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Eastern and Southern Africa region program

Despite facing multiple and overlapping shocks, the economies of African countries remain resilient and average growth is projected to stabilise at 4.0% in 2024–25, a percentage point higher than 3.1% in 2023.

African countries have suffered 4 turbulent years dealing with multiple shocks, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and disruptions to global supply chains due to Russia's prolonged invasion of Ukraine, as well as other geopolitical tensions and persistent factors affecting supply chains. Climate change and extreme weather conditions are having a serious impact on agricultural productivity and food security.

However, Africa's economic growth remains resilient and the outlook for Sub-Saharan Africa is gradually improving with nearly two thirds of countries anticipating higher growth in coming years.

Population growth and economic transformation are increasing the pressure on the agricultural ecosystem, and climate change continues to exacerbate these challenges. To achieve true transformation of food systems in Africa, there is growing recognition that the whole food production system needs to be considered differently to account for the true value and full cost involved in growing, distributing and consuming food.

This is vital not only for the food security of hundreds of millions of Africans but also for African economies and sustainable development on the continent.

The countries of Sub-Saharan Africa have the largest proportion of their populations, of any countries in the world, living in extreme poverty-. The region is characterised by high levels of food insecurity and very low Human Development Index rankings. If the current trend continues, Africa is unlikely to meet the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including Goal 1 of eradicating extreme poverty by 2030.

2024–25 program

Partner countries

Ethiopia
Kenya
Malawi
Mozambique
Rwanda
South Africa
Tanzania
Uganda
Zambia
Zimbabwe

17
projects

A\$6.78 million

Investment in agricultural
research for development

3
small research
activities

14
research
projects

Africa's urban population has been growing at a very high rate and is projected to reach 56% of the total population (currently 44% of 1.34 billion) by 2050. Africa's demand for food is expected to more than double by that time, driven by population growth, rising incomes, rapid urbanisation, changes in national diets towards greater consumption of higher-value fresh and processed foods, and more open intra-regional trade policies.

The pressure of rising food demand is compounded by impacts associated with climate change, which continue to hamper agricultural production, productivity and reliability and increase the demand for land and water.

In addition, rural demographics continue to change. Rural populations are aging, many farms are getting smaller, and rural youth are looking for more lucrative livelihoods in urban areas rather than in traditional farming.

However, these changes are helping to create new opportunities for Africa's smallholder farmers. Their small farms are transforming from subsistence farming into business operations, which in turn bring new challenges to the agricultural systems.

Agriculture typically accounts for 30–40% of GDP of African countries and more than 70% of the continent's poor live in rural areas. While agriculture remains a key driver of the economic growth that is required to deliver economic transformation for the rural poor, growth in productivity and production have broadly stagnated in the past decade. Unlocking the potential of Africa's agricultural and food systems requires substantial investment in the agriculture sector and in research to provide the knowledge that underpins growth in agricultural productivity, especially for commercialising smallholder farming.

Drivers of regional collaboration

The Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) of the African Union, in collaboration with the Regional Economic Communities, has been at the helm of mobilising the interest and commitment of African member states and their stakeholders for the transformation of the African agriculture sector.

A major milestone was the adoption of the 2014 Malabo Declaration on Accelerated African Agricultural Growth and Transformation for Shared Prosperity and Improved Livelihoods, in which the heads of states agreed to spend a minimum of 10% of their total expenditure on agriculture and pursue a target of 6% annual growth.

The African Union introduced a biannual review, the Africa Agriculture Transformation Scorecard, which tracks and reports each country's progress towards achieving the goals and targets of the Malabo Declaration. This important mechanism ensures that there is political will, backed by appropriate actions, to achieve agricultural growth and transformation.

The scorecard is presented at the African Green Revolution Forum, a key annual pan-African forum with the goal of accelerating progress on agriculture's contribution to economic growth and transformation, in line with the Malabo commitments. The forum is a premier platform for leaders from across Africa and around the world to advance action plans and share knowledge to drive equitable and sustainable economic growth across the continent. The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, in collaboration with several investors, coordinates the forum and produces a report on the forum, the Africa Agriculture Status Report.

Regional collaboration is crucial to achieving economic development in Africa, and the role of regional and sub-regional organisations is key, including the promotion and protection of foreign investment. ACIAR is closely linked to the main regional agencies, including the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa, the African Union Development Agency–New partnership for Africa Development, and the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa, which are important knowledge brokers and sources of priorities for the region.

ACIAR also liaises with sub-regional organisations, which are important strategic partners and play a key role in enhancing our impact to a regional scale, especially the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa and the Food, Agriculture, and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network.

A good source for calibrating our regional priorities comes from the annual African Green Revolution Forum, which aims to advance concrete action plans and share knowledge to tap into the enormous potential of agriculture in driving equitable and sustainable economic growth across the continent.

Regional ACIAR program

The agricultural environments of eastern and southern Africa and northern Australia have much in common – the wet tropics of Rwanda with northern Queensland, the semi-arid tropics of eastern Africa with central Queensland, and the arid rangelands of Ethiopia and southern Africa with the Northern Territory.

Australian agricultural science has expertise that is directly relevant to the African context. For more than 3 decades, ACIAR has supported projects that mobilised this expertise to deliver sustainable development outcomes in the region. The free-market orientation and effective architecture of agricultural research in Australia are also relevant to African agricultural transformation.

The ACIAR program with eastern and southern Africa fills a niche not addressed by many donors: agricultural research for development. Our work is highly regarded and remains as relevant now as it was 30 years ago because of our research-for-development focus, ability to enable projects with a trans-disciplinary and cross institutional approach, the similarities of the agricultural environments between Australia and eastern and southern Africa, synergies built with Australia's world-class teaching and research institutions that advance African agriculture and our long-term commitment to address specific constraints in agricultural production, with multi-year projects.

ACIAR invests approximately 10% of its annual research budget in the Eastern and Southern Africa regional program and directly funds projects in partnership with 10 African countries. However, our footprint is much broader because of our contribution to CGIAR, which has 4 centres located in Africa and, until recently, spent half of its total budget in Africa. ACIAR also provides funding for other international agricultural research centres working in Africa, such as CABI, WorldVeg and *icipe*.

Our program is delivered primarily through bilateral country research partnerships (linked to regional impact pathways) and regional collaborations coordinated with sub-regional organisations.

We also have a strong element of engagement through CGIAR. The portfolio of projects covers a diverse range of priorities, guided by the recommendations of the regional research coordination bodies that we collaborate with.

We also have a substantial collaboration with Canada's International Development Research Centre through the Food Loss Research Program that has a global reach and has 2 of its projects being implemented in Africa. The more substantive program, Cultivate Africa's Future (CultiAF) focusing on Africa ended in 2023 and the 2 agencies are discussing options for the future. CultiAF supported 9 projects across 7 countries and was a highly regarded and unique program within Africa.

The CultiAF program led to new and further opportunities for smallholder farmers in eastern Africa, such as the ACIAR-supported and *icipe*-led project, 'Upscaling the benefits of insect-based animal feed technologies for sustainable agricultural intensification in Africa (LS/2020/154)'. The project is enhancing the development and adoption of insect farming businesses in East Africa through commercialisation of safe and culturally acceptable insect-based products for animal feed.

During 2025, ACIAR and the Australia Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade will support the implementation of the Africa-Australia Partner for Climate Responsive Agriculture (AAPCRA). Through agricultural research and capacity development, the program will work with smallholder farmers to improve access to climate-smart innovations and safeguard food production as the impacts of climate change become more severe. African research organisations will be key partners in the program to undertake individual and institutional capacity development, enhancing capacity to work with policymakers to plan and encourage climate-responsive agriculture into the future. In-country partners are also essential to ensure solutions and innovations developed by the program address local priorities and are locally appropriate.

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Research Program Managers


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More information about our projects is available on the ACIAR website. Search for the project title or project code.

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Current and proposed projects in the Eastern and Southern Africa region, 2024–25

Program	Project title & code	Country	Start	End	Total investment
	Agribusiness				
	Transitioning mining-based communities through agribusiness approaches CROP/2022/112	Kenya	01/05/23	30/06/26	A\$1,130,000
	Regreening for the future: integrating climate change adaptation pathways into community-led greening in eastern Africa CLIM/2022/140	Kenya	16/12/24	30/10/28	A\$3,449,846
	Crops				
	Faba bean in Ethiopia: mitigating disease constraints to improve productivity and sustainability CIM/2017/030	Ethiopia	01/12/18	31/10/24	A\$1,972,214
	International Mungbean Improvement Network (Phase 2) CROP/2019/144	Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Myanmar	01/07/20	30/06/25	A\$2,257,184
	Protecting Ethiopian lentil crops CROP/2020/164	Ethiopia	01/07/21	30/06/26	A\$2,140,000
	Accelerating genetic gain in wheat through hybrid breeding in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Pakistan CROP/2020/167	Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Pakistan	01/12/21	30/06/26	A\$2,311,970
	Village-based biological control of fall armyworm in Zambia CROP/2022/112	Zambia	01/05/23	30/06/26	A\$1,130,000
	Shifting agro-ecological zone boundaries under climate change at country scale in Africa CLIM/2024/104	Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe	15/04/24	30/06/25	A\$425,000
	Forestry				
	Management of pests and diseases of forest crops in Ethiopia FST/2022/122	Ethiopia	15/05/24	14/05/29	A\$2,900,000
	Horticulture				
	Developing a biosecurity system for small banana growers resilient to Fusarium wilt TR4 in southern and eastern Africa HORT/2020/128	Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania	01/01/22	31/12/25	A\$726,904
	Livestock Systems				
	Strengthening adaptive capacity of extensive livestock systems for food and nutrition security and low-emissions development in eastern and southern Africa LS/2020/152	Ethiopia, Kenya, Zimbabwe	22/09/22	31/12/26	A\$3,050,000
	Upscaling the benefits of insect-based animal feed technologies for sustainable agricultural intensification in Africa LS/2020/154	Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda	23/02/22	30/06/25	A\$3,000,000
	Indo-Pacific Initiative for Sustainable Animal Health Cooperation LS/2022/143	Bangladesh, Kenya, Philippines, Vietnam	01/01/24	30/06/27	A\$1,400,000
	Exploring local constructs of 'resilience' in the face of chronic uncertainty in the drylands LS/2022/144	Ethiopia, Kenya	01/01/24	30/06/27	A\$1,400,000
	Moving further towards formalised sheep and goat value chains in Pakistan and Ethiopia through business-oriented breeder and producer groups LS/2023/132	Ethiopia, Pakistan	01/09/24	31/12/28	A\$2,400,000
	Water				
	Circular food systems in Africa WAC/2023/111	Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zimbabwe	01/10/23	30/06/26	A\$3,270,000
	Food and water security in southern Africa WAC/2024/100	Mozambique, South Africa, Zimbabwe	21/10/24	24/10/25	A\$349,887

Note: Additional projects may be commissioned during 2024–25.

