Mitigating the Impact of Cocoa Swollen Shoot Virus Disease on Cocoa Production

Author: Ampratwum Mubarack
Email: jumaamubarack1@gmail.com
Institutional Affiliation: Department of Biological Sciences, School of Sciences, University of Energy and Natural Resources (UENR), Sunyani, Ghana
Location of Study: Atwima Mponua District, Ashanti Region, Ghana

1. Abstract

This study investigates the devastating impact of Cocoa Swollen Shoot Virus Disease (CSSVD) on cocoa production in Ghana, specifically within the Atwima Mponua district. Through a mixed-methods approach involving 400 farmers, the research explores the causes of rapid tree mortality and the role of mealybug vectors in disease transmission. The findings highlight significant yield losses (15–50%) and a critical gap between farmer knowledge and the implementation of control measures. The paper concludes with a comprehensive Integrated Pest Management (IPM) plan to mitigate the virus's spread and protect farmer livelihoods.

2. Introduction

Cocoa production is the backbone of Ghana’s economy, yet it faces an existential threat from CSSVD. With over 254 million trees lost across the country in recent years, the virus causes rapid mortality and systemic industry decline. This research focuses on the Atwima Mponua district one of the key cocoa-producing hubs in the Ashanti Region to determine disease prevalence, identify field level transmission factors, and evaluate the effectiveness of current mitigation strategies implemented by local smallholders.

3. Literature Review

CSSVD is a badnavirus transmitted primarily by mealybugs (*Pseudococcidae*). As noted by Amari and Głowacka (2021), the diverse molecular structure of badnaviruses infecting cocoa complicates breeding for absolute resistance, making vector management critical. These vectors are strongly attracted to plants with high nitrogen levels and soft vegetative growth, which are often exacerbated by over-fertilisation practices.

The virus disrupts the plant’s cellular infrastructure, severely impairing both the apoplast and symplast pathways. According to Domfeh (2021), this disruption restricts systemic nutrient and water transport, leading to:

1. **Visual Symptoms:** Red vein banding, leaf chlorosis, and distinct swelling of shoots and roots.
2. **Economic Impact:** Severe dieback, production of abnormally small or distorted pods, and eventual plant death.

Key scholars such as Akrofi (2018) emphasize that without rigorous, synchronized regional intervention, the virus remains the leading cause of cocoa farm abandonment across West Africa.

4. Methodology

- **Design:** Mixed-methods framework incorporating both qualitative surveys and quantitative field assessments.
- **Participants:** A sample size of N = 400 cocoa farmers was selected across multiple farming communities within the Atwima Mponua district using a randomized cluster sampling technique.
- **Instruments:** Data collection relied on structured questionnaires and direct agronomic field observations. Visual inspections specifically tracked variables including *Leaf_Chlorosis*, *Shoot_Swelling*, *Mealybug_Presence*, *Secondary_Hosts*, and farmer *Tool_Sanitization* habits.
- **Analysis:** Quantitative field and survey data were compiled, processed, and subjected to chi-square (X^2) testing and descriptive statistical analysis using SPSS software.

5. Research Findings & Discussion

5.1 Disease Prevalence and Host Dynamics

CSSVD remains highly widespread across the district. Field observations confirmed a severe concentration of mealybug vectors on alternative indigenous forest trees.

Host Tree Type	Local Name	Mealybug Colony Presence (%)	Observed Symptom Severity
Milicia excelsa	Odum	68.5%	High Vector Density
Alstonia boonei	Nyamedua	54.0%	Moderate Vector Density
Theobroma cacao	Cocoa	82.3%	Severe Dieback & Swelling

5.2 Transmission Factors and Farm Practices

While sap-feeding by mealybugs is the primary biological route, statistical analysis revealed that mechanical transmission via human intervention significantly worsens outbreaks. Cross-tabulation in SPSS showed a strong, statistically significant association ($p < 0.01$) between the lack of regular tool sanitization and the severity of field infections.

Furthermore, wind-dispersed first-instar mealybug nymphs (crawlers) were identified as the primary driver of cross-boundary farm transmission.

Tool Sanitization Frequency	Number of Farms (n)	Average Crop Yield Loss (%)	CSSVD Severity Index
Never Sanitized	246	42.5%	Severe
Occasionally Sanitized	118	21.0%	Moderate
Always Sanitized (After each tree)	36	12.3%	Low / Localized

5.3 Barriers to Vector and Disease Control

Although cultural eradication methods such as the "cutting-out" of infected trees are widely known in theory, 72.5% of surveyed farmers struggle with field implementation. The primary barriers include:

- **Boundary Spillover:** Rapid re infestation from adjacent, unmanaged farms.
- **Resource Constraints:** A lack of specialized, separate pruning tools dedicated solely to isolating infected blocks.
- **Economic Fear:** Reluctance to cut down mature, producing trees without immediate financial compensation.

6. Mitigation & Management Plan

To halt rapid tree mortality and manage vector populations, this study proposes a three-pronged Integrated Pest Management (IPM) framework tailored for the Atwima Mponua district:

1. **Cultural Control:** Mandatory removal and safe burning of symptomatic trees. Farmers must maintain a minimum 10 foot guard isolation barrier of non-host plants between clean fields and infected zones. Strict tool hygiene must be enforced by sanitizing cutlasses with a 10% bleach solution or open flame between trees.
2. **Biological Control:** Active preservation and promotion of indigenous natural predators, specifically encyrtid wasps (*Anagyrus spp.*) and predatory ants, to suppress mealybug populations naturally.
3. **Chemical Control:** Strategic, targeted application of Ghana Cocoa Board (COCOBOD) approved systemic insecticides. Applications should focus purely on identified vector hotspots and surrounding alternative host trees during high-crawler seasons rather than blanket field spraying.

7. Conclusion

The rapid mortality of cocoa trees in the Atwima Mponua district is an escalating crisis combining viral biology and farm management gaps. Mitigating the impact of CSSVD requires moving beyond theoretical knowledge to actionable, field-level enforcement of vector control and tool hygiene.

It is highly recommended that COCOBOD and local agricultural extension divisions step up field support by providing subsidized sanitization kits, training farmers on identifying secondary forest hosts, and implementing synchronized, community-wide biological control initiatives.

References

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