1.0 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought issues of agriculture and food security to the fore as Africa largely depends on food and agriculture imports. Tralac (2017) suggests that Africa has remained a net food importer over the last two decades, with agricultural imports accounting for about 60% of Africa’s total trade in agricultural products. Furthermore, agricultural product imports account for around 13% of total imports.

Notwithstanding, agriculture holds a very strategic position in the economies of most COMESA countries supporting food security, livelihoods, trade, rural economy and economic development. McKinsey (2019) suggests that than 60% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa is smallholder farmers, and about 23% of sub-Saharan Africa’s GDP comes from agriculture. In this regard, sustainable agriculture is an essential factor to advancing trade within COMESA and the rest of African.

At the centre of agriculture trade or food trade, lies issues of seed: access to quality and affordable seeds and trade. McKinsey (2019) suggests that Africa has the capacity to produce two to three times more cereals and grains, horticulture crops and livestock, which could result in a 20% increase in global production.

On 27th July 2020, CBC convened the webinar, Unlocking Food Security Through Improved Seed Trade in COMESA. Its focus was on facilitating a public-private consultative platform towards agricultural transformation and improved agriculture trade within COMESA; topics discussed included:

- access to quality and affordable seed;
- trade facilitation in the movement of seed across the borders during amidst COVID-19;
- measures to curb illicit trade in seed;
- policy and regulatory frameworks to facilitate investment and increased seed production and trade; and more.

2.0 Panellists

I. Mr. Osure George: Regional Director, Syngenta Foundation East Africa
II. Mr. Ndavi Muia: Regional Head Africa & Middle East, Advanta Seeds
3.0 Recommendations

Trade Facilitation and Simplification of Procedures
- Create simpler processes by formalising and harmonising all the clearance processes of seed imports and exports at a domestic level, to address time, cost and multiplicity of procedures. This can be complemented by establishment of one stop shops which provide relevant permits for the seed industry.
- There is a need to have strong inter-agency regulatory processes and information flows, in order to map out simpler clearances processes at domestic and transboundary trade facilitation.

Market Information
- Establish COMESA Seed statistic information system to address the challenge of lack of real time trade data on seeds. This should capture value, quantity, and export volumes to provide an informed analysis of seed trade in COMESA.
- Set up a platform for sharing market information for seed industry players. This will facilitate business linkages and partnerships, increase awareness on quality seeds, regulation and provide a platform for engagement and sharing of opportunities, strategies.

Policy and Regulatory Harmonisation
- Consolidation and publication of rules, regulations and administrative procedures pertaining to sale, distribution of seeds to inform decisions and easy of accessibility.
- Ensure alignment of COMESA regulations with ISTA or OECD regulations to address trade with 3rd parties.
- To ensure predictability and private sector preparedness, regulators should provide adequate grace period and notification time when a regulation or legislation is changing.
- Ensure private sector participation in COMESA processes towards seed standards harmonisation policy making processes. Furthermore, ease the requirements of registration of seed varieties in a second country.

Counterfeit /illicit trade of seeds
- Introduce e-verification for seed across the COMESA region to curb counterfeit seed. This enables the use bar coding systems to verify and authenticate genuine seeds from counterfeit.
- COMESA member states should strengthen the regulations on counterfeit through establishing stronger penalties. To strengthen enforcement, adopt a collective approach (regulators, seed companies, governments, associations) work together and exchange of relevant market information to enable curbing counterfeit seeds.

Public-Private Engagement
- CBC strengthen dialogue and partnerships between industry players and other stakeholders to facilitate increased investment and seed trade in COMESA. Furthermore, address the various challenges and provide a platform for sharing solutions and best practices.
- CBC to strengthen public-private platforms that fosters dialogue, collaboration, awareness on new regulatory requirements and response mechanism, to ensure the effective implementation of the COMESA Seed Harmonisation Policy and other regulations related to seed in the region.
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