

Nowadays, a growing proportion of goods is being transported across borders by rail, a trend that has been accelerated by COVID-19. As explained in this [post](#) published in 2020 by UNESCAP, the United Nation Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, international railway transport has a distinctive advantage with respect to other types of transport due to its reduced capacity to spread the virus. This essentially happens because railway transport uses less manpower (which justifies reduced quarantine checks on trains), differently, for example, from road transport, where congestion at border crossings exposes truck crews to frequent human interactions.

The [WCO Railway Guidance](#) mainly aims at simplifying and harmonizing customs regulations and procedures applicable to railway transportation, by encouraging the use of modern methodologies (such as risk management techniques for targeting controls on cargo and use of advance cargo notice information), as well as new technologies like railway scanners and other non-intrusive inspection (NII) equipment, including electronic seals to monitor the movement of wagons carrying goods in transit.

Although railway transport is still little used in Africa, due to the dominance of road transport (which carries about 80% of cargo in the continent), the guidance offers examples of two African countries where Customs have made significant steps in the use of modern methodologies and advanced technologies for railway operations.

The first example is referred to South African Customs, that require railway companies to submit an “advance cargo notice” for each import, export and transit operation at least one hour before arrival of the cargo train at the first railway station.

The second example is referred to Kenya, where Customs monitor the movement of rail cargo since its offloading from the vessel up to the Customs station of destination. When exiting the port, the train passes through a railway scanner, which scans all containers on-board the train. The scanned information is accessed from a centralized image analysis centre known as Scanner Command Centre and analysed on a real time basis, with the possibility for the Customs station of destination to access to the analysed image before the cargo arrives.

Importantly, the WCO Railway Guidance recommends – with specific regard to the use of combined rail-road solutions - the adoption of the eTIR International System as it can help

ensure fast and safe railway transit procedures.