Eight East African countries are seeking to attract more investment into agriculture and food processing, as the region looks to turn its agricultural potential into businesses that can generate jobs, income and economic growth.

Representatives from Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan and Uganda gathered in Kigali on Monday for the Hand-in-Hand Investment Forum for Eastern Africa, organized by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization.

The forum is bringing together governments, investors and development partners to identify projects, mobilize capital and strengthen trade and investment across the region's food systems.

“We need to move from discussions to concrete action,” said Mohamed Aw Dahir, FAO representative in Rwanda. He said the success of the forum should ultimately be measured by whether ideas lead to investments that benefit farmers, businesses and rural communities.

The FAO's Hand-in-Hand initiative aims to help countries move beyond reliance on aid-funded projects and attract commercially viable investments capable of transforming agriculture and food processing.

Agriculture and Animal Resources Minister, Dr. Telesphore Ndabamenye, said the region already has significant investment opportunities but needs to develop them into projects that can attract capital and generate returns.

“The opportunities are there. What remains is to turn them into investments that can generate returns, grow and contribute to development,” he said.

Ndabamenye said Rwanda is working with FAO to identify investment opportunities in agriculture and develop projects that can connect investors with financing, technology and expertise.

Potential areas include coffee, livestock and dairy, fisheries, horticulture, cereals and oilseed production, according to Farayi Zimudzi, FAO's regional coordinator for Eastern Africa.

But climate change, inadequate infrastructure, high transportation costs and limited access to finance remain major barriers to investment, she said.

Zimudzi called for stronger cooperation among governments, the private sector, financial institutions, development partners and technology companies to address those challenges.

The Kigali forum comes ahead of the Africa Food Systems Summit, scheduled for Kigali in early September, and the FAO Hand-in-Hand Investment Forum in Rome in October.