

Unlocking the potential

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Unlocking the potential. A term often cited, sometimes a cliché, but it suits no regional entity better than the EAC. With 10 years of advancement and progress along the integration pathway, much has been accomplished.

Many significant and even historical steps on the road towards integration have been taken during the past years. Intra-regional trade volumes are on the increase, and the common market, once implemented at regional and national levels, will bring further significant growth opportunities. It is imperative to keep up the momentum and seek for quick and region-wide delivery of political decisions, and by so doing materialise the true benefits of integration for the citizen.

Equally important is to stay innovative. The EAC has earned respect for its dynamism and achievements of the past ten years, but still the challenge remains to successfully tap into the best practices of the partner states at national level. The World Bank Group report on Doing Business in the East African Community 2010 is filled with fascinating examples of the potential the community holds. The report measures ten topics that regulate domestic small and medium-size companies throughout their life cycle and delivers an estimate of the ease of doing business in a given country. According to the report, the average ranking for East African countries is 116th out of the 183 economies overall. However, and this is where the potential really manifests itself, the region would rocket to 12th place overall if partner states were to adopt the best practice of the region for each of the Doing Business indicators.

It is worthy to note that integration has already realised the potential of bringing increased stability and security to the region. Political stability is also reflected through elections which, this year, are exceptionally numerous in the region. Elections are a critical indicator of good governance, democracy, the rule of law, observance of human rights and social justice. It is important to note that the EAC Treaty acknowledges all of these aspects and integration has indeed contributed substantially to regional stability.

The efforts of the EAC partner states in creating a stronger regional community and realising the potential within it also deserve support. Finland has always given much value to partnerships and cross-border trade for economic growth. Finland's main support channel to the EAC in the past years has been

the EAC Partnership Fund. It is an instrument meant for development partners to pool their resources in the spirit of aid harmonisation and for the benefit of regional integration and is managed by the EAC Secretariat. Finland is currently chairing the Group of Friends contributing to the Partnership Fund and Finland and the EAC recently signed a new two-year, two million euro agreement on Finland's support to the Partnership Fund.

Finland has also pledged two million euro to support the Lake Victoria Basin Commission. In addition, Finland's ambassador to Tanzania has been accredited as the Permanent Representative of Finland to the East African Community. With these measures Finland wants to give a strong signal that it fully supports the EAC and its secretariat in taking forward the regional integration process.

As in any partnership, the level and frequency of dialogue is an important indicator. It is only through dialogue that we can improve our joint efforts, making them more efficient, productive and beneficial to the integration process. The dialogue with the secretariat and the partner states' representatives continues to be fruitful and we have seen good results in many of the cooperation fields under the Partnership Fund.

Only time will tell us how the EAC will look in another ten years' time and the potential it holds has been harnessed. The opportunities are there, but much work remains ahead. There are many examples that one could use to describe what the reality of integration on the ground looks like. Often the most descriptive are the ones coming from personal experience. On a recent visit to Rusumo border post between Rwanda and Tanzania, we were holding discussions with immigration officials from both countries regarding a Finnish-funded and IOM-implemented border management capacity building project. After fruitful meetings and tours of facilities on both sides of the border, farewells were shared. I could not help overhearing the discussion between a Rwandan and a Tanzanian officer that ended with a warm handshake and a brotherly well-wishing comment of "Tuko Pamoja", or "we are together". I feel that it is precisely that spirit which so well describes the EAC and its partner states today. It is also the kind of spirit that can really move regional integration forward, create opportunities, foster cooperation and truly unlock the potential. **F**