



Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation in Asia and the Pacific **2021**

Based on the United Nations Global Survey
on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation

The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) is the most inclusive intergovernmental platform in the Asia-Pacific region. The Commission promotes cooperation among its 53 member States and 9 associate members in pursuit of solutions to sustainable development challenges. ESCAP is one of the five regional commissions of the United Nations.

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FOREWORD

The United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation is jointly conducted by five United Nations Regional Commissions (UNRCs) for Africa (ECA), Europe (ECE), Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and West Asia (ESCWA). Led by ESCAP, it aims to gather information from countries worldwide on the implementation of digital and sustainable trade facilitation measures. The results of the survey will enable countries and development partners to better understand and monitor progress on trade facilitation, support evidence-based public policies, share best practices and identify capacity-building and technical assistance needs.

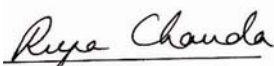
The survey is built on strong partnerships with international and subregional organizations including the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the International Trade Centre (ITC), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Oceania Customs Organization Secretariat (OCO), International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN), Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) and the Institute and Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC).

The first and second global surveys were conducted in 2015 and 2017 as a key initiative under the Joint UNRC Approach to Trade Facilitation agreed upon in Beirut, Lebanon in 2010 by the Executive Secretaries of all five United Nations Regional Commissions. The joint approach was designed to enable the Regional Commissions to present a joint and global view on trade facilitation issues in the context of the negotiations of the Doha Round at the World Trade Organization (WTO). Then the third survey was further developed with new forward-looking measures related to trade digitalization, trade finance and sustainable development.

The fourth survey is built upon the earlier surveys and expanded collection of measures on trade finance facilitation as well as on trade facilitation in times of crisis. The latter was incorporated in order to gather information on the implementation of short-term measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as long-term measures in preparation for future crises and pandemics. The crucial role of trade digitalization has been emphasized not only for increasing regulatory compliance and reducing illicit financial flows, but also as an effective method to mitigate trade disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The fourth survey also continues to pay special attention to sectors and groups with special needs, such as the agricultural sector, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and women traders, at the outset of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development's recognition of international trade as one of the key means of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Against this background, we hope that this report further supports the economies around the region in order to make trade simpler, cheaper, more resilient and sustainable through the use and application of technology and innovation in international trade procedures.

This regional report could be read together with the upcoming global report, and subregional and country notes. The underlying dataset, available upon request, can be used by researchers and analysts for any further analysis. More information is available at <https://untfsurvey.org/>



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The regional report is part of a global survey effort on the implementation of trade facilitation and paperless trade measures, undertaken jointly by the five United Nations Regional Commissions for Africa (ECA), Europe (ECE), Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and West Asia (ESCWA). The report was prepared by Jiangyuan Fu and Chorthip Utoktham under the guidance of Soo Hyun Kim and the overall supervision of Yann Duval, all from the Trade, Investment and Innovation Division (TIID) of ESCAP.

Support from the following organizations and individuals is gratefully acknowledged: Tadateru Hayashi and Esnerjames P. Fernandez from the Asian Development Bank (ADB); Cuong Ba Tran and Anki Agustrin from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat; Ghulam Samad, Qaisar Abbas and Iskandar Abdullaev from the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Institute; Richard Brennan and Laisiana Tugaga from the Oceania Customs Organization (OCO); Julien Fraga-Campos and Marianne Dumont from United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Khan Salehin and Charles Frei from ECE and Sangwon Lim from ESCAP contributed to the survey efforts, in particular by facilitating data collection from relevant experts as well as data validation in several countries. The United Nations Network of Experts for Paperless Trade and Transport in Asia and the Pacific (UNNExT), a knowledge community supported by ESCAP and ECE, also greatly facilitated data collection.

Inputs to the expert group meeting on trade facilitation in times of crisis and epidemic in the Asia-Pacific region (virtual, July 2020) as well as the results from the pilot survey on trade facilitation in times of crisis and pandemic (conducted in 2020, with the Asia-Pacific results published in a regional report in January 2021), contributed to the development of the additional measures on trade facilitation in times of crisis. In addition, comments and suggestions received from participants at the Launch of the United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation 2021 (virtual, July 2021), where the 2021 Survey results were presented, are gratefully acknowledged. The authors are also grateful to the following organizations and individuals for their inputs and suggestions for the development of the 2021 Survey: Alexander R. Malaket, formerly of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) Banking Commission, and Andrew Wilson from the ICC for the 'Trade Finance Facilitation' component; Candice White from the World Economic Forum (WEF); and Alexandre Larouche-Maltais and Sijia Sun from UNCTAD for the 'Women in Trade Facilitation' component. The research assistance provided by Ruixin Xie, Yifan Tan and Linyi Chen in data collection and finalizing the report is appreciated. Tony Oliver edited the report. Arom Sanguanyuang created the cover design.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reducing trade costs is essential in enabling economies to effectively participate in regional and global value chains, and for them to continue using trade as an important engine of growth and sustainable development. According to the ESCAP-World Bank Trade Cost Database, trade costs remain high in the Asia-Pacific region. The international supply chain disruptions caused by the covid-19 pandemic and the recent surge in shipping costs have put additional pressure on importers and exporters in Asia and the Pacific. Trade facilitation, which aims at avoiding unnecessary costs by enhancing efficiency through streamlined and digitalized processes, can help bend the trend of increasing trade cost.

Based on the 2021 United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation covering 46 countries of the Asia-Pacific region, this report reviews the progress of trade facilitation reforms and provides a detailed analysis based on 58 trade facilitation measures that are classified into four groups (“General Trade Facilitation”, “Digital Trade Facilitation”, “Sustainable Trade Facilitation” and “Other Trade Facilitation”) and a further 11 sub-groups covering both binding and non-binding WTO TFA measures, and measures beyond the scope of WTO TFA+.

Despite supply chain difficulties triggered by the pandemic, the survey result shows continued progress in streamlining trade procedures in Asia and the Pacific. The implementation rate of 31 general and digital trade facilitation measures increased to 64.9% in 2021, 6 percentage points higher than 2019. All countries across the region have further implemented trade facilitation measures. However, a varying state of implementation is still noticeable in the Asia and Pacific region, with Australia and New Zealand achieving the highest level at 96.8%, followed by East and North-East Asia (82.5%), North and Central Asia (71.4%), South and South-West Asia (63.1%), with the Pacific Island Developing Economies lagging behind at 40.1%. South and South-West Asia recorded the most progress, recording a more than 10 percentage point increase since 2019. The Pacific also made substantial progress, despite the significant challenges and trade disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

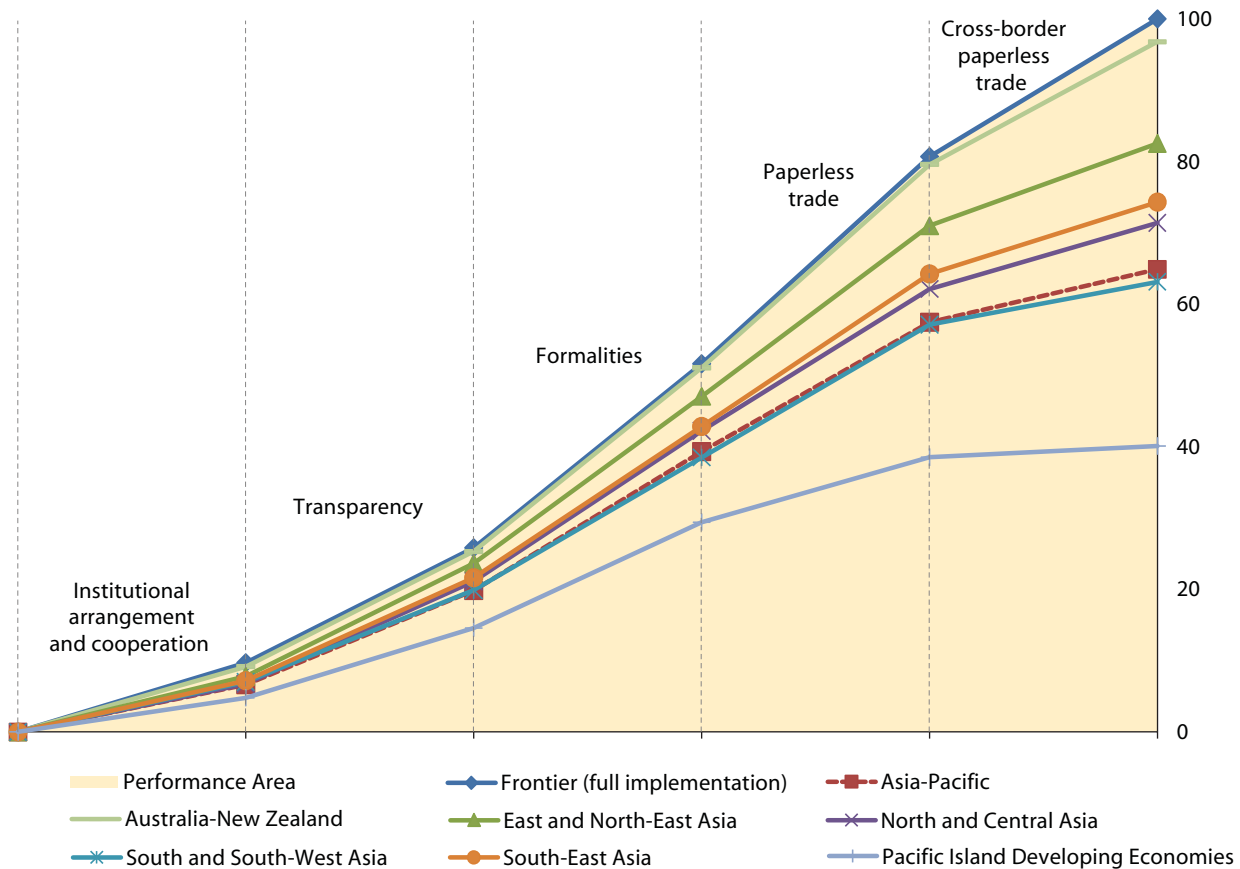
In general, WTO TFA-related measures are well-implemented in the region, with an implementation rate at 60-80%. In addition, the pandemic has contributed to the acceleration of digital transformation. Implementation of ‘Paperless Trade’ stands at 62.4%. However, the implementation level for ‘Cross-Border Paperless Trade’ stands low at 38.5%, with implementation of bilateral and subregional paperless trade systems remaining mostly at the pilot stage.

Sustainable trade facilitation is another indispensable dimension of trade facilitation, but implementation of “Sustainable Trade Facilitation” measures – especially those aimed at SMEs and women – face big challenges with average implementation rates of 33.3% and 40.9%, respectively. Implementation of agricultural trade facilitation has a higher implementation rate at 58.5%. Given their importance in achieving sustainable and inclusive development of economies in the region, particularly in times of crisis, trade facilitation strategies should be designed in a more holistic and inclusive manner.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed many weaknesses of the trading system. The survey result shows that most countries have implemented a number of short-term crisis measures. Yet, the overall implementation level of measures in the ‘Trade Facilitation in Times of Crisis’ section only stands at 55.7%, essentially because many countries still lack long-term trade facilitation plans to enhance preparedness for future crises. Continued and sustained efforts should be made to further enhance cooperation, make trade information transparent, strengthen the capacity of countries to contribute to recovery and prepare to adequately safeguard against future crises.

The analysis presented in this report, based on the latest data available, confirms that digital trade facilitation measures can result in significant benefits to the countries in the region. Full digital trade facilitation implementation beyond the WTO TFA could cut the average trade cost in the region by more than 13%, seven percentage points more than that could be expected from implementation of the WTO TFA measures. Moving forward, trade facilitation implementation may be seen as a step-by-step process, based on the groups of measures included in the survey – i.e., enhancing the institutional arrangement; establishing transparency; implementing efficient trade formalities; development of paperless trade systems, followed by enabling trade data and documents within these systems, including national Single Windows, to be safely and securely used and reused by authorized stakeholders along the international supply chain (see figure). Especially in the case of paperless and cross-border paperless trade, countries need to work together to develop and implement the legal and technical protocols needed for the seamless exchange of regulatory and commercial data and documents within and between countries. In this regard, the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific (CPTA) could support countries in gradually moving to “less-paper” and then to paperless and cross-border paperless trade by providing a dedicated, inclusive and capacity-building focused intergovernmental platform.

Moving up the trade facilitation ladder towards seamless international supply chains



Source: United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, untfsurvey.org, 2021

Note: The figure shows the cumulative trade facilitation implementation scores of Asia-Pacific subregions for 31 common trade facilitation measures included in the survey. Full implementation of all measures = 100.

This Asia-Pacific report may best be read in conjunction with the upcoming Global Report on the results of the UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation 2021, which will be made available at <https://untfsurvey.org/>

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