

Ready to Trade Beyond Borders?

How East African Youth Can Use AfCFTA and the EAC Common Market to Grow Their Agribusiness

East Africa is one of the youngest regions in the world: almost 60% of people in the EAC are under 25. This is a huge advantage—if young people can access real economic opportunities. Agriculture already provides up to half of all jobs in Africa and about a third of GDP, yet the continent still spends over USD 50 billion every year importing food. Youth agripreneurs are the ones who can change that story by moving from local sales to regional and continental markets.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the EAC Common Market open new doors for trade in food and agricultural products. The AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade goes even further by making youth inclusion a legal requirement. But good policies on paper are not enough. What matters now is whether young people can actually use these systems—whether procedures are simple, costs are affordable, and finance is within reach. If this does not happen quickly, the region’s “youth bulge” could become a source of frustration and instability instead of a source of growth.

This article brings together key messages from the regional dialogue “*Unlocking Agribusiness Opportunities for Youth Agripreneurs under the AfCFTA and the EAC Common Market Protocol*,” held on 29 February 2026. It highlights what is blocking youth, what is already working, and what needs to change next.

Youth Are Farming. The Problem Is Trade Access

Across the EAC, millions of young people are active in farming, processing, logistics and food services. At the same time, trade in agricultural products within the region is growing fast. Yet most youth-led agribusinesses still sell only in local, informal markets. Why? Because stepping into formal cross-border trade remains difficult and expensive.

Young agripreneurs consistently point to five main obstacles:

- **High compliance costs:** paying for certification, lab tests and documentation is beyond the reach of most youth-led businesses.
- **Non-tariff barriers:** complicated sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) rules make it hard to move food products across borders.
- **Information gaps:** many youth do not fully understand AfCFTA rules of origin, customs procedures or what “formal trade” actually requires.
- **Limited finance:** banks and investors see youth as risky, especially when they lack collateral and trade history.
- **Weak digital systems:** where processes are not digitized, customs clearance and documentation are slow, confusing and vulnerable to rent-seeking.

The result is an unfair situation: young people are producing food, adding value and creating jobs—but are blocked from the profitable regional and continental markets that AfCFTA is supposed to unlock.

What Experts and Youth Said in the Dialogue

Speakers and youth participants shared a clear message: the biggest gap is not in policy documents, but in how systems work on the ground.

- **Policy vs. practice:** Regional and continental frameworks recognize youth and even provide a dedicated protocol for youth and women in trade. But many of the day-to-day systems—inspection procedures, certification processes, border operations—are still designed for large, established companies.
- **Systems, not just production:** Youth are already producing. The real challenge is getting their products into formal value chains that demand quality, safety and traceability. Investing only in production without fixing trade systems will not deliver transformation.
- **Risk of exclusion:** Youth participants warned that, without targeted support, AfCFTA could actually widen the gap between big exporters and small youth-led enterprises. The agreement could become another space where only those with capital and lawyers can participate.

The positive message is that solutions are known and practical. What is needed is political will, coordinated implementation and strong youth organizing.

Seven Practical Principles to Make Trade Work for Youth

From the discussion, seven principles emerged to guide action:

1. **Start from where youth are.** Informality should be treated as a stepping stone, not a dead end. Simplified Trade Regimes can help young cross-border traders gradually move into formal systems without being punished.
2. **Reduce costs, keep standards.** Food safety and quality standards are essential. But compliance costs can be shared through cooperatives, youth hubs, collection centres and clusters that spread the burden across many businesses.
3. **Tie finance to real progress.** Trade finance for youth should be released in stages—after registration, after adopting traceability tools, after the first compliant shipment or confirmed export contract—rather than demanding everything upfront.
4. **Fix the system, not just the entrepreneur.** When exports are rejected because institutions are uncoordinated or labs are not recognized, youth should not pay the price. Governments need to harmonize SPS systems, invest in labs and improve inter-agency coordination.

5. **Aggregate to scale.** Organised youth groups have more bargaining power with buyers, regulators and financiers. Aggregation helps in meeting minimum volumes, sharing risks and negotiating better prices.
6. **Use digital tools to simplify.** Youth are already comfortable with technology. Digital platforms can help them calculate rules of origin, generate documents, track consignments and get real-time information on border requirements.
7. **Measure who benefits.** Success should not be measured only by total trade volumes. It should also track how many youth- and women-led businesses are exporting, how long it takes them to comply, and whether they are moving up value chains into processing and branding.

What Different Actors Need to Do

Governments and Regional Institutions

- Turn the AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade into concrete, time-bound measures at national level.
- Create predictable trade corridors with clear, transparent SPS requirements and consistent enforcement.
- Establish youth trade support desks or centres at key border posts to help with paperwork, digital systems and problem-solving.
- Include youth-specific indicators in national and regional monitoring of agricultural trade and CAADP implementation.

Development Partners and Trade Support Organizations

- Invest in digital platforms that make rules of origin, documentation and border procedures easier to understand and follow.
- Support youth in meeting quality, safety and certification requirements through mentorship, training and market intelligence.
- Provide blended finance and guarantees linked to key trade milestones such as first export, certification and long-term contracts.
- Strengthen laboratory infrastructure and regional recognition of test results to reduce time and cost.

Youth Agripreneurs and Their Networks

- Organize through cooperatives, youth associations and digital platforms to aggregate supply, share compliance costs and negotiate better deals.
- Treat quality, safety and traceability as core parts of the business model, not as add-ons.

- Engage early with chambers of commerce, export councils and trade support agencies to understand requirements and opportunities.
- Use e-commerce and digital tools to reach buyers, tell their product stories, and build trust with the market.

From “On Paper” to “In Practice”

The AfCFTA and EAC Common Market already give East Africa a strong foundation for inclusive agricultural trade. The missing piece is implementation that takes youth realities seriously. For young agripreneurs, the promise of regional trade will only be real when border posts are navigable, procedures are clear, costs are manageable and support systems are designed with them—not just for them.

If governments, partners and youth themselves act on these insights, the region can move from talking about a “youth bulge” to celebrating a generation of **youth trade leaders**—farmers, processors, logistics entrepreneurs and digital innovators who use AfCFTA and the EAC Common Market to feed the continent and build shared prosperity.