

The AfCFTA Secretariat launched today in Nairobi, Kenya, a 4-day session of experts from the Secretariat itself and national States, dedicated to the development of the AfCFTA e-CO System, an electronic origin certification system where customs administrations and other designated authorities of the AfCFTA State Parties will be digitally interconnected in a network that will allow them to directly exchange electronic certificates of origin with each other, without going through traders, as it happens with the paper-based certificate . The certificate of origin is like a passport for goods that guarantees that a product is originating from a certain country. Such certificate is the precondition for accessing to preferential customs duties rates when imported in a country which is member of the same Free Trade Area of the one from where they are exported. The purpose of the AfCFTA e-CO system is to allow traders to benefit from such a preferential treatment under the AfCFTA without the need of going physical ly to Customs (or other designated authority), as they will be able to apply, obtain and monitor the issuance of the certificate through an online platform, that will dispatch the certificate directly to Customs (or other designated authority) of the importing country . This system is therefore expected to reduce the time and cost of issuance of certificates of origin, but also to minimise possibilities of frauds and of alteration of the certificate, being it totally dematerialised.

The first experiences in developing electronic versions of preferential certificates of origin have been developed in Eastern and Southern Africa. COMESA was the first Regional Economic Community (REC) to develop an electronic certificate of origin, under the COMESA Digital Free Trade Area (DFTA) initiative adopted by the COMESA Council of Ministers in 2018. However, pilot tests, [planned for 2020](#) have proven complicated to organize. Due to these difficulties, they have been postponed many times, until [2023](#) . Currently, the system is available in testing mode on a [specific webpage](#) , accessible upon registration.

The SADC Secretariat introduced the electronic Certificate of Origin (e-CoO) in 2019 with the support of the GIZ within the Programme “Cooperation for the Enhancement of SADC Regional Economic Integration” (CESARE). Also in this case, operationalization and pilot exercises started only [recently](#) . The SADC e-CO includes multiple security features to ensure trust along the customs chain, including optical watermarking technology, digital rubber stamps and 2D barcoding, as well as printer control language, i.e. a technology that allows only one original

certificate to be printed out. The EAC also initiated the automation of the EAC certificate of origin, to date not yet achieved. Lastly, a project has been recently launched in the WAEMU (West Africa Economic and Monetary Union) region for the dematerialization of the WAEMU CoO.

It is too early to understand which ones the future characteristics of the AfCFTA e-CO System will be, as discussions just started. For sure it will build on the experience of COMESA and SADC. The roll out of the new system will also require awareness raising both for Customs officials, that will need to understand how to use the system, but more importantly for traders and the private sector, that will need to learn how to utilise it properly.