



Government of the Netherlands



CBI



Transforming Trade Together

CBI Approach

Foreword

In 2026, we build on what works, sharpen our focus where needed, and strengthen the partnerships that allow us to make a lasting difference. This brief sets out how we aim to do that in a changing global context: pragmatic, focused and grounded in practice.

CBI is part of the Dutch government and operates within the framework of Dutch foreign trade and development policy. We are closely aligned with the Sustainable Economic Development Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ensure that our work continues to contribute to domestic policy objectives and to the integrated country approach of the Netherlands. The Multi-Annual Country Strategies of Dutch Embassies will increasingly guide where and how we engage, reinforcing coherence across trade, development and diplomatic efforts.

For decades, our work with SMEs and their export enabling environment in partner countries has been connected to the Dutch market. Today, this link is becoming more intentional and more central in our approach. Sustainability ambitions driven by buyers in the Netherlands create strong incentives, long-term partnerships and more resilient value chains. Commitment and insights from Dutch companies are essential for us to address root causes of sustainability issues in partner countries, and keep our market information relevant and up-to-date. The Netherlands and Europe act as a broker between exporters and importers and link market demand in Europe with priorities and capabilities in our partner countries.

At the same time, we recognise that policy frameworks are still evolving. In light of ongoing developments, further joint scoping with the Ministry takes place in 2026. This means we are not launching a new multi-annual CBI strategy at this moment. Instead, we remain flexible: aligning existing projects where possible, developing new initiatives within the agreed country scope, and combining long-term projects with targeted, short-term interventions where these add value.

Our approach reflects how we work: focused on impact, responsive to context, and firmly anchored in partnership. By working closely with governments, the private sector and knowledge partners – in the Netherlands, Europe and in our partner countries – we will continue to contribute to sustainable production and trade that works for people, economies and markets.

Let's keep Transforming Trade Together.

Judith Arends
Managing Director CBI



About CBI

CBI is the centre for the promotion of sustainable production and trade between low- and middle- income countries and the Netherlands and Europe. We partner with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and their ecosystems to strengthen their social and environmental sustainability.

CBI is part of the Netherlands Enterprise Agency and is commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. CBI was established by the Ministry in 1971 with the goal of increasing prosperity in developing countries by assisting local SMEs in developing their exports to the European market.

As an important organisation in the implementation of Dutch foreign trade and development policy, CBI has operated in over 70 developing countries, working with over 10,000 local SME exporters and 250 business support organisations. We have provided them with guidance, export coaching, training, and market information. We facilitated thousands of connections between exporters and importers. CBI is well known for 55 year of experience working with SMEs and their ecosystem. We are unique in terms of high-quality knowledge of European market trends and market access requirements, and have great learning capacity through a comprehensive methodology.

We are based in The Hague with a dedicated staff of 60 employees. Over the years we have built an extensive network of over 250 international experts.

About the CBI Approach

The CBI Approach is based on lessons learned and practical experience during the CBI Strategic period 2021–2025, and the findings and recommendations from a range of external consultations, assessments and resources.



Contents

Foreword	2
About CBI	3
Policy context	5
Trends and developments in sustainable production and trade between the Global South and the Netherlands/Europe	7
Vision, mission and pathways to change	9
A systems approach to promote transitions	11
Market information & projects	12
The CBI niche: 'win-win' in international value chains	15
Strategic priorities	16

Policy context

This brief has been developed against the backdrop of the Dutch foreign trade and development policy, and trends and developments in sustainable production and trade between the Global South and the Netherlands/Europe that are shaping and reshaping economies and the ways in which we do business.



CBI Approach

Dutch policy

As part of the Netherlands Enterprise Agency, CBI puts the Dutch policy for foreign trade and development into practice. The Dutch international development policy sets Dutch interests at its heart.

3 categories of interest:



Aid and trade



Security



Migration

CBI contributes to the dual objective of promoting socioeconomic development in low- and middle-income countries, while taking into account Dutch interests. CBI's work directly fits into the policy priority on trade and the economy (aid and trade). CBI builds on strong, long-standing relationships with public and private partners in these countries.

The Netherlands depends on imports from low- and middle- income countries for many products, to secure food supplies and to generate earning capacity and employment through the processing and re-export of these products. For example, in the case of tropical fruits such as pineapples, avocados and mangoes, 87% of Dutch imports come from developing countries.

CBI supports SMEs and their ecosystems throughout value chains of importance to the Netherlands in meeting European market standards, such as those arising from the European regulation and directives with regard to due diligence. In doing so, we help Dutch companies to secure responsible supplies in their chains. CBI's core sectors are in agri-food, services and textiles.

Core policy themes are based on areas in which the Netherlands excels:



Water management



Food security



Health

On a thematic level, the Netherlands has extensive knowledge in the area of food security. The international development policy prioritises the improvement of the agricultural sector in low- and middle- income countries. CBI works in a diverse range of agri-food sectors of importance to the Netherlands, such as fruits and vegetables, spices, and cocoa.

Food security is a multidimensional concept. Besides the dimension of food availability as a supply-side variable, CBI's work contributes to the dimension of (economic) access to food resulting from increased income through exports.

Another priority theme of the Dutch government is water management. The Netherlands helps low- and middle- income countries use scarce water resources more efficiently and improve preparedness for extreme weather. Within CBI's environmental sustainability focus area, water scarcity and clean water are addressed at production level. For instance in the textiles sector, the main challenges are related to water pollution and water scarcity.



Trends and developments in sustainable production and trade between the Global South and the Netherlands/Europe



Key trends and developments we have factored into our approach

Europe's evolving sustainability requirements are a challenge for businesses in the Global South, particularly for SMEs. The EU has integrated sustainability due diligence as a key obligation for businesses to comply with. These regulations create new exporting barriers for our partner countries, but are also an opportunity for these businesses to help EU businesses towards climate neutrality and the energy transition, and to improve their own production, labour conditions and protect workers' rights.

Geopolitical pressures, including ongoing trade disputes and competition over resources, are reshaping international relations, and the European Union's position in the global trade landscape is increasingly being challenged by other trading partners in Africa and Asia.

Climate change poses significant risks to the security of supply chains, disrupting production and transportation networks, and leading to supply shortages and increased volatility in prices.

Competitiveness and resilience are gaining priority over sustainability in Europe's narrative. This marks a shift toward more pragmatic, competitiveness-oriented policy-making in the Netherlands and across Europe, with a stronger focus on raw materials and stricter national strategies to reduce supply chain risks.

Digitalisation and innovations, from GenAI to blockchain, fintech and agri-tech, are transforming global trade and value chains, potentially supporting productivity, transparency, traceability, and sustainability. However, these tools are also raising concerns related to data security, ownership, environmental impact due to energy consumption, and ethics. For exporting SMEs in the Global South, digitalisation is vital for survival. It is an opportunity to become competitive on the European market and comply with European regulations. Digital solutions can create opportunities for SMEs to access support services that were previously unavailable or out of reach.

Population growth combined with job scarcity and instability in parts of Africa is fuelling migration to Europe. Ongoing unrest in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and North Africa is adding pressure on Europe's southern border.

Youth unemployment is a major problem across Africa, both in rural areas - where 60% of the population lives - and in Africa's rapidly expanding cities. By 2050, half of all young people worldwide will live in Africa.



Vision, mission and pathways to change

Mission

CBI contributes to the Dutch International Cooperation policy by promoting the transition to sustainable production and trade.

In collaboration with exporting SMEs and actors within their business environment in partner countries, we strengthen economic, social and environmental sustainability. We foster decent jobs, stimulate innovation and support the implementation of sustainable production practices. By focusing on value chains relevant to the Netherlands and the EU, we facilitate SMEs' access to these markets.

Vision

CBI envisions inclusive and sustainable economies that create positive impact in low- and middle-income countries.

We believe that resilient supply chains aligned with EU standards create shared value for the Netherlands and partner countries, benefiting SMEs, employees and communities.

Pathways to change

Exports do not automatically have a broader positive impact on entrepreneurs, workers and their communities in terms of decent jobs, or a healthy working and living environment. To understand why some people are not profiting from trade, and how this can be changed, we need to understand the market systems in which they operate. This is why we start with an analysis of the market system, investigating root causes of unsustainable and non-inclusive practices, and examining how exports can be used to trigger sustainable change.

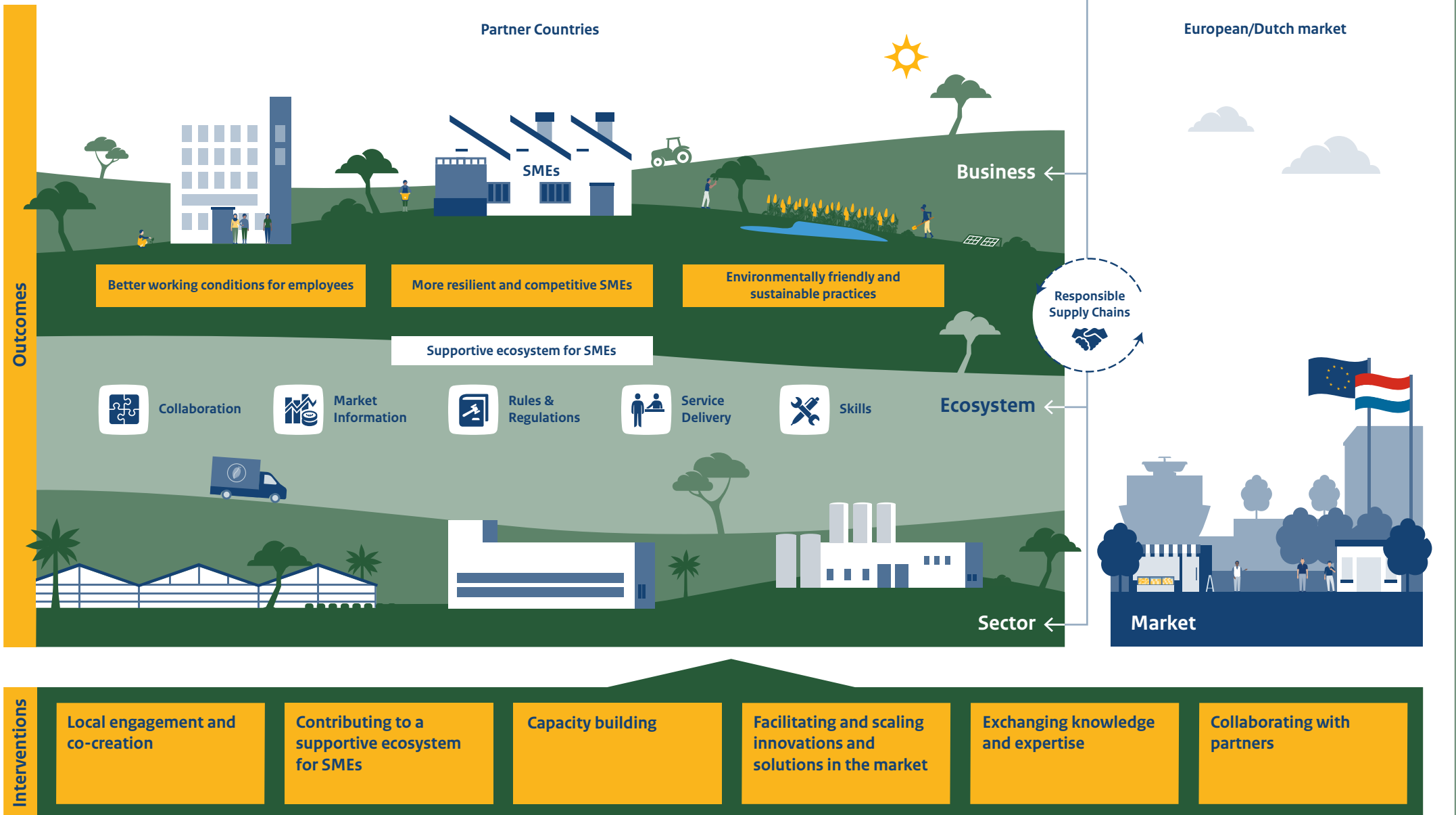
We identified 4 pathways that contribute to the desired change:

1. Supportive ecosystems for SMEs;
2. Businesses contribute to sustainable production and trade;
3. Responsible supply chains;
4. Scaling innovations and solutions.

These 4 pathways to change are incorporated in a Theory of Change, which you find on the next page.



Theory of Change



A systems approach to promote transitions

CBI builds on a systems approach in recognition of the growing complexity of our field. Project designs are based on tackling the underlying root causes of systemic underperformance and scaling successful interventions in collaboration with system actors. This involves many aspects, such as:

Demarcation of the system

Together with local stakeholders and partners, we demarcate system boundaries – which can be national, sub-national, sectoral or sub-sectoral – at the start of every project.

Market-based solutions

We develop viable, long-term business cases with local market players and service providers to continue beyond the duration of projects without distorting markets.

Adaptive management

Because political, economic and other external factors keep changing, we continuously analyse whether interventions have the intended effect, check for unintended side effects, and adapt and adjust where and when required.

Taking on a facilitative role

To avoid becoming part of the systems we aim to support, and in accordance with the principle of exit at entry, we take on a facilitative role. We support system stakeholders in bringing about change.

Reaching scale

To maximise our impact, we scale successful interventions. Because reaching scale takes time, we engage with frontrunners and encourage second movers to adopt tested solutions.

Assessing systems change

We monitor systemic change with diverse methods, focusing on the parts of the system we aim to influence. This helps us show how our work has contributed to real change.



Market information & projects

On our mission to promote the transition towards sustainable production and trade, we dedicate most of our daily work at CBI to two areas: market information and projects. Our unique market information services help us to leverage export as a means to addressing specific challenges in a given market system. Our projects provide the framework within which we collaborate with exporters in the Global South, Dutch and European buyers and other system stakeholders.



Market Information

With 55 years of experience in contributing to sustainable economic development through exports, CBI has acquired unique knowledge of European market trends and market access requirements. We have a strong network of European businesses across many sectors. We attend many Dutch and European trade fairs. We continuously conduct in-depth market research.

Actionable input for exporters

We have developed the ability to convert market knowledge into practical, actionable input for SMEs in low and middle-income countries. Our market information services consist of a large body of specialised market studies on particular sectors, products and trends. These studies and reports are continuously updated and expanded. They include everything from market analysis to fact sheets on specific products and countries, as well as tips for exporters. The market information is freely accessible on the CBI website.

Exporting SMEs from different sectors in the Global South, or those aspiring to export, can use CBI market information studies to explore key questions for their business development, such as:

- Which European markets have the best opportunities for their product;
- Trends that open up new possibilities;
- Requirements their product must meet to enter the market;
- How to find Dutch/European buyers and how to build successful relationships with them;
- How to build a business in an ecologically and socially responsible way;
- How to organise the export of their product (or service) to the Dutch/ European market.

■ *To find out more, please visit the market information pages on the [CBI website](#).*

Projects

In order to channel our knowledge and efforts toward systemic change, we work on a project basis. When we have identified an opportunity for contributing to sustainable production and trade through a particular market system, we design a project. This is an ongoing part of our work. Projects usually last for around four years. They involve the identification of root causes of underlying sustainability and inclusiveness gaps, the selection of challenges and goals, collaboration with a broad and varying range of partners and stakeholders, and the rollout of targeted interventions that can be sustained and scaled after the project ends.

The majority of CBI projects revolve around contributing to making existing market systems more sustainable and inclusive. Most projects focus on a specific sector in a specific country and address a specific sustainability challenge and focus on multiple root causes. While project interventions are implemented locally, they are closely connected to European – and in particular Dutch – market demand. By actively involving our network of Dutch and European buyers and other system stakeholders, projects contribute to building reliable, sustainable trade relationships that support Dutch and European businesses, while creating lasting impact in partner countries.

Within the CBI project portfolio, we seek a balance between longer-term and ‘fully-fledged’ CBI projects, and flexible alignment complementing other Dutch initiatives such as the Combi-Tracks with shorter-term, smaller-scale CBI interventions.

CBI concentrates its work in countries within the trade interest priority of the Dutch policy.

■ *For an overview of active and past projects, please visit the projects page on the [CBI website](#).*



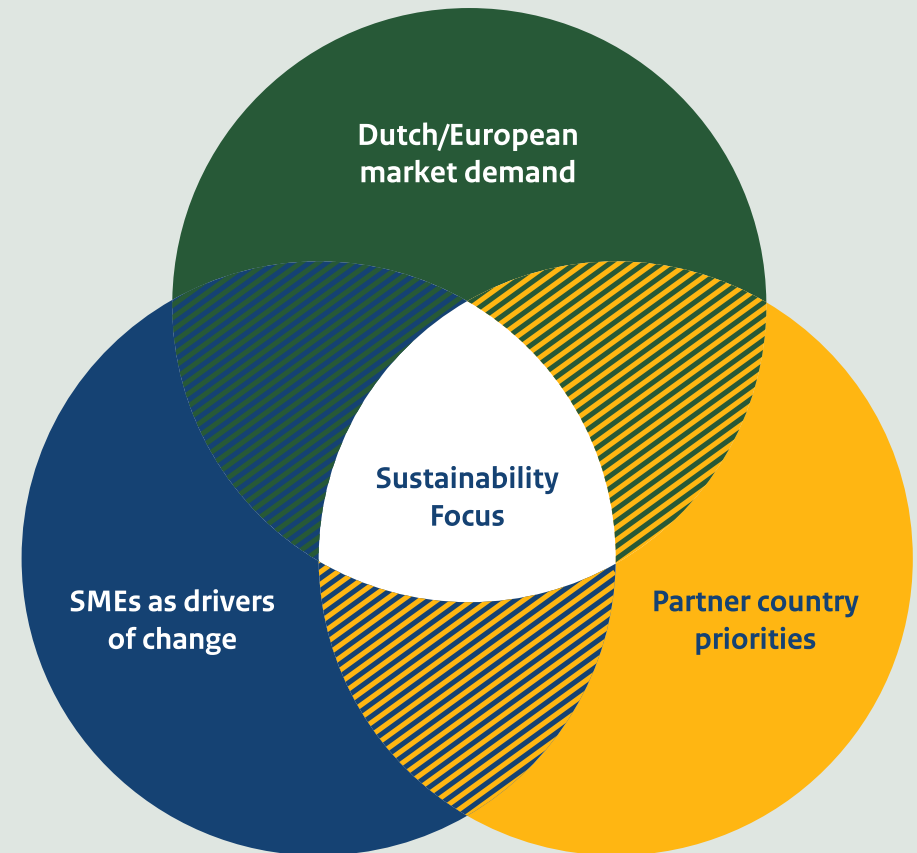


The CBI niche: ‘win-win’ in international value chains

CBI projects promote the transition to sustainable production and trade in selected international value chains of importance to the Netherlands and Europe. We engage in projects where there is a win-win for SMEs, their employees and communities in our partner countries, as well as for market actors in the Netherlands and Europe. We contribute to transforming sectors into becoming more socially and/or environmentally sustainable with a focus on those issues that are supported by market demand in the Netherlands and Europe and that are prioritised in our partner countries.

More specifically, there should be:

- A clear **European/Dutch market demand** for the sector’s products or services. Increasing market requirements for sustainable products and services can accelerate demand. Through our network of importers, we have an in-depth understanding of trade opportunities and sustainability standards;
- A match with **partner country priorities** to ensure local ownership and collaborative efforts;
- **SMEs with the potential to drive the change** in the partner country. We consider SMEs as our key partner since they are the drivers of innovation and competition and provide a main source of employment. They can play a frontrunner role in the transition to sustainable and inclusive production and trade.



Strategic priorities

CBI contributes to the Dutch sub-strategy on aid, trade and economic development. The following strategic priorities are designed to enable an effective contribution to this agenda. Country/sector choices, project focus and scope are guided by Dutch priorities and the Multi-Annual Country Strategies of Dutch embassies.

- Dutch/European market demand as a precondition
- Environmental and social sustainability focus
- Local engagement
- CBI Knowledge Hub
- Collaboration



Dutch/European market demand as a precondition

Considerations influencing our prioritisation of Dutch/European demand

Trade between the European Union and partner countries is in the interest of economies in the Global South as well as in the Netherlands and Europe. It can serve as a means of leveraging the transition towards sustainable production and trade in partner countries.

From voluntary to mandatory sustainability due diligence systems

The European market is experiencing a shift from voluntary to mandatory sustainability due diligence requirements. This can lead to the exclusion from European supply chains of SMEs in our partner countries, and to a decrease in their sustainability and inclusivity performance and in the availability of high-quality products in Europe. Attracting SMEs can strengthen Europe's global trade position, while also enabling sustainable and inclusive economic development in partner countries.

Supporting SMEs with compliance

The Africa Strategy of the Netherlands 2023-2032 underscores CBI's important role in making the EU market accessible for SMEs in Africa. By working on a supportive ecosystem for SMEs, addressing systemic root causes of unsustainable and non-inclusive practices, testing solutions and scaling best practices, we work towards sustainable production and trade.

The Netherlands as a trade hub towards Europe

Because the Netherlands is the second-largest exporter and importer of goods in Europe, and profits from global trade with the EU as a trade hub, it is in the interest of Dutch importers that they can rely on suppliers that comply with their sustainability requirements.



Engaging with Dutch and European importers

Importers play a key role in our pursuit of sustainable production and trade, and we work more closely with Dutch and other European importers with a vision for sustainability and inclusiveness from the development stages of our projects. To this end, we continue to invest in our network of Dutch importers in sectors that are key to the Dutch economy.

In our view, importers can play any of these three roles:

- 1. Informant:** sharing information on their market and market requirements;
- 2. Buyer:** buying products from CBI project partners when they are market-ready;
- 3. Partner:** engaging in all aspects of a project, for example by advising on sustainability risks and opportunities during the development phase, or advising CBI participants on sustainable production during the implementation phase.

Engaging with Dutch and European partners

Alongside importers, Dutch and European partners such as trade associations, knowledge institutions and other stakeholders play a crucial role in trade promotion and collaboration. We work with these partners to strengthen long-term trade relationships and connect Dutch and European markets with reliable and sustainable suppliers.

Environmental and social sustainability focus

Increasingly, access to the Dutch and EU market depends on compliance with sustainability requirements, which help to eradicate unsustainable practices in value chains and may have a positive effect on entrepreneurs, employees and their communities in low- and middle income countries. We focus on sustainability challenges that are both relevant to international trade and actionable within the sector context.

Because we see SMEs as key drivers in shaping more sustainable and inclusive sectors, we focus on two key areas of sustainability: decent work and greening. These domains reflect where SMEs can have the most direct and meaningful impact. Each project focuses on one specific challenge within one of these two areas. This focal point can be shaped by Dutch, EU or local legislation, market access requirements, or pressing sectoral or company challenges, such as water scarcity affecting production, or labour-related issues like staff retention and low productivity.

A closer look at ‘decent work’

Within this category, projects focus on one of the following aspects:

1. Labour rights and compliance with international standards

Focus on compliance with international standards, due diligence and addressing abuses in supply chains. Examples include child and forced labour, discrimination, decent (contractual) working conditions.

2. Safe, healthy and inclusive working conditions

Focus on working conditions at SME level, with particular attention to women and youth.

3. Working towards living wages and fair payment

Focus on fair payment of employees. We see fair wages as vital not only to social sustainability, but also increasingly to EU market access, business continuity and therefore economic sustainability.

4. Employment and a future-proof workforce

Focus on securing a stable workforce for the future to secure supply and maintain stability in the supply chain. This also includes to utilizes the potential of female employees.

A closer look at ‘greening’

Within this category, projects focus on one of the following aspects:

1. Sustainable and climate-smart land use

Focus on EUDR compliance, sustainable water use and climate smart agriculture, as means of developing regenerative agriculture and more stable supply chains.

2. Circular and clean production

Focus on circular use of materials, waste reduction and management, preventing pollution (water, air, soil) and reducing the environmental impact of production on communities.

3. Low-emission value chains

Focus on limiting and reduce greenhouse gas emissions and more energy efficiency within the production processes and logistics.

The role of women and youth in sustainability transitions

Women and youth are often critical actors in achieving systems change. In many sectors, they represent a large and growing share of the workforce. Their inclusion is therefore not only a matter of equity, but of effectiveness. This means that we systematically apply a gender and youth lens in our analysis to identify barriers and opportunities. Where relevant, we integrate targeted interventions to improve their position. Thus we support their access to decent work and opportunities for growth, and strengthen the impact and sustainability of our work overall.





Local engagement

An increased level of localisation in partner countries is a prerequisite for more effective and locally relevant projects with a larger – and lasting – systemic impact. Localisation improves the effectiveness, accountability, sustainability, contextual relevance and local ownership of development programmes. It ensures a better connection of project interventions with challenges in the sector and responsiveness to local needs and demands.

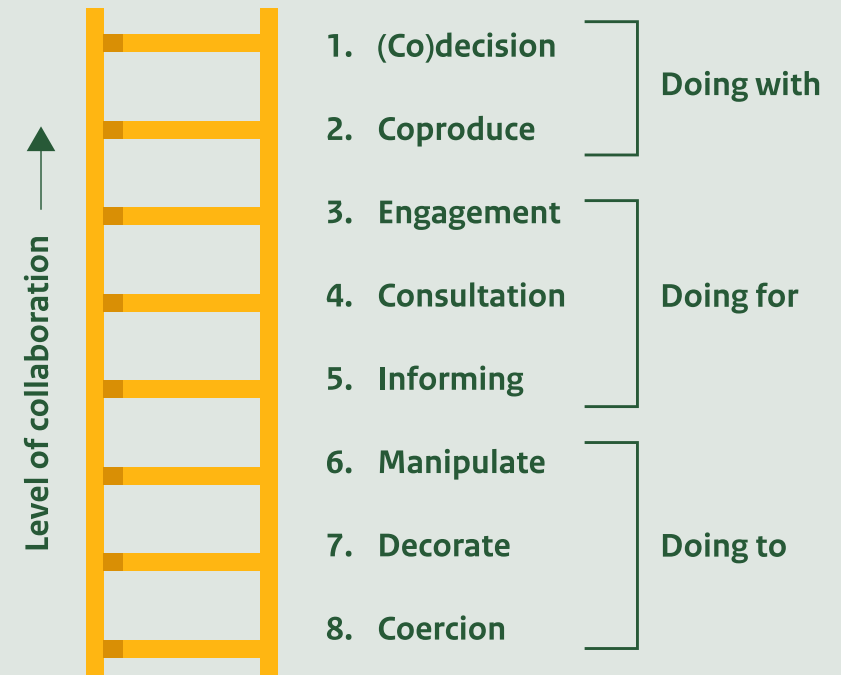
In line with the ambition to increase locally-led development as formulated in the NL Africa Strategy 2023-2032, CBI will build on current practice and take additional steps to climb the ‘ladder of participation’ towards ‘engagement’ and ‘coproduction’. CBI strives for the ‘engagement’ level during project development. Engagement entails explicitly asking for the priorities of the local community, seriously considering and documenting this input and including it into the decision-making process.

Coproduction during project implementation

During project implementation, CBI strives for ‘coproduction’, in which the design and implementation of project interventions is carried out in full cooperation and transparency. In decision-making, we wish to demonstrate how local knowledge, resources and priorities have been valued and integrated for strategic and intervention approaches.

Investing in our pool of experts from partner countries

We will continue to increase our effectiveness and impact through intensified collaboration with national experts from partner countries. We encourage a diverse and inclusive pool of experts in terms of knowledge and skills, gender and age, increasing the involvement of female and young national experts by offering mentorships, training and development opportunities.





CBI Knowledge Hub

CBI is widely recognised as a centre of knowledge and expertise and we aim to build on this position by sharing more practical knowledge, insights and results, creating a Knowledge Hub that will contribute to systemic change.

Specifically, the CBI Knowledge Hub will gather and share knowledge on:

- Dutch/European market access requirements;
- Working with SMEs;
- Methodology/approach.

To increase our impact, we will invest in visibility among existing and potential partners. We aim to demonstrate how we work and how our methods help us achieve our goals, actively sharing experiences, results and innovative approaches to systemic change, for instance, among TRIC partners, at the WTO in Geneva, or with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. This will also enable us to continue learning from others.

Collaboration

Collaboration is at the heart of everything we do: transforming trade together. Our guiding principle in choosing the ‘right’ Strategic Project Partners is their ability and willingness to contribute to solutions for the sustainability focus that projects address. We seek collaboration with partners based on the following sub-goals:

- Joining forces to address root causes beyond our scope, for instance in access to finance, infrastructure or production;
- Scaling beyond our scope;
- Avoiding overlap or competition;
- Learning about PSD best practices;
- Deepening knowledge of Dutch and EU markets and legislation;
- Sharing Dutch knowledge in political/international debates;
- Improving our visibility;
- Enlarging our impact through EU Delegated Cooperation.

CBI



Transforming Trade Together

Interested in learning more?
Visit the [CBI website](#).