COMESA HOLDS A REGIONAL WORKSHOP TO REVIEW THE AID FOR TRADE STRATEGY

In an effort to review efforts towards achieving the objectives of the Aid for Trade agenda, COMESA held a regional workshop to present the draft report of the COMESA Aid for Trade strategy to Member States. The workshop which took place on 15th September 2011 in Lusaka, Zambia, drew participation from fifteen COMESA member states.

The Acting Chief Executive Officer of the Alliance for Commodity Trade in Eastern and Southern Africa (ACTESA), Dr Chungu Mwila echoed the vision of COMESA which is to be a fully integrated and internationally competitive region with improved living standards for the ordinary people. He contended that COMESA had adopted an Aid for Trade (AfT) strategy as one of the means of realising this vision.

The COMAid Coordinator, Mrs Hope Situmbeko said that some progress had been made under the Aid for Trade initiative, which included the North South Corridor, operationalisation of the COMESA Fund, and disbursement of funds under the adjustment facility. She also said that given the regional nature of programmes, it was necessary to have mutual prioritization and sequencing in the implementation of programmes.

Matthew Wilson from the World Trade Organization (WTO) Development Division emphasised the importance of having regional AfT priorities complement national AfT priorities. He also hailed COMESA for being one of the few RECs to have incorporated AfT within its regional processes and institutional structure. He said that although the COMESA AfT strategy is still in early days, there is much inter-regional sharing that COMESA can lead on.

Dorothy Tembo, the Executive Director of Enhanced Integrated Framework (EIF) pointed out the need to mainstream and build on existing mechanisms like the Integrated Framework. She also informed the workshop that COMESA was one of their strategic partners in facilitating complementarities of national programs with the regional integration programs and that the program was currently active in 47 of the LDCs and that 12 of these countries were COMESA Member States.

The European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) who had been commissioned to undertake the review made cognizance of the fact that AfT continued to grow in size and relevance within the COMESA region. They also noted progress made over the last few years on core strategy objectives such as developing corridors and adjustment instruments and on wider issues of ownership, coherence and effectiveness. ECDPM however mentioned that a number of important issues needed to be considered in the move towards a revised strategy which included the COMESA EAC SADC Tripartite developments, institutional mechanisms and capacity constraints. They also advised that any
revision should be expeditious and concise to ensure that the expected benefits do not outweigh the costs in terms of time and resources used in the exercise.

In the discussions however, the Member States observed that there was still need for better integration of trade programmes within national development programmes and implementation of regional commitments and more efforts were required for developing bankable projects and in formulating mechanisms that blend private sector resources with grant funds for infrastructure programmes.