

The COMESA [Electronic Certificate of Origin \(eCO\)](#) is one of the tools developed under the [COMESA Digital Free Trade Area \(DFTA\) initiative](#), aimed at replacing the current paper-based and manually-released certificates of origin being used by COMESA importers for preferential trade within the COMESA Free Trade Area, with electronic certificates that will simplify their issuing, circulation, and verification processes, that are quite burdensome in all COMESA countries. The certificate of origin is like a passport for goods that proves that the product is originating from a certain country. Such certificates are the precondition for accessing to preferential customs duties rates when imported in another country which is member of the same Free Trade Area to which the country where goods are originating is part.

The aim of the COMESA eCO is to allow traders to benefit from a preferential treatment (exemption or reduction of customs duties) each time such goods are imported in another State which is member of the COMESA Free Trade area.

The need to quickly start the implementation of the eCo system has recently gained urgency from African Regional Economic Communities (RECs), given the challenges that movement of goods across borders is facing as a result of restrictive measures put in place in response to the Coronavirus pandemic. Indeed, the use of Electronic Certificates of Origin falls within a strategy of dematerialisation of trade documents to limit direct contacts with documents and human-to-human contacts in the international supply chain, that is being actively pursued by COMESA and other RECs in Africa ([SADC launched the piloting of the SADC eCO in May 2020](#)), and recommended by many international organisations like UN/CEFACT (read this [post](#) for more information).

The COMESA eCO is also supposed to facilitate intra-COMESA trade (which currently stands at 8% of total trade generated by this Region, below the continental intra-Africa average, which is 15%), in particular through a reduction in the cost and time required in registration, application and submission of certificates and the post-verification of originating goods.

The decision to replace manual certificates of origin with the eCOs was made by the COMESA Council of Ministers in 2014, but so far the use of electronic certificates has not gained traction among COMESA Member States, mainly because of the lack of the necessary regulations under the COMESA Rules of Origin (RoO). In November 2019, however, at the 40th Meeting of the Council of Ministers, COMESA made a significant step in the implementation of

the system, with the adoption of draft regulations to implement the COMESA eCO system (currently non publicly available).

During the 14th meeting of the COMESA Technical Working Group (TWG) on Rules of Origin, held on 10 June 2020, the COMESA Secretariat announced that soon the eCOs will be piloted in 15 COMESA Member States that have indicated their readiness to implement the system, namely: Burundi, DR Congo, Egypt, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sudan, Tunisia, Zambia and Zimbabwe.