**PRESS RELEASE**

**Regional ICT Programme Worth €8 Million Launched**

***The programme will enhance policy and regulatory environment for competitive markets and improve infrastructure connectivity and access to ICT.***

***Lusaka, Thursday, May 12, 2022:*** Five Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are set to benefit from a new eight million euros project: Enhancement of Governance and Enabling Environment in the ICT sector (EGEE-ICT), funded by the European Union. It was launched on Thursday 12 May 2022 at the opening of the 2nd Programme Steering Committee Meeting.

The four-year programme covers 29 African countries from the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) as the lead, the East African Community (EAC), the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). It will support the review and/or development of various regional policy and regulatory framework in a harmonized manner that will contribute to enhancing competition, improved access to cost effective and secure ICT services.

The implementation of the project begun in late 2021 following the signing of a Grant contribution amounting to eight million Euros between the European Union and COMESA in December 2020. Its objective is to deepen regional integration and growth of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector in the Eastern Africa-Southern Africa and Indian Ocean (EA-SA-IO) regions.

The programme will coordinate regional public and private sector ICT policy development, enhance policy and regulatory environment for competitive markets and gender sensitive ICT markets and improve infrastructure connectivity and access to ICT.

According to the EGEE-ICT project document, the penetration of mobile telephones in the EA-SA-IO region has increased because of both private and public sector investments in infrastructure adding that internet penetration is also rapidly growing. The socio-economic benefits of accessing and using ICTs, in particular the internet, are rising as essential information and services, both in the public and private sectors, continue to move online.

Despite these positive developments, many people in the region are still not connected to ICT services, especially the internet, and the cost of access is prohibitive in most cases.

“ICT accessibility and affordability is the key for utilizing e-services and for reaching all groups of society in remote areas and other disadvantaged groups in order to transform the landscape for development,” said Dr Kipyego Cheluget, COMESA Assistant Secretary General for Programmes.

Major challenges inhibiting the improved access to cost effective ICTs in the region include the existence of vertically integrated dominant operators providing both the infrastructure and services, limited resources or lack of expertise to implement harmonized policies, laws and institutions. Besides, uneven and fragmented implementation of policy and regulatory frameworks across the region impedes promotion of competitive markets and the development and adoption of regional policies and regulations varying among Member States.

To resolve these bottlenecks, the EGEE-ICT will leverage on available opportunities to enhance the capacities of public and private sector institutions and the civil society to develop, implement and monitor harmonized ICT policies and regulations. The programme will also develop model policy and regulatory frameworks that enhance cross-border interconnection, competition, trade facilitation, e-commerce as well as gender perspectives in regional ICT markets.

European Union Delegation to Zambia Team Leader for Infrastructure Mr Claudio Bacigalupi said the EGEE-ICT programme is fully aligned with the EU Global Gateway Strategy and it would contribute to the development of the ICT sector in Africa and deepen regional integration.

**Media Contacts**

Muzinge Nampito

Corporate Communications

COMESA Secretariat

Email: [mnampito@comesa.int](mailto:mnampito@comesa.int)

[pr@comesa.int](mailto:pr@comesa.int)

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