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Roadmap for Building a National Trade Information Portal



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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CMS	Content Management System
EAC	East African Community
IT	Information and Technology
ITC	International Trade Center
NTFC	National Trade Facilitation Committee
NTIP	National Trade Information Portal
RTIP	Regional Trade Information Portal
TFA	Trade Facilitation Agreement
TIP	Trade Information Portal
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
WCO	World Customs Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

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1. Introduction

Import, export and transit entails cross-border transactions with two or more countries. For economic operators, ensuring an uninterrupted flow of their goods at the border always poses a series of challenges. Despite significant improvements in terms of trade facilitation nationally and internationally, completing formalities and processing trade documentation remains complicated for most firms, especially smaller ones. Often, due to lack of transparency, complicated or redundant procedures, and unharmonized legal frameworks, exporters and importers alike spend substantial time and resources securing the correct trade documents to comply with customs formalities and regulations.

Recognizing the root causes of inefficiencies in cross-border procedures, and building on its decades' long experience developing digital government solutions for investment and trade, UNCTAD developed the Trade Information Portal (TIP) - an online tool aimed at improving transparency and supporting traders' with completing trade-related requirements and formalities. To date, UNCTAD has assisted 30 countries in establishing TIPs, with 22 of them currently operational and eight being implemented. In 2017, Kenya was the first country to launch a TIP built using UNCTAD's technology and methodology. Since then, traders have benefited from continuously improving time and cost savings. At the time of publication, the Kenyan government through its National Trade Facilitation Committee (NTFC) has – by analysing the user's step-by-step guides to trade-related procedures in the TIP - simplified 49 procedures, eliminating 50 steps and 70 required documents, allowing traders to complete 23 new steps online instead of in-person. Recognizing these benefits, 12 more countries have expressed an interest in UNCTAD technical assistance to develop their own TIPs.

The WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA)'s transparency provisions lists the mandatory items that members need to publish online (Art 1.2), namely: “(a) a description of its procedures for importation, exportation, and transit, including procedures for appeal or review, that informs governments, traders, and other interested parties of the practical steps needed for importation, exportation, and transit; (b) the forms and documents required for importation into, exportation from, or transit through the territory of that Member; (c) contact information on its enquiry point(s).” The Agreement does not explicitly mention a TIP as a requirement, but as demonstrated in this guide, the most sensible way to fulfil these obligations in the prescribed “non-discriminatory and easily accessible manner” is for a country to offer the trading community a user-centric central site with step-by-step guides to trade-related procedures as a central feature.

The obligation to comply with the Agreement's transparency measures is one of the key drivers for the rising numbers of TIPs around the world. However, not all TIPs are the same in terms of design, structure and quality. UNCTAD's approach is centred on the principles that the information has to be presented from the user's point of view and that traders should always have access to

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