

Dear Madam Director General,
Dear High Representative,
Honorable Ministers and Heads of delegations from LLDCs,
Dear Representatives from the international organizations,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is the great honor for me to co-host this virtual meeting as Coordinator of LLDC Group on trade issues. I am also delighted to be with you amid these circumstances, which nevertheless allowed us all to meet today.

First of all, I would like to express my condolences to all LLDCs members who lost loved ones during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am confident that thanks to a global program on robust vaccination, our efforts for combating the pandemic will end soon. I wish all the delegates and their families the best of health and spirit in these difficult times.

I would like to express our appreciation to the World Trade Organization and the United Nations Office of the High Representative for Least developed countries, LLDCs and Small Island developing states (UN-OHRLLS) and for organizing this meeting.

Dear Colleagues,

The COVID-19 pandemic poses unforeseen challenges to the multilateral trading system. LLDCs were in especially vulnerable situation even before the pandemic, but the situation has worsened, and border closures and social distancing measures instituted by governments across the world to combat the pandemic have caused a severe reduction in economic activity.

By convening today's meeting, we set out to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on LLDCs and the best practice examples of promoting international trade, trade facilitation and connectivity and their role in achieving resilient COVID-19 recovery.

Furthermore, we will confirm priorities for LLDCs on a wide range of issues and to advance our interests during and after the upcoming MC12. The outcomes of the meeting provide a critical opportunity to assess and strengthen our collective position in multilateral trade negotiations and to ensure that the concerns of LLDC members are taking into account as well as to find ways to bridge the gaps of understanding and interest to narrow our differences in order to better target our goals.

Dear Colleagues,

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed many global fragilities and vulnerabilities, not only on the sphere of health, but also in the economy, which require urgent attention.

As I mentioned earlier, LLDCs were already among the most disadvantaged countries in the world economy before the crisis, and hence the pandemic has further exacerbated their vulnerabilities. Average growth rates in LLDCs have slowed since 2014. Similarly,

the share of LLDCs in global merchandise exports has fallen, rather than doubled, compared to 2014.

Our geographical position and dependence on transit transport as well as multiple border crossings continue to pose obstacles to our socioeconomic development. High trade costs remain a defining common challenge of LLDCs, reducing the competitiveness of our exports on world markets and raising import prices.

As we enter the final years of the Vienna Program of Action for LLDCs (VPoA), the regression the pandemic has brought is a major setback. Consequently, there must be an intensification of efforts from all stakeholders to recover and achieve meaningful progress by 2024. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), in 2020, global economy declined by 4.3%, and LLDCs' economies are estimated to contract by 2.4%.

Restoring LLDCs' capacity to trade means, development partners need to support LLDCs to develop their productive capacities, diversify their economies, increase value-addition to their exports and further integrate into global and regional value chains. In this fragile time for the global economy, it is also important that transit countries reiterate their commitment to multilateralism and exercise restraint in export restrictions and other measures that could potentially disrupt the free flow of goods and services.

The pandemic has fortunately accelerated the adoption of digital technology across various sectors of the economy including in LLDCs. As such, an enhanced digital connectivity would assist in facilitating the development of necessary digital infrastructure thereby making significant progress on priority 2 of the VPoA.

In implementing the VPoA, the WTO has a clear and important role to play – especially regarding Priority 3 on international trade and trade facilitation. The VPoA outlines precise actions that the LLDC themselves, transit countries, and development partners must take to support the economic development of LLDCs. The continuous and full implementation of the WTO's Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) is central to ensuring LLDCs can fully participate in the multilateral trading system. Aid for Trade being a key pillar of the TFA is equally critical to LLDCs especially in the wake of the pandemic.

Since more than half of LLDCs and LDCs are unable to fully use the granted preferential tariffs in the markets of developed and developing countries due to uncertainly defined rules of origin, we are faced with the need to develop more specific rules on this matter.

Imposition of import SPS and TBT requirements on goods in transit become an obstacle for countries with agriculture-based economies to fully benefit from international trade. Therefore, it is important to address these concerns by developing separate, more specific and simplified requirements to be applied to goods in transit.

In view of the continued hardships in international trade suffered by the LLDCs, we stress the importance of issuing a specific Work Program for LLDCs in the WTO that will address

the special needs, challenges and vulnerabilities of LLDCs, in order to increase their participation in the multilateral trading system, including of issues related to trade facilitation, transit transport, Aid for trade, services, regional integration and cooperation, accession and capacity building. This program is not aimed at obtaining additional special and differential treatment, but only to make the relevant rules and regulations of the WTO clearer and detailed. Therefore, I hope that the members of the group will be united in their opinion on this issue.

I wish to conclude by expressing my strong belief that today's constructive dialogue and our joint declaration will contribute to ensuring that the multilateral trading system remains fair, predictable, inclusive, accessible and sustainable for all our countries.

Thank you.