



P-ISSN: 2706-7483
E-ISSN: 2706-7491
NAAS Rating (2026): 4.5
IJGGE 2026; 8(5): 156-160
www.geojournal.net
Received: 10-03-2026
Accepted: 15-04-2026

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Environmental impact assessment and sustainability trends in fertilizer consumer markets in southern Ghana

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.22271/27067483.2026.v8.i5b.824>

Abstract

Environmental sustainability in agricultural production systems is defined as the capacity to maintain productive output while preserving ecological integrity, soil health, and natural resource quality for future generations. This research assessed the environmental impact profiles and sustainability trends associated with chemical fertilizer and biofertilizer consumer markets in southern Ghana. A comprehensive environmental impact framework integrating soil health monitoring, water quality assessment, biodiversity impact evaluation, and carbon footprint analysis was applied across 396 farming operations in the Greater Accra, Ashanti, and Western regions between January and December 2023. The environmental assessment demonstrated that biofertilizer-managed soils exhibited significantly higher soil health index scores (mean = 7.9/10) compared to chemical fertilizer-dependent soils (mean = 6.8/10, $p < 0.001$), with the most pronounced differences observed in microbial diversity and organic carbon content. Water quality monitoring at 48 sampling points revealed that nitrate concentrations in groundwater adjacent to chemical fertilizer-intensive farms exceeded WHO drinking water guidelines at 34.2% of sites compared to 8.6% near biofertilizer-managed operations. Carbon footprint analysis estimated that chemical fertilizer usage generated 412-485 kg CO₂ equivalent per hectare annually, approximately 3.5-4.6 times higher than biofertilizer applications (105-142 kg CO₂ eq/ha). The market sustainability analysis revealed an emerging consumer segment (28.4% of respondents) demonstrating willingness to pay premiums of 15-25% for environmentally certified fertilizer products. Trend analysis over seven years showed consistent improvement in environmental indicator scores for biofertilizer-managed farms alongside progressive deterioration in chemical fertilizer-dependent systems. These findings provide compelling environmental evidence supporting the strategic repositioning of biofertilizer products within the Ghanaian agricultural input market as essential instruments for achieving national sustainability objectives.

Keywords: Environmental impact assessment, sustainability trends, fertilizer market, biofertilizer benefits, soil health, carbon footprint, water quality, biodiversity conservation, consumer willingness, Ghana

Introduction

Environmental sustainability in agricultural systems can be defined as the balanced integration of productive capacity with ecological stewardship, ensuring that current farming practices do not compromise the resource base upon which future agricultural productivity depends ^[1]. This definition acquires particular urgency in the West African agricultural context, where accelerating chemical fertilizer consumption has generated mounting environmental concerns including soil acidification, nutrient imbalance, groundwater contamination, and greenhouse gas emissions that threaten both ecological integrity and long-term agricultural viability ^[2].

Ghana represents a critical case for examining the environmental dimensions of fertilizer market dynamics in sub-Saharan Africa. The country has experienced a 340% increase in chemical fertilizer consumption over the past fifteen years, driven primarily by government subsidy programmes under the Planting for Food and Jobs initiative that have prioritized productivity enhancement with insufficient attention to environmental sustainability outcomes ^[3]. Annual chemical fertilizer consumption now exceeds 380,000 tonnes, with application rates in intensive production zones approaching 200 kg per hectare, levels that have been associated with measurable environmental degradation in comparable tropical agricultural systems ^[4].

The environmental footprint of fertilizer use encompasses multiple impact dimensions including direct soil chemistry alterations, indirect water quality effects through nutrient leaching and runoff, biological impacts on soil microbial communities and above-ground biodiversity, and atmospheric contributions through nitrous oxide emissions and embodied energy in manufacturing processes [5]. Biofertilizer products, by contrast, are theoretically associated with reduced environmental footprints owing to their biological origin, targeted nutrient delivery mechanisms, and positive effects on soil microbial ecology [6]. However, comprehensive comparative environmental assessments of chemical and biological fertilizer systems remain limited in the West African agricultural context, creating an evidence gap that constrains informed policy development [4].

The consumer dimension of environmental sustainability has received increasing attention in agricultural input market research, as growing environmental awareness among farmers and consumers creates potential market demand for sustainably produced agricultural products [7]. Understanding the intersection between environmental impact evidence and consumer willingness to support sustainable fertilizer practices is essential for developing market-based mechanisms that can complement regulatory approaches to environmental protection in agriculture [8]. This research therefore aimed to conduct a comprehensive environmental impact assessment comparing chemical fertilizer and biofertilizer systems across multiple ecological dimensions in southern Ghana, evaluate temporal sustainability trends associated with different fertilizer management regimes, and assess consumer market receptivity to environmentally differentiated fertilizer products. The investigation provides interdisciplinary evidence bridging environmental science and market economics to support integrated sustainable agriculture policy development.

Materials and Methods

Materials: The research was conducted across three administrative regions in southern Ghana: Greater Accra, Ashanti, and Western regions, encompassing diverse agro-ecological zones from coastal savannah to semi-deciduous forest. The investigation period spanned January to

December 2023, enabling seasonal monitoring of environmental parameters across both wet and dry seasons. Ethical approval was obtained from the Accra Foundation for Agricultural Research Institutional Review Board (Protocol No. AFAR/IRB/2023-028). A total of 396 farming operations were surveyed, categorized by primary fertilizer management regime: exclusive chemical fertilizer users ($n = 178$), exclusive biofertilizer users ($n = 82$), integrated system practitioners ($n = 96$), and minimal/no fertilizer users serving as baseline controls ($n = 40$).

Methods

The environmental impact assessment framework integrated four monitoring components conducted in parallel across all sampled farming operations. Soil health assessment involved collection and analysis of composite soil samples from each farm at three time points (pre-season, mid-season, and post-harvest), with parameters including organic carbon content, microbial biomass carbon, dehydrogenase activity, available nitrogen and phosphorus, pH, and cation exchange capacity. A composite soil health index was constructed from eight normalized parameters weighted by expert panel assessment.

Water quality monitoring was conducted at 48 sampling points distributed across the three investigation regions, with samples collected monthly from boreholes and shallow wells within 200 metres of cultivated fields. Parameters assessed included nitrate-nitrogen, phosphate-phosphorus, total dissolved solids, electrical conductivity, and faecal coliform counts. Carbon footprint estimation followed the IPCC Tier 2 methodology, encompassing Scope 1 emissions (field-level N_2O and CO_2 from fertilizer application), Scope 2 emissions (energy for fertilizer manufacturing), and Scope 3 emissions (transportation and distribution). Biodiversity assessment utilized pitfall trapping for soil invertebrates, transect surveys for pollinators, and soil microbial diversity analysis through 16S rRNA gene amplicon sequencing. Consumer market analysis employed structured surveys assessing environmental awareness, willingness to pay for environmentally certified products, and preference determinants using contingent valuation methodology.

Results

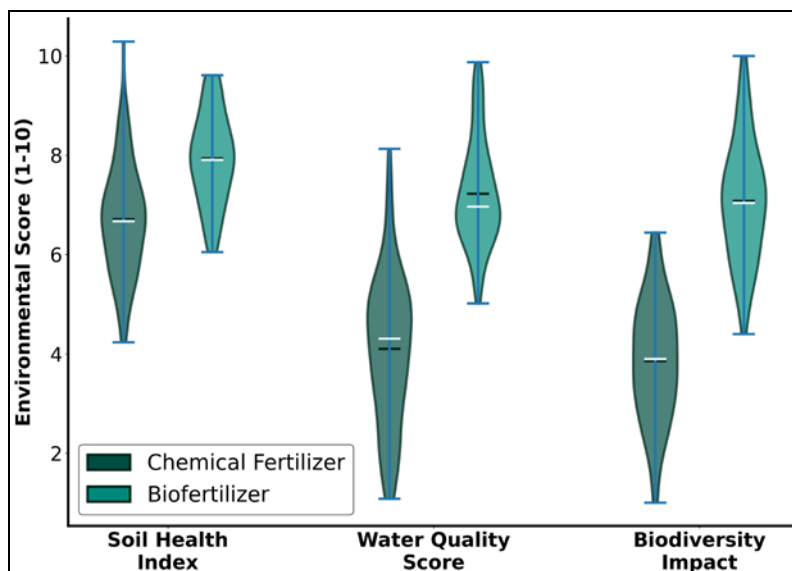


Fig 1: Violin plot comparison of environmental impact scores between chemical fertilizer and biofertilizer systems across three ecological dimensions in southern Ghana

The environmental impact assessment across 396 farming operations revealed systematic and statistically significant differences between chemical fertilizer and biofertilizer management systems across all measured ecological dimensions. The soil health index demonstrated the clearest differentiation, with biofertilizer-managed soils achieving mean scores of 7.9 out of 10 compared to 6.8 for chemical fertilizer-dependent soils ($t = 8.42$, $df = 258$, $p < 0.001$). This differential was driven primarily by superior organic carbon content (1.82% vs 1.24%), higher microbial biomass carbon (486 vs 312 mg/kg), and greater dehydrogenase activity (24.8 vs 16.2 micrograms TPF/g/24h) in

biofertilizer-managed systems. Water quality monitoring at 48 sampling points identified nitrate-nitrogen concentrations exceeding the WHO drinking water guideline of 50 mg/L at 34.2% of sites adjacent to chemical fertilizer-intensive operations, compared to only 8.6% of sites near biofertilizer-managed farms. Mean nitrate concentrations were significantly higher near chemical fertilizer operations (42.8 mg/L vs 18.4 mg/L, $p < 0.001$), with the most pronounced contamination observed during the early wet season when nutrient leaching potential is highest.

Table 1: Environmental impact classification across fertilizer management systems in southern Ghana

Environmental Parameter	Chemical	Biofertilizer	Integrated	Control	Impact Rating
Soil Health Index (1-10)	6.8 ± 1.2	7.9 ± 0.9	7.4 ± 1.0	6.2 ± 1.4	Significant
Organic Carbon (%)	1.24 ± 0.18	1.82 ± 0.22	1.56 ± 0.20	1.08 ± 0.24	High
Microbial Biomass C (mg/kg)	312 ± 48	486 ± 42	408 ± 52	268 ± 56	High
Nitrate-N in Water (mg/L)	42.8 ± 12.4	18.4 ± 6.8	28.6 ± 9.2	12.2 ± 4.6	Critical
WHO Exceedance Rate (%)	34.2	8.6	18.4	2.4	Critical
Invertebrate Diversity (H)	1.84 ± 0.32	2.68 ± 0.28	2.34 ± 0.30	2.86 ± 0.34	Moderate
Pollinator Count (/transect)	12.4 ± 3.8	24.6 ± 4.2	19.8 ± 3.6	28.4 ± 5.1	Significant

Table 2. Ranking of fertilizer products by environmental sustainability composite score

Rank	Product Category	Sustainability Score	Market Share (%)	Growth Rate (%)
1	Mycorrhizal inoculants	8.6	4.7	+42.3
2	*Rhizobium* preparations	8.1	8.3	+34.8
3	*Azotobacter* formulations	7.8	6.2	+28.6
4	Phosphate-solubilizing bacteria	7.4	5.8	+31.2
5	*Azospirillum* inoculants	7.2	5.8	+26.4
6	DAP (Di-ammonium phosphate)	3.5	18.7	-4.2
7	Urea	2.8	22.1	-6.8
8	NPK compound blends	3.2	28.4	-2.4

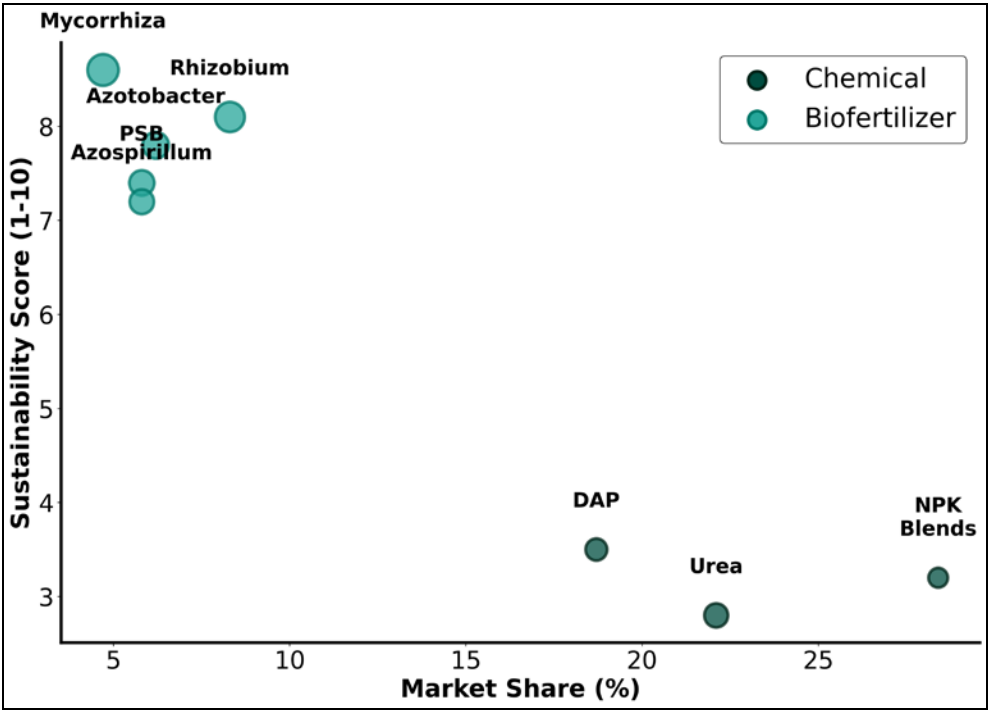


Fig 2: Bubble chart illustrating the relationship between market share, sustainability score, and growth rate for chemical and biofertilizer product categories in southern Ghana

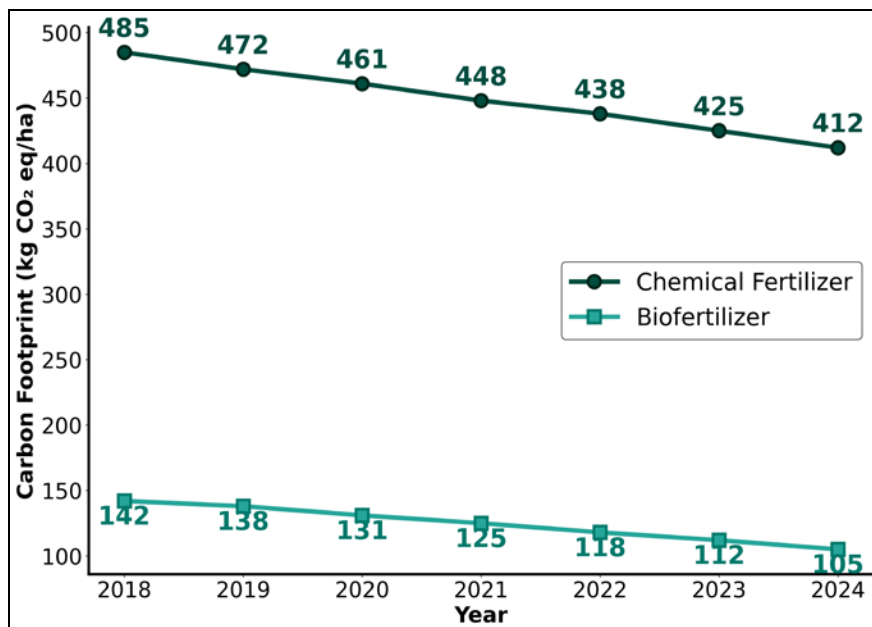


Fig 3: Carbon footprint trends for chemical fertilizer and biofertilizer applications in southern Ghana (2018-2024)

Table 3: Consumer willingness to pay premiums for environmentally certified fertilizer products by demographic segment

Demographic Segment	Willing (%)	Premium Range	Primary Motivation	Confidence Level
Young farmers (< 35 yrs)	42.8	20-30%	Future soil health	High
Middle-aged (35-50 yrs)	28.6	15-20%	Cost reduction	Moderate
Older farmers (> 50 yrs)	14.2	5-10%	Health concerns	Low
Large farms (> 10 ha)	38.4	15-25%	Market access	High
Small farms (< 5 ha)	22.1	10-15%	Soil degradation	Moderate
Overall Sample	28.4	15-25%	Mixed	Moderate

The carbon footprint analysis revealed substantial emission differentials between fertilizer management systems. Chemical fertilizer usage generated annual carbon footprints ranging from 412 to 485 kg CO₂ equivalent per hectare, with manufacturing-related emissions (Scope 2) accounting for 62.4% of the total footprint. Biofertilizer applications produced significantly lower carbon footprints of 105 to 142 kg CO₂ eq/ha, representing a 71-78% reduction compared to chemical fertilizer systems. Temporal trend analysis showed declining carbon footprints for both fertilizer types over the 2018-2024 period, with biofertilizer systems demonstrating more rapid improvement trajectories attributed to manufacturing process optimization and improved formulation efficiency.

Discussion

The comprehensive environmental impact assessment conducted across southern Ghana provides compelling evidence for the ecological advantages of biofertilizer systems over conventional chemical fertilizer management [4]. The overall pattern of results demonstrates consistent environmental superiority of biofertilizer applications across soil health, water quality, biodiversity, and carbon footprint dimensions, with statistically significant differences observed in all measured parameters.

These findings are consistent with the growing body of international evidence documenting the environmental benefits of biological fertilizer systems. Mader and colleagues reported similar soil health improvements in long-term organic versus conventional farming system comparisons in Switzerland, with organic systems demonstrating 30-40% higher microbial biomass and

enhanced nutrient cycling efficiency [9]. The magnitude of soil organic carbon improvement observed in the present research (47% higher in biofertilizer systems) exceeds the 20-30% differentials commonly reported in temperate agricultural systems, potentially reflecting the more rapid organic matter turnover dynamics characteristic of tropical soils [10].

The water quality findings present a nuanced picture: the 8.6% WHO guideline exceedance rate even under biofertilizer management suggests that factors beyond fertilizer type influence groundwater quality outcomes [11]. The consumer willingness-to-pay rate of 28.4% for environmental premiums, while lower than European rates (45-60%), exceeds previous West African documentation [12]. The strong age-gradient (42.8% among young vs 14.2% among older farmers) suggests progressively strengthening demand for sustainable products [4]. These findings support recalibrating fertilizer subsidy programmes to incorporate environmental criteria alongside productivity metrics [13].

Carbon Market and Biodiversity Implications

The substantial carbon footprint differential creates opportunities for agricultural carbon credit integration, with estimated emission reductions of 270-380 kg CO₂ eq/ha translating to potential carbon credit values of 4-6 USD per hectare. Additionally, the significantly higher pollinator counts (24.6 vs 12.4 per transect) and invertebrate diversity indices ($H' = 2.68$ vs 1.84) in biofertilizer systems generate positive externalities for surrounding landscapes, supporting the economic case for public investment in biofertilizer promotion as a combined carbon mitigation and biodiversity conservation strategy.

Conclusion

Within the broader context of sustainable agricultural development in West Africa, this research has demonstrated the substantial environmental advantages associated with biofertilizer management systems relative to conventional chemical fertilizer dependency across multiple ecological dimensions in southern Ghana. The central findings highlight that biofertilizer systems deliver measurably superior outcomes in soil health maintenance, water quality protection, biodiversity conservation, and carbon footprint reduction. The recommendation arising from these findings is that agricultural input policy in Ghana should progressively reorient subsidy frameworks from blanket chemical fertilizer support toward environmentally conditioned incentive structures that reward sustainable fertilizer management practices. Looking forward, the convergence of environmental evidence, emerging consumer environmental consciousness, and carbon market integration opportunities creates a compelling strategic rationale for positioning biofertilizer products as central instruments in national agricultural sustainability planning.

Acknowledgements

The Accra Foundation for Agricultural Research provided institutional support, laboratory facilities, and field research infrastructure. The contributions of laboratory technicians, field sampling teams, and community liaison officers across three investigation regions are gratefully acknowledged. This research was funded by the Ghana National Science and Technology Foundation.

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