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Recommendation No. 38: Trade Information Portals

Submitted by the Bureau for approval

Summary

Transparency and predictability are essential elements for the cross-border movement of goods. Stakeholders need to know the conditions for the entry or exit of their goods well before the goods arrive at the border in order to prepare all regulatory requirements and commercial negotiations. A Trade Information Portal (TIP) is a facility that compiles these requirements and publishes the information on an internet portal accessible to all relevant traders. This recommendation provides guidance on how to set up such a portal, what information should be shared, the governance, as well as some elements which have been identified as potential evolutions. It is accompanied by a repository of case studies of such facilities in order to help countries navigate through the best possible solutions for their requirements.

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I. Recommendation No. 38: Trade Information Portal

A. Introduction

1. Transparency and predictability are essential elements for the cross-border movement of goods. In order to trade internationally efficiently and cost effectively, it is necessary to access all the regulatory requirements prior to the actual sale of merchandise. Having an official, single portal where all this information can be accessed provides the necessary transparency and predictability. Such a portal also encourages cross-administration cooperation which can carry over to border control requirements or other trade facilitation mechanisms such as a Single Window.

2. Many countries affirm that they have such a portal; however, these can vary greatly from one country to another. This recommendation puts forward a base understanding of a Trade Information Portal as a trade facilitation mechanism.

B. Purpose and scope

3. A Trade Information Portal is a website that aggregates and publishes all trade-related regulatory information originating from the government agencies that perform a control function in relation to imports, exports, transits or trans-shipments. This allows importers, exporters or anyone involved in international trade to easily find, understand and comply with any legal requirements and procedures pertaining to specific goods that are necessary to comply with national obligations for clearings goods at the border as well as before or after clearance.

4. A Trade Information Portal enables the publication and availability of information related to importation, exportation and transit regulatory requirements and procedures. By nature, it should be an electronic system which is accessible by Internet. The main objective is to create a trade facilitation tool which helps the private sector access, and ultimately better understand trade regulations and trade agreements and thus streamline their processes.

5. This recommendation establishes a base definition of Trade Information Portal, the type of information that should be included, the different types of models that exist as well as the technical requirements for its implementation. It is meant to provide basic guidance to understand the portal and how it should be implemented, while remaining neutral of eventual technical solutions.

C. Benefits

6. A Trade Information Portal provides the transparency and predictable information necessary for traders to plan their processes and resources for their cross-border operations. It allows traders to prepare all necessary documentation and authorizations for the entry or exit of goods prior to their arrival at the border, and thus contributing to compliance and streamlined border crossing.

7. Such a portal also contributes to cross-agency collaboration. The exchange and preparation of data linked to the information published on the portal can also help agencies to align their requirements, and the standards they use to communicate such information.

D. International standards

8. The exchange and publication of information on a Trade Information Portal is optimized if the data is standardized. The United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) has developed standards for electronic information exchange to accompany this recommendation and to facilitate interoperability between government agencies and between different economies.

E. Recommendation

9. The United Nation Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business, at its twenty-seventh Plenary session on 19-20 April 2021 in Geneva recommends that governments do the following:

- (a) Establish a Trade Information Portal in order to improve the transparency and predictability of trade information;
- (b) Establish a strategic vision for the Trade Information Portal as part of overall trade facilitation policy;
- (c) Appoint a collaborative governance body for strategic direction as well as the oversight of development, implementation and ongoing operation of the Trade Information Portal, comprising all key stakeholders (i.e. government entities involved in the regulatory control of imports/exports and private sector trade practitioners) and put in place agreements for collaboration and mechanisms for exchanging information between stakeholders;
- (d) Appoint Lead Agency for implementation and the entity tasked with operating and keeping the Trade Information Portal up-to-date on an ongoing basis (may be the same as Lead Agency) and ensure that operation is sustainable in the long term through adequate resourcing and financing and continuous supervision by the governance body, and
- (e) Make provisions, including financing provisions, for the capacity building of the Trade Information Portal (i.e. awareness programmes, training, publicity and outreach) both initially and on an ongoing basis.

II. Guidelines for establishing a Trade Information Portal

A. Trade Information Portal definition

10. A Trade Information Portal (TIP)¹ is a website that aggregates and publishes all trade-related regulatory information originating from the government agencies that perform a control function in relation to imports, exports, transits or trans-shipments. It allows importers, exporters or anyone involved in international trade to easily find and understand and comply with any legal requirements and procedures pertaining to specific goods that are necessary to comply with national obligations for clearings of goods at the border as well as before or after clearance.²

11. A TIP may evolve and provide other pertinent information. This is elaborated in section I below on the possible evolutions of a Trade Information Portal.

B. Information to be shared on a Trade Information Portal

12. Trade-related regulatory information to be published on a TIP should comprise, at a minimum, the following general information:

- Laws, regulations, decrees, instructions, notifications and any other legal instruments relating to trade and compliance;
- Forms and/or electronic messages used to apply for permits, licences, Customs clearance, etc.;
- Information on how to connect to governmental electronic systems related to international trade (i.e. Single Window, individual ministries etc.);
- Penalty provisions for breach of formalities;
- Procedures for appeal or review;
- Notifications or guidance notes;
- Lists of codes required in various documents (e.g. country codes, units of measurement, currency codes, customs procedure codes, etc.); and
- Contact information for enquiry point(s).

13. It is also useful to provide the following information at the commodity³-specific or generic product level:

- Procedures comprising the practical steps for discharging regulatory obligations with Customs and other agencies including those required by a Single Window, where applicable;

¹ In some economies, the term National Trade Repository or similar terms are used to refer conceptually to the same thing as intended by the term Trade Information Portal (TIP) in this document.

² Though this recommendation targets international exchanges of goods, the base principles could also be applied to trade within a single economy or in a regional context.

³ The terms 'commodity' and 'goods' are used interchangeably throughout this document. Most customs systems refer to 'commodity classification' which is why this term is preferred in this section; 'goods' is used elsewhere.

- Commodity classification in the format in use in each country (most countries have adopted the Harmonized System⁴ format) and associated applied tariff rates;
- Fees and other charges associated with each commodity or regime;
- Preferential tariffs or special requirements (e.g. applicable rules of origin, preferential certificate of origin) for trading with countries that are parties to a trade agreement or other form of preference;
- Rules for the classification of products for Customs valuation purposes;
- Special measures applicable to specific commodities or products, e.g. quotas, exemptions, prohibitions or restrictions for sanitary/phytosanitary (SPS) or other;
- Non-tariff measures such as requirements to obtain a licence, permit, certification, registration, submit to an inspection or testing, or other requirements;
- Technical standards required for specific categories of products, either mandatory (technical regulations) or recommended; and
- Information on advance rulings that may be made publicly available.

14. The above information is often interrelated, so it would be beneficial if the information could be cross-referenced within the TIP. For example, users may want to look up a specific commodity code or product type and discover any tariffs and duties applicable; whether any specific authorizations are required to import or export the goods; what the procedure is to obtain the authorizations; and which legal instruments provide the legal basis for these requirements.

15. Users should also be able to find the information they require, to the extent possible, by searching for specific text or keywords and any other relevant search parameters.

16. In addition to the trade-specific information above, a TIP is also likely to include many standard features, such as the following:

- Contact Us;
- FAQ;
- Site Map; and
- Share via social media, etc.

17. These would typically be available as standard, off-the-shelf website software.

C. Trade Information Portal technology and model

18. A TIP may be created using any industry standard technology platform that allows a website to be built and that also provides interaction through various user interfaces. It is likely that, as well as static web pages with plain text or images, the system will also need a database to store structured data and an application to look up the data and format it in response to specific user queries.⁵ A Content Management System (CMS) will also be required to upload and format data to the website.

⁴ See the World Customs Organization Harmonized System Convention (1986) and related databases: <http://www.wcoomd.org/en/topics/nomenclature/instrument-and-tools/tools-to-assist-with-the-classification-in-the-hs/hs-online.aspx>

⁵ For example, a full stack (requiring a database layer, application layer, web server layer and a web browser front-end) is likely to be required.

19. The trade-related information to be published on a TIP originates from different sources, typically government agencies but also other national or international organizations. In many countries, information may be available across a number of websites maintained by each government agency responsible for a particular aspect of trade regulation. Aggregating and publishing this information so that it can be presented to users in a single website may be achieved in different ways. The following models represent an organizational model for information sharing rather than a technical solution.

1. Centralized model

20. In the centralized model, website information is brought in from the relevant agencies or other organizations and is structured in a compatible way in a single database so that it can be easily cross-referenced and formatted to build a response to a user's query.

21. The advantage is that users only need to go to one place to find out what they need and they can expect to be given the complete picture of the rules, regulations and procedures across all agencies in a consistent and predictable manner, which is a key objective of trade facilitation. Another advantage is that the dissemination of information could be largely facilitated between agencies and even within a same agency through a centralized model. The disadvantage of this model is that, inevitably, there will be some duplication of information and, potentially, inconsistencies or conflicts across different government websites and that it will require a dedicated task force to keep it up-to-date by collecting the information from all the different sources. It also means that collaborative institutional arrangements must be put in place for information to flow to the TIP. Having a standardized data model for such exchanges can assist with the identification of duplications and their removal and the consolidation of information.

22. This is the model most commonly adopted by countries that have implemented a TIP.

2. Decentralized model

23. It is conceivable that a TIP could be built by creating a platform which can provide the information required by users by directing them, through links, to the different agencies' or organizations' websites. An advantage of a decentralized model is that the information would not be duplicated across websites. Furthermore, the maintenance of the TIP would be less onerous. However, for this to happen, clear common data standards and operating procedures would be necessary for the various websites at a very detailed level. Otherwise the user would likely need to navigate between multiple websites with different interfaces in order to assemble the information required.

3. Hybrid model

24. It is conceivable to think of a hybrid model where core structured information is maintained in a centralized TIP and supplementary information is accessible through links to other websites.

25. Countries wishing to implement a TIP will determine which method suits them best, according to the local circumstances.

D. Legal aspects

26. The requirement for accuracy and timeliness of information published on a TIP is particularly important for legal information (i.e. laws, regulations, notifications and any other instruments that carry legal weight) as the public must be confident that by acting according to the information on the TIP, they will be compliant with the law.

27. Insofar as possible, the information shared on the TIP should be legally binding reflecting the most up-to-date legislation. Each country must decide whether it is possible to achieve the high standard required for information held in electronic form to be legally binding and, should this prove too onerous to achieve, should publish an appropriate disclaimer.

28. As well as legislation currently in force, the TIP could also publish proposed legislation with an indication of whether it has already been approved and the date it is expected to enter into force. This will assist the users to prepare in advance in order to be compliant when conducting future business.

E. Key success factors

1. Establishing the basis for collaboration

29. The trade-related information described in section B will need to be gathered from all the government agencies and other organizations involved in trade and, therefore, collaboration will be required between these parties. The free flow of information between government agencies may often be constrained by bureaucratic or cultural impediments. Indeed, there may be laws that prevent the exchange of information between agencies, although these are likely to relate to operational or private information rather than information which should be freely available in the public domain.⁶ It is therefore recommended that the sharing of information for the purpose of a TIP be underpinned by a binding agreement between the parties. This type of agreement may vary according to what would be effective in each country. It could be as simple as a Memorandum of Understanding or it may need to be an instrument carrying greater legal weight. The instrument of agreement should clearly assign responsibilities and define accountability mechanisms with the aim of ensuring full and perpetual disclosure of public information and to keep information up-to-date.

30. The instrument should also define the governance and operational structure of the TIP and include the Terms of Reference and Service Level Agreement for the services to be provided by the operating entity.

31. The agreement between the parties should also cover the mechanisms for exchanging information, which would most likely involve formally nominating a Focal Point, i.e. a person in each of the agencies or institutions responsible for maintaining the liaison with the TIP Management Team. These mechanisms ensure that information to be published is provided in a timely manner and for continuously informing of any changes to the procedures (e.g. forms, required documents, laws, contact details, etc.).

32. A legal instrument would not normally be required to establish a TIP as a single, authoritative source of information unless such information has legally binding value (see section D on legal aspects).

2. Lead Agency / Management Team

33. A government agency should be appointed to lead the establishment of a TIP and its subsequent operation. The appropriate agency will vary from country to country depending on legal, political and capacity issues. The Lead Agency requires a clear government mandate, which may need to be conferred through legislation, to empower it to orchestrate

⁶ UNECE Recommendation No. 35: Establishing a Legal Framework for an International Trade Single Window, ECE/TRADE/401 (2013) provides a complete checklist of considerations to be taken when implementing a Single Window.

the sharing of trade-related regulatory information between all relevant agencies and other stakeholders. The Lead Agency must be a very strong organization with the necessary vision and commitment to implement trade facilitation policies and should be accountable to a collaborative body such as a National Trade Facilitation Committee⁷ or a dedicated TIP governing body such as a Steering Committee. This body, depending on specific countries' circumstances, may also be the one tasked with the oversight of the Single Window.

34. The governing body must meet regularly to review progress and the availability and accuracy of trade information, to monitor usage and to set the priorities for data collection. This body should also set the development of new modules and functionalities, the evolution of the system and communication activities.

35. The Lead Agency would have the responsibility of coordinating efforts and managing the development and implementation project. The Lead Agency would normally also be expected to be responsible for operating the TIP on an ongoing basis and for ensuring that its content is kept accurate and up-to-date, reporting to and acting upon policy decisions made collectively by the governing body.

36. The Lead Agency would be expected to appoint an Implementation Team tasked with developing and implementing the TIP with the required technical resources and skills.

37. Collection and integration of data into the TIP should be done, as much as possible, with internal resources assigned to the Implementation Team. This should be done to build institutional knowledge of the regulatory framework, and of the system, and to contribute effectively to the overarching goal of simplifying the trade environment.

38. Once operational, a Management Team would be tasked with operating and maintaining the portal and ensuring that, after the initial implementation, relevant content continues to be provided on an ongoing basis by all the relevant government agencies in a timely manner. In order to ensure continuity, it would be beneficial if members of the Implementation Team formed part of the Management Team or provided training to new members.

3. Risk mitigation

39. The Lead Agency should identify any potential risks and impediments that may jeopardize the success of the project and evaluate the likelihood of each risk occurring together with the impact it would have on the project. The Project Team should also develop a risk management plan with appropriate mitigation strategies in the event of the risk materializing.

40. During the implementation project, the risks should be continuously monitored and the Project Team should adopt good management practice in order to manage and mitigate the risks.

41. To a large extent, the potential risks for this kind of project will be the same as any technical project. Other risks will be specific to the circumstances of each country. A clear strategic plan for the project should be developed at the outset and this will contribute to mitigating the risks of failure that would result from an unclear vision of the objectives, lack of ownership and direction and poor planning.

42. Perhaps the highest risk specific to this kind of project is the failure to collect complete and accurate quality information from all the agencies and present it in a user-friendly and

⁷ See UNECE Recommendation No. 4: National Trade Facilitation Bodies, ECE/TRADE/425, (2015). An NTFC is also an integral part of the World Trade Organization's Free Trade Agreement, 2017, Article 23.

informative way. This would result in a poor public impression of the usefulness of the website.

43. Information may be kept by the agencies in an organized format (e.g. databases, folders, lists, etc.) or it may be stored haphazardly, or it may simply be knowledge residing with key individuals. The task of identifying and structuring this information may therefore prove to be challenging.

44. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, agencies may be unwilling or unaccustomed to share information or they may simply find it difficult to source it. It is therefore important that the Lead Agency should have the necessary authority to collect the information and that appropriate instructions are given to all the Focal Points within the agencies who will be tasked with assisting the Implementation Team. Therefore, it is crucial to develop processes and procedures for the ongoing inter-agency collaboration before the operational phase of TIP to ensure the published information stays relevant and up-to-date. There is a risk that, without proper institutional arrangements to ensure a proactive supply of information from the agencies to the TIP Management Team, the flow of information will dry up and may result in a confusing mix of obsolete and current information.

45. Much will also depend on the skill and experience of the Implementation Team members to scout for information and extract the required knowledge from their counterparts. Specific training may be required to build the team's capacity in this respect.

46. The ongoing operation of a TIP will incur costs for system maintenance, equipment, cyber/data security, facilities and personnel for the TIP Management Team. The operation and ongoing success of the TIP would be put at risk if adequate funding arrangements are not put in place.

47. The sections below address the risks above and make recommendations as to how to mitigate them.

4. Completeness and accuracy of information

48. As mentioned above, one of the key success factors of a TIP is that the public must have confidence in the fact that the information published is complete, accurate, and up-to-date. It is therefore important to attempt to measure the degree to which this is the case while striving to achieve the highest possible level of accuracy. There may be some information which becomes available progressively. This should be made as transparent as possible to the user community.

49. In the initial phase of its implementation, while the TIP is being populated with information from the participating agencies and organizations, it would be very useful for all users to have an indication of which parts are completed and available and which parts are still under construction. This could be complemented by a general indicator which expresses the overall degree of completeness.

50. Throughout the operation of the TIP, the Lead Agency should continuously measure whether the information is up-to-date. Should issues be reported that operational practices differ from the information provided on the TIP, this should be taken into account and either be aligned with the law and procedures, or the TIP should be updated where required. The degree of accuracy and up-to-dateness of information should be expressed in the number of cases handled and solved within a given period.

51. The following could also be measurements of the degree of accuracy of the TIP:

- A measure of the degree of involvement of each of the participating government agencies and organisations. This could use indicators such as full and complete

information published on the TIP, partial information published on TIP, contribution under preparation;

- An indicator of the degree of information fully available online, partially available online or only available in paper format; and
- An indicator of the availability and responsiveness of contact points for obtaining further information (details, special cases, etc.).

5. User-centric design and content

52. The design of a TIP should be such that information is presented from a user's perspective. This recommendation has identified the following best practices:

- Information on procedures must be presented or segmented by type of goods.
- Information must be easy to find from the perspective of a variety of user types.
- Information on trade procedures and regulations must be presented in a language that is easy for first-time traders with no prior knowledge to understand.
- Information must be arranged in a standardized and simple way.
- Information must be relevant and reduced to the minimum necessary for the trader to complete the sequence of steps in the various processes.

53. The TIP must be easy to manage so that all content can be easily integrated and updated through a Content Management System (CMS) without the need for Information Technology (IT) specialists' intervention.

54. The look and feel of the public interfaces should be regularly updated to remain inviting and relevant.

6. Training

55. Training will be required for members of the Implementation Team and, subsequently, the TIP Management Team. The Lead Agency should therefore factor into the implementation plan training courses targeted to the specific training needs of the personnel selected. Training should target the following groups:

- Management staff: These are individuals in charge of the operation of the TIP and with a responsibility for reporting to the governing body. Training should focus on building the skills required to provide management oversight of the implementation and operation of the TIP.
- Technical (IT) staff (e.g. Webmaster, who will support the system): Training will involve general good practice IT management methods as well as specific training dependent on the technology model adopted.
- Content management personnel: Training should be on the policies and procedures for collecting and publishing information.
- Business analysts: A substantial part of the TIP content will relate to procedures that need to be analysed in order to be explained to the public in an easy-to-understand format. Some training in basic business process analysis skills would be desirable for personnel tasked with sourcing such information.
- Focal points and other key personnel within the agencies: Training will focus on the procedures for exchanging information and validating the accuracy of the information once it is published.

- Traders and other potential users of the TIP: Training will focus on creating awareness of the TIP functions and how to use them in order to find information.

7. Publicity and dissemination

56. For a TIP to deliver its benefits at scale, it is essential for the business community to be aware of its existence and how it will help them in their trading activities. This requires implementation of an effective, multi-channel publicity plan, which identifies audience-appropriate channels of communication and activities, including dissemination efforts by participating agencies and bodies using their own habitual channels of communication. The goal of the publicity plan is to raise awareness about the benefits of the portal and to encourage its use by the business community.

57. Potential channels of communication may include billboards, a pre-launch website, newsletters, email campaigns, videos, online articles, branded marketing materials, fliers to be distributed to various government locations, press releases, radio or television interviews, etc. Social media, including paid digital advertising, is also an effective channel of communication.

58. As much as possible, different initiatives should be targeted and tailored to specific audiences such as importers, exporters, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), large traders, specific sectoral organizations, brokers as well as other government agencies as they will also be users of the TIP. An effective way of reaching out to targeted segments of the trade community is through workshops or seminars tailored to the needs of the specific audience, especially when disseminating knowledge to remote provinces or rural areas.

59. While the publicity effort will necessarily be more intense in the period leading up to the launch of the TIP, it is important that publicity should be sustained through periodic initiatives throughout operation of the TIP in order to keep awareness alive and attract new audiences.

60. Experience has shown, through website usage analytical tools, that often the majority of hits to a website derive from referrals from other websites—in other words, from users clicking on links on these websites or selecting embedded content from the TIP on the websites of other agencies. It is therefore recommended that the Lead Agency encourage as many organizations as possible to include a link to their TIP on their existing websites. These could be other ministries or agencies, sectoral organizations, trade bodies, the trade pages of foreign embassy websites or of the country's embassies abroad, etc.

61. Likewise, search engine optimization techniques should be taken into consideration and appropriate tags should be used to show up in search engines.

8. Financing model

62. The operational costs of running a TIP will involve the cost of hosting the website, software maintenance and support, maintaining and, from time to time, renewing the necessary equipment and the cost of premises and the personnel dedicated to supporting it. It is critical to the success of a TIP that these costs be adequately funded. The Lead Agency may consider whether they should be met through their budget or whether they could be recovered by some other means.

63. In the spirit of transparency and trade facilitation, it is the government's obligation to make regulatory information freely available to the public. It is therefore difficult to see how a financing model, such as a subscription-only service could be built around providing information which should be freely available without discrimination in the public domain. Furthermore, unlike the Single Window, the TIP would not provide a transactional service

where a transaction fee could be justified by the added value that results from a simplified electronic process.

64. However, if recovering costs is imperative, the Lead Agency may consider options such as levying a moderate fee for certain value-added services. These could be additional subscription-only services such as providing targeted alerts by email or SMS about specific topics of interest to a subscriber or the ability to download publications which would otherwise need to be purchased. Another possibility is to make advertising space available on the website, although this would run the risk of diminishing the authoritative nature of the website as it may be seen to promote specific commercial interests.

65. In a situation where the TIP and the Single Window are seen as closely integrated (e.g. sharing infrastructure, management structure, etc.) it would be conceivable to cover the operating costs of the TIP through a minor adjustment to Single Window transaction fees.

66. When evaluating these options, the governing body and the Lead Agency should weigh the benefit of collecting fees against national policy decisions to facilitate trade and increase transparency, as well as the broad benefits that would derive as a result of increased use of the website, for example, cost savings in disseminating information, increased compliance, less time spent dealing with enquiries and reduced face-to-face interaction to handle queries or resolve conflicts.

9. Ongoing institutional arrangements and maintenance

67. The long-term success of a TIP will ultimately depend on the degree of usage to which it is used by traders and the public. This will be greater if the TIP is seen to be always accurate and up-to-date with timely information. In order for the content of the website to be kept up-to-date it will be necessary to have the necessary mechanisms in place for new information to continually flow from all the stakeholders to the Lead Agency's TIP Management Team. A close watch should be maintained on information which may become obsolete and that should therefore be removed or replaced.

68. To this end, the institutional structure put in place for the initial implementation of the TIP should continue to operate. The governing body (e.g. Steering Committee) should continue to provide regular oversight in the operation of the TIP. The Lead Agency should provide the governing body with regular updates about the usage and the usefulness of the TIP so that appropriate action may be taken if necessary (see section F on measuring success).

69. Typically, the Lead Agency that was in charge of implementation would continue, as part of its mandate, to take responsibility for operating the TIP on an ongoing basis. However, it is also conceivable that, depending on specific circumstances of the country, a different organization may be better suited to take on responsibility for ongoing operations. In any case, the operating entity should ensure that the operation is adequately funded to cover the operational costs (see section E.8 on financing models) and that it has the required in-house skills and capacity.

70. The instruments put in place to provide a basis of agreement for exchanging information between stakeholders would continue to have effect after the initial implementation phases and the practical mechanisms for information exchange should then become part of normal day-to-day activities.

F. Measuring success

71. The purpose of a TIP is to provide up-to-date trade-related information as part of the efforts towards greater transparency and predictability. It is therefore desirable to measure, in some way, the degree to which transparent access to accurate and up-to-date trade-related

information contributes to the facilitation of trade. This, however, presents some challenges. Measuring the effectiveness of trade facilitation in terms of the direct and indirect savings to trade in transaction costs is, in itself, a notoriously complex endeavour. Transparency is only one of many aspects that could contribute to trade facilitation and publishing regulations and information on a portal is itself only a part of transparency. How those regulations are interpreted or applied in practice is also a factor. It is therefore very challenging to identify any key indicators that could specifically measure the contribution that a TIP makes to trade facilitation.

72. Nonetheless, a judgement as to the effectiveness of a TIP could, to some extent, be formed by gauging the perception of traders and the wider business community. Targeted surveys, using online tools or face-to-face interviews, could be carried out before the introduction of a TIP to establish a baseline in respect of the degree of difficulty traders encounter in obtaining accurate information and the extent to which this impacts their business. Repeating the surveys periodically after the introduction of the TIP and comparing the results with the baseline could provide a statistical model from which satisfaction trends can be identified. Based on the pre and post analysis, anecdotal cases may also be developed using key-informant interviews. Samples for such interviews may be selected from users representing different groups, for example, SMEs, women traders, large enterprises and others.

73. Standard website analytics tools can also be used to extract statistical trends related to the usage of the TIP such as number of hits, time spent on specific pages, number of new or returning visitors, bounce rate, geographic spread, etc. While these indicators cannot provide a direct measurement of facilitation, they can, nonetheless, point to usage trends as an indicator of the increased reliance by the public on the website as a source of information.

74. Through analytical tools or some specific facility, it may be possible to measure how long it takes, on average, to find the information needed and the degree of success (in percentage terms) in finding it, for example by asking a question at the end of a session.

75. The number of queries submitted via the website and feedback about the usefulness of the replies could be analysed against a benchmark of the number of queries handled by an agency prior to the introduction of the website, if such information is available.

76. Another indicator could be the length of time it takes to complete specific transactions which normally attract enquiries or are known to give rise to involuntary non-compliance. If this time decreases after the introduction of the TIP, it may be an indication that these transactions require less explanation or are less likely to be subject to mistakes.

77. The simplification and harmonization of procedures and of the legal framework affecting trade resulting from the use of TIP can be another important indicator of success. Indeed, the continuous and effective use of the TIP by the government and economic operators should reveal both the efficiency, redundancies or bottlenecks in existing procedures for completing various documentary obligations and which could lead to efforts to simplify and harmonize protocols and procedures. The TIP Management Team and/or an appointed multi-stakeholder group should support this process by monitoring the regulatory environment and analysing and submitting recommendations for further trade facilitation harmonization and simplification.

78. While it may be difficult, if not impossible, to put a percentage value on the degree of facilitation directly attributable to the introduction of a TIP, ultimately, the key measure of trade facilitation is the perception of the trade community. Therefore, the agency in charge of the TIP should endeavour to sound out public opinion in whichever possible way, for example, by holding regular seminars or training workshops on how to make best use of the website and to use these opportunities to continuously sound out the opinion of the public.

79. Experience has shown that major projects benefit significantly from a Post Implementation Review (PIR). A formal review allows the implementation to be objectively analysed and to cover important issues such as funding, resource management, whether the defined objectives were met and, perhaps most importantly, to learn lessons for any similar future projects. The PIR should record successes, detail the unforeseen problems encountered with the solutions to overcome them, note any mistakes or failures and offer options to avoid the recurrence of such errors or oversights.

G. Trade Information Portal and the Single Window

80. The concepts of TIP and Single Window are tightly connected. Both are facilities aimed at facilitating trade by providing a single access point to traders and the public. However, in the case of the TIP, the single access point is to facilitate discovery of information; whereas, in the case of the Single Window, the single access point is to enable traders to carry out actual transactions electronically with government agencies, as recommended by UNECE Recommendation No. 33, which is the generally accepted definition of Single Window.

81. Nonetheless, both have a common basis in that the regulations, procedural instructions and compliance rules that are discoverable on a TIP are also the basis for the business rules that drive the processing of a Single Window and that must be in conformance with the law. Therefore, at a minimum, a TIP and a Single Window should be synchronized to ensure that the operations of Single Window correspond to what is published on the TIP, thus lending transparency to the operation of Single Window.

82. Where possible, synchronization may be achieved through the architecture and design of the two systems.

83. Failing such a tightly coupled integration, it will be necessary to create institutional mechanisms for ensuring that the information in the TIP is aligned with the business rules of Single Window. Both TIP and Single Window require a governance structure that allows for inter-agency collaboration and collective decision-making. It would therefore be beneficial, if possible, to appoint a single body (e.g. a Steering Committee) to be tasked with policy and oversight in relation to both TIP and Single Window.

84. In countries where the circumstances determine that a TIP is implemented before the Single Window, there will be an opportunity to establish the institutional structures and mechanisms for collaboration between agencies which can subsequently be leveraged to step up to the more challenging level of collective decision-making required by the Single Window. Furthermore, with adequate foresight and planning, much of the work required to build a TIP, such as the business process analysis and legal research, can subsequently be utilized to provide the legal basis and functional design of the Single Window.

H. Interoperability

85. When designing a TIP, issues of interoperability with other systems, such as a Customs tariff database or regional repositories mentioned below, should be factored into the design of the software if required. Also, information such as the trade statistics mentioned below or subsets of the TIP core information such as step-by-step procedures may be available from existing national or international websites through Application Programming Interface (API) or other integration methods. An API is a published format for a request for information to be submitted to a system and for that system to respond by returning the data requested. While the format of the API will necessarily vary from system to system, it is recommended that the design of the TIP include facilities for importing or exporting data via

APIs using the most common messaging standards, such as XML or JSON. UN/CEFACT proposes an international standard for this purpose and suggests to align or directly use this standard for such electronic data exchanges between agencies or between systems.

I. Possible evolutions of a Trade Information Portal

86. In addition to its basic purpose of publishing trade-related information, a TIP may be expanded in scope to provide various other features which may fulfil other trade policy objectives.

1. Additional information

87. Although the main purpose of a TIP is to publish trade-related regulatory information, it can also be used to provide, without limitations of scope, any other information which may pertain to trade or that is deemed to be useful to the target audience. Such information may include the following:

- News or announcements related to trade;
- Useful information such as addresses and contact details of various agencies' offices or border stations;
- Links to other national or international organizations' websites;
- Trade statistics (these may be derived from national or international sources and may be available via APIs or may be generated via the Single Window where available);
- Information about movement of peoples (e.g. lorry drivers, workforce);
- Links to national SPS measures, technical barriers to trade (TBT) and other trade-related enquiry points; and
- General plain-language pages on any topic of relevance.

88. It would also be desirable for a TIP to have multi-language capabilities in order to publish the content in the local language as well as one or more additional languages for the benefit of international users.

2. Market access

89. A TIP may be the natural place to provide information about trading with other countries, at least for the most common trading partners, in order to facilitate or promote exports to these countries. Such information may include tariffs and instructions on how to navigate the most encountered regulatory requirements (documentation, standards, inspections, etc.) to access this other market, especially those requirements seen as constituting a barrier to entry.

90. If a country is a party to one or more FTAs with other countries, the TIP could be used to provide easy-to-follow instructions to exporters and importers on how to take advantage of preferential tariff rates and other facilitation measures and to assist them with determining whether the goods they intend to import or export qualify for preferential treatment under the FTA rules of origin.

91. Such information may be readily available through direct links to TIPs of other countries or similar websites, or websites specifically dedicated to the FTA (see section H on interoperability).

3. Trade in services

92. A TIP may be considered a suitable vehicle for publishing regulatory information, not only for trade in goods but also for trade in services. When providing services across borders, provisions may apply which are stipulated in legislation and give rise to measures which may be generally applicable to all categories of services or may be specific to a particular type of service.

93. The TIP may be designed to allow users to discover what measures apply to each type of service and, similar to trade in goods, what the step-by-step procedures are for complying with these regulatory requirements.

94. As for trade in goods, preferential treatment may be available for trade in services in countries that are party to an FTA. The TIP could provide such information through the same facilities described in section I.2 on market access.

4. Regional context

95. Many countries belong to regional associations of countries aimed at fostering socio-economic cooperation and integration of its members. These associations usually also embrace, to different degrees, facilitating trade and the cross-border movement of goods and people as part of their mission. Some of these associations may require members to contribute trade-related information to a regional TIP or Repository. This information may be intended to facilitate market access for traders in the member states, but it could also be used for analytical purposes in order to compare and potentially streamline or harmonize various non-tariff measures or procedures.

96. If there is a requirement for a country wishing to develop a TIP to also contribute to a regional repository or portal, this should be borne in mind at the design stage to ensure that the required information may be provided to the regional facility in the required format and via the required method. This may be achieved through data exchange or via a suitable link (see section H on interoperability).
