

## COMESA Ministers Adopt COVID-19 Food Security and Nutrition Plan



File Photo: Meeting of the COMESA Ministers of Agriculture, 2015.

Ministers responsible for agriculture, environment and natural resources have adopted the COMESA COVID-19 Food Security Response Plan to help the region deal with the impacts of Covid-19 on regional food security.

In their 7th joint meeting conducted virtually, the Ministers expressed concern about the unfolding effects of Covid-19 on food and nutrition and called on Member States to immediately mobilise resources to support the implementation of the regional plan to ensure food security.

The Ministers also committed themselves to ensure that food and agricultural input markets and supply chains, along with associated logistics and services remained open and functional in line with the COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite COVID-19 guidelines adopted last week.

In a Declaration issued at the end of the one-day meeting on tuesday, August 4, 2020, the Ministers pledged to support agricultural research to develop, transfer and disseminate technologies, innovations and management practices that are climate-resilient, market-responsive, suited to assorted agro-ecological contexts and end-user preferences in the region.

**“We commit ourselves to supporting smallholder farmers to increase production and productivity, through access to inputs, services and improved technologies including seeds, planting materials, fertilizer, veterinary products and animal feeds,”** the Ministers said.

Speaking at the official opening, Secretary General Chileshe Kapwepwe said a lot more needs to be done for the region to effectively address the challenges of climate change, transboundary plant pest and animal diseases, and degradation of natural resources.

“We need to build the resilience of our agriculture and agri-food systems as well as ecosystems for greater functionality and efficiency. This will also call for adoption of comprehensive approach to early warning, disaster preparedness and response including social protection & safety net systems,” the Secretary General noted.

She urged Member States to collectively deal with food safety issues to further open-up markets and enhance trade in safe agricultural and

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# Improved Seed Trade will Unlock Regional Food Security

Sustainable agriculture is an essential factor to advancing trade within COMESA and the rest of Africa. Over the last two decades, Africa has remained a net food importer, with agricultural accounting for about 60% of Africa's total trade in agricultural products. Furthermore, agricultural product imports account for around 13% of total imports.

The COVID-19 pandemic has however brought agriculture and food security issues to the fore and presents a formidable threat to trade in agricultural commodities. This has necessitated bringing together experts to discuss and come up with recommendations to cushion the sector from pandemic related disruptions.

This is what informed the COMESA Business Council (CBC) Webinar on 27 July 2020 themed: "Unlocking Food Security Through Improved Seed Trade in COMESA". This was a public-private consultative platform on agricultural transformation and improved trade within COMESA and brought together regional seed producers and traders.

Discussions hinged on, access to quality and affordable seed, trade facilitation in the movement of seed across the borders during COVID-19, measures to curb illicit trade in seed and policy and regulatory frameworks to facilitate investment and increased seed production and trade among others.

Among the key recommendations of the Webinar was the need to develop harmonized legislation across the region and one stop shop to provide relevant permits for the seed industry. Participants noted that some of the authorities are not based at one place which in turn increase costs and time for getting the necessary documentations. They agreed that strong inter-agency regulatory processes and information flows need to be put in place to map out simpler clearances processes at domestic and transboundary trade

facilitation level.

The meeting also recommended that a peer review be conducted to monitor the authenticity of seed in the region to avoid cases of counterfeit and those found wanting to be penalized. This will be done through strengthening the supply of the volumes of truly certified seeds marketed in the region, as well as information sharing campaigns, which is key in sensitizing farmers on quality seeds.

The CBC was urged to engage local seed companies and governments to strengthen the existing business environment. This will motivate companies to make investments in countries they are operating in. This will strengthen dialogue between different actors in the seed sector for the sustainability of the industry.

Further, CBC was called upon to come up with a seed statistics information system. This will address the challenge posed by lack of real-time trade data on seeds, which delays and affects decision making process.

Currently, COMESA is working with Member States to benchmark seed standards and regulations to international accepted standards. This needs involvement of both private and public sector mostly through private-public dialogue so that policies are well informed and also practical solutions can be identified.

Panelists included the Regional Director for Syngenta Foundation East Africa, Mr. Osure George, Regional Head Africa & Middle East at Advanta Seeds, Mr. Ndavi Muia and the Corporate Engagement Lead – Africa for Bayer Crop Science Mr. Jimmy Kiberu. Others were, Dr. John MacRobert, the Acting Chairman for Zimbabwe Seed Trade Association and Mrs. Providence Mavubi, Director, Industry and Agriculture at COMESA. CBC Chief Executive Officer Ms. Sandra Uwera moderated the Webinar.

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food commodities in the region and in the context of African Continental Free Trade Area.

As part of efforts to boost sustainable agricultural productivity, the Secretariat has supported Member States to adopt Climate Smart Agricultural policies and strategies and implementation of the Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) through technical and advisory support.

The Secretariat has also supported the development of livestock and fisheries development through provision of financial, technical and organizational support in the development and implementation of policies and strategies.

Through its Agency, the Alliance for Commodity Trade in Eastern and Southern Africa (ACTESA), COMESA Secretariat has been working with Member States and partners in harmonizing and domestication of the seed trade regulations to promote cross-border seed trade for increased access to quality seeds by the farmers.

Representatives of partners organization including the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) and the African Union Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR) among others attended the meeting.





# COMESA Sugar Safeguard for Kenya is Paying-Off



Source: Alamy

A tractor carrying sugar cane after harvesting

The sugar industry in Kenya has steadily expanded over the years, currently with 15 white sugar mills being opened and several jaggery (healthy sugar alternative) operators in place. This development has been attributed to the safeguard granted by COMESA since 2002 when the government sought protection from importation of cheap sugar from the region.

According to the Head of the Sugar Directorate in Kenya's Ministry of Trade, Rosemary Owino the area under cane increased by 24% from 159,288 hectares in 2010 to 197,438 hectares in 2019 in an effort to meet the expanding mill crushing capacities. The cane yields have been fluctuating over the ten years, from a low of 51 tonne per hectare in 2012 to a high of 66.41 tonne per hectare in 2015.

She was speaking during the third meeting of the COMESA Sub-Committee on the Kenya Sugar Safeguard conducted virtually on 30 July 2020. The Committee was established in 2018 as a dedicated forum for the COMESA region to deliberate on the issues relating to the administration of the sugar safeguard.

**"For the period January to June 2020, total sugar production was 298,636 tonnes**

**compared to 244,826 tonnes in the same period in 2019, a 22% increase. This is an indication of improvement in the industry performance. To bridge the gap, a total of 237,581 tonnes of sugar was imported,"** she said.

In addition, sugar production increased by 22% from 523,652 tonnes in 2010 to 639,741 tonnes in 2016. In 2019, production stood at 440,935 tonnes against a consumption of 1,038,717 tonnes, resulting into a 58% deficit.

According to trade experts, production costs determine whether the sugar industry can compete with duty free and quota free imports from the COMESA Free Trade Area. Ms Owino reported that Kenya's sugar production costs are currently at about USD\$700 per metric ton. Government owned sugar mills have the highest cost of production therefore, putting Kenya's production costs at about 36 per cent higher than import prices from the COMESA exporters.

Speaking during the opening of the meeting, COMESA's Director of Trade Dr Christopher Onyango said it was about time the region begins to strategize on how to deal with the distorted world market

prices given the uncertainties in world market for sugar.

"There is an emerging shift of consumer preferences, towards healthier diets which has boosted consumer spending on healthy food, more so in leading producers in developed economies," he observed.

"The excess sugar is likely to be dumped into the region and this should worry all of us given the projected increase on world sugar production in the coming years."

Dr Onyango listed the following as among the strategies to address emerging uncertainties: the adoption of environmentally sustainable production, infrastructure, trade policy, research and development and unlocking the potentials for production of energy. This is in addition to addressing productivity and diversifying sources and usage of sugar to help improve the position of small-scale sugar cane growers and their dependent communities, which are being undervalued by the global sugar market.

The meeting was attended by delegates from sugar exporting Member States namely Burundi, DR Congo, Egypt, Eswatini, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Kenya, which is implementing the safeguard.

## FEMCOM Supporting Eritrean Women Farmers Tackle COVID-19 Challenges through Agriculture

Agriculture in the African continent has increasingly come under severe strain due to increased population, changing access to resources and evolving markets, climate change and the global COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. But in the State of Eritrea, farmers, most of them women, have been able to produce adequate food for the local consumer markets, thanks to availability of dams in various villages and continuous rain this year.

Led by the Eritrean Women Agribusiness Association (EWAA), which is the national chapter of the COMESA Federation of National Associations of Women in Business, women entrepreneurs have been facilitated to form groups so that they work as partners by merging their capital, knowledge, time, and resources. This has led to the creation of sustainable business. As a result of these mergers, the Eritrean Women Agribusiness Association mushroom group has been established and brings together women in food processing, oyster and mushroom and Aloe production as well as rabbit farming.

Chairperson of EWAA Mrs. Selamawit Mekonnen says the current challenges caused by the COVID-19 has led her organization to enhance women empowerment in agricultural activities to continue operating their businesses.

EWAA was established in 2003 and registered in 2016 to promote small scale agriculture amongst women. In November 2019, EWAA linked up with FEMCOM to build capacity and participate in the empowering of women farmers and entrepreneurs for economic development and in the hope for market linkages for future regional trade activities.

FEMCOM is a COMESA institution for the empowerment of women in business, with national chapters in the Member States. The FEMCOM Secretariat is based in Lilongwe, Malawi.

## Business Sector Calls for Digital Inclusiveness and Enterprise Competitiveness in Cross-Border Trade



The current disruption in global supply chains has underlined the importance of regional markets, and the need to address constraints and build robust economies that can fully compete and take advantage of regional markets.

According to the Chairman of the COMESA Business Council (CBC) Mr. Marday Venkatasamy, the strategy of 'Building Regional Going Global', has never been more important than it is now.

He was speaking during the CBCs 9th Annual General Meeting (AGM) on Wednesday, 5 August 2020 and 1st Industry Technical Committee Meeting themed "Towards Digital Inclusiveness and Enterprise Competitiveness in Cross-Border Trade. The virtual meeting was attended by national and regional sectoral associations of 15 out of the 21 COMESA countries and corporate companies.

Cognizant of the serious disruptions in trade and value chains caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in grave losses to economic output and business sustainability in the region, the CBC has been active in influencing policy-making processes and high-level engagement to address some of the key impediments in regional and global trade.

Key advocacy programs for the second half of the year, include the CBC's Business Trader Observer: An Annual Survey of Business Impediments along Trade and Transport Corridors in the COMESA Region.

The other is the CBC Digital Financial Inclusion (DFI) project whose objective is to develop a digital integrated regional common payment scheme that can address issues of affordability, accessibility, convertibility

and interoperability for Small and Medium Enterprises and industry response to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the private sector's competitiveness.

"The expected outcome of the proposed digital common payment policy for SMEs would be an increase in financial inclusion of SMEs and a subsequent increase in the volumes of digital cross-border transactions within the segment," Chairperson of CBC's Industry Technical Committee Dr. Sherif Al Gabaly, who is also the Chairman of the Africa Cooperation Committee, Federation of Egyptian Industries noted.

He called for collaborative public-private sector efforts in the identification and resolution of business impediments when conducting cross-border trade to inform public-private dialogue and advocacy efforts towards addressing the issue.

The meeting cited the need for increased efforts towards curbing illicit trade, prioritizing key business and trade facilitation impediments for advocacy, and setting up strong and more strategic engagement platforms with ministers, parliamentarians and regulators to address these issues.

COMESA Assistant Secretary General, Ambassador Kipyego Cheluget stressed the need for consistent involvement and advocacy of the private sector in policy making processes and public-private dialogue to address some of the notable challenges in regional trade.

The meeting underlined the importance of increasingly adopting digital technologies for both manufacturing and services sector, in view of fast-tracking the development of the region's industries and economies.



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