

Redefining the Ivorian Smallholder Cocoa Farmer’s Role in Qualitative Research: From Passive Contributions to Passionate Participation

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Provider and researchers from the University of Cocody in Abidjan were faced with the challenge of adapting a user-centered approach to qualitative research endeavors in Côte d’Ivoire. Our cross-cultural team with expertise from multiple disciplines developed a novel approach for the cocoa sector. In observations, interviews, and co-creation groups with cocoa farmers, we explored concepts of success, productivity, and profitability both orally and visually. The resulting quality and level of farmer participation was enhanced, therefore improving research results.

This case study is based on our experiences conducting ethnographic research and co-creation sessions in several rural Ivorian communities.

In February 2015 in a small village in the Southwest of Côte d’Ivoire, INSITUM global research lead Hannah Calderón and Marie Bai, her translator, sat among a small circle of Ivorian cocoa farmers and their friends, listening to one very frustrated farmer talk about the responsibility big chocolate manufacturers and exporters had to him and the community.

Hannah understood French and could even communicate to some extent, but after her last trip to Côte d’Ivoire, she knew that she would need a translator to help her navigate country-specific slang and overcome the racial and cultural distances she felt between herself and the farmers and their communities. This time, she had found the perfect person for the job. Marie was a student of economics at a local university in Chicago, but she grew up in Côte d’Ivoire.

Earlier that morning, Hannah and Marie had met with Dr. Landry Niava and his team of local researchers to review the plan for the day. Landry and two others would go to one village, while Hannah and Marie would go with the other three local researchers to a village about 45 minutes further down the road. Hannah reassured the team that she was not there to supervise their work, but that she and Marie would be “floating,” so they could observe what was being said and also so the interviewees wouldn’t be too inhibited by Hannah’s presence. She reminded them of how a young girl they had interviewed the summer before for another project had been reserved and had even begun to cry. Finally, the team had realized that the girl was afraid that Hannah, *la blanche* (“the white woman”), wanted to get her father in trouble for letting her work on the farm. Some of the participants could be wary of her presence and the minute Hannah sensed this, she and Marie would have to remove themselves. They might go observe another interview or intercept some people hanging around the village for a less formal conversation instead.

As they sat alongside Landry, who was interviewing a participant who cared for the cocoa farm with her eldest son and several sharecroppers, Hannah sensed a familiar shyness

in the woman. She noticed that the woman was avoiding eye contact with her specifically, so she motioned to Marie that it was time to leave. They found their driver and headed back up the road to the other village. The other researchers had already gone off with their interviewees to their houses and farms, so Hannah and Marie walked around the village intercepting whomever was available and comfortable speaking with them.

Around 3:30 p.m., they headed over to the tree in the village where the younger farmers and their friends often met up to drink and talk. Marie asked politely if they could join the group and soon they were part of the conversation asking questions and responding to the farmers' curious inquiries about their long trip from the United States to their village.

"Hannah wants to know why cocoa farming is not as profitable as it used to be," Marie asked the group after a few farmers had voiced this opinion.

"The price is not as good anymore and the Swollen Shoot disease is ravaging our crops," one farmer said.

"What are farmers doing to counteract Swollen Shoot?" Marie asked for Hannah.

"Nothing. There's nothing we can do. It comes and it kills all the plants and it's expensive to replant them. There's no cure for Swollen Shoot. We need money if you white people want to keep eating chocolate," the same frustrated farmer from earlier exclaimed. He then looked at Hannah for a response.

"Hannah doesn't work for the chocolate companies," Marie explained. "They've hired her to come understand what it's like here and to understand your thoughts and opinions."

"Well, tell her to tell the companies then. Anyway, the companies need us and they are running out of chocolate. If we wait until all the cocoa runs out, they will give us the money we need to replant our farms," he retorted.

Hannah frowned. She hoped the co-creation group they had planned for later that week would be productive. If all of the farmers were so discouraged they couldn't even fathom solutions, the session might not work as well as they had anticipated. She and the team would need to regroup later that evening to make sure their approach would yield the results they were looking for.

INSITUM Company History

INSITUM is a global strategic research and innovation consultancy. The company was in 2002 by two Mexican designers who graduated from the master's program at IIT's Institute of Design in Chicago. Over the years, they were able to establish offices across the United States and Latin America. With its foundation in human-centered design, INSITUM quickly became known to its clients for robust research capabilities that lead to impactful services, products, brands and experiences grounded in people's actual needs and behaviors.

Today Insitum's Chicago-based U.S. office is contracted by clients across a wide variety of industries to conduct everything from human-centered research to strategic workshops to prototyping and design. Insitum's U.S. office primarily serves multinational Fortune 500 companies. More recently, it has been engaged to work in the agricultural development sector in rural Latin America and Africa.

Research and Service Design in the Cocoa Sector

For over half a decade, West Africa has been the primary producer of cocoa. Farmers in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana currently produce more than 70% of the global cocoa supply. The majority are smallholder farmers. With less than 10 hectares of land, they are extremely susceptible to a variety of threats, resulting in low yields and low profit from cocoa farming. This reality, in combination with land shortage, mass migration to cities and other global trends, is making cocoa farming much less attractive and feasible as a profitable livelihood for West Africans.

Recently, multiple constituents in the cocoa sector have publicly recognized that the world is running out of cocoa. Despite countless attempts by philanthropic institutions and individual companies to affect scalable change in cocoa farming communities, a cocoa shortage still remains imminent. The theory of change is often used in the cocoa sector to gauge progress towards combatting this reality. Impact is measured by conducting a baseline community study to establish existing conditions. An intervention is then introduced to part of this community and changes are monitored over time to determine impact. The majority of the data collected for both baseline and monitoring purposes is quantitative. Generally, there is a small qualitative data collection portion. In the past, the qualitative research has involved traditional focus groups resulting in lengthy research papers. While the findings of these qualitative studies may often be highly detailed and descriptive, they do not always translate easily into actionable next steps or insights that inform new solutions. INSITUM was contracted by a consortium of companies looking to remedy this issue. The company adapted its human-centered research approach to design two studies involving cocoa farmers in Côte d'Ivoire in 2014 and 2015. This case study focuses on the second of these studies conducted for the World Cocoa Foundation, a non-profit focused on cocoa sustainability from three perspectives – people, profit and planet. The World Cocoa Foundation brings together over 110 private sector companies active in the cocoa and chocolate value chain. Their membership includes large, medium and small chocolate makers and cocoa exporter/process companies. This particular study was commissioned on behalf of the World Cocoa Foundation's pre-eminent strategy for cocoa sustainability called CocoaAction, "a commitment by participating cocoa and chocolate companies and producing country governments to work together toward a truly sustainable cocoa industry" (World Cocoa Foundation, 2014).

Local Partners

To conduct the research most effectively, INSITUM recognized the need for a local partner. It forged a relationship with a group of sociologists from the University of Cocody led by Dr. Landry Niava. In the cocoa sector, research vendors like INSITUM are often contracted in the country where the cocoa is manufactured. Rather than traveling to the country of origin, these research institutions often utilize local teams on the ground in West Africa to collect the raw data. These vendors, who have not been involved in the fieldwork and do not have extensive local knowledge, then attempt to conduct the analysis and reporting themselves. With this approach, the nuances and intuitions of those actually interacting with the interviewees and observing environments can get lost. To avoid these pitfalls, INSITUM developed a blended-team approach. Insitum's U.S. team members and local research partners worked hand-in-hand — from research design all the way through to analysis and report delivery. This approach helped bridge cultural gaps and incorporate both global and

local perspectives into the research findings in way that was still easily digestible and relevant for its clients.

Insitum's Dilemma

Landry and his team were instrumental in providing a nuanced understanding of the research fatigue plaguing Ivorian cocoa farmers. These farmers have been asked to share information about themselves in study after study (both quantitative and qualitative). They have received team after team into their communities and shared their opinions, but when a new program or service is rolled out, it is difficult for them to observe any direct positive link between their research contributions and the program designs. Many guidelines introduced by certification and other programs are at direct odds with farmers' traditions and beliefs (e.g., anti-child labor campaigns and cutting down old cocoa trees). This has resulted in farmers feeling betrayed, marginalized and even patronized after sharing their daily lives with researchers.

Developing a Culturally-Relevant Approach

To address this, Hannah, Landry and team used their collective cross-cultural knowledge and expertise from multiple disciplines. They incorporated participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and co-creation, as well as past experience to design their methodology. Similar to co-creation methods used in the business world, PRA approaches give rural communities the agency to conduct their own appraisal, analysis and action (Chambers, 1994). According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), customers who participate in co-designing a product or service feel more ownership and connection to that product or service. Companies and their customers and/or stakeholders can create value together, making user experiences more relevant to customers. INSITUM often uses co-creation with its Fortune 500 clients and their customers. Activities in these sessions generally require participants to read and complete worksheets in small groups or follow along as participants and/or facilitators scribble notes onto a whiteboard and/or Post-it Notes. Conducting similar activities with rural smallholder farmers, most of whom are unable to read or write presented a new conundrum.

The INSITUM team had decided that purpose of these sessions was not simply to understand farmers' current situations, but also to work together with them to imagine new interventions. It wanted to paint a picture of a better future from their point of view. So, Hannah, Landry and the other researchers discussed options for how to produce this outcome. The local team had extensive experience conducting focus groups with farmers and community members, but they had not gone beyond the descriptive to actually generating solutions with their participants. Hannah had experience conducting co-creation sessions and knew that the generative nature of these lengthy sessions would make it difficult for farmers to follow along and build off of each other's ideas.

Inspired by a strategic facilitation workshop she had just attended, Hannah had an idea. What if they were to use completely visual mind maps and other visual facilitation techniques on a board during the session? Everything would have to be depicted in pictures rather than words. Landry and his team were taken aback by this idea, as they had never done this before. But they were also excited and this stimulated new ideas for the individual interviews they were planning to conduct, as well. They came up with the idea of creating

cards of different farming imagery to use as an icebreaker and stimulus for an activity during the individual interviews. As a team, the group began practicing and honing its visual facilitation skills. Academically trained in sociology, Landry and his team were nervous that their artistic skills would cause the farmers to think they were not qualified to be conducting research, but Hannah urged them to do their best and test it out. The most important thing was to communicate an idea to the group and have a visual symbol that could act as a collective reference for everyone present when people referred back to the idea later in the session.

During the debrief meeting after the first day of research, Hannah and Marie told the group about their encounter with the frustrated farmers. Hannah was worried that farmers with negative feelings might derail the conversation in the co-creation groups if they were not careful. Landry and the team reassured her that they had not encountered this during the individual interviews, but they were worried that it might be problematic during times when the farmers would be divided for small group work. They suggested having the director of the local cooperative present for the small group work to help them navigate any issues that might arise.

“Ok, let’s test it out and see how it goes. We can always make adjustments for the next co-creation groups if things don’t go to our liking,” Hannah told the team.

Landry looked confident as he prepared to facilitate the first co-creation group. Hannah and Marie took a seat behind the circle of chairs they had laid out for the farmers. As the farmers walked into the room, Marie nudged Hannah. She had noticed the same farmer they had encountered the day before who told them that it was the companies’ responsibility to fund the rehabilitation of his cocoa farm. He was already asking Landry how long this session would take and he was not pleased with the response. He sat down, peering down at his phone and closing off his body to the rest of the group. This did not bode well, Hannah thought. Landry went around the room having each farmer introduce himself or herself and, as they had practiced, he had the farmers talk about their favorite traditional meals, as well. The farmers began to smile shyly as they talked about their favorite meats and sauces, but the vocal farmer remained checked out.

“Let’s talk about what it means to be a successful cocoa farmer. I’m going to draw everything you say up on the board here for you to see,” Landry addressed the group.

The farmers began suggesting symbols of success. As they talked, Landry repeated their contributions and explained what he was drawing on the board.

Ok, so you said that a successful farmer has a lot of food to provide for the family, so I’m going to draw a big fish, because my ethnicity likes fish.”

The farmers began to laugh as they began contributing more openly.

“Ok, so now let’s talk about the problems that farmers who can’t quite reach success are facing,” Landry said.

The farmers were laughing and building off each other’s answers now and the frustrated farmer Hannah and Marie had recognized was laughing and looking very interested in the conversation. He began making more productive contributions, eager to see how the doctor would interpret his responses through drawings.

“Ok, so you said that a less successful farmer uses all his money drinking and has no food for his family, so I’ll draw a drunk farmer. And remember how we said that a successful farmer has a lot of food for his family? So now for this farmer with no food, I’ll draw a very, very, very tiny fish. And you said he has to share it with his many, many family members so

I'll draw them as well and we can see how this farmer has to divide this tiny little fish among his entire family.”

As Landry divided the farmers into groups to envision solutions to the some of the key problems they had outlined, Hannah was pleasantly surprised by the quality of responses they were getting. She was no longer worried, but rather giddy with excitement to see what kinds of solutions the frustrated farmer she had encountered the day before would propose to combat his problems with Swollen Shoot.

Project Outcomes

Observations, individual interviews, farm tours and co-creation groups were conducted in six villages across three different regions in Côte d'Ivoire. Insitum's Ivorian research team became more comfortable with the co-creation method as the work progressed. With each group came more positive results. In one community, the cooperative members became so excited by the farmers' ideas that they pledged to begin work on some of them on their own without the help of CocoaAction.

Research findings, initial ideas developed by farmers and recommendations for next steps were presented to the World Cocoa Foundation and the CocoaAction company members in June of 2015. Several members were impressed with the results, recognizing the uniqueness of the findings compared with past studies. One member noted that some of the ideas and recommendations were completely “new thinking” for the industry. The World Cocoa Foundation is currently working to identify opportunities to further develop some of the farmers' ideas to help refine existing programs and services and design and test new ones for the future. They are also working on incorporating more co-creation with farmers into future service design initiatives.

Hannah Pick Calderón is a Project Lead at INSITUM. Her background in sociolinguistics gives her the unique ability to develop insights that are critical in forging opportunities and business strategies for clients. She holds a master's degree in sociolinguistics and a bachelor's degree in linguistics and cognitive science.

Landry Niava holds a PhD in Sociology from the University Felix Houphouët Boigny. He is a consultant for several organizations including the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF), the International Cocoa Initiative (ICI), Tulane University, etc. Dr. Niava focuses on social issues in the cocoa sector and health in Côte d'Ivoire.

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