AFSA
ALLIANCE FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN AFRICA

Sweden
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Strengthening Cross-Border Trade in Agroecological Products

A Policy Brief for EALA and EAC Partner States

Introduction

The East African Community (EAC) has set an ambitious target to increase intra-regional trade from 15% to 40% by 2030, positioning regional trade as a key driver of integration and development. Agriculture remains central to this vision, contributing between 25% and 40% of Partner States' GDP, employing over 80% of the population, and accounting for 65% of intra-regional trade.

Agroecology offers a strategic pathway to advance this trade agenda while building resilient, inclusive, and sustainable food systems. By drawing on traditional knowledge, ecological principles, and territorial markets, agroecological enterprises can reduce the region's heavy food import bill, support smallholder farmers, and increase the availability of healthy, climate-resilient food. However, the potential of agroecological trade within the EAC remains under-recognised and under-supported.

This policy brief presents key insights from a regional study on cross-border agroecological trade in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), highlighting policy frameworks, trade barriers, key findings, and strategic recommendations for EALA and EAC Partner States.

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Regional, Continental, and Global Frameworks

Agroecological trade is shaped by a web of continental, regional, and national policy frameworks that both enable and constrain its growth.

At the continental level, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aims to boost intra-African trade by 53%, including a 41% rise in agrifood trade. However, gaps in the Rules of Origin may disadvantage local smallholder producers by favouring imports over regionally grown products. The Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) 2026–2035 reinforces agroecology as a nature-based solution for building resilient, farmer-led agrifood systems.

At the regional level, the EAC Treaty and Protocols commit to promoting unrestricted trade in goods and services. Policies such as the EAC Regional Payment System Masterplan, the Common External Tariff (CET), the Simplified Trade Regime (STR), and the EAC NTB Act (2017) create a foundation for cross-border trade, including agroecological products.

However, enabling frameworks coexist with structural gaps. The EAC Customs Management Act (2021) does not formally recognise Trade Information Desk Officers (TIDOs), leaving small traders without structured support. The EAC Industrialisation Policy and Master Plan (2012–2032) prioritises capital-intensive industrial agriculture, sidelining smallholder-driven agroecological value chains.

At the national level, Uganda's National Agroecology Strategy (2023/24–2028/29) and Kenya's National Agroecology Strategy (2024–2033) offer progressive pathways for agroecological development. However, restrictive seed laws, agro-industrial investment incentives, and uneven policy implementation continue to limit the integration of agroecology into formal cross-border trade.

Barriers that Limit Cross-Border Trade of Agroecological Products

Despite emerging opportunities, systemic barriers constrain the growth of agroecological trade within the EAC:

- **High tariffs and multiple fees**: Export inspection fees, import duties, and local levies can reach 10% of consignment value, undermining competitiveness for small traders.
- **Non-tariff barriers and clearance delays**: Inconsistent and lengthy border processes—averaging 1.5–3 hours at some borders—create delays that are especially harmful for perishable agroecological products.
- **Costly SPS certification and lack of harmonised standards**: Daily inspection fees of $250 and lab costs of $140 per sample are unaffordable for smallholders. Lack of harmonised agroecological certification leads to repeated inspections and missed market opportunities.
- **Fragmented institutional mandates**: Overlapping roles of customs, standards bodies, plant health, and port health authorities increase complexity and costs.
- **Limited infrastructure and currency challenges**: Lack of cold storage and aggregation hubs at borders reduces competitiveness, while currency fluctuations disadvantage small-scale traders.

Key Findings from the Study on Cross-Border Agroecological Trade

The study revealed that agroecological products are steadily gaining traction in cross-border trade within the EAC, particularly across Busia, Mpondwe, Namanga–Tarakea, and Rusumo border points. However, alongside this growth are significant structural and operational challenges that limit the sector's full potential.

At Busia (Kenya–Uganda), agroecological trade is dynamic and diverse, dominated by staple cereals and legumes. Maize worth approximately USD 400,913.60, beans valued at USD 227,470.50, and sorghum worth USD 268,128 were traded during the study period. Sorghum alone accounted for 6.9% of Uganda's national sorghum trade, while avocados moving through Namanga represented 7% of Kenya's national avocado trade, demonstrating the commercial relevance of agroecological trade flows. Yet, traders at Busia cited high inspection fees, limited storage, and currency fluctuations as persistent barriers to expanding agroecological commerce.

At Mpondwe (Uganda–DRC), rice dominates agroecological trade, with over 100,000 MT traded annually, followed by beans and horticultural products. While demand for sustainably produced food is growing in the DRC, traders face lengthy clearance times, language barriers, and limited cold storage, which lead to losses and reduced profitability.

At Namanga–Tarakea (Kenya–Tanzania), agroecological trade involves maize, avocados, potatoes, and wheat. Avocado trade alone reached 84.4 MT, with increasing smallholder participation in ecological production systems. However, the lack of harmonised standards, certification challenges, and uneven enforcement of trade protocols create uncertainty and additional costs for producers and traders.

At Rusumo (Rwanda–Tanzania), bean and cassava flows reflect the role of territorial markets in sustaining household incomes and food security. Yet, limited infrastructure, inadequate testing facilities, and inconsistent application of Simplified Trade Regime (STR) procedures hamper smooth trade for small-scale agroecological actors.

Across all sites, data gaps emerged as a major challenge. Agroecological products are not classified separately under Harmonized System (HS) codes, making them invisible in trade statistics. Moreover, the study covered only about 35% of official border points, suggesting actual volumes are significantly higher than reported. This lack of disaggregated data limits targeted policy action and resource allocation.

Overall, these findings confirm that agroecological trade within the EAC is commercially significant, socially impactful, and growing, but constrained by infrastructure deficits, regulatory fragmentation, certification hurdles, and data invisibility. Addressing these challenges through harmonised policies and targeted investment would unlock substantial opportunities for farmers, traders, and consumers across the region.

Policy Recommendations

To unlock the potential of cross-border agroecological trade within the EAC, the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) and Partner States should adopt a coordinated set of policy, regulatory, infrastructural, and institutional measures. These actions will strengthen trade systems, enhance market access for agroecological producers, and position the EAC as a continental leader in sustainable trade.

1. **Harmonise regional standards, certification, and traceability for agroecological products:** EALA and the EAC Secretariat should spearhead the development of a unified EAC Agroecology Policy that harmonises trade standards, HS codes, and certification systems for agroecological products. Scaling up Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) and establishing national directories of producers will improve cross-border traceability, recognition, and market confidence.
2. **Establish a Special Cross-Border Agroecological Trade Corridor**: Designate and operationalise a dedicated trade corridor for agroecological products, linking key territorial markets and border posts such as Busia, Namanga–Tarakea, and Rusumo. This corridor should provide harmonised inspection and certification protocols, prevent contamination with conventional products, and support premium pricing while serving as a regional pilot.
3. **Streamline and align customs and SPS procedures for agroecological products**: Simplify customs processes and STR forms, pilot electronic issuance of Simplified Certificates of Origin (SCO), and implement mutual SPS recognition across Partner States for agroecological goods. Retrain and formally recognise Trade Information Desk Officers (TIDOs) to provide targeted support to smallholders, women, and youth engaged in agroecological trade.
4. **Strengthen border infrastructure to support agroecological trade**: Invest in public cold storage, aggregation hubs, and testing facilities at strategic border points. Equip border posts with appropriate product identification and traceability technology to distinguish agroecological products from conventional goods and reduce post-harvest losses, delays, and informal fees.
5. **Improve documentation and data systems for agroecological trade**: Customs authorities should disaggregate agroecological products in documentation and databases to make the sector visible within official trade statistics. This should be coupled with expanded data collection across all major border points, enabling targeted policy interventions and investment planning.
6. **Create a Regional Technical Working Group (RTWG) on Agroecological Trade**: Establish a multi-stakeholder RTWG to coordinate implementation of cross-border agroecological trade policies, oversee the special trade corridor, harmonise regulations, and monitor flows. The RTWG should include EAC institutions, Partner States, CSOs, producer groups, and traders.
7. **Align trade and agriculture policies with cross-border agroecological trade objectives**: Partner States should

integrate agroecological trade priorities into national trade laws, SPS frameworks, and investment policies. Finalising and operationalising the EAC Agroecology Policy/ Strategy will ensure coherence across sectors and borders, creating an enabling regulatory environment.

8. **Strengthen certification systems and reduce compliance costs for cross-border traders**: Reform certification fees and inspection processes to make cross-border compliance affordable for small-scale agroecological traders. Institutionalise PGS as a regionally recognised certification method, and promote mutual recognition agreements to reduce repeated inspections and delays.
9. **Build cross-border market awareness and consumer demand**: Translate agroecology and trade materials into local languages and conduct targeted public campaigns at border communities and regional markets to distinguish agroecological products from conventional goods. Leverage public procurement to stimulate demand in schools, hospitals, and institutions across borders.

Conclusion

Agroecological trade within the EAC is growing, vibrant, and strategically positioned to advance regional integration, climate resilience, and inclusive development. However, its full potential remains untapped due to fragmented policies, costly procedures, and inadequate infrastructure.

By harmonising standards, reducing structural barriers, investing in infrastructure, and anchoring agroecology in trade policy, EALA and Partner States can position the EAC as a continental leader in sustainable agroecological trade. This requires bold legislative action, coordinated implementation, and deliberate support for smallholder farmers, women, youth, and territorial markets—the true drivers of regional food systems transformation.

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About AFSA

The Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) is a broad alliance of different civil society actors that are part of the struggle for food sovereignty and agroecology in Africa. These include: African farmers' organisations, African NGO networks, specialist African NGOs, consumer movements in Africa, international organisations which support the stance of AFSA, and individuals. Its members represent smallholder farmers, pastoralists, fishers, hunter/gatherers, indigenous peoples, faith-based institutions, and environmentalists from across Africa. It is a network of networks, currently comprising 48 member networks working in 50 African countries