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**Economic Commission for Europe****Inland Transport Committee****Working Party on Customs Questions affecting Transport****165th session**

Geneva, 6 (p.m.), 7 and 9 (a.m.) February 2024

Item 3 of the provisional agenda

**Activities of United Nations Economic Commission for Europe bodies and other United Nations organizations of interest to the Working Party****The Working Party on Customs Questions affecting Transport strategy and action plan - Alignment of the work of the Working Party with the Inland Transport Committee strategy\*****Note by the secretariat.****I. Background and mandate**

1. The Working Party on Customs Questions affecting Transport (WP.30) might wish to recall that at its 162nd session (February 2023) decided to revert to the proposed strategy and action plan (as proposed in ECE/TRANS/WP.30/2023/2) once agreement on the ToR had been reached (ECE/TRANS/WP.30/324, para. 9). Since the Working Party adopted at its last session (October 2023) the revised ToR and its new name to “Global Forum on Customs Questions Affecting Transport including Border Crossing Facilitation”, the secretariat prepared the current document on WP.30 strategy and action plan, which is an updated version of document ECE/TRANS/WP.30/2023/2 for consideration by the Working Party.

2. The secretariat considered important, now that the ToR of the Working Party have been adopted and are fully aligned with the new ToR of the Inland Transport Committee (ITC), the Working Party to start discussing a possible strategy and an action plan for the years to come in order to better serve the ITC Strategy and its objectives.

**II. Vision, mission, and pillars of the ITC Strategy and revised Terms of Reference, as approved by ECOSOC**

3. During its eighty-first session (Geneva, 19–22 February 2019) ITC considered and adopted by acclamation the ITC Strategy until 2030, as contained in ECE/TRANS/2019/R.1, including vision, mission, strategic objectives, action plan, list of priorities and resource

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\* This document was scheduled for publication after the standard publication date owing to circumstances beyond the submitter's control.



mobilization and partnership (ECE/TRANS/288, para. 15 (a)). Also, ITC requested its subsidiary bodies to take follow-up actions to align their work with the strategy.

4. ITC Vision 2030: ITC is the United Nations platform for inland transport to help efficiently address global and regional needs in inland transport.

5. The mission for ITC is that it contributes to sustainable inland transport and mobility for achieving the sustainable development goals in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) region and among United Nations member States, through policy dialogue, harmonizing regulatory frameworks, as appropriate, promoting new technologies, assisting in enhancing connectivity and supporting the implementation of legal instruments.

6. In performing its mission, ITC will enhance its role as:

(a) The United Nations platform for regional and global inland transport conventions. By strengthening its role as the United Nations platform of inland transport conventions to all United Nations Member States and by remaining at the forefront of global efforts to curb the road safety crisis, through its 360° approach to road safety, cut emissions by setting and promoting its vehicle standards, and reduce cross-border barriers with its large set of facilitation conventions.

(b) The United Nations platform for supporting new technologies and innovations in inland transport. By ensuring that (a) its regulatory functions are keeping pace with cutting-edge technologies driving transport innovation - especially in the areas of Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS), autonomous vehicles and digitalization - thus improving traffic safety, environmental performance, energy efficiency, inland transport security and efficient service provision in the transport sector, (b) the different amendment processes for the different conventions do not cause fragmentation, and (c) the dangers of stifling progress due to too early regulation are avoided.

(c) The United Nations platform for regional, interregional and global inland transport policy dialogues. By providing a platform for policy dialogue to review emerging challenges in inland transport, as well as proposals for improving infrastructure and operation at its annual session.

(d) The United Nations platform for promoting sustainable regional and interregional inland transport connectivity and mobility. By providing a comprehensive, harmonized regulatory framework, as appropriate, and institutional reference point supporting international connectivity, developing new or building on existing initiatives, agreements, or corridors, as needed.

7. On 16 February 2022, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) adopted a resolution to approve the revised Terms of Reference of ITC (E/RES/2022/2), which gives a mandate to ITC as a United Nations centre providing a comprehensive platform for consideration of all aspects of inland transport development and cooperation, with special attention to interregional and intraregional regulatory governance through the United Nations transport conventions and other means. It gives further mandates to ITC as follows:

(a) The Committee provides a forum for its members and contracting parties for (a) cooperation and consultation based on the exchange of information and experiences, (b) the analysis of transport trends and economics and transport policy trends, and (c) coordinated action designed to achieve an efficient, coherent, balanced and flexible transport system which is based on principles of market economy, pursues the objectives of safety, environmental protection and energy efficiency in transport and takes into account transport developments and policy of Committee members;

(b) The Committee promotes the harmonization and improvement of technical and operational regulations, standards and recommendations in the various fields of inland transport across its members and contracting parties, particularly in road safety, road vehicles, the transport of dangerous goods, border crossing facilitation, infrastructures and combined transport;

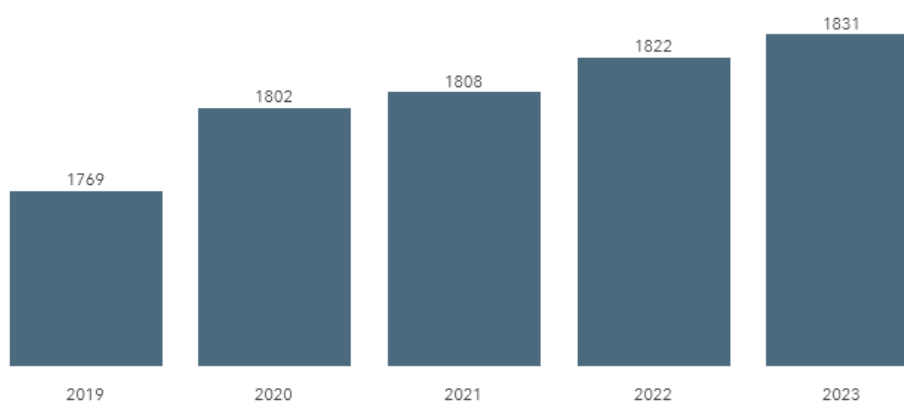
(c) It promotes the facilitation of international road, rail and inland waterway transport, particularly through the simplification and harmonization of administrative border crossing procedures and physical and electronic documentation.

### III. Facts on the work of the Working Party on Customs Questions affecting Transport

8. Figure I below show the growth of the total number of contracting parties to legal instruments on inland transport, concluded under the purview of ITC. On November 2023, the total number of contracting parties to the 60 United Nations legal instruments in the field of transport administered by ECE was 1,831. Out of these 60 legal instruments, 10 have not yet entered into force.

Figure I

#### Annual Growth of contracting parties to legal instruments on inland transport under the purview of ITC



Source: ECE

9. Out of those 60 legal instruments, 17 are under the auspices of WP.30. Of the 17 legal instruments, 2 have not yet entered into force<sup>1</sup>, another one is being administered by the World Customs Organization (WCO)<sup>2</sup> while 6 legal instruments have been considered during the last two years sessions of the Working Party as outdated, meaning that their main raison d'être does no longer exist.<sup>3</sup>

10. However, the Working Party administers some of the flagship legal instruments of the United Nations system, such as the TIR Convention (1975), the Harmonization Convention (1982) as well as the Temporary Importation Conventions for both private (1954) and commercial (1956) vehicles, where a lot of digitalization efforts are taking place.

11. In addition, the Working Party hosts three Administrative Committees and their specialized bodies:

- AC.2: TIR Convention, 1975;
  - TIR Executive Board (TIRExB);
  - eTIR Technical Implementation Body (TIB).

<sup>1</sup> Convention on International Customs Transit Procedures for the Carriage of Goods by Rail under Cover of SMGS Consignment Notes Geneva, 9 February 2006 / Convention on the Facilitation of Border Crossing Procedures for Passengers, Luggage and Load-Luggage carried in International Traffic by rail, 22 February 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Customs Convention on Containers, of 2 December 1972.

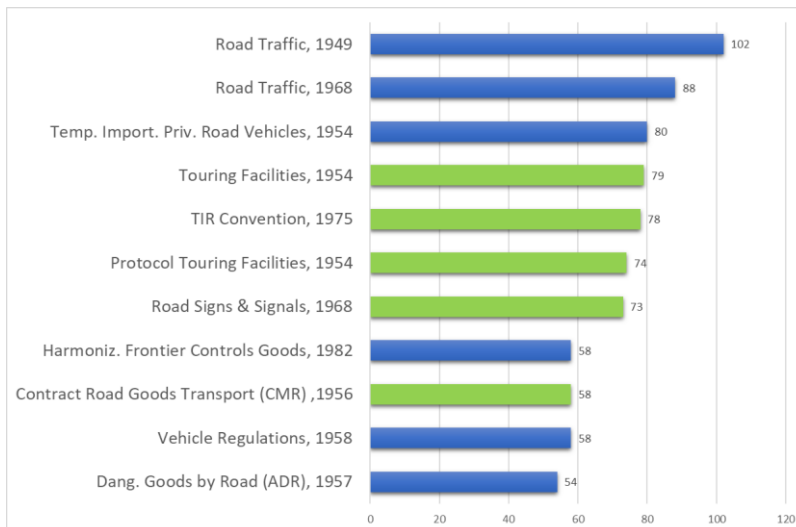
<sup>3</sup> Convention concerning Customs Facilities for Touring, 1954; Additional Protocol to the Convention concerning Customs Facilities for Touring, 1954; TIR Convention, 1959 International Convention to Facilitate the Crossing of Frontiers for Passengers and Baggage, carried by Rail, 1952; International Convention to Facilitate the Crossing of Frontiers for Goods, carried by Rail, 1952; Customs Convention concerning Spare Parts Used for Repairing EUROP Wagons, 1958;

- AC.3: Harmonization of Frontier Control of Goods, 1982
- AC.4: Custom Treatment of Pool Containers, 1994.

12. Five out of the 10 most acceded United Nations inland transport conventions globally are under the auspices of WP.30, making a total of 362 contracting parties.

Figure II

**Top 10 United Nations inland transport conventions based on the number of contracting parties**

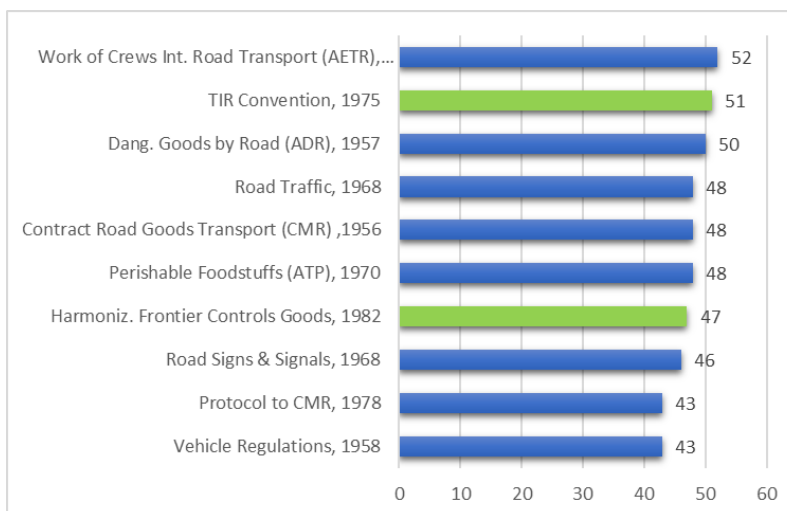


Source: ECE

13. The conventions with the highest number of individual contracting parties in the ECE region are: the European Agreement concerning the Work of Crews of Vehicles engaged in International Road Transport (AETR) which has 52 ECE contracting parties and the Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods under Cover of TIR Carnets (1975 TIR Convention) which has 51 ECE contracting parties. They are followed by the Agreement concerning the International Carriage of Dangerous Goods by Road (ADR) with 50 ECE contracting parties.

Figure III

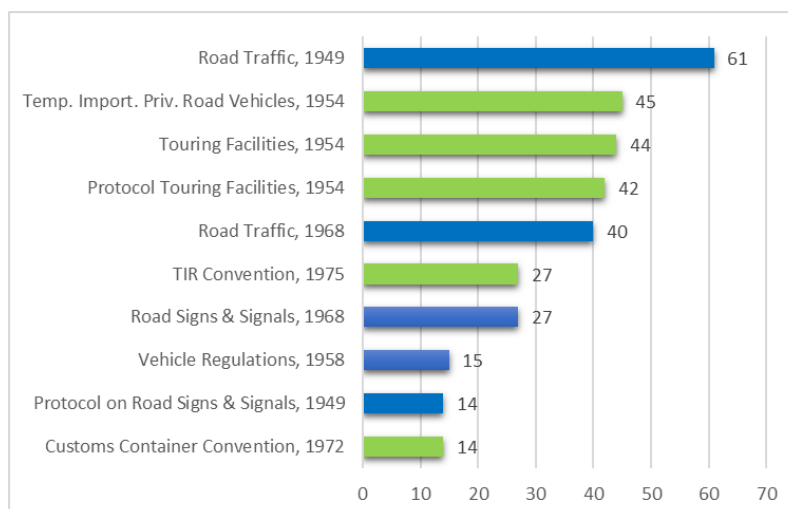
**Top 10 United Nations inland transport conventions based on the number of contracting parties in the ECE region**



Source: ECE

14. Outside the ECE region, 5 out of the 10 inland transport conventions with the highest number of contracting parties are under the auspices of WP.30.

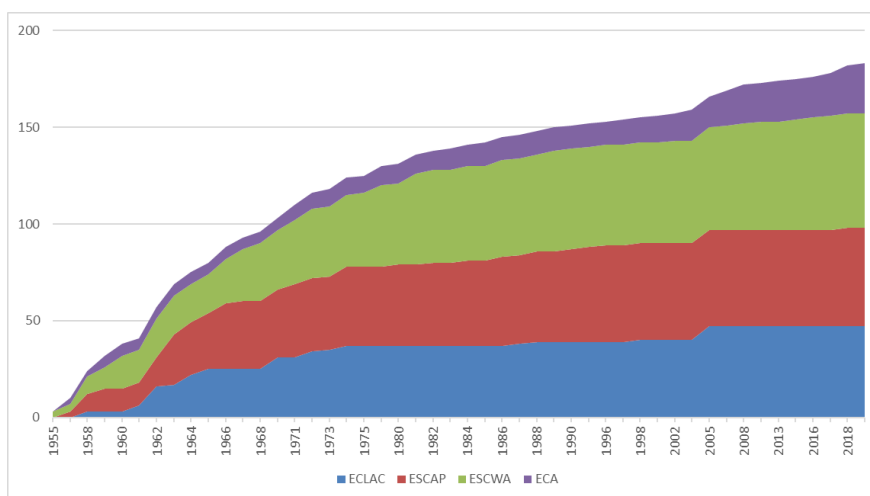
Figure IV  
**Top 10 United Nations inland transport conventions based on the number of contracting parties outside the ECE region**



Source: ECE

15. Figure V illustrates the cumulative border crossing conventions accessions by regional commissions (excluding ECE) over time.

Figure V  
**Cumulative border crossing convention accessions by regional commissions (excluding ECE), over time**



Source: ECE

## IV. Proposed Working Party on Customs Questions affecting Transport Strategy – Action Plan

### A. Global challenges in international inland transport and border crossing

16. Globally, one of the most complicated elements in international transport transactions is to move goods across borders and bring them into efficient circulation in another country. In fact, the effort it takes to move these goods from one country to another, across borders, and by means of various modes of transport, is time consuming and costly. It follows that cost-effective international transport of goods requires the alignment of ordering, payment, insurance, logistics, customs inspection and clearance, and border controls. If this complex process is not solved seamlessly, goods are delayed or go missing, the wrong goods are being

shipped, and overall transaction costs increase. Border inefficiencies are, in fact, estimated to cost twice the amount of tariffs, while the removal of those inefficiencies could increase global trade by as much as US\$ 1 trillion, and create as many as 21 million jobs worldwide.

17. Here is where the United Nations legal instruments on transport and border crossing facilitation and the activities of WP.30 have an important role to play. Below are some indicative challenges that transport and border crossing facilitation face:

- (a) Inconsistent, complicated and cumbersome border-crossing formalities and procedures;
- (b) Large numbers of documents that are lacking harmonization;
- (c) Repeated inspections by different authorities;
- (d) Less than transparent rules and regulations;
- (e) High and numerous charges for entry or transit;
- (f) Non-conformity with conventions to which the countries are parties;
- (g) Lack of coordination among control authorities and various stakeholders;
- (h) Slow progress in the introduction of new technologies, including information and communication technology (ICT);
- (i) Restrictions on foreign carriers for the use of domestic routes and operations including short validity of transport permits;
- (j) Different technical standards including vehicle weights and dimensions;
- (k) lack of simplified insurance arrangements for vehicles;
- (l) Shortage of skilled professional staff involved in international road transport operations;
- (m) Different traffic regulations including variation in signals;
- (n) Restrictive visa requirements for driver and crew;
- (o) Incompatible working hours at borders;
- (p) Different locations of various control stations;
- (q) Escort or large cash (bond) deposit for transit of goods; and
- (r) Restrictive requirements for temporary importation of transport vehicles.

## **B. Mandates stipulated by the Inland Transport Committee Strategy**

18. The revised ToRs of ITC (E/RES/2022/2) approved by ECOSOC (16 February 2022) set the scene for the new strategy of WP.30.

- For the first time, the contracting parties to the United Nations conventions under the purview of ITC outside the ECE region have full members' rights during the Committee's session while the conventions that they are contracting parties to are being discussed. This immediately increases the number of United Nations Member States that can participate in ITC sessions with full member rights from 56 (ECE region) to 152 (number of contracting parties to the United Nations legal instruments).
- It provides further mandates to the Committee, strictly connected to border crossing facilitation:
  - "...The Committee provides a forum for its members and contracting parties for (i) cooperation and consultation based on the exchange of information and experiences, (ii) .... (iii) coordinated action designed to achieve an efficient, coherent, balanced and flexible transport system...."
  - "...The Committee promotes the harmonization and improvement of technical and operational regulations, standards and recommendations in the various

fields of inland transport across its members and contracting parties, particularly...border crossing facilitation.....”.

- “....It promotes the facilitation of international road, rail and inland waterway transport, particularly through the simplification and harmonization of administrative border crossing procedures and physical and electronic documentation”.<sup>4</sup>

### C. Proposed Working Party on Customs Questions affecting Transport strategy – action plan

19. WP.30 can serve and contribute to all four pillars of the ITC strategy 2030 (see paragraph 6). Specifically:

(a) The United Nations platform for regional and global inland transport conventions. It follows from the above-mentioned analysis that there is still much room and urgency to strengthen the appeal of conventions under the purview of ITC to all regions on border crossings and inland transport facilitation. Despite the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the period of the pandemic and post- pandemic dynamics, empirical evidence suggests that countries with a high-level of accession to border-crossing facilitation conventions were able to record more successful responses to the cross-border flow of goods during the pandemic emergency and its aftermath, despite many of them having suffered heavy epidemiological impacts on their population. Accession levels vary between regions. Countries from the ECLAC region appear to be lagging behind in accessions to border-crossing, while the number of accessions by ESCAP member States appears to increase more dynamically over time. Non-ECE accessions are clearly lagging behind, compared to those of ECE overall. Following ITC’s new ToR and Strategy until 2030, WP.30 has a global role to play, in order to promote the border crossing facilitation agreements in other regions. In order for this to be achieved concrete actions are required. Indicatively should be mentioned:

(i) Strengthen cooperation with other regional commissions, co-organize events / workshops, if possible and if funds secured, in their regions. Promote the advantages from the implementation of the border crossing facilitation conventions by preparing relevant web pages / sites / brochures for each convention, in one of the six official languages of the United Nations.

(ii) Analyse if the conventions that have been identified by their current contracting parties as outdated could bring, if revised / updated and implemented in other regions, any advantages to them, similar to what they brought to the European region when first established. Possibly a study should be prepared to identify any potentials.

(iii) In conjunction, possibly, with the previous and the work on promoting conventions, a “global” border crossing / inland transport facilitation protocol could be prepared in the framework of WP.30, to be agreed by the contracting parties and implemented in cases of emergencies such as the COVID 19. This protocol could possibly, become a new Annex to the Harmonization Convention.

(b) The United Nations platform for supporting new technologies and innovations in inland transport. New technologies and innovations are great enablers of border crossing / inland transport facilitation. As long as the new tools / technological approaches have been coordinated and agreed among the contracting parties, technological solutions can play a tremendous role in border crossing facilitation. Over the last few years, WP.30 has worked very hard on finding agreement about the implementation of the electronic TIR (eTIR), leading to tangible results. However, the work on digitalization should continue and even be strengthened. Specifically:

(i) eTIR international system: The development and hosting by ECE of the eTIR international system is a concrete achievement. In order to further capitalize this

<sup>4</sup> See E/2022/L.4

output and bring more value to its users several proposals could be made and if possible, be undertaken as actions:

- ensuring that all current users of paper TIR Carnets are interconnected and using the eTIR international system within a horizon of four years.
- Further promoting the eTIR National Application developed by the TIR secretariat that facilitates the interconnection of customs authorities by drastically reducing the time / resources required. This would increase the possibilities for the system to be used, in the near future, by new contracting parties in new geographical regions, such as Africa and Latin America and even perform pilot tests and runs.
- Making use of the platform and the interconnection with customs authorities by adding more services / cooperating with other intergovernmental platforms that provide electronic documents (i.e eATA, ePhyto etc), in order to increase the value of the eTIR platform and its sustainability but also mutually increase the value that customs and border crossing facilitation in general receive from the digitalization of United Nations legal instruments.

(ii) Accelerate the work on the digitalization of the Temporary Importation Conventions on the Carnets de Passage en Douane (CPD). ECE and the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) signed, in 2021, an MoU on this work. Digitalization of the CPD will bring a lot of value to the existing users of the system and it will further assist in promoting the Conventions, leading to accession by more countries.

(iii) Digitalization of the Harmonization Convention. The Harmonization Convention is a very useful border crossing / transport facilitation framework convention, whose implementation, unfortunately, cannot be monitored or "imposed" on contracting parties. Several attempts took place in the past, in cooperation mainly with the Working Party on Rail Transport (SC.2) to monitor its implementation but this has not led to concrete results. Still, a five-year survey on Annex 8 is taking pace. Technological solutions should be evaluated, in order to prepare a tool that permits monitoring the Convention, even by collecting online / real time data. Possibly a study should be first prepared, for discussion in AC.3, on how such a tool could operate, funded etc.

(iv) Other digitalization efforts for other conventions or other purposes should be examined by WP.30. A good example is the development of the Observatory on the status of Border Crossing due to COVID 19, where, in the end, information from more than 170 countries was collected. The Observatory was supported by all United Nations regional commissions and other organizations, and it was clearly appreciated by the Governments and the private sector.

(c) The United Nations platform for regional, interregional and global inland transport policy dialogues. WP.30 has the opportunity to be transformed into a global forum where discussions will take place concerning border crossing / inland transport facilitation. Having the Harmonization Convention, and AC.3, as flagship, such dialogues could take place in the form of workshops, taskforces and even group of experts and could lead to revitalization of AC.3. This will also give the opportunity to further increase the number of delegates / experts participating at the sessions as well as the number of countries, by inviting experts and addressing topics in the agenda that are dealing not only with customs issues affecting transport, but any other profession involved in border crossing / inland transport facilitation work. Also, these activities might increase the number of contracting parties to the Harmonization Convention. Indicatively it could be mentioned:

- Facilitation of visa for professional drivers.
- Border crossings architecture / infrastructure (good practices, optimal designs etc);
- Border crossings operational processes (good practices, optimal processes etc);
- Phytosanitary convention and the e-Phyto solution.



- Electronic solutions that facilitate any other documents used by customs and authorities in general.

(d) The United Nations platform for promoting sustainable regional and interregional inland transport connectivity and mobility. Connectivity is about border crossing / inland transport facilitation. If facilitation is there, then connectivity is achieved. WP.30 is unique in that sense and has an unexplored advantage and role to play. The ITC Strategy pronounces the ITC's vision as a United Nations platform for inland transport to help efficiently address global and regional needs in inland transport. The platform provides a comprehensive regulatory framework for inland transport, comparable to the role of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). In this context, WP.30 could play the role of the global facilitator on inland transport / border crossings. In order for this objective to be achieved and having all regulatory frameworks and conventions on board, more communication efforts are required. The first step towards this direction has been already materialised since the Working Party adopted its revised ToR but also its new name as the Global forum on customs questions affecting transport including border crossing facilitation, pending final endorsement by ITC.

20. This change will greatly enhance its role to achieve the vision of ITC in its Strategy.

## **V. Considerations by the Working Party**

21. The Working Party is invited to consider and, possibly, adopt the proposed strategy / action plan.

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