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'Lack of infrastructure costing farmers'
By CYNTHIA MWALE

GOVERNMENT says lack of proper infrastructure in Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) member States is hampering most farmers from exporting surplus grain.

Minister of Agriculture, Food and Cooperatives Peter Daka said the issue of poor infrastructure such as access roads in individual countries and those linking other countries in the region needs to be tackled if COMESA countries are to achieve growth.

Mr Daka said this when he officiated at a COMESA/ Alliance for Commodity Trade for Eastern and Southern Africa (ACTESA) conference whose theme is Awakening the sleeping giant: Making grain markets work for smallholder farmers and consumers in Eastern and Southern Africa at Lusaka’s Taj Pamodzi Hotel yesterday.

“This conference has been convened at a time when most of our countries have produced surplus grain that can be exported to deficit areas within and outside the region.

“This can easily be achieved if the challenges that inhibit easy access to goods within the region are addressed,” he said.

He said there is need for a collective responsibility by governments and stakeholders to invest in critical public goods such as infrastructure, research and education.

He said there is also need to develop and adopt appropriate policies that will encourage and facilitate trade at both national and regional levels for the benefit of farmers, traders and consumers.

The minister said sometimes, farmers have been given a good price for grain but due to lack of market access, the move is out-weighted by poor infrastructure.

Mr Daka said the sector has the potential to reduce poverty and increase incomes of rural people who depend on agriculture for their livelihood, adding that smallholder farmers account for the largest produce of grain.

He cited Zambia’s small-scale farmers whose produce account for about 70 percent of the total national produce.

Earlier, COMESA secretary general Sindiso Ngwenya said while the major citizens of COMESA region derive their livelihood from agriculture, the sector’s contribution to the economy is declining in most countries within the region.

"Given the high population growth, per capita food production in the region is declining. While the per capita production trends in the rest of the world have been going upwards, sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing downward trends," he said.

Mr Ngwenya said agricultural commodities are the major drivers for growth in intra-COMESA trade.

He said COMESA is currently assisting member states to implement the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) to achieve the target of doubling per capita income and reducing the number of poor people through steady expansion.