SADCA HOLDS WORKSHOP ON IAF CERTSEARCH - GLOBAL DATABASE OF ACCREDITED CERTIFICATION

SADC Cooperation in Accreditation (SADCA) held a virtual workshop on the International Accreditation Forum's (IAF) CertSearch - Global Database of Accredited Certification on 27 October 2021. The workshop was officially opened by Mrs Maureen Primrose Mutasa who in her capacity as the SADCA Chair welcomed the workshop presenter Mr Brahim Houla, Member of the IAF Database Management Committee, Chair of the IAF Communications and Marketing Committee and Accreditation Services Director GCC Accreditation Centre.

Mrs Mutasa gave a brief background on the development of the International Accreditation Forum's (IAF) Global Database which houses and provides an authoritative source for validating accredited certifications issued all over the world which dates back to 2014. The program was championed by the IAF's Database Management Committee (DMC) represented by Accreditation Bodies, Certification Bodies and Industry. The global database which was branded as *IAF CertSearch* was launched during the run up to the 2019 World Accreditation Day. A number of certifications bodies in the region had signed up to the IAF CertSearch amidst some concern on data security.

Mrs Mutasa outlined the objective of the Workshop which was:
- Inform stakeholders about the *IAF CertSearch* Database;
- Inform stakeholders about the essential modifications that have to be made to the principles of the IAF CertSearch to achieve the intended purpose of a global database of accredited certifications.
- Hear at first hand the views of stakeholders on the proposed changes to the principles of the database

The workshop was well attended by at least 80 stakeholders on 59 gadgets logged onto the *Zoom* platform. The stakeholders who attended the workshop included   accreditation bodies (AB) representatives from MAURITAS, SADCAS and SANAS, accredited and under process certification bodies (CBs), certified organizations mainly industry, procurement authorities, National Accreditation Focal Points, certification Advisory Committee members and AB assessors.
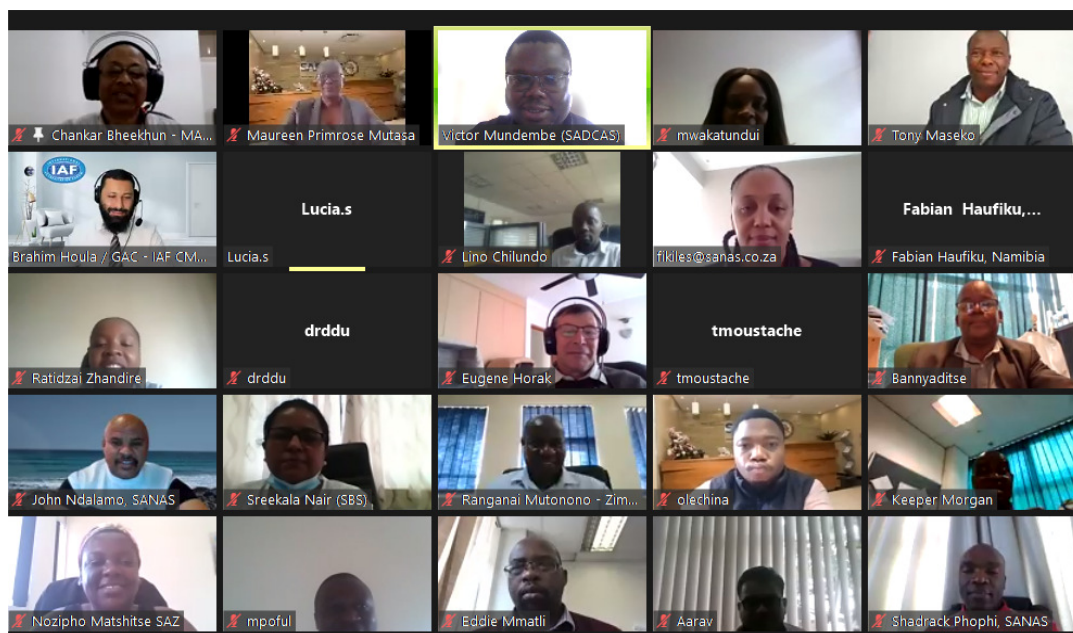
Some of the delegates at the IAF CertSearch Workshop

Mr Brahim Houla first presented the major issues with the current business model that include the voluntary nature of uploads of data by CBs, with only 35% achievement, due to many CBs having withheld data because of concerns of possible commercialization of data. With insufficient certification data, the current financial model of IAF CertSearch is not viable hence not sustainable. Furthermore, the persistent problem of fraudulent certificates has not been addressed through *IAF CertSearch*, as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic with fake certificates for PPE and medical devices. Mr Houla explained that certification trade associations, accreditation user groups and others remain supportive as long as the issues of concern are addressed.

The following key proposed changes were presented:
- To make the database mandatory for CBs to upload their certification data;
- To introduce a "user pays" model;
- To include contractual arrangements between CBs and the *IAF Database LLC*; and
- To update the contract between the service provider *Quality Trade* and *IAF Database LLC*.

Mr Brahim Houla explained that in the new self-funding model, revenue is generated from analytical services and verification services, but with the objective of being not-for-profit. The model is consistent with the principle of not selling certification data and compliance with relevant privacy laws. Electronic data management agreements formalise the controls necessary to prevent or limit unauthorized data mining (to prevent competitive poaching) as well other security measures to ensure data integrity and protect against unauthorized access to, and use of, the data. There will be no access to personal information.

The presentation was then followed by a question-and-answer session during which the following key issues were raised by the stakeholders and to which Mr Houla provided **answers** to the satisfaction of stakeholders:
- *What sort of information do the Credit Rating Agencies rely on from the database* - There are a number of supply chains and number of suppliers from those supply chains and the database is to confirm whether the suppliers bring the certificates that are fake or authentic or valid or what percentage of the work that they do is in conformance, and it will be possible to rate the suppliers as credible or not.
- *Could you clarify on the commercialization statement versus ownership of the database and related agreements. I am concerned on how the end-to-end process works like* – The old model the database was free, the IT service was free. The counterpart *Quality Trade (QT)* was putting a link on the database so that database users can go and see the other services available from QT, that wat QT had a benefit to commercialise themselves. There was concern that the certification data may or may not have been commercialised. The new model removes the option for QT to commercialise themselves and only has a subscription service where QT just provides the IT software.
- *Is the validity of certificates dependent on the registration status of the AB issuing accreditation to CBs or it is just limited to accreditation status of the CB* – the CB must be accredited and the AB

must be a signatory to the IAF MLA under the Main Scope ISO/IEC 17021-1 Management Systems. All sub-scopes that the AB has accredited can still be uploaded.

- *Does this mean that anyone who wants to have access to the data who is not an AB or CB shall be required to pay* – No. It is free for most of the *small verifiers*, one just enters the code of that certificate into the database search engine to verify validity of the certificate. The reply may be "*this certificate is not in the database*". Those who want to verify hundreds of thousands of certificates will pay.

- *In terms of the competency of accredited CBs, does this new proposed database take this into account? Also, will a certified client be able to check this information on the database* – A certified client can check if their certificate has been uploaded or not. If not, they can ask the CB as to why their certificate is not on the database. One CB cannot check who are the clients of another CB. We are aware that there is competition between CBs and we don't want this information to go out. If you have been issued a certificate as a CB client, make sure that the certificate is authentic. If you are a user, a supply chain operator, government, regulator you can access the database for free and confirm the authenticity of the certificate that you have in hand.

- *Elaborate on how ABs are going to make it mandatory for accredited CBs to upload all the certificates they have issued* –The document *IAF ML4* will be revised to include a requirement that CBs must upload their certificates and that if they do not there will be sanctions. Such sanctions should normally be in the contract between the AB and the CB. The discussions at the moment indicate a normal way of dealing with nonconformities, followed by corrective process as per AB policy.

- *What are the criteria for recognising ABs* – The AB shall be an IAF MLA signatory under the main scope Management Systems ISO/IEC 17021-1. Which means that the AB is providing accreditation to Management System CBs, was peer evaluated by IAF and the Region and recognised as competent. All recognised ABs are listed on the IAF website, https://iaf.nu/en/recognised-abs/ from which one can search or filter for the ABs in the different economies and view the scopes and sub-scopes that are recognised.

  The SADCA Arrangement members (MAURITAS, SADCAS & SANAS) meet the requirements, as they are recognised under the main scope Management Systems ISO/IEC 17021-1 and:
    o sub-scopes QMS and FSMS for MAURITAS;
    o sub-scopes QMS, EMS, OHMS and FSMS for SADCAS and
    o subs-copes QMS, EMS, OHSMS, FSMS and EnMS for SANAS.

- *Is the agreement going to be between the CB and the IAF or is it going to be between the CB and AB? Are the CBs that had already signed agreements with their ABs for IAF CertSearch going to sign new agreements?* – For using the database it's a user agreement so as a CB you will have a contract with *IAF Database LLC*, the entity managing the database. This is also because as the owner of the data, the CB submits the data to *IAF Database LLC* to manage the data. The contract between the CB and the AB is already in place since application for accreditation, as required by ISO/IEC 17011. Most ABs will not need to sign a new contract as they already apply all the rules of the IAF. Some ABs may require a new agreement due to legal requirements when specific items are added to the contract. CBs must consult with their ABs on this matter.

- *How will the database handle certifications by more than one CB* – if an entity has different certifications from more than one CB, each CB will upload its own certificates. All certificates will be available on the database.

The SADCA Vice Chair, Mr Chankar Bheekhun gave the vote of thanks, appreciating Mr Houla for taking time at short notice to present at the workshop, for the comprehensive presentation and for the fruitful discussions, signifying how he values the significance of accredited certification. Mr Bheekhun thanked the SADCAS Chair Mrs Mutasa for coming up with this laudable initiative to organize the workshop. He thanked the Programme Director Mr Victor Mundembe the SADCA Technical

Committee Vice-chair and the SADCA Secretariat Mrs Yolanda Vinnicombe and Ms Fikile Skosana for making all the necessary logistical arrangements for participation through the virtual Zoom platform.

Commenting on the outcome of the workshop, the SADCA Chair Mrs Maureen Mutasa had this to say: "*We had very good discussions based on the key points raised by stakeholders after Mr Houla's presentation. The workshop objective of informing stakeholders about the IAF CertSearch Database and the essential modifications that have to be made to the principles of the IAF CertSearch to achieve the intended purpose of a global database of accredited certifications were achieved. There is interest in the region for the IAF CertSearch for which some of the CBs in the region had already signed up for. Since data security has been addressed I am sure those CBs that had not signed up for this will also be ready to join in making it easier for us to enforce the uploading of data*".

As away forward consultations on the IAF CertSearch will continue into April 2022 through FAQs and webinars. A final presentation of the IAF CertSearch revised model will be made at the 2022 mid- term meetings after which a ballot will be undertaken amongst members.

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