



**OPENING REMARKS
BY HER EXCELLENCY MS. CHILESHE MPUNDU KAPWEPWE,
SECRETARY GENERAL OF COMESA AT THE COMESA@25
ANNIVERSARY DAY GALA DINNER**

**28 NOVEMBER 2019
MULUNGUSHI INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTER
LUSAKA, ZAMBIA**

Theme: "COMESA – Growing together for Prosperity"

**The Guest of Honour;
Distinguished Delegates;
Your Excellencies Ambassadors and High Commissioners;
Our Co-operating Partners;
Representatives of International Organisations;
Distinguished Delegates, Observers and Guests;
Members of the Print and Electronic Media;
Officials of the Secretariat;
Heads and Officials of COMESA Institutions;
Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Indeed we have a great reason to celebrate, we are marking 25 years of existence. As we look ahead to the future, it is important to look back on our journey thus far. Therefore, this is a happy moment as there is no better time than today to reflect on our journey and to congratulate ourselves for reaching this point. It therefore gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to this event marking 25 years of COMESA's existence. I sincerely thank you for taking the time to join us on this important occasion. This is a day to educate, reflect, to mobilize collective will, and reinforce our achievements. A number of events have been held this past week to mark our silver jubilee with today being the climax.

Your Excellencies

Distinguished Delegates;

Allow me to thank Standard Chartered Bank for sponsoring the Gala Dinner and the following for sponsoring the other COMESA Anniversary activities; Trade and Development Bank, Barclays Bank Zambia, Yellow Card RCTG, PTA Reinsurance (ZEP-RE), COMESA Competition Commission, European Union, Ethiopian Airlines and Kenya Airways.

It is appropriate to say that COMESA is among the well-recognised regional economic communities globally, continentally and regionally with stakeholders at all levels. As we celebrate the foundation of this organisation, allow me to take you back to the origins. COMESA was initially established as the Preferential Trade Area for Eastern and Southern Africa in 1981, within the framework of the Organisation of African Unity. The PTA was established to take advantage of a larger market size, to share the region's common heritage and destiny and to allow for greater social and economic cooperation. In 1994, the PTA evolved into COMESA.

Today our organisation is one of the Eight (8) Regional Economic Communities recognised by the African Union formed to promote regional integration among the groupings for the gradual establishment of an African Economic Community.

At the continental level, COMESA has been instrumental in the design and formulation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) which came into force on 30th May 2019. One of the building blocks that led to the (AfCFTA) is the COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite Free Trade Area which was officially launched in 2015.

Your Excellencies

Distinguished Delegates

The organisation employs a multi-dimensional approach in pushing forward its regional integration agenda and recently increased its membership from 19 to 21 African member States to include Tunisia and Somalia. Our region has continued to undertake its responsibility as a building bloc to the realisation of a unified and peaceful continent. Among its results has been the establishment of larger markets to facilitate trade which has contributed to rapid economic growth and ultimately the development of the region through the improvement of the social economic realities of our citizens. In this regard, intra-COMESA total exports have increased from USD 2.4 billion in 2001 to USD 10.3 billion in 2018. This improvement demonstrates the degree of reliance of our member States on intra-COMESA trade. More than ever, we are confident of our export potential with emerging markets outside our region. A recent diagnostics study revealed the comparative advantage of our region in trading with the emerging markets due to factors such as large income in terms of gross domestic product of both COMESA member States and the emerging markets and shorter distance with regards to lower transportation cost between COMESA and emerging markets.

Your Excellencies

Distinguished Delegates

We are gathered here today, to reflect on our achievements and contributions towards the regional integration agenda and to unlock its hidden potential. This means widening our reach, creating opportunities and deepening our integration programmes. In addition to trade facilitation, we have made great strides in improving our Transport, Energy, and ICT infrastructure, however more requires to be done as infrastructure plays a pivotal role in regional integration by improving efficiency of the interconnectivity among our member States to facilitate trade and movement of factors of production. An example of the infrastructural development is the North-South Corridor, which is a collaborative transport project implemented by the Tripartite to facilitate trade, support regional integration, employment and ultimately economic growth through the improvement of physical infrastructure.

Allow me to state that through our programmes aimed at fostering gender equality, women empowerment and social development, our region has emerged as a leader in promoting women's role in development efforts. Women must be supported to contribute to the development agenda as their participation leads to stronger economies. I am happy to announce that on 25th November 2019, the 50 Million African Women Speak Platform was launched in Kigali, Rwanda. This is a digital networking platform to enable women to access financial and non-financial information including sharing of experiences, mentorship, and access to markets among others.

The project is supported by the African Development Bank (AfDB) and implemented in partnership with East African Community (EAC) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) covering 38 countries on the continent.

Your Excellencies

Distinguished Delegates

It is our shared obligation to do more to achieve the mandate for which the organisation was created and maintain our resilience to uplift the living standards of the region's citizenry. These 25 years have been filled with milestones that have solidified our position. We have learnt from our past experiences and this places us in a good position to anticipate our future prospects. We have proved ourselves in adapting to the inevitable global challenges that we have faced. This event could not have come at a better time. For example, as we speak, we are caught between the emerging technological advances which have changed the way we conduct our business. Member States are poised to commence implementation of the Electronic Certificate of Origin in a bid to speed up the process of certification as well as facilitate trade in real time. COMESA has certainly many reasons to celebrate, these are only a few that I have singled out.

These achievements are not without the down side.

COMESA still has an enormous infrastructure deficit characterised by low production and distribution of clean energy, low ICT and transport connectivity and barriers to free movement of people to mention a few.

As you may be aware there are two legal instruments governing the free movement of people in COMESA, the Protocol on the Gradual Relaxation and Eventual Elimination of Visa Requirements; and

- a) The Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Labour, Services, the Right of Establishment and Residence;
- b) In the years to come I call upon member States to work towards facilitating freer movement of people and right to establishment.
- c) As stipulated in the COMESA Free Movement Protocol, “a genuine Common Market shall be achieved only when the citizens of member States can move freely within the Common Market.” Already, we have a few member States implementing these protocols. It is my sincere wish to have all our member States harmonize their national laws and ratify the protocols.

Your Excellencies

Distinguished Delegates

Let me mention that all our regional activities require an efficient and effective Secretariat that is *Fit for Purpose*. Going forward, our efforts should be directed towards consolidating the organisational structure which is agile and responds to emerging issues. Implementing our COMESA regional integration agenda is dependent upon high levels of institutional capability and high-calibre human resources.

COMESA Institutions should be strengthened in systematic, effective and sustained ways. Our institutions are essential in addressing the development deficits of our region.

Your Excellencies

Distinguished Delegates

With this being said, allow me to recognise our robust workforce who have been the main players of our regional integration programmes. We would have not achieved any of our goals without their utmost dedication and tireless work, they are champions in their own right. Each and every one of you is a committed leader to regional integration. Together we are making a tremendous difference for the citizens of our region.

Your Excellencies

Distinguished Delegates

Allow me to also commend our numerous strategic partners at the national, regional and international level that have provided immense support financially as well as through technical assistance, training and sharing of information. As always, we will be actively seeking to widen our resource mobilization base from our member States and Cooperating Partners as we build mutually beneficial strategic relationships.

Your Excellencies

Distinguished Delegates

As I conclude my statement, allow me to ask, how do we recalibrate our efforts as our programmes continue to expand? I wish to appeal to you all as policy makers in your respective countries, to review your country's commitments to regional integration and re-dedicate yourselves to the ideals and goals set out in the COMESA Treaty. Let us also continue in the spirit of continuous dialogue and solidarity between our member States, Institutions and Cooperating Partners as it is the only way that we can push our regional integration agenda forward and to maximize our collaboration. We are counting on your support.

Thank you all for coming, we are grateful to you for taking time from your busy schedules to join us in these celebrations.

Alluta Continua.