



POLICY PAPER 2025

Influencing Regional Legislative Processes to Support Agroecology and Regional Market Integration in East Africa

Submitted to: East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) – Committee on Agriculture, Tourism and Natural Resources

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1. Background and Rationale

Agroecology is increasingly recognized as a viable pathway for achieving sustainable food systems, climate resilience, biodiversity conservation, and inclusive rural livelihoods in East Africa. Across the region, smallholder farmers, particularly women and youth, are already practicing agroecological approaches such as diversified cropping systems, use of local seeds, organic soil fertility management, and community-based natural resource governance. These practices contribute directly to food sovereignty, ecosystem restoration, and adaptation to climate variability.

Despite this progress at the community level, the regional policy and legislative environment have not adequately evolved to support agroecology or to facilitate cross-border trade in agroecological products. Existing regional trade and agricultural policies largely favor input-intensive, industrial models of agriculture. In contrast, regulatory frameworks for seeds, food safety, and trade standards often marginalize small-scale producers and informal cross-border traders. This policy misalignment constrains the scaling of agroecology and undermines regional market integration.

This policy paper draws on research and grassroots evidence generated by MVIWAARUSHA, SHIWAKUTA, and AFSA, including studies on agroecological production systems and cross-border trading of agroecological products in the East African Community (EAC). It seeks to inform and influence EALA's legislative and oversight role in shaping a regional framework that supports agroecology and inclusive regional markets.

2. Problem Statement

- i. While the EAC promotes regional integration and free movement of goods, agroecological producers and traders continue to face systemic barriers, including:
- ii. Restrictive seed laws and harmonized seed regulations that criminalize the exchange and trade of farmer-managed seeds across borders, despite their central role in agroecological systems.
- iii. Inappropriate sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) standards that are designed for large-scale commercial value chains and are inaccessible to smallholder agroecological producers and traders.
- iv. Limited recognition of agroecological products within regional trade policies, leading to their exclusion from formal markets and public procurement systems.
- v. Harassment and criminalization of informal cross-border traders, many of whom are women trading small quantities of agroecological produce.
- vi. Weak coordination between regional legislative processes and community-level realities, resulting in laws and directives that do not reflect farmers' lived experiences.

Unless these challenges are addressed through deliberate legislative reform and policy harmonization, agroecology will remain marginalized, and regional market integration will continue to exclude the majority of small-scale producers.

3. Evidence from Agroecological Cross-Border Trading Research

Research conducted by AFSA in collaboration with MVIWAARUSHA and SHIWAKUTA in East African border regions, with linkages to cross-border markets in Tanzania and other EAC partner states, highlights that agroecological products, such as traditional grains, legumes, vegetables, and non-timber forest products, are actively traded across borders, largely through informal channels.

Key findings include:

- i. Agroecological products contribute significantly to household incomes and food security, especially for women traders.
- ii. Informal cross-border trade persists due to the absence of simplified, trader-friendly regional mechanisms.
- iii. Traders face frequent confiscation of goods, fines, and inconsistent application of regulations at border points.
- iv. There is strong demand for agroecological products in urban and cross-border markets, driven by growing consumer awareness of health and environmental issues.

These findings demonstrate that agroecological trade is already contributing to regional integration but remains invisible and unsupported within formal legislative and policy frameworks.

4. Policy Gaps at the Regional Level

The current regional legislative framework exhibits several gaps:

- i. Absence of a regional agroecology policy or framework law to guide Partner States.
- ii. Seed harmonization processes that prioritize commercial varieties while excluding farmer-managed seed systems.
- iii. Trade facilitation instruments that do not accommodate small-scale, low-volume traders.
- iv. Limited EALA oversight on how regional agricultural and trade policies impact smallholder farmers and agroecological systems.

These gaps present an opportunity for EALA to exercise its mandate in initiating, reviewing, and influencing legislation that aligns regional integration with sustainable and inclusive food systems.

5. Policy Recommendations to EALA

MVIWAARUSHA, SHIWAKUTA, and AFSA respectfully propose the following actions:

1. Initiate a regional framework on agroecology that formally recognizes agroecology as a pillar of sustainable agriculture, climate resilience, and food sovereignty within the EAC.
2. Review and amend regional seed laws and harmonized regulations to protect and promote farmer-managed seed systems, including cross-border exchange and trade of traditional seeds.
3. Promote simplified trade regimes for agroecological products, including simplified SPS requirements and certification mechanisms suitable for small-scale producers and traders.
4. Strengthen protection of informal cross-border traders, particularly women, through legislative safeguards and harmonized border procedures.
5. Institutionalize stakeholder engagement mechanisms that enable farmers' organizations, civil society, and research institutions to meaningfully contribute to regional legislative processes.
6. Enhance EALA's oversight role by commissioning studies and public hearings on the impacts of regional trade and agricultural policies on agroecology and smallholder livelihoods.

6. Conclusion

Agroecology offers a strategic opportunity for the East African Community to advance sustainable development, climate adaptation, and people-centered regional integration. However, without supportive regional legislation and coherent policy frameworks, its potential will remain constrained.

EALA has a critical role to play in bridging the gap between grassroots agroecological realities and regional legislative processes. By adopting the recommendations outlined in this paper, EALA can contribute to a more inclusive, resilient, and integrated regional food system that benefits farmers, traders, consumers, and ecosystems across East Africa.