



United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
Seminar report

Submitted by: Mario Apostolov
Division/Section: Economic Cooperation and Trade Division

Date: 5/10/2020

Seminar title, location and dates: UNECE-GIZ technical cooperation seminar / “Second Regional Meeting of National Trade Facilitation Committees in Central Asia» for the SPECA countries, held online 3-4 Nov. 2020.

Distribution:
ECE Trade Division,
TCU, OES

Type of mission:

- Capacity-building (total no. of participants/ no. of female participants): 94 / 32 women. This was a two-day webinar, held on Webex parallel in English and Russian with presentations shown in the two languages and simultaneous translation.
- Field project under the UNDA COVID-19 response project to support the implementation of the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy.
- Advisory services
- Other (e.g. conference, meeting, consultation): (total no. of participants/ no. of female participants): second meeting of NTFCs in Central Asia

Colleagues from UNECE: Elisabeth Tuerk, Mijidgombo Oyunjargal, Grant Akopyan

Beneficiary countries: the SPECA participating countries: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

Objective(s) of the seminar: Organize with GIZ a meeting of NTFCs of four Central Asian countries (KZ, KG, TM and UZ) plus the other SPECA countries: AF, AZ, and TM, on 3-4 November 2020 online (instead of physically in Tashkent or Dushanbe), due to the COVID-19 pandemics, to advance trade facilitation in the SPECA subregion, combined with a capacity-building event. Concrete objectives: • exchange experiences on progress in the implementation of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) and trade facilitation in general; • agree on a sustainable mechanism for cooperation between the NTFCs in the subregion; • discuss the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on cross-border trade; • build awareness and capacity on technical issues in trade facilitation. This seminar is in the work plan of the Regional Adviser, the roadmap to implement the SPECA TF Strategy and the UNDA COVID-19 response project. GIZ expressed willingness to cooperate for the online event.

Results of the seminar:

Seminar successfully organized as an interactive event using two channels of WEBEX in English and Russian with English-Russian interpretation from 3 to 4 November 2020. For a second time (after the July 2020 seminar), the result was an excellent seminar with two channels, presentations in the two languages, simultaneous translation: quite an exploit made possible by the cooperation of Grant Akopyan, Mijidgombo Oyunjargal and Mario Apostolov!

All SPECA countries actively participated. Seminar co-organized between UNECE and GIZ, joined by OSCE and UNCTAD.

The seminar advanced the agenda for trade facilitation in the SPECA region (COVID-19 is not a reason to stop trade facilitation). It advanced the idea of establishing a formalized regional network of NTFCs. GIZ sent a letter of intent to the four countries participating in their projects (KZ, KG, TJ, UZ) to form such a network. The other SPECA countries actively participated. The capacity-building part covered the following issues: how to organize a regional NTFC network; what response to the COVID-19 pandemic the countries could prepare in trade facilitation (presentations and discussion of the UNDA COVID-19 response project); transit policy and instruments (including eTIR)

Seminar highlights: (work accomplished; observations and conclusions; implications for UNECE):

- (1) UNECE provided the platform for the seminar simultaneously in two languages using the Cisco WebEx Meetings software. It not only worked for a second time, it proved certain advantages: making presentations in the two languages.
- (2) All SPECA countries (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) participated. GIZ focused on their four project countries (KZ, KG, TJ, and UZ), but we agreed and invited as well the other SPECA countries: AF, AZ, and TM. Participants were from the public and private sectors. International organizations and developments partners, such as the OSCE and UNCTAD took place.
- (3) The first session was an overview of the experience of the NTFCs in KZ, KG, TJ and UZ, and their willingness to join a regional network.
- (4) Mario Apostolov reported on activities in implementing the regional SPECA TF Strategy and the experience of other regions (Southeastern Europe) in building functional regional sets of NTFCs. OSCE presented a survey of the NTFCs in Central Asia: what were their needs and concerns. Larisa Kislyakova, TJ expert, reported on the practical experience and problems with the exportation of sample products across the region. Birgit Viohl (GIZ expert) presented a concept of a regional set of NTFCs in Central Asia.
- (5) Session III: on the impact of COVID-19. Mario Apostolov presented the results and further plans of the UNDA COVID-19 response project, notably the package of standards for digital multimodal transport data and document exchange (and invited countries to cooperate on pilot projects and to use the standards whenever they try digital solutions), as well as the recommendations of the study on NTMs in the SPECA region. Larisa Kislyakova (TJ expert) reported on the findings of the study on the need for harmonization of border-crossing procedures under the COVID-19 project. Birgit Viohl (GIZ expert) presented the UNECE Guide for NTFCs on how to use the UN/CEFACT TF standards. The participants requested distribution for comments of: the paper on harmonizing border-crossing procedures (AZ and UZ) and the paper on NTMs (UZ). GIZ and ECE will publish the drafts.

- (6) A session on transit incorporated presentations from UNECE (Konstantinos Alexopoulos); IRU (Tatiana Rey-Bellet); and UNCTAD (Poul Hansen). Poul gave a lecture on the concepts and sensitive issues in transit. Even if the plan was to invite national transit coordinators (TFA art.11.17) from the countries to speak and establish cooperation, none of the countries had included a transit coordinator among the participants. Some countries have not yet nominated transit coordinators.
- (7) Discussions took place on streamlining documentary procedures, using international trade facilitation standards, developing further the enabling environment for digitalization of documents and procedures. Speakers and participants recognized that electronic exchange of trade and transport information, harmonized with international (UN/CEFACT) standards, has become a necessity under the COVID-19 emergency, with the need to decrease physical person-to-person interaction in supply chains.
- (8) The participants exchanged best practice experiences. They expressed interest in the work under the UNECE segment on digitalization of trade and transport data sharing under the UNDA COVID-19 response in connectivity project, following UN/CEFACT standards.

Follow-up action(s) required (what, when, by whom):

1. Upload the materials from the seminar on the web site.
2. Distribute the studies on harmonizing border-crossing procedures and NTMs to the countries for their comments and input. Make these papers working papers of the SPECA WG on Trade. Encourage international development partners and organizations to support this work.
3. Continue organizing events for the NTFC network in the SPECA subregion (Dec. 2020).