

***Christmas and Year-end Function Message by the SACU Executive
Secretary, Ms. Paulina M. Elago.***

13 December 2019

WINDHOEK, NAMIBIA

1. Good afternoon colleagues,
2. The festive season is once again downing upon us. I would therefore like to begin by expressing my appreciation to all of you for being here today to jointly bid farewell to the year 2019 in a style and most importantly as a team.
3. We have made it a norm at the Secretariat to come together, to briefly reflect on the year that was in terms of the implementation of our mandate, and overall rejoice together before we join our loved ones for the festive season holiday.
4. Before I go any further, at this point I would like to acknowledge that the timing for this year's function could not be conveniently set to accommodate all of us, hence the low turn-out. I am aware that some of the colleagues are still on the work mission whilst others have already taken their annual leave due to family commitments.
5. We could, however, not have the year-end function earlier due to the tight schedule we had to endure to ensure that all documents and other preparations required for the recent SACU Institutional Meetings held from 2-5 December 2019 here in

Windhoek, were fulfilled. Next year, we will try to set an earlier date for this function.

6. You will agree with me that we spend more time of each day of the week at work than we do with our own families. Therefore, it is fitting that as we break for the holidays, we have time to meet as Team SACU, outside of our usually tight schedule in our offices. This will give a rare opportunity to embrace the spirit of togetherness in a relax and celebratory mood.
7. Before we get to the jovial part of the day, it is important to reflect on some of the achievements that stood out for us and the challenges encountered this year.
8. On the success side, amongst others, we have successfully:
 - (a) Convened all the quarterly Meetings of the SACU Institutions, save for the Council that was only able to meet in April and December 2019 whilst the Summit was not able to convene. We hope that the Summit will be able to conclude bilateral consultations on issues that have been elevated to the Summit by the Council and hopefully convene in June 2020.

- (b) On the trade negotiations front, a key milestone was the conclusion and signing of the SACU-Mozambique-UK Economic Partnership Agreement which, solidifies the strong trade relations and the commitment on both sides, to maintain and ensure continuity of our trade relationship with the United Kingdom as it prepares to leave the European Union, which is now certain with the outcome of the UK elections last night.

- (c) The Secretariat also continue to play a pivotal role in the other ongoing trade negotiations, particularly (i) the African Continental Free Trade Agreement; (ii) COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite Free Trade Agreement, and (ii) EFTA Review. These included convening and facilitating consultative Meetings prior to each round, and briefing sessions for the Senior Trade Officials and Ministers. This is very critical in assisting our Member States to formulate common negotiating positions. Thereby, facilitate effective and successful engagement in the negotiations.

- (d) The conclusion and launching of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement is surely an achievement for the Member States. It created a large market and provides our business community with an increased market access across

the Continent. Secretariat will need to play an important role in ensuring effective implementation, going forward.

- (e) Under the Trade Facilitation Programme, the Secretariat continued to facilitate the cooperation at a regional level in order to create a conducive trade environment and to enhance efficiencies at border posts. The key highlights in this regard include the successful closure of the five years (2014-2018) flagship Customs Modernisation Project named “WCO SACU Connect Project” as well as the handover of the SACU Handbook for the Customs Modernisation Programme by the WCO to the SACU Secretariat and SACU Member States. The Handbook is a blueprint for Customs, and it contains all the tools and technical frameworks required to strengthen the existing cooperation and collaboration on IT Connectivity, Customs Legislative Reform, Preferred Trader Programme, and Risk Management and Enforcement.

- (f) This year, the sugar issue that has been on the SACU Agenda for a long time as a subject of concern, has finally become sweet. As we speak, the Interim solution is being implemented smoothly. A Monitoring and Evaluation tool has been adopted with Member States have begun to report progress. Congratulation to the Policy Research and

Development Directorate for the facilitating the work leading to this outcome to sweetening the sugar.

(g) We have without failing successfully facilitated the calculation and allocation of revenue shares for the Member States.

(h) I wish to also recognise efforts made to improve the Secretariat's operational environment. This include the development of the extranet site for the Institutions of SACU, which was demonstrated to the Member States during the Commission's meeting last week. Various Policies of the Secretariat were also reviewed and approved by the Council. These include the Financial Policy and Guidelines; Information Classification Policy; Procurement Policy and Guidelines; and the Fixed Assets Policy. Our finances are in order and are managed professionally. In that regard, the Secretariat continues to receive unqualified audit reports.

9. I wish to further recognise the contributions made through our different structure including the Professional Staff Forum, Editorial Committee, Senior Management Forum and EXCO.

Through these structures, our work has been streamlined whilst the quality of our outputs has clearly been improved.

10. Allow me to thank each one of you for your effort and contributions toward the achievements of these milestones. Surely, these could not be achieved without your invaluable inputs and contributions.
11. As I alluded to earlier, it is a fact that we tend to spend more hours attending to work than we do with our own families daily. The nature of work such in the areas of Trade Negotiations require some of us to travel extensively and being away from our families. Please convey my appreciation to your respective families for their support and understanding, in that regard.
12. As for the shortcomings, of course we have had our fair share of challenges. For instance, we were not able to convene the Summit of the SACU Heads of State or Government this year. You are also aware that progress on the implementation of the Ministerial Work Programme had slowed down due to divergences in some areas that require Summit's guidance and directives. Nevertheless, I am pleased to note that work in the areas of Trade Facilitation and Regional value chains continue make notable progress. For example, the technical experts on regional value chains have identified agro processing as the

initial priority sector for the development of the value chains in SACU. My own contract was also not approved until three months later.

13. Going forward and as we prepare for 2020, you will be aware that the Council has just approved our revised budget for the current financial year and the proposed budget and planned activities for the year 2020/21 Financial Year. We need therefore to familiarize ourselves with both the revised and proposed budgets and strategize on the implementation of the approved activities. This also call for effective planning, prioritization and possible frontloading of some of the activities to facilitate high budget absorption. That goes without saying that we should keep our eyes on the ball by planning our activities in advance and implement them promptly as expected.

14. For those of you who did not have the opportunity to attend the recent Council Meeting, there is an increasing call by the Member States for the Secretariat to make use of our limited resources prudently and sparingly. This resulted from the ongoing economic challenges that our Member States are facing. Therefore, in executing our work, let us all be aware of this fact and strive to maximize our limited resources in what we do to ensure value for money.

15. In closing, I would like to again call on all of us to continue to do the best we can in all what we do. Let us all ensure quality of our deliverables. I will personally ensure that the quality of our work meet the standard that we have set for ourselves as in institution, the standard that has been commended by Member States on numerous occasions and has become the norm.

16. Let us all look forward to the year 2020 with optimism and renewed dedication.

17. Having said all this, I would like to take this opportunity now to wish you all and your loved ones a Merry Christmas and Happy Festive Season.

Team SACU!

-End-