

**Seventh United Nations Conference to Review All Aspects of the Set of
Multilaterally Agreed Equitable Principles and Rules for the Control of
Restrictive Business Practices**

Opening remarks by Mr. Joakim Reiter, Deputy Secretary-General of
UNCTAD

CHECK AGAIN DELIVERY

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Distinguished Colleagues,

As you know, this 7th Conference to Review the UN Set of Principles and Rules for the Control of Restrictive Business Practices marks the 35th anniversary of the UN Set. Today, the UN Set remains the only fully multilaterally agreed Set of Principles and Rules on Competition Policy.

There is much to be proud of in the UN Set, but being the only universal forum on competition policy comes with much responsibility. The sizeable and challenging task before you, of reviewing the UN Set, is also critically important.

I know that I preach for the already converted, but it is worth recalling: **competition policy makes for more efficient markets, and more efficient governance.**

Competition policy has of course always been important. But, in my view, **the need for effective national competition policy and for international cooperation in this area is more pressing than ever.**

Just think about the important improvements made in trade and investment openness, not least in many developing countries, over the last two decades. Or the deregulation of certain sectors - even relinquishment of state ownership - that has taken place. Much of this has been done with the view of enhancing consumer choice, reduce prices, increase productivity in production of for example utilities and creating new engines for economic growth, diversification and employment creation. But, regrettably, these expanded market opportunities have far from always created their desired outcomes, especially in smaller and/or less mature markets such as in developing countries. The gains from liberalization have sometimes ended up in the pockets of a few companies or individuals due to oligopolistic behavior and abuse of dominant positions. This threatens to seriously undermine the credibility of the market and the legitimacy of the government's efforts. Just as we must rebuild trust in financial markets after the financial crisis, we need competition policy to ensure sustained trust in structural reforms.

In more closed markets or markets with dominant state-controlled firms, where the barriers to new entrants are higher, the risk of anti-competitive practices is obviously even greater. And, over the last decade, we have seen the rise of state-owned enterprises not only as key actors in national markets, but also in global markets. But, unless matched by efforts to keep checks and balances on competition, this may ultimately trigger question-marks about the extent of a level playing field in international trade and investment.

So what you do matter enormously for the efficiency, and credibility, of national and global markets, as well as the efficiency, and credibility, of international trade and investment.

This you probably knew already. But because of this, I would argue, **competition policy is also a crucial area to focus on as the international community gears up to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.**

Facilitating trade, lowering consumer prices, and improving government effectiveness will all contribute to achievement of the forthcoming Sustainable Development Goals. And, I believe, the *universal appeal of competition policy to all countries, rich and poor, is particularly noteworthy in regards to the SDGs.*

Later this year, all of your governments - at the highest level - will commit to dignity for all, prosperity for all and a sustainable planet for all. The coming Sustainable Development Goals, expected to be agreed by UN Member States this fall in New York, are greater in ambition and scope than any previous international development agreement. Importantly, Member States stress that the SDGs will be a universal agenda. They will apply just as much to developed as developing countries. The point is that sustainable development is a challenge that faces all of us, and that all of us should be responsible for it, at home and abroad.

Similarly, the challenge of combatting restrictive business practices is faced by all countries, developed and developing. It's as much about ensuring affordable prices to benefit people living in poverty, as it is about encouraging healthy competition among firms to stir innovation, or about improving the products and services, which small and medium businesses use everywhere. And importantly, the presence of a strong and disciplined competition authority is also a sign of strong institutional development and rule of law.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You have heard me here today underline that competition policy matters for efficient markets and efficient governance and, because of that, it matters for the fulfillment of the SDGs.

Let me finish with a plea to all of you this week as you embark on reviewing the UN Set. The plea is to never take international cooperation on competition - like this important forum and the UN Set - for granted.

We should remember the international community has, for decades (even dating back since the League of Nations), recognized the importance of controlling restrictive business practices.

The 1948 Havana Charter - from the ashes of which we got the GATT - tried to tackle the issue of competition policy, but it was never adopted. GATT's successor, the WTO, also tried to take up the issue of competition policy. But it was dropped from WTO negotiations in 2003.

The UN Set that we have today grew out of UNCTAD V in Manila in 1978, and was adopted by the General Assembly 35 years ago in 1980.

Over the years, other organizations and networks have taken up some aspects of competition policy, including the OECD, the World Bank and the International Competition Network. This is very good. But the UN Set remains the only universally recognized and accepted framework and this meeting is literally the only universal forum to address restrictive business practices.

So our UN Set remains the most important game in town, so to speak. And important is the key word here. For trade, for sustainable and inclusive development, competition policy has an enormous role to play. And implementing the provisions of the UN Set is an important step in the right direction, for all countries both developed and developing.

The review of the UN Set you are undertaking this week is a sizable and impressive venture that, for me, is also an example of UNCTAD at its best. The voluntary peer reviews you have undertaken, the meeting of the UNCTAD research partnership platform, which you will hold later this week – all of these activities exemplify what our inclusive consensus building, our analytical expertise, and our technical cooperation activities can accomplish for our Member States.

I wish you a fruitful week, and I welcome your continued engagement and support for UNCTAD's work.

Thank you.