

Social Issues and Emerging Opportunities in India-COMESA Relations

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Introduction

The 11th anniversary of COMESA strengthens India-Africa long established trade routes since 1498 in general and India-COMESA in particular. Today, India is known in various sectors like power and energy, Small and Medium Enterprises, transport & other infrastructure projects, agriculture, food processing and water management, printing and publishing and pharmaceuticals. Along with it, there is a need to assert COMESA and SAARC, Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), BIMESTEC & ASEAN as building block to realize the Pan Afro-Asia vision through a Common Union. Today, these trading arrangements are envisaged to foster trade and investment relations amongst member countries by removal tariffs and other impediments to intra-regional trade flows. The success of these arrangements in fostering trade has been diverse with COMESA being the successful ones (Table-1).

Table-1 Regional Trade Blocs in Africa
(US \$ MILLION)

Merchandise Exports within Blocs

1970

1980

1990

1995

2000

2002

COMESA

412

616

963

1386

1519

1801

Source: World Development Indicators, 2004, World Bank.

Table-1 shows that COMESA has been one of the most successful in terms of enhancing trade within the member countries. COMESA intra-bloc exports have been raised from US \$ 412 million in 1970 to as high as US \$ 1.8 billion in 2001. COMESA strategy would entail identification of select member countries, based on trade complementarities with India as also potential for setting up joint ventures/WOS, which would then be used as a based for accessing

the markets of other member countries. Such a strategy would further entail a detail analysis of the current trade relations among member countries, rules of origin criteria as also existing trade regulations within each member country.

India attended the 9th COMESA summit as an observer from 30 May-8 June 2004, addressed eight strategic areas of great economic importance to members like:

- Trade Liberalization.
- Custom Cooperation, Trade related Issues,
- Industry and Energy,
- Monetary Affairs,
- Agriculture,
- Economic and Social Development and
- Report on COMESA Institutions.

India and COMESA still underneath its potential in the level of economic activity. COMESA zone is becoming an increasingly attractive location for Indian foreign investment. The success of the COMESA-India Free Trade Area (FTA) would depend critically on the ability of producers to exploit economies of scale arising from an increase in market size, where size of the market would in turn depend on the volume of expenditure inside the bloc and not on its population. In related developments, on June 1st 2004 the Indian government and COMESA reached an agreement designed to increase cooperation between the African regional bloc and the Asian country. Although not signed as yet, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the regions seeks to improve inter-regional cooperation in the areas of

- Pharmaceuticals,
- Information Technology,
- Agriculture,
- Human Resources Development,
- Low Cost Housing,
- Non-Commercial Energy and
- Regional Infrastructure Development.

The aims and objectives under Article 3 (a) of COMESA charter writes, “to attain sustainable growth and development of the member states by promoting a more balanced and harmonization development of its production and marketing structures”. The area Economic and Social Development and Human Resources Development (MOU) mentioned above need to include education, constitutional practices, beside others like roads, electricity, agricultural research and extension, health, potable water, sanitation and issue of trans-oceanic terrorism in the interests of common man social and economic benefits.

Social Issues

COMESA charter in the field of economic and social development under Article 4 (VI a) says, “Harmonize the methodology of collection, processing and analysis of information required to meet the objectives of the common market”. The Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India sponsors eight Ugandan students per year and some students from Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda through the Indian Council of Cultural Relation (ICCR) programme. There is need to build education, teaching and research programme on cultural exchange basis to various universities in COMESA countries and India. India likes to share its vast experience and potential to build and run polytechnic institute (ITI), agricultural, engineering, medical & veterinary, law colleges, Information Technology sector and broadly sciences and social science colleges and universities. It will enhance the professional human power, scientists and engineers, professional & semi-professional skilled labour that endow with an educated mass society in COMESA region. This social partnership particularly in the education sector will work for development and poverty alleviation faced by COMESA.

The cultural exchange programme based on education and research sector provides a way to strengthen the human resource development that will help in building and sustaining this sector in this region. Moreover, the history of this region in the form of literature and movies need to share each other like University of Delhi, India recently renovated its undergraduate and postgraduate syllabus that include the play of The trial of Dedan Kimathi (Ngugi Wa Thiong’o Micere Githae Mugo) and Chinua Achebe Things Fall Apart in BA (Hons) English and various others in MA English, Government and Politics in Africa and Africa in World Politics in MA Political Science, African concept and society in the MA History, Geography and Sociology and full fleshed Department of African Studies having Master of Philosophy (M.Phil) and Ph.D. With a view of conducting in-depth studies and research on various problems and issues, the Department of African Studies has set up the following study groups like India-Africa relations, Post Independence South Africa, Human Rights and Refugees, Sudan School Unit and there is a planning to build study group on regional organizations, which will include AU, COMESA, SADC, ECOWAS, SACU and regional Investment Forum (RIFT).

Along with it, it is a time to share the Art, Painting, Sculpture and Music particularly tribal folk and dance richly available in both regions will strengthen the common mass contact in

Indo-COMESA relations. It provides more clarity about Africa and remove myths about that continent among all the society particularly the investors.

Implementation of Constitutional Democracy

Fundamental Principles of COMESA charter declares under Article 6(h), “The promotion and sustenance of a democratic system of governance in each member state”. India’s rich experience of last 54 years of practicing democracy based on three tier of government right from the Panchayatas (Rural) & Municipalities, state assemblies and National Parliament will give a way to newly emerged democratic states. The white paper on the report of the Constitution Review Commission in Uganda need mass debate and experience of Indian constitution on it, which will stand the test of time and serve best interests of Ugandans. There is a need to assess the constitutional reforms in Republic of Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Republic of Sudan (Post Peace Accord Development), Kingdom of Swaziland and Zimbabwe today really require the experience of brother India in implementing constitution through democratic practices affirming as a secular state.

Conclusion

India has been geared towards strengthening of horizontal South—South linkages, and towards promoting self-reliance through transfer of technologies, appropriate to the needs of her partners. India sees South—South Cooperation as the embodiment of a new spirit, of an alternative, cooperative approach to the challenges of economic development. Africa and India Project Partnership Conclave March 4-7, 2005 focused a special session to deliberations on **financing partnerships**.

SMEs sectors discussed how to overcome them to become effective participants in the globalized regime. The trade promotion under Article 62 (b) states, “actively encourage the undertaking of supply and demand surveys, the organization of buyers and sellers meetings and other multi-country contact promotion events in order to further identify and exploit the potential of intra-Common Market trade.” Thus some multinational enterprises having plants for producing similar products in COMESA countries and India may consolidate their capacities at one location for greater efficiency for the combined COMESA–India market. Some patterns of specialization (Human Resources Development and Education and Cultural Exchange Programme) may emerge depending upon the comparative strength of the economies. That means that mutual trade and investment flows may grow rapidly following the free trade arrangement.

To strengthen it, the common visa to the citizens of India particularly investors in Delhi for

COMESA and Africans for SAARC regions may be given that will minimise the investor's problems regarding their movements and concentration on work. The protocol on visa relaxation and eventual elimination, which is already in force, should pave the way for the free movement of persons, labour and services. Along with it, the trade promotion under Article 62 (8) emphasises, "organize frequent general and specialized trade fairs" that will include fairs like book fairs, information technology fairs, agricultural fair and others. Equally important is the need to implement the gender policy and strategy in order to unleash the full potential of creativity and resourcefulness of the 400 million citizens of the COMESA region.

Overall, it is the high time for India to attract COMESA as HRD investment location because of growing political stability, commitment to provide liberal foreign-exchange regime, availability of cheap labour, agro-fertile land for agricultural research, common mass friendly attitude towards professional, semi-professional education, research and social development. It will cherish the dreams of Pan-COMESA-SAARC by building this bond unique on the globe, which will challenge the hegemony of uni-polar world on the one hand and work for the real civil society, people's democracy and global peace on the other.