



# Cocoaching

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Individualised Coaching  
for Sustainable Cocoa  
Farming at Scale

# Introduction

Over the past decade, Farmer Field Schools (FFSs), conducted in groups of 15-20, have been the main source of trainings conducted for smallholder farmers. Although FFS trainings have helped many farmers develop more sustainable farming practices, the adoption rates are often low, even below 15%. We believe more individual coaching is needed to guide and support farmers and to increase good agricultural practice (GAP) adoption rates and overall impact. Additionally, The governments of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana have recently disclosed that individual coaching and personal farm development plans may soon become obligatory for all farmers.

One of Beyond Beans' newest programmes, Cocoaching, based on Grameen's FarmGrow, provides individualised training to farmers to help them achieve higher yields through more environmentally beneficial practices. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to farming, so we provide farmers with concrete advice that matches their farm's needs and their personal situation. While FFS can cause farmers to become frustrated by generalised advice, we have seen that individual coaching leads to higher farmer motivation. This ultimately means more farmers adopt good agricultural, social, and environmental practices on their farms.

In this overview, we introduce Cocoaching and its key success factors. We then share how we developed and refined our methodology, and discuss our plans for upscaling. Early results show that, compared to Farmer Field Schools, Cocoaching can increase the uptake of good agricultural practices along with cocoa yields.





## Why is Individual Coaching so Valuable?

One of the main benefits of individual coaching is its personal approach. Group trainings may teach farmers about agroforestry and its benefits for their cocoa farms yet disregard the fact that agroforestry is a broad practice that should be modified to match farm-specific needs. Whereas one farmer may need to focus on planting a larger number of multipurpose trees, another may be better off focusing on the spread of multipurpose trees around their farm.

We have also seen that individual coaching can create a broader community impact. Farmers who are coached with farm-specific information tend to

see an increase in their knowledge and motivation and are more likely to share their learnings with their community.

The governments of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana are both working towards developing their own national sustainability standards. As part of this, both governments may soon require individual coaching and personal farm development plans for all farmers. FFS are therefore no longer accepted as the standard of farmer trainings. This not only shows the importance of this programme but also its potential for scale.



Field Officer with Cocoaching Manual



## The Cocoaching Method

We strive to provide trainings that farmers want and need. Through Cocoaching, we listen to farmers' stories and visit their farms so that we can work together to create a plan that farmers are proud to work on. Our local teams and a community-based network of field officers make this possible.

### How does it work in practice?



Field Officers visit each of their farmers twice per year. These visits include a farm inspection where the individual farm development plan is created together with the farmer, followed by a more in-depth coaching session. For consistency, both visits are done by the same Field Officer. This allows our Field Officers to build meaningful relationships with farmers.

During the initial visit, Field Officers fill out a series of surveys with the farmer. The first survey assesses the farmer based on their socio-economic capacity and motivation to determine their Farmer Profile. The Field Officer then walks around the plot with the farmer to evaluate the farm based on nine different GAP indicators.

The surveys are done through the Mergdata application, which we use for all our data collection at ETG | Beyond Beans. As part of Cocoaching, we use Mergdata in the field to automatically calculate farmer's scores in these categories, providing 'live' updates for our team to view and assess.

Based on these scores, field officers then fill out a Farm Development Plan document which becomes the farmers' annual plan with concrete recommendations to sustainably increase yields. The recommendations are in the form of illustrative stickers rather than written text, so they are understandable by farmers who have low literacy levels.

### The Nine Good Agricultural Practice Indicators

1		Replanting
2		Pruning
3		Weeding
4		Pests & Diseases/Pesticide Use
5		Soil Quality
6		Fertilizer Use
7		Use of Prohibited Products
8		Climatic Zone
9		Agroforestry

Farmers are then given a physical copy of their personal plan that outlines all the recommendations tailored to their specific situation, socio-economic position, and motivation level.

For example, regarding agroforestry, farmers are coached on planting and managing multipurpose trees to help prevent drought, provide shade, and enrich the soil through leaf litter. For a farmer who is just beginning to implement agroforestry systems, this may include a target of 7 trees per hectare in the first year, with the aim of building up to 16 trees per hectare of at least 3 distinct species by the third year of coaching. However, for a more experienced farmer who already has trees on their farm, a first-year target may be as high as 25 shade trees of at least 4 species, building up to 40 per hectare of at least 6 species in the third year.



## Farm Development Plan

The photo below shows a hard copy of the plan that field officers fill out together with farmers. Here's how it works:

First, farmers fill out two short surveys on Mergdata: one about their socioeconomic status and another about their motivation. They receive a score for each of these, which is entered in the top left-hand corner. This is the farmer's capacity.

Then, a farm visit takes place to assess the status of the farm using the 13 farm observations.

With all this information, field officers use Mergdata to come to 1 out of 16 advice options for each of the 13 categories included in the plan.

For example, soil quality can be improved through fertilizer use. For farmers with poor soil quality and low capacity, the advice included may be to return healthy cocoa pods and other organic waste to the soil. As this decomposes, it nourishes the soil. However, for farmers with poor soil quality but a higher capacity, the advice may also include planting vegetation all over the farm to further nourish the soil.



## THE KEY ELEMENTS OF COCOACHING

1



Individualised  
Approach

2



Merged Data  
Collection

3



Focus on Sustainable  
Farming Practices and  
Agroforestry

4



Annual Visits

***“I like the individual support I am receiving; the recommendations are based on what I need.”***

Nameba OUEDRAGO, a cocoa farmer in Côte d'Ivoire, expects yields to increase this year, thanks to the coaching he has been receiving through the Beyond Beans Cocoaching programme.

He has already received farm-specific advice from Cocoaching Field Officer Pacom NEHIN and is beginning implementation immediately.

Amongst the different coaching modules, Nameba has learned about the benefits of planting shade trees in parts of his farm exposed to strong sunlight, pruning which improves the health of cocoa trees, and strategies to prevent pests and diseases.

Nameba Ouedrago



## The Benefits of Cocoaching

Cocoaching has several key benefits both for implementing organisations as well as for farmers:

### 1 — The Inclusion of Climate Agroforestry:

A lack of shade trees can lead to damaged cocoa trees and soil erosion. Shade cocoa agroforestry—one of Cocoaching's main components—is an environmentally sustainable strategy for mitigating adverse environmental conditions and increasing farmer yields.

### 2 — A Hard-Copy Plan is Left at the Farm:

Providing plans digitally through a mobile application is not accessible for many smallholder farmers. Instead, Cocoaching Field Officers fill out a physical copy of the annual development plan and leave it with the farmer after the initial farm inspection (a copy is also stored digitally). This allows the farmer to begin implementation immediately.

### 3 — Data Collection and Implementation:

Collecting the necessary data for a farm's annual development plan usually takes a day of surveying. With Cocoaching, this process is simplified using the localised data organisational tool, Mergdata, through which Field Officers can build digital farmer profiles—which includes their socioeconomic score, motivation score and their farm development plan details. This allows us to track impact through a centralised data platform.

### 4 — Flexible Eligibility Criteria:

Cocoaching is directed towards smallholder farmers, concentrating on increasing farm management skills without reliance on external inputs such as financial loans or hired labour.

### 5 — Factoring in Farmer Motivation:

We know that farmer motivation increases with individual coaching compared to group trainings. In addition, motivation is also an important success factor for the implementation of GAP and other farming practices. Through Cocoaching, we not only create close farmer-trainer relationships that cultivate higher farmer motivation, but we also include a farmer motivation survey as part of our data collection. This means that farmers with higher levels of

motivation are offered different advice from those with lower motivation.

### 6 — A Variety of Farm Development Options:

We recognise that every farm is different—from its size to the sunlight exposure. This means that there are numerous methods to improve farm management practices. Cocoaching's field officers offer farm-specific advice that helps farmers improve their farming practices and subsequently their yields.

### 7 — Plans are Adapted Over Time:

As farmers begin implementing the advice given to them by Field Officers, the situation on their farms develop. Cocoaching encourages individualised farmer plans which can be adapted over time as the needs on their farm change.



Cocoa Farmer with development plan



## Progress So Far

Cocoaching was developed in the first half of 2021 and is being implemented in Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria. In Cote d'Ivoire, we have already coached around 2,500 farmers, and in Ghana, over 1,600 farmers.

In Nigeria, Cocoaching started in 2022, with 250 farmers being coached last year and an additional 300 farmers in 2023.

Across Côte d'Ivoire, we have 25 Field Officers who have been working with farmers since April 2021. As a direct result of this programme, we hope to see cocoa yields gradually increase and to see farmers using and sharing the knowledge they gain, especially regarding the implementation of agroforestry systems.



## Next Steps

We are continually reviewing and improving Cocoaching and have already developed and are rolling out Cocoaching 3.0 in 2023. In Cocoaching 2.0, we simplified some of the recommendations and turned the recommendations into illustrated stickers. In the new version we have reviewed our surveys and materials again based on the feedback and experience of our field officers in order to continue to strengthen our methodology and support to farmers.

In addition, we are ensuring ongoing data collection to understand how the programme is developing and where improvements can be made.

As the governments of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire further develop national sustainability standards, individual development plans may soon become mandatory for all farmers. With these developments, we are seeing not only the importance of this programme and the individualised support it provides farmers but also its potential to scale to a national or even regional level. In the future, we will be collaborating with local government authorities on the tool's development.

***“The interventions we implement in our supply chain need to be tailored to the farmers we work with, and the programs we design must have the farmer at the centre.”***



**Joel Angoran**  
Specialist Agroforestry &  
Environment

“Individual farmer training, based on their socio-economic situation, their level of motivation, as well as the environmental conditions of their farms, help provide relevant recommendations that are directly related to their capacity. This is the essence of our Cocoaching programme and what makes it so successful.

By having individual follow-ups, farmers feel empowered and have a wealth of knowledge to guide them on the key issues they face. By not having one blanket solution for all, we increase the likelihood of implementation, bringing better sustainable practices in our supply chain, producing better quality cocoa, and improving the livelihoods of our smallholder farmers.”





**BEYOND  
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