



FAIRTRADE

PILOTING DATA OWNERSHIP WITH COCOA CO-OPERATIVES IN GHANA

KEY PRINCIPLES LEARNING PAPER

Kate Robinson, October 2026

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Acknowledgements

This report was written by Kate Robinson (The Outcome Gap).

The author is grateful for contributions and feedback from colleagues at the Fairtrade Foundation, Fairtrade Africa, the ISEAL Innovations Fund, Mondelēz International and The Outcome Gap.

The author and contributors would like to express their gratitude to the Ghanaian cocoa co-operative unions and the individuals that have participated in this pilot project, contributing their time and expertise.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the ISEAL Secretariat, ISEAL members, or donor entities to the ISEAL Innovations Fund do not claim to reflect the positions of all co-funding parties.

This project is made possible thanks to funding from Mondelēz International and the ISEAL Innovations Fund, which is supported by the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs and UK International Development from the UK government.



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Introduction

‘We want to reach the point where we don’t have to call anyone to share our own data [back] with us.’

Cocoa co-operative union representative

Cocoa supply chains are increasingly dependent on reliable farm-level data for traceability, certification, due diligence and regulatory compliance. Yet data systems remain fragmented: similar information may be collected repeatedly by different actors, data quality and systems of interoperability vary, and producer organisations often lack the resources and capability to maintain data to the standards required by downstream users. At the same time, farmers and their organisations may have limited access to, control over, or ability to benefit from the data generated about them.

The cases for producer-owned data management are interconnected. Without adequate capability, formal rights over data may have limited practical value. Without appropriate rights and governance, investments in capability may primarily benefit actors seeking access to producer information. Without a viable economic model, producer organisations may struggle to sustain the staff, software and systems required to exercise either function over time.

It is in this context that the Fairtrade Foundation and Fairtrade Africa developed a project, ‘Piloting data ownership with cocoa co-operatives in Ghana’.¹ Co-funded by the ISEAL Innovation Funds and Mondelēz International under the Cocoa Cooperatives Organisational Strengthening Programme (CCOSP), the project has served to test if and how unions might successfully collect and manage data, and the extent to which supply chain actors might be interested in purchasing co-operative union data.

This report summarises findings from the pilot and offers six key principles for producer-led data governance for cocoa supply chain actors.

¹ See [Piloting data ownership with cocoa cooperatives in Ghana | ISEAL Alliance](#)

Data challenges in the cocoa supply chain

Reliable data has become an integral part of cocoa supply chains.² Farm geolocation, transaction records and information on social and environmental conditions are now used for traceability, certification, sustainability programmes, risk assessment and regulatory compliance. Digitalisation has expanded the volume and granularity of information that can be collected and exchanged, while regulatory developments are increasing scrutiny of its quality and provenance.

Recent legislation is driving even more digital requirements. Under the EU Regulation on Deforestation-free Products (EUDR), information collected can include product and supplier details, links to deforestation production, geolocation details of every plot. The EU information system is designed to accommodate up to 10,000 producer records per commodity within a single Due Diligence Statement - illustrating the extent to which sustainability management and legal compliance are becoming dependent on structured and verifiable data.³

First-mile data collection and management systems pose several challenges to meeting these many new data requirements, as well as to the farmers and co-operative unions (hereafter referred to as unions) tasked with providing data into the system.

Data collection is a costly process

Collecting and maintaining quality farm-level data requires ongoing investment in mapping, software, hardware, field visits, skilled staff, validation and database management. These are not one-off costs: records need updating, land boundaries correcting and data continually maintaining if it is to remain useful.

These costs can fall disproportionately on producers and their organisations. Research in the Peruvian cocoa sector found that investment in digital sustainability traceability systems was not clearly matched by increased producer income, and highlighted the need for greater supply-chain cooperation to ensure adequate returns on farmer-side investment.⁴ Costs can increase

² See, for example FAO/Preferred by Nature, *Forest monitoring good practices: Inclusive smallholder data governance* (2026) <https://www.preferredbynature.org/library/document/forest-monitoring-good-practices-inclusive-smallholder-data-governance>

³ European Commission, *EUDR Information System – Operator API Reference* (2026) <https://eudr.webcloud.ec.europa.eu/tracesnt/help/eudr-documentation/operator/pdf/EUDR%20Operator%20API%20Reference%20v1.1.pdf>

⁴ Steinke, J. et al., *Digital sustainability tracing in smallholder context: Ex-ante insights from the Peruvian cocoa supply chain* (2024). <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2772655X24000636>

further where data must meet certification, regulatory or assurance requirements, requiring additional verification and quality controls.

Duplication compounds the problem. Farmers and producer organisations may be asked to provide similar information to multiple companies, certification schemes and programmes, while downstream actors incur costs reconciling overlapping datasets. IDH research identifies extensive duplication in agricultural data collection and analysis, alongside limited standardisation and interoperability.⁵ Repeated requests can also create data fatigue, reducing farmers' willingness to engage with digital agriculture providers.

Data quality and data management capacity are linked

As expectations for supply-chain data increase, so do the skills and systems needed to collect, manage and maintain it. Producer organisations' ability to meet these requirements varies considerably.

We learned from the first part of this project, the 2024 Fairtrade feasibility study, how significant these challenges are. The study assessed nine cocoa unions in Ghana across digital literacy and human capacity, digital infrastructure, governance and leadership, and data capability.⁶ Two thirds faced challenges establishing and maintaining data-management systems to the quality required by international customers. The study also highlighted leadership as an important determinant of data-management capability.

The challenge is that without capacity, data quality is impacted. Research in the Peruvian cocoa sector similarly identified risks to data quality where farmers lack the capacity or incentives to provide accurate information, highlighting the need for investment and supply-chain cooperation.⁷

Distribution of value from cocoa data is unequal

Farm-level data creates value across the supply chain. Brands and traders use it for traceability, due diligence, risk management and reporting; governments for public administration; financial institutions and service providers to develop new products; and farmers and producer organisations for market access, planning and member services.

⁵ IDH, *Unlocking Data Sharing in Agriculture* (2024) <https://idh.org/resources/unlocking-data-sharing-in-agriculture>

⁶ Fairtrade Foundation, Farmerline, The Outcome Gap. *Summary paper: Empowering data cocoa cooperatives through data ownership* (2025). <https://www.fairtrade.net/content/dam/fairtrade/fairtrade-uk/resource-library/reports/Data%20Ownership%20Feasibility%20Study%20Summary%20Paper.pdf>

⁷ Steinke et al. (2024)

However, these actors have unequal capacity to capture that value. GIZ and Dalberg identify significant asymmetries in infrastructure, skills and decision-making power, with smallholders often having limited control over how information about their farms is collected and used.⁸

The concern is growing as the digitalisation of agriculture continues. Research has highlighted both the proliferation of separate traceability systems and the need for greater harmonisation and data sharing.⁹ More recently, Amar, Bori and Cörvers find that digital agricultural systems frequently centralise control over farmer data even while increasing the volume of information collected from smallholders. They argue for greater shared control, participatory governance and farmer-led infrastructure.¹⁰

Developing solutions for interoperability and data governance

National and international initiatives are beginning to respond to the fragmentation in the cocoa data sector through the standardisation of data schema. At the international level, approaches such as the UN Transparency Protocol similarly emphasise interoperability rather than a single central repository. Within Ghana, the government-led Cocoa Management System (including the Ghana Cocoa Traceability System), seek to connect farmer, farm and transaction information within a common national infrastructure, although at the time of writing, there is limited evidence that either scheme is removing friction in data collection or improving accuracy.

There are also international efforts to create a more balanced approach to supply chain data governance. Maastricht University's Fair & Smart Data initiative has produced five principles for powerful and well-resourced supply chain actors to commit to fair treatment and compensation of smallholder farmers.¹¹

In response to these challenges, Fairtrade Foundation and Fairtrade Africa launched the 'Piloting data ownership with cocoa co-operatives in Ghana' project to test how unions can strengthen control and management of their data, and whether this can create value for both unions and downstream supply chain actors.¹²

⁸ GIZ/Dalberg, *Data Sovereignty in Agricultural Value Chains* (2022) <https://dalberg.com/our-ideas/data-sovereignty-in-agricultural-value-chains/>

⁹ IDH (2024)

¹⁰ See Amar, S., Bori, N. & Cörvers, R. (2026). *From collection to control: Data governance, digital technologies, and the politics of inclusion in the digitalisation of smallholder agriculture*. *Outlook on Agriculture*, 55 (1), 19–27. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00307270251410944>

¹¹ Maastricht University, *Smallholder-oriented Data Governance Principles*. <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/file/fsdsmallholder-oriented-data-governance-principlespdf>

¹² See <https://isealalliance.org/innovations-fund/explore-projects/piloting-data-ownership-cocoa-cooperatives-ghana>

Piloting data ownership with cocoa cooperatives in Ghana

Background to the pilot

In 2020, the Fairtrade Foundation and Mondelēz International launched the Climate Change and Organisational Strengthening Programme (CCOSP), implemented in Ghana by Fairtrade Africa. Now in its second phase, CCOSP focused on strengthening unions as professional and effective organisations.

A core ambition of CCOSP has been to build the expertise and capacity of unions to manage their own data, help compliance with emerging legislation and eventually for unions to monetise their membership data. A data ownership feasibility study was conducted in CCOSP's 9 unions representing 32,393 farmers in 2024.¹³ The study aimed to assess whether a viable and sustainable business model exists for cocoa unions to manage, market, and sell access to their membership data. It also sought to define this model and identify the resources and capacities required for its adoption.

Fairtrade and partners then designed action research to provide direct capability building support and pilot the business model for data ownership, with three cocoa producer organisations in Ghana. The objective is to build evidence on how to create conditions for data ownership at producer level in the cocoa sector. The project aspired to successfully support unions in collecting and managing data, facilitate more commercial dialogue between producer organisations and supply chain actors, and to generate interest in the concept of producer-led data ownership.

Implementing the pilot

The pilot was implemented in Ghana from March 2025 to September 2026 with three cocoa co-operative unions: Fanteakwa, Sekyere East and West Akyem. Together, the three unions represented approximately 8,900 farmers, and union leaders were supported through a range of activities:

- **Assessing union capacity:** Each union completed an assessment of their existing data management capacity, covering human capacity and governance, digital infrastructure and literacy, policy implementation and investment into data management.

¹³ Fairtrade Foundation, Farmerline, The Outcome Gap (2025)

- **Union capacity building:** Technical support was provided to data managers and board members to address the gaps identified. This included support to purchasing software licenses and equipment. Unions also developed practical capabilities, including digitizing paper-based data collection and creating risk assessment maps.
- **Data product development:** Unions were supported to collect, consolidate and improve the quality of various types of data, including GIS/polygon and environmental data; membership data; human rights data including CL RMS, and traceability data.
- **Understanding and engaging the market:** The pilot mapped existing and potential users and buyers of union-managed data, including Licensed Buying Companies (LBCs). Market engagement explored what information companies need, where they might see value and how a viable business model could work. The project also facilitated direct engagement between the unions and potential data buyers.
- **Testing commercial opportunities:** Unions were supported to explore opportunities to provide relevant data products to potential data buyers. This work is ongoing. To date, one LBC has expressed interest in purchasing data from one union, while further opportunities have been identified to sell data for certification.
- **Peer-to-peer and sector learning:** The pilot supported peer-to-peer learning between unions and cocoa sector stakeholders. Internationally, the pilot contributed content to two stakeholder webinars and this paper setting out principles for producer-led data governance and commercialisation.

Results of the pilot

The pilot provided evidence that cocoa producer organisations can strengthen their capacity to collect, manage and govern farmer data when investments were made in the necessary people, skills and systems. Across the three participating unions, enhanced capability demonstrated practical benefits and opportunities. The pilot also identified areas requiring further investigation and support.

Data management capability

The clearest positive result was the development of functioning data-management infrastructure. By the close of the pilot, all three unions had developed digital systems for storing membership data (compared to two at baseline). All three had also developed cloud-based management systems and used mobile applications for data collection, supported by 23 electronic devices procured through the programme.

Each union established dedicated data-management capacity, while staff across all three unions received training in four core areas: data protection, data ethics, data storage and security, and

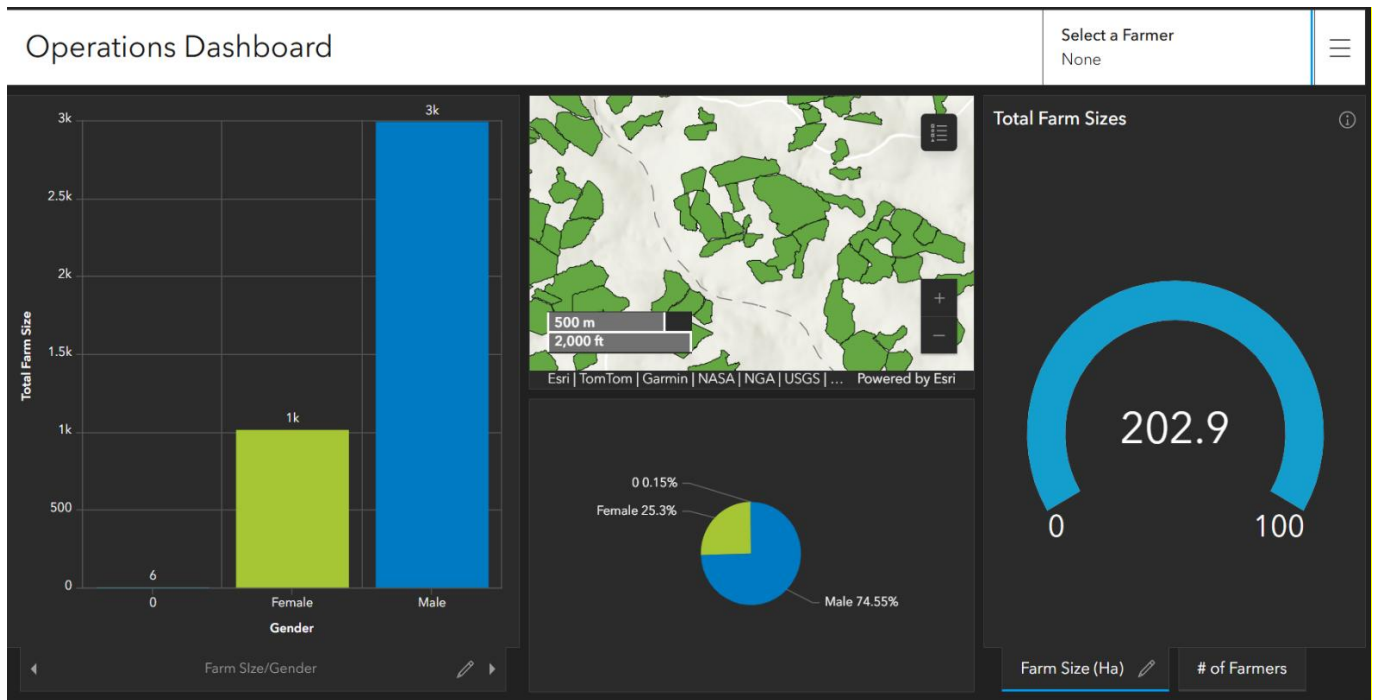
digital data-collection tools. At endline, leaders rated their confidence in overseeing data governance at an average 4/5, their understanding of ownership of farmer data at 4/5, awareness of farmer data rights at 4.33/5, and confidence in managing and using data strategically at 3.67/5. All three reported a significant increase in confidence in overseeing data governance compared with the start of the programme.

Qualitative feedback reinforces this finding. When asked about the most important change resulting from the pilot, union leaders highlighted "Having access to accurate an data system and management," "Data collected of our membership," and stronger connectivity and knowledge of compliance requirements such as EUDR.

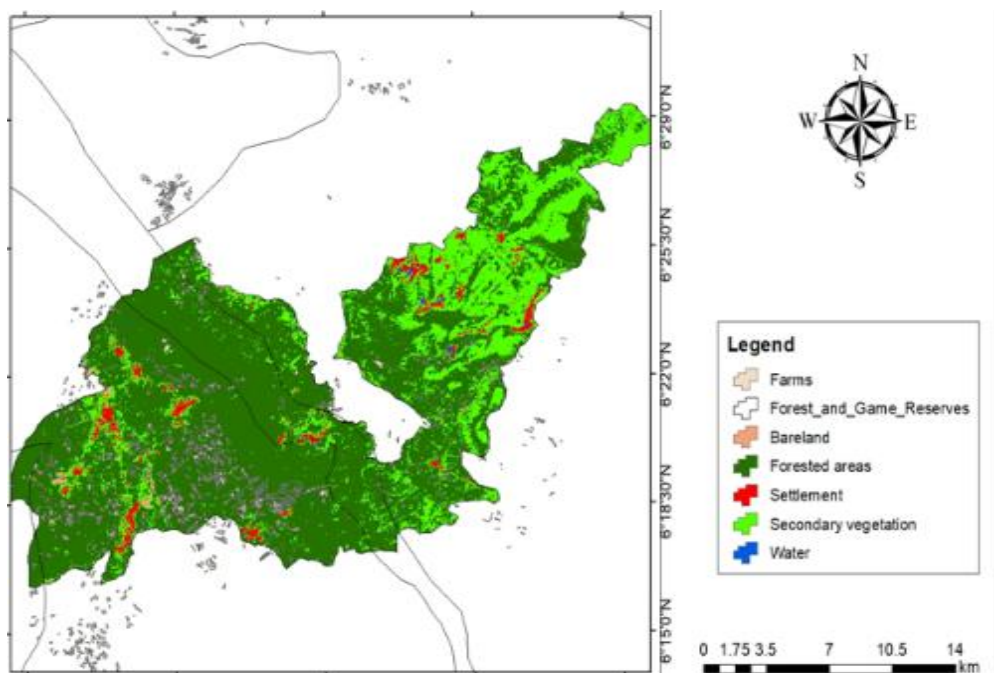
Building data products

The pilot also supported the unions to turn their underlying data into practical data products. These included farm boundary and polygon maps, forest compliance and risk-assessment maps, land-use and land-cover analysis, membership dashboards showing characteristics and trends across the union (Figure 1), farmer location maps, and production and productivity maps linking farm-level production to mapped plots. The products combined membership, farm, GIS and environmental information and demonstrated how producer-managed data could move beyond record-keeping to support analysis, decision-making and engagement with downstream supply-chain actors.

Figure 1. (overleaf) Examples of an operations dashboard and land use map (both using dummy data here) built and used by the unions with the data collected through the pilot. The Operations Dashboard, configured using the ArcGIS Operations Dashboard application, provides visual representations of the data, including total farms mapped and gender of those farmers). The Land Use Land Cover Analysis, configured using ArcGIS Pro, uses data from the 2019 Land Cover Map of Ghana produced by the Forestry Commission of Ghana. It allows the unions to see the type of land their farms are on.



Operations dashboard & interactive web map of farms



Land use and land cover analysis

The scale of data managed through the pilot was substantial. Across the three unions, more than 10,000 farm polygon records and 5,000 membership records were collected and managed over the 12-month period. These underlying datasets were used to develop products including farm boundary and risk maps, land-use and land-cover analysis, membership dashboards, farmer location maps, and production and productivity maps (Table 1). By endline, the unions held records for 8,899 active members, 87% of which had been updated within the previous 12 months.

Table 1. Summary of the data collected by the 3 unions over the 12-month pilot

Category	Data type	Specific data available
Farm polygon data (10,040 records)	Farm boundary maps	Location-based data collected from the farm. Exact coordinates of farm plots
	Forest compliance & risk assessment maps	Draws on farm polygons and forest mask maps
	Land use/land cover maps	Draws on farm polygons, satellite imagery, and forest mask maps
Union membership data (5,309 records)	Farmer membership dashboard	• Number of active members by region/district • Gender & age • Membership growth trends
	Farmer location map	• Farmer household and/or farm center GPS point • Symbolized by union, cocoa variety, or farmer category
Union production maps	Cocoa production maps	• Total production per district • Yield per hectare • Crop distribution maps
	Farmer productivity map	• Each farmer's yield performance • Linked to exact farm polygon • Visualized using colour scales

Reported benefits of enhanced data capability

Union leaders associated better data management with practical organisational benefits. All three union leaders reported improvements in decision-making, reporting efficiency, member engagement, communication with farmers, traceability and certification readiness. The

strongest reported improvements were in union leaders' perception of their own certification and traceability readiness.

One of the unions has been successful in securing Fairtrade certified volumes and additional investment from an international buyer and described how improved data management had been a key driver and enabler to secure this deal. For example, the union noted that in early discussions, the buyer asked for farm mapping data and the union was able to provide it immediately as they already had it available.

There are also encouraging signs of market relevance with union leaders reporting increased awareness of buyer requirements, greater confidence discussing data services and increased engagement from supply-chain actors. Three meetings between unions and potential buyers were reported at endline.

Union leaders themselves emphasised the significance of these changes. When asked about the most important change resulting from the pilot, responses included "Having access to accurate data system and management" and "Strong internet connectivity, knowledge on compliance e.g. EUDR."

Working to improve data quality

The pilot aimed to strengthen the unions' ability to manage data quality. By endline, all three had reported having processes for validating entries for member records, compared with two at baseline. At the time of the endline, all unions had membership databases with 100% coverage of their members, and 87% of membership records had been updated in the previous 12 months at this point. The midline assessment captured examples of unions beginning to apply GIS-based checks and buyer-data quality requirements in practice. Sekyere East, for example, reported conducting cross-mapping exercises as part of its quality assurance processes.

Whilst all three unions had validation processes to check their membership records, the process was ongoing and incomplete at the time of the endline. Testing or assessing the resulting membership datasets by downstream data buyers was beyond the scope of the pilot. Continued improvement in data quality would likely require longer-term investment and support.

Emerging evidence of market relevance

The pilot produced early indications that union-managed data has value to downstream actors. By endline, all three union leaders reported increased confidence in discussing data with buyers, greater awareness of buyer requirements and increased engagement from supply chain actors. Three meetings between unions and potential buyers took place during the pilot. Wider engagement reached 14 potential customers, while the project delivered eight market engagement or awareness sessions, including four trader meetings and two brand meetings.

Qualitative feedback from downstream actors helped clarify where potential value might lie. Traders identified the possibility of saving time and reducing duplication where reliable union-managed data could replace some repeated data collection and validation. One buyer indicated that the quality measures being introduced by unions were aligned with its expectations, while another discussion identified independent quality assurance as an important condition before union data could be relied upon.

It is worth noting that buyer interest was conditional on data quality, price, whether the buyer already held equivalent data, specific client requirements and the existence of a clear business need.

Given the short timeframe of the pilot, this interest has not yet translated into a functioning market, although one LBC expressed interest in purchasing data from one union, providing a potential opportunity for further testing.

Sustainability questions of producer-led data management

A strong indication that unions themselves valued the investment is that all three planned to retain their data managers after the pilot. However, unions identified the ongoing costs of data managers, software and continued skills development as a barrier to sustainability.

The pilot therefore indicates that producer-level data management needs to be treated as an ongoing organisational function rather than a one-off investment. Maintaining current datasets and usable data products requires recurring expenditure on staff, software, data collection, validation and skills. While the unions' intention to retain their data managers provides evidence of perceived organisational value, the pilot did not establish a sustainable financing or cost-recovery model.

While the pilot has demonstrated that data management capability can be enhanced at producer level, a remaining question is how the recurring costs of maintaining that capability should be financed, particularly where downstream supply-chain actors also benefit from the resulting data.

Principles for producer-led data governance

The feasibility study and pilot project has produced evidence that union capacity to store and manage data can be improved with targeted support from Fairtrade. But it has also identified a need to improve the commercial, economic and governance conditions that the unions operate within, to ensure such a shift is sustainable and beneficial to both data demand and supply side stakeholders.

The following principles have been developed to provide a potential framework for producer-led data governance in cocoa. They build on a growing body of work on fair and responsible data governance, including the Fairtrade Global Policy for the Data Governance of Fairtrade Supply Chain Operator Data and principles developed through research by Maastricht University on fair data governance.¹⁴ The principles below draw on these foundations and are explicitly informed by the pilot's findings.

1. Producer control and representation

Unions should have meaningful control over information collected about them and their members. At a minimum, this means being able to access relevant information, identify and correct errors, understand who is authorised to use it, and have appropriate influence over onward sharing and secondary uses.

Where data is managed collectively by a cooperative or union, governance also needs to address farmer representation. Producer ownership should not be assumed to guarantee individual farmer control. Clear rules are needed to establish the authority under which the organisation collects and manages member data, which decisions can be taken collectively and which require individual authorisation.

¹⁴ Fairtrade (2025), *Global Policy for the Data Governance of Fairtrade Supply Chain Operator Data* https://www.fairtrade.net/content/dam/fairtrade/global/compliance/Global%20Data%20Governance%20Policy_updated%20fonts_25072025.pdf; and Maastricht Principles, Amar, Bori & Cörvers (2026)

2. Transparency and informed participation

Unions should understand what information is being collected, why it is needed, who will have access to it and the potential benefits and risks associated with its use.

This requires more than obtaining consent at the point of registration. Data originally collected for one purpose, e.g. certification, traceability or delivery of a sustainability programme, may subsequently become useful for other commercial or regulatory purposes. Governance arrangements should therefore address how new uses are communicated and authorised through informed consent.

Information should be provided in accessible language and formats appropriate to the farmers concerned. Producer organisations can play an important intermediary role, helping members understand both data requirements and the implications of sharing information with different actors.

Transparency should also extend in the opposite direction. Where possible, farmers should be able to see the information held about them, by unions and beyond, and understand how it contributes to decisions or claims affecting them.

3. Value creation and fair distribution of benefits

Data governance should consider also who benefits from data use. As discussed in the second section, farmer and farm data can create value in several ways, for a range of different stakeholders. It is challenging to establish the precise value of individual data points. Nevertheless, where producer organisations incur material and recurring costs to maintain data required by other supply-chain actors, measures should be put in place to sustainably address those costs.

Mechanisms for the fairer distribution of benefits need further testing as this was not addressed through the pilot project. The appropriate model may differ depending on whether information is maintained primarily for cooperative management, regulatory compliance, commercial traceability or additional services.

4. Interoperability and portability

Enhancing producer control of data will have limited practical value if that information remains locked in systems that cannot communicate with one another. Interoperability enables data that is collected and verified just once before it can be reused multiple times over. For producers, interoperability can reduce the costs of duplicative efforts. For downstream actors, it can reduce duplication and facilitate access to consistent and transferable information.

Emerging international approaches to supply-chain data such as the UN Transparency Protocol (UNTP), provide a potential technical model based on decentralised data and interoperable, verifiable credentials.¹⁵ The UNTP architecture separates transparency from centralised ownership of data. Its requirements envisage data remaining where its owner chooses while verified information is exchanged with authorised actors. This creates the technical possibility for a producer organisation to maintain information within its own system while providing evidence required by traders, buyers or other users. In this model, supply-chain transparency does not necessarily require the transfer of underlying datasets to downstream actors.

For unions, interoperability should therefore include the ability to retain usable copies of relevant information and the ability to transfer or share authorised information between trusted systems.

5. Security, privacy and responsible governance

Producer-led systems require appropriate safeguards against loss, misuse and unauthorised disclosure. Enhanced governance arrangements should establish:

- responsibilities for data security and quality;
- appropriate levels of access;
- rules governing onward sharing and secondary use;
- retention and deletion procedures where appropriate;
- processes for correcting inaccurate information, and;
- mechanisms for complaints, grievances and accountability.

Particular consideration is needed where data is aggregated or commercialised or used to substantiate sustainability or compliance claims.

Participatory governance should not itself be assumed to guarantee equitable outcomes. Research by the Ada Lovelace Institute on participatory data stewardship highlights the importance of considering who actually participates in governance, how decisions are made and whether participants have meaningful influence over access and use.¹⁶

¹⁵ See <https://untp.unece.org/docs/about/Requirements/>

¹⁶ Ada Lovelace Institute, *Participatory and inclusive data stewardship: A landscape review* (2024) <https://www.adalovelaceinstitute.org/report/participatory-inclusive-data-stewardship/>

This principle is also relevant to producer organisations themselves. Cooperatives and unions need governance arrangements that protect their individual members and ensure that organisational control over data is exercised transparently and accountably.

6. Sustainable producer capability

Meaningful producer-led data governance requires long-term, sustained institutional capability. A formal right to access, control or share information has limited practical value if a producer organisation lacks the people or systems needed to exercise it. Similarly, interoperability standards cannot solve first-mile data challenges if information is incomplete, outdated or insufficiently reliable to be exchanged.

Producer-level data governance therefore requires investment beyond the initial collection of data, across personnel, software, hardware and connectivity, digital literacy and data protection, and knowledge of policy and data requirements.

The need for capability also changes how capacity building should be understood. Short-term training can develop individual skills, but sustainable data management requires an organisational function that can be maintained after a project or programme ends.

Conclusion

The pilot demonstrates that producer organisations can build the systems, skills and governance needed to manage their own data, and that doing so can create immediate organisational and market value. The next challenge is to move from individual pilots towards a model that can operate sustainably within cocoa supply chains.

The pilot project has identified five areas of priority:

- 1. Invest in producer-level data capability as critical infrastructure in the cocoa sector.** Data management should be treated as an ongoing organisational function, not a one-off data collection exercise. Brands, traders and other supply chain actors should explore how their existing expenditure on data collection, traceability and assurance could support sustainable producer-level capability.
- 2. Strengthen data quality and assurance at producer level.** Producer-managed data will only have wider commercial and regulatory value if downstream actors can trust it. The next phase should test practical approaches to validation, quality standards and independent assurance without recreating costly parallel systems.
- 3. Test the commercial model.** The pilot established capability and identified potential demand, but the mechanisms for recovering the costs of producing and maintaining data need to be further tested. Further pilots should test different models, including service fees, incorporation into sourcing agreements, shared investment and payment for specific data products.
- 4. Build interoperability rather than new data silos.** The sector should work towards common standards and interoperable systems that allow producer organisations to maintain control of core datasets while providing authorised users with the information or verified evidence they need.
- 5. Ensure the value from data reaches producers.** Stronger data governance should be assessed by whether it produces better outcomes for producer organisations and farmers. Future work should track indicators linked to these farmer outcomes, such as whether there are reductions in the costs of repeated data collection, or whether market access has been strengthened.

Coordinated investment and commitment across the supply chain in producer-led data governance will be necessary to strengthen farmer agency and improve the quality and value of cocoa sector data, for the benefit of all.



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