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Project for a Recommendation on Cross-Border Management of Humanitarian Relief

Summary

In a changing and increasingly complex world, many Governments are facing more pronounced challenges such as the increasing incidence of natural disasters, threats to peace and security, and disease and environmental-related illnesses. A national readiness plan can build end-to-end predictability into the process of importing emergency relief supplies and is the best way to effectively respond to large-scale emergencies. The United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) trade facilitation recommendations are an effective channel to promote this agenda. In March 2019 UN/CEFACT launched a project to prepare a new policy recommendation on cross-border management of humanitarian relief to provide clear, accessible and concise best practice guidelines and to enable efficient clearance facilitation measures for humanitarian readiness and response. This document reflects the discussions of the many stakeholders of the project, who are involved in cross-border management and humanitarian relief; these include OCHA, The International Committee of the Red Cross, The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Doctors Without Borders, and others.

Document ECE/TRADE/C/CEFACT/2020/9 is submitted by the UN/CEFACT Bureau to the twenty-sixth UN/CEFACT session of the Plenary for information.

I. Introduction

1. In the event of a disaster, are Governments prepared for a large influx of humanitarian relief? A new policy recommendation on cross-border management of humanitarian relief is being developed which will advocate for the importance of building a nation's capacity to cope with the sudden importation requirements and procedures associated with emergency relief items. The objective of the recommendation is to provide guidance to Governments on the implementation of readiness measures for effective and efficient cross-border facilitation. Application of these recommendations will enable emergency relief to rapidly reach disaster-affected people and communities.
2. The recommendation will include guidelines and general considerations to be assessed during the implementation of disaster-readiness programs at border points. The recommended measures will support Governments' efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development targets—particularly Sustainable Development Goal 11, which prescribes the implementation of integrated policies that build resilience in the face of disasters.

II. General principals

3. Post-disaster periods involve exceptional circumstances, especially in the event of reduced operational capacity, in which infrastructure, personnel, and IT systems are directly affected. Preparing ahead enables border agencies to endure the sudden influx of cross-border relief shipments and to minimize the risk of blockages at borders. The most effective strategies for immediate response to a disaster cannot depend on a fully operational technical environment or automated information systems; instead, they must rely on preparedness mechanisms that can be enabled in a relatively short timeframe and a strong collaborative effort from all stakeholders involved.
4. There are numerous stakeholders that participate in the international trading system, (as also described in the UNECE International Supply Chain Reference model). It is important to engage stakeholders that play a direct role in the cross-border movement of disaster relief in the design and implementation of facilitation measures. The participation of different stakeholders is essential to having appropriate disaster preparedness; that is, a response that takes into consideration the different possible types of disasters and hazards. These disaster-relief networks can also help when sourcing relief supplies from the master list (which will be included in the recommendation). It is worth noting that a disaster relief plan should consider that different types of large-scale disasters will have different patterns of need and will therefore require different response phases.

III. Guidelines for immediate response priorities, operational readiness, standards and information systems

5. Procedures and simplification measures enable timely and effective disaster response while maintaining the minimum controls necessary to ensure security and safety. The priority of all recommended procedures and simplifications will be to ensure that predictable and pragmatic controls can be rapidly implemented in immediate response to a disaster.
6. One solution, that will appear in the recommendation, is a physical 'One-Stop Border Post': a single location where all agencies involved in the clearance of humanitarian relief consignments have representative offices. Another important procedure is to have a fallback plan in case IT systems and communication networks are unavailable. The use of a paper-based documents will be a fallback solution in case of need.

7. Disaster-relief efforts can be expedited by adopting a prioritized list of relief items that are mapped against their tariff classification code. This list of prioritized relief requirements can be further enhanced by identifying which relief items are manufactured domestically and in what quantities they are available. Another measure to facilitate rapid disaster response is to pre-register potential donors to enhance their in-country readiness to respond.

8. As part of the measures put in place before a disaster strikes, it is highly recommended that information on customs procedures and processes specific to disaster scenarios be shared both within government institutions and externally across other response stakeholders to effectively manage risk and minimize delays. Inter-agency cooperation is crucial for smooth cross-border trade. By integrating the technical and operational sectors it is possible to collaborate on information, resources, and responsibilities. Indeed, much of the standards-development work of UN/CEFACT is aimed at enabling wider information sharing and reducing costs.

9. Standardized systems are widely used in international supply chains. These automated systems reduce manual mistakes and increase efficiencies. Trade facilitation mechanisms like single windows allow governments to improve trade compliance and more effectively and efficiently deploy resources. In the case of emergencies, information systems based on global standards and harmonized documentation become a vital tool to increase response efficiency.

10. Operational readiness can be achieved by having capacity-building and readiness plans that consider the scalability of the cross-border influx of humanitarian relief. Before a crisis hits it is necessary to know how to respond and to have adequate training and information sharing to implement appropriate control measures.

11. Disaster preparedness plans should be revisited regularly to ensure inter-agency cooperation and updated procedures. The effective cross-border management of humanitarian relief can considerably alleviate the chaos of an unexpected crisis.

IV. Conclusion

12. This Project is in progress and the draft recommendation will go to public review, possibly in June 2020. Considering the humanitarian impact of this project, the project team requests the opportunity to present this recommendation to the Head of Delegations for intersectional approval.
