

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) [announced](#) that preparatory works for operationalisation of the SADC electronic certificate of origin (eCoO) are underway and that its official launch is expected for July 2022, while its implementation in Member States is planned for 2024, after the pilot tests and the capacity building and awareness raising activities addressed to customs officials and exporters in the Region will be completed.

The preferential certificate of origin is a document attesting the origin of goods within trade agreements establishing duty and quota exemptions or reductions. It is particularly important because allows Customs in the importing country to determine whether certain goods are eligible for import under the preferential arrangement of the SADC Free Trade Area.

In the SADC region, rules of origin are contained in the Annex I of the SADC Protocol on Trade. The relevant procedure requires traders to go physically to the offices of the authority responsible for the issuance of the COO (in most cases, Customs), submit a specific [application](#), and wait the issuance of the paper-based certificate after that the issuing authority has completed the controls aimed at verifying that goods declared by the exporter conform to SADC rules. Once the certificate is obtained, this must be transmitted by the exporter to the importer, that in turn has to show the certificate to the customs authority in the country of import as a condition for obtaining the duty exemption.

The implementation of the eCoO is aimed at simplifying this process by allowing the trader to apply on-line, trace the processing status of the application and obtain an electronic certificate through the same platform. Customs authorities of the importing country will also be able to verify the eCoO authenticity directly online, so that they will no need anymore to wait to receive the original paper-based certificate.

Technical specifications for the implementation of the SADC eCoO are contained in the SADC e-Certificate of Origin Framework, which was [approved](#) by the Sectoral Committee of Ministers of Trade at the 31st Meeting held in June 2019 in Windhoek, Namibia. This framework, which is currently piloted in Eswatini, Malawi and Zambia with the imminent extension to Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania and Zimbabwe, aims at harmonising the process of automation for registration, issuance, approval and transmission of CoOs among SADC member States.

The e-CoO is expected to ease trade in the region by reducing the time taken to issue the CoOs, but will also reduce possibilities of frauds because of the elimination of any human intervention in handling the certificates.

In addition to SADC, also COMESA has developed a similar system that although not yet fully implemented in all COMESA member states, is already operational and accessible to traders in the region through a dedicated [web page](#) upon registration.