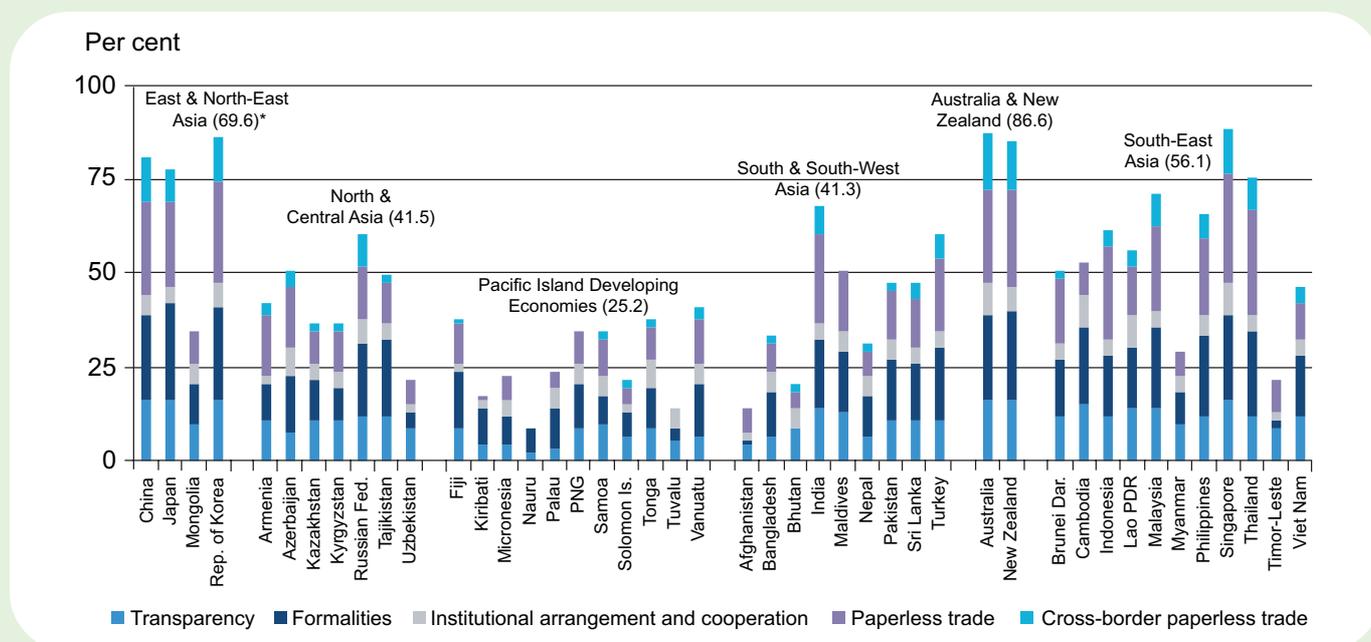


TOWARDS AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR PAPERLESS TRADE

The State of Paperless Trade in Asia-Pacific 2015

The use and exchange of electronic data and documents to support international trade transaction processes, otherwise known as *Paperless Trade*, is an important means of facilitating trade and one of the keys to reducing trade costs and enabling developing economies to more effectively use of trade as an engine of growth and sustainable development. A pioneering Global Survey on Trade Facilitation and Paperless Trade Implementation was conducted by the United Nations Regional Commissions (UNRCs)¹ between September 2014 and May 2015 to provide more detailed cross-country information on the implementation of trade facilitation measures in general, and Single Window and other paperless trade measures in particular. Following an overview of the overall Survey findings, this brief reviews the Survey results specifically related to paperless and cross-border paperless trade implementation in Asia and the Pacific and discusses the way forward.

Figure 1: Overall implementation of trade facilitation and paperless trade measures in Asia-Pacific



Source: ESCAP, UNRCs TF Survey 2015
* Sub-regional average implementation rate

¹ The survey results for Asia-Pacific were prepared by the United Nations ESCAP Secretariat. The survey was conducted in close collaboration with OECD, ITC and UNCTAD, as well as several sub-regional organizations, such as the Oceania Customs Organization in the South Pacific.

Trade Facilitation Implementation in Asia and the Pacific 2015: Survey Highlights

The UNRC Survey 2015 covers 44 Asia-Pacific economies (see **Figure 1**) and provides information on the implementation of 38 trade facilitation (TF) measures divided into four major groups: *General trade facilitation measures*, *Paperless trade*, *Cross-border paperless trade* and *Transit facilitation*.² The *General trade facilitation measures* – as well as *Transit facilitation measures* – are essentially measures featured in the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA). In contrast, most *Paperless* and *Cross-border paperless trade* measures go beyond the basic requirements of the WTO TFA.

Key findings of the Survey include the following:

- The level of TF implementation in Asia-Pacific of the ambitious set of measures considered in the UNRC Survey reaches almost 50%, indicating that the region has been actively engaged in implementing TF initiatives.
- Nearly 40% of the Asia-Pacific economies are now implementing advanced national paperless trade systems such as electronic Single Windows. However, cross-border paperless trade systems implementation remains mostly at the pilot stage, including in ASEAN.³
- Implementation remains very heterogeneous, with Australia, Republic of Korea and Singapore achieving scores in excess of 85%, while other economies barely reach 15% implementation. TF implementation levels are lowest in Pacific Islands, with levels in North and Central Asia and South Asia also below 50%.
- While East Asia and South-East Asia are performing well above the Asia-Pacific average, all sub-regions still have significant room to make progress in all areas of trade facilitation, starting with institutional arrangements and further enhancing inter-agency cooperation.
- Specific WTO TFA-related measures that need the most work are *Trade facilitation measures for authorized operators*, *Establishment and publication of average release times* and *Electronic Single Window System*, with all three measures featuring regional implementation levels below 50%.
- Many developing countries have already implemented many of the basic requirements of the WTO TFA and would need to strengthen their focus on the implementation of paperless and cross-border paperless trade measures in order to reduce significantly trade costs.

A Closer Look at Paperless Trade Implementation

Paperless and cross-border paperless trade measures are important components of a national trade facilitation strategy. Nine of the trade facilitation measures in the UNRC Survey are categorized as “paperless trade” measures (see **Figure 2**). These all involve the application of modern information and communications technologies (ICT) to trade “formalities”, starting from the availability of Internet connections at border-crossings to full-fledged electronic Single Window facilities.

As shown in **Figure 2**, at the regional level *Internet connection availability*, *Electronic/automated Customs System*, along with *Electronic submission of Customs Declarations*, are among the most implemented measures. In contrast, implementation of *Electronic application and issuance of Preferential Certificates of Origin* and *Trade Licenses* are well below the overall regional average. The implementation levels of

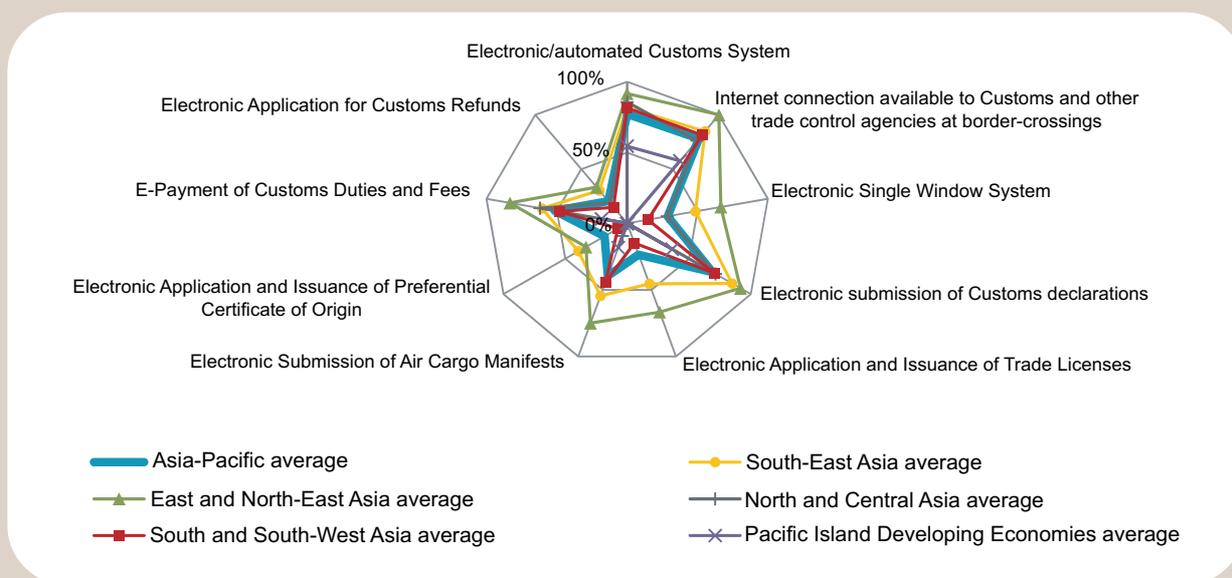
“paperless trade” measures in South-East Asia and East and North-East Asia exceed those in other sub-regions, especially for *Electronic Single Window System*, *Electronic application and issuance of trade licenses* and *Electronic submission of air cargo manifests* (particularly in East and North-East Asia).

Recognizing the importance of having the basic ICT infrastructure and services in place to enable “paperless trade”, nearly all countries (96%) have fully, partially or on a pilot basis made available *Internet connection to trade control agencies at border-crossings* (see **Figure 3**). *Electronic/automated Customs System* are fully implemented in more than half of the countries of the region and are in any case available at the main Customs station(s) of 39 of 44 countries included in the survey. Similarly, *Electronic submission of Customs Declaration* has been fully or partially implemented by 14 and 24 countries, respectively (or 86% of the

² In the Survey, *Paperless trade* measures refer to those that enable the electronic exchange of trade data and documents between traders, government agencies and other stakeholders domestically. In contrast, cross-border paperless trade refers to electronic exchange between stakeholders located in different countries. For details, refer to: <http://unnex.unescap.org/UNTFSurvey2015.asp>

³ See UNNEXt Brief No. 13 on the ASEAN Single Window (May 2015). <http://unnex.unescap.org/pub/brief.asp>

Figure 2: Implementation of “paperless trade” measures in Asia-Pacific sub-regions



Source: ESCAP, UNRC TF Survey 2015

countries surveyed). *E-payment of Customs duties* is also at least partially available in a majority of the countries surveyed, with a significant number of countries currently pilot testing e-payment systems.

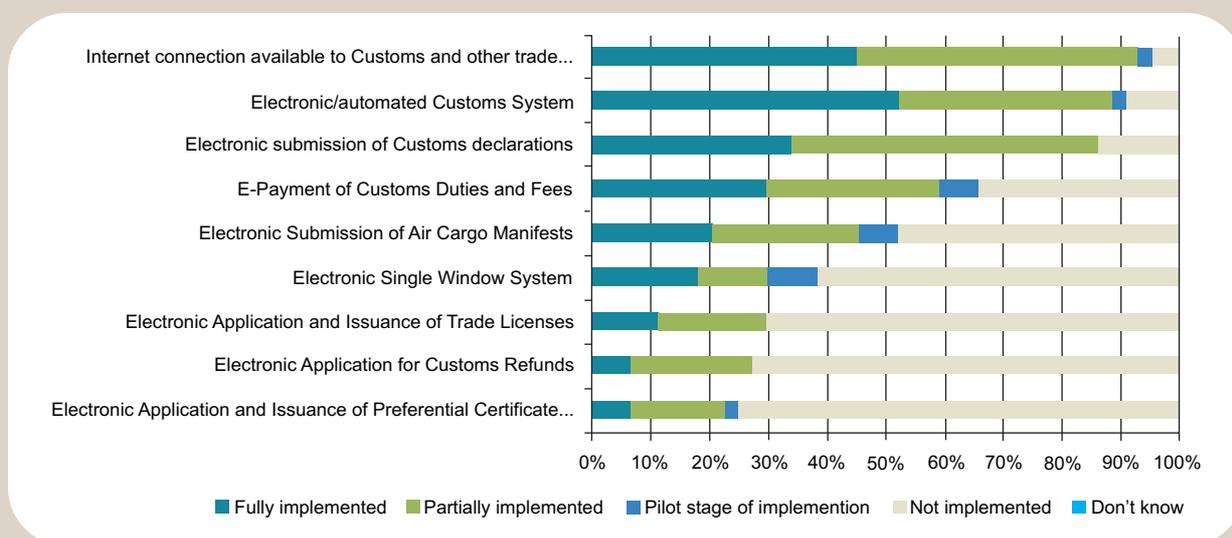
Beyond the use of electronic data and documents for customs procedures, *Electronic Single Window System* has been implemented fully, partially or on a pilot basis by 17 countries, or nearly 40% of all the Asia-Pacific countries surveyed. Clearly, when benchmarked against the high implementation rate of Customs automation, *Electronic Single Window System* implementation remains at a relatively early stage.

Interestingly, relatively simpler measures such as *Electronic application and Issuance of Trade Licenses* and *Electronic application and Issuance of Preferential Certificate of Origin* are even less implemented than

Single Window. This may be explained in part because such agency-specific system may become redundant as Single Window systems are implemented. However, this also highlights the fact that Customs in most countries are indeed much more advanced than other trade-related agencies in developing and using electronic and automation system for trade facilitation and compliance.

To fully facilitate trade, electronic procedures should replace paper-based procedures rather than supplement them. Unfortunately, the available data suggests that about a quarter (25%) of the countries that have electronic systems for *Customs Declarations*, *Submission of Sea Cargo Manifests* and *E-Payment of Customs Duties & Fees* still require paper documents to be submitted as well.

Figure 3: State of implementation of “paperless trade” measures in Asia-Pacific economies (in %)



Source: ESCAP, UNRC TF Survey 2015

Electronic Single Window Implementation

Examining *Electronic Single Window Systems* in particular shows that this measure is “fully implemented” in around 20% of all Asia-Pacific countries surveyed, “partially implemented” in 10% of countries and “at the pilot stage” in 9% of them. According to the UNRC Survey 2015, implementation of this measure, along with upgrading of customs automation system (sometimes to provide a basis for the national Single Window), was among the measures on which countries in Asia-Pacific focused the most over the past year.

Looking at the 17 countries, where a Single Window system is at least at the pilot stage, around 70% (12 of 17) have Single Window-specific legislation in place. Likewise, 60% of these countries have already connected relevant trade facilitation stakeholders to the E-Single Window system. **Table 1** provides the information on Single Window functionalities in eight Asia-Pacific countries identified in the UNRC Survey that has the most fully implemented systems. It shows the extent to which these seven paperless trade procedures, included in the Survey, can be conducted through Single Windows. All seven procedures are performed using electronic Single Windows in the Republic of Korea and Singapore, while other countries use Single Windows for a more limited number of processes.

Table 1: E-Single Window System Functionalities in 8 Asia-Pacific Countries

	Azerbaijan	Indonesia	Japan	Malaysia	New Zealand	Korea (Rep. of)	Singapore	Thailand
1. E-submission of Customs Declarations	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
2. E-Application and Issuance of Trade Licenses	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
3. E-Submission of Sea Cargo Manifests	–	√	√	√	x	√	√	√
4. E-Submission of Air Cargo Manifests	x	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
5. E-Application and Issuance of Preferential Certificate of Origin	x	√	x	√	x	√	√	x
6. E-Payment of Customs Duties and Fees	√	√	√	√	x	√	√	√
7. E-Application for Customs Refunds	x	x	√	x	x	√	√	√

Legend: √ – “Yes”; x – “No”

Source: ESCAP, UNRC TF Survey 2015

In most cases, no or very limited information is available on Single Window functionalities in countries identified in the UNRC Survey as having partially implemented Single Windows, perhaps indicating the difficulty in actual access and use of the systems by the relevant stakeholders. In the case of large countries such as China and India, it appears that some forms of electronic Single Windows are often accessible and link agencies with each other, but that these systems may not be fully integrated or interconnected at the national level (i.e., no “national” Single Windows).⁴ The most prevalent Single Window functionalities in the 13 Asia-Pacific countries having at least partially implemented Single Windows are those related to *Customs Declarations* and application for *Import or Export Licenses*.⁵ Functionalities enabling *Submission of Air Cargo Manifests*, *E-Payment of Customs Duties & Fees* and *Submission of Sea Cargo Manifests through Single Window* are available in only about 50% of these countries.

⁴ The situation in China is such that it does not have a “national” E-Single Window system, but instead has many “local” Single Windows developed by its different provinces and cities (e.g. Shanghai and Xi An). Similarly, many of its busiest port and trading cities are located along the Eastern coast, where the quality of trade facilitation infrastructure is much more advanced than in Western regions. See also, UNNExT Brief No. 13 on China E-Port System at: <http://unnex.unescap.org/pub/brief.asp>

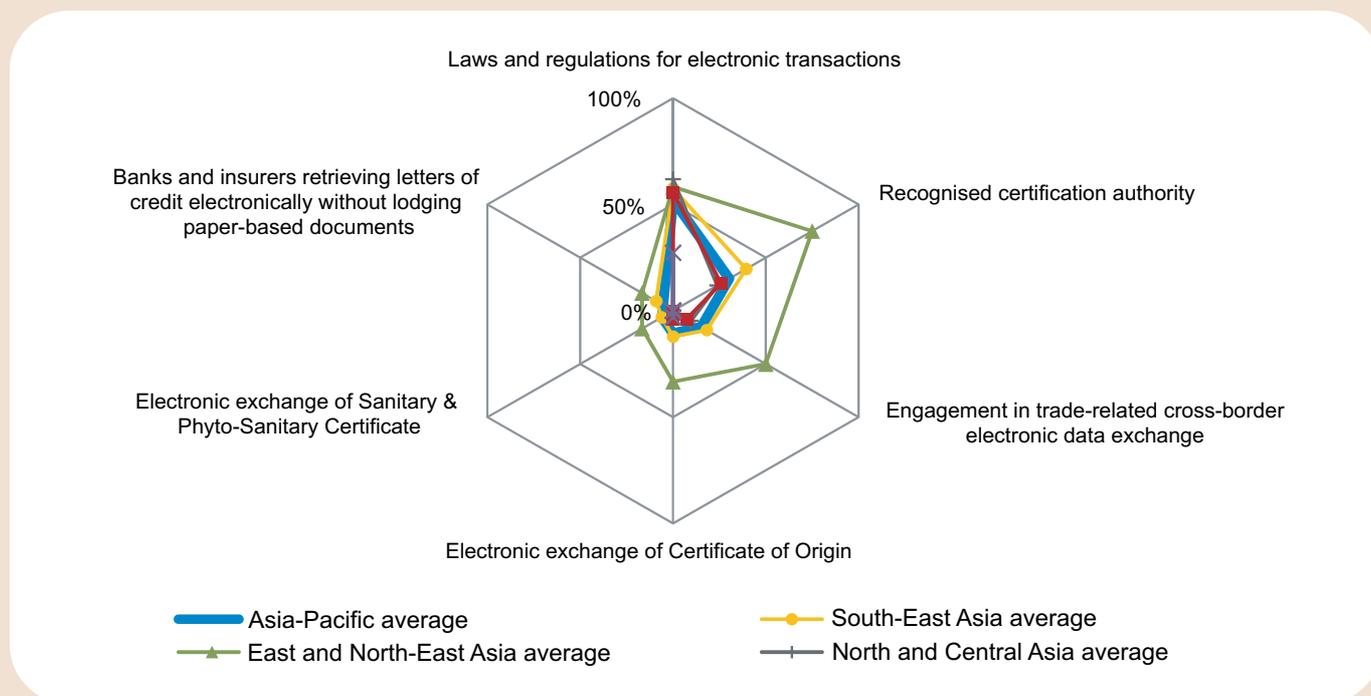
⁵ It is worth recalling here that a Single Window (SW) should inherently allow traders to interact with several (all) trade-related government agencies through one system, such that SW functionalities should necessarily extend beyond submission of *Customs Declarations*.

Cross-Border Paperless Trade Implementation: A Long Way To Go

Six of the trade facilitation measures in the UNRC Survey are “cross-border paperless trade” measures, as shown in **Figure 4**. Two of the measures, *Laws and regulations for electronic transactions* and *Recognised certification authority*, are basic building blocks towards enabling the exchange and legal recognition of trade-related data and documents not only among

stakeholders within a country, but ultimately also across borders between stakeholders along the entire international supply chain. The other four measures relate to the implementation of systems enabling the actual exchange of trade-related data and documents across borders to remove the need for sending paper documents.

Figure 4: Implementation of “cross-border paperless trade” measures: Asia-Pacific average



Source: ESCAP, UNRC TF Survey 2015

At the regional level, average implementation scores for “cross-border paperless trade” measures is very low, with the exception of *Laws and regulation for electronic transactions*, whose implementation level is slightly over 50%. The pattern is very similar at the sub-regional level, apart from East and North-East Asia, whose implementation levels far exceed those of other sub-regions for most of the “cross-border paperless trade” measures.

Over two-third of the countries surveyed in the Asia-Pacific (68%) have at least partially developed the legal and regulatory frameworks needed to enable electronic transactions, but these frameworks remain mainly domestic and incomplete, i.e., they do not readily support the legal recognition of electronic data or documents received from stakeholders in other countries. This is also true for Certification Authorities (CAs) issuing recognised electronic signature

certificates to traders, which in any case have yet to be established in a large majority of countries in the region.

In part as a result of the lack of institutional and legal frameworks to support cross-border paperless trade, *Engagement in trade-related cross-border electronic data exchange* has remained limited, typically being conducted only on a restricted or pilot basis with a few specific trade partners.⁶ Indeed, implementation of *both Electronic exchange of Certificates of Origin and Electronic exchange of Sanitary & Phyto-Sanitary Certificates* have been initiated by less than 10% of the economies of the region. Similarly, in all but three Asia-Pacific countries included in the survey, it is not yet feasible for banks and insurers to retrieve letters of credit electronically without lodging paper-based documents.

⁶ Most common is customs-to-customs data exchange, with, e.g., Customs of Korea and the Philippines reportedly exchanging data electronically since 2008 (Koh, J.; 2015).

The Way Forward

Nearly 40% of all economies in the Asia-Pacific region have initiated implementation of multi-agency paperless systems such as national electronic Single Windows. However, a closer analysis of existing systems suggests that overall implementation remains often rather rudimentary. Importantly, these systems are

usually inward looking and have often not been developed for interoperability and connectivity beyond national borders. This is unfortunate, as cross-border paperless trade reforms hold much potential benefit for Asia-Pacific countries (see **Box 1**).

Box 1 – Securing the Benefits from Cross-Border Paperless Trade in Asia-Pacific

Recent analyses suggest that implementation of cross-border paperless trade measures included in the survey can potentially increase regional exports by \$36 bn up to \$257 bn annually. In tandem, the time required to export would fall between 24% and 44%, and the direct costs between 17% and 31%, depending on the reform scenario considered. Furthermore, the total direct cost savings across all trade in the Asia-Pacific region would be approximately \$1 bn annually for partial reform and \$7 bn annually for full implementation.⁷

Given the large potential benefits associated with the implementation of these “next generation” trade facilitation measures, it is in the interest of countries to work together and develop the legal and technical protocols needed for the seamless exchange of regulatory & commercial data and documents along the international supply chain. Some work has already been done bilaterally as well as in several Asian sub-regions (e.g., the ASEAN Single Window). This work can be further leveraged at the regional level through adoption and implementation of the intergovernmental agreement for the facilitation of cross-border paperless trade currently under negotiation at ESCAP.

The agreement would provide an overarching regional-level framework to facilitate the interoperability of existing and emerging bilateral and sub-regional cross-border paperless trade initiatives, aimed at supporting intraregional trade as mandated by ESCAP Resolution 68/3 (2012). As noted in a follow-up ESCAP Resolution (70/6) establishing a formal mechanism for its negotiation, the regional arrangement, with its wholly ICT-based trade facilitation provisions, is complementary to the WTO Agreement on Trade Facilitation (TFA). As currently drafted, the ESCAP agreement would provide parties with a common set of general principles on the basis of which to implement paperless trade systems, as well as a dedicated intergovernmental platform to exchange best practices, request/offer capacity-building and technical assistance, and to multilaterally develop, adopt and implement more specific and detailed technical and/or legal protocols needed to achieve safe and secure cross-border paperless trade (e.g., the exchange and legal recognition of e-certificates of origins or other relevant documents).

As reflected in **Figure 5**, implementation of trade facilitation may be seen as a step-by-step process, beginning with the setup of *Institutional arrangements* needed to prioritize and coordinate TF implementation;

In practice, however, trade facilitation measures are often very much interrelated across categories and much time and cost can be saved by adopting a more integrated approach based on a long-term vision. ICT

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