



A trader displays some of the grains he trades to visiting officials during their visit to the Busia, Uganda, cross-border market. PHOTO/MARTHA NIMUSIIMA

How policy failures are strangling East Africa's organic food revolution

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BY MARTHA NIMUSIIMA

As demand for chemical-free produce soars across the region, outdated trade rules and bureaucratic chaos are crushing smallholder farmers and threatening a sustainable food future.

Across bustling markets in Nairobi, Kampala, and Dar es Salaam, a quiet revolution is unfolding. Consumers are reaching past gleaming industrial produce to seek out vegetables, grains, and fruits grown without synthetic chemicals food that honour the soil, protects biodiversity, and sustains local farming traditions. This surging appetite for agroecological products represents more than a lifestyle trend; it signals a fundamental shift in how East Africans think about health, sustainability, and food sovereignty.

Yet this promising movement faces an invisible enemy: the region's own trade policies.

Despite growing from 10 to a staggering 48 between November 2024 and May 2025, non-tariff barriers now form an impenetrable web strangling cross-border commerce. For smallholder farmers operating on razor-thin margins, these obstacles aren't mere inconvenience they're existential threats.

When integration meet reality.

The East African Community was built on a bold promise: seamless movement of goods, predictable rules, and fair markets for all. The EAC Treaty and Customs Union Protocol explicitly require Partner States to harmonize their sanitary, phytosanitary, and technical regulations. On paper, the vision is clear. On the ground, it's chaos.

Phytosanitary thresholds vary wildly from country to country. Laboratory accreditations remain uneven. Border officers apply

contradictory documentation requirements. A shipment of organic tomatoes approved in Uganda may be rejected without explanation at the Kenyan border. Fresh produce wilts in the sun while traders scramble to understand which regulation applies today.

"Most traders lack knowledge about their rights and trade procedures, which exposes them to non-tariff barriers and potential exploitation," explains Zira Babu, youth representative of the Busia Women Cross-Border Cooperative at the Uganda-Kenya border. "Some border agencies themselves struggle to interpret existing trade policies, creating additional obstacles for traders."

The irony is bitter: while regional leaders celebrate tariff elimination under the Customs Union, discriminatory taxes, procedural delays, and inconsistent regulations have multiplied to fill the void.

The invisible farmers.

A recent study by the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa delivers a stark warning: without deliberate efforts to integrate agroecological entrepreneurs into regional markets, East African trade and the broader African Continental Free Trade Area will remain dominated by large industrial operations. This imbalance carries environmental and social costs that directly contradict the region's stated sustainability goals.

The problem runs deeper than bureaucracy. Current EAC policy frameworks don't even acknowledge agroecology exists. Trade instruments remain designed for conventional industrial production, rendering smallholder

agroecological producers invisible within the system.

This invisibility has real consequences. Women and youth traders, who often operate at smaller scales with perishable goods, find themselves systematically denied access to trade finance, market information, training on cross-border regulations, and other essential supports.

Many don't even know that Trade Desk Information Officers exist to help them navigate these complex systems. The knowledge gap becomes a locked door.

A path forward

During a regional conference on advancing agroecological trade in Jinja City last month, Kenya's Assistant Director of Trade Policy and Strategies, Beatrice Pamela Onyango, signalled a shift in thinking. She committed to building trader capacity and promoting agroecological zoning. "We shall support aggregation of market's specific interests in promoting Agro-ecological zoning," she announced.

But promises from podiums must translate into concrete reforms.

Trade experts argue the solution lies not in eliminating competition between similar products, but in fundamentally reimagining regional value chains.

Aiman Ahmed Omar, a digital trade specialist at Trade Policy in Africa, advocates moving beyond low-value primary exports toward shared agro-industrial systems that benefit all member states.

"We are not going to eliminate Non-Tariff Barriers because we are producing similar products," Omar notes. "Instead, we must look at the bigger picture and focus on creating opportunities for value addition."

Naume Kalinaki of the Eastern and Southern Africa Small-Scale Farmers Forum Uganda emphasizes that processing, packaging, grading, and certification help farmers reduce post-harvest losses, meet regional standards, and strengthen their bargaining power. Value addition transforms vulnerability into resilience.

Racing against time.

The region has demonstrated it can act decisively when political will exists. More than fifteen One-Stop Border Posts have slashed average crossing times by 70 percent and saved over 63 million US dollars annually. These gains prove that smart policy design delivers real results.

Yet even these victories are undermined when the Simplified Trade Regime gets applied inconsistently, when regulations remain contradictory, when traders resort to informal channels because formal systems are simply too unpredictable.

The stakes extend far beyond economics. Agroecological farming practices protect watersheds, rebuild degraded soils, preserve seed diversity, and maintain the traditional knowledge systems that have sustained communities for generations. When policy failures block these farmers from markets, the entire region loses.

East Africa stands at a crossroads. Consumer demand is creating unprecedented opportunities for sustainable agriculture. Farmers are ready to meet that demand. The missing ingredient is policy courage the willingness to redesign trade systems that recognize, value, and reward the ecological stewardship of smallholder producers.

When trade rules finally see these farmers, the benefits will ripple outward: stronger communities, healthier ecosystems, greater food security, and regional prosperity built on foundations that can endure. The revolution is growing. The question is whether policy will catch up before the opportunity withers at the border.

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BARRIERS