

Participating in EAC integration

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One of the reasons often advanced for failure of the first attempt to integrate East Africa, between 1967-77, was lack of private sector participation. However, with the revival of the East African Community in 1999, the Treaty ensured that private sector participation was central to the integration process.

Initially established in 1997 as a forum that brought together the business community with a view to increasing private sector participation in EAC integration, the East African Business Council (EABC) has since grown to become fully recognised as the official representative of the private sector. Our vision is to be an effective change agent for fostering an enabling business environment for a diversified, competitive, export-led, integrated and sustainable economy. Our mission is to promote the private sector's regional and global competitiveness in trade and investment.

The EABC is at the forefront of stimulating dialogue on key issues affecting the private sector as well as bringing it together to speak with one East African voice. The Council's membership is drawn from all 5 EAC Partner States. This has grown from 19 in 2004 to the current 145 and continues to grow as the Council seeks to broaden private sector participation in the EAC integration process.

With a permanent secretariat in Arusha, Tanzania which is also the seat of the EAC Secretariat, the EABC coordinates and engages members in coming up with collective policy positions and lobbies for policy change through a structured dialogue with EAC organs. The secretariat enjoys a unique relationship with the EAC Secretariat. The EABC is invited and participates in various technical, sectoral, council, and senior ministerial meetings at the EAC where we articulate private sector positions. The council also works closely with the East African Legislative Assembly, governments, regional economic communities, multilateral groups and the business community to improve the region's trade and investment climate.

Since its inception, the EABC has played an integral role in the negotiations and final passage of EAC instruments such as the EAC Customs Union Protocol, the EAC Customs Management Act, and the Common Market Protocol. Our different working groups and sector-specific committees are forums where the business community can regularly discuss and drive reforms to ensure a conducive business environment in East Africa.

The EABC's advocacy agenda is driven through working with national private sector apex bodies who are the council's National Focal Points to identify private sector priority areas and issues for advocacy. Each year the EABC organises a series of events and activities across East Africa as a way of introducing to potential investors the opportunities that exist in the EAC. The EABC also collaborates with foreign missions, export and investment promotion agencies, as well as leading private sector organisation to foster bilateral trade relations and joint ventures between East African companies and those in other strategic markets.

The EABC also provides training and advice to members on legislative and regulatory developments in the EAC. Annual business forums, public-private sector dialogues and conferences to raise awareness on how the private sector can take advantage of opportunities in East Africa, are some of the services the EABC offers its membership. The council publishes in-depth policy papers and research studies that provide members with up-to-date information on legislative and regulatory developments in the EAC vital to their business success. The EABC website, www.eabc.info, is a one-stop information centre for anyone seeking to do business in East Africa.

The East African Business Directory, to date, is the most comprehensive in East Africa, with a listing of information on businesses and investment opportunities in the region. It offers information on the economic performance of important sectors in the region, as well as investment opportunities. Published annually, the directory is widely read among corporate executives and public sector officials in East Africa. EABC members have an opportunity to influence policy-making at the top level, access latest news and information on legislative and regulatory developments in the EAC, to network with both local and international businesses, access EABC value-added services at a discounted cost; and belong to a well-established and respected regional apex body for the private sector.

The EABC's strategic focus, going forward, will be to bring all private sector associations under the EABC fold in order to give the private sector a stronger voice, to work towards a business environment that is conducive for trade and investment, to enhance the capacity of the EABC National Focal Points and other trade support institutions to be competent advocates for the private sector, and to improve private sector competitiveness through provision of regular business and trade information. **F**