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Reports of rapporteurs

United Nations for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business Regional Rapporteur Reports

Submitted by the secretariat

Summary

This report aims to update the Plenary on the activities of the Regional Rapporteurs to United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) since their last reports. It provides an overview of meetings that took place in the respective regions and key projects that are of pertinence to UN/CEFACT.

Document ECE/TRADE/C/CEFACT/2021/5 is submitted by the secretariat to the twenty-seventh session of the Plenary for noting.

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1.   In 2019, the UN/CEFACT Plenary session elected three Regional Rapporteurs (Plenary Decision 19-02): Ms. Urachada Ketpromas UN/CEFACT Regional Rapporteur for Asia-Pacific, Mr. Mor Talla Diop as UN/CEFACT Regional Rapporteur for Sub-Saharan Africa and Mr. Jalal Benhayoun as the UN/CEFACT Regional Rapporteur for the Middle East and Northern Africa.

2.   The *Consolidated United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) Mandate and Terms of Reference* (ECE/TRADE/C/CEFACT/2017/15) outlines the role of the Regional Rapporteur in paragraphs 82 – 85.

3.   The mandate of Regional Rapporteurs shall be carried out, wherever possible, in coordination with the UN/CEFACT Bureau, Heads of Delegation to UN/CEFACT from the region, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) secretariat and other Regional Commissions of the United Nations.

4.   Within their defined region, the Rapporteurs shall:

- Promote UN/CEFACT's interests and activities among governments, intergovernmental organizations, relevant trade associations and business and trade facilitation organizations, with the assistance of the UNECE secretariat, which is responsible for official communications;

- Encourage the participation of experts in UN/CEFACT's work programme and stimulate the implementation of UN/CEFACT's standards, recommendations and other deliverables; and

- Coordinate UN/CEFACT's activities in the region.

5.   All Regional Rapporteurs shall present a report at each UN/CEFACT Plenary. They may raise issues directly with the UN/CEFACT Bureau and have an open invitation to attend the Bureau meetings in a consultative capacity.

6.   This document consolidates the reports that were received in January 2021 for the twenty-seventh Plenary. Annex I presents the report of the Rapporteur for Sub-Saharan Africa. Annex II presents the report of the Rapporteur for Asia and the Pacific. No report was received for the Middle East and Northern Africa region.

Annex I: Report of Rapporteur for Sub-Saharan Africa

I. Introduction

1. Considering the pandemic crisis, the trade facilitation developments in the sub-Saharan region have not been very active from February to November 2020. Most activities have been cancelled.

2. Below are the activities that have a direct link to deliverables of the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT), notably *Recommendation No. 4: National Trade Facilitation Bodies; Recommendation No. 33 on Establishing a Single Window; Recommendation No. 34: Data Simplification and Standardization for International Trade; Recommendation No. 35: Establishing a Legal Framework for International Trade Single Window; and Recommendation No. 36: Single Window Interoperability.*

II. African Alliance for Electronic Commerce

3. The African Alliance for Electronic Commerce (AAEC) organized a webinar entitled "Single window experience and emerging opportunities during and post COVID-19" on 14 December 2020. This event allowed for the sharing of experiences between all AAEC member countries on the effect of the pandemic and the changes in trade facilitation processes that were needed to maintain small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) activities.

4. This webinar provided an opportunity for members of the AAEC and beyond to share experiences, methods and issues. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges that Single Window mechanisms must face (e.g. prepare for negotiations on e-commerce transactions as these have risen sharply, take advantage of the acceleration of digitalization caused by the pandemic, create performance measurement tools for the effectiveness of digital measures). Single Window mechanisms have been organized to support long-term trade facilitation even in the face of such a pandemic.

5. This event was attended by the members of the AAEC as well as experts from the World Trade Organization, the World Customs Organization, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa through its African Centre for Trade Policies (ATPC), the UNECE and UN/CEFACT.

III. Electronic certificate of origin implementation in West African Economic and Monetary Union

6. Within the framework of the initiatives of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) Commission to increase the level of intra-community trade and to reduce barriers to trade in the subregion, a project has been initiated to dematerialize the WAEMU certificate of origin used for trade in products originating from within the Union. This project, which is part of the implementation of the WAEMU regional trade facilitation programme (PRFE), is a trade facilitation step towards the dematerialization of customs and trade documents.

7. In March 2019, the WAEMU Commission signed a grant agreement with the AAEC on the project to dematerialize the WAEMU certificate of origin between Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire and extend it to the six other Member States of the Union. The AAEC benefited from financial support through the African Trade Fund (AfTra) of the African Development Bank (AfDB). This AfDB project provides for the establishment of Trade Information Portals and

platforms for the exchange of electronic data and documents between African countries. The WAEMU Commission and the AAEC have decided to extend their agreement to make more trade facilitation tools available to countries that can impact trade between them.

8.   A joint WAEMU-AAEC video conference was organized on 3 November 2020 to discuss the project to dematerialize the certificate of origin in the WAEMU zone. This conference was jointly chaired by the President of the Executive Committee of the AAEC and by a WAEMU Commissioner of the Department of Regional Markets, Trade, Competition and Cooperation.

9.   To accelerate the implementation of the certificate of origin dematerialization project and to revitalize the partnership between the two organizations, various recommendations were issued:

   (a) Define, by mutual agreement with WAEMU, a semi-annual or annual calendar of activities in perfect synergy with the AfDB project.

   (b) Adopt a subregional approach including all WAEMU Member States involved in the AfDB project to strengthen their capacity and resolve differences between them.

   (c) Organize, as soon as possible, a regional videoconference workshop to present the various platforms and concrete proposals, and at the same time compile an inventory of the existing national commercial information portals in the WAEMU area.

   (d) Set a date for the tripartite launch of the project (AAEC, AfDB, WAEMU) to involve the authorities of these institutions.

   (e) Transmit the functional specifications of the AfDB project to WAEMU so that the technical departments involved in the project, including trade, customs, transport and the private sector, can be better integrated.

IV. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa through its African Centre for Trade Policies

10.   A videoconference was organized between the ATPC and the AAEC on 22 October 2020. The objective of this meeting was to obtain the opinions and advice of ATPC prior to submission of the documents prepared by the Technical Committee before the validation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), scheduled for January 2021. These documents include the following:

   • E-Trade Strategy for the AfCFTA; and

   • Single Window Evaluation Guidelines.

V. African performance institute webinar on e-health passport

11.   This webinar was organized on 27 August 2020 to debate the future of intra-African mobility and the mobility of African nationals in other regions of the world. As the COVID-19 pandemic evolves, the African continent should be able to build a digital solution to nurture trustworthiness between African countries and with other countries of the world to ensure a rapid return to normal in terms of people's mobility. This webinar intended to do the following:

   • Determine how the complexity of the current situation is impacting the mobility of people;

   • Determine the harm to business caused by mobility restrictions; and

• Present arguments for the creation of an African digital solution to promote a return to normal mobility.

VI. African Continental Free Trade Area implementation

12.   The AfCFTA Secretariat is now operational in Accra, Ghana. Important projects have been identified, among which are the implementation of the exchange of electronic documents. The Secretariat is currently pushing to set up instruments to enable free trade activities in Africa. The Regional Rapporteur will contribute as an expert to ensure that instruments align with UN/CEFACT standards and recommendations as much as possible.

Annex II: Report of Rapporteur for Asia and the Pacific

I. Introduction

1. This is the report of the Rapporteur for Asia and the Pacific, covering several important sessions on trade facilitation in the region since the previous Rapporteur report.

2. The main focus in the Asia-Pacific region is to ensure that data communication occurs smoothly, cost-effectively and safely between trading partners and related stakeholders, especially given the growth of global supply chains utilizing e-business. There are many challenges in creating and developing the ICT infrastructures and networks that play an important role in governing high-level, transparent, global supply/value chains. The countries and regional bodies in the Asia-Pacific region continue their efforts to realize the potential of e-business and trade facilitation for regional development.

II. Activities conducted by the Asia Pacific Council for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (AFACT)

3. AFACT is positioned to stimulate, improve and promote the ability of business, trade and administrative organizations in the Asia-Pacific region to exchange products and relevant services effectively through the use of international standards and best practices—especially those developed and promoted by UN/CEFACT. Most of the active members of AFACT have continued to pursue joint activities, of benefit to all member countries, over the last year.

4. All members look forward to facilitating international trade transactions and contributing to the growth of e-commerce in a non-political environment.

5. A midterm meeting in the first half of the year and a plenary in the latter half of the year are held annually. All members are welcome to attend, share experiences and knowledge and identify key strategic issues. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 meeting of the AFACT Steering Committee was held online. The 2021 meeting will take place in Malaysia if the pandemic situation permits. The following meetings were held since the last report:

- The 37th Midterm meeting was held on 22-24 May 2019, Bangkok, Thailand;

- The 37th AFACT Plenary meeting and eAsia Awards were held on 18-21 November 2019, Bangkok, Thailand, and

- The 38th AFACT Steering Committee was held on 9 December 2020, virtual.

6. The Rapporteur provided a report on the activities of UN/CEFACT at the AFACT Plenary meeting which detailed the Forums, the conferences, and UN/CEFACT projects. Experts who participated in the relevant UN/CEFACT working groups reported in detail to the AFACT working groups committees.

7. The activities of the UN/CEFACT Travel and Tourism Domain were reported to the AFACT Travel, Tourism and Leisure (TT&L) Working Group in order to provide support based on the needs of the region and to discuss some local related issues to be solved by the working group. This focused on the following working items:

- Business Standards for Sustainable Tourism; and

- Experience Programs Technical Artefacts.

8. The AFACT Cross-Border E-Commerce (eCom) Working Group is discussing customs procedures and documents related to goods imported via cross-border e-commerce

channels in order to levy import duties and/or taxes on goods delivery based on the transactions of a cross-border e-marketplace platform.

9.   The eASIA Awards ceremony is carried out every two years at the same time as the annual AFACT Plenary. It is administrated by the relevant AFACT host member. The event promotes the achievements of AFACT member countries/economies in the development of trade facilitation, electronic business policies and practices, and initiatives for bridging the digital divide in the Asia-Pacific region. The purpose of the eASIA Awards is to recognize the significant efforts made within the AFACT community and to encourage the exchange of best practices. The event also intends to develop mutual understanding and experience sharing between member countries/economies by displaying the shortlisted projects in the eASIA Awards Exhibition.

10.   The Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Forum (APTFF) Trade Facilitation Innovation Award 2019-2020 was given to three winners for innovative digital and sustainable trade facilitation implementation cases. Winners demonstrated ways to simplify and streamline international trade processes; use of digital means and channels for effective and efficient trade facilitation measures; and strong linkages with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

11.   During the 37th AFACT Plenary meeting, the Pan-Asian E-Commerce Alliance (PAA) reported that it acts as a bridge to link the private and public sectors both domestically and internationally. The PAA reported that it sees the benefit of using blockchain technology for interoperability and cross-border trade facilitation to digitalize document verification in trade (using a cloud platform) and to reduce the manual transmitting of paper between countries. PAA members plan to report on this progress in a UN/CEFACT meeting in 2021.

- Case study: A free trade agreement in which PDF versions of documents between members using blockchain technology and two-way communication between the requester and approver. The PAA has further plans to utilize blockchain technology to facilitate trade along these lines.

12.   The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region officially launched live operations of the regional ASEAN Single Window (ASW) on 1 January 2018. The use of exchanged electronic data to grant preferential tariff duty has marked a new key milestone for the ASW initiative.

- Case study: The Thai Government is promoting a collaboration between the public and private sectors to develop Thailand's National Digital Trade Platform (NDTP) to facilitate export and import procedures. It is also focused on the development of their national Single Window (NSW), which already links data among 37 state agencies and 18 banks. The NSW is to be linked to the NDTP and the ASEAN Single Window.

III.   Collaboration with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

13.   Member States of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) developed the "Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific" which was open for signature to ESCAP member States on 1 October 2016. As of November 2020, China is now a party to this agreement. China ratified the agreement on 22 November 2020, following Azerbaijan (acceded in March 2018), the Philippines (acceded in December 2019), Islamic Republic of Iran (ratified in May 2020) and Bangladesh (ratified in October 2020). This inclusive and enabling treaty will enter into force on 20 February 2021.

14. All eligible countries are encouraged to join to ensure implementation of the Agreement, which effectively builds upon the large number of bilateral and (sub)regional paperless trade initiatives, ensuring greater harmonization and interoperability between systems and promoting adoption of international standards. The Agreement has the potential to cut trade costs by 25 per cent and make contactless trade a reality where supply chains are resilient, even in times of pandemic such as COVID-19.

15. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), in collaboration with the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL), have developed an online platform to facilitate cross-border paperless trade readiness self-assessments. The interactive guide is designed to support countries to conduct self-assessments of legal and technical readiness on cross-border paperless trade. The new tool is relevant to all countries globally, as it can support the implementation of not only the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-Border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific, but also the full digital implementation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA).

16. ESCAP events of relevance include the following:

- The 7th meeting of the Legal and Technical Working Groups on Cross-border Paperless Trade Facilitation, held on 14 January 2020;

- The 8th meeting of the Legal and Technical Working Groups on Cross-border Paperless Trade Facilitation, held on 14 October 2020;

- The Expert Group meeting on Trade Facilitation in Times of Crisis and Epidemic, held on 29-30 July 2020;

- The 9th Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Forum (APTFF) under the theme "Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation for Regional Prosperity", held on 17-19 September 2019 in New Delhi;

- The 37th AFACT Plenary meeting, held on 18-21 November 2019, in Bangkok, Thailand; and

- The 6th meeting of the Interim Intergovernmental Steering Group on Cross-Border Paperless Trade Facilitation was held at the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok, Thailand on 25-26 January 2021 as a hybrid meeting.

IV. Other

17. According to the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) database, as of 2021, 30 WTO Members in Asia and the Pacific have ratified the agreement. Vanuatu was ratified on 6 May 2020 and became the 30th country in the Asia-Pacific region to ratify the agreement.