

Sokokuu online trading platform launched



The COMFWB, AeTrade initiative aims at promoting online trade for women entrepreneurs

The COMESA Federation of Women in Business (COMFWB) in collaboration with the African e-Trade Group (Ae-Trade) have launched an online Platform Sokokuu to traders in the COMESA region. The platform will enable traders to conduct cross border trade using ICT as a tool to minimize physical barriers. Sokokuu is a Swahili word meaning big market.

Two other COMESA institutions namely the COMESA Business Council (CBC) and the African Leather and Leather products (ALLPI) have already signed Memorandum of Understandings (MoU) with Ae-Trade on the operationalization of the Sokokuu platform.

Sokokuu will complement existing platforms such as the *womenconnect* which is used by women entrepreneurs in regional States to exchange information on availability of essential products within the region.

The platform enables manufacturers and suppliers

in different Member States to share information on their potential to produce and supply products.

The AeTrade is a multi-stakeholder group of African professionals and businesspeople with a vision to develop and implement an e-empowerment program that will enhance intra-and inter-African trade. The group brings together public and private sector partners to develop projects that leverage the power of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for the benefit of Africa's present and future entrepreneurs.

Speaking at the launch on Wednesday 22 September 2021, during the 2nd COMFWB Annual Regional Trade Fair in Lusaka, Secretary General (SG) Chileshe Kapwepwe underlined the role of ICT in enhancing regional integration.

"Four years ago, COMESA decided to shift focus to promote digital economic integration and adopted the theme: COMESA - Towards Digital Economic Integration," she said. "The decision was based on the understanding that the region stood on the brink of a new industrial revolution, driven by new-generation information technologies."

The adoption of the Digital Free Trade Area (DFTA)

was intended to reinforce the implementation of the Free Trade Area, which was launched in October 2000 to facilitate COMESA regional integration. It is aimed at empowering traders to do cross-border trade using ICT as a tool to minimize physical barriers and provide the necessary infrastructure for enhancement of global trade.

Hence COMESA has embraced Sokokuu as a valuable tool especially at this time of COVID 19 pandemic which has restricted physical contacts.

The SG was represented by the Assistant Secretary General Administration and Finance Dr Dev Haman.

Speaking at the same event, COMFWB Chief Executive Officer, Ms Ruth Negash stressed the importance of creating an enabling environment to support adoption of e-commerce by ensuring women and girls' full access to ICTs, including digital devices and services.

Other organizations represented at the forum included the African Union, the United Nations Develop Programmes, the African Continental Free Trade Area Secretariat and Ae-Trade Group.

Zambian student invents a medicine dispenser



Billy Munyenembe with his medicine dispensing innovation

The technology, based on Smart Hospital model was submitted for the COMESA Innovation Awards Scheme

One of the challenges people face in developing countries is access to health facilities owing to long distances. Overcrowding by patients seeking medical assistance in the available health facilities is quite prevalent, while in some far-flung rural areas, people barely have access to health personnel.

This is what inspired Billy Munyenembe, a final year student at Information and Communication University (ICU) of Zambia to invent a medicine dispenser. Billy presented this innovation at the 8th Annual COMESA Research Forum 13 - 16 September 2021 for consideration in the COMESA Innovation Awards.

The technology, which he has named BRIISP Medicine Dispenser (BMD), is intended for remote dispensation of medicine by medical personnel as per prescription.

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“A lot of people who are HIV positive stop collecting drugs because of the stigma and the number of people with HIV, but not on ARVS, keep on increasing leading to more deaths,” Billy Munyenembe

“If the patient has a prescription already, he or she can use a card or a given code for medicine dispensation,” said Billy a bachelor’s degree student in Software Engineering. “With the ever-increasing queues at hospitals and ever-increasing number of patients, doctors barely attend to every patient that comes for medical assistance.”

The BMD is designed to help people have access to medical assistance at any particular time without going to any health facility unless the situation is critical and needs serious medical attention. He says that it will also help evade stigma to those who are on anti-retroviral drugs

“A lot of people who are HIV positive stop collecting drugs because of the stigma and the number of people with HIV, but not on ARVS, keep on increasing leading to more deaths,” he said.

In his presentation, Billy observed that health care is one of the priority development areas for countries and requires special attention in the transition to the innovative management models based on the use of advanced medical concepts and digital technologies such as the Smart Hospital model.

This is the second innovation that Billy has presented for the COMESA Innovation Awards. In 2019, he developed an energy solution to increase power access and reduce inconsistency of power supply. Known as BRIISP Power System (BPS), the technology sustains power almost in its normal range despite being used. The technology won the COMESA award worth \$10,000 to assist in its further development.



Secretary General Chileshe Kapwepwe addressing the AfCFTA, RECs meeting

SG attends the AfCFTA, RECs coordination meeting in Accra

COMESA was part of the delegations that attended the 1st Coordination Meeting of the Heads of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) on the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

The meeting took place from 20 September 2021 in Accra, Ghana. Its objective was to prepare actionable strategies towards enhancing the effective implementation of the AfCFTA, drawing on lessons from the implementation of REC’s Free Trade Areas (FTAs). The implementation of the AfCFTA will influence future trade decisions that the RECs may be engaged in.

Among those in attendance were Secretaries General of the East African Community, The Community of Sahel–Saharan States (CEN-SAD), representatives from Economic Community of Central African States (EECAS) and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU).



Handling of small-scale cross border traders among key topics at border staff training



File/ small scale cross border traders

COMESA has trained its Trade Information Desk Officers (TIDOs) that serve in selected borders in the region, on how to implement the Simplified Trade Regime and ensure the minimum standards for the treatment of small-scale cross border traders are upheld.

The training was conducted on 23 September 2021 as part of capacity building for TIDOs serving at the following border points: Chirundu (Zambia/Zimbabwe), Kasumbalesa (Zambia/DR Congo), Mwami/Mchinji (Zambia/Malawi) and Nakonde (Zambia/Tanzania).

The training is part of a €15 Million Cross-Border Trade Initiative, financed by the European Union under the 11th European Development Fund (EDF) to facilitate small scale trade across borders. The overarching goal of this project is to increase formal small scale cross border trade flows in the region leading to higher revenue collection by governments as well as increased security and higher incomes for small scale cross border traders.

The simplified trade regime (STR), which the TIDOs are expected to promote, was launched in 2010 at the request of the small-scale cross border traders. It was intended to

streamline the documentation and procedures for the clearance of small consignments while enabling the traders to also benefit from the COMESA preferential tariffs. This followed the realization that the gains that accrued from the launch of the COMESA Free Trade Area in 2000, was mainly benefitting the big and established companies that were able to obtain the Certificates of Origin as well as filling in the required customs documents. This was to the exclusion of small-scale traders who cross the borders with small consignments of goods that are meant for sale in their countries.

The trade information desks at the border were thereafter established to assist small scale traders with information on trade and basic border procedures in the context of the STR.

“One of the activities under Cross-Border Trade Initiative is to support the posting and training of Trade Information Desk Officers at the targeted borders, equip the TIDOs to do their job properly and to carry a study on the sustainability of TIDOs,” said the Senior Research Fellow at the COMESA Secretariat, Mr. Benedict Musengele who represented the Director of Trade at the opening of the training which was conducted virtually.

“The TIDOs interact with the traders and other stakeholders at the borders, and it is essential that they display good behaviour, probity and courtesy in their interaction with both traders and border officials as well as researchers that frequent the borders gathering primary data.”

He added that that capacity building was also important for the TIDOs to keep abreast with policy and administrative changes that affect small scale traders to provide value added information.

The training was conducted by customs and immigration officers from Kasumbalesa, Chirundu and Nakonde borders.

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Record number of women entrepreneurs attend the COMFWB trade fair



Zambia Minister of Commerce, Trade and Industry Hon. Chipoka Mulenga (speaking), COMESA ASG Dr Dev Haman, COMFWB Chief Executive Officer Ms Ruth Negash and COMFWB Chairperson Ms Maureen Sumbwe

Over 200 local, regional and international businesswomen and investors participated in the 2nd COMESA Federation of Women in Business (COMFWB) annual regional trade fair that took place on 22 – 24 September 2021 in Lusaka, Zambia.

The forum provided a platform for businesses to showcase innovative products and services available and the existing potential in the region. It also enabled knowledge and experience-sharing especially for women in business to discuss the challenges and opportunities in regional trade particularly for micro small and medium entrepreneurs.

The expo was inspired by the need to address women's equal access to business leadership and entrepreneurship. According to COMESA statistics obtained under the Women in Cross-Border Trade programme, 70 % to 80 % of individual cross border traders in COMESA are women. However, most of the border areas in the region lack basic infrastructure to cater for the needs of small-scale women traders.

Zambia's new Minister of Commerce, Trade and Industry Hon. Chipoka Mulenga opened the trade fair. He said trade expos provide valuable knowledge on the potential large markets available, outside current comfort zones, and urged women in business to take keen interest and actively participate.

"It is impossible to implement effective programmes of economic transformation without the involvement of women entrepreneurs," Minister Mulenga said. "...we are delighted in gatherings such as this one because it provides a forum for exchange of ideas and experiences through which women development programmes can be implemented."

He said women entrepreneurs need to be encouraged and supported to participate in trade and become more competitive in a region that has embraced integration.

COMESA Secretary General (SG) Chileshe Kapwepwe underscored the importance of knowledge-sharing among women entrepreneurs as it enables enterprises to innovate, explore new markets, manage businesses effectively and in general serve as a springboard for such businesses into the future.

In her statement presented by Assistant Secretary General for Administration and Finance Dr Dev Haman, she outlined some of the initiatives that COMESA is implementing to enhance the participation of women entrepreneurs in regional and global markets. Among them, the promotion of e-commerce through better access to technology and online platforms such as the digital platform 'womenconnect' known as the 50 Million

African Women Speak (50MAWSP) Project. This project is designed to address the information needs of women in business in the region and is implemented jointly by COMESA, the East African Community (EAC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). COMESA is also supporting competitiveness of the Private Sector through the European Union funded Regional Enterprise Competitiveness and Access to Markets Programme (RECAMP).

COMFWB has benefitted from this project through technical assistance and advisory services for SMEs in improving business management and coordination among them and other value chain players.

Other speakers included the COMFWB Chairperson Ms Maureen Sumbwe and COMFWB Chief Executive Officer Ms Ruth Negash.

COMFWB formerly FEMCOM was established by the COMESA Heads of State and Governments in 1993 in recognition of the role women play in the economic and social transformation efforts of the region.



States urged to strengthen value chains for post Covid-19 economic recovery

Regional states should strengthen existing value chains both at the regional and global level and develop new ones to unlock the transformative potential in manufacturing and industrial sectors in COMESA. This will enable the region to fully participate in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) while keeping pace with changing production and consumption patterns both globally and regionally.

This was among recommendations made at the 8th COMESA annual research forum conducted from 13 – 16 September 2021. This recommendation is part of the strategic interventions to fast-track the recovery process from the COVID-19 pandemic that has negatively affected trade.

The forum further called for enhanced economic diversification in the region, maximizing on gains made in other sectors in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. These include financial services (mobile money and banking services) and telecommunications, the game-changing initiative in the AfCFTA and Afreximbank's Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS).

According to the forum's report, leveraging digital trade will generate adequate jobs and ensure transparent, simple, coherent and business friendly rules of origin, which are key to supporting intra-regional trade both in COMESA and across the African continent.

Besides, digitalization of trade instruments

will further support economic diversification through adoption of e-trade, e-logistics, and e-legislation under the COMESA Digital Free Trade Area initiative, as well as promoting the diversification of markets for COMESA imports and exports.

The theme of the forum was "Rethinking Trade and Doing Business in the Wake of Covid-19 Pandemic". Participants from the academia, policy think tanks, government and private sector attended representing the following countries: Burundi, DR Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Eswatini, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Seychelles, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Youths elected to the COMESA advisory panel

Eleven youths from the region have been elected to the COMESA Youth Advisory Panel (COMYAP). The roles and responsibilities of the panel is to, among others, provide the COMESA Council of Ministers with direct and well-informed advice on matters relating to young people through recommendations contained in the COMYAP bi-annual reports. Representatives of the COMESA National Youth Councils elected the 11 members during their two-day meeting held virtually on 8 - 9th September 2021. The meeting was attended by 18 COMESA countries; Burundi, DR Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Eswatini, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Zambia's Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Child Development, Dr John Phiri officially opened the meeting.

The establishment and operationalization of the COMYAP is part of the implementation of the Joint COMESA/AU- African Governance Architecture (AGA) project on youth engagement in democratic governance and socio-economic development processes in Africa. This is a pilot project supported financially by the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC)

The election of the COMESA Youth Advisory Panel is part of the implementation of the COMESA Youth Engagement Strategy (COMYES) which was adopted by the First meeting of the COMESA Ministers of Youth held in June this year. The same meeting also adopted the Terms of Reference for the establishment of the COMYAP.

Dr Phiri commended COMESA and its partners

especially the African Union's African Governance Architecture (AU-AGA) and the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC) for support rendered in enhancing youth engagement in the region.

He pledged Zambia's continued support to the COMESA agenda, specifically the youth programme. Based on the good results by the Joint COMESA/AU-AGA project, Dr Phiri urged COMESA and its partners to mobilise resources for an extended support to more youth in the region.

At the same forum, COMESA Assistant Secretary General-Programmes, Ambassador Dr Cheluget and the Acting Head of AGA/ APSA Secretariat, Ambassador Salah Sidding Hammad commended the milestone reached towards engaging the young people in the COMESA region and Africa at large.

COMESA Diary

Date	Event	Venue
28 - 29 September 2021	Experience sharing on the Impact of COVID-19 on the Youth in COMESA Member States	Virtual
6 October 2021	Women Empowerment Conference on AfCFTA	Virtual
2 – 4 November 2021	Intergovernmental Committee meeting	Virtual
9 – 10 November 2021	Council of Ministers meeting	Virtual
18 November 2021	The 21st COMESA Summit	Egypt – Hybrid

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