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Matters arising since the twenty-seventh session

Report from Economic Commission for Europe Regional Adviser

Submitted by the secretariat

Summary

This is the report of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Regional Adviser for Trade. The Regional Adviser participates in national capacity-building activities and the implementation of technical cooperation projects. His activities facilitate the sharing of experience and good practices among the ECE membership. This document provides a report of his activities since the twenty-seventh session.

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I. Introduction

1. The Regional Adviser's work is based on the mandate of the Economic Cooperation and Trade Division (ECTD) of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), including the mandate of the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) to set standards for trade facilitation and e-business. The Regional Adviser supports the seventeen ECE programme countries in strengthening their trade capacity by implementing UN/CEFACT standards and trade facilitation recommendations. More broadly, this work aims to improve cooperation and integration in the ECE region and to support achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

2. In 2021–2022, the Regional Adviser supported countries in three focus areas related to UN/CEFACT:

- **Implementing the World Trade Organization (WTO) Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA):** Six transition economies received assistance in areas where ECE and UN/CEFACT have a comparative advantage. Among other results, this led to improvements in the countries' notifications to WTO and, more broadly, to the achievement of SDG 17.10¹.
- **Supporting countries participating in the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA)**²: Specifically, this supported implementing the Ashgabat Initiative on Reducing Barriers to Trade and Transport using United Nations legal instruments, norms, standards and recommendations while bolstering connectivity in the SPECA region³; the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy⁴; the SPECA Principles of Sustainable Trade⁵, and to limiting the negative effects of non-tariff barriers to trade in times of pandemic.
- **Implementing UN/CEFACT semantic standards and reference data models:** These activities were aimed at limiting the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on connectivity, trade, and transport. Thirteen transition economies received assistance and a number of pilot implementation projects were undertaken.

3. In this way, the Regional Adviser continued to manage projects and activities supporting countries in the implementation of the above-mentioned UN/CEFACT trade facilitation recommendations and standards.

4. Activities of the Regional Adviser during the last years contributed to several major achievements in 2021-2022:

- **Supporting WTO accession:** Activities in support of Turkmenistan since 2016 helped the country launch its WTO accession process in November 2021; Activities in support of Uzbekistan helped the country assess its readiness to implement the WTO TFA, establish a trade facilitation enquiry point, and start drafting a national trade facilitation strategy/roadmap (steps towards achieving SDG 17.10).
- **Improving the rate of implementation of WTO TFA measures and the notifications of SPECA countries to the WTO secretariat:** Kazakhstan, for example, notified the WTO of improvement in its WTO TFA implementation in 2021;

¹ SDG 17.10: Promote a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system under the World Trade Organization, including through the conclusion of negotiations under its Doha Development Agenda

² See www.unecce.org/speca. The countries of SPECA are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

³ See https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session14/IV._AHGABAT_INITIATIVE_English.pdf.

⁴ See https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session14/SPECA_Trade_Facilitation_Strategy_English.pdf.

⁵ See https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session14/Principles_of_Sustainable_Trade_Trade_English.pdf.

it moved four measures, on which there had been collaboration with the Regional Adviser (enquiry points, use of international standards, single window and customs cooperation) from category C to category B. In July 2021 Tajikistan informed the WTO of the launch of its new trade portal and progress in the implementation of four measures, including the single window, with which they have received assistance from ECE.⁶

- **Endorsement of the new package of standards for the digitalization of data and document exchange in multimodal transport** has been received from sectorial organizations, business associations, member States and other stakeholders. This package has been aligned to UN/CEFACT semantic standards and the Multimodal Transport Reference Data Model (MMT RDM).

II. Assisting transition economies with trade facilitation and implementing the WTO TFA

5. Four training events organized by the Regional Adviser, either separately or in cooperation with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the International Trade Centre (ITC) and other partners, boosted the capacity of over 400 experts from the SPECA countries (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) to implement trade facilitation:

- A training event for regional cooperation of national trade facilitation bodies, organized by GIZ in collaboration with ECE, took place in the spring of 2021. It encouraged the regional collaboration of national trade facilitation committees (NTFCs) in the SPECA countries.
- Two online trainings for the SPECA countries, organized by ECE in 2021, contributed to two key products in 2021-2022: the drafting of a guide on how to establish a trade facilitation enquiry point and how to set up a simple system for exchange of information on trade and customs procedures among the SPECA countries.
- The SPECA Working Group on Trade focused on several trade facilitation measures that must be completed under the TFA.⁷ The working group will review the implementation of the current roadmap for the implementation of the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy and adopt a new version of this roadmap for the 2023 or 2024 meeting of the group.

6. Three working papers by the SPECA Working Group on Trade were drafted or updated and published in 2021, expanding the knowledge base on the capacity to harmonize border-crossing procedures around the subregion, on implementing the SPECA Principles of Sustainable Trade, and in taking steps to digitalize trade and transport data and documents. The SPECA countries and their agencies currently continue to review these papers with the

⁶ See the WTO trade facilitation database <https://tfadatabase.org/members> for data on the latest notifications of the countries (at the end of each country's page). It shows the dynamics of implementation of the TFA measures in the countries. In addition to Kazakhstan, ECE advisory services have helped Ukraine, as well as Azerbaijan, Belarus and Uzbekistan (three WTO accession countries) assess their readiness and plan the implementation of the TFA measures. All seventeen programme countries have received assistance for implementing the TFA measures in which ECE has competitive advantage (notably Art. 23.2, 10.1, 10.3, and 10.4). By 31 March 2022 Kyrgyzstan had notified the WTO of the implementation of several measures, some of which they had received assistance with from ECE.

⁷ Updates on the implementation of the SPECA Trade Facilitation Strategy, and the roadmap to its implementation, are published on the web page of the SPECA Working Group on Trade (<https://unece.org/speca-working-group-trade>) and the United Nations Development Account (UNDA) connectivity project (<https://unttc.org/stream/europe-and-central-asia-region>). The roadmap itself available at https://unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session14/Roadmap_for_Implementation_of_the_SPECA_TF_Strategy_English.pdf (accessed 6 June 2022).

goal of implementing their recommendations and revising the papers for the next meeting of the working group:

- The working paper [on harmonizing border-crossing procedures in the SPECA countries](#)⁸ was updated with new set of recommendations. It will continue to be a key working paper for the group.
- The working paper on the nexus between trade facilitation, water management and food security in the SPECA subregion⁹ was finalized in this period and will continue to be updated in the framework of the new ECE project on sustainable trade in the subregion.
- The working paper, “Promoting Sustainable Trade and Circular Economy in SPECA Countries: State of play and way forward”¹⁰ is a first draft of another working paper that assesses the readiness of the SPECA countries (without Afghanistan) to implement the SPECA Principles of Sustainable Trade.

A. Supporting Uzbekistan with its accession to the WTO

7. In 2021, following a request from the Government of Uzbekistan, the Regional Adviser supported the completion of the self-assessment of the readiness of Uzbekistan to implement the WTO TFA. The report of the assessment was finalized and presented to the Government of Uzbekistan, and it is expected to help with the accession of Uzbekistan to WTO and with the achievement of SDG 17.10. Based on the recommendations of this assessment, several activities to help Uzbekistan in its drive to achieve trade facilitation took place. Two experts, with the assistance of the Regional Adviser, started drafting a national trade facilitation strategy (roadmap). Preparatory work for launching a national trade facilitation enquiry point (TFA Art. 1.3) was completed. Studies were under development in 2021-2022 on (a) the procedural and regulatory barriers to trade and (b) the readiness of Uzbekistan to implement United Nations standards for the digitalization of data and document exchange in multimodal transport.

B. Supporting Turkmenistan with its accession to the WTO

8. Following the start of negotiations for WTO accession, on 25 March 2022, ECE, in cooperation with the WTO secretariat, held an information seminar on the process of accession to WTO for the Government of Turkmenistan. The Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan chaired this online seminar, which was attended by the interagency commission on the accession to WTO, and by vice-ministers in all relevant areas. A decision was made to carry out an assessment of the readiness of Turkmenistan to implement the measures of the TFA.

III. Digital data sharing for trade and transport in the age of COVID-19

9. The Regional Adviser continued supporting the United Nations rapid response to the challenges of COVID-19, notably managing a segment of the United Nations Development Account (UNDA) project “Transport and Trade Connectivity in the Age of Pandemics: United Nations solutions for contactless, seamless and collaborative transport and trade”. The package of standards developed under the project and the reports of the pilot implementation

⁸ Available at <https://unece.org/speca/documents/2021/11/working-documents/border-crossing-harmonization-analytical-background>.

⁹ Available at <https://unece.org/speca/documents/2021/11/working-documents/trade-water-food-circular-economy-analytical-background>.

¹⁰ Available at <https://unece.org/speca/documents/2021/11/working-documents/draft-promoting-sustainable-trade-and-circular-economy>.

project are published on the relevant segment of the website of the project.¹¹ The segment managed by the Regional Adviser of the ECTD led to the following developments in 2021:

- Completion of the package of standards for the digitalization of multimodal data and document exchange, as well as several pilot implementation projects, including digital twin implementation of the standards.¹²
- The International Federation of Freight Forwarders Associations (FIATA) tested and prepared for use the digital version of its multimodal bill of lading, using the UN/CEFACT standards and MMT RDM. Such organizations as the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the Organization on Cooperation of Railways (OSJD) cooperated with ECE on the implementation of the standards. At least five pilot implementation projects advanced in 2021. Cooperation deepened on these issues with the European Commission (DG TAXUD and DG MOVE).
- Under this project the following activities have taken (or continue to take) place:
 - Experts developed new standards for the main documents accompanying goods: consignment notes, bills of lading and some additional documents in the five key modes of transport (road, rail, inland water, maritime and air cargo transportation). The latest additions in 2021-2022 were standards for interoperability for three air cargo documents: airwaybill, dangerous goods declaration, and consignment security declaration.
 - Pilot implementation started for several projects, including trade in bitumen and meat between Azerbaijan and Ukraine; IMO/FAL¹³ implementation with the use of UN/CEFACT standards in Ukraine; export of timber from Belarus to Central Europe, conversion of data between UN/EDIFACT (IFTMIN) in Eurasia and XML and other internet-based technologies in Western Europe; and other pilot projects, notably based on the digital twin concept.
 - Work started on the development of a matrix of data in the dangerous goods declarations of the five main modes of transport.
- Activities on data sharing and alignment with the Multimodal Transport Reference Data Model (MMT-RDM) have taken place:
 - At the eleventh ECE Odessa Seminar on Trade and Transport Facilitation¹⁴ organized by ECE (26-28 May 2021), governmental and business representatives from Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine and other countries expressed their intention to develop multimodal data and document exchange along digital corridors and to start a pilot implementation. The ECE Odessa seminars fostered collaboration with FIATA on the development of an electronic equivalent of the FIATA multimodal bill of lading, aligned with UN/CEFACT standards, which will be followed by other FIATA documents.
 - At the online brainstorming session on data harmonization and modelling using UN/CEFACT standards and reference data models, organized by ECE and the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) on 17 June 2021¹⁵, experts from ECE, EEC, and UN/CEFACT agreed to harmonize standards for multimodal data exchange, notably with respect to the exchange of information on railway cargo and alignment between the UN/CEFACT standards and regulatory data collection systems.

¹¹ For more information, see the UNDA COVID-19 Trade and Transport Project website: <https://unttc.org/stream/electronic-trade-and-transport-documents-and-data>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ International Maritime Organization (IMO) Convention on Facilitation of International Maritime Traffic (FAL Convention)

¹⁴ See <https://unece.org/trade/events/tenth-international-seminar-trade-and-transport-facilitation-multimodal-transport-data>.

¹⁵ See <https://unece.org/trade/events/data-harmonization-and-modelling-using-uncefact-standards-and-reference-data-models>.

- At the fourth regional seminar for the Western Balkans on data sharing and single window implementation (26-28 January 2022) experts from ECE, UN/CEFACT, the Western Balkan countries examined ways of implementing the UN/CEFACT semantic standards and reference data models in multimodal data exchange.

10. Work on the UNDA COVID-19 project has strengthened collaboration with the European Commission, EEC, railway, air, and other sectorial organizations to advance the digitalization of multimodal transport data and document exchange with reference to the UN/CEFACT standards. Collaboration with the European Commission, ICAO and OSJD at numerous events attest to their support for this initiative.

11. Due to restrictions caused by COVID-19, capacity-building seminars and subregional cooperation events have taken place online, and many more will be organized online. Information sessions have taken place with partners in the UNDA COVID-19 connectivity project as well as with the European Commission and other organizations.

IV. Liaison with Resident Coordinators and support for subregional cooperation

12. Based on the special responsibility of the Regional Adviser to act as liaison with the United Nations Resident Coordinators in three specifically identified transition economies in the ECE region (Kazakhstan, North Macedonia, and Turkmenistan), the Regional Adviser has fostered specific collaborations on issues related to trade facilitation in these countries. Examples of cooperative activities include the following:

- The United Nations Resident Coordinator in Kazakhstan moderated, in person, the session on trade and trade facilitation of the SPECA Economic Forum "Sustainable transport and trade for a green and inclusive economy after the pandemic"¹⁶, which took place in Tashkent, Uzbekistan on 17-18 November 2021. She guided the discussions and the formulation of trade facilitation recommendations for the region.
- The United Nations Resident Coordinator in Turkmenistan participated in and supported the ECE webinar on how to organize the WTO accession process of Turkmenistan on 23 March 2022, which launched a ECE project for an assessment of the readiness of the country to implement the TFA.
- The Regional Adviser met the United Nations Resident Coordinator in North Macedonia and agreed to coordinate the ECE contribution to the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for the country. This relationship is also being used to advance the implementation of the UN/CEFACT tools in North Macedonia and the Western Balkans, notably through the annual ECE seminars on single window and data sharing (the latest was co-organized between ECE and the North Macedonian Customs Administration on 26-27 January 2022).

13. The Regional Adviser continues to support the SPECA Working Group on Trade, which provides an institutional basis for the implementation of the SPECA regional trade facilitation strategy in the following areas:

- Policy cooperation in the WTO process;
- Roll-out of the trade facilitation strategy and the roadmap for its implementation;
- Implementation of the SPECA Principles of Sustainable Trade (one of the working papers developed under the working group specifically emphasizes the link between trade facilitation and sustainable trade in the subregion¹⁷);

¹⁶ See <https://unece.org/speca/events/2021-speca-economic-forum>.

¹⁷ See <https://unece.org/speca/documents/2021/11/working-documents/trade-water-food-circular-economy-analytical-background>.

- Non-tariff barriers to trade (ECE is preparing a study on procedural and regulatory barriers to trade in Uzbekistan); and
 - Implementing the standards for digitalization of multimodal transport data and document exchange¹⁸ in Central Asia.
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¹⁸ See <https://unttc.org/stream/electronic-trade-and-transport-documents-and-data>.