



Organic Agriculture Outlook in Uganda

Sector Outlook, Policy Direction, and Strategic Pathways – August 2025

● Background

Agriculture remains a foundational pillar of Uganda's economy, contributing a significant share of national output and employing a large proportion of the labour force (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS], 2025). The sector influences household incomes, national food availability, export earnings, and macroeconomic stability. However, persistent challenges including soil nutrient depletion, climate variability, land fragmentation, and rising costs of external inputs continue to constrain productivity and profitability. These pressures underscore the need for production systems that are economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and socially inclusive.

Organic agriculture has gained increasing policy relevance within this context because it presents an alternative production paradigm grounded in ecological sustainability and smallholder adaptability. By emphasising composting, mulching, crop rotation, biological pest management, and integrated nutrient cycling, organic systems enhance soil organic matter and improve long-term land productivity (Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries [MAAIF], 2020). In a climate-sensitive agricultural economy, such systems strengthen resilience to erratic rainfall and reduce dependence on imported agrochemicals, thereby stabilising farm-level production costs and limiting foreign exchange expenditure.

Globally, organic agriculture has transitioned from a niche movement into a recognised component of sustainable agricultural transformation, with expanding market demand and institutional recognition (Willer et al., 2025). This broader global trajectory situates Uganda within an evolving international food system where environmental sustainability, traceability, and food safety increasingly shape market competitiveness.

● Current Trends and Overview of Organic Production in Uganda

Organic agriculture in Uganda has evolved into a structured sector characterised by widespread smallholder participation and organised group certification systems. National documentation indicates that more than 200,000 farmers are engaged in certified organic production, cultivating over 250,000 hectares under organic management (MAAIF, 2020). Production is concentrated in coffee-growing regions of Central, Western, and Eastern Uganda, alongside cocoa, oilseed, fruit, spice, and horticultural zones.

A defining operational feature of Uganda's organic system is its **group-based certification** model, where farmers are organised into cooperatives, associations, or out-grower schemes operating under internal control systems. This structure enables geographically dispersed producers across multiple districts to aggregate volumes for export while maintaining compliance with international standards. Increasingly, these organised clusters are progressing beyond primary production into semi-processing and value addition activities, including coffee hulling, cocoa fermentation, oilseed cleaning, spice drying, fruit pulping, and branded packaging. This shift reflects gradual vertical integration within organic value chains.

Export markets remain dominant in certified organic trade, particularly for coffee, cocoa, sesame, vanilla, and dried fruits. However, a visible expansion of domestic agroecological and organic markets is emerging, especially in urban centres such as Kampala, Entebbe, Jinja, and Mbarara. Through exhibitions, territorial markets, and Participatory Guarantee Systems, organised producer networks are supplying fresh produce, indigenous foods, honey, herbs, and processed products to local consumers. Although still smaller than export channels, domestic organic markets are steadily gaining traction.

Another important trend is the rise of organic input enterprises. Farmer innovators and small businesses are producing compost-based fertilisers, botanical pesticides, microbial bio-inputs, and soil conditioners, thereby expanding Uganda's organic input catalogue. Youth- and women-led enterprises are increasingly entering aggregation, packaging, and distribution segments, signalling diversification and entrepreneurial dynamism within the sector.

This structural evolution demonstrates that Uganda's organic agriculture is no longer confined to raw commodity export; it is gradually transitioning into a more integrated system combining production, processing, local marketing, and innovation.



● Challenges of the Organic Sector in Uganda

Despite its recognised economic and environmental potential, the organic sector in Uganda continues to face deep structural, institutional, and market-related constraints. A major challenge remains the **high cost and complexity of certification**, particularly for smallholder farmers seeking access to export markets. Compliance with international organic standards requires detailed record-keeping, periodic inspections, internal control systems, and renewal audits, all of which impose administrative and financial burdens on producer groups. While group certification mechanisms have broadened participation, costs associated with inspections, documentation, and corrective actions remain significant for farmer associations operating with limited capital (MAAIF, 2020). Transitional periods, during which farms shift from conventional to organic systems, may also involve temporary yield reductions, further discouraging adoption among resource-constrained households.

Market structure presents another substantial constraint. Although Uganda has established export channels for organic coffee, cocoa, vanilla, oilseeds, and fruits, the **domestic organic market remains underdeveloped**. Consumer awareness of certified organic products is still emerging, and purchasing power limitations restrict demand for premium-priced goods. This narrow domestic base increases dependence on export markets, which are vulnerable to global price fluctuations, exchange rate volatility, and changing regulatory requirements. Weak traceability systems, limited cold-chain and aggregation infrastructure, and inadequate investment in value addition further reduce farmers' ability to capture higher margins within organic value chains (Willer et al., 2025).

Institutional and research gaps also constrain sector growth. Organic agriculture requires specialised knowledge in soil biology, ecological pest management, biodiversity conservation, and bio-input formulation. However, public agricultural research and extension systems have historically prioritised conventional input-intensive production models. As a result, extension messaging often centres on hybrid seed, synthetic fertilisers, and chemical pesticides, leaving organic farmers with limited technical advisory support tailored to agroecological systems (MAAIF, 2020). The absence of dedicated funding streams for organic research limits innovation in locally adapted organic seed systems, microbial fertilisers, and ecological crop protection solutions.

A further structural challenge lies in **policy orientation and investment bias towards conventional and plantation-based agriculture**. National development strategies have often emphasised large-scale commercialisation, monoculture expansion, and agro-industrial processing models that depend on external inputs. Public subsidy frameworks and agricultural credit schemes frequently prioritise synthetic fertilisers and improved seed packages, thereby marginalising organic producers who do not rely on such inputs. This policy bias can create uneven competitive conditions, where conventional systems benefit from institutional backing while organic producers must rely heavily on civil society support and self-organisation.

Climate variability adds an additional layer of risk. Although organic systems improve resilience over time through enhanced soil organic matter and water retention, extreme weather events and prolonged drought can still affect yields, particularly during conversion periods. Without structured insurance schemes, climate finance integration, or transitional support mechanisms, smallholders may perceive organic adoption as risky.

Furthermore, coexistence concerns related to genetically modified crop expansion present emerging regulatory challenges, particularly for export-oriented organic producers who must maintain strict compliance with non-GMO standards.

Collectively, these constraints highlight that the growth of Uganda's organic sector requires more than farmer-level adoption. It demands coherent legislation, targeted research investment, balanced policy incentives, structured domestic market development, and institutional recognition that places organic agriculture alongside, rather than subordinate to, conventional commercialisation strategies.

● Role of CSOs in Organic Sector Promotion

Capacity building and innovation support for organic production have been strengthened through coordinated civil society action across Uganda. Organisations such as **ACSA**, **PELUM Uganda**, **NOGAMU**, **Slow Food Uganda**, and the **Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA)** operate through wide membership networks and farmer associations that are geographically dispersed across multiple districts, creating a national body of organised organic producers. Through structured farmer training, demonstration sites, and innovation documentation, these organisations support compost production, botanical pesticide development, bio-input enterprises, crop rotation systems, and soil regeneration practices. In particular, ACSA promotes farmer-led organic innovations and contributes to expanding Uganda's organic input catalogue, enabling producers to access locally developed alternatives to synthetic fertilisers and agrochemicals.

Market development and aggregation have equally been advanced through coordinated platforms that link scattered producers into structured value chains. Under agroecology and territorial market initiatives, PELUM Uganda convenes agroecological entrepreneurs and market actors to showcase value-added and raw organic products, facilitating exchange between farmers, processors, and buyers. Such platforms demonstrate how clusters of organic producers are increasingly moving beyond primary production into small-scale processing, packaging, and branding of coffee, cocoa, oilseeds, spices, and indigenous food products. Slow Food Uganda complements these efforts by promoting indigenous crops, strengthening quality assurance practices, and guiding producers on pricing strategies and market readiness, thereby improving competitiveness in both exhibition spaces and continuous market environments.

Standards assurance and certification coordination form another critical layer of support within the organic ecosystem. Through collaboration with certification bodies such as **UGOCERT**, networks coordinated by NOGAMU facilitate inspection, compliance, and traceability processes for organised farmer groups. Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) are increasingly promoted as locally grounded quality assurance mechanisms that can serve domestic markets where third-party certification may be financially prohibitive. Advocacy for a nationally recognised PGS mark, supported by leaders within PELUM and Slow Food Uganda, reflects a collective effort to institutionalise trust and consistency in agroecological products across producer networks.



Policy advocacy and continental coordination further reinforce this chain of organised organic actors. AFSA and allied organisations amplify farmer voices within national and regional policy debates, promoting agroecology as a climate-resilient and biodiversity-enhancing pathway. By linking district-level producer groups to national platforms and continental advocacy bodies, these CSOs create an interconnected system of organic producers, aggregators, processors, and market actors. The cumulative effect is the gradual transformation of dispersed smallholder organic farmers into structured value chain participants, with increasing numbers transitioning into processing, branding, and value addition enterprises that strengthen income generation and sector sustainability.

● The Future of the Organic Sector in Uganda

The future of the organic sector in Uganda will largely be shaped by the strength of its legislative and institutional framework. A central development in this regard is the proposed **National Organic Agriculture Bill**, which seeks to provide a statutory basis for organic production, certification, labelling, inspection, and market regulation. Once enacted and operationalised, the Bill is expected to clarify institutional mandates, formalise standards enforcement, and enhance consumer confidence in organic products. A legally anchored framework would also improve coordination among regulatory bodies, certification agencies, and producer organisations, thereby reducing fragmentation within the sector.

Institutional consolidation will depend on effective collaboration among entities such as **UGOCERT**, **NOGAMU**, and the **Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS)**. UGOCERT, as a locally rooted certification body, has the potential to expand access to affordable inspection and certification services, reducing reliance on foreign certifiers and strengthening national ownership of standards assurance. NOGAMU's coordinating role within organic trade networks positions it to link producers, exporters, and processors within a structured value chain framework. UNBS, through its mandate on standards development and quality assurance, will remain central to harmonising national organic standards with regional and international benchmarks, thereby safeguarding both domestic consumers and export credibility. The effectiveness of these institutions will determine whether Uganda's organic sector transitions from a predominantly export-oriented niche to a more comprehensive and regulated industry.

Another defining factor for the future of organic agriculture in Uganda lies in the ongoing parliamentary debates surrounding Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and biotechnology legislation. The regulatory direction taken on GMOs will have implications for coexistence frameworks, biosafety enforcement, traceability requirements, and export market access. Organic systems require strict avoidance of genetic contamination to maintain certification integrity, particularly for markets in Europe and North America where GMO thresholds are tightly regulated. As biotechnology legislation evolves, safeguards will need to ensure that organic producers are protected from cross-contamination risks and that their market differentiation is preserved. The policy balance between biotechnology adoption and agroecological expansion will significantly influence Uganda's agricultural identity in the coming decades.

Looking forward, the organic sector's expansion will also depend on strengthening research, extension, and innovation systems tailored specifically to organic production. Public agricultural research institutions and universities will need to invest in soil biology, bio-fertiliser development, organic seed systems, and agroecological pest management. Extension services must be equipped to support organic transition pathways, including soil fertility rebuilding during conversion periods. Integration of organic agriculture within climate adaptation strategies and green growth frameworks offers further opportunity, particularly as international climate finance increasingly prioritises regenerative and low-carbon production systems.

Market transformation will equally be critical. While export markets remain important, the long-term sustainability of the sector requires development of structured domestic organic markets supported by consumer awareness, credible labelling, and consistent pricing systems. Expansion of Participatory Guarantee Systems can facilitate domestic assurance mechanisms, especially for territorial and urban markets. Furthermore, strengthening value addition and agro-processing among organised farmer clusters will enhance income retention within rural communities. As scattered organic producers increasingly aggregate and transition into processing enterprises, the sector can generate employment, improve rural industrialisation, and contribute to broader economic diversification.

In summary, the future of organic agriculture in Uganda is promising but contingent upon coherent legislation, effective institutional coordination, biosafety safeguards, strengthened research and extension systems, and sustained civil society engagement. If these elements converge, organic agriculture can evolve into a structured pillar of Uganda's agricultural transformation, contributing to climate resilience, foreign exchange earnings, rural employment, and long-term ecological sustainability.

● About Advocacy Coalition for Sustainable Agriculture (ACSA)

The Advocacy Coalition for Sustainable Agriculture (ACSA) is a legally registered national network of Civil Society Organisations working with smallholder farmers to advance sustainable agriculture, agricultural market development, environmental conservation, research, and policy advocacy. ACSA now has **30 member organisations** operating across **52 districts** in Uganda. Its mission is to empower Civil Society Organisations, including church and non-church actors, to advocate for a favourable agrarian policy environment for sustainable communities, and its **Vision** is smallholder farmers living in a sustainable environment. ACSA advances this mandate through **advocacy and lobbying, research and documentation, capacity building** for member organisations and the Secretariat, and **networking and partnership building**, to ensure that relevant agricultural policies and services are effectively implemented to foster profitable and sustainable smallholder enterprises.

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