REGIONAL TRADE GAPS DISCUSSED AT NAIROBI SUMMIT

By Titus Kakembo

Regional business leaders have issued a bold call for action following the East African Business and Investment Summit & Expo 2026 (EABIS 2026), demanding faster implementation of trade reforms to unlock the full potential of the East African Community (EAC).

The two-day summit, held in Nairobi-Kenya on February 24-25 was organised by the East African Business Council (EABC) in partnership with the Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA) and the East African Community (EAC) Secretariat.

It brought together more than 450 delegates, including ministers, senior government officials, captains of industry, investors, development partners and financial institutions from across the region and beyond.



L-R: EABC CEO Ahmed Farah, EABC chairperson John Lual Akol and EABC vice-chairperson Denis Karera displaying the resolutions of the East African Business and Investment Summit in Nairobi last week.

KENYA'S MINISTER SPEAKS

In her opening remarks, Beatrice Askul Moe, the chairperson of the EAC Council of Ministers and Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for EAC and Regional Development, commended organisers for convening a transformative forum.

"Over the past two decades, the EAC has registered commendable growth in intra-regional trade and cross-border investment, strengthening economic ties among partner states. It is now time to translate policy reforms into measurable economic outcomes," Askul said.

THE EAST AFRICAN COMMUNITY

Speaking on behalf of the EAC secretary general, Annette Ssemuwemba Mutaawe, the deputy secretary general for customs, trade and monetary affairs at the EAC, affirmed that the community already has strong policies and frameworks in place. "What is required now is acceleration of implementation and stronger co-ordination among stakeholders," Mutaawe said.

She stressed the EAC Secretariat's commitment to working closely with the private sector to dismantle trade barriers and strengthen regional value chains and leverage technology as a catalyst for integration.

According to Mutaawe, digitalisation — from customs automation to electronic certificates of origin — remains central to improving efficiency, and enhancing market access across the region.

OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

In a related tone, John Lual Akol, the chairperson of the East African Business Council, warned that while intra-EAC trade has grown steadily, it still accounts for less than 15% of total trade within the bloc — far below the shared target of 40% by 2030. "East Africa stands at a key moment in its economic transformation. I urge governments and businesses to move decisively, from reform to attain tangible results. Frameworks exist, but implementation gaps persist," Akol said.

Jas Bedi, the chairperson of KEPSA and vice-chair of EABC, highlighted persistent non-tariff barriers, regulatory inconsistencies and unpredictable tax regimes as key obstacles to regional competitiveness. He argued that reducing the cost of doing business is essential to strengthening investor confidence and attracting both domestic and foreign capital.



Annette Mutaawe, the deputy secretary general for customs at EAC

He called for accelerated investment in trade-enabling infrastructure, including modern transport corridors, efficient ports, improved rail connectivity and expanded digital infrastructure.

Paperless customs systems and interoperable digital platforms, he said, are critical to facilitating seamless cross-border trade.

BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT

Beyond policy dialogue, the summit provided a platform for practical business engagement. More than 60 exhibitors showcased products and services.

The summit concluded with the formal signing of the resolutions by Moe and Akol, the chairperson of EABC, signalling high-level political and private sector alignment.

Key among the resolutions was a commitment to deepen collaboration between the East African governments and the private sector.

DELEGATES' PLEA

At the heart of the summit's resolutions was a renewed commitment to fully implement the EAC Customs Union and Common Market Protocols.

Delegates urged partner states to operationalise the Single Customs Territory (SCT), harmonise domestic tax regimes and eliminate non-tariff barriers that continue to fragment markets.

The delegates further emphasised the need to strengthen intermodal transport systems — integrating road, rail, air and inland waterways — to reduce logistics costs and enhance supply chain resilience. Efficient infrastructure, they noted, is indispensable to achieving the region's ambitious trade targets.