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Rural Youth and Cacao Farming In the Brazilian Amazon: Interpretations of Their Roles and Challenges

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Abstract

This study investigates the trajectories of rural youth involved in cocoa farming in the Brazilian Transamazon region (Uruará and Medicilândia, Pará). It explores their perspectives on succession, productive management, and family relationships. Conducted in 2024 through semi-structured interviews, the qualitative research was analyzed based on four main categories: inheritance and land access, management and profit-sharing, perceptions of leadership, and family conflict or harmony. The results indicate that young people have a pragmatic view of cocoa farming, considering it a viable activity if technical support and access to credit are provided. Regarding family succession, some youth take on greater autonomy in managing properties, while others still depend on parental administration. Youth leadership is seen as promising, though many acknowledge the need for technical training. Profit distribution is generally centralized among older family members, with some exceptions where young people have greater control over income. Women face additional challenges regarding land access and productive autonomy. Despite optimism surrounding the increased value of cocoa, land tenure insecurity, limited access to credit, and the lack of effective public policies hinder the consolidation of rural life projects for young people. The study concludes that integrated public policies are needed to ensure the sustainability of cocoa farming.

Keywords: Cocoa farming, family succession, rural youth

Jeunesse rurale et culture de cacao en Amazonie brésilienne : interprétations de leurs rôles et défis

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Résumé

Cette étude examine le parcours de jeunes ruraux impliqués dans la culture du cacao en région transamazonienne brésilienne (Uruará et Medicilândia, au Pará). Elle explore leurs perspectives en matière de succession, de gestion productive et de relations familiales. Menée en 2024 au moyen d'entrevues semi-dirigées, cette recherche qualitative a été analysée selon quatre grandes catégories : l'héritage et l'accès à la terre, la gestion et le partage des bénéfices, la perception du leadership et les conflits ou l'harmonie familiale. Les résultats indiquent que les jeunes ont une vision pragmatique de la culture du cacao, la considérant comme une activité viable à condition de bénéficier d'un soutien technique et d'un accès au crédit. Concernant la succession familiale, certains jeunes acquièrent une plus grande autonomie dans la gestion des propriétés, tandis que d'autres restent dépendants de l'administration parentale. Le leadership des jeunes est perçu comme prometteur, bien que plusieurs reconnaissent le besoin de formation technique. La répartition des bénéfices est généralement centralisée entre les mains des membres les plus âgés de la famille, à quelques exceptions près où les jeunes ont un plus grand contrôle sur les revenus. Les femmes font face à des difficultés supplémentaires en matière d'accès à la terre et d'autonomie productive. Malgré l'optimisme suscité par la hausse du prix du cacao, la précarité foncière, l'accès limité au crédit et l'absence de politiques publiques efficaces entravent la consolidation des projets de vie rurale pour les jeunes. L'étude conclut que les politiques publiques intégrées sont nécessaires pour assurer la pérennité de la culture du cacao.

Mots-clés : culture du cacao, succession familiale, jeunesse rurale

1.0 Introduction

Brazil ranks seventh among the world's largest cocoa producers, with approximately 700,000 hectares under cultivation (World Cocoa Foundation, 2024). It is estimated that between 5 and 6 million smallholder farmers account for over 90% of global cocoa production. In Brazil, around 95,000 farmers are engaged in cocoa farming, with the states of Pará and Bahia standing out (World Cocoa Foundation, 2024PLe). As a cash crop, cocoa drives sustainable economic growth and development in both developed and developing countries (Azumah et al., 2021), especially when linked to the use of by-products and biomass, which fosters local job and income generation in line with the principles of sustainable development (Zugaib et al., 2023).

Cocoa cultivation also plays a key role in environmental regeneration and forest landscape conservation, as it contributes to the enrichment of secondary vegetation areas. This potential becomes even more significant in the face of rising domestic and international demand for chocolate, strengthening both the economic and environmental value of the activity (Venturieri et al., 2022).

In Pará—Brazil's second-largest cocoa-producing state, accounting for 46.77% of national cocoa output (IBGE, 2023)—the Transamazon cocoa hub stands out. This hub is composed of the municipalities of Pacajá, Anapu, Vitória do Xingu, Altamira, Brasil Novo, Medicilândia, and Uruará. Together, these municipalities account for more than 65.84% of the state's cocoa production and 28.55% of national production (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2023). The region also represents about 60.5% of the total planted area in the state and is characterized by production systems largely based on small and medium-sized family farms (Nunes & Bastos, 2018).

The construction of highways in the Amazon region of Pará spurred the development of various agricultural initiatives, especially those focused on family farming, such as black pepper, oil, and cocoa cultivation (Homma, 2014). Initially, cocoa production was established through forest clearing, but later, degraded pasturelands began to be converted into cocoa plantations, reflecting a transition in land use and regional production strategies (Folhes & Serra, 2023). Today, cocoa production in the Transamazon region plays an important role in the local economy, with strong representation in the commercialization of cocoa beans. In 2022, cocoa ranked fourth in the state's agricultural production, generating a production value of R\$ 1,896,303,000 (IBGE, 2022).

In this context, rural youth emerge as key actors in ensuring the continuity and renewal of agricultural practices in cocoa farming. Amid social, climatic, and economic transformations affecting agriculture, young people play a strategic role in strengthening and innovating the sector. Intergenerational and cross-sector communication in rural areas becomes essential to promote dialogue, knowledge exchange, and engagement in more sustainable practices (Da Silva Junior et al., 2019).

Demographic data from the municipalities of Uruará and Medicilândia—the focus areas of this study—reveal a population that is still predominantly young compared to national figures, with median ages of 28 and 29 years, respectively. However, there are signs of progressive aging, reflected in the ratios of 35.91 and 38.18 people aged 60 or older for every 100 individuals aged 14 or younger (IBGE, 2022). This scenario indicates a demographic transition that directly impacts succession in family farming. As the population ages and young people face barriers to remaining in or entering rural life—such as lack of access to services, infrastructure, and supportive policies—the risk of productive units

being discontinued increases (IBGE, 2022). The absence of successors may compromise the social and economic sustainability of rural properties.

Challenges faced by rural youth range from limited access to land, credit, inputs, and technical assistance, to the precariousness of basic living conditions, such as education, healthcare, culture, infrastructure, digital inclusion, and employment opportunities (Stropasolas, 2006; Oduwole et al., 2018). These limitations can contribute to rural exodus and make agriculture less attractive to newer generations. However, when they have access to resources and opportunities, young people tend to be more productive and open to innovation than previous generations, contributing to the dynamism of agriculture and complementary economic activities in rural areas (Mujcinovic et al., 2021).

The political and social participation of rural youth in Brazil is deeply rooted in specific historical and cultural contexts, shaped by structural inequalities and persistent exclusion. As Castro (2008) points out, this participation takes place in societies marked by their historical legacies and contemporary challenges. Without their involvement in policy-making, responses to their demands will be insufficient (Sousa & Cardoso, 2023), and these policies should go beyond economic activities, providing opportunities for inclusion in spaces and practices that extend beyond the rural environment (Martinelli et al., 2019).

It is important to emphasize that the permanence of youth in rural areas also depends on well-planned family succession strategies, especially in crops like cocoa, whose sustainability is strongly linked to the continuity of activities by new generations. Intergenerational succession in agricultural properties—an essential process for ensuring rural renewal—is often underestimated and rarely discussed among producers, including in the cocoa sector (World Cocoa Foundation, 2024).

Given this scenario, understanding how young people interpret their roles in the cocoa production chain, as well as the factors that facilitate or hinder their ability to remain in rural areas, is essential for the development of effective public policies and territorial development strategies that take into account their aspirations, identities, and values.

Among the main challenges faced are the barriers to family succession—often marked by land tenure insecurity, gender inequalities, and the lack of recognition of youth as legitimate heirs—and the limitations in access to productive management, which include the centralization of decisions and profits among older generations. In this context, it is urgent to recognize young people not merely as beneficiaries of policies and actions, but as political subjects and agents of innovation who can actively contribute to the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of the Amazonian rural environment.

Considering this, this article aims to investigate how rural youth interpret their roles in cocoa production in the Brazilian Amazon. It also seeks to identify the main challenges they face in the context of cocoa farming in the Transamazon region, considering socioeconomic, environmental, cultural, and intergenerational aspects.

2.0 Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach to understand how rural youth interpret their roles within the cocoa value chain in the Amazon. The choice of a qualitative approach is justified by the need to access the meanings individuals attribute to their everyday experiences in family cocoa farming. This approach values their narratives, life paths, and subjective perceptions.

Data collection was carried out in the second half of 2024, in the municipalities of Uruará and Medicilândia, located along the Transamazon Highway in the state of Pará. It was conducted through semi-structured interviews, with a total of 16 individual interviews, designed to provide a space for attentive and in-depth listening to the participants' experiences. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The number of interviews was determined by the saturation of responses and the researcher's ability to travel, as rural properties are often far apart, and poor road infrastructure made access to participants more difficult.

Participants were intentionally selected, considering young people between the ages of 18 and 29 residing in the municipalities of Uruará and Medicilândia, located in the Transamazon region—areas recognized as important cocoa-producing hubs in the state of Pará. The choice of this group as the central focus was based on the relevance of understanding the aspirations, motivations, and challenges faced by rural youth who are engaged or interested in engaging in agricultural activities, particularly in contexts marked by intense social, economic, and environmental transformations.

Participant selection initially took place through a referral from the local rural producers' union, which collaborated by suggesting the first young person to be interviewed based on their involvement in cocoa farming. From this initial contact, the chain sampling technique—also known as the snowball method—was adopted, in which each interviewee referred other young individuals who met the research criteria.

The interviews were conducted upon signing the Informed Consent Form (ICF), in accordance with Resolution No. 510/2016 of the Brazilian National Health Council, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. After data collection, the interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed using content analysis techniques, as proposed by Bardin (2011). This approach allowed for the identification of emerging thematic categories that reflect social representations and the meanings attributed to land, work with cocoa, and intergenerational relationships that influence the continued presence of youth in rural areas.

Participants were identified using the label "Youth n," where "n" corresponds to the number assigned to each interview, for example: Youth 1, Youth 2, and so on, to preserve the anonymity of the respondents.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Profile of the Youth Participants

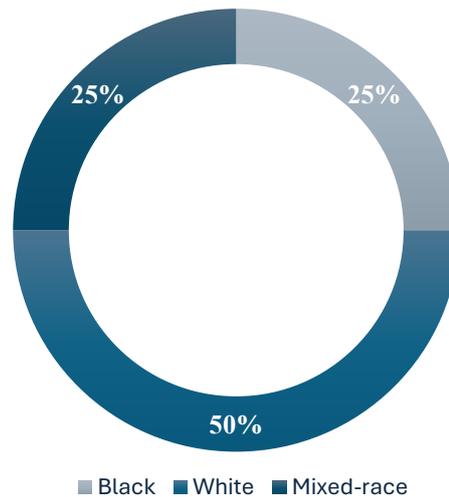
The participants in the 16 interviews were aged between 18 and 29 years, distributed across three age groups, as shown in Table 1. There is a predominance of youth in the 26 to 29 age group, with seven participants in this range.

Table 1. *Age Range of the Participants*

Age Range	Participants
18–22 years	3
23–26 years	6
27–29 years	7

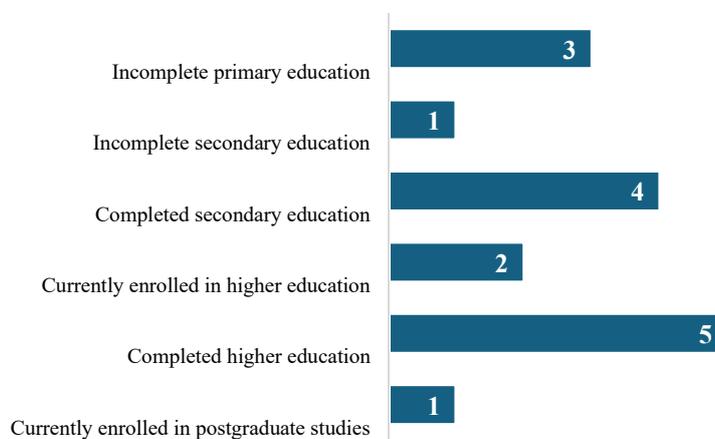
The data distribution reveals ethnic-racial diversity among the young interviewees, although with a predominance of a specific group. As shown in Figure 1, most young people self-identify as white (n=7; 43.75%), followed by those who identify as *pardo* (mixed-race) (n=4; 25%) and Black (n=5; 31.25%). This distribution highlights the presence of a heterogeneous racial composition, a common characteristic in mixed-colonization areas of the Amazon, such as the Transamazon region, where different migratory flows and historical settlement patterns have contributed to the formation of the current population.

Figure 1: Self-declared color/race of the interviewees.



The analysis of the participants' educational level revealed a relatively high educational profile, considering the rural Amazonian context. Among the participants, eight young people (50%) had either completed or were currently pursuing higher education or postgraduate studies, indicating a youth population with academic aspirations and access to educational opportunities, despite the region's structural challenges. Figure 2 presents the distribution of educational levels in detail.

Figure 2: Educational level of the participants.



The data regarding the occupations of the interviewed youth revealed a strong connection to agricultural work, although in many cases this involvement was combined with other professional roles. Among the 16 interviewees, the majority (12) engaged in activities related to agriculture, with five that identified themselves exclusively as farmers, while the others combined farming with formal or informal occupations.

In addition, a diverse set of professional profiles was identified, including roles in the public sector, commerce, and services, as shown in Table 2. The presence of occupations such as barber, bank technician, butcher, and train assistant, among others, indicated that a significant portion of rural youth moved between multiple forms of work, reflecting the need to supplement income and adapt to the instabilities of the agricultural sector.

Table 2. *Occupations of the Participants*

Profession	Participants
Farmer	5
Public servant	1
Engineer, farmer, and project manager	1
Barber/farmer	1
Bank technician/farmer	1
Butcher and farmer	1
Student and helps in agriculture	1
Agronomist	1
Train assistant and farmer	1
Sharecropper farmer	1
Agronomy student	1
Farmer and homemaker	1

This scenario indicated that, although a connection to cocoa farming was present in the life paths of most of the young participants, this relationship was neither homogeneous nor exclusive. Abukari et al. (2022), in the context of cocoa farming in Ghana, point out that an increase in the level of education among youth reduces the risk of unemployment, increases the chances of entering economic activities outside the cocoa sector, and simultaneously decreases their involvement in cocoa cultivation and in the diversification of income sources related to the activity.

The present study revealed a context of multifunctionality and adaptation to the economic and social dynamics of the Amazon region, with young people moving between rural life, technical and higher education, and urban or hybrid occupations. This empirical evidence aligns with the argument put forth by the scholar who highlights that it is increasingly common for individuals from farming families—especially youth—to seek job opportunities both in urban and rural settings in pursuit of financial independence or to contribute to increasing the family income (Castro, 2005).

3.2 Rural Youth in the Cocoa Sector of the Transamazon Region, Pará

Of the 16 young people interviewed, 11 (Youth 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, and 15) reported that their involvement with cocoa farming began in childhood as part of their daily family support activities. This early participation was described as natural and often linked to family life and growing up in a rural environment, as reflected in the statements of the youth:

I started working with cocoa because it's a job that has always been in the family [...] I began helping out since childhood (Youth 1, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

I started as soon as I came into the world, I don't even remember when it really became a profession (Youth 3, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

I've been working since forever, my family has always been involved in cocoa farming (Youth 4, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

Since I was a child, with my parents (Youth 7, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

I started as long as I can remember, with my father. I do everything from planting to drying. It was my choice, but it was influenced, you know, by my family. I learned the tasks, and today I strongly identify with what we do (Youth 14, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

The entry of these young people into cocoa farming appears as a path strongly marked by family inheritance, with autonomous decisions detached from tradition being rarely reported. However, this continuity should not be understood as homogeneous. There are different levels of involvement and distinct strategies for staying in the activity. In many cases, the youth continued working in cocoa farming over time, achieving partial or full autonomy over land plots through inheritance, donations, or partnership agreements. As Youth 4 and Youth 7 noted:

I have been working in cocoa farming forever; my family has always been involved in cocoa activities. I left for a while to study here in Santarém, but I have always been connected to cocoa production. Today, I have my own plot. During college, I received a plot from my mother and later bought others with my husband (Youth 4, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

Since I was a child, with my parents. My father worked with livestock, commerce, and cocoa. Today, I already have a small cocoa area that my parents left under my responsibility (Youth 7, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

Others, in turn, combined agriculture with other professional paths, maintaining their connection to the countryside as a complementary strategy. This was the case for young people who, even while attending higher education or working in other fields, continued to assist with their family's agricultural activities, especially during peak periods such as the harvest. Some of the youths mentioned:

My grandfather always helps me, but I also have my own job on the side. Because the cocoa money only comes in during the harvest (Youth 13, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

My family has cocoa, and I help there, but I only do my irrigation work (Youth 12, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

I left for a while to study here in Santarém, but I have always had contact with cocoa production (Youth 4, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

The process of forming a new generation of farmers, or succession, who will likely remain in rural areas, involves managing the property and continuing their parents' agricultural activities. This cycle may continue with their own children. Tonezer et al., (2022) and Carneiro and Castro (2007) explain that young people's daily lives and future are influenced by an integrated logic of time. The past, represented by family traditions, shapes their current actions and decisions. The present focuses on day-to-day activities like work, community interaction, and education. The future is built on practical choices, such as inheriting assets, maintaining family continuity in the area (succession), and deciding whether to migrate temporarily or permanently.

On the other hand, there is the emergence of a new profile of young farmers who are more educated and intentional about staying in agriculture. Young people pursuing technical or higher education in the field, such as agronomy (two students and one graduate), demonstrate a proactive attitude toward the activity, seeing cocoa as a productive potential and an opportunity for innovation. Youth 4, a forest engineer who graduated in the city of Santarém, adjacent to Uruará, maintained contact with cocoa farming and managed a production system where, after graduation, she applied her academic knowledge to improve the family's production, even affiliating with companies involved in cocoa bean commercialization. Youth 12, an agronomist also graduated in Santarém, was able to bring irrigation knowledge to Medicilândia, which has a high demand for this in the cocoa-producing region.

The old notion that those who remain in agriculture do not need to study has been losing ground. Currently, many rural youth seek training in technical schools with the goal of expanding their knowledge, improving the productivity of their properties, and adopting more sustainable practices (Tonezer et al., 2022). This movement reflects a shift in perspective, where education is increasingly seen as a tool to strengthen and sustain family farming (Tonezer et al., 2022).

Despite this, the entry and retention of young people in agricultural activities still face challenges. Low income, land insecurity, limited access to credit, and the absence of specific public policies hinder the consolidation of life projects in rural areas.

3.3 Gender Division of Labor in Cocoa Farming

The gender dimension also emerges as a relevant factor. Young women, despite participating in agricultural activities, report greater distance from direct cocoa production, often being involved in other economic or caregiving activities. Interviewees 11, 15, and 16 described these realities:

I thought about leaving to study, but I don't intend to stop participating in the farm work (Youth 11, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

I've always helped my parents on the farm. They did influence me, and I came to really enjoy working in agriculture. That's why I chose to study agronomy, to improve things (Youth 15, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

I used to only do house chores, helping my mother... Now I work with cocoa, but mainly during the harvest (Youth 16, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

In these statements, involvement in agriculture was often described as “helping” rather than as full and recognized work. This reflects both traditional norms that restrict women's autonomy in rural areas and the desire to seek greater economic independence, often through education or diversification of activities.

Even so, many young women maintain ties to the land and family production, either through shared responsibilities with their spouse or through informal succession arrangements. However, this process does not occur under conditions of equity. The following statement is illustrative:

Before I got married, I only did house chores and helped my mother, and that was it. But after I got married and had children, my father gave a piece of his plot to me and my husband, and now we are sharecroppers on his land. So now I work with cocoa, but mainly during the harvest (Youth 16, female, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

This account revealed that the young woman's entry into cocoa production occurred only after marriage and motherhood—and even then remained limited to specific and seasonal tasks. The status of “sharecropper” reinforced her dependence on the men in the family, especially her father and husband, both for access to land and for the legitimacy of her agricultural work. This type of arrangement is common in contexts where women have indirect access to productive resources, usually through family ties rather than by their own rights.

Such dynamics reflect the persistence of a gendered division of labor that undervalues women's contribution to family farming. The domestic sphere continues to be assigned almost exclusively to women, and entry into agricultural production occurs in a limited way, generally subordinated to the male figure. This is consistent with what de Aguiar Lima et al. (2024) point out, highlighting that rural women in the Northern region face historical inequalities in access to resources, work overload, and greater vulnerability to climate change.

In addition to the limitations in agricultural tasks, women also have less participation in decision-making regarding production and property management. This is evidenced in the statements:

I don't feel prepared to be a leader; I leave that part to my husband"
(Youth 16).

"I said, I help on the farm, but I don't yet have production responsibilities that are mine (Youth 15, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

These data align with Ferrari et al. (2004), who show that young women participate significantly less than men in the decision-making processes on rural properties: only 16% of the young women interviewed had some degree of participation, compared to 6% of the young men who did not participate at all. Despite a growing appreciation of agriculture among some young women, the centrality of male authority and patriarchy remain prominent features in family and production structures (De Carvalho et al., 2021).

This context contributes to the high migration rate of young women from rural areas, a phenomenon that intensifies the masculinization of the countryside (Camarano & Abramovay, 1999). Many young women avoid following the same paths as their mothers, which are often associated with submission, invisibility, and a double workday, expressing the desire to explore other trajectories, whether through education, urban work, or activities outside the cocoa value chain (Ferrari et al., 2004).

As LeBaron and Gore (2020) point out, women's access to land is often conditioned on ties to men in the family, which perpetuates patriarchal patterns of control and hinders women's empowerment in rural areas. Thus, women's protagonism in agriculture, especially in chains like cocoa production, continues to be limited by cultural, institutional, and economic barriers that affect everything from the recognition of their work to their permanence in rural areas.

Therefore, understanding the role of women in cocoa farming requires a broad perspective that simultaneously considers their productive, reproductive, and community contributions. Only with this integrated perspective is it possible to understand why women are more vulnerable to exploitation in global supply chains and why transforming these structures demands profound changes in gender norms and the institutional frameworks that regulate access to land, resources, and decision-making power.

3.4 Challenges and Expectations

Overall, the young people show optimism about the current cocoa farming scenario, especially due to the recent appreciation of the cocoa bean in the national and international markets. The price increase—reported to reach up to R\$ 60/kg in 2024—is seen as an incentive for cultivation, even by those who initially did not view the activity as attractive. For some, this represents not only an immediate source of income but also a prospect of autonomy and continuity in rural areas. As the participants emphasized:

A sector of agriculture that is growing a lot, currently with high prices due to major climate changes that have affected the main cocoa-producing countries (Youth 2, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

In our region, cocoa is currently the best source of income... I see it as advantageous because cocoa prices are quite high, around 50 reais per kilogram (Youth 5, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

I believe it is an important activity in the region. The advantage is that it supports many families (Youth 13, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

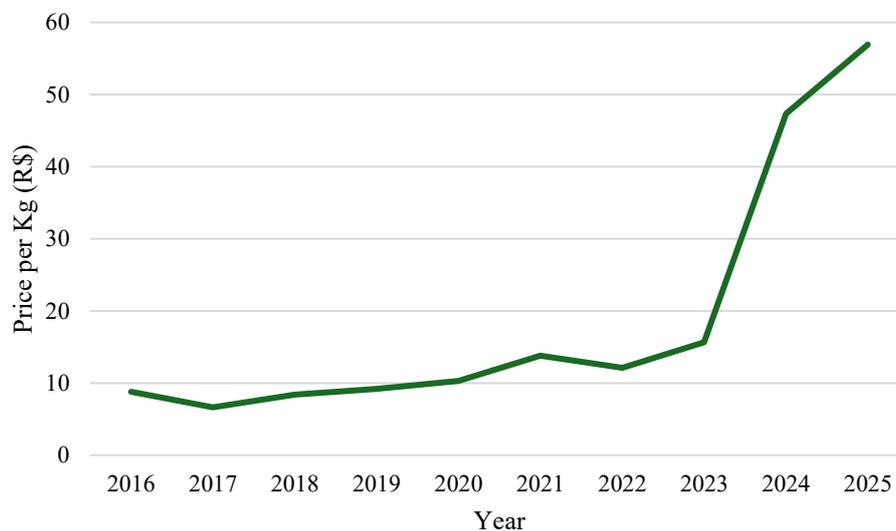
The main advantage has been the appreciation of cocoa in our region; 60 reais per kilogram has encouraged people to plant more.” (Youth 11, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

The price is really good (Youth 14, personal communication August 22, 2024).

... but due to the rising price of cocoa, I believe people will invest more (Youth 15, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

The statements revealed a pragmatic perspective in which the recent economic attractiveness reshapes perceptions of the sector, potentially acting as a catalyst for new strategies of retention and investment in agricultural production. This scenario aligns with data from the National Supply Company (CONAB), which records a significant increase in the price of cocoa beans in the state of Pará starting in 2024 (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Annual average price per kg of cocoa beans in the State of Pará.



Source: CONAB (2025).

Such an increase is partly attributed to external factors, such as climate change, which has negatively impacted the main global producing countries—such as Ghana and the Ivory Coast—creating a window of opportunity for Brazilian producers. This was noted by Youth 2, who said, “a sector of agriculture that is

growing a lot, currently with high prices due to major climate changes that have affected the main cocoa-producing countries.”

However, the optimism of the young people regarding the appreciation of cocoa does not overlook the structural obstacles they face, which frequently appeared in their accounts. One of the main challenges is the growing dependence on adaptive technologies in response to climate change, such as irrigation systems. More prolonged and irregular droughts, as well as diseases like witch’s broom, directly affect productivity, making investments indispensable—investments that are not always within the reach of small producers. One young person clearly expressed this concern:

Very advantageous, but due to climate change, a lot of investments are required, including indispensable irrigation (Youth 1, personal communication August 22, 2024).

I don’t think it’s such a difficult crop to manage. But irrigation has become necessary (Youth 4, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

One disadvantage is labor, and some diseases always appear, like witch’s broom, etc (Youth 6, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

The issue of labor is another critical point. In several statements, the difficulty of finding workers for intensive activities, such as harvesting, was mentioned as a significant disadvantage, especially considering the aging rural workforce and the low attractiveness of manual labor for young people. The statements from youths 2, 4, 9, and 14 reflected this reality:

Another disadvantage is the lack of labor during harvest season (Youth 2,)

That could be the disadvantage. Besides the labor for the harvest, it’s hard to find people who want to do it (Youth 4, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

A disadvantage is the labor and little government support (Youth 9, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

The disadvantage is that the work is not light (Youth 13, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

The disadvantage is the cleaning, pruning, heavy work. The sharecropper only earns when they sell (Youth 14, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

The shortage of skilled labor in the Amazon, essential for the bioeconomy, is worsened by deprivations such as low income, lack of access to education, healthcare, energy, transportation, adequate housing, and basic infrastructure (Clement et al., 2024). These factors drive rural exodus and depopulate productive areas (Clement et al., 2024).

Another recurring element is the recognition that, although cocoa farming offers a real opportunity for income generation, the interviewees express that the work

involved is heavy, physical, and often dangerous, especially in contexts with little mechanization. The presence of insects, the risk of accidents, and the effort required during pruning and harvesting phases were frequently mentioned:

It's very heavy and dangerous work; a person can easily get hurt.

Besides that, there are many dangerous insects in a cocoa farm (Youth 5, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

The work is not light (Youth 13, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

Cleaning, pruning, heavy work (Youth 14, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

Additionally, the young people highlighted obstacles related to public policy and environmental regulation. The lack of incentives for small producers, combined with the difficulty of expanding cultivation areas due to legal preservation requirements, was seen as a barrier to the expansion of the activity. The perception is that, despite its economic potential, cocoa farming does not receive the necessary institutional support to become a secure path for staying in rural areas. As two of the youths noted:

The disadvantage is the government, which should provide more incentives to small cocoa producers, and the environmental policies that, due to widespread deforestation, make it difficult for anyone who wants to expand their land for planting (Youth 2, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

The disadvantage is the labor and the little help from the government (Youth 9, personal communication, August 22, 2024).

This perception aligns with Barcellos's (2017) observation that public policies like Pronaf Jovem are immersed in tensions and contradictions. These contradictions arise from the gap between the State's vision of rural youth and the concrete projects and realities experienced by young people, technical staff, and local leaders. Consequently, without alignment between state policy design and territorial experiences, public policies tend to lose effectiveness, discouraging young people from investing in and remaining in agricultural activities.

Even though these young individuals recognized the cultural, emotional, and productive value of cocoa in their family trajectories, their statements made it clear that the sustainability of the activity depends on overcoming a series of material and institutional barriers. The appreciation of cocoa beans and the good quality of the land were seen as local assets, but their full potential can only be realized through improved access to technology, more effective public policies, and strategies that value the work of rural youth.

Finally, a pragmatic yet hopeful perspective stood out among these young people. They did not idealize cocoa farming, but neither did they dismiss it as a life project. In this way, the Life Project is built through the relationship between the individual and society, showing that personal life only gains meaning through the presence of others, where the individual and the collective are always interconnected, with

no separation between what is subjective and objective in the formation of the subject (Nascimento, 2006). Therefore, the youth engaged in cocoa farming in Pará built their life projects amid contradictions and challenges, but also grounded in emotional ties to the land, family, and agricultural production.

3.5 Youth Narratives on Succession, Land Access, Productive Management, and Family Relations in Amazonian Cacao Farming

In the analysis of the young people's statements, four central analytical categories emerged: (1) Inheritance and land access, related to how land is distributed and transferred to the new generations; (2) Management and profit sharing, referring to how young people are compensated or recognized for their contributions to family-based cacao farming; (3) Perception of leadership, which concerns their self-image and sense of ability or desire to lead productive activities on the cacao farm; and (4) Family conflict or harmony, which highlights the intergenerational dynamics established between the youth and their parents or older guardians within the context of cacao agriculture, as presented in Table 3.

In the thematic axis “Inheritance and Land Access,” it is possible to observe that young people gain access to land through different means: inheritance, lifetime donation, and even personal purchase, demonstrating hybrid strategies between family transmission and the pursuit of autonomy. For example, in the statement by Youth 4, “I was given a piece of land, but I also bought some. It was passed on during life,” this mixed arrangement is evident, where intergenerational transfer is complemented by individual initiative. Meanwhile, the statement by Youth 7, “The small piece of land was given by my father so I could start working,” points to a process more dependent on paternal authority, reinforcing the centrality of the family as the mediator of access to land resources. These examples illustrate that generational succession does not occur as a sudden replacement process, but rather as a trajectory of co-management and progressive construction of autonomy, marked by tensions between dependence and emancipation.

As Silvestro et al. (2001) explains, generational succession in agriculture depends on three main factors: the transfer of management and business control to the youth; the legal transfer of land and productive assets; and the retirement of the elders, which marks the end of their work and authority over the property. However, the data from this research suggest that, in practice, these elements do not always occur simultaneously or linearly. On the contrary, phases of informal sharing, shared use, and family arrangements coexist, prolonging the bond between generations and, while ensuring young people's permanence in rural areas, potentially limiting their full autonomy—especially in contexts where land control remains under parental guardianship.

In the thematic axis “Profit Sharing,” the reports reveal informal and personalized practices, frequently mediated by the father, reinforcing a vertically structured authority. The statement by Youth 16, “We are sharecroppers for our father, but we also have family land. We get paid just like sharecroppers,” suggests a more formalized income participation arrangement, albeit subordinate. Youth 3 states, “We divide it according to sales, but it's not something pre-defined,” which highlights the absence of objective criteria or internal contracts. These statements reflect the institutional fragility of family production units, complicating young people's economic planning and opening space for tensions, especially during periods of market instability. A relevant point is the statement by Youth 5, “My mother gives me a share of the profit when sales are high,” which reveals an exception where a woman plays an active financial role, although mediated by conditions such as the volume of sales.

Table 3. *Thematic categories of youth statements on August 22, 2024.*

Thematic axis	Interview excerpts from research participants
Inheritance and land access	<p>“Here the land belongs to the family; each person has a piece” (Youth 1).</p> <p>“I was given a piece of land, but i also bought some. It was passed on while still alive” (Youth 4).</p> <p>“I started with my family’s land, but now i have my own plot” (Youth 6).</p> <p>“The small piece of land was given by my father, so i could start working” (Youth 7).</p>
Profit sharing	<p>“We divide it based on the harvest from each plot that the father gave to the children” (Youth 1)</p> <p>“We split it according to the sales, but it’s not something pre-defined” (Youth 3)</p> <p>“My mother gives me a share of the profit when sales are high” (Youth 5)</p> <p>“He gives part of the money to the children” (Youth 9)</p> <p>“He’s the one who decides the division, gives an amount after each sale” (Youth 10)</p> <p>“We’re sharecroppers for our father, but we also have family land. We get paid just like sharecroppers” (Youth 16)</p>
Perception of leadership	<p>“I can take on leadership, yes — i already handle all parts of the work (Youth 1).</p> <p>“I see myself as having the potential to own land and be a leader (Youth 10).</p> <p>“The job of leading this farm is mine and the other workers” (Youth 14).</p> <p>“One day i see myself running the business, but for now, it's still managed by my father (Youth 9).</p> <p>“I don’t feel ready to be a leader—I leave that part to my husband (Youth 16).</p>
Family conflict or harmony	<p>“There has never been conflict because i know the expenses are high, so it’s not possible to divide the profit equally (Youth 10).</p> <p>“I don’t see the need for division right now because we live in the same house (Youth 3).</p> <p>“Here, everyone helps everyone, so there are no fights (implied in several statements, such as those from Youth 1 and 9).</p>

In the thematic axis “Perception of Leadership,” the statements reveal that youth protagonism is constructed through symbolic and material negotiations with previous generations. Leadership is associated with practical involvement in productive activities and social and family recognition. For instance, Youth 1 asserts, “I can take on leadership, yes—I already handle all parts,” indicating their full engagement in tasks as the foundation for their self-perception of leadership. In contrast, Youth 16 states, “I don’t feel ready to be a leader—I leave that part to my husband,” highlighting the obstacles young women face in

assuming management roles, despite their active participation in production. This difference illustrates how leadership in rural settings remains gendered, being more readily attributed to men. Women encounter symbolic and structural barriers, often internalized, that limit their affirmation as legitimate managers or successors of the properties.

Finally, the axis “Family Conflict or Harmony” reveals a predominance of statements that normalize the absence of conflicts in resource and task division. These statements generally justify the lack of profit sharing by citing cohabitation or understanding financial difficulties. The statement of Young Person 10—“There has never been any conflict because I know the expenses are high, so there is no way to split the profits equally”—points to an acceptance of internal inequalities, supported by a discourse that acknowledges productive limitations. However, this “harmony” may conceal unspoken tensions, especially when there is little transparency or youth participation in decision-making.

Taken together, the data indicate that succession processes in family cacao farming are characterized by flexible yet asymmetrical family arrangements, in which access to land, income control, and leadership are distributed unevenly, especially according to gender and the degree of family recognition. These elements highlight the importance of public policies that promote greater economic autonomy and decision-making capacity for young people—especially women—as a condition for youth to remain in rural areas and for the sustainability of cacao farming.

4.0 Final Considerations

This research aimed to understand how rural youth in Pará’s Trans-Amazon region perceive their roles in the cocoa production chain and the main challenges they face in staying in rural areas. The results reveal that young people do not limit themselves to a passive role as heirs; instead, they actively participate in the reproduction and reinvention of cocoa farming, even amidst intergenerational tensions, gender inequalities, land insecurity, and limited access to public policies.

The analysis of the interviews revealed multiple strategies for engaging in cocoa farming, including co-managing production with parents, cultivating inherited or purchased plots, and combining agriculture with other forms of work and study. Youth articulated staying in rural areas with projects of autonomy and innovation, despite facing significant structural barriers, particularly young women whose productive participation is often made invisible or limited to secondary roles. The burden of domestic tasks and the male centrality in property management restrict their leadership, even when they demonstrate technical knowledge and interest in production.

The articulation between the thematic axes of inheritance, management, and leadership reveals that youth autonomy is shaped by asymmetric and unequal family relationships. Land is generally transferred through lifetime donations, partial transfers, or shared ownership, often without formal regularization. Profit sharing follows informal and familial patterns, with decisions predominantly centralized by parents, which can lead to frustration among young people who feel uninvolved or unrecognized for their contributions. Leadership, in turn, is linked to individual trajectories and the degree of legitimacy earned within the family, being more common among men and rarely exercised by women.

This research stands out for its originality in addressing rural succession from the perspective of cocoa-producing youth in the Amazon. This topic remains largely unexplored in the scientific literature. By examining the intersectional

factors that influence young people's decision to remain in rural areas, the study contributes to the ongoing debate about productive succession within specific value chains and historically neglected territories, such as the Trans-Amazon region. This approach enhances our understanding of rural youth as a diverse and politically significant group.

From a public policy perspective, the findings underscore the urgent need for intersectoral programs targeting rural youth. These programs should integrate technical training, accessible credit, land regularization, and productive inclusion, with a gender focus. It is essential to expand opportunities for youth participation and decision-making, recognizing them as strategic actors for the sustainable development of cocoa farming and the Amazonian territory. The valorization of youth must transcend rhetoric and translate into concrete investments that enhance their living and working conditions in rural areas.

The study has several limitations. First, it focuses on only two municipalities in the Trans-Amazon region, which may restrict the generalizability of its findings. Second, the use of individual interviews and remote focus groups could also limit the research's scope. To improve future studies, it would be beneficial to conduct comparative research with other cocoa-producing regions in Brazil. Ethnographic studies could provide valuable insights into family dynamics, the construction of productive identities, and succession in contexts involving quilombolas (Afro-Brazilian descent communities), Indigenous peoples, or riverside youth (They are young people who live along riverbanks, especially in the Amazon, and whose way of life is directly linked to the cycles of the waters). Finally, longitudinally investigating the impacts of climate change and public policies on the trajectories of these youth would be a valuable addition to the research.

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