

Making the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement Work for SMEs

Mainstreaming Trade Facilitation in SME Development Strategies

SME Development

Trade Facilitation

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Executive Summary

This reference document for policy makers and trainers provides a succinct overview of articles of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) particularly relevant to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and identifies examples of SME-specific programmes, measures and interventions that can support the implementation of such provisions. In order to maximize the benefits of the TFA for SMEs, it is suggested that the trade facilitation measures featured in the TFA be mainstreamed in the broader SME development and internationalization initiatives and programmes that may already be in place.

The report highlights the potential role of SME Centres to disseminate information on trade procedures, facilitate SME consultations on trade facilitation matters, and to provide special services for SMEs to participate in AEO programmes and access single window facilities. Several steps that authorities and agencies in charge of trade facilitation and SME development (which are in many countries under different ministries) may consider jointly taking as part of WTO TFA implementation are outlined as a practical way forward. A regulatory review checklist for small business trade facilitation is also proposed.

Acknowledgments

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This effort was undertaken under the overall supervision of Ms. Susan Stone, Director, TID, ESCAP. The document is a “living” document, i.e., it will continue to be updated as new ideas, case studies and good practices are identified by participants in ESCAP, ITC and UNNExT activities.

¹ <http://www.unescap.org/news/escap-and-itc-strengthen-cooperation-trade-facilitation-asia-and-pacific>

² See <http://unnexnext.unescap.org>

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I. Introduction: The WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement and SMEs

The WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (WTO TFA) aims at increasing the transparency and efficiency of customs and other administrative procedures involved in trading goods across international borders (see Box 1). Implementation of the agreement is expected to benefit both developing and developed countries, with an overall reduction of in global trade costs of 11 to 15 per cent (OECD, 2014) and global potential gain in exports estimated by some at roughly one trillion dollars, producing 21 million jobs (PIIE, 2013). Moreover, trade facilitation is expected to also benefit consumers and Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) (ITC, 2013).

SMEs represent 95 per cent of global enterprises and at least two-thirds of all private sector employment (ITC, 2014), and are recognized engines of growth, innovation, social integration and employment. In high-income countries, they contribute nearly two-thirds of both employment and GDP, while in low-income countries (where SMEs are typically hidden in the informal sector), formal SMEs account for almost half (45 per cent) of employment and 33 per cent of GDP (IFC, 2013).³ In developing countries, SMEs also play an important role in closing the development gap through their contribution to poverty reduction, women empowerment, and income distribution (ITC, 2014). Countries need them to strengthen their resilience in facing a competitive and challenging global environment.

However, SMEs face particular constraints in doing business, in particular in accessing international markets. It is generally recognized that policy interventions are needed to support internationalization of SMEs and enabling their more direct participation in international trade. One constraint faced by SMEs in this context is their limited capacity to deal with the complex administrative and regulatory procedures associated with moving and selling goods across borders. A recent firm-level study conducted by the UN Regional Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) found that a reduction in customs and trade clearance times increased SMEs likelihood of participation in export or international production networks (IPNs) relatively more than that of larger enterprises (Duval and Utoktham, 2014).

In principle, therefore, the WTO TFA provides a convenient policy vehicle for most countries to address this constraint to SME development. However, much of the WTO TFA – and many other trade facilitation programmes - has been crafted by governments with existing importers and exporters in mind,

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