

Life is tough but sweet, says Comfort Kumeah, 62, a Fairtrade cocoa farmer in Ghana.

I wake up and smell the chocolate

At 5.30, I wake with the light. I live alone now, but as a woman in a Ghanaian community, it's still my job to sweep the red dust from the house and the compound. Next thing, I take a cold bath. The water is in buckets, collected from the sky, and I tip it all over me. Then I polish my clay stove and light the fire to make porridge.

I live in Mim, a small village in the Ashanti region. I was a teacher for 39 years. When I retired I acquired 20 acres of land from my husband's family. It's important to me to have something to hand to my children when I'm dead. The farm is about a half-hour's walk away and I set out at 7.30, wearing my old work clothes and my wellington boots. They are blessed things. They protect from biting insects and sharp stones, and many people want them. I take matches, palm oil and some cooking pots in my basket; when I'm hungry I fetch water from the stream that crosses my land and I prepare a fire. Then I pick plantain and cocoa yarn and boil them for lunch.

The cocoa harvest starts in

October and ends around May, with another light harvest in July and August. When the pods change from green to yellowish they are ripe. For two days I cut those in reach with a machete and the high ones with a sharp knife. On the third day I ask friends and relatives to help; the men cut the pods open, the women and children scrape the beans into baskets. We spread the beans on banana leaves and cover them. The fermentation gives the chocolate its flavour. Every bean has to be turned, and the smell changes as they go from white to brown. On the seventh day we bring the beans back to Mim, sack by sack on our heads, and dry them in the sun for a week. A well-dried cocoa bean, pressed between two fingers, will crush.

Each farmer has a passbook to record weight and payment. In the whole of Ghana, only Kuapa Kokoo – it means "good cocoa farming" – is certified Fairtrade. The farmers'



“My wellington boots are blessed things. They protect from biting insects and sharp stones. Many people want them.”

union is made up of 1,300 village societies that elect local representatives. I was voted chair of the farmers' trust and national secretary for the union; once a year I attend a conference to vote on how the Fairtrade premium is spent. Last year we bought a palm-nut crusher and we sell the red oil on the market.

Before, I was always cheated. Purchasing clerks would come and weight the beans and you never knew if their scales were correct, as no one checked them. Some embezzled the money instead of paying it to the farmers. Now the whole village votes for a recorder, who weighs the beans. Francis, our recorder, is the most trusted man in Mim.

We are the only farmers who also own 45% of our own chocolate company, Divine. So if people eat a lot of Divine chocolate, we get much dividends! The first year we got very little. The second year it was more, and we voted to buy machetes because all we had were old, broken tools; 52,000 were bought and distributed to members. Owning this company has given cocoa farmers a voice for the first time.

When I come back from the farm I wash and change and light my fire to prepare supper – boiled yam or rice or *kenkey* (fermented maize balls) in plantain leaves – before church at 7.30. We sing, dance and clap. On the way home I hear all the news. Ghanaians love

greetings, and shout “Hello! Hello” and shake your hand whenever they pass.

My husband died several years ago but I cannot be lonely in Mim. I'm mother to five children who all help. But my youngest, Philip, died on March 11 last year, aged 23. He was ill just one day, and it broke my heart. I think of him every day. The doctors said it was TB. I don't know, but I have to thank God it wasn't me, because if I die, what would the rest do? Philip was Wednesday-born (*Kwaku*). Exactly a week after he died, my eldest daughter, Dinah, gave birth to a boy and the whole village was shouting: “*Kwaku* he has come back! You mustn't cry, because Philip has come back!”

A cocoa farmer's life is hard. In the lean season, we have no income. Also, cocoa is controlled by climate. Drought followed by too much rain causes fungus and rot, and then every farmer is poor. Last year I produced 15 sacks of beans, which I sold for 138 Ghanaian cedis each (around £64). I've saved money for my children's education but my own needs are few: clothes, soap and toothpaste. Generally, you know, women are strong. Last year more women than men were voted onto the Kuapa Kokoo national executive and now hold some of the most senior positions. I think I'm a role model for young women. They say: “There's Comfort, I can do that.”

Darkness falls very quickly in Africa – the sun is gone by 6.00 pm and I am in my bed by 8. I love my clean sheets. If someone had said to me when I was a teacher, “Comfort, one day you'll be an ambassador for Divine.” I would have doubted them, but God has a role for me, I know. I always pray before I sleep, and thank God for taking care of me, my children and my company. I never feel dissatisfied with my life. I am surrounded by beauty, I eat well and I am free.

**Interview: Caroline Scott
Photograph: Aubrey Wade**