

Building vertical market linkages in the cocoa sector

Outcomes and insights from the Cocoa SMEs' Participation at the 2026 International Sweets Fair in Cologne

Dates: 31 January to 5 February 2026 **Location:** Cologne, Germany

Facilitated by: Agri-Business Facility for Africa, in cooperation with sequa gGmbH through the Import Promotion Desk

Participants: 10 cocoa SMEs from 9 African and Caribbean countries (Nigeria, Togo, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, DR Congo, Kenya, Liberia, Uganda and the Dominican Republic)



The Agri-Business Facility for Africa (ABF) supported 10 cocoa small and medium enterprises (SMEs) from African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries to participate in the International Sweets and Snacks Fair (ISM) 2026 in Cologne, a leading global trade fair for cocoa and confectionery products. As cocoa is a key commodity for the European Union (EU) and market requirements on sustainability and traceability continue to increase, the programme aimed to help SMEs engage competitively with processors, manufacturers and buyers from across Europe and beyond.

Objectives

- Facilitate direct engagement between ACP cocoa SMEs and European buyers
- Connect ACP cocoa SMEs with European buyers
- Improve SMEs' knowledge of EU market rules, pricing, sustainability and quality standards
- Build lasting vertical trade partnerships in the cocoa value chain



Workshop agenda

Day 1

Saturday 31 January

- Pre-fair knowledge and B2B exchange
- Pre-fair workshop on market dynamics and linkages
- Preparation and decoration of the showcases at the booth

Day 2

Sunday 1 February

- Introductory workshop, EU market entry for cocoa products
- Individual 1:1 sales coaching sessions
- Exhibition and matchmaking at the trade fair

Day 3

Monday 2 February

- Retail market research: Visits to discounters, drugstores, specialty and organic shops
- Matchmaking meetings at ISM
- Exhibition and matchmaking at the trade fair

Day 4

Tuesday 3 February

- Matchmaking meetings at ISM
- Full guided ISM visit
- Individual 1:1 sales coaching sessions
- Exhibition and matchmaking at the trade fair

Day 5

Wednesday 4 February

- Matchmaking meetings at ISM
- Workshops (EU entry, buyer expectations, packaging, EU price calculations)
- Exhibition and matchmaking at the trade fair
- Debriefing meeting on established partnerships and linkages with EU buyers

Day 6

Thursday 5 February

- Field trip to Bonn and Aachen: Visits to different chocolate manufacturing companies and chocolatiers

Programme approach

To fully leverage participation for the SMEs, the programme combined exhibition space with targeted export-readiness support. Depending on their profile and level of export readiness, companies participated through one of two tracks. Four companies exhibited at the Import Promotion Desk (IPD) Pavilion and engaged in structured matchmaking with European buyers. The remaining six took part in an Export Market Orientation Mission (EMOM), a structured learning and orientation programme designed for companies without direct EU export experience, focused on understanding market requirements and identifying the steps needed before commercial engagement becomes realistic. Across both tracks, support included pre-fair coaching on buyer engagement and pitching, tailored B2B matchmaking or guided trade fair activities and on-site guidance at the IPD booth. This structured preparation allowed SMEs to move from a passive presence to active, strategic engagement with the European market

In addition, ABF organised two short workshops before and after the trade fair. The pre-fair workshop was an interactive exchange among participating companies, focusing on access to finance, traceability, quality standards and sustainability certification, based on interests shared in advance. Through small group discussions and plenary reflection, participants exchanged practical experience, identified common challenges, and initiated follow-up exchanges during the week. The debriefing session on the last fair day reflected on benefits for the companies, emerging partnerships, and possible follow-up support by ABF and sequa.

To deepen learning beyond the trade fair, a post-ISM field visit to leading German chocolate manufacturers (**Nobis Printen, Confiserie Coppeneur** and **KESSKO**) offered hands-on exposure to premium chocolate production. These visits deepened the understanding of EU quality standards, consumer segments, processing techniques and sustainability practices, while highlighting opportunities for post-harvest improvements, value addition and potential technical or commercial collaborations.





Key outcomes

Building meaningful market connections

Over the four-day fair, the four matchmaking companies at the IPD Pavilion conducted **85 structured business-to-business meetings** with European buyers, processors and manufacturers, engaging with 72 potential buyers, of whom 66 were from EU markets. The EMOM companies also met with potential buyers and importers as part of their market orientation activities, bringing the total number of B2B interactions across all 10 companies to 87. The high level of buyer interest across both groups confirms the relevance of ACP-origin cocoa products in the EU market.

Participants reported that pre-arranged matchmaking, combined with self-identified target buyers, enabled more focused and productive discussions, laying the groundwork for follow-up negotiations and partnership development. Commercial outcomes varied significantly, however, reflecting the different starting points of the two groups. For the most market-ready companies, ISM generated concrete results, including requests for quotation and confirmed orders shortly after the fair. For others, the primary value was as a learning and benchmarking experience that clarified what steps are needed before direct market entry becomes realistic.

"I had the opportunity to connect with chocolate makers from all over the world, exchange information and experiences, showcase our products and receive feedback from some of the best chocolate makers in Europe and beyond. This is knowledge I can take back and apply in our business."

– Mohammed Kobembe, Kokoa Kamili, Tanzania

Strengthening market orientation and competitiveness

A key outcome was a clear shift in mindset among participating SMEs. Many entered the fair viewing certifications as their primary competitive advantage. Engagement with EU buyers clarified that certifications are often a baseline requirement, while purchasing decisions depend on trust, operational proof, traceability systems, consistent quality, reliable sourcing and transparent communication. This insight significantly strengthened SMEs' understanding of EU buyer logic and competitiveness.

"Seeing the range of organic products and comparing prices the market value against non-organic alternatives has really opened our minds. It is encouraging us to move further towards organic certification and to focus more on high-flavour and high-quality cocoa."

– Denise Karway, United Women for Sustainable Development, Liberia



Driving diversification and value addition

Exposure to EU market demand stimulated concrete plans for diversification into semi-processed and processed cocoa products, including cocoa liquor, butter, and powder. SMEs also explored opportunities around co-packing, packaging, and branding for European markets, highlighting increased ambition to move up the value chain.

Strengthening South-South collaboration

In addition to North-South market linkages, ISM 2026 facilitated South-South partnerships among participating SMEs. New collaborations were initiated between cocoa enterprises from Sierra Leone, Liberia and Togo, including plans for exchange visits to explore processing and market strategies. A Cocoa Center of Excellence for state-of-the-art training to be opened by Kokoa Kamili in Tanzania will open its doors to cocoa professionals from other participating companies.



Institutional visibility and policy alignment

The visit of the Officer in Charge of the Department of Policies and Programmes at the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS), Anthony Brand, reinforced the strategic importance of ACP SME participation. His engagement underscored the link between policy ambition and commercial implementation, encouraging SMEs to actively build partnerships and seize export opportunities.

“By understanding the needs of the EU market, our company recognized an opportunity to expand beyond cocoa beans and diversify into cocoa butter, powder mass and other cocoa-derived products.”

– Helen Afere, Springboard, Nigeria

“At OACPS, we drive sustainable economic development across our 79 Member States. Our mission is to empower ACP producers to transcend local markets, integrating their products into European and global value chains.”

– Anthony Brand, OACPS





Key lessons learned

Preparation matters

The experience at ISM 2026 reaffirmed that trade fair participation delivers meaningful results when embedded in a structured preparation process. Pre-fair coaching, buyer targeting and matchmaking enabled SMEs to engage confidently and strategically. This was reflected in commercial outcomes: companies that came well prepared, communicated clearly, and followed up in a structured way, were more likely to generate concrete results, including requests for quotation and, in some cases, confirmed orders. Companies that were less prepared still benefited significantly, but more as a learning experience than as an immediate commercial opportunity. This underlines that trade fair participation functions not only as a business platform but also as a practical benchmarking and capacity-building instrument.

Think like the buyer

A central learning was the importance of shifting from a producer-driven narrative to a buyer-oriented approach. SMEs recognised that understanding buyer priorities is essential for building trust and securing long-term partnerships. Buyer expectations at ISM 2026 were clearly defined and demanding. Reliability, consistent quality, detailed technical product information – including technical specifications and organoleptic profiles – and professional communication were all decisive factors. Logistics, political stability and supply chain transparency also played a role in buyer

decision-making. Companies that demonstrated a clear value proposition and structured engagement approach were able to move discussions quickly beyond an initial introduction, while those lacking essential market-readiness elements faced limitations in building credibility, regardless of product quality.

Certification is the baseline

While certifications remain critical for market entry, ISM 2026 demonstrated that they are increasingly viewed as a baseline rather than a differentiator. SMEs learned that competitive advantage in the EU market lies in consistent quality, robust traceability systems and the ability to demonstrate how standards are implemented in day-to-day operations. Requirements for traceability have been substantially elevated through the European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) to include tracking of origin and specific plots of land – digital systems are paramount to fulfilling that requirement. Beyond certification, the combination of fermentation quality, traceability and clear origin differentiation proved particularly attractive to European buyers, especially in a market context where buyers are increasingly diversifying sourcing origins and responding to due diligence requirements.



Market readiness goes beyond product quality

One of the clearest findings from ISM 2026 is that product quality alone is not the main constraint for many participating companies. In several cases, SMEs already offer products that correspond well to current European demand. The more significant gaps lie in market readiness. Weak or missing websites, insufficient marketing materials, lack of technical product information, limited digital visibility and weak follow-up systems frequently created a disconnect between a company's actual product potential and the way it was perceived by buyers. Export readiness is multi-dimensional: technical quality and certification are essential, but effective participation in an international trade fair also requires clear positioning, professional communication, suitable promotional materials and the ability to adapt to buyer-specific requirements. Future support should be tailored accordingly, with more advanced companies focusing on deepening buyer relationships and expanding market reach, while less advanced companies prioritise the fundamentals of market readiness first.

Market exposure

Direct interaction with European buyers provided real-time feedback that accelerated learning and shaped commercial strategy. Exposure to concrete market demand encouraged SMEs to pursue diversification into semi-processed and processed cocoa products, explore co-packing and branding opportunities, and rethink their positioning within the value chain. For many participating SMEs, smaller, high-quality market segments offer substantial opportunity for initial market entry:

"Meeting with different potential buyers was really enlightening. This event introduced me to a niche market I didn't even know existed."

– Daniel Scholler, Lizard Earth, Sierra Leon

For companies without direct export experience to Europe, structured market orientation proved particularly valuable. Workshops, company visits, retail market research, guided trade fair activities and individual coaching helped participants better understand the practical realities of the European market and clarify what steps are needed before market entry becomes realistic – particularly around certification, sales preparation, packaging and labelling, and production scale.

Cocoa beans as the primary entry point

A further learning is that cocoa beans remain the most accessible entry point for most participating companies. While some SMEs are beginning to explore cocoa nibs, paste, butter or finished chocolate products, these categories face higher barriers to entry – including stronger competition, stricter technical requirements and more complex market access conditions. Value-added cocoa products may offer meaningful future opportunities, but they generally require a more gradual and targeted market entry strategy. For companies at an earlier stage of export readiness, consolidating a strong position in cocoa beans first is the more realistic path to sustainable commercial outcomes.

South–South and North–South collaboration

Beyond North–South trade linkages, ISM 2026 highlighted the value of peer exchange among SMEs from different origins. Informal discussions and emerging South–South partnerships created space for shared learning on sourcing models, processing strategies and market entry pathways, strengthening collective resilience across the cocoa sector.



Knowledge exchange and mutual learning

Supported by the B2B-workshop, the ISM and the accompanying programme offered a valuable opportunity for cocoa companies from different countries to exchange experiences and learn from each other. Participants discussed common challenges and shared practical approaches related to access to finance for certification costs, strategic choices around certification schemes, cooperation with universities and the use of AI, as well as the practical application of traceability systems, including data ownership constraints and financing strategies.

Evaluation and outlook

To measure the success of the programme for the participating cocoa SMEs, a two-stage evaluation process will be pursued:

1. Following the event, ABF and sequa's Import Promotion Desk will follow up on the status of the 87 conducted B2B meetings.
2. Based on the feedback received, ABF will design further, tailored support measures to bring initiated market linkages to maturity. For example, through targeted buyers' missions to build trust and facilitate the conclusion of supply contracts.



[Watch the highlights from ISM Cologne 2026](#)

Support requested by partner SMEs:

- Guidance on EU sustainability and due diligence standards, for staff and small-scale suppliers
- Support and orientation around pertinent sustainability standards
- Facilitation of access to low-interest, patient financing and investment for upgrading and scaling
- Promotion of partner SMEs on global and European platforms
- Increased technical assistance and advisory support
- Support for crop diversification and local value addition

Learn from ABF's Expert Talks

Enhance your expertise on market access, sustainability requirements, certification, traceability and trade opportunities through these ABF Expert Talks:

- ▷ [Expert Talk: Traceability for Deforestation-Free and Low-Carbon Cocoa](#)
- ▷ [Expert Talk: Access to the EU-Market for Agricultural Products? Anything but simple - what to consider?](#)
- ▷ [Expert talk 1: The EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive \(CSDDD\)](#)
- ▷ [Expert talk 2: The Global G.A.P - The significance of certification in agriculture](#)
- ▷ [Expert Talk: The Import Promotion Desk - Your Partner for Sustainable Business Contacts](#)
- ▷ [Expert Talk: Exploring AfCFTA Opportunities for African MSMEs in Agribusiness](#)



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