



**DEPUTY MINISTER
TRADE, INDUSTRY AND COMPETITION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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**DEPUTY MINISTER ALEXANDRA ABRAHAMS' ADDRESS AT THE 41ST SOUTHERN AFRICAN
DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY (SADC) TECHNICAL BARRIERS TO TRADE (TBT)
COOPERATION STRUCTURES MEETINGS**

Thank you Programme Director,
Heads of Delegations,
Representatives of the SADC Secretariat,
Representatives of Regional and International Organisations,
Distinguished Members of the SADC TBT Cooperation Structures,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honour to welcome you to the 41st SADC Technical Barriers to Trade Cooperation Structures Meetings here in Johannesburg, South Africa. Your presence reflects our shared commitment to building a stronger, more integrated, and more resilient Southern African region.

In line with the most recent direction agreed by our Heads of State, this year's SADC theme, "*Advancing Industrialisation, Agricultural Transformation, and Energy Transition for a Resilient SADC*", underscores that our work is central to delivering tangible socio-economic progress across the region. The theme reinforces our long-term industrialisation ambitions, our region's urgent need to transform agriculture, strengthen manufacturing, and responsibly navigate the global transition toward sustainable energy systems.

Industrial diversification, agro-processing, mineral beneficiation, and expansion of clean and reliable energy systems all depend on robust Quality Infrastructure (QI). Standards, metrology, accreditation, and conformity assessment, such as testing, certification and inspection are all critical cogs in the wheels driving our region's economic growth. Without credible QI systems, our products cannot compete in global markets, our Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises cannot scale, and our regional value chains cannot mature.

Agricultural transformation, in particular, requires a change in how we approach quality infrastructure across the value chain. From primary production through to agro-processing and export, farmers and agri-enterprises must increasingly comply with stringent sanitary standards, traceability requirements, and sustainability benchmarks. Strengthening testing, certification, and inspection capacity within the agricultural sector is therefore essential to improve food security and productivity, and to unlock access to higher-value regional and international markets. In this regard, quality infrastructure becomes a critical enabler of both rural development and industrialisation, supporting the transition from subsistence and commodity-based production toward diversified, value-added agricultural systems.

As Africa advances toward deeper economic integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), as products move in, out and through the continent, the importance of harmonised technical regulations, aligned standards, and trusted conformity assessment becomes even more urgent.

The AfCFTA offers SADC enterprises unprecedented opportunities to expand regional value chains and access a larger, unified African market. However, realising these benefits depends on our ability to reduce Technical Barriers to Trade, enhance testing and certification capacity, and ensure our goods meet both continental and global quality requirements.

We meet at a time when technological change is accelerating. In response to these changes, globally Quality Infrastructure Standards is evolving toward greater sustainability, digitalisation and resilience to advance the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Emerging priorities include the integration of artificial

intelligence, circular economy principles, and climate action and the effect these priorities have on QI systems. Key trends highlight the shift toward more demand-driven, sustainable, and inclusive approaches, the strengthening of public-private partnerships, and the enhancement of regulatory frameworks to improve safety, foster innovation and boost trade competitiveness.

To remain relevant, our QI systems must evolve alongside these technological shifts. Strengthening cooperation between regulators, industry, laboratories, and accreditation bodies is essential.

This sentiment has been echoed by the World Bank. In its 2025 World Development Report on Standards for Development the World Bank indicated that in the short- to medium term, developing economies increasingly face difficult decisions on:

- How to sequence and prioritise QI reforms;
- Which QI functions should be public versus private sector driven;
- How to finance costly laboratory and accreditation systems; and
- How to balance trade competitiveness with health, safety, and environmental objectives.

Strategic investment in standards development, testing laboratories, metrology capabilities, and the technical skills of our people is foundational to strengthening priority regional value chains in agro-processing, pharmaceuticals, and mineral beneficiation. In doing so, we can enable MSMEs to meet increasingly stringent, importer-mandated quality requirements and participate more meaningfully in regional and global markets. At the same time, these investments position us to deepen regional integration and to strengthen SADC's role within continental trade frameworks, including the Tripartite Free Trade Area and the African Continental Free Trade Area. In this regard, the Tripartite Free Trade Area, now in force but still under phased implementation, provides a practical pathway to expand market access across Eastern and Southern Africa, while the African Continental Free Trade Area underscores the central importance of consolidated standards and quality infrastructure in unlocking meaningful intra-African trade and building competitive regional value chains.

SADCs growing engagement in international Quality Infrastructure forums is encouraging, but we must continue building scientific, technical, and diplomatic capability to ensure global standards reflect Africa's realities and support equitable participation. This must be underpinned by deliberate investment in scientific excellence, technical depth, and coordinated diplomatic capability if we are to shape outcomes rather than respond to them.

To achieve this, we must strengthen our national standards bodies, accreditation systems, and metrology institutes so that they can generate credible data, influence technical committees, and anchor Africa's positions in evidence. This also requires building a cadre of skilled experts and negotiators who can engage consistently in global standard-setting platforms and ensure that emerging norms, whether in digital trade, green technologies, or advanced manufacturing, are informed by the production realities, development pathways, and regulatory capacities of our region. In doing so, we can move from passive adoption of external standards to active co-creation, ensuring that global frameworks do not inadvertently become barriers to entry, but rather instruments that enable fair competition, industrial upgrading, and equitable participation for African economies.

The global rise in complex technical regulations, now extending beyond health and safety to environmental protection and labour standards, demands even stronger QI systems. This requires significant investment in:

- Human capital
- Modern testing facilities
- Digital traceability and record systems
- Sustainable product design and energy-efficient technologies

It is encouraging to see that the theme of your workshop later today is on the Circular economy focusing on Extended Producer Responsibility.

We cannot just talk the language of sustainability, climate change, recycling, eco-friendly and leaving a country and continent in a state that is environmentally sustainable and economically viable for future generations.

We need to ask ourselves serious questions such as whether EPR levies are set at the appropriate cost/percentage margins to give effect to its intention? We need to ask if it is in fact encouraging suppliers/manufacturers to source and use recycle materials instead of non-recycle materials, which we know is cheaper, easier to source and hence more attractive. We need to ask ourselves is the incentive to use recyclable materials enough and if we are doing sufficient awareness and education on the long-term impact if we don't pay closer ethical attention to climate change and our safeguarding our environment.

The circular economy presents an opportunity for industrialisation and job creation through the entire value chain – from waste pickers to scientists to manufacturing to sales. It also addresses the pressing issue of overconsumption of landfills as well as an alternative to crude/oil-based fuels.

Which all interlinks to the energy transition. While every country's energy transition will be progressing at different paces depending on their country's development and economic needs, it too presents economic opportunities in areas such as green hydrogen and EV batteries and the value chains we can foster across the continent.

As SADC collectively advances industrialisation, agricultural transformation, and the energy transition, QI Standards remain an indispensable enabler.

As you begin this week of deliberations, I wish to thank each of you for your dedication. Although your work is relatively technical and often unsung, it forms the foundation of our region's ability to trade, industrialise, innovate, and compete globally.

Let us use this opportunity to strengthen cooperation, refine our systems, and drive the quality agenda that will support a more industrialised, food-secure, and energy-resilient SADC.

At the same time, as we look ahead, there is a clear and shared responsibility to accelerate the finalisation of outstanding elements of the African Continental Free Trade Area. This includes the conclusion of negotiations on tariff schedules, rules of origin, and key protocols that are necessary to give full practical effect to the agreement. Without this, the promise of a truly integrated continental market will remain constrained. For SADC, this is particularly important, as the effectiveness of our regional value chains and the competitiveness of our firms will increasingly depend on a predictable, transparent, and fully operational AfCFTA framework, supported by strong and harmonised quality infrastructure systems.

I wish you productive discussions and continued success. May our collective efforts ensure that the SADC Quality Infrastructure grows from strength to strength.

Thank you.

MS ALEXANDRA ABRAHAMS

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