

Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation

in South and South-West Asia 2021

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





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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.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

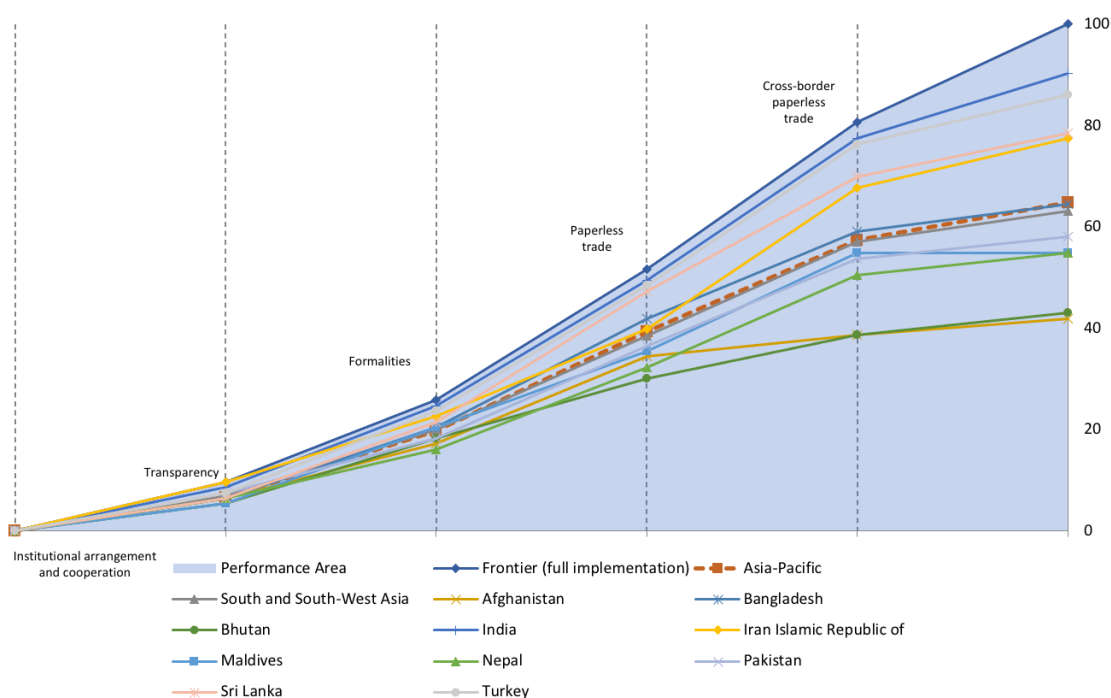
Reducing trade costs is essential for developing economies to effectively use trade as an engine of growth and sustainable development. Trade facilitation and digitalization have taken increasing importance as evidenced by the World Trade Organization (WTO) Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA), as well as the growing number of regional and subregional initiatives for facilitating the electronic exchange of information along international supply chains, including the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific (CPTA).

This report presents an analysis of the results of the United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation for 10 South and South-West Asian countries. The WTO TFA+ Survey was conducted during the first half of 2021 and covered 58 trade facilitation measures categorized under five groups: "General Trade Facilitation", "Digital Trade Facilitation", "Sustainable Trade Facilitation", "Trade Finance", and "Trade Facilitation in Times of Crisis and Pandemic". The report reveals that:

- South and South-West Asia implementation rate of the measures stands at 63.1%, slightly below the Asia-Pacific regional average (65%). Within the region, the implementation level of South and South-West Asia is only ahead of Pacific Island Developing Economies (40%). Implementation in South and South-West Asia varies widely. India (90%) and Turkey (86%) achieved high implementation rates, but other countries are falling significantly behind, like Bhutan (43%) and Afghanistan (42%) trailing behind.
- The implementation level of Trade Facilitation measures by South and South-West Asia saw a significant increase of approximately 10 percentage points from 53% in 2017 to 63% in 2019. While Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and India, made huge leaps of around 27, 12 and 12 percentage points, respectively. Other South and South-West Asia countries made a modest increase in their implementation level over the past two years, with Pakistan making the least progress with no increase from 2019 to 2021.
- South and South-West Asia countries have already implemented some WTO TFA related measures, particularly 'Transparency' measures. However, implementation levels of 'Cross-border Paperless Trade' measures remain extremely low, with an average implementation of about 31%.
- Measures under the "Sustainable Trade Facilitation" have low implementation levels, particularly those targeted at women and SMEs. These measures need to be further emphasized to ensure that trade facilitation benefits many stakeholders.
- Data on the implementation of "Trade Facilitation in Times of Crisis" facilitation measures are collected for the first time in 2021. Measures related to trade facilitation in times of crisis are relatively adequately implemented (approximately 63%). South and South-West Asia also has a relatively high implementation rate of 'coordination between countries on emergency Trade Facilitation (TF) measures', which is crucial for world trade order during this pivotal time.

The report finds that achieving basic South and South-West Asia wide compliance with the WTO TFA may reduce trade costs in this subregion by only about 3-6% going forward. In contrast, a more ambitious strategy involving digital trade facilitation and cross-border paperless trade could reduce trade costs by close to 18%. 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 required for the seamless exchange of regulatory and commercial data and documents within and between countries. In this regard, the Framework Agreement on the 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.

Figure. Moving up the trade facilitation ladder towards seamless international supply chains



Note: The figure shows 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.

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

This South and South-West Asia report should be read in conjunction with the Global and Asia-Pacific report on the results of the UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation 2021, available at <https://untfsurvey.org/>.

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