

BUSINESS CASE STUDY

Advancing Sustainable Cacao through the G-ESG Model: A Business Perspective



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MENNONITE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATES (MEDA)

The Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA) is an international economic development organization that creates business solutions to poverty. MEDA's programs and investments contribute to the transformation of agricultural systems to create and maintain decent job opportunities for women and youth. Since 1953, MEDA has advanced agricultural transformation in 80 countries.

RESILIENCE AND INCLUSION THROUGH INVESTMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRIKULTURA (RIISA) PROJECT

The Resilience and Inclusion through Investment for Sustainable Agrikultura (RIISA) Project is an initiative led by MEDA in the Philippines. The project is focused on building more gender-inclusive, sustainable livelihoods, and profitable agri-businesses for smallholder farmers in the cacao sector in Mindanao. The project aims to directly support 5,400 smallholder farmers, with 40% of them being women. Additionally, it seeks to indirectly support 25,000 small-scale farmers through cooperatives, associations, public institutions, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the cacao sector.

RIISA - STRATEGIC LEARNING AGENDA (RIISA-SLA)

Funded by MEDA, the Philippines Partnership for Sustainable Agriculture (PPSA), was tapped to develop the Strategic Learning Agenda (SLA) of MEDA's RIISA project. The SLA serves as a framework for co-developing a strategic learning agenda and disseminating learning products related to Gendered-Environmental, Social, and Governance (G-ESG) factors and other project results. This is accomplished through various learning activities and platforms designed to catalyze positive change within the cacao sector. The SLA also seeks to facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing among key stakeholders in the sector.

PHILIPPINES PARTNERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE (PPSA)

The Philippines Partnership for Sustainable Agriculture (PPSA) is a multi-stakeholder partnership platform initiated by Grow Asia, a regional platform for inclusive and sustainable agriculture development in Southeast Asia catalyzed by the World Economic Forum and the ASEAN Secretariat. Grow Asia's goal is to reach smallholder farmers in ASEAN through its country chapters like the PPSA to build regional and country partnerships and broker market-driven solutions for more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable food systems in Southeast Asia.

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Executive Summary

A. Purpose and Scope of the Study

This business case appraises the contributions and emerging value of integrating the Gendered-Environmental, Social, and Governance (G-ESG) approach, from the experiences of some cacao value chain stakeholders in Davao, Philippines. The business case focuses on the cacao value chain in the Davao Region, highlighting the experiences of four cacao SMEs, namely , Lomerados Agri-Supply Trading, Kennemer Group, Cacao Culture and Auro Chocolate.

The study captures how targeted interventions show results toward building inclusive and sustainable business practices, leading to measurable improvements in employment, financial performance, and operational sustainability. It reviews how the application of certain practices identified through the G-ESG lens improves workplace conditions, business operations, and the economic resilience of cacao enterprises. The study was informed by direct engagement with cacao small and medium enterprises (SMES).



B. Results

All participating enterprises demonstrated positive results by implementing G-ESG practices. Key results include:

G-ESG Target / Objective	Result	Supporting Evidences
Strengthen environmental sustainability and climate resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Application of sustainable and regenerative farming practices such as biofertilizers, organic inputs Zero-waste processing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All Enterprises: Yield increases ranging from 30-90% Kenemer: 3,328 farms verified by Kenemer for agroforestry and sustainable methods Kenemer: 135 IP forest guards mobilized for forest protection Lomerados: Production of natural disease control inputs for the farm (e.g. <i>Trichoderma</i> packs)
Build capacity and governance for sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduced G-ESG aligned monitoring tools Institutionalized sustainability in business operations (e.g. manual of operations) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cacao Culture: Inclusive hiring, workplace compliance, and governance mechanisms applied to 100% of employees in enterprises adopting G-ESG systems. Auro: Expanded number of farmer suppliers with traceability forms (e.g. >325 farmers documented systems)
Improve market access and competitiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthened quality assurance measures—from initially having no quality-monitoring tools to now utilizing moisture meters that enable farmers to accurately assess and maintain optimal cacao bean moisture levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lomerados, Kenemer: Total production increased more than 200–250% in some farmer groups (e.g. Lomerados, TARBEKO). Auro: Access to high-value markets strengthened (fine-flavor buyers, organic-certified supply chains).
Enhance social impact and local empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved access to markets and other sources of livelihood, especially for the women in the cacao value chain. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All enterprises: Farmer incomes increased 50–100% through better yields, premium pricing, and sustainable practices. Cacao Culture, Kenemer: Women assumed leadership roles in cooperatives and enterprises. Kenemer: Community enterprises strengthened (e.g., TARBEKO governance reform). Cacao Culture: Employment created for women in cacao farms



Collectively, these enterprises demonstrate that integrating gender inclusion, environmental stewardship, and good governance into business operations can strengthen productivity, improve incomes while generating broader social value. SMEs that have implemented inclusive business models, such as providing farmers with training, reliable markets, and better prices, have played a vital role in strengthening participation across the cacao value chain. By offering financial services like loans and credit support to women, these enterprises have opened new opportunities for smallholder farmers, particularly women, Indigenous Peoples, and youth, to engage more actively in cacao production and enterprise development. These shifts are not just institutional but cultural, fostering workplaces and communities where fairness and accountability are practiced every day.

Overall, the outcomes reflected above suggest that a G-ESG-driven approach can position enterprises as catalysts for shared prosperity aligning business growth with social empowerment and environmental responsibility. The cases presented indicate that sustainability and profitability are complementary goals when guided by principles of inclusion, fairness, and accountability.

C. Integrating G-ESG in Business: Pathways to Production, Governance, and Market Growth

Evidence from the businesses profiled in this study suggest that integrating G-ESG principles into core business strategies may support the alignment of profitability with sustainability, potentially creating shared value for farmers, enterprises, and the broader industry. The ongoing challenge and opportunity lie in expanding these practices so that inclusive and sustainable approaches become increasingly common across the cacao sector.



In Photo: Lomerados' cacao drying shed/solar dryer, with fermented cacao beans undergoing the sun-drying process



Farmer-level:

- Expand adoption of sustainable practices (e.g. regenerative farming)
- Deepen collaboration with buyers who value responsible sourcing to unlock premium markets



Business sector-level:

- Adopt G-ESG approach to improve business and sustainability targets (i.e updating of business & operations manuals with G-ESG)



Government-level:

- Institutionalize governance practices such as hiring processes, and operations
- Leveraging sustainability-driven branding can strengthen competitiveness
- Expand access to finance, particularly for women smallholders, that will help address rising input costs and climate risks
- Track measurable social and environmental outcomes, such as yield performance, gender participation, and employee development to ensure inclusive and sustainable growth

These next steps can help transform the cacao sector into a model of dignity, resilience, and shared prosperity, with lessons that can extend to other commodity value chains and industries in the Indo-Pacific region.



In Photo: Freshly harvested cacao pods at Susan Corbita's, a partner farmer of Kennemer in Paquibato, Davao City, Philippines

I. The Philippine Cacao Industry

A. Current Landscape: Opportunities and Persistent Challenges in the Cacao Sector

The global cacao and chocolate value chain is a multi-billion dollar industry that links millions of smallholder producers in developing countries to large-scale processing and retail systems in advanced economies. Cacao production is largely concentrated in emerging economies with tropical zones and provides livelihoods for approximately five to six million smallholder farmers worldwide.¹ In the Philippines, cacao production reached 10,843.53 metric tons in 2024, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority, with the Davao Region contributing 7,805.96 metric tons, or about 71% of total national output solidifying its position as the country's leading cacao-producing region.²

Within the Philippines' cacao sector, both women and men play essential roles across the production and value chain. While men often perform physically demanding tasks such as land preparation and harvesting, women typically engage in lighter farm work, post-harvest processing, and value-added activities such as sorting and fermenting beans, and³ marketing. A study conducted in the province of Zamboanga del Sur found that 65% of cacao farmers were men and 35% were women. While the data primarily reflects the demographic profile of cacao growers, it also highlights that women participate meaningfully in farming activities, even if their roles are not always formally acknowledged in production or enterprise decisions.⁴

The Philippine cacao industry holds significant potential for growth, driven by increasing global demand and favorable agroecological conditions. Yet, the sector continues to face persistent challenges, including low productivity, low farmer incomes, limited access to financing and technology, and social and environmental concerns such as labor issues, climate risks, and sustainability gaps across the value chain. In response, both the government and private sector have introduced programs aimed at improving productivity, ensuring fair compensation, and embedding sustainable practices to create lasting benefits for farming communities and other key actors in the cacao ecosystem.

1 World Cocoa Foundation (n.d). Cocoa Household Income Study Methodology. Retrieved from <https://worldcocoafoundation.org/programmes-and-initiatives/cocoa-household-income-study-methodology?utm>

2 Philippine Statistics Authority (n.d) . Volume of Production, by Region, Province, Quarter, and Semester, 2010-2025. OpenSTAT. Retrieved from <https://openstat.psa.gov.ph/>

3 Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (2023). Exploring socially responsible consumption intentions for gender-responsive cacao value chains in the Philippines. Retrieved from <https://cgspace.cgiar.org/items/1c430d17-1cff-4e14-8840-723bb9d6c074>

4 International Journal of Agricultural Technology (2022). Status of Cacao (*Theobroma cacao* L.) production on its challenges and prospect in Zamboanga del Norte Province in the Philippines. Retrieved from <https://philarchive.org/archive/PATSOC>

As global demand for cacao continues to rise, ensuring sustainable and ethical sourcing has become an urgent priority. Unsustainable farming practices have contributed to deforestation, biodiversity loss, and soil degradation issues that threaten both ecological stability and farmer livelihoods. In the Philippines, where about 80% of cacao production occurs in Mindanao, many smallholder farmers still face barriers such as inadequate access to markets, financing, and post-harvest facilities.⁵ These challenges sometimes drive farmers to shift to other crops that offer quicker returns, compromising long-term soil health and ecosystem balance. The path toward sustainability in the local cacao industry therefore lies in empowering farmers with the inclusive tools, incentives, and inclusive business models that balance productivity with environmental stewardship and social equity.

Adopting practices that integrate sustainable farming methods, empower farmers through fair pay and market access, and promote inclusivity in the cacao value chain presents opportunities to strengthen the local industry's competitiveness and position it to meet the growing global demand for sustainable cacao, while safeguarding ecosystems, uplifting communities, and fostering long-term economic resilience.

II. G-ESG Practices in Focus

This study captures lessons *from four (4) cacao enterprises in Davao region of the Philippines*, to demonstrate the contributions created through the investments made applying the Gendered-Environmental, Social, and Governance (G-ESG) approach in business operations. It assesses how the integration of G-ESG practices into business operations contributes to profitability, product competitiveness, livelihood opportunities, income rates, and environmental impact. It also explores the challenges of realizing measurable benefits for the people, business, and environment.

The **Resilience and Inclusion through Investment for Sustainable Agrikultura (RIISA)** project, funded by **Global Affairs Canada (GAC)** and implemented by **Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA)**, aims to enhance the resilience, inclusivity, and competitiveness of agricultural enterprises and smallholder farmers in the Philippines. By promoting gender equality, environmental sustainability, and responsible investment, RIISA helps cooperatives and SMEs adopt green and inclusive business practices that create long-term economic opportunities and climate-resilient livelihoods, particularly within the cacao sector.



⁵ Gonzales, M. V. A., & Janaban, A. A. (2024). Cacao industry: Its status, opportunities and challenges. *International Journal of Science and Management Studies*, 7(6), 178-196. <https://doi.org/10.51386/25815946/ijsms-v7i6p120>

Across its portfolio, RIISA provides support to 15 cacao cooperatives and 14 small and medium enterprises through technical assistance, capacity development, market linkages, and improved access to finance. This business case research focuses on four selected enterprises to demonstrate how G-ESG integration is influencing operational performance and offering practical pathways for scaling sustainable and inclusive agribusiness models.

What is RIISA's G-ESG approach?

RIISA's approach centers on embedding **Gendered–Environmental, Social, and Governance (G-ESG)** principles into enterprise operations and community development. The project empowers women, Indigenous Peoples, and marginalized groups to take leadership roles and actively participate in governance, while promoting environmentally responsible farming through biofertilizers, organic inputs, and soil health improvement. Enterprises are also supported to strengthen transparency, accountability, and financial management building trust and access to premium markets. Through this integrated approach, RIISA demonstrates that gender inclusion, environmental stewardship, and sound governance together drive sustainable, competitive, and people-centered growth in the cacao industry.

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- 6 Only four clients were selected for this business case research due to the limited period available for fieldwork and data collection, which required a focused approach to ensure depth and quality of analysis. The selected enterprises were chosen based on their: a) Readiness and availability to participate within the constrained timeline; b) Representativeness of different enterprise types within the cacao value chain (e.g., enterprise processor, aggregator); c) Clear evidence of G-ESG practice adoption, allowing for meaningful documentation of outcomes and lessons; and d) Potential to showcase diverse and scalable models that reflect the broader experiences of RIISA-supported clients. This targeted sampling allowed the research team to gather richer insights and produce more detailed business cases, while still reflecting the project's wider impact across its portfolio.



In Photo: Susan Corbita's (Kennemer Eco Solutions) on-the-ground interview by MEDA and PPSA



Auro Chocolate (Auro)⁷ a Filipino enterprise behind the internationally awarded Auro Chocolate brand. Auro engages in sourcing, processing, manufacturing, distribution, and sales of premium tree-to-bar chocolate, working closely with cacao farmers in Mindanao to promote sustainability, fair partnerships, and world-class quality.



Cacao Culture⁸ is a Davao-based social enterprise dedicated to promoting Philippine cacao and chocolate products while advancing fairness, sustainability, and community upliftment. Guided by values of passion, integrity, quality, stewardship, and collaboration, the enterprise combines innovation with heritage to create distinctive chocolate products that honor local culture and craftsmanship.



Kennemer Group (Kennemer)⁹ is a Filipino agri-sourcing company and a leading supplier of cacao beans to the international market. Through its subsidiaries, Kennemer Foods International, (Kennemer Foods) Kennemer¹⁰ Eco Solutions (Keneco) and Agronomika Finance¹¹ Corporation (Agronomika), the Group further strengthens its commitment to sustainability and inclusion. Kennemer Foods focuses on cacao sourcing and trading, connecting farmers to global markets while ensuring quality and traceability. Keneco leads initiatives that restore ecosystems, sequester carbon, and promote regenerative farming practices such as the use of biochar, organic fertilizers, and soil health improvement. Meanwhile, Agronomika bridges the financing gap faced by smallholder cacao farmers by providing accessible, gender-responsive financial products and literacy programs that empower especially women farmers to invest in their farms and livelihoods.



Lomerados Agri-Supply Trading (Lomerados)¹² is a single proprietor company registered with the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) that sells high-quality agricultural supplies and provides technical and extension services focusing on cacao farm management services at a profit. It buys wet beans and sells fermented and dried cacao beans, and is engaged in cacao production by adopting abandoned cacao farms to improve their productivity.

⁷ aurochocolate.com

⁸ cacaoculture.ph

⁹ www.kennemer.group

¹⁰ www.ken.eco

¹¹ www.agronomikafinance.com

¹² www.facebook.com/cacaosouth

III. From Pod to Progress: Success Stories in Cacao

A. Lomerados: Advancing Environmental Stewardship to Boost Cacao Yield and Quality

Lomerados Agri-Supply Trading (Lomerados) is an emerging cacao enterprise that creates business opportunities for smallholder farmers as consolidators of beans in their own village. Before the project's interventions, Lomerados and its partner farmers faced environmental and sustainability challenges including limited warehouse capacity, and pest and disease issues. With RIISA's intervention, farmers gained access to quality-focused cacao production training and tools such as pruning shears, enabling them to adopt better farm management and post-harvest practices. The farmers have highlighted how these new, environmentally-friendly practices have improved soil fertility and reduced long-term risks associated with heavy pesticide and fertilizer application.


In Photo: Post-fermentation cacao beans at different stages of drying (lighter brown to darker tones) on Lomerados' mesh drying mat



The enterprise places environmentally sustainable agricultural practices at the core of its operations. Guided by G-ESG principles, the enterprise focuses on the environmental pillar, investing in more efficient and sustainable farming practices to boost productivity and resilience. Working with over 300 cacao farmers in its supply chain, Lomerados provides technical assistance, farm inputs and performance-based incentives to help cacao growers increase their yields while strengthening long-term partnerships for sustainable cacao trading.

Lomerados made strategic shifts, moving toward cacao farming that is more climate- and resource-conscious. Through the RIISA project, Lomerados received support that strengthened both its business and farmer network. This support included technical and gender-focused training, financial assistance and post-harvest equipment, such as container van, dryer and moisture meters, all of which improved product quality and operational efficiency.

For Lomerados' partner farmers, recent gains reflect a combination of expanded farm areas, improvement management practices and gradual adoption of more sustainable approaches. Production increased from approximately 40 metric tons in 2019 to about 180 metric tons as of May 2025; driven not by a single intervention but by several reinforcing factors. These include regular technical assistance, timely inputs, and tool incentives provided by Lomerados to more than 300 cacao farmers in her supply chain, which have enabled farmers to increase their productivity per hectare and better manage or expand their farm areas over time. On average, farmers have achieved a 30% increase in cacao yield, highlighting how consistent support and improved practices contribute to strengthening production systems.



"The tools and equipment that RIISA provided help us become more confident in our work."

-Cha Bacalso, Founder of Lomerados Agri-Supply Trading

Photos of Lomerados Agri-Supply Trading (LAST)

Metrics	Baseline	Applying G-ESG (under RIISA Project)	Outcome
Production volume	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 40 metric tons of cacao beans annually 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular Technical Assistance: Lomerados provides on-demand, issue-based on-farm technical and extension services to their partner farmers. Incentives for farmers: the enterprise offers incentives such as access to bio-based production inputs and pruning tools, encouraging farmers to adopt environmentally sustainable practices. The incentive scheme also motivates farmers to maintain their cacao farms to achieve the required yield and volume of beans that they can sell to Lomerados, thereby qualifying for the incentives RIISA Support: the project facilitates both the deployment of farm management services and access to essential ESAP production inputs and tools through its Smart Incentives approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Average yields increased by 30%, alongside noticeable improvements in cacao quality Reached 200MT beans traded this year. The increase in traded beans resulted in higher sales allowing Lomerados to provide employment opportunities to more women and youth part-time workers during drying, sorting, storing, and packing of cacao beans.
Farmer Income and Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited income generated Low adoption of sustainable practices among smallholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farm Management Services for Farmers: The on-site deployment of farm management services, along with technical assistance provided on a per-request or issue-based basis, has contributed to improving cacao farmers' knowledge and skills. Access to Production Inputs and Tools As part of the incentive scheme, Lomerados provides farmers with access to essential production inputs and tools. This initiative motivates farmers to adopt proper farm management practices, increase yield, and meet the required volume of beans for sale to Lomerados, thereby qualifying for the incentives. RIISA Support: RIISA supported the establishment of a village-level Biocon laboratory to ensure that Lomerados has a consistent and readily available supply of production inputs. These inputs are distributed as incentives to cacao farmers to help prevent pod rot infestation (Phytophthora) and properly maintain their cacao farm. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase in livelihood opportunities for women Fair pricing and consistent buyer for farmers



Metrics	Baseline	Applying G-ESG (under RIISA Project)	Outcome
Governance/ Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10%-12% losses in revenue caused by the poor quality of beans due to pests in the storage and inconsistent moisture content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to All-Weather Drying and Storage Facilities: Through the support of the RIISA project, Lomerados established drying facilities capable of drying beans even during prolonged rainy seasons, thereby improving the quality of beans for trading. RIISA also supported the construction of a storage facility to address pest issues and mitigate the impact of weather variability in the area, which significantly reduced bean losses. Standard Moisture Meter: Through RIISA incentives, Lomerados procured a standard moisture meter that enables the company to reliably measure the beans' moisture content (MC), which is indicative of their quality. Accurate moisture readings provide critical information for decision-making on whether to further dry the beans or proceed with selling them. Higher MC levels reduce sales, as deductions are imposed on beans with moisture content above the allowable limit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Losses down to 2% Established additional revenue to grow the business and support more cacao farmers in the organization's supply chain



While their involvement in the RIISA project began only in late 2023, early support has contributed to strengthening these ongoing improvements through the promotion of sustainable and regenerative practices that enhance soil health and long-term productivity. These sustainability-oriented approaches complement the technical assistance and incentives already provided by Lomerados, positioning farmers to adopt practices that can deliver benefits well beyond immediate production gains.

Corresponding with these increases in productivity, farmers have also seen improvements in their gross incomes. During peak season, individual farmers earn between PhP 45,000 and PhP 90,000 per month, while low-season incomes range from PhP 20,000 to PhP 50,000. These income gains align with broader shifts in farm productivity and market activity, not solely by RIISA's interventions, but influenced by multiple factors such as favorable price conditions, expanded farm areas and adoption of better farming practices. The trends nonetheless suggest that integrating sustainability-oriented approaches can support more resilient and economically-viable cacao farming over time.

From the market perspective, offtakers such as NutraRich Philippines, another RIISA-supported enterprise, have recognized the added value of partnering with suppliers like Lomerados, understanding that sustainability translates into reliability in both supply and quality. Leveraging more sustainable and modern farming practices, Lomerados reinvests in its network of farming through tools, training and capacity-building initiatives that enhance farm productivity and improve overall quality of cacao beans. By prioritizing environmental stewardship while strengthening farmer livelihoods and business relationships, Lomerados demonstrates that business growth and sustainability are mutually reinforcing goals. Its participation in the RIISA project underscores how applying G-ESG approaches can transform environmental protection from a perceived constraint into a strategic advantage, fostering resilience, stronger partnerships and long-term success across the cacao value chain.



Building on this progress, Lomerados is further enhancing its operations through the establishment of a village-level biocontrol laboratory, an investment made from the enterprise's own cacao trading earnings, complemented by incentives from the RIISA project. The facility would be able to produce up to 1000 packs of Trichoderma weekly, providing an environmentally-friendly solution to control pod rot disease in cacao farms, in turn, further strengthening the enterprises' environmental pillar while directly improving farmers' productivity and resilience.

To support its continued growth and efficiency, Lomerados in partnership with Villgro is also developing an operations manual. This initiative aims to standardize processes, enhance operational efficiency and consistency, and serve as a guide for expansion and increased production capacity. Moving forward, Lomerados remains committed to advancing sustainability in its operations, benefiting both the business and the smallholder farmers it supports.

B. Kennemer Group: Strengthened Market Linkage and Sustainability Practices to Empower Women and Communities for Better Livelihoods

With sustainability and inclusion at the heart of its operations, the Kennemer Group and its subsidiaries Kennemer Foods International (Kennemer Foods), Kennemer Eco Solutions (Keneco), and Agronomika Finance Corporation (Agronomika) are advancing inclusive and climate-resilient cacao production across the Davao Region. The group promotes sustainable agricultural practices, reforestation, forest conservation, and financial inclusion, positioning itself as a key driver of responsible agribusiness in the Philippines.

As one of the region's major cacao offtakers, Kennemer Foods has built a reliable and transparent market for smallholder farmers, offering faster payments (payment upon delivery), fairer prices, and higher incomes compared to traditional traders. This has strengthened farmer loyalty and improved livelihoods, while reinforcing trust in the cacao value chain.

Keneco, the group's environmental arm, focuses on ecosystem restoration, carbon sequestration, and biodiversity conservation. It promotes regenerative farming practices such as the use of biochar, organic fertilizers, and sustainable soil management techniques—helping farmers reduce chemical dependence and improve yields. In 2024, Keneco began expanding its carbon credit initiatives, enabling farmers to diversify income by intercropping cacao with fruit and forest trees. The initiative actively involves local communities, including 11 Indigenous Political Structures (IPS) in Davao Oriental, which have deployed 135 forest guards to protect ancestral forests. This approach not only safeguards biodiversity but also generates livelihood opportunities for Indigenous families engaged in forest protection.

Across its operations, in 2024, Kennemer has reached over 23,000 smallholder farmers, including 5,800 farmers certified under Rainforest Alliance and Cacao Trace Standards, and 3,328 growers accredited as agroforestry farms underscoring its progress toward climate-smart and traceable cacao production. The group's work reflects an integrated approach to environmental sustainability, inclusive finance, and responsible business.

Meanwhile, Agronomika addresses a long-standing financing gap among smallholder farmers by offering accessible and flexible microfinance products alongside financial literacy training. The institution's Barangay Livelihood Centers (BLCs) serve as community-based hubs for organizing members, facilitating savings, and fostering local leadership particularly among women. As of 2024, Agronomika has reached over 12,000 clients, 93% of whom are women, across 746 BLCs in Mindanao and Luzon, with more than 11,000 active women members. These centers have become platforms for collective empowerment, supporting both enterprise and household resilience.¹³

While Kennemer has shown strong foundations in championing sustainable and inclusive cacao production, its partnership with the RIISA project revealed opportunities to further scale and systematize these gains, working collaboratively to deepen impact in cacao-producing communities while ensuring a steady, sustainable supply chain. The partnership has helped advance an inclusive cacao industry, aligning with Kennemer's long-standing commitment to responsible business and ensuring that smallholder farmers, women, and Indigenous Peoples benefit from improved market access and livelihood opportunities. Together, Kennemer and RIISA have implemented community initiatives promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, such as Women's Day celebrations that serve as platforms for dialogue and collective action. While sustainability and inclusion have always been part of Kennemer's core values, the collaboration with RIISA has enabled the company to test and refine G-ESG concepts, laying the groundwork for scaling future initiatives.

¹³ Kennemer Group. (2024) 2024 Kennemer Group Impact Report



In Photo: Women-partner farmers of Keneco

Metrics	Baseline	Applying G-ESG (under RIISA Project)	Outcome ¹⁴
Inclusive Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women experienced limited access to formal financing and farm investment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women's Financial Inclusion and Economic Empowerment: Agronomika Finance expanded access to tailored microfinance products and financial literacy support, reaching a predominantly women client base within cacao-producing communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased women's access to finance, enabling greater investment in farms and income-generating activities
Environmental Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conventional farming practices with high dependence on chemical inputs; Limited adoption of agroforestry and sustainable farm certifications; Limited awareness on soil health and carbon sequestration. Low awareness of ecosystem management and forest protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regenerative Agriculture and Sustainable Production Farmers adopted regenerative practices, including biochar, organic fertilizers, and compost supported by training on sustainable farming and soil health management to improve productivity and long-term soil resilience. Environmental Stewardship and Indigenous-Led Forest Protection: Forest restoration and protection initiatives were implemented in partnership with 11 Indigenous Political Structures (IPS), strengthening community-based environmental governance and biodiversity conservation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adoption of regenerative farming practices has contributed to improved soil fertility and a gradual reduction in reliance on synthetic fertilizers among participating farmers 3,328 agroforestry farms have been accredited as agroforestry or sustainable farms, signaling positive progress toward climate-smart and potentially carbon-positive cacao production systems Strengthened forest protection efforts through the deployment of 135 forest guards contributing to broader ecosystem protection and sustainability outcomes
Gender and Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited awareness on roles of women in management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender Inclusion and Participatory Governance: In partnership with the RIISA Project, G-ESG-based gender programs and community dialogues (e.g., Women's Day, leadership forums) to strengthen awareness of women's roles and promote more gender-responsive decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased opportunities for women's participation in community and cooperative governance have supported gradual shifts toward more gender-responsive and inclusive decision-making
Production Volume	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low production volumes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> e.g. TARBECO recorded <20 tons annually, from 2015 - 2018 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity Building and Farm Productivity: Conducted a series of Cacao Farm Management Trainings to enhance farmers' technical skills, improve farm planning and practices, and support more efficient and sustainable cacao production¹⁵ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased production volumes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> e.g. TARBECO recorded 40 tons/year in 2024

¹⁴ MEDA. (2025). Resilience And Inclusion Through Investment In Sustainable Agrikultura (RIISA): RIISA FY 4 Annual Report (April 1, 2024, to March 31, 2025).

¹⁵ MEDA (2024) Resilience And Inclusion Through Investment In Sustainable Agrikultura (RIISA) (RIISA):YEAR 4 Project Operations Report (April 1 to September 30, 2024)

"We are really empowering the women to have a say-even if it's in agriculture. It's the women who receive support through Agronomika, the women who make the decision. We enrolled more than 16,000 women into our program."

-Jonna Bickel, Chief Impact Sustainability Officer, Kennemer Group

Support from Keneco and Agronomika, through the RIISA project, has contributed to strengthening Tamugan Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries Cooperative (TARBECO), a 235-member cooperative in Davao City. Through access to training on sustainable cacao production, financing, and sustainability tools, TARBECO has increased its production capacity, equipping farmers like TARBECO members with the knowledge to increase yields while conserving natural resources. This effort is complemented by Kennemer's fortified bio-compost, made from natural inputs that improve soil health and reduce dependence on synthetic fertilizers, which is made accessible to the farmers through Agronomika's loan programs. As a result, TARBECO's annual cacao production has grown from less than 20 tons in 2015 - 2018 to 40 tons in 2024. This increase reflects meaningful gains in productivity and farm management practices, alongside a steady adoption of sustainability-oriented approaches within the cooperative.

"RIISA Project is center to educate farmers on how to improve agricultural life para maging disente ang pamumuhay ng farmers" (RIISA Project is center to educate farmers on how to improve their agricultural life so they can achieve a decent and sustainable quality of life.)

-Felix Adorneo, General Manager, TARBECO



Merry Fimientero, a member of indigenous group in Paquibato District in Davao City access financing from Agronomika/ Keneco to support cacao production.

In addition to improved productivity practices, through Kennemer's technical guidance, TARBECO has enhanced its leadership and governance capacity, improving transparency through better and clearer cooperative policies. These systems have helped ensure fair pricing, timely transactions, and equitable benefit-sharing among members. Moreover, farmers also receive cash bonuses also known as a chocolate bonus, farm inputs, and technical assistance, reinforcing long-term trust and engagement within the cooperative.

Not new to G-ESG, the Kennemer Group continues to embed its commitment to people, planet, and prosperity across its business model. Their integrated approach has led to empowered women cacao producers, stronger cooperatives, fairer trading relationships, and more sustainable livelihoods, demonstrating the potential of how responsible agribusiness models can align commercial performance with social and environmental value.

C. Cacao Culture: Creating Shared Prosperity through Decent Work and Inclusive Growth

Founded in 2016, Cacao Culture started as a small retail venture selling locally sourced cacao and chocolate products. With an opportunity to expand the business, scaling operations presented both challenges and possibilities to maintain sustainability, strengthen community impact and enhance internal systems without compromising social purpose. Along with the support from the RIISA Project, Cacao Culture formalized its commitment to sustainability and inclusion by embedding G-ESG principles into its operations. This integration has helped translate its core values into concrete practices, strengthening organizational culture, improving stakeholder engagement and positioning the enterprise as a model for responsible agribusiness.

Cacao Culture's engagement with the RIISA Project began in 2024 focusing on enhancing its retail, packaging design, and youth-oriented marketing initiatives. Through the engagement, the enterprise received technical assistance and capacity-building support enabling the organization to better integrate G-ESG principles across its operations.




Metrics	Baseline	Applying G-ESG (under RIISA Project)	Outcome
Number of Employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> < 30 employees across operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusive and non-discriminatory hiring practices implemented to promote equal opportunity and workforce diversity Organizational management and human resource development trainings conducted to strengthen internal systems, leadership, and staff capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased number of employees (> 30 employees), 57% of which are inclusive of women
Improved Farming Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of synthetic fertilizers Cacao production was at 2 kilograms per tree annually 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investment in an additional biochar processing facility: Through the RIISA project, Cacao Culture was able to expand capacity for producing organic soil inputs and support regenerative farming practices Along with improving access to organic soil inputs, partner farmers of Cacao Culture received trainings on sustainable alternatives to synthetic fertilizers, including beneficial fungi and efficient microbes to improve soil health and reduce chemical dependence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved access to organic inputs to improve farming production 2.7 kilograms per tree annually Increased additional livelihood opportunities for women counterparts of male farmers through biochar production



"RIISA helped us become more inclusive in terms of gender. G-ESG was already in our values, but with RIISA, we were able to put a label on it."

-Kenneth Reyes Lao, Founder, Cacao Culture



Kenneth and Shiela Reyes-Lao, Cacao Culture's tech-entrepreneurs and founders

The RIISA Project's gender-focused interventions, particularly through the G-ESG training, strengthened Cacao Culture's commitment to inclusivity and equitable growth. In the past year, the enterprise expanded to more than 30 employees from 26 full-time employees to almost forty employees, providing equal opportunities to women, LGBTQ+ members, and Indigenous Peoples across its workforce. Diversity and inclusion are reflected in the company's structure and day-to-day practices. Women now lead most of Cacao Culture's retail operations, while in the farming side of the enterprise, roles traditionally limited to men, have evolved to include their spouses as independent employees responsible for recordkeeping and traceability. The enterprise also fosters a safe and supportive workplace, ensuring that every employee, regardless of gender or background, has a fair chance to grow and contribute.

Through RIISA's support, Cacao Culture demonstrates that gender inclusion is not only a social goal, but also a driver to business performance, enhancing productivity, creativity and teamwork.

"I don't experience discrimination here. Everyone has voice. Even those not in leadership positions are encouraged to share ideas during our team huddles."

-John Llyod Toledo, Retail Supervisor, Cacao Culture

It has also strengthened Cacao Culture's commitment to decent work, creating an environment where inclusion, fair labor practices and sustainable livelihoods reinforce one another. The enterprise ensures compliance with labor and social protection standards, assuring government remittances and leave policies are available for all staff. The enterprise also promotes continuous learning through leadership and personal development programs for its staff, such as training for mothers and young professionals.

Cacao Culture's commitment extends beyond its retail employees to its partner farmers as well. True to this principle, the enterprise upholds fair compensation, provides safe working conditions on the farm and invests in building farmers' technical capacity in sustainable cacao production.

"Decent work means safety first, stable jobs, and fairness for everyone."

-Orlando Samson Jr., Farm and Facilities Manager, Cacao Culture

To improve farm production, Cacao Culture introduced biochar technology to their operations through a Singapore-based Agri Startup Waste X, to reduce dependency on synthetic fertilizers and improve soil health.¹⁶ Being the first small-scale biochar facility in Mindanao, improved access to biochar has boosted annual yields from less than 2 kilograms per tree to 2.7 kilograms per tree. Beyond better yields, the introduction of biochar has also created new livelihood opportunities for women farmers, who now operate equipment and play more active roles in farm operations. Cacao Culture, alongside the RIISA project, looks into scaling this initiative through the support of the RIISA project.¹⁷ The enterprise has also participated in various trainings that focused on improving production practices and using more environmentally-friendly inputs such as beneficial microorganisms.

By embedding G-ESG and decent work principles, Cacao Culture demonstrates how profitability and social responsibility can be mutually reinforcing. Its experiences highlight that sustainability is not only about environmental stewardship, but also about empowering people, ensuring fairness and fostering shared prosperity across the cacao sector.

Cacao Culture's story shows that true sustainability begins with people valuing their voices, ensuring fairness, and fostering shared growth across the cacao value chain.

¹⁶ Cacao Culture. (2024, March 19). Cacao Culture collaborates with Singapore agri-startup Waste X. Retrieved from <https://www.cacaoculture.ph/blogs/events-1/cacao-culture-collaborate-with-singapore-agri-startup-waste-x>

¹⁷ MEDA. (2025). Resilience And Inclusion Through Investment In Sustainable Agrikultura (RIISA): RIISA FY 4 Annual Report (April 1, 2024, to March 31, 2025).

D. Auro Chocolate: Empowering Farming Communities for Better Markets

Auro Chocolate (Auro), through its affiliate Filipinas Oro De Cacao Inc. (FODCI), was established to bring Philippine cacao to the global stage while ensuring farmers share in its success. From its inception, Auro sought to create transparent, traceable and inclusive cacao value chains, connecting smallholder farmers to premium markets while promoting fair compensation and sustainable farming practices. The company has always believed that good chocolate starts with good relationships, those built on respect, equity and shared growth.

"Auro's mission has always been inseparable from sustainability—ESG values were not something adopted later but have always been part of the company's DNA."

- Auro's Managing Director Mark Ocampo

Auro has already been practicing ESG principles in their business operations and long-term strategy, even before the RIISA project. With opportunities to grow the business, Auro has showcased how to balance business growth while maintaining its efforts towards sustainability and inclusion. Committed to conserving the environment, Auro practices organic farming and agroforestry which aim to make cacao farming sustainable. The enterprise also aims to reduce plastic footprint by ensuring plastic waste is diverted from landfills and managed responsibly. As for practices specific to social-governance pillars of ESG, Auro has been a champion for fair wages, safe workspaces, gender-diverse hiring, women empowerment and livelihood generation such as crafting cacao leaves into marketable products.

The partnership with RIISA Project played a pivotal role in accelerating and scaling Auro's sustainability and inclusion initiatives, reinforcing its mission to empower farmers and promote responsible cacao production. Through RIISA's support key notable initiatives with the project include, attaining organic certification for Auro-partnered farmers, improving production practices through the provision of farm tools and strengthening capacities through finance, digital marketing and gender inclusion workshops.



In Photos: Saloy Organic Farmers Association have been supplying quality organic cacao beans and were acknowledged of world class quality at international level.

"RIISA further strengthened our mission to champion our partner farmers, while also allowing us to incorporate diversity and inclusion into our overall business strategy."

-Auro Managing Director Mark Ocampo

Attaining organic certification has enabled Auro and its partner farmers to strengthen income opportunities and enhance market positioning, particularly in premium European markets. In Saloy, a local farmers' association composed of 13 cacao growers cultivating 19 hectares was able to secure organic certification, enabling access to differentiated buyers and higher-value channels. Auro has also continued its efforts to encourage women's participation within its organic cacao program. The initial target groups, the 20-member Saloy Organic Farmers Association and the 26-member PAG-ASA Cacao Farmers Association, included 2 women and 18 men, and 12 women and 14 men respectively, representing steps toward more gender-balanced participation. However, the two groups ultimately did not proceed with a full organic conversion due to minimal price differentials and faster productivity gains associated with synthetic fertilizers, particularly in a high-price market environment.

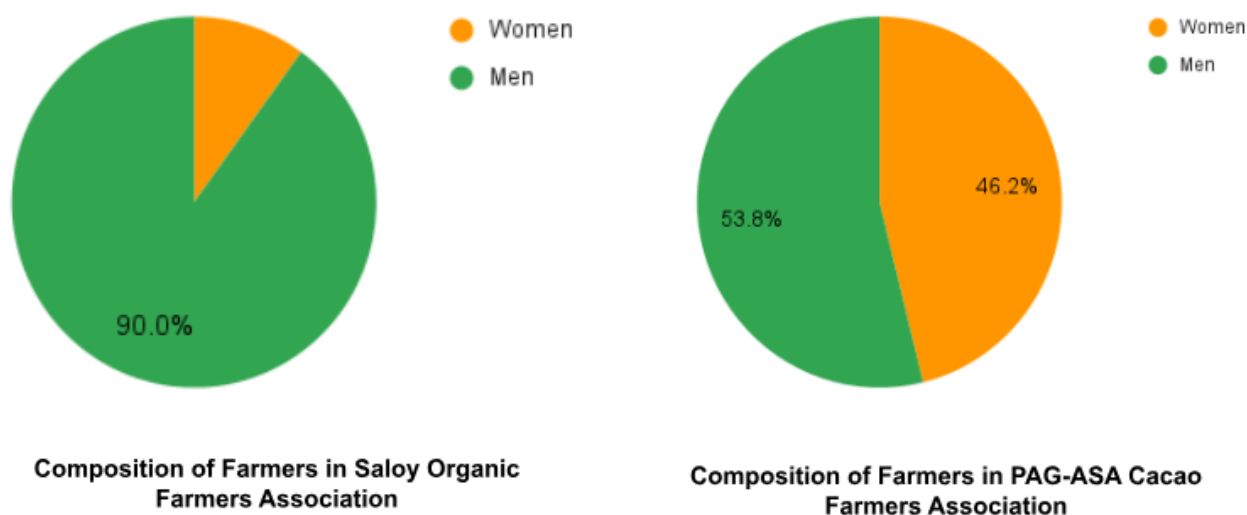


Figure 1. Farmers Composition in Saloy Organic Farmers Association and PAG-ASA Cacao Farmers Association

As for strengthening transparent and traceable cacao value chains, as of August 2025, Auro has 325 partner farmers supplying to the company complete with traceability forms. Farmers who have once relied on middlemen now earn higher incomes through premium pricing and fair-trade arrangements.



Although farmers have experienced significant income gains in recent years, much of this increase has been driven by the global surge in cacao prices and tightening local supply. Prices have surged from PhP 90 per kilogram to over PhP 300 per kilogram. Making the most of the market's situation, farmers have opted to utilize practices that brought in yields that are bigger and faster, farmers have experienced increased yields from 800 grams to 1.5 kilograms per tree, allowing farmers to sell greater volumes at premium prices. Despite short-term shifts similar to the previously mentioned shifts by Saloy Organic Farmers Association, organically grown cacao remains a valuable long-term strategy that strengthens soil health, enhances climate resilience and preserves access to specialty markets that reward consistently high-quality traceable beans. As global prices normalize, these differentiators will once again position organic farmers to secure premium market opportunities.

Despite these market-driven fluctuations, Auro continues to leverage G-ESG principles across its operations, strengthening its reputation as a purpose-driven enterprise that combines quality with impact. Clients and consumers not only recognize the excellence of Auro's single origin cacao, but also its commitment to responsible sourcing and community development. By embedding social inclusion, fair trade and farmer empowerment into its business model, Auro demonstrates that sustainability and social impact are not peripheral goals but key drivers of long-term competitiveness and brand strength. While immediate price premiums for organic beans may fluctuate, organic and sustainable practices continue to offer opportunities for soil health improvements, enhanced production resilience and access to specialty markets over time.



In Photo: One of Saloy Organic Farmers' Association young farmers

"The recognition of our beans as 'single origin' added value to our product."

-Policarpio Enricoso, Member, Saloy Organic Farmers' Association

Auro's experience shows that sustainability and inclusivity are not trade-offs but strategic drivers for growth. By aligning environmental stewardship with farmer empowerment and gender inclusion, Auro shows how a values-driven approach can produce globally competitive cacao while uplifting local communities. Their model illustrates that when enterprises invest in the people and the planet they strengthen their supply chains and build resilient markets, creating long-term value for business and community alike.

"Auro sets a strong example through its emphasis on inclusion and sustainability, making it a model worth supporting"

-Leticia Moreau, Culinary Director, Gruppo Dolci

Metrics	Baseline	Applying G-ESG (under RIISA Project)	Outcome
Farmer Engagement and Market Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to sustainable agricultural practices • Utilized basic market access and pricing mechanisms • Limited access to organic and premium export markets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted financial literacy and management workshops to strengthen farmer's business and investment skills workshop • Provision of farm tools and organic inputs to enhance productivity and sustainable practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Organic fertilizer trials were conducted to introduce farmers to organic practices that can be adopted in their respective farms • Conduct of gender inclusion workshops to promote equitable participation and leadership within farming communities • Support from the RIISA project included assistance in preparing farmers for organic certification, including trainings on organic production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scaled initiatives for partner farmers of Auro • Increased involvement of women farmers in certification process • Continued efforts to promote organic farming • Beans recognized as "single origin"
Productivity and Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average yield of 0.8 kg per tree 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The RIISA project was able to provide partner farmers with key farm tools to support farming activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased yield to 1.5 kg per tree
Social Governance and Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal governance structures with limited inclusion mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthened internal governance and fair-trade systems; integrated gender equality and community participation in decision-making. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved governance transparency, women's participation in farmer groups • Balanced representation of men and women in various roles within the organization

V. Insights for Action

From the ground, the integration of G-ESG principles demonstrate how small but deliberate changes can transform communities, enterprises, and livelihoods. One of the most visible shifts is in enhancing inclusion and fostering agency, empowering communities to be more entrepreneurial and self-reliant. Women, Indigenous Peoples, and other marginalized groups are increasingly involved in decision-making, contributing to more balanced, inclusive and effective governance systems in the cacao value chain. This shift reflects a growing recognition that diversity and shared accountability drive stronger business performance and community engagement. Across cacao-producing communities, the adoption of G-ESG has led to more resilient enterprises and empowered farming systems. Changes in farming practices, specifically the use of biofertilizers, biochar, and organic methods have resulted in healthier soils, stronger crops and higher yields, and reducing long-term risks tied to chemical dependence. These incremental shifts demonstrate how environmentally sustainable farming practices directly support productivity and climate resilience.

Equally important are the social and governance dimensions. Inclusive decision-making structures have enabled women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and Indigenous Peoples and other marginalized groups to take active leadership roles in cooperatives and enterprises. Transparent governance and equitable benefit-sharing have strengthened trust, reduced dependency on intermediaries and reinforced loyalty, all of which are key ingredients for stable, high-quality supply chains. Enterprises that have embraced G-ESG principles also have shown stronger and nurturing workplace cultures through the promotion of diversity, gender balance and safe spaces in the workplace.

The business case for G-ESG, which highlights the integration of environmental sustainability, social inclusion and good governance, strengthens competitiveness, attracts responsible buyers and ensures long-term viability. Initiatives, such as those provided by the RIISA project, demonstrate how providing structured support and building an enabling environment, can promote G-ESG adoption that translates into tangible improvements in productivity, livelihood improvement and enterprise performance, strengthening resilience and ability to withstand economic and environmental shocks.



VI. Translating Gains to Growth

The gains from the initial adoption of the G-ESG approach (under the RIISA Project) go beyond short-term outcomes as they are now being embedded into the systems, practices, and cultures of partner enterprises and communities. Each SME has demonstrated that when sustainability and inclusivity become part of daily business operations, they no longer depend on external interventions but evolve into a better way of doing business.

The integration of Gendered-Environmental, Social, and Governance (G-ESG) principles is now reflected into key result areas that are indices of business, social, and environmental value such as:

Key Result Areas (Business Adoption)	Investments, Activities
Inclusive policies	Inclusive HR policies, Partner engagement systems, farm management protocols, corporate policies
Operational processes	Farmer traceability systems, investing in climate-smart technologies, introduction of organic and biofertilizer practices, postharvest technologies, transparent pricing mechanisms, traceability database
Farmer engagement and monitoring	ESG-aligned monitoring tools



Ruth Lorenzana has been in partnership by supplying organically grown cacao beans to AURO chocolate together with members of Purok PagAsa Farmers Association in Brgy. Malabog, Davao City

These mechanisms ensure that environmental care, fair trade, and decent work remain part of the production process long after the project ends.

The most powerful evidence of sustainability lies in local ownership. Farmers' associations and cooperatives have taken charge of managing training programs, monitoring environmental practices, and maintaining market partnerships. Women are now active in enterprise governance and financial decision-making proof that empowerment has moved beyond participation to leadership.

These examples from Mindanao's cacao sector offer strong models for replication. Similar approaches can be scaled across other agricultural value chains coffee, coconut, and abaca where smallholders face the same challenges of limited market access and resource constraints. The premium market strategy, organic certification pathways, and biofertilizer adoption present opportunities for replication not only across other regions of the Philippines but also in Southeast Asian markets where sustainable sourcing is gaining traction. By fostering partnerships with local governments, industry chambers, and impact investors, these practices can reach new markets while maintaining their inclusive and ethical foundations.

To sustain and scale these gains, continued investment in capacity building, access to climate finance, and ESG-aligned policy support is essential. Stakeholders should prioritize mechanisms that link farmers directly with ethical buyers, provide incentives for sustainable practices, and strengthen local monitoring systems. Enterprises can leverage their sustainability credentials for market differentiation, while cooperatives can enhance transparency and inclusivity to attract investment. Finally, government agencies and development partners are encouraged to integrate G-ESG indicators into their agricultural programs, ensuring that environmental care, gender equality, and governance reforms remain central to future growth.

In essence, sustaining the gains means turning progress into permanence, embedding inclusivity, sustainability, and accountability as the backbone of the cacao sector's growth. By deepening local ownership, scaling successful practices, and aligning policies with G-ESG values, the path forward becomes clear: a resilient, inclusive, and globally competitive cacao industry led by empowered communities and responsible enterprises.

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Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative multiple case study design utilizing Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) as the primary method of data collection. This approach is well-suited to capturing in-depth perspectives from various stakeholders on how gendered-Environmental, Social, and Governance (G-ESG) practices have influenced enterprise performance, risk mitigation, and decent work creation across RIISA partner enterprises.

Serving as a follow-up to the initial business case conducted during the early stages of the RIISA project, this second business case aims to generate comparative insights on how stakeholder engagement, adoption of G-ESG practices, and perceived outcomes have evolved toward the project's conclusion.

Rationale for the Approach

A qualitative multiple case study approach is particularly appropriate for exploring the complex realities of the cacao value chain in Mindanao, where multiple enterprises, stakeholders, and interventions intersect. This design enables the study to:

- Explore and compare enterprise-level experiences (e.g., SMEs and cooperatives) across stakeholder groups;
- Understand how and why G-ESG practices drive impact in specific contexts;
- Identify shared strategies and unique experiences within the enterprise ecosystem; and
- Develop evidence-based, human-centered business cases grounded in stakeholder voices and lived experiences.

Rather than seeking to generalize findings, the approach emphasizes contextual understanding, analyzing each enterprise's journey within its unique environment while extracting cross-cutting lessons for replication and scaling.

Data Collection

Data were collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with purposively selected individuals representing different segments of the cacao value chain, including:

- Senior management and enterprise leaders;
- Mid-level staff;
- Farmers and producers; and
- Clients and consumers.

The interviews followed a structured discussion guide aligned with RIISA's Strategic Learning Agenda (SLA) learning questions. The tool explored respondents' understanding and adoption of ESG principles, changes in employment conditions, financial and operational performance, leadership practices, and perceptions of RIISA's interventions.

This method enabled deep exploration of personal narratives and organizational insights, allowing the study to capture both measurable outcomes and qualitative transformations across partner enterprises.

Sampling Strategy

A stratified purposive sampling approach was adopted to ensure balanced representation across enterprise levels and stakeholder categories. Stratification was based on:

- Enterprise level: management, staff, producers, and clients;
- Business type: SMEs, cooperatives, and cacao-based enterprises.

Respondents were purposively selected according to their level of engagement in RIISA activities and relevance to G-ESG adoption. This ensured the inclusion of key actors directly involved in or influenced by the project's interventions, while also enabling comparative analysis between early-stage and late-stage participants.

Data Processing and Analysis

Data Preparation

- All interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized;
- Responses were consolidated into a centralized database;
- Quantitative details (e.g., workforce composition, income changes) were encoded for descriptive analysis.

Thematic Analysis

- Interview data were coded using a deductive–inductive framework anchored on the SLA learning questions;
- Recurring themes were identified (e.g., improvements in decent work, leadership, environmental sustainability, and gender inclusion);
- Comparisons were made across stakeholder roles and enterprise types to identify patterns and divergences.

Narrative Analysis

Personal stories and illustrative cases were analyzed to capture the contextual and human dimensions of change, enriching the business cases with grounded, relatable examples of transformation.

Integration of First Business Case Findings

Findings from the initial business case were reviewed and integrated to enable a comparative and longitudinal perspective—tracking how G-ESG practices and stakeholder engagement evolved over time.

Triangulation

To ensure credibility and validity, KII findings were cross-checked with secondary data sources, including:

- MEDA's annual survey datasets;
- RIISA project reports and monitoring documents; and
- E-GEM reports and other learning materials.

Descriptive Quantitative Summaries

Where applicable, quantitative data such as gender representation, employment growth, and income trends were summarized through tables and simple visualizations to complement qualitative insights.



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