

ASIA-PACIFIC TRADE FACILITATION FORUM 2015

20-21 OCTOBER 2015, WUHAN, CHINA

The 7th Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Forum ***“Deepening Regional Integration through Trade Facilitation”***

- Summary of proceedings and discussions –

The 7th Annual Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Forum (APTFF) was jointly organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Asian Development Bank and the Chinese International Electronic Commerce Center, in collaboration with China’s Ministry of Commerce, Hubei province and Wuhan city from 20 to 21 October 2015. It brought together 300 participants from 62 countries. A week-long series of side events were also organized from 19 to 23 October.

Under the theme of ‘Deepening regional integration through trade facilitation,’ the forum was dedicated to making it easier and cheaper for all to trade across borders. It highlighted the removal of cumbersome trade procedures as the cornerstone of strategies aimed at enhancing regional integration, connectivity and sustainable development. The Global Report of the Trade Facilitation and Paperless Trade Implementation Survey 2015 launched during the Forum provided data on 44 countries in the Asia-Pacific region and suggested that most countries still had much room for improvement in this area. A key recommendation of the Forum was the need to prepare and tap opportunities associated with cross-border e-commerce given the potential benefits for SMEs in particular. Engagement of all countries in the development of regional and multilateral legal and technical solutions for cross-border paperless trade was highly relevant in this context; in line with current work on this issue at ESCAP.

The High-level Panel discussed the role of trade facilitation in regional integration for inclusive and sustainable growth. We learned how Indonesia has been striving for regional integration by launching a new single-window system integrated with the ASEAN system. We also learned how ASEAN countries are coordinating closely with each other on trade facilitation initiatives, and see streamlining of trade procedures and automation as a core component of its regional connectivity and integration strategy.

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While much progress was reported, a lot of challenges were also mentioned, particularly in Pacific island countries. There was general agreement that a lot of capacity building would still be needed going forward. The potential of China's "One Belt, One Road" policy to contribute to regional and global trade integration and facilitation was recognized. The potential of cross-border e-commerce was also recognized, particularly for SMEs.

Session 1 focused on prioritizing trade facilitation measures to reduce trade costs that remain too high in many of the countries of the regions. Some of the key recommendations that emerged from this session included the need for countries to proceed swiftly with ratification of the WTO trade facilitation agreement and its implementation. Countries should try to fully implement the measures in the agreement rather than focus on achieving minimum compliance levels. Implementing paperless trade measures and facilitating access to information and communication technology services was also highlighted as one of the keys to reducing trade costs, along with regional cooperation on providing a legal basis to support electronic exchange of data and documents across borders. At the same time, the panel discussion indicated that countries should develop holistic and comprehensive trade facilitation programmes covering procedures along the international supply chain, based on regular and evidence-based assessment of bottlenecks, including those related to transport, commercial, payment and other trade-related services. A key message from that session is that consultation and cooperation with the private sector would be the key to implementing relevant trade facilitation programmes and reducing trade costs.

Session 2 focused on what needed to be done to simplify trade procedures to enhance regional connectivity through trade and transport corridor facilitation. Some best practices such as regional facilitation frameworks for road and railways, Port Community Systems (PCS), the TIR convention, and joint border control between Georgia and Turkey were introduced. Integration of single window and port community system appear to be particularly promising. Consideration should also be given to joining the TIR convention as a way to facilitate transit trade, in particular with the recent adoption of the convention by Pakistan and possibly soon by China as well. It was noted that a special regional support mechanism may be necessary for small landlocked countries. That session also highlighted the importance of national and regional legal frameworks to facilitate the movement of goods and electronic exchange of trade and transport documents along corridors.

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Session 3 aimed at re-thinking trade facilitation strategies focusing on SMEs and the agricultural sector. There was recognition that SMEs face special constraints in taking advantage of trade facilitation measures, including some of the ones included in the WTO TFA. Accelerating implementation of enquiry points in local language and ensuring that Authorised Economic Operator programmes do not de facto exclude small or infrequent traders would be important. On the agriculture side, the importance of relying on international standards for sanitary and phytosanitary measures and controls was highlighted. There was a need to conduct detailed case studies and pilot projects as situations vary greatly across agrifood products and countries. These studies could form the basis for national and regional agriculture value chain development plan – and related capacity building programmes.

Session 4 focused on facilitating regional cross-border e-commerce through paperless trade. Through presentations and discussion among speakers and panelists, the session concluded that trade policy should be designed in a way that cross-border e-commerce and paperless trade transactions can be secure and trusted among the participating parties. Harmonization and coordination of different electronic systems and platforms will be essential, keeping in mind the need to balance regulatory compliance and trade facilitation in setting the rules and how the systems owned by private and public operators interact. It was also emphasized that proper attention should be given to the development of an intergovernmental coordination mechanism, such as a regional-level agreement. Such agreement should include an effective technical assistance mechanism to narrow capacity gaps among countries, so that more countries, in particular developing ones, can engage in cross-border e-commerce and paperless trade.

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