



From promise to practice: Making regenerative agriculture investable and scalable

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About SNV

SNV is a global development partner, deeply rooted in the countries where we operate. Driven by a vision of a better world where all people live with dignity and have equitable opportunities to thrive sustainably, SNV strengthens capacities and catalyses partnerships that transform agri-food, energy, and water systems. 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.

With 60 years of experience and over 90% of our team coming from and working within the countries where we operate, we support our partners in more than 20 countries in Africa and Asia, tailoring our approaches to different contexts to achieve large-scale impact and create more equitable lives for all.

About this paper

This paper contributes to ongoing discussions around implementation of the Kampala CAADP Strategy and Action Plan 2026–2035. Drawing on SNV and partners' experience and wider evidence, it sets out six practical implications for sustained adoption and scaling regenerative agriculture.

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Regenerative agriculture will not scale on promise alone. Evidence of its potential continues to grow, but it does not provide a ready-made pathway for adoption at scale. Approaches and outcomes will vary by context; the practical challenge is to understand which differences matter, how programmes and business models should adapt, and which lessons can inform decisions in comparable settings. Drawing on SNV's implementation experience, published research, and evidence from other organisations, this paper identifies six implications for farmer decision making, service ecosystems, business and delivery models, shared sourcing landscapes, public finance, and cumulative learning. Written for farming communities, policymakers, businesses, investors, funders, and implementing organisations, it offers a candid account of what must be tested, adapted, and coordinated to move beyond isolated pilots and support African agrifood systems transformation under the Kampala Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) Strategy and Action Plan.¹

Introduction

Regenerative agriculture has moved rapidly from the margins into mainstream sustainable food systems discussions and is increasingly reflected in corporate commitments, donor portfolios, and policy agendas (NewClimate Institute, 2024; WBCSD, 2024). This momentum creates significant opportunities, but also a risk that the label moves faster than understanding of where, when, and for whom regenerative approaches create value, how transition costs and risks should be shared, and what enables farmers and businesses to sustain change. For African food systems, this matters because productivity, livelihoods, resilience, and natural resource outcomes must improve together.

To move beyond supported pilots, regenerative agriculture must function not only as an environmental proposition, but also as a viable resilience and business strategy for farmers and other market actors.

Regenerative agriculture is increasingly understood as a holistic approach to farming that seeks to improve ecological conditions, while maintaining productive agricultural systems (Schreefel et al., 2020). Although definitions continue to evolve, most share common principles, including improving soil health and biodiversity, strengthening water management, reducing dependence on external agrochemical inputs, and enhancing the resilience of farming systems (Newton et al., 2020; SNV, 2024). Importantly, regenerative agriculture is increasingly framed as an outcomes-oriented approach, that can be adapted to different farming systems and contexts, rather than a fixed package of practices (Giller et al., 2021; IFC, 2026; Regen10, 2026).

Regenerative agriculture overlaps significantly with agroecology, conservation agriculture, climate-smart agriculture, and organic production. Many practices associated with these approaches have deep roots in Indigenous and local knowledge. Good Agricultural Practices can provide an important foundation, but these approaches go further by deliberately seeking to improve ecological functions and wider environmental, economic, and social outcomes. Rather than treating these approaches as competing or hierarchical, this paper focuses on whether practices are combined and supported in ways that deliver meaningful results across farming systems and contexts. Their contribution should be judged not by the novelty of individual practices or the label applied to them, but by the outcomes achieved over time.

These questions are especially timely and coincide with the start of African Union Member States' efforts to implement the Kampala Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme Strategy and Action Plan for 2026–2035. Its ambitions for sustainable production, investment, nutrition, inclusion, resilience, and stronger agrifood systems governance provide an important policy context for this discussion (African Union Commission & AUDA-NEPAD, 2025; AUDA-NEPAD, 2026). Regenerative agriculture can contribute to these ambitions, but applying the label is not enough. The practical challenge is to translate growing interest and investment into sustained change, rather than another cycle of promising pilots.

¹ The Kampala CAADP Strategy and Action Plan is a 10-year framework adopted by African Union Member States in January 2025 and launched in May 2025. It succeeds the Malabo Declaration to transform the continent's agri-food systems, boost intra-African trade, and eradicate hunger.



This paper draws on SNV's decades of experience working alongside farmers, businesses, governments, and investors to support transitions towards more resilient and sustainable food systems. Across diverse countries, contexts, commodities, and business models in Africa and Asia, SNV works with organisations and communities to translate regenerative agriculture from concept into practice. Its programmes span farmer advisory services and regenerative agriculture pilots, private sector engagement, and market systems development, partnerships between public and private actors, and landscape initiatives. Some programmes connect several of these areas and are explicitly designed to support wider systems transformation.

The implementation perspective offered here complements academic research and individual project case studies. While research increasingly documents the potential outcomes of regenerative agriculture, organisations like SNV also address a different set of questions: Why do farmers adopt, sustain or abandon particular practices? Which service delivery models are commercially viable, and which require sustained financing arrangements beyond temporary project support? Why do promising pilots fail to scale? How do different market, policy, and landscape contexts influence outcomes? These questions unpack how transitions work in practice. Our intention is not to deliver universal answers or determine which contextual differences matter in advance. Indeed, one of the most powerful lessons to emerge from SNV's experience—one that is echoed by other implementing organisations and researchers—is that the evidence base for regenerative agriculture remains highly context-specific. This paper's contribution is not to prescribe which regenerative practices will work in every context, but to provide a practical framework for examining why promising practices do or do not become sustained transitions. Drawing on wider evidence and SNV's implementation experience, it identifies six areas in which assumptions about farmer decision making, services, business models, landscape coordination, finance, and learning need to be discussed and tested under real-world conditions.

The paper argues that evidence of regenerative agriculture's potential is insufficient to achieve sustained adoption at scale. Whether regenerative approaches are sustained depends both on whether practices deliver meaningful outcomes in context and whether the surrounding business models, services, finance and institutions distribute costs, risks, and benefits in ways that enable farmers and other actors to continue under real-world conditions. Where change stalls, programmes should distinguish whether the constraint lies in the performance of the practices, the assumptions and economics of the business and delivery model, or the wider enabling environment, because each calls for a different response. The paper first examines what existing evidence tells us about outcomes, adoption, and scaling. It then draws out six implications for farmer decision making, service ecosystems, business and delivery models, shared sourcing landscapes, public finance, and cumulative learning. These implications are offered not as universal prescriptions, but as a basis for discussion and further testing among policymakers, businesses, investors, funders, and implementing organisations. Together, they focus attention on what needs to be tested, adapted, and coordinated across different regenerative transitions to move from promise to practice.

What the evidence tells us about outcomes, adoption, and scaling

Evidence on the outcomes of regenerative agriculture

Research examining regenerative agriculture and associated practices has focused primarily on whether, and under what conditions, they produce ecological, productive, economic, and social outcomes. Considerable effort has been devoted to understanding if regenerative agriculture ‘works’ (Rai et al., 2025; Dabalen et al., 2024). This has generated a growing body of valuable evidence. Across a wide range of farming systems, studies suggest that regenerative approaches can contribute to more resilient and sustainable farming systems, while creating value for farmers and businesses. They can improve soil health, increase biodiversity, strengthen resilience to climate variability, and—under the right conditions—generate economic benefits through lower input costs, more stable yields, and diversified income streams (Berthon et al., 2025; Raveloaritiana & Wanger, 2026; TechnoServe & Sustainable Food Lab, 2026; Tekeba et al., 2026).

At the same time, outcomes vary across commodities, farming systems, and agroecological zones, depending on the practices adopted, market incentives, farmer capabilities, service ecosystems, and institutional environments (Dabalen et al., 2024). This variation limits the extent to which findings from one setting can be generalised to another. It does not negate evidence of potential benefits, but it means that conclusions must be interpreted in relation to the conditions under which outcomes were achieved.

The evidence therefore supports cautious optimism rather than universal claims about performance.

What wider agricultural evidence tells us about adoption and sustained change

Moving beyond regenerative outcomes, a separate but highly relevant body of evidence comes from decades of agricultural research and implementation across sustainable production approaches, rural innovation, market systems, and agricultural finance. This evidence helps to explain why technically promising changes are adopted, financed, and sustained in some circumstances, but not in others.

Farmers are more likely to adopt innovations when these address recognised priorities, offer credible evidence of benefits, are used successfully by peers, can be tried at limited cost and on a small scale without exposing household livelihoods to unacceptable risk, fit existing

farming systems, and are supported by appropriate advisory, input, finance, and market services. Farmers transitioning to regenerative agriculture may need to make several interconnected changes over time, rather than adopt a single technology or practice. For example, a farmer encouraged to use bio-inputs may also need reliable access to suitable products, whether through local production or distribution channels, advice on their application, working capital, evidence of efficacy, and access to a market that makes the investment worthwhile. If one part of this system is absent, or arrives at the wrong time, the transition may stall. Further, evidence from a demonstration plot or another farmer may carry limited weight if farmers do not consider the conditions sufficiently comparable to their own (Dabalen et al., 2024; Meijer et al., 2015; Knowler & Bradshaw, 2007).

Market incentives can support adoption, but their reach and ability to finance wider transitions can be limited. Certification, sustainability standards, and premium markets can encourage improved practices and reward early adopters, particularly in export-oriented value chains (Meemken, 2020). Premiums, however, are unavailable in many markets and, where offered, may not provide stable long-term income, cover transition costs, or reward improvements across the whole farming system (Oya et al., 2018; TechnoServe & Sustainable Food Lab, 2026; Pamuk et al., 2026). More fundamentally, a model that depends on premiums is structurally at odds with mainstreaming: once sustainable production becomes a baseline market expectation rather than a differentiated attribute, a separate price premium becomes increasingly difficult to sustain (Sedjo & Swallow, 2002; Ingenbleek & Reinders, 2013). Institutional demand can provide another source of market pull in domestic and regional markets. Public procurement for home-grown school feeding, for example, can create structured demand for locally produced, nutritious food, although participation by small-scale suppliers depends on appropriate procurement rules, aggregation, food safety systems and payment arrangements (FAO & WFP, 2018; WFP, 2025).

These market mechanisms are generally organised around particular commodities, while farmers allocate land, labour, water, and biomass across several crops. Investment channelled through one commodity may therefore affect the wider farming system and generate benefits for other buyers or communities that did not contribute to its costs. This creates a potential coordination and cost-sharing problem that an individual value chain is unlikely to resolve alone.

Nonetheless, market-based delivery models may provide greater continuity beyond project funding if actors can capture sufficient value. Their viability depends on recognising opportunity costs, meaning the value of labour and other resources in their next best use, alongside the timing of costs and returns, and the expenses temporarily absorbed by projects (IDH, 2025; Pamuk et al., 2026).

Because the factors shaping adoption differ across farmers, segmentation seeks to match practices and support packages to differences in resources, priorities, risk capacity, and market access, making them more relevant, feasible, and likely to be adopted. However, collecting and updating the required data and delivering differentiated support adds cost and complexity, while results depend heavily on the variables and methods used. Evidence that segmentation improves adoption remains limited, and increasingly granular classifications may obscure structural constraints shared across farmer groups (Alvarez et al., 2018; Hammond et al., 2020).

Staying honest about what remains unresolved for regenerative transitions

Regenerative agriculture research increasingly shows what these approaches may achieve, while wider agricultural evidence helps to explain the conditions associated with adoption and sustained change. A small but growing body of field-based and modelling research is beginning to connect these questions by examining how farming context and transition economics shape outcomes, but remains too limited and context-specific to provide broadly applicable guidance (Berthon et al., 2025; Pamuk et al., 2026).

Decision makers need to understand which business and delivery models are viable and investable; how transition costs and risks can be managed and shared; which combinations of advisory, finance, and market services support adoption; and under what conditions regenerative approaches outperform conventional production systems on resilience, costs, and productivity. Financing specifically raises a related set of questions: which parts of a regenerative transition require public finance, which can attract commercial investment, and how these financing roles should change over time. Regenerative transitions often require a combination of farm practices, advisory services, input market development, finance, shared data, infrastructure, and coordination, while also generating wider environmental and social benefits. The associated costs and benefits accrue over different time horizons and to different actors. Some may generate returns that farmers, businesses or investors can capture. Others may primarily create public value through healthier soils and watersheds, increased biodiversity, stronger climate

resilience, or more stable food systems. Treating this entire package as a single business case can therefore obscure which components are genuinely investable, and which require public or collective provision.

Limited or short-lived adoption can have different causes, and these need to be distinguished. Practices may not deliver the expected economic or environmental outcomes, or benefits may emerge too slowly or unevenly. Programme assumptions may also fail to reflect how farmers and businesses make decisions under uncertainty: a practice that is profitable on average may still create unacceptable risk, require cash or labour at the wrong time, or compete with more pressing priorities. Constraints may also lie beyond the farm, where advice, inputs, and finance are poorly coordinated or mistimed, subsidies make an otherwise unviable model appear viable, or programmes focused on individual commodities are too narrow to support changes across whole farms and landscapes. Each explanation points to a different response: adapt the practice, redesign the business and delivery model, or strengthen the enabling environment. Where finance is the constraint, this may mean de-risking a potentially viable activity or recognising that some essential services and public benefits require sustained public provision because markets will not finance them adequately.

The priority is to connect two questions over time: whether particular practices or combinations deliver the expected outcomes in a given context, and whether the associated business models, services, finance and institutional arrangements enable farmers and businesses to sustain them. Individual projects cannot answer these questions alone. Scientific research can assess outcomes and causal relationships, while implementation evidence can show how costs, assumptions, service arrangements, and adaptations shape sustained use. Implementation evidence becomes more useful when it can be compared across programmes operating in broadly comparable value chains or farming systems, with key differences in farmer starting conditions and exposure to risk, transition stage, market pull, access to services and finance, and policy and landscape governance documented rather than assumed away. Monitoring that stops at farmers reached or trained cannot reveal this trajectory; useful evidence distinguishes between trial, adoption, retention, adaptation, and abandonment and compares results across sufficiently similar contexts. Relevant lessons may also come from programmes associated with other sustainable agricultural approaches, not only those labelled regenerative agriculture.



Six implications for scaling regenerative agriculture

The six interconnected implications that follow draw on the evidence presented above and on recurring tensions between programme assumptions and farmer decision making, targeted value-chain approaches and wider system constraints, and commercial viability and public value. Together, they frame priorities for discussion, testing, and learning about how practices, services, business models, and finance can be combined and adapted across different regenerative transitions.

1 Farmer engagement: test assumptions about risk and decision making

Programmes should test their assumptions about farmer decision making as deliberately as they test agronomic performance. This means identifying the constraints that farmers themselves prioritise, understanding how different farmers perceive downside risk, and designing changes that can be tested and sequenced with manageable exposure. Where the proposed practices do not address a pressing constraint, programmes should consider what complementary service, financial mechanism or risk-sharing arrangement is needed, or whether another intervention should take priority.

Evidence of future benefits may be insufficient when farmers cannot absorb the immediate cost or risk of transition.

Regenerative Agricultural Practices for Improved Livelihoods and Markets (REALMS) in Kenya and Rwanda found that farmers were most interested in practices that were familiar, required relatively little financial investment, and could use inputs produced on the farm. Many managed transition risks by combining organic and inorganic practices and introducing changes sequentially, while some reported waiting as long as three seasons to see benefits. [Kenyan farmer Stephen Nginya Mwangi illustrates the potential payoff](#). Producing compost and bokashi reduced his costs, improved avocado yields, and created additional income through sales and services (SNV, 2025a; SNV, n.d.).

TechnoServe encountered a similar constraint among Ethiopian coffee farmers. Stumping involves cutting back ageing trees so that they regrow more productively. Although it can increase future yields, it temporarily reduces coffee production. In the pilot, farmers were offered packages of commonly used farm tools, such as saws, pruning shears, and wheelbarrows, after stumping a specified number of trees. In the pilot communities, the proportion of farmers who stumped trees was nearly three times more in comparison to communities, and those adopting the practice stumped about twice as many trees per farm (Laterite & TechnoServe, 2021; TechnoServe, 2023).

2 Service ecosystems: design for coordination and continuity

Programmes should treat coordination of services as a delivery function in its own right. They should identify which services are required at each stage of the transition, how they connect, who provides and finances them, how effective delivery models can be replicated, and who maintains coordination once external support ends. Continuity does not require every service to become commercial, but each needs a credible provider and financing pathway over time.

The unit of scaling can be an organised network through which farmers test practices, obtain services, and sell produce, not training alone.

The Veggies for People and Planet (V4PP) programme combined training in regenerative practices with business coaching, demonstration plots, collective marketing, access to inputs and finance, and market information. By the fifth year, 219 Vegetable Business Networks were operating across Ethiopia and Kenya. The programme reported annual vegetable sales of USD 5.6 million (EUR 4.87 million)² in Ethiopia and USD 3.1 million (EUR 2.7 million) in Kenya, alongside widespread adoption of multiple regenerative practices (SNV, n.d.).

² All currency conversions in this paper were conducted according to [InforEuro](#) on 18 August 2026.



3 Business models: test viability beyond the project conditions

Programmes should test business and delivery models under realistic conditions before project support ends. This requires accounting for financial and opportunity costs borne by farmers and delivery actors; showing who bears transition costs and risks, when returns accrue, and how cash flow gaps will be financed; and testing whether each necessary actor can continue without project subsidies or externally managed coordination. The purpose is to determine which assumptions hold, which must change, and whether each actor has a viable reason to continue participating.

Testing viability requires matching finance to the transition period and identifying local actors capable of sustaining essential delivery functions.

Modelling by IDH, the Sustainable Trade Initiative, for a Ugandan coffee company estimated that farmers required about three years to implement a regenerative system and seven to eight years to complete the transition. Cash flow from diversified crops could become positive in the second year, while investment requirements peaked in the third (IDH, 2025).

In Indonesia, the Biodiverse and Inclusive Palm Oil Supply Chain (BIPOSC) shows how delivery functions can be embedded in local institutions. Farmer organisations have strengthened governance and financial management while coordinating training, record-keeping, traceability, and market relationships. In Labuhanbatu, one cooperative also operates a composting enterprise producing approximately 130 tonnes of organic fertiliser each month, creating jobs and reducing reliance on synthetic inputs (SNV, 2025b).

4 Mainstreaming: the business case must extend beyond premiums

Programmes should use cash crop value chains as entry points rather than boundaries. Cash crops can provide an initial platform for delivering services, finance, and market access across the wider farm, including for food crops and other products sold through domestic or regional markets. Realising this potential requires coordination among multiple buyers, including companies sourcing commodities for export, buyers serving domestic and regional markets, and, where appropriate, public procurement bodies. Coordination within shared sourcing landscapes, meaning the geographic areas from which several buyers source, can help to align investment, reduce duplication, and extend benefits beyond individual supply chains. Such spillovers should not be assumed; they must be designed around farmer priorities, interactions between crops, food security, natural resource management, and viable markets. Because costs, risks, and benefits may be distributed unevenly, such arrangements require transparent governance, meaningful farmer representation, and clear agreements about who contributes and who benefits.

Cash-crop value chain investments can support regenerative transitions across farming systems and food-crop production, but require coordination with other buyers and services beyond the contracted crop.

IDH's Coffee Farmer Income Resilience Programme in Kenya and Uganda combines regenerative coffee production with blended services and market access for other crops (IDH, 2022a, 2022b). Earlier TechnoServe experience in Ethiopia illustrates a possible household pathway: increased coffee income enabled farmers to invest in improved maize production, and more than three-quarters of farmers trained in maize adopted the promoted practices (TechnoServe, 2016).

5 Public policy: match finance to the function and value created

A regenerative transition is not a single investment. Programmes should therefore assess each activity or role separately. They should distinguish between activities that are already commercially investable, those that could become viable with temporary de-risking, and public goods or persistent market failures that require sustained public or philanthropic support. For each activity or function, they should assess what value it creates, and who captures that value, when returns emerge, which risks prevent investment, and whether any market failure is temporary or persistent. They should then specify the appropriate financing instrument, its expected duration, and intended endpoint, revisiting these decisions as markets and delivery capacity develop. Some functions may move from grant-supported market development to commercial provision as demand, evidence, and delivery capacity strengthen; others may continue to require public support because their value cannot be fully captured commercially. This helps to avoid both crowding out viable private investment and underfunding essential enabling functions. Public and private roles are complementary but not interchangeable, nor can they be assumed to converge on a single commercial endpoint.

Public and concessional finance can play different roles. Public investment can fund enabling functions across a wider system, while concessional support can help a viable enterprise to secure follow-on capital. The right type and length of support, and when it should end, depends on what it is funding.

Rwanda's Fifth Strategic Plan for Agriculture Transformation (PSTA 5) anticipates substantial private investment, while retaining public responsibility for research and technology transfer, agricultural de-risking, extension, infrastructure, food security and nutrition (Rwanda MINAGRI, 2024).

In Vietnam, a EUR 367,500 grant and technical assistance from the Dutch Fund for Climate and Development (DFCD) helped Phuc Sinh to strengthen sourcing, farmer training, and environmental and social systems before Dutch entrepreneurial development bank FMO provided a USD 15 million (EUR 13 million) financing package for processing capacity and working capital (DFCD, 2025).

6 Evidence and scaling: build cumulative learning across programmes

Robust evidence remains essential, but implementation decisions cannot wait for every contextual uncertainty to be resolved. Programmes should therefore make learning comparable and cumulative, rather than treating each project as a standalone test. This requires a small set of shared definitions and indicators, documentation of assumptions, costs, adaptations and failures, and mechanisms for sharing non-sensitive implementation data.

A practitioner-led African learning mechanism could bring comparable programmes together in regional cohorts organised by farming system or value chain and periodically synthesise which practices and delivery arrangements are retained, adapted or abandoned, for whom, and under what conditions. It should build on and connect existing CAADP structures, research and extension institutions, practitioner networks and relevant multi-stakeholder coalitions, rather than create another standalone network (AUDA-NEPAD, 2026; ReSAKSS, n.d.; CGIAR, n.d.).





A practical agenda for coordinated action

Scaling regenerative agriculture is not principally a matter of replicating a fixed package of practices, or multiplying successful pilots. It requires deliberately connecting farmer decision making, service, and business models, sourcing-landscape investment, public and private financing, and cumulative learning.

Responsibilities differ across actors:

- **Farmers and farmer organisations** should help to define the problems to be addressed, the risks considered acceptable, and the services required. They should also have meaningful influence over how transition costs, risks, and benefits are negotiated, and how progress is assessed.
- **Businesses and investors** should embed regenerative agriculture in core sourcing and procurement strategies, assess costs and returns over realistic transition periods, and coordinate with other buyers where risks and benefits extend beyond a single commodity or supply chain.
- **Governments and CAADP institutions** should identify which functions create public value, or address persistent market failures, then match these with appropriate policy and financing instruments, and support the proposed African practitioner-learning mechanism through existing regional institutions.
- **Implementing organisations and donors** should test programme assumptions under real-world conditions, strengthen local delivery capacity, distinguish participation from sustained use, and contribute comparable, non-sensitive evidence across programmes.

Coordination is not neutral. Participating actors have different interests, resources, and influence, and farmers may bear transition costs and production risks, while other actors capture benefits or operate over shorter time horizons. Effective collaboration therefore requires representative participation, transparent information, and decision making, explicit negotiation of costs and risks, and accountability mechanisms through which less powerful actors can exercise genuine influence.

For CAADP-aligned transformation, success should not be measured primarily by the number of regenerative agriculture pilots or farmers trained. The stronger test is whether farmers retain and adapt effective practices, local service systems continue functioning, private investment enters where viable, public support remains available where justified, and learning from one programme improves the design of the next.

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