East African local governments discuss local economic development in cross-border communities
The East African Local Governments Association (EALGA) in collaboration with the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) under the auspices of the East Africa Local Government Forum (EALGF), convened local government leaders and practitioners from East African partner states in Arusha, Tanzania on 27-28 February 2024 for a regional conference on local economic development in cross-border communities.

EALGF is a network of ministries of local government, local government associations and organizations with an interest in local government in East Africa, involved in promoting effective decentralization, empowering local governments to deliver development at the local level, and engaging with the East African Community (EAC) and other formal regional structures. It was officially launched in 2012 in Arusha (Tanzania) by the Ministers of local government of the five countries of the EAC, EALGA and its five member associations, in partnership with CLGF, UCLG, EU, and UNDP.

The regional conference showcased and underscored the role of local government in facilitating the EAC trade agenda following a commitment made by EALGA and the EAC under their memorandum of understanding signed in February 2022.

EALGF representatives during a field interaction with livestock traders at the Longido district livestock market.
In her keynote address, Dr. Irene Isaka, the EAC Deputy Secretary General committed to further involving local governments in the EAC’s procedures, noting that, “local governments are the epicentre of productivity and they feed and ensure sustainable markets, it therefore becomes imperative that we at the EAC include and involve them in our discussions and planning processes”.

EALGA Chairperson, Cllr Jeannette Nyiramasengesho highlighted the challenges of the EAC Common Market Protocol for local governments in terms of regulatory frameworks, revenue generation, service provision, and trade management, as it was developed without adequate consultation or feedback from the local government sector. “The protocol continues to have significant negative impacts on local economies, which inadvertently calls for dialogue to inform the local economic development prospects at the country level”, she added.

Ms. Claire Frost, the CLGF Programme Manager explained that CLGF would continue to champion local economic development because of its ability to enable local governments to not only enforce laws and policies but also play a developmental role by convening key stakeholders, reinforcing social inclusion, supporting SMEs and decent work along with increasing opportunities for citizens to engage in trade and investment.

Participants also received information on how to access resources for trade and investment from Dr. Jenifer Bukhohe, the UNCDF Deputy Director for Local Transformative Finance who spoke about the friendly loan guarantee that would allow local governments access loans with UNCDF as the guarantor. This is part of UNCDF’s work with other partners in influencing the global financial ecosystem to ensure that cities and local governments have access to finance and the capacity to utilize those resources. She also shared that UNCDF was working on developing sources of own-source revenue for local governments and improving inter-governmental transfer systems given that some countries have no proper systems for transferring resources to local governments.

Right to left EALGA Secretary General Rose Gertrude Gamwera and CLGF Programme Manager Claire Frost and other LG stakeholders during a panel session at the LED conference
Florence Atieno, the Chairperson for Women Cross Border Traders in Kenya invited fellow women traders to follow official border procedures to avoid illicit trade and reap the benefits such as free storage space for their goods, established by the formal structures to enhance safety. She referred to cross-border trade as, “a good opportunity for women to access the international market”.

The conference culminated into a cross-border pilot project that will be implemented by EALGA in Longido District, Tanzania linking to Kajiado county in Kenya, with support from CLGF.

The event was supported by the European Union under its project “Strengthening local government’s role as a partner in development”, which runs from 2022 to 2025, aimed at increasing recognition of the important role of local government, promoting subsidiarity and reinforcing decentralization across the Commonwealth. The countries represented included; Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda and Tanzania.
Border district representatives from Tororo in Uganda, Holili in Tanzania and Kajiado in Kenya, together with other local government stakeholders from the region outlined several recommendations on how to improve cross border trade to foster a holistic integration process. These included the following:

- CLGF should support continuous peer learning, dialogue and networking among local governments associations on LED and other SDGs to accelerate the realization of Agenda 2030
- The EAC should work with Local leaders and gain insights on how to promote and adapt trade facilitation at the LG level
- EALGF partners should support local governments in building a knowledge hub to document success stories on local economic development, promote innovation and supplement existing capacity-building efforts
- EALGF partners should support information sharing and citizen participation at local government level as they are the engine of local economic development
- The EAC should work on the harmonization of policies and local governments priorities
- Cross-border communities in the 7 EAC states must make use of joint border committees (JBC) for mutual co-existence and trade facilitation
- Local governments should be supported to access financing instruments in existence such as pool financing, grants, and bonds- among others. This also includes building their capacity to access these instruments, for instance through the use of alternative mechanisms like special-purpose vehicles
- The EAC working with partner states should create an enabling policy and regulatory environment to facilitate trade in cross-border communities
- Continuous advocacy and engagement are essential to break existing barriers in terms of economic independence e.g. user fees, import permits, infrastructure developments.