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Workshop on Harmonizing Customs Procedures and Custom to Custom Exchange of Electronic Documents in the Arab Region

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Table des matières

1. Introduction

In December 2011, the UN General Assembly approved the project "Strengthening the capacities of developing countries and countries with economies in transition to facilitate legitimate border crossing, regional cooperation and integration." In December 2012, the Review Committee, convened under the auspices of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, approved the final draft of the project as a United Nations initiative to be led by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), as an executing entity, in partnership with the United Nations Commissions for Africa (UNECA), for South East Asia (UNESCWA), for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and for Asia and the pacific (UNESCAP).

The project aims to strengthen the capacity of developing countries and of countries with economies in transition to facilitate border crossings, by means of increased secure electronic information sharing between customs administrations. Simultaneously, the project aims to contribute to secure the supply chain and the government revenues related to the international transport of goods. Ultimately, this project will help increase cooperation between customs administrations and promote the use of international standard electronic messages, particularly for transit operations. On the basis of existing international standards on transit-related information, such as those used and defined in the eTIR project, this project will deliver a Customs-to-Customs (C2C) electronic exchange platform.

Under the project's activities, a workshop was planned for exchanges between pilot countries and their actual or potential partners as part of implementing the project or within the framework of general trade relations. The meeting held in Casablanca, Morocco, from 2 to 4 December 2015, responds to that need. It was organized by the ECA Office for North Africa and ESCWA, in close cooperation with the AMU General Secretariat.

2. Meeting's objective and expected outcomes

The overall objective of the workshop was to contribute to the strengthening of trade facilitation in the Maghreb region through expediting the harmonization of customs procedures and drawing up a plan that will make the exchange of electronic data in the Maghreb a reality.

The expected results of the workshop are fourfold:

- Inform States of the results of the analysis of obstacles hampering customs harmonization in the region;

- Analyze the technical and legal gaps facing the electronic exchange of customs documents between Maghreb customs administrations;

- Share lessons learned from international and regional experiences and practices in customs harmonization; and

- Lay the foundations of an Arab project for the electronic exchange of customs documents;

- Discuss opportunities for the Agadir initiative countries to join a C2C data exchange platform.

3. Attendance

National experts from the customs administrations of the member countries of the Arab Maghreb Union and from the Arab region are the main participants in the meeting. Representatives of the AMU General Secretariat, of the Agadir Technical Committee, of UNECE, IRU, ECA and other institutions also participated in the meeting. The list of participants is attached as Appendix 2 to this report.

4. Format of the meeting

Proceedings were conducted in plenary sessions, of which there were nine, including an opening session with two speeches centered on analyzing the sub-regional context and the importance of the ESCWA-ECA-AMU partnership.

During the discussion, there was an exchange of views on regional integration, trade facilitation and trade procedures in the Arab region, on the TIR Convention and regional conventions in the field of transport, the digitization of customs procedures and the WCO Data Model. Specific sessions allowed participants to share their own experiences and to learn from the experiences of other countries and other nations and regions around the world, including ASEAN, the EU, Iran, Georgia and Turkey. Finally, various options for the establishment of a pilot platform for the electronic exchange of data were examined.

Opening session

The opening session was chaired by Mr. Nassim Oulmane, Acting Director at the Economic Commission for Africa (Office for North Africa), Mr. Reda El Merini, Director of Economic Affairs at the General Secretariat of the Arab Maghreb Union and Mr. Mohamed Chemingui, Head of the Regional Integration Section at the Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA), who delivered opening remarks on the occasion.

Speech by Mr. Oulmane, Acting Director, ECA Office for North Africa

In his opening remarks, Mr. Oulmane said the workshop on harmonizing customs procedures and the custom to custom exchange of electronic documents between customs administrations in the Maghreb was held as part of an overall project entitled "Strengthening the capacities of developing countries and countries with economies in transition to facilitate border crossings, cooperation and regional integration." (UNDA C2C). This initiative, which is coordinated by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), is supported by five UN Regional Commissions, including the Economic Commission for Africa and the Economic Commission for West Asia. It will make it possible, among other things, to put at the disposal of the countries concerned an IT platform to facilitate the exchange of trade documents for countries wishing to facilitate trade while improving the management of risks involved in such transfers through accelerated digitization of customs procedures.

The Director then made an overview of the meeting's objectives, including the opportunity for the customs administrations of AMU countries and the Member States of the Agadir Agreement to learn about experiences in other regions regarding customs harmonization and the exchange of electronic documents between customs administrations.

At a time when several countries in North Africa and the Arab world are engaged in numerous regional integration processes which, nonetheless, have the same ambitions (African Continental Free Trade Area, Greater Arab Free Trade Area, Arab Customs Union, AMU Free Trade Area, Agadir Agreement), customs cooperation is an essential tool, he said, for facilitating regional integration, given the strategic positioning of customs administrations at the border. He then recalled the reforms undertaken in the last decade by most countries in the regions concerned. These countries (Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia) have sought to reform their customs procedures to facilitate trade and meet the needs of their exporters. However, the impact of these reforms was limited due to the absence of full inter-state cooperation on harmonizing customs laws, regulations, procedures and documents, and also in terms of

compliance with international conventions and good practices in this area due, in particular, to some legal, technical or other obstacles. For this reason, the Director called on participants to make concrete proposals based on various experiences in other regions.

Remarks by Mr. Mohamed Chemingui, Head of Regional Integration Section at the Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA)

Mr. Chemingui emphasized the significant obstacle represented by non-tariff barriers to trade among Arab countries. In Arab countries, he said, customs duties today account for 5 to 10% of trade costs, whereas customs procedures and other non-tariff barriers account for about 30 to 40% of tariff equivalent. In recent years, he added, countries in the region have basically negotiated a reduction of customs duties, but little has been done regarding non-tariff measures (NTMS), which are the main obstacle to trade. Although there has been a slight improvement in the Gulf countries in recent years in this area, Arab countries need, according to Mr. Chemingui, to attach even more importance to this issue rather than seek new trade agreements.

Since the European Union is one of the most advanced markets in the world in terms of customs management, Mr. Chemingui wondered if the Arab countries that seek to promote their relations with this partner have the means, currently, to manage this situation in a way that would benefit them. He also stressed the importance for Arab countries to boost coordination in order to build a homogeneous Arab customs union.

At a time when the countries of the Arab League are negotiating the creation of a customs union, many countries still refuse certificates issued by their Arab neighbors; hence the need, he said, to start a dialogue to develop tools that would enable the countries concerned to overcome these obstacles.

Mr. Reda El Merini, Director of Economic Affairs at the General Secretariat of the Arab Maghreb Union

Speaking on behalf of Mr. Habib Ben Yahia, Secretary General of the Arab Maghreb Union, Mr. El Merini also underscored the low volume of trade, both within the Arab Maghreb Union and between Arab countries. He insisted on the need to identify the underlying obstacles leading to this situation.

According to Mr. El Merini, promoting trade between Maghreb countries should not be limited to concluding free trade agreements; it should also include trade facilitation on the ground, meaning at customs.
To this end, the Arab Maghreb Union has set up various working groups under

the aegis of the Committee of Directors of Maghreb Customs. In turn, the Committee has set up a Maghreb Council which brings together the five Maghreb customs administrations and whose statutes should soon be initialed by the Finance Ministers of AMU countries. The Customs Council will include working groups for the standardization of customs procedures and nomenclature.

Work has progressed in this regard, said Mr. El Merini. Given the development of information technology, electronic exchanges between customs authorities represent a new area of action that UMA countries are currently establishing.

Session 1

Session 1 has provided a broad overview of the Arab regional integration process and experience to date based on a report published recently by ESCWA. The presentation by Mehmet Eris (ESCWA) started by discussing the benefits of regional integration in general before introducing a novel tool, referred to as Arab Economic Integration System of Indicators (AESI), to assess Arab economic integration performance. The AESI is constructed to quantitatively assess efforts and successes in economic integration across the Arab region and with the rest of the world, with the ultimate goal of generating practical recommendations amenable to policy intervention. Based on the AESI, the progresses made and the challenges faced in the pursuit of regional economic integration within a wide range of sectors, including trade, manufacturing agriculture, tourism, services, facilitating and structural factors for integration are presented. The low volume of intra-regional trade, relatively weak manufacturing services sectors and services trade restrictiveness are among the areas where the biggest gaps lie. Intra-regional migration and remittances are relatively high in the Arab world and there is scope to further increase those, representing opportunities in the regional integration process.

A customs union is a more advanced form of integration than a free trade area and the Arab region has been intensifying discussions on the Arab Customs Union (ACU). The evolution of PAFTA to the ACU entails overcoming numerous challenging issues, most notably including a common external tariff and a mechanism of tariff revenue distribution. Based on three illustrative trade reform scenarios, two 'pure' tariff reforms scenarios and one tariff reform that is complemented by a reduction of trade costs on intra-Arab trade, it was reported that although the GDP impact would be limited, the impact on intra-regional trade patterns would be more pronounced. The fiscal impact of under these scenarios would vary across countries, depending in part on fiscal instruments in use. Overall, economic gains from the ACU would critically depend not only on the CET but on a package of policies to ensure a competitive Arab market.

The participants' questions on the presentation were centered around several major problems faced in the regional integration process in the Arab world. These most notably included the lack of commensurate implementation of regional integration agreements and of transparency measures, and effective dispute settlement mechanisms. The limited depth and scope of most regional integration agreements, including PAFTA, is reflected in intra-regional trade volumes, which has remained extremely low compared to ASEAN and the EU. Also, it was also noted that the apparent lack of a champion of Arab integration process and of the political will greatly undermine regional integration efforts. Participants also raised concerns over the feasibility of the ACU, underlining the magnitude of challenges and the importance of a fully functioning PAFTA before introducing the ACU. It was also emphasized that negotiating new FTAs with the rest of the world is likely to further undermine feasibility of the ACU, unless there are mechanisms in place to negotiate FTAs as a bloc.

Session 2: Computerizing customs procedures and TIR

Three presentations were made during this session: a presentation by the Economic Commission for Europe on the TIR Convention and the eTIR Project; an update on the implementation of the computerization of the TIR in general; a presentation of the eTIR pilot project between Turkey and Iran; and a presentation by the WCO on globally networked customs and interoperability between customs administrations.

The presentation of the TIR and the eTIR Project highlighted the benefits of a centralized approach for the interconnection of customs administrations, compared to a bilateral or decentralized approach. The presentation also highlighted the importance of using international standards for data exchange, such as the data used and developed in the framework of the eTIR Project. The presentation also provided an opportunity to present the main pillars of the IT system and to explain how it works.

The two representatives of the International Road Transport Union (IRU) then briefed the participants on the progress made in computerizing the e-TIR system in general and on its benefits in terms of paperless procedures before introducing the specific experience of Iran and Turkey. The system described by the IRU is based on the pre-declaration of cargo information as well as on risk management. It has many advantages, including the reduction of data entry and management errors through automation and the integration of technical and legal specificities at national level. The e-TIR is electronically operated and does not require the use of carnets, which it replaces. The system was designed to reduce implementation costs; it required only minor adjustments in the national customs

systems of the two countries concerned and among carriers and national guaranteeing associations. The system allows customs to receive, in advance, declaration information from the carrier. This makes it possible for customs officers to perform upstream risk analysis and therefore speed up transit at the border, thus reducing costs. Guarantees can also be ordered online, thus eliminating paper processing and saving time and money. All TIR stakeholders concerned can manage online TIR transport, and the guarantee status is sent directly by the guarantor. This significantly enhances the security of the TIR system.

The TIR is one of the oldest, most successful public-private partnerships of the United Nations. Since 1949, it continued to be revamped over the decades. It facilitates the flow of millions of transactions each year, helping to boost trade and promote development and prosperity.

The experience of Turkey and Iran showed participants, in a tangible way, the possibilities offered by the implementation of the e-TIR and the link with the customs to customs electronic information exchange. Finally, the presentation by the World Customs Organization helped drive home the idea that the future of customs operations and the future of the secure movement of goods and people lie in the notion of networked customs which the Organization is promoting. Through an optimal computerization of utility blocks, networked customs system will prove to be valuable.

The discussions which followed the presentations focused on collaboration mechanisms between the IRU and States that are not parties to the TIR conventions, clarification requests on the nature of the guarantees and their management in a computerized TIR, and quantifying the benefits of the e-TIR system vs TIR.

Session 3: WCO Data Model: Customs Procedures and paperless data exchange

Paperless customs procedures and trade with the outside world: the example of Senegal

Having recalled the legal framework for paperless procedures in Senegal and made a brief presentation on the customs computer platforms and modules used, Mr. Basse, Customs Inspector at the Directorate of Computer Customs Systems in Senegal, presented the outline of a database modeling project (version 3.6 of the WCO Data Model). He then introduced the customs interconnection project within ECOWAS.

Regarding the proposed database modeling, the expert pointed out the main results obtained:

  • The decision to entrust to the FG the modeling of regional transit within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS);

  • **Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire** are pilot countries in the modeling the WCO Data Model;

  • **In Senegal**: modeling for electronic sea waybill and master air waybill, Advanced electronics information (AEI) and the transit declaration

  • The Customs Declaration and Cargo Manifest are based on the WCO DM's XML format based on a service oriented architecture (SOAP).

As regards the interconnection project within ECOWAS, Mr. Basse briefly described the related legal framework, adding that the project will make it possible to set up an electronic platform for transit data exchange between Member States. The platform should be a standard one and should be open to all Member States' IT systems.

TradeNet single window: An important step in C2C exchanges

Mr. Mezghani, CEO of *Tunisie TradeNet* (TTN), built his presentation around three points; i) a brief presentation of TTN; ii) international data exchange; and iii) some proposals.

Mr. Mezghani shared with participants some key dates in connection with TTN since its creation in 2000 up to the current customs duties online payment project and the generalization of electronic signature. He pointed out the effectiveness of the model chosen by Tunisia to promote paperless processing. The results obtained are self-evident:

  • Very high service availability
  • Generalization of the electronic signature
  • Completion of the electronic document management
  • Dematerialization of payments (online payment)
  • E-invoicing
  • Development of exchanges between customs administrations
  • Better use of information base

The TTN CEO concluded his presentation by informing participants that the country is currently discussing the facilitation of customs procedures with the European Union.

The two presentations were followed by several questions and comments by participants, especially regarding TTN's legal status and the nature of its relationship with private operators and customs authorities. Clarifications were given about the TTN system; it was indicated that TTN is a public agency, although a small portion of its capital is privately owned.

As regards the Senegalese experience, the meeting noted the importance of sharing experiences to improve the current process in the sub-region.

Session 4: Customs harmonization initiatives in the Arab region in a context of regional integration

Data exchange between Agadir Initiative countries in the framework of the ATU action plan

Mr. Mohamed Tolba, Senior Advisor to the Agadir Agreement's Technical Unit (ATU) made an overview of the Agadir Agreement and data exchange modalities among Member States.

Following a brief historical overview of the Agadir Agreement since its Declaration in 2001 up to its implementation in 2007, Mr. Tolba shared his perception of the Agreement's expected benefits for member countries and the arrangements made for its success. He also briefly introduced the mission and activities of the Technical Unit.

Mr. Tolba reported on the status of the process for the creation of an electronic exchange platform between Member States' customs authorities. This platform is expected to be launched in 2016.

He then briefed participants on the nature of the main challenges identified regarding the above project; they are: i) the lack of infrastructure, and ii) the lack of coordination between regional organizations and communities.

The Arab Customs Union and the need for exchanges between member countries of the League of Arab States

Mr. Sameh Abd El-Karim, from the Directorate of Arab Economic Integration at the League of Arab States, briefed participants on the progress made for the

creation of the Arab Customs Union. His presentation revolved around the following: i) A brief presentation of the Arab League and of the Directorate of Economic Integration; ii) Principles underpinning the Customs Union; and iii) Unified customs measures.

Mr. Abd El-Karim briefly presented the Arab League's mandate and lines of work before addressing the vision and mission of the Directorate of Economic Integration, which is the body in charge of supervising the customs union process. He also shared with participants a detailed presentation on the database of member countries' customs tariffs.

Mr. Abd El-Karim concluded his presentation by a status report on the adoption of the single customs act.

During the debate which followed the two presentations, several issues and questions were raised by the participating experts; they can be summarized as follows:

• Differences in market size and economic structures between member countries of the Arab League are a significant challenge that slows down negotiations. Developing equalization mechanisms seems to be crucial for the success of the project;

• Evaluating the Agadir process should help to identify the main challenges facing member countries;

• The electronic exchange of customs documents is a project on which both regional initiatives have been working; progress has been made, notwithstanding the above obstacles.

Session 5 : Echanges des bonnes pratiques dans l'harmonisation des procédures douanières

The first presentation, entitled "Arab connectivity, information as regional public good", was made by Mr. Quang Anh Le (Chief Technical Advisor, UNDP). A review of the objectives sought from the exchange of data was made and presented as a factor that stimulates trade facilitation. It makes information available prior to physical exchange and allows for better understanding of the requirements of customs administrations. The presentation then addressed general prospects for trade facilitation and integrated border management, of which data exchange is a part. The speaker then addressed the basics of data exchange at bilateral and regional levels from the perspective of Arab countries'

connectivity. He then concluded with an example which is full of practical lessons and shared the data exchange experience of South East Asian countries.

The second presentation, entitled "EU Customs Union C2C interfaces learnings", was made by Mr. Zahouani SAADAOUI (European Commission). He made an overview of the process for the production of European laws before turning to the customs regulatory framework in Europe. The evolution of the European Customs IT system clearly shows the sector's growing importance as well as better integration over time. EU customs statistics also indicate an intensive volume of activity as well as a steady increase in the past five years, which can partly be explained by the enlargement of the European area. Performance indicators in terms of declaration processing time, reduced use of paper documents, AEO and simplified procedures clearly point to the success of the European customs experience in this field.

Mr. SAADAOUI then presented the European Customs Union's support program for cooperation, including a description of the IT system, the current portfolio, the types of customs procedures, the adopted Single Administrative Document and the Combined Nomenclature.

The challenges currently facing the Customs Union were also discussed. They concern the legislative aspects, the enforcement of provisions by the 28 EU Customs, the issues of monitoring and standardization, closer cooperation, performance evaluation, financing and operational management.

The question of paperless processing was then presented and discussed. It was indicated that 99% of transactions are now exclusively electronic; this implies a challenge in terms of harmonizing information systems and customs procedures in the 28 Member States.

The recommendations made at the end of this session called for the adoption of a paperless system for customs in the Arab region, through the use of Arabic as a common language for better connectivity through logistics data, standard protocols and specific business process models. Moreover, it was recommended to develop a more robust legal and regulatory framework, to clearly define its scope of competence and to bring national and regional regulatory frameworks in line with international standards.

Session 6. Building on ICT to achieve integration and trade facilitation in North Africa

In Session 6, Mr. Lotfi Ayadi discusses the system of customs to customs (C2C) data exchange for the Tunisian case, following a presentation. Tunisia is selected by ESCWA for a pilot study on C2C secure information exchange, mainly on the grounds that Tunisia is a highly open economy that has been steadily improving its position in terms of different indicators, including the Crossing Border of the Doing Business indicators. Tunisia is also a signatory to various international and bilateral conventions to ensure the facilitation of international trade and a member of WTO, WCO and TIR. The domestic legal

framework follows best practices and notably allows electronic signature and payment, electronic loading manifestations. The customs clearance operations in Tunisia are done using the system called SINDA, which is an open system, compliant with EDI and XML. SINDA also provides for the digitization of different customs procedures, making it an effective means to carry out, simplify and facilitate such operations. Additional possible benefits include access to timely and precise information, uniform application of rules and regulations and the facilitation of the exchange of information between different partner entities both domestic and external. SINDA also has an integrated module to manage risks in a selective and effective manner. Tunisia Trade Net (TTN), the virtual single window system, is another important body in the Tunisian context. The TTN serves as a platform to simplify maritime transport procedures, standardize and digitize documents, facilitate the flow of goods transiting from ports and reduce the maximum amount of time goods stay at the port. Tunisia signed two protocols with France and Italy to establish a maritime highway between Rades and two ports in those countries, Marseille and Jeans, with a view to intensifying and accelerating the flow of goods by facilitating and digitizing procedures and exchanging information between customs offices in line with recent rules and regulations.

Tunisian experience particularly with European counterparts has been promising and can be extended to co-operation between Arab partners. Initially, countries parties to the Agadir agreement are considered potential candidates. The question on to as to create a new customs platform or take advantage of existing TTN is outstanding. The details on the IT infrastructure and nature of information that will be exchanged are to be deliberated.

The participants raised questions on various aspects of the Tunisian system. In particular, the delineation of the roles played by SINDA and TTN was demanded by several participants. For instance, it was clarified that customs declarations are handled using SINDA but notifications to pertinent entities are sent through TTN. Participants also demanded as to whether the flow of information between the Tunisian and European customs authorities is one way, with Tunisia providing information to their European counterparts. Although the infrastructure used would allow two-way information exchange, currently legal provisions do not require the Tunisian customs authorities to request a pre-declaration, except for the case of dangerous and perishable goods. If Tunisia adopts a measure to require exporters to Tunisia to pre-declare, then the two-way information exchange should be possible. Also, the information exchange between Tunisian and European customs agencies is not yet multi-modal, due to short travel times involved. Nevertheless, air manifest is at the stage of testing.

Session 7 : C2C, Application à la Tunisie

In this session, Mr. Adel Alghaberi provided an overview on how Arab countries performed in implementing trade facilitation measured based on a survey that was conducted by ESCWA for the region as part of a global initiative to assess the level of implementation of trade facilitation measures including those articulated in the WTO trade facilitation agreement and other measures such as paperless trade, paperless cross border trade and transit facilitation.

The presentation outlined the methodology of the survey, the partners and the results. The survey included 38 types of trade facilitation measures that go beyond the general trade facilitation measures to include paperless trade, paperless cross border trade and transit facilitation. Results of the survey show that Arab countries are at different stages of implementation of the trade facilitation measures. But the overall average of implementation across the region is around 50% on all categories that are covered by the survey.

Some variation existed between the different groups of trade facilitation measures with the general trade facilitation measures being the most implemented and the border crossing being the least. Within the general trade facilitation measures, transparency was the most implemented measure and institutional arrangements being the least implemented.

Additionally, the presentation highlighted some of the most important benefits of implementing trade facilitation measures including reducing waiting times at borders (which is an issue for Arab countries particularly), the huge saving it leads to for private sector operators as evidenced by the Korean case which was used as an example.

The presentation also stressed the importance of addressing not only trade facilitation at borders but also trade facilitations beyond border to help exporters reach to international markets competitively and therefore increase exports of developing countries.

Few questions were raised focusing on the link between implementation of trade facilitation and trade cost, which was responded to by indicating that the new edition of the survey, planned for 2017, will focus more on linking implementation of trade facilitation with trade cost at countries level.

Session 8: Customs procedures in Arab States: How they evolved over the last decade?

A presentation by ESCWA on trade facilitation in the Arab region paved the way for discussions on the evolution of customs procedures in the region. The presentation is the result of a study by the United Nations Regional Commission, in partnership with the OECD, the International Trade Centre (ITC) and UNCTAD.

The survey focused not only on the implementation of general trade facilitation measures, including most of those stipulated in WTO texts, but also more advanced measures based on ICT. The results confirmed the existence of a strong link between the costs of international trade and the extent to which trade facilitation measures are implemented.

The survey suggested that much progress still needed to be made in many countries in the Asia Pacific region, though the vast majority of countries in the region have been actively engaged in measures to improve transparency as well as inter-agency coordination and cooperation, and streamline trade costs and formalities. Customs authorities in almost all countries have actively been developing electronic systems to speed up customs clearance while improving controls; close to 40% of the region's economies are now engaged in implementing more advanced electronic systems, such as single windows. However, the implementation of cross-border cooperation concerning electronic data exchange (at bilateral, sub-regional and regional levels) is still mostly confined to pilot stage. This is hardly surprising given that, on the one hand, many of the least developed countries in the region are at an early stage of developing national paperless systems and, on the other, most developed countries in the region have systems which do not allow for interoperability.

It was noted, during the discussion, that given the significant potential benefits to be derived from the implementation of these 'next-generation' trade facilitation measures, it is in the interest of countries in all groupings to work together and to develop the technical and legal protocols needed for the transparent exchange of trade data and documents across the international supply chain. Measures have already been taken at the bilateral level as well as in several Asian sub-regions (for instance in ASEAN, through the implementation of the ASEAN Single Window). Countries can still build on this work at the regional level through the adoption and implementation of the

Regional Arrangement for the Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade, which is being negotiated at ESCAP.

Session 9: Technical and legal gap analysis for C2C exchanges in the Arab Region: Agadir and AMU

Session 9 revolved around presentations made by countries engaged in the electronic exchange of customs documents. All participating countries stressed the importance of these exchanges to boost and facilitate trade; they pointed out that the legal and technical guarantees required are available in most countries of the sub-region.

Several recommendations were made by the participants:

  • Take advantage of the most advanced experiences in the sub-region, including the Agadir Agreement, in order to share best practices;

  • Conduct a mapping of the legislative and technical frameworks of countries in the sub-region to determine adequate instruments to be harmonized;

  • Underline the importance of integrating measures for the electronic exchange of customs documents in a coherent national trade facilitation program.

5. Key findings and recommendations

In conclusion

1. Participants agreed that Customs-2-Customs (C2C) electronic exchange of information would greatly support risk assessment for transit operations and, ultimately, facilitate legitimate trade, improve and secure border crossing as well as reducing related costs. Moreover, they pointed out those internationally standardized Bussiness-2-Customs (B2C) electronic messages for transit, not only facilitate the submission of information by the business community but also the exchange of data among customs administrations. Participants stressed the importance of computerizing the TIR procedure (eTIR).

2. They underlined the importance importance of the harmonization of customs documents and trade facilitation in the evoluting North Africa context

3. They also emphasized that trade facilitation and accelerating trans-border transport became important part of the mission of custom administrations within Arab region for more cooperation and integration.

4. Participants called for the need to facilitate the usage and penetration of new technologies related to customs work in the region. This would enhance the exchange of data electronically and the need to accelerate the simplification and the uniformisation of customs process within NA and Agadir Region. WCO data

5. They also expressed the need Arab region to focus on achieving the goals of the current agreements rather than conducting new one.

6. They recognized the importance of existing international instruments, such as the TIR Convention, which have already demonstrated their effectiveness in the process of integration in other regions, to facilitate trade and transport in the countries in the region and with their trade partners, such as the European Union.

7. They emphasized the role of international standards and experiences, such as those developed by UNECE and the WCO, in facilitating the submission of data from the private sector to Customs administrations and other cross border agencies as well as the exchange of data among customs administrations

8. Finally, participants greatly welcomed the exchange of best practices and the opportunities provided to learn, in more detail, how data exchange issues related to transit are dealt with in other countries. Participants underlined the importance of conducting similar events on topics such as risk management and other innovations in the customs area. They finally called for following recommendations.

Recommendations

1. Assist member countries in developing technical capacities in improving the electronic treatment of trade documents and their exchange in the context of regional integration agreements

2. Implement a pilot project for electronic exchange of customs documents between customs administration based on the principle of the data centralization under a star format. The star format could be the one, which offers the most advantages in terms of flexibility for further extension

3. Invite member states to sign and ratify different cooperation agreements in the field of Trade facilitation and the corresponding international conventions, such as the Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods under Cover of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention), 1975 and the International Convention on the Harmonization of Frontier Controls of Goods, 1982

4. Invite member states to implement WCO data model, which is an important step toward Customs harmonization and electronic exchange

6. Closing of the meeting

Closing the meeting's proceedings, Mr. Mohamed El Moctar Hacene, Director of ESCWA's Globalization and Economic Development Division, thanked the participants for the quality of the presentations and discussions. He thanked the Kingdom of Morocco for hosting the meeting and assured the participants that the Economic Commission for Africa and the Economic and Social Commission for West Asia will continue to work together to make sure that the harmonization of customs procedures becomes a reality in the Arab region, that the electronic exchange of customs documents is given concrete substance and, more broadly, that regional integration becomes a fact on the ground. He then closed the meeting on behalf of the Organizing Committee.