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CODEX
ALIMENTARIUS
INTERNATIONAL FOOD STANDARDS

CODE OF PRACTICE FOR THE PREVENTION AND REDUCTION OF CADMIUM CONTAMINATION IN COCOA BEANS (CXC 81-2022)



SERIES

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CODE OF PRACTICE FOR THE PREVENTION AND REDUCTION OF CADMIUM CONTAMINATION IN COCOA BEANS

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1. Introduction

The objective of this code of practice (COP) is to provide guidance to countries and the cocoa production industry on the prevention and reduction of cadmium (Cd) contamination in cocoa beans during production and post-harvest processing: fermentation, drying, storage and transportation.

Cd is a heavy metal that predominantly enters the environment through anthropogenic activities such as processing ores, burning fuels, contamination with industrial waste, livestock manure, and use of phosphate fertilizers. Cd can also enter the soil naturally by volcanic activity, from marine shale soils, erosion sea-salt aerosols, and sewage-containing fertilizers.

Cd is toxic and persistent in soil (estimated half-life for Cd in soils varying between 15 to 1100 years). Cd is absorbed and bio-accumulated by cocoa trees (*Theobroma cacao* L.), which in some cases results in unacceptably high levels in cocoa beans, so measures may be needed to reduce both Cd in the soil and Cd absorption by cocoa trees.

Cd is not found in nature in its pure state. Its most common oxidation state is +2 and it is usually found associated with iron (Fe), zinc (Zn), lead (Pb), phosphorus (P), magnesium (Mg), calcium (Ca), or copper (Cu). The concentrations of Cd in soil depend mainly on soil pH, which affects Cd solubility and mobility. Most metals in the soil tend to be more available at acidic pH, which increases their bioavailability for uptake by plants.

Greater adsorption of Cd on the surface of soil particles is desirable, as this reduces the mobility of this contaminant in the soil profile and reduces its bioavailability to cocoa trees, and consequently, its environmental impact. The concentration of Cd in soil solution and Cd bioavailability and mobility are mainly controlled by adsorption and desorption reactions on the surface of soil colloids. Soil factors that affect the accumulation and availability of cadmium include pH, texture, organic material, Fe, and manganese (Mn) oxides and hydroxides, Zn, carbonates, chlorinity, and cation exchange capacity.

At alkaline pH, elevated chloride content in soils tend to enhance chloride complex formation, which decreases the adsorption of Cd on soil particles, thereby increasing Cd mobility and bioavailability.

Over time, the development in our understanding of how various cropping systems contribute to or alleviate Cd contamination in cocoa beans could be used to develop integrated systems for the management of cadmium levels in cocoa beans.

Grafting as a genetic strategy with low cadmium accumulation varieties may be a viable option in various soil types and at different soil Cd levels, but has only been tried experimentally for reducing Cd in cocoa trees.

To mitigate Cd levels in cocoa beans, it is crucial to identify cocoa-growing areas with high Cd and develop strategies to address this problem, including mitigation measures that may be taken in the near term (e.g. soil testing and addition of soil amendments), while other measures will require longer time to implement (e.g. grafting of plants on rootstocks with low Cd uptake).

2. Scope

This COP provides guidance on recommended practices to prevent and reduce Cd contamination in cocoa beans before planting, for new or existing cocoa tree plantations and during the production stage through the harvest and post-harvest phases.

3. Definitions

This COP provides guidance on recommended practices to prevent and reduce Cd contamination in cocoa beans before planting, for new or existing cocoa tree plantations and during the production stage through the harvest and post-harvest phases.

Adsorption and absorption: Adsorption refers to the physical or chemical attraction and retention of Cd to soil particles. Absorption refers to the net uptake of Cd from the soil by the roots of the cocoa trees.

Bioavailability: Bioavailability of a mineral to plants and soils can be defined as its accessibility to normal metabolic and physiological processes as influenced by many factors including total concentration and speciation of metals, pH, redox potential, temperature, total organic content (both particulate and dissolved fractions) and suspended particulate content.

Biochar (biocarbon): By-product of the pyrolysis of residual biomass. Biochar is a stable carbonate derivative produced from plant and/or animal biomass for application in agriculture.

Cane by-product (bagasse): By-product of sugar cane through milling and pressing.

Cation exchange capacity (CEC): A measure of the soil's ability to hold positively charged ions. The clay mineral and organic matter components of soil have negatively charged sites on their surfaces which adsorb and hold positively charged ions (cations). This electrical charge is critical to the supply of nutrients to plants because many nutrients (e.g. Mg, K and Ca) exist as cations.

Cocoa bean: The seed of the cocoa fruit, which is composed of the episperm (also called integument, testa or shell), embryo and cotyledon.

Drying: Cocoa beans are dried either under sunlight or in mechanical/solar dryers (or a combination of both) to reduce the moisture content (to less than eight percent) to make them stable for storage.

Fermentation: A process designed to degrade the pulp or mucilage and initiate biochemical changes in the cotyledon by enzymes and microorganisms in the farm environment.

Humus: The organic component of soil, formed by the decomposition of leaves and other plant material by soil microorganisms.

Pruning: Annual removal of branches that are dry, diseased, or unbalanced from shade trees and cocoa plants.

Pulp or mucilage: Aqueous, mucilaginous and acidic substance in which the seeds are embedded.

Shading: Growing cocoa plants with shade trees to reduce the amount of solar radiation and wind that reaches the crop. Shading is usually more or less 50 percent during the first four years of plant life, after which the percentage of shade can be reduced to 25 percent or 30 percent.

Soil amendments: Any material added to the soil to improve its physical and chemical properties. The application of amendments depends on the characteristics of the soils, and may include compost, livestock manure, magnesium sulphate, vinasse, zeolite (minerals or adsorbents that hydrate and dehydrate reversibly), charcoal or biochar, calcium sulphate, lime, cane by-product (bagasse), zinc sulphate, dolomite (calcium magnesium carbonate), vermicompost, sugar cane, palm kernel cake, phosphate rock, and other organic matter.

Vinasse: A by-product of the production of alcohol from sugar cane. Vinasse is obtained from the fermentation and distillation of molasses; it is the main organic residue in the production of alcohol.

4. Recommended practices to prevent and reduce Cd contamination in cocoa beans

4.1

Before planting – new plantations

4.1.1 Recommended short- and medium-term practices

The prevention and reduction of Cd in cocoa should begin with the physical-chemical analysis of the soil and be an integral part of the practices before planting a new plantation. Soil analysis is not limited to Cd measurement, but should also consider percent organic matter, cation exchange capacity, soluble zinc, and chlorinity. Physical analysis parameters are: sand %, clay %, silt %, textural class. Chemical analysis should consider where appropriate: pH, organic matter %, Total N %; available ppm of P, K, Pb, Fe oxides and hydroxides, Mn carbonates, Cd and Zn; changeable (cmol (+) /kg) of Ca, Mg, K, Na, Al and H; CEC, Bas. Camb %, Ac. Camb. %, and Sat. Al. It is recommended to consult a qualified professional for information on parameters that are relevant for cadmium uptake by plants and for interpretation of the results of these soil analyses.

National or relevant food control authorities should consider implementation of source directed measures in the *Code of Practice Concerning Source Directed Measures to Reduce Contamination in Foods with Chemicals (CXC 49-2001)*.¹

In new plantations, the use of cover crops of perennial legumes should be considered. Cover crops improve soil organic matter, and they can protect soil from erosion and reduce the loss of nutrients, improving soil productivity through greater availability of essential nutrients and reducing the bioavailability of metals.

No specific recommendation on Cd levels in cocoa-growing areas has been identified. The acidity of the soil affects acceptable cadmium soil levels.

Irrigation waters can be monitored to determine if they are a potential source of Cd, e.g. higher than background levels due to point source contamination. As one possible guideline for higher levels, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended Cd level for drinking water is 0.005 mg/L.

Although there are known benefits to agroforestry, data on the impact of agroforestry versus monoculture on Cd levels, are preliminary. Studies that have systematically compared agroforestry with monoculture found no statistically significant difference in Cd uptake in cocoa beans.

In agroforestry the most commonly used shade plant species with cocoa trees are Musaceae (bananas, moles and cambures) for temporary shade in early cocoa establishment and legume trees such as the pore or bucare (*Erythrina* spp.) and guabas (Ingas) for permanent shade trees. Other shading plant species that provide greater economic benefits include timber species (e.g. laurel, cedar, Colombian mahogany (*Cariniana pyriformis*), cenizaro or rain tree and terminalia) and/or fruit trees (e.g. citrus, avocado, sapote, breadfruit, date palm). It is advisable to plant short shade trees and use citrus or fruit trees for the borders of cocoa plantations.

Establish plantations, if possible, in areas separate from roads or take measures to reduce the exposure of the cocoa plantations to emissions from the combustion engines (e.g. in vehicles) because they may contain Cd. Likewise, they should be located in areas separated from dumpsites in cities, mining areas, smelting areas, industrial wastes, sewage and household wastewater because these could be sources of Cd.

Avoid flooded soils if the water sources are contaminated with Cd.

4.1.2 Recommended long-term practices

When planting new plantations, it is recommended to plant varieties of cocoa trees that are less prone to cadmium uptake.

4.2 From production to harvesting

4.2.1 Recommended short- and medium-term practices

Knowledge of the sources and the distribution of Cd in the soil is important. In general, it should be noted that any organic or inorganic amendment applied to the crop should be previously analysed for Cd, because depending on its source, it may contain Cd and become a Cd source for crops. Sewage sludge, fly ashes, and phosphate fertilizers can have high concentrations of Cd. The phosphate fertilizers applied should contain low Cd levels. To decrease Cd uptake, phosphate fertilizers for cocoa farms should meet national criteria with respect to the ratio of Cd to phosphorus (Cd: P or Cd: P₂O₅).

Data suggest that there is a positive correlation between higher levels of Cd in soil (as measured by soil tests) and elevated levels of Cd in plant tissues and cocoa beans.

Where available, soil characterization analysis for cocoa plantations should be conducted by accredited laboratories – using validated methods which include the use of certified reference materials and standards and provide associated uncertainties. In addition, it is very important to carry out soil analyses with internationally recognized methods. These methods should include appropriate ones for use by local farmers trying to export cocoa. These soil characterization analyses should not only include Cd but other nutrients too (see paragraph 11). Soil pH is the most important parameter to measure on an ongoing basis.

The soil sampling protocol should consider obtaining samples representative of each farm because Cd content could be variable in the same cocoa production area. Because of the natural variation in Cd and Zn levels in the soil, at least one composite soil sample (consisting of at least 20 subsamples) per hectare should be collected. The protocol should take into account international standards for taking soil samples in soils specifically contaminated with metals. The depth of soil sampling in surveys and field evaluation is 0–15 cm. Because litterfall of cocoa leaves and branches may contain higher Cd than the soil they are grown in, allowing litterfall to be metabolized on the soil can add Cd to the top 0–5 cm of soil. Taking 0–15 cm soil samples provides a more representative measure of soil Cd.

In areas where cocoa beans have relatively higher levels of Cd, it is important to determine soil and irrigation water salinity (chloride salts) since the absorption of Cd by plants increases with increased chloride concentrations. However, this effect is most pronounced in alkaline soils (pH>7.0). Therefore, when Cd levels in cocoa beans are of concern and soil is alkaline, it is important to determine the electrical conductivity of soil and water which should be less than 2 mS/cm.

4.2.2 Strategies to immobilize cadmium in the soil (medium- and long-term practices)

When there is a deficiency of Zn in the soil, soil Zn levels should be increased. Cd competes with Zn for uptake by plants, and Cd is more likely to enter plants and accumulate in cocoa beans when Zn soil concentration is low. Moreover, national local authorities can specify critical levels of Zn for cocoa-growing soils.

The application of zinc sulphate is carried out with fertilization conducted annually at the cocoa plantation, according to the requirements of the crop and the Zn content of the soil. However, if zinc sulphate is added at high rates to inhibit Cd uptake from higher Cd soils (e.g. 25 kg Zn/ha), soil acidification could occur, requiring addition of limestone to counteract the effects of the acidification.

The most effective method developed to date to decrease Cd bioavailability is through liming the soil when soil pH is below six. Liming is an agronomic management practice that reduces Cd uptake by cocoa trees cultivated on highly acidic soils, and its addition also might improve nutrition and production of cocoa trees. However, it is important to verify that added lime does not contain cadmium.

Soil pH should be managed with a goal of pH>6, but if Cd levels in the soil are high, a higher pH may be needed to reduce Cd accumulation by cocoa trees. However,

the pH should not be so high that it reduces the absorption of desirable minerals and micronutrients. Addition of Zn sulphate through fertilization also may be needed to ensure Zn levels are maintained.

Apply lime in low doses (3 t/ha/year), preferably as dolomite $\text{CaMg}(\text{CO}_3)_2$, to gradually increase the pH and incorporate Ca and Mg, which are essential for the growth of cocoa trees. This can help precipitate Cd and decrease its bioavailability. Over liming should be avoided as this can reduce micronutrient bioavailability.

A greater amount of soil organic matter may increase soil Cd adsorption and thus may help to decrease Cd in cocoa beans, based on field studies. The use of organic fertilizers such as treated manure from stabled livestock, or compost, increases the organic matter content of the soil and improves its microbiological activity.

For a successful cocoa production, it is vital to supplement the soil with phosphate, because tropical soils have a very limited natural phosphate content. This can be best done via the use of organic fertilizers, which have a high phosphorous bioavailability and a low cadmium content. As phosphate fertilizers or sedimentary phosphorous rock may contain high cadmium concentrations, they should only be used when they have a demonstrated low cadmium content, and they should in any case comply with cadmium limits established by national or regional competent authorities.

In general, the formula for the ratio of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium in NPK fertilizers to be applied to cocoa crops will vary according to the age of the plant and the characteristics of the soil. The heavy metal content of fertilizers needs to be verified through analysis prior to application to soil to ensure that Cd content is low.

The application of soil amendments (magnesium, sulphate, dolomitic limestone, vinasse, zeolite, humus, charcoal, calcium sulphate $[\text{CaSO}_4]$, cane by-products [bagasse] and zinc sulphate $[\text{ZnSO}_4]$), can help decrease Cd concentrations in cocoa beans. The choice of amendments varies depending on the characteristics of the soils.

Vinasse is a source of K that promotes the installation of fungi that form mycorrhizas in the roots of the cocoa tree, thereby increasing the efficiency of P nutrition and immobilizing Cd.

Lime and sugar cane cake can reduce the bioavailability of Cd in the soil profile. Zeolite is another option in soils with high sand content and in clay-textured soils. Apatite (or rock phosphate) which can contain Cd, should be avoided where possible.

Biochar has been shown to reduce the uptake of Cd in cocoa beans. The reduction rates in uptake of Cd through the use of biochar are comparable to liming and can have an additive influence on liming.

Biochar and compost have significant effects on soil physico-chemical features, metal bioavailability (including Cd), and enzyme activities in heavy metal-polluted soil. Therefore, they help to mitigate Cd concentrations in the cocoa trees.

The cocoa plant genotypes identified with low bioaccumulation of Cd have the

potential to be used for Cd mitigation through grafting plants onto rootstocks with low cadmium uptake and obtaining new varieties that are not as prone to the absorption of Cd.

4.2.3 Avoiding further cadmium contamination of the soil (recommended practices in the short and medium term)

To reduce soil Cd contributions, remove pruned cocoa and shade tree limbs and leaves from the ground as they could contain Cd, which can be released into the top layers of the soil during decomposition. The practice should include removing pruned materials in orchards with high foliar Cd levels.

Avoid the application of sewage sludge.

Avoid burial or incineration of household waste, which can contain metals, including Cd. Their burial can contaminate the groundwater, while incineration can cause contamination, release volatile metals into the atmosphere and consequently pollute soils.

National or regional authorities should consider limiting main polluting industrial activities near cocoa plantations, such as non-ferrous mining and smelting, metal-using industries, leather tanning, coal combustion and phosphate fertilizer manufacturing.

4.3

Post-harvest phase (recommended practices in the short and medium term)

The process of fermentation of cocoa beans is an important practice that producers carry out to develop chocolate flavours.

Mucilage draining improves the sensorial quality of cocoa beans in the process of fermentation reducing its acidity. Studies have shown that mucilage draining times up to 12, 24 or 36 hours reduces the cadmium concentrations, without affecting the organoleptic quality of the cocoa.

It is a recommended practice to make sure that during the fermentation of cocoa beans they are not contaminated with smoke, or with gases coming from dryers or vehicles, or industrial discharges.

Saccharomyces cerevisiae is a yeast strain, which absorbs Cd during cocoa fermentation. Therefore, experimental studies have shown that increasing the concentration of *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* during the fermentation process can help to reduce the cadmium content in the beans.

After fermentation, cocoa beans should be dried on clean solid surfaces to avoid contamination by soil.

During storage, contamination of cocoa beans due to spills of fuels, exhaust gases or fumes should be prevented.

4.4

Transport phase (recommendations)

It is recommended to carry out good practices during transportation of cocoa beans:

- Cover loading/unloading areas to protect from rain.
- Ensure that vehicles are well maintained and thoroughly cleaned.
- Ensure that tarpaulins/covers are clean and free from damage.
- Ensure that containers have not been used for chemicals or noxious substances and that they are well maintained and clean.
- Ensure that the humidity levels are as low as possible by using ventilated containers if available and cardboard/kraft paper lining.
- For bagged cocoa: load bags carefully and cover with materials to absorb condensation.
- For cocoa in bulk: use a sealable plastic liner if possible and ensure that it is kept clear of the roof of the container.
- Ensure that the ventilation holes in containers are free from clogging.
- Ensure to the extent feasible that the cocoa is not exposed to temperature fluctuations and that it is not stored near noxious materials.

Notes

¹ FAO and WHO. 2001. *Code of Practice Concerning Source Directed Measures to Reduce Contamination of Food with Chemicals*. Codex Code of Practice No. CXC 49-2001. Codex Alimentarius Commission. Rome.



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