

More shade for more cocoa in CÔte d'Ivoire

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How women farmers are shifting to agroforestry to beat the heat and boost production



In the village of Anangui, in southern CÔte d'Ivoire, 46-year-old cocoa farmer Sylvie Sopié N'Gbesso moves through her two-hectare plot, machete in hand. Her arm swings like a pendulum as she slices through the dried leaves on the ground. She's doing what she calls the "nettoyage" – keeping her cocoa plot tidy and healthy.

Sylvie has transformed an ageing, full-sun cocoa plot into a thriving agroforestry system where shade, fruit and cocoa trees helped double her cocoa production from 1 000 kilos in 2023 to 2 000 kilos in 2025.

But there was a journey behind this success. She was once a fruit and vegetable vendor at a market in Abidjan, the nation's capital. As her family grew, so did her expenses. She knew she had to diversify her income to make ends meet and keep her kids in school, so she asked her father-in-law if she could use the family plot for cocoa farming. He agreed.

"I've been a cocoa farmer since I came here in 2003," says Sylvie. "But in the beginning, the trees didn't produce much."

Like most of the country's cocoa plots, the trees were exhausted following decades of full-sun, monoculture cultivation, which maximised short-term gains for farmers, but caused long-term soil degradation and biodiversity loss, ultimately also hurting productivity.

Over 40 percent of the world's cocoa – the main ingredient in chocolate – now comes from CÔte d'Ivoire, but at a bitter price: more than 80 percent of the country's forests have been cleared, largely for cash crops like cocoa.

Deforestation has made the land hotter and drier, while drought, unpredictable rainfall and other effects of climate change have started shifting cocoa growing zones, half of which could be lost by 2050, according to a [study by the European Commission](#).

But this is changing. The Government of CÔte d'Ivoire has been taking steps to curb deforestation and safeguard cocoa â?? an income-generating crop for about one million smallholders â?? by helping farmers convert unsustainable, full-sun cocoa plots into shaded agroforestry systems.

In 2023, Sylvie heard about a project called [Promoting zero-deforestation cocoa production for reducing emissions in CÔte d'Ivoire \(PROMIRE\)](#), funded by the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Government.

At first, Sylvie was hesitant, but she knew that improving production meant securing her family's future, and her skepticism gave way to trust.

"When I switched to agroforestry, I saw that the trees were okay, even when it rained too much or got too hot," she explains.

With support from FAO experts and partners, Sylvie learned how to weed, clear the undergrowth, maintain the plot and tend the cocoa trees.

"With them, I learned how to produce a lot more," she says brightly, pointing to Meledge Yao, an FAO agroforestry expert, and Kanga Esther, from the Marie-Esther Foundation â?? a project implementing partner.

"Sylvie is a model farmer who had the courage to change her way of farming," Meledge says. "She committed to learning new techniques and applying what she learned season after season."

"With technical guidance from FAO, we provide cocoa farmers with hands-on training," Kanga explains. "We also teach them how to use waste to make biopesticides and compost, which reduces fertiliser costs. But cocoa farming is often hard and hazardous, largely because mechanisation is lacking. It's not easy," says Sylvie, looking at her right hand. "I was working in my cocoa plot, cleaning, when the machete took the tip of my finger off," she describes, determined not to linger on the memory.

"Maintaining plots properly is labour intensive, and workers are often scarce in rural areas," Kanga adds.

Cooperatives have been one solution.

FAO has been working with local partners on the "Scaling up cocoa-based food systems, land use and restoration transformative innovations in CÔte d'Ivoire" ([SCOLUR-CI](#)) project funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), which supports cooperatives to invest in motorised equipment for agroforestry.

Through cooperatives, farmers can rent equipment such as tricycles, pruning tools and chainsaws, and hire workers when needed.

In the ComoÃ© District, 36-year-old cocoa farmer, Nicole Kambou, comments enthusiastically, "Before, pruning the trees and cleaning the cocoa plot was really difficult. But now the cooperative helps us with everything: planting, pruning and harvesting."

She now has avocado, "*petit cola*", shade and timber trees growing above her cocoa â?? an agroforestry system that boosts biodiversity, stores carbon and revives land. She's especially happy about her cola tree, which is prized for its medicinal properties that settle the stomach.

The GEF SCOLUR-CI cooperative model will be replicated in the final year of the FAO-GCF PROMIRE project, helping farmers sustain and scale their agroforestry practices.

The FAO-GCF PROMIRE project has benefitted over 7 500 cocoa producers and converted over 3 400 hectares of conventional cocoa plantations into sustainable agroforestry systems. Through the FAO-GEF SCOLUR-CI project, integrated landscape management plans have been adopted across 300 000 hectares and agroforestry models established across over 8 100 hectares to improve efficiency and sustainability of cocoa value chains while delivering benefits for climate, biodiversity and land.

"Agroforestry came to me so that tomorrow my children won't have to leave this land," says Sylvie, now a mother of eight. "I did this for my children's future, to leave something for them."

To read more click: [FAO Cocoa Story](#)