

## **First Dialogue on Regional Cooperation for Trade Facilitation – Summary of Recommendations – [Final]**

Following up on recommendations from the Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Forum 2009 and subsequent events to, inter alia, improve the effectiveness of the existing regional/subregional cooperation initiatives and identify synergies among them, ESCAP Member States in July 2011 explicitly recommended the Secretariat to support the creation of a region-wide coordination mechanism, bringing together representatives of key regional organizations active in trade facilitation.<sup>1</sup> As a result, ESCAP, with the support of ADB, invited relevant regional/sub-regional organizations to a Dialogue on Regional Cooperation for Trade Facilitation, which was held on the side of the Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Forum 2011.<sup>2</sup> Dialogue participants were requested to share information with each other on their trade facilitation programmes and frameworks. Beside generally developing collaboration among existing regional organizations, the initial meeting aimed at, inter alia, determining trade facilitation focal points of each organization, identifying best practices or initiatives for possible replication, and harmonizing trade facilitation data collection methods or indicators.

This first meeting was attended by representatives from the following organizations: Asian Development Bank, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Secretariat, Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) Secretariat, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) Secretariat, the World Customs Organization (WCO Regional Office), the Asia-Pacific Center Council for Trade Facilitation and e-Business (AFACT), the Oceania Customs Organisation Secretariat (OCO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The absence of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat was regretted.

Each organization provided a briefing on their trade facilitation activities including, when available, an introduction to their existing trade facilitation implementation and monitoring frameworks. The Dialogue programme, list participants, and selected presentations are available at: <http://www.unescap.org/tid/projects/rctf.asp>

The meeting agreed that it was important to improve regional connectivity and trade facilitation performance of the region, improve market access for our members (both inside and outside our own region/subregion), and to develop a more harmonized environment for trade across the region. To do so, there was a real need to share information and knowledge on good practices across subregions to better support our member countries in making improvements, and to develop a common understanding of trade facilitation problems and issues.

The meeting considered a number of concrete actions including, identifying focal points in each of our organization for trade facilitation, informing each other of our trade facilitation activities in advance, especially when overlapping membership, inviting each other to relevant events [as observers if needed] whenever possible, and sharing information on country-level trade facilitation focal points - to encourage within-country coordination of TF activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the ESCAP Committee on Trade and Investment, Second Session, Bangkok, 27-29 July 2011.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unescap.org/tid/projects/tfforum11.asp>

The following key recommendations emerged from the discussion at the first dialogue

1. Organizing Regional Cooperation Dialogues for Trade Facilitation (RCDTF) among sub-/regional organizations involved in trade facilitation should be continued, as it was essential in developing trust and collaboration among organizations. Consideration should be given to invitation and participation of a few more organizations, including the World Bank, relevant sub-/regional private sector associations, and selected donors with sub-/regional programmes on trade facilitation (e.g., GIZ in Central Asia), as important providers of capacity building and technical assistance on trade facilitation.
2. RCDTF should be organized (tentatively annually) on the side of major regional trade facilitation events as those are typically attended by most organizations involved in the Dialogue (e.g., the annual Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Forum organized by ESCAP and ADB). It is important for the regional cooperation mechanism to be very cost efficient, as neither ESCAP nor ADB could sponsor travel of representatives to RCDTF.
3. Identification of “official” focal points should be pursued. While this would be easy for smaller organization with dedicated trade or trade facilitation divisions, some organizations such as ADB may need focal points identified in each or its regional departments. It was agreed that a formal approach (official letters) may be useful as it would help secure the high-level support needed within each institution to support the cooperation mechanism – and ensure the allocation of staff time as well as travel funds to it. ESCAP would discuss individually with Dialogue participants the most effective way to request focal points.
4. Establishment of a restricted online discussion group among Dialogue participants was recommended to facilitate sharing of information on trade facilitation. ESCAP agreed to provide the online discussion group facility, as part of its UNNExT initiative. Initial member of the list will be participants to this first Dialogue, with addition of “official” focal points as they are identified.
5. As a first step towards exchanging information, an electronic newsletter would be launched and circulated among the group (and possibly more widely if all contributors agree) every quarter. The newsletter would list recent and, more importantly, planned trade facilitation activities of our organizations, as well as relevant publications and documents that may be useful across sub-regions. A first newsletter would be circulated by ESCAP on 17 January 2012 - and quarterly thereafter – based on information submitted by Dialogue participants before 31 Dec. 2011.
6. Sharing of names and contact of national trade facilitation focal points identified separately by each organization should be pursued to the extent possible both to facilitate implementation of individual activities as well as a way to avoid duplication and foster coordination on TF at national levels. While some organizations are already making those contact information of focal points available online, an internal authorization process is required in other organizations. Obtaining relevant authorization for sharing this type of information should be included in the Terms of Reference of TF focal points in the organizations.
7. The development of a common trade facilitation performance monitoring framework across the wider region, and based on existing frameworks, should be discussed again at future dialogues, and may be pursued as one of the long-term goal of the Dialogue organization.

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