



9th Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Forum (APTFF)

New Delhi, India, 17-18 September 2019

Summary & Highlights

The 9th APTFF was organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), in collaboration with the Ministry of Commerce, India and Confederation of Indian Industry.

The theme of APTFF 2019 was “Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation for Regional Prosperity” and brought together about 270 participants from 42 countries. As part of the opening session of the Forum, ADB and ESCAP launched the *Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Report 2019: Bridging Trade Finance Gaps through Technology*. The report reviews trade facilitation progress in the region, including recent trends in paperless trade and transit facilitation and the impact of trade facilitation initiatives on trade costs. It also highlights how trade finance gaps—especially prevalent for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)—can be bridged by technology, and the supporting policies and actions required to make this happen.¹

The high-level panel session “*Leaving no one behind in trade facilitation: identifying challenges, priorities and solutions*” highlighted the need for sustainable and inclusive trade facilitation, ensuring that all stakeholders and groups can benefit from trade facilitation initiatives. The session provided insights from the experience of both public and private sectors in developing and using trade systems based on modern information and communication technologies. It noted that digitalization could contribute to trade facilitation being more inclusive and sustainable. The session also discussed the impact of digitalization of global supply chains on SMEs, and how these enterprises can benefit from the digitalization of trade systems and procedures.

Session 1 “*Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation in Asia and the Pacific – State of play and prospect*” provided an update on trade facilitation implementation in the Asia and the Pacific region, based on the results of the UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation 2019 (<https://untfsurvey.org>). The session revealed that Asia-Pacific countries made significant progress in streamlining and digitalizing trade procedures over the past 2 years. It also noted that aiming for full digital implementation of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement and enabling seamless electronic exchange of trade data across-border could help the region to reduce trade transaction costs by nearly 17% on average. The Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific (“Framework Agreement”) was highlighted as an enabling platform to accelerate progress in this area.

¹ Report available from: <https://www.unescap.org/resources/asia-pacific-trade-facilitation-report-2019-bridging-trade-finance-gaps-through-technology>



Session 2 “*Digital implementation of the WTO Agreement on Trade Facilitation – Lessons from implementation*” focused on the relevance and value of digitalization of trade procedures for the implementation of WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA). The session noted that many of the WTO TFA measures would be best implemented using digital tools and platforms, even if the use of electronic and internet-based systems was not mandatory. The key principles embedded in the Framework Agreement were highlighted as essential to ensure effective digital implementation. Implementation cases from Bangladesh, India, Mongolia, Republic of Korea, and APEC countries, pointed to the benefit and also the challenges of a digital approach to implementation. The importance to ensure that the basic ICT infrastructure was in place was highlighted, together with the need to build human resource capacity and ensure that the systems could be made interoperable.

Session 3 “*Aligning trade facilitation with sustainable development goals: Good practices in trade facilitation for agriculture, SMEs and women*” focused on challenges faced by the agriculture sector, SMEs and women, and how sustainable practices in trade facilitation could be further pursued in this regard. First, it was recognized that trade facilitation measures and support should more directly focus on challenges that SMEs face, such as access to finance, and limited capacity for them to meet international standards and business requirements. Second, the session noted the need for long-term reform of agricultural trade and domestic policies, with digitalization seen as a way to ensure effective trade in perishable goods without compromising human and animal health and safety, to be pursued on the basis of harmonized international standards. Third, it was noted that women in international trade are still very under-represented and faced specific challenges, especially since many are engaged in informal sectors. Enhancing consultations with women traders to develop specific trade facilitation measures to address their needs was recommended.

Session 4 “*Facilitating trade finance for inclusive growth: Bridging gaps through technology*” highlighted the role of financial technologies to enhance the efficiency and availability of trade finance, especially for SMEs in the region, a topic that was also reflected in the ADB-ESCAP report. The session noted that technologies, such as e-commerce platforms, blockchain technology and artificial intelligence, can improve efficiencies at various stages of international trade. The session noted the importance of public-private sector collaboration and regional initiatives for strengthening the support for SME trade finance. The session highlighted the importance of increasing awareness raising activities at national level about the instruments and sources of trade financing for SMEs, together with improvement in monitoring mechanisms related to trade finance provisions. The session recognized the need for the trade facilitation and trade finance communities to work more closely together to develop integrated systems.



Session 5 “*Trade facilitation for e-commerce: Emerging innovations for seamless cross-border transactions*” focused on the development of e-commerce and implications on trade facilitation. Cases from both public and private sectors were shared at the session, including China Customs’ experience in introducing new technologies to develop “intelligent Customs”, express delivery services development by DHL India, postal services modernization to accommodate the “tsunami” of parcels by Universal Postal Union (UPU) and the development of international standards to better track goods by GS1. The session noted that in order to effectively support e-commerce, it should: improve ICT infrastructure; pursue legal, regulatory and institutional reforms; improve logistics and delivery infrastructure; broaden the e-payment; and intensify regional efforts to modernize and harmonize regulations.

Session 6 was dedicated to presentation by three winners of the Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Innovation Awards 2019. The awards were given to cases which demonstrated ways to simplify and streamline international trade processes by using digital means and channels for effective and efficient trade facilitation measures, with strong linkage with the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Three winners were: International Plant Protection Convention for its work on the Generic ePhyto National System (GeNS); PSA International Ltd and Global eTrade Services (GeTS) for enhancing digital connectivity for China-ASEAN trade; and Tuticorin CFS Association for its CoDEX: Container Digital Exchange.

Nine capacity building and other side events were held back-to-back with the APTFF 2019. All programmes and presentations are available online. For details, please visit <https://www.unescap.org/events/asia-pacific-trade-facilitation-forum-2019>.