

# Uganda's Food Security at a Crossroads

*What the New Geopolitics of Food Means for Uganda — and What Must Be Done*

Adapted by Danny Gotto, Innovations for Development from the IPES-Food Special Report: The New Geopolitics of Food

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The world's food system is under strain. Conflicts from Iran, Ukraine to Sudan, escalating trade disputes, climate shocks, and the unravelling of multilateral institutions are shaking global food markets in ways not seen since the 1970s. For Uganda — a country where agriculture employs nearly 70 percent of the workforce and feeds the majority of the population — these global tremors are not distant. They are already being felt in local markets, on farm gates, and in household budgets.

A landmark special report by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) argues that this moment demands urgent action. Governments across the world — and urgently in sub-Saharan Africa — must move to build what the report calls “resilient self-reliance”: strengthening domestic food production, reducing dangerous exposure to import dependency, and reclaiming policy tools that protect food access when global markets fail. This briefing contextualises those findings for Uganda.

## Why Uganda Should Take Notice

Uganda's food system sits at an uncomfortable intersection of strengths and vulnerabilities. On one hand, Uganda remains a net food exporter, has fertile soils, and has made real progress in agricultural productivity over the past two decades. On the other hand, the country is not insulated from global food market instability.

Uganda imports significant volumes of fuel, fertilisers, and other agricultural inputs that are priced in global markets and traded in foreign currency. When global commodity prices spike — as they did following the USA-Iran war 2025/2026 and previously in 2022 following the Russia-Ukraine war, which have driven fertiliser prices to historic highs — Ugandan farmers face sharply higher input costs, while urban consumers absorb price rises in cooking oil, wheat flour, and other imported staples.

***When fertiliser prices spiked globally in 2022, Ugandan farmers absorbed costs they could not pass on and could not avoid. That vulnerability is structural — and it will not fix itself.***

At the same time, climate variability is intensifying. The two annual rainy seasons that anchor Uganda's agricultural calendar are becoming less predictable. Prolonged droughts

in the cattle corridor and flash floods in the highlands are damaging harvests and driving food price volatility in domestic markets. For the estimated 40 percent of Ugandans who remain food insecure, another external shock could be devastating.

The IPES-Food report warns that powerful corporations are using this instability to raise prices and consolidate control of global supply chains. For smallholder farmers in Uganda — who make up the vast majority of the country’s agricultural producers — this concentration of market power reduces their bargaining position and squeezes their margins further.

## The Import Dependency Trap

One of the IPES-Food report’s central warnings is directed at countries in the Global South that have been made “structurally dependent” on food imports — often as a result of decades of policy pressure from international financial institutions to open markets and reduce public investment in domestic food systems.

Uganda’s relationship with import dependency is complex. While the country does not depend on food imports for basic staples in the way that some smaller or more arid nations do, it is highly dependent on imported inputs — particularly synthetic fertilisers and agro-chemicals — to sustain productivity gains in the commercial farming sector. The National Development Plan III has identified agricultural modernisation as a central pillar of Uganda’s ambition to reach upper-middle-income status by 2040. But if that modernisation is built on deep dependence on globally traded inputs, Uganda will remain exposed to exactly the kind of shocks the IPES-Food report describes.

### KEY RISK FOR UGANDA

*Heavy reliance on imported fertilisers links Uganda’s farm productivity directly to global commodity markets and foreign exchange fluctuations — risks that are beyond any Ugandan farmer’s or policymaker’s control.*

There is also a food-as-geopolitics dimension that Uganda cannot ignore. As major economies including the United States, China, and the European Union weaponise food trade in strategic competition, smaller economies in the Global South can find themselves caught between competing blocs or cut off from supply chains with little warning. Uganda’s government must plan for a world in which international goodwill cannot be assumed.

## The Case for Homegrown Market Management

A key contribution of the IPES-Food report is its rehabilitation of market management tools that were largely abandoned in Uganda and across sub-Saharan Africa following structural adjustment reforms in the 1980s and 1990s. These include public food reserves, supply management systems, marketing boards, and strategic production planning.

Uganda had its own version of these tools. The Produce Marketing Board, established after independence, managed the export of key commodities and provided price floors for farmers. Its dismantling under structural adjustment left smallholder farmers exposed to

market volatility without the buffers that farmers in India, Canada, Norway, and other countries continue to benefit from today.

***The market management tools that wealthy countries use to protect their farmers were the same ones Uganda was told to abandon. It is time to revisit that history.***

The IPES-Food report draws on case studies from India's public food stockholding system, West Africa's regional food reserves, Canada's supply management dairy sector, and Norway's state-supported fishing industry to show how these mechanisms can stabilise prices, buffer supply disruptions, and support farmer incomes without sacrificing broader development goals.

For Uganda, the lessons are directly applicable. A strategic national food reserve, combined with transparent price stabilisation mechanisms for key staples such as maize, beans, and cassava, could significantly reduce the volatility that currently undermines household food security and farmer income planning. The East African Community framework offers a regional platform through which such mechanisms could be coordinated with neighbouring countries.

## **Agroecology: Uganda's Built-In Advantage**

The IPES-Food report's concept of resilient self-reliance is not a call for isolationism or a return to subsistence farming. It is a call to build food systems that are more diverse, more locally rooted, and less dependent on fossil fuels and external inputs — while remaining open to fair and cooperative trade partnerships.

Uganda is unusually well-positioned to pursue this path. The country's high agricultural biodiversity, varied agro-ecological zones, and the deep traditional knowledge of its smallholder farming communities represent assets that many other countries lack. The growing movement around regenerative and agroecological farming — already being implemented in Kibaale, Luwero, northern Uganda, and elsewhere — demonstrates that Uganda can build productive, climate-resilient food systems without deepening dependence on imported inputs.

Research and evidence from programmes run by organisations working across Uganda's districts consistently show that agroforestry, composting, intercropping, and integrated farming systems can match or exceed the yields of chemical-intensive approaches, at lower cost and with greater climate resilience. These are not experimental ideas. They are working solutions, already on the ground, waiting to be scaled.

### **UGANDA'S OPPORTUNITY**

*Uganda's agricultural biodiversity, fertile soils, and growing agroecological movement represent a ready platform for the kind of resilient self-reliance that the global moment demands.*

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## **What Uganda's Policymakers Must Do**

Drawing on the IPES-Food recommendations and applying them to the Ugandan context, this briefing calls on the Government of Uganda and its development partners to take the following actions:

- Support the transition to agroecological farming at scale — by funding extension services, research, and farmer training programmes that build soil health, reduce dependence on synthetic inputs, and strengthen Uganda’s food sovereignty.
- Invest in local and territorial food supply chains — including rural storage infrastructure, feeder roads, local market facilities, and digital market information systems that connect smallholder farmers with buyers and reduce post-harvest losses.
- Restore and modernise market management tools — including the establishment of a strategic national food reserve, transparent price stabilisation mechanisms for key staples, and reinvestment in agricultural marketing infrastructure.
- Pursue cooperative regional trade arrangements through the East African Community and African Continental Free Trade Area that protect smallholder farmers and vulnerable consumers from global price volatility, rather than exposing them further to it.
- Align climate adaptation and food security policy — ensuring that Uganda’s national climate commitments are fully integrated with agricultural and food policy, including through scaled-up investment in climate-smart and regenerative farming systems.

## A Historic Moment — and a Clear Choice

The IPES-Food report describes the current moment as “historic” — a rare opportunity to reshape how food systems are governed before another crisis forecloses the options. For Uganda, the convergence of geopolitical instability, climate stress, and an active agricultural transformation agenda creates exactly the conditions in which bold, forward-looking policy choices are both possible and necessary.

The choice is clear. Uganda can continue on a trajectory that deepens dependence on volatile global markets and expensive imported inputs — a path that leaves millions of smallholder farmers and food-insecure households exposed to shocks they cannot control. Or it can invest now in the domestic food systems, market management tools, and agroecological transition that will make its agricultural sector more resilient, more equitable, and better able to feed its people through whatever the world throws at it next.

***Uganda’s farmers already know how to work with the land. The question is whether policy will work with them.***

The tools exist. The knowledge exists. The evidence is in. What is needed now is the political will to act.

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*This briefing is adapted from: IPES-Food (2025). The New Geopolitics of Food: Navigating Policies for Resilient Self-Reliance.*

Contextualised for a Ugandan audience by *Danny Gotto, Innovations for Development*.  
Full report available at [ipes-food.org](https://ipes-food.org).