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Ministerial round table: Sustainable transportation for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – boosting the arteries of global trade

Summary prepared by the UNCTAD secretariat

1. The ministerial round table, held in collaboration with the Partnership on Sustainable, Low Carbon Transport, brought together stakeholders from Governments, the United Nations, public and private sectors, transport industries, academia and regional development banks. Panellists discussed the concept and meaning of sustainable freight transport, shared experiences and considered the need for an international framework and the potential role of UNCTAD.
2. The first panellist highlighted the timeliness and relevance of the round table, in particular in view of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Sustainable freight transport entailed a balancing act with regard to the three dimensions of sustainable development. There was merit in further defining the concept of sustainability, and a framework for sustainable freight transport could provide coherence in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. UNCTAD had a role to play in advancing this important work.
3. The second panellist emphasized the nexus between freight transport, trade and development. The priority in sustainability efforts was to promote seamless transport systems that integrated the key elements of freight transport through a corridor approach. This could help avoid mode-specific approaches that resulted in disjointed policies. Ensuring that all players across a corridor worked together could help promote the development of sustainable freight transport systems.
4. The third panellist stressed the importance of a multimodal perspective. There was a need to consider the economic as well as social and environmental dimensions of relevant

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freight transport policies. For example, policies aimed at improving working conditions in a national trucking sector revealed the potential economic and environmental co-benefits that could arise when adopting socially minded freight transport policies. All modes of transport could be further leveraged through sound policies in support of sustainability.

5. Another panellist provided examples of support for safety and environmental protection objectives in the sector, including through collaboration with the International Maritime Organization and relevant industry initiatives (such as the Sustainable Shipping Initiative). Many stakeholders in the shipping industry, including the shipbuilding sector, promoted sustainability initiatives (for example through initiatives on carbon emissions and air pollution control in shipping) that enhanced energy efficiency while limiting the detrimental environmental impact of the sector.

6. The next panellist presented examples of sustainability initiatives, including initiatives addressing the social dimension. Growth in freight volumes had outpaced growth in transport infrastructure investment, and challenges to sustainability efforts in the sector were manifold. For example, in East Africa, some of the key obstacles to sustainable freight transport were the fragmentation of rules, limited numbers of talent pools, financial constraints and a lack of harmonization.

7. Another panellist highlighted the importance of urban freight transport that took sustainability into account. Freight transport required a systemic view to ensure that the urban context was taken into account by central governments, and that local and city governments considered urban freight transport in national urbanization policies. A systemic approach could help ensure that considerations such as energy costs, land planning and logistics configurations were addressed. Related implications with regard to the environment, energy, accessibility, affordability, job creation, rural area development and overall sustainability were significant. UNCTAD was well positioned to help integrate freight transport into the urban agenda.

8. The next panellist stated that academic circles had an important role to play in conducting relevant research on sustainable freight transport, including urban freight transport. Sustainability considerations were important for urban freight, especially as short-distance deliveries in cities generated significant traffic. Academia could help foster systems and technologies, such as electric vehicles, including by working with regional and multilateral development banks, as well as Governments. Collaboration was required for research findings to be translated into sound policies and strategies.

9. The final panellist reiterated the importance of safe, affordable and climate-friendly freight transport for development, including in Africa. Describing the challenges facing Africa's freight transport systems (such as a lack of access to all-weather roads and high transport costs), the panellist noted that the African Development Bank aligned its policies to address regional connectivity, access from rural areas to urban centres and capacity-building at the level of executing agencies. Sustainability for the African Development Bank, in the short term, entailed a focus on improving the efficiency of existing systems.

10. In sum, the importance of freight transport for trade and development was reiterated. While all three dimensions of sustainability were recognized as important, there was a greater focus on economic aspects, especially in the context of developing countries. Co-benefits across the three dimensions of sustainability could be significant, and approaches to sustainable freight transport therefore needed to leverage potential mutual gains. Urban freight was identified as a key issue that also needed to be integrated into the sustainability debate. Challenges highlighted spanned institutional, legal, financial, technological and capacity-related considerations, including human capacity and skills.

11. Achieving convergence under a common framework might be difficult given the multiple stakeholders involved and the varied perspectives, and building capacity to

manage such differences was important. Leveraging local initiatives, partnerships and innovation and scaling up investments were important elements for such a framework. UNCTAD could act as an observer in relevant regional trade groupings, for example in Africa, for better appreciation of the situation at local and regional levels. Partnerships, including public–private partnerships, as well as collaboration between Governments and academia, were key, as were broad agreement on performance outputs and metrics and clear monitoring and reporting mechanisms. UNCTAD could support work on monitoring and reporting, as well as on enabling the sharing of best practices.
