CASA

Export Readiness Playbook

Lessons from the CASA Kenya portfolio for Kenyan agribusinesses interested in entering the export market

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Foreword

Kenya's agricultural sector continues to play a central role in driving inclusive economic growth. Yet for many agribusinesses, export markets remain an underexplored frontier – one that offers opportunities for higher margins, stable demand, and business expansion. This Export Readiness Playbook has been developed to help Kenyan agriSMEs navigate that journey with confidence. It serves as a practical, step-by-step guide to understanding what it takes to enter, compete, and succeed in international markets.

Drawing on the experiences of agribusinesses supported under the CASA Kenya programme, the Playbook distils lessons from real-world cases and translates them into actionable advice. The Playbook is organised into sequential sections that mirror the natural progression of an exporter's journey:

1. **Initial market assessment**
2. **Initial customer engagement**
3. **Understanding certification and specifications**
4. **Production and cost assessment**
5. **Logisitcs and processing assessment**
6. **Financial planning**
7. **Securing trial orders and contracts**
8. **Buyer retention and growth**

Each section combines practical guidance, illustrative case studies, and tips to help you assess your readiness and make informed decisions at every stage.

Whether you are an agribusiness taking your first steps into export or one looking to expand into new markets, this Playbook provides the structure and insight needed to chart your course, from opportunity identification to sustained export success.

1 Initial market assessment: Do exports represent an attractive opportunity?

Objective: Establish high-level market potential of the commodity of interest.

So, you're interested in entering the export market. As a first step, it's essential to conduct light market research to understand the opportunities and challenges for your product. This can be done through online resources, trade websites, or conversations with trade associations. The goal at this stage is to gather enough information to identify promising markets and potential buyers before investing significant time and resources. Below are **three key questions** to guide you:

1 Is there strong and growing market demand for my product?

- Identify international markets that purchase large volumes of your product, either through domestic production or imports.
- Focus on countries or regions within Kenya's existing network of trade partners. Compare annual consumption volumes and year-on-year growth.
- Target markets showing at least double-digit annual consumption growth for your product. This is an indicator of healthy demand and signals opportunities for new entrants.
- Map out key buyers in these markets and prepare short profiles summarizing purchase volumes, indicative prices (if available), and current sourcing countries.

2 How significant are the barriers to entry for the most attractive markets?

- Review the import regulations and ensure they are clear and not overly restrictive.
- Check whether the sector has a defined structure for self-regulation and quality standards (e.g., certifications, labelling requirements, or phytosanitary standards).
- Assess the degree of market openness, i.e. whether the country is generally receptive to imported agricultural products.
- Evaluate the logistical connectivity of the market (e.g. access to international trade routes) to determine if shipping costs or transport constraints could make exports uncompetitive.

3 Does Kenya have a competitive advantage for this product in this market?

- If similar products are already exported from Kenya, this suggests that there might be existing export capacity and infrastructure that your business could leverage, such as certified packhouses, cold-chain facilities, or Export Processing Zones (EPZs),
- If the product is not yet exported from Kenya, you may need to conduct additional agronomic or production research to determine whether Kenya can produce competitively in terms of cost, quality, and consistency. This will be discussed in later sections.

What is the outcome of the initial market assessment?

By the end of this initial assessment, your business should have:

- A longlist and shortlist of potential markets and buyers; and
- A set of prioritisation criteria to guide initial outreach.

A simple prioritisation framework might include:

1. Desired purchase volumes;
2. Ease or flexibility of quality requirements;
3. Experience buying from Kenya or East Africa; and
4. Indicative prices offered.

Use this information to create a simple **CRM tracker** to organize your outreach and follow-ups.

See here for an example CRM tracker.

1 Initial market assessment: Do exports represent an attractive opportunity?

! Key Risks

When gathering market intelligence, it's important to be aware of the **limitations and risks** that may affect your analysis and decisions.

Outdated or incomplete export data

Government trade statistics are often outdated or incomplete. Always validate official data through cross-checks with trade associations, other exporters, and potential buyers to ensure you have an accurate picture of market trends and volumes.

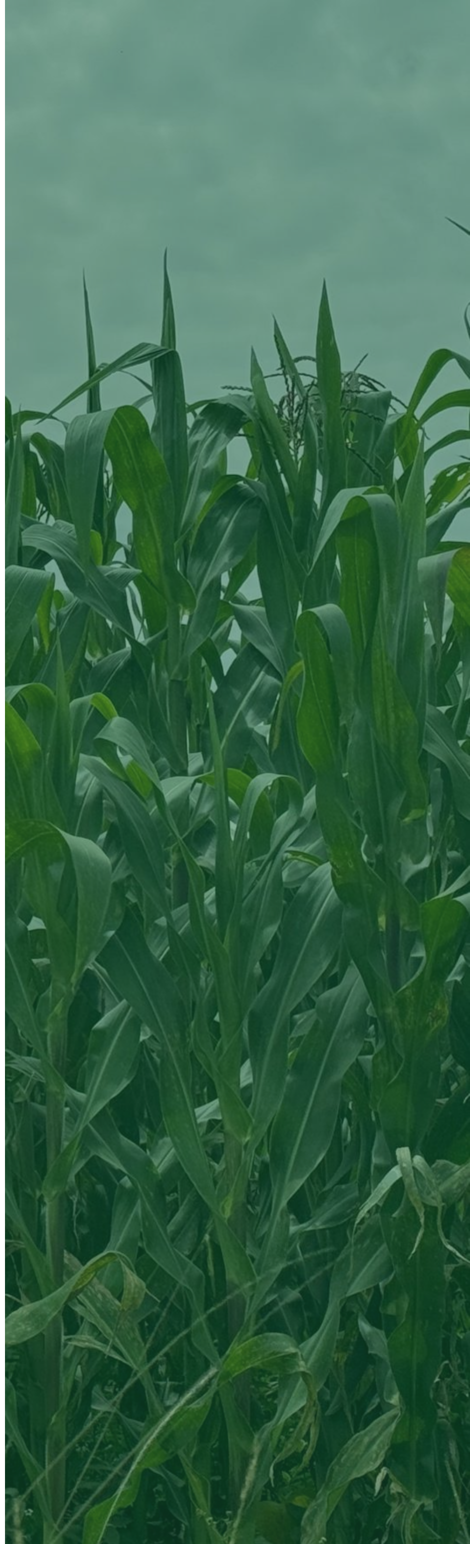
Climate-related disruptions

Climate change is increasingly affecting crop performance and production patterns. Shifts in temperature, rainfall, and pest pressure can change where crops are viable, meaning some countries may gain or lose competitive advantage over time. Build resilience through diversification, both in where you source or grow your product and in the range of markets you serve.

Geopolitical and trade policy instability

Global trade dynamics are shifting as many countries adopt more protectionist policies. Exporters should:

- Diversify their target markets to reduce dependence on any single buyer or region;
- Stay informed on trade policy changes, tariffs, and sanctions that could affect competitiveness; and
- Regularly update their market opportunity analysis to reflect evolving risks and conditions.



2 Initial customer engagement: What are customers looking for??

Objective: Understand customer demand your product's fit and competitiveness in target markets.

Once you've identified promising markets, the next step is to **engage potential buyers** to gauge their interest in your product(s) and better understand their requirements.

> Finding and connecting with buyers

Leverage your existing networks and trade associations to obtain introductions or access databases of potential buyers. Don't overlook LinkedIn as a tool for identifying and establishing direct contact with sourcing managers or distributors.

International trade fairs are also excellent opportunities to meet multiple buyers in one place – most major value chains host at least one annual global or regional event.

NOTE: There are usually costs associated with this step. These could include trade association membership fees, travel and exhibition costs for trade fairs, or attendance at networking events. Your business should actively plan and budget for these expenses.

TIP

To establish credibility with buyers, present a professional and trustworthy image. At minimum, prepare:

- A simple but well-designed website,
- A dedicated business email address
- Digital product brochures or fliers, and
- Printed business cards for networking events and trade fairs.

> Key areas to explore during buyer conversations

When speaking with potential customers, focus on the following aspects to assess whether there is a realistic and mutually beneficial opportunity:

Volume Requirements

Determine whether the buyer's demand aligns with your production capacity. A buyer may be too large or too small for your needs. For example, if your business currently produces 100 tonnes per month, a buyer sourcing 1,000 tonnes per day would not be a viable fit at this stage.

Product Specifications

Clarify the buyer's expectations around quality standards, variety, size, and other specifications. Obtain this information in writing whenever possible as this will be essential for the technical and commercial feasibility analysis covered later in this playbook.

Pricing Expectations

Buyers will often ask about pricing early on; however, you should avoid committing to a firm price before you've completed your feasibility and cost analysis. If the product is already exported from Kenya, you can share a broad illustrative price range, while noting that a detailed quote will follow if mutual interest is confirmed.

Payment Terms

Payment terms can significantly affect the risk and cash flow of your export business. Be cautious if buyers propose long credit periods or shift most responsibilities and costs of the trade to you (as defined by the relevant 'Incoterm'); however, these risks could potentially be offset by higher prices or larger order volumes. See **Box 1** for more detail on different Incoterms.

Case Study: Identifying market opportunities – The case of Exotic EPZ

Exotic EPZ, a Nairobi-based macadamia nut processor and exporter, sources primarily from smallholder farmers. Through CASA Kenya, the business received technical assistance to strengthen its customer base in existing markets and to expand into new international geographies.

As part of this support, CASA Kenya commissioned a macadamia market study that provided strong evidence of a well-defined market opportunity and demonstrated significant buyer interest in both raw and value-added macadamia products.

The report revealed that the global macadamia market was valued at approximately USD 1.58 billion in 2022, with a projected compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 9.3% through 2030. This expansion is being driven by global consumer trends favouring healthy, plant-based snacks and rising awareness of macadamias' nutritional and health benefits.

Importantly, the study also identified a clear market niche for Exotic EPZ: distinguishing between the bulk "raw" kernel segment and the premium "roasted/value-added" segment. The latter offers higher margins and is strongly influenced by gourmet, snacking, and clean-label trends in key growth markets such as the United States (the largest and fastest-growing destination), Europe, and the Middle East.

BOX 1: PRICING TERMINOLOGY — INCOTERMS

There are several price structures in international trade, commonly referred to as **Incoterms**. These terms indicate which party (buyer or seller) bears specific costs and risks. The following are commonly used Incoterms:

- **Ex-Works / Ex-Warehouse / Ex-Factory (EXW):** This refers to the price at which the product leaves the factory or warehouse, and indicates that from that moment onwards, the buyer bears all costs and risks including loading the goods, export clearance, transportation to destination country, import clearance and customs, and delivery to final destination.

- **Free on Board (FOB):** This term is specifically related to sea transport, and indicates that the seller is responsible for delivering the goods to the port of shipment, clearing the goods, and loading them onto the shipping vessel and the risk transfers to the buyer once the goods are on board the vessel. There is sometimes confusion between "FOB shipping point" where the buyer takes responsibility once goods are loaded (this is the strict definition of FOB) and "FOB destination", which, if specified, might mean that the risk transfers at the destination port instead.

- **Cost, Insurance and Freight (CIF):** Also a term specific to sea transport, here the seller bears the responsibility and cost of delivering the goods to the agreed port of destination, and also takes out minimum insurance cover for the goods during transit. Risk transfers to the buyer once the goods are loaded onto the vessel at the port of shipment, but the seller pays for transport and insurance to the destination port. The buyer then covers import clearance and customs, as well as transport to the final destination.

- **Free Carrier (FCA):** Under FCA, the seller delivers the goods, cleared for export, to a carrier or other party nominated by the buyer at a named place (which could be the seller's premises or another location). From that point the buyer assumes risk and cost. FCA can be used for any mode of transport (including sea, air, or road).

- **Delivered at Place (DAP):** Under DAP, the seller is responsible for all costs and risks up to the point of unloading at a named destination chosen by the buyer, at which point risk transfers to the buyer. The seller bears all risks and costs of bringing the goods to that place (excluding import duties/taxes) and clears for export. The buyer is responsible for unloading and import formalities.

- **Delivered Duty Paid (DDP):** This term places maximum obligation on the seller. The seller delivers the goods to the buyer's country, at the named destination, pays for all costs and bears all risks of bringing the goods there, including import duties, taxes, and customs clearance. The buyer only unloads. Because of the high responsibility on the seller, DDP should be used with care if you (as exporter) are unfamiliar with the destination country's procedures.

3 Understanding certification and specifications: What are the additional requirements?

Objective: Maintain a clear understanding of the certification and standards required for the target markets.

When preparing to export, it is critical to understand the difference between **product specifications** and **certifications**, and how both affect your production, cost structure, and market access.

Product Specification

A detailed, documented **list of requirements** that a product must meet, **prescribed by the specific buyer**. These requirements define what the product must look like, how it must be packaged, and the standards it must meet to satisfy that buyer's expectations.

- **Examples include:** Produce size, colour, or variety; packaging format and labelling details; moisture content, residue levels, or shelf-life parameters.

Certification

A formal, **third-party process** that verifies a product or production system complies with standards **established by an industry association, certification scheme, or government agency**. An independent certification body conducts audits, tests, and documentation reviews to confirm compliance. Buyers might specify that certain certifications be attained/met as part of the trade.

- **Examples include:** Global G.A.P. (Good Agricultural Practice for farms supplying fresh produce); Organic Certification (EU, USDA, or other regional standards); Fairtrade or Rainforest Alliance for ethical and sustainable sourcing, or ISO 22000 or HACCP for food safety management systems.

During the initial market and buyer assessments, you should map out both the unique buyer specifications and the certification requirements of the buyer or target market.

Note: This will be *two separate sets of requirements*. For example, a buyer may request that their fruits be only of a certain size (specification) *and* be sourced from Global GAP certified farms (certification). Understanding both helps you plan your production processes and accurately estimate costs during your technical and commercial feasibility analysis (covered in the next section).

Getting certified:

To obtain certification, you will need to engage a qualified consultant or certification body to guide your business through the process. This involves:

- Preparing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and internal documentation;
- Conducting staff training and awareness sessions;
- Establishing record-keeping systems and traceability mechanisms; and
- Undergoing internal and external audits before certification is granted.

Kenya has a well-developed certification and audit industry, so most international certification can be conducted by local consultants. For instance, Global G.A.P. maintains a list of registered consultants and trainers in Kenya, available on its official website.

Case Study: Mapping macadamia specifications and certifications for Exotic EPZ

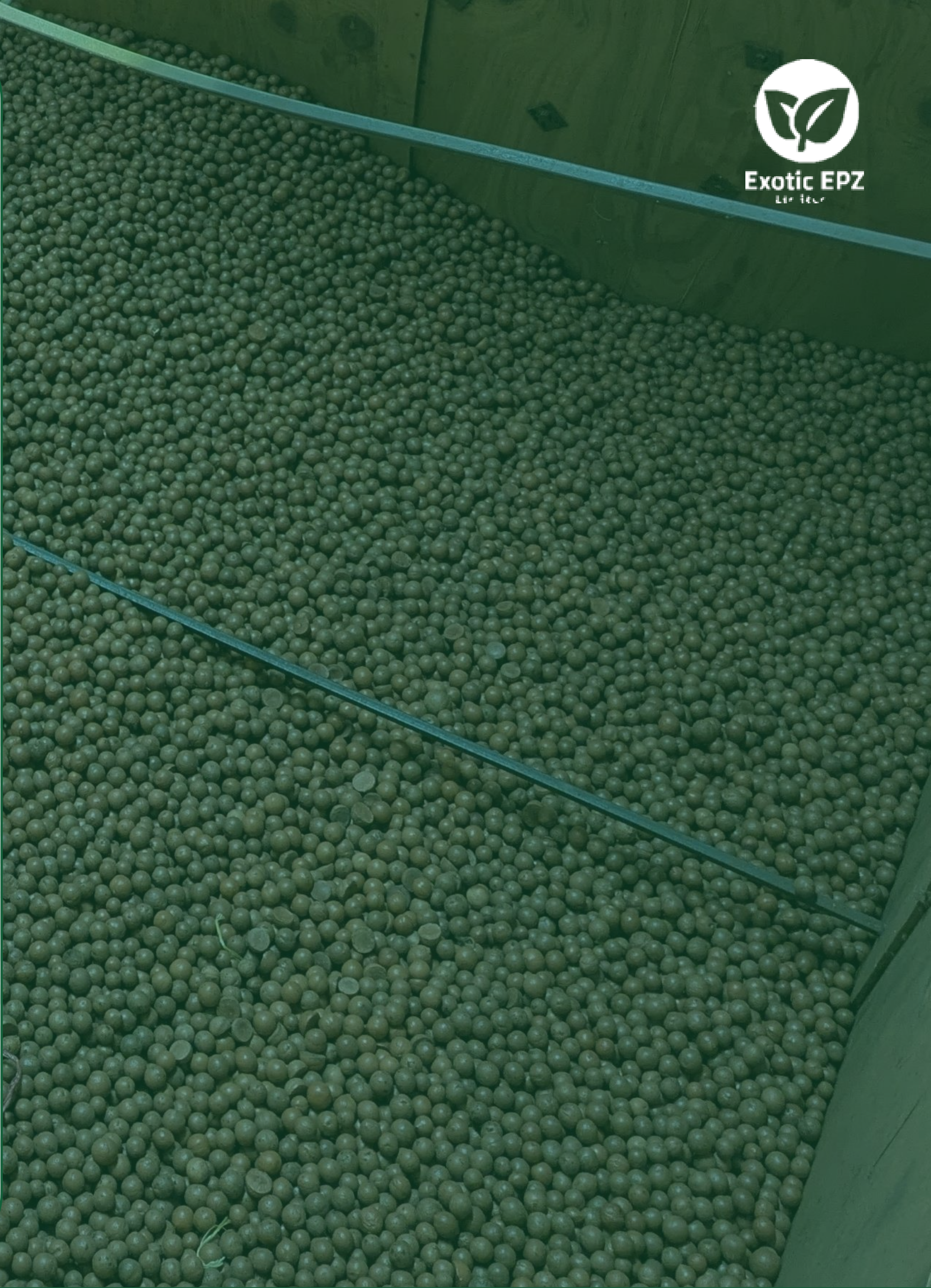
The market assessment commissioned by CASA Kenya mapped out the key certification requirements and trade regulations for Exotic EPZ's target export markets. These included: Food safety certifications such as HACCP and ISO 9001; phytosanitary certificates required for imports; and consumer-facing certifications like organic or kosher standards for packaged, roasted products.

The report also detailed buyer specification requirements, including critical quality parameters for raw nuts, such as final kernel moisture content and preferred trade form (in-shell or shelled). For roasted or value-added products, specifications extended to packaging and labelling, for instance, using vacuum-sealed packaging for long transit periods and including market-specific labelling such as nutritional facts, allergen information, or Arabic-language packaging for Middle Eastern markets.

Importantly, the buyer assessment identified growing global demand for organically certified macadamia nuts, highlighting a new market opportunity for Exotic to pursue. Based on these insights, and with CASA Kenya's support, the company plans to obtain organic certification in the coming year to strengthen its competitiveness and market access.

TIP

While certifications such as Rainforest Alliance, Fairtrade, USDA Organic, and EU Organic can open access to premium market segments, they are also costly to acquire and maintain, and are not always prerequisites for exporting into certain markets. Before pursuing certification, always assess whether they are in fact required and whether the expected price uplift justifies the full cost of certification, including preparation, audits, and annual renewals.



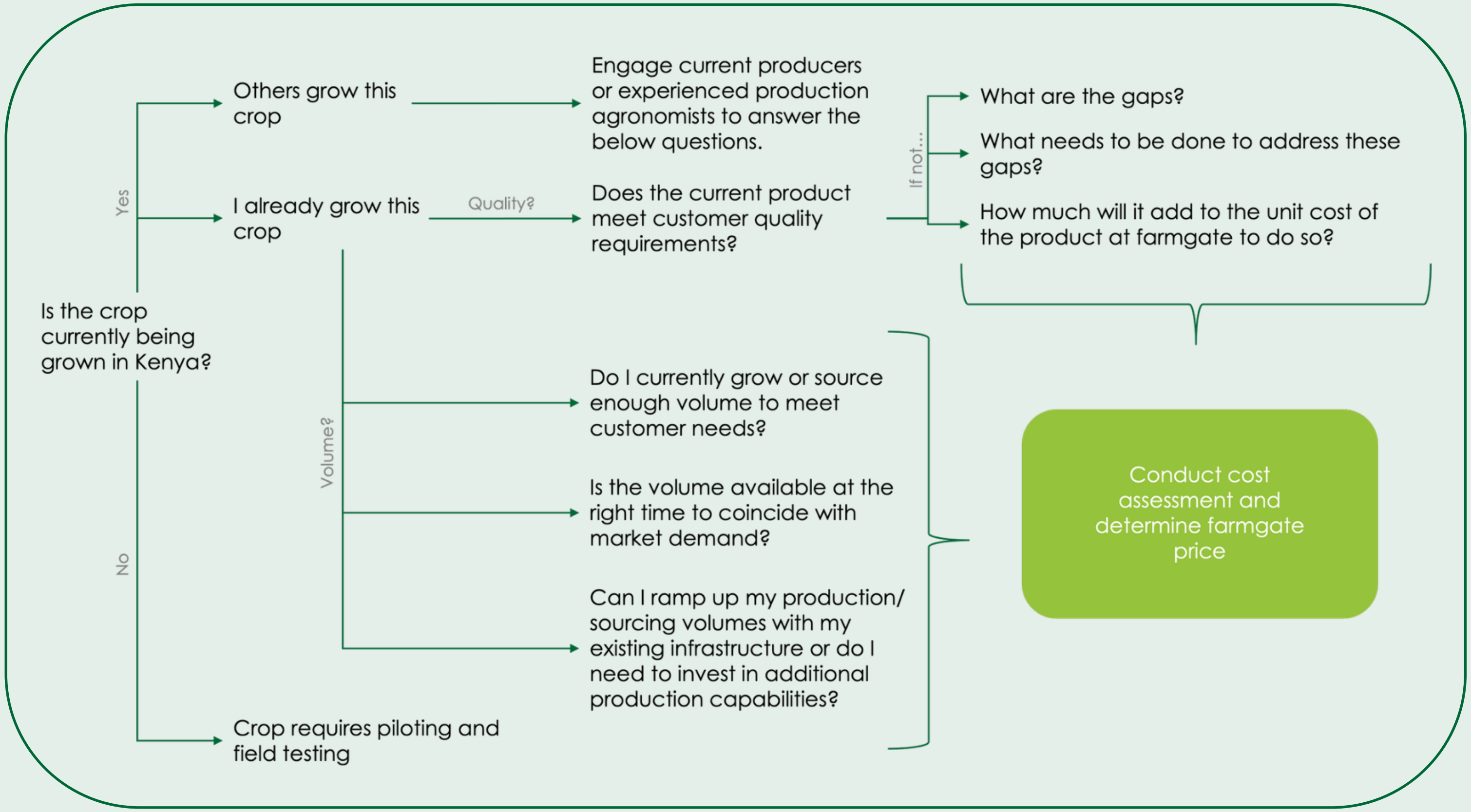
4 Production and cost assessment: What will it take to meet client demand?

Objective: Determine the feasibility of meeting client demand from production side and the associated cost.

Once you have identified promising markets and potential customers, the next step is to assess whether your business can **consistently supply products that meet buyer expectations** in terms of quality, volume, and price.

At this stage, your focus should be on **understanding the technical and commercial feasibility of production**, starting with the cost of production at the farm level. This analysis will determine whether you can produce competitively while maintaining acceptable profit margins.

The way you conduct this assessment will vary depending on whether the crop is already being grown in Kenya (by you or another person) or if it's a new crop that requires field trials / piloting. The decision tree below sets out the questions to which you will need to obtain answers, depending on your context:



TIP

Having a customer product specification document will be essential in assessing current quality and any improvements required to meet client benchmarks.

As a final step in your production and cost assessment, **engage the relevant Ministry of Agriculture crop directorate to understand any regulatory requirements related to the crop**, for instance, minimum farmgate prices, quality standards, or export permits. Each crop in Kenya falls under a specific directorate within the Ministry. See list here.

This analysis will enable you to start building a simple commercial model to establish whether, and under what circumstances, exporting will be commercially viable for your business

Case Study: Assessing production feasibility – The case of Cinch Markets

Cinch Markets, a Kenya-based farmland aggregation company, is piloting a mosaic farming model to grow fruits, vegetables, and flowers for export. During initial discussions with a potential buyer, the buyer requested summer flowers that Cinch was not yet producing.

Recognizing a potential market opportunity, Cinch's agronomy team obtained the buyer's product specifications and developed an agronomic protocol tailored to the summer flowers. The team then estimated all input and labour costs, calculated the expected yield per hectare, and used the buyer's indicative price to assess commercial viability.

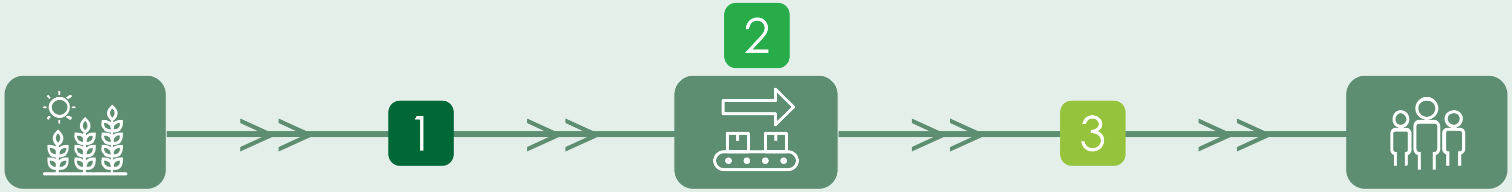
Their analysis showed that the crop could be profitably produced under existing conditions. Cinch proceeded with a short production trial, using the results to refine their cost and yield estimates. They then shared sample consignments with potential buyers, which helped strengthen negotiations and demonstrate that they could reliably meet the buyer's quality standards at the agreed price point.

This process illustrates the importance of combining agronomic validation with cost modelling early in the export readiness journey, ensuring that new production opportunities are both technically feasible and commercially sustainable before scaling.

5 Logistics and processing assessment: How to get your product to your buyer?

Objective: Determine optimal aggregation and transport models, and the cost of getting the produce to the buyer.

At this stage, your goal is to assess the cost and logistics of moving your product from the farm to the buyer. This involves **mapping your entire supply chain**, identifying the main cost drivers, and understanding the risks at each stage.



1 Farm → Packhouse: Choosing an aggregation model

The first consideration is how you will aggregate produce from farms efficiently and cost-effectively. The most suitable aggregation model depends largely on farm location and size:

- If you work with large commercial farms or groups of co-located smallholders, you can often manage aggregation directly.
- If farmers are geographically dispersed, it may be more cost-effective to partner with third-party aggregators such as cooperatives, farmer associations, agents, or traders.

Working with established intermediaries allows you to manage costs, logistics, and farmer relationships more efficiently while reducing the operational burden of dealing with multiple small suppliers.

2 Processing to meet buyer specifications.

Buyers will specify whether products require processing or packaging before export. Some crops can be shipped unprocessed, but most require at least basic handling, such as grading, cutting, or washing. Processing facilities fall into two broad categories:

- High-care facilities – Handle highly perishable produce under strict food-safety standards. Products from these facilities can be shipped directly to retail outlets abroad.
- Low-care facilities – Conduct basic processing, with final handling and packaging completed by the buyer at destination.

Kenya has a well-established horticultural export industry and numerous packhouses, both high- and low-care, available for lease. Some are operated by private firms, while others are managed by the Horticultural Crops Directorate (HCD) under the Ministry of Agriculture, offering affordable daily or monthly rates (though space is limited).

TIP

For most fresh export products, temperature management is critical.

Develop a comprehensive cold-chain management system that begins immediately at harvest and continues until the product reaches the buyer. Improper cold-chain management can lead to significant financial losses and reputational damage.

Create clear Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for cold storage and transportation, and ensure that aggregators and transporters are trained and compliant at all times.

TIP

If you don't already own a packhouse, consider leasing one during your first few years of export operations. Building and maintaining a certified packhouse is capital-intensive. For example, constructing a BRCGS-certified packhouse can cost between USD 100,000 and 1 million. Leasing helps you manage early-stage costs while ensuring compliance with buyer standards.

5 **Logistics and processing assessment: How to get your product to your buyer?**

Objective: Determine optimal aggregation and transport models, and the cost of getting the produce to the buyer.

3 Export logistics: Choosing the right transport mode

Selecting the appropriate mode of transport depends on product characteristics and shipment value. Key factors include:

Product shelf-life	○ Highly perishable goods (leafy vegetables, herbs, berries, flowers) require air freight despite higher costs. ○ Medium- or low-perishability goods may be shipped via sea freight, which offers lower costs per tonne.
Product volume	○ Air freight has limited cargo capacity (maximum of 144 MT) and is best suited for high-value, low-volume consignments. ○ Sea freight is more economical for large-volume (maximum capacity of 280,000 MT), lower-value shipments (typically above 15 MT).
Product value	○ For ultra-premium or niche products, air freight helps minimise risk and preserve quality through shorter transit times.

TIP

Partner with logistics providers experienced in handling similar products and markets. They often offer better rates, and their expertise can help you navigate first-time export challenges such as documentation, customs clearance, and cargo handling.

Exporters of fresh produce must also obtain licenses and registrations from relevant authorities – see indicative list of required licenses and agencies here. Always verify requirements for your specific product and destination market, as regulations may change.

! Key Risk: Geopolitical Disruptions

Shipping routes are vulnerable to geopolitical events and trade restrictions, which can affect shipping costs, timelines, and insurance coverage. Stay informed about the routes your products use and work with experienced freight forwarders who can anticipate and manage disruptions.

Additional resources:

- A list of transporters/ shippers is available here
- A list of pre-shipment documents

Case Study: SokoFresh and the choice between aggregation models

Since its inception, SokoFresh has relied primarily on a direct farm aggregation model, using its own team of sourcing agents to engage with farmers. This enabled the company to build strong, trusted farmer networks and secure consistent supply.

However, as SokoFresh expanded into direct avocado exports, the model's limitations became clear – in-house aggregation was costly and inflexible, constraining the company's ability to meet growing demand for export-grade fruit.

To address this, SokoFresh adopted a hybrid sourcing model. It continues to buy directly from a core group of farmers (maintaining quality control and loyalty) while supplementing supply through third-party agents and commercial farms. This approach provides scale, flexibility, and efficiency, while still nurturing a smaller, deeply engaged network of farmers who benefit from better prices and consistent offtake.

Source: SokoFresh

6 Financial planning: How do you ensure you earn a profit?

Objective: Gain a detailed understanding of costs and what price point would be required for the proposition to be viable.

The ultimate objective of all preceding assessments is to calculate the cumulative unit cost of producing, processing, packing, and shipping your product to the buyer, and to **determine whether your price offer will be both competitive and profitable**. **Once you understand your total costs, you can confidently re-engage buyers with a concrete, evidence-based price proposal** that reflects true production realities and a sustainable margin for your business.

1 Build a bottom-up costing model

Develop a per-unit cost breakdown that captures all expenses discussed in earlier sections, including:

- Crop production and farm-level costs (inputs, labour, land preparation, etc.);
- Aggregation, cold-chain, and logistics costs;
- Processing, packaging, and quality assurance;
- Certification, licensing, and compliance expenses; and
- Export logistics and insurance.

A detailed costing model not only informs pricing but also highlights areas where efficiency gains can improve profitability over time.

2 Estimate market price and margin

Use insights from your buyer discussions and market research to estimate the current market price per unit. Then compare your internal cost estimates against this benchmark to determine your expected profit margin per unit. Where possible, compare your margin with industry norms for similar products. The margin should comfortably cover:

- Ongoing operational overheads;
- Financing costs (e.g., bridging loans or trade finance interest); and
- A reasonable profit buffer for reinvestment.

It is normal for export businesses to experience thin or negative margins in the first year or two due to start-up and compliance costs. However, your projections should clearly demonstrate a path to profitability within 3–4 years, as production efficiency, buyer volumes, and repeat contracts grow.

3 Assess financing needs and options

Export transactions often involve a working-capital gap: farmers expect upfront payment for produce, while buyers may only pay 30–90 days after shipment. This means you'll need bridge financing to manage cash flow between procurement and payment.

Unfortunately, access to trade finance for start-up exporters in Kenya remains limited; however, some options do exist:

- Commercial banks: Some banks may offer short-term financing if you have signed supply contracts or purchase orders that demonstrate predictable cash inflows.
- Impact investors and social venture funds: Organisations such as Hooge Raedt Social Venture and Rabo Foundation have provided catalytic financing to export-oriented AgriSMEs.
- High-net-worth individuals and foundations are increasingly interested in funding inclusive agribusiness growth with flexible financing structures.

TIP

When negotiating with potential buyers, explore opportunities for buyer-supported financing to ease cash-flow constraints. This could include: Shorter payment periods upfront deposits; or signed contracts / purchase orders that can be used as collateral for financing. These arrangements reduce your exposure and strengthen your financial position while you build export experience.

7 Securing trial orders and contracts: How do you negotiate with your first client?

Objective: Provide proof to the target customer; establish a sufficient successful track record to warrant a contract.

Once you have a clear understanding of your unit economics, you are ready to **re-engage potential buyers to negotiate the terms of your first export order**. This is a critical milestone – it's where all your research, costing, and preparation come together to secure a deal that is both profitable and sustainable.

Preparing for negotiation

Before entering discussions, ensure you are clear on:

- Your minimum acceptable price – the lowest price that still allows you to make a profit, based on your cost and margin analysis;
- Your maximum feasible volume – the largest quantity you can confidently supply without compromising quality or reliability; and
- Your delivery capacity and lead times – aligned with harvest cycles, processing schedules, and logistics timelines.

It's often helpful to engage an experienced export agent or intermediary to facilitate these negotiations. Agents can help you vet buyers, negotiate better terms, and manage communications, particularly when dealing with unfamiliar markets, languages, or cultural norms.

Buyers may also request sample shipments before confirming their first order. Be prepared to produce and ship samples at your own cost, as these are often seen as a standard part of due diligence.

TIP

Always verify the authenticity of potential buyers before sending any consignments or signing agreements. There are many "briefcase buyers" who present themselves as legitimate companies but operate as informal brokers seeking to exploit new exporters. To vet a buyer:

- Request references from other suppliers;
- Verify the company's registration details on official business registries or chambers of commerce websites;
- Ask for a bank reference letter; and
- If possible, visit the company's premises or verify them through a trusted local agent.

Taking these steps reduces the risk of fraud or payment disputes.

Case Study: SokoFresh and the role of in-country agents

After its first export season, SokoFresh recognised the challenges of managing buyer relationships and negotiations remotely. These included differences in expectations, communication gaps, and misunderstandings around consignment quality or delivery terms.

In response, the company invested in a network of in-country buyer agents located in key export markets. These agents now play a central role in:

- Negotiating and finalising terms with buyers;
- Managing relationships and resolving issues in real time; and
- Coordinating in-country logistics once consignments arrive.

Having agents with strong local market knowledge and personal relationships with buyers has significantly reduced transaction risks and made SokoFresh's export operations smoother and more efficient.

8 Buyer retention and growth: How do you build on your success?

Objective: Secure long-term contracts supply by ensuring high customer satisfaction.

Securing your first export contract(s) is a major achievement, but **maintaining and expanding those relationships is the real test of success**. Your first shipment will serve as a critical baseline for future business, so it is essential to collect insights and feedback on what worked well and what needs improvement.

It's unlikely that your first shipment will be entirely problem-free, so managing expectations (both your own and your buyer's) is key. Use this learning period to strengthen systems, build trust, and demonstrate professionalism.

Going forward, your focus should be on **securing long-term partnerships and building a strong reputation in your target markets**. Three key strategies will help you achieve this:

Quality assurance

Establish and maintain a systematic process to ensure your products consistently meet the quality standards and expectations of your buyers. Develop a quality assurance management system that spans the entire value chain, from farm production and aggregation through to packaging, logistics, and delivery.

Remember, your final customer is the end consumer. Their satisfaction is as important, and often more influential, than that of your immediate buyer. Positive consumer experiences translate into repeat orders and stronger demand for your product.

Relationship management

Strong buyer relationships are the foundation of export growth. Dedicate time and resources to regular engagement with your clients. Whenever possible, arrange face-to-face meetings at least once per year, by visiting buyers or hosting them at your facilities. These interactions help you:

- Build relationships that extend beyond single transactions;
- Understand evolving buyer needs; and
- Navigate challenges more effectively when market conditions change.

Good relationships are your insurance policy during difficult periods.

Business development

As your reputation grows, continuously scan for new market opportunities while maintaining your existing buyer base. Diversification helps you reduce risk by avoiding overreliance on a single buyer or market.

However, be cautious not to overextend yourself. Each new buyer comes with unique requirements, specifications, and expectations. Focus on quality over quantity – building manageable, high-value partnerships that fit your production and operational capacity.

TIP

Regular feedback loops, combined with strong data tracking and transparent communication, will help you move from one-off shipments to repeat orders and long-term partnerships. Building on early wins with a culture of improvement is what transforms exporters into trusted, preferred suppliers.

Cinch

Case Study: Cinch Markets using feedback to drive growth

For Cinch Markets, one of the most important factors in retaining buyers has been listening to customer feedback and using it to drive continuous improvement.

Cinch began its export journey with small trial shipments during the low season, allowing the team to learn buyer expectations and refine operations before scaling. The company developed a customer feedback tracker to log every buyer comment, both compliments and complaints.

After each shipment, Cinch conducts a post-shipment analysis to identify areas for improvement and shares the findings across the entire supply chain, from logistics to packhouse to farm level. This ensures that lessons are implemented quickly and consistently.

Just as importantly, Cinch also tracks what is going well, so it can reinforce successful practices and build upon its strengths. This deliberate approach to learning and adaptation has been central to Cinch's growing success in export markets.

Conclusion

Export development represents a significant opportunity for AgriSMEs in Kenya, offering a clear path to accessing higher-value markets, boosting profitability and productivity, and attracting investors and lenders. The transition to becoming an exporter is a rigorous journey that demands strategic planning and systematic execution.

The framework outlined in this Playbook, from Initial Market Assessment through to Securing Trial Orders and Retaining Buyers, is designed to demystify the export journey. It provides a step-by-step roadmap to help you:

Gauge feasibility	Determine the commercial and technical viability of exporting your specific product to target markets.
De-risk the process	Systematically address critical dependencies, such as buyer specifications, certification requirements, and logistics challenges.
Build a sustainable model	Ensure that your production, processing, and financial systems can support the new export operations profitably and at scale.

The experiences of the featured CASA Kenya portfolio companies (like SokoFresh, Exotic EPZ, and Cinch Markets) demonstrate that success is achieved through diligent application of these steps, coupled with a commitment to quality and responsiveness to market signals.

With the insights and tools provided in this Playbook, your business is now equipped to take the next step. We encourage you to use this Playbook as your guide, applying its phased assessment to transform your business from a domestic supplier into a competitive and credible player in the global market.

Remember: The time invested in thorough, systematic preparation is not a delay. It is the most critical step toward successfully launching and sustaining your export ambitions.

Annex 1 - Agribusiness Trade Associations in Kenya and other agencies that can support export development

Annex 2 - Certifications required by key markets

Annex 3 - Logistics companies in Kenya

The FCDO-funded Commercial Agriculture for Smallholders and Agribusinesses (CASA) Technical Assistance Facility (TAF) partners with investors with development interests to increase the smallholder impact of existing investments. We design, co-fund, and manage delivery of inclusive technical assistance (TA) projects at selected agribusinesses that can drive commercial and social impact by strengthening, deepening, or broadening inclusive supply chains.

Over its seven-year life cycle, the CASA TAF will collect data on the impact of inclusive technical assistance, not only at the farmer-level, but also at the portfolio company and investment fund level. The objective is to learn and to influence DFIs, impact investors, commercial investors, and TA providers on the significance of generating compelling evidence to track commercial and development impact metrics, thus demonstrating the value of inclusive TA.

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