Concluding remarks by the Chairperson

This third joint Review of East African Community (EAC) Member countries has provided us with a good opportunity to assess the developments in their trade policies and practices, in the context of their regional integration initiatives, since their previous joint Review in 2012. We now have a better understanding of their trade regimes and the challenges they are facing.

We are grateful for the active participation by the delegations from the five EAC Member countries headed by: H.E. Mr. Jean-Marie NIYOKINDI, Minister of Trade, Industry and Tourism, for Burundi; Dr. Chris KIPTOO, Principal Secretary, State Department of Trade, for Kenya; H.E. Ms. Soraya M. HAKUZIYAREMYE, Minister of Trade and Industry, for Rwanda; Dr. Edwin Paul MHEDE, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Industry and Trade, for Tanzania; and H.E. Ms. Amelia Anne KYAMBADDE, Minister of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives, for Uganda. A delegation of the EAC Secretariat and a delegation from South Sudan, a member of the EAC and currently in accession to the WTO, also participated as observers in the meeting.

The review has benefitted from the constructive comments by our discussant, H.E. Dr. Athaliah Lesiba MOLOKOMME, Ambassador of Botswana; and by the 33 Members that took the floor. Members appreciated the responses provided to more than 400 advance written questions and look forward to answers to any outstanding questions within the prescribed deadline of one month.

Members commended the EAC countries on their strong overall economic performance and the concurrent improvement in their key socio-economic indicators during the period under review. This performance was largely supported by increased public investments in infrastructures for, inter alia, transport, energy, and information and communication technology (ICT). The resulting fiscal deficits have suggested a call by certain Members for fiscal prudence, mainly in the perspective of macroeconomic convergence within the EAC and reduction of its members' reliance on border taxes. Further reforms aimed at improving participation by women in the economy was viewed as a way to make the EAC countries' performance more inclusive.

Members praised EAC countries for their strong commitment to the multilateral trading system. They took note of the adoption of the Tripartite Agreement aimed at harmonizing policies between the EAC, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and of the progress towards establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area. They sought details about the full implementation of these initiatives that aim at addressing concerns relating to overlapping memberships.

Members sought details about regional and national initiatives for implementation of the Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA). They encouraged Burundi and Tanzania to promptly ratify the TFA, and invited Kenya and Uganda to submit their outstanding notifications of Categories B and C commitments.

Members welcomed the progress made by the EAC countries in liberalizing intra-community trade through, inter alia, the dismantling of tariff and some non-tariff measures, the establishment of one-stop border posts, the introduction of an Authorized Economic Operator scheme, and initiatives for interconnectivity of customs systems. The EAC's aspirations for deeper integration were also acknowledged, notably the adoption of the East African Monetary Union Protocol aimed at establishing a monetary union by 2024. However intra-EAC merchandise trade remains low due mainly to non-tariff barriers.

In consequence, Members recommended further simplification by EAC countries of their customs procedures and documentation requirements. They also saw scope for further harmonization of internal taxes, standards and technical regulations, competition and intellectual property rights regimes, and sectoral policies, including on services. Some Members urged EAC countries to limit their frequent and extensive recourse to waivers from the common external tariff (CET). Concerns were also expressed about the increase in non-ad valorem duties under the CET.

EAC countries were urged to ensure compliance with their tariff binding commitments and to continue improving their adherence to WTO disciplines on, inter alia, notification, customs valuation, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, technical barriers to trade, and intellectual property rights. They were encouraged to become observers to the Agreement on Government Procurement, and some Members invited them to join the initiatives on investment facilitation, MSMEs and electronic commerce given their recent efforts to modernize their ICT infrastructures.

In closing, I would like to thank the delegations of the EAC countries, our discussant Ambassador Athaliah Lesiba MOLOKOMME, and the other Members for their contributions to the third joint Trade Policy Review of EAC countries.

The large number of advance written questions and of delegations that took the floor during this meeting highlights the interest Members attach to the EAC's trade and related policies. I am certain that the constructive comments made during this Review will help EAC countries to formulate policies that enable them to further enhance competitiveness and address current difficulties and future challenges. The outcome of this Review could well fit into debates at national and regional levels, and I strongly encourage EAC countries to consider organizing TPR follow-up activities. I urge all Members to strengthen their support to EAC countries' development and reform efforts.