



18 May 2009

African Union (AU) 2nd Customs Officials of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) Coordination Meeting 30 April - 01 May 2009, Lome Togo.

1. The 2nd meeting of the African Union/Customs Departments of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) coordination meeting was held on 30 April-1 May 2009 in Lome, Togo. The meeting was organized as a follow up to the 1st meeting held from 23-24 April 2008 Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The objective of the meeting was to further review the coordination mechanism between the AU Commission and the Customs Departments of RECs by coming up with Terms of Reference for the Customs Coordination subcommittee.
2. The meeting was attended by delegates from the following RECs: EAC; COMESA; ECCAS; ECOWAS and SADC. Also in attendance, as observers, were representatives of Cameroon, Sudan; Zimbabwe and UNECA. SACU, which is recognised as an Intergovernmental Organisation (IGOs), was represented by Mr Yusuf Daya the Deputy Director Trade Facilitation.
3. Mr Jean Noel Francois, Director Customs Cooperation Division of the African Union Commission (AUC), opened the meeting. He welcomed participants to the meeting and thanked delegates for attending the meeting and provided a background to the meeting. He noted that this Committee was convened in response to a recommendation of the 3rd session of the AU Sub-Committee of Director Generals of Customs held in May 2007 in Abuja, Nigeria, that the AU establish an AU Commission/Customs department of RECs Coordination Committee constituting Customs Experts from the RECs and from the Customs Division of the AUC.

4. He explained that the framework for continental integration has been laid down in the Abuja Treaty that provides for a process whereby RECs are established and used as building blocks for continental integration. In practical terms RECs will go through a process of putting in place Free Trade Areas (FTAs), thereafter upgrading to the status of regional Customs Unions (CUs) and ultimately merging into a single continental Customs Union. He further noted that that in most African RECs, this process of establishing FTAs and CUs is already underway but with unequal success. He highlighted that some RECs are on the way to achieving a 100% FTA while one, the EAC, has already risen to CU status. He further highlighted that two African Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs), SACU and UEMOA, which do not have the official status of RECs, have already attained CU status.
5. The Director highlighted that within the long term perspective of the establishment of a continental customs union there are many areas that need to be addressed, including harmonization of procedures in areas like import, export, transit, rules of origin, valuations, harmonization of customs regulations etc. He further highlighted that customs cooperation between African Customs administrations exists under the aegis of the World Customs organisation and emphasised that there was a need for proper coordination of projects and efforts to limit the dispersion of efforts and resources into competing activities. He explained that the purpose of this coordination committee is to ensure coordination of the customs projects and programmes of all integration bodies of the AU within the framework of the Abuja Treaty.
6. The Chairperson of the meeting highlighted that whilst the Abuja Treaty provides for the establishment of a continental Customs Union, it does not provide clarity on specifically how this is to be achieved. The meeting was invited to deliberate on the pre-requisites, challenges and constraints related to the establishment of a continental Customs Union.
7. The meeting noted that some of the prerequisites would include having a Common Tariff Nomenclature (CTN), a Common External Tariff (CET), identical rules of Origin and common customs procedures. However, the meeting noted that in order for these to be attainable there are significant constraints, both at the level of RECs and the continent, related to diversity of the African Economies. The meeting recognised that given the various levels of development and integration on the continent achieving the pre-requisites would remain a significant challenge. The meeting agreed that in order to promote the continental Customs Union work should continue in areas that are likely to bring successes. These include but are not limited to issues around transit, Rules of Origin and customs procedures.

8. The meeting agreed that the RECs submit their road maps and work plans for the attainment of Customs Union status to the AUC for further analysis. This will provide input in developing a strategic plan for the AUC Customs Cooperation Division and the development of a road map for the continental customs union.
9. The meeting also agreed that the AUC work on developing Terms of Reference and a work plan for the AUC/RECs Coordination Committee. It was requested that a bureau composed of UNECA; COMESA; and SACU assist the AUC in this regard.

END

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