so let’s go with him. He will take our crop to a short-holding warehouse in the city by the coast. I am looking around and seeing many of my favorite brand names of chocolate on those warehouses. This is where the major exporters purchase our seeds and arrange for export from Ghana.

Before leaving the port city we decide to review what we were seeing and hearing: we saw a variety of workers, from the small farmer who owns the fields and his family members, to his laborers, who may be slaves. There were other people who came from the village to harvest pods and to ferment seeds. I remembered waiting for the buyer to come along. Then finally, once we arrived at the port city, we noticed the middlemen between these purchasers and the exporters who finally will get our crops to an export ship. I was glad to be in Ghana because it has stricter bean and weighing standards with fixed prices. From the export pier, we can see the major cargo ships that will transport the cocoa beans to Europe and North America. Most of the money will not be made until that ship reaches its northern import pier.

The cocoa growers today receive about 6 percent of the price that I pay at home in my rich country for that chocolate. Back in the 1980s, their share was almost three times as great: 16 percent.

Now, we will need to go to a sugar cane farm because chocolate bars also contain 2 to 55 percent sugar. At the farm, I learned that, *sucrose* is often extracted and refined from either cane or beet sugar. We have several travel choices because the main sugar cane producers around the world are Brazil, India, China, Mexico, Australia, Thailand, Pakistan and the United States. In the United States, sugar cane is grown in Florida and Louisiana. I thought I could stay in the states for this part of the trip.

However, I learned that sugarcane farming in the United States has gone down dramatically in the past several decades. Similar to harvesting cocoa, I learned that hand-harvesting accounts for more than half of production and is dominant in the developing world. Speaking of the developing world, at least 20,000 people are estimated to have died of chronic kidney disease (CKD) in Central America in the past two decades – most of them sugar cane workers along the Pacific coast. This may be due to working long hours in the heat without adequate fluid intake.

After all this work and travel, if I really want to find out how chocolate is made, I just need to go to this website from “The Field Museum” in Chicago with a fun, interactive game to explain how chocolate is made:

http://archive.fieldmuseum.org/chocolate/manufacture_interactive/manufacture.html

**Questions:**

How will chocolate companies guarantee a living income for small-scale farmers?

How are chocolate companies ensuring compliance with human rights and decent working conditions?

How can chocolate companies contribute to the maintenance of a balanced ecological and climate system, as well as to good soil and water quality by supporting sustainable cocoa production?