

COMESA NEWS

Vol 4 | October - December 2023

Digitization and unification of Customs' systems in focus

- Plans afoot to establish a customs automation regional support center
- Competition Commission disburses USD 1.9m to Member States
- EU, COMESA sign €48.2m financing agreements
- COMESA Court operations to relocate

Editorial

Empower focal points to resolve persistent NTBs



Non-tariff barriers are persistent organic pollutants to regional trade. Even with the best efforts and intents, alongside robust policy pronouncements to eliminate them, they keep regenerating or otherwise born again like the mythical phoenix. Hence, they continue to persist in the regional trading environment and are a permanent agenda in the trade-related

meetings.

Granted, COMESA region has done extremely well and the success of resolving NTBs is rated above 90%. This is attributed to measures put in place such as the SMS reporting tool, Tripartite Online NTB reporting system, the on-the-spot verification missions, and bilateral and trilateral meetings.

Notwithstanding, some NTBs are as old as 12 years and new energy is required to deal with them, once and for all. And the best placed structures to lead this onslaught are the National Focal Points and National Monitoring Committees, armed with the stated NTBs elimination toolkit. Unfortunately, not all countries have constituted these teams and even where they exist, some are not functional.

This is what the Council of Ministers in its last meeting in November 2023, that relevant officials are unable to promptly attend to the reported Non-Tariff Barriers. So, the call by Council to prioritize the processing and resolution of the reported NTBs is critical. This should start with building the capacity of the frontline; the focal points and the monitoring committees.

Mwangi G

COMESA INSTITUTIONS

COMESA Clearing House
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Trade and Development Bank
African Trade & Investment Development Insurance
COMESA Competition Commission
PTA Reinsurance Company
COMESA Regional Investment Agency
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Judicial Arm

COMESA Court of Justice

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EDITORIAL TEAM

EDITOR:

Mwangi Gakunga

CONTRIBUTORS:

Mwangi Gakunga
Muzinge Nampito-Chibomba
Daniel Banda
Philip Siphon Kambafwile

ARTWORK/LAYOUT:

Philip Siphon Kambafwile

PHOTOGRAPHY

Philip Siphon Kambafwile
Daniel Banda,
Mwangi Gakunga
Muzinge Nampito-Chibomba
Maxwell Moono

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Longstanding non-tariff barriers constitute 63% of those currently unresolved

Longstanding Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs) constitute 63.6% of total outstanding NTBs with some of these remaining unresolved for an average period of 5-8 years, the longest being above 12 years and the shortest being 2-4 years.

The long standing NTBs are categorised into Technical and Non-Technical NTBs; costly additional taxes, import licensing numerous/complex documentation and registration procedures and Customs valuation.

Subsequently, COMESA Secretariat has facilitated bilateral and trilateral meetings to resolve NTBs amongst countries involved which include DR Congo, Egypt, Kenya, Malawi, Mauritius, Uganda, and Zambia.

In considering the outstanding NTBs in the Time Bound matrix, Member States have raised concerns over the long periods taken by Focal Points and National Monitoring Committees to undertake internal consultations to resolve them.

In its meeting on 23 November 2023, the COMESA Council of Ministers noted that relevant officials failed to attend to the reported NTBs promptly and that majority of the consultations were undertaken during the regional NTB meetings.

The meeting therefore urged National Monitoring Committee members to prioritize processing and resolution of the reported NTBs without necessarily having to wait to make consultations

during the NTB Forum.

The Council, however, noted that Member States had made some progress in trying to resolve them with two resolved during the NTBs Forum and significant progress made in follow up activities to resolve the outstanding ones.

The Council urged Member States to commit to the application of either the general or the detailed Rules of Origin to grant Customs exemptions stipulated in the COMESA Protocol on Rules of Origin. Further, Member States that have not established the dedicated NTBs desks strive to do so by 31st December 2023.



Plans to establish a customs automation regional support center

COMESA Secretariat is preparing to establish a Customs Automation Regional Support Centre at its Headquarters, in Lusaka, Zambia. This initiative is being undertaken in cooperation with UNCTAD through a co-delegation agreement.

The Secretariat is also collaborating with the World Customs Organisation (WCO) to enhance the capacities of Customs officials in technical subjects, specifically, the Harmonised System (HS) and Rules of Origin.

This is being done within the framework of the EU-WCO HS and Rules of Origin Africa Programmes, respectively. The aim is to develop a critical mass of regional experts to take charge and control of the expanding roles and demands for customs services.

Further collaborating with UNCTAD is in the field of Customs automation including capacity building on ASYCUDAWorld. So far, UNCTAD has conducted three training sessions on ASYCUDAWorld functional courses and two training sessions on technical courses since October 2022. These have been supported under the 11th European Development Fund programmes and activities.

A total of 103 Customs and IT officers



Modern customs agencies are increasingly embracing the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to facilitate trade and streamline customs administration processes in response to global challenges,” Dr Christopher Onyango.

have been trained since the training on ASYCUDAWorld Technical and Functional Courses started in March 2022.

Speaking during the opening of the 9th meeting of customs experts conducted virtually on 10 October 2023, COMESA Director of Trade and Customs Dr Christopher Onyango, underscored COMESA's commitment to support capacity building in Customs related matters. The objective is to strengthen Customs-to-Customs exchange of information, data analytics, artificial intelligence and machine learning, and the implications of the growing volumes of e-commerce on Customs processes and procedures.

“The implementation of the key activities for realizing the COMESA Customs Union is lagging and the main issues to be addressed are alignment of national tariffs to the COMESA Customs Tariff Nomenclature and Common External Tariff – issues that are within your

areas of jurisdiction together with other stakeholders,” Dr Onyango told the customs experts.

He emphasized the multifaceted role of customs authorities which extend beyond their traditional functions of collecting customs duties and overseeing the flow of goods, animals, personal effects, and public health safety and security.

“Modern customs agencies are increasingly embracing the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to facilitate trade and streamline customs administration processes in response to global challenges,” he said.

Key issues in the agenda of the meeting were to review progress in the implementation of the 2021-2025 Customs and Trade Facilitation Work Programme and to consider the working documents that had been developed or validated by the technical working groups.



Zambia Vice President Mrs. Mutale Nalumango (centre) and ministerial delegations attending the 44th Council of Ministers' meeting

Snapshot of COMESA accomplishments at the 44th ministerial meeting

The 44th COMESA Council of Ministers held in Lusaka, Zambia on 23 November 2023, provided an opportunity for the Secretariat of the regional bloc to highlight some key accomplishments of its regional integration agenda. These focused on its key pillars: market integration, physical connectivity, productive integration (industry and agriculture) and gender and social integration.

Among the key highlights presented by the Secretary General of COMESA Chileshe Kapwepwe, was the enhanced growth in global and regional trade. In 2022, COMESA's exports to the world increased by 15% while the value of intra-COMESA exports increased by 10%. Imports sourced from the COMESA

market were ranked in fourth position and increased by 27% in 2022.

The uptake and utilization of trade facilitation programmes also has notably been successful in terms of automated and digitalized customs systems, the Simplified Trade Regime and the Tripartite online Non-Tariff Barriers reporting, monitoring and eliminating mechanism.

COMESA has also continued to facilitate the smooth movement of vehicles, goods and persons within its Member States and between COMESA and other regions through the implementation of the Yellow Card and the Regional Customs Transit Guarantee (RCTG) Scheme.

In collaboration with the African Export-Import Bank (AFREXIMBANK), an Online Platform for COMESA Negotiations of Trade in Services has been developed. The platform, which was launched at the meeting, aims to expedite the negotiations, providing tools to improve the technical quality of offers and increase the transparency, while at the same time safeguarding the confidentiality of information exchanged between the parties.

Ms Kapwepwe attributed the success of the COMESA regional integration to substantial support from development partners, especially the European Union, the World Bank and the African Development Bank.

"Without the assistance of these partners, work under our programmes would be greatly impaired," said the Secretary General in appreciation to these institutions.

“Prioritization should be based on value addition, diversification and embracing new technologies, all with due consideration to the protection of our environment,” Zambia Vice President

Vice President of Zambia, Mrs. Mutale

Continued to page 4



COMESA Secretary General Chileshe Kapwepwe welcoming Zambia Vice President Mrs. Mutale Nalumango

Snapshot of COMESA accomplishments...

Continued from page 3

Nalumango, who was the chief guest underscored the need for the region to prioritize and refocus on key areas that contribute to development, productivity, and competitiveness.

"Prioritization should be based on value addition, diversification and embracing new technologies, all with due consideration to the protection of our environment," she said.

The European Union Special Representative to COMESA, Amb. Karolina Stasiak underscored the need for collaboration to make trade fairer and more sustainable with green transition at the heart of this change.

She said: "Green investments held the key to creating more job opportunities for the youth, fostering industrial growth and revitalizing trade relations between Africa and Europe."

In her statement, the World Bank Director for Regional Integration, Dr. Boutheina Guermazi said that in the last two years, the Bank has renewed its partnership with COMESA owing to the regional blocs' standing especially in applying regional solutions to the developing challenges of a cross border nature.

At present, the World Bank's regional integration portfolio for COMESA Member States is over five billion dollars with the latest programme being the support to the Great Lakes Trade Facilitation and Integration project with \$8 million dollars grant to COMESA to implement regional economic integration activities.

The African Development Bank, Vice President for the Regional Development Integration and Business Delivery, Ms. Marie-Laure Akin-Olugbade said the Bank's cooperation focuses on regional corridors to facilitate seamless flow of goods, services, capital and people, and promote value addition and to lower transport costs and connect landlocked countries to coastal countries.

She said the Banks active portfolio in the region exceeds \$7 billion and has lately approved \$7 million to advance the COMESA, EAC, SADC Tripartite Free Trade area programmes.

The ministers made a raft of decisions based on recommendations by the COMESA Intergovernmental Committee meeting that preceded the Council meeting. These will inform the implementation of programmes in the coming year and beyond.

Trade in services portal launched

The portal will facilitate online negotiation of offers and requests between Member States



Platform has been developed with the support of the AFREXIMBANK

COMESA launched a Trade in Services Portal to facilitate online negotiation of offers and requests between Member States under the COMESA Trade in Services liberalization programme. The launch was conducted during the 44th Meeting of the COMESA Council of Ministers on 23 November 2023 in Lusaka, Zambia.

The portal provides tools to ensure the technical quality of the offers being made and exchanged are transparent and confidential in information sharing. It also provides messaging tools for users to interact safely and support the provision of trade in services data collected from all Member States.

The need to develop the portal followed the COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted travels and curtailed the ability to organise physical meetings. Subsequently, COMESA Secretariat requested for technical assistance from the African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank) on capacity building



The platform is not meant to replace, but rather to support and enhance physical trade in services negotiations,” Chileshe Kapwepwe



in Trade in Services to help speed up negotiations and to harmonize the Trade in Services processes at regional and continental level which was granted.

The platform has been customized for the COMESA region to support and complement the ongoing negotiations on Trade in Services. Specifically, it will enhance preparation for negotiations by providing a tool to assist Member States representatives to create and edit offers that are of a high technical quality efficiently.

It will also facilitate negotiation of sector specific commitments digitally to complement physical negotiations and minimise delays and better coordination.

“The platform is not meant to replace, but rather to support and enhance physical trade in services negotiations,” COMESA Secretary General Chileshe Kapwepwe said at the launch and assured that it will be hosted on the Secretariat’s servers to ensure its security and confidentiality.



COMESA Competition Commission disburses USD 1.9m to Member States

The COMESA Competition Commission has disbursed 1,933,061 to Member States being proceeds from the review of 21 business mergers assessed between January to August 2023.

In reviewing these mergers, the Commission receives statutory fees from the merging parties which are shared with affected Member States. This is in accordance with the Rules on COMESA Revenue Sharing of Merger Filing Fees to support the development of competition laws and authorities.

According to a progress report presented to the 44th COMESA Council of Ministers’ meeting, on 23 November 2023, the Commission has allocated USD 29,142,045.07 to Member States since its inception 10 years ago and disbursed USD 26,148,531.35. The Commission is however holding USD 2,993,513.73 that is due to the Member States awaiting the conclusion of their respective administrative matters.

The merger fees distributed by CCC were aimed at strengthening their Member States National Competition Authorities (NCA) to enhance their capacity and competencies. The Council, however, noted that merger fees issued to Member States were not being used for

the intended purpose.

In its decision, the Council urged Member States’ Governments to comply with the Rules of the Council by channeling all the merger fees resources disbursed by CCC NCAs to ensure that they are utilised to develop, strengthen and capacitate the NCAs.

Further the Council urged Member States to advise their NCAs and competent authorities to adopt one position when negotiating the African Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCFTA) Competition Protocol. This is crucial in determining the merger notification and dominance thresholds under the AfCFTA Protocol on Competition Policy.

So far, the Commission has collaborated with the Competition Commission of South Africa (CCSA) under the auspices of the African Competition Forum (ACF) on a study focusing on the factors to consider under the AfCFTA Merger and Dominance Thresholds.

The NCAs and other competent authorities at national level were called upon to be part of the discussions organized by the Commission to discuss the findings of the study so that COMESA Member States adopt one position when negotiating at the AfCFTA.



EU Special Representative to COMESA, Ambassador Karolina Stasiak (L) exchange signed financing agreement with Secretary General Chileshe Kapwepwe

EU, COMESA sign €48.2m financing agreements as new envoy is accredited

COMESA and the European Union have signed two Financing Agreements, totaling EUR 48.2 million, as part of the EU's Neighbourhood Development, and International Cooperation Instrument, Sub Saharan Africa Program for 2021-2027.

H.E. Ambassador to Zambia and Special Representative to COMESA, Karolina Stasiak and Secretary General of COMESA Chileshe Mpundu Kapwepwe signed the agreement on 20 November 2023 in Lusaka.

The EUR 40 million Trade Competitiveness and Market Access program will focus on enhancing trade competitiveness among COMESA member states, addressing global

challenges like climate change and promoting sustainable trade. EUR 8.2 million Trade in Services program aims to boost the overall competitiveness of service-providing enterprises, including those operating on digital platforms.

Ambassador Stasiak underscored the Trade Competitiveness and Market Access program's importance, emphasizing EU support for the development and implementation of compliance and due diligence processes. These measures aim to reduce the CO2 footprint of trade, promoting fairer and more sustainable trade with European member states. Secretary General Kapwepwe stressed the significance of the Financing Agreements, emphasizing

their timely nature in enhancing cooperation efforts.

The European Union will coordinate closely with COMESA and ensure that both regional programs will not only be implemented most efficiently, but also respond to challenges and opportunities, to deliver concrete results and tangible outcomes within Member States.

The signing ceremony followed the accreditation of Amb. Stasiak to COMESA as the Special Representative of the EU.

Welcoming the new envoy, the SG appreciated the EU as COMESA's biggest development partner with an invested grant funding of EUR 381 million to date.

“The EU is COMESA's biggest development partner with an invested grant funding of EUR 381 million to date,” Chileshe Kapwepwe

“As you begin your tenure here in Zambia, rest assured of our co-operation and support in the execution of your duties. We look forward to continuing strengthening our collaboration in advancing our regional integration agenda,” Ms Kapwepwe said.



Cross border traders at Nakonde Border in Zambia

Burundi, DR Congo set to implement the Simplified Trade Regime

Burundi and the D.R. Congo are poised to start implementing the COMESA Simplified Trade Regime following a bilateral meeting conducted in Lusaka, Zambia, from 31 October to 2nd Nov 2023.

The two delegations, comprising mainly trade experts, came together under the Great Lakes Trade Facilitation and Integration project (GLTFIP) to provide an update on the status of implementation of the 2022 signed Trade Bilateral Agreements. The project is funded by the World Bank.

Their discussions centered on ironing out pending issues and making proposals to improve the document before actualizing the full implementation of the STR.

The COMESA STR is an instrument of facilitating and formalizing the small-scale trade between countries. It assists small-scale traders to qualify for duty-free entry for certain goods and for a more simple and reduced set of documentary requirements to cross the border.

Through the STR, a Simplified Certificate of Origin is obtained at the border for consignments of an agreed list of community-originating goods with a total value less than the requisite threshold.

Under the agreement, qualifying goods are allowed to pass border points duty free, and traders are not asked to provide Certificates of Origin of their goods if they are agreed on the Common List of Products between the two countries.

COMESA Assistant Secretary General for Programmes, Dr. Mohamed Kadah, who addressed the delegates through Senior Customs Officer, Ms Balness Sumani said GLTFIP is a deliberate response to address the empowerment of small-scale traders with an emphasis on women and youth.

Burundi Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Commerce, Transport, Industry and Tourism Madam Christine Niragira said the two countries will benefit significantly from easing the process of doing business for their small-scale cross border who are the majority.

The GLTFIP is a follow up project to the first phase which targeted the DR Congo, Rwanda and Uganda focusing on the Mahagi/Goli, Kasinde/Mpondwe, Bunagana, Goma/Rubavu and Bukavu/Rusizi borders. It ended in 2021.

The current project will contribute to safe, fast and resilient small scale trade integration.



Judge President, Lady Justice Lombe Chibesakunda

Ministers approve temporal relocation of COMESA court operations from Sudan

COMESA Court of Justice will temporarily relocate its Registry Operations from Khartoum, Sudan owing to the current political instability in the country, which has affected its operations. The decision was made by COMESA Ministers of Justice and Attorneys General during their 26th Meeting held on 22 September 2023 in Lusaka, Zambia. This followed a request by the Court for temporary relocation to Zambia, where COMESA has its headquarters.

Making the request, Judge President of the Court, Lady Justice Lombe Chibesakunda expressed the Court's empathy by the turn of events in Sudan, which is one of the founding Member States of COMESA.

"Unfortunately, the situation as it stands now underscores the urgency of considering alternative measures to ensure the Court continues delivering on its mandate," she said in her address to the meeting.

The Court has been based in Khartoum since 2014 pursuant to a 2003 COMESA

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Assistant Secretary General in charge of programmes Ambassador Dr. Mohamed Kadah (5th left) with participant to the 17th session of the Council for the Regional Customs Transit Guarantee scheme (RCTG Carnet) at Fringilla Lodge in Lusaka, Zambia.

Ethiopia, Djibouti set to operationalize the Regional Customs Transit Guarantee Scheme

Ethiopia and Djibouti have finalized their preparations to start operating the COMESA, Regional Customs Transit Guarantee (RCTG) scheme. The COMESA RCTG also known as a Carnet is an Insurance Bond or a Bank Guarantee issued by Sureties on behalf of the Principals in Customs Administration to cover any loss of revenue when goods are transiting in the COMESA region. It provides a uniform basis for transit movement where only one Guarantee is issued for the transit of goods in all the countries of transit.

As part of the final preparation, stakeholders from the two countries conducted a joint benchmarking visit to Rwanda in October 2023 to share experiences on RCTG operations and implementation of One Stop Border Post.

This was announced during the 17th session of the Council for the RCTG conducted on 14-15 November in Lusaka, Zambia.

Addressing the meeting, the COMESA Assistant Secretary General responsible for Programmes Dr. Mohamed Kadah, appreciated the Customs Administrations and National Sureties from Ethiopia and Djibouti for the progress made and their commitment towards the implementation of the RCTG and requested them to commence operations at the earliest possible time.

He acknowledged the substantial contributions of Customs Administrations, National Sureties, and Clearing Agents to the region over the eleven years of the Scheme's operation.

According to a progress report presented at the meeting, over 1,240 Regional Customs Transit Bonds, amounting to US\$ 718.9 billion have been executed, compared to 1,282 RCTG Bonds amounting to US\$ 994.1 million issued during the same period last year, showing a decrease of 3.3% and 27.7%. At the same time, over 401,120 Carnets were issued for transfer of goods in

the Northern and Central Corridors, compared to 330,618 Carnets issued in the preceding year, showing an increase of 21%.

Further, the Number of Clearing and Forwarding Agents and Sureties which are participating in the scheme has reached 1,077 and 51 respectively. Over 70% of the Clearing & Forwarding Agents are Small and Medium-sized businesses; and since inception, 18 claims have been paid.

Participants of the meeting included Commissioners of Customs Administrations, Deputy Commissioners, Directors of Customs Administrations, Managing Directors, and CEOs of Insurance and Reinsurance companies.

Additionally, representatives from Government Authorities, Transporters, Clearing and Forwarding Associations, and experts from various International organisations also attended the meeting.



COMESA global trade rises by 15%

COMESA's trade globally and within the region recorded a significant increase with the total exports to the world gaining by 15% from US\$ 179bn in 2021 to US\$ 205bn in 2022. The largest exporting countries in the COMESA region were Libya, Egypt, Tunisia and Sudan. These had a combined market of 98% in exported fuels in 2022.

This was reported during the 39th Meeting of the COMESA Trade and Customs Meeting held from 23 – 27 October in Mauritius. A report presented by COMESA Secretariat on trade developments in the region indicated that the value of intra-COMESA total exports equally rose by 10% from US\$12.8bn in 2021 to US\$ 14.1bn in 2022.

Exports in Sulphur of all kinds, cobalt oxides and hydroxides, palm oil, refined petroleum oil, urea, electric current, cotton, Sulphuric acid, main flour, gold and ammonia among others contributed to the increase.

According to the report, most of the COMESA Member States recorded growth in their 2022 intra-COMESA total export values except for D R Congo, Ethiopia, Malawi and Seychelles whose exports to the region declined.

The report added that Mauritius had the highest utilization rate of 96% for its COMESA originating imports in 2022 followed by Seychelles, Malawi, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and Zambia.

The COMESA Medium Term Strategic

Plan 2021-2025 targets an increase of intra-regional exports to at least 25% of total exports by 2026 from the current 10%.

Based on 2019 trade statistics, the region has potential to increase intra-trade by US\$100 billion if all extra-COMESA trade could be diverted to the region. This means that if at least 50% of current extra-COMESA trade is diverted to the region, intra-trade could expand by US\$50 billion.

"To attain this target, there is a need to change mindsets and practical approaches within the COMESA family," said COMESA Assistant Secretary General in charge of Programmes, Dr Mohamed Kadah when he addressed the delegates comprising of trade experts from the Member States.

"Your committee is therefore invited to interact on this desired course of action in the interest of laying down a solid foundation for the advancement of COMESA regional trade and economic integration agenda."

The Trade and Customs Committee is one of COMESA's key policy structures through which the bloc has made significant strides in fostering trade and economic integration.

During the three-day meeting, the delegates received updates on various COMESA supported programmes and sectors, which are specifically connected to trade and economic development.

Ministers approve Court relocation..

Unfortunately, the situation as it stands now underscores the urgency of considering alternative measures to ensure the Court continues delivering on its mandate," Lady Justice Lombe Chibesakunda

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Decision of the Heads of State, which chose Khartoum as the Permanent Seat of the Court.

As the judicial organ of COMESA, the Court adjudicates and arbitrates on, among other matters, unfair trade practices, interpretation of Treaty (Protocols and other legislative acts) and ensures that Member States uniformly implement and comply with agreed decisions.

The Court has two divisions with a total of 12 Judges all holding high judicial offices in their respective countries. The lower Division, known as the Court of First Instance, has seven judges, while the upper division is the Appellate and has five Judges.

Decisions of the Court on the interpretation of the provisions of the COMESA Treaty have precedence over decisions of national courts and are binding on all COMESA Member States.

The Decision was later adopted by the 44th Meeting of the Council of Ministers on 23 November 2023 in Lusaka, Zambia.



File- Customs officers at Mwami border point between Zambia and Malawi.

Digitization and unification of Customs' systems in focus

Customs Chiefs review the progress on implementation of the Customs Union

Automation of customs clearance processes, customs connectivity and implementation of a COMESA regional authorized economic operator scheme were key issues in focus during the 9th meeting of the COMESA Heads of Customs conducted virtually on 10 – 12 October 2023.

The meeting provided the Customs chiefs with an opportunity to review the progress COMESA was making in the implementation of the Customs Union and trade facilitation work programme and the impact on intra-regional trade, regional and continental economic integration.

While addressing the meeting, Dr Mohamed Kadah (inset), COMESA Assistant Secretary General in charge of Programmes said the unification of the African economic space was urgent and this calls for rationalization of tariff negotiations in COMESA with other regional economic communities and Africa's integration.

"Traders and investors are looking towards a one COMESA customs territory and not segments of customs territories to realize economies of scale and enjoy the full benefits of market integration," Dr Kadah said.

"We therefore need to re-energize or efforts and support the Tripartite and African Continental Free Trade (AfCFTA) processes at the same time. In this way, our interventions

will remain relevant, and we will make incremental progress towards unifying the African economic space, a goal long mooted by our forefathers under the Abuja Treaty."

Further, he said the adoption of modern customs practices such as the one stop border posts (OSBP's) and the Authorized Economic Operator (AEO), requires institutional reforms for these initiatives to have major impacts on intra-regional trade and deliver expected efficiency improvements at border posts.

AEO refers to a party involved in the international movement of goods, in whatever function, that has been approved by, or on behalf of, a national Customs administration as complying with World Customs Organization or equivalent supply chain security standards.

"Many a times the Customs officers scan 100% of the commercial consignments passing through most border posts, thereby resulting into long queues and delayed clearances. This can be made worse if a border post has one functional scanner and the impact is felt by AEO traffic, transit goods and goods for home use without regard to the risk status of the consignments," Dr Kadah observed.

To address such challenges COMESA Secretariat is collaborating with Development

Partners to upgrade infrastructure at border posts and provide the ICT and other soft infrastructure upgrades to improve the efficiency of processing cross-border traffic.

A report prepared by Customs Experts on the progress so far on several interventions supported by the 11th European Development Fund (EDF 11) Trade Facilitation Programme was presented which covered digital facilitation of trade.

These include the establishment of trade information portals, development of a trade and transport corridor monitoring dashboard, the COMESA electronic certificate of origin system, a regional electronic single window, setting up of a COMESA Regional Customs Automation Support Centre and establishment of an interconnectivity platform.

Dr Kadah observed that the region could only reap dividends from the exponential opportunities offered by the application of digital solutions to expedite clearance of goods across borders.

He asked Customs officials to support the Automation of Systems to effectively work and to trust the credibility of the inputs into the systems that create risk profiles of traders, transporters and clearing and forwarding agents.



An Artist performs during the Generation Culture Event in Mauritius

COMESA, IOC close ranks to promote culture and arts

COMESA and the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) have come together to promote culture and creative industries (CCI) in a project focusing on the review of existing legal and policy frameworks for the two. The goal is to develop a people-centered cultural policy to foster the equitable development of diverse cultures and heritages.

The project targets 13 Member States: Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, and Seychelles. COMESA oversees the project in nine countries, while the IOC takes the lead in the remaining four Island countries.

Funding for this project is provided through a grant from the ACP-EU Culture Programme, managed by the HEVA Fund LLP and the British Council Kenya. Project activities have been underway with the highlight being a three-day training workshop on the UNESCO Culture 2030 Indicators conducted in Mauritius on 11 - 13 December 2023. Stakeholders considered

this event a significant collaborative effort to enhance the measurement and monitoring of culture's role in sustainable development.

Recognizing culture as a potent force for transformation, driving innovation, social cohesion, and economic growth, the workshop aimed at empowering participants in effectively utilizing the UNESCO Indicators 2023 indicators provide a comprehensive framework for measuring the impact of culture across various dimensions, including education, employment, cultural participation, and cultural heritage.

The workshop was officially opened by Ms. Alice N'Diaye, the Director General of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC). COMESA was represented by Mrs. Beatrice Hamusonde, the Director of Gender and Social Affairs.

Alongside the workshop was a showcase of generational culture hosted at the House of Arts in Port Louis. A diverse array of expressive and performing artists from

Mauritius and neighboring Island States was showcased.

The event, held on December 13, 2023, showcased a diverse array of expressive and performing artists from Mauritius and neighboring Island States. It was organized within the framework of the Duly Mandated Regional Organisations and supported by the European Union through the European Development Fund.

The COMESA-IOC culture project was a focal point of the event, aiming to underscore the significance of cultural initiatives in the broader context of economic development and regional unity.

Secretary General Kapwepwe urged Member States to implement the COMESA Intellectual Property Policy within their countries to unlock the sector's potential as a key contributor to the economic development of the region.



Participants at the IRSK Inaugural Conference in Nairobi

Stakeholders call for enhanced research in conflict prevention and management

Researchers, policy makers, diplomats, scholars and political leaders from the COMESA region and beyond have called for in-depth research into causes of conflict and re-assessment of the current interventions in order to address some of the ongoing geopolitical dynamics in Africa and the world.

This call was made during the inaugural conference to dissect the multiple crises and geopolitical divides that are redefining international relations and diplomacy in the world today.

The conference was organized by the International Relations Society of Kenya (IRSK) with support from COMESA Secretariat and the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD).

Stakeholders from the key sectors in peace and security met from 25 – 27 October in Nairobi Kenya to discuss and make recommendations to address the multiple crises and unprecedented geopolitical changes that have far-reaching implications on future growth and development for the

COMESA region and Africa as a whole.

Speaking on behalf of COMESA Secretariat, then Head of Governance, Peace and Security Unit Ms Elizabeth Mutunga described the conference as significantly important to the regional bloc whose programme on peace and security is a product of policy research.

“Whether it is conflict prevention, conflict management or post conflict reconstruction, our programmes have mostly been guided by research and upon assessment of the interventions by other RECs, COMESA has carved its niche around the economic dimensions of conflict,” Ms Mutunga said.

Sha added that the current global environment has manifested in an increase of terrorism and violent extremism for the region and continent, including a rise in unconstitutional changes of governments, hence it is time again to reassess existing interventions to establish if they are fit for purpose.

Delegates hailed the conference as timely in the wake of the current conflicts in the

middle east, the aftermath of the COVID-19 and the Ukraine war all of which have negative impacts. The effects of climate change were also discussed as contributing to the complexity of the already complex situations in the world.

Keynote speakers at the hybrid meeting included former COMESA Secretary General Amb. Erastus Mwencha in his capacity as Chairperson African Capacity Building Foundation, H.E. Anthony Okara, Special Amb. African Leaders Malaria Alliance and Dr Vasu Gounden Executive Director of ACCORD.

Others were Ms Rose Makena Permanent Representative of Kenya to the United Nations Office at Nairobi and UNEP. The Swedish ambassador to Kenya H.E. Ms Caroline Vicini and Ms Betty Sungura-Nyabuto National Gender and Equality Commission Chief Executive Officer also spoke at the grand events.



Dr Christopher Onyango



COMESA-SADC- EAC meet to align Rules of Origin

The tripartite group that brings together COMESA, East African Community (EAC) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) has over the years taken crucial steps towards aligning various instruments to streamline regional trade. The latest is the updating of the Rules of Origin for the Tripartite Free Trade Area and align them with the latest Harmonized System (HS) 2022 version.

The alignment is expected to help avoid misapplication of the Rules of Origin and facilitate origin determination, thereby ensuring efficient and effective collection of revenue.

Towards this end, a three-day workshop was conducted on 09 - 11 October 2023 at COMESA Secretariat in Lusaka, Zambia, supported by the WTO and the European Union through the EU-WCO Rules of Origin Africa Programme, with participants drawn from the COMESA-EAC-SADC Secretariats as well as implementing agencies from the Tripartite Member States.

Rules of Origin serve as critical instruments in advancing the three development pillars of the Tripartite, which include Market Integration, Infrastructure Development, and Industrial Development.

The Harmonized System, maintained by the World Customs Organization (WTO),

“.....
In preparation for the implementation of the TFTA, it is necessary to ensure that the Rules of Origin are aligned to the latest version of the Harmonized System which is in use by most the Partner/Member States,” Dr Christopher Onyango

undergoes updates approximately every five years. These updates are essential to accommodate new products, address global environmental and social concerns, and recognize emerging trade patterns, among other factors.

Consequently, it becomes necessary to ensure that the Rules of Origin for various trade agreements, which are based on the HS, are also updated to reflect the latest HS version.

At the opening of the workshop, Assistant Secretary General in charge of Programmes in COMESA, Dr. Mohamed Kadah called for simplified, transparent and predictable rules of origin for easy trade flow, especially amongst the small-scale traders.

“In preparation for the implementation of the TFTA, it is necessary to ensure that the Rules of Origin are aligned to the latest version of the Harmonized System which is in use by most the Partner/Member States,” he said in a statement presented by Director of Trade and Customs, Dr Christopher Onyango.

Dr Kadah urged the Tripartite States to strive to adopt Rules of Origin that are conducive to the emergence of regional value chains as a springboard to structural transformation and export diversification.

“Besides the Rules of Origin must be flexible enough to allow for producers even from the weakest economies to reap meaningful benefits of regional markets,” he added.

Programme Manager at the European Union Delegation in Zambia and to COMESA Ms. Christian Haziyo emphasized the importance of updating the Rules of Origin as ‘not just a matter of compliance, but an essential step in cultivating a dynamic and vibrant trade environment that will unlock the immense potential of the region.’

The draft updated TFTA Rules of Origin to HS 2022 version will be submitted for consideration by the TFTA Technical Working Group on Rules of Origin.



Governors at the 27th Meeting of the COMESA Committee of Governors of Central Banks in Victoria Falls town, Zimbabwe

Regional monetary cooperation and integration process on track

The annual meetings of the COMESA Monetary Cooperation and Integration were conducted on November 10, 2023 in the Victoria Falls town, Zimbabwe, culminating with the 27th Meeting of the COMESA Committee of Governors of Central Banks.

The Governors reviewed and adopted the report of the 27th Meeting of the COMESA Committee of Experts on Finance and Monetary Affairs which preceded this meeting. Their meeting was preceded by the Governors Symposium, the 43rd Bureau of the COMESA Committee of Governors and the experts meeting

Among the key issues on the agenda were progress reports on the activities of the COMESA Regional Payment and Settlement System (REPSS), the COMESA Monetary Institute and the COMESA Clearing House.

Members of the Committee of Governors are responsible for ensuring greater macroeconomic and financial stability in their respective countries, which facilitate the economic integration efforts and provide for sustained economic development. Such efforts may include policy actions geared towards increased economic diversification, leveraging on the on existing trading regimes to boost

regional trade among others. "Our agenda of pursuing deeper financial and monetary integration requires establishing macroeconomic stability, financial system soundness, introduction of compliance with various international standards and practices in the financial sector to ensure regional harmonization," said Dr. John Mangudya, Governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe and outgoing chair of the COMESA Committee of Governors.

In her statement, the Secretary General of COMESA Chileshe Kapwepwe, urged the governors to encourage other Central Banks that are not live on the REPSS system to join.

"This will ensure that the real benefits of implementation of REPSS are realized including but not limited to guaranteeing prompt payment for exports as well as other transfers and eliminating mistrust among traders as there is Central Bank involvement," she said in the statement presented by her Assistant Dr Dev Haman who is also in charge of Administration and Finance.

Currently, nine member countries are live on the REPSS system, and the value of transactions processed are slowly

increasing.

REPSS is a Multilateral Netting System with end-of-day settlement in a single currency. It provides a single gateway for Central Banks within the region to effect payment in a multicurrency environment. The direct participants of the COMESA Clearing House are the Central Banks of Member States.

The meetings also acknowledged the capacity development activities carried out by the CMI under the Monetary and Exchange Rates Policies sub-committee and the Financial System Development and Stability sub-committee. These are aimed at improving macroeconomic management and the assessment of financial system stability of member countries

Eswatini was elected to take over the Chair for the COMESA Committee of Governors for 2024, with Zimbabwe as Vice Chair, Uganda as Second Vice, Malawi as Rapporteur and Burundi as Second Rapporteur.

Governors, Deputy Governors and delegates from 13 COMESA member Central Banks, namely: Burundi, Djibouti, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe participated.



Staff from Central Banks attending the CMI workshop

Central Banks validate studies on exchange rate pass-through

Economists from 12 COMESA countries have validated studies conducted by member Central Banks on the “Exchange rate pass-through to domestic prices”. The exchange rate pass-through (ERPT) is the change in local currency domestic prices resulting from one percent change in the exchange rate.

In general, ERPT entails both the direct and indirect channels through which changes in the exchange rate may be transmitted to consumer prices. In their conduct of monetary policy, central banks require an understanding of the transmission mechanism of monetary policy to be able to respond adequately to different shocks.

COMESA Monetary Institute Director, Dr Lucas Njoroge says the extent and timing of ERPT is an issue of interest for monetary policymakers as it is a key ingredient of monetary policy and forecasting models of prices. He was speaking during the validation workshop on ‘Exchange rate pass-through to domestic prices’, for the

studies conducted by Member Central Banks. The workshop took place on 3 - 4 October 2023 in Nairobi, Kenya.

Currently, the region is grappling with a challenging macroeconomic environment, marked by, among others, severe exchange rate pressures owing to multiple global shocks. Surging global oil and international commodity prices compounded by tightening global financial conditions associated with the war in Ukraine and sanctions on Russia has fast paced market volatility and disrupted capital flows to small open economies, including those in the COMESA region.

It is against this background, the Director noted that, the Committee of Governors of Central Banks directed CMI using staff from member Central Banks to empirically assess the ERPT to better understand the impact of the on-going turmoil in the external environment on inflation.

The key finding of the studies is that ERPT

is low, incomplete and lagged, which, in general, reflects limited exposure of the respective economies to pressures from exchange rates on the consumer price side.

Among the key common policy recommendations from the studies were that Central Banks need tailored policy responses to exchange rate shocks to moderate exchange rate pass-through pressures. In addition, they should manage future price expectations by increasing their communication with market players. They also need to exercise caution when dealing with excessive exchange rate movements/volatility and should be ready to take appropriate actions, among others.

The 12 COMESA member Central Banks that participated from Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Eswatini, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.



COMESA Secretary General Chileshe Kapwepwe (R) witnesses the signing of the TFTA Agreement by Lesotho Minister, Hon. Mokhethi Shelile (middle) assisted by COMESA Legal Counsel Mr Gabriel Masuku

Tripartite signatories rise to 23

State signatories to the Tripartite Free Trade Area Agreement that brings together COMESA, East African Community and Southern African Development Community rose to 23 in the past year. This followed the signing of the Agreement by the Kingdom of Lesotho on 27 October 2023 in a ceremony conducted in the capital Maseru. It was officiated by COMESA Secretary General, Chileshe Kapwepwe, on behalf of the Tripartite Task Force.

Lesotho's Minister of Trade, Industry, Business Development, and Tourism Hon. Mokhethi Shelile signed on behalf of his government thus paving way for the country's ratification of the Tripartite FTA Agreement.

The COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite Free Trade Area Agreement was finalised and opened for signature in 2015 at the third Tripartite Summit in Sharm-el-Sheik, Egypt.

Its objectives are to promote economic and social development of the Tripartite

region, create a large single market with free movement of goods and services to promote intra-regional trade, enhance the regional and continental integration processes; and build a strong Tripartite Free Trade Area for the benefit of the people of the three Regional Economic Communities.

The Agreement covers trade in goods, trade in services; and other trade-related matters. So far, it has 23 signatures, and 11 ratifications. To bring the Agreement into force it must attract 14 ratifications by Member/Partner States.

The entry into force of the Agreement will start the implementation of the three pillars of the Tripartite Free Trade Area, namely, market integration, industrial development, and infrastructure development.

The benefits to be accrued by Members/ Partner States when the Agreement comes into force include expansion of value chains beyond borders, improvements in trading conditions,

industrial outputs, input sourcing and markets connectivity and increased investments as result of fair and anti-competitive practices in the Tripartite region

The Agreement will also contribute to the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCFTA) by creating more liberalized environment for trade amongst African countries.

The Agreement also contributes to the objectives of the African Union Abuja Treaty and Agenda 2063, by boosting intra-African trade and deepening Africa's market integration, fostering competition and will assist the Member/Partner States to prepare them to compete more effectively on the global market.



File: Presidents H.E. Andry Rajoelina (Madagascar) and H.E Abdel Fattah El Sisi (Egypt) were re-elected in 2023.

AU-COMESA in joint elections' observer missions

In yet another demonstration of complementarity of roles between the continental and regional bodies, the African Union Commission (AUC) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) mooted a joint Election Observation Mission (EOM) for the second year running, 2023.

The mission observed the presidential elections in Madagascar on 16 November 2023 and in Egypt on 10-12 December 2023. H.E. Catherine Samba-Panza née Souga, former Transitional President of the Central African Republic, in collaboration with Ambassador Patrice Eugene Cure, Member of the COMESA Committee of Elders from Mauritius led the mission.

In Egypt, the joint mission was led by Former Vice President of Uganda Her Excellency Dr. Specioza Wandira Kazibwe in collaboration

with Ambassador John Kakonge, member of the COMESA Committee of Elders. Both missions comprised of 70 short term observers who included Ambassadors accredited to the African Union and COMESA, Officials of Election Management Bodies, members of African civil society organisations, African election experts, human rights specialists, gender and media experts, and representatives of women and youth organizations.

The EOM based its observation on the legal framework governing elections in each State and the OAU/AU Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections. Also considered were the standards and obligations stipulated in the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, the Principles for Election Management, Monitoring and Observation (PEMMO), COMESA Elections Observation Guidelines and the International Declaration of Principles

(DoP) for International Election Observation among others. The assessment focused on the regularity of the electoral process, transparency and credibility.

The Chairperson of the African Union Commission, H.E. Moussa Faki Mahamat, approved the deployment of the joint short-term AU-COMESA EOM to observe and report on the conduct of presidential election following invitation by the respective governments. The primary goal of the Missions is to promote peaceful, democratic, and credible elections by independently and impartially assessing the electoral process.



Regional ICT experts attending validation workshop in Zambia

Regional Optic Fiber study completed

Regional ICT experts have validated an Optic Fiber Study which identifies the status of optical fiber connectivity and challenges impeding country-wide fiber deployments. The study is intended to address the challenge that most African countries are currently facing on connectivity to the in-land.

It was funded under the eight million Euros European Union supported Enhancement for Governance and Enabling Environment (EGEE-ICT) programme, being implemented in the Eastern Africa, Southern Africa and Indian Ocean regions.

The meeting took place in Lusaka from 1 – 3 November 2023 where the consultancy firm took the delegates through the methodology, data collection, GIS fibre infrastructure analysis, policy and regulatory analysis and overview of regional fibre infrastructure development in the region.

The validation workshop in Lusaka also discussed the importance of having optic fiber given the high demand for data-based technological advancements such as Machine to Machine (M2M), Internet of Things (IOT) and Artificial Intelligence

(AI).

“At the time 5G deployments are in the early stages in Africa, sufficient optic fiber capacity will promote the expansion of 5G networks as well as internet connectivity for our citizens,” Dr Mohamed Kadah, Assistant Secretary General in charge of programmes in COMESA said when he addressed the delegates.

He added that accessibility and affordability of ICT is key for the region to utilize e-services and reach all groups of society, in remote areas and the disadvantaged groups, a move that could help transform the landscape of development in EA-SA-IO.

Over the past few years, Africa has experienced growth in the use of ICTs such as increased subscription

and improvements in coverage and accessibility, hence the need to improve ICT infrastructure coverage.

“We need to improve ICT and digital literacy at all levels, ensure that ICT services and devices are affordable and target to reach the underserved and unserved populations,” Dr Kadah said. The EGEE ICT programme focuses on coordinating regional public and private sector ICT policy development, enhancing policy and regulatory environment for competitive markets and gender sensitive ICT markets, and improving infrastructure connectivity and ensure access to ICT to all.

Regional Economic Communities namely COMESA, the EAC, IGAD, IOC and SADC are working together under the EGEE-ICT programme to achieve ICT regional integration.



At the time 5G deployments are in the early stages in Africa, sufficient optic fiber capacity will promote the expansion of 5G networks as well as internet connectivity for our citizens,” Dr Mohamed Kadah



Editor in Chief, Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, Mr Woldeyes Getachew (L) receives participation certificate from Amb. Vestine NAHIMANA, President of the National Council of Media, Burundi, flanked by Dr Bernard Dzawanda, Senior Transport Economist, COMESA and Dr George AH-THEW Senior Programme Officer (ICT) at SADC

Enlisting the media in covering infrastructure programmes

The second media training and familiarization workshop on the Support to the Air Transport Sector Development (SATSD) Programme and the Enhancement of Governance and Enabling Environment in the ICT sector (EGEE - ICT) Programme, took place in

Bujumbura, Burundi, on 25 - 26 October 2023.

The workshop was attended by media professionals from national and regional media organizations in the Northern Africa, Horn of Africa, and Eastern

Africa sub-regions. The target countries included Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Tunisia, and Uganda.

Its objective was to enhance the skills and capacity of media practitioners to improve the creation and dissemination of media content related to these regional infrastructure programs. The training is intended to foster closer connections between media and communication experts in Member/ Partner States and Regional Economic Communities (RECs). It is also expected to facilitate collaboration in the promotion of EGEE-ICT and SATSD programs and investments within the COMESA, EAC, SADC, IGAD, and IOC regions. The two programmes are funded by the European Union under the European Development Fund.

The Assistant Minister of Communications, Media, and ICT in Burundi Mr. Thierry Kitamoya opened the workshop, which was also addressed by then COMESA Senior Transport Economist Bernard Dzawanda.

Aviation experts meet in Cairo to validate laws, regulations and policies



Aviation experts at the workshop in Cairo, Egypt

Aviation experts from five regional economic communities (RECs) from the Eastern Africa, Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean met in Cairo to validate national laws, regulations and policies in the sector.

The two days validation workshop, 30

-31 October 2023, was aimed at ensuring they conform with the provisions of the Yamoussoukro Decision (YD). This was the second workshop after the first one which was conducted in Kenya in 2022.

Participants were drawn from the COMESA, the East African Community,

Inter-Governmental Authority on Development, Southern Africa Development Community and the Indian Ocean Commission. The RECs are jointly implementing the eight million euros, four-year programme on Support to the Air Transport Sector Development (SATSD) funded by the European Union under the European Development Fund.

The Yamoussoukro Decision (YD) is a commitment by signatory African States to eliminate restrictions on open skies including transit rights and frequency limits on international routes.

The workshop was officially opened by Egyptian Minister of Civil Aviation Hon. Mohamed Abbas and the COMESA statement was read by the Director of Infrastructure and Logistics Mr Jean Baptiste Mutabazi (now former).



CBC's Digital Financial Inclusion Workshop

Empowering MSMEs for enhanced participation in intra-COMESA trade

A transformative three-day workshop, jointly organized by the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) Business Council (CBC) and the Mauritius Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI) was conducted on 17 October 2023 in Balaclava, Mauritius.

The Digitalization Toolkits for Greater Financial Inclusion Workshop was attended by approximately 50 Micro, Small, and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs) and inaugurated by President Prithvirajsing Roopun of Mauritius. The event also featured key addresses from Mr. Marday Venkatasamy, President of the CBC, and Mrs. Namita Jagarnath Hardwar, President of the MCCI.

“The transformative potential of digital financial services and cross-border transactions are poised to reshape the financial landscape.

The capacity building initiative, whose primary goal is to enhance MSMEs' financial literacy and increase their adoption of digital financial services, forms an integral part of CBC's Digital Financial Inclusion (DFI) Program.

The Program is dedicated to establishing a low-cost, interoperable, and fraud-resistant regional digital financial services infrastructure, with a primary focus on serving MSMEs. It is a response to the pressing issue of financial exclusion, affecting approximately 400 million adults in Africa, particularly women, who do not have access to formal financial services.

The President recognized the significance of fostering innovation, promoting financial stability, and empowering people.

“It is in the spirit of collective determination, of innovation, and of a collective vision that we gather today, to make our SMEs, especially women and young entrepreneurs, better equipped to navigate the digital world with confidence. We look forward to a future where our SMEs, especially women

and youth entrepreneurs, are equipped to navigate the digital landscape with confidence and resilience”, he stated.

Mr. Venkatasamy provided an overview of the CBC, highlighting its role as the regional apex body of the private sector and business community in the 21 COMESA member states.

“The CBC's Digital Financial Inclusion (DFI) Programme, which we are gathered to discuss and implement, represents our response to this pressing issue. Capacity building stands at the core of our strategy,” he said.

The transformative potential of digital financial services and cross-border transactions are poised to reshape the financial landscape, enhancing the capabilities and reach of SMEs. This collaborative effort, led by the CBC and supported by the MCCI, signifies a significant step towards inclusive and digitally empowered entrepreneurship, driven by the words of the esteemed speakers and their collective vision for the future.



Statistics experts meet in Lusaka

The 13th Session of the COMESA Committee on Statistical Matters was held in Lusaka, Zambia, 6-8 November 2023. The meeting coincided with the midway point of

the COMESA Regional Strategy for the Development of Statistics (RSDS) and demonstrated the collective dedication to enhance statistical capabilities within COMESA Member

States. Secretary General Chileshe Mpundu Kapwepwe officially opened the meeting conducted at the COMESA Secretariat.

Participants included Directors of National Statistics Offices, representatives from Central Banks, various sector ministries, and delegates representing international organizations such as the European Union, African Development Bank (AfDB), United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), African Union Commission (AUC), Macroeconomic and Financial Management Institute of Eastern and Southern Africa (MEFMI), Paris21, Statistics Norway, Statistics Sweden, as well as our partner regional economic communities, IGAD, SADC, and EAC.



Stakeholders' validate studies on roaming, optical fiber infrastructure

Five crucial activities were initiated by the programme on Enhancement of Governance and Enabling Environment in the ICT sector (EGEE-ICT) in the Eastern Africa, Southern Africa, and Indian Ocean region in 2023.

They included two studies on roaming and interconnection and optical fiber infrastructures, along with the development of three policy and

regulatory frameworks associated with these studies.

This was part of the report presented at the 4th meeting of the Programme Steering Committee (PTSC) that took place on 5 – 8 December 2023 in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe.

Participants in the two-day

meeting included Information and Communications Technology experts from partner Regional Economic Communities such as EAC, IGAD, IOC, and SADC. The Project Implementation Unit (PMU) members and staff from the COMESA

Secretariat actively contributed to the discussions.

The meeting acknowledged significant advancements in program implementation, with an increase in overall budget utilization from 11% in previous years to the current 27%.

The Guest of Honour, Mrs. Georgina Chingonzo, Director of Strategic Planning & Monitoring and Evaluation at the Ministry of ICT Postal & Courier Services in Zimbabwe, officially opened the meeting.

Representatives from the COMESA Secretariat included Dr. Benard Dzawanda, the Director of Infrastructure and Logistics, and Mr. Joseph Chibwe, the EGEE-ICT project manager at the EU delegation in Zambia. Their presence emphasized the collaborative and multi-stakeholder nature of the EGEE-ICT program.



Delegates in the regional ICT sector visiting Konza Smart City in Kenya

Stakeholders validate key studies on regional interconnectivity

In November 2023, stakeholders in the ICT sector gathered in Nairobi, Kenya, to validate reports from two significant studies: the draft Final Report on roaming and interconnections and the study on policy and regulatory frameworks on fibre.

These activities were conducted under the programme on Enhancement of Governance and Enabling Environment in the ICT sector (EGEE-ICT) in the Eastern Africa, Southern Africa, and the Indian Ocean (EA-SA-IO) region. These studies represent a crucial step in enhancing regional integration and ICT growth in the EA-SA-IO region.

The beneficiaries of the EGEE-ICT programme are the twenty-nine countries of the EA-SA-IO region, which collectively are Member States of the five regional economic communities of COMESA, EAC, IGAD, IOC, and SADC.

The programme, funded under the

European Development Fund, focuses on coordinating regional public and private sector ICT policy development, enhancing the policy and regulatory environment for competitive markets and gender-sensitive ICT markets, and improving infrastructure connectivity to ensure access to ICT for all.

Speakers at the validation workshop emphasized the importance of ICT in deepening regional integration. COMESA Senior Transport Economist, Mr. Bernard Dzawanda, highlighted that the studies will enable the harmonization of mobile roaming, termination tariffs, and transit internet charges across the region. He also mentioned the extension of the data collection process to improve stakeholder response and enrich the study's outcomes, acknowledging the challenges faced in gathering data and the steps taken to mitigate them.

Director of ICT in Kenya, Mr.

Loyford Mureithi, reiterated Kenya's commitment to expanding broadband access and promoting digital literacy as pivotal efforts to bridge the digital divide. He emphasized the importance of ensuring affordable and inclusive access to digital services for all citizens, underscoring Kenya's dedication to ICT-driven regional integration and cooperation. Mr. Mureithi further highlighted Kenya's leadership in digital transformation, citing initiatives like the Konza Smart City and expanding internet connectivity as examples.



Dr. Bernard Dzawanda



Capacity building the Eswatini media

Initiative aimed at creating a pool of well-informed media on regional integration

The first national capacity building workshop for media practitioners on regional integration was conducted in Mbabane, Eswatini. Thirty-five journalists and communication experts participated in the two-day forum facilitated by COMESA Secretariat and the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Trade, Eswatini.

The workshop took place in Mbabane on 29 – 30 November 2023.

Its objective was to create a large pool of media practitioners at the national level that are well informed about the COMESA regional integration agenda. Similar forums will be conducted in more member States in the coming years and will go a long way in helping disseminate information and knowledge on the positive impact that COMESA regional integration programmes

have at the national level.

Participants were taken through key that COMESA has supported Eswatini across diverse sectors, including customs automation, statistics, investment promotion, leather and leather products value chains, quality and standards, the COMESA Federation of Women in Business, and agriculture. Other areas of collaboration are the support to small-scale cross-border traders to upgrade into the formal economy and digitalization of customs borders.

Participating journalists were conducted on a visit to Manzini Trade Hub and Private Sector Support Project, a milestone achievement in facilitating small scale trade for over 300 handicraft traders and over 400 businesses.

This project was constructed through a three million euros support under the

COMESA European Union funding. The facility provides traders with sleeping quarters, storage space, sanitation facilities and display space for their wares. The facility visit provided a tangible proof a transformative COMESA led project.

Under Secretary in the Ministry of Commerce, Ms Cebile Nhlabatsi opened the workshop on behalf of the Principal Secretary. She informed the participants that her Ministry had launched the Eswatini Trade Information Portal (ETIP), the International Trade Department website and government social pages that have links to the COMESA website guaranteeing the availability of information on regional integration.



Former Director of Infrastructure Jean Baptiste Mutabazi addressing the delegates

Rallying Member States to sign the open skies protocol

Slow uptake of the air transport liberalization principles outlined in the 1999 Yamoussoukro Decision, has been attributed to a lack of clear information on its economic benefits. However, a study commissioned by the African Union Commission (AUC) in 2021 has since filled this knowledge gap, facilitating informed advocacy towards implementing Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM).

In recent years, there has been a fresh push towards rallying regional States to secure more Member States signing the Solemn Commitment, thereby ensuring a wider adoption of SAATM. This commitment is expected to unlock the full potential of air transport as an engine of growth and development across the continent.

Towards this objective, on 6 – 8

November 2023, technical experts in the aviation sector and stakeholders met in Lusaka to discuss the SAATM's benefits, the regulatory framework, and the operational challenges, with the aim of quickening the implementation of the Yamoussoukro Decision (YD).

The YD is the most important air transport reform policy initiative by African Governments aimed at removing the restrictive and protectionist intra-African regulatory regime which hampers the expansion and improvement of air transport on the continent.

The drive for SAATM comes against the backdrop of the vital role air transport plays in economic, social, and cultural development, aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Despite the

recognition of its importance, the growth of Africa's air transport has been hampered by restrictive bilateral agreements and regulatory hurdles, which have kept most intra-African air transport markets relatively closed, in stark contrast to liberalized markets outside the continent.

The gathering of technical experts marked a significant stride towards actualizing the SAATM, with an eye on bolstering regulatory capacity and air navigation efficiency across the Eastern Africa, Southern Africa, and Indian Ocean Region.

The workshop was supported by the Support to Air Transport Sector Development (SATSD) programme, an €8 million Grant Contribution Agreement between COMESA and the European Union. The objective of the workshop was to secure more Member State signatures on the Solemn Commitment, thereby ensuring a wider adoption of SAATM. This commitment is expected to unlock the full potential of air transport as an engine of growth and development across the continent.

Since the launch of SAATM in January 2018, 37 Member States have already signed up, which is a clear indication of the commitment that the continent's realisation of its economic growth and integration agenda. This number has grown from 35 Member States in 2021.

COMESA at the Djibouti expo - first time!



COMESA Staff, Ms Ketamalala Andrianiaina (R) engages visitor at the COMESA information desk in the Djibouti International Trade Fair

For the first time, COMESA Secretariat participated in the Djibouti International Trade Fair with the support of the European Union under the Institutional Capacity Building Project. The objective was to disseminate information, share knowledge, and dialogue with stakeholders from the public and private sectors. The expo was opened by H.E. Ismail Omar Guelleh, President of Djibouti. It featured diverse industries and welcomed about 170 exhibitors from 10 countries.



Participants at the regional trade promotion strategy validation workshop in Bujumbura

Regional trade promotion framework validated

In December 2023, representatives from trade promotion agencies, chambers of commerce, the private sector and ministries of trade and industry met in Bujumbura, Burundi and validated the COMESA Regional Trade Promotion Strategy. This was during a two-day workshop held on 11 – 12 December 2023 to review and amend the draft content of the strategy.

It was the first time that COMESA was developing such a strategy. Once adopted and fully implemented, it will enable the region to boost its intra-COMESA trade levels from the current low levels. The workshop thus provided an opportunity for the delegates to review the content and make input that captures the various aspects that could help the region deepen its trade.

Speaking at the workshop, the Assistant to the Minister of Trade, Industry, Transport and Tourism Mr Jean Claude Kanene emphasized the importance of the region having a Trade Promotion Strategy as a way of bringing about real integration.

“Promoting exports in our region is a giant step towards improving community trade,” said Mr Kanene. “A

frank dialogue between Member States will provide a common overview of the opportunities to promote exports, the challenges faced by exporters and possible solutions to these challenges in order to facilitate the movement of products across the corridors.”

He reiterated Burundi’s commitment to the COMESA integration agenda adding that the country has over the years signed and implemented various regional instruments such as the COMESA Free Trade Area and the free movement of people.

“You are all witnesses, you have received the Visa on arrival and the digitalization of immigration services is an important step in reducing costs,” he added. On his part, the Director of Trade and Customs, COMESA, Dr Christopher Onyango stressed the importance of the region having a Trade Promotion Strategy that is alive and effective.

He said despite the progress that COMESA has made in advancing economic integration and trade liberalization, the regional market is still characterized by various challenges and constraints. This is evident by low levels of intra-COMESA trade and investments,

dependence on commodity trade and under-developed value chains. He cited some of the priority value chains identified under the COMESA Industrial development cluster which include agricultural products, agro processed products, livestock and livestock products, fisheries, cosmetics and beauty products, pharmaceuticals, leather and leather products, textiles and apparels, fertilizers, paper and paper products, furniture, iron and steel, electrical products and construction materials.

“But it is not enough just to value add and take goods to markets. A Trade Promotion Strategy must be accompanied by a well-designed marketing and communication strategy. At the same time, we should work harder to open services markets. We live in a digital age, and digital trade is global by nature,” Dr Onyango said.

The Validation Workshop was supported by the European Union Development Fund (EDF11).

Currently, Burundi is the Vice Chair of COMESA and is expected to host the next Summit of Heads of State and Government in 2024.

EU Hands Over Equipment to Mchinji Border



In December 2023, COMESA Secretariat with the European Union handed over equipment to the Malawi Government promoting smooth trade flow at Mchinji One Stop Border Post. EU Team Leader for Economic Cooperation and Public Sector at the EU Delegation in Malawi, Bartek Studniarski, highlighted its significance in enhancing border operations and trade facilitation. The equipment included Smart Gates, Mini Labs for Rapid Testing, and Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS), and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT). Support details: Smart gates EUR 353,856, Mini labs EUR 148,500. This initiative, part of the EU's 48 million EUR Trade Facilitation regional program, benefits six other COMESA States. This initiative is a significant leap forward for border efficiency and ensuring the safety of goods. It underscores the EU's commitment to trade facilitation, efficiency, and safety, paving the way for economic growth and job opportunities. COMESA was represented by the EDF Programme Manager, Ms Mshuka Kamwela.

Twenty Women SMEs Empowered in Rwanda



Twenty women-owned Small and Medium Enterprises based in Kigali, Rwanda have been trained on how to improve management of their businesses and coordination as they embark on exporting their goods to the COMESA region and beyond. The training held 27 November – on 01 December in Kigali was organized by the COMESA Federation of Women in Business (COMFWB). It is part of the European Union backed Regional Enterprise Competitiveness and Access to Markets Programme RECAMP which aims to increase private sector participation in sustainable regional and global value chains.

COMESA at the Continental expo



COMESA Secretariat in collaboration with its institutions namely the COMESA Competition Commission (CCC) and the COMESA Federation of Women in Business (COMFWB) was among participants at the 3rd Intra-African Trade Fair in Cairo, Egypt. This was part of the regional bloc, and its institutions drive to enhance visibility, public awareness and continuous engagement with stakeholders on the regional integration agenda.

The COMESA Secretariat's participation was supported under the European Development Fund (EDF11) Institutional Capacity Building Programme. Sixteen COMESA Member States also participated in the bi-annual event from 9 – 15 November 2023. It was promoted by AFREXIMBANK in collaboration with the African Union Continental Free Trade Area and hosted by the Government of Egypt.



COMESA SECRETARIAT
COMESA Center
Ben Bella Road
P.O. Box 30051



+260 211 229 725



www.comesa.int



info@comesa.int



facebook.com/ComesaSecretariat/



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