

Global Forum for National Trade Facilitation Committees 2022

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Opening Remarks

Mr. Rajesh Aggarwal, Officer, International Trade Centre

Excellencies,

Heads and Members of National Trade Facilitation Committees,

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to represent the International Trade Centre (ITC) today at the opening session of the Global Forum for NTFCs. I would like to thank UNCTAD for organizing this event despite the challenging circumstances arising out of COVID 19 pandemic. We have had the privilege of collaborating with UNCTAD and UNECE in the past to organize such events . Today after a gap of two years, during which the Forum could not be organised because of unavoidable hindrances, we are again very pleased to partner with UNCTAD and contribute to this edition of the NTFC Global Forum.

Forging collaboration, coordination and partnership among trade actors is at the core of ITC's mandate and work. In the realm of trade facilitation, NTFCs play a unique role in fostering this spirit of collaboration and trust among public and private sector stakeholders responsible for, or involved in, trade facilitation reforms in their respective countries.

ITC's support to strengthening NTFCs to promote trade facilitation reforms has intensified in the recent past, as countries strive to build back their economies by promoting the ease of cross border trade, which is seen as an important pillar of post-pandemic recovery phase.

On this occasion, I would like to complement the NTFCs for the tremendous progress made by them in bringing public and private sector stakeholders to the same table to jointly discuss trade facilitation reforms. It is a great achievement that all participants in this forum should be proud of.

Second, NTFCs have enormously contributed to opening of the trade facilitation policy space to active participation of the business community and by encouraging policymakers to listen to their perspective. Businesses have a vital role to play in NTFCs, and it is of paramount importance that the private sector is involved at every step of the policymaking process – from design to implementation and monitoring of trade facilitation reforms.

Private sector's evidence-based advocacy, aided by practical experience of dealing with trade related constraints, has stirred their respective governments to accelerate implementation of trade facilitation measures, and even embark on an ambitious reform agenda- often going beyond the minimum requirements of the WTO- Trade Facilitation Agreement.

Private sector engagement has also been critical to the exercise of prioritising and sequencing trade facilitation reforms with a view to maximising the business benefit from optimal use of limited human and financial resources.

NTFCs, by enabling both the public and private sectors to be equal stakeholders in promoting trade facilitation reforms, have sparked a truly collaborative approach in many countries, which has been reflected in two major accomplishments:

- Border regulatory agencies have worked together to overcome their hitherto zealously guarded turf issues in their national governance systems.

- They have also experienced a far-reaching shift in the mind-set – from a ‘silo’ approach of their respective work and standard operating procedures, to a facilitative environment where border regulatory agencies align their individual practices to maximise the business impact of the reform measures.

ITC has witnessed this change on the ground in its project implementation work undertaken with NTFCs on Trade Facilitation Portals. Mapping and graphic depiction of dozens of steps and the complexity of many of these procedures to be gone through by businesses for import and export of food stuffs, such as, milk or wheat, astonished even the most seasoned border agency officials and made them realise the loss incurred by businesses due to high cost of navigating these avoidable complexities. This tryst with reality usually triggers NTFCs to take initiatives to simplify trade procedures *at and behind the border* through trade facilitation reforms.

Going forward, ITC’s support in implementing trade facilitation reforms is increasingly defined by imperatives of post pandemic recovery. The use of digital technologies and user-friendly tools to foster simplification of procedures to reduce the time and cost of trading across borders is gaining ground. We are now supporting many NTFCs in driving simplification reforms by leveraging digital technologies – for example, from electronic transmission of certificates of origin , to introducing online payment solutions and facilitating the adoption of virtual queue management systems at road border crossings.

Second, we are promoting regional dimension of trade facilitation reforms, to promote regional integration efforts in Africa through the continental free trade area (AfCFTA). We have already supported the establishment of the first Regional Trade Facilitation Committee in West Africa, and we are now working with other regions to achieve the same result. A road

map for regionally coordinated and harmonised implementation of trade facilitation reform measures for maximising the trade integration efforts has also been developed.

Last but of great importance, in difficult times of supply chains disruptions and major global challenges that will impact future generations, businesses in developing and the least developed countries have become conscious of the need for revolutionary reforms beyond the 'minimum' implementation of the TFA mandated requirements – and we in the ITC are not only promoting this vision but also helping the willing clients to implement such far reaching reform measures. One such initiative is **focussing on 'whole-of-supply-chain'** approach to trade facilitation reforms from the perspective of addressing the **entire spectrum of non-tariff measures** which can become barriers to trade. This means that trade facilitation principles and tools are being applied not only to customs clearance measures of revenue collection nature but also to stringent regulations dealing with product quality or technical standards and sanitary / phytosanitary standards, and fast forward to even environmental standards. We have provided support to many countries and regions, especially the East Africa, the Central European Free Trade Area and the Central Asian region, to resolve such trade obstacles using this holistic approach.

To conclude, we must be able to demonstrate that trade facilitation reforms contribute substantially to achievement of SDGs. NTFC have an increasingly important role to play in ensuring that trade facilitation reforms have a wide, long-term and far-reaching impact on societies and future generations – helping to achieve women empowerment, environmental protection and food security, among others.

I am confident that this Forum will give all of us a solid base of information, inspiring examples as well as opportunities to forge new partnerships and collaborations. Let's commend this global forum to **record progress and reward success**.

Thank you.