



POLICY BRIEF

Policy Brief Series | **Issue 03**

Strengthening Youth Employment and Participation in the EAC Agricultural Sector



Key Messages

1 Youth are central to agricultural transformation in the East African Community (EAC), yet remain constrained by limited employment opportunities and structural barriers to participation in agrifood systems.

2 Strong regional and continental frameworks, including the African Agribusiness Youth Strategy (AAYS) and EAC Youth Policy, exist, but domestication and implementation remain uneven and largely aspirational.

3 Limited access to finance, weak coordination, and insufficient integration of youth priorities into national policies continue to constrain youth-led agribusiness development.

4 Youth inclusion across agricultural, trade, and industrial policy frameworks remains indirect, with limited dedicated targets, financing mechanisms, and accountability systems.

5 Strengthening policy alignment, domestic financing, coordination, and youth participation is essential to unlock employment, innovation, and inclusive agricultural transformation in the EAC.



Context

The EAC recognises youth as critical drivers of agricultural transformation, with agriculture offering significant potential for employment, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Regional and continental frameworks, including the AAYS and the EAC Youth Policy, provide a strong foundation for advancing youth inclusion in agrifood systems. However, domestication and implementation remain uneven, with youth priorities often insufficiently integrated into national policies, financing frameworks, and coordination mechanisms. This policy brief provides evidence-based insights on progress, gaps and opportunities for strengthening youth integration in agriculture, examining the status of the EAC Youth Policy and the AAYS and assessing youth inclusion across the broader agricultural and trade policy landscape.

Introduction

Africa's rapidly growing youth population presents both a demographic dividend and an urgent employment challenge. With young people projected to account for over 60% of the continent's population by 2050, limited formal job opportunities demand bold, strategic responses that generate decent work and foster inclusive growth. Agriculture, Africa's largest employer and a cornerstone of economic activity, offers one of the most promising pathways to absorb and empower youth. However, unlocking this potential requires a shift from subsistence production toward market-oriented, technology-driven, and youth-led agribusiness.

In the EAC, agriculture remains central to economic transformation, contributing between 25% and 44% of national gross domestic product (GDP) across Partner States, accounting for approximately 65% of intra-regional trade, and underpinning nearly 70% of regional industries. Given its economic weight, strengthening youth integration within agrifood systems is both a development priority and a strategic investment in regional competitiveness.

Continental and regional frameworks recognise this imperative. The AAYS and the revised EAC Youth Policy position agriculture and agribusiness as critical entry points for youth employment, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Complementary instruments such as the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), the Regional Agricultural Investment Plan (RAIP), and the EAC Food and Nutrition Security Strategy (FNSS) explicitly position young people as drivers of innovation, agribusiness

development, and food systems resilience. Trade and industrial frameworks including the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the East African Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Protocol, and the EAC Industrialisation Policy, provide indirect but important entry points for youth engagement through trade facilitation, value addition, compliance services, and agro-industrial development.

While young people across the region are already advancing digital and climate-smart innovations in agriculture, translating policy commitments into large-scale employment gains requires stronger implementation, improved coordination, and the deliberate integration of youth across agricultural value chains.



Current Status, Key Implementation Challenges and Opportunities



Domestication and Implementation of the EAC Youth Policy and the AAYS

To date, no EAC Partner State has formally ratified or adopted the AAYS as a binding legal instrument. Domestication remains uneven and largely aspirational, with most youth-focused interventions embedded within broader agricultural or national youth policies rather than explicitly aligned with AAYS. Nevertheless, at least half of EAC countries are implementing initiatives that strongly reflect AAYS priorities, indicating that the strategy is being indirectly domesticated in practice.

At the regional level, the EAC Youth Policy, originally adopted in 2013 and revised in 2021, provides a foundational framework for youth empowerment, including explicit recognition of agriculture and agribusiness as critical sectors for youth engagement. Complementary instruments, such as the EAC Climate Change Master Plan (2021–2031), further emphasise green jobs and agribusiness opportunities. National governments have also established Youth Development Funds (YDFs), Youth Councils, and institutional reforms to support youth agribusiness enterprises, although implementation remains uneven.

Country experiences demonstrate growing momentum. Kenya and Uganda show alignment through youth champions and small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) incubation programmes. Further, Uganda has institutionalised youth representation through the Ministry of Gender, Labour

and Social Development, with programmes that tie into agrifood system opportunities. Rwanda has embedded youth employment and entrepreneurship targets within its fourth Strategic Plan for the Transformation of Agriculture (PSTA IV), supported by information and communications technology (ICT) based entrepreneurship and mentorship models such as YouthConnekt. Tanzania's Building a Better Tomorrow–Youth in Agribusiness (BBT-YIA) programme represents one of the most ambitious efforts in the region, targeting 1.5 million youth and women by 2030. To the contrary, countries such as Burundi, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Somalia remain at earlier stages, with youth engagement largely donor-driven and institutionalisation limited.

Despite visible innovation and emerging youth-led enterprises across the region, sustainability remains a central challenge. Dedicated budget allocations for youth within National Agricultural Investment Plans (NAIPs) are rare, institutional coordination across agriculture, youth, ICT, and trade ministries is fragmented, and awareness of AAYS among policymakers and youth groups remains low. Moreover, while the EAC Youth Policy has been ratified regionally, its translation into domestic legal and operational frameworks varies considerably, and there is no central regional monitoring dashboard to track mainstreaming and accountability.



Persistent Implementation Challenges and Potential Opportunities

Table 1 summarises the principal barriers constraining effective domestication and implementation of the EAC Youth Policy and the AAYS, alongside actionable opportunities to strengthen alignment, accountability, and impact.

Table 1. Implementation Barriers and Opportunities for the EAC Youth Policy and the AAYS

Barrier	Description	Implication	Opportunity
Lack of formal ratification and legal domestication of AAYS	AAYS has not been formally adopted as a binding instrument in Partner States, limiting its institutional anchoring.	Weak accountability, fragmented execution, and limited policy coherence across countries.	Develop and adopt national AAYS protocols and legislative instruments and formally integrate AAYS targets into NAIPs and national youth strategies.
Low awareness of AAYS and the EAC Youth Policy	Limited awareness among youth, policymakers, and sub-national institutions.	Reduced demand for accountability and limited youth ability to leverage policies for advocacy and resource mobilisation.	Launch youth-led awareness campaigns, national dialogues, fellowships, and capacity-building programmes to increase visibility and ownership.
Insufficient domestic financing and reliance on donor funds	Most youth development and AAYS-aligned programmes lack dedicated national budget lines and depend heavily on external partners.	Weak sustainability and vulnerability of initiatives to shifting donor priorities.	Create national budget lines for AAYS-aligned interventions and mobilise targeted public and blended finance instruments.
Weak institutional coordination	Fragmentation across ministries responsible for youth, agriculture, education, finance, and trade; siloed implementation at national and sub-national levels.	Duplication of efforts, inefficiencies, and limited cross-sectoral impact.	Strengthen cross-ministerial coordination and integrate youth priorities into sectoral frameworks such as agriculture, industrialisation, and digital innovation.
Capacity constraints at sub-national level	Local governments and implementing institutions lack adequate human and financial resources.	Poor operationalisation of policies and uneven implementation across regions.	Build institutional capacity and establish knowledge management and peer-learning platforms within EAC structures.

Weak monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and data systems	Limited youth-specific indicators; inadequate or non-existent M&E systems; lack of disaggregated data.	Difficulty tracking impact, scaling successful models, or ensuring accountability.	Establish regional M&E frameworks with youth-specific indicators, scorecards, and digital dashboards to track domestication and implementation.
Limited integration with national policies	AAYS not systematically mainstreamed into NAIPs and youth employment strategies.	Policy disjunctures and missed opportunities to align regional and national development plans.	Mainstream AAYS priorities into national agricultural and youth strategies to ensure alignment and budget support.
Limited youth engagement platforms	Weak institutional spaces for youth participation in policy co-creation and learning.	Underrepresentation of youth voices and limited policy responsiveness to youth realities.	Revitalise regional platforms such as the EAC Youth Forum and establish innovation hubs and incubation spaces to support youth entrepreneurship and peer exchange.





Extent of Youth Inclusion Across the Wider EAC Agricultural Policy Landscape



Beyond the AAYS and the EAC Youth Policy, youth inclusion is also reflected, albeit unevenly, across broader continental and regional agricultural and trade frameworks guiding the EAC. Instruments such as CAADP, Malabo Declaration, RAIP, FNSS, AfCFTA, SPS Protocol, and the EAC Industrialisation Policy acknowledge youth as important actors in agrifood systems transformation, value addition, trade integration, and employment creation. However, inclusion is often indirect and insufficiently institutionalised. Across these frameworks, youth inclusion is characterised by several common patterns:

- Youth are frequently referenced as beneficiaries of agricultural growth and employment strategies, but most frameworks lack explicit youth-specific targets, financing instruments, or implementation guidelines.
- Youth priorities are not systematically embedded within NAIPs or sector strategies, constraining scale and coherence across countries.
- Frameworks such as AfCFTA, the SPS Protocol, and the EAC Industrialisation Policy create opportunities for youth engagement in value chains, agro-processing, compliance services, and cross-border trade, yet these entry points are rarely framed in youth-responsive terms.

- Formal structures to ensure youth representation in agricultural policy planning, coordination platforms, and value chain governance remain limited and inconsistent.
- Youth-focused initiatives within agricultural programmes are often donor-driven, with minimal domestic budget allocations to support long-term engagement.
- Monitoring and evaluation systems rarely include age-disaggregated indicators, limiting the ability to track youth participation, employment outcomes, and enterprise development across agrifood systems.

At the country level, promising initiatives demonstrate that youth can actively contribute to agricultural transformation through innovation, digital technologies, and climate-smart practices. However, these efforts are frequently fragmented and not systematically anchored within regional agricultural policy frameworks.



Recommendations



To translate regional commitments on youth employment and agricultural transformation into tangible outcomes, the following priority recommendations are proposed:



Recommendations for EAC Partner States



Formally domesticate and integrate AAYS into national frameworks. Adopt national protocols or legislative instruments to anchor AAYS and mainstream its targets into NAIPs and national youth employment strategies.



Ring-fence domestic financing for youth in agriculture. Create dedicated national budget lines for youth-responsive agrifood programmes to reduce reliance on donor-funded, project-based interventions.



Institutionalise cross-ministerial coordination. Establish structured coordination mechanisms linking ministries of agriculture, youth, education, ICT, finance, and trade to ensure coherent and integrated youth programming.



Strengthen youth participation in policy and governance platforms. Embed youth representatives in national agricultural coordination bodies, value chain platforms, and sector review processes to enhance accountability and co-creation.



Recommendations for the EAC Secretariat



Establish a regional monitoring and accountability framework. Develop an EAC-wide M&E system with youth-specific indicators and disaggregated data to track domestication, implementation progress, and impact.



Mainstream youth across sectoral frameworks. Ensure systematic integration of youth targets within CAADP implementation, RAIPs, AfCFTA engagement, SPS systems, and agro-industrial initiatives.



Revitalise regional youth engagement platforms. Strengthen structures such as the EAC Youth Forum to serve as institutionalised spaces for peer learning, policy dialogue, and youth-led innovation exchange.



Promote regional knowledge-sharing and scaling of best practices. Create peer-learning mechanisms, youth scorecards, and digital knowledge platforms to scale successful youth-led agribusiness models across Partner States.



Conclusion



The EAC has a strong policy foundation for advancing youth employment and participation in agriculture, yet implementation remains uneven and fragmented. While innovation and youth-led enterprises are emerging across the region, the absence of formal domestication, dedicated financing, coordinated delivery systems, and robust monitoring frameworks continues to limit scale and sustainability. Translating commitments into tangible impact will require deliberate integration of youth priorities into national planning and budgeting processes, strengthened regional accountability, and institutionalised platforms for youth engagement and peer learning. With coordinated action by Partner States and the EAC Secretariat, youth can move from being recognised as beneficiaries to becoming key drivers of inclusive agricultural transformation across the region.

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ABOUT THE POLICY BRIEF SERIES

This policy brief forms part of a series developed to support evidence-based dialogue on the domestication and implementation of key regional and continental agricultural policy frameworks in the East African Community (EAC) Region. Drawing on findings from the *Assessment of the Domestication and Implementation of Regional and Continental Agricultural Policies in East African Community*, the series examines progress, challenges and opportunities across priority thematic areas that are central to agricultural transformation, food security, resilience and inclusive growth. Together, the briefs aim to highlight gaps between regional commitments and national implementation, identify good practices across EAC Partner States, and propose practical policy actions to strengthen coordination, accountability and impact at both national and regional levels.

AGRA

AGRA is a proudly African-led institution focused on scaling agricultural innovations that help smallholder farmers towards increased incomes, better livelihoods, and improved food security. Since 2006, AGRA has worked with partners, governments, non-governmental organisations, private sector businesses, and more; to deliver a set of proven solutions to smallholder farmers and indigenous African agricultural enterprises. AGRA puts smallholder farmers first on the agenda, recognising that no country has moved from low income to middle income without agricultural transformation. For more information visit <https://agra.org/>

FANRPAN

The Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN) is an autonomous regional stakeholder-driven policy research, analysis and implementation network that was formally established by Ministers of Agriculture from Eastern and Southern Africa in 1997. FANRPAN was borne out of the need for comprehensive policies and strategies required to resuscitate agriculture. FANRPAN is mandated to work in all African countries and currently has activities in 17 countries namely Angola, Benin, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Eswatini, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

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