

During the COVID-19 crisis, trade is proceeding at a slower pace. The pandemic has spotlighted border agencies' challenge to safeguarding public health while avoiding disruptions to the free movement of goods. These agencies are undertaking unprecedented measures to speed up import, export and transit of goods, in many cases by extending their working times, suspending certification procedures or mitigating Customs investigations, foreign exchange inspections and origin verification, in order to avoid disruption of ongoing procedures. At the same time, they must cope with recent restrictive measures to trade whilst preserving trade flows and supply chains. On the other hand, traders must cope with the proliferation of export restrictions through new controls and license requirements, especially on medical devices. As a result, border posts are crowded, controls have multiplied, and truck queues are getting longer. A new [paper from UNCTAD](#) presents the main trade facilitation solutions, supported by country cases, that can address the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The solutions described in the document are largely based on principles already consolidated in the [WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement \(TFA\)](#) and in the [Revised Kyoto Convention on the simplification and harmonization of customs procedures](#), and seek to improve efficiency in four main areas: 1) process optimization, 2) cost reduction (e.g. exemptions or flexibilities regarding payments of customs duties and other taxes, interests and guarantees), 3) transparency and cooperation enhancement (ex. publication of accurate information on temporary restriction measures), and 4) full display of technology to ensure cross-border trade, reducing as much as possible face-to-face interaction. Country cases offer concrete examples. For instance, Kenya is reported to have published information on COVID-19 trade-related emergency measures on the [InfoTradeKenya](#) Portal. The portal also covers step-by-step guides on export and import procedures of pharmaceutical products and medical devices. The COVID-19 webpage is updated on a regular basis by border regulatory agencies.

Solutions in the field of process optimisation are mainly aimed at expediting or relaxing procedures import and export procedures. The main ones are the following:

- **Pre-arrival processing** (i.e. the anticipated lodging of goods declaration and supporting documents before their arrival in the importing country, in line with Article 7.1. and 8.1(b) of the WTO TFA). Such a solution allows border agencies to pre-assess, identify and prioritize import procedures.

- **Fast-track lanes:** special counters and green lanes are working 24/7 at all clearance sites across countries, treating goods outside business hours and away from Customs offices. Article 7.8(a) and 11.5 of the TFA requires WTO Members to establish such a kind of special infrastructures or facilities. In Europe, together with the European Commission (EC) has developed an app to facilitate the movement of goods and freight within the EU in support of the COVID-19 pandemic response. The app, called "[Galileo Green Lane](#)", is aimed at easing the flow of freight through borders and at enabling the efficient transit of critical goods, by allowing both cross-border agencies and truck operators to monitor freight traffic, truck queues and waiting times at green lane border crossings. When drivers enter a geo-fenced area within a specified distance to a green lane border, they receive a notification on the situation at that border on the basis of information that is regularly fed into the system by border officials.

- **Release upon arrival:** goods are released by Customs prior to the submission of the goods declaration as laid down in Article 7.8.2(b) of the TFA, provided that the declarant will subsequently accomplish all formalities in respect of the clearance of goods.

- **Prioritization of relief consignments for clearance:** through this mechanism, Customs and other border agencies give priority to the clearance of relief consignments, as established by Annex J to the Revised Kyoto Convention-Chapter 5. It is also recommended that relief consignments for export, transit, temporary admission and import are prioritized for clearance, as a matter of urgency.

- **Trusted traders schemes:** traders who are pre-audited by Customs and granted with the Authorised Economic Operator (AEO) status, as established under Article 7.7 of the WTO TFA, should benefit from accelerated procedures for the release and clearance of goods during the crisis, particularly relief consignments and essential goods. These benefits multiply when countries mutually recognise the equivalence of their AEO schemes.

- **Simplification of procedures by Customs and other border agencies:** this is a solution that can significantly accelerate cross-border trade. Risk management and post-audit controls must complement to prevent any misuse of these facilities. Accordingly, Customs

needs to bolster its risk management and post-clearance audit systems in line with paragraphs 4 and 5 of Article 7 of the WTO TFA. Simplification of goods declarations or the possibility for traders to submit provisional or incomplete goods declarations (to be complemented by missing information or documents within a specified period) is a measure that can considerably expedite clearance of goods, especially at import. Similarly, in accordance with Article 7.8.2(a) of the WTO TFA, documentation requirement can be minimized to speed up the release of expedited-shipments. To this end, Customs and other border agencies i.e. Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) or Standard agencies must work hand-in-hand to adapt requirements temporarily. For instance, Sanitary agencies could validate SPS certificates issued by exporting countries for critical supplies.

- **Acceptance of copies:** to reduce the burden of compliance for traders, border agencies may accept paper or electronic copies of the required documentation in accordance to Article 10.2 of the WTO TFA. Notwithstanding, they may reserve the right to request a posteriori the original document in case of doubts

- **Temporary admission:** Inventory of the goods together with a written undertaking to re-export (Annex B.9 of the Istanbul Convention) can replace Customs document and security for the temporary admission of medical, surgical and laboratory equipment. Countries can also accept A.T.A and CPD (Carnet de Passages en Douane) carnets in place of Customs documents and security for temporary admission.

- **Transit measures:** as measures to contain the spread of the COVID-19 may impact transit procedures (i.e. health screening test to drivers). According to Standard 3-RKC Annex J-Chapter 5, authorities of the transit country should facilitate as far as possible the carriage of relief consignments and possessions of disaster relief personnel. Thus, the transit of relief consignments should be completed without examination, except for reasons of security or in exceptional circumstances, subject to simple documentation where required. Transit coordinators, appointed under Article 11 of the WTO TFA, could play a critical role in further streamline the process.