Interview

Elizabeth Nsimadala, Regional President of the Eastern Africa Farmers Federation (EAFF), speaks to 'Seeds of Gold' reporter Sammy Waweru about the participation of Generation Z in agriculture, access to finance and the need to give young people a greater voice in shaping the future of the sector.

East Africa Farmers Federation Regional President Nsimadala Elizabeth during an interview at the Scaling Finance for Smallholder Farmers in Africa Conference at JW Marriott Hotel Nairobi on March 18, 2025. WILFRED NYANGARESI | NATION

Why Gen Zs hold the key to Kenya's agriculture's future

Why should the young people, particularly Generation Z take a greater interest in agriculture?

We need to position farmers as key actors and partners in food systems transformation. Quite often, farmers and farmers' organisations are looked at as beneficiaries of handouts, yet collectively we are the largest private-sector actor and the largest producers of food globally. Young people, including Gen Z, therefore have a critical role to play in shaping the future of agriculture. We want them to be part of the discussions and speak for themselves because agriculture is not just about production; it is also about business, investment, technology, markets and food security.

What is EAFF doing to give young people a voice in agriculture?

The Eastern African Farmers Federation is the first regional farmers' organisation to have a youth and female president through a democratically elected process, not affirmative action. This means we put issues of youth and women at the centre. We have a strategy on gender and youth, and we have dedicated percentages for youth and women in our projects. We aim to have 30 per cent youth and 40 per cent women within all our projects.

We also have targeted interventions to support youth. We recently closed a project on rural youth access to financing, where we built the capacity of young people to develop investor-ready proposals and conducted business-to-business meetings to link them with financing opportunities. We also have an ongoing project supported by AGRA, under which we intend to build the capacity of more than 50,000 youth.

You have said, "If you are not invited to the table, you might be on the menu." What does this mean for Gen Z in agriculture?

We are not speaking for youth; we are inviting them to be part of the discussion. We have seen a higher turnout of youth in the events we hold and we want them to speak for themselves. Young people need to participate in decisions affecting agriculture, markets, financing and food systems. If they are excluded from these conversations, policies and programmes may not adequately address their needs or aspirations. We have also created the Africa Youth in Agri-business Platform together with FAO. I think there are more than 100,000 youths on that platform. It provides an opportunity for young people to learn from each other. We have also been able to mobilise almost US$2 million (Sh258.80 million) to support youth.

What are some of the biggest barriers preventing young people from entering agriculture?

We conducted scoping studies in Uganda, Rwanda and Kenya looking at financing for youth and the available funds. Everyone speaks about youth funds and organisations supporting youth, but when you ask where the funds are and why young people cannot access them, there is a gap. One of the key challenges is lack of collateral. Most of our youth don't have access to land. They don't own land, so they don't have title deeds, and when it comes to accessing financing, that is often the number one requirement.

What we are pushing as a federation is innovative financing for youth. Instead of using a title deed, if a young person has been in agriculture for two or three years and has seasonal data on their production, why don't we use this data to help them access financing? Why don't we secure a forward contract for them and use the contract to access financing? That way, we can attract more young people to agriculture and accelerate the transformation and growth of food systems across East Africa.

How can technology and platforms help young people turn agriculture into a viable business?

We have built a platform called e-Granary, which aggregates farmers for markets. By markets, we mean input markets, service markets and output markets. It is a mobile and web-based digital platform that we created to connect smallholder farmers in countries like Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda with essential agricultural services, reliable markets, financial credit, and quality farm inputs. We hope the platform will address many of the challenges farmers face across the entire value chain.

It is good to note that, currently, we have more than 250,000 farmers on the platform. We know where they are, the size of their land and the crops they produce, and we are able to use that data to secure work contracts for them. Such data can also help young farmers demonstrate their production potential and improve their chances of accessing financing and markets.

EAFF recently launched an initiative with GIZ and other stakeholders. What is the initiative about, and how will it benefit farmers and young people?

We launched a project dubbed the EAFF GIZ Farmers' Organizations for Transformation of Agri-Food Systems (FO Hub) 2026-2028, which aims at strengthening farmers' organisations in food systems transformation in East Africa. The whole idea is to position farmers as key actors and partners across food systems transformation. The project is around USD 1 million (Ksh129.3 million), but for us, we look at it as catalytic support. It is not just about the money we are receiving, but the power that the project gives us to strengthen farmers' organisations and their representation. Farmers' organisations, especially a regional organisation such as EAFF, represent the voices of farmers across the region, but we don't usually have the resources, financing and technical capacity to effectively participate in many of these discussions. The initiative comes at the right time, particularly following the launch of the CAADP Kampala Declaration (2026-2035). We want farmers to understand these processes, participate in monitoring and evaluation, and make key actors accountable. We are also looking at the African Continental Free Trade Area and how farmers can be part of fast-tracking its implementation.

What is your message to Gen Z about the future of agriculture in Africa?

Africa now imports more than US$100 billion (Sh12.93 trillion) worth of food. This is money that is being earned by a farmer somewhere outside the African continent. However, as farmers, we have the capacity to produce this food within the continent.

What we need to do is rethink and co-create ideas and investments to address the agri-food system challenge. We are embracing aggregation through farmers' organisations and cooperatives so that we can aggregate production and produce the food demanded on the continent. For Gen Zs, agriculture should not be viewed simply as farming with a hoe. It is about business, markets, technology, investment and innovation. We need young people at the table, participating in these discussions and helping shape the future of agriculture.

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French beans farming gains ground in Murang'a County

French beans contract farming has become a huge source of livelihood in Murang'a County where after 52 days, income starts streaming in.

In the plains where there are water sources, you will find men and women attending to their small holding plantations where their only input is to water the crop, fight destructive birds and also keep vigilance against thieves.

According to Mr Daniel Njuguna from Nginda village in Maragua constituency, the companies that contract them provide seeds, pesticides and fertiliser as advance logistical credit to be recovered once harvest is delivered to pick centers.

For an acre of the crop, he says he harvests about 600 kilos which the company contracting him recovers 88 kilos to cater for the advance credit.

"Currently, the companies are buying from us at Sh45 per kilo. This means I will get about 27,000 gross pay minus Sh3,960 as the subsidised cost. This means I will get Sh23,040 which again I will part with about Sh6,000 as my own operation costs. This translates to Sh17,040 net profit," he said.

He said the venture is good owing to the partnerships that guarantees them a ready market and the short waiting period that starts posting income in two months.

"Those who can afford to farm about five acres of the crop are minting money. Those who have water pumps to irrigate the crop are doing better. We are happy in the villages since we are able to raise school fees as well as upgrading our quality of life through this venture," he said.

Mr Joseph Njuguna from Kandani village in Kigumo constituency says if farmers were able to form producer groups instead of relying on contract farming but get linked to the export market, the gain would be immense.

"If you look at the prevailing export rates, top quality is going at Sh270 per kilo. For an acre, it means the gross gain is about 162,000.

– Mwangi Muiruri