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## Pan-African and Regional Trade and Policy for the Food Systems Transition

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# SUMMARY

The links between trade and food security and nutrition are inherently complex yet undeniably affect the six dimensions of food security: availability, access, utilisation, stability, sustainability and agency (High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) (2020). Reforming regional and pan-African trade and policy for the agroecological transition must therefore shift from policies that promote uniformity under the influence of the industrial agriculture model and the green revolution to embrace food sovereignty and diversity (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) 2016), from global supply chains to localisation and territorial markets (Abrego et al. 2020).

Territorial markets are food distribution systems directly linked to local, national and/or regional food systems. They are typically organised horizontally among various stakeholders. Significantly, within their respective territories, they also serve multiple functions beyond mere food supply – economic, social and cultural – and are often most remunerative for smallholder farmers. Evidence suggests that the role of territorial markets in strengthening local food systems and entrenching the right to food is gaining prominence. Recently, the second Agroecological Entrepreneurs and Territorial Markets Convening organised by the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) was successfully held in Harare in September 2024, demonstrating an emergent agroecological transition (AFSA 2024; Muigai et al. 2024).

Conversely, adherence to neoliberal orthodoxy means that customs procedures, taxes, permits and administrative trade costs, among other vestiges of trade, continue to be maintained to deliver the promise of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The AfCFTA is an arrangement between member countries that aims to create conditions for the free flow of trade among them, in which there are no import tariffs; that is, taxes on imported goods or any other barriers on imported goods from members of the same free trade agreement (African Export-Import Bank 2024;

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) 2023; Bonuedi et al. 2020).

If overcoming tariff and non-tariff barriers and narrowing the divergence between food-related provisions of regional economic communities can be integrated with efforts to promote agroecology and prioritise territorial markets and food sovereignty, then Africa could be on its way to addressing its food, health and environmental crises. Bridging the gap between these two narratives is crucial to ensuring food sovereignty, the right to food, and that the food systems transition to agroecology indeed takes place (Narula 2024; Owasa & Kabaseke 2024; Fakhri 2021).

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Philanthropy can play a catalytic role in shaping trade measures and policies that ensure food security for sustainable food systems by providing financial resources, expertise and advocacy to support progressive movements such as the AFSA in challenging an entrenched industrial, capital-intensive food system that is controlled by a limited number of dominant multinational corporations and facilitated by the globalisation and financialisation of food systems (Narula 2024; Elver 2023). Philanthropy can also help bridge existing gaps between research, practice and policy, ensuring that trade policy, tariffs and non-tariff measures that act as barriers to trade are aligned with ecological sustainability, social equity and economic resilience. By fostering innovation, collaboration and systemic change in trade, philanthropy can play a crucial role in transforming African food systems for a more sustainable and equitable future.

# INTRODUCTION

The role of trade agreements such as the AfCFTA in fostering the agroecological food systems transformation cannot be overstated. Strengthening regional trade relations with more or less equally developed neighbouring countries is a way of leveraging trade to make the transition to a more diversified economy. By focusing on regional trade, countries can further exploit and develop their comparative advantages on nearby markets, using the generally existing social connections through which local consumers' tastes are understood and the connections that can be served by short chains in which small-scale farmers and traders can participate (van Berkum 2021).

While the AfCFTA aims to boost intra-African trade by reducing trade barriers and enhancing economic integration among African countries, insufficient regional integration and trade facilitation measures constrain full realisation of the benefits of regional integration (Tschirley et al. 2021). Although the AfCFTA represents a strong foundation for reimagining trade policies across the continent, it does not explicitly or fully incorporate the principles of agroecology in its framework. Presumably, the potential to align the AfCFTA with the principles of agroecology does exist and can be further developed as the agreement evolves (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) 2021).

However, for the opportunity to innovatively redesign intra-regional trade policies that are in sync with the 13 principles of agroecology to come to fruition, it requires that a broad range of stakeholders including local communities, indigenous knowledge holders and civil society organisations (CSOs) actively participate. It also requires prioritising fair trade and sustainability as well as promoting a broad transition to new sustainable, inclusive and resilient food systems that can deliver nutritious and healthy food for all (Sibanda & Mwamakamba 2021). Philanthropy can help catalyse such a transition, contributing to more resilient, equitable and environmentally friendly food systems in Africa.

Philanthropic organisations can play a vital role in terms of providing the necessary financial resources, technical assistance and capacity-building support to empower local stakeholders, bridge policy gaps and reclaim territorial food trading systems to ensure equitable power relations among people, communities and states. Philanthropic funding and non-financial resources can also support initiatives that strengthen civil society's role in policy advocacy and empower communities to engage meaningfully in policy-making processes (Babu & Osei 2020). Through such collaborative efforts, philanthropy can help catalyse an inclusive and sustainable transformation of Africa's food systems, undergirded by the principles of agroecology, fair trade and the right to food.





# MOTIVATION

## Why does the issue of trade matter?

Transforming Africa's food systems using trade instruments (tariff and non-tariff measures and trade agreements) is crucial for providing diverse, accessible and affordable nutritious diets (Global Panel 2020). However, the links between trade and food security and nutrition (FSN) are inherently complex and contested. For example, the impact of a tariff structure on trade cost can undermine intra-African trade. Non-tariff barriers such as complex customs procedures, sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures and poor infrastructure often have a more pronounced impact on trade, disproportionately affecting small-scale businesses.

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Strengthening policy and trade regime coordination – including food and trade standards, food safety and compliance – expanding market-oriented infrastructure that is demand-driven, and strengthening trade negotiation capacity are the main thrusts in the *Framework for Boosting Intra-African Trade in Agricultural Commodities and Services* (FAO & African Union Commission (AUC) 2021). Nevertheless, for the last decade, the AFSA and other CSOs have been raising concerns about critical gaps in the regional and pan-African trade and policy architecture that risk sidelining smallholder farmers and agroecology advocates (AFSA 2025). The key issues these CSOs articulate include the marginalisation of agroecology, limited engagement of CSOs, weak accountability measures, insufficient agroecology funding and corporate-driven influences that undermine biodiversity and farmer autonomy.

## Why should philanthropies be interested?

Because of the unintended consequences of liberal trade policies such as environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity and displacement of small-scale farmers, philanthropy has a role to play in promoting trade policies that are in harmony with agroecological transitions. As catalysts for change, philanthropic organisations can help co-create knowledge and innovation design with local, national and regional stakeholders in the pan-African and regional trade and policy space to signal transformation pathways for African food systems that are capable of reclaiming and defending food as well as national and regional sovereignty. This includes cultural identity based on effective governance, transparency, accountability and inclusivity – principles upon which fair, participatory and equitable food systems must be built.

The value add of philanthropy's participation and contribution is to:

- Facilitate the use of trade policy instruments (such as tariffs and other trade-facilitating measures) that are conducive to smallholder farmers participating in profitable networks of short food supply lines.
- Support the development of territorial markets that ensure fair prices for small farmers. Collaboration with cooperatives and grassroots organisations can play a pivotal role in creating fair market conditions.
- Encourage the development of local organic markets and the promotion of consumer awareness to boost demand for diversified and nutritious food products.
- Advocate and facilitate in monitoring the implementation of trade policies that incorporate externalities and reinforce non-market values, supporting environmentally sustainable, nutritionally dense and safe food systems through local and regional trade arrangements that recognise these values.

## What is the relevance of climate change adaptation and resilience?

Using systems innovation, Africa can harness its local renewables, address social and gender inequities and foster a sustainable, culturally aligned food system that meets the trifecta of environmental, economic and social resilience. Pan-African regional trade and policy frameworks can be transformed into harbingers of just and inclusive food systems, involving all stakeholders including smallholder farmers, women and indigenous communities. Farmer-to-farmer training programmes, financial support and the application of agroecology principles and practices are tangible steps towards this future. Effective monitoring and learning mechanisms can ensure food and nutrition security for present and future generations.

Sustainable and equitable food systems in Africa are crucial for global well-being, environmental stewardship and social justice. Philanthropies should invest in Africa's

agroecology-led transformation to ensure a peaceful future. Inclusivity and community participation are essential for culturally sensitive and locally driven interventions. Supporting capacity-building and equitable trade policies can help reduce poverty, improve livelihoods and create more resilient communities. This aligns with the broader goals of fostering human well-being, environmental stewardship and social justice.

The issue of access to food, water and sustainable livelihoods is crucial for human rights. Philanthropies can catalyse change, drive innovation and scale successful agroecological practices. Their involvement can accelerate progress towards achieving the United Nations (UN) sustainable development goals (SDGs), particularly in ending hunger, promoting sustainable agriculture and ensuring gender equality. Philanthropic engagement in this area is an investment into Africa's future and a more equitable and sustainable world.



# CONTEXT

## Eastern, Western and Southern Africa

### What is the current state of knowledge on the issue?

The current state of knowledge on regional trade, policy and food system transformation in Africa recognises the need to transform food systems to improve access to healthy and sustainable diets. Multiple sources point to deepening appreciation that trade and policy contributes to all six dimensions of FSN, including through the social capital available in stakeholder groups' participation, collective action (agency), training, enhanced resilience and increased empowerment (Odjo et al. 2024, 2023; Clapp et al. 2022; HLPE 2020).

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### *Trade policies affect FSN outcomes via three channels: traffic, non-tariff measures and deep trade agreements*

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Trade policies affect FSN outcomes via three channels: traffic, non-tariff measures and deep trade agreements. The contribution of trade to food security is much debated. Proponents of the right to food argue that some trade restriction is necessary to promote local production and food sovereignty for food security. Conversely, proponents of neoliberalism consider trade to be paramount for food security, as it allows access to affordable and diverse food, thereby improving food security and diets. The tension between these narratives is a root cause of dysfunctional food systems and food insecurity (Odjo et al. 2024; Elver 2023). It is important to note, however, that trade interactions with food security and nutritional outcomes are influenced by structural drivers of food insecurity. These drivers include profit-driven food inflation, corporate control of and concentration in the food system, producers' response to adverse incentives and inequitable land distribution, which affect smallholder participation in food trade either as producers or consumers (Elver 2023; May 2021).

In addition, investment in effective trade facilitation, for example, is key to reducing the costs and delays caused by documentary and border compliance procedures (van Berkum 2021). To be effective, trade policy interventions must consider these factors and the complexity of trade and FSN, making the overall impact context-specific. Flexibility and coordination in designing and implementing trade policies are crucial, especially in the context of the AfCFTA (FAO & AUC 2021).

With specific reference to trade and transition, the regional trade literature reveals the following:

- I Growing awareness and attention to the role of **agroecological entrepreneurs and territorial markets** (AFSA 2024; Muigai et al. 2024).
- I Attention to **trade facilitation**. The main arguments for trade facilitation to promote intra-regional trade include the reduction of trade costs. While the agroecological transition presupposes shorter supply chains (or localness), fair trade and better connection between producers and consumers, agroecological food systems might still be entangled in the structures and dynamics of pan-African and regional trade and policies, given that the bulk of food is channelled through rural, peri-urban, urban local, national and regional *territorial* markets – positioning these markets as foremost among different kinds of market system in the context of FSN (Kay 2016).
- I The recognition that trade-related measures such as dealing with **tariff and non-tariff barriers** to trade can support the implementation of agroecological principles and practices (van Berkum 2021).
- I **Trade policies and food security**. Trade policies need to look beyond the possible short-term consequences of policy interventions when assessing their effectiveness in achieving food security objectives, and address the more transformational aspects of food systems (Fakhri 2021; FAO 2020).

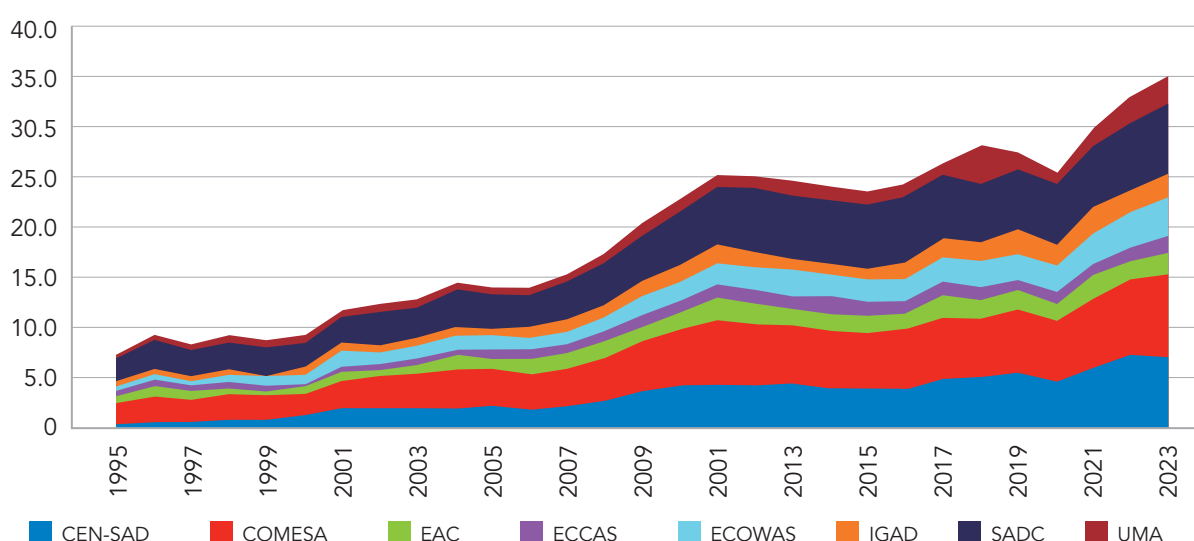


Trade in Africa, particularly intra-African trade, remains dismal even though increasing intra-regional food trade is a top policy priority for governments across Africa. Depending on the form of trade, whether liberal or transformative (Narula 2024), it potentially contributes to (or undermines) important development objectives, including FSN, resilience, the sustainability of food systems and livelihoods and economic development (Ngwu & Ojah 2024).

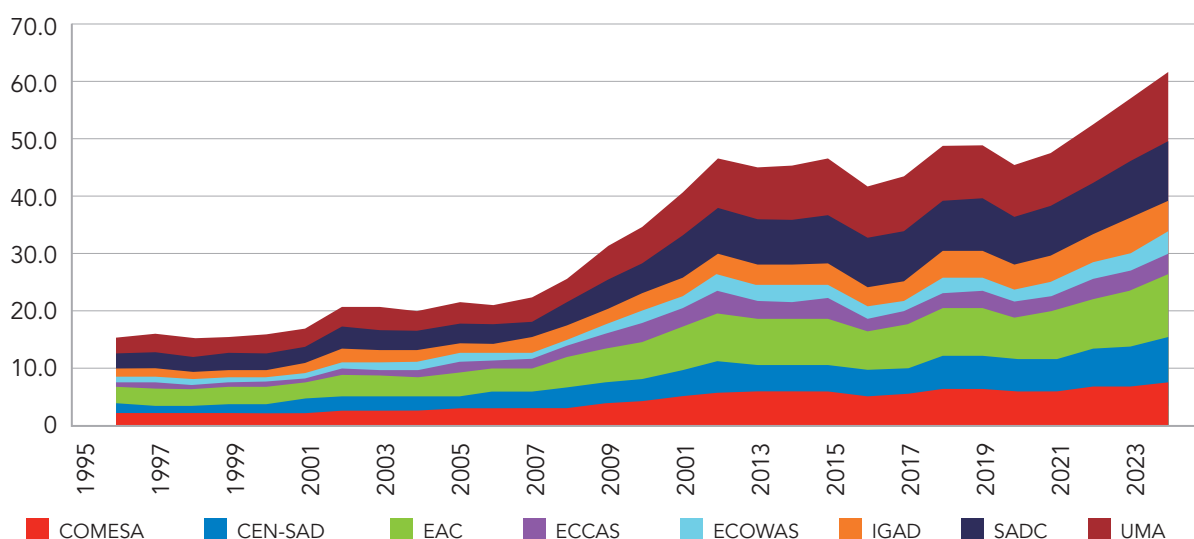
Figures 1 and 2 show trade between and within major regional economic communities (RECs) during 2020–2022.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) is the largest player in intra-African trade for both exports and imports, followed by the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa. The SADC has a substantial intra-African agricultural trade surplus, with exports to other African RECs exceeding imports by US\$834 million. This surplus corresponds to more than 10% of the SADC's total intra-African exports. Every other REC shows intra-African trade deficits, ranging from approximately 7% of export value in the East African Community to more than 200% in the Economic Community of Central African States (Odjo et al. 2024).

**FIGURE 1: INTRA-AFRICAN AGRICULTURAL TRADE IMPORTS (CONSTANT 2015 US\$ BILLION)**



**FIGURE 2: INTRA-AFRICAN AGRICULTURAL TRADE EXPORTS (CONSTANT 2015 US\$ BILLION)**



**Notes:**

- CEN-SAD refers to the Community of Sahel-Saharan States
- EAC refers to the East African Community
- ECOWAS refers to the Economic Community of West African States
- SADC refers to the Southern African Development Community

- COMESA refers to the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
- ECCAS refers to the Economic Community of Central African States
- IGAD refers to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development
- UMA refers to the Arab Maghreb Union (Union du Maghreb Arabe)

Source: Regional Strategic Analysis and Knowledge System 2023



## How does this issue relate to the converging dynamics of climate change, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, pollution, population growth, rapid urbanisation, migration and conflict?

The intersection of trade and the transition to agroecological food systems in Africa is shaped by the converging dynamics of climate change, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, pollution, population growth, rapid urbanisation, migration and conflict. These factors influence the sustainability and resilience of African food systems, necessitating a comprehensive approach that integrates trade policies with agroecological practices.

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### *Agroecology offers a pathway to building more sustainable and resilient food systems that can withstand environmental stresses*

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Climate change acts as a threat multiplier, exacerbating vulnerabilities in African food systems (Mamoundou et al. 2024; FAO et al. 2018). Agroecology offers a pathway to building more sustainable and resilient food systems that can withstand environmental stresses (Fakhri 2021; Pavageau et al. 2020). Trade policies must support the transition to agroecology by creating incentives for sustainable production, promoting local and regional markets and ensuring that trade agreements do not undermine environmental and social standards (van Berkum 2021; Hoffmann 2015). The AfCFTA presents opportunities and challenges for promoting sustainable food systems (Matchaya et al. 2024; UNECA 2023, 2022; Fusacchia et al. 2021). By reducing barriers to trade, the AfCFTA can facilitate regional integration, promote economic growth and enhance food security. However, achieving these goals requires the strategic development of regional food processing and supply chains that capitalise on local

production potential and ensure the equitable benefits of trade.

To ensure that trade contributes to a just and sustainable transition in Africa, policy-makers must adopt a holistic approach that integrates environmental sustainability, social equity and economic development (UNECA 2023). This includes promoting agroecology, supporting local food networks, investing in sustainable infrastructure and creating regulatory frameworks that protect vulnerable populations (May et al. 2021; Dengerink et al. 2021). It also requires a shift from regulatory to collaborative governance systems involving all stakeholders (UNECA 2023). By embracing this integrated approach, African countries can harness trade to build resilient, equitable and environmentally sustainable food systems (Dengerink et al. 2021; Fakhri 2021; Sibanda & Mwamakamba 2021).

## How does this issue play out at different scales?

Pan-African and regional trade and policy issues operate at different scales from farm to region. In the language of the framework employed in the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) study (2023), every level has peculiar food system transformation challenges, drivers and, ultimately, strategies. Nicol (2020) refers to these elements as ‘scaling out, scaling up and scaling deep’, in the context of the potential for community-led trade to enhance agroecological practices and support local food systems. Farmers’ decisions at the farm level can enhance efficiency, resilience and the agroecological transition. These decisions, based on context and objectives, influence landscape, market, society and policy levels. Reducing external inputs and recycling can lower costs, increase income and improve resource efficiency. This can lead to increased soil health, animal health, crop quality, food security, biodiversity, synergies and economic diversification. However, this is only the first step in the agroecological transition.

# HURDLES TO TRANSITION

Several obstacles and hurdles impede the reform of trade regimes for agroecological transitions and the emergence of trade regimes promoting agroecology. These challenges span economic, policy, structural and investment dimensions (Fusacchia et al. 2022; Hoffmann 2015).

- I **High pan-African and regional trade tariffs:** African countries impose high duties on trade with each other. On average, tariffs on agricultural goods reach 19.58%, the highest intra-continental trade tariff globally (Bouët et al. 2017).
- I **Non-tariff measures:** Significant non-tariff measures such as technical regulations and variations in certification, testing and inspection practices impede intra-African trade. SPS regulations, particularly those of the European Union (EU), can also act as barriers to entry for African exports (van Berkum 2022; Kornher & von Braun 2020; UNECA 2020a; Bureau & Swinnen 2018; Idsardi & Viviers 2018; Kareem & Rau 2018).
- I **Complex rules of origin:** Intra-regional African trade is hindered by complex rules of origin, which prevent firms from utilising preferential concessions under regional trade agreements. Overly restrictive rules of origin can negate preferential market access intended by free trade agreements and prevent regional supply chains from functioning independently (Fusacchia et al. 2022; UNECA 2020b; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2019).
- I **Limited price transmission:** Market inefficiencies, including poor infrastructure, unbalanced market power and illicit taxes, constrain price transmissions from international to domestic markets, contributing to high price volatility (van Berkum 2022; Pernechele et al. 2018).
- I **Market-driven innovations:** An emphasis on market-driven innovations by development actors across Africa that favour large corporations and export orientation can be counter-productive to agroecological goals (Pavageau et al. 2020; Newell 2019; Schnurr 2013).
- I **Profitability and scalability:** Concerns persist across the agricultural research for development (AR4D) community regarding the profitability and

scalability of agroecology and whether it can fit within short project time frames. Behind the façade of a fragmented AR4D landscape, the reality is of a handful of dominant organisations (e.g. the Gates Foundation) acting as brokers and setting the terms of agricultural research by dominating funding flows or by influencing others through partnerships and coalitions (Pavageau et al. 2020).

- I **Trade barriers:** High tariff and non-tariff barriers coupled with substantial transaction costs prevent large-scale trade across the continent. Poor trade facilitation (customs procedures, taxes, permits and administrative trade costs) is a significant driver of food insecurity in Africa, where intra-regional trade suffers greatly under complex and burdensome import and export procedures. Food availability and food access are significantly reduced by higher documentation requirements and long export and import procedures (van Berkum 2021; Bonuedi et al. 2020).

## Policy and institutional challenges

- I **Inadequate policy harmonisation:** Overlapping memberships in multiple regional groupings with different or contradictory objectives confuse regional integration goals and lead to counter-productive competition. The corollary is a failure of African countries to harmonise agricultural, industrial, trade, human resource, economic and other policies and standards (McKay et al. 2024; Fusacchia et al. 2022; UNECA 2022; Geda & Seid 2015).
- I **Dominance of the industrial agriculture model:** The dominance of the industrial agriculture model presents policy and institutional changes to reforming trade regime for the agroecological transition in several ways including policy and institutional lock-in (Pavageau et al. 2020; Wezel et al. 2020; IPES-Food 2016). Problematic general incentives in trade rules foster excessive specialisation and factory-like mass production (Böhm et al. 2016; Hoffmann 2015). Low (or even a lack of) policy awareness of alternatives to the green revolution model is a significant barrier

to implementing more agroecological projects (Materia et al. 2021). As a consequence, traditional agroecological practices are neglected because of international obligations and trade laws. Policy tools that regulate chain integrity, safety and compliance further marginalise local foods (Lee 2024; Njaya 2015).

■ **Limited integration of agroecology in the AfCFTA:**

The AfCFTA does not explicitly or fully incorporate the principles of agroecology in its framework (Merbold et al. 2024; Ouko et al. 2024; UNECA 2021). The AfCFTA's primary focus on conventional trade objectives such as reducing trade barriers and promoting trade (UNECA 2023) may overshadow specific needs and considerations of agroecological systems that often go beyond ensuring tradable products; namely, providing essential ecological services, culture and livelihoods, among others (van Berkum 2021). The AfCFTA's policy tools may regulate chain integrity, safety and compliance in ways that further marginalise local food systems, which are central to agroecological approaches (Smith et al. 2016).

- **Need for supportive policies:** The absence of supportive trade measures needed to strengthen food security and sustainable rural development suggest that trade rules need to shift focus apace with the emerging consensus of environmental sustainability and nutritious food as food systems outcome. Currently, the policy space for environmental protection and healthy food in trade agreements is restricted (Smith et al. 2026). For agroecology transitions to be realised, a shift in focus is needed to develop regional food processing and supply chains and build trade policies that support these (Ahmad & Köpke 2024; Milhorance et al. 2024; Raftowicz et al. 2024; Tataridas & Freitas 2024; Place et al. 2022; Nicholls & Altieri 2018).

## Need for capacity-building and infrastructure development

- Innovation's current profit-driven evolutionary selection is insufficient for steering food systems towards sustainability, necessitating a paradigm shift from a 'game-changer' to a directional process.
- The current innovation process lacks a purposeful, goal-oriented dimension that ensures economic viability and sustainability in the food market. A prescriptive restructuring is needed.
- Reintroducing true competitiveness in the food system is crucial for smaller actors and newcomers to engage, disrupt the status quo and participate in necessary changes.
- Trade infrastructure and logistics are inadequate, thereby impeding on intra-African trade.

## Current state of transition funding

The funding landscape for agroecological trade initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa is complex and challenging. Funding comes from a mix of international donors, governments, private sector actors and philanthropies. While there is growing interest in agroecological approaches, actual investment and support remain limited and fragmented. In particular, funding for trade-related aspects (e.g. market access, value chain development, export promotion) remains limited compared to conventional agricultural funding since the majority of funders endorse some principles of agroecology while simultaneously supporting industrial agriculture (Pavageau et al. 2020).



## Key aspects of transition funding

Funding sources	Status
EU	The EU has been a significant funder of agroecology initiatives in Africa, particularly through programmes such as Development Smart Innovation through Research in Agriculture (DeSIRA), which supports research and innovation in agroecology (GFA Consulting Group 2024; Milhorange et al. 2024).
UN and multilateral agencies	FAO: Provides technical and financial support for agroecology projects, including trade-related aspects (Marfurt et al. 2024; Achterberg & Quiroz 2021).
	United Nations Development Programme: Funds initiatives that link agroecology to the SDGs, including market access (Hailu et al. 2024).
	IFAD: Supports smallholder farmers in adopting agroecological practices and improving market linkages (IFAD 2023).
	World Bank: While traditionally focused on conventional agriculture, the World Bank has started to fund projects that incorporate agroecological principles, including value chain development (Sib et al. 2024).
	Global Environment Facility (GEF): Funds projects that align agroecology with environmental sustainability, including trade-related components (GEF 2023).
African governments and regional bodies	African Union (AU): Through the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme, the AU promotes sustainable agricultural practices, including agroecology, although funding for trade-specific aspects is limited (UNECA 2022; UNECA 2021; UNECA 2020a).
	National governments: Some African countries (e.g. Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya and Senegal) have integrated agroecology into their national agricultural policies, with limited funding allocated to trade-related initiatives (Sib et al. 2024).
	RECs: Organisations such as ECOWAS and SADC support agroecology through regional trade policies and programmes (UNECA 2023).
Private sector and foundations	Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA): While primarily focused on conventional agriculture, AGRA has started to explore funding for sustainable practices, including agroecology (Kelam 2024; Vicedom & Wynberg 2024).
	Philanthropies: Support agroecology initiatives and agroecological transitions to address urgent global agricultural and environmental challenges. These foundations include the African Climate Foundation, the Agroecology Fund, Biovision – Foundation for Ecological Development, Builders Initiative, the Children's Investment Fund Foundation, the ClimateWorks Foundation, the Erol Foundation, the European Climate Foundation, the Funders for Regenerative Agriculture, the Global Alliance for the Future of Food, the GRACE Communications Foundation, the Instituto Ibirapitanga, the IKEA Foundation, the India Climate Collaborative, the Instituto Clima e Sociedade, the Laudes Foundation, the Macdoch Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, the Oak Foundation, the Platform for Agriculture and Climate Transformation, Porticus, the Robert Bosch Stiftung, The Rockefeller Foundation, the Thread Fund, and the Walton Family Foundation.
	The Gates Foundation: Historically focused on conventional agriculture but there is growing pressure for the foundation to fund agroecology, including trade-related aspects (AGRA 2024).



Funding sources	Status
Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and CSOs	AFSA: Advocates for agroecology and supports trade-related initiatives, such as local market development and farmer cooperatives (Greenberg 2024).
	Oxfam: Funds agroecology projects that include trade and market access components (Achterberg & Quiroz 2021).
	Slow Food International: Supports agroecology initiatives that promote local food systems and trade (Chanyau & Rosenberg 2024).

## Funding amounts

Funding for agroecology is generally fragmented and difficult to quantify precisely. However, estimates suggest that agroecology receives less than 10% of total agricultural funding in Africa (Agroecology Fund 2023). The trade-related aspects of agroecology (e.g. market access, value chain development) receive even smaller portions of this funding, as most resources are directed towards production and research. For example, the EU's DeSIRA initiative allocated over €270 million to agroecology projects in Africa (as of 2023), with some funding directed towards trade-related activities (GFA Consulting Group 2024). The IFAD has invested over US\$200 million in agroecology-related projects in Africa, including components for market access and value chains (IFAD 2023). The GEF has provided approximately US\$50 million for agroecology projects in Africa, with a focus on environmental sustainability and trade linkages (GEF 2023).

## Challenges in funding trade-related agroecology

- Limited focus on trade: Most funding for agroecology is directed towards production and research, with less emphasis on trade and market access.
- Donor priorities: Many donors still prioritise conventional agriculture and high-input systems over agroecology.
- Lack of data: There is limited data on the economic and trade benefits of agroecology, making it difficult to attract funding for trade-related aspects. As a result, agroecology is often viewed sceptically due to concerns about its economic viability, scalability and longer time frames for delivering returns compared to industrial practices. This bias favours targeted, technological solutions that promise quick results.
- Policy gaps: Weak policy frameworks for agroecology in many African countries hinder the allocation of funds for trade-related initiatives.





## Opportunities for increased funding

- Growing interest in sustainability: Increasing global interest in sustainable agriculture and climate resilience could lead to more funding for agroecology, including trade-related aspects.
- Farmer-led movements: Grassroots movements advocating for agroecology are gaining momentum, potentially influencing funding priorities.
- Public-private partnerships: Collaborations between governments, NGOs and the private sector could unlock new funding streams for agroecology trade initiatives.
- International advocacy: Organisations like the AFSA and La Via Campesina are pushing for greater investment in agroecology at international forums such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the FAO.

## Gaps in funding and areas needing more attention for supporting agroecological practices

- Low-cost, long-term funding for small-scale food systems operations are needed, particularly for women, minorities and small-scale farmers during the transition to agroecological practices.
- Gaps in funding for destabilising 'big food' exist, necessitating a normative, purposeful transformation involving a fundamental shift in food system governance to disempower incumbent actors.
- Food sovereignty movements face conflict over donor-directed development, with critics highlighting the violence of outcomes-based funding and logical frameworks. This is unsettling in light of the grounded discourse on food sovereignty calls for structural and redistributive reforms around land, water and agricultural resources. Moreover, complexity and decolonial theories suggest new funding mechanisms based on trust and local decision-making rather than relying on outcomes and indicator boxes. This acknowledges the importance of co-being and human-non-human actors.



## The extent to which key levers are currently receiving philanthropic attention and support

Industrial food systems are being challenged on multiple fronts, from new forms of cooperation and knowledge-creation to the development of new market relationships that bypass conventional retail circuits. However, the future technology and systemic 'innovation-driven' approach is problematic, given that innovation as an evolutionary process is intrinsically driven by profit, not by sustainability. This very fact prevents innovations from creating the strong unidirectionality that is needed for transformation to happen.

## Areas where more strategic investment is needed to support pan-African and regional trade and policy development and agroecology

Innovation and sustainability need to be aligned. Innovation alone is not enough to solve problems; a prescriptive restructuring of the innovation process is required. Economic priorities and profitability drive major socio-technical progress, but this process may create undesirable lock-ins. Sustainable transformation requires a purposeful, normative and goal-oriented component. Transforming food system governance and shifting political incentives is crucial for emerging alternatives.

## Ways in which current philanthropic funding strategies and mechanisms might be exacerbating problematic trends

The emphasis on market-driven innovations that favour 'big food' is counter-intuitive. The focus on export orientation can also be counter-productive – tweaking practices that improve only some specific outcomes but do not provide long-term solutions to the multiple problems created by industrial agriculture.

Improvements to align funding with transformative goals towards agroecology might include providing appropriate incentives, regulations and social licences through constructive stakeholder dialogue and clear transition pathways. Establishing a normative environment guides technological innovation, ensuring that desirable innovations are identified and supported while deterring non-sustainability-oriented ones. This governance system should challenge anti-competition regulations, which are seen as biased against nature and discriminatory, leading to climate, food and health injustices. A holistic strategy involving regenerative agroecology and diversified systems informs transition implementation to promote long-term fertility, healthy agro-ecosystems and secure livelihoods.





# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORT TO PROMOTE TRANSITIONS

To effectively support the agroecological transformation of African food systems through trade-related initiatives,

philanthropy can focus on several actionable strategies, implementation mechanisms and key partnerships.

## 1. Support territorial markets as trading pathways for agroecological produce

For example, increase recognition and support for agroecological entrepreneurs, encourage the establishment of smallholders' markets as spaces of access to healthy agroecological food and decent, predictable incomes. Such actions serve to reinforce territorial food systems (or at least to soften deterritorialisation forces). This can be achieved by working through multi-scalar, cross-sector collaborations between the government, civil society and the private sector to establish mechanisms for fair trade, agroecology, food sovereignty and the right to food.

Smallholders and territorial markets are in many respects better equipped to deal with systemic challenges – such as increasing climate and price shocks. This is largely due to the multi-functionality of territorial markets involving smallholder farmers and diversified farming systems. Multiple marketing channels for food trade, with the possibility of relying on self-consumption or short circuits when this is the best option, means that producers in territorial markets are less vulnerable to price swings in international markets and the breakdown of long, centralised agro-food chains.

Philanthropic efforts can focus on supporting on-going initiatives to create fair trade conditions by providing financial resources, technical assistance and capacity-building support to local stakeholders. This can involve:

- Working with governments to implement supportive policies;
- Collaborating with grassroots organisations to create fair market conditions; and
- Investing in research and development to improve agroecological practices.

## 2. Promote local and regional food trade

This can be achieved by facilitating the use of trade policy instruments, such as tariffs and other trade-facilitating measures, which would enable smallholder farmers to participate in profitable short food supply lines. A range of public policy tools can be used to follow up on this recommendation including support prices, protection against dumping, marketing boards, low-cost mobile phone-based market price information systems and competition policy to name but a few.

## 3. Advocate for policy changes and monitor trade policies

Philanthropies can advocate for and monitor the implementation of trade policies that incorporate externalities and reinforce non-market values, supporting environmentally sustainable, nutritionally dense and safe food systems through local and regional trade arrangements.

Similar policy advocacy might include:

- Addressing the limited integration of agroecology in the AfCFTA framework by supporting policies that recognise the ecological services, cultural value and livelihoods associated with agroecological systems.
- Supporting policies that fuse overcoming tariff and non-tariff barriers and narrowing the divergence between the food-related provisions of RECs with efforts to promote agroecology and prioritise territorial markets and food sovereignty.



#### 4. Support the reduction of trade costs

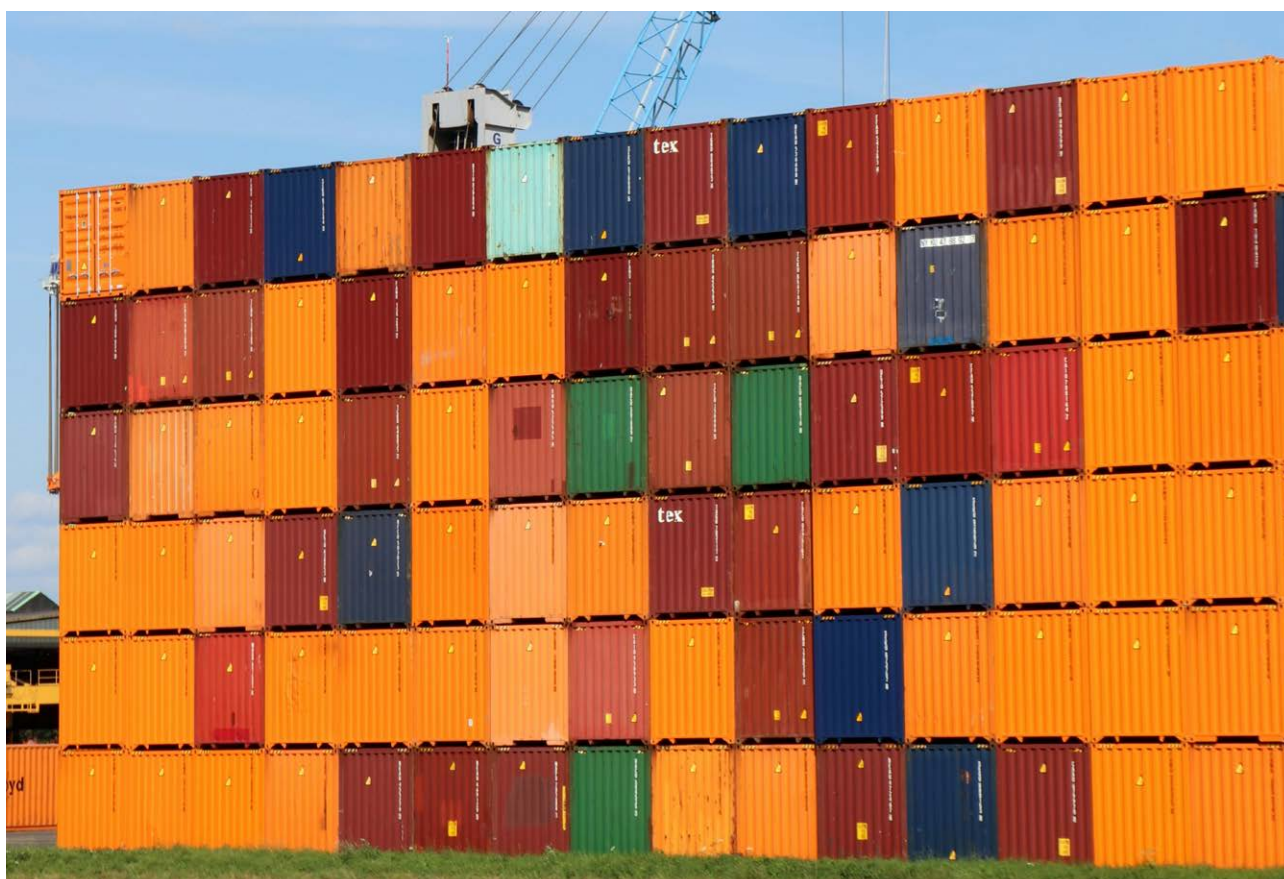
- Encourage the implementation of measures to reduce trade costs such as high tariffs and non-tariff barriers, which disproportionately affect small-scale businesses.
- Simplify customs procedures, taxes, permits and administrative trade costs to facilitate intra-regional trade.
- Advocate for trade facilitation to promote intra-regional trade, reduce trade costs and ensure fair trade and better connection between producers and consumers.

#### 5. Capacity-building and infrastructure development

- Provide financial resources, technical assistance and capacity-building support to empower local stakeholders.
- Ensure equitable power relations and support initiatives that strengthen civil society's role in policy advocacy.
- Empower communities to engage in trade-related policy-making processes.
- Support capacity-building for all stakeholders involved in agricultural development and transformation, including policy-makers, farmers, managers of farmers' cooperatives, extension service providers, staff from technical and financial institutions and business enterprises, and external consultants.
- Invest in capacity-building for agroecological communities of practice via learning platforms and knowledge exchange.

#### 6. Address policy gaps

Weak policy frameworks for agroecology in many African countries hinder the allocation of funds for trade-related initiatives. Support efforts to co-create coherent trade policy reforms that align with national development plans to address market failures in food systems and frameworks that ensure policy consistency and mechanisms to expedite the process of domesticating the protocols already agreed on.



## 7. Financial support and resources

- Provide long-term financial support, training and resources to smallholder agroecological farmers to enhance productivity and resilience by facilitating access to credit and financial products tailored for the agroecological transition.
- Make greater investments to capture greater value from local agricultural food products through processing and growing domestic markets to reduce dependence on imports and enhance food sovereignty.

## Implementation mechanisms

- I **Philanthropic funding and non-financial resources:** Catalyse change by providing financial resources, expertise and advocacy to support progressive movements and help bridge existing gaps between research, practice and policy, which would ensure that trade systems align with ecological sustainability, social equity and economic resilience.
- I **Collaborative governance systems:** Shift from regulatory to collaborative governance systems involving all stakeholders including local communities, indigenous knowledge-holders and CSOs.
- I **Supporting research and innovation:**
  - Invest in research and development to improve the profitability and scalability of agroecological practices;
  - Co-create knowledge and innovation design with local, national and regional stakeholders to signal transformation pathways for African food systems;
  - Focus on the operational elements of agroecology as first steps in a well-sequenced strategy for transformation;
  - Initiate an alliance to formulate principles and guidelines for agroecological research; and
  - Monitor trade and related practices, and showcase agroecological success stories.
- I **Promoting fair trade practices:** Collaborate with cooperatives and grassroots organisations to create fair market conditions for smallholder farmers and accelerate shifts towards territorial supply chains and ethical consumerism.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Establish a robust framework to ensure the adoption and implementation of proposed policies to avoid inaction.

## Key partnerships

- I **Support and recognise key organisations** such as the AFSA and other actors that are actively fighting against industrial food systems and promoting food sovereignty and the right to food. Strengthen civil society's role in policy advocacy and empower communities to engage in trade-related policy-making processes.
- I **Collaborate with research institutions** to ensure that trade systems align with ecological sustainability, social equity and economic resilience.
- I **Work with African governments and RECs** to harmonise trade and related (economic, financial, industrial and labour) policies and standards. Collaborate with cooperatives and grassroots organisations to create fair market conditions for smallholder farmers.
- I **Partner with community-based enterprises** to transform rural livelihoods and promote heritage-based economic systems.

By focusing on these strategies, mechanisms and partnerships, philanthropy can play a crucial role in transforming African food systems towards greater sustainability, equity and resilience.

# CASE STUDIES

## Common Agro-Industrial Park, Zambia and Zimbabwe

The first-ever common agro-industrial park (CAIP) is being established by Zambia and Zimbabwe as a cooperative venture to promote economic growth, regional cooperation and industrialisation. To increase agricultural production, industrial value addition and trade between the two countries, this effort constitutes a ground-breaking partnership. An initiative within the SADC, the CAIP is a model of regional integration with the goals of improving food security, diversifying economies and generating long-term jobs.

The primary objectives of the CAIP are threefold: (a) promoting agro-industrialisation; (b) enhancing regional trade; and (c) creating employment and improving livelihoods. On promoting agro-industrialisation, through the introduction of cutting-edge technology, contemporary agricultural methods and agro-processing facilities, the CAIP seeks to modernise agriculture. By doing this, Zambia and Zimbabwe would be able to develop agricultural

products with more value added and become less dependent on the export of raw commodities.

With regard to enhancing regional trade, the park is anticipated to boost trade relations between Zambia and Zimbabwe as well as with other SADC members by boosting agro-industrial production. Within the CAIP framework, unrestricted cross-border trade in products and services would promote the growth of regional value chains and raise the level of competitiveness of domestic sectors.

In terms of creating employment and improving livelihoods, jobs will be created by the agro-industrial park, especially in rural areas where agriculture is still the main source of income. There will be jobs in agriculture, processing, transportation and related sectors, which will improve under-privileged areas and lessen the movement of people from rural to urban areas.





## Integral Kumusha, Zimbabwe

**Integral Kumusha** is a community-based enterprise for societal transformation from poverty to prosperity. To achieve this, Integral Kumusha is transforming rural homesteads into viable business entities through partnerships and collaboration, and creating a heritage, ubuntu-based economic system that promotes prosperity and a greater legacy for future generations. Located in Mutoko Village in Buhera North of Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe, 'The Smart Integral Kumusha' was officially launched as the national model rural homestead on 8

December 2021. Current operations and products include livestock farming, traditional crop farming, horticulture production using drip irrigation, rural tourism, organic manure production and soil regeneration, apiculture, value addition, water harvesting, solar energy harnessing, land conservation, knowledge creation and field torus, and consultancy and projects. The key learnings from this case include innovation (*Nhakanomics*) to stimulate systemic transformation, experimentation, knowledge co-creation, networking and local socio-economic development.

## Intra-African trade challenges: A case for the AfCFTA

Consider a South African client who wants to buy chocolate made from Ghanaian cocoa beans. When the cocoa beans travel from Africa to Europe and are transformed into chocolate in Belgium and then exported to South Africa, there is a 0% duty on the product. When the cocoa is transformed into chocolate in the same country where the beans were grown (i.e. in Ghana) and exported to South Africa, there is a duty of approximately 20% on the product. So, although intra-African trade between Ghana and South Africa saves lots of (unnecessary) transport cost and has a lower net price (and a far smaller CO2 footprint), at the end, the product is still more expensive than if it was made in Belgium. Europe has done an amazing job of negotiating these trade agreements.

In the case of the EU, traditional farm subsidy and protection policies have been aggregated into a regional policy. Nonetheless, the governance institutions of the European Commission's Common Agricultural Policy remain dominated by a council of national ministers of agriculture. Ultimately, decisions are made through bargaining among the heads of separate national governments. At the end of the negotiation, it is the EU versus the rest of the world. The AfCFTA must thus be mindful in setting up common policies for a pan-African trade regime that will also develop the continent's food system to achieve food sovereignty for AU member countries.





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- Members of The Advisory Committee
- Philanthropic Partners
- Strategic Partners Network
- The Pan African and Regional Trade and Policy for the Food Systems Transition

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**African  
Food Systems  
Transformation  
Collective**

## African Food Systems Transformation Collective

This network of researchers and food systems development experts collaborates to inform philanthropies, governments and development finance organisations on funding strategies to promote transitions to sustainable, equitable and resilient food systems across Africa.

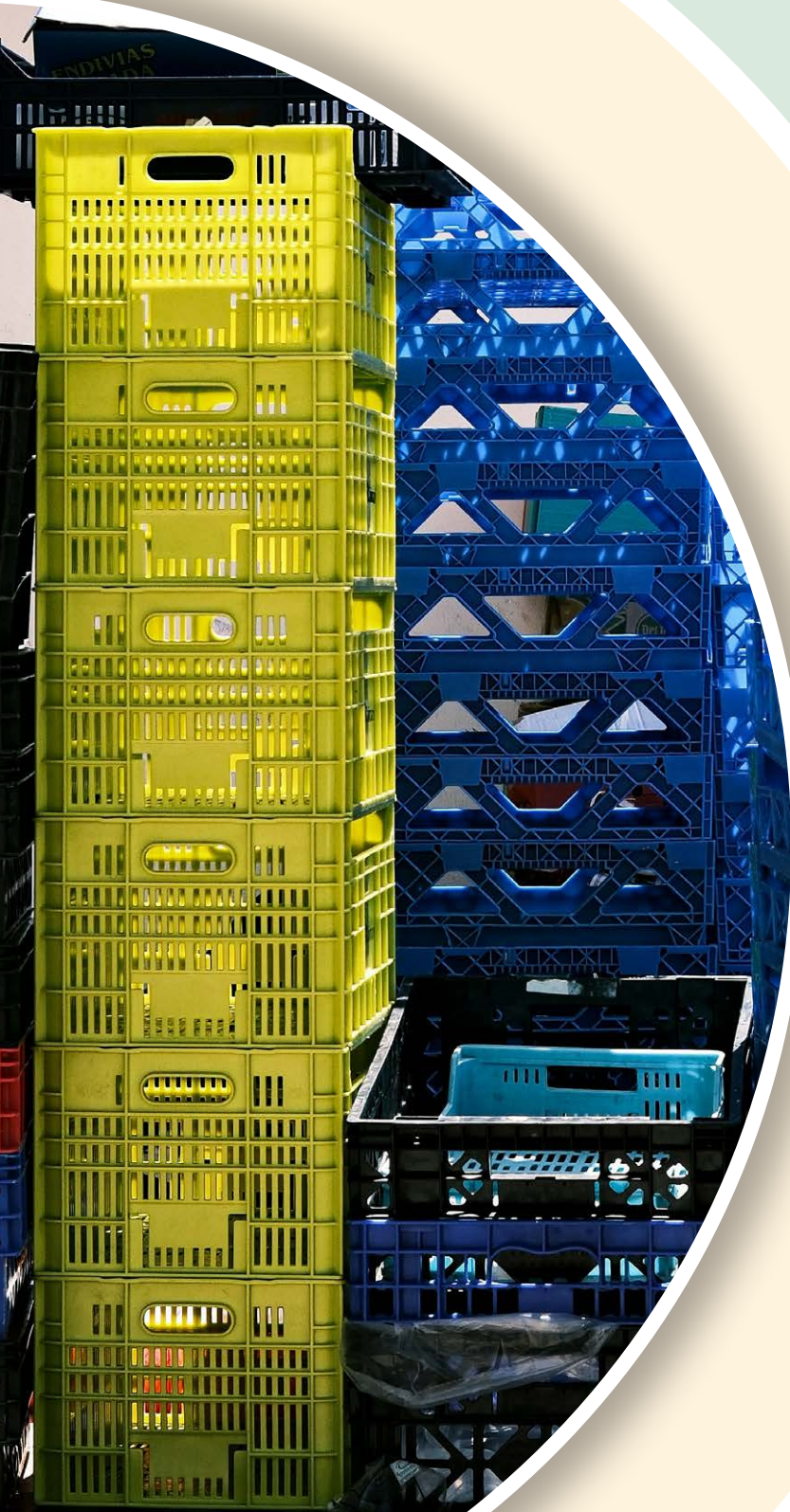
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