



**MSG Secretariat**  
**Secretariat du GFLM**

Melanesian Spearhead Group | Le Groupe Fer de Lance Mélanésien

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**REMARKS OF THE DG AT THE SIGNING OF THE MOU BETWEEN THE MSG AND THE OCOS  
MSG Secretariat, Port Vila, 19 September 2024**

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Ms Nancy T Oraka, Head of the OCO Secretariat  
Mr Collin Gesa, Acting Director of Customs and Inland Revenue of Vanuatu  
Mr Udit Singh, Head of Customs of Fiji  
Ms Sania Teisini, Director of Inland Revenue of Tuvalu  
Staff of the MSG

Good morning and welcome to the House of Melanesia.

I am pleased to be able to take part in this morning's ceremony which would result in the signing of a renewed MOU of Cooperation between the MSG Secretariat and the Oceania Customs Organisation (OCO) Secretariat.

When I was looking at the notes for this morning and wondering how to situate my comments on cooperation between the MSG and OCO, I was confronted with the difference in our membership.

While the MSG membership is comprised of four (4) countries and one pro-independence Group in the FLNKS of New Caledonia, the OCO membership comprises of twenty-three (23) member nations and territories that are autonomous customs jurisdictions in the Pacific.

It has not been lost on me that some may say, with some degree of justification, that this is an unequal arrangement.

But having acknowledged the difference in the size of our two organisations membership, let me hasten to point out, what I have proudly asserted on many occasions, that, excluding calculations for Australia and New Zealand, the MSG as a collective constitutes the largest population (86%), land mass (98%), GDP (91%), almost 50% of the EEZ, and by some accounts has close to 90% of the natural resources in the PIF area.

As such, I have always maintained that the MSG as a collective has a corresponding responsibility to be in the forefront of regional cooperative and collective actions that seek to better serve and better respond to the needs of our peoples.

The MOU that we will sign today will help us leverage whatever knowledge, whatever experience, whatever resources, whatever network, and whatever human capital that OCO Secretariat has to play a constructive role in the customs and trade space.

The MSG Trade Agreement has proven to be a very robust platform for the MSG member countries to trade in goods. I have claimed unabashedly, rightfully or wrongly, that the MSGTA is the only trading agreement in the region that is operating effectively.

From a mere three (3) goods in 1995 we have now, after 2005 MSGTA 2, we are now trading in so many goods under the 6 - digit HS code. Again, I have proudly contended that MSG countries are trading with over 1,000 items now.

We are currently exploring how best to have New Caledonia participate in this MSG Trade Agreement. MSG Leaders have also directed us last year to look into ways and means on how to improve trading links between MSG countries and Indonesia.

In 2016, agreement was reached on the text of the Melanesian Free Trade Agreement (MFTA), which include the Services Sector. Fiji and Solomon Islands have signed this MFTA, while Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu are still undertaking the necessary domestic clearances. We are working very hard to expedite the operationalization of this MFTA.

It is pertinent to point out that MSG Leaders have also directed that in developing and implementing MSG collective and cooperative initiatives we must always remember that we are part of a bigger regional community – the Blue Pacific Continent. MSG Leaders have unambiguously determined that MSG must remain inclusive in its approach to its collective initiatives and must be positively disposed to others joining in whenever they feel appropriate.

Why am I venturing into this discussion?

This is to illustrate that trade and commercial activities will only increase within the MSG countries, between the MSG countries, and between the MSG countries and the region and the globe. Customs procedures and trade facilitation play an important role in international and trans-national trade.

Advances in IT has allowed countries to embrace “E” commerce to facilitate trade and maximise profits. But we also know that illegal actors also capitalize on this IT advances to carry out their illicit activities. May I be so bold as to suggest that ASYCUDA cannot be excluded from the list of systems that pernicious illegal actors might target in their illicit activities. They have targeted and caused havoc to our financial systems, Government payment systems and our Central Banks.

Likewise, improvements and innovations in transportation vehicles, like cheap submersible marine units and drones have dealt, might I suggest, a favourable hand to those with malevolent intentions to carry out their illicit activities.

I am convinced that our MOU today, provides a useful umbrella under which we can develop specific joint activities to facilitate legitimate trade between and amongst MSG countries, between MSG countries and other countries in the OCO jurisdiction, between MSG countries and countries outside of the OCO jurisdiction but members of the WTO and the World Customs Organisation.

Let me at this point, acknowledge with thanks the collaboration that we have had in the past with OCO Secretariat. This includes participation in OCO sponsored regional workshops on the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement, sharing of information on rules of origin on the MSG Trade Agreement, and collaboration in the development of the Pacific Trade Database System.

As the administering arm of the MSG, we are ready to assist, where appropriate - and if needed, in helping our members with facilitating safe and secure trade, maximising their revenue and improving their compliance, promoting better coordination of border security and management, and introducing best practices for customs reform and modernisation.

We know, and are confident, that OCO Secretariat can help us and our members in this regard. And as such our investment in this MOU.

But let me make it very clear. MSG will not be involved in any initiative if our members do not want us to. MSG will not be involved if OCO Secretariat feels that is not appropriate for us to be involved. We will only come in to add value and to complement.

Let me, with your permission, briefly just mention the 2038 Prosperity for All Plan. This is the MSG long term strategic development plan. If you look at it, the Plan prescribes a long-term goal and aspiration for MSG to morph into a community such as that manifested in the European Community today. So, all cooperative actions that the MSG countries are taking now are harbingers to that ultimate goal of an MSG Community.

And when that eventuates, it is not inconceivable to imagine a customs union being developed amongst the MSG members.

Our MOU with the OCO is fundamental in our overall approach and strategy towards positioning the MSG towards greater trade and economic integration.

On this note, I am happy to sign off on the MOU with the OCO Secretariat today.

Thank you, Merci beaucoup, Tenk yu tru, Tagio tumas, Vinaka vaka levu, Oleti!

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