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International Seminar Urges Continued Focus on Agriculture in Africa

Washington, DC—May 13, 2007

At the 3-5 June 2007 international workshop held in Lusaka, Zambia on strengthening and widening markets and overcoming supply side constraints, African policy makers, agribusiness, farm leaders, international organizations, donors, and foundations agreed on the importance of agriculture and trade for poverty alleviation and pledged their ongoing support to and advocacy for this important sector.

Over 100 local and international stakeholders attended the seminar organized by the International Food & Agricultural Trade Policy Council (IPC) in conjunction with the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), and the Partnership to Cut Hunger and Poverty in Africa. IPC Chairman Piet Bukman and COMESA Secretary General Erastus Mwencha delivered keynote addresses at the workshop. African Caribbean Pacific (ACP) Secretary General Sir John R. Kaputin attended the workshop as well as leaders of Farmers' Associations in the COMESA region, representatives of the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP), the WTO, the World Bank, and various donor countries and foundations.

The meeting focused on trade policy options and trade negotiations, emphasizing the importance of regional trade within the COMESA region as well as improved market access for African exports to other countries. Acknowledging that trade liberalization is not a panacea, seminar participants also identified key supply side constraints in the agricultural sector and called for these to be addressed in a coordinated and comprehensive fashion. Many speakers referred to increasing global demand for food and feed as well as fuel, which has resulted in higher commodity prices and dwindling global surpluses, and urged African countries to increase domestic production. There are also trade opportunities for African producers in this new environment.

"After a considerable period of neglect, a great deal of energy is now being focused on the agricultural sector in Africa," IPC Chairman Bukman said, "and this is to be very much welcomed." Through CAADP, African governments have pledged to spend some 10% of their domestic budget on the agricultural sector; donors have agreed to support the African-led initiative, as well as to provide increased "aid for trade" in response to such calls by the WTO. The World Bank is also rightly emphasizing the importance of the sector for poverty alleviation, and the Gates and Rockefeller Foundations have embarked on promoting a Green Revolution in Africa.

Secretary General Mwencha stressed the importance of regional integration, but also called upon the COMESA region "to be engaged on the international agenda, such as the Doha Round negotiations, the Economic Partnership Agreements with the EU, trade relations with the US as well as emerging countries." The importance of the private sector, and in particular effective farm organizations, was stressed by all participants, and it should be closely involved in efforts to improve market access and supply-side constraints.

A conference report of the seminar will be prepared. All presentations given at this seminar are now available at http://www.agritrade.org/events/strengthening_african_markets.html

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About IPC: The International Food & Agricultural Trade Policy Council (IPC) pursues pragmatic trade and development policies in food and agriculture to meet the world's growing needs. IPC accomplishes its mission by convening influential policymakers, agribusiness executives, farm leaders, and academics from developed and developing countries to clarify complex issues, build consensus, and to advocate policies to decision-makers.