



30 YEARS OF
COMESA IMPACT



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COMESA-EU HORTICULTURE CONNECT

**From COMESA Fields to
European Supermarkets**
The Story of Horticulture Connect

1

Growing Bridges: A Transformative Journey in Horticulture Trade

2

Empowering Farmers with skills for Market Readiness : African Trade Observatory (ATO) Trainings in COMESA Member States

4

Strengthening Market Linkages through European Learning Missions

6

The COMESA–EAC Horticulture Accelerator (CEHA)

8

Spotlight on the COMESA–EU Horticulture Connect Forum Nairobi 2025

12

Looking Ahead: Sustaining Momentum and Expanding Opportunities



Growing Bridges:

A Transformative Journey in Horticulture Trade

Over the past few years, the COMESA-EU Horticulture Connect initiative has charted an ambitious and transformative path to strengthen trade linkages between horticultural exporters in the COMESA region and buyers across the European Union. Anchored in the vision of inclusive growth, sustainability, and regional integration, the initiative has become a flagship model for connecting African producers with global markets. By blending capacity building, market exposure, and strategic partnerships, COMESA has empowered farmers, cooperatives, and agribusinesses to meet EU market standards, diversify

export destinations, and enhance their competitiveness.

Through a series of well-curated activities including farmer training programmes, outward learning missions to the Netherlands and Germany, and the landmark COMESA-EU Horticulture Connect Forum in Nairobi, Kenya, the initiative has nurtured a new generation of export-ready enterprises, redefining the region's horticultural landscape.



Empowering Farmers with skills for Market Readiness: African Trade Observatory (ATO) Trainings in COMESA Member States

A major highlight of the capacity-building phase was the rollout of Africa Trade Observatory (ATO) training workshops across COMESA Member States. The sessions targeted exporters, cooperatives, and farmer organizations, equipping them with data-driven tools to identify market opportunities, understand trade dynamics, and enhance competitiveness. Through hands-on training, participants learned to leverage the ATO platform to monitor trade flows, assess tariff structures, and make informed export decisions, laying the groundwork for smarter, more connected regional trade.

Approximately 1000 SMEs across the region benefited from training on market information platforms, business management, and market intelligence, with a deliberate focus on gender inclusivity to ensure women-led enterprises were empowered to participate in trade opportunities. The training took place in eight COMESA Member States: Malawi, Zambia,

Ethiopia, Egypt, Eswatini, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Rwanda.

The training workshops were supported by the COMESA EDF–Regional Enterprise Competitiveness and Access to Markets Programme (RECAMP), which aimed to ensure that the competitiveness and market access of SMEs and other firms in targeted value chains are sustainably enhanced. By combining access to market intelligence, practical business skills, and compliance knowledge, RECAMP-enabled trainings strengthened SMEs' capacity to translate insights into concrete business strategies, positioning them to engage effectively with European buyers during the COMESA-EU Horticulture Connect and subsequent outward missions.

These initiatives reinforced inclusive growth, competitiveness, and regional integration within the horticulture sector, ensuring that both women and youth-led enterprises could participate fully in shaping the future of COMESA's export markets.





Strengthening Market Linkages through European Learning Missions

COMESA's outward learning missions to Europe in 2024 and 2025 have served as powerful catalysts for strengthening market linkages, enhancing competitiveness, and expanding export opportunities for horticulture SMEs across Eastern and Southern Africa. Supported by the EU-funded Regional Enterprise Competitiveness and Access to Markets Programme (RECAMP) under the 11th European Development Fund (EDF 11), the missions provided regional enterprises with unparalleled exposure to world-class horticultural markets, value chains, and innovation ecosystems in the Netherlands and Germany.

The first mission, held in the Netherlands from 15–22 September 2024, convened 11 SMEs from Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Taking place in one of Europe's most advanced horticultural hubs, the programme immersed participants in the Dutch auction system, modern greenhouse technologies, cold-chain solutions, and engagements with leading industry actors such as the Fresh Produce Centre and Svensson.

Through B2B meetings, value-chain tours, and interactions with experts across floriculture, fruit and vegetable production, packaging, and logistics, SMEs gained practical insight into EU certification requirements, quality standards, and sustainability practices. Given that the Netherlands absorbs 28% of COMESA's horticulture exports, the mission offered strategic value in helping enterprises enhance compliance and strengthen their export readiness.

Building on this momentum, COMESA and the COMESA Business Council (CBC) organized a second outward mission to Germany from 8–15 June 2025, expanding access to Europe's largest fresh produce market, which attracts nearly €10.9 billion in annual imports. Eleven representatives from regional horticultural enterprises and institutions participated in an intensive week of business matchmaking, institutional visits, and hands-on learning within Germany's innovation-driven value chains. Delegates visited globally recognized institutions including RootCamp, K+S, Grimme, KWS Saat, Obsthof Lefers, and EDEKA Foodservice, deepening their understanding of seed technology, fertilizer solutions, agricultural machinery, organic



production systems, and retail market dynamics. The mission also strengthened participants' grasp of EU regulatory frameworks and GlobalG.A.P. certification requirements, while opening avenues for technology transfer and future trade partnerships.

Several SMEs reported immediate follow-up engagements with German firms, particularly in certification services, fertilizer technologies, and export logistics. Delegates noted that the diversity of the programme and the multi-country composition of the delegation enriched peer-to-peer learning, fostered intra-regional collaboration, and strengthened cross-border business linkages within the COMESA region.

Across both missions, several shared insights emerged:

- EU markets offer strong growth potential but demand stringent compliance with quality, traceability, and certification standards.
- European innovations, especially in seed breeding, cold chain management, and mechanization—provide

actionable models for strengthening horticulture value chains in COMESA Member States.

- Direct engagement with businesses delivers far more impactful learning than traditional workshop formats.
- Continued support is needed in certification readiness, market intelligence, and access to credible foreign buyer networks.

To sustain the progress made, the missions identified priority follow-up actions, including strengthening certification and compliance training, developing comprehensive buyer directories, facilitating ongoing matchmaking with European partners, and replicating the outward mission model in other strategic global markets.



The COMESA–EAC Horticulture Accelerator (CEHA)

The COMESA–EAC Horticulture Accelerator (CEHA) has emerged as a powerful regional mechanism designed to consolidate, scale, and sustain the growth of the horticulture sector across Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. Building on the momentum generated through RECAMP-supported capacity-building activities and the outward learning missions to Europe, CEHA was established to provide a coordinated response to the challenges and opportunities within the region's fruit and vegetable value chains. Since its creation in 2022 by public and private sector partners, the initiative has sought to accelerate the development of climate-smart, inclusive, and commercially competitive horticulture systems capable of driving income growth, job creation, and improved nutrition across the COMESA and EAC regions by 2031.

Anchored in the Regional Strategic Action Plan (RSAP) 2025–2035, CEHA promotes a harmonized regional approach to policy coordination, value chain development, financing, and research and innovation. Through its multi-level governance structure—which includes a regional Board, National Chapters, and specialized

Technical Committees—CEHA is strengthening the link between local priorities and regional action. National Chapters have now been launched in all five focus countries, providing platforms for public-private dialogue, investment facilitation, and alignment of national workplans with regional horticulture transformation goals. These structures are driving the establishment of production clusters, improving connections with markets and off-takers, and enhancing the consistency of interventions across borders.

A key instrument under CEHA is the Matching Grant Facility (MGF), which has begun providing targeted support to SMEs, farmer organizations, and agribusinesses investing in irrigation, cold storage, packaging, and value addition technologies. By de-risking innovation and crowding in private sector financing, the facility aims to unlock scalable business models and accelerate enterprise growth within priority value chains. Complementing this effort, CEHA convened a regional workshop in Lusaka in October 2024 to craft the CEHA Regional Horticulture Strategy (2025–2035). Structured around three strategic pillars—efficient regional value chains, productive and profitable horticultural systems, and an enabling policy environment—the strategy outlines a unified roadmap for transforming the sector at scale.

Together with ACTESA, CEHA is advancing the establishment of commercial production clusters and trade-linked logistics hubs across the five participating countries. Priority sites have been identified



for avocado, Irish potato, and onion value chains, with emerging opportunities for additional high-value crops. These hubs aim to integrate fragmented production systems, reduce transaction costs, and build competitive supply chains capable of servicing regional and international markets.

Strategic partnerships remain central to CEHA's progress. Collaborations with AGRA, GIZ, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, PFS, CABI, COLEAD, and the EU Delegation are expanding technical support, enabling policy harmonization, accelerating certification and standards compliance, and strengthening climate-smart innovation. These partnerships are particularly instrumental in supporting women- and youth-led enterprises through training, access to finance, and market information systems that equip MSMEs to meet international market requirements.

As CEHA moves forward, it will continue to align closely with the COMESA-EU Horticulture Connect platform to reinforce trade linkages, harmonize standards, and scale investment in production and logistics infrastructure. With strong coordination, strategic partnerships, and sustained investment, CEHA is positioning Eastern and Southern Africa to become one of the most dynamic and competitive horticulture regions globally empowering farmers, expanding markets, and driving transformative growth across the continent.





Spotlight on the COMESA-EU Horticulture Connect Forum Nairobi 2025

The COMESA-EU Horticulture Connect initiative continues to pave a transformative path in deepening trade linkages between horticultural exporters across Eastern and Southern Africa and buyers in the European Union. Co-funded by the Institutional Capacity Building Programme (ICBP) and the ACTESA-CEHA Programme, the initiative is grounded in a shared vision of inclusive growth, sustainability, and regional integration. Through capacity building, market exposure, and strategic partnerships, it has empowered farmers, cooperatives, and agribusinesses to meet EU standards, diversify markets, and enhance competitiveness across COMESA's horticulture value chains.

Following extensive groundwork—including Africa Trade Observatory (ATO) trainings, outward learning missions to the Netherlands (2024) and Germany (2025), and the momentum built through the COMESA-EAC Horticulture Accelerator (CEHA)—the COMESA-EU Horticulture Connect Forum was launched as a strategic platform to enhance SME market readiness and strengthen direct engagement with EU buyers. Held from 6–8 October 2025 in Nairobi, Kenya, the forum brought together SMEs, EU buyers, investors, policymakers, and development partners, with a deliberate focus on women- and youth-led enterprises.

The forum was inaugurated by senior dignitaries whose remarks underscored the sector's economic and social importance:

"This platform represents a first-of-its-kind opportunity to link our horticultural SMEs directly with European markets, fostering competitiveness, innovation, and inclusive growth across the region." COMESA Secretary General, H.E. Chileshe Mpundu Kapwepwe:

"Our farmers and agribusinesses hold immense potential. This platform strengthens their capacity to meet international standards and expand into global markets." Minister of Agriculture and Livestock Development, Kenya, Hon. Mutahi Kagwe

"This initiative reflects our commitment to harmonized policies and coordinated action that unlocks trade opportunities for our region." Chairperson of the COMESA Council of Ministers, Burundi, H.E. Dr. Hassan Kibeya:

"Digitalization, market readiness, and targeted cooperation are key to bridging African producers with European buyers sustainably and efficiently." Ms. Lana Žutelija, EU Delegation Representative to Zambia and COMESA

"Horticulture is a gateway for our SMEs to integrate into regional and global value chains, leveraging innovation, green growth, and inclusive partnerships." Principal Secretary of Trade, Kenya, Ms. Regina Ombam.





During the forum, participants engaged in dynamic panel discussions, product exhibitions, and B2B/B2G meetings exploring opportunities across the horticulture–EU trade ecosystem.

Discussions focused on EU market requirements, certification, traceability systems, logistics, and emerging digital solutions, highlighting challenges and new avenues for growth. Technological innovators including Technimex, Photondancing, Ithaka Organic, and PUM Netherlands showcased solutions in smart irrigation, LED grow lighting, organic production, and SME capacity development. One presenter noted: “Innovation is not an option; it is the key to competitiveness and resilience in horticulture.”

Farm visits provided EU buyers with first-hand exposure to production systems, sustainability practices, and certification compliance. Delegates visited Sian Flowers, Sereni Fries Limited, Kevian Kenya Limited, and Exotic Penina Fields Group—farms demonstrating excellence in hydroponics, climate-smart agriculture, waste reduction, and fair labour practices. A visiting EU buyer said: “Seeing these operations firsthand gives confidence in the quality of COMESA produce and inspires SMEs to adopt global best practices.” The forum delivered high-impact outcomes that energized the region’s horticulture–EU trade agenda. Participants celebrated

strengthened EU–COMESA commercial linkages, renewed commitment to standards and compliance, and a heightened appreciation of technology as a driver of competitiveness. The forum spotlighted the indispensable role of women and youth in shaping resilient regional value chains. Delegates called for accelerated policy harmonization, improved market and data intelligence systems, expanded B2B engagement platforms, and targeted SME support to transform emerging opportunities into tangible export deals and long-term partnerships.

Through its inclusive, innovation-driven approach, the COMESA–EU Horticulture Connect continues to strengthen trade, enhance competitiveness, and lay the foundation for sustainable, globally competitive horticulture across Eastern and Southern Africa. Going forward, its work will increasingly align with the operationalization of the COMESA Medium Term Strategic Plan (MTSP 2026–2030), ensuring that regional priorities, enterprise support, and market linkages are fully coordinated.





Looking Ahead: Sustaining Momentum and Expanding Opportunities

Building on the success of the Nairobi forum and outward learning missions to Europe, COMESA is advancing a forward-looking agenda fully aligned with the COMESA Medium Term Strategic Plan (MTSP 2026–2030). The plan emphasizes deeper market integration, enhanced competitiveness, digital transformation, and resilient regional value chains—all reflected in the next phase of the COMESA–EU Horticulture Connect initiative. The platform has strengthened an ecosystem bringing together exporters, policymakers, EU buyers, and technical partners, laying a foundation for sustained export growth, market diversification, and value-chain upgrading.

Through strategic partnerships with experts such as PUM Netherlands, COMESA will continue providing targeted capacity building and technical support for exporters, focusing on market readiness, certification, traceability, and quality compliance. SMEs are being equipped to meet evolving EU regulatory and sustainability standards while enhancing competitiveness and fostering enterprise-level innovation.

Market access will be further strengthened through collaboration with EU business facilitators, digital matchmaking, and certification support systems, building on relationships forged during the Nairobi

forum and European missions. Structured pathways are being established to enable reliable and long-term EU–COMESA trade partnerships.

COMESA will also prioritize participation in global trade fairs such as Fruit Logistica (Berlin) and Macfrut (Italy), showcasing the region's horticultural excellence, promoting the COMESA brand, and connecting exporters to high-value buyers. Knowledge exchange, innovation adoption, and policy harmonization remain central, with initiatives such as regional peer learning, agri-tech integration, and enhanced use of the Agricultural Trade Observatory empowering SMEs with real-time market intelligence.

The COMESA–EU Horticulture Connect has now evolved into a regional movement driving inclusive, sustainable, and globally competitive horticultural trade. As the MTSP 2026–2030 comes into effect, the initiative will serve as a practical vehicle to implement its priorities, ensuring enterprise support, market linkages, and investment alignment are fully coordinated. Through this approach, COMESA is positioning its Member States as leading suppliers of high-quality horticultural products to Europe and global markets—accelerating shared prosperity for farmers, women, youth, and broader value-chain communities across the region.



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