The annual meetings of the Arab Cooperation in Accreditation (ARAC) were held at the Residence Hotel in Tunis, Tunisia from 8 to 12 September 2019. The 7th General Assembly was held on the last day of meetings on 12 September 2019. Mrs Mutasa the SADCAS CEO attended the meetings in her dual capacity as the Vice Chair of the African Accreditation Cooperation (AFRAC) and Chair of SADC Accreditation Cooperation (SADCA). Her attendance costs were met by PTB Germany under the PTB/SADC SQAM Support Project on Strengthening Quality Infrastructure for Trade and Enhancement, Competitiveness and Consumer Protection in SADC.

The meetings started with an opening ceremony which was attended by over 72 delegates amongst whom were ARAC members, invited guests from AFRAC, SADCA, cooperating partner UNIDO, Chair of the Association of industry and Mining in Tunisia, representatives of regional standardization organizations etc.

The opening ceremony was graced by the Honourable Slim Feriani, The Tunisian Minister of Industry and SMEs. The General Assembly started off 45 minutes late with welcome remarks by Mr Yassine Wali the Director General of TUNAC who outlined the achievements of TUNAC and thanked UNIDO and SIDA for the support afforded towards the development of ARAC and expressed his hope that the meetings would come up with solutions to the regional challenges. This was followed by remarks by the Chair of ARAC who welcomed delegates and also expressed gratitude to UNIDO and SIDA for support to ARAC over the years. She then informed the General Assembly meeting about the current membership of ARAC which comprises of 17 Accreditation bodies from Arab countries, 4 of which have signed the ARAC Multilateral Arrangement (MLA) and the training workshops for accreditation bodies and peer evaluators held during the course of the week of meetings. She then articulated the importance of the ARAC MLA to the region. In her remarks the representative of UNIDO, Dr Dorsaf Zangar conveyed the wishes of UNIDO for a successful 7th ARAC General Assembly. She highlighted UNIDO’s efforts in pushing UN strategic development goals SD#9 on Industry Innovation and Infrastructure with its partners throughout the world and informed the meeting about the critical discussions on the base of the ARAC Secretariat underway and also about the technical support that will be provided by UNIDO to 5 ARAC members as they work towards international recognition. She then thanked the Chair of ARAC and her team of executives for putting in a lot of work in the development of ARAC. A Representative of the Arab Union, Dr Abhunat hailed the recognition of the ARAC MRA as a key milestone to the Arab Union to boost exports and economic integrity and also thanked SIDA and UNIDO for the technical support afforded to ARAC. He articulated the importance of the MRA in improving Arab intra and inter regional trade and informed the meeting that the Free Trade Area between Arab countries will come into effect soon. This was reiterated by the representative of the Arabic Industrial Development and Mining Organization (AIDMO) who thanked the Minister for all the resources put to make these meetings a success. The meetings were hosted by TUNAC a member of ARAC.
In the keynote address, Honourable Mr Feriani welcomed delegates and wished them good and comfortable stay in Tunisia. He thanked UNIDO for continued support to ARAC and the team at TUNAC for organizing the meeting. He informed delegates that Tunisia is behind the goal of enhancing inter and intra-regional trade which he said requires radical change in working towards quality and competitive products. He reaffirmed the importance of ARAC MLA and expressed his country’s involvement in ARAC activities. “Industrial sector in Tunisia represents 17% of economy. Tunisia is the 2nd exporter of car components and aeroplane parts to Europe and is the largest exporter of organic Olive Oil for which Tunisia holds the golden medal” he said. He noted that this high level of cooperation between Arab countries is designed to boost trade. “Together we will achieve prosperity” he said, reiterating his country’s commitment to participating in ARAC activities”.

The opening ceremony ended with a presentation by the ARAC Chair of plaques of appreciation to Honourable Minister and other invited guests including myself.

The opening ceremony was then followed by the General Assembly during which various reports were presented by the Chair, Chairs of ARAC Committees and Secretariat and discussed including discussions on sustainability of ARAC, incorporation of ARAC which is underway etc. Presentations were also made by other organizations such as SAFE Arab Food Safety Reference Laboratories and new Codex Guidelines followed by a presentation by a UNIDO anti-corruption expert on Integrity Compliance for Organizations – Anti corruption expert UNIDO. The expert urged ARAC in their current review of the ARAC Bylaws to incorporate good governance and anti-corruption principles in the bylaws using ISO standard 37000 as a basis and to put in place measures to build integrity such as whistleblowing, contract terms, financial and commercial controls, policy on gifts etc.

The AFRAC and SADCA reports were the last item on the ARAC agenda after a long day of deliberations. The reports were received with great interest judged by the interesting questions posed.

On the side-lines of the meetings, a number of meetings were held with ARAC members as well as aspiring members from Africa to try and convince them to be members of AFRAC.

The meetings which were hosted by TUNAC were well organized. A dinner was hosted by TUNAC at one of the top restaurants in Tunis located in the tourism hub of Tunis.

Attendance to the 7th ARAC General assembly was good opportunity for networking and sharing experiences and strengthening our relationships. The meetings provided an invaluable opportunity to enhance collaborations and strengthen the relationship amongst AFRAC, ARAC and SADCA and also the developing relationship between Africa and the Arab region.

Many thanks to PTB Germany for sponsoring my attendance to these meetings.

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