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THE SINGLE WINDOW CONCEPT

Note by the secretariat

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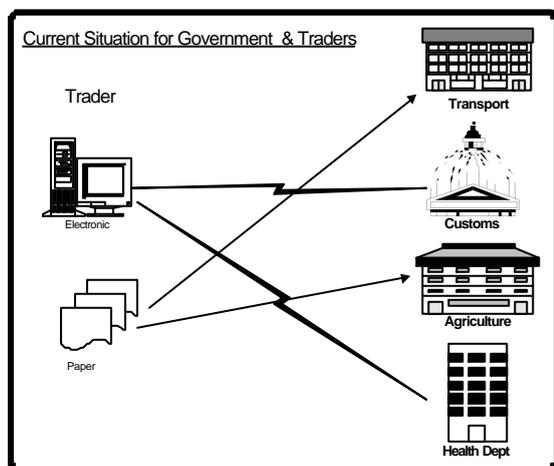
THE SINGLE WINDOW CONCEPT

*... Enhancing the efficient exchange of information
between trade and government*

The importance of efficient information flows

The efficiency with which information can be submitted to official agencies is becoming a key factor in the competitiveness of firms or agencies involved with cross-border activities.

On a daily basis, international traders have to prepare and submit increasing amounts of information to various governmental controlling authorities, with each authority often having its own specific (automated) systems and paper forms. These extensive information requirements can become a significant obstacle to business and can hinder the development of international trade.

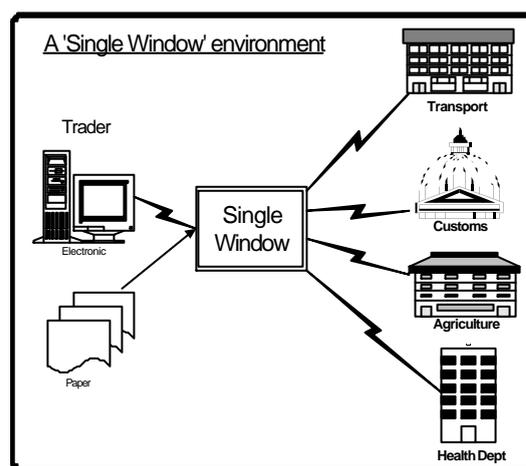


With the increasing integration of economies around the world, facilitating the smooth flow of information becomes a pressing requirement of Governments and business. Efficient information systems and procedures can significantly increase the speed at which goods can move, reduce costs, improve business efficiency, and enhance the overall economic performance of a country.

A 'Single Window' Environment

The 'Single Window' environment aims to expedite and simplify information flows between trade and government and bring meaningful gains to all parties involved in cross-border trade. In a theoretical sense, a 'Single Window' can be described as *"a system that allows traders to lodge information with a single body to fulfil all import- or export-related regulatory requirements."*

In practical terms a 'Single Window' environment provides one 'entrance', *either physical or electronic*, for the submission and handling of all data, and documents related to the release and clearance of an international transaction. This 'entrance' is managed by one agency, which informs the appropriate agencies, and/or directs combined controls.



A 'Single Window' environment is, therefore, a practical application of trade facilitation concepts to reduce non-tariff trade barriers and deliver immediate benefits to all members of the trading community.

Benefits for government

- Correct revenue yields
- Improved trader compliance
- Enable the use of sophisticated 'risk management' techniques for control and enforcement purposes
- More effective and efficient deployment of resources
- Increased transparency and integrity

Laying the ground work for a 'Single Window' environment

Cooperation and coordination between relevant government agencies is the essential ingredient in the establishment of a successful Single Window environment. This requires strong commitment and leadership from senior levels of government.

In addition, Governments must work to simplify and enhance the flow of information related to international trade. To this end, they should coordinate and minimize legal data requirements related to trade. Once official and commercial information requirements have been rationalized, these data sets can be standardized and subsequently harmonized to the benefit of the trading community.

Governments can further enhance information flows by identifying and adopting suitable information and communication technologies (ICT). Combined with the development of simpler, standardized and harmonized information, the effective application of ICT can help maximize the data flows, resulting in faster, easier and lower cost international trading. In the framework of the World Customs Organization (WCO), the United Nations and various other international organizations, much work has already been done, and continues to be done, to simplify and harmonize information requirements.

Benefits for trade

- Cutting costs through reducing delays
- Faster clearance and release
- Predictable application and explanation of rules
- More effective and efficient deployment of resources
- Increased transparency and integrity

An example of such standards and recommendations is the

International Convention on Simplification and Harmonization of Customs Procedures (the Kyoto Convention) brought about within the framework of the WCO.

This Convention incorporates the principle of coordination by customs regarding inspections of goods that are also to be examined by other relevant authorities. In addition, other provisions in the Convention tackle the operation of joint controls at common border crossings and the establishment of juxtaposed customs offices.

The WCO is developing a framework for improving the information flow through the WCO Customs Data Model that would be used by administrations as a part of the process to modernize systems and streamline processes for import and export declarations as well as for the report of cargo. The WCO Data Model is a collaborative effort between government and trade to provide an effective framework for the facilitation of international trade through data simplification and harmonization.

These precepts are also reinforced within Recommendation No. 18 of the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) entitled: "Facilitation Measures Related to International Trade Procedures". For example, it recommends that sellers and buyers should align all relevant in-house documents to the United Nations Layout Key for Trade Documents. Further, the recommendation suggests that government authorities should require a minimum of data and documents for control purposes and, where possible, utilize commercial information.

In addition, it is proposed that Governments should request import and export data only once and should allow the submission of data to a single entity and, if various authorities must inspect the goods, such inspections should be coordinated and, if possible, carried out at the same time. One approach to achieving this is the introduction of a 'Single Window' environment, as explained above.

How can a 'Single Window' work in practice?

A 'Single Window' can take various forms. Because it is not just limited to custom's regimes, the 'Single Window' environment must represent close cooperation between all involved

departments and/or authorities.

Customs, because of its pivotal role at borders, can be the enforcement agency best suited to be the 'entrance' point to receive and coordinate the flow of information related to fulfilment of all cross-border regulatory requirements.

A 'Single Window' environment does not necessarily imply the implementation of high-tech information and communication technology (ICT).

However, facilitation can be enhanced if Governments identify and adopt relevant ICT opportunities.

Over the last few years various 'Single Window' programs have been developed and effectively introduced. A selection of these models is outlined below:

- **A single authority:** Customs coordinates and/or enforces all border-related controls. For example, in Sweden and the Netherlands, Customs officers perform many tasks based on assignments from other governmental authorities.
- **A single system,** integrating the electronic collection, use, and dissemination of international trade data related to trade that crosses the border. For example, the United States established a pilot program that allows traders to **submit standard data only once** and the system distributes the data to the agencies that have an interest in the transaction.
- **An automated system** through which a trader can submit electronic trade declarations to the various (controlling) authorities for processing and approval in a single application. In this approach the approved permits are transmitted electronically to the sender's computer. Such a system is in use in Singapore and Mauritius. Moreover, in the Singaporean system, fees, taxes and duties are computed automatically and deducted from the traders' bank accounts.

When considering the above models, it is important to acknowledge that, although many business and trade practices are common across all countries, each country will also have its own unique requirements and conditions.

Signposts for further information

Sweden

http://www.tullverket.se/TargetGroups/General_English/frameset.htm

United States

<http://www.itds.treas.gov>

Singapore

<http://www.tradenet.gov.sg/>

Mauritius

<http://ncb.intnet.mu/mof/departement/customs/services.htm>

World Customs Organization

www.wcoomd.org

UN/CEFACT

<http://www.unece.org/cefact/>

UNCTAD

<http://www.unctad.org/>

This document was prepared by the International Trade Procedures Working Group (ITPWG) of UN/CEFACT, which is hosted by the UNECE.

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