EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Capitalization study in support of the agro-ecological transition of cocoa farming in Ghana

Farmers' experiences with dynamic agroforestry

1 Introduction

Dynamic agroforestry (DAF) refers to diversified farming systems that combine cocoa, food crops and trees in evolving configurations over time. It builds on existing farming knowledge while introducing new ways of organizing and managing plots to improve soil fertility, resilience and production diversity.

Within the Fairtrade movement, agroforestry is seen as an agroecological pathway that connects environmental regeneration with livelihood resilience and social inclusion. It aligns with a broader commitment to sustainable farming, decent incomes and the empowerment of groups that are often structurally disadvantaged in the cocoa sector, particularly women and young people.

This capitalization study focuses on cocoa farmers' experiences with DAF within the framework of the Ghana Agroforestry for Impact (GAIM) project. GAIM supports smallholder cocoa farmers in the Ahafo region in engaging with DAF and related agroforestry practices. Financed by AFD and implemented by Fairtrade Africa in partnership with Max Havelaar France, it builds on earlier initiatives such as Sankofa and D4All. The project works through three Fairtrade-certified farmers' cooperatives, combining technical support with local learning, youth engagement and women's leadership.

2 Purpose of the study

This study is conceived as a capitalization exercise based on qualitative fieldwork with cocoa farmers supported through GAIM. Rather than evaluating project performance, the study seeks to understand how these farmers encounter, test and adapt DAF in practice, and under what conditions they are able to remain engaged over time. Capitalization aims to make lived experience and learning explicit, in order to inform reflection and dialogue.

The study focuses on the early stages of DAF implementation, when labour demands and cash-flow constraints are most acute. Particular attention is given to how women and youth experience and navigate DAF, and how differences in access to land, labour, income and decision-making shape their engagement.

Findings draw on the experiences of farmers supported through GAIM, field observations and exchanges with key stakeholders, and are triangulated with other DAF initiatives as well as existing research.

By documenting farmers' trajectories, practices and adjustments, the study identifies the factors that enable or constrain DAF uptake, as well as the different pathways through which farmers engage with it. The insights are intended to inform reflection and future practice within GAIM and among Fairtrade cocoa partners.

3 Dynamic agroforestry in context

Farmers in the Ahafo region engage with DAF in a context of multiple and interacting pressures: declining soil fertility, climate variability, rising living costs and land tenure constraints. These pressures are not experienced equally; access to resources and decision-making power varies across age and gender.

Research and stakeholder perspectives show that the adoption and implementation of agroforestry systems are shaped by a combination of technical, economic and social factors. These include labour availability, access to finance, land and tree tenure security, market conditions and institutional support.

They also highlight the importance of local knowledge, farmer-to-farmer learning and the role of trusted intermediaries in supporting transitions, as well as farmers' choices and their capacity to manage risk.

4 The GAIM approach

GAIM supports farmers in transitioning toward DAF through Fairtrade-certified Unions that mobilize farmers, host activities and provide services. Field officers and youth brigades are embedded within these cooperative structures and play a central role in field-based learning, plot installation and follow-up. The project also provides farmers with a combination of training and planting material.

GAIM combines technical support with social and organizational dimensions, including youth engagement and women's empowerment and leadership. This approach aims to strengthen both farming practices and the conditions for sustained engagement with DAF.

GAIM's technical approach is based on defined agroecological principles and a structured implementation process. In phase 1, DAF is primarily introduced on aged cocoa farms.

Implementation follows a sequence of steps, including community sensitization, training, voluntary participation, plot design & installation, plot management and follow-up through demonstration, peer exchange and training.

Within this framework, GAIM provides clear pathways into agroforestry, with some flexibility to accommodate farmers' situations. This includes allowing farmers - particularly women and youth - to start on smaller plots and expand gradually over time, making it easier to enter DAF under labour and cash flow constraints.

5 Findings

Adoption of DAF is a process

Across the experiences documented, DAF appears as a process that farmers enter, test and negotiate over time. Farmers rarely adopt DAF in a single step. Instead, they experiment, adapt and reassess their engagement as conditions evolve.

Farmers engage with DAF not simply because it is promoted, but as part of broader efforts to improve their farming systems and livelihoods: securing food, improving degraded farms, reducing chemical use, learning new skills and preparing for the future. Many relate DAF to past agroforestry practices, enriched with new techniques and forms of organization.

DAF becomes meaningful when it is visible in the field, discussed among peers and connected to farmers' own histories. Observation, exchange and learning-by-doing are central in turning interest into action.

The first years: a period of exposure

The early years of DAF implementation constitute a period of exposure: labour peaks, cash-flow difficulties and climate variability accumulate, while benefits remain limited or uncertain.

The pressures are not experienced equally. Women and youth often face more acute constraints due to limited structural access to time, labour, land, income and decision-making power.

During these starting years, farmers therefore continuously reassess whether they can continue.

At the same time, farmers already perceive first tangible benefits. Food production creates early "breathing space" by reducing household expenses and providing small income between cocoa seasons. Farmers also observe changes in their fields, including improved shade, better soil cover, more organized layouts and renewed pride in farming.

Key constraints shaping early implementation

Several interrelated factors shape farmers' ability to remain engaged:

- Labour demand: Regular weeding without burning or chemicals is the make-or-break task in the first years, especially in off-season periods when cash is scarce.
- Cash-flow timing: Engagement with DAF is not constraint by labour demand alone, but by the timing of labour needs relative to cash availability. Lack of liquidity at key moments delays implementation and increases risk.
- Land and tree rights: Insecure access to land and trees limits the ability to invest long-term; this is especially so for women and youth
- Market access and transport: Limited access to buyers hampers the conversion of diversified production into reliable income.
- Climate variability: Unpredictable rainfall amplifies all other constraints and increases the cost of delays.

These factors interact and accumulate, shaping differentiated pathways of engagement.

How farmers respond: managing risk and learning

Farmers actively adapt their engagement with DAF. Many start with small plots (DAF islands) or food-based agroforestry systems, allowing them to learn while limiting exposure. Partial or gradual engagement is not a sign of failure, but a deliberate strategy to manage risk and protect household stability. Scale becomes a way for farmers to regulate their involvement over time.

Support structures are central. Youth brigades notably help address labour pressure during installation. They also create opportunities for youth engagement, skills development and recognition, and contribute to strengthening local ownership and visibility of DAF practices.

Learning plays a central role in this process. It is not only information transfer; it is confidence-building, experimentation and mutual support. Understanding deepens through practice, observation and exchange with other farmers. As plots evolve, new questions emerge, making continued, field-based learning essential.

Collective learning and visible engagement further strengthen confidence and agency, particularly through leadership and empowerment training cycles for women and young people.

The role of support and organization

Farmers emphasize that how support is organized matters as much as what is delivered. Reliable planning, timely delivery and continued presence are valued over one-off interventions.

The locally embedded cocoa Unions play a key role in building trust and sustaining engagement, through field officers, youth brigades and local society members. Confidence in DAF is closely linked to trust in these actors.

Access to seedlings, training and local services further influences whether farmers can act on their intentions. When these remain close, reliable and responsive, they reduce entry barriers and support continued engagement.

6 Lessons for agroforestry transitions

The experiences documented point to several cross-cutting lessons:

- DAF becomes credible when it starts from what farmers already know, see and can discuss with others.
- Adoption is a process of exposure and adjustment, not a one-time decision.
- The first 1–3 years require protection, as labour and cash flow pressures concentrate during this period.
- Labour continuity (weeding) and cash flow timing are central conditions of early implementation.

- Starting small, close-to-home and building gradually over time reduce exposure and allow farmers to learn DAF at a manageable scale.
- Gender, age and land tenure shape differentiated pathways; women, youth and sharecroppers do not face the same entry conditions.
- Secure land access and tree rights increase farmers' ability and willingness to invest long-term.
- Trust, posture and local, cooperative-based support are part of the technical system, not add-ons.
- Youth brigades are more than a workforce; they help build local capacity, learning and DAF visibility.
- Climate variability makes timing reliability, planning and follow-up critical.
- Local access to seedlings, training, markets, learning spaces facilitate DAF uptake.

7 Implications for future interventions

For GAIM Phase II and similar initiatives, the findings point toward strengthening the conditions that allow farmers to remain engaged:

- Treat the early years as a protection period that requires buffering labour, cash flow and related risks.
- Make weeding continuity and labour capacity central to planning, budgeting and activity sequencing.
- Maintain small, flexible and differentiated entry pathways, including DAF islands and food-based agroforestry systems.
- Support women, youth and farmers with insecure land access through pathways adapted to their farming calendar, resources and decision-making.
- Make land security and tree rights more practical and actionable.
- Prioritize planning reliability, timely seedling delivery and follow-up presence.
- Strengthen youth brigades as local labour, learning and service capacity, with attention to continuity and skills development.
- Invest in trust-based, locally embedded support through cooperative structures.
- Bring services closer to farmers: seedlings, training, transport solutions, markets, tree nurseries and learning spaces.
- Support locally articulated initiatives, especially those led by women and youth, without imposing predefined agendas.

8 Conclusion

Dynamic agroforestry offers a credible and promising pathway toward more resilient and diversified cocoa systems, but it is not a quick fix. Its benefits unfold gradually, while its demands are immediate.

DAF works when farmers can move forward without having to risk everything at once.

Scaling DAF depends less on promoting adoption than on enabling persistence. What matters most is whether farmers can remain engaged through the first, most demanding years - through approaches that are reliable, locally grounded, attentive to timing and adapted to diverse realities.