



STATEMENT BY

**H E CHILESHE MPUNDU KAPWEPWE
COMESA SECRETARY GENERAL,**

**AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF
MEETING OF THE VIRTUAL EXTRA-ORDINARY MEETING OF
THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS 14TH MAY 2020**

**Chairperson,
Distinguished Honourable Ministers,
Chief Executives of COMESA Institutions
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is my pleasure to have this opportunity to make a few remarks at the opening of this Meeting, which for the first time is being held online due to the new ways of working brought about by the effects of the Coronavirus disease.

Honorable Ministers

Our region has continued to register rising cases of COVID-19 and indications are that we are not yet close to flattening the curve of infections yet. Nonetheless, we have some of the best outcomes from the measures put in place by your governments. We have seen a few of our countries maintaining low number and others have successfully flattened the curve. At the same time, we have countries that have experienced an upward trajectory despite very gallant efforts to contain the pandemic.

Given that we are interconnected, it will be very critical that Member States stand together and collectively respond to the crisis. That

way, the gains made by one state will cascade to the other and the omissions by one will equally affect the other, especially those that share physical boundaries. It means that without collective effort, the gains that each individual state makes are likely to be undermined or reinforced by the measures that the other countries in the region puts in place. That is why as COMESA, we felt it is critical to have a coordinated and harmonized response, as much as possible, so that our collective efforts serve to only reinforce each other.

Hon Ministers

The ravaging impact of COVID- 19 on health, livelihoods and economic activities in the entire world is unprecedented. These impacts are even more prominent in Africa, and in particular, the COMESA region, whose economies are relatively young, less resilient, have weak health systems, dependency on commodities and high levels of unemployment.

Further, economies in the region have significant presence of the informal sector, as a major driver of the economies. So far, Member States have put in place various measures to fight the transmission of the corona virus. These measures have been taken at the national level and continue being implemented at different times.

The application of these measures are also different. They range from complete lockdown to partial lock downs with restrictions on international travel among others.

As a result, the majority small scale businesses, small scale traders and other self-employed populations have been adversely affected. Transit trade and transport across the region has been seriously affected leading to disruption of regional supply, especially basic food stuffs.

This has the potential of causing food shortages and price spikes beyond the reach of the majority poor. Besides, social and cultural effects including weakening of societal fabrics due to social distancing, gender-based violence, loss of livelihoods and stress related issues and increased inequalities as women face bigger burden of taking care of the sick.

Chairperson, Ladies and gentlemen,

In a bid to complement Member States responses, the Secretariat established a Task Force to develop guidelines to facilitate movement of goods and services across the region and also

modalities of joining hands with other RECs to facilitate mobilization of resources.

These interventions are aimed at bridging the gap between policy intentions and implementation outcomes. For instance, the adoption of quarantine, social distancing, and restrictions of movement of persons, goods and services in the face of COVID-19 directly result into production cut-downs, loss of jobs, shortage of food and other essential supplies.

Additional resources are therefore required to help address emerging challenges including food shortages, loss of jobs, and social security safety-nets when these are put in place.

At the same time, the private sector has equally been hit hard by the pandemic and as much as we rely on this sector to support us during this pandemic, the governments should put in place a clear strategy on how to cushion and support them during and after the pandemic. This is important in facilitating their recovery with fair, transparent and non-discriminatory rules and regulations to enable them to survive and even open up new production lines to directly address the spread and treatment of the disease.

Chairperson and Honourable Ministers,

It is worth noting that tremendous progress has been made towards realization of COMESA goals and objectives. Today, 16 countries are members of the Free Trade Area, whereas several trade and trade facilitation instruments are being implemented. It is important that the gains already made are protected now and in future and the guidelines before you is a step towards consolidating our programmes and activities.

We therefore urge you to build on the ongoing COMESA programmes and work with member States to implement trade facilitation programmes touching on trade and transport. The implementation of the COMESA Digital Free Trade Area and enhanced application of its instruments such as use of electronic certificates will be crucial as we move into the future.

The collaboration with the private sector in the region and use of existing processing capacities in the production of essential medical supplies will not only contribute to saving lives but will also re-vamp our economies.

The other areas which require prioritization is the liberalization of critical services sectors including the banking and insurance services among other areas.

Hon. Ministers

The impact of COVID-19 has made it clear that as a region we need to strengthen and integrate regional policies to take into account the adverse social-economic and political impacts and to develop strategies to support and facilitate quick recovery of our economies. This will require collaboration at regional level and among all stakeholders. The guidelines that are before you today are intended to support that and I believe, you will not only adopt them but more importantly, to ensure they are implemented for the collective good of our region at this critical time.

In conclusion, Hon Ministers, I would also like to invite this meeting to consider the two administrative agenda items that require your decision as they are critical to the smooth operations of the Secretariat. These are: the state of Member States contributions and the acquisition of a new headquarter for the Secretariat.

I have no doubt that this meeting will conclusively deal with these issues as well.

I thank you for your attention.