

A portrait of James Mureithi, a man with short dark hair and a goatee, wearing dark sunglasses, a white button-down shirt, and a dark blue textured blazer. He is standing outdoors with a blurred background of greenery and a building. His hands are clasped in front of him.

Unlocking certification: how James Mureithi is building Africa's bridge to global markets

Key-Cert Services Limited's Managing Director on turning certification from a paper chase into a growth strategy for African agriculture



By Murimi Gitari

← **T**hree weeks before harvest, a Kenyan herb farmer who had sunk USD 4,000 into a greenhouse for the export market received devastating news.

He still needed toilets, bathrooms, a fertiliser store, worker training, and water and soil tests before he could even apply for certification — at a further cost of roughly USD 1,000.

It is a scene James Mureithi, the managing director of Key-Cert Services Limited, has watched play out too many times.

"This was a shock to the producer, and it was due to lack of awareness," Mureithi said. "This is what we are addressing as a company."

That gap — between what farmers assume certification requires and what it actually demands — sits at the heart of Mureithi's vision for Key-Cert, a Nairobi-based, internationally accredited certification body he has led since early this year.

Mureithi's path into certification began far from an auditor's clipboard. A horticulture graduate of Egerton University, he spent five years in fruit and vegetable farm production before joining Control Union Kenya, where over 14 years he rose from junior auditor to senior lead auditor, then managing director for Kenya, and eventually regional manager for East Africa. That grounding in both agronomy and auditing shapes how he leads today. Mureithi describes his leadership philosophy as leading with integrity, building strong systems, and developing people — particularly the young — while pursuing excellence and using certification as a tool to unlock sustainable growth and market opportunities.



James Mureithi, Managing Director of Key-Cert Services Limited, says certification work starts long before an auditor arrives.

PHOTO CREDIT: KEY-CERT SERVICES.

"I have come to realise that there are bottlenecks entities face [in attaining certification], and these come from an operational point of view," Mureithi said.

"Our approach is to make sure our client understands why they need certification before they ever apply."

Rather than simply processing applications, Key-Cert runs awareness training through phone consultations, farm visits, workshops and farmers' days, walking clients through requirements — from GLOBALG.A.P. protocols to organic standards — long before an auditor arrives.

"We do not give them the solution, but give them the awareness on what they need in place," he said, "and guide them on implementation before they can apply for certification."

It is a pattern he sees constantly among aspiring exporters.

"In Kenya, you find people who want to venture into export and they need the GLOBALG.A.P. certification. They rush to certification bodies, pay the fees, and expect to get the certificate, only for them to realise that there is more to that than the certification needed," he said.

Many, he added, do not realise that a full audit — the process that ultimately determines whether a business is certified — can take a day or two of intensive assessment, and that the groundwork for passing it has to be laid long before the auditor arrives.

Key-Cert is accredited by the Kenya National Accreditation Service (KENAS) under ISO/IEC 17065 for GLOBALG.A.P. and GRASP, and is approved to offer GLOBALG.A.P. certification in every country except the United States and Canada. It also delivers organic certification through partners in Germany, social-standards auditing such as SMETA



← with partners in Bangladesh, and is recognised by the Kenya Organic Agriculture Network (KOAN) for East Africa Organic Products Standards, popularly known as Kilimo Hai.

That accreditation is not a formality, Mureithi insists; it is what makes Key-Cert's word bankable.

"Regardless of how much a client has paid, the financial aspect does not hinder one from being or not being given a certificate," he said. "Decisions are made based on objective evidence gathered during an audit."

For the farmer or exporter on the receiving end, he added, certification should mean something deeper than a wall certificate: a production system that respects the environment, protects workers and consumers, and safeguards the authenticity of what leaves the farm gate.

Certification's reputation as a large-exporter privilege is one Mureithi is determined to dismantle. Key-Cert encourages smallholder farmers to organise into cooperatives and groups, pooling resources to meet both cost and volume requirements, while its National Industrial Training Authority (NITA)-accredited training academy tackles the awareness gap he calls the industry's biggest obstacle. The company is also an approved commercial pest control provider under the Pest Control Products Board (PCPB), rounding out a model Mureithi describes simply as "a one-stop shop."

"Key-Cert offers training, inspection, auditing and pest control bundled together," he said, noting that this integrated, customer-focused approach — serving exporters, producers, farmer groups, processors and academic institutions alike — sets the company apart in a crowded field.



Certification starts on the farm: an assessor checks a crop field.

PHOTO CREDIT: KEY-CERT SERVICES.

Beyond its accredited course catalogue, Key-Cert also designs in-house training tailored to individual client needs, and partners with other certification bodies, both locally and internationally, to deliver solutions it cannot provide alone.

Climate change has added a new layer of cost and complexity to certification, Mureithi noted. Shifting weather patterns have driven up pest pressure just as export markets tighten their maximum residue level requirements, squeezing producers — particularly those running monoculture systems — from both directions. His answer lies in cultural practice rather than chemistry: intercropping. An avocado orchard, for instance, can pair its main crop with a secondary one that draws pests away from the avocados, cuts the workload otherwise spent on weeding alone, and creates a second income stream in the process.

"It requires a practical application," he said, describing the broader shift from conventional to regenerative production as both a pest-management strategy and a cost-control one.

Since joining Key-Cert, Mureithi has extended its footprint into Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Benin and Togo. He notes that Kenya remains years ahead of its regional peers in certification adoption, thanks largely to awareness and resources — a gap Key-Cert is closing by deploying Kenyan auditors abroad, with regional offices planned to bring audit costs down further.

Asked to distil Key-Cert's commitment to clients into one line, Mureithi does not hesitate: "Integrity, excellence and a sustainable business approach — Key-Cert is there to unlock your certification."