



Enhancement of Regional Trade Capacities in Food through Harmonized Regional Conformity Assessment and Food Safety Systems

ABSTRACT/ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Arab countries need more than anytime to enhance their regional trade integration, to better address challenges related to food security and food safety. Imports of agricultural products have increased from USD 25.6 billion in 2005 to USD 66.2 billion in 2013, while exports have also increased from USD 16.5 billion to USD 33.8 billion in the same time period (Talks, 2015).

With the aim of enhancing trade and economic integration, and ultimately stimulating the region's potential for growth and job creation, the SEMCs have signed a large number of free trade agreements (FTAs) over the past 20 years, including some amongst themselves, as well as with the EU, Turkey and the United States. The Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA) created between 18 Arab countries in 1998, liberalizing trade over a period of ten years including trading in agricultural products. The Agadir agreement fully liberalized trade between Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia in 2006. Even though, the economic benefit of all the previous agreement related to the intra-trade liberalization have been limited to date, by exceptions to liberalization for sensitive products, NTBs and trade constrained by poor infrastructure, transportation services and customs delays.

Alongside intraregional agreements, many Arab countries have acted to liberalize trade in goods and services with non-Arab countries and economic groupings, including the European Union, the United States, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), Turkey, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and others. Surprisingly, many Arab countries were faster in concluding preferential arrangements with foreign parties than with each other, engaging in the deep economic commitments imposed by those arrangements and accepting commercial provisions that very often surpassed WTO requirements.

At the same time, however, the Arab countries were reluctant to provide similar concessions to each other. It is perhaps not surprising then that growth in exports with extra-regional partners has exceeded rates achieved in regional markets. Another major impediment in achieving the regional intra-trade integration is related to the insurance of the quality of products and the unification of standards to enhance commercial exchange and cooperation in the related activities. AIDMO is assigned from LAS to achieve this objective, and to date, they adopted nearly 9000 international standards but unfortunately, they are not implemented for several reasons related to political impediments, weak infrastructure and logistics, poor accreditation certification schemes and weak Inspection bodies that can ensure implementation.

Keywords: regional trade, agreements, standards, capacities, accreditation