



From promise to practice: Making regenerative agriculture investable and scalable

Executive summary of a discussion paper
for the African Food Systems Forum

Regenerative agriculture will not scale on promise alone. Evidence of its potential continues to grow, but it does not provide a ready-made pathway from promising results to sustained 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 and wider evidence, 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

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.



The frame

Regenerative agriculture has moved rapidly from the margins into mainstream policy discussions, corporate commitments, and donor portfolios. 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. These questions are especially timely as African Union Member States begin implementing the Kampala Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) Strategy and Action Plan for 2026–2035, with its ambitions for sustainable production, investment, nutrition, inclusion, resilience, and stronger agri-food-systems governance. Regenerative agriculture can contribute to these ambitions, but applying the label is not enough.

Regenerative agriculture is best understood as an outcomes-oriented approach that seeks to improve ecological conditions while maintaining productive agricultural systems, rather than as a fixed package of practices. It overlaps with agroecology, conservation agriculture, climate-smart agriculture, and organic production, and many associated practices have deep roots in Indigenous and local knowledge. Their contribution should be judged by the outcomes achieved over time, not by the novelty of individual practices or the label applied.

The heart of the discussion

This paper takes stock of the current state of regenerative agriculture: growing evidence of its potential, but also the considerable complexity in translating that potential into sustained adoption at scale. Outcomes vary across geographies, commodities, value chains, and farmer groups, while sustained adoption is shaped by the interaction between practice performance, farmer and business priorities, business models, services, finance, policies, and institutions. Precisely because there is no single pathway to scale, the paper does not offer a universal prescription or presume 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 draws on the experience of SNV, which has worked for decades alongside farmers, businesses, governments, and investors to transition 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. Our programmes span farmer advisory services and regenerative agriculture pilots, private-sector engagement, and market systems development, multi-stakeholder and public-private partnerships, 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 by confronting a different set of questions: Why do farmers adopt, sustain or abandon particular practices? Which service delivery models are commercially viable? Why do promising pilots fail to scale? How do different market, policy, and landscape contexts influence outcomes? The paper does not prescribe which practices will work in every context. Its contribution is a practical framework for examining why promising practices do or do not become sustained transitions, identifying six areas in which assumptions need to be discussed and tested under real-world conditions.

Across the six implications, two cross-cutting messages are particularly important. First, profitability does not ensure sustained adoption when practices fail to address farmers' immediate priorities or expose them to costs and risks that they cannot bear. Regenerative approaches must address these constraints or be accompanied by

services, finance or risk-sharing that makes the transition manageable. Second, transitions are unlikely to scale through isolated programmes organised around single buyers. Cash crop value chains can provide market pull and investment, but wider transformation requires coordination across shared sourcing landscapes and the deliberate extension of relevant services and practices beyond the contracted crop.

What the evidence tells us

The evidence supports cautious optimism rather than universal claims about performance. Regenerative approaches can improve soil health and biodiversity, strengthen climate resilience and, under the right conditions, create economic benefits through lower input costs, more stable yields, and diversified income. Outcomes nevertheless vary with the practices adopted, farming and agroecological context, market incentives, farmer capabilities, services, and institutions. Findings must therefore be interpreted in relation to the conditions under which they were achieved.

Wider agricultural evidence shows that technical or average profitability is insufficient to explain adoption. Farmers are more likely to sustain changes that address recognised priorities, can be tried with manageable exposure, fit their farming systems, and receive timely support. Yet outcome and implementation evidence are rarely connected over the full transition. Decision-makers still need to understand which combinations of practices and support deliver results, which delivery models remain viable after project support, how costs and risks should be shared, and which functions require sustained public or collective provision.





The six implications at a glance

1 Farmer engagement: test assumptions about risk and decision making

Farmers judge proposed changes against their most pressing constraints and the losses they can absorb. Programmes should test assumptions about farmer priorities and downside risk as deliberately as agronomic performance, enable practices to be tried and sequenced with manageable exposure, and consider complementary services or risk-sharing, where necessary.

2 Service ecosystems: design for coordination and continuity

Advice, inputs, finance, and markets must work together, arrive at the appropriate stage, and remain accessible. Programmes should identify which services are required, how they connect, who provides and finances them, and who coordinates them once external support ends. Each function needs a credible provider and financing pathway, although not every service may necessarily become commercial.

3 Business models: test viability beyond project conditions

Business and delivery models should be tested under realistic post-project conditions, accounting for financial and opportunity costs, the timing of expenditure and returns, cash flow gaps, and each actor's incentives and risks. This should reveal which models can continue commercially, which require collective or public support, and which are not viable in their present form.

4 Mainstreaming: the business case must extend beyond premiums

Cash crop value chains can provide market pull and a platform for services, finance, and market access, but should serve as entry points rather than boundaries. Coordination among companies sourcing for export, buyers serving domestic and regional markets, and public procurement bodies can extend support across wider farms and shared sourcing landscapes. These arrangements require transparent governance and meaningful farmer representation.

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

A regenerative transition is not a single investment. Programmes should distinguish between commercially investable activities, those that could become viable with temporary de-risking, and public goods or persistent market failures that require sustained support. For each function, the value created and captured, financing instrument, duration, and intended endpoint should be explicit. Public and private roles are complementary but not interchangeable, and should not be assumed to converge on one commercial endpoint.

6 Evidence and scaling: build cumulative learning across programmes

Programmes should test outcomes and delivery arrangements together, document assumptions, costs, adaptations, and failures, and distinguish reach, trial, adoption, retention, adaptation, and abandonment. A practitioner-led African mechanism could compare similar programmes through regional cohorts and build on existing CAADP structures, research and extension institutions, practitioner networks, and relevant multi-stakeholder coalitions.



A practical agenda for coordinated action

Farmers and farmer organisations should define the problems, acceptable risks, and required services, and influence how costs, risks, and benefits are negotiated.

Businesses and investors should assess returns over realistic transition periods, embed regenerative agriculture in core sourcing, and coordinate where risks and benefits cross supply chains.

Governments and CAADP institutions should finance public-value functions and persistent market failures, while supporting regional learning through existing institutions.

Implementing organisations and donors should test assumptions under real-world conditions, strengthen local delivery capacity, and contribute comparable evidence on sustained use.

Coordination is not neutral: farmers may bear transition costs and production risks, while others capture benefits. Effective collaboration therefore requires representative participation, transparent decision making, explicit negotiation of costs and risks, and accountability to less powerful actors.

For CAADP-aligned transformation, success should not be measured primarily by the number of 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.

About SNV

SNV is a global development partner rooted in and working across Africa and Asia. With 60 years of experience and over 90% of our team coming from and working within the countries where we operate, our mission is to strengthen capacities and catalyse partnerships that transform agri-food, energy and water systems to enable sustainable and more equitable lives for all.

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