

MRA HOSTS WCO-EU CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAMME FOR AFRICAN COUNTRIES

The Mauritius Revenue Authority (MRA), in collaboration with the World Customs Organization (WCO) and the European Union (EU), hosted a **Regional Training of Trainers seminar on Harmonised System (HS)**, spanning from 03 to 06 October 2023, at the Integrated Customs Clearance Centre (ICCC), Le Chaland Road, Plaine Magnien. This programme aimed at training experts from the East and Southern Africa (ESA) countries to become trainers on tariff classification with a focus on HS 2022.



MRA hosts the Regional Training of Trainers seminar on the Harmonised System

The Harmonised System (HS) is an internationally recognized classification system used for the uniform classification of goods traded across borders. HS provides a standardized framework for customs authorities to classify and identify products based on a set of codes and descriptions.

In his keynote address during the opening ceremony, Mr. Sudhamo Lal, Director-General of MRA and WCO ESA Vice Chair, stated that Mauritius has at heart the prosperity of the region and it is fully supportive of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) which aims at accelerating intra-African trade and boosting Africa's trading position on the global market.

AfCFTA, he said, will strengthen Africa's common voice and policy space in global trade negotiations and bring prosperity for the people of Africa. So, he said, it is important to work in close collaboration and support each other.

On another note, Mr. Lal explained that *“Mauritius has exported its first consignment under the AfCFTA preferences to Ghana, consisting of printed plastic labels, indicating the readiness of Mauritius to trade under the Agreement. Other potential products of export potential from Mauritius include sugar, fishmeal, fish oil, fertilizers and tuna.”*



Mr. Lal firmly believes that *“AfCFTA has the potential to bring broader and deeper economic integration of the African Continent and much has been achieved in terms of negotiation under the Agreement. This is why year 2023 has been declared as the implementation year of the AfCFTA by the AU Heads of State and Government.”*

Mr. Lal commended the AfCFTA Secretariat for the good work being done, especially for publishing the AfCFTA Rules of Origin Manual last year. He elucidated that *“in order to benefit from the tariff preferences under the AfCFTA, goods produced in one of the AfCFTA State parties must meet specific origin rules (RoO) detailed in the Annex 2, the interpretation of which, due to their highly technical nature, can be challenging for both traders and customs administrations.”* The RoO Manual actually sets out guidelines on the operationalization of Annex 2 on Rules of Origin of the Protocol on Trade in Goods of the AfCFTA Agreement and explains in a simple language how RoO works for the determination of the origin of goods.

The AfCFTA is a complex trade agreement, involving 54 countries with different market access. Several challenges still remain to be addressed. On this score, Mr. Lal added that *“negotiations are still ongoing for market access and rules of origin for textiles and automotive. Moreover, there is the need for all countries that have ratified the Agreement to be ready to trade. There is also the need to eliminate Customs barriers and poor documentation and also address issues related to the readiness of Customs and longer cargo release times.”*

For Mr. Lal, the EU-WCO HS Africa programme is a laudable initiative that enables partner African countries to implement and apply the 2022 version of the HS in a timely, uniform, consistent and coordinated manner.

He is confident that this *“4-day Training of Trainers Seminar will enhance the skill of customs officials in relation to HS matters and also equip them with the expertise required to provide training for relevant stakeholders”*. *“With a focus on a Training of Trainers, this workshop will no doubt achieve its objectives of ensuring sustainability and continuity in the implementation of HS by ESA Member countries,”* he said.

Mr. Vivekanand Ramburun, Director of the MRA Customs Department highlighted in his address that *“the Harmonized System is considered one of the pillars of customs procedures”*. He underlined that HS facilitates international trade, ensures accurate classification, and provides a standardized framework for classifying goods. This classification system, according to him, enables customs authorities globally to identify and categorize goods consistently, and ensures accurate customs declarations.



Mr. Ramburun also pointed out that *“the use of HS codes modernizes customs processes such as customs declarations, inspections, and clearance, leading to faster and more efficient trade operations.”* Mr. Ramburun is convinced that this training will help all the attendees to meet the challenges ahead in the Customs landscape.

Mr. Badr Mouhcine, Head of Programme, HS & RoO Africa, World Customs Organisation (WCO), highlighted that *“advanced ruling and training on the Harmonized System are two main areas that require attention and focus”*. *“By promoting the use of advanced rulings and providing capacity building on the HS, we can enhance trade facilitation, improve compliance, and contribute to the economic growth of our African nations”*, he affirmed.



Ms. Macarena Ruiz San Jose, Programme Manager, European Union (EU), stressed the significance of regional economic integration. Regional economic integration brings together countries within a specific region to foster closer economic cooperation, promote trade, and create a more prosperous and stable environment. The European Union stands as a prime example of successful regional integration.



By pooling resources and expertise, countries can tackle these challenges more effectively and achieve sustainable development, she concluded.



The Tariff Book is a comprehensive document that outlines customs duties and tariffs applicable to goods traded within AfCFTA. On this score, Ms. Demitta Gyang, Director, AfCFTA Secretariat, explained that *“the Tariff Book plays a crucial role in facilitating trade and promoting economic growth across the African continent. It also aims at simplifying and harmonising customs procedures and requirements across the AfCFTA”*. It provides a

standardized classification system for goods, ensuring consistency and clarity in the determination of customs duties and tariffs, Ms. Gyang concluded.

5th Steering Committee Meeting

The 5th Steering Committee Meeting of the EU-WCO Programme for Harmonized System in Africa was held on 02 October 2023 with a view to sharing and discussing the results of the HS Africa Programme, and planning the next phase as well as its strategic orientation for sustainability.

The meeting was combined with the 1st Steering Committee meeting of the Rules of Origin (RoO) for Africa Programme, during which delegates discussed the progress and future implementation of the programme.

About twenty-five high-level officials from the Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) countries participated in the discussions which ended with fruitful deliberations.



5th Steering Committee Meeting of the EU-WCO Programmed for Harmonized System in Africa

Training on Rules of Origin

MRA also hosted a comprehensive training session on **Rules of Origin (RoO)** at the Regional Training Centre (RTC), Custom House, Mer Rouge on Wednesday 04 October 2023. Twenty-eight participants availed themselves of this training, which aimed at enhancing the skills and knowledge of Customs Officers in effectively applying RoO regulations in their day-to-day work.

In his keynote address, Mr. Vivekanand Ramburun, Director of the MRA Customs Department stressed the importance of continuous learning and keeping abreast of the latest developments in customs procedures. The comprehensive training session on Rules of Origin, he said, is thus part of MRA's ongoing efforts to equip Customs officers with the knowledge and necessary skills to facilitate trade, ensure compliance, and protect domestic industries.

“Rules of Origin play a pivotal role in customs operations, as they determine the country or region of origin of goods, and establish eligibility for preferential trade agreements. By correctly applying RoO, Customs Officers can ensure accurate tariff classification, facilitate trade, prevent fraud, and protect domestic industries from unfair competition”, he affirmed.

Mr. Ramburun expressed his deep gratitude to the World Customs Organization and the European Union for providing various training sessions and other technical assistance to MRA.

The numerous capacity-building initiatives, workshops, and technical assistance programs conducted by the WCO have greatly contributed to the professional development of our customs officers, he concluded.

For his part, Mr. Badr Mouhcine, Head of Programme, HS & RoO Africa, World Customs Organisation (WCO) lauded Mauritius for organizing the WCO-EU capacity-building programme really well with a good atmosphere. *“Mauritius is an active member of the World Customs Organization (WCO) and as a member; Mauritius participates in the activities and initiatives of the organization to promote international customs cooperation. We look forward to further collaboration to facilitate trade”*, he added.

Ms. Macarena Ruiz San Jose, Programme Manager, European Union (EU) pointed out that the European Union remains committed to working closely with our partner countries to strengthen trade. The partnership between EU and MRA has yielded tangible results in terms of enhanced capacity, improved customs procedures, harmonized practices, trade facilitation, and boosted regional integration.

