

**CLOSING CEREMONY REMARKS BY MR. PHODISO VALASHIA, THE
COMMISSIONER OF CUSTOMS FOR THE BOTSWANA UNIFIED
REVENUE SERVICES (BURS)**

THE 9TH WCO-SACU CONNECT PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE

SACU Executive Secretary, Ms. Paulina Elago
Deputy Director Tariff, Namibia, Ms. Jacklyn Gawanas,
WCO Deputy Director of Capacity Building, Ms. Brenda Mundia,
SACU Heads of Customs,
Members of the media,
Ladies and gentlemen,

1. A very good morning to you all.
2. It gives me great pleasure, on behalf of SACU Heads of Customs, to address you this morning on a matter that is very close to our collective hearts: celebrating a milestone on our humble contribution towards a free, fair, open, predictable and sustainable international trade in the SACU region.
3. It will be recalled that SACU was established over a 100 years ago. The main consideration that brought us together during a substantial period of these years, at least on the Customs administration front, was revenue mobilization. The limitation of such an approach on industrialization and economic development of the region cannot be over emphasized. It is for this reason, amongst other considerations, that SACU in 2002 came up with a new Agreement that hit the re-set button on the role of Customs administration in the region. In terms of the 2002 SACU Agreement, Customs Administrations in the Region now not only mobilize government revenue but, most importantly, are also increasingly focused on facilitating free, fair and open international trade, fostering sustainable regional economic development and protecting the region from cross-border crime. It is in answer to this responsibility that, exactly five (5) years back, as SACU Customs Administrations, with the kind assistance of the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the World Customs Organization (WCO), we came up with a Customs reform and modernization project called, the WCO-SACU Connect Project.

4. Director of Ceremony, for us, as Heads of Customs, it has been an adventurous five years under the project, with notable achievements in the midst of a number of challenges. The Customs landscape of 2018 is not that of five years back as a direct result of the WCO-SACU Connect Project. I would like to cite a few examples of these achievements. We now, thanks to the project, have the following:
 - a. Connectivity between the South African Revenue Services (SARS) and Eswatini Revenue Authority IT Systems, enabling real time data exchange between the two Administrations, and we are at an advanced stage of achieving the same thing between SARS and Botswana Unified Revenue Service;
 - b. All Member States, except one, now have modern Customs legislative framework, which replacing the 1964 Customs laws that existed in Member States before the project started. The remaining Member State is working towards having the revised legislation being considered at the next seating of Parliament;
 - c. SACU Preferred Trader framework, which seeks to fast track the processing of cargo transported by traders with high levels of compliance;
 - d. Regional Customs Trade Forum; and
 - e. SACU-wide risk management framework, through which we have, for the first time in over 100 years, undertaken joint and very successful Customs enforcement operations.
5. All these initiatives are intended to breakdown some of the trade barriers that have existed within SACU for over a century and, in the process, create an enabling environment for ease of doing business within the SACU region, enhancing the competitiveness of SACU traders within the region and on the global market, as well as enhancing the collaborative capacity of SACU Customs Administrations to deal with non-compliance.
6. It has not been an easy journey to arrive where we are today. There were a number of challenges, including funding, long and complex legislative processes, capacity constraints and administrative bottlenecks and, lack of synergies between national and regional strategies and programs. Though these challenges often put the limit of our resolve to the test, we have however, in our own way, gone right through them.

That is why we are here today, standing shoulder-to-shoulder and proud of the humble successes we have attained.

7. Master of Ceremony, I know of no tree that grows without nurturing and watering. We too cannot, with good conscience, claim any exclusivity of success of this project. In fact, as Heads of Customs, we were but just the depository and conveyors of support from various quarters.
 - a. The unwavering political support that we received from our principals in the five SACU Member States is what really broke the ground and planted and sustained the seed for reform. We wish to register our sincere appreciation to the our Parliaments, SACU Summit, Council and Commission in this respect.
 - b. We would also want to register our sincere appreciation to the government of Sweden for their much needed financial support. We are particularly grateful that this was support without any strings attached. It was the kind of support that allowed SACU to set the agenda and tone of the project.
 - c. We would also want to thank the private sector for always being available to advice and critic our work, especially under the Regional Customs Trade Forum.
 - d. It will be remiss of me not to recognize the technical support that we have received from the WCO Secretariat, right from inception to this point. Your (WCO Secretariat) participation in this project affirmed in us the conviction that we are not alone in this because, you carry the seal of approval of the global Customs family. We thank you and look forward to your continued support and hand of friendship as we move into the future.
 - e. The SACU Secretariat, your total commitment to the success of this project can only be exceeded by your professionalism, patience, accountability and sheer hard work. We thank you most profoundly – we could not have asked for a better pillar of strength.
 - f. To all the technical officers who had a role to play in this project, thank you very much for giving freely of your dedication, passion and talent. You constantly remind us of a duck swimming on a river: when you look at it, it moves gracefully on water whilst below, under the water, its legs are working very energetically and tirelessly. We thank you; you have made us proud.

8. To my colleagues, fellow Heads of Customs, as I thank you also, I would like us not to see today as an opportunity for us to take rest under the aura of success. Today, more than any day, should be a reminder that, dedication, hard-work, accountability and integrity are keys to success. Reforms do not come about riding on a magic wand. We therefore should be inspired to re-double our efforts and break new grounds on modernizing and reforming Customs service in this region. Today should remind us that, citizens of this Region do not want poverty; they want economic advancement; they want to be gainfully employed; they want to be able to trade with the rest of the world on an equal footing and, as Heads of Customs, given the fact that we have been placed at the very heart of trade facilitation, we are the custodians of those aspirations; we are the custodians of those hopes; and we are the custodians of those dreams. We therefore must work, and work even harder and smarter than ever before.
9. Ladies and gentlemen, with those remarks, I want to thank you for your kind attention.
10. Thank you.