

NEWS & FEATURES

Strengthening Trade Standards, Consumer Protections, and Unified Policies to Build Resilient Markets

Published: 31 October 2024

While Africa often prioritizes international export standards, internal standards that protect African consumers remain insufficient- **SAGCOT CEO Geoffrey Kirenga**,

Arusha, Tanzania, October 29, 2024 -

At the REPOA 28th Annual Research Workshop, African leaders, policy experts, and regional organization representatives came together to outline the steps needed to protect consumers and support local industries across Africa. The second session highlighted the urgent need for unified quality standards, consumer protection, and regional collaboration to foster a competitive African marketplace. SAGCOT CEO Geoffrey Kirenga, highlighted the need for stronger quality standards and consumer protections within African markets. Drawing on a personal experience with a poorly made imported shoe, Kirenga emphasized the importance of developing continent-wide standards to prevent the dumping of substandard goods in Africa.

"Most standards are developed to facilitate access to African markets, but what about standards for our own continent, he posed?

"What do we have in place when these products are being imported into Africa?" He emphasized that while Africa often prioritizes international export standards, internal standards protecting African consumers remain insufficient.

Personal Experience as a Call for Consumer Protection

Kirenga shared his experience with a pair of shoes he'd bought for a special ceremony, only to find they fell apart within two weeks of storage, catching him off guard at the event. "This shoe was supposed to last me at least three years," he stated, underlining that African consumers deserve better than unreliable, short-lived goods. "Imagine how many of the 1.2 billion shoes in circulation are of that low quality," he added, questioning who, if anyone, is protecting African consumers from products that fall short of basic standards.

The Urgent Need for Quality Standards in African Markets

Kirenga's story captured the broader issue: an influx of low-quality, imported goods that threaten not only consumers but also local industries striving to produce reliable products. He argued that without stronger standards, African markets remain vulnerable to products that do not meet safety or durability requirements, allowing companies to "dump" substandard goods across the continent.

“We know, for example, that there is a lot of dumping of substandard materials and products in Africa, which often aren’t what they claim to be,” Kirenga stated. He suggested that this problem stems from an “outward-looking” approach, where standards are established primarily to meet the requirements of foreign markets, leaving African consumers underserved.

Domestication of Standards

Kirenga also questioned the effectiveness of the African Standards Organization (ASO) in ensuring quality controls within the continent. “If our system for domesticating standards was truly in place and alive, ASO would not be a well-kept secret to many of us,” he noted, implying that standards must be functional and visible to serve African consumers effectively. He advocated for a system that actively works to domesticate international standards in a way that is practical, effective, and widely implemented across the continent.

Protecting African Markets and Local Industries

Kirenga’s remarks resonated as a call for African nations to take ownership of the standards that shape their own markets, protecting consumers and promoting fair competition. He argued that standards must shift from an outward-looking focus to prioritize the unique needs of African markets to fully protect consumers. Kirenga’s remarks reminded African markets to look inward, ensuring that consumer protections and quality standards keep pace with the continent’s economic growth and aspirations.

ARSO Secretary General Responds to SAGCOT CEO Kirenga on Standards, Calls for Greater Consumer Protection and African-Centric Measurement Standards"

In response to SAGCOT CEO Geoffrey Kirenga's call for stronger quality standards and consumer protections across Africa, Dr. Hermogene Nsengimana, Secretary General of the African Organisation for Standardisation (ARSO), detailed recent advancements in quality control.

Dr. Hermogene Nsengimana, Secretary General of ARSO, responded to questions raised by Mr. Geoffrey Kirenga, CEO of SAGCOT, on the gaps in quality standards and consumer protection mechanisms within African markets. Referencing a past session on quality infrastructure held with the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) in 2014, Dr. Nsengimana noted that Africa’s approach to standards has evolved, especially with the recent approval of the African Continental Technical Regulation Framework.

"I had a whole day session with the EALA Assembly back then on quality standards," Dr. Nsengimana recalled, acknowledging the importance of revisiting these discussions to adapt to the continent’s current needs. This framework, approved by the African Union in May 2024, represents a key step toward harmonizing African standards and addressing issues such as substandard imports.

Ensuring Consistent Standards Through the Continental Technical Regulation Framework

In response to Kirenga’s concerns about inconsistencies in domestic and continental standards, Dr. Nsengimana explained that the African Continental Technical Regulation Framework requires African countries to align their standards with the continent's standards, ensuring consistency and removing national standards that conflict with continental regulations. This

process aims to prevent situations where substandard goods bypass certain national regulations and enter African markets unchecked.

"Private sector representatives may soon ask, 'Why is my product being stopped if it conforms to African standards?'" Dr. Nsengimana said, highlighting the challenges and potential conflicts arising from the new framework. To address this, he emphasized the importance of sensitization and mobilization efforts among governments and the private sector to understand and adhere to the updated standards.

Introducing African-Specific Standards for Body Measurements

One of the unique challenges faced by African consumers, Dr. Nsengimana explained, is the lack of standardized body measurements tailored to African physiques. "Look at your clothes," he noted, pointing out that most sizing systems in Africa are based on American, European, or Chinese standards. "We don't have African body measurements, yet our physiques are distinct. We need our own standards for clothing and footwear," he emphasized.

This initiative to develop African-specific measurement standards would not only improve the fit and comfort of products for African consumers but would also support local manufacturers in producing goods that meet the needs of the local population. This move toward African-centric standards reflects ARSO's broader mission to ensure that quality control measures are grounded in the continent's unique needs.

Challenges in Testing and Verification: Building Local Capacity

A major challenge that Dr. Nsengimana highlighted was Africa's limited capacity to test and verify products domestically, leaving many countries dependent on pre-verification mechanisms carried out by foreign certification boards. These foreign boards inspect products for compliance with African standards before they are shipped, but this system falls short in providing consumer recourse when goods do not meet expected standards.

"If we could develop our own testing infrastructure, consumers could directly file complaints and hold sellers accountable for substandard products," Dr. Nsengimana said. Local testing facilities would provide greater autonomy for African countries, allowing them to maintain higher standards and enhance consumer protection across various product categories.

Empowering African Standards Bureaus for Domestication

Dr. Nsengimana also addressed the process of domestication, emphasizing that each country's Bureau of Standards is responsible for implementing and enforcing standards. These bureaus, representing their respective governments, are central to translating continental frameworks into national policies that protect consumers and regulate imports.

He noted that this step is essential for effective quality control and consumer protection across the continent. He called on African standards bureaus to strengthen their engagement with governments and local businesses to build a trustworthy marketplace.

Toward a Harmonized and Consumer-Centric Future

Dr. Nsengimana expressed optimism about the new frameworks and African-centric initiatives that are being implemented. He encouraged ongoing discussions among African leaders, regulators, and businesses to ensure that the evolving standards framework serves African

consumers while promoting fair competition and accountability.

"EAC Competition Authority Official Affirms Commitment to Consumer Protection Amid Quality Concerns in African Markets"

Stella Nyambeki Onyancha, Deputy Registrar for Monopolies and Cartels at the East African Competition Authority, responded to concerns raised by SAGCOT CEO Geoffrey Kirenga regarding consumer protections in Africa. Onyancha emphasized the role of the EAC Competition Authority in handling cross-border consumer complaints and the need to raise awareness about consumer rights and recourse options.

Responded directly to SAGCOT CEO's question, "Who is protecting African consumers?" Onyancha clarified that the EACA is committed to safeguarding consumers in cases of cross-border product violations, reinforcing that the agency is accessible to consumers who have complaints about misleading or substandard goods.

"We're here to protect the African consumer," Onyancha affirmed, addressing Kirenga's concerns about the influx of substandard products. "If you're aggrieved as a consumer—if you buy a product that doesn't meet standards or you feel you've been misled—you can file a complaint with us." The EACA, she explained, works closely with partner states to handle consumer protection violations that span multiple jurisdictions, thus helping ensure that consumers across the East African Community (EAC) have a channel to address grievances.

Empowering Consumers to Understand and Assert Their Rights

Onyancha highlighted the importance of consumer awareness in driving effective protection and enforcement. "Consumers need to know their rights," she emphasized, calling attention to the EACA's role in sensitizing and educating consumers about their entitlements and available recourse mechanisms. In cases like Kirenga's disappointing shoe purchase, she noted, consumers should be empowered to seek redress and understand how to file a complaint.

Onyancha committed to strengthening the EACA's efforts to raise consumer awareness through enhanced sensitization programs. This strategy, she explained, would not only inform consumers of their rights but also promote their active role in business transactions, supporting accountability and transparency within the marketplace.

Challenges in Enforcement: Limited 'Teeth' to Address Violations

When questioned further on the EACA's enforcement capabilities, Onyancha acknowledged certain limitations in the current regulatory framework, notably the absence of a ratified protocol on trade remedies within the EAC. Although the EACA addresses cross-border consumer issues, a fully empowered enforcement mechanism remains challenging without widespread ratification of trade remedies protocols.

Onyancha candidly described the EACA's enforcement limitations, humorously referring to the authority as having "baby teeth" due to its inability to impose stronger corrective actions in unresolved cross-border trade disputes. "We're aware that the protocol on trade remedies has yet to be ratified by most member countries, including my own," she admitted, noting that the EACA currently lacks robust mechanisms to enforce trade standards without full regional support. "Right now, we have no mechanism in the region to resolve these disputes comprehensively," she stated, underscoring the urgent need for member states to ratify this protocol to bolster consumer protection across East Africa. Onyancha reaffirmed the EACA's

dedication to consumer advocacy despite regulatory limitations and called on EAC member states to accelerate the ratification of trade remedy protocols. This, she suggested, would give the agency the “teeth” it needs to ensure accountability across borders, fostering a more transparent and consumer-centric market within the East African Community.

The second session of the REPOA 28th Annual Research Workshop saw experts from across Africa explore solutions to protect consumers and improve trade competitiveness.

With a focus on standardization, consumer rights, and regulatory alignment, the session brought together high-level speakers, including Mr. Benedict Nsengele from TradeMark Africa, Dr. Hermogene Nsengimana, Secretary-General of the African Organization for Standardization (ARSO), and Ms. Stella Onyacha, Deputy Registrar of the East African Community Competition Authority (EACCA). Panelists shared insights on bolstering Africa’s trade competitiveness by implementing robust standards that cater to Africa’s unique needs.

The session underscored that as Africa moves toward greater economic integration, quality standards must play a central role in protecting consumers and creating a thriving, competitive marketplace.

Challenges to Africa’s Trade Competitiveness and Vision for the Future

Opening the session, Mr. Benedict Nsengele of TradeMark Africa emphasized that Africa’s trade competitiveness hinges on efficient infrastructure, unified trade policies, and advanced facilitation systems. He noted that while efforts to integrate African economies have made strides, persistent non-tariff barriers and inconsistent regulatory standards hinder growth and increase operational costs.

TradeMark Africa’s data on the East African Community’s (EAC) trade performance highlights that, while East African exports grew by 76% from 2018 to 2022, there is still a significant gap between the vision for seamless trade and the realities on the ground. Much of TradeMark Africa’s work, Nsengele noted, focuses on harmonizing standards, improving infrastructure, and reducing logistical bottlenecks to enhance intra-African trade.

“Competitiveness isn’t just about removing tariffs; it’s about having the right systems, structures, and policies in place,” Nsengele explained. “Our vision is a continent where goods can move freely, efficiently, and safely from one country to another, underpinned by standards that support both consumers and businesses.”

Setting Standards: Safeguarding African Consumers and Empowering Local Markets

Taking the discussion further, Dr. Hermogene Nsengimana of ARSO addressed the urgent need for quality standards tailored to Africa. Recalling his earlier work with the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) nearly a decade ago on establishing quality frameworks, Dr. Nsengimana highlighted how Africa’s economic landscape and consumer needs have evolved, creating an urgent demand for modernized standards.

He gave a memorable example of purchasing a new pair of shoes that deteriorated within days, an experience shared by many African consumers who struggle with substandard imported goods. This experience, he explained, speaks to the broader issue of consumer vulnerability to

unregulated imports, which often fail to meet durability or safety expectations.

“In the absence of strong standards, substandard products flood our markets, undermining local businesses and eroding consumer trust,” Dr. Nsengimana stated. “It’s essential that we build frameworks to ensure that what’s sold in Africa meets high-quality standards and truly serves African consumers.”

Dr. Nsengimana introduced the Africa Continental Technical Regulation Framework, recently ratified by the African Union in May 2024, as a step toward this vision. This framework requires member countries to align their national standards with continental regulations and to remove conflicting standards that undermine these efforts. “We need consistent standards across the continent, not only to protect consumers but also to create a level playing field for local industries,” he emphasized.

Strengthening Consumer Awareness and Recourse Mechanisms

Adding to the discussion, Ms. Stella Onyacha, Deputy Registrar of the EACCA, highlighted the crucial role of consumer education in safeguarding rights and ensuring accountability.

Responding to Kirenga’s question, “Who is protecting African consumers?” Onyacha emphasized that the EACCA works to protect consumer rights across borders and that African consumers must understand and assert these rights to drive accountability and quality.

“An empowered consumer is a protected consumer,” Ms. Onyacha remarked. “Consumers need to know their rights and understand how to pursue recourse if they encounter a substandard or misleading product.”

The EACCA, she explained, is intensifying its efforts to educate consumers across East Africa on their rights and available recourse mechanisms, particularly in the case of cross-border trade violations. Ms. Onyacha also acknowledged challenges within the EAC’s regulatory framework, specifically the limited enforcement capabilities due to the lack of a fully ratified protocol on trade remedies.

“At present, we lack a robust framework for resolving cross-border disputes within the EAC. Ratifying these trade remedies is essential for building consumer confidence and supporting market transparency,” she noted, calling on regional governments to prioritize this protocol for a more unified trade system.

Building Local Testing and Verification Capacity

An additional point of consensus among the panelists was the need to expand Africa’s capacity for product testing and quality verification. Dr. Nsengimana and Ms. Onyacha highlighted the reality that many African nations rely on pre-verification systems managed by foreign certification bodies, limiting their control over imported goods’ standards.

“Developing local capacity to test and verify products at the border will give us the control we need to ensure only high-quality goods enter African markets,” Dr. Nsengimana explained. He pointed out that this would also empower consumers to seek redress when goods fail to meet expected standards, strengthening overall market resilience.

Onyacha echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that, with local testing facilities, consumers would have a more straightforward channel to file complaints and demand better products. “We’re talking about creating an environment where consumers feel safe and confident in what they buy,” she added.

Moving Toward a Cohesive, Competitive African Marketplace

As the session drew to a close, panelists underscored the importance of unified standards and consumer protections as pillars of Africa's vision for a competitive, self-sustaining market. Dr. Nsengimana called for a continent-wide commitment to quality standards, noting that when African nations adopt consistent regulations, they foster an environment where businesses can thrive, consumers feel secure, and trade flows smoothly.

"We must align our standards to empower African consumers and provide opportunities for local industries to compete on equal footing," he urged, reminding participants that a strong standards framework benefits all stakeholders in the African market.

Ms. Onyacha underscored that achieving this vision will require collaboration among African governments, regulatory bodies, and the private sector. "Our continent's success hinges on a well-informed, empowered consumer base. It is up to all of us to put the necessary systems in place and make sure consumers know where to turn if they encounter issues."

The session's discussions emphasized a collective commitment to building resilient, competitive African markets that prioritize consumer rights, promote local industry, and foster fair competition. Through the implementation of the Africa Continental Technical Regulation Framework, unified standards, and robust consumer education initiatives, Africa is poised to establish a secure, consumer-friendly market system that will support its long-term economic growth and sustainability.

Published 31 October 2024 · News & Features

Source: <https://agcot.org/2024/10/31/sagcot-calls-for-african-consumer-protection-and-higher-standards-for-imported-goods/> · AGCOT Centre, Dar es Salaam