



**UNECE**

**United Nations Economic Commission for Europe**

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## **UN Group calls for “Task Force on Electronic Trade Documents”**

Two key messages emerged from the three-day UNECE *Capacity Building Workshop on Trade Facilitation Implementation: Tools, Techniques and Methodologies*: that a uniform approach to developing electronic trade documents needs to be adopted, and that it is essential to use international standards.

Through its Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT), the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) called for a task force to be set up early next year on electronic documents for trade, including UneDocs\*. The task force, which has the support of Technical Committee 154 of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), will have members from all the interested parties.

Representatives of over 40 countries attended the UNECE Workshop, which was held in Geneva from 18-20 October.

The Director of the UNECE Trade Development and Timber Division, Carol Cosgrove-Sacks, stressed the importance of ensuring a smooth and efficient flow of trade information for the international movement of goods. “Without a standard for electronic documents”, she said, “the world cannot automate and move forward to paperless trade”.

The Workshop focused on building capacity for implementing existing UN/CEFACT trade facilitation standards, recommendations and tools. It provided intensive training in:

- Supply-chain efficiency
- Document harmonization and simplification
- Use of standards and codes.

It also assessed participants’ needs and priorities regarding implementing the tools.

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Opening the Workshop, Ambassador Alejandro Jara, Chile's Permanent Representative to the World Trade Organization, said that trade facilitation, whether being undertaken unilaterally, regionally (such as in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Countries (APEC)) or multilaterally, was primarily about reducing transaction costs. He explained that under the WTO mandate for trade facilitation negotiations, as contained in the Agreement of July this year, the Special and Differential Treatment provision requires that the timing and extent of commitments entered into by developing countries shall be related to the countries' implementation capacities.

He also pointed out that, "while in WTO the trade facilitation mandate is limited to three GATT Articles – V, VIII and X, containing provisions on goods in transit, fees and formalities for imports and exports and transparency issues – for UNECE, the World Customs Organization (WCO) or APEC, trade facilitation might have a different, broader meaning".

In this regard, the Workshop saw WTO as a channel for negotiations, addressing the "what" of trade facilitation; while UN/CEFACT, through its standards, recommendations, tools, and capacity-building activities, provided the "how". UN/CEFACT could guide countries in implementing the WTO Articles, as well as other aspects of trade facilitation.

Ms. Cosgrove-Sacks called attention to the benefits for enterprises worldwide of implementing trade facilitation instruments – regardless of their size or level of development. Explaining the importance of trade facilitation to UNECE, she said that UNECE comprised 55 member States, including the United States, Canada and the countries of the former Soviet Union. "Since these 55 countries, together, account for two thirds of world trade, it is logical that trade facilitation should have its home in UN/CEFACT, where we have a global remit for developing trade facilitation instruments and tools".

The Workshop also presented examples of successfully operating "Single Window" systems for submitting trade information and documents. These were described by speakers from Germany, Hong Kong SAR (China), Mauritius, Senegal, Singapore, Sweden and the United States. The speakers emphasized that successful implementation of a "Single Window" required securing strong political will; establishing a strong dialogue, and partnership, between government and business; developing a strategic step-by-step approach; and updating technology.

With an ever-increasing number of countries worldwide introducing the "Single Window", the need for common standards and interoperability between such facilities has become evident. UN/CEFACT will work with existing "Single Windows" to develop this standard approach.

UNECE is compiling a repository of information on the operation of current "Single Windows". The repository will complement the UN/CEFACT Recommendation and Guidelines on the establishment of a Single Window (Recommendation No. 33).

The Workshop stressed the need for an integrated approach to trade facilitation among all international organizations concerned. Mr. Toni Matsudaira, Technical Officer of the World Customs Organization, said that his Organization continued to support the UNECE in trade facilitation. "Trade facilitation", he said, "is not only about customs; it also needs a holistic approach – which UNECE has".

The four other UN regional commissions, ECA, ESCWA, ESCAP and ECLAC, attended the Workshop, and expressed their support for UNECE's trade facilitation activities. They will consider the possibility of organizing regional workshops on this topic jointly with UNECE.

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\* Detailed information on UNeDocs can be found at <http://www.unece.org/etrades/unedocs/>