

Diversify, comply or perish: Africa's new trade agenda

By Murimi Gitari

Stakeholders in Africa's agrifoods system are pushing for greater compliance, product diversification, and harmonised regulations to catalyse and expand trade.

Speaking at a forum in Nairobi in September, they said there was a need to remove the barriers that continue to limit intra-African trade and reduce the competitiveness of agricultural products in the global markets.

Kenyan Trade and Investment Cabinet Secretary Lee Kinyanjui called for bold measures to increase intra-African trade from the current 12 percent to 25 percent over the next decade, citing the need for larger markets, deeper integration, and enhanced competition.

"Diversifying our agricultural and food export base is not optional—it is essential for Kenya's and Africa's competitiveness in a changing global trade environment," he said in speech made on his behalf at GLOBALG.A.P. Tourstop 2025 forum by the acting Secretary for Trade Michael Mandu.

He cited initiatives by the Kenyan government such as special economic zones (SEZs) and county aggregation and industrial parks (CAIPs) to support agro-processing and help micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) meet global market standards.

The three-day event was hosted by GLOBALG.A.P and Rotooba and sponsored by European Union, TradeMark Africa (TMA), Absa Bank PLC Ltd, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and other partners, under the theme, "Driving the region's agri-food trade through compliance and product diversification."

TradeMark Africa (TMA) Country Director for Kenya Lillian Mwai also underscored the importance of compliance and diversification in securing markets.

"Compliance is the currency of trust in agrifood trade. Compliance is not just a technical requirement—it is a passport to premium markets and a shield for rural livelihoods," she said. "It secures shelf space in European supermarkets, retail chains in Dubai, and wholesale markets across Africa. Without it, every harvest risks rejection—and with rejection comes lost livelihoods."

Mwai stressed the need to diversify product offerings to include fresh produce, oils, pastes, and dried fruits, especially as new markets such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) open up, offering access to 1.4 billion consumers and a combined GDP of USD 3.4 trillion.

Under the Business Environment and Export Enhancement Programme (BEEEP), which is backed by the European Union, TMA is focused on strengthening the mango, avocado, and vegetable value chains.

The programme has already trained over 5,000 farmers to meet international standards, resulting in the export of more than 100 tonnes of fresh produce in 2024.

Five packhouses have achieved BRCS certification, enabling the export of over 2,000 tonnes of vegetables and dried mangoes, while nearly 1,000 farmers are progressing toward GLOBALG.A.P. and GRASP certification, positioning them to access high-value export opportunities.

Dr Charity Mutege, Lead, Rotooba and the Host of Kenya's GLOBALG.A.P. National Technical Working Group (NTWG), said it was important to create awareness about compliance so that it is seen as an investment in prosperity, and not a burden.

"At the heart of our dialogue lies compliance. In today's world, access to markets is access to compliance. Buyers demand assurance — proof that produce is safe, traceable, responsibly grown, and sustainable. Certification, such as GLOBALG.A.P., is that passport. It tells a retailer in Europe or a distributor in America: 'Kenyan produce meets the same standard as anything grown in your backyard.' And the fish we consume here is as much as what is fished in their waters," said Dr Mutege.

Elizabeth Wasunna, the Director of Business Banking at Absa Bank PLC, emphasised the bank's commitment to supporting agriculture.

"We view farmers not just as food producers but as nation builders," she said, highlighting Absa's KES 100 billion pledge to finance agriculture over five years, including KES 15 billion lent in 2024 alone. Through initiatives like SHE Business and strategic partnerships, Absa is enabling agribusinesses to scale by providing access to finance, markets, and training—while championing standards like GLOBALG.A.P. to ensure global competitiveness.

Robert Peck, the Senior Operations Officer at IFC, underscored the role of financial support in enabling agribusinesses to invest in compliance infrastructure such as packhouses, cold storage, and digital traceability.