

“As we integrate our economies, we must recognise that SME sectors have become pivotal in the African drive to sustainable and long term development”, said Mr Edward Kiwanuka Sekandi at the opening of the 8th COMESA Business Council Forum in Kampala, Uganda on 19 November 2012.

Mr Sekandi, who is the Vice President of Uganda, opened the forum under the theme, “Promoting Intra-COMESA trade through micro, small and medium enterprise development: Seizing opportunities for innovation and prosperity in business.”

He underscored the importance of the Business Forum and its immense benefit to the people within the regional economic bloc and added that the Government of Uganda is proud of its central role within the correlation of other COMESA Member States, which has given a lively business forum.

“Member States must enhance the capacity of entrepreneurs especially the small and medium enterprises with a view to enabling the region attain market competitiveness where there is general participation supported by high technique production and market systems,” said Mr Sekandi.

A study by the East African Community Secretariat revealed that the MSMEs sub sector is the biggest employer and constitutes about 90 percent of the private sector in the East African Community region. The COMESA Secretariat also reports that SMEs are known to contribute over 50 percent of employment in the COMESA region and are dominating the business world and cutting across all priority sectors.

Mr Sekandi noted that despite significant contributions of MSMEs, reports show that the sub sector is still regarded as one operated by school leavers, job seekers awaiting formal employment, retirees, retrenchees, or people supplementing their low income.

“There is need to address the factors that affect the growth and development of MSMEs”, he said and noted that it is therefore not surprising that the value of intra COMESA trade remains low.

He urged COMESA to reverse the current situation by addressing the inhibitions in intra regional trade growth and competitiveness. He also reiterated the need for the Business Forum to seize the opportunity to identify measures to be supported by Member States as this will enhance the capacity of entrepreneurs, especially the small and medium enterprises, with a view to addressing the challenges and enabling the region attain market competitiveness and sustainable development.

Mr Sekandi expressed the Government of Uganda commitment to supporting MSMEs and enabling them to become key in the economy. “To this end, a fully fledged directorate will be

instituted in the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives, to ensure effective coordination and support to MSMEs in Uganda”, he added.

Participants were encouraged to take advantage of the dialogue and make specific and relevant regulatory reforms and interventions that COMESA Member States will undertake in promoting growth and participation of small and medium enterprises.

In conclusion, Mr Sekandi pledged government’s continued support to measures aimed at aligning production with market standards and harmonising policies and regulations that impact on both internal and cross border trade.