**6 October 2021**

**“Food for thought” paper**

**Reflecting on the outcome of the High-level online conference**

**"HARNESSING INTER-REGIONAL INTEGRATION FOR SDGs"**

**May 20, 2021**

*Prepared by the Permanent Mission of Belarus to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva*

**Introduction**

Institutionalized dialogue among different regional integration groupings could be an important factor supplementing UN Member States’ efforts at achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Indeed, such kind of a dialogue allows for exchange of experience and best practices, coordination and implementation of joint projects in many areas like, among others, trade and standards, transport and infrastructure, digitalization and innovation, energy and environment protection.

There seems to be the need for a mechanism for regular multilateral interaction among regional integration groupings, which will build on many ongoing positive patterns of contact and cooperation. It should be all-inclusive and predicated on the principles of international law. It should aim to avoid unnecessary inter-regional competition and strive instead for ensuring synergies and complementarity among various regional processes. Furthermore, it would make much sense to entrust the United Nations with a coordinating and guiding role here.

 This has been the key message from the High-level online conference *«Harnessing inter-regional integration for SDGs»,* held online on 20 May 2021. The virtual meeting organized by the Permanent Missions of Belarus and Barbados to the United Nations and other international organizations in Geneva, in partnership with UNCTAD, brought together, in a forward-looking and very engaging discussion, a number of ministers whose countries presided over regional integration groupings, executive heads of several international organizations, senior officials of regional groupings’ secretariats as well as many other prominent speakers. The participants’ main focus was on how inter-regional integration could best contribute to the global work on attaining the SDGs, not least by means of stepped-up cooperation among regional integration groupings.

This document summarizes some key points raised by the participants, as well as some ideas for future work.

**On regional integration**

It appears to have been a consensual view that the world is currently facing multiple challenges. Indeed, rising geopolitical tension and increasing global turbulence have been significantly compounded by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic with its devastating social and economic effect. All of this significantly complicates the prospects for realizing the 2030 Agenda with its Sustainable Development Goals.

Some speakers voiced concerns about fragmentation or even destruction of well-established cross-border cooperation patterns and supply chains resulting from the current negative trends in the global economy and politics. Some noted that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of countries and other stakeholders in their reliance on extremely stretched international supply chains, whether for vaccines, medical equipment or other products. An opinion was expressed that production and trade value chains were likely to be reduced in size and scope, which would be a key economic trend in the post-pandemic world.

The Conference featured an exchange of views on how regional integration had already helped its members develop collective solutions to common challenges, including to those that were aggravated by the COVID-19 crisis, while continuing to work effectively on the SDGs.

Some panelists shared stories of how various regions were able to muster collective responses to the pandemic, in particular, by pooling efforts of national sanitary and epidemiological agencies.

Many speakers dwelt on their respective integrational groupings’ successful work in trade facilitation and harmonization in various social and economic fields. Moreover, many noted the mutually reinforcing nature of regional integration and reduced regional conflict potential, on the one hand, and domestic consolidation of political systems in countries concerned, increased domestic public cooperation and trust, as well as reinvigorated internal social and economic development, on the other.

The benefits of regional integration, thus, are widely evident and recognized. More than anywhere else, these are visible in international trade, where the number of regional trade agreements has seen a two-fold increase from 150 to 300 over the last 15 years.

Roughly half of these agreements sought in recent years even «deeper» integration by addressing issues beyond tariffs and trade rules under the World Trade Organization. Hence, international trade today is not only about buying and selling goods and services, it is something more as, by establishing a common level playing field among different countries, trade effectively links societies.

Some speakers focused on their integration groupings’ work in digitalization, e-commerce, circular economy, sustainable energy, preparedness and response to regional emergencies and disasters. Some panelists reflected upon human rights as they relate to integration, involving, in particular, a gender perspective and non-discrimination in international trade. Certain participants highlighted the potential of integration entities to address the sustainable management of forests with the view to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preventing biodiversity loss. Others pointed to the role played by regional integration in ensuring sustainable management of agriculture, fisheries and aquaculture through effective policies to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated activities and to prevent such products from entering the trade flows.

Some suggested that a future global order was likely to look like a world built around regions rather than around «great powers» as has been the case throughout history. Indeed, experience unequivocally demonstrates that there is barely any room for political tension and fragmentation in places marked by ever-evolving regional integration.

The Conference concluded that in the context of disruptive and turbulent globalization regional integration has proven to be a key driver for sustainable and inclusive growth, while stressing the point that regional integration was able to unlock its untapped potential in support of Member States’ efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda even more.

The Conference also pointed out the positive role played by the UN Regional Economic Commissions in promoting regional integration. In particular, the Commissions have produced a very broad normative framework in such areas as transport, energy, trade, and environmental protection, while being actively engaged in an effort to contribute to their members’ transit capacities, connectivity, and harmonization of industry standards.

**On cooperation among regional integration groupings**

Many panelists appreciated the fact that each and every regional integration grouping followed its own specific development path and accumulated unique experience, which was vital in the work on the SDGs. All voiced support to the mutually beneficial nature for regional groupings from exchanging information on relevant experiences and best practices, capacity building and implementation of internal integration agreements at the national level.

A number of speakers provided some practical examples on how their regional groupings served as large incubators for knowledge and products, which could be effectively utilized by other regions as well as globally via multilateral platforms.

All speakers seem to have shared the point about the importance for integration groupings to develop ties among themselves in order to increase the benefits of regionalization and to achieve better outcomes in improving the well-being of their populations as well as in transitioning to a sustainable development economic paradigm.

One panelist underlined the need to demonstrate in practice that different regions were not “sworn rivals”. According to him, interdependency will allow to avoid harmful inter-regional competition and prevent emergence of new dividing lines in the world. Another speaker echoed that institutionalizing the inter-regional dialogue would be a constructive step in preventing a rollback to a bloc-type confrontation and in making it possible to effectively combat “distortions” stemming from unilateral restrictive measures and the “right of the strongest”.

Various speakers mentioned that interaction among regional integration groupings have already been underway, but to a limited extent, and mostly involving bilateral ties. So, that fact reinforces the argument for the expansion of inter-regional cooperation.

Some panelists provided specific examples of bilateral cooperation between integration entities, saying that the regions involved positively appraised such type of cooperation.

A number of panelists emphasized the point that no framework or platform has been established up to now that could facilitate regular and continuous exchanges among regional economic integration groupings, so there was an obvious need to create one.

Certain participants made reference to some already existing multilateral fora, which could positively contribute to increased inter-regional interaction, such as the WTO’ transparency mechanism for RTAs and the UN Regional Economic commissions.

An overriding point that was stressed throughout the Conference was that there was no alternative to effective multilateralism. Some speakers argued in favor of a “new multilateralism” that could be built around networks and coalitions with separate networks doing their best to contribute to global solutions. All participants seem to have agreed that the idea of inter-regional cooperation was neither in contradiction nor in competition with the concept of multilateralism. This understanding will, in turn, help pave the way for strengthening multilateralism further.

**On the future work**

The participants agreed on the importance of continued work to establish a mechanism for interaction among integration groupings, and to determine the most appropriate format of such interactions, while taking into account existing limited fora on some specific issues.

Several speakers pointed to the direct correlation between the idea of a mechanism and the SDG #17 related to global partnerships for sustainable development.

Many panelists underlined the role of UNCTAD in this endeavor, noting that its well-recognized expertise was in high demand in the context of enhancing the role of regional economic ties in global efforts to implement the SDGs.

Speakers also highlighted the important role played by the UN Regional Commissions in harnessing the power of regional integration and cooperation.

Proposals were voiced to bring the topic of the Conference to UNCTAD-15, the UN General Assembly, the 7th UNCTAD World Investment Forum as well as to the ECOSOC’s High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

**Background documents:**

**Concept Paper**

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| What | * A virtual meeting to discuss ways to maximise the contribution of inter-regional integration to SDGs attainment, and to facilitate regular and continuing collaboration among regional integration groupings
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| When | * 20 May 2021, 13:30 – 17:00 (Geneva time)
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| Who | * Organized by the Permanent Missions of Belarus and Barbados in partnership with UNCTAD; participated by UN Member States, regional integration groupings, international organizations
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**Background**

The socio-economic crisis ignited by the COVID-19 pandemic has reversed the progress towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. An initial proliferation of trade-restrictive measures, such as restrictions on the export of essential medical supplies and/or foodstuff, highlighted the need for a trading system that would safeguard vulnerable countries in times of crisis.

Even before the COVID-19 crisis hit the world, the international trading system was undergoing a structural change. While the multilateral trading system under the World Trade Organization (WTO) remains as the foundation for promoting “a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable” (SDG Target 17.10) trading system, there has been a significant increase in the number of regional and sub-regional economic integration and trade agreements. Between 2005 and 2019, a number of regional trade agreements doubled from 150 to over 300. In recent years, about half of all trade agreements aim at “deeper” integration by addressing issues beyond tariffs and trade rules under WTO.

Regional economic integration aims to reduce trade barriers among members to foster region-wide socio-economic development in a meaningful manner. Regional economic integration at its best may help member countries to address collective interests on issues such as poverty and inequality, vulnerability, food security, debt, gender empowerment, energy, decent work, infrastructure, sustainable production, and “green” and “blue” growth, among others.

It is in this context that regional integration could play a crucial role in revitalizing growth and accelerating the pace to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

Each regional integration grouping follows its own development path and accumulates unique experience in contributing to the attainment of the SDGs. Exchanging information on such unique experiences and best practices, including building institutional capacity and implementation of the integration agreements at the national level, will be mutually beneficial for all regional integration groupings.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) could be seen among prime examples in this regard. In particular, the EAEU is the only regional project that has provided a voluntary review of the presentation of its SDG activities in 2017 at the ECOSOC High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in New York.

Interactions among regional integration groupings are already underway but on a limited scale. A web of bilateral FTAs involving regional integration groupings are emerging, while large-scale multi-party RTAs evolved along South-South and South-South-North axis.

However, to date no framework or platform facilitates regular and continuous interactions among regional economic integration groupings.

**Proposal**

Against the above background, Belarus and Barbados proposed to organize an event to discuss ways to enhance horizontal cooperation and collaboration among regional integration groupings towards achieving the SDGs.

The event is envisaged to:

- Bring regional integration groupings and their member countries together to exchange views on if/how regional integration has helped members develop collective solutions to common challenges, including those exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, and ensure SDGs attainment.

- Be an integral element of the preparatory process towards the Fifteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD 15), to be held in October 2021. UNCTAD would substantively contribute to this event as a partner agency.

- Explore the possibility of a mechanism for interaction and sharing of best practices among interested regional integration groupings. The outcome could be presented at the 2021 ECOSOC High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and/or at the general policy discussion of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, during UNCTAD 15, and the 7th UNCTAD World Investment Forum (WIF).

- Explore mechanisms to launch a regular dialogue between the interested countries and regional integration groupings.

**Programme & Speakers**

**Moderators:**

- Opening session and Panel 1 – H.E. Amb. Yury Ambrazevich, Permanent Representative of Belarus in Geneva;

- Panel 2 and Closing session – H.E. Amb. Chad Blackman, Permanent Representative of Barbados in Geneva

**Opening Session - Setting the Scene**

Regional integration is becoming a way to make economic life and trade better contribute to sustainable development. What strategic issues require greater cooperation and coordination among regional integration groupings worldwide?

- H.E. Mr Vladimir Makei, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus

- H.E. Mr Jerome Xavier Walcott, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Barbados

Keynote Speaker:

- H.E. Mr Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation

**Panel 1 - Regional integration for a stronger multilateral economic system, tackling the COVID 19 challenges, and attaining the SDGs – experience of the integration groupings**

What are the best practices and needs for inter-regional integration, including in countering socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis? Speakers are invited to present one success story to be shared and to identify one most important point of interest towards future cooperation among regional integration groupings.

**Speakers:**

- H.E. Mr Mikhail Myasnikovich, Chairman of the Board of the Eurasian Economic Commission

- H.E. Mr Dato Lim Jock Hoi, Secretary-General of ASEAN

- H.E. Mr Henri Gétaz, Secretary-General of EFTA

- H.E. Ms Gail Mathurin, Director-General, Office of Trade Negotiations, CARICOM Secretariat

- H.E. Mr Jorge Hernando Pedraza, Secretary-General, Andean Community of Nations

- H.E. Mr Jorge Neme, Secretary for International Economic Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Worship of Argentina

- H.E. Dr Amery Browne, Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

- H.E. Mr Kairat Torebayev, Vice-Minister of Trade and Integration of the Republic of Kazakhstan

- H.E. Mrs. Martha Pobee, Chief Director – Director-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration of Ghana

- H.E. Ms. Emaleen Abdul Rahman Teo, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brunei Darussalam

**Panel 2 - Regional integration for a stronger multilateral economic system, tackling the COVID 19 challenges, and attaining the SDGs – experience and contribution of the international organizations**

What are the ways that cooperation among integrational projects can complement and create synergies with the efforts of international organizations in attaining the SDGs? Each speaker is invited to present existing tools available for inter-regional cooperation and to identify potential directions for deepening partnership between international organizations and regional integration groupings.

**Speakers:**

- H.E. Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, WTO Director General

- H.E. Ms Alicia Bárcena, ECLAC Executive Secretary

- H.E. Ms Isabelle Durant, Acting Secretary-General of UNCTAD

- H.E. Ms Tatiana Valovaya, Director-General of the UNOG

- H.E. Ms Olga Algayerova, UNECE Executive Secretary

- H.E. Ms Vera Songwe, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa

- H.E. Mr Daren Tang, WIPO Director General

- H.E. Ms Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, ESCAP Executive Secretary

- H.E. Mr Mounir Tabet, UNESCWA Deputy Executive Secretary

**Closing Session – A way forward (15 minutes)**

Feedback from moderators on the main outcomes of the discussion and the next steps to enable regular dialogue, information exchange and collaboration among regional integration groupings?

- H.E. Amb. Federico Villegas, President of the Trade and Development Board of UNCTAD, Permanent Representative of Argentina in Geneva

- H.E. Amb. Yury Ambrazevich, Permanent Representative of Belarus in Geneva

- H.E. Amb. Chad Blackman, Permanent Representative of Barbados in Geneva