

Studies in Trade, Investment and Innovation No. 87

DIGITAL TRADE FACILITATION IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC



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Executive Summary

The simplification and digitalization of international trade procedures, or digital trade facilitation, is essential to reducing trade costs and enabling developing economies to effectively use trade as an engine of growth and sustainable development. Trade facilitation has taken increasing importance as evidenced by the entry into force of the World Trade Organization Trade Facilitation Agreement (WTO TFA). Governments in Asia and the Pacific have also engaged in a growing number of regional and subregional initiatives for facilitating the electronic exchange of information along international supply chains, including most recently the adoption of a Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific (FA-PT), a United Nations treaty signed by Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Armenia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2017.¹

In light of the increasing importance of digital trade facilitation, this report provides an overview of trade facilitation and paperless trade implementation in the Asia-Pacific region, followed by an analysis of the impact on trade costs of different sets of trade facilitation measures. It also reviews in some details paperless trade provisions in recent regional trade agreements in the region, before discussing the benefits of the FA-PT as an inclusive regional platform and tool to accelerate progress towards digital trade facilitation.

The first chapter presents key results of the second United Nations Global Survey on Trade Facilitation and Paperless Trade Implementation (UNTF Survey), covering 44 countries in Asia and the Pacific.² Despite existing efforts and initiatives, the results highlight the difficulties for the region in moving towards cross-border paperless trade: the average implementation rate of measures such as electronic exchange of Certificates of Origin, or of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Certificates stand at less than 20%, compared to more than 50% for most other types of trade facilitation measures. The findings also show that trade facilitation implementation rates vary widely across and within subregions. The analysis suggests that limited human resource capacity is a key challenge for Asia-Pacific least developed and landlocked developing countries in making further progress, while the lack of coordination between government agencies seems to be the most important challenge in other developing economies.

Chapter 2 estimates the effect of trade facilitation measures implementation on trade costs in Asia and the Pacific using data from the UNTF Survey. Impact of different sets of measures are considered, from a basic set of measures to ensure compliance with the WTO TFA commitments to a full set of digital trade facilitation measures. The analysis shows that full implementation of both binding and non-binding measures in the WTO TFA is associated with an average 15% trade cost reduction in Asia-Pacific. On the other hand, full implementation of binding and non-binding WTO TFA measures together with other paperless and cross-border trade facilitation measures (digital trade facilitation) is projected to decrease trade costs by more than 26%, cutting international transaction costs in Asia and the Pacific by about \$0.6 trillion. The analysis also confirms that there are significant reductions in trade costs associated with trade partners' implementation of trade facilitation measures. This shows that economies which already have high rates of trade facilitation implementation have strong incentive to encourage and support their trading partners in implementing trade facilitation. Further facilitation of trade in these economies will involve developing legal and technical frameworks to support cross-border paperless trade, i.e., enabling the electronic exchange and legal recognition of trade data and documents between public and private actors located in different countries along the international supply chain, as envisaged in the recently adopted regional UN treaty on cross-border paperless trade facilitation (the FA-PT).

Next, chapter 3 analyses the extent to which recent regional trade agreements (RTAs) have included provisions related to paperless trade globally, using the WTO TFA as a reference. The results provide insights and models for future negotiations in this area, as well as for implementation of the FA-PT. The analysis revealed that more than half of the trade agreements which have entered into force since 2005 globally include paperless trade measures or provisions, with a large majority of RTAs now featuring one or more measures aiming to exchange trade-related data and information electronically. In many cases, recent RTAs are found to go further than the WTO TFA in promoting digital trade facilitation

¹ As of December 2017.

² Interactive database available at: https://unnex.unescap.org/AP_TFSurvey 2017.

and the application of modern information and communications technologies to trade procedures. Furthermore, many of the recent RTAs found in Asia and the Pacific implicitly or explicitly call upon the parties to develop electronic exchange of trade-related data and documents and work towards interoperability of paperless trade systems. However, they provide little detail on how to do so beyond recommending cooperation among the parties. In this context, the FA-PT provides a useful multilateral framework through which paperless trade-related RTA commitments may be concretized.

Finally, chapter 4 provides an overview of the FA-PT. The Framework Agreement is fully dedicated to the digitalization of trade processes and enabling the seamless electronic exchange and legal recognition of trade-related data and documents across borders, rather than only between stakeholders located in the same country. Developed by a diverse group of more than 25 Asia-Pacific economies at very different stages of development over four years, the Framework Agreement is designed as an inclusive and enabling platform that will benefit all participating economies regardless of where they stand in terms of trade facilitation implementation. Implementation of the Agreement is expected to greatly reduce transaction time and costs as well as increase regulatory compliance. Importantly, it will enable countries that have already initiated work at the bilateral or subregional levels to leverage that work and ensure that emerging regional and multilateral solutions more fully take into account such work.

Achieving cross-border paperless trade across the region is expected to be a long and difficult process, and it cannot be achieved without close collaboration between countries. The FA-PT is expected to support that process by providing a dedicated institutional framework for countries with proven political will to develop legal and technical solutions for cross-border paperless trade, including through pilot projects, capacity building and technical assistance. The Framework Agreement provides a unique tool for countries to better implement the WTO TFA, taking full advantage of emerging digital solutions and technologies. It is also expected to help countries meet commitments they have already made on paperless trade through RTAs and other agreements.

Going forward, digitalization offers immense potential to enhance trade facilitation implementation and further reduce trade costs in Asia and the Pacific. The *Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-Border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific* provides a unique opportunity for participating countries to accelerate electronic exchange of trade-related data and documents across borders and to overcome challenges on cross-border paperless trade.

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