



# Transforming agri-food systems through regenerative agriculture

Position Paper

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## About SNV

SNV is a global development partner, deeply rooted in the countries where we operate. We are driven by a vision of a better world: A world where across every society all people live with dignity and have equitable opportunities to thrive sustainably. To make this vision a reality, we need transformations in vital agri-food, energy, and water systems. SNV contributes by strengthening capacities and catalysing partnerships in these sectors. We help strengthen institutions and effective governance, reduce gender inequalities and barriers to social inclusion, and enable adaptation and mitigation to the climate and biodiversity crises.

Building on 60 years of experience we support our partners with our technical and process expertise and methodological rigour. We do this in more than 20 countries in Africa and Asia with a team of approximately 1,600 colleagues. By being adaptable and tailoring our approaches to these different contexts, we can contribute to impact at scale, resulting in more equitable lives for all.



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**Fast-changing global circumstances necessitate a rapid transformation of our agri-food systems.**

## Transforming agri-food systems through regenerative agriculture

### The urgent need for transformation

Over the last 100 years, the world has witnessed a significant increase in food productivity and nutrition security. Agricultural production has tripled in the last 50 years, with an eight-fold increase in trade of agricultural commodities and food<sup>1</sup>. However, this transformation has not been uniform across the globe. In Europe and the USA, the boost in food production has primarily been achieved through intensification, involving higher yields per unit of land and labour<sup>2</sup>. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), this growth has mainly been driven by the expansion of cultivated areas<sup>3</sup>.

Despite these advancements, substantial inequalities in access to quality food persist across different geographies and socio-economic groups, leading to ongoing hunger in many regions<sup>4</sup>. The global food system faces various crises that exacerbate these issues. In most intensive agricultural systems, the overuse of external inputs such as fertilisers and chemicals has resulted in declining soil health, groundwater pollution, and loss of biodiversity<sup>5</sup>. In SSA, relatively low use of external inputs on already degraded soils contributes to further degradation and the expansion of agricultural land at the expense of natural habitats has a negative impact on biodiversity<sup>6</sup>. Power structures in national and international agri-food systems present further challenges<sup>7</sup>.

Population growth, urbanisation, climate change, shifting consumption patterns, human-induced conflicts, and limited resources such as water, land, and labour demand a re-evaluation and reorganisation of our agri-food systems to ensure sustainable and equitable food production and distribution within our planetary boundaries<sup>8</sup>.

SNV's vision in agri-food centres on a sustainable and resilient agri-food system – able to deliver food security and adequate nutrition for people in all their diversity in such a way that the economic, social, and environmental bases are safeguarded for future generations.

### Towards regenerative agriculture

Research, development organisations, and the private sector in agriculture have long focused on increasing productivity and efficiency through technological advancements such as improved seeds, fertiliser technologies, and advanced management practices, as well as through achieving economies of scale<sup>9</sup>. This approach has seen substantial success in Europe, the USA, and Asia, but to a lesser extent in most SSA countries<sup>10 11</sup>.



The widely recognised negative impacts of unsustainable agricultural intensification have spurred the development of alternative approaches. The Paris Climate Agreement (2015)<sup>12</sup> and the Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (2022)<sup>13</sup> have provided directions towards more fundamental transitions in agri-food systems. The philosophy of regenerative agriculture emerged in the 1980s, alongside movements such as organic agriculture and conservation agriculture<sup>14 15</sup>. Regenerative agriculture has recently gained renewed traction and is considered a relevant global framework to guide an agri-food transition including the most typical agroecological practices<sup>16</sup>.

Although there are numerous definitions of regenerative agriculture, most definitions converge to the following:

**Regenerative agriculture includes a set of farm and land management practices, principles, and processes that restore and rebuild ecosystems' health, resilience, and biodiversity.**

**As a farming approach, it emphasises soil health improvement as the foundation of a sustainable food system, biodiversity enhancement, water management, minimal soil disturbance, integrated livestock management, crop diversity, carbon sequestration, circularity and optimum use of resources/inputs, as well as the use of renewable energy<sup>17 18 19 20</sup>.**

The ultimate objective of the approach, when adopted in local contexts is to enhance sustainable food systems environmental, social, and economic outcomes<sup>21 22 23 24</sup>.

More specifically to:

- Improve soil health, biodiversity, and water management
- Produce sufficient, nutritious, safe food on current agricultural land to ensure food security for all
- Contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation reducing the environmental footprint of agriculture
- Increase resilience to environmental, socio-economic, and market shocks
- Improve the livelihoods of small-holder, men and women farmers



# The adoption gap

The adoption of these principles varies significantly across geographic regions, farming systems, and commodities. In intensive farming systems in Europe, the USA, and Asia, niche markets for these practices have developed but have not yet become mainstream. In export commodities such as cocoa, palm oil, coffee, and tea, multinational companies have started to introduce regenerative and agroecological production principles, including associated certifications, albeit without consistency<sup>25</sup>. While many farmers in SSA are already practicing components of regenerative and agroecological principles (often by default), a large-scale, comprehensive, and technically sound adoption is lacking<sup>26</sup>.

**More than 50 years of research and extension efforts have resulted in relatively low adoption rates at smallholder farmer level of both technological advancements and productivity-enhancing practices as well as agroecological practices<sup>27</sup>.**

Although the necessary set of technical practices for increasing productivity in a more sustainable manner are known, some key factors such as short-term economic benefits, high labour requirements, land ownership, small land sizes, adequate technical information dissemination, gender social norms and current policies have limited

adoption and implementation in different contexts<sup>28</sup>. There is also limited knowledge on drivers of adoption as well as the economic benefits and costs of change in various contexts<sup>29</sup>.

Rapid and substantial progress in transforming agri-food systems requires a consolidated, joint effort by governments, private sector, research, NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) and CSOs (Civil Society Organizations) and consumers, driven and initiated by actors and coalitions of actors championing change.

## SNV's position on regenerative agriculture

### Our vision

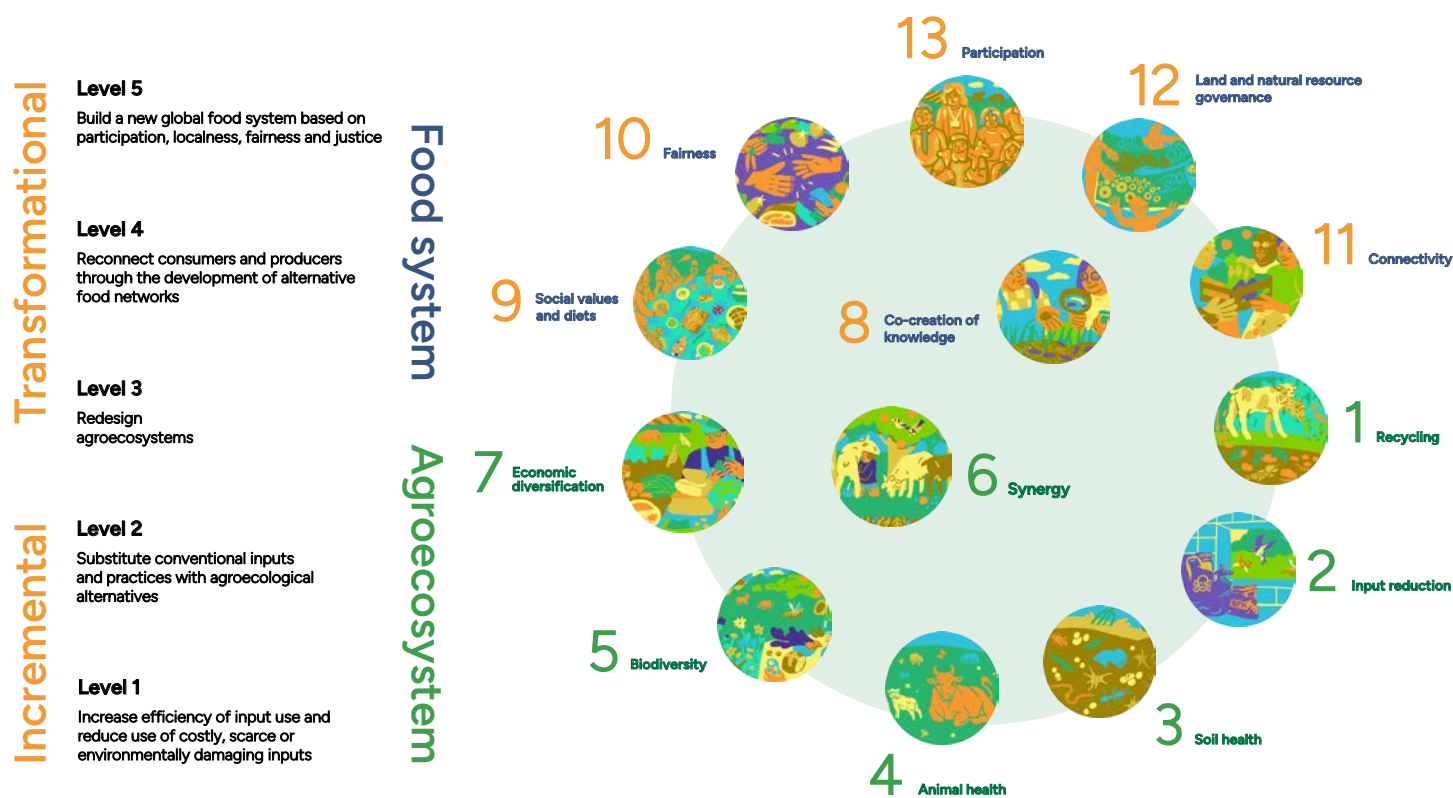
A sustainable and resilient agri-food system able to deliver food security and adequate nutrition for people in all their diversity in such a way that the economic, social, and environmental bases are safeguarded for future generations.

### Prioritised outcome

Agri-food systems transformed at farm, landscape, and agri-food system level guided by Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) 13 agroecological principles that seek to improve resource efficiency, strengthen resilience and secure social equity<sup>30</sup>.

## The five levels of transition towards sustainable food systems and the related 13 principles of agroecology

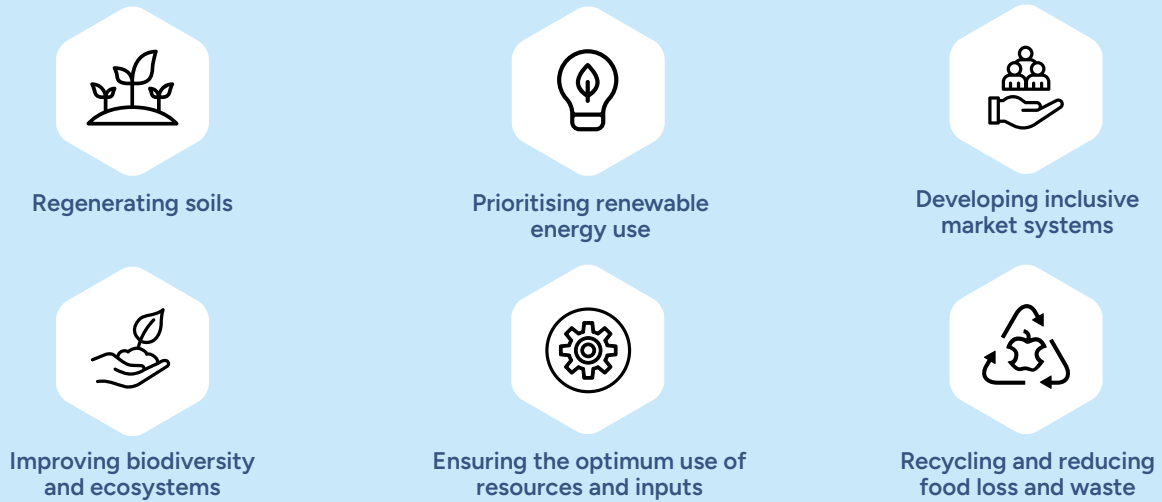
Source: Gliessman (2007) and HLPE (2019)



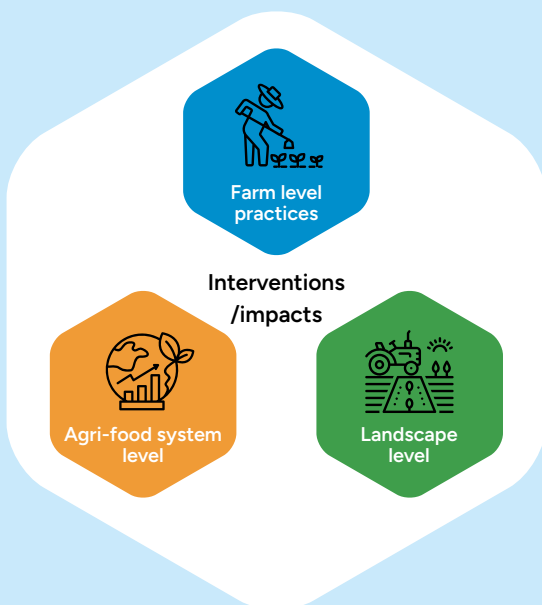


## Prioritised interventions

- Our interventions focus on the following elements for agri-food system transformation:



- SNV supports the development and implementation of innovative and context-specific practices based on FAO's 13 principles, while integrating scientific evidence, practical experiences, and local knowledge. We seek to understand the complexity and diversity of farmers, farming systems, and agri-food systems as a starting point for context-specific interventions with a focus on the following:



**Farm level practices:** reduced tillage, cover crops, intercropping, mulching, green manures, agroforestry, crop rotations, crop diversification, crop-livestock interactions, integrated pest management, integrated soil fertility management, (which combines mineral fertilisers and organic amendments such as compost, crop residues, and manure to offset nutrient depletion and build soil organic matter), improved and quality seeds, biodigesters, small-scale solar irrigation, biological nitrogen fixation.

**Landscape level:** natural resources management, improving biodiversity and ecosystems, integrated water resource management, integrated landscape management and community governance.

**Agri-food system level:** Inclusive market systems development and market diversification, healthy diets and sustainable consumption, recycling and reduced food waste, strengthening governance and institutions, policy influencing, mobilising financial resources.

- Changes and practices are selected and assessed on scalability, short- and long-term return on investments, accessibility constraints, social viability, and aspirations of actors. In addition, the required enabling environment is addressed.

## SNV's approach for widespread adoption of regenerative agriculture

**Participatory assessments and analyses.** SNV starts with in-depth, participatory assessments and analyses of current and desired agroecosystems, farm systems and practices, market systems, gender equality and social inclusion dynamics, and policy context. These inform the selection, planning, prioritisation, and scaling of relevant interventions in response to context-specific and actor-specific challenges. Participatory processes allow for a landscape focus beyond the farm systems level in determining and developing interventions and measuring impact. It ensures that we learn with men and women farmers and other actors as they pursue their development.

**Learning and evidence generation.** SNV pursues effective impact measurement through scientific results, practical evidence, and local/indigenous knowledge supported by systematic qualitative and quantitative data collection, analysis, documentation, learning, and sharing – for continuous adaptation of interventions, practices, and influence. While external evaluations have their place, we also facilitate the implementation of a self-evaluation approach, learning and adapting with and by actors. SNV, therefore, uses a mix of self-assessment tools, internationally recognised tools, technologies, practice-based standards, and outcome-based (digital) tools.

**Collaboration and partnerships.** SNV actively participates and strengthens coalitions (such as REGEN 10, Agroecology coalition and CA4SH) and other efforts to foster change and exchange experiences, results, and challenges for the widespread adoption of regenerative agriculture<sup>31</sup>. We leverage national and international partnerships to strengthen our influencing agenda by presenting recommendations based on context-specific evidence. Partnering with the private sector, for example, is crucial in making the application of regenerative agriculture practices possible by providing inputs (such as nurseries, seeds, fodder, bio-fertilisers) and technologies (equipment) but also by providing stand-alone or related agri-business services and markets.

**Landscape approach.** SNV adopts a climate-resilient landscape approach to address systemic challenges through integrated resource management, biodiversity enhancement, social inclusion, and gender equity. A landscape approach is a holistic method of managing and conserving land, water, and natural resources by considering the complex interactions between different land uses and the diverse needs of stakeholders, including local communities, governments, the private sector, and civil society organisations.



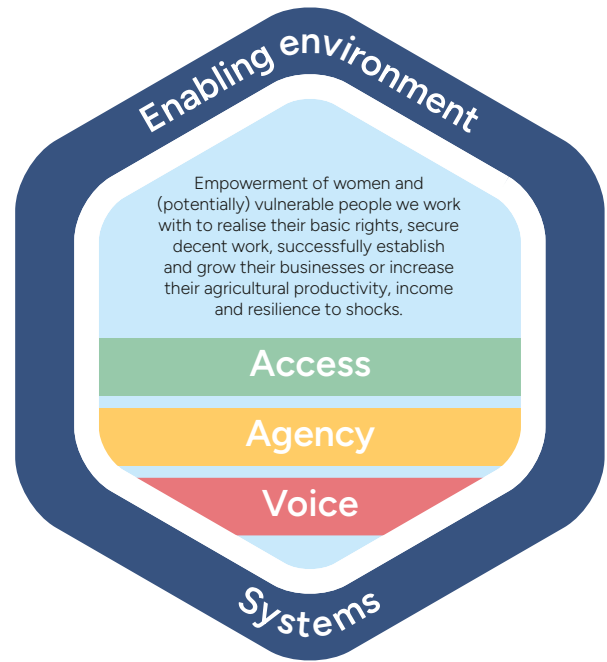
This approach identifies common solutions across agriculture, livestock, forestry, and the environment, promoting livelihood resilience and ecosystem restoration.

**A systems transformation approach.** SNV interventions adopt a systems approach to address complex challenges and achieve transformative change beyond surface solutions. As facilitators of transition processes, SNV fosters inclusive and collaborative efforts at multiple levels, linking needs to opportunities and delivering impactful outcomes and enabling conditions. We collaborate with a broad set of system actors, combining capacities, knowledge, and innovation to tackle systemic issues in the regenerative agriculture ecosystem together. Our interventions target farm production systems, market systems, and consumer-related systems. SNV aims to influence key levers for change, positively impacting policies, practices, resource flows, relationships, power dynamics, and social norms.

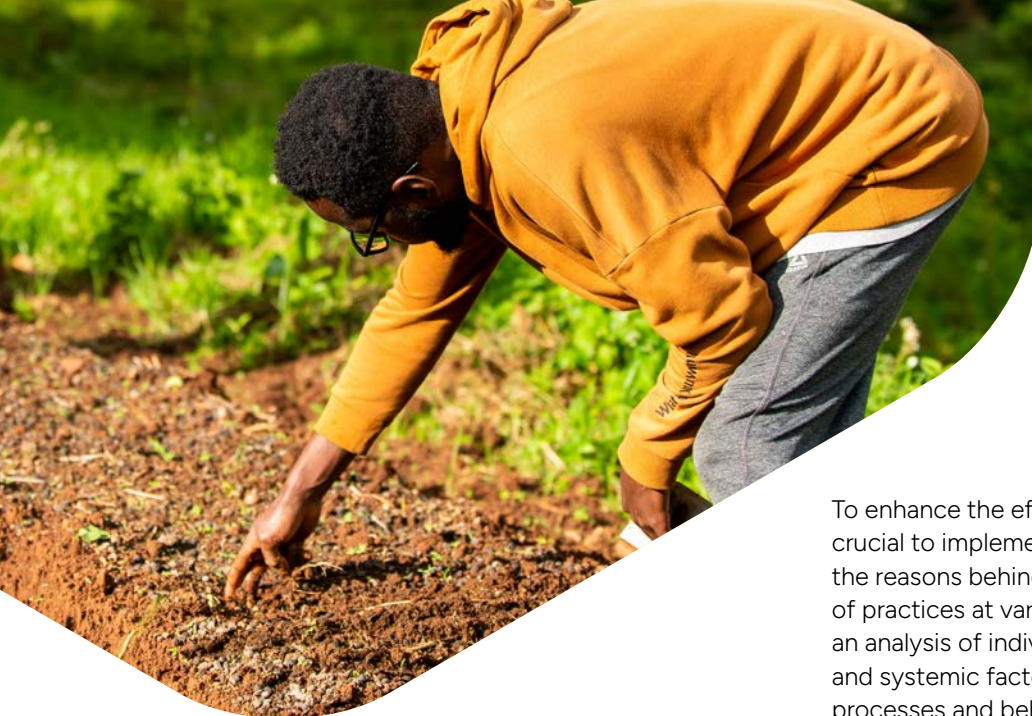


**Gender equality and social inclusion.** SNV aims to create space for participation, influence, and leadership from diverse voices in the change process. Empowering women, youth, and indigenous people to have agency in a transformation process is essential to attain sustainable and locally led changes in agri-food systems. In activities, SNV focuses on access, agency, and voice for women and vulnerable groups, while promoting positive trends in key enablers such as social norms and the inclusiveness of participatory processes which bring together diverse voices and perspectives.

**Evidence based advocacy and influencing.** SNV seeks to be clear, to address complexity, and avoid dogmatic approaches when presenting, communicating, and discussing recommendations, learnings, and findings in relevant fora and coalitions. In our projects, we believe in using inclusive multi-stakeholder platforms that generate locally experienced evidence, amplified through participation. We believe in specific actions and interactions targeted at actors in the agri-food system which can make a change at local, national, regional and global level.







### SNV's indicators of success

SNV aims to measure impact through a set of practice-based and outcome-based indicators using comprehensive and multi-level evaluation frameworks. This requires defining and using a set of easy-to-measure and critical indicators at farm, farm household, landscape, and agri-food systems level.

SNV supports and contributes to the development of outcome-based measurement frameworks (such as REGEN 10's Outcome Framework and the Landscape Assessment Framework) and use of tools that facilitate the analysis, evaluation, and comparison of agricultural programmes, projects, and policies from an agroecological perspective. As an indication, the following categories below of outcome indicators (and their associated practices) are relevant for our work:

To enhance the effectiveness of practice adoption, it is crucial to implement specific assessments that delve into the reasons behind both the adoption and non-adoption of practices at various levels. This should include an analysis of individual, community, organisational, and systemic factors that influence decision-making processes and behaviour change.

Moreover, it is essential to incorporate scenarios that explore the large-scale adoption of these practices and their potential impacts on food security and resilience, as well as their social, labour, and economic implications, particularly in the context of climate change. These scenarios should provide insights into how widespread implementation could mitigate risks and enhance the sustainability of food systems.

To support continuous improvement, it is important to facilitate an approach where actors engage in self-evaluation, learning, and adaptation. This approach encourages stakeholders to reflect on their experiences, identify areas for improvement, and adapt practices to better meet evolving challenges and opportunities. By fostering a culture of continuous learning and adaptation, we can enhance the overall effectiveness and resilience of the practices being implemented.

Environmental indicators	Economic indicators	Social indicators
Soil health <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soil Organic Matter (SOM)</li> <li>• Soil microbial biomass</li> <li>• Soil pH and nutrient levels</li> <li>• Soil erosion rates</li> </ul>	Yield and productivity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crop yields</li> <li>• Livestock productivity</li> </ul>	Community engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Farmer participation</li> <li>• Knowledge sharing</li> <li>• Youth and women empowerment</li> </ul>
Water management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water infiltration rates</li> <li>• Water retention capacity</li> <li>• Water quality</li> </ul>	Cost efficiency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Input costs</li> <li>• Operational costs</li> </ul>	Health and well-being <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food security</li> <li>• Workers rights</li> </ul>
Biodiversity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Species richness and abundance</li> <li>• Pollinator activity</li> <li>• Habitat quality</li> <li>• One Health</li> </ul>	Profitability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Net income</li> <li>• Market access</li> </ul>	Equity and inclusion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land tenure and security to resources</li> <li>• Gender and social equity</li> </ul>
Carbon sequestration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soil carbon content</li> <li>• Above-ground biomass</li> </ul>	Economic resilience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk management</li> <li>• Diversification</li> </ul>	



## SNV's progress on regenerative agriculture

### Veggies for People and Planet (V4PP) (2020-2025)

**Donor:** IKEA Foundation

**Lead partner:** World Vegetable Centre

**Target population:** 6,000 smallholder farmers

**Location:** Ethiopia, Kenya

#### Project goal

Create jobs and income for youth and women in the vegetable sector in Kenya and Ethiopia, while improving environmental and human health through safe regenerative production of vegetables.

#### Results:

- Area under regenerative agriculture (RA) – 479.1 hectares.
- Revenue generated from sale of vegetables – USD 3,184,739.
- Job creation – 61,438 casual and decent jobs created by Vegetable Business Networks (VBN).

### Regenerative Agricultural Practices for Improved Livelihoods and Market Systems (REALMS) (2020-2024)

**Donor:** IKEA Foundation

**Partners:** CSOs, Research and Knowledge Universities/Institutions Organisations and Knowledge

**Target population:** 10,000 smallholder farmers

**Location:** Kenya, Rwanda

#### Project goal

Improved livelihoods of smallholder farmers in Western Kenya and Western Rwanda through the adoption of regenerative agricultural practices.

#### Results:

- 10,716 farmers reached with RA practices.
- 40% proportion of plots show improved soil health.
- Up to 57% improvement in yield after application of RA.
- 63% SMEs show improved revenues.
- 10 multi-stakeholder platforms.

## Biodiversity and Inclusive Palm Oil Supply Chain Project (BIPOSC) (2021-2027)

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**Donor:** L3F - Livelihood Fund for Family Farming, Mars, Danone, L'Oréal.

**Partners:** PT. Musim Mas (off takers) and ICRAF

**Target:** 2,500 smallholder's partners, and 4,000 ha of land improvement from BAU transform to regenerative agriculture palm oil practice.

**Location:** Indonesia

### Project goal

Establish a sustainable, deforestation-free palm oil supply chain by implementing regenerative agriculture practices, a locally adapted agroforestry model, ecosystem protection, and improving smallholder livelihoods.

### Results:

- Enhanced the skills of 26 Village Facilitators to support independent smallholder farmers.
- Established a composting unit and cooperative, now operational in managing a production capacity of 100-150 tons of organic compost per month.
- Established seven demonstration plots of regenerative agriculture.
- Implemented regenerative agriculture practices on 1,063.68 hectares of independent smallholders' plots.
- Established and maintained 20 hectares of agroforestry demonstration plots in seven villages.
- Engaged 50 farmers, covering a total of 71 hectares, committed to adopting the agroforestry application model to improve soil biodiversity, water resistance, and soil quality.

## Cooperation from public-private partnerships against deforestation in Vietnam (Café REDD) (2018-2024)

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**Donor:** Federal Ministry for the Environment and Consumer Protection (BMUV) - International Climate Initiative (IKI)

**Partners:** Lam Dong Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) - Vietnam

**Target population:** 35,635

**Location:** Vietnam

### Project goal

Helping to reduce deforestation and forest degradation in a high priority protected area in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The project supports sustainable landscape planning and effective cooperation between the public and private sector, as well as delivering training courses targeting improved agricultural methods.

### Results:

- Trained over 3,355 farmers in sustainable coffee production and conservation, resulting in 2,853 ha under sustainable upland agroforestry systems, which have led to the establishment of 30 coffee farmer groups and five macadamia cooperatives.
- Provided 111,574 macadamia, 498,000 coffee and 71,000 persimmon seedlings to support agroforestry practices.
- Over 15 coffee and OCOP companies in Lac Duong implemented the project's traceability system, distributing 250,000 traceability stamps.
- Empowered local communities, including 2 women-led cooperatives, and encouraged cooperation between public and private sectors.
- Mobilised 3.25 million EUR public and private finance to date for climate landscape restoration.



## The Agri-food Programme for Integrated Resilience and Economic Development in the Sahel (Pro-ARIDES) (2021-2030)

**Donor:** Dutch Government, Danish Government  
**Partners:** SNV, CARE, KIT institute WUR and 23 local partners  
**Target population:** 2,142,000  
**Location:** Burkina, Mali, Niger

### Project goal

Systemic change for a more inclusive and sustainable overall context based on four essential dimensions - landscape, market, governance, and equity.

### Results:

Household and organisations engaged:

- 953 villages in 71 municipalities (100%) in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger zone of intervention.
- 92,161 farming and (agro) pastoral households impacted (70% direct and 30% indirect) leading to 568,225 people – 65% of the target for phase 1.
- 2,960 local organisations engaged in agri-food system transformation – 131% of phase 1 target.

Household food security and nutrition improved given:

- 20% i.e. 11,956 HH progression of production.
- 9% progression of diversification of production.
- 17% i.e. 11,136 HH on improved diets.
- 63% i.e. 40,745 HH on diversified income sources.
- 23% i.e. 11,978 HH increase in income.

Household resilience to climate change improved, considering:

- 63,395 hectares of agricultural and pastoral land brought under sustainable management.
- 60% of households i.e. 35,860 HH successfully securing their land rights.
- 69% of households 39,946 HH have adopted climate-smart technologies and practices.

## SUSTAIN Ecosystem Stewardship to Balance Sustainability & Growth in Tanzania (SUSTAIN Eco) (2023-2025)

**Donor:** SIDA  
**Partners:** IUCN and AWF  
**Location:** Tanzania

### Project goal

A two-phase project which sought to firstly build the foundations for integrating water, land, ecosystem management, and sustainable business practices in agricultural landscapes in Tanzania and Mozambique. Secondly, it aims to create healthy ecosystems and prosperous communities in Tanzania through improved governance and rights, sustainable management practices, and catalysing investment in the protection and restoration of biodiversity and ecosystems.

### Results:

- 2,137.3 hectares have been demarcated for protection, including 1,887.3ha along Mpanda, Katuma and Msaginya rivers buffers and 250ha around Kenswa and Mnyaki water sources.
- 8,945 hectares of forest area protected as a result of capacitated natural resources management committees (NRMCS) to effectively carry out their duties and responsibilities.
- 588 farmers (40% women) have increased knowledge and skills on agroforestry techniques and practices.
- 384 community members have increased knowledge and skills on good agricultural practices through Farmer Field Schools (FFS).
- 174 NRMCS members and village leaders have increased knowledge on environmental laws, village bylaws, and their duties and responsibilities.
- 150 land parcels have been measured in Kachele village to facilitate issuing of Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy (CCROs) to women, youths, and men.

## Sustainable Energy for Smallholder Farmers (SEFFA) (2023-2025)

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**Donor:** IKEA Foundation

**Partners:** GIZ and RVO

**Location:** Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda

### Project goal

Addressing the lack of access to sustainable and affordable energy technologies and services for productive use of energy (PUE). This project is based on scalable and innovative business cases to help smallholder farmers and related local businesses of agricultural value chains to achieve increased productivity, higher income and improved, climate-resilient and food-secure livelihoods.

### Results:

- More than 4,000 smallholder farmers engaged in horticulture value chain accessed SWPs irrigation systems through various modalities (RBF, Demonstration, PAYGO and consumers loan).
- 15,000 farmers participated in awareness and product demonstration events aimed at promoting the uptake of PUE technologies.
- 644 experts, technicians and end users trained.
- Solar based dryer technologies piloted at smallholder farmers level and results on the performance of the technology captured.
- Technical training provided for 29 Vegetable Business Network (VBN) members supported by Veggies for People and Planet (V4P&P).
- About 20 smallholder farmers, including a dairy cooperative, obtained the solar loan product for PUE for cooling technologies.

## Endnotes

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