

The Regional Strategic Analysis and Knowledge Support System for Eastern and Central Africa – ReSAKSS-ECA, based at the International Livestock Research Institute in Nairobi has linked-up with the Alliance for Commodity Trade in Eastern and Southern Africa (ACTESA), a Specialized Agency of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, to collaborate in the area of agricultural research to enhance food security, promote crop diversification and augment the role of women in agriculture. In an interview with e-COMESA, ACTESA Acting Chief Executive Officer, Dr Chungu Mwila, said COMESA is engaging with ReSAKSS, firstly in the assessment of soybean trade in the region because Soybean is the most important and preferred source of high quality vegetable protein for animal feed worldwide.

“Globally, soybean constitutes the largest share of cultivation and trade among biotechnology crops (GMOs). Today, more than 85% of the soybean traded in the world market is derived from GM soybean,” Dr Mwila said. European countries and China are the major importers, mostly for stock-feed purposes.

He added that the study is expected to generate information to be used to inform the implementation of COMESA’s regional biotechnology and biosafety policy, which is currently in draft form.

Dr Mwila further said that a future phase of the study would consider the economics of production and/or trade in GM soybean and the likely implications on technology and/or product choices in the COMESA region.

“The second area of cooperation will involve the participation of women in intra-regional agricultural trade in the COMESA region because previous studies have indicated that most women are involved in small-scale agriculture at national and regional level, but little is known about their actual contribution to economic growth and development.”

He added that the study has been identified as a priority by ACTESA, which has been given the mandate of linking small-scale agricultural producers in COMESA member countries to national, regional and international markets.

“This arises from the emerging concern that the impact of trade liberalization on women’s welfare in the region is not well understood. A full understanding of the gender dimension to trade can bring significant change on how regional and national interventions should be prioritized under the CAADP process. The role of women in regional agricultural trade appears to be important, both as active agents in, and target beneficiaries of, development,” Dr Mwila said.

He continued to say that women play a significant role in informal cross-border trade in the region yet this role is neither recognized nor supported by policy. There is a definite need to promote an integration of gender needs and concerns in the design of policies for linking smallholder agricultural producers to national and regional markets.

“COMESA and ReSKASS have also partnered in assessing trade openness in the region in

order to expand intra-regional trade, which is a key objective of COMESA's regional integration agenda.

He said there is a widespread perception that failure to implement agreed trade agreements has serious negative consequences on intra-regional trade performance.

"Under this activity, protection and market access indicators for selected food staples among COMESA member States were computed in 2011," Dr Mwila noted.

"ACTESA's Development Strategy and Operational Plan, formulated within the CAADP framework, have highlighted the importance of expanding regional trade to overcome the region's main challenges of food insecurity and poverty and have identified inappropriate policies as a key challenge to realising the full potential of the region."

Meanwhile Regional Strategic Analysis and Knowledge Support System – ReSAKSS has advised COMESA to ensure that barriers to trade are minimised especially on food staples in the region.

Dr Joseph Karugia, the Coordinator of ReSAKSS, said that COMESA needs to eliminate the existing tariffs on imports and exports of staple foods like maize, rice and others if the region is to compete with the products coming from outside the region.

"It is sometimes cheaper to import food staples from overseas or other regions rather than COMESA, a situation I think should stop. This is basically because of the high taxes each Member State imposes on imports, making it cheaper to do business with other countries, some of which are outside the African continent."

He attributed the high taxes add to the cost of production, which he said are already too high in the COMESA region compared to other parts of the world.

And Stella Massawe, the Monitoring and Evaluation Expert at ReSAKSS, said that productivity of agricultural systems in the COMESA region was still low compared to other regions of the world, such as Asia and Latin America, and the region has become a net food importer.

Massawe said that if the trend continues, COMESA will continue to lag behind in terms of productivity in the agricultural sector and has since called on the region to come up with measures that will enhance high productivity rather than high production.

ReSAKSS and COMESA jointly organised a Seminary in Lusaka on 06 February 2013 under the theme: *"Trade Openness in COMESA"*.

The seminar will be followed-up by further consultations between ReSAKSS, ACTESA and other COMESA programmes, such as CAADP on the modalities for implementing the three identified studies which are being funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).