Youth at the Center of East Africa’s Agrifood Trade:

Unlocking Opportunities under AfCFTA and the EAC Common Market Protocol.

Executive Summary

With 60% of its population under the age of 25 years, the East African Community (EAC) possesses a demographic dividend that can drive continental agri-food transformation if systemic trade barriers are addressed. With agriculture contributing 35% of Africa's GDP and nearly 50% of employment, youth agripreneurs can drive down the continent's $50+ billion annual food import bill while creating millions of decent jobs. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), with its binding Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade, provides a promising framework for inclusion. Success hinges not on policy design but on operationalizing inclusive trade systems, reducing compliance costs, and strategic investments in simplified procedures and youth-responsive finance. Without urgent action, the youth bulge risks becoming a source of instability rather than a demographic dividend.

This policy brief synthesizes insights from the regional dialogue: "Unlocking Agribusiness Opportunities for Youth Agripreneurs under the AfCFTA and the EAC Common Market Protocol," convened by the EAC Secretariat in collaboration with AGRA, FANRPAN, Generation Africa, SADC, and TradeMark Africa on 29th February 2026.

The Policy Problem

Youth are active in agriculture but excluded from formal trade. Across the EAC, half of young people aged 15-35 are unemployed, with rates as high as 66% among rural young women. Agricultural trade offers clear opportunities: intra-EAC agricultural commodity trade reached USD 4.6 billion in Q2 of 2025, growing 24.5% year-on-year. Yet systemic barriers prevent youth from accessing these markets:

01

High Compliance Costs:

certification, SPS testing, and documentation requirements are prohibitively expensive for youth-led enterprises.

02

Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs):

Complex Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) barriers account for 70% of trade barriers.

03

Information Gaps:

Limited knowledge of AfCFTA rules of origin and trade procedures despite high interest.

04

Finance Exclusion:

Youth lack capital to scale beyond local markets or meet compliance requirements.

03

Infrastructure Deficits:

weak digital integration prevents streamlined customs clearance and documentation.

---

1 Farm Africa. (2025). Boost youth employment in eastern Africa. [***https://www.farmafrica.org/our-work/what-we-do/boost-youth-employment/***](https://www.farmafrica.org/our-work/what-we-do/boost-youth-employment/)

2 East African Community. (2025, November 9). EAC trade soars to USD 38.2 billion in Q2 2025 as exports surge. [***https://www.eac.int/press-releases/3456-eac-trade-soars-to-usd-38-2-billion-in-q2-2025-as-exports-surge-40***](https://www.eac.int/press-releases/3456-eac-trade-soars-to-usd-38-2-billion-in-q2-2025-as-exports-surge-40)

The Risks:

Without safeguards, AfCFTA implementation may disproportionately benefit large exporters while excluding small-scale youth enterprises that lack technical capacity and market access.

The Opportunity:

The AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade (2024) institutionalizes inclusion as a binding obligation, creating legal entry points for youth across aggregation, value-addition, processing, packaging, and branding.

Evidence from the Field

The EAC Secretariat's regional stakeholder convening focused on the assessment of the practical barriers and solutions limiting Youth-led enterprises from taking advantage of AfCFTA or being actively involved in cross-border trade, even within the EAC. Key insights include the following:

Policy vs Implementation Gap:

Ms. Sithembile Mwamakamba, Director of Policy Research and Analysis at the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN), presented on the intersection of continental trade policy and youth economic inclusion in the EAC. She provided a comprehensive analysis of how the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), particularly its dedicated Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade, can serve as a transformative framework for integrating young agripreneurs into formal cross-border value chains. Critically, Ms. Mwamakamba identified systemic barriers that exclude youth despite strong policy frameworks. This includes prohibitive compliance costs, non-tariff barriers, financing constraints, limited awareness of rules of origin and trade procedures, and complex Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS). She emphasized that the challenge is not policy design but implementation, calling for coordinated investments in youth-responsive agricultural trade policies and strategies, institutional coordination aligned with the EAC Youth Policy and African Agribusiness Youth Strategy, digital innovation to simplify trade procedures, and targeted financing mechanisms to convert Africa's $50+ billion annual food import bill into a youth-driven economic opportunity.

Key Takeaway: *Strong frameworks exist, but youth exclusion persists due to prohibitive compliance costs and failures in institutional coordination. The challenge is not policy design but operationalization: converting the Protocol into youth-responsive agricultural trade policies, simplified digital procedures, and targeted financing.*

---

3 African Union. (2024). Protocol to the agreement establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area on women and youth in trade. https://africanlii.org/en/akn/aa-au/act/protocol/2024/free_trade_area_on_women_and_youth_in_trade/eng@2024-02-18

Systems Challenge, Not Production Challenge:

Dr. Andrew Edewa, Director of Standards and SPS at TradeMark Africa, delivered a key note presentation titled "Cultivating Seamless Trade: TradeMark Africa's Role in Accelerating Agricultural Integration Across the EAC and AfCFTA". He framed youth inclusion as a systems rather than a production challenge. He emphasized that East African youth are already active in agriculture but remain excluded from formal cross-border trade due to prohibitive compliance costs and requirements. He discussed the importance of prioritizing quality and safety to promote value for exports across countries.

Dr. Edewa explained the importance of SPS requirements and standards in trade, explaining how they facilitate market access and build trust between trading partners, and emphasized the need for compliance. He highlighted the need for youth and women in agriculture to shift from informal trading to formal value chains, with a focus on processing, branding, and using e-commerce platforms. Dr. Edewa stressed the importance of understanding and complying with AfCFTA rules to benefit from the trade agreement and called for collective action and proactive engagement with governments and institutions. He confirmed that TMA is actively supporting the rollout of the AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade through targeted capacity building and mentorship for youth agripreneurs. He concluded with a call to action, reiterating that the success of AfCFTA hinges not on the existence of inclusive policies, but on building trade systems that youth can actually use and position themselves as drivers, not merely beneficiaries, of continental agri-food transformation.

Key Takeaway: *East African youth are already producing but remain excluded from formal cross-border trade due to compliance barriers. Success requires shifting focus from informal trading to formal value-chains through processing, branding, e-commerce, and strategic compliance with quality and safety standards.*

Youth Perspectives:

Youth participants identified a potentially critical equity risk in AfCFTA implementation. Without targeted safeguards, they observed that the agreement may disproportionately benefit large, established exporters while excluding small-scale producers and youth-led enterprises that lack the capital, technical capacity, and market access needed to navigate cross-border trade requirements.

Seven Principles for Operationalizing Youth Inclusion

Treat informality as a starting point,

not a permanent condition. Implement Simplified Trade Regimes (STRs) as on-ramps to formal trade, enabling progressive compliance while reducing harassment and risk at borders.

Lower the compliance costs, not standards.

Scale aggregation models (cooperatives, hubs, clusters) to share certification costs and achieve economies of scale.

Link finance to compliance milestones.

a) Disburse youth-responsive capital upon registration, traceability adoption, first compliant shipment, or confirmed buyer contracts.

Strengthen public-sector accountability.

Address system failures (e.g., export rejections due to documentation errors) by harmonizing SPS institutions, laboratories, and inter-agency coordination.

Prioritize aggregation at scale.

Cooperatives and youth-led platforms reduce per-unit compliance costs and improve access to finance and markets.

Deploy digital tools for simplicity.

Simplify rules-of-origin calculations, documentation, and border procedures through accessible digital platforms.

Measure inclusion, not just volumes.

a) Track youth/women participation rates, cost/time to comply, certification access, and value-chain upgrading not only aggregate trade values.

Policy and Strategic Recommendations

For EAC Partner States and AfCFTA Institutions

- Fast-track domestication of the AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade with binding operational measures and timeliness.
- Establish predictable trading corridors that operate with transparent SPS requirements and regulatory clarity. Enhance compliance and trust through sensitization and training of the youth on trading rules, SPS requirements and standards (which account for 70% of trade barriers).
- Track and report on explicit youth inclusion indicators within AU CAADP monitoring frameworks.
- Launch youth trade facilitation centres at border posts to provide documentation support and real-time compliance assistance.

For Development Partners and Trade Support Institutions

- Deploy digital tools that simplify rules-of-origin, documentation and real-time border procedures.
- Support the EAC Network of Youth Champions in Agribusiness with targeted mentorship on standards compliance, trade documentation, and market intelligence.
- Scale financing mechanisms linked to compliance milestones (e.g. first export, certification attainment, etc)
- Invest in laboratory infrastructure and SPS harmonization to reduce rejection rates and testing costs.

For Youth Agripreneurs

- Organize collectively (e.g., through cooperatives and youth platforms) to increase bargaining power and share compliance costs.
- Prioritize quality and safety as competitive advantages for accessing regional and continental markets.
- Engage trade support institutions early to navigate rules of origin, documentation requirements, and buyer standards.
- Leverage digital tools and e-commerce platforms to reach formal markets and build traceability.

From Framework to Action

The AfCFTA and the EAC Common Market Protocol provide the architecture for inclusive agri-food trade. There is the need for intentional and targeted support to ensure youth inclusion. The urgent task now is implementation in terms of building trade systems that youth can actually use. Standards, border efficiency, and digital infrastructure are not bureaucratic hurdles they are enablers of trust, market access, and inclusion. With coordinated action across policymakers, development partners, and youth themselves, the EAC can position its next generation not as beneficiaries of trade policy, but as its drivers transforming demographic potential into continental prosperity.