New technologies to respond to new challenges: How UN/CEFACT electronic standards help Governments to better control international trade in agriculture and bio-trade to protect their citizens and economies from the spread of pests and zoonoses

UNECE, through its Center for Trade Facilitation and electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) develops international standards for electronic information exchange and the implementation of efficient trade control procedures.

In the area of agriculture and wildlife trade governments control the exchange of animals, plants and other agricultural products through the issuance and exchange of licenses, permits and certificates (LPCs). These documents and the underlying controls ensure the legality of trade and aim to prevent illegal trade and the transmission of pests and diseases which can be transmitted from animals to humans (zoonosis).

Currently these documents are mainly issued and exchange in paper format. However, information in a physical format is slow and paper documents are very vulnerable to fraudulent use. Criminals find ample opportunities to alter or forge documents, thus preventing efficient implementation of sanitary and phytosanitary controls thus exposing the population of entire countries to risks of new diseases.

To strengthen controls Governments have looked for high-tech protection mechanisms and are now starting to implement UN/CEFCAT advanced agriculture eBusiness standards which allow electronic information exchange and control mechanisms to protect their citizens and economies from illegal trade and the transmission of dangerous diseases.

A good example for use of UN/CEFACT solutions is the implantation of electronic CITES permits information exchange by Governments under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES):

CITES regulates trade in over 36,000 species of wild animals and plants, both aquatic and terrestrial, and includes emblematic species such as tigers, elephants, rhinos, manta rays and all the great apes. The objective of CITES is to ensure the survival of the species in the wild while allowing sustainable trade and income from wildlife resources.

However, wildlife is becoming increasingly threatened by illegal trade. In October 2019 the World Bank estimated that illegal logging, fishing and wildlife trade have an estimated value of $1 trillion or more per year Illegal trade in wildlife is now considered the fourth largest international crime.

All illegal trade in wildlife completely evades the sanitary and phytosanitary controls implemented by the Governments to protect the health of their citizens and the national agriculture production resources. In particular illegal trade in wildlife significant risks for transmission of animal borne diseases such as the African Swine Fever or the COVID-19 to other animals and humans.

Concerned with the increasing scale of illegal trade in wildlife and wildlife products and its associated risk for humans and the economies, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution in September 2019 to tackle illicit trafficking in wildlife with a call to

urgently increase efforts to prevent illegal trade. The General Assembly called on Member States "...to take measures making permit systems more resistant to corruption and to take advantage of modern information and communications technologies for improved control of international trade in protected species of wild fauna and flora in order to prevent the use of fraudulent documents in the international trade of protected species."

As a response CITES established strategic partnership with the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) to adopt United Nations Economic Commission (UNECE) standards for improved regulatory control of international trade and UN/CEFACT eBusiness standards for electronic information exchange between government agencies.

Building on the UN/CEFACT standards, UNCTAD has now developed an advanced electronic permit management system which implements a transparent and efficient permit control process. Information can be exchanged electronically with Customs and border control agencies which allows implementation electronic data analysis and targeted inspection strategies. The system is hosted in a disaster resilient cloud-based facility and is made accessible to Governments as an internet-based service. The first implementation of this system was completed in March 2020 in Sri Lanka and the system has already demonstrated its capabilities for control of trade in wildlife. Within less than one month of operation this system has already demonstrated its value for the economy of Sri Lanka as it allowed traders and the Sri Lanka Government agencies to remotely request, issue and control CITES permits despite the lockdowns implemented by the Sri Lanka Government to control the current outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a further step Governments are now starting to exchange electronic CITES permits across borders, thus completely eliminating opportunities for fraudulent paperwork. Pilot exchanges of electronic permits are already ongoing, inter alia between Switzerland, France and the Czech Republic and other EU countries and the European Commission are already preparing to join into electronic permit exchanges. UNECE, in collaboration with ESCAP and UNCTAD is now supporting developing countries and transition economies of the ECE and ESCAP region to access to these advanced trade control procedures to better protect their wildlife and the health of their citizens from the dangerous consequences of illegal trade.