In 1981, countries in Eastern and Southern Africa decided to integrate their region by establishing the Preferential Trade Area (PTA). In order to enhance trade among its members, COMESA decided to establish programmes aimed at elimination of Technical Barriers for goods and services traded in the area. One of these programmes related to Standardisation, Accreditation, Metrology and Conformity Assessment.

The COMESA programme relating to Standardisation, Accreditation, Metrology and Conformity Assessment was established as part of COMESA’s agenda to move towards higher integration in the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa. The programme started in 1989 with the establishment of the Sub-Committee on Standardisation and Quality Control (SQC).

In 1994, the COMESA Treaty made a provision for cooperation in Standardisation and Quality Assurance under Chapter 15 of the Treaty - Standardisation and Quality Assurance. Under this Chapter, Member States, recognised the importance of standardisation and quality assurance in the promotion of health, the enhancement of the standard of living, the rationalisation and reduction of unnecessary variety of products, the facilitation of inter-changeability of products, the promotion of trade, consumer protection, the creation of savings in government purchasing, improved productivity, the facilitation of information exchange as well as in the protection of life, property, and the environment. Member States thus agreed to evolve and apply a common policy with regard to the standardisation and quality assurance of goods produced and traded within the Common Market, the relationship of their national standards bodies with regional, international and other organisations concerned with standardisation and quality assurance and in the development of activities in standardisation and quality assurance for the achievement of the objectives of the Common Market. They also agreed to establish institutions in their member States and enhance their capacities to enable them carry out their mandates. In addition, member states agreed to promote and enforce standards relating to public health and safety as well and the protection of the environment as well as develop cooperation with other organisations relating to Standardization and related activities within and outside Africa.

In order to implement the provisions of Chapter 15 of the Treaty the member States through the Council of Ministers, in May 2002, established a Committee on Standardization and Quality Assurance to steer its implementation. This was followed by the establishment in 2003, of the Sub-Committee on Standards Harmonization, which was given the responsibility of harmonising standards in the region. The Sub-Committee working with the Secretariat has to-date agreed on some 300 harmonised standards most of which are based on International Standards.

In order to develop further the programme on Standardization, Accreditation, Metrology and
Conformity Assessment, the Committee on Standardization and Quality Assurance, in 2007, recommended to the Council of Ministers, the establishment of a Sub-Committee on Accreditation, a Sub-Committee on Metrology (to deal with Industrial and Scientific Metrology), a Sub-Committee on Legal Metrology (to deal with Measurement standards designed for commerce, sometimes known as trade metrology sometimes or Weights and measures, a Sub-Committee on testing and Quality Assurance (to deal with conformity assessment activities such as Testing, Certification, Inspection and others). COMESA has also proposed a Regional Policy on Standardization, Accreditation, Metrology and Conformity Assessment (SAMCA) which will guide member States in the implementation of the various activities.

In order to enhance the mutual acceptability of products in the Region COMESA developed modalities for achieving Mutual Recognition in areas of Accreditation, Metrology and Conformity Assessments as well as a Mechanism for implementation of Standards and a Technical regulatory Framework for implementation of Technical regulations.

COMESA also recognises that the region is part of the global village. Consequently COMESA is also a key player in the enhancement of cooperation with other Regional Economic Communities, in particular the East African Community (with whom it has developed some joint Standards for Dairy products and Maize) and SADC. In this respect, COMESA has been working with the two sister RECs to harmonise their programmes relating to Standardization, Accreditation, Metrology and Legal Metrology. In addition COMESA has pursued avenues for closer cooperation with organizations dealing with similar activities within and outside Africa.

As the region moves towards a Customs Union, Standardization, Accreditation, Metrology and Conformity Assessment activities are expected to play a key role in facilitating movement of goods and services among member States. To achieve this a substantial expansion in the activities is expected.