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Recommendations and standards:  
Other meeting reports  

Report of the Fifth United Nations Economic Commission for Europe International Conference on Single Window

Summary

This report reflects the discussions and decisions of the fourth UNECE International Conference on Single Window. This event was organized in partnership and back-to-back with the Moroccan Single Window annual conference. The event’s main focus was on how Single Window can help the competitiveness of economic operators and improve the national economy in general.

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I. Introduction

1. The secretariat, with the support of the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) held the 5th International Conference on Single Window (SW) on 12 November 2018 in Casablanca, Morocco. The main purpose of this conference was to present the ongoing progress of UN/CEFACT work in this area; to evaluate the current direction of the revision of Recommendation 33; and to further explore how Single Window implementation can help improve the competitiveness of economic operators and improve national economies in general. This conference was held back-to-back with the 4th edition of the national annual conference of the Moroccan Single Window system PortNet and the annual conference of the International Port Community System Association (IPCSA). The Secretariat extends its thanks to the PortNet team, who supported the logistics and organizational aspects of this meeting.

2. The conference was attended by nearly 450 delegates on the first day (800 delegates in total for the 3 days) from roughly 33 countries and over 10 international organizations. The following UNECE member states were represented: France, Germany, The Netherlands, Spain, The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and The United States of America. The following Non-UNECE member states participated in the conference: Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Djibouti, Ghana, Morocco and Senegal. The following United Nations Bodies and Organs participated in the conference: United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA) and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The following intergovernmental organizations, private sector players and independent experts participated in the conference: The World Bank, Global Alliance for Trade Facilitation (GATF), African Alliance for eCommerce (AACE), the International Port Community System Association (IPCSA), Federation of National Associations of Ship Brokers and Agents (FONASBA), Portbase, Djibouti Port Community System, Port of Los Angeles, Port of Marseille-Fos, Portic (Port Community System of Barcelona), Conseil Congolais des Chargeurs, Conseil Gabonais des Chargeurs, Port Autonome de Nouadhibou, Etablissement portuaire de la Baie du Repos, Conseil Guinéen des Chargeurs, Conseil National des Chargeurs du Cameroun, Guichet Unique du Commerce Extérieur du Cameroun, Guichet Unique du Commerce Extérieur de Tunisie, Conseil Gabonais des chargeurs, Centre Islamique pour le Développement du Commerce, Port de Rotterdam Authority, Tarragona Port, Bureau Veritas, TradeVan, Dagang Net Technologies, Maqta Gateway (Port Community System of Abu Dhabi Ports, UAE), Senegal Customs, the Confédération Générale des Entreprises du Maroc (CGEM), l’Association des Exportateurs Marocains (ASMEX), national professional associations (Freight Forwarders, Customs Brokers, Agents Maritimes,..), l’Observatoire Marocain de la Compétitivité Logistique, and independent consultants.

II. Update on the UN/CEFACT Recommendation 33 revision project

3. A presentation was made on the basic principles of Single Window as outlined in UNECE Recommendation 33 and the impact this guidance has had on national implementations and other organizations such as the World Trade Organization, the World Customs Organization and the International Trade Centre. Morocco, Cameroon and the AACE all underlined the importance of Recommendation 33 and other UN/CEFACT standards as a basis for their national implementations.

4. The Technical Note on Terminology for Single Window and other electronic platforms was also presented, with emphasis on the base definition and its five key elements:
• The parties involved in trade and transport are the main focus of Single Window facilitations;
• Single Window implementations should be based on international standards;
• A single entry point should allow traders to submit all information;
• Single Window targets regulatory requirements; and,
• Individual data elements should only be submitted once.

5. It was reiterated that though an electronic system is often cited as a central aspect of Single Window implementation, it is only a tool to achieve the true objective—which should always be trade facilitation. To highlight this, it was explained how multiple agencies could work together within an environment to achieve this trade facilitation goal.

6. The current tendency of the UN/CEFACT project to revise Recommendation 33 is striving to remain as faithful to the original definition and structure as possible, so as not disrupt national implementations or other standards organizations which have used this guidance as their base. However, there are a few possible evolutions currently being considered:

• The base definition will no longer state “if electronic…” In today’s environment, it is considered that all Single Window implementations should be electronic – though this is just a means to achieve trade facilitation. It is no longer considered that a Single Window can no longer be paper-based, as such a paper-based solution would be defined as a “One Stop Shop.”;
• A section will be introduced on how to conceive of Single Window in the context of a regional economic agreement such as the European Union or the Economic Cooperation of Western African States;
• Key Performance Indicators are to be introduced, and it is suggested that they be considered from the conception phase of Single Window projects;
• A section will be introduced on how to approach the notion of a collaborative environment where there could potentially be multiple entry points.

III. Update on other UN/CEFACT projects related to Single Window

7. The Terminology Technical Note introduced several alternative terms to assist implementers and economic operators identify solutions which can facilitate trade, but which may not satisfy the five-point definition of Recommendation 33. One of these is Single Submission Portal (SSP).

8. A recommendation on SSPs is currently being finalized and will likely be presented at the twenty-fifth UN/CEFACT Plenary in April 2019. It will be presented as a platform which does not necessarily have a mandate from government to act as a single entry point, but which can (for the economic operators that use it) provide the same or similar facilitation as a Single Window. The Business-to-Business transactions which are not normally part of a Single Window could be one of the core focuses of an SSP. Port community systems, cargo community systems, and e-Commerce platforms could be considered SSPs.

9. The IPCSA underlined the importance of port community systems in national trading systems. Such systems often federate all logistics procedures and facilitate regulatory compliance—many have been doing this for over 40 years. It was suggested that when a country is considering a Single Window implementation, it should take into consideration
the existing systems that offer trade facilitation for economic operators. Very often there are existing legacy systems that function well.

10. Data Pipeline is another work item under UN/CEFACT which can be associated with Single Window. The objective of this solution is to obtain better quality data in a timelier fashion. The core principle is that the economic operator who is the source of the data would share it on a platform. Every subsequent economic operator would then add their data to the platform—but they would not send or modify information already sent (single submission of individual data elements). Instead of sending documents which include previously submitted data (sometimes in contradicting terms), all data is sent only once from its source. Several projects within the European Union have been launched on this principle and standardized technical guidance is near completion within UN/CEFACT.

11. The Core Principle for the Operation of Single Window project was briefly presented. If a Single Window is truly a single entry point, and all procedures are centralized in a single platform, there are great risks if it does not function technically or if expected procedures are not integrated in a timely manner. This project seeks to identify these potential risks and to propose solutions to reduce their impact on implementations.

12. UN/CEFACT is also exploring new technologies such as Blockchain and the Internet of Things. The use of these technologies in relation to Single Window is not being integrated into this revision of Recommendation 33. There are some case studies on how these technologies can support Single Window implementation and operation; these are presented in the individual projects on these technologies. The UN/CEFACT Single Window Domain experts have shown interest in pursuing these points further, and it may result in specific projects in the future.

IV. Brief summary of discussions from the PortNet Single Window Conference

13. The PortNet Single Window 4th Annual Conference was organized around two round-table discussions which concentrated on enhanced competitiveness through the continuous search for new, innovative and bold solutions.

14. Through a Memorandum of Understanding (signed between 3 Banks and PortNet during the opening ceremony chaired by the Minister of Transport of Morocco), PORTNET S.A. combined its efforts with those of its partners in the Moroccan banking sector to develop an unprecedented solution for the dematerialized management of documentary credits via the single window platform. Named Tr@de Direct, the result of this strategic alliance will be a unified, multi-bank, multi-user platform open to companies operating in the import/export sector. It will allow both banks and PortNet users better management via the end-to-end dematerialization of the entire life cycle of Documentary Credits, Letters of Credit, Standby Letters of Credit, Documentary Remittances, as well as some non-documentary operations.

15. Continuous innovation was underlined as one of the key factors to help improve the competitiveness of countries in the global market. New technologies will reinvent processes and challenge current methods of work but should bring real economic development. The PortNet Single Window has striven to improve the efficiency of formalities and speed up administration tasks. Multi-channel payment options and exchange of invoices for services related to the international supply chain have been integrated into this platform, as well as approvals, exit vouchers, container port exit, customs tax exemption requests and others. Over 33,000 economic operators are connected to PortNet and the majority of ports within the kingdom.
16. Single Window was viewed as a philosophy of trading and interactivity, as stated by the representative from customs. It represents an engagement in modernization. Morocco has established a national roadmap and put in place the necessary reforms to facilitate procedures. They have also made great efforts to work in partnership with the private sector, especially through their National Trade Facilitation Committee. Single Window implementation across Africa and the world is favourable with the current conjuncture of the World Trade Organization’s Trade Facilitation Agreement.

17. Special attention was given to the place of the economic operator, as this was one of the key themes of the overall event. Participants were reminded that facilitation measures should always keep in mind the end user and efforts should always be made to disseminate information and receive feedback. When there is resistance to new procedures, it is often because they have not been sufficiently explained. It is also important to consider the different stages of advancement of each actor, and that education may be one of the key investments necessary for effective implementation.

18. Economic intelligence was another recurring topic during this event. As information becomes electronic, databases gather more and more information. Efficient use of this information can create an economic advantage for a country. Japan’s Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) was cited as demonstrating one of the most coherent uses of economic intelligence from a government agency. However, the use of such data can be limited given privacy laws. Future competitiveness of countries will likely depend on how this information can be used efficiently.

V. Next steps and recommendations

19. Based on the discussions at this event, it was agreed that the current revision of Recommendation 33 is going in the right direction. It was recommended that the following three points be integrated into this revision:

- Ensure that the economic operator is positioned as the key actor in Single Window implementation. Trade facilitation measures that are put in place should facilitate procedures and improve competitiveness in the global market;

- Think global and act locally. All international trade transactions will cross borders and will likely involve multiple modes of transport. It is therefore important to reference and use international standards such as the UNECE Recommendation 33 and UN/CEFACT semantic e-business standards;

- Legacy systems should be considered when a new Single Window project is being discussed. These systems often offer existing facilitations to their stakeholders, which could either be integrated into a Single Window system or harmonized with other facilitations to be proposed in a Single Window.