

## **ANNEXURE 1-WCO**

### **1. BUILDING BORDERS THAT SERVE PEOPLE BY DRIVING THE FUTURE OF CUSTOMS AT THE 2025 WCO COUNCIL**

**1 July 2025, Brussels** – The past week marked a pivotal moment for the global Customs and trade facilitation community. The South African Revenue Service (SARS) actively chaired, participated in, and represented South Africa at the annual meetings of the World Customs Organization (WCO), at the home of Customs, WCO Headquarters in Brussels. These included the 92nd Session of the Policy Commission, the Private Sector Consultative Group (PSCG), and the 145th and 146th Sessions of the WCO Council — attended by over 400 participants — as well as several high-level bilateral engagements with Customs administrations from around the world.

### **STRENGTHENING GLOBAL CUSTOMS: THE ROLE OF THE WCO**

The WCO, established in 1952 as the Customs Co-operation Council, is an independent intergovernmental organization committed to enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of Customs administrations worldwide. Representing 186 member administrations responsible for approximately 98% of global trade, the WCO is the world's leading authority on Customs matters.

The WCO Council, its supreme decision-making body, convenes annually to shape the Organization's strategic direction. SARS Commissioner Edward Kieswetter serving as the WCO Chairperson concluded a successful and impactful two-year term, during which he played a key role in forging consensus, guiding deliberations, and amplifying the voice of Members to steer the future of global Customs.

At its heart, the WCO is about serving people — supporting Member countries in developing responsive, capable, and future-ready Customs administrations that deliver tangible benefits to citizens. From securing borders and facilitating trade to protecting societies from illicit goods, the WCO promotes Customs as a vital government function that safeguards national interests while advancing economic opportunity. Through collaboration, capacity building, and the promotion of international standards, the WCO contributes to a safer, more connected, and more inclusive global community.

### **ADVANCING THE WCO'S STRATEGIC AGENDA AND CUSTOMS ADMINISTRATION**

While often misunderstood, Customs is far more than an enforcement mechanism at borders. It plays a crucial facilitation role in managing the flow of trade efficiently and with integrity, balancing this against enforcement obligations to protect domestic economies and societies from harmful products and illicit practices. Trade remains the

lifeblood of economies — and in this fast-changing global environment, Customs is central to ensuring its security and fairness.

Digitalisation, automation, and data-driven risk management are reshaping trade flows. As legitimate trade accelerates, illicit networks also evolve — exploiting gaps and undermining global trust. Customs administrations must therefore adapt swiftly, investing in capacity building, public-private collaboration, and regulatory innovation. The WCO is central to this transformation — guiding Members through standard-setting, technical support, and global knowledge exchange to ensure trade remains secure, inclusive, and sustainable.

Under the chairmanship of Commissioner Kieswetter, this year's WCO meetings successfully concluded a robust agenda, advancing several strategic priorities. Chief among these were the continued implementation of the WCO Modernisation Programme and the adoption of the new WCO Strategic Plan for 2025–2028, which will guide the Organisation's direction over the next cycle.

Deliberations focused on improving prioritisation, enhancing implementation, and maximising impact — ensuring that WCO efforts remain results-driven and responsive to Member needs. A renewed approach to engagement was also introduced, aimed at strengthening collaboration within the Secretariat, among Members, and with external stakeholders such as the PSCG and broader Customs community.

Several technical reports and policy matters were considered, including:

- The SAFE Framework of Standards;
- The WCO Fragile Borders Action Plan;
- The WCO Secretariat's Gender Equality and Diversity Work Plan;
- Developments in e-Commerce administration;
- Enhancements to the Harmonised System (HS) framework; and
- The evolution of the WCO Capacity-Building Paradigm.

“As we convened this past week, it was against a backdrop of significant global challenges. Geopolitical tensions, economic uncertainties, climate-driven disruptions, and evolving illicit trade patterns continue to test the resilience of our Customs administrations. These complexities are a clear reminder of the critical role we play in securing supply chains, protecting societies, and facilitating legitimate trade.

I urged our 186 Member countries to bring their expertise, passion, and vision to the session — because together, we have the power to shape a future where Customs administrations are agile, inclusive, and fully equipped to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world. Let us continue to work with purpose and resolve, knowing that our collective efforts will pave the way for a safer and more prosperous global community.” – Edward Kieswetter, Chairperson of the WCO Council.

Together, these discussions and decisions reflect the WCO's continued commitment to building a smart modern, resilient, and forward-looking Customs global ecosystem that enables secure trade and shared prosperity.

## **REFLECTIONS ON TENURE AS WCO CHAIRPERSON (2023–2025)**

During his tenure as Chairperson of the WCO (2023–2025), Commissioner Edward Kieswetter guided the Organisation through a pivotal period marked by strategic renewal, leadership transition, and institutional transformation. He championed a vision of a Smart, Modern WCO—one that is agile, data-driven, inclusive, and equipped to navigate complex global challenges. Under his leadership, the WCO adopted and began implementing a comprehensive Modernisation Plan, reaffirmed its core mission in trade facilitation, revenue collection, and societal protection, and made significant progress across its strategic priorities: Technology & Innovation, Green Customs, and Governance & Accountability.

He also strengthened Member engagement, fostered diplomatic cohesion, and drove commitment to Sustainable Development Goals especially the pivotal role played by tax and customs administration, key structural reforms, including improved governance arrangements, a smooth leadership transition, and the successful acquisition of a permanent headquarters in Brussels. Commissioner Kieswetter reimagined the WCO's partnership with the private sector, championed inclusivity, and raised the global profile of Customs as a critical enabler of sustainable development and domestic resource mobilization. His tenure laid a strong foundation for a more effective, responsive, and forward-looking global Customs community.

From the outset, Commissioner Kieswetter committed to a leadership style that was inclusive, responsive, and strategic. He translated this vision into tangible outcomes by actively engaging with Members to ensure the WCO's strategic goals were realized through a well-managed Secretariat, a transformative modernization plan, clear priorities that considers the needs of developing countries and a shared understanding of success. He was a strong advocate for greater inclusivity and diversity, while also building resilient and effective partnerships with all stakeholders. Moreover, he worked tirelessly to elevate the profile of Customs, underscoring its vital role in domestic resource mobilisation (DRM), service delivery and societal well-being. Throughout his tenure, Commissioner Kieswetter provided the strategic leadership and support necessary to fulfil these commitments.

Across the global Customs community, there is growing alignment behind this shared vision of a Smart, Modern WCO—one equipped with the tools, talent, and technology to promote voluntary compliance, strengthen resilient and secure supply chains, and advance inclusive and sustainable growth. The progress achieved so far stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of Ubuntu—depicting our shared responsibility, mutual support, and collective action.

Reflecting on this journey, Commissioner Kieswetter expressed his “deep gratitude for the trust placed in him and pride in what has been accomplished together. He urges all stakeholders to build on this momentum and remain steadfast in the mission to transform the WCO for the benefit of all Members and the global trade community”.

## **ELECTED AS THE WCO EAST SOUTHERN AFRICA (ESA) VICE-CHAIR**

The WCO is composed of 6 geographical regions that represents the 186 Members countries. South Africa is part of the Eastern Southern Africa (ESA) region. South

Africa has been elected unanimously to the position of Vice-Chair of WCO ESA regional office that would take effect from 1 July 2025. As Vice-Chair, South Africa intends to strengthen the governance arrangements and improve the sustainability and effectiveness of the regional office whilst steering the implementation of the region's strategic priorities, including digital transformation, customs modernisation, revenue mobilisation, and regional cooperation

## **PROGRESSIVE BILATERAL ENGAGEMENTS STRENGTHEN CUSTOMS COOPERATION**

On the sidelines of the annual meetings, fellow Customs administrations present in Brussels leveraged the opportunity to engage with key trading partners. The South African Revenue Service (SARS) team achieved a historic milestone with the signing of three Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) under its Authorised Economic Operator (AEO) Programme. The agreements were concluded with the United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the United Kingdom's His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), and India's Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC). These MRAs enhance trade facilitation and security by recognising trusted traders and streamlining customs procedures between countries.

In a landmark first for the continent, South Africa became the only African country to secure an MRA with the United States under its Customs Trade Partnership Against Terrorism (CTPAT) programme—widely regarded as the global benchmark for supply chain security. This rare achievement reflects the operational maturity and international credibility of SARS's AEO Programme and positions South African exporters for faster, more predictable access to the U.S. market.

SARS also undertook a Memorandum of Understanding with the Hong Kong Customs and Excise Department on cooperation and mutual assistance and concluded a cooperation agreement with the Xiamen District of the General Administration of China Customs (GACC).

Strengthening Customs cooperation through these agreements and undertakings will enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of Customs administrations in these countries, resulting in smoother, faster, and more reliable clearance processes. This improved collaboration will directly benefit importers and exporters by reducing delays, lowering costs, and increasing transparency, ultimately fostering greater trade facilitation, improving security, and economic growth for all parties involved.

## **DELIVERING OUR SHARED MISSION**

"It has been a productive and forward-moving week for the global Customs and trade facilitation community—advancing efforts on the global, regional, and domestic fronts alike. These collective strides are firmly aligned with South Africa's trade and foreign policy and the SARS's Vision and Strategic Intent. Exemplifying our shared commitment to the WCO mission: borders divide, Customs connect!" — Commissioner Edward Kieswetter.

**END.**

