

STRENGTHENING FARMER TRAINING FOR CACAO SYSTEMS

LESSONS ON BUILDING ADOPTION, PRODUCTIVITY AND MARKET READINESS IN LATIN AMERICA

Across Latin America, improving cacao productivity and farmer incomes requires more than access to information. Farmers often need ongoing technical support, practical training and strong connections to market systems in order to adopt improved practices and sustain long-term productivity gains.

Over the past several years, Lutheran World Relief, part of Corus International, has worked with partners across **Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru** to strengthen farmer training systems that improve knowledge, adoption of practices and long-term productivity.

This work demonstrates that effective farmer training requires more than delivering information. Sustainable results depend on **continuous learning, locally adapted approaches and strong linkages to market systems and services.**



Gerardo Sotz Asig from Tzalamtun, Guatemala

KEY FINDINGS



Continuous learning drives behavior change.

Farmers were more likely to adopt improved practices when training was delivered through **continuous learning models** that combined refresher sessions, field visits, peer support and practical demonstrations. Repeated exposure reinforced learning, supported long-term behavior change and contributed to productivity improvements at the farm level.



Training reached significant scale and drove adoption of improved practices.

Across six countries, more than **24,800 cacao farmers** participated in structured training programs, with **over 60 percent adopting improved agronomic practices** including pruning, grafting, shade management and soil conservation.



Practical, hands-on training drove stronger results.

On-farm demonstrations and **experiential learning** approaches were more effective than classroom-based training, helping farmers internalize and replicate improved practices.



Farmer-to-farmer extension strengthened trust and scale.

Peer-led training models using **local promoters** increased trust, expanded reach and supported faster adoption of practices, particularly in remote and Indigenous communities.



KEY FINDINGS CONT.



Digital tools expanded access to knowledge and reinforced learning.

Platforms such as Lutheran World Relief's Cacao Móvil complemented in-person training by providing farmers with ongoing access to technical guidance, research findings and best practices. By project end, 35 percent of farmers accessed cacao research and **92 percent applied that information to farm management decisions.**



Training design influenced who could participate and benefit.

Adjusting training formats to reflect **household responsibilities, local languages and literacy levels** increased participation and helped ensure that knowledge was applied across the farm and household.



Strong local extension systems are critical for sustainability.

Investments in **community-based promoters and local service providers** helped ensure continued access to technical assistance beyond project implementation.



Training is most effective when linked to markets and services.

Training delivered the strongest results when paired with **inputs, finance, technical assistance and market opportunities.** Connecting learning to broader support systems helped farmers adopt improved practices and sustain changes over time.

Training driving transformation: Teofilo Perez, Honduras



"I have improved my farm production, involved my family, and shared what I have learned with other producers."

For **Teofilo Perez**, a cacao farmer in Atlántida, Honduras, training changed how he managed his farm and how his family planned for the future. Before receiving technical support, limited knowledge and low productivity made it difficult to generate reliable income, and his family considered leaving in search of better opportunities.

Through training and technical assistance provided by **Lutheran World Relief and local partners**, Teofilo learned improved practices including grafting, nursery management, organic fertilization and agroforestry systems. With ongoing, hands-on support, he was able to apply these techniques directly on his farm and improve how he managed production.

As a result, his production increased from **250 kilograms to more than 1,500 kilograms of cacao**, generating annual income of approximately **\$6,000 to \$8,000**. His farm is now a more productive and stable source of income, demonstrating how continuous, practical training can support long-term productivity and stronger livelihoods.



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Results of Lutheran World Relief's farmer training approach



24,800+ cacao farmers trained

Across Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru.



60%+ adopted improved practices

Including pruning, grafting, shade management and soil conservation.

Continuous learning, practical demonstrations and farmer-to-farmer extension helped translate knowledge into action.

FROM TRAINING DELIVERY TO BEHAVIOR CHANGE

Improving farmer knowledge alone is not enough to change farm management practices. Experience across multiple countries showed that adoption increased when training was delivered through **structured learning systems** that reinforced knowledge over time and connected learning to practical application.

Lutheran World Relief therefore emphasized training approaches that combined technical content, **repeated engagement and hands-on learning**. Farmers participated in an average of 13 training modules covering topics such as pruning, grafting, integrated pest management, soil health and post-harvest handling.

Key shifts included:

- From isolated training events to continuous learning and follow-up
- From generic agronomy to cocoa-specific technical content
- From external trainers to community-based promoters
- From classroom instruction to practical, on-farm demonstrations

These approaches helped farmers move from awareness to adoption, demonstrating that sustained engagement is a critical driver of behavior change, productivity and long-term farm performance. Farmers who consistently participated in training were better positioned to apply improved practices, increase production and **strengthen farm income over time**, reinforcing the value of investing in continuous learning rather than one-time knowledge transfer.



Victor Manuel Tiul Caal in Cobán, Guatemala



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DESIGNING TRAINING FOR ADOPTION

Effective training approaches focused on **relevance, accessibility and repetition**.

Lutheran World Relief adapted training content and delivery methods to reflect local realities, including:

- Tailoring training to **agroecological conditions and farm size**
- Using visual aids and oral instruction to address **literacy barriers**
- Translating materials into **local languages**
- Scheduling sessions to accommodate **household responsibilities** and center women
- Incorporating **youth and community promoters**

These adaptations improved both participation and comprehension, particularly among farmers who previously had limited access to technical support.



Sebastián Tiul Yaxcal from Tzalamtun, Guatemala



Sebastián Tiul Yaxcal from Tzalamtun, Guatemala

STRENGTHENING LOCAL EXTENSION SYSTEMS

A critical component of success was strengthening local capacity for ongoing technical assistance.

Lutheran World Relief invested in local extension systems by strengthening the individuals and organizations responsible for delivering technical assistance, including:

- Strengthening local technical service providers
- Developing farmer promoter networks
- Expanding youth-led service provider models
- Strengthening cooperatives as last-mile service providers

These efforts helped create sustainable knowledge systems that continue beyond project implementation.

Digital tools also played an important role. Lutheran World Relief's **Cacao Móvil**, a mobile-based learning platform developed for cacao farmers, served as a virtual extension of in-person training. The platform provides users with access to technical manuals, step-by-step guidance and practical tools on topics such as pruning, grafting, pest management and post-harvest handling. It also allows farmers and local promoters to access information on demand, reinforcing training between field visits and helping address gaps in access to technical assistance.

More than **30,000 producers** have engaged with Cacao Móvil, and over **700 local facilitators** have been trained, strengthening community-level capacity to deliver and sustain technical assistance over time.



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LINKING TRAINING TO MARKET OUTCOMES

Training alone does not guarantee improved livelihoods. The greatest impact occurs when training is **connected to broader value chain opportunities**.

Lutheran World Relief linked farmer training with complementary services, including:

- Access to improved inputs and planting material
- Strengthened producer organizations
- Market linkages and buyer relationships
- Financial services and credit

This integration helped farmers see the economic value of adopting improved practices, increasing motivation and sustaining behavior change.

Evaluation findings show that adoption of improved practices increased significantly, contributing to improved farm management and laying the foundation for long-term productivity gains, even where external factors such as climate variability limited short-term yield increases.

KEY LESSONS

Experience across Latin America highlights several lessons for strengthening farmer training systems:

- Training interventions must focus on **behavior change, not just knowledge transfer**
- Continuous learning and follow-up are critical for **reinforcing adoption and improving economic outcomes over time**
- **Practical, hands-on approaches** are more effective than classroom-based instruction
- Local extension systems are essential for sustaining **access to technical support**
- Training design should **reflect real-world constraints faced by farming households**
- Linking training to inputs, finance and markets helps translate knowledge into **economic outcomes**



Maria Luisa Tiul Ico from Tzalamtun, Guatemala



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