Enabel

Executive summary

Evaluation of the project to strengthen the capacity and sustainability of cocoa cooperatives in Ivory Coast to improve the living conditions of their farmer members: Sustainable Cocoa

Delegation Agreement: CIV21002

Ivory Coast

Aide à la Décision Economique (ADE s.a.)

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1 Presentation of the evaluation

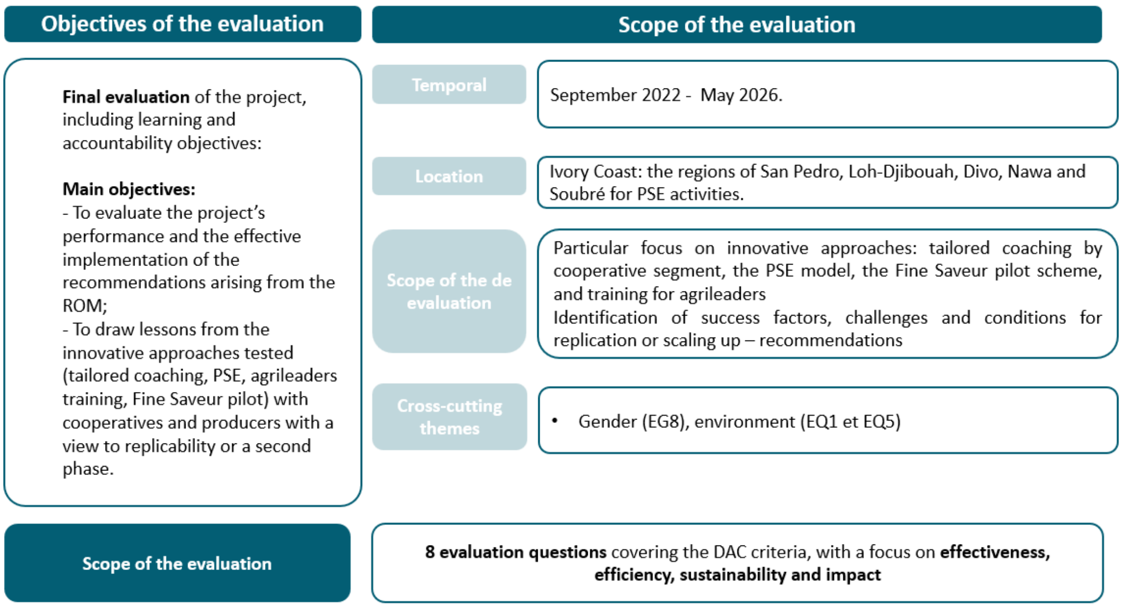
The final evaluation of the project “Strengthening the capacity and sustainability of cocoa cooperatives in Ivory Coast to improve the living conditions of their farmer members – Sustainable Cocoa” was carried out to assess the performance, results and sustainability prospects of the action’s implemented between September 2022 and May 2026 by Enabel with funding from the European Union.

The project forms part of the Team Europe Initiative (TEI) Sustainable Cocoa and aims to support the sustainable transformation of the Ivorian cocoa sector by strengthening cooperatives, improving cocoa quality, developing agroforestry models, trialing Payment for Environmental Services (PES) mechanisms, developing supplementary income streams and preparing stakeholders for the growing demands of international markets, notably the EU Regulation on Sustainable Development (RDUE) and the ARS 1000 standard.

The evaluation has a dual objective of accountability and learning. It aims to assess the project’s performance against the OECD DAC’s evaluation criteria, to analyse its contribution to strengthening the sustainability of cocoa cooperatives, and to evaluate the relevance and effectiveness of the main innovations implemented. It also seeks to identify the factors that have facilitated or hindered the achievement of results, in order to draw useful lessons for future projects aimed at developing the cocoa sector and to formulate operational and strategic recommendations for the various stakeholders concerned.

The evaluation covers all components of the project, ranging from strengthening the governance of cooperatives and their financial and commercial professionalisation to the development of Village Savings and Credit Associations (AVECs), income-generating activities and economic diversification initiatives. It also analyses the actions undertaken to improve cocoa quality through the “Fine Saveur” initiative, the development of Payments for Environmental Services (PES) mechanisms, the promotion of agroforestry and the conservation of natural resources, as well as efforts to promote the economic inclusion of women and young people. Finally, it examines the project’s contribution to strategic and institutional dialogue on the sustainability of the cocoa sector in Ivory Coast.

Figure 1 : Objectives and scope of the evaluation



Methodologically, the evaluation is based on a mixed-methods approach combining a literature review, individual interviews with key stakeholders, focus groups with beneficiaries, field visits and a contribution analysis. This approach has made it possible to cross-check information from different sources and to rigorously assess the project’s contribution to the changes observed at the level of cooperatives, producers and the sector as a whole.

2 Findings and conclusions

2.1 Summary of the project performance assessment

The evaluation concludes that the "Sustainable Cocoa" project has made a significant contribution to the professionalisation of Ivorian cocoa cooperatives and to the transition towards more sustainable production models. The action enabled the successful trialing of several promising innovations, notably differentiated coaching, AVECs, PSE models and the Fine Saveur value chain. It also helped to strengthen the cooperatives' preparedness for international regulatory and commercial developments.

The most robust results relate to cooperative governance, financial inclusion, improvements in cocoa quality and the establishment of agroforestry schemes. However, several of these achievements remain fragile due to uneven institutional capacities, a persistent reliance on external support and uncertainties regarding long-term financing mechanisms.

A summary assessment of the DAC criteria is presented in the following table:

Relevance	A	The project directly addresses the main challenges facing the Ivorian cocoa sector: the professionalisation of cooperatives, improved incomes, adaptation to sustainability requirements, combating deforestation and economic inclusion. Its alignment with national and European priorities is particularly strong.
Coherence	A	The action demonstrates strong internal coherence across its various components (governance, finance, quality, agroforestry, financial inclusion and policy dialogue). Partnerships with Rikolto, Nitidæ, the CCC and private sector stakeholders have strengthened its external coherence.
Effectiveness	B	The majority of the expected outcomes have been achieved or partially achieved. The progress observed in terms of governance, access to financial services, financial inclusion, cocoa quality and the adoption of agroforestry practices demonstrates generally satisfactory effectiveness.
Efficiency	B	The use of personalised coaching and specialist expertise has led to significant results. However, some delays in contracting, coordination difficulties and logistical constraints have affected the efficiency of certain components.
Impact	B	The project has contributed to significant changes in the management practices of cooperatives, the quality of production, financial inclusion and the adoption of agroforestry practices. It has also influenced national discussions on the sustainability of the sector.
Sustainability	B	The project has achieved significant results in the areas of cooperative governance, financial inclusion, the professionalisation of organisations and the adoption of agroforestry practices. The AVECs, coaching schemes, compliance tools and management mechanisms introduced have real potential for sustainability. However, certain vulnerabilities remain, particularly regarding the dependence of some models on external funding, the sustainability of the PSE mechanisms and the varying capacities of the least mature cooperatives. Despite these risks, the evaluation considers that the general conditions for maintaining the main achievements are in place, justifying an overall satisfactory assessment.

2.2 Summary of findings by evaluation question

2.2.1 EQ1 – Contribution to the sustainability of cooperatives

The project has made a significant contribution to strengthening the sustainability of the beneficiary cooperatives by addressing their institutional, economic, social and environmental dimensions simultaneously. Support in the area of governance has led to a significant increase in the professionalism of management bodies, greater transparency and improved compliance with the requirements of cooperative law. Financial management systems and monitoring tools have strengthened the cooperatives' credibility among members and financial partners. On the social front, the AVECs have consolidated financial inclusion and household resilience, whilst women's participation in decision-making bodies has increased. Environmentally, the project has encouraged the adoption of agroforestry systems and developed innovative mechanisms for paying for environmental services. However, the sustainability of certain achievements remains uneven and still depends on the level of maturity of the cooperatives, as well as their ability to continue the practices introduced without external support.

2.2.2 QE2 – Professionalisation through differentiated support

The differentiated support approach is one of the project's most significant innovations. By recognising the diversity of the Ivorian cooperative sector, the project avoided a one-size-fits-all approach to support in favour of guidance tailored to the capacities and needs of each organisation. The categorisation of cooperatives into "Agoutis", "Antelopes" and "Elephants" made it possible to tailor the objectives, requirements and intensity of the coaching. The use of in-depth assessments and individualised progress plans has fostered greater ownership of governance, financial management and marketing tools. The progress observed in terms of the conduct of statutory meetings, financial planning, access to credit and commercial structuring demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach. The evaluation nevertheless highlights that some cooperatives remain vulnerable and that the sustainability of the gains made will depend heavily on the implementation of an exit strategy tailored to their actual level of maturity. However, whilst segmentation has facilitated the differentiation of objectives, the intensity of coaching and exit strategies, its operational added value appears more limited than that of individualised assessments and Mind Maps. The evaluation also highlights that the diversity of cooperative governance models could have been taken into account to a greater extent when tailoring the support provided.

2.2.3 QE3 – Added value of technical partnerships

Partnerships with Rikolto and Nitidæ were a key factor in the project's technical quality. Their involvement enabled Enabel's skills to be complemented by specialist expertise covering areas as varied as cocoa quality, community financial inclusion, agroforestry, Payments for Environmental Services and carbon finance. Rikolto played a major role in developing the AVECs, supporting agrileaders and, alongside Enabel, developing the Fine Saveur value chain, whilst Nitidæ provided essential scientific expertise for the design of agroforestry models and PES mechanisms. This complementarity enabled the development of innovative and credible tools, recognised by national stakeholders and private partners. Coordination difficulties characterised the start-up phase but were gradually resolved through enhanced dialogue between partners and improved coordination mechanisms, enabling the partnership to fully realise its technical added value.

2.2.4 QE4 – Decent income and reduced vulnerability

The project has helped to improve producers' income prospects through a combination of complementary approaches aimed at increasing the value added of production, strengthening households' economic resilience and diversifying sources of income. Progress made in cocoa quality, notably through the Fine Saveur pilot initiative (which, however, involves only 3 cooperatives and 30 producers), has helped to increase the market value of the beans and demonstrate the potential of speciality markets. The AVECs have improved access to savings and credit, promoting the development of income-generating activities and reducing households' vulnerability to economic shocks. PSE mechanisms have generated additional income linked to environmental conservation. However, households' continuing dependence on cocoa, difficulties in accessing investment finance and uncertainties surrounding the sustainability of environmental premiums still limit the prospects of a sustainable decent income for all producers. Given the exceptional rise in the global price of cocoa during the project's final year, the evaluation draws on a convergent range of factors (professionalisation of cooperatives, diversification, quality improvement, market access and capacity building) to assess the project's specific contribution.

2.2.5 QE5 – Agroecological and agroforestry transition

The evaluation shows that the project has demonstrated the feasibility of a transition to more sustainable agroforestry systems when supported simultaneously by economic incentives and high-quality technical support. Payments for Environmental Services helped to offset some of the costs and risks associated with introducing shade trees, whilst coaching schemes and agrileaders promoted the adoption of good agricultural and agroforestry practices. The scientific protocols developed by the project made it possible to measure and monetise environmental performance. The Fine Saveur supply chain has also created indirect incentives for better plantation management by linking cocoa quality to ecosystem quality. Despite these advances, several challenges remain, notably high seedling mortality in certain areas, competition from free seedling distributions, land tenure constraints and uncertainty regarding the sustainability of environmental financing mechanisms.

2.2.6 QE6 – Strategic dialogue and political influence

The project has moved beyond the scope of a simple action to become a genuine space for experimentation in the service of public policy. Through its close collaboration with the Coffee and Cocoa Council, the relevant ministries and partners of the Team Europe Initiative, it has helped to inform national discussions on the sustainability of the sector, traceability, agroforestry, the carbon market, the ARS 1000 and the RDUE. The tools developed as part of the project, notably the compliance kits, PSE models, agroforestry protocols and georeferenced atlases, serve as useful references for public decision-makers. The project also played an important role in advocating for the adaptation of the regulatory framework to the needs of speciality cocoa. The evaluation concludes that this contribution to strategic dialogue represents one of the project's most promising achievements for future scaling up.

2.2.7 QE7 – Unintended effects

The project generated several unexpected outcomes that demonstrate its ability to influence social, economic and organisational dynamics beyond the results initially sought. Among the positive outcomes, the evaluation highlights the mediating role gradually assumed by the coaches in resolving internal conflicts within the cooperatives, the strengthening of social cohesion through the AVECs, and the emergence of a new generation of rural entrepreneurs thanks to the agrileaders. Some cooperatives have also developed new ambitions for economic diversification beyond the cocoa sector. At the same time, several negative effects or tensions were observed. Disparities in access to PSE grants sometimes led to frustration between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, whilst increasing demands for formalisation met with resistance from certain traditional stakeholders. These findings highlight the importance of further integrating social and conflict management dimensions into future projects.

2.2.8 QE8 – Inclusion of women

The project has made a significant contribution to strengthening women's economic and social participation within cocoa-growing communities. The AVECs have been the main driver of this transformation by facilitating women's access to savings, credit and income-generating activities. Women account for a significant proportion of the active members of these schemes and play a leading role in the development of the micro-enterprises supported by the project. At the same time, coaching and institutional strengthening activities have helped to increase their representation on the governing bodies of the cooperatives. The evaluation also notes the emergence of female leadership role models capable of influencing practices in other organisations. Despite these advances, structural barriers remain, notably limited access to land, the low proportion of women among cooperative members, and the initial lack of an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms underpinning gender inequalities. These constraints continue to limit the full realisation of the project's transformative potential.

3 Recommendations

The experience of the “Sustainable Cocoa” project has inspired the 10 recommendations set out below. These focus on consolidating the achievements of cooperatives according to their level of maturity, strengthening the initial assessment, adapting support to different models of cooperative governance, ensuring the long-term viability of sustainability funding mechanisms, developing partnerships with the private sector, and scaling up the innovations that have been tested.

Recommendation 1	Related conclusions	Target stakeholders	Level	Priority	Type
Recommendation 1: Implement a differentiated exit strategy based on the level of maturity of the cooperatives in order to safeguard the achievements of the most vulnerable organisations and to promote the gradual empowerment of the most successful ones.	C1, C3, C8	Enabel, CCC, cooperatives	1–2	Short term	Operational
Recommendation 2: Capitalise on and institutionalise the specialised coaching approach so that it can be adopted by national support structures for the sector and umbrella organisations for cooperatives.	C2, C8	CCC, ANADER, Enabel, umbrella organisations	2	Medium term	Strategic
Recommendation 3: Systematically incorporate a broader typology of cooperatives into future programmes, including the nature of their governance and their social embeddedness, in order to tailor support mechanisms more precisely.	C1, C3	Enabel, CCC, DGD	2–4	Medium term	Strategic
Recommendation 4: Strengthen support for cooperatives to move towards diversified economic models combining cocoa, complementary agricultural activities and economic services in order to reduce their dependence on cocoa revenues.	C5, C7	Cooperatives, CCC, Enabel	1–2	Medium term	Strategic
Recommendation 5: Support the establishment of funding mechanisms tailored to cooperatives’ productive investments, particularly for local processing, agroforestry and diversification activities.	C5, C7, C8	Financial institutions, CCC, Enabel, donors	2–4	Long term	Strategic
Recommendation 6: Consolidate Payment for Environmental Services mechanisms by embedding them in longer-term contractual commitments and strengthening their alignment with national climate and forest policies.	C6	CCC, MINEF, private sector, donors	2–4	Long term	Strategic
Recommendation 7: Continue to advocate for the adaptation of the regulatory and logistical framework to facilitate the export	C4, C7	CCC, Ministry of Trade, port	2	Medium term	Strategic

and marketing of speciality cocoa produced by cooperatives.		authorities			
Recommendation 8: Institutionalise the tools developed by the project (in conjunction with ARS 1000 and RDUE, the carbon atlas and agroforestry protocols) within the national monitoring and support mechanisms for the cocoa sector.	C4, C6	CCC, MINEF, Ministry of Agriculture	2	Medium term	Strategic
Recommendation 9: Strengthen mechanisms for social mediation, conflict management and community inclusion in future programmes in order to anticipate tensions arising from economic incentives and organisational changes.	C2, C7	Enabel, cooperatives, implementing partners	1–2	Medium term	Operational
Recommendation 10: Develop a more structured gender strategy incorporating land issues, women's leadership and the economic empowerment of inclusive cooperatives in order to consolidate the progress made	C8	CCC, AFOR, Enabel, cooperatives	2	Long term	Strategic

4 Lessons learnt

The experience of the Sustainable Cocoa project highlights several key lessons:

1. The sustainable professionalisation of cooperatives relies more on local support than on the mere provision of management tools.
2. Tailored approaches yield better results than standardised schemes.
3. Economic incentives are a key driver for accelerating the adoption of agroforestry practices.
4. Multi-stakeholder partnerships provide decisive added value when they are based on a clear complementarity of expertise.
5. Financial inclusion is a powerful driver of economic and social resilience.
6. Pilot innovations must be designed from the outset with a view to scaling up.
7. Land tenure security remains an essential condition for the sustainability of agroforestry investments.
8. The integration of social and governance dimensions is just as important as technical innovations in ensuring the sustainability of change.
9. An initial phase of in-depth assessment, covering governance, leadership and the motivation of cooperatives as well as their economic performance, is essential for effectively tailoring support and minimising the risk of subsequent disengagement.
10. Sustainability programmes must identify, at a very early stage, the funding mechanisms needed to maintain the gains made once the project has ended.