Case Study: The Path to EAC Regional Harmonized Staple Foods Standards

The case for regional quality standards

Quality is one of the biggest challenges to staple foods value chain integration and competitiveness. Inconsistencies from country to country within the East African Community (EAC) constrain regional trade. The absence of consistent standards and, importantly, the limited awareness of existing standards among staple foods producers make transactions less transparent. This affords buyers and traders the opportunity to set their own standards and take advantage of information asymmetry to secure an advantage in the producer-buyer relationship. The benefits that accrue to producers from a more transparent quality standards system should serve as incentive for smallholders to invest in production, which should support the push for greater regional food security.

Harmonizing regional standards and driving broad/consistent awareness and adoption of those standards across the EAC is a critical component of COMPETE’s work to help improve transparency and level the playing field across the value chain. It should also enable the development of key structured trading systems such as WRS and commodities exchanges that depend on consistency and standardization.

COMPETE has collaborated closely with the EAC and the national bureaus of standards from the five EAC countries to develop harmonized quality standards for 22 staple foods products. The seven main staple categories include:

- Rice and rice products
- Beans and similar legumes
- Millet
- Sorghum
- Cassava
- Wheat and other grains

This case study looks at the process involved in developing regional standards
Steps to harmonizing standards (policy process)

COMPETE used this opportunity to help build the capacity of the EAC to lead the harmonization process through its existing structures. The EAC, by taking the lead, assured these negotiations would lead to regional adoption at the EAC level. This process is bureaucratic, but absolutely essential in order for any project-supported reform to succeed. COMPETE followed a similar methodology that was successful under the RATES program. First, the process had to be anchored in the EAC’s official reform making process.

The adoption process which actually began in November 2009 involved working through the existing EAC Standards Committee to guide the process. This included working with national technical committees comprised of public and private sector institutions led by each national bureau of standards. The national committees reviewed existing national standards and worked to find common ground on establishing proposed regional standards and to build unified national consensus positions. These early discussions also helped build a better understanding of impact of regional reforms on the value chain actors in each country.

Once all the national positions were developed, COMPETE supported the EAC to convene a meeting of all the national technical committees to reach final consensus by all five countries on harmonized regional staple foods standards. The group reached final consensus in June 2011 after a protracted negotiation process.

Solution to which we thought EAC members had arrived

The June 2011 proposed 22 harmonized regional standards were forwarded to the EAC Standards Committee for approval. If approved by the Standards Committee, these standards would have been submitted to the EAC Council of Ministers for adoption. This was originally scheduled to be submitted to the Council of Ministers in November 2011.

Slippage by Kenya

Just before approving and submitting the June 2011 standards for adoption, the Standards Committee received a letter from the Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS) requesting a delay in the approval process and asked the committee to not submit the already negotiated standards to the Council of Ministers.

In the letter, KEBS indicated that Kenya had reconsidered its position on maximum moisture levels that were indicated in the standards for the 22 staple food products. Kenya was especially concerned about the moisture content for maize. After initially promoting and agreeing to a 13% moisture level for maize, they now expressed concern that this level may cause problems for the Kenyan grain industry. KEBS proposed raising the moisture content back to 14%, a level deemed excessive by all the other countries, even in Uganda, that struggles with high humidity levels at harvest time.

KEBS indicated that some Kenyan traders feared that they might not be able to meet the 13% level and would not be able to sell their products to national and regional markets. This last minute change risked derailing the whole process.
The sticking point – moisture content

Moisture content is the amount of water in grain and an important parameter in ensuring quality during harvesting and storage. The duration grains last after harvesting is greatly influenced by moisture content. Lower moisture content helps ensure food safety and quality parameters, but it can be difficult to achieve for a number of producers, especially in high humidity production zones.

COMPETE and EAGC’s 2nd effort

In an effort to get the process back on track, COMPETE and the EAGC met with KEBS regarding their concerns. KEBS asked for more information on acceptable and safe moisture levels in grains that could be shared and discussed in a forum of grain stakeholders. At this request, the EAGC produced a position paper on recommended moisture levels in grains and staple foods that was circulated to all stakeholders in the Kenyan grain sector.

Consensus again

With COMPETE support, the EAGC convened a national stakeholders meeting in Kenya in September 2012 to address Kenya’s moisture content concerns. During the meeting, the different actors in the value chain debated the pros and cons of raising the moisture content levels. After a lively debate, consensus was reached again and the Kenya industry settled on a 13.5% for maize. They also revised upward the moisture levels of the other categories by .5%.

Anticipated EAC approval

The revised Kenyan position will be presented at an extra-ordinary EAC Standards Committee meeting scheduled for October 29 – 31, 2012 in Entebbe, Uganda. Those involved in the negotiation process expect that these revised levels will be accepted by other EAC member states. If the revised standards are approved by the Standards Committee, they will be submitted at the EAC Council of Ministers’ meeting scheduled for November 2012.

Next steps for COMPETE

Once the standards are adopted regionally, COMPETE will begin the process of facilitating their adoption at the national level. This usually requires a gazetting process that is slightly different for each country. Once gazetted, the regional harmonized standards will replace the existing national standards for these products.

To be effective, these standards must be accepted and used by national value chain players. Public agencies working at borders must be aware of the changes and producers and traders must be aware of their rights and obligations under the standards.

COMPETE will begin the process of facilitating adoption of the standards at the national level. To ensure consistency in the effort, COMPETE will develop “train-the-trainers” manuals and public awareness materials to be used across the region. To facilitate national adoption, COMPETE will work with bilateral missions and their projects to identify and convene the right set of national implementing partners and develop national implementation blueprints.