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Strategic questions of a horizontal policy nature:

Assistance to countries with economies in transition

Overview of the project “Strengthening the capacities of developing countries and countries with economies in transition to facilitate legitimate border crossing, regional cooperation and integration”

Note by the secretariat

Summary

This note provides information on progress achieved in the implementation of the project on customs-to-customs electronic document exchange, funded by the United Nations Development Account.

I. Background

1. Crossing borders has always been a problem in international transport and trade. Despite recent improvements, international transport still faces obstacles, costs and difficulties at borders. Border crossing problems most severely affect landlocked developing countries, as also seriously impede the access of these countries to the global market and leads to substantial losses for the national economies. The competitiveness of these countries is undermined by cumbersome customs and other control procedures. Overall, limitations to trade and transport facilitation are detrimental to economic growth, regional cooperation and integration.
2. Control authorities at borders face security challenges with smuggling, terrorism, illegal trade and immigration. In view of the large volume of cross-border transport operations nowadays, Customs authorities are no longer in a position to control every vehicle or container. Instead, they have to apply risk management and identify high risk

consignments on the basis of data available. However, the data provided for risk analysis in a given country could potentially be falsified or intended to mislead Customs officials. Often, the most reliable data on the goods transported is available at the Customs offices of departure at the origin of a transit movement following an export procedure. To the extent possible, these data should be captured and then made available to the Customs authorities of transit and destination countries through a common Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) system, prior to the arrival of the goods. The availability of advance electronic cargo information and the establishment of Customs-to-Customs network arrangements have been identified as cornerstones of the global supply chain security by the World Customs Organization.

3. Today, only a few international conventions provide a legal basis for the exchange of information on the international transport of goods. Among those, the Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods under Cover of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention) administered by UNECE has the broadest geographical scope (67 countries worldwide). The exchange of electronic information is being addressed in the framework of the eTIR project, which has been in development since 2002 and which is nearing completion. The eTIR project aims at full computerization of the TIR procedure and will eventually replace Customs documents on paper by an exchange of a set of electronic messages. The requirements of the necessary electronic systems have already been determined, including the establishment of a centralized Customs-to-Customs information exchange platform.

4. On the basis of the work already done in the framework of the eTIR project, the project aims at implementing and strengthening the capacity of developing countries and countries with economies in transition to use a versatile Customs-to-Customs information exchange platform developed to ensure a secure exchange of information related to goods in transit, in particular, for goods travelling under cover of TIR Carnets. The exchange platform will be designed to facilitate, in the long term, the exchange of Customs-to-Customs and Business-to-Customs information globally. The sustainability of the exchange platform will be ensured through a minimal fee-for-use. Ultimately, the secure electronic exchange of Customs-to-Customs information will lead to increased security and reduced border crossing delays.

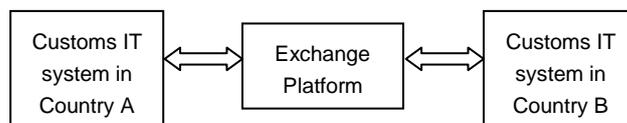
II. Expected results and activities

5. The following project activities have two major expected results, the increased use of international standards, in particular, when it comes to the submission of Business-to-Customs (B2C) electronic information, as well as the increased collaboration between Customs of different countries and C2C exchange of relevant electronic information:

A1.1 Delivering a first inter-regional Expert Group Meeting (two days) aimed at the assessment of the legal and technical needs of candidate developing countries and countries with economies in transition to extend the exchange of electronic information with other countries (“gap” analysis). The linkages with major existing national and regional computerized transit systems will also be assessed and explored. On the basis of studies to be prepared by independent consultants, the Expert Group will determine the selection criteria and nominate at least five pilot countries.

A1.2 Development and deployment of a secure C2C versatile electronic exchange platform (see Figure 1), taking due account of the specific challenges faced by developing countries and countries with economies in transition.

Figure 1
C2C information exchange via an independent centralized exchange platform



A1.3 Provision of technical assistance to national experts in at least five pilot countries to link national or regional Customs IT systems (e.g. ASYCUDA) to the C2C exchange platform or to development of an Action Plan setting out the steps needed to introduce a new C2C platform to exchange information and ensure its sustainability over time.

A1.4 Deliverance of five technical workshops (two days) to build capacity of developing countries and countries with economies in transition and maximise the benefits offered by the C2C exchange platform, to increase their electronic exchange of Customs information with neighbouring countries as well as to adopt international standards when it comes to electronic messages (the project will provide funding for twenty participants at each workshop).

A2.1 Delivering a second inter-regional Expert Group Meeting (one day) at the end of the project to present and evaluate the results achieved in the five pilot countries.

A2.2 Delivering a seminar (one day and back to back with the second inter-regional Expert Group Meeting) to promote the electronic exchange of Customs information and the adoption of standard electronic messages, with special focus on the specific requirement of developing countries and countries with economies in transition on the basis of the results achieved in the five pilot countries (the project will provide funding for 45 participants from developing countries and countries with economies in transition, in particular from countries other than the pilot countries).

III. Project status

6. All five Regional Commissions are preparing for the first interregional Expert Group meeting, where experts from each Regional Commission will discuss the gap analyses of the candidate countries. On the basis of the results of the gap analyses, they will select the pilot countries and determine whether it is possible to achieve within the framework of the project an actual C2C electronic exchange of transit related information or if the development of an Action Plan setting out the steps required to introduce such a system would be the best way to proceed. The meeting was tentatively scheduled for 18 December 2013, but had to be postponed in view of the difficulties encountered by some of the Regional Commissions in finding candidate countries or consultants. Table 1 summarizes the status of the progress in each Regional Commission.

Table 1
Status report for each Regional Commission

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| <p>UNECE executes the project globally, in cooperation with the other Regional Commissions. A project website¹ was developed to allow for the efficient and fast dissemination of the project documentation. All financial authorization for the year 2013, mainly covering activity A1.1, were prepared.</p> <p>Further to various contacts and exchanges of letters, Georgia has accepted to be UNECE candidate country for the project and has nominated a focal point for the project. On the basis of the Terms of Reference prepared by the secretariat, a call for tender was issued to find a qualified consultant to undertake a gap analysis. A consultant has been hired and is currently working on the gap analysis, in close contact with the secretariat, the focal point in Georgia and the relevant ministries in the Georgian government. The analysis is planned to be finalized by mid-December.</p> |
| <p>UNESCAP is seeking interested candidate countries in Central Asia and has difficulties to find a consultant for the amount assigned for the gap analysis.</p> |
| <p>UNECA has nominated Morocco and Tunisia as candidate countries and, further to a call for tender, has hired a consultant to undertake their gap analysis.</p> |
| <p>UNESCWA, further to a call for tender, has hired a consultant to undertake their gap analysis.</p> |
| <p>UNECLAC has encountered difficulties in triggering interest for the project in Latin America as they originally tried to only address countries using or interested in TIR. It has since broadened the project scope and is looking for countries interested in the electronic exchange of any transit related information.</p> |

¹ www.unece.org/trans/themes/unda_customs-to-customs.html