



L-R: COMESA SG, Chileshe Kapwepwe, Vice President, HE. Mutale Nalumango, Sudan Acting Minister of Trade Hon. Omer Ali and Burundi's Minister of Trade Hon. Marie Chantal Nijimbere

# COMESA Marks 30 Years of Regional Integration

## Celebrating Milestones and Charting the Future

The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) celebrated its 30th anniversary in conjunction with the 45th Meeting of the COMESA Council of Ministers in Lusaka, Zambia, on Thursday, 28 November 2024. The commemorative events underscored the organization's remarkable achievements and its forward-looking vision for fostering regional integration and economic growth.

Zambia's Vice President, Mutale Nalumango, presided over the Council of Ministers meeting, while Burundi's Minister of Commerce, Transport, Industry & Tourism, H.E. Marie Chantal Nijimbere,

the current Chairperson of the COMESA Council, led the anniversary celebrations. The festivities began on 27 November 2024 with a panel discussion featuring heads of 12 COMESA specialized institutions alongside former Secretaries General—Mr. Erastus Mwencha, Mr. Sindiso Ngwenya—and the current Secretary General, Ms. Chileshe Mpundu Kapwepwe.

Addressing the Council, Vice President Nalumango acknowledged COMESA's significant progress in advancing regional integration and economic development. She emphasized the importance of further efforts in value

addition and underscored the critical role of frameworks for trade facilitation, digital transformation, and gender inclusion in driving shared goals.

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 Vice President, Mutale Nalumango



Zambia's Vice President, Mutale Nalumango, (blue/yellow) with delegates at the Council of Ministers meeting

Key milestones highlighted include the development of innovative trade facilitation tools such as the regional customs guarantee scheme and the yellow card system, which have set benchmarks across the continent. Over the last 30 years, intra-COMESA trade has steadily grown, reaching \$14 billion. Additionally, the combined GDP of member states has expanded from \$90 billion in 1994 to an impressive \$1.13 trillion in 2024, representing one-third of Africa's total GDP.

Looking to the future, Vice President Nalumango called for a greater focus on climate-resilient technologies and strategies to combat the adverse effects of climate change, including droughts, floods, and extreme weather patterns. She stressed the need for solutions to safeguard food security, promote socio-economic stability, and create jobs, especially for the region's youth.

"This milestone signifies COMESA's relevance, endurance, and commitment to fostering the regional integration agenda to contribute towards the development of the Africa we want," she stated.

She also commended the progress made in operationalizing the COMESA-



EAC-SADC Tripartite Free Trade Area, which came into effect in July 2024. Nalumango emphasized the need for innovative solutions, cross-border policy harmonization, and strengthened partnerships to ensure a prosperous future for the region.

COMESA Secretary General, Ms. Chileshe Mpundu Kapwepwe, highlighted ongoing efforts to enhance efficiency in cross-border trade through automation of customs operations, digitalization of procedures, and improved coordination among border agencies. She also noted initiatives aimed at strengthening regional agri-food systems, reducing post-harvest losses, ensuring food safety, and fostering agricultural commodity exchanges.

Ms. Petra Gasporova, Deputy Head of Delegation for the EU Zambia Office, reaffirmed the EU's unwavering commitment to supporting COMESA. She lauded the operationalization of the Tripartite Free Trade Agreement as a pivotal achievement and underscored COMESA's vital role in driving Africa's integration agenda.

As COMESA celebrates 30 years of progress, the focus remains on leveraging past successes to address emerging challenges. The organization continues to prioritize its mission of creating a prosperous, integrated, and sustainable Africa while maintaining its position as a leading force in regional economic development.



# Fireside Chat with COMESA Secretaries-General

## Reflecting on 30 Years of Integration and Shaping the Future



L-R: Moderator Dr Dennis Matanda, Secretary-General, Chileshe Mpundu Kapwepwe, Amb. Erastus Mwencha and Sindiso Ngwenya

In a historic gathering, two former Secretaries-General of COMESA joined the current Secretary-General in a captivating fireside chat to celebrate 30 years of the organization's impactful journey. The event, held on November 27, 2024, in Lusaka, Zambia, was a key highlight of COMESA's 30th anniversary celebrations. Ambassador Erastus Mwencha, the 4th Secretary-General, and Sindiso Ngwenya, the 5th, joined the current Secretary-General, Chileshe Mpundu Kapwepwe, for this reflective and forward-looking discussion.

Moderated by Dr. Dennis Matanda, a recognized expert in regional integration, the discussion reflected on COMESA's evolution from the Preferential Trade Area of Eastern and Southern Africa to its present status as a regional economic powerhouse. The audience included high-level dignitaries such as ministers, permanent secretaries, technical officials, and COMESA staff.

Burundi's Minister of Commerce, Transport, Industry & Tourism, H.E. Marie Chantal Nijimbere, the current Chairperson of the COMESA Council, presided over the high level panel discussions and appreciated the transformative impact the organization has had on the region.

Amb. Mwencha shared insights into the organization's formative years, highlighting the challenges of harmonizing diverse economies and fostering cooperation among member states.

"When I assumed office, COMESA was still finding its footing. Through concerted efforts in policy coordination and infrastructure development, we witnessed the birth of a more connected region," he remarked, underscoring the importance of perseverance and collaboration in building regional unity.

Amb. Mwencha, emphasized the critical role of visibility in strengthening COMESA's influence.

"In today's interconnected world, it's vital that COMESA's successes are globally recognized," he said. "By publicizing our programs and achievements, we can inspire confidence in our vision of regional integration and attract partnerships beyond Africa."

He championed efforts to enhance COMESA and its institutions presence on global platforms, leveraging modern media to showcase its achievements and programs, a point further stressed by Sindiso Ngwenya, Ngwenya also reflected on the strides made in fostering intra-regional trade and building economic partnerships, key pillars of COMESA's mandate.

SG Kapwepwe expressed gratitude to her predecessors, acknowledging their contributions to shaping COMESA's trajectory.

"I am deeply honoured to have you here to share your experiences," she said. "Your guidance and insights will inspire us as we work to fulfil the vision of COMESA's founding fathers."

Kapwepwe affirmed her commitment to leveraging their wisdom to navigate the current and future challenges facing the organization.

Looking ahead, the trio underscored the importance of innovation, digital engagement, and deeper integration across critical sectors such as trade, infrastructure, and finance. They called for sustained efforts to adapt to emerging global trends while addressing regional priorities.

"As COMESA gears up for the next 30 years, we must continue to evolve," they agreed. "Strengthening our role as a regional powerhouse is essential for advancing Africa's broader development goals." The fireside chat served as a powerful reminder of the collective vision that has driven COMESA's success. It highlighted the enduring commitment of its leaders to fostering economic integration, enhancing regional connectivity, and promoting prosperity across member states.

As the organization reflects on its remarkable 30-year journey, it stands poised to build on its legacy, embracing innovation and collaboration to shape a brighter future for the region.



L-R: Moderator Dr Matanda, Dr Willard Mwemba, Ms Hope Murera, Mr Manuel Moses, Prof. Oliver Saasa, Ms Jedidah Ndebele and Dr Lucas Njoroge.

## COMESA's Institutional Impact and Resilience in Shaping Africa's Economic Landscape

The resilience of financial institutions and their pivotal role in shaping Africa's economic landscape took center stage in a panel discussion marking the 30th Anniversary of COMESA. The session offered valuable insights into how financial intermediaries can channel global capital to meet the region's needs, while also emphasizing the regulatory frameworks essential for fostering long-term growth. The panel featured leaders from key COMESA institutions, including Prof. Oliver Saasa from the Trade and Development Bank (TDB) Group, Mr. Manuel Moses, CEO of Africa Trade and Insurance Development (ATIDI), and Ms. Hope Murera, CEO of COMESA Reinsurance Company (ZEP-RE).

Other distinguished CEOs included Ms. Jedidah Ndebele of the COMESA Clearing House, Dr. Willard Mwemba of the COMESA Competition Commission, and Dr. Lucas Njoroge of the COMESA Monetary Institute. Guided by three key questions, the discussion delved into how institutions are responding to evolving challenges and contributing to sustainable economic growth across the continent. The panelists reflected on the substantial progress made by COMESA and its affiliated institutions over the past three decades, underscoring their expanding footprint across Africa. Prof. Saasa highlighted the crucial role of robust financial services in promoting regional cooperation, especially in connecting global capital with local markets.

He emphasized the need to leverage

technology and digital platforms to enhance financial inclusion and stimulate growth, particularly in underserved areas.

"By focusing on innovative financial products tailored to the diverse needs of our member states, we can strengthen economic resilience and deepen regional integration," Prof. Saasa remarked. Mr. Moses discussed the role of institutions like ATIDI in linking African businesses to international markets, stressing that a collaborative approach between financial institutions and policymakers is key to scaling Africa's trade both within and outside the continent.

Ms. Murera underscored the significance of policy consistency and well-defined regulatory frameworks in building investor confidence and ensuring economic stability. She also noted that during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, the responsiveness of member states in providing financial and regulatory support plays a critical role in recovery.

"In times of crisis, the ability of member states to act swiftly with financial and regulatory backing can significantly accelerate recovery," Murera said. She also called for greater collaboration in risk management, particularly in sectors such as insurance and reinsurance, to help businesses mitigate unforeseen shocks. Ms. Ndebele emphasized the importance of ensuring timely liquidity and facilitating trade finance mechanisms to guarantee the

smooth flow of goods and services across borders.

Dr. Njoroge spoke about the potential benefits of implementing a regional monetary policy framework, which could help mitigate economic volatility and foster a stable investment environment. "We need to create an environment that minimizes economic shocks and builds resilience. A unified monetary policy is crucial to enhancing the predictability of our markets," Dr. Njoroge explained.

Dr. Mwemba addressed the importance of strengthening competition policies to eliminate trade barriers, encourage innovation, and protect consumer welfare. He stressed that enhancing competition across sectors would lead to greater diversification and higher value-added exports, which are essential for the continent's economic advancement. "By enhancing competition across sectors, African economies can achieve greater diversification and higher value-added exports," Dr. Mwemba noted.

The discussion concluded with the recognition that institutions like TDB, ZEP-RE, and the COMESA Clearing House are evolving to foster a more conducive regulatory environment and financial ecosystem. Their combined efforts will play a vital role in shaping the trajectory of Africa's economic future.



L-R: Ms Heba Salama, Dr Mohamed Kadah, Dr Dev Haman, Mr Nicholas Mudungwe, Mr. Teddy Soobramanien Mr John Mukuka and Mr Chikakula Miti

## Driving Trade, Investment, and Regional Integration in Africa

For over 30 years, COMESA has been at the forefront of driving trade, investment, and regional integration in Africa, playing a pivotal role in the realization of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). This informed the topic of discussions of the COMESA at 30 Anniversary that focused on COMESA programs and interventions aimed at enhancing trade, strengthening value chains, and contributing to the AfCFTA, all while advancing the broader objectives of Agenda 2063.

The panel featured several key experts, including Dr. Mohamed Kadah, COMESA Assistant Secretary General for Programs, and Dr. Dev Haman, Assistant Secretary General for Administration and Finance. They were joined by five chief executives from COMESA institutions: Mr. Teddy Soobramanien (COMESA Business Council), Dr. John Mukuka (Alliance for Commodity Trade in Eastern and Southern Africa - ACTESA), Mr. Nicholas Mudungwe (African Leather and Leather Products Institute - ALLPI), Mr. Miti Chikakula (COMESA Federation of Women in Business - COMFWB), and Ms. Heba Salama (COMESA Regional Investment Agency - COMESARIA).

Their discussions explored how COMESA is shaping Africa's economic future and the steps needed to strengthen its role as a catalyst for sustainable development. The conversation began with a focus on the most significant interventions COMESA has made to promote trade and investment across the region.

Dr. Kadah highlighted several key initiatives, such as trade facilitation programs that streamline customs procedures and improve the ease of doing business. «Our programs aim to reduce trade barriers, enhance infrastructure, and equip member states with the tools to compete in global markets,» he said. He also emphasized COMESA's efforts to harmonize trade policies and promote regional infrastructure projects as essential drivers of economic integration.

Dr. Mukuka stressed the importance of agricultural value chains in regional trade. Through ACTESA, COMESA has played a significant role in advancing the agricultural sector, promoting trade in agricultural commodities across member states, and boosting food security while creating jobs. Mr. Soobramanien emphasized the need for stronger collaboration with other Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and the African Union (AU). «We have learned from each other's experiences in promoting intra-Africa trade, and we continue to adopt successful practices from other regions, including the effective implementation of the African Union's Agenda 2063,» he stated. The panel agreed that fostering stronger inter-REC relationships is essential to addressing Africa's development challenges, including the need for improved trade infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, and investment in innovation.

Dr. Haman underscored the role of AfCFTA as a key vehicle for regional integration. He noted that it allows for the creation of

a single market, reducing trade barriers and opening up opportunities for intra-African investment. «We are contributing to AfCFTA's implementation by promoting tariff reductions, eliminating non-tariff barriers, and facilitating the movement of goods and services across the continent,» he said.

Mr. Chikakula highlighted the importance of gender inclusion in trade and economic policies. He pointed out that COMESA's efforts to integrate women into value chains in key sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and services align with the inclusive growth and sustainable development goals of Agenda 2063.

Ms. Salama spoke to the need for robust infrastructure development to support both AfCFTA and Agenda 2063. She stressed that COMESA's investment in cross-border infrastructure, including roads, ports, and energy, is vital to ensuring that the benefits of AfCFTA are felt by all African economies, especially landlocked countries. Mr. Mudungwe called for greater focus on leather production as a means to achieve competitive pricing in the sector. He noted Africa's vast potential in leather and its capacity to export to global markets. «I used to buy a pair of shoes from Italy for \$200, but now I buy the same pair for \$20. When you can buy shoes at that price, you can buy more and share the savings with your relatives,» he remarked.

The discussion underscored the importance of aligning regional efforts with continental initiatives, particularly in relation to AfCFTA and Agenda 2063.



## COMESA Launches Electronic Certificate of Origin

The COMESA Secretariat has unveiled the pilot phase of the COMESA Certificate of Origin (e-CO), a digital alternative to the traditional manual certificates often plagued by bureaucratic and security challenges. This initiative underscores COMESA's commitment to leveraging technology for trade facilitation.

The e-CO platform offers a streamlined, secure, and fully online process for applying, issuing, exchanging, and verifying certificates of origin. Supported by the

European Union through the EDF 11 Trade Facilitation Programme, the concept was approved by the COMESA Council of Ministers in 2014 as a key tool for boosting trade across the region.

The launch of the e-CO was officiated by Hon. Marie Chantal Nijimbere, Chairperson of the COMESA Council of Ministers and Burundi's Minister of Commerce, Transport, Industry & Tourism, during COMESA's 30th-anniversary celebrations in Lusaka, Zambia, on November 27, 2024. Ms. Nijimbere

commended the Secretariat for its technical and financial support to Member States, made possible through partnerships with development partners like the European Union.

To prepare for the implementation, COMESA conducted training sessions on the e-CO system and Rules of Origin for 405 public and private sector officials from Eswatini, Malawi, and Zambia. These include representatives from customs authorities, traders, exporters, importers, and trade associations.

"As we celebrate 30 years of COMESA's impact, I am honored to launch this transformative digital tool," Ms. Nijimbere remarked. She highlighted the successful development of national e-CO systems in Eswatini, Malawi, and Zambia as part of the pilot phase. Eswatini, notably, became the first Member State to launch its e-CO system on November 7, 2024.

COMESA has also provided essential ICT equipment, such as servers, laptops, and software, to facilitate the system's operation in Member States. Ms. Nijimbere urged other nations, including Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Seychelles, and Zimbabwe, to expedite their system integrations, as they are already in advanced stages.

## Simplified Trade Regime Mainstreamed in National Policies

The 45th COMESA Council of Ministers has decided that all Member States should mainstream the Simplified Trade Regime (STR) in domestic trade policies and regulatory frameworks for continuity and sustainability.

The meeting was informed that the Trade and Trade Facilitation Sub-Committee (TTFSC) had considered the report of the Second Policy Dialogue meeting on the implementation of the COMESA STR that was held on 6-7

August 2024 in Kenya. The objective of the Dialogue was to discuss the policy and technical aspects of the STR implementation and propose policy recommendations.

The TTFSC noted a policy paper on the STR which focused on the background of the STR, its genesis, progress on issues raised at the first Policy Dialogue, issues for discussion, challenges in the implementation of the STR as well as recommendations for enhancing it. The

Dialogue had also considered issues on Gender in Cross Border Trade and the COMESA Regulations on the Minimum Standards for the Treatment of Small-Scale Cross Border Traders.



Hon. Rhodine Sikumba (6th left) SG Chileshe Kapwepwe (5th left), Chairperson of IC Ms. Christine Niragira (6th right) and other delegates at the IC meeting

## Reflections on 30 years Milestones as COMESA Intergovernmental Committee Meets in Zambia

The 45th COMESA Intergovernmental Committee (IC) meeting was held in Lusaka, Zambia on 25 November 2024, comprising of Permanent and Principal Secretaries from the coordinating Ministries of the 21 Member States. For two days delegates reviewed the implementation of COMESA's regional integration programmes for the past year and the 2025 work programme. Progress made in the past 30 years of COMESA's existence was in focus as the bloc marks the anniversary on 8 December 2024.

Addressing the delegates during the official opening ceremony, Zambia's Minister of Commerce, Trade and Industry Hon. Chipoka Mulenga said significant change has been recorded in the region over the past years as the bloc has continued to grow stronger.

"Indeed, as we mark 30 years of regional integration, our achievements cannot be insignificant. The COMESA that is today is not what it was 30 years ago in terms of development," he said. "Our countries are more vibrant, with increased cross-border trade, improved infrastructure and industrial activities and an overall positive trend in socio-economic development."

He was represented by the Minister of Tourism Hon. Rhodine Sikumba.

Regarding the various challenges that the region has endured such as effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and most recently climate change, the Minister commended Member States for their resilience.

Among the key milestones highlighted at the meeting is the implementation of various trade facilitation programmes which has boosted small-scale cross border trade, and enhanced the use of electronic tools to ease management and processing of documents at border points.

Outlining the COMESA's milestones in the implementation of the free trade area regime, Secretary General Chileshe Mpundu Kapwepwe said intra-COMESA export trade is now at US\$14 billion.

She highlighted the benefits of embracing the automation and digitisation of customs procedures and clearances which has resulted in reduced clearance times at border points for both passenger and goods. In addition, the Simplified Trade Regime is now being implemented in eight countries namely Burundi, DRC,

Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Other programmes under implementation include the Support to Air Transport Sector (SATSD), the Regional Infrastructure Finance Facility (RIFF) and the Enhancement of Governance and Enabling Environment for the ICT Sector (EGEE-ICT) programme among many others.

Kapwepwe also commended COMESA's co-operating partners particularly the European Union, the World Bank, African Development Bank, Afrexim Bank, UN Trade and Development Organisation (UNCTAD) and the World Customs Organisation for supporting the integration through various sector initiatives.

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**"Indeed, as we mark 30 years of regional integration, our achievements cannot be insignificant. The COMESA that is today is not what it was 30 years ago in terms of development," Hon Chipoka Mulenga**



File photo: Delegates at the Regional Meeting on the Trade Promotion Strategy held in Bujumbura in 2023

## Regional Trade Promotion Strategy Framework Adopted

The 45th COMESA Council of Ministers has endorsed the Regional Trade Promotion Strategy Framework, validated in December 2023 in Bujumbura, Burundi. This framework focuses on enhancing trade across Member States through targeted interventions.

The key recommendations of the Strategy include raising awareness and conducting trade promotion activities, identifying value

chains of products based on their analysis, augmented by market survey on products and strengthening the effectiveness of the NTB monitoring and elimination mechanism.

Other areas in the strategy include enhancing market information and sensitization through digital systems, strengthening regional transport and trade facilitation and logistics, fast tracking

development of a Simplified Trade Regime (STR) for trade in services to facilitate trade promotion of services that COMESA Member States would wish to trade under services STR and facilitating Mutual Recognition Agreements for liberalized professional services among others.

## COMESA Masters Programme Achieves Milestone



Twenty students from the COMESA region have graduated with a Master's Degree in Regional Integration, offered by Kenyatta University and the University of Mauritius. To date, 76 students have enrolled in this program, developed in collaboration with COMESA and 22 regional universities, with eight institutions signing MoUs to implement the curriculum.

This was contained in a report presented to the 45th COMESA Council of Ministers meeting held in Lusaka. The previous Council of Ministers Meeting had decided that the programme be extended to other public and private universities who are willing to offer the programme.