

Cotton made in Africa

Theory of Change

Aid by Trade Foundation

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1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale and Assumptions

- A **Theory of Change (ToC)** serves as a logical framework to articulate the impacts an organisation seeks to achieve and the pathways it intends to follow to contribute to these changes. The Cotton made in Africa (CmiA) Theory of Change delineates the initiative's activities and connects them to the anticipated immediate outputs, medium-term outcomes, and long-term impacts. It encompasses all of CmiA's interventions, spanning both field- and ginnery-level cotton production as well as actions within the broader supply chain.

The ToC is a cornerstone of CmiA's Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) system, enabling the derivation and regular monitoring of key performance indicators and long-term objectives. Recognising the dynamic nature of development work, the underlying assumptions of the ToC are continuously tested and refined, making the ToC a living document that evolves with the initiative's experiences and learning.

It is acknowledged that the ToC presents a simplified representation of assumed causal relationships and does not capture the full complexity of reality. Causal pathways are not always linear, and reciprocal effects can occur. The ToC outlines only CmiA's own scope of action, while recognising that other actors may be active in similar or overlapping areas and may influence the system. External factors and risks that fall outside CmiA's direct influence but could impact the system are monitored and considered in strategic planning.

Furthermore, while the ToC is designed to describe the intended results of CmiA's interventions, it is recognised that activities may also generate unintended effects, both positive and negative. CmiA is committed to identifying and capturing these effects through its monitoring and evaluation systems, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the initiative's impact and areas for improvement.

For ease of reading, the term 'CmiA' is used to include 'Cotton made in Africa Organic' (CmiA Organic).

1.2 CmiA's Scope of Action

- Cotton production is a vital economic activity in much of Africa South of the Sahara, providing a significant source of income for small-scale farmers and their families. These farmers, however, face numerous challenges, including changing climate conditions, volatile global market prices, low productivity, and inadequate infrastructure.

The Aid by Trade Foundation launched the Cotton made in Africa (CmiA) initiative in 2005 to address these challenges and foster ecological, social, and economic development in cotton-producing regions. CmiA's work is anchored in the three main pillars of sustainability and interrelated with one of the Sustainable Development Goals¹:



Planet: Committing to the protection of soil, water, biodiversity, and ecosystems, minimising the contamination of natural resources.



Prosperity: Enabling small-scale farming families to optimise their farm operations, improve productivity, and enhance their overall living conditions.



People: Supporting small-scale farming families in building resilience to climate and market changes, while ensuring decent working conditions for ginnery workers.

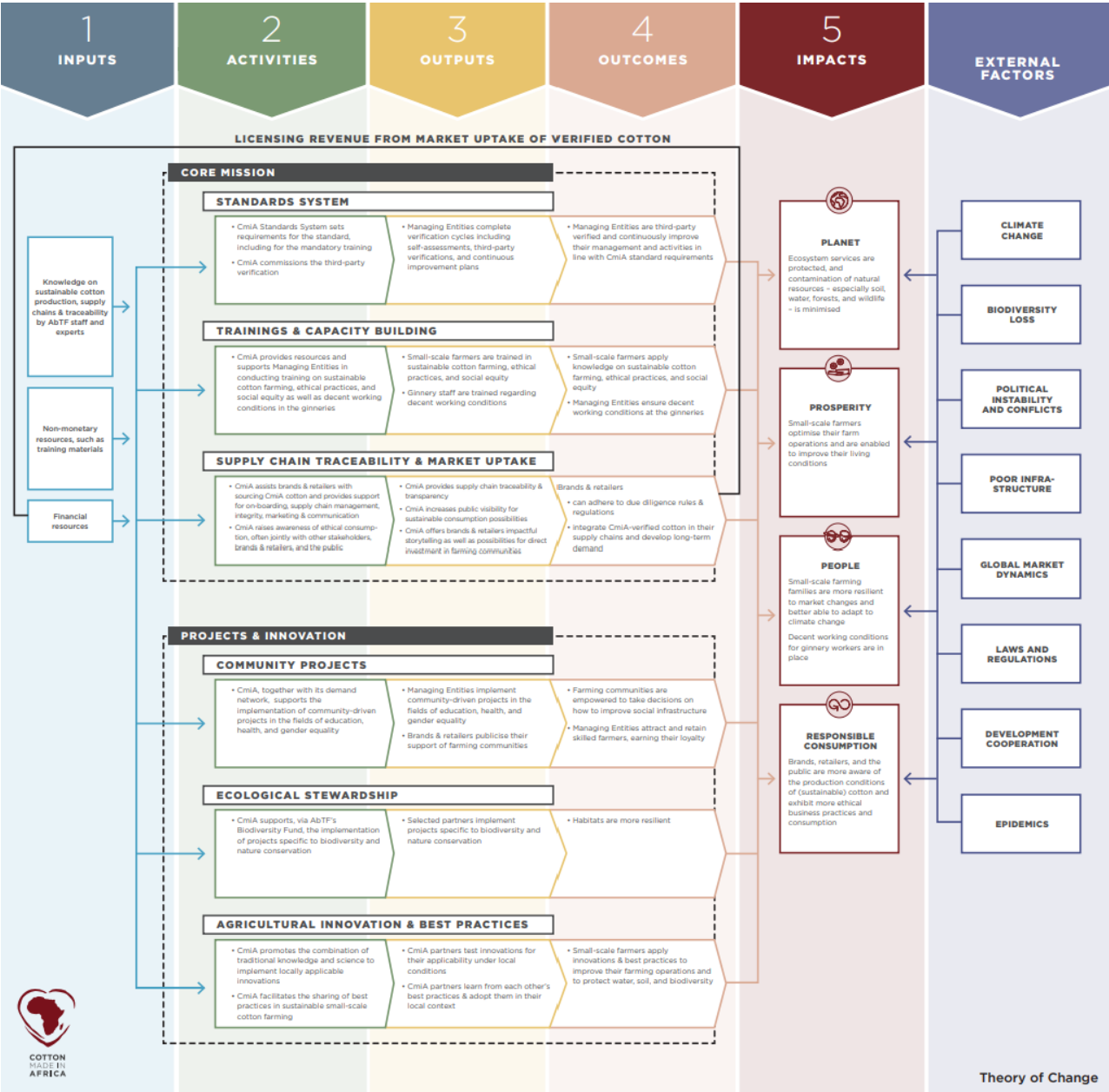


Responsible consumption: Promoting ethical business practices and raising awareness among brands, retailers, and the public regarding sustainable cotton production.

CmiA's approach to achieving these goals is articulated in the Theory of Change, which guides its strategy and operations across all levels of the value chain.

¹ The Global Goals – 12 Responsible consumption and production.
See www.globalgoals.org/goals/12-responsible-consumption-and-production

2. The CmiA Theory of Change



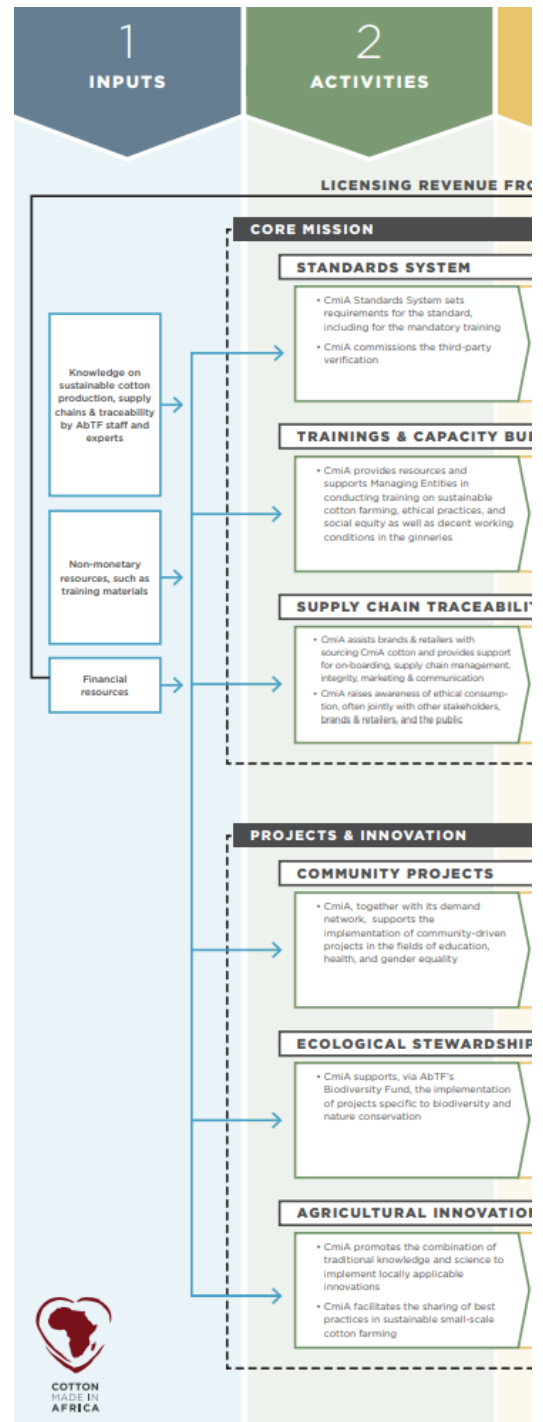
2.1 Inputs and Activities

→ The Aid by Trade Foundation draws on a variety of resources to achieve CmiA's objectives. The key **inputs** include:

Expert knowledge: AbTF staff and external experts provide specialised knowledge on ecological and ethical cotton production, supply chain management, and traceability. This expertise forms the foundation for all training and capacity-building activities.

Non-monetary resources: Training materials, technical equipment, and organisational support are provided to Managing Entities and partners to facilitate effective knowledge transfer and implementation.

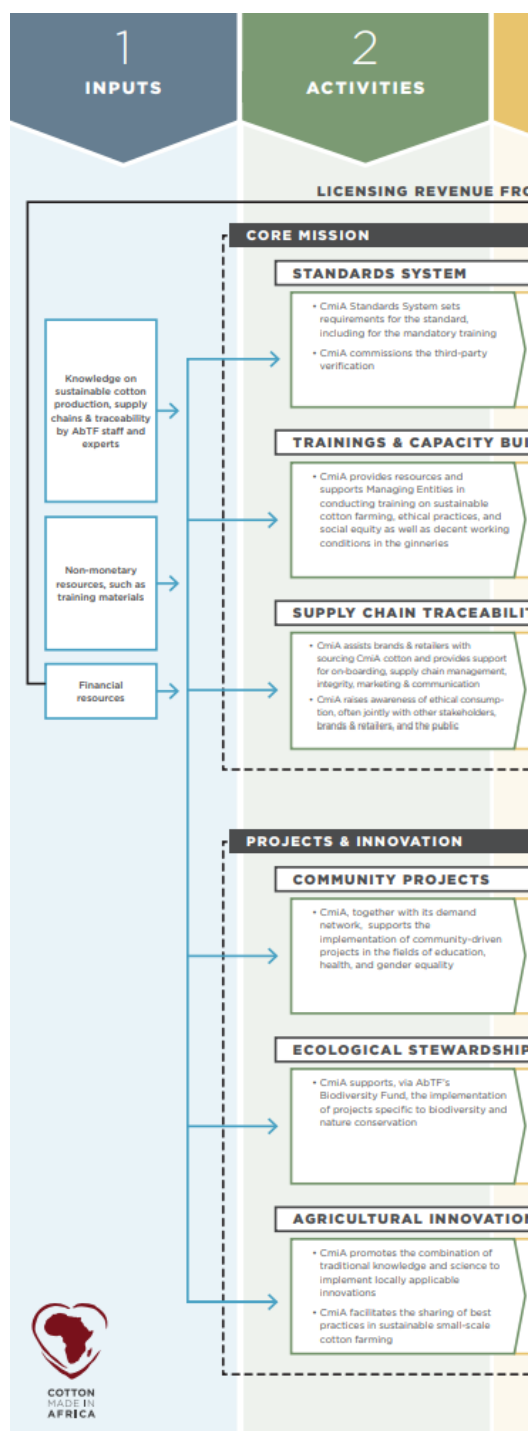
Financial resources: In order to sell CmiA cotton, a Managing Entity is required to hold a CmiA certificate, which is obtained by successfully completing a verification cycle. When brands and retailers source this verified cotton, they pay licensing fees based on their market uptake, thereby generating revenue for the Aid by Trade Foundation. These resources are then directly reinvested into the cultivation areas to support ongoing activities and ensure the lasting impact of the initiative.



The inputs are used for **activities** in several areas. The CmiA ToC clearly differentiates between the core mission on the one hand, and projects and innovation on the other.

The **core mission** represents the fundamental, standards-based operations of the initiative. It encompasses the essential, recurring mechanisms – such as the CmiA standards system, mandatory capacity building of farmers and ginnery staff, third-party verification, and supply chain traceability – required to establish, verify, and scale sustainable cotton production and market demand.

Projects and innovation, on the other hand, represent targeted, collaborative, and often co-funded interventions that go beyond mere compliance with the standard. Activities range from strengthening local communities and promoting ecological stewardship, and agricultural innovations. These enable CmiA and its partners to address specific local challenges, explore new solutions, and achieve more profound, locally focused impacts that complement the core mission.





In the area of the **standards system**, the activities comprise the entire assurance process incorporating comprehensive requirements for sustainable cotton production and the verification of these requirements. The Managing Entities complete verification cycles including self-assessments, third-party verifications, and continuous improvement plans. Alternating between the field and the ginnery level, AbTF commissions independent third-party verifications to conduct on-site verification missions at the Managing Entities to ensure credibility, transparency and compliance with CmiA standard requirements.

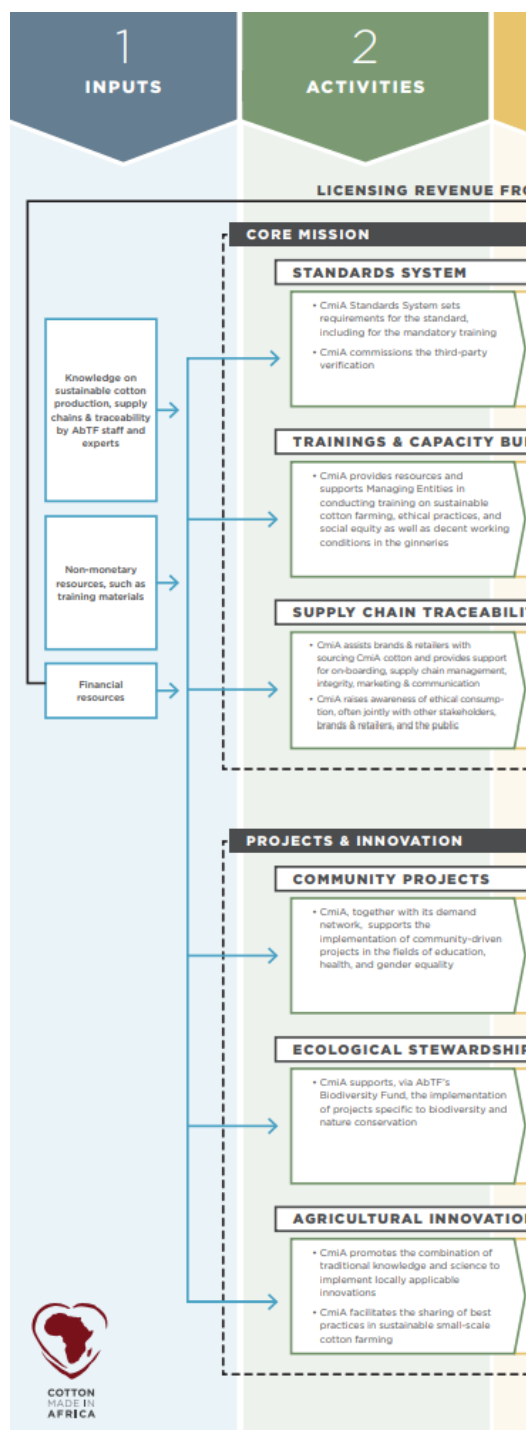


The initiative enables CmiA Managing Entities to conduct high-quality **training** by providing expertise, non-monetary resources, and financial support. Via so-called Trainings of Trainers (ToT) and a field extension system, the training contents are shared with the farmers, addressing sustainable cotton farming, ethical practices, and social equity. Because CmiA standard requirements cover both field- and ginnery-level activities, training and information about decent working conditions are also provided for ginnery staff.



For **supply chain traceability and market uptake**, CmiA assists brands and retailers with sourcing CmiA cotton and offers dedicated support for onboarding, supply chain management, integrity, marketing, and communication. It raises awareness of ethical consumption, often jointly with other stakeholders, brands, retailers, and the public. Furthermore, CmiA offers brands and retailers impactful storytelling as well as possibilities for direct investment in farming communities.

CORE MISSION





Partnering with its demand network, CmiA supports the implementation of **community-driven projects** for farmers and farming communities in CmiA producing countries. These initiatives focus on improving social infrastructure in the critical areas of education, health, and gender equality. This support is not only monetary but also content-related to ensure the conception of impactful projects with the objective of improving overall living conditions for the rural communities.

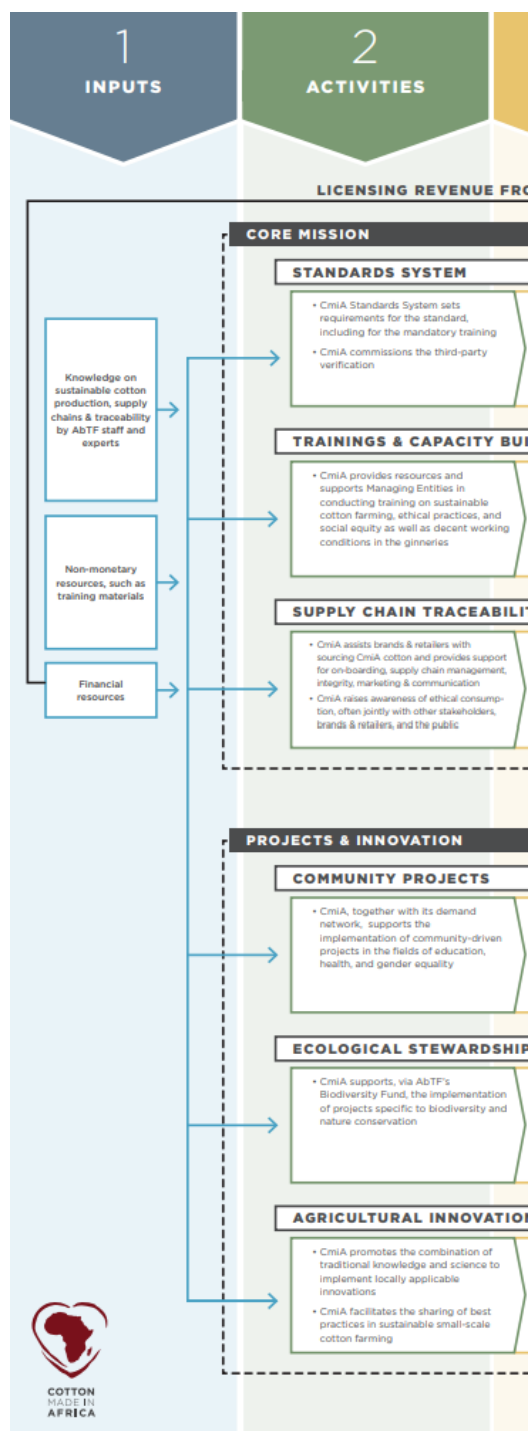


Through the AbTF Biodiversity Fund, CmiA drives **ecological stewardship** by promoting nature conservation and biodiversity. The fund supports projects that maintain healthy ecosystems – protecting soil, water, and habitats for beneficial insects and wildlife. By safeguarding essential ecosystem services like pollination and nutrient cycling, these initiatives build climate resilience, sustaining high-quality fiber production and protecting smallholder livelihoods.



CmiA promotes the combination of traditional knowledge and science to implement locally applicable **agricultural innovations**, while facilitating the sharing of **best practices** in sustainable small-scale cotton farming.

PROJECTS & INNOVATION

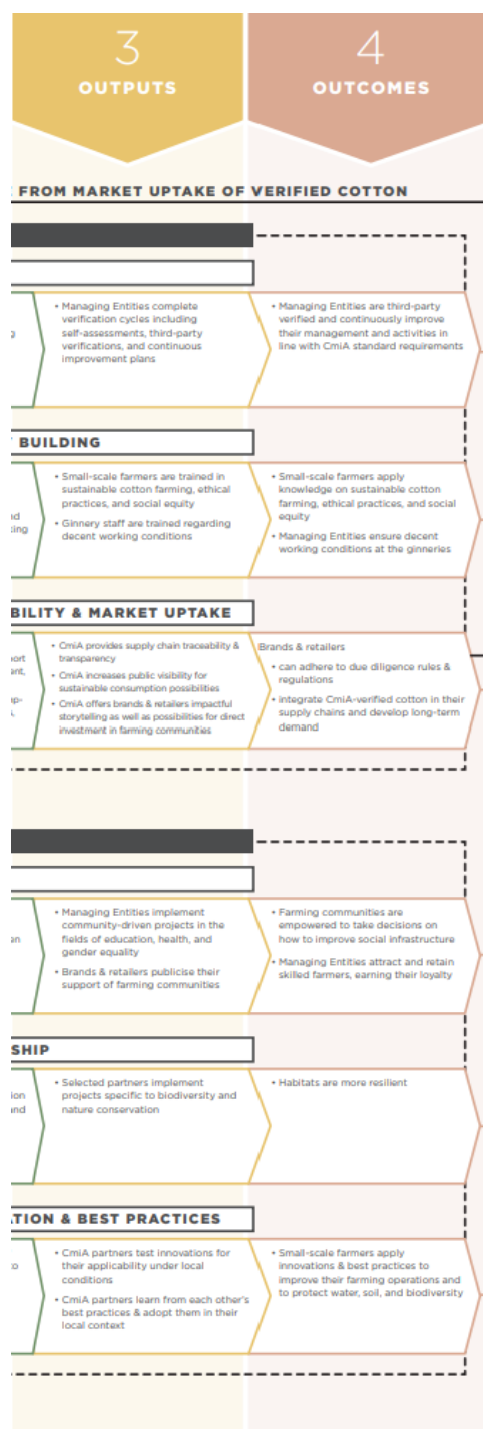


2.2 Outputs and Outcomes

→ To achieve long-term impacts around the sustainability dimensions of planet, prosperity, people, and responsible consumption, CmiA pursues specific objectives at the **outcome** level by means of the initiative's **outputs**.

Under the core mission, for the **standards system**, the direct output is that Managing Entities complete verification cycles including self-assessments, third-party verifications, and continuous improvement plans. This output is expected to lead to the outcome of Managing Entities being third-party verified and continuously improving their management and activities in line with CmiA standard requirements.

Also under the core mission, the direct outputs of **trainings and capacity building** are small-scale farmers who have acquired knowledge in responsible cotton farming, ethical practices, and social equity, alongside ginnery staff trained regarding decent working conditions. The underlying assumption is that these outputs will lead to outcomes where small-scale farmers actually apply this gained knowledge in their fields, and Managing Entities ensure decent working conditions at the ginneries.



In the area of **supply chain traceability and market uptake**, direct outputs include increased supply chain traceability and transparency, increased public visibility for sustainable consumption possibilities, and impactful storytelling and investment opportunities for brands and retailers. These outputs lead to key outcomes: brands and retailers are enabled to adhere to global due diligence rules and regulations, and they successfully integrate CmiA-verified cotton into their supply chains, developing long-term demand.

Under projects & innovation, outputs and outcomes are divided into three areas.

For **community projects**, the direct outputs are the implementation of community-driven projects in education, health, and gender equality by Managing Entities, and the public support of these communities by brands and retailers. This leads to outcomes where farming communities are empowered to make decisions on improving their social infrastructure, and Managing Entities attract and retain skilled, loyal farmers.

For **ecological stewardship**, the output is the implementation of biodiversity and nature conservation projects by selected partners, leading to the outcome of more resilient habitats.

Finally, for **agricultural innovation and best practices**, the outputs are CmiA partners testing innovations under local conditions and learning from each other's best practices. This leads to the outcome of small-scale farmers applying innovations and best practices to improve their farming operations and protect water, soil, and biodiversity.



2.3 Impact

→ At the **impact** level, the CmiA initiative seeks to achieve long-term improvements across four primary dimensions: planet, prosperity, people, and responsible consumption.



Regarding the dimension of **planet**, the application of sustainable farming practices, innovations, and ecological stewardship projects is expected to protect ecosystem services and minimise the contamination of natural resources – especially soil, water, forests, and wildlife.



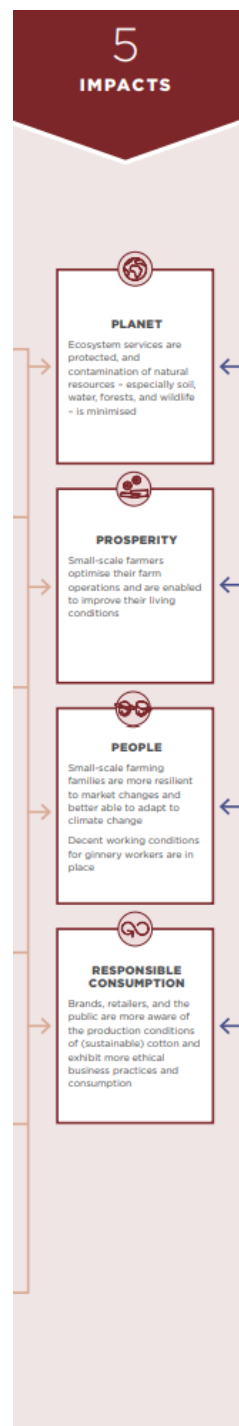
Concerning **prosperity**, CmiA aims to assist small-scale farmers in optimising their farm operations. By applying sustainable agricultural techniques and innovations, farmers are enabled to improve their productivity and efficiency, which ultimately allows them to improve their overall living conditions.



The **people** dimension encompasses impacts at both the field and ginnery levels. In the field, the overarching objective is to ensure that small-scale farming families are more resilient to market changes and better able to adapt to the adverse effects of climate change. At the ginnery level, CmiA aims to ensure that decent working conditions for ginnery workers are firmly in place, protecting their rights and well-being.

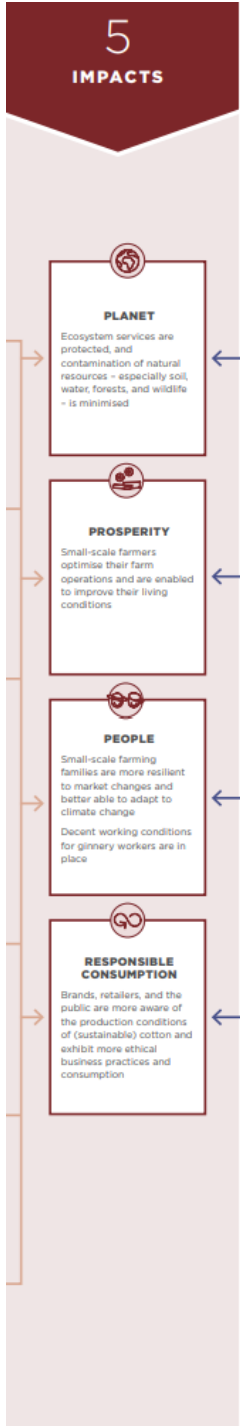


For **responsible consumption**, CmiA strives to ensure that brands, retailers, and the public are more aware of the production conditions of sustainable cotton. This increased awareness is expected to drive more ethical business practices and consumption patterns globally.



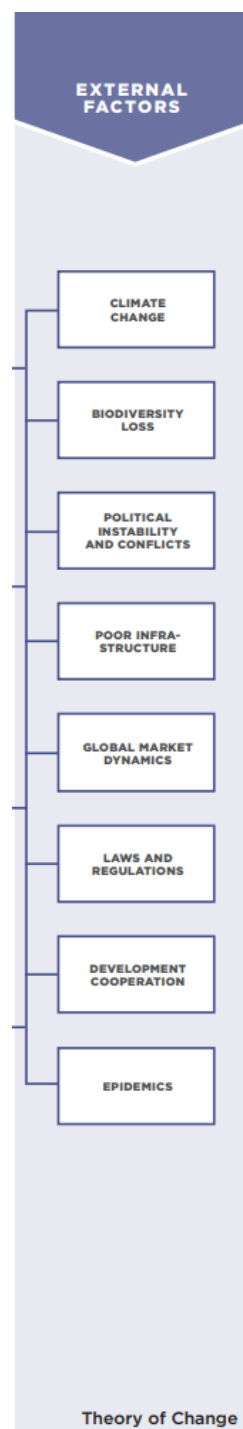
These impacts are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Growing trust and demand from brands and retailers, combined with the integration of CmiA in global supply chains, leads to a steady, long-term increase in the market uptake of CmiA-verified cotton.

As part of CmiA's circular model, this market uptake generates licensing revenues from verified cotton sales. These revenues are directly reinvested into the initiative, funding the inputs and activities that sustain the entire system. This self-sustaining loop ensures continuous, reliable, and long-term support for smallholder cotton farming communities and ecosystems in Africa South of the Sahara.



2.4 External Factors

- While CmiA's strategic pathways are designed to maximise positive impacts, the initiative operates within a complex global and local environment. Several **external factors** lie outside CmiA's direct control but can significantly influence the progress, feasibility, and success of its interventions:
- **Climate change:** Severe weather events, changing rainfall patterns, and rising temperatures directly affect cotton yields and the livelihoods of small-scale farming families.
 - **Biodiversity loss:** The degradation of local ecosystems can reduce soil health and natural pest control, impacting agricultural productivity.
 - **Political instability and conflicts:** Political unrest or regional conflicts in cotton-producing countries can disrupt supply chains, training delivery, and verification processes.
 - **Poor infrastructure:** Inadequate transport, storage, and communication networks in rural areas can hinder market access and the efficient implementation of activities.
 - **Global market dynamics:** Fluctuations in global cotton prices, trade policies, and economic shifts affect both farmer incomes and brand demand.
 - **Laws and regulations:** Evolving national and international legal frameworks, particularly around supply chain due diligence, can drive or restrict market requirements.
 - **Development cooperation:** While public funding and partnerships can greatly strengthen local capacity building, they also present a risk. The sudden withdrawal of major international donors or unexpected budget cuts due to shifting political priorities can create critical funding gaps and destabilise ongoing projects.
 - **Epidemics:** Health crises and epidemics can severely restrict movement, affect labour availability, and disrupt local economies and training programs.



CmiA continuously monitors these external factors and risks, integrating them into strategic planning and adaptive management to build resilience within the initiative.

Glossary

Assumption

A set of (untested) factors and beliefs that form the basis of the intervention logic, and factors or risks, which affect its relevance, progress or success. Assumptions are the conditions necessary for the cause-and-effect relationships between the different levels of results (i.e., to move from activities to outputs, outputs to outcomes, and outcomes to impacts).

Impact

The extent to which an intervention generates, or is expected to generate, significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects.

Indicator

A quantitative or qualitative variable that provides simple, verifiable, and reliable means to track changes, achievements, and the overall performance of an intervention.

Inputs

The financial, human, material (in-kind), and institutional (including technological and information) resources used for an intervention.

Outcome

The short-term and medium-term effects of an intervention's outputs.

Outputs

The products, capital goods, and services that result from an intervention. Outputs may also include changes resulting from the intervention that contribute to the achievement of outcomes, including changes in knowledge, skills, or abilities produced by the activities.

References

OECD (2023), Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results-Based Management for Sustainable Development (Second Edition), OECD Publishing, Paris.

Document History

Name of document	Date of publication	Change
Theory of Change – Cotton made in Africa, Version 01	11/2020	First publication
Cotton made in Africa Theory of Change, Version 2.0	05/2026	Version 2.0 includes influence from external factors on CmiA's impacts and adds the dimension of responsible consumption; slight changes in wording for more clarity.

Next Review

The Aid by Trade Foundation regularly reviews standards system related documents, at least every five years. The next review is expected in 2031.

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The Aid by Trade Foundation (AbTF) was founded in 2005 and is now an internationally renowned and active nonprofit organization for sustainable raw materials. Through its work, it makes a decisive and measurable contribution to improving the living conditions of people and animals and to protecting the environment. With its certified raw materials Cotton made in Africa (CmiA), Cotton made in Africa Organic (CmiA Organic), Regenerative Cotton Standard (RCS) and The Good Cashmere Standard (GCS), the foundation puts its goals into practice. A globally active alliance of textile companies and brands requests the certified raw materials and pays a license fee to the foundation's marketing company, ATAKORA Fördergesellschaft GmbH. This entitles the partners to market their goods with the labels of the standards. In view of the increasing challenges small-scale farmers and textile companies are facing, the standards are of fundamental importance for their resilience and future viability. The AbTF works in close cooperation with industry experts, animal welfare and nature conservation specialists.

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