

# Chapter 1: Introduction

**Greenwell Collins Matchaya and Mahlatse Nkosi**

As climate change continues to exert pressure on East and Southern African economies, it is increasingly important for policymakers to deepen their understanding of the structure of their economies, the resilience options available, and the general trends shaping key sectors. Such knowledge is crucial for developing effective preventive and corrective policy frameworks, as well as guiding their implementation.

Economically, East and Southern African countries are highly diverse and heterogeneous, yet they also share many similarities. These differences offer opportunities for collaborative transformation, while their common challenges—particularly in agriculture—further justify coordinated regional approaches.

The region includes a mix of low-income, lower-middle-income, and middle-income countries, creating opportunities for intra-regional trade, technology transfer, and knowledge exchange. While services, mining, and manufacturing are important, agriculture remains the dominant source of employment in many countries. Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles, and South Africa have recorded more advanced economic progress, while others continue to face high levels of poverty.

Agriculture is a major contributor to GDP in Southern Africa, accounting for between 3% and 40% of GDP depending on the country (Gardiner & Mabogunje, 2023). It also remains a key employer, especially in rural areas, where most households depend on farming for their livelihoods (Ayim et al., 2022). This underscores the agricultural sector's critical role in regional development.

However, the region is highly vulnerable to climate change and other external shocks. Recent crises, including El Niño-induced droughts, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, have exposed the region's limited resilience.

These events have led to sharp declines in agricultural yields, food price spikes, and widespread livelihood disruptions. Droughts in particular have triggered severe food insecurity, causing starvation in some areas and hurting both producers and consumers through volatile prices.

The agricultural landscape in East and Southern Africa is changing, shaped by climate variability, rapid urbanization, technological progress, shifting trade policies, and broader macroeconomic trends. Expansionary monetary policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the inflationary pressures from global crises, have further affected food systems and markets.

In this context, diversifying agricultural production is essential for strengthening resilience and driving growth. Yet maize continues to dominate the region's crop sector, despite its vulnerability to climate shocks. Limited diversification has left both farmers and consumers increasingly exposed to risks.

Urbanization is also reshaping food demand in the region. As more people move to cities, food systems are adapting to changing diets and rising incomes, with greater emphasis on processed foods and longer supply chains. This shift highlights the need for better rural-urban linkages and improved market access (Tschirley et al., 2013). In parallel, the growing use of digital technologies is helping bridge gaps between input providers, producers, consumers, and markets. Mobile applications and digital platforms are enhancing information flow and knowledge-sharing, enabling smallholder farmers to access timely, reliable agricultural advice (Ayim et al., 2022).

These trends underscore the region's agricultural potential but also highlight the need for accelerated efforts to achieve growth, diversification, and stronger market integration for smallholder farmers.

Ukama Ustawi (UU) supported water security and climate-resilient agricultural livelihoods in East and Southern Africa (ESA), enabling millions of vulnerable smallholders to transition from maize-dominated farming systems to more intensified, diversified, and de-risked systems.

The initiative fostered enterprise development, mobilized private investment—particularly targeting women, youth, and other disadvantaged groups—and promoted landscape-scale environmental health. These efforts are now continuing under the **CGIAR Scaling for Impact (S4I) Science Program** through science-based innovation, capacity strengthening, policy engagement, and strategic communications.

A key milestone of these efforts has been the establishment of the **Regional East and Southern Africa Scaling Hub**, based in Nairobi, Kenya. This hub focuses on adaptive scaling research and developing fit-for-purpose, bundled innovation delivery models tailored to the region's specific contexts.

Scalable solutions, including digital platforms co-developed with national agricultural research systems (NARS), governments, and private-sector partners, are being deployed to provide agro-advisory services and de-risk agricultural activities.

These platforms feed into multi-stakeholder dialogues that actively engage the private sector and help cultivate a pipeline of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These SMEs benefit from incubation and acceleration services, coupled with access to inclusive financial mechanisms, to drive sustainable and climate-resilient growth.

Empowerment of marginalized groups—especially women, youth, and migrants—is integrated through targeted capacity-building activities such as change agent identification, internships, mentorship programs, and support for cooperatives and networks.

These efforts are supported by integrated land, water, and energy management systems, alongside collaborative governance frameworks. Through shared regional visions, targets, and plans for food and water security, these initiatives are also expected to influence regional trade patterns and human mobility dynamics positively.

Against this backdrop, this report examines current agricultural performance trends in East and Southern Africa, with a particular focus on crop sector dynamics, the extent of diversification, and the impacts of climate change. It also explores climate trends, regional agricultural trade dynamics, and related constraints, before presenting possible agricultural development scenarios under future climate conditions. Each of these themes is addressed in the chapters that follow.

**Chapter 2** summarizes the current status of agricultural transformation in ESA, focusing on the enabling environment (policies, macroeconomic conditions, and infrastructure), agricultural performance, and the linkages between agricultural inputs and sectoral/national outcomes.

**Chapter 3** analyses regional trade and agricultural diversification, highlighting the role of trade in driving diversification, existing constraints, and regional trade potential.

**Chapter 4** presents the regional climate outlook and its likely impacts on agriculture, identifying priority value chains either vulnerable to or likely to benefit from future climate regimes.

**Chapter 5** discusses plausible agricultural development scenarios under projected climate conditions.

The report concludes with a summary of key findings and provides recommendations for policy actions and stakeholder engagement across the region.

The next chapter presents the status of agricultural performance in Eastern and Southern Africa, providing a data-driven baseline on productivity, policy, and investment trends.

## References

Ayim, Claudia, Ayalew Kassahun, Chris Addison, and Bedir Tekinerdogan. 2022. Adoption of ICT innovations in the agriculture sector in Africa: A review of the literature. *Agriculture and Food Security* 11(1):22. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40066-022-00364-7>

Gardiner RK, Mabogunje AL. 2023. Agriculture for Africa. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Available at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Africa/Agriculture>

Tschirley, David, Steven Haggblade, and Thomas Reardon. 2013. Africa's emerging food system transformation: East and Southern Africa. East Lansing, Michigan, USA: Michigan State University, Global Center for Food Systems Innovation. Available at <https://gcfsi.isp.msu.edu/files/7214/6229/3434/w1.pdf>

