



Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Mid-term review SSF/SPVO

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Mid-term review SSF/SPVO

Final report

RVO Netherlands Enterprise Agency

Rotterdam, 18 December 2025

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List of acronyms

CSDDD	Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive
DD	Due Diligence
DDE	Directie Duurzame Economische Ontwikkeling (Directorate for Sustainable Economic Development)
EU	European Union
EYCU	Early Years Count Uganda
FBK	Fund against Child Labour
FVO	Fund for Responsible Business Conduct
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Corporation for International Cooperation)
HRDD	Human Rights Due Diligence
IAF	International Apparel Federation
IDH	The Sustainable Trade Initiative (Initiatief Duurzame Handel)
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMVO	Internationaal Maatschappelijk Verantwoord Ondernemen (International Responsible Business Conduct)
KIT	Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen (Royal Tropical Institute)
LWI	Living Wage Income
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MFI	Microfinance Institution
MTR	Mid-Term Review
MVO	Maatschappelijk Verantwoord Ondernemen (Responsible Business Conduct)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSH	Occupational Safety and Health
PDA	Participatory Development Associates
PMEL	Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
RVO	Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland (Netherlands Enterprise Agency)
RBC	Responsible Business Conduct, used in this report to cover corporate social responsibility as well (CSR)
SIF	Social Innovation Fund
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
SPVO	Subsidy Programme for Responsible Business
SSF	Social Sustainability Fund
STTI	Sustainable Terms of Trade Initiative
ToC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
VSLA	Village Savings and Loans Association

Executive summary

Introduction

The Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) has commissioned Ecorys to conduct a review (MTR) of the Subsidy Programme for Responsible Business (SPVO), previously known as the Social Sustainability Fund (SSF). The SPVO is funded by the Directorate for Sustainable Economic Development (DDE) of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). This mid-term review (MTR) aims to assess the overall relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of the SPVO, focusing on the fund's contribution to supported projects currently in their early stages. The review draws on desk review, interviews, surveys and case studies to provide triangulated insights and actionable recommendations for the ongoing and future development of the programme.

The SPVO aims for social sustainability in international value chains by promoting responsible business conduct (RBC), with a focus on three themes: 1) improving working conditions, 2) improving the wages and income of workers and small suppliers, and 3) combating child labour. The current SPVO portfolio comprises 27 individual value chain projects and 5 custom projects with a more sector-wide approach, all at varying stages of implementation. The MTR does not assess the effectiveness of individual projects, as most are in their research or early implementation phase, but instead evaluates the fund's relevance, alignment with companies' expectations and needs, early signs of impact, and preconditions for long-term effectiveness and sustainability.

The MTR consisted of the following research activities:

- Desk and literature research provided context and policy framework analysis.
- Surveys for lead and local companies were disseminated across the project portfolio to capture feedback on the fund's processes and early impacts across the project portfolio.
- Interviews were conducted with a sample of lead companies, local partners, and other stakeholders to gather qualitative insights.
- Three in-depth case studies offered a closer look at specific project experiences and challenges.

Key Findings

Relevance

The SPVO's objectives remain highly relevant to the needs of companies operating internationally, especially considering increasing demands for responsible business conduct and sustainable supply chains and the limited availability of alternatives for funding. The fund's design aligns with RVO's broader strategic ambitions, including transition-oriented working and integration of sustainability at both policy and implementation levels. Participating organisations value the opportunity to experiment with innovative approaches and partnership models enabled by the SPVO, costs that they would not easily find funding for through their own products or clients.

Effectiveness

There is evidence of strong intentions among project lead companies to address social and environmental challenges in their value chains, and positive initial engagement and willingness to collaborate across stakeholders, despite some variation in commitment and responsiveness. It is clear that project leads are proactively integrating responsible business conduct (RBC) principles from the outset, prioritising not only compliance but also continuous improvement in working conditions, fair wages, and the prevention of child labour. Some lead companies have demonstrated a strong sense of ownership and have already taken steps to embed RBC into their internal policies and supplier codes of conduct. Others are still in the process of building trust with local partners, navigating complex supply chain dynamics, or overcoming resource constraints that limit more proactive engagement. Despite these differences, the willingness to collaborate and experiment with innovative approaches—such as joint training sessions, pilot interventions, and data-sharing initiatives—has laid a promising foundation for future progress.

Generally, most SPVO project partners consider the partnership between the Dutch lead company and their value chain partner(s) to be a relatively equal one, as far as partnership can be achieved in a supplier-buyer relationship. In terms of the expected impact of the SPVO project on the existing relationship between the project partners, specifically, the vast majority of both local (65%) and Dutch (74%) companies indicate they expect their joint work on the SPVO project to influence their cooperation positively.

Sustainability

At the time of writing, no formal decision had been made on the explicit application of transition theory within SPVO. As a result, current project selection and implementation practices show only an implicit connection to transition thinking rather than a systematic one. There is no clearly documented or verifiable link between project objectives, implementation modalities, and the different phases of transition models, such as Simons' Transmission Model. Although for some value chains, notably cocoa, there appears to be an implicit assumption that projects targeting early transition phases are no longer eligible, this is not formally articulated or consistently applied.

Project proposals and Phase A reporting do not clearly indicate which transition phase individual projects or value chains are addressing. Moreover, opportunities for upscaling, replication, and system-level change are generally not explicitly integrated into the design or documentation of individual projects. This contrasts with customised projects, where scaling and replication are core elements of project formulation. Even so, neither individual nor customised project documentation makes explicit reference to transition theory or the transmission framework.

Smaller companies tend to pursue bottom-up approaches, focusing on improving their own sustainability through measures such as transparent pricing, traceability, and strong local partnerships. These companies typically target niche or premium markets rather than large-scale volume growth, aiming to demonstrate viable business models that others could potentially replicate. Larger companies, often influenced by emerging human rights due diligence requirements, are more likely to use SPVO-funded pilots as a basis for internal upscaling or replication across countries or value chains. However, the evaluation finds that

such replication usually depends on additional public or private funding, limiting the structural embedding of successful pilots within companies.

Customised projects place a stronger emphasis on system-level change, often seeking to establish or adapt sector-wide structures, tools, and frameworks to promote social sustainability. Knowledge sharing, joint learning, and network strengthening are central objectives, though involving all relevant stakeholders remains a significant challenge.

The Theory of Change itself is considered coherent, with outputs being delivered and short-term outcomes appearing feasible, although most projects are still in early stages. Finally, two key assumptions require close attention: the limited immediate perceived value of social sustainability for many local companies and growing uncertainty around the strength of European RBC legislation, which could slow broader corporate engagement in the future.

Recommendations

At the policy level (MFA)

R1. A mandatory legislative framework for social and environmental sustainability would be a huge incentive to make global value chains more sustainable and facilitate phase 4 (the institutionalisation phase) of the Transition Framework.

R2. RBC Criteria included in Public Procurement Policies. Public authorities can significantly promote corporate social responsibility by explicitly integrating sustainability criteria into public procurement policies. Doing so creates strong incentives for companies to improve social and environmental sustainability across their value chains.

R3. Long-Term Policy. Uncertain long-term funding for the SPVO undermines companies' confidence in RVO as a reliable sustainability partner and limits the potential for scaling up successful projects. The evaluators therefore recommend a transparent long-term policy, including multi-year (e.g. five-year) financial commitments, to provide companies with a clear perspective for continued engagement and impact.

At the strategic level (RVO & MFA)

R4. Global value chain analysis of major value chains. The evaluation recommends developing systematic sector visions and global value chain analyses for other major value chains, building on the good practice of the Cocoa Strategy, particularly where multiple projects and Dutch companies are involved to identify upscaling opportunities. At the same time, pilot projects in less well-known value chains can generate valuable insights and good practices, allowing the SPVO to fill a niche not addressed by other donors.

R5. Combining environmental and social sustainability in the projects. The MTR's findings confirmed that ecological and social sustainability often go hand in hand. Maintaining social sustainability as a core objective may be interesting because there appear to be fewer subsidy opportunities for projects with this theme at their core.

At the operational level (RVO)

R6. Maintain SPVO's strong aspects. The evaluation recommends maintaining SPVO's strong aspects, including the effective combination of research and implementation phases to ensure data-driven action and stronger results. It also highlights the value of mandatory in-company training to engage diverse departments and the importance of flexibility to adapt projects to changing contexts while remaining aligned with grant conditions.

R7. Continue and further optimise activities in knowledge sharing and providing networking opportunities. The need seems greater among SMEs than among large companies. The evaluation team recommends continuing to focus on the knowledge pillar of the SPVO and trying to involve as many companies as possible, whether or not this is mandatory for certain topics.

R8. Expand Consortium and Sectoral Approaches. The evaluation finds that customised projects have greater upscaling potential than individual projects and align more closely with SPVO's intended long-term impact, despite higher coordination risks. We therefore recommend increasing the share of tailor-made projects and strengthening collaboration with Embassies to facilitate sector-wide approaches.

R9. Streamlining communication. It is also advised to involve local partners in RVO communication with project lead companies (e.g. on approval or feedback of outputs) and facilitate their participation in regular update meetings with the RVO team.

R10. Increasing Outreach. The evaluation recommends strengthening communication and outreach on SPVO's offer, as awareness is currently limited despite interest from organisations willing to help promote it. In particular, it suggests engaging member organisations such as MVO Nederland and sector or trade associations to disseminate information through their networks.

R11. Optimisation of internal capacity resources. The evaluation notes that SPVO places a high workload on RVO staff and recommends addressing this through efficiency gains in internal processes rather than increasing management budgets. It suggests that RVO advisers focus more on a broker role—connecting partners across themes, value chains, and countries—rather than providing in-depth advice on individual projects.

1 Introduction

The Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) has commissioned Ecorys to undertake the mid-term review (MTR) of the Subsidy Programme for Responsible Business (SPVO), previously called the Social Sustainability Fund (SSF). This draft final report starts with an introduction to the MTR and process (Chapter 1) and key background information on the Fund (Chapter 2). We then describe findings of our overarching data collection using desk review, interviews, a survey and case studies in Chapter 3. Based on these, Chapter 5 contains our conclusions and recommendations.

Objective of the assignment

The purpose of this MTR, as stipulated in the Terms of Reference (ToR), is to assess the relevance, effectiveness and sustainability of the SPVO programme and its interventions, captured in five evaluation questions. The MTR is not intended to examine the effectiveness of individual projects, since it is too early to make any conclusions, as most projects are still in the research phase. Instead, it aims to assess the fund's contribution to the projects in the initial stage. The recommendations from this review should provide the programme team with lessons learned and concrete steps forward to improve project implementation and to increase learning in the current SPVO as well as inform decisions about a successor of the SPVO fund.

Research areas of the MTR include the relevance, effectiveness and sustainability of the fund. Because the current stage of implementation does not allow to fully assess effectiveness and sustainability, we here consider prerequisites and preconditions that make effectiveness and sustainability likely. We also pay special attention to how SPVO aligns with RVO's ambitions on transition-oriented working and adoption of recommendations from the earlier MTR of FVO and FBK in 2021. The research questions are presented in the evaluation matrix in Annex 2. The scope of this MTR is the current SSF/SPVO portfolio of 27 individual projects, 5 custom projects and portfolio-level data about SSF/SPVO, such as the policy framework, annual planning and reporting. When we refer to SPVO in the remainder of the report, this also includes the projects and activities when the fund was named SSF.

Approach and methodology

The methodology for this MTR, as outlined in Annex 1, combined desk research, interviews, a survey and three case studies to collect comprehensive data on the SPVO fund and its portfolio of projects. This mixed-methods approach enabled the evaluation team to capture information from different sources and scopes (programme-wide, lead companies, local companies, and other stakeholders), ensuring a robust assessment tailored to the early implementation phase of the programme. In principle, findings presented in Chapter 3 are taken directly from data collected, and sources are indicated where relevant and as far as possible in maintaining the anonymity of respondents. The viewpoints of the evaluators, based on the data and observations, are part of the conclusions and recommendations in Chapter 4. The evaluation matrix describing the methods used to answer each research question is presented in Annex 2.

Challenges and limitations

The MTR was influenced by a few challenges and limitations. A limitation that was known at the start of the project was that most projects are currently in Phase A of their implementation, with few results to report. As such, the evaluation matrix was designed to look for early signs and preconditions of effectiveness and sustainability. Findings thereon are mostly based on the projects' intentions and ambitions. Actual realisation of these remains to be assessed. This also limited the extent to which case studies could be meaningfully conducted and likely had an effect on the willingness and comfort of engaged organisations and stakeholders to participate in reflective interviews (see point 1). Further challenges encountered in the MTR include:

1. Reaching sampled projects for survey and interview data collection: A majority of projects did not respond to initial requests to participate in our survey and interviews, despite an introduction and request to participate from RVO. Both Ecorys and RVO have had to send multiple rounds of individual follow-up requests to reach a sufficient response rate, both for the survey as well as interviews. The small number of remaining non-responders might introduce some bias into the findings, as non-responders could also be a subgroup of projects that are less successful or less active in their project implementation. Triangulation of information from different sources mitigates this bias to a larger extent, as together almost all projects are represented. The limited number of companies also meant that survey results alone could not be stratified for company size, which would result in too small numbers for meaningful interpretation. We have thus only reported on differences between larger and smaller companies where the evidence for this was strong enough and also confirmed in multiple interviews.
2. While the review was designed to target companies primarily, some projects included more NGO engagement or other organisations, such as national trade associations and did not (yet) engage local companies. Navigating this heterogeneity required more tailoring and adaptation of interview questions by the evaluation team. This also limits the effects – and our insights – into effects at the level of local responsible business conduct.
3. Case studies are based on limited information available – linked to the limited implementation of projects so far. This means that we have used the case studies to illustrate other findings, but that not all case study findings could be validated as stand-alone findings also relevant across the programme.

2 Background

Introduction to the SPVO

The SPVO was preceded by the Fund against Child Labour (FBK, 2018-2022) and the Fund for Responsible Business Conduct (FVO, 2018-2022), which merged into the SSF until its name change to SPVO in 2024. The SPVO supports businesses active in the Netherlands committed to social sustainability in international value chains. One of the principles of the SPVO is that responsible business conduct should be promoted in the Netherlands and internationally, in line with Dutch and EU policies. This is in line with the recent policy letter on foreign aid¹, which states that supporting Dutch companies to introduce innovations and expand their businesses is one of the priorities of the government, especially in the combination countries identified (in which aid and trade are promoted in synergy).

The SPVO framework aligns with this broader regulatory context, with a specific emphasis on promoting social sustainability in international value chains. The programme aims for more inclusive, gender-equitable, and sustainable global value chains by promoting responsible business conduct (RBC), with a focus on three social themes: 1) improving working conditions, 2) improving the wages and income of workers and small suppliers, and 3) combating child labour. Since August 2025, greening, environment and ecosystem themes have been added to the scope of SPVO, as long as they also link to the social priorities.

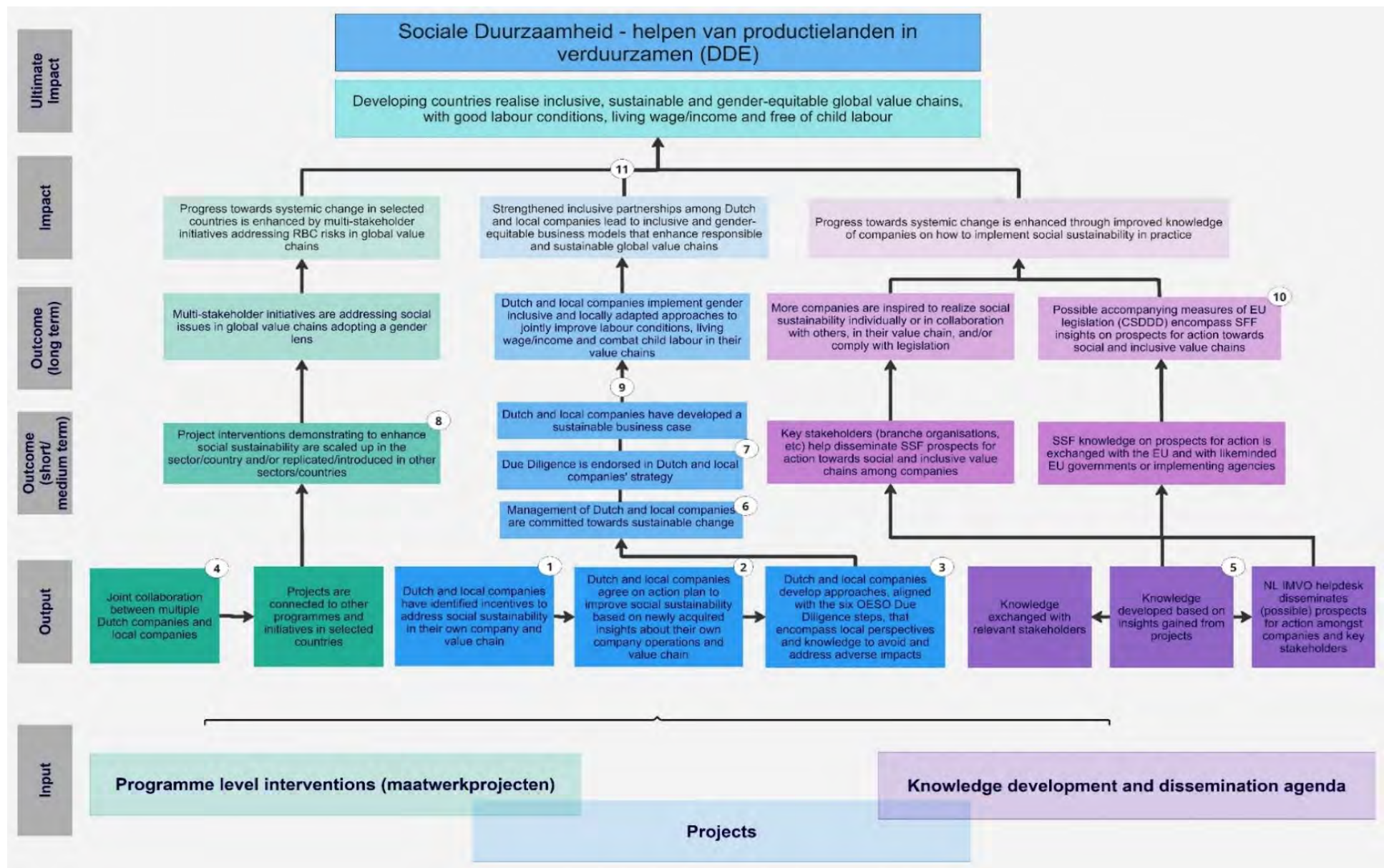
SPVO contributes to this long-term impact through three key approaches: individual projects, customised projects involving clusters of companies, and the development of knowledge products. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Prevent and address social abuse in value chains by developing and testing actionable insights and solutions within projects, with a focus on child labour, low wages/income, and poor working conditions.
2. Enhance stakeholder engagement and meaningful dialogue by facilitating discussions in (customised) projects and providing actionable insights and solutions that empower local producers and other stakeholders. This strengthens their voice in making international value chains more sustainable and supports the implementation of responsible business conduct (RBC) and due diligence legislation, including EU regulations.
3. Advance knowledge and learning for impact by capturing insights from projects, fostering knowledge exchange, and supporting companies in understanding their role in making value chains more sustainable. This includes practical guidance on implementing impactful measures in collaboration with local partners.

Theory of change

These specific objectives of the SPVO/SSF have been translated by RVO into a dedicated theory of change, which is presented below. The Theory of Change is based on the assumption that strengthened partnerships between Dutch companies and local suppliers, supported by joint action plans, can drive systemic improvements in RBC. Collaboration with civil society, embassies, and other stakeholders, alongside knowledge sharing, reinforces this change.

¹ Beleidsbrief Ontwikkelingshulp, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, published 20 February 2025.



Transmission Framework

RVO has adopted the Transmission Framework² as a framework for transition-oriented working. The aim is to increasingly apply this framework to the projects implemented, for example, by stimulating transition-oriented working in assessing subsidy proposals and in advising ongoing projects. In line with this, RVO has also shifted their internal organisation to work more task/problem-oriented, trying to connect different services that link to the same ambitions/challenges. This implies a closer collaboration between SPVO and instruments or services such as Sesam (sectoral collaboration), the RBC support desk (MVO-steunpunt), CBI and the Combi-tracks programme. As the use of the Transmission Framework was largely adopted after the SPVO ToC was designed, it was not incorporated in the ToC.

Social and environmental responsibility themes

The focus of the SSF and SPVO was narrowed to social responsible business conduct, with less emphasis on greening and climate-related responsible business conduct. This was decided based on the limited size of the fund and the opportunity to better support companies working on similar (social) themes by exchanging between them, training staff and working with the learning agenda and learning partners. For the subsidy opening of August 2025 and January 2026, it was decided to add greening, environment and ecosystem to the priority topics again, as long as they also link to the social priorities of decent work, living income and wage and child labour and address supply chain malpractices.

SPVO portfolio

The current SPVO portfolio comprises 33 projects, of which 5 custom projects (involving clusters of companies) and 28 individual projects (one lead company partnering with at least one local company in their value chain). One individual project is cancelled due to the bankruptcy of the lead company, which brings the number of active individual projects to 27. In May 2025, four projects had moved to phase B (implementation), and the others were in phase A (research).

The tables below show the distribution of the portfolio across sectors and countries. A majority of 21 projects are agricultural, of which coffee, cashew, cocoa and spices are common products. Most projects address multiple RBC themes, at least in the research phase A. Living wage and income, as well as working conditions, are addressed in almost all projects (29 and 26, respectively).

² TransMissie, de missiegedreven transitieaanpak voor het managen van complexe veranderprocessen. 2023. Lucas Simons, André Nijhof, Matthijs Janssen.

Sector	Count
Agriculture	21
Textiles	7
Mining	4
Recycling/Waste	1

Country	Count
India	10
Uganda	5
Ghana	4
Côte d'Ivoire	3
Indonesia	3
Ethiopia	2
Rwanda	2
Tanzania	2
Burkina Faso	1
Egypt	1

Type of projects	Count
Individual	27
Custom	5

Project phases	Count
Phase A	28
Phase B	4

Product	Count
Coffee	9
Cashew	3
Textile	3
Cotton	2
Cocoa	2
Spices	2
Natural stone	1
Salt	1
e-waste	1
Oysternut	1
Leather bags	1
Coconut sugar	1
Cotton, Sugar & Spices	1
Mica	1
Bricks	1
Shea	1

Theme addressed	Count
Living wages and income	29
Working conditions	26
Child labour	18

3 Findings

3.1 Relevance

3.1.1 *Research question 1. To which extent is the fund able to support companies in their sustainability ambitions?*

This section, in line with the formulated sub-questions (see evaluation matrix in Annex 2), focuses on the motivations for parties to apply for SPVO funding and the role of SPVO projects in their wider social sustainability ambitions and actions.

Pilots and Experimentation

The fund enables companies to conduct research and implement pilot projects, particularly where commercial benefits are unclear or cannot be immediately recouped in product prices (e.g. studying the living income of waste pickers or implementing cash transfers to farmers).

Survey results of lead companies show that a majority would address social sustainability issues without the SPVO subsidy as well (66% yes or likely; 34% unsure or unlikely). However, they also indicate that the funding of extra costs related to working on this is a main reason to participate and allows them to set up pilot projects that they consider would have been hard to fund from their own funding or via increasing product prices (81% indicated financing to be the main added value of SPVO). A significant group of lead companies also expects gaining additional expertise and networking with other companies to be of added value (52% and 33%, respectively).

For local companies, this picture is relatively similar, with 76% of respondents indicating they would have addressed social sustainability without the SPVO project as well, but added value being indicated for financing (88%), gaining expertise (71%) and networking with other companies (65%).

Interviews confirmed the above results. Smaller companies often presented sustainability and RBC as being in the core of their business model and company values, and the fund helps them finance research, data collection and other investments that would have been hard to finance otherwise. Examples named were collecting data on living income, establishing local partnerships and developing protocols or ways of working that can be incorporated in their business. According to the companies interviewed, setting up solid, sustainable production systems and transparent value chains in smaller, intrinsically motivated companies can then inspire larger companies and potentially lead to replication and scale-up. Smaller companies and NGOs have described intentions of making their developed products as a result of SPVO available publicly. Examples named included RBC protocols in the coffee sector and contract templates for the textile industry.

Embedding Sustainability within the Business

For larger companies, most interviewees explained how the fund helps RBC managers and other staff working on social sustainability, embedding this in the company.

External funding provides external stimulation and accountability for companies where RBC is not yet part of their core business model. These companies use the funding mostly to develop successful cases that they aim to fund through clients in the future.

The program also requires successful applicants to participate in due diligence training, with attendance from a range of departments including management, procurement/sales and legal departments, depending on the company's structure. Companies have indicated that this promotes the institutionalisation of sustainability beyond the RBC or sustainability department.

Leveraging and credibility

Companies described how working with a government agency like **RVO lends them significant credibility and leverage**, both internationally and with local partners. Several Dutch and local companies have described how being associated with government funding has stimulated bringing together different organisations to work on shared objectives. This is even more evident in custom projects, where multiple value chains work together under one project. In Uganda (Greater Masaka Region), a joint project of the three largest coffee trading companies and their local partners (including farmers and handling stations) allows coverage of the majority of the regional coffee sector. According to the interviewed companies, this leverages their position towards stakeholders, prevents internal competition and prevents transfer of RBC issues from one value chain to another trading organisation. In one instance, a company also noticed a negative effect of communicating government funding, as the collaboration with local stakeholders was complicated by organisations now asking for a share of the SPVO subsidy.

The MFA's DDE – funder of SPVO – has included several policy goals on RBC in their Theory of Change, including strengthening policies for working environments and improving the actual work environments, as well as increasing the number of decent jobs³. **From the viewpoint of achieving these goals, the relevance of funding opportunities like SPVO is even higher given the recent changes to the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) law**, which will be applied to a narrowed scope of only large companies. Limited additional Dutch laws and regulations further regulate or stimulate social sustainability and responsible international business conduct. This limited regulatory pressure means that RBC changes will need to be stimulated through other incentives, such as financial support. Exceptions with stricter regulation on social sustainability exist, for example, companies participating in government tenders. One project working on living income for pickers of e-waste described how the government tender regulations on compensation of e-waste provide an incentive for companies to work on this social sustainability theme. This will be further addressed under 3.3 when we discuss sustainability prospects.

3.1.2 Research question 2. Does the fund meet the expectations of applicants or do applicants have any additional needs (e.g. non-financial support) which could be considered in a follow-up of the current SPVO scheme (SPVO 2.0)?

In line with the research question, this section describes early findings of SPVO recipients regarding their needs and expectations of the fund, other support that companies use and additional needs they have.

Expectations of primary support

A large majority of companies interviewed indicate that SPVO meets their expectations.

Companies view RVO's funding role as very positive. RVO project advisors – the primary contact points for applicants and successful grants - are described as pleasant,

³ Waardig Werk en Economische Groei – Theory of Change DDE, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022.

understanding, and interested partners to work with. RVO is appreciated for its pragmatic and collaborative approach regarding reporting and administration. Especially smaller companies sometimes struggle with the administrative burden of working with governments and public funding in general, and several mention duplications in reporting templates and information requested, as well as unclear timelines for feedback. The latter refers to not knowing when reports, such as the Phase A report, are approved such that Phase B can be initiated. They do, however, understand the need for accountability of public finances and experience that once they reach out to RVO staff to discuss reporting needs or questions on the timeline, this is usually supported well. Several companies more experienced in working with different public donors also note that the administrative burden of the SPVO is less than for other donors. The administrative burden on participating companies can also be accounted for in project funds or (by hiring costs or in-kind contributions) as part of each project's mandatory co-funding.

Besides being approachable for procedural questions or discussion, the project advisors are also valued to provide an advising role for projects. Advice sometimes includes connecting companies to other stakeholders or sharing knowledge and resources on successful approaches. This role largely depends on the advisors' backgrounds, which varies across sectors, RBC themes and countries. The RVO team, as much as possible, tries to match projects with the most suited advisor. The RVO staff also perceives a high workload as a result of being highly involved in projects. Although the engagement of staff is highly appreciated and, in many cases, leads to improvement of project plans and results, the wide scope of SPVO also inherently brings a trade-off between in-depth knowledge of the projects' contexts and keeping RVO's role proportional to the grants disbursed.

Other financial and non-financial support used

A majority (62%) of lead company survey respondents indicate they use other types of financial support in addition to internal funding and the SPVO grant. Examples named include:

- client funding, both project-based (e.g. through RBC/foundation funds of their buyers) and through pricing of products,
- other Dutch Government funding, e.g. via RVO SESAM and the Social Innovation Fund (SIF) of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment,
- other donor funding (World Bank, UNDP, IDH, FairTrade Africa),
- impact investment, including venture capital.

For local companies, 59% indicate using financial support other than their own and SPVO funding, including:

- other donor funding and partnership funding (e.g. FairTrade)
- client funding (buyers)
- impact investments (loan and equity)

Although the survey results show a variety of other funding opportunities, companies as well as other stakeholders, agree that these are limited. A few companies have previously worked with funding from GIZ⁴ or DANIDA⁵, but have also seen fewer of these opportunities in the last years.

⁴ Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Corporation for International Cooperation)

⁵ Danish International Development Agency

No non-financial types of support were indicated in the survey, but some were discussed in interviews. **Member organisations such as MVO Nederland and Fair Wear Foundation guide companies in their sustainability ambitions**, but the support is mostly focused on networking and development and dissemination of knowledge and tools, less at the individual level. Organisations like IDH⁶ offer similar services, especially on the theme of living income and wage, some paid.

Additional needs identified

Additional needs for financial and/or non-financial support indicated by lead companies in the survey include:

- SPVO-supported expertise from independent experts or NGOs, particularly on technical skills such as how to perform due diligence assessments in their value chain;
- Connecting with other relevant stakeholders or with networks to bring new products to the market;
- Connecting with businesses with similar objectives for resource and knowledge sharing.

Additional needs identified by local companies include:

- Knowledge sharing from other SPVO projects or similar experienced organisations.
- Peer-to-peer engagement to share and reflect on ideas.
- Training on technical expertise in social sustainability themes.
- Access to market information and support in scaling up current projects.

Facilitating Learning and Exchange and building a community of companies with similar objectives is a frequently cited non-financial need. RVO, however, already facilitates a number of knowledge-sharing events, has a learning agenda and disseminates knowledge materials such as white papers. So far, these outputs have not (yet) all had a large reach or attendance, and there are opportunities to share the written products or event recordings/takeaways more widely. More knowledge-sharing products and events are scheduled for the remainder of the SPVO. It is our impression that companies have larger aspirations in terms of knowledge sharing and exchanging with other companies. On the other hand, several companies indicated that they lack time to join or participate since they have busy schedules. Sharing detailed information can also involve reservations based on competitiveness. Nevertheless, these findings should encourage RVO to continue and further optimise their activities in knowledge sharing and providing networking opportunities.

Additional small budgets are another wish from companies interviewed, for instance, to support monitoring of long-term results even after the project concludes (beyond three years) to assess genuine behavioural change. In addition, there is a significant need for a tiered approach, including simpler, lower-threshold funding (e.g., vouchers up to €10,000 or a "light" version) for smaller interventions, transparency checks, or initial research, before companies commit to a large, multi-year project. The current re-installment of IMVO-vouchers, now managed by RVO's MVO support desk, could be a good opportunity for this kind of financial support, although timelines need to be well-aligned to make sure companies can use these different instruments in the most relevant sequence and timing.

Lastly, the following additional needs were identified by a minority of interviewees:

⁶ A global NGO with its headquarters in The Netherlands, focussing on making global and local value chains more inclusive and sustainable, including climate change, unfair wages, inequality and gender disparities.

- **Consortium/Sector Approach:** allowing and actively encouraging consortia of multiple Dutch companies or competitors to collaborate on shared issues, such as monitoring systems or remediation efforts, which drives efficiency and increases leverage (as is already done under some customised projects). RVO's sectoral collaboration programme Sesam could be a relevant instrument for this need.
- **Flexibility in scope:** Being more flexible regarding the inclusion of environmental or "green" components when they directly contribute to social improvements and income diversification. The current round of subsidy opening has already incorporated this option.
- **Flexibility in geography:** To consider installing a (small-scale) flexible segment of the fund for projects in countries not on the current country list (anymore), as these change relatively frequently and this might be a way of facilitating valuable work in those geographies - especially where previous progress can be leveraged towards enhanced impact.

3.2 Effectiveness

3.2.1 *Research question 3. To what extent does the fund contribute to the implementation of RBC due diligence within the companies (companywide/beyond RBC departments) that receive support through SSF/SPVO?*

This section provides an overview of the main risks, challenges, and added value identified across all SPVO-supported projects. It highlights key patterns in risk analyses, differences in company approaches, and the main strategies adopted to address issues such as low wages, poor working conditions, and gender inequality. The further sections will also examine implementation risks, the likelihood of achieving outcomes, the degree of integration within company structures, and the perceived added value.

Identified Risk & Objectives across all projects

Across the full range of projects and value chains, risk analyses are converging on issues that are rooted in economic vulnerability, poor labour practices and deep-seated social inequalities – in line with SPVO's core themes:

- The majority of projects have concluded that low wages and the severe **Living Income/Wage Gap are the most critical sustainability issues**. Poverty and income instability were identified as the underlying causes of child labour, forced migration and substandard working conditions. For instance, the incomes of farmers frequently suffice only for a single individual, thus proving incapable of supporting an average family unit.
- **Poor working conditions are consistently identified as a significant risk**, particularly at the levels of raw material extraction or initial processing. The specific hazards that are present vary but often include risks that are life-threatening due to low safety protocols (e.g. salt mining, granite quarrying), exposure to dangerous substances (pesticides, sulfuric acid, CNSL), lack of protective gear (PPE), and irregular work schedules/forced overtime.
- **Child labour is seen as a consequence of poverty**. While some sectors (e.g. cashew, cassia) note minimal child labour risk in their direct operations, the risk is always present in associated informal sectors or as a direct consequence of parental poverty. In other sectors, such as cotton, coffee, and jute, child labour is explicitly prevalent, often involving children from migrant or low-income families. In addition, specific processes (e.g. cottonseed hybridisation or oysternut collection) rely on or encourage child labour.

Multiple projects reveal that women face barriers that are disproportionate to those faced by men. These include earning significantly less than men, lacking decision-making power, and facing limited access to resources like land or finance due to restrictive socio-cultural norms. Opportunities for women are often limited to low-paid, informal and high-risk roles.

One recurring vulnerability is reliance on informal employment, such as contracting, seasonal work and migrant labour. This results in low job security, an absence of trade union representation and social and healthcare protections. A primary conclusion of the risk analysis for major global companies is the **lack of transparency** in deeper tiers (Tier 3/4).

The patterns in risk analyses by the program vary depending on the size and capacity of Dutch companies. Some of the large companies tend to focus on transparent supply chains (Tier 3–4), particularly at the raw material stage, i.e. cotton farms and spinning mills. This seems to be the case in particular in the textile sector. They identify governance gaps and the need for corporate policy reform to strengthen due diligence frameworks. Medium-sized companies, on the other hand, want to address tangible risks directly tied to their operations. These companies treat the Living Wage Income (LWI) gap as a key benchmark. Small companies centre their analyses on a single dominant risk, which shapes the overall project strategy. Their findings often highlight the need for systemic innovation, requiring a complete rethink of supply or production systems as key mechanisms for driving safer and more sustainable practices. The smaller companies in the project portfolio are often “impact companies” established with sustainability as their main objective.

Analysis of the documents and interviews shows that companies across all sectors want to deploy a set of actions to deal with the identified risk. One of the common strategies seems the shift from auditing towards creating structured due diligence systems, including comprehensive RBC or ESG policies, codes of conduct and monitoring frameworks with clear KPIs. Another central focus is the approach to address income gaps. This is done through a variety of direct measures, such as improved purchasing and pricing conditions, productivity-based approaches like regenerative farming and good agricultural practices, and the diversification of livelihoods through alternative income-generating activities. Strengthening the voice of workers and remediation mechanisms is also seen as a priority. Deep-tier activities try to include the promotion of financial and digital literacy, occupational health and safety (OSH) training, and gender equality activities. Finally, nearly all projects emphasise the importance of external collaboration to improve upscaling and sustainability. This involves cooperation with local authorities to align and implement policies, as well as collaboration with international organisations such as the ILO, UNICEF, OECD and NGOs.

Finally, based on the survey results, it could be concluded that for a large majority of companies/projects, the funds will be sufficient to address the main identified risks. 26% of the Dutch companies and 18% of the local companies say that funds will be sufficient to address the risks ‘completely’, while 53% of the Dutch companies and 47% of the local companies say ‘mostly’. Surprisingly, more than one in three local businesses say that the SPVO subsidy will “not really” or “to some extent” enable them to address the main risks to the achievement of project objectives. The difference in percentages can largely be explained by the different interpretations of the question, “To what extent do you expect the SPVO grant to enable you to address the main risks to achieving the project objectives?” The responses to the open-

ended follow-up question ('Please explain why') reveal that some respondents mentioned implementation risks, while others referred to social sustainability risks.

Potential Implementation Risks

According to the project stakeholders, the greatest risks to the success or failure of projects in terms of social sustainability are related to the belief among local companies that such initiatives lead to increased operating costs (including administrative/compliance burdens) and to reduced income in the short term. This is certainly the case in informal sectors or practices, such as brick production and artisanal recycling, where unsafe and exploitative practices often generate higher revenues than those prioritising responsible entrepreneurship. Many local businesses, particularly firms in low-margin industries, consider paying living wages or funding healthcare to be uncompetitive in markets driven by low prices. Based on the revision of project documentation, local resistance also arises from a lack of knowledge and awareness. Additionally, local companies often lack the expertise to implement sustainability actions effectively. Smaller local firms, in particular, have major concerns about complex requirements and prefer short-term financial gains to long-term sustainability. Also, cultural and contextual factors create resistance, with long-standing norms, like e.g. hierarchical labour relations discouraging change.

By establishing transparent partnerships, many SVPO-funded projects aimed to demonstrate that it is possible to integrate sustainability into the various chains, with a strong focus on the people involved in the production process. This is achieved by building local capacity and taking the cultural context into account. In general, the projects aim to demonstrate that integrating sustainability aspects into their chain can create significant value, which in turn leads to higher revenues (e.g., through increased productivity and a healthier workforce that experiences greater well-being). Many projects focus on financial initiatives, such as working with various premium systems. In addition, access to international and European markets is also considered an important motivator. What is striking in almost all projects is that open communication between Dutch companies and local companies is considered essential for building trust and realising the value of sustainable value chains. Several interviewees considered the joint search for solutions to be particularly enriching.

Finally, some companies and project partners identified other implementation risks, such as political and climatic risks. Some projects also cite regional security aspects as uncertain factors that could have an impact.

In general, it can be said that companies are very aware of these potential risks. No less than 74 per cent of Dutch respondents answered positively to the question of whether they have encountered or are expecting any particular challenges in the implementation of the project (see figures below). Among local companies, this percentage is reversed, which indicates that local companies seem to be more confident about the successful implementation of the projects. This was also reflected in the interviews, in which a significant number of Dutch respondents indicated that doing business and getting things done is "just a little more difficult" than they are used to in the Netherlands.

Have you encountered or are you expecting any particular challenges in the implementation of the project?	Yes	No
Lead companies	74%	26%
Local companies	29%	71%

Likelihood to achieve outputs/outcomes

As mentioned earlier, it was explicitly not the intention of this MTR to systematically analyse the results (output/outcomes). After all, this is not possible because most projects are not yet in the implementation phase, and only a very limited number have just started implementation. Multiple data sources indicate that a very strong element of SPVO funding is that projects consist of two phases (phase A & B). Phase A mainly consists of analyses (including data collection) of contextual and risk factors. According to several respondents, a thorough study that precedes the implementation phase increases the chances of success. The stakeholders interviewed generally indicated that phase A is unique for SPVO funding. It enables them to collect concrete data on the risks in a participatory manner (with various local stakeholders). Most projects also have a clear idea of the objectives and related activities they want to achieve (on paper). According to the evaluators, the objectives and activities appear to have been developed realistically and with sufficient depth. Most respondents also indicated that they strongly believe in the chances of success of their projects, partly thanks to the thorough preparation (Phase A, including mandatory training).

Finally, the monitoring framework for the programme contains clear outcome indicators, which in principle enable accurate monitoring of the impact at the programme level. Although the subsidy is based on 'company's effort' (best efforts obligation) and incurred costs, and not on whether a specific impact level is achieved, the results of the various projects can be aggregated at the programme level.

Integrated Company Approaches

Based on the project documentation, it could be concluded that cross-departmental collaboration is the norm. The project formulation documents generally mention a strategic commitment to Responsible Business Conduct and state that coordination between different business units takes place. The project leads, especially in large companies, are often the RBC or Impact teams. They then coordinate with the sourcing, procurement, or trade departments. The finance departments often need to be involved as well. In small companies, the projects are led directly by senior management (or the CEO). The interviews clearly showed that the integrated approach of companies varies greatly depending on the size of the companies and their underlying motivations (so-called impact companies and strongly commercially oriented companies). For some large companies, certain projects appear to be isolated initiatives that rarely lead (or can be expected to lead) to systemic change. Larger companies also describe themselves as being more dependent on market prices in their value chains and selling their products at a competitive price, whereas the smaller impact companies target a customer segment that can and wants to pay a premium price.

The long-term impact of projects within the bigger companies will depend on whether they are integrated into the company's regular operations. For smaller 'impact or social' companies, aspects of decent work or sustainability are at the core of their mission and therefore form an integral and inseparable component of business operations. On the other hand, unlike large

companies, these smaller companies likely have much less impact in transforming entire value chains.

One of the major challenges is therefore to extend ownership of the projects to other units within large companies. In a number of interviews with employees of large companies, it became clear that when senior management (including the CEO) is determined to place sustainability aspects at the heart of business operations, it becomes much easier to get other units in the company on board and to justify upscaling successful pilot projects. The interviews also showed that the SPVO mandatory Due Diligence training makes it easier for sustainability managers to convince other business departments of the importance of the project and the sustainability aspects. The training is generally considered to be good by the participants, providing valuable knowledge transfer. Some interviewees even indicated that companies that are already very advanced in terms of sustainability still discovered due diligence gaps in their chain. For non-RBC staff, these training sessions were often an eye-opener. The findings of the survey confirm the usefulness of in-company training courses. No less than 75 per cent of participants say that in-company training courses are “mostly useful or very useful.”

In general, the requirement to draw up a Due Diligence Improvement Plan is considered an added value, although some companies regard the drawing up of this plan as a duplication of their existing plans and an unnecessary repetition of the analysis carried out in phase A of the project.

Another criticism that was raised, albeit only very marginally, was the assertion that training is intended as a one-off step. For some, it is a concern that no structural mechanisms are in place to translate learning into sustainable business practices. The suggestion was made to organise follow-up moments or joint sessions where lessons learned can be shared, and implementation challenges can be discussed.

Finally, it should be noted that external contextual factors can play an important role in involving multiple units and the management of large companies. For example, climate change is contributing to significant variations in the volume and quality of harvests, making supply unreliable. This makes it important for some buyers to invest in their suppliers' better production processes and build long-term relationships with them. In addition, some buyers recognise that there is a lot of waste in their chain (e.g., the clothing industry). Better delivery agreements and RBC could then lead to greater efficiency (and thus profit).

3.2.2 Research question 4. To what extent is the fund expected to contribute to a more inclusive partnership between the Dutch companies and their value chain partners/supplying companies from production countries?

This section answers research question 4 by assessing the equality of partnerships and the perspectives of likely project impact from both local and lead companies.

(In)equality of partnerships

Generally, most SPVO project partners consider the partnership between the Dutch lead company and their value chain partner(s) to be a relatively equal one. The vast majority of both local (70%) and Dutch (74%) companies surveyed perceive their relationship as ‘Mostly equal’ or ‘Very equal’. Explanatory comments refer, e.g. to the partnership being

‘very participative and collaborative by all partners’; the relationship being ‘balanced’ and for the partners to ‘leverage every organisation’s strength... [so that] ...everybody brings in their own expertise’. This dynamic seems to characterise the relationships from the outset: both the local companies (47%) and their Dutch (58%) partners confirm in about half of the cases surveyed that the decision to address the relevant social sustainability theme(s) through the SPVO project was made collaboratively. Most of the other half of the local companies (i.e. 47% of the remaining 53%) indicate it was in fact their needs identification that sparked the process, with the remaining 42% of the Dutch companies surveyed being equally split between those that indicate it was their partners’ (21%) or their own initiative (21%) first.

However, the specific type of cooperation relationships should be considered, i.e. partners indicate a relationship between buyers and suppliers is also inherently not a partnership, as one party holds the financial power. In addition, the Dutch partner being the lead partner of an SPVO project by definition, does produce additional constraints to an equal working relationship truly materialising. In this regard, Dutch and local partners indicate that the fact that Dutch partners are closer to RVO, have final responsibility over the project’s implementation and are in control of the funds results in a certain power imbalance and inherent dependency on the Dutch lead.

As such, on the one hand, certain structural conditions seem to disincentivise partnerships built on the premise of complete equality in practice. On the other hand, the partnership approach most SPVO project partners uphold does seem to counteract that to a certain degree, resulting in a working relationship that is built on equality of perspective and an acknowledgement of the respective project partners’ complementary value in addressing the social sustainability issues identified, linked to their specified positioning within the value chain concerned.

Lastly, a general caveat that needs to be made is that the type of local company involved differs considerably between the different SPVO projects, which is likely to also affect (the perception of) the (power) relationship with the Dutch lead partner. For example, some companies functioning as local partners in SPVO projects are in fact the local counterpart or spin-off of a Dutch business; others are local subsidiaries of large Western-based multinationals. Whereas these parties might formally fit the definition of a local partner in the context of the SPVO fund, their context, means and contacts are likely to differ considerably from local partners such as farmer cooperatives in other projects, with related implications for the (in)dependency within and power (im-)balance of the cooperation relationship with the respective Dutch lead partners concerned.

(Likely) Project impact

In terms of the expected impact of the SPVO project on the existing relationship between the project partners, specifically, the vast majority of both local (65%) and Dutch (74%) companies indicate they expect their joint work on the SPVO project to influence their cooperation positively. A remaining 21% of Dutch companies expect no (16%) or neutral (5%) changes, with the remaining local companies expecting no (24%) or neutral (12%) changes also, and none of the companies surveyed indicating to expect any adverse effects. Examples of positive effects include the following:

- Transformation of the partnership from a merely commercial to a more holistic relationship;
- Fostering enhanced mutual understanding of respective interests and perspectives;

- Formalising the cooperation into a formal partnership leading to a stronger and more collaborative working relationship;
- Partners' continuous learning, adaptive management and further development of their (joint) approach;
- Trust being established and the cooperation gaining in depth as a result of the continuous engagement over the project's duration;
- Increasing transparency of and closeness within the working relationship, i.e. as 'we are all showing full vulnerability through the assessment and discussing openly the issues we face and the way we can support each other'.

When no particular impact on the relationship between the project partners is expected, this is often linked to the fact that the partners concerned have been cooperating for a long period of time already and have an existing track record of working on similar projects together.

3.3 Sustainability

3.3.1 *Research question 5. As part of this evaluation, we seek insights on how SPVO aligns with transition-oriented working and how it can be better positioned within this framework.*

This section examines how the SPVO is integrating a transition-oriented approach into its operations, in line with the RVO's broader transition framework. As of the writing of this report, a decision has not yet been made regarding the application of the transition theory of SVPO. Current project selection and implementation practices demonstrate an implicit rather than a systematic connection to the various transition phases. Furthermore, opportunities for scaling up, replication and system-level change are not usually explicitly embedded in project design or documentation. This section also explores the relationship between the 'transmission framework' and the SPVO's Theory of Change, identifying areas where strategic alignment and acceleration mechanisms could be strengthened.

The Transition Framework in the SPVO Practice

While specific tools and principles related to transition thinking have been introduced to the SPVO team, its full positioning within this framework is still evolving. Transition-oriented working is fundamentally about system-level thinking, complexity management, long-term impact, and striving toward a common goal.

. At present, there is no direct, objectifiable and documented relationship between the selection of projects, the implementation and objectives of the projects, and the transition phases outlined in e.g. Simons' Transmission Model. Implicitly, for some value chains, such as cocoa, there seems to be an idea that project proposals that still focus on earlier phases of transformation (the inertia phase and the inception phase) are no longer eligible for funding. Annex 5 contains an example exercise showing how an in-depth analysis of the cacao value chain can be integrated directly into the transmission model.

Based on the available information (the project proposals and the reporting on phase A), it is not entirely clear in which transmission phase each of the projects for the various value chains is located.

The Transition: Upscaling and Replication.

Project documentation for individual projects usually does not explicitly reference the possibility of upscaling or replicating any results that projects might achieve. This contrasts with customised projects, for which upscaling and replication are a key part of the project formulation. The project documentation (for both types of projects) also does not make any direct link to transition theories or the transmission model.

The projects of smaller companies implicitly aim to improve their own sustainability through e.g. transparent pricing models, traceability, and strong local partnerships. Rather than targeting massive volume increases, they are primarily focusing on premium products for which buyers are willing to pay a higher price. Their approach is more bottom-up. They aim to demonstrate that a successful business case can be built with strong local partnerships, which can then be adopted by other companies or replicated in other chains or countries. Large companies, on the other hand, partly under pressure from upcoming HRDD obligations, attempt to achieve upscaling and/or replication within their own company. Often, this involves running successful pilots through the SPVO fund, which can then be rolled out more broadly within the company. This roll-out can be achieved by either replicating the pilot project in the same value chain in another country or by implementing it in other value chains where the company operates. However, it has been found that the replication of projects depends heavily on additional public or private funding. This means that successful pilots do not immediately lead to structural embedding within the company. Instead, the results are incrementally expanded within the company on the basis of additional external funding. This external funding generally consists of two sources. Firstly, additional non-SPVO government funding (e.g. from foreign donors) whereby the successful pilot project is implemented again. Secondly, customers of the company who want to promote their own CSR and are willing to finance a project for this purpose. A successful pilot project then serves as a demonstrable good practice for customers.

Scaling up is an essential part of customised projects. With SPVO funding, stakeholders hope to establish new structures or modify existing ones, frequently at a sectoral level. The aim of a number of these projects is to promote social sustainability in supply chains by developing practical tools, guidelines and assessment frameworks. Legislation (see e.g. CSDDD) often drives the pursuit of change on a larger scale. Knowledge sharing, joint learning processes and strengthening networks are important objectives in most of these projects. Unlike individual projects, the intended change is therefore to a greater extent at the system level. The biggest challenge for these projects is involving all stakeholders.

Theory of change

This mid-term review was not intended to examine the validity of the overall ToC, given that most projects and customised projects are in the early stages of implementation. However, the evaluation team can assess the output and short-term outcomes. The ToC consists of three pillars. The central pillar is the impact pathway for individual projects, while the other two pillars relate to the customised projects and the knowledge and development and dissemination agenda. As indicated in various places in this report, the findings indicate that the outputs as formulated in the ToC are being realised. Based on the document analyses and, more specifically, the proposed objectives and implementation modalities of the various (customised) projects, the evaluation team estimates that the potential to achieve the short-term outcomes is present. However, this remains an estimate as the formulated intentions on

paper have to be realised in the coming years. In section 3.2.1., we outlined the risks involved in successfully organising the implementation.

With regard to the assumptions of the ToC, the assessment team's conclusion, based on interviews and document analysis, is that these are still valid, built on the evidence provided in this report. However, there are two assumptions that require special attention.

- Firstly, assumption six states that “Social sustainability and sustainable production chains are also valued by local businesses, as much as they are by Dutch companies.” As mentioned earlier in the report, the commercial added value of social sustainability and sustainable production is not always immediately apparent to local companies. This is due to low margins, the fact that they deal with different customers, and cultural and political contexts. The stakeholders also identified these risks. It is therefore clear that continuous attention will need to be paid to convincing local production entities of the need to implement social sustainability measures and ensuring added value for them is realised.
- Secondly, the evaluation team doubts whether assumption 10 (“The enabling environment for RBC remains conducive: Dutch IMVO/European RBC legislation is enacted into law and provides directives and expectations (including SMART indicators) for Dutch and local companies to comply with RBC legislation”) still applies. There appears to be a strong recent trend toward deregulation at the European level, partly as a result of a significantly changed global context. The findings in this report clearly show that enforceable legislation provides a strong impetus for social sustainability measures that companies want and are able to implement. A weakening or standstill in RBC legislation will slow down the onboarding of the vast majority of companies that have not yet developed concrete actions and strategies regarding (social) sustainability.

3.3.2 *Research question 6. To what extent have recommendations of the FVO & FBK mid-term review in 2021 been incorporated into the current SPVO?*

The current SPVO has taken significant steps with regard to the recommendations concerning the strategic planning process & programme structure in the MTR of FBK/FVO. The decision to merge the funds lead to more informed strategic decisions on project selection, implementation and contribution to change. The integration of both funds also led to a revision of the ToC, which accurately describes the intended change processes.

Furthermore, the findings of this evaluation do not point to a desire among companies to receive larger grants; on the contrary, (smaller) companies are mainly asking to be allowed to submit very small exploratory projects with a rather limited budget. This finding from the FVO & FBK MTR is therefore no longer supported during this MTR.

Based on the experience of several interviewees and documented learning activities, the internal capacity building is high. An example is the recent training on assessing living income and wages, facilitated by IDH. The vast majority of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the expertise of the case managers involved and that they consider them to be critical and constructive sparring partners.

One of the recommendations in the MTR of FVO/FBK was that the potential for learning opportunities and exchange of experience was not being exploited. It is clear that this recommendation has been taken into account in the SPVO. A large number of tools have

been developed to facilitate learning opportunities such as (online) workshops, (mandatory) training, and provision of materials. These tools are considered very good by the majority of the stakeholders (see section 3.1.2). However, the companies indicated that participation in these activities requires a significant investment of time, which they do not always have to participate in these activities.

With regard to Monitoring & Planning, the evaluation team found that smart indicators have been developed for measuring outputs and outcomes at the programme level. A very comprehensive PMEL plan has also been developed that contains all the necessary elements, such as detailed chapters on planning, monitoring, knowledge & learning activities, and evaluation. The evaluators consider the current PMEL plan to be a very good basis for systematic implementation. Some methodological details, for example, about how to collect data on outcome and impact indicators, are still in the process of being defined.

In summary, it can be said that the SPVO program has addressed the recommendations of the previous MTR of FKB/POI to a very significant extent. Some of the recommendations, especially at the strategic level, are currently being incorporated through the integration of transition thinking within the SPVO.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

4.1.1 Relevance

The evaluation demonstrates that the SPVO is regarded by participating companies as a highly relevant catalyst for advancing social sustainability of their value chains, primarily because it delivers critical financing that enables pilots, research, data collection, and the mitigation of risks. For smaller companies, it would be impossible to address certain risks without SPVO funding. For most companies, whether small, medium-sized or large, funding allows them to experiment and also fosters the development of expertise and networks, thereby enhancing credibility and providing leverage within the market. All companies view splitting the project into Phases A and B very positively. This approach allows companies to examine specific risks in greater depth and develop detailed implementation plans. The SPVO's flexibility to adapt activities to circumstances and its phased approach are considered unique compared to other funding possibilities. The evaluation team regards these strong aspects as important to maintain (**recommendation 6**).

The programme largely meets expectations: companies praise the interest, expertise, and engagement of the RVO team. A large number of companies consider the RVO team to be critical sparring partners, which has improved the project formulation. Nevertheless, the administrative burden remains a notable friction point, especially for smaller enterprises, although it is generally understood as a necessary safeguard for transparency in public spending. Variability in support quality, linked to the differing expertise of advisors across niche sectors and value chains, is also cited by some respondents working in a number of niche value chains. Given RVO's limited capacity, it would not be possible for RVO to build up the same level of expertise across all value chains. It is therefore recommended that, for value chains involving multiple companies, a global value chain analysis be carried out, as was done, for example, by the MFA for the cocoa value chain, without ruling out the possibility of setting up new experiments in less well-known value chains (**recommendation 4**). Besides that, given the high workload associated with managing the SPVO grant, any structural adaptations should prioritise efficiency gains rather than expanding management time or budget. Management costs must remain proportionate to the overall SPVO budget. One option is for RVO staff to emphasise their broker role—facilitating links between implementing partners working on similar themes, value chains, or countries—rather than providing detailed project-level advisory support, especially since the fund's diverse sectoral scope limits the feasibility of developing deep expertise in all areas (**recommendation 11**).

SPVO's exclusive focus on social sustainability is not always logical. Very often, there is a direct link between ecological and social sustainability. It is therefore suggested to retain social sustainability as a core element, as funding opportunities for these types of problems are rather limited, but making environmental sustainability a mandatory part of the risk analysis (**see recommendation 5**).

Although RVO is making considerable efforts to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and expertise, there is a continuing need, particularly among smaller companies, for more

exchange of lessons learned and good practices. At the same time, companies are struggling with overloaded schedules (and therefore limited staff capacity) to participate in the RVO knowledge-sharing activities. Nevertheless, it is recommended to continue to focus on sharing knowledge and experiences and looking for creative ways to get as many companies on board as possible (*see recommendation 7*).

4.1.2 Effectiveness

The assessment of effectiveness underscores that the programme targets a comprehensive set of core sustainability risks—ranging from living-income and wage gaps, poor working conditions, gender inequality, and informal employment.

The review found indications that small companies mainly focus on specific dominant risks in their business operations with local companies. Some large companies, such as those operating in multiple countries, try to build cases that they can then replicate in other chains or production countries. There are also indications that a number of large companies want to address risks more at the start of their value chain (tier 3/4). Small companies focus primarily on their own business case and hope to make it socially and financially sustainable. Upscaling is not their primary and most important concern. Larger companies, on the other hand, seem to be primarily trying to use an SPVO project to build a sustainable case that they can then replicate in other value chains in which they operate or replicate in other countries. The replication of good practices, however, only seems to happen when additional funding can be sourced either from governments or from private companies. As such, improved value chains remain project-based and are not fully integrated into the main operations of larger companies. Customised projects do not seem to have these limitations. Since they often involve different companies (sometimes even a large number of companies) within a particular sector focus, their potential impact on improving sustainable practices is greater. In addition, lessons learned and good practices are shared more widely because the number of stakeholders is larger. Due to the potentially greater impact of customised projects, the evaluation team recommends allocating a relatively larger budget to customised projects (*see recommendation 8*).

Some specific project implementation risks have been identified. Local companies in particular fear that the implementation of sustainability measures will lead to increased costs in highly competitive markets where premium prices are not possible. Local companies often also face knowledge and capacity problems, which most projects attempt to address through training. In addition, there are cultural and contextual factors that can hinder the implementation of projects (such as political instability, climate change, and security issues). Another risk raised is the uncertainty surrounding the implementation (weakening) of EU CSDDD. Mandatory, sanction-enforceable regulations would give a major boost to the creation of socially and environmentally sustainable global value chains (*see recommendation 1*). Another possibility is that various public authorities could strengthen corporate social responsibility by explicitly integrating sustainability criteria into their procurement policies. Doing so would create powerful incentives for companies seeking to improve social and environmental sustainability in their value chains. The evaluation team, therefore, recommends integrating such criteria into public procurement processes. (*recommendation 3*).

Projects have a strong positive impact on cooperation between local and Dutch companies. Many companies experience an improved mutual understanding, and, in some cases, the

projects contribute to long-term formal partnerships. Creating trust and openness was another frequently shared comment. Nevertheless, communication and information about the specifics of the projects were not always balanced. Particularly, the case studies showed that local partners were not sufficiently informed about project details and had only limited access to information provided by RVO and SPVO. Therefore, it is recommended that communication with local and Dutch companies and RVO should be streamlined (**see recommendation 9**).

The evaluation finds that two interrelated issues, uncertainty about long-term funding and limited outreach, as reported by external stakeholders not directly receiving funding, constrain the SPVO's ability to achieve sustained impact. Companies express hesitation in viewing RVO as a reliable long-term partner, which in turn undermines the conditions needed for scaling successful individual projects into customised, sector-wide initiatives. At the same time, awareness of the SPVO remains modest, despite clear opportunities to leverage existing networks to reach a broader group of potential applicants.

Based on these findings, the evaluation team recommends that a consistent and transparent long-term policy is essential. Ensuring predictable, multi-year (e.g., five-year) financial commitments to the SPVO would strengthen companies' confidence in RVO as a sustainable partner and enable them to anticipate pathways from individual projects to customised, upscaling initiatives (**recommendation 2**). Besides that, increasing outreach is necessary to enhance SPVO's visibility and accessibility. By actively collaborating with organisations such as MVO Nederland and relevant sector and trade associations, RVO can broaden dissemination efforts and more effectively inform companies about the opportunities the SPVO offers (**recommendation 10**).

4.1.3 Sustainability

The assessment shows that while the SPVO has begun to engage with a transition-oriented approach, its integration into project selection, implementation, and documentation remains largely implicit. Clear alignment with transition phases, as well as systematic consideration of upscaling, replication and system-level change, is still limited, particularly within individual projects, where sustainability gains often depend on external funding to advance beyond the pilot stage. Customised projects demonstrate greater potential for sector-wide impact, yet continue to face challenges in securing broad stakeholder engagement. The ToC provides a viable framework, and early outputs suggest that short-term outcomes are attainable, but several underlying assumptions warrant close monitoring. In particular, the commercial incentive for local actors to adopt social sustainability practices cannot be taken for granted, whilst the uncertain future of European RBC legislation may weaken essential drivers for systemic progress. Strengthening strategic alignment, clarifying transition pathways, and ensuring enabling conditions remain in place will be crucial for the long-term sustainability and transformative ambition of the SPVO (**recommendation 1 & 9**).

4.2 Recommendations

4.2.1 At the policy level (MFA)

R1. Legislative framework.

One of the key findings from this study is that a mandatory legislative framework for social and environmental sustainability would be a huge incentive to make global value chains more sustainable. Sanctioning mechanisms are crucial in this regard. Of course, such a legislative framework will not solve all problems immediately⁷, but it will accelerate various processes. Enforceable legislation accelerates the institutionalisation of sustainability within value chains. It is therefore important for the MFA to continue advocating for enforceable (social) sustainability legislation for local and global value chains.

R2. Consistent, transparent long-term policy.

The evaluators found that the uncertain long-term funding of the SPVO is an obstacle for companies to consider RVO as a reliable, sustainable partner. As a result, there is a risk that long-term impact cannot be achieved. Long-term commitments are particularly relevant when scaling up individual projects to customised projects. After all, customised projects are usually upscaling projects of successful individual projects to include more sector companies. In order to get and keep companies on board and thus achieve upscaling impact, it is important that RVO can offer these companies a long-term perspective. In concrete terms, this means, for example, that companies that have successfully implemented a project should know at the outset that they may be eligible for customised projects. This requires RVO to be able to offer this perspective. That is why the evaluation team advocates a long-term policy that guarantees long-term (e.g., 5-year) financial commitment to the SPVO.

4.2.2 At the strategic level (MFA & RVO)

R3. RBC criteria inclusion in public procurement policies.

Various authorities can give a strong impetus to corporate social responsibility by explicitly including sustainability criteria in their procurement policies. This can be a powerful incentive for companies that want to achieve social (and environmental) sustainability in their value chain. The evaluation team, therefore, advocates the integration of these criteria into Dutch public procurement processes.

R4. Global value chain analysis of major value chains

The “Cocoa Strategy & Pilot - Monitoring System Change” document is an example of a very good practice (MFA) for systematically analysing a global value chain, including a stakeholder analysis with identification of system touch points and the influence that these touch points can have on the desired change. In addition, it indicates the potential influence of the Netherlands on each of these touch points. The evaluation team recommends creating similar sector visions and analyses for other value chains. This is particularly necessary for value chains where multiple Dutch companies implement SPVO projects, in order to identify upscaling opportunities systematically. On the other hand, based on the findings in the report,

⁷ For more information on the implications of CSDDD legislation, see: Dupont V (2024) A step in the right direction, or more of the same? A systematic review of the impact of human rights due diligence legislation. In: Human Rights Review, 25:131-154.

it can also be concluded that pilot projects in value chains where less knowledge and experience is available (e.g., e-waste, minerals, etc.) can contribute to better insights in less well-known value chains (such as mapping the various stakeholders in the value chain), experience, knowledge, and practices. It is an added value that a minority of projects in 'less well-known' value chains can also introduce good practices through the SPVO. This allows the SPVO to fill a niche that is not being addressed by other donors.

R5. Combination of Environmental & social sustainability in the projects

The MTR's findings confirmed that ecological and social sustainability often go hand in hand. For example, climate change often causes productivity problems, which naturally have an immediate impact on producers' turnover and income. Dutch companies also indicate that, in many cases, it is necessary to consider both aspects together. Maintaining social sustainability as a core objective while making it mandatory to include environmental risks (and measures) broadens the scope of the projects without diluting the main objective of social sustainability. Maintaining social sustainability as a core objective may be interesting because there appear to be fewer subsidy opportunities for projects with this theme at their core, keeping the relevance of the fund exceptionally high.

4.2.3 At the operational level (RVO)

R6. Maintain SPVO's strong aspects.

The review has identified an encouraging number of good practices of SPVO, which the evaluation team recommends maintaining. These could also be relevant considerations for other RVO instruments or RBC support mechanisms.

- Combining research (Phase A) and implementation (Phase B), to ensure that research is followed up by actions and that actions implemented are data-driven. Phase A is widely appreciated by participating companies as a way to focus and specify the proposed follow-up work in Phase B, and as such expected to increase the likelihood of the intended results being achieved.
- To engage a wider representation of different departments within participating companies with the mandatory in-company training.
- Responding to (changing) developments in projects' contexts, partner countries and/or specific value chains flexibly, giving implementing partners the opportunity to adjust project activities according to the altering conditions while ensuring changes align with the conditions the grant agreements have been awarded upon.

R7. Continue and further optimise activities in knowledge sharing and providing networking opportunities.

The evaluation team found that RVO has set up a large number of initiatives to share knowledge and experience between the various companies and other stakeholders. On the other hand, feedback is that many project leaders have very busy schedules and that these types of activities are often the first to be sacrificed. Findings show that companies might be further motivated to participate if they could share knowledge and experience in depth with sector peers in their value chain. There also appears to be interest in specific country expertise and more advanced technical topics (experiences, good practices, lessons learned). The need seems to be greater among SMEs than among large companies. The evaluation team recommends continuing to focus on the knowledge pillar of the SPVO and trying to involve as many companies as possible through country, sector and/or value-chain specific

knowledge exchange and networking sessions, as many implementing partners seem to consider these types of events more relevant, the more specific they are. In addition, concrete suggestions shared to encourage further connections between participating companies include disseminating participants lists of in-country events to all attendees, as well as sharing the overall SPVO portfolio among all of its implementing partners – so that these have the full overview of which company works on what sector/value chain in which country, which could produce additional opportunities for cooperation and/or synergies.

R8. Expand Consortium and Sectoral Approaches.

The document review and interviews show that the upscaling potential of customised projects is greater than that of individual projects, which is explicitly the intention of the SPVO based on the outcomes and impact identified in its theory of change. Of course, the risks of failure are greater with this type of project because a larger number of companies in a specific sector or country, which are often direct competitors, have to work together. Nevertheless, given that the ‘ultimate impact’ of SPVO is ‘developing countries realise inclusive, sustainable, and gender-equitable global value chains, with good labour conditions, living wages/income, and free of child labour’, and this transcends the purely individual project level, consideration could be given to increasing the share of tailor-made projects in comparison to the number of individual projects. Increased collaboration with Embassies can also catalyse sector approaches, giving them a role in the facilitation of bringing together companies working in the same sectors and country-regions.

R9. Streamlining communication.

The evaluation team concluded, mainly on the basis of various interviews with local partners, that there is an information imbalance between the Dutch lead companies and the local companies and stakeholders. This potentially entails the risk that local stakeholders will be less involved and engaged in project development and implementation. It therefore seems advisable to also involve local partners in RVO communication and facilitate their participation in regular update meetings with the RVO team.

R10. Increasing the outreach of SPVO

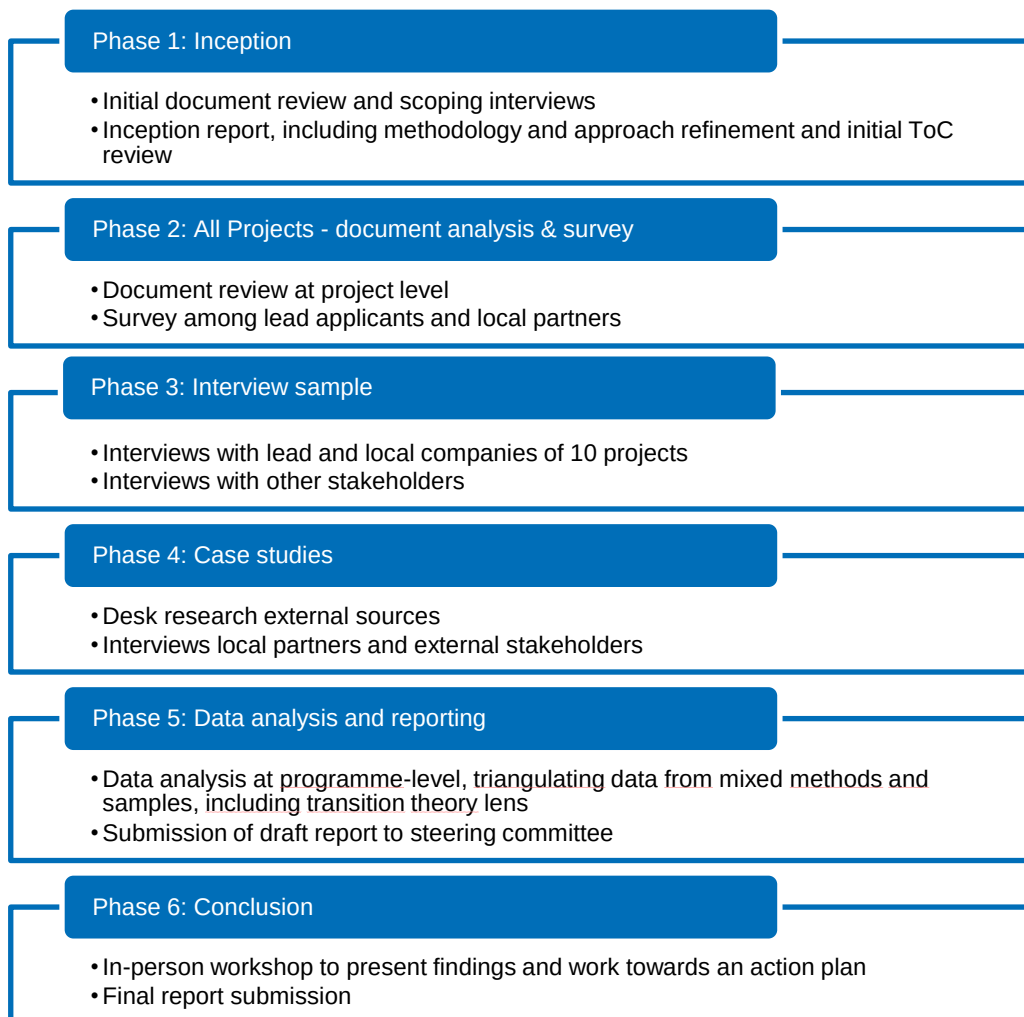
The communication about SPVO's offer appears to be modest, whereas multiple organisations have indicated willingness to help spread awareness on SPVO and the opportunities it offers for companies. We recommend increasing outreach activities to member organisations such as MVO Nederland and sector/trade associations, which can distribute information among their networks.

R11. Maintaining proportional management costs

The workload of the SPVO grant is experienced to be high for RVO staff. If constraints in workload require structural adaptations, we do not advise increasing the time and budgetary resources for the management of SPVO. Instead, we then advise seeking efficiency improvements or compromises in the internal work processes, to make sure that management costs stay in proportion with the total SPVO budget. A potential way of doing that might be for the RVO advisors to focus more on their ‘broker’ role, connecting implementing partners with their counterparts working on similar themes/value chains and/or countries than on their advisory work regarding individual projects, taking into account that the diversity of sectors the SPVO fund supports makes it challenging for RVO to acquire the sectoral insight into each of these that would be required to add substantial value in this capacity.

Annex 1: Methodology

This chapter describes the six-phase approach undertaken, summarised in the figure below.



Phase 1 | Inception Phase

The following have been implemented in the inception phase:

- A **kick-off meeting** with the steering committee on 13 May 2025 as well as with the SPVO team on 27 May 2025;
- An initial **document review** at SPVO programme level of key policy documents, programme documents and documentation available, see overview available in Annex 1;
- **Scoping interviews** with key programme stakeholders to learn about programme developments and the most important information gaps/requests for the evaluation. The list of interview participants is included in Annex 3;
- Methodology and approach refinement, including:
 - Refinement of the evaluation matrix;
 - Development of questionnaires for the surveys and interviews;

- Sampling of projects for interviews and case studies.
- A **review of the SPVO Theory of Change**, based on the initial document review and scoping interviews. This review will be finalised in the final report based on data collected during the research phase;
- The synthesis of the findings from the above in the **inception report**, which was discussed with the steering committee on 19 June 2025. Adjustments have been made based on the feedback received, resulting in the final version of the inception report, submitted 3 July 2025.

Phase 2 | All Projects: document analysis & surveys

Document review

Document review during the research phase was focused on the project level and provided a first foundation of data on research questions 1-5. Sources are listed in Annex 3. We have collected data based on the evaluation matrix structure. A concise literature review was conducted, based on evaluation reports from other programmes and projects, grey literature, and academic sources. The primary aim was to identify good practices and lessons learned that may be relevant for the further implementation of the SPVO, providing a comparison between good practices reported and (components thereof in) SPVO. The results of these are integrated into Chapter 4, with limited outcomes.

Survey

We used a survey to efficiently collect a broad picture of experiences with SPVO, including a version tailored to Dutch companies (lead applicants) and one for local partner companies. The survey built on data already available from the desk research and included questions covering mostly research questions 1-4 about relevance and effectiveness (e.g. risks selected, objectives formulated, changes in relationships, lessons learned). While the documentary review yielded mostly forward-looking information (objectives, themes, planning, etc.), the survey was focused on reflective data (progress, observed changes, challenges, etc.). To facilitate a high response rate, we designed a survey with a response time of approximately 10 minutes. We included a mix of open and closed questions with pre-set answer options (multiple choice questions) and quantified data on some themes by including ratings on scales. The survey was administered to all Dutch(-based) lead companies of SPVO subsidies and their local partner company. The survey produced a wide foundation of data, from which we could identify data gaps and topics to explore further during interviews. RVO sent all companies an introductory email about the survey, after which the evaluation team shared the link and instructions to the survey. This was followed up with multiple follow-up requests by Ecorys as well as RVO project advisors where needed, to ensure high response rates. A total of 21 lead companies participated in the survey, of which 19 complete responses. We have obtained 18 responses of local companies, of which 17 complete. The results – restricted by the total number of projects - not split by company characteristics such as their size, because of limited sample sizes.

Phase 3 | Interview sample: 10 projects

From the projects in implementation phases A and B, 10 projects were selected for interviews. Annex 2 shows the interview sample. We have selected projects with a large spread in:

- Types of (social) sustainability risks/themes addressed;
- Regions and countries;
- Sectors;
- Company size of the lead company.

For each project, interviewed the lead (Dutch) company, and the local business involved separately, preferably the lead company first. Interviewing the local company allowed validating some of the survey and interview results from the Dutch lead company and adds local contexts into the analysis.

In addition, we have interviewed more programme-wide stakeholders such as NGOs and unions working on responsible business and sustainable value chains, to assess developments and coherence in the context of the SPVO. The perspectives of external stakeholders also provided us with inputs about the complementarity of SPVO with other initiatives and in comparing SPVO to successful other practices. In addition, three additional interviews with RVO staff and service providers were conducted. The list of interviewed organisations is part of Annex 3.

Interviews were semi-structured based on the questionnaire presented in the inception report and adjusted based on the survey answers submitted. All research questions were covered, with more emphasis on research questions 1-4 for interviewing companies and research questions 4 and 5 for interviewing other stakeholders. This allowed for a targeted interview and limited the burden on interview partners, while providing high-quality information.

Phase 4 | Case studies

As indicated in the proposal, three projects of the sample of 10 projects were sampled for a case study. The criteria for the case selection were:

- projects that have advanced relatively far, such that more lessons can be learned;
- variation in location;
- variation in sectors.

The last two criteria were important in order to increase representation of the SPVO portfolio and context-specific findings. The case studies selected are presented in Annex 2.

Local consultants were contracted for the case studies in Uganda (Ekanath Khatiwada) and Ivory Coast (Philippe Kouadio), to work together with the team leader and researcher. For one case study (STTI), the team was not able to speak to stakeholders in the target countries (trade associations) and as such, no local consultant was involved. This case study only covers the Dutch and overarching stakeholders. The case study activities included:

1. Reviewing project-level intervention logics and project plans, to assess whether assumptions seem to hold true and how they link to a transition-oriented approach.
2. Extended desk research with external resources to enrich context information and project results, where available.

3. Interviews (2-4) with local stakeholders, both engaged and independent (e.g. local Embassy). The added value of conducting these interviews in-person was discussed with the project partners, but project partners preferred a remote meeting as the projects are still starting up and most of the work undertaken is also still at a remote level, i.e. there were no site visits possible.

Phase 5 | Data analysis and reporting

Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out during and after data collection, triangulating and comparing data from different sources. We combined data from the project level to draw conclusions at the programme level and structured our analysis based on the research questions. A transition-oriented lens was applied to the assessment of the SPVO contributions of case studies as well as under research questions 5. We ensured that data was collected and analysed against expected results and existing performance indicators, as well as by examining intended and unintended results, both positive and negative. Furthermore, we linked the findings and especially lessons learned to actionable recommendations for the continuation of the SPVO. In doing so, we distinguished between actions for the remainder of the SPVO and for the longer term, taking into account the different stakeholders involved.

Draft report

The activities in the research phase were synthesised in this draft final report. The report will be presented to the SPVO team on 18 November.

Phase 6 | Conclusion phase

The conclusion of the evaluation consists of the following steps:

- An **in-person workshop** at the RVO office with the steering on 18 November, including a translation of findings into (outlines of) a common action plan. The recommendations as outlined in the draft report will be the starting point in developing an action plan. The Ecorys team can support in capturing summary notes and outcomes of the workshop, which will then be handed over to the RVO team as the owner of the action plan to be developed.
- Incorporation of feedback from the steering committee and into a **final report** with a similar structure and adherence to requirements as the draft final report.

Annex 2: Evaluation matrix and project sample

Evaluation theme	Research question	Indicators - Individual project <i>Link to sub-questions (sq.) of the ToR in brackets</i>	Indicators - Custom project <i>Link to sub-questions (sq.) of the ToR in brackets</i>	Data collection methods
Relevance	1. To which extent is the fund able to support companies in their sustainability ambitions?	- Type of (social) sustainability risks identified (sq. 1a); - Motivation of the parties to act jointly (sq. 1b); - Motivation of parties to take steps to make the chain more sustainable? (sq. 1d); - Perception of CSDDD and contribution to better conditions (sq. 7a); - Perception of win-wins (sq. 7a);	- Reasons for collaboration (sq. 1a); - Motivation for action jointly/for making the chain more sustainable (sq. 1c-d); - Identification/ prioritisation of risks (sq. 2a-b, and d); - Identification of objectives (sq.2c).	- Survey to lead companies; - Project interviews (Dutch and local companies).
		- Companies indicating that financial support was crucial for their sustainability transition and substantiation thereof; - Type of sustainability measures implemented by companies due to the fund; - Identification of beliefs and motivation for companies within the framework of the project (perspectives of Dutch & Local Companies, and NGOs). - Appropriateness of the SPVO process (as experienced by Dutch company, local company and NGOs); - Added value of tailor-made versus individual projects (sq. 1b custom projects, 1b individual projects).		
	2. Does the fund meet the expectations of applicants or do applicants have any additional needs (e.g. non-financial support) which could be considered in a follow-up of the current SPVO scheme (SPVO 2.0)?	- Adequateness of the SPVO instrument to support companies in (social) sustainability (sq. 6a); - SPVO meet the needs of Dutch companies to (be able to) achieve this social sustainability (sq. 6b); - Identification of needs of companies to improve (social) sustainability (both from SPVO and outside SPVO) (sq. 6c); - The use of other forms of financing to promote social sustainability in the value chain and for other sustainability measures such as CO2 savings and deforestation by companies (sq. 6d); - Perceptions / assessment of in-company training by RVO (sq. 6f) & suggestions for improvement (sq. 6g); - Identification of risk factors and resistance to the project (sq. 7b).	(based on the second sub-question set in ToR)⁸; - Needs for entire sector sustainability (sq. 2a); - Measures needed (sq. 2b); - Identification of bottle necks (sq. 2b).	- Survey to lead and local companies; - Project interviews (Dutch and local companies).
		- Extent to which expectations are met; - Applicant needs for technical assistance, knowledge sharing, and networking;		

⁸ Second set of questions under Custom projects research question 2. Number 2 is double counted in the Terms of Reference.

Evaluation theme	Research question	Indicators - Individual project <i>Link to sub-questions (sq.) of the ToR in brackets</i>	Indicators - Custom project <i>Link to sub-questions (sq.) of the ToR in brackets</i>	Data collection methods
Effectiveness (pre-requisites & preconditions of effectiveness)	3. To what extent does the fund contribute to the implementation of RBC due diligence within the companies (companywide/beyond RBC departments) that receive support through SSF/SPVO?	• Identification of sustainability (continuation) and possibilities of scaling up (countries/chains (sq. 6e). • Objectives (including risks) of the projects (sq.3b & 3c); • Measures planned by Dutch and local businesses (sq. 2a & 3a); • Perceptions of likely effectiveness and risks of the project and support received (sq. 2a & b); • Likelihood to achieve outputs & outcomes; • Identification of pre-requisites and preconditions of effectiveness to reach the long term goals, as defined by Dutch companies, local companies and NGOs; • Identification of potential hurdles (process/implementation as experienced and expected); • Identification of areas for improvement in the process; • The extent to which the project, project objectives and RBC training are embedded throughout the companies; • Comparison of SPVO with good practices and mechanisms from other programmes and projects; • Extent to which SPVO is aligned with and complementary to other support/projects available in the systems it operates in. For custom projects, also: • Adequateness of SPVO as a tool (sq. 3a); • Additional needs identified (sq. 3b); • Other forms of financing used (sq.3c); • Needs for sustainability after end of project (sq. 3d); • Sector challenges & needs (sq. 3e); • Identification of procedural bottlenecks and suggestions of improvement (sq. 4a&b).		• Desk research; • Survey to lead companies; • Project interviews (Dutch and local companies); • Literature review; • Interviews with external stakeholders with extensive value chain experience (key experts); • Case studies.
	4. To what extent is the fund expected to contribute to a more inclusive partnership between the Dutch companies and their value chain partners/supplying companies from production countries)?	• Evidence of equal dialogue (power balance) with local producers, including other stakeholders (including women & marginalised groups) (sq. 4a-4d); • (changes in) Perception of /impact of project on relationships between local & Dutch companies (sq. 5a-b); • (Likely) structurally improved collaboration with suppliers in production countries. (including more equal and balanced partnerships between Dutch and local companies, perceptions); • Nature of partnership initiatives between Dutch companies and suppliers in production countries; • Expectations of likely effectiveness of partnership between Dutch and local companies and external stakeholders.		• Survey to lead companies; • Survey to local companies; • Project interviews (Dutch and local companies); • External interviews. • Case studies.
Sustainability	5. As part of this evaluation, we seek	• Extent to which the transition framework being used;		• Desk research;

Evaluation theme	Research question	Indicators - Individual project <i>Link to sub-questions (sq.) of the ToR in brackets</i>	Indicators - Custom project <i>Link to sub-questions (sq.) of the ToR in brackets</i>	Data collection methods
	insights on how SPVO aligns with transition-oriented working and how it can be better positioned within this framework.	• Identification of good practices of practical translations of transition-oriented working in specific countries and value chains, as well as in the selection and implementation process • Identification of strengths and weaknesses in the processes; • Consistency between transition framework(s) and the ToC (including underlying assumptions); • Extent to which the SPVO is aligned with influencing different conditions of system/transition changes, incl. enablers, barriers, unintended effects; • Integration of cross-cutting themes such as circular economy, climate-neutrality; • Likely contribution SPVO to companies and sectors moving into next phases of the aimed transitions; • Extent to which SPVO is likely to have an effect beyond its direct beneficiaries, on the wider system; • Extent to which SPVO contributes to initiatives which are / with the potential to be scaled and/or replicated in other contexts or sectors. • Identification of pre-requisites and preconditions for sustainability, as defined by Dutch companies, local companies and NGO's;		• Project interviews (Dutch and local companies); • External interviews; • Case studies; • Literature review.
	6. To what extent have recommendations of the FVO & FBK mid-term review in 2021 been incorporated into the current SPVO?	• Extent to which recommendations from the MTR have been implemented or are still valid, taking into account the RVO management response to the MTR; • Effects of the merging of funds into the SPVO; • Availability and quality of the M&E data; • Appropriateness of design and implementation of the learning function in the SPVO.		• Desk research, including RVO management response; • Interviews with RVO staff.

Sample of projects for interviews and case studies.

No ⁹	Project title	Country	Region	Sector	Product	Theme: Child Labour	Theme: Living Wages	Theme: Working Conditions	Lead Applicant	Type of Project	Project Phase	Large/Small Business
1	Addressing Living Income Gap in Rwanda coffee growing communities	Rwanda	East-Africa	Agriculture	Coffee	No	Yes	No	Ahold Delhaize Coffee Company B.V.	Individual	B	Large Business
2	Creating the foundation for a more sustainable apparel industry by improving purchasing practices through a manufacturer led approach	Multi (Global) - Netherlands, Morocco, Türkiye, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, Indonesia	Global (mostly East-Asia)	Textiles	Textiles	No	Yes	Yes	International Apparel Federation (IAF)	Custom	A	N/A
3	EmpowHER: Reduce the Living Income gap and child labour through financial inclusion of VSLAs and empowering their members	Ivory Coast	West-Africa	Agriculture	Cocoa	Yes	Yes	No	ETG Commodities B.V.	Individual	A	Large Business
4	Scaling social Impact	India	South-Asia	Textiles	Textile bags	Yes	Yes	Yes	Tiny miracles	Individual	A	SME (< 250 employees)
5	We Wonder Project: Socially Responsible Coffee Farming in Uganda	Uganda	East-Africa	Agriculture	Coffee	Yes	Yes	Yes	We Wonder Company B.V.	Individual	A	SME (< 250 employees)
6	Spinning Forward: Enhancing worker rights and conditions in Indian mills	India	South-Asia	Textiles	Textiles	No	No	Yes	Zeeman Textiel Supers B.V.	Individual	A	Large Business

⁹ Projects 2, 3 and 5 shaded in light blue are also sampled as case studies.

No ⁹	Project title	Country	Region	Sector	Product	Theme: Child Labour	Theme: Living Wages	Theme: Working Conditions	Lead Applicant	Type of Project	Project Phase	Large/Small Business
7	Setting the new bar for African processed cashew	Tanzania	East-Africa	Agriculture	Cashew	No	Yes	Yes	Johnny Cashew	Individual	A	SME (< 250 employees)
8	Towards a living income for (e-) waste pickers in Ghana	Ghana	West-Africa	Recycling / Waste	E-waste	Yes	Yes	Yes	Fairphone B.V.	Individual	A	SME (< 250 employees)
9	U CLAP: Uganda Corporate Sustainability Landscape Assessment Partnership	Uganda	East-Africa	Agriculture	Coffee	Yes	Yes	Yes	ETG Commodities B.V.	Custom	B	Large Business
10	Indonesia's sweet spot: livelihood resilience through innovation for safe, organic coconut sugar production.	Indonesia	South-East Asia	Agriculture	Coconut sugar	No	Yes	Yes	Tradin Organic Agriculture B.V.	Individual	A	Large Business

Annex 3. Consulted sources

Overarching interviews at programme level (inception phase and research phase):

Organisation	Person(s) interviewed
RVO	PMEL coordinator
RVO	MEET advisor
RVO	SPVO advisor and SPVO coordinator
RVO	Two SPVO advisors
RVO	Manager team Sustainable Value Chains
RVO	Two SPVO advisors
RVO	Process coordinator SPVO
RVO	Transition manager RVO
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Senior policy advisor Trade for Development
IDH (SPVO's learning partner)	Director public sector engagement
Schuttelaar en Partners (SPVO's learning partner)	Advisor responsible value chains, Advisor ESG
In-company training	Freelance trainer
MVO Nederland (renamed to Future Up)	Partnership manager
Solidaridad	Corporate Engagement Manager
Fair Wear Foundation	Strategic Lead, Gender Equality Expert, Research & Regional Coordinator WANA

Project interviews

Case studies indicated in blue.

Nr.	Project	Organisation(s) interviewed
1	Addressing Living Income Gap in Rwanda coffee growing communities	- Lead company - Local company
2	Creating the foundation for a more sustainable apparel industry by improving purchasing practices through a manufacturer led approach	- Lead company - Trade association - International NGO <i>No response to requests to interview trade associations and local companies</i>
3	EmpowHER: Reduce the Living Income gap and child labour through financial inclusion of VSLAs and empowering their members	- Lead company - Local company - Local stakeholder - Royal Netherlands Embassy in Ivory Coast - Local NGO
4	Scaling social Impact	- Lead company <i>Local company did not respond</i>
5	We Wonder Project: Socially Responsible Coffee Farming in Uganda	- Lead company - Local company - Local NGO - Local trade association - Consultant involved with We Wonder Project Phase A - Royal Netherlands Embassy in Uganda

Nr.	Project	Organisation(s) interviewed
		Ministry for Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF)
6	Spinning Forward: Enhancing worker rights and conditions in Indian mills	<i>No responses despite multiple efforts</i>
7	Setting the new bar for African processed cashew	- Lead company - Local company
8	Towards a living income for (e-) waste pickers in Ghana	- Lead company - Local company
9	U CLAP: Uganda Corporate Sustainability Landscape Assessment Partnership	- Lead company - Local company
10	Indonesia's sweet spot: livelihood resilience through innovation for safe, organic coconut sugar production.	- Lead company <i>Local company did not respond</i>

Documentation consulted:

- MFA policy documents and SPVO assignment to RVO.
- Programme level documents:
 - SSF + SPVO PMEL plan.
 - Annual reports SSF 2023 and SPVO 2024.
 - Theory of change SPVO and MFA DDE.
 - Guidance to develop custom projects & process description incidental subsidies.
 - Overview spreadsheet of SSF SPVO grant projects.
 - Internal analysis of SSF SPVO portfolio (findings and data sheet).
 - Multiyear country strategies for selected countries (Uganda, Ivory Coast, Bangladesh).
 - MFA Sector strategy for cocoa.
 - Work instruction on subsidy process SPVO 0.9.
 - Memo Transition-oriented working at RVO.
- Mid-term review FVO + FBK, including management response.
- For each individual project: project proposal, results sheet phase A. Where available, also impact assessments, final report phase A, proposal/results sheet phase B;
- For each custom project: project plan/concept note, results sheet.
- Internal appraisal forms and communication with applicants of 3 project proposals rejected based on content reasons (Resirest, Johnny Cashew & Grounded).
- SPVO Knowledge and learning products and inputs:
 - Project proposals IDH and Schuttelaar & Partners (learning partners).
 - Whitepaper responsible procurement and supplier engagement for social sustainability.
 - White paper Adding Value with Smallholder Data.
 - ToR The impact of organic and regenerative farm inputs and practises and pesticides in the coffee sector, in Rwanda and Uganda: Impact study on living income and scaling opportunities.
 - Policy brief Addressing child labour risks and living income gaps in global value chains (KIT institute).
 - Report Addressing the income-child labour – gender nexus, evidence from the cocoa, coffee and cashew sectors (KIT Institute).

Annex 4. Case studies

Case studies are not included in public version of the report, because of private company information.

Annex 5. The Cocoa Value Chain & Transmission Model.

The MFA has developed Cocoa Strategy & Pilot, which maps out the global cocoa value chain with a strong focus on the expected impact of system touch points “to reduce poverty, increase income, eradicate child labour and deforestation”. The objective is also very clearly formulated, as well as the approach as the scope.

- **Goal:** The Dutch government's goal is to realise sector transformation towards sustainable production and trade of cocoa globally, safeguarding cocoa supplies. Sustainable production and trade include decent working conditions (e.g. living income, prevention of child labour) and environmentally sustainable production (e.g. good agricultural practices, no deforestation).
- **Approach:** Sector transformation requires a systems approach. The Netherlands can make a difference as the largest importer in the world (roughly 20% of world trade), thanks to the relatively large leverage that Dutch and other companies have in the value chain. Individually, they are unable to alter the functioning of the system and thus to prevent the negative outcomes. All interventions by the Dutch government are aimed at influencing and adjusting the conditions of the global cocoa system, so that the supply chain partners can transition to more sustainable practices).
- **Scope:** Ghana and Ivory Coast export roughly 95% of their cocoa production to Europe. The Dutch policy interventions are therefore mainly aimed at these two countries. In our work in these production countries, we need to find where the Dutch ambitions and the local ambitions overlap. Although this analysis and these ambitions are a very good starting point, they were not translated or linked to the transmission framework.

When the cocoa strategy is linked to Simons' Transmission Intervention Matrix, we could say (based on our limited analysis and as a preliminary assessment; a comprehensive analysis and linkage must of course be carried out) that the cocoa strategy is mainly in phase 2 (Competition/Recognizing Frontrunners) and is moving towards phase 3 (Synergy & Integration/Scaling Up/Organizing). The current strategy (falling within phase 2 of the Transmission Model) therefore focuses primarily on recognising solution directions and frontrunners, with “stepping-up farmers” being the drivers of system change; the strategy also sets long-term goals with regard to a living income, eradicating child labour, traceability, and deforestation.

In addition (and these are characteristics of phase 3 of the transition model), there is mention of a strategy for system integration in which various government agencies, together with companies, NGOs, and international institutions, want to coordinate their initiatives. The emphasis here is on coordinating roles, joint monitoring, and policy for scaling up (including EU legislation).

Linking an analysis of a specific value chain to the transmission model (using the transmission intervention matrix, for example) could then be used as a tool (or selection mechanism) for the government (in this case, the SPVO) to decide whether or not to support certain projects. Assuming that the above analysis of the Cocoa Value Chain is correct, the following types of projects would, for example, be highly relevant in accelerating the evolution from phase 2 to phase 3 (by way of example):

- Creating connections between frontrunners, for example, by encouraging coalitions from different parts of the chain.
- Supporting projects that promote sectoral agreements and collective learning agendas.
- Rewarding actors who make the transition from pilot to sector level (impact bounds?)
- Financing upscaling projects by involving multiple actors in the value chain or replication projects (which can be repeated in other value chains or in other countries, for example)
- Supporting local authorities, regulatory bodies, producer organisations, certification mechanisms.
- Joint sector-wide data platforms that promote transparency/shared monitoring systems.
- Mandatory knowledge sharing as a condition for subsidy.
- Supporting the transition skills of managers throughout the chain.

Annex 6. Survey results

Case studies are not included in public version of the report, because of private company information.



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