



Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation: Global Report **2021**

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



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FOREWORD

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on people and economies across the globe. It has also highlighted the importance of trade facilitation and the need to streamline trade procedures. Given the essential role of international trade and supply chains play in accessing essential supplies, many countries have renewed their efforts to simplify and digitalize trade, as suggested by the findings of this report.

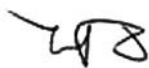
This report presents the results of the fourth UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation. It brings together information from countries worldwide on the implementation of a wide range of trade facilitation measures, going beyond the set of measures included in the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA). The report aims at enabling countries and development partners to take a forward-looking approach to trade facilitation, better understand and monitor progress, support evidence-based public policies, share best practices, and identify emerging capacity-building and technical assistance needs.

The fourth Global Survey builds upon the earlier editions and an expanded collection of measures on trade finance facilitation and trade facilitation in times of crisis. The latter category was incorporated 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 means to mitigate trade disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The fourth Global Survey also pays special attention to sectors and groups with special needs, such as the agricultural sector, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and women traders, as international trade is one of the key means of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

As all economies now strive to recover from the COVID-19 crisis, still more needs to be done to make trade easier for all. We hope that this report and the associated interactive database at untfsurvey.org will prove helpful in making trade simpler, cheaper, more resilient and sustainable through the application of technology and innovation to international trade procedures.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reducing trade costs is essential for 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 many regions of the world. 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. Trade facilitation, which is aimed at enhancing efficiency through streamlined and digitalized processes, can help to lower trade costs and increase economic welfare, particularly in developing and emerging economies.

Based on the 2021 UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, this report reviews the progress of trade facilitation reforms across 144 countries. The analysis is 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, as well as measures beyond the scope of WTO TFA.

The global average implementation rate of 31 general and digital trade facilitation measures stands at 64.7%. Despite the grave impact of COVID-19 on global trade, significant progress has been observed in more efficient trade facilitation over the past two years. The overall implementation rate of measures increased by more than 5 percentage points between 2019 and 2021. Implementation still varies greatly around the world, with developed economies achieving the highest level at 81.8%, while the Pacific Islands have the lowest implementation rate (40.1%). Implementation in Sub-Saharan Africa is 49.1%, second to the Pacific Islands. South Asia recorded the most progress, with more than 10 percentage point increase since 2019. Sub-Saharan Africa (6 percentage points), Developed Economies (5.2 percentage points) and Pacific Islands (4.9 percentage points) also made substantial progress, despite the significant challenges and trade disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

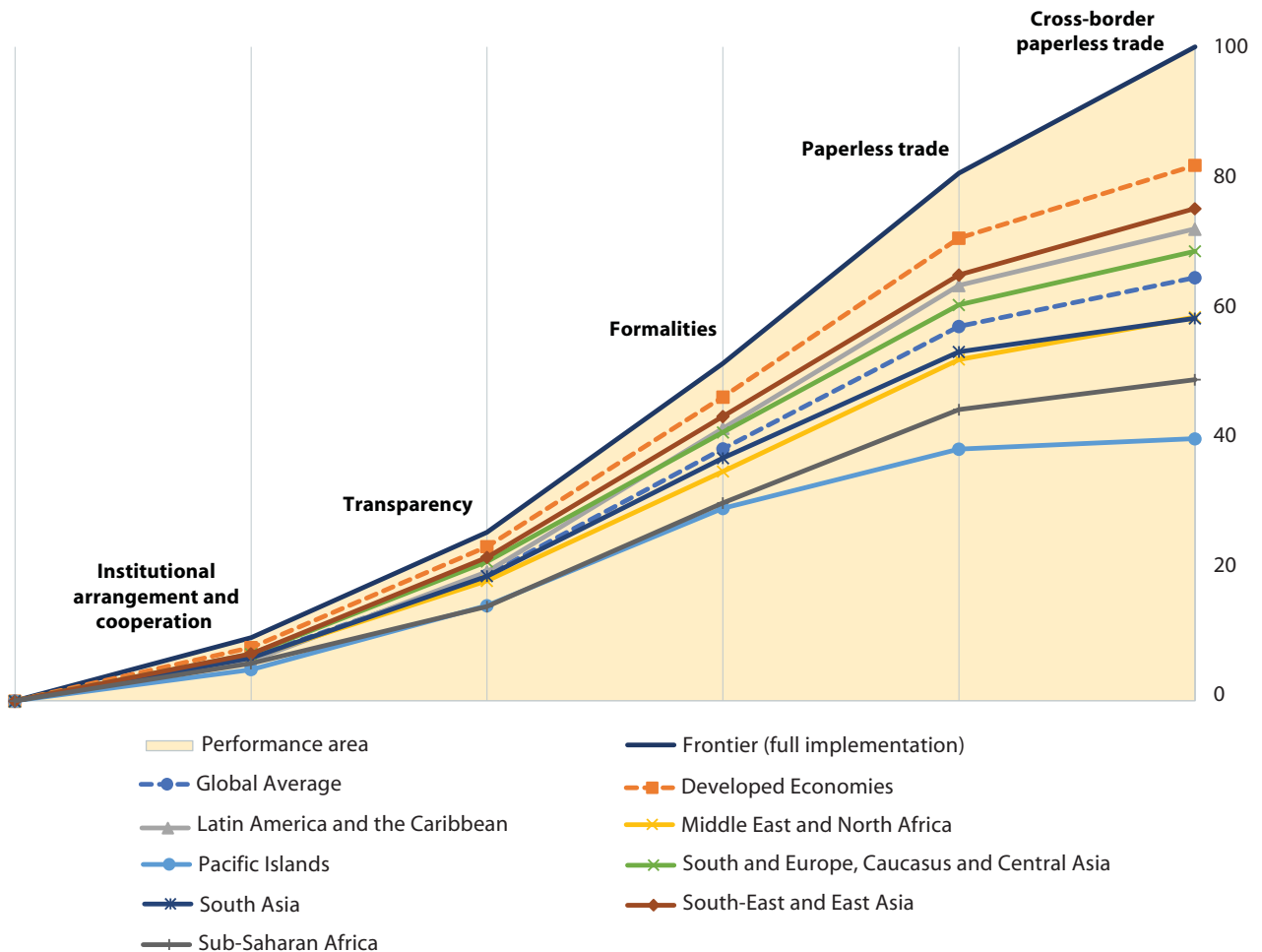
In general, WTO TFA-related measures are relatively well-implemented globally. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the acceleration of digital transformation, with the implementation of ‘Paperless Trade’ standing at 64%. However, the implementation level of ‘Cross-Border Paperless Trade’ is substantially low at 38%, with bilateral and subregional paperless trade systems remaining either mostly partial or on a pilot basis. Nonetheless, progress in the implementation of ‘Paperless Trade’ and ‘Cross-Border Paperless Trade’ measures is remarkable, with increases of 6.3 and 5.4 percentage points over the past two years, respectively – the highest improvement in these areas since the introduction of the survey in 2015.

International trade is an engine for economic growth and poverty reduction, and sustainable trade facilitation is one indispensable dimension of trade facilitation. However, while ‘Agricultural Trade Facilitation’ measures have been comparatively well-implemented, the implementation of trade facilitation measures aimed at SMEs and women in business face big challenges, with average implementation rates of 41% and 31%, respectively. Given their importance in achieving sustainable and inclusive development, particularly in times of crisis, trade facilitation strategies should be designed in a more holistic and inclusive manner.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed many weaknesses of the trading system. The survey results show that most countries have implemented short-term crisis measures. However, the overall implementation level of measures in the ‘Trade Facilitation in Times of Crisis’ section stands at only 41%, 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, and strengthen the capacity of countries to contribute to recovery and prepare to adequately safeguard against future crises.

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; and the development of paperless trade systems. This is 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 the following figure). Countries need to work together to develop and implement the legal and technical protocols required for the seamless exchange of regulatory and commercial data as well as documentation within and between countries. In this regard, regional and subregional initiatives – such as the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific (CPTA), the expansion of the ASEAN Single Window Agreement, and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement – 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 intergovernmental platform. Indeed, the report finds that digital trade facilitation measures serve as a great catalyst for trade cost reduction. Empirical evidence shows that full digital trade facilitation implementation beyond the WTO TFA commitments could cut the average trade cost by more than 13%, 6.7 percentage points more than that could be expected from meeting requirements of the WTO TFA.

Moving up the trade facilitation ladder towards seamless international supply chains



Source: The UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, 2021. Available at untfsurvey.org

Note: The figure shows global cumulative trade facilitation implementation scores for different regions in the five groups of trade facilitation measures included in the survey. Scores are based on the equally weighted implementation of 31 trade facilitation measures, but the number of measures varies in the five groups. Full implementation of all measures = 100.

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