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Editorial Note

This issue of *AYIKA* brings together a rich and timely collection of scholarship that underscores a central truth: in Africa, environmental questions are deeply political, and political realities are increasingly shaped by environmental change. The contributions in this volume reflect the growing complexity of this relationship, engaging themes that span governance, technology, security, sustainability, and identity across diverse African contexts and beyond.

A defining feature of this issue is its strong engagement with the role of digitalisation in advancing sustainability. From the systematic review on how digitalisation enables decarbonisation, to analyses of agri-tech adoption in Nigeria and South Africa, the volume highlights the transformative potential of technology in addressing environmental challenges. These contributions move beyond optimism, carefully examining the mechanisms and constraints that shape technological uptake. They remind us that digital solutions are not neutral; their effectiveness depends on policy frameworks, institutional capacity, and socio-economic conditions.

Equally prominent is the question of governance, particularly in relation to service delivery and institutional performance. The examination of water service failures in Gauteng Province offers a sobering account of how governance lapses can translate into environmental and public health crises. Similarly, the discussions on public service reform and parliamentary oversight reveal the persistent challenges of accountability and administrative effectiveness across the continent. Together, these studies point to a critical insight: sustainable environmental outcomes are contingent on capable, transparent, and responsive institutions.

The issue also engages deeply with questions of political order, security, and regional cooperation. Analyses of Zimbabwe's political history, hybrid regimes in Central Africa, and border conflicts involving Nigeria reveal how political instability and governance structures shape environmental management and development trajectories. The exploration of indivisible security within the SADC region further highlights the interconnectedness of peace, cooperation, and sustainable development. These contributions reinforce the idea that environmental sustainability cannot be pursued in isolation from broader political and security dynamics.

Another important strand in this volume is the emphasis on economic strategies and livelihoods, particularly in rural contexts. Articles on organic agribusiness, marketing strategies aligned with climate action, and the challenges faced by women in agribusiness illuminate the everyday realities of sustainability. They foreground the experiences of local actors, especially women entrepreneurs, whose resilience and innovation are often overlooked. By examining the socio-economic factors shaping revenue growth and participation, these studies contribute to a more inclusive understanding of development.

The volume also makes a significant intellectual contribution by foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems and alternative epistemologies. The exploration of

Ubuntu as a framework for regional governance offers a human-centred perspective that challenges dominant policy paradigms. Similarly, the critique of epistemic violence in transboundary conservation highlights the marginalisation of local knowledge and agency. These interventions are particularly important in rethinking whose knowledge counts in environmental governance and how more equitable frameworks can be developed. Urban spaces and cultural expressions are not left out of this conversation. Contributions on city branding in Harare and the intersection of art, space, and identity in Durban demonstrate how environmental and political dynamics are experienced and expressed in urban contexts. These studies expand the scope of environmental politics by incorporating cultural and spatial dimensions, offering fresh insights into how cities in the Global South are responding to climate change.

Notably, this issue also extends its analytical reach beyond Africa, with a study on urban climate initiatives in Brazil and a comparative examination of socio-economic vulnerability in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific Islands. These contributions enrich the volume by situating African experiences within a broader global context, encouraging cross-regional learning and dialogue.

Finally, the inclusion of research on language and education, such as the study on tense substitution errors among Tshivenda-speaking students, serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of knowledge production, communication, and development. It highlights the importance of education in shaping the capacity to engage with complex environmental and political issues.

Taken together, the articles in this issue reflect a vibrant and interdisciplinary field of inquiry. They challenge simplistic narratives and instead offer nuanced analyses that recognise the interconnected nature of environment and politics in Africa. As the continent continues to navigate the pressures of climate change, population growth, and political transformation, the insights presented here are both timely and necessary. This volume invites scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to think more critically and act more collaboratively. It is our hope that the conversations sparked within these pages will contribute to more just, sustainable, and context-sensitive approaches to environmental governance in Africa and beyond.

Managing Editor

Prof. Kayode EEsuola

Institute of African and Diaspora Studies.

University of Lagos, Nigeria

oeesuola@unilag.edu.ng

Editor

Dr. Bamidele Olajide

Department of Political Science

University of Lagos, Nigeria

contactdele@gmail.com

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ORGANIC AGRIBUSINESS IN RURAL SOUTH AFRICA: MARKETING STRATEGIES AMID STIFF COMPETITION

Ishmael Obaeko Iwara

Institute for Rural Development
University of Venda, P/Bag X5050
Thohoyandou, South Africa

Correspondence: ishmael.iwara@univen.ac.za
Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8886-576X>

Abstract

This study examines the strategies used by agroecology entrepreneurs involved in organic agribusinesses in rural South Africa. The aim is to interrogate their organisational resilience and viability amidst fierce competitive pressures from their non-organic entrepreneurial counterparts, whose product offerings are characterised by market saturation, entrenched market presence, and affordability. Using a qualitative research approach, the competitive strategies of six stakeholders from the Nombhela Gardens & Cultural Village Cooperative were analysed, providing insights for policy, practice, and further research. The key findings identified four essential strategies: market segmentation, market engagement, distribution agreements, and digital marketing. This study offers a blueprint for navigating the complexities of the organic agrobusiness market in South Africa's rural landscape. Further scientific inquiry can triangulate these findings with organic agribusiness in a broader context, thereby deepening the insights and facilitating the development of a comprehensive framework for successful outcomes.

Keywords: *Agroecology entrepreneurs, organic agribusiness, market complexities, stiff competition, rural economy*

Introduction

Despite sustained growth in global demand and strong normative support from sustainability agendas, organic agribusinesses globally continue to face a complex configuration of structural, economic, and environmental constraints that limit their scalability, profitability, and long-term resilience. Empirical evidence reveals that these challenges are deeply embedded in regulatory frameworks (Silva & Merida, 2025), production systems (Narendran, Kumar & Panghal, 2026), financial architectures (Wu & Li,

2024), and market structures (Wang et al., 2026), collectively shaping the performance and viability of organic value chains.

A central and widely discussed constraint relates to certification and regulatory compliance. Organic production is governed by stringent and often heterogeneous standards that vary across national and regional jurisdictions (Silva & Merida, 2025). This regulatory fragmentation generates high transaction and compliance costs, particularly for producers participating in export-

oriented value chains. Organic farms often undergo lengthy conversion periods, typically two to three years, during which they incur the full costs of organic production without access to price premiums, creating significant cash flow pressures (Escribano, 2016; Karipidis & Karypidou, 2021). These burdens are disproportionately borne by small and medium-scale producers, for whom certification fees, record-keeping requirements, inspection costs, and the need to comply with multiple standards undermine economies of scale. Limited international harmonisation of organic standards (Sawyer, Kerr & Hobbs, 2008; Kumari & Pandey, 2025) further amplifies administrative complexity, reduces market access efficiency, and constrains the integration of producers from low- and middle-income countries into high-value global organic markets.

From a production and agroecological perspective, yield performance and biotic stress pressures remain persistent challenges. A substantial body of comparative studies indicates that organic agricultural systems generally exhibit lower average yields and higher yield variability than conventional systems (Seufert, Ramankutty & Foley, 2012; Kniss, Savage & Jabbour, 2016; de la Cruz, Cheng & Tawaraya, 2023; Pantović, 2025; Narendran, Kumar & Panghal, 2026), particularly in the short to medium term. These outcomes are attributed to restrictions on synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, slower nutrient release from organic amendments, and greater exposure to pest and disease outbreaks. While long-term studies demonstrate that organic systems can improve soil health, biodiversity, and ecosystem services (Pearsons et al., 2023; Rani et al.,

2023), their productivity is highly site-specific and management-intensive. Climate change is further intensifying these vulnerabilities (Bloch et al., 2016; Pantović, 2025). Increasing temperature extremes, altered rainfall patterns, and heightened pest and pathogen dynamics disproportionately affect organic systems, which rely primarily on preventative and biological control strategies rather than rapid chemical interventions. As a result, climate-induced production risks pose a growing threat to the stability and predictability of organic supply.

Organic agribusinesses also face pronounced supply chain fragility and market volatility. The supply chains are typically thinner and less flexible than their conventional counterparts, characterised by limited input suppliers, fewer intermediaries, and weak logistics infrastructure (Wang et al., 2026). High perishability, combined with underdeveloped cold storage and transport systems, particularly in the Global South, contributes to elevated post-harvest losses and quality degradation (Makule, Dimoso & Tassou, 2022; Kaur & Watson, 2024; Kumar et al., 2024). These inefficiencies erode margins and undermine competitiveness, especially in cross-border trade. On the demand side, although global organic markets have expanded steadily, consumption remains highly sensitive to price fluctuations and macroeconomic conditions (Tandon et al., 2020). Organic premiums are vulnerable to inflationary pressures, income shocks, and food security concerns, which can rapidly reduce willingness to pay. Consequently, producers face significant revenue volatility, as premium markets contract during

economic downturns while production costs remain comparatively rigid.

A further systemic constraint is limited access to finance and investment capital. Organic agribusinesses frequently encounter credit rationing due to longer production cycles, yield uncertainty, and lenders' limited familiarity with their production economics (Munguti, 2023; Wu & Li, 2024). Financial institutions often perceive organic farming as higher risk and struggle to assess returns on sustainability-enhancing investments such as soil regeneration, biodiversity management, and certification. This financing gap constrains producers' ability to invest in productivity-enhancing resources, for instance, technologies, climate adaptation measures, processing capacity, and vertical integration, thereby limiting their growth and development (Munguti, 2023). The absence of tailored financial instruments, such as transition finance, risk-sharing mechanisms, or results-based sustainability payments, further limits the sector's capacity to manage shocks and scale sustainably.

Taken together, global empirical discourse demonstrates that while organic agribusiness delivers substantial environmental and social benefits, including improved ecosystem health, reduced chemical exposure, and enhanced rural livelihoods, its long-term expansion is not assured by market growth alone. The viability and scalability of organic agribusinesses depend critically on coordinated policy frameworks, regulatory harmonisation, targeted technological innovation, strengthened value chain infrastructure, and risk-responsive financial mechanisms.

Without such systemic support, organic agriculture risks remaining a niche or premium-oriented sector, rather than a transformative pathway toward sustainable global food systems.

This current study, however, addresses the challenge of the organic agribusiness market with particular attention to competition in rural South Africa, for policy and practices. Intense competition from conventional, non-organic producers, who often benefit from lower production costs, stronger market penetration, and established distribution networks, poses a significant threat to the competitiveness of organic products. Using the Nombhela Gardens & Cultural Village Cooperative as an empirical case study, the research examines the strategies employed by agroecology entrepreneurs to navigate market complexities, differentiate their products, and sustain organic ventures within a challenging commercial environment. The study further argues that the methodologies and insights generated have broader relevance beyond South Africa, offering transferable lessons for mitigating market-related barriers facing green and organic products in diverse international contexts.

The Nombhela Gardens, established in 2014, spans 40 hectares in Bungeni, within the Makhado Local Municipality of Limpopo Province, South Africa (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2024). This initiative engages 16 members in agroecology and is situated in the central region of the western Vhembe Biosphere Reserve (VBR), a priority area for the Global Environment Facility's Small Grants Programme.

The cooperative was developed to provide healthy organic farm products to its environment, stimulate rural economic development, and enhance household income with minimal negative environmental impact. It also aims to create a sustainable green community model essential for spearheading long-term programming within the VBR. The local entrepreneurs are residents of neighbouring traditional villages such as Nkuzana, Nwamandzi, and Shivambu. Weaved together, it has a collective population exceeding 8,000; women constitute approximately 60% of the total figure (UNDP, 2024). In other words, should this agroecological entrepreneurial endeavour find succour, it has the potential to exert a substantive influence on the local community through employment generation and the provision of nutritious sustenance.

Methodology

An exploratory qualitative case study research design was adopted, employing a participatory community-led action research framework. This methodology was strategically chosen to interrogate the competitive traits of organic agribusiness, with a particular focus on the Nombhela Gardens & Cultural Village Cooperative in South Africa. The participatory action research approach emphasizes active, collaborative engagement with

grassroots stakeholders, thereby eliciting nuanced, first-hand perspectives derived from their experiences. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify stakeholders, specifically agroecology entrepreneurs involved with the production of organic products at Nombhela Gardens. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth information. This was obtained using a one-on-one open dialogue strategy. The data collection was guided by the saturation threshold. At this point, information from subsequent participants no longer contributes novel insights to existing data, indicating the threshold for sufficient data acquisition. The qualitative data collected from four participants were systematically processed through thematic analysis. This analytical framework enabled the identification of emergent patterns, key constraints, and actionable strategies aimed at fostering the effectiveness of agroecological practices in the study area.

Results and Discussion of Findings

Four distinctive strategies agroecology entrepreneurs in the study area frequently employ to ensure their organic products remain competitive amid saturated non-organic products include market segmentation, strategic community engagement, distribution agreements and digital marketing (Table 1).

Table 1: Agroecology entrepreneurs' marketing strategies

Market segmentation	Dividing a broad market into smaller, defined groups of consumers with similar needs for organic products or specific characteristics enables entrepreneurs to target more effectively. For instance, the assumption that sensitised individuals readily understand the importance of healthy eating. Ill individuals
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	inevitably require organic products to recover and stay healthy. High-income earners can afford organic products.
Market engagement	Entrepreneurs frequently interact with consumers, creating awareness of the importance of organic products, and analysing their needs and preferences. This is aimed at building loyalty.
Distribution Agreement	This is a mutually beneficial contractual arrangement that authorises well-established larger firms to stock, shelf and sell their organic products within specific markets.
Digital marketing	The use of online channels, such as websites and social media platforms, to advertise, promote brands and engage customers.

Source: Author’s illustration based on primary data

Market segmentation

The effectiveness of niche market positioning as a strategic approach for entrepreneurs is well-articulated in scientific discourse, illustrating its role in establishing competitive advantage within specialised segments. According to Helmold (2022) and Iwara (2024), successful differentiation through targeted positioning enables ventures to capitalise on unmet needs within narrow markets, enhancing brand loyalty and reducing direct competition.

“We strive to identify and establish the unique presence of organic products in the minds of a specific segment of consumers, mainly by highlighting their distinctive value proposition, benefits, or qualities. Firstly, we work with dieticians; most of them need my products for their patients. I also target educated and upper-class individuals, as this category of persons not only understands the importance of healthy food but also possesses the means to afford it. This focus is crucial amid stiff competition, especially in an environment highly saturated

with non-organic products; it allows an enterprise to differentiate itself from competitors, build a unique, loyal customer base, and allocate resources equitably and efficiently by concentrating on a niche where it can excel” (Female, 66 years old, agroecology entrepreneur).

A well-defined targeted market position helps businesses stand out, attract the right customer base, and achieve sustainable growth in a crowded marketplace. The theoretical position aligns with market segmentation theory, which stipulates that tailoring a unique product to a specific customer base enhances satisfaction and retention (Arnett, 2024). Focusing specifically on unique customer typologies, the agroecology entrepreneurs develop a distinct value proposition that resonates deeply with their target audience (Iwara, 2024), thus improving their market penetration and long-term sustainability amid stiff competition.

Market engagement

In entrepreneurship, customisation and community engagement are critical drivers of customer loyalty and brand advocacy in niche markets. The

entrepreneurs highlight the importance of co-creation and personalised experiences in building strong customer relationships, especially within specialised segments like organic green products. One of the participants explained:

“It involves several key steps. To begin with, I actively engage customers who frequently patronise my products through feedback channels, surveys, or interactive platforms. This is to interrogate their perceptions, gather insights and understand their needs and preferences. Based on the nuance, I develop or tailor my products and services, ensuring offerings resonate with individual desires. Personalisation tools and data analytics are then used to customise interactions, communications, and experiences in real-time, making each touchpoint relevant and meaningful. Throughout this process, ongoing dialogue and feedback loops help refine and adapt the offerings, fostering a dynamic relationship where customers feel heard, valued, and involved in shaping their experience, ultimately strengthening loyalty and trust.” (Male, 41 years old, agroecology entrepreneur).

Engaging directly with consumers through community-building activities and experiential marketing enhances perceived value and emotional attachment to the product, which in turn fosters trust and advocacy (Vivek, Beatty & Morgan, 2012; Harmeling et al., 2017). These strategies enable

entrepreneurs to differentiate their offerings not only through product features but also through authentic, meaningful interactions, ultimately leading to a resilient and dedicated customer base that sustains competitive advantage in niche markets.

Distribution agreement

Another context is strategic partnerships and distribution agreements between agroecology entrepreneurs and big firms operating in the areas. This form of arrangement enables the shelving of organic products within larger, well-known retailers or brands on mutually beneficial terms. In addition, the mutually beneficial arrangements enable the emerging organic agribusiness ventures to penetrate competitive markets more effectively, while established firms in partnership strengthen their product diversity and appeal to targeted customer segments.

“Because our emerging Nombhela Gardens business lacks the market power to attract a large customer base or compete directly with well-established non-organic firms, we strategically enter into mutually beneficial distribution agreements with well-known, larger, reputable companies. Through this arrangement, our initial products are shelved and sold alongside those of established brands, providing our organic business with valuable exposure and access to broader markets...” (Female, 36 years, agroecology entrepreneur).

“The essential part of it is that this partnership enables our venture to gain credibility, compete more effectively in the area, and achieve sustainable growth by leveraging the distribution channels and customer trust of the larger firms” (Female, 45 years old, agroecology entrepreneur).

The assumption that collaboration between small ventures and established firms can be mutually beneficial aligns with Doz (1987), whose viewpoint highlights the advantages of strategic alliances in fostering innovation and market access. Mutually beneficial collaborations enable small firms to leverage the resources, distribution channels, and brand recognition of larger partners, thereby reducing entry barriers, operational hurdles and accelerating growth. The alliances facilitate knowledge sharing and co-innovation, which are crucial for small ventures, especially nascent enterprises, to compete effectively in crowded markets (Mantili, 2020). Hence, the distribution agreement is instrumental, strategically enhancing competitiveness and sustainable growth for small agroecology ventures.

Digital platforms

The fourth strategy is digital marketing. The presence of digital technologies for a wide variety of businesses opens up fundamentally new opportunities for the collection and analysis of information about markets and consumers, the implementation of marketing communications with customers and the formation of brand awareness. Its platforms provide interaction with customers and business partners using digital information and communication

technologies and electronic means. For instance, organic entrepreneurs leverage the internet and social networks, such as Nombhela's official website, Facebook page and WhatsApp. These channels enable them to market their products, communicate more interactively, cost-effectively, and measurably than traditional marketing approaches.

The university created a Facebook page for the cooperative, where we frequently upload our activities and products. This page gained broader visibility, promoted our products to essential stakeholders and loyal consumers. Truth be told, some of these people would not have been reached through other marketing channels; they are far from our farm. We received orders from them. Some of them even trace us all the way down here using the address on the Facebook page. (Male, 29 years old, agroecology entrepreneur).

WhatsApp can be very resourceful in advertising products and attracting loyal customers. Because the cooperative is isolated from Bungeni town, we saw the need to advertise our products on WhatsApp status and encourage close family and friends to share on their platforms. Somehow, people got the gist and located us. Some of our clients said they learned about our products on WhatsApp platforms. They were thrilled by our genuine organic agribusiness initiative, and visiting the farm in person to buy the product gives them a sense of originality. (Female, 32 years old, agroecology entrepreneur).

Digital marketing is highly effective and critically important for organic agricultural entrepreneurs operating in highly competitive markets because it enables

them to differentiate their products, communicate value, and reach niche consumers at relatively low cost (Nyangomam et al., 2024; Somthawinpongsai et al., 2024). Unlike conventional products that compete primarily on price and scale, organic products rely on trust, transparency, and sustainability narratives—elements that digital platforms are uniquely suited to convey through storytelling, traceability content, and direct engagement with consumers (Dumortier et al., 2017; Busch, Mühlrath & Herzig, 2024). Digital marketing allows organic entrepreneurs to educate customers about health, environmental, and ethical benefits, strengthen brand credibility through certifications and customer feedback, and bypass traditional intermediaries by accessing markets directly. In contexts where organic producers face intense competition from cheaper non-organic alternatives, digital marketing enhances visibility, builds loyal customer communities, improves market access, and stabilizes demand, thereby contributing significantly to business resilience and long-term competitiveness.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In the South African rural context, adopting targeted strategies, such as market segmentation, market engagement, distribution agreements and digital marketing, significantly enhances agroecology entrepreneurs' ability to attract and retain a specialised customer segment for their unique organic products. Through market segmentation, the entrepreneurs divide a broad organic market into distinct customer groups, allowing them to tailor products, pricing, and marketing strategies more effectively to meet specific needs and improve competitiveness and profitability. Market engagement enhances frequent

interaction with consumers, not only for awareness campaigns on the importance of organic products but also to analyse their needs and preferences, thus building loyalty. While distribution agreements strategically link entrepreneurs with big firms, enabling the shelving and sale of their organic products in well-established markets, digital marketing was resourceful for reaching a broader market segment. It allows entrepreneurs to advertise and promote their organic initiatives on websites, Facebook and WhatsApp, thereby attracting customers.

This study offers a blueprint for navigating the complexities of the organic agrobusiness market in rural South Africa and beyond; however, it carries important limitations: its sample size of six participants and qualitative approach may limit generalisation. Similarly, the geographic sample underrepresents other local municipalities and provinces in the country. Future research should conduct empirical statistical nation studies with standardised measurement instruments to test the emerged strategies.

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