**Workshop on Harmonizing Customs Procedures and
Custom to Custom Exchange of Electronic Documents**

Casablanca, Morocco, 2-4 December 2015

Aide-memoire

I. Context

In December 2011, the UN General Assembly approved the project "*Strengthening the capacities of developing countries and countries with economies in transition to facilitate legitimate border crossing, regional cooperation and integration*". In December 2012, the Review Committee, convened under the auspices of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, approved the final draft of this project being an initiative of the United Nations led by the Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), in partnership with the Economic Commissions for Africa (UNECA), Western Asia (UNESCWA), Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP).

The project aims to strengthen the capacity of developing countries and economies in transition to facilitate border crossings, by means of increased secure electronic information sharing between customs administrations. Simultaneously, the project will further contribute to secure the supply chain and the government revenues related to the international transport of goods. Ultimately, this project will help increase cooperation between customs administrations and promote the use of international standard electronic messages, in particular, for transit operations. On the basis of existing international standards on transit-related information, such as those used and defined in the eTIR project, this project will deliver a Customs-to-Customs (C2C) electronic exchange platform.

Five pilot countries have been selected to benefit from with technical assistance to connect their ICT systems with selected partners using either existing platforms or new ones to be developed or under development in the context of their integration initiatives Furthermore, technical workshops to be held in each region will build capacity of developing countries and countries with economies in transition to maximize the benefits offered by the C2C exchange platform, to increase their electronic sharing of customs information with neighboring countries as well as to adopt international standards when it comes to electronic documents. Such cross-border electronic exchange of related customs information will not only streamline border crossing procedures but also improve risk management. The adoption of existing international standards for electronic transit-related messages will also be promoted and will further facilitate the work of transport operators.

Expert groups meetings, workshops and an end-of-project seminar will serve as a platform for sharing best practices, capacity building and, the dissemination of the project results. The pilot countries will serve as examples and their experience will encourage additional countries to link up to the C2C exchange platforms aiming ultimately to fully computerize transit operations globally. The project builds on the experience of the UNECE Working Party on Customs Questions affecting Transport (WP.30) and, in particular, eight years of work of the Informal Ad hoc Expert Group on Conceptual and Technical Aspects of Computerization of the TIR Procedure (WP.30/GE.1).

As for Africa and the Arab Region, North Africa and members of the Agadir declaration were chosen for the implementation of the project. In fact, the first activity of the project was to undertake two studies to take stock of the situation in two potentially pilot countries and to choose, depending on the results of these studies, one pilot country in each sub-region, based on the selection criteria agreed upon at a meeting devoted to the subject. The two studies were undertaken during 2014 and the first meeting of experts, held in Geneva, Switzerland, recommended Morocco as a pilot country under the Economic Commission for Africa, and Tunisia under the Economic Commission for Eastern Asia. The study undertaken by ECA have found out that Morocco has no technical or even legislative barriers to data exchange between its customs administration and those of partner countries. The modernization process that the Customs Administration is going through and the latest developments observed in the country in terms of dematerialization and the setting up of a "C2C" exchange platform convinced the project team to extend the situational analysis to Algeria and Mauritania. The objective is to come up with a strategy and, if possible, an indicative roadmap to step up customs harmonization in the Maghreb region. The additional study on these two countries, together with the study on Tunisia and Morocco, will be the subject of a synthetic report that will be presented at this meeting, during which other issues of importance relating to customs will also be discussed.

For western Asia a study covering countries namely, Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon and Jordan was conducted to assess the technological and legal readiness of relevant institutions to engage in an electronic exchange of data arrangements. The study revealed high degree of legal and technological readiness among the countries covered and recommended Tunisia to be the pilot country since it was the most ready country for such connection among other things. Tunisian authorities' opted to make the electronic connection as part of this project with France, the country's biggest trade partner in Europe. The selection of Tunisia is motivated by two other key determinants. First, Tunisia is an active member of the Euro-Med partnership where C2C is an important area of cooperation for a deeper integration with the European Union. Moreover, technical discussions have been initiated recently on modalities of C2C among members of Agadir declaration as a first step towards a more connectivity with the EU partners. The technical assistance being provided to Tunisia in the context of this project aims to facilitate this process through the development of the most suitable platform based on the specific needs and objectives of the Tunisian customs authority.

II.   Rationale

Customs cooperation is key to regional integration facilitation due to the strategic role customs administrations play at the border level. During the last decade, Maghreb countries have implemented national trade facilitation strategies and achieved varying levels of progress.

For example, Tunisia and Morocco were the first countries to launch customs procedures reform and trade facilitation, motivated by the export sector's needs. Algeria has also made significant efforts in this respect and has an ambitious program to modernize and facilitate customs procedures. Jordan is also among the first countries in the Middle East where platform of C2C have been already implemented with neighboring countries, mainly WITH Saudi Arabia.

Overall, each UMA Member country has implemented a reform program with the aim of facilitating customs procedures, reducing the time of customs inspection, etc... However, cooperation in terms of experience sharing and harmonization, such as harmonizing customs laws, regulations, procedures and documentation, in order to comply with the relevant international conventions and international best practices, was limited among these countries.

In addition, these Maghreb countries are using different electronic management systems for customs operations and even when they use the same system, they do not share data: terminology used available customs information, etc..., for both legal and technical reasons.

Aware of the importance of harmonized laws, regulations, procedures and customs documents relating to import and export operations, UMA countries' customs Directors General have established, at a meeting held on 27-28 April 2010, a Maghreb working group, consisting of experts from the member countries, in charge of, at first, drawing up and studying "a list of import and export customs procedures, as well as customs obstacles and barriers".

The Maghreb working group held several meeting, the last of which being on 15-16 May 2014 in Rabat.

Furthermore, the Council of Maghreb Finance and Money Ministers urged, during its meeting held in Marrakech on 28-29 May 2013, the working group to "prepare a Maghreb guide on import and export procedures applied by the customs of the UMA Member countries, and to prepare a document comparing the similarities and differences relating to the regulations and tariff and non-tariff barriers applied in UMA countries."

The Commission of Maghreb Ministers in charge of Economy and Finance has also supported the Maghreb customs harmonization process. It recommended, at its meeting held on 24-26 June 2013 in Tunis, "accelerating the actions needed for the harmonization of customs laws, regulations and procedures and preparing a draft unified Maghreb Customs Code..."

Pursuant to these recommendations made by the different Maghreb Councils, the aforesaid Maghreb expert working group has identified a number of axes for the Maghreb guide project relating to import and export regulations and procedures applied by the customs of UMA countries.

The Agadir countries (Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia) are set to benefit from accumulated rule of origin arrangements when exporting to Europe. Thus, coordination of data exchange between customs of the Agadir member countries is of paramount importance. Supporting Agadir members in this direction will be one of ESCWA's priorities.

In order to support UMA efforts for customs cooperation, and pursuant to the UNDA C2C Project, the ECA Office for North Africa and ESCWA in close collaboration with the UMA Secretariat general, will organize a workshop on harmonizing customs procedures and electronic documents exchange between customs administrations.

This workshop will also be an opportunity for the Maghreb and Agadir customs administrations to learn from number of regions experience in terms of customs harmonization and exchange of electronic documents between the customs of Member States and the experience of Latin America which is now considered a model in terms of electronic document exchange and procedure harmonization. The main product of the UNDA C2C project will be the provision of an IT platform that should facilitate electronic documents exchange between countries willing to step up trade facilitation by accelerated procedures dematerialization. The platform is being developed in such a way to be easily adaptable to all IT systems used in the different countries even those not yet part of the TIR system.

III. Objectives and expected results

The overall objective of the workshop is to contribute to the strengthening of trade facilitation in the Maghreb region through expediting the harmonization of customs procedures and drawing up a plan that will make the exchange of electronic data in the Maghreb a reality.

The expected results of the workshop are fourfold:

- Informing Member States of the results of the analysis of obstacles hampering customs harmonization in North Africa and Agadir declaration;
- Analyzing the technical and legal gaps facing electronic exchange of customs documents between the Maghreb customs services and between the members of the Agadir declaration;

- Sharing lessons learned from international and regional experiences and practices in customs harmonization; and
- Laying the foundations of a Maghreb project for the electronic exchange of customs documents.
- Discussing the opportunities for Agadir countries to connect to C2C data exchange platform.

IV. Attendance

National experts from the customs administrations of the UMA Member countries and from Agadir countries are the main participants to this meeting. Representatives of the UMA Secretariat General and from Agadir Technical Unit will also take part to this meeting.

V. Format of the meeting

It is expected to be a three-day meeting. Activities will be organized in plenary sessions dedicated to expert presentations from the Member States, and from several institutions such as the World Customs Organization, IRU, UMA, ECA, LAS, Agadir Technical and ECE. Experts invited from other regions of the world will also make presentations and enrich the discussions.

Interpretation services will be available in three languages: English, Arabic and French.

VI. Date and venue

The meeting will take place in Casablanca (Morocco), on 2-4 December 2015.

VII. Contact

For any information relating to the meeting:

ESCWA
- Adel Alghaberi
  E-mail: adelalghaberi@un.org

UMA General Secretariat
- Kouider Lahoual
  E-mail: Kouidera12@gmail.com

ECA Office for North Africa
- M. Ochozias Gbaguidi
  Email : gochozias@uneca.org

- M. Aziz Jaid
  Email : ajaid@uneca.org

- Mme Naima Sahraoui
  Email : nsahraoui@uneca.org

- M. Mohammed Mosseddek (Documentation)
  Email : mmossedd@uneca.org

  Téléphone CEA-AN : 00 (212) 537 71 56 13 / 537 71 78 29