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LANDLOCKED DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (LLDC) MINISTERIAL DECLARATION

WTO MINISTERIAL MEETING OF THE GROUP OF LANDLOCKED DEVELOPING COUNTRIES,
25 FEBRUARY 2024, ABU DHABI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

*Theme: "Unlocking the opportunities for LLDCs in global trade:
The role of the Multilateral Trading System"*

The following communication, dated 4 March 2024, is being circulated at the request of the delegation of Botswana on behalf of the LLDC Group.

We, the Ministers of Trade and Heads of delegation of Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) met on 25 February 2024 in Abu Dhabi, on the margins of the Thirteenth Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO),

We express appreciation to the Government of the United Arab Emirates for the hosting of the 13th WTO Ministerial Conference in Abu Dhabi and we look forward to a balanced and inclusive outcome that takes into account the needs of developing countries including LLDCs,

Taking note that we are meeting in the run up to the Third United Nations Conference on LLDCs to be held in Kigali from 18 to 21 June 2024 and welcoming the generous offer of the Government of Rwanda to host the conference.

Taking note with satisfaction the ongoing preparations for the third UN Conference on LLDCs and welcoming the convening of the three regional review meetings held in preparation for the Conference held for the Africa region in Gaborone on 29 and 30 May 2023; for the Latin America region in Asuncion on 27 and 28 July 2023; and for the Euro-Asia region in Bangkok on 22 and 23 August 2023. We endorse the outcomes adopted at the three regional review meetings.

Expressing with deep appreciation to the Government of Botswana for its able chairmanship, tireless efforts and excellent leadership provided to the landlocked developing countries as the Global Chair of the Group of Landlocked Developing Countries and look forward to its continued efforts to the promotion of the interests of the landlocked developing countries,

Recalling the Vienna Declaration and the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries (VPoA) for the Decade 2014–2024 adopted at the Second United Nations Conference on Landlocked Developing Countries held in Vienna, Austria, in 2014,

Recalling also the Political Declaration of the Comprehensive High-level Midterm Review of the Implementation of the VPoA for LLDCs for the Decade 2014-2024, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 5 December 2019,

Recalling the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for

Development; and the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change,

Recalling the Ministerial Declaration adopted during the 22nd Annual meeting of Foreign Ministers of the LLDCs, held on 21 September 2023 in New York on the margins of the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, which called for the convening of the LLDCs Ministerial Meeting on Trade in the Margins of the 13th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization to provide inputs to the outcome of the third UN Conference on LLDCs,

Recognizing that international trade offers extraordinary opportunities for achieving economic growth, job creation and sustainable development and concerned that LLDCs are not able to harness the full potential of international trade owing to a lack of territorial access to the sea, remoteness from world markets, multiple border crossings and high trade costs and risks. These factors severely constrain the overall socioeconomic development of the LLDCs,

Further recognizing that international trade is critically important for the LLDCs, accounting for a higher share of their Gross Domestic Product than the world average, however concerned that the LLDCs' share in global merchandise exports was just 1.1 per cent of global trade in 2022 and their exports constitutes mainly of primary commodities and therefore are greatly affected by external shocks,

Concerned that the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions and current multiple crises, which increase pressure on inflation, energy and food prices, and financing, as well as disruptions in supply chains and elevated trade costs, impacts LLDCs efforts to integrate into the regional and global trade,

Recalling and reaffirming the objectives and principles of the Marrakesh Agreement establishing the WTO as a global trade rule making body and the need to renew and strengthen its negotiating function,

We acknowledge the importance of the WTO Agreement on Trade Facilitation (TFA) and other WTO Agreements in addressing high trade costs faced by LLDCs and in promoting freedom of transit and recognize that many LLDCs in collaboration with their neighbouring transit countries and with the support of development partners have made efforts to implement the Agreement,

Recalling the outcome document of the Twelfth Ministerial Conference of the WTO instructing the Trade Facilitation Committee to hold a Dedicated Session on transit issues annually until the next review of the Trade Facilitation Agreement is completed and recognizing the importance of these sessions in providing a dedicated platform to discuss transit related constraints and challenges faced by all landlocked WTO Members as well as best practices to address these issues,

Recalling and reaffirming the outcomes of the WTO Senior Officials meeting at the level of assistant Minister, held in Geneva on 23 and 24 October 2023 and the belief that cooperation and goodwill is needed for a fruitful conclusion of the Thirteenth Ministerial Conference of the WTO,

We welcome the adoption of an LLDC paragraph in the MC13 Abu Dhabi Ministerial Declaration.

We reaffirm our commitment to contribute actively to the focused sessions to be held in the Committee on Trade and Development, to assess trade-related challenges identified for the fuller integration of LLDCs into the multilateral trading system. This effort should allow the Group to enhance our role and establish a work programme for LLDCs in the future.

Recognizing the importance of unfettered, efficient and cost-effective access for LLDCs to and from the sea, on the basis of freedom of transit and other related matters, in accordance with the applicable rules of international law,

Recognizing also that high transport and trade transaction costs remain a major stumbling block to the LLDCs achieving their trade and development potentials,

Recognizing the many crisis that the world confronts, which continue to expose the vulnerabilities of the LLDCs.

Have adopted the following Ministerial Declaration:

We recognize the need to "promote an inclusive, transparent and equitable rule-based Multilateral Trading System (MTS) under the WTO" as core principles of the WTO;

We acknowledge the ongoing efforts within the WTO to reform its operations and reiterate the importance of development and the principle of Special and Differential treatment as cornerstones of the WTO Agreements and emphasize that these principles should be an integral part of any WTO agreement;

We acknowledge the importance of the WTO Agreement on Trade Facilitation (TFA) and other WTO Agreements in addressing high trade costs faced by LLDCs and in promoting freedom of transit and recognize that many LLDCs in collaboration with their neighbouring transit countries and with the support of development partners have made efforts to implement the Agreement;

We commend the WTO's Trade Facilitation Agreement Facility for its remarkable work in assisting developing countries, including LLDCs, in implementing the Trade Facilitation Agreement, we emphasize the need for continued support in this regard and we encourage the Facility to expand its outreach and support mechanisms to help LLDCs to build their trade facilitation capacity, streamline customs procedures, and enhance their transit trade infrastructure;

We also commend developed countries for their continued contribution to the Trade Facilitation Agreement Facility, enabling it to provide targeted technical assistance, training, and capacity-building initiatives to ensure that LLDCs can fully benefit from the Trade Facilitation Agreement;

We emphasize the importance of mobilizing adequate resources to accelerate the implementation of the TFA, particularly Category C measures, and call for continued solidarity with LLDCs including for strengthened partnerships between LLDCs, transit countries, development partners, the United Nations system, and international and regional organizations, as well as the private sector and other stakeholders, to continue to provide technical, financial and capacity building assistance to LLDCs on a sustainable basis, for the effective implementation of the Agreement and other trade facilitation reforms;

We reiterate our call for constructive cooperation with transit countries for the effective and early implementation of disciplines that will contribute to reducing transit time and costs, simplify procedures, enhanced transparency and greater certainty in cross-border trade;

We recognize the importance of Aid for Trade support in addressing the trade-related capacity constraints and supply-side constraints of LLDCs and we call upon development partners to increase their allocations to LLDCs. We also reiterate that the Aid for Trade should give special consideration to the special needs and requirements of LLDCs, including capacity-building for the formulation of trade policies, implementation of trade facilitation measures, trade finance, development of trade related infrastructure as well as the diversification of export products and strengthening of productive capacities;

We acknowledge the persistent challenges to trade and transport connectivity, particularly in LLDCs, and we call for increased Aid for Trade, including international development assistance and multilateral financing in the development and maintenance of transport infrastructure;

We recognize the importance of deepening regional connectivity and integration including through interconnected and resilient transport infrastructure, energy and digital infrastructure connectivity; increased intraregional trade and the development of regional value chains; improving the quality and effective implementation of regional integration agreements. We call upon the UN system, and other international organizations to strengthen their technical, financial and capacity building support to LLDCs and transit countries to enable them to advance their regional integration efforts;

We urge the United Nations and other international organizations to increase their technical, financial, and capacity-building assistance to LLDCs and transit countries so that they can advance their regional integration initiatives;

We recognize the need to reduce commodity dependence and LLDCs' vulnerability to external shocks, as demonstrated by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and call for concerted

measures and actions to support LLDC efforts, such as assistance in diversifying their export bases and improving commodity processing, investment facilitation, trade diversification, trade finance, and the creation of a conducive business and trade environment;

We continue to make efforts to mainstream the building of productive capacities in our development strategies and call for international support including financial, technical and capacity-building assistance to support these endeavours;

We emphasize that agriculture, including the role of trade in achieving food security, is of critical importance to the LLDCs and emphasize that the continuation of the reform process in order to promote market access, a reduction of distortive domestic support measures, the total elimination of all forms of export subsidies, and the promotion of fair rules for agriculture sector, will constitute an important tool for the promotion of economic activities and development in LLDCs;

We reiterate our concern that challenges including inadequate infrastructure, limited internet access, high cost of broadband, inadequate digital skills and regulatory and data policies continue to persist. Noting with concern that the LLDCs dependence on their neighboring and coastal countries for access to submarine cables and international Internet bandwidth raises the cost of, and reduces the quality of, their Internet access. We call on increased support towards facilitating cost-effective means including ease access to submarine cables and satellite-based internet connectivity;

We aim to foster favorable conditions for the development of the digital economy by creating appropriate enabling environment including the necessary policies, legal and regulatory framework to support ICT development in particular the development of broadband, enhancement of digital skills, promotion of digital inclusion, increased adoption and utilization of ICT applications and services;

We acknowledge the need for harnessing the potential of e-commerce as it presents a transformative opportunity for LLDCs and we call for enhanced support to LLDCs to assist in building their digital ecosystems, encompassing widespread internet access, robust digital infrastructure, and appropriate personal data protection measures, as well as investment in enhancing the skills and capabilities of small businesses, enabling them to fully leverage the advantages offered by e-commerce;

We recognize that foreign direct investment (FDI) can be a catalyst for structural transformation, raising the value added of the domestic economy and linking it more effectively into global value chains and we commit to continue promoting conducive policies to attract FDI that promotes trade as well as sustainable development of LLDCs;

We recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that digital transformation and connectivity creates tremendous opportunity for achieving the SDGs and emphasize that LLDCs face fundamental challenges including inadequate infrastructure, limited internet access, high cost of broadband, inadequate digital skills and regulatory and data policies;

We recognize that the growth in e-commerce provides international trade opportunities, including new market opportunities for LLDCs, and we call on UN-OHRLLS, UNCTAD, ITU, ITC and partners to provide technical assistance to promote e-commerce in LLDCs, including through capacity building and advice on developing the necessary legal framework and improving digital infrastructure;

We recognize the importance of a conducive multilateral trade framework for the promotion of digital inclusion and the development of e-commerce in LLDCs and we commit ourselves to fully take into account our interests in multilateral, regional and bilateral negotiations on this subject including our fundamental challenges specially the inadequate infrastructure, the underdeveloped legal and regulatory framework as well as the limited digital skills;

We recognize that the LLDCs' share in world services exports remains very low and emphasize that an efficient and productive services industry will contribute significantly to productivity growth and for the overall competitiveness of LLDCs' economies;

We recognize the importance of a conducive multilateral trade framework for the development of the services sector in LLDCs as well as the importance of addressing supply side constraints and we commit ourselves to fully take into account their interests and constraints in multilateral, regional

and bilateral negotiations on this subject, including the granting of economically relevant preferential access to their markets;

We call on international organizations and bilateral donors to assist the development of the services sector in LLDCs and in that regard we affirm our commitment to develop the service sector with the view to addressing supply side constraints, and call on development partners and international organizations to support LLDCs to develop their services sectors and provide market access to LLDCs service providers;

We commit to strengthen the works of the LLDCs group in Geneva in order to maintain regular meetings, share experiences, and seek enhanced support, including capacity building for LLDCs in the main areas of work of the WTO including monitoring, rules making, dispute settlement and capacity building. This effort should allow the Group to enhance our role and establish work plan;

Given the persistent difficulties that LLDCs face in international trade, we emphasize the importance of having a dedicated Work Programme for LLDCs in the WTO that will assess the distinctive challenges and possible recommendations that can facilitate LLDCs improved participation in the MTS and we request that exploratory discussions on the development of this Work Programme take place in the Committee on Trade and Development, and that the General Council report on the outcome of these discussions to the Ministerial Conference;

We recognize the increasing role of environmental sustainability in international trade, and the impact of climate change on trade of the LLDCs and in this regard we call upon the LLDCs to pay more attention to address their trade-related environmental issues, provide comprehensive review on this matter, and share their best practices based on their experiences;

We acknowledge the critical importance of trade as a catalyst for sustainable development and poverty eradication in our nations as we embark on shaping the Third United Nations Programme of Action for the LLDCs in the coming months and we affirm our commitment to consider the strategic priorities of LLDCs in the realm of trade;

Recognizing the unique challenges faced by LLDCs in accessing global markets due to geographical constraints, inadequate infrastructure, and limited institutional capacities, we emphasize the necessity for tailored policies and support mechanisms to enhance their participation in multilateral and regional trading systems;

We request UN-OHRLS, WTO, UNCTAD, UN Regional Commissions, UNDP, ITC, ITU, and WCO, among others in close cooperation and coordination with relevant organizations and stakeholders of recipient countries to continue to assist the LLDCs in their effective participation and negotiations in international trade;

We reiterate our commitment to participate at the Third UN Conference on LLDCs at the Head of State and Head of Government level and invite our transit countries and development partners to participate also at such high level. We invite the international and regional organizations as well as other stakeholders to participate at the highest possible level.
