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Kenya-Uganda mutual recognition agreement is key for regional trade

Kenya and Uganda, in December last year, signed a Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA) on goods that allows both countries to accept each other's conformity assessment results, including testing, inspection and certification, conducted by accredited institutions. In practical terms, goods that meet agreed standards in one country will no longer require repeat testing at the border when entering the other.

While technical in nature, this agreement marks a quiet but consequential shift in how trade is conducted in East Africa. It is not a headline-grabbing mega-infrastructure project, nor a sweeping new trade bloc. Instead, it addresses a daily frustration for traders, farmers and processors, which include duplication, delays and uncertainty at the border.

For years, non-tariff barriers have steadily eroded the competitiveness of regional trade. Trucks carrying maize, beans, dairy products or manufactured goods routinely spend days at border points as samples are retaken, documents re-verified and standards re-interpreted. These delays translate into lower farm-gate prices for producers, lost contracts and cash-flow pressures for traders, and higher food prices for consumers. The MRA directly confronts this inefficiency by replacing duplication with trust.

At its core, the agreement recognises that harmonised standards alone are not enough. Without mutual recognition of how those standards are applied, regional trade remains unpredictable and costly. By allowing regulators in Kenya and Uganda to rely on each other's accredited systems, the MRA turns standards from paper commitments

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Trade



into operational tools.

The agreement is also a statement of intent that regional trade is no longer optional or peripheral to national economic strategy. In an era of climate volatility, geopolitical shocks and fragile global supply chains, Africa's food security increasingly depends on the ability to move food efficiently from surplus areas to deficit markets within the continent. Regional trade is no longer a fallback option; it is a resilience strategy.

The role of Comesa in facilitating the development, clearance and signing of the MRA deserves recognition. Regional institutions are often criticised for producing declarations with limited practical impact. In this case, Comesa has helped translate years of technical work on standards and conformity assessment into a concrete, implementable agreement. Harmonised frameworks only matter when they are applied consistently at borders.

The real test, however, lies beyond the signing ceremony. MRAs succeed or fail at the point of implementation. Border officials must be trained to apply the agreement

consistently. Accredited laboratories and certification bodies must maintain credibility and transparency. Traders need clear information on which products and processes are covered. Without a jointly agreed and well-resourced implementation plan, even the best-designed agreement risks becoming another document on the shelf.

For agriculture and food markets, the stakes are particularly high. Trade enables food to move from areas of surplus production to areas of deficit, smoothing shocks caused by droughts, floods or market disruptions. When borders function efficiently, farmers gain access to larger and more predictable markets, encouraging investment in quality, storage and productivity. Consumers benefit from more stable supplies and prices. In this sense, the MRA is not just a trade facilitation tool; it is a food-security intervention.

There is also a competitiveness dimension. As regional agro-processing expands, buyers increasingly demand consistency, traceability and compliance with recognised standards. An operational MRA reduces uncertainty for millers, processors and exporters sourcing from Kenya and Uganda. It lowers transaction costs and strengthens confidence in regional supply chains, an essential condition for scaling trade beyond informal or spot-market transactions.

Ultimately, the Kenya-Uganda MRA reflects a simple but powerful idea: when borders become bridges, markets work better. The task now is to implement the agreement with the same seriousness that went into negotiating it. If done well, this MRA can become a model for deeper regional integration, one that turns technical cooperation into tangible gains for farmers, traders and consumers across East Africa.

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