Opening Statement

Ab van Ravestein
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Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to speak a few words at the opening of this 7th World Conference of Trade Promotion Organizations. I will not be too long, as we have intensive work ahead of us, and there are many presentations to come in the next two days.

For me, as managing director of EVD, it is an honour to see so many representatives of trade promotion organizations in this conference center in The Hague.

Whatever region we come from, we are all colleagues. And we all have the same ambition: to stimulate our companies to discover and explore the world that lies beyond the national markets.

In particular, we cater for the Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, the SMEs. That target group constitutes, as you know, the backbone of our economies. The larger companies, banks, etc. often do not need us when they plan to enter new markets, or to expand their existing positions. They will have in-house expertise, or they have the means to obtain these services elsewhere. That does not mean to say that we will not be ready to help them, if they so wish.

But first and foremost the SMEs are our “raison d’être”, as the French say; the reason for our existence.

Different as we all may be, when our companies come to us we will assist them. These companies need market information, they want to have market surveys done by us, and they require our help in finding suitable business partners. Often, TPOs also organise trade missions, or they are directly involved when these missions are organized by their governments.

In some cases, TPOs can even provide tailor-made financial support for companies who want to export to, or invest in, foreign markets.

Some of us do not charge for their services, while others ask a fee, particularly those whose assistance ranges from the first business contacts to the negotiation of business contracts.

Some TPOs have their own foreign network, and others, like my own organization, use their diplomatic network: the commercial sections of embassies and consulates, to provide services abroad.
Some of us are part of the government and others are semi-autonomous or even completely private institutions.

So we appear to be an extremely heterogeneous group!

But there is unity in diversity. And we can learn a lot from each others’ practices.

This is where ITC comes into the picture. ITC has for many years been active in providing information and other services to companies doing international business. ITC, linked to the WTO and UNCTAD, has a particular focus on companies in the developing world. And it is quite an active organization!

Only last week, ITC held its World Export Development Forum in Montreux. Some of you will have attended that conference. And today and tomorrow, under the auspices of ITC, the 7th World Conference of Trade Promotion Organizations will take place here in The Hague.

Why did EVD offer to act as co-host and organizer? I have already implicitly given you the answer. It is because we feel that we, as a European TPO, can benefit from sharing views with our colleague-organizations from all regions. Valuable information is exchanged in the conference rooms, but sometimes the informal contacts outside these rooms provide an even better source of information.

ITC and EVD have worked hard to present you with a programme that, we hope, will later be evaluated by you as highly relevant and informative.

Personally, I also look forward to the Award presentations, with its atmosphere of anticipation and uncertainty. I will not say that tonight's event will be more exciting than the famous Oscar presentations in Los Angeles, but we have tried to come as close as possible!

I am very grateful that Mr. Dirk Jan van den Berg will act as chair of this conference. Mr. Van den Berg has an extensive knowledge of all aspects of international trade. He has held several high functions at the ministry of Economic Affairs; later he became secretary-general of the ministry of Foreign Affairs, Permanent Representative at the UN in New York and ambassador in Beijing. In that latter function, he designed and put into practice an entirely new diplomatic approach for increasing business between The Netherlands and China.

Mr. Van den Berg is now Chairman of the Governing Board of the renowned Technical University of the City of Delft. I have no doubt that he will guide you through this conference in a highly professional way.

ITC’s Executive Director, Mrs. Patricia Francis, will of course also welcome you at this conference. But before giving her the floor, I want to express my sincere gratitude to the Dutch Centre for the Promotion of Imports from Developing Countries, CBI, which offered support to EVD when we were planning to host this conference. And they have kept their promises. The previous director of CBI, Mr. Ton Lansink, and his successor, Mr. Hans Klunder, are here today. A warm welcome to you both!

Ladies and gentlemen, I told you I would be brief. Unlike most speakers who promise that, and then bore the audience to death for an hour or more, I will keep my word.

I hope that you will enjoy this 7th World TPO Conference and I call on you to participate actively at the discussions in the plenary and the workshops.

I now give the floor to Mrs. Patricia Francis.

Thank you very much.