Statement of Dr. Mukhisa Kituyi, UNCTAD Secretary-General, Trade and Development Board
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With the slow growing storm of COVID-19 consequences and with recovery still ahead, the need of developing countries for support meeting their trade and development challenges continues to grow. As I detailed to you at our last meeting in July, we have provided rapid response to the crisis pivoting our most immediate substantive focus towards the urgent needs facing developing countries. We continue supporting Members in critical areas to the pandemic response, such as digital trade, debt, logistics, maritime trade, customs, investment policies, regional cooperation, consumer protection and on building productive capacities for “a better recovery” — especially in Africa, LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS.

At this fragile time, UNCTAD must continue sustaining our critical contributions in these areas, as the response to the crisis turns to recovery and to the eventual reforms needed to address the developing world’s extraordinary pre-existing vulnerabilities, which the crisis has exposed. We must use the tools available to us to maximize post-COVID-19 recovery in support particularly of our most vulnerable stakeholders and beneficiaries.

Today I continue from where we let it on how we are endeavoring to weather this storm and sustain our contributions to the recovery, especially in terms of our programme planning and budget process. The shock of the COVID-19 pandemic has made us re-tool our delivery to be more fit for purpose and for the needs of our member States. While we will continue doing what we do, we all have to recognize that what you see — that we keep continuing to deliver on our mandates — is a testament to dedicated staff who are intensely committed to the ideals of the United Nations and to keep the ship afloat.

First, on the immense challenges that we face in terms of budget and programme planning. As you know, due to non-payment of dues by member States, severe limitations on resources were enacted to preserve cash and ensure the payment of essential costs, including the salaries for our staff. Even before COVID-19 pandemic, due to the liquidity crisis, we had lost 15% of our 2019 budget and faced a recruitment freeze, that made us operate on a reduced level of resources throughout the year.

The situation has gotten worse in 2020 and lagging in the payments led to de jure and de facto across-the-board freeze of posts. This means we cannot recruit against any regular budget vacancy, at all levels, including temporary job openings. This has hampered the efforts we were making both in the gender and geographic representation areas. It has also been particularly painful for us as we have seen other parts of the UN system, such as the reformed UN resident coordinator system continue to recruit away our staff, despite our inability to recruit replacements for those who leave..

In order to continue delivering effectively on our mandates, UNCTAD must be able to maintain a minimum of core staff with the signature mix of cutting-edge economic expertise and institutional knowledge. We have delivered this same message to colleagues in New York and we will continue raising this issue with all our member states. And we count on your support in appreciating this challenge and helping us search for creative ways forward, despite these severe obstacles.

Secondly, although it will not produce more resources, we do however believe that we have found creative ways to give you clearer ownership over the programme planning process. We have taken note of your many members concerns about the new annual budget process, which has been on a trial period for the last two years as mandated by the General Assembly. Concerns include the compressed time period, the frequent format changes, and about ensuring the mandates of the working party are safeguarded. We have seen your struggles and appreciated your continued and valued efforts to come up with a meaningful solution. We are sensitized by your feedback and share a readiness and willingness to facilitate a more significant consideration by Geneva ahead of the budget process at CPC, ABACQ and the Fifth Committee in New York.
I am therefore pleased to inform you that we welcome the idea proposed by Member States of having a novel informal preparatory session. This session could take place in the form of an informal exchange with oral presentations and discussion between the member States and UNCTAD senior management on our strategic thinking and focus areas for the organization for the coming year, ahead of the Session 2 of the Working Party. This discussion would enrich our thinking on the pool of proposed highlighted results for each subprogramme and performance measures to be considered, but also on any emerging issues or lessons learned. We believe that this session will provide necessary guidance and orientation for the preparation of the Programme Plan and will also ensure that the views of the Member States are expressed and taken on board at the planning and inception phase, as has been expressed previously by Member States. I invite you to work with the Secretariat on the modalities which should be flexible and agile. We should remember that the ultimate goal of this session should be facilitation of exchange of ideas, rather than creating additional bureaucracy and overburdening the process.

In the same context, I am happy that after a long conversation between Geneva and New York, there is an agreement reached on the terms of reference of the Working Party. I am convinced that this will further facilitate our work together and support the effectiveness of the process.

It is also worth mentioning that we have made further efforts in line with management reform by moving the monitoring function, previously vested with the Evaluation and Monitoring Unit, to the Resources Management Service. This move will allow the integration of monitoring with program planning process while leveraging UMOJA 2 as the primary delivery mechanism. It would also align UNCTAD with the best practice at the Secretariat level. This new integrated framework will allow us to reflect the performance in our budget documents, as you have already seen incorporated in the last document.

As for the evaluation function of the organization, the move of the monitoring function will allow the unit to be able to focus its resources exclusively on evaluation activities; including to respond to the need to oversee or manage evaluations requested by donor agencies and other external bodies, to provide guidance and assistance to programme managers and project officers for their evaluation and self-evaluation activities in particular.

All of these efforts are in line with our previous efforts over the past years in implementing a set of measures that are aimed at strengthening the evaluability of our programme of work, as well as overall results-based management. These have included a revision of the evaluation framework, improved self-evaluation methodologies and approaches through which the development of guidance and self-assessment tools for programme managers and establishment of an oversight mechanism to ensure that evaluation and appropriate resources are budgeted in all forthcoming project documents can be realized.

In these difficult times, Excellencies, I want to re-assure you that we are doing all we can to keep our work relevant, efficient and effective for the benefit of Members. I am pleased that our in-person meetings are beginning to re-convence albeit with close attention to the relevant sanitary precautions. And I am pleased that with the re-scheduling of UNCTAD 15, that the preparatory process can also soon begin in earnest.

As I begin the final year of my term as Secretary-General of this organization, allow me to reaffirm my eagerness for close and productive engagement with you, on behalf of the entire Secretariat. UNCTAD will continue supporting our Membership in meeting the unprecedented challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as we continue fulfilling our mandate addressing the persistent and emerging trade and development challenges facing all developing countries and membership at large. Thank you.