



**OPENING STATEMENT BY PRESIDENT CYRIL RAMAPHOSA AT THE
9th SUMMIT OF THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN CUSTOMS UNION**

**26 JUNE 2026
CAPE TOWN**

Programme Director,
Your Majesty,
Your Excellencies Heads of State and Government,
Honourable Ministers and Members of the SACU Council,
Executive Secretary of SACU, Mr Dumisani Masilela,
Members of Parliament and members of the diplomatic corps,
Officials,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning.

Allow me to begin by thanking you, Your Excellency Dr Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, for your stewardship during your term as SACU Chair.

Due to your leadership, we assume the chairship of a stronger, more resilient SACU.

We warmly welcome His Excellency Duma Gideon Boko of the Republic of Botswana who is participating in our Summit for the first time.

I would ask that we observe a moment of silence in memory of our departed leaders: Dr Hage Geingob, who passed away in 2024, and Dr Festus Mogae, who passed away in May this year.

They were both steadfast champions of pan-African solidarity and advocates for regional economic integration. We are comforted by the knowledge that their legacies live on.

Your Majesty, Your Excellencies,

At our last Summit in June 2023 in the Kingdom of Eswatini, we reflected on the global economic challenges that had emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We agreed on the need for a coordinated response to tackle supply chain disruptions as well as food and energy market volatility.

The Re-imagined SACU Agenda emanated from that Summit.

We gather today at a moment when the global economy is being reshaped before our eyes. Trade patterns are changing. New technologies are redrawing industrial competitiveness.

Supply chains are being reconfigured. Around the world, nations are reorganising themselves for a far more uncertain future.

In such a world, no African country, regardless of its size, can prosper alone. Our strength will increasingly depend on the strength of our region.

It is at this moment when a Re-imagined SACU Agenda matters. SACU has lived through empire, two world wars, the Great Depression, the struggle against colonialism and apartheid, the birth of independent African states and the transformation of our own region.

Few institutions anywhere in the world have demonstrated such endurance.

Three years on, the global economic environment remains precarious and uncertain. It is marked by trade tensions, tariff disputes, supply chain disruptions and growing economic fragmentation.

In this increasingly contested global trading system, the need for Africa to strengthen its economic resilience has become all the greater. A Re-imagined SACU therefore becomes the vehicle which would enable our region to navigate the turbulent economic environment that the current moment continues to present us with.

Through frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area and mechanisms like SACU, we want to enhance intra-African commerce and trade.

We need to build resilience and reduce the economic dependencies that render African economies vulnerable to the whims of international trade. The certainties upon which the international trading system rested for decades are steadily giving way to uncertainty.

The decline in official development assistance has affected members of our Union.

The World Bank estimates that global growth will slow to 2.5 percent this year because of the conflict in the Middle East.

The SACU economies have, however, proven to be resilient against external shocks, supported by stronger regional integration, the diversification of export destinations and effective risk-mitigation measures. It is through regional integration that our region will continue to strengthen economic sovereignty.

The overall GDP growth in SACU is expected to grow to 2.64 percent in 2026 and 2.1 percent in 2027.

Ours is the world's oldest customs union, established in 1910. It has evolved from being an instrument serving colonial interests to one that advances regional economic integration, development and shared prosperity among member states.

Since the SACU Agreement of 2002, this Union has served as a crucial building block for broader regional integration efforts.

At the same time, the revenue transfers support the delivery of public services and infrastructure development.

Yet, we have not fully unleashed SACU's potential.

Our Union has the potential to be more than a fiscal instrument. It must be a catalyst for development.

We therefore welcome the progress towards establishing a Regional Development Fund in partnership with the African Development Bank.

SACU must be able to adapt its frameworks and instruments to advance industrialisation, strengthen regional value chains, promote economic diversification, attract investment and improve the economic competitiveness of member states.

It is time to move away from the traditional role of SACU as a customs arrangement and towards being the premier platform for regional economic resilience and self-reliance. This is essential because institutions that fail to adapt to changing realities ultimately become custodians of the past rather than architects of the future.

Commendable progress has been made in a number of areas. Our ambition must be nothing less than building Southern Africa into one of the world's most competitive regional production hubs.

In agriculture, for example, there has been valuable cooperation by farmers across member states on citrus and sugar cane production. There has been important cooperation between South Africa and Botswana on Foot and Mouth vaccines.

We acknowledge the work of the SACU Task Team on Automotive and Mineral Beneficiation that convened in April in Maseru. Its focus is on the development of the battery value chain and cross-border component manufacturing in the auto and mining sectors.

Eswatini's manufacturing base, Lesotho's textile sector, Namibia's green hydrogen and uranium processing potential, Botswana's diamond beneficiation experience and South Africa's automotive and steel capacity should be harnessed towards a regional industrial ecosystem that can compete in the global economy.

Industrialisation is the only durable path from commodity dependence to an economy capable of sustaining our growing populations. The next chapter in SACU's history must be written not in customs schedules alone, but in factories that produce, laboratories that innovate, railways that connect our economies and young people whose talents are fully realised.

With Africa holding approximately 30 percent of the world's mineral reserves, SACU needs to leverage the growing global demand for critical minerals to support our own regional value chains and to fast-track the beneficiation of our raw materials.

To make use of these opportunities, we must continue to invest in shared infrastructure.

We need roads, railways, ports, energy grids, digital networks and water systems that don't just serve individual national economies, but that serve an integrated regional economy.

The Trans-Kalahari Railway, which Botswana and Namibia have been advancing, is precisely the kind of transformative infrastructure that the region needs.

The Lesotho Highlands Water Project is a model of shared infrastructure that has served both Lesotho and South Africa for decades.

Eswatini's energy interconnections with South Africa and Mozambique demonstrate the same value.

We are also launching cross-border special economic zones that will serve as nodal points for regional industrialisation.

Shared infrastructure requires shared investment. We must attract private investment by creating conditions in our region that are conducive to both international and domestic investment.

On this great continent lies everything the world needs for the next century of human development. The question is whether we will be the architects of that development or merely suppliers of raw materials.

This is the challenge we must address at this Summit.

Our meeting would not be possible without the efforts of our Ministers, officials and the Executive Secretary and his team at the Secretariat.

We thank you for your hard work and support to all the institutions of the Union.

South Africa affirms its commitment to the objectives of this Summit and to the advancement of SACU's strategic objectives.

We are grateful for the collegiality and shared resolve that have always characterised the work of the Customs Union.

One hundred and sixteen years ago, the nations of this region were bound together not by choice, but by the instruments of colonial power.

Today, we choose this Customs Union. We renew it freely. We deepen it deliberately.

Because we understand that economic sovereignty and regional solidarity are not mutually exclusive. They complement each other.

One hundred and sixteen years ago, this Union was created to serve an empire.

Today it must serve the aspirations of free African nations.

Its original purpose was to move goods. Its future purpose must be to create opportunity.

Its past was shaped by history. Its future must be shaped by our choices.

We should therefore choose a re-imagined SACU and stronger SACU over fragmentation.

We choose industrialisation over dependence.

We must together work for a shared prosperity over narrow national interest.

In the end let history record that this generation of African leaders transformed the world's oldest customs union into one of its most dynamic engines of regional development.

It is now my great honour to declare the 9th Summit of the SACU Heads of State and Government officially open.

I thank you.