



**United Nations Conference  
on Trade and Development**

Distr.: General  
5 September 2023

Original: English

---

**Trade and Development Board**  
**Trade and Development Commission**  
**Multi-year Expert Meeting on Transport,  
Trade Logistics and Trade Facilitation**  
Tenth session  
Geneva, 17–19 July 2023

**Report of the Multi-year Expert Meeting on Transport,  
Trade Logistics and Trade Facilitation on its tenth session**

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, from 17 to 19 July 2023



## Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Introduction .....	3
I. Chair's summary .....	3
A. Opening plenary.....	
B. Coordination and digitalization as a means to accelerated and climate-smart trade facilitation .....	4
II. Organizational matters .....	14
A. Election of officers .....	14
B. Adoption of the agenda and organization of work.....	14
C. Adoption of the report of the meeting.....	14
 Annex	
Attendance.....	15

## Introduction

The tenth session of the Multi-year Expert Meeting on Transport, Trade Logistics and Trade Facilitation was held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, from 17 to 19 July 2023, with physical and remote participation.

### I. Chair's summary

#### A. Opening plenary

1. In her opening remarks, the Secretary-General of UNCTAD noted three pertinent areas of action in addressing disruptions to trade facilitation. First, several international legal instruments could assist countries in facilitating cross-border trade, notably the Agreement on Trade Facilitation of the World Trade Organization, along with improving the competitiveness of countries, boosting revenue collection, strengthening governance and formalizing the informal sector. The current implementation rate of the Agreement was about 77 per cent, yet there were significant gaps between country groupings; 44 per cent of the least developed countries had fully implemented the Agreement to date. The Agreement provided for important coordination mechanisms such as the establishment of national trade facilitation committees and border agency cooperation, which were important to ensure harmonized and streamlined processes for the clearance and transit of goods and that national safety and security compliance controls were undertaken. Second, the Secretary-General highlighted the role of automation and digitalization in enhancing trade facilitation, since they helped create transparency and availability and access to information, which enhanced predictability and helped traders navigate cross-border trade, for example through the customs management system of the Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA). Third, the Secretary-General stressed the relationship between trade facilitation and addressing climate change-related challenges, and the need for climate-smart solutions to reduce emissions at borders. She stated that Barbados and UNCTAD would co-host the Global Supply Chain Forum in Bridgetown in May 2024.

2. The Chair highlighted the link between economic growth and the ease of trade facilitation and border measures. Some measures of the Agreement on Trade Facilitation were easier to implement and others were challenging and required more time, capacity-building, technical assistance and appropriate financing. Implementation required political will and appropriate processes at the domestic level that focused on implementation and the monitoring of improvements.

3. The Head of the Trade Logistics Branch, in his opening remarks, stated that the United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation showed that positive results had been achieved in the implementation of trade facilitation reforms, both despite the pandemic and due to intentions to "lock in progress made during lockdown". However, many vulnerable economies, such as landlocked developing countries, the least developed countries and small island developing States, were delayed in implementation and required support. There was a need for collaborative solutions at all levels, as well as visibility, transparency and data exchanges, since institutional and technological solutions needed to come together. Finally, the Head highlighted new challenges linked to climate-friendly approaches to mitigating and reducing the impacts of global trade on the environment.

## **B. Coordination and digitalization as a means to accelerated and climate-smart trade facilitation**

(Agenda item 3)

4. Under the agenda item, the Multi-year Expert Meeting held six panel discussions.

### **1. Agreement on Trade Facilitation of the World Trade Organization: Status and implementation**

5. Panellists for the first panel discussion comprised the following: Secretary, Committee on Trade Facilitation, World Trade Organization; Project Lead, Trade Facilitation, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; and Chair, Global Trade and Investment Commission, International Chamber of Commerce.

6. The first panellist detailed the current status of the Agreement on Trade Facilitation in terms of implementation commitments. At present, 53 members were due to implement 260 measures in 2023–2024. Digital measures such as electronic single windows were among the leading five measures due to be implemented by 2024. The least implemented measures were under category C, and there were significant gaps in implementation by region. The Agreement provided for flexibility in implementation according to level of development and the possibility of extending implementation dates with, to date, 27 members having requested extensions, some due to the fact that countries did not have capacity for implementation. With regard to the shifting of categories under article 19 of the Agreement, 22 members had shifted from B to C and many more had shifted from C to B. The panellist noted that there was a new automatic reminder procedure for the implementation of measures. She stated that 33 per cent of members had notified of implementation arrangements with donors and development partners, including UNCTAD. The panellist concluded by stating that development partners needed to provide development support, particularly in the implementation of single windows, which were a vital measure for trade facilitation, and that the more engaged national trade facilitation committees were, the higher the chances were that requests for extensions would be received in time, with higher levels of awareness among committee members, as well as capacity to leverage implementation of the Agreement.

7. The second panellist highlighted the importance of public–private partnerships in trade facilitation. The Agreement on Trade Facilitation could serve as a blueprint, to help increase efficiency among companies. Business and business associations could play a pivotal role in this regard, and organizations such as the Global Alliance for Trade Facilitation supported developing countries and the least developed countries in implementing trade facilitation measures through public–private partnerships. Digitalization and standardization could help businesses through the establishment of efficient regulatory systems with clear rules and allowing them to keep up with technologies and innovations. Some bureaucratic procedures had been replaced by digital processes, particularly in electronic commerce. The panellist emphasized that trade facilitation was linked with trade competitiveness, and there was a need for the private sector to prioritize digitalization in global markets while providing granular data to the public sector, to better inform policy formulation. He concluded by highlighting the need for co-creation and trust between the public and private sectors.

8. The third panellist emphasized six key findings and results of an analysis of the trade facilitation indicators of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. First, trade facilitation reforms had contributed to about 4.5–5 per cent of the reduction in trade costs on average, and more benefits remained to be gained by fully implementing the Agreement on Trade Facilitation, while the continuous implementation of trade facilitation reforms could further reduce trade costs. Second, the impact of such reforms on trade flows had grown over time since the Agreement had been concluded. Third, reducing the trade cost impacts of trade facilitation processes continued to translate into significant trade flows, increasing effects across sectors by up to 16 per cent. Fourth, it was important to automate and streamline border processes. Fifth, improving operational practices was important for transparency and predictability. Sixth, trade facilitation processes not only enhanced existing policies but also stimulated the development of new

policies. The panellist concluded by noting the policy implications and the role of trade facilitation reforms that could enhance trade and supply chain resilience. She stressed the importance of automation and streamlining, which should focus on improving operational practices; investment in transparency and predictability measures, which remained a priority; and the need to reduce national performance gaps through increased border agency cooperation.

9. During the ensuing discussion, a representative of the UNCTAD secretariat stressed the importance of article 10.1 of the Agreement on Trade Facilitation, with regard to the simplification of trade procedures and the need for the continuous review and adaptation of trade facilitation procedures and processes, an important and ongoing effort. One expert noted the work of the Global Express Association in collecting data on trade facilitation from 121 countries, and a forthcoming tool with which to assess gaps in implementation of the Agreement and identify priorities. One delegate stated that, in Colombia, private sector involvement in the national trade facilitation committee had led to impacts on the efficiency of the committee with regard to trade facilitation through public–private partnerships; and commended UNCTAD technical cooperation in this regard. One expert noted that national trade facilitation committees relied on efficient border agency cooperation and the involvement of regional economic communities in the implementation of regional trade agreements such as the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement. Another delegate addressed cybersecurity and the risks associated with increased digitalization in trade facilitation. A representative of the UNCTAD secretariat highlighted collaboration between UNCTAD and the World Trade Organization with regard to the online availability of data from over 140 countries, including on national trade facilitation committees, and good practices in this regard.

## **2. Trade facilitation implementation in vulnerable economies**

10. Introducing the issue, a representative of the UNCTAD secretariat highlighted progress in implementing the Agreement on Trade Facilitation, noting that vulnerable economies required additional technical assistance and capacity-building in order to fully benefit from the advantages of implementation. The international donor community and development partners were encouraged to provide support, to accelerate the implementation of trade facilitation reforms, including on: ratification of the Agreement; strengthening of coordination between landlocked developing countries and transit countries; ensuring that development assistance was available for small island developing States; and enhancing coordination between the public and private sectors, particularly in vulnerable economies. Panellists for the second panel discussion comprised the following: Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission, Mongolia; Senior Programme Officer, United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (OHRLLS); Trade Policy and Aid for Trade Adviser, Permanent Delegation of the Pacific Islands Forum; Head, Small Island Developing States Unit, OHRLLS; and Deputy Permanent Representative, Chargé d’Affaires a.i., Permanent Mission, Nepal.

11. The first panellist stressed that landlocked developing countries had a population of 553 million yet represented only 1.2 per cent of global trade. Ratification of the Agreement on Trade Facilitation by all 26 landlocked developing country members of the World Trade Organization showed strong commitment. Critical challenges remained, including high transit costs, the lack of infrastructure, inadequate coordination and inefficient border management. He shared the transit-related experiences of Mongolia, noting that the national trade facilitation committee had representatives from both the public and private sectors. As at December 2022, Mongolia had implemented 79.8 per cent of the measures under the Agreement. An electronic trade readiness assessment conducted with UNCTAD support had contributed to de minimis adoption, customs automation and paperless trade.

12. The second panellist detailed progress on the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries for the Decade 2014–2024, including regional arrangements such as the Tripartite Transport and Transit Facilitation Programme of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, the East African Community and the Southern Africa Development Community. The panellist noted that landlocked developing

countries still required support in implementing many of the measures under the Agreement on Trade Facilitation, such as on single windows, trade portals and other transport facilitation measures such as on dry ports and corridors. The pandemic had highlighted the need for greater digitalization; recommendations in this regard included better collaboration with the private sector, capacity-building in reliable data collection and experience-sharing. The panellist stressed that even if landlocked developing countries fully implemented the Agreement, they still needed to depend on neighbouring countries; therefore, partnerships between landlocked developing countries and transit countries was essential.

13. The third panellist highlighted the potential of regional resource utilization to achieve more. Trade facilitation initiatives, committed to long-term improvement, included the Aid for Trade initiative, an electronic commerce strategy and a road map. The panellist stated that the Pacific electronic commerce strategy supported trade facilitation reform, a priority in the Pacific, with multiple regional initiatives built on strong public-private partnerships.

14. The fourth panellist discussed progress on the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway ahead of the fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States, to be held in Antigua and Barbuda in May 2024. The panellist highlighted trade facilitation reforms at regional and multilateral levels. Priorities among small island developing States included digital transformation, national trade facilitation committees and single windows. In addition, digitalization and greater coordination were necessary for climate change mitigation.

15. The fifth panellist emphasized the importance of implementation flexibility under the Agreement on Trade Facilitation for the least developed countries and that, since notification in this regard had been a challenge in many of these countries, assistance was required. Other challenges included those with regard to connectivity costs, the lack of infrastructure, remoteness, isolation, the lack of technical capacity, difficulty in accessing technology and difficulty in identifying needs and potential donors. The panellist recommended focusing on small and medium-sized enterprises and on vulnerable groups such as women, as well as on building resilience and domestic supply. He addressed loss and damage linked to climate vulnerability and discussed how the least developed countries might be compensated.

16. During the ensuing discussion, a representative of the UNCTAD secretariat emphasized the importance of appointing transit coordinators under the Agreement on Trade Facilitation in landlocked developing countries and transit countries; using international standards; reviewing the qualifications of vulnerable economies for official development assistance, particularly small island developing States; supporting the implementation of trade facilitation reforms; and bridging the digital divide in many vulnerable economies. One expert emphasized the importance of identifying the training needs of national trade facilitation committees and the private sector, and underscored the pivotal role of educational institutions in supporting development partner efforts in capacity-building. A representative of the UNCTAD secretariat noted the recommendation of UNCTAD to include academia among committee members and highlighted support to vulnerable economies through technical assistance and capacity-building programmes on trade facilitation, including UNCTAD tools such as the Reform Tracker, ASYCUDA customs automation and trade portals.

### **3. Trade facilitation and coordination**

17. Introducing the issue, a representative of the UNCTAD secretariat highlighted the obligation to establish a national committee on trade facilitation under article 23.2 of the Agreement on Trade Facilitation and underscored the importance of coordination in national trade facilitation reforms. Article 8 on border agency cooperation widened coordination, to include agencies among countries with common borders. The articles did not delineate the composition of committees, yet private sector involvement in coordination activities was critical in optimizing reforms. A global survey on paperless trade indicated that various levels of coordination lagged behind the level of establishment of committees. In this context, article 2.1 referred to consultations not only between agencies, but also with traders, interested parties and other stakeholders. Membership in the committees, therefore,

needed to be drawn from both the public and private sectors, particularly from entities relevant to cross-border trade. Panellists for the third panel discussion comprised the following: Representative, Permanent Secretariat, National Trade Facilitation Committee, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, Madagascar; Trade Facilitation Adviser, Division of Market Development, International Trade Centre; Chief, Trade Facilitation Unit, Trade and Investment Division, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific; and Project Officer, International Federation of Freight Forwarders Associations.

18. The first panellist underscored the pivotal role of a well-developed trade facilitation implementation road map as the basis of the sustainable and dynamic coordination of reforms instrumental in attaining various milestones, building on the well-defined membership of the public and private sectors in national trade facilitation committees. In Madagascar, trade facilitation initiatives included completion of a coordinated border management gap analysis; establishment of the customs 360 green line, a customs clearance time observatory and a trade information portal; implementation of authorized operators and electronic certificate projects on sanitary and phytosanitary standards; and deployment of the UNCTAD Reform Tracker. The latter was linked to the road map, aimed at enhancing national coordination, with the tracker critical in strengthening, automating and optimizing the collaborative structure of the Madagascar national trade facilitation committee, managing collaborative efforts to meet implementation deadlines for category C measures, monitoring impact and performance indicators under the road map and managing donor coordination activities related to trade facilitation. In reinforcing coordination activities, the committee benefited from UNCTAD capacity-building and technical assistance, such as online courses on trade facilitation, committee coaching and training. In addition, the panellist stated that the committee organized activities to raise awareness of the importance of coordination in all port and airport regions; and took an active role in coordinating activities to trace the causes of non-tariff barriers reported by the private sector through the trade obstacles alert mechanism.

19. The second panellist presented the small-scale cross-border trade tool that supported border trade facilitation coordination among microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises with regard to the trade of legitimate goods and services that eluded regulatory frameworks. Traders operating in small-scale cross-border trade were mostly from vulnerable population groups, such as women, and such trade was often categorized as informal, often falling under national *de minimis* rules. It was important to differentiate this type of trade from illegal activities. The panellist noted that the International Trade Centre coordinated with and assisted border associations in advocating for and formally supporting small-scale cross-border trade. Facilitating and formalizing such trade required “whole-of-the-border” coordination in aligning policies and regulations across border agencies, to ensure consistency and clarity for traders, collaborative risk assessment and mitigation strategies that enhanced border security and protected legitimate traders from illicit activities, strengthened border control measures through the integration of local knowledge and professional expertise and improved transparency and reduced administrative burdens, as well as fostering trust between traders and regulatory agencies.

20. The third panellist detailed results from the United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade in 2023, noting that, globally, the implementation of trade facilitation and cross-border paperless trade (e.g. electronic exchanges of certificates of origin) among small and medium-sized enterprises remained lower than general paperless trade (e.g. electronic customs declarations). Based on research by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, full cross-border paperless trade could reduce trade costs by 13–26 per cent in the region, drive the greater participation of small and medium-sized enterprises in trade, reduce tax revenue losses from illicit financial flows originating from trade misinvoicing by at least \$100 billion per year and enable the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions in the region by up to 13 million tons annually, equivalent to saving approximately 400 million trees. The Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific was an example of coordination and collaboration between countries in accelerating the implementation of such trade. The Economic and Social Commission had launched a tool to assess readiness for such trade that had been instrumental among beneficiary countries in negotiations and preparing for implementation of the Framework Agreement. Countries in other regions were

encouraged to join as observers, to engage in discussions on shaping the Framework Agreement for increasingly global coverage.

21. The fourth panellist, highlighting the importance of private sector involvement in trade facilitation and coordination, detailed results from a survey among members of the International Federation of Freight Forwarders Associations. Of the 41 per cent of members that had responded to the survey, with regard to private sector participation, 84 per cent had stated they were satisfied with interactions with national trade facilitation committees. Suggestions had been received on improving private sector interaction with such committees, such as the following: provide a dedicated private sector position on committees; ensure greater accuracy of discussion topics; follow up on and complete agenda items; ensure faster follow-up actions; change committee chairs less frequently, to not limit the completion of tasks and accountability; ensure public sector willingness to implement Agreement on Trade Facilitation measures in all relevant sectors; ensure better coordination in national administrations; and ensure that national trade facilitation committees go beyond information-sharing to be able to process changes and enact them.

#### **4. UNCTAD digital trade facilitation tools**

22. Introducing the issue, a representative of the UNCTAD secretariat discussed ASYCUDA and other digital trade facilitation tools, highlighted the evolving nature of electronic solutions and encouraged the adoption of information technology. Panellists for the fourth panel discussion comprised the following: Deputy Director, Customs Service, Ministry of Finance, Republic of Moldova; Senior Economic Affairs Officer, ASYCUDA Programme, Division on Technology and Logistics, UNCTAD; Principal Customs and Excise, Revenue Agency, Namibia; and Trade Information Portal and Facilitation Value Add Services Practitioner, Trade Network Agency, Kenya.

23. The first panellist discussed the policy in the Republic of Moldova for establishing trade relations with the European Union and aligning with European Union requirements. He emphasized the role of the Customs Service in facilitating the export of agricultural goods from Ukraine and the movement of humanitarian aid. The panellist detailed a two-phase project implemented with UNCTAD; phase one focused on digitalizing the pre-arrival processing of personal consignments and phase two aimed at automating decision management processes, enhancing customs clearance transparency through a trade dashboard and promoting a paperless environment for greater efficiency. The strategic framework for customs cooperation with the European Union was critical in enhancing transit and facilitating trade between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union, including the transit of goods from Ukraine to the European Union. Aligned with national requirements and with specifications for the new computerized transit system, the focus was on enhancing customs supervision and monitoring, along with supporting digitalization projects on cross-border electronic commerce. Overall, the priority was to strengthen customs operations through digitalization and cooperation, to facilitate trade between the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and the European Union.

24. The second panellist detailed the role of ASYCUDA in building single electronic windows for trade. Noting the importance of the Agreement on Trade Facilitation, he discussed the single window implementation strategy, emphasizing stakeholder involvement, top-down dedication, financial resources, the engagement of business, information technology and managerial experience. In addition, he highlighted benefits such as enhanced government revenue and security, knowledge transfer, addressing corruption and improved trade through online information access, as well as environmental benefits.

25. The third panellist highlighted how UNCTAD technical assistance had played a significant role in supporting Namibia, including in the use of the UNCTAD Reform Tracker to monitor progress in implementing the Agreement on Trade Facilitation. She stated that Namibia had made notable achievements and progress in implementation, such as through the launch of a time-release study and the signing by customs administrations of a mutual recognition agreement. The tracker has provided benefits such as timely monitoring, task reminders and easy access to reports, and Namibia continued to use it effectively to accelerate implementation and coordinate efforts among stakeholders.



Finally, the panellist highlighted the importance of the tracker and effective government structures in facilitating implementation of the Agreement and achieving trade facilitation goals.

26. The fourth panellist stressed the importance in Kenya of the UNCTAD-developed trade information portal, which served as a one-stop shop for national information on cross-border trade, aiding businesses in overcoming trade barriers related to documentation. She noted that the portal complemented business process automation in Kenya, and prioritized transparency and accountability through consistent data review. Collaboration with other institutions ensured that published information was aligned. The panellist stressed achievements in the use of the portal, such as procedures mapped for various sectors and commodities, leading to cost and time reductions, including of costs imposed on traders that were not supported by law. Challenges in its use related to institutional arrangements, sustainability and coordination among government agencies. Success factors included effective government structures, designated contacts of institutions, user trust, private sector collaboration and regular dissemination and communications. Finally, the panellist noted the challenge of limited government funding, which covered basic implementation and maintenance, with further initiatives requiring greater financial assistance. In this regard, Kenya had approached development partners, obtaining aid such as UNCTAD technical support, but additional funding was required for certain improvements, including on automation and stakeholder feedback integration.

27. During the ensuing discussion, panellists, in response to a question on whether partial implementation could be considered as fulfilling implementation according to notified deadlines, noted that, while there was flexibility with regard to deadline extensions under the Agreement on Trade Facilitation, Governments should aim for full implementation by notified deadlines and, in this regard, underlined the importance of exchanging experiences and addressing obstacles. One delegate noted the impact of the pandemic on single window deployment, which had, in some cases, led to increased support for single windows and hastened automation. One panellist, with regard to managing a large number of digitalization projects with limited resources, noted that, in the Republic of Moldova, the focus was on simplifying and digitalizing customs procedures while improving infrastructure, since the latter was one of the main challenges, and the Republic of Moldova was working with international partners such as UNCTAD through capacity-building, risk analysis and border management, to ensure the smooth flow of goods. One delegate detailed initiatives in Albania on a new computerized transit system in line with European Union requirements and an integrated tariff management system, and highlighted the importance of international cooperation and working with organizations such as UNCTAD, emphasizing the role of ASYCUDA in enabling paperless customs and communications, as well as the Asyhub project, the goal of which was to streamline the processing of maritime cargo, provide access to larger data pools for risk analysis, enable the better targeting of shipments and lead to richer information for informed risk assessment and more effective decision-making; the delegate also emphasized the value of stakeholder involvement, the role of automation in implementing single windows and the benefits gained from the new projects in enhancing trade facilitation.

## **5. Trade facilitation and emerging issues**

28. Introducing the issue, a representative of the UNCTAD secretariat noted the four topics to be addressed during the discussion: Agreement on Trade Facilitation, including issues beyond its original scope; significance of climate-smart trade and transport facilitation in addressing climate-related issues; corridor performance and sustainable corridors; and impact of electronic bills of lading. Panellists for the fifth panel discussion comprised the following: Chair, Committee on Trade Facilitation, World Trade Organization; Economic Affairs Officer, Trade Facilitation Section, Trade Logistics Branch, Division on Technology and Logistics, UNCTAD; Chief, Transport Section, Trade Logistics Branch, Division on Technology and Logistics, UNCTAD; Chief, Policy and Legislation Section, Trade Logistics Branch, Division on Technology and Logistics, UNCTAD.

29. The first panellist stressed the need to adapt trade facilitation to changing international trade scenarios and address implementation challenges in countries, particularly concerning technical assistance gaps. Trade facilitation was recognized as a valuable tool in addressing global issues such as environmental concerns and disaster preparedness, as well as ensuring resilient value chains and women's economic empowerment. Opportunities lay in areas such as digitalization, electronic trade and supporting microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises. At the national level, national trade facilitation committees had gathered valuable experiences and feedback, and the panellist suggested that the Agreement on Trade Facilitation "plus" could address particular country needs. Finally, he emphasized the significance of investment facilitation in addressing infrastructure constraints related to trade facilitation.

30. The second panellist discussed climate-smart trade facilitation. Given the substantial carbon dioxide emissions from the trade and transport of goods, the goal was to transform trade practices and mitigate and reduce environmental impacts. Climate-smart trade facilitation centred on optimizing procedures to minimize time, costs and emissions. Through harmonization, simplification, standardization and modernization, trade procedures could become more efficient and environmentally friendly. Technology, particularly digitalization initiatives such as single windows and trade information portals, was critical in streamlining processes, minimizing paperwork and promoting automation. The panellist proposed policy recommendations such as investing in digitalization, promoting system interoperability and preparing for global trade instruments addressing environmental issues. UNCTAD, with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and the United Nations Environment Programme, had conducted analysis in this field, and would further support countries through additional research and assistance, including on simplifying trade facilitation, fostering public-private partnerships and implementing digital solutions such as the UNCTAD Reform Tracker, ASYCUDA and trade information portals.

31. The third panellist discussed the critical role of corridors in integrating transport and trade facilitation measures, linking physical infrastructure development with soft infrastructure, including trade facilitation. Successful corridor development required an institutional framework for governance and management, with efficiency and cost reduction as key drivers. Climate-smart trade facilitation was essential in reducing time and energy consumption, and transport observatories along corridors helped monitor performance and identify key performance indicators. The panellist stated that UNCTAD played a significant role in enhancing institutional capacity; developing corridors through a management approach and regulatory framework; promoting sustainability, inclusiveness and gender considerations; and supporting infrastructure development and services through public-private partnerships. Finally, the panellist provided examples of UNCTAD assistance in establishing sustainable corridors, such as the Trans-Saharan Road Corridor and the Northern Corridor and Central Corridor in East Africa.

32. The fourth panellist detailed legal developments related to an electronic equivalent to a negotiable bill of lading, a key document in international trade. Global carriers had committed to significantly increasing the use of electronic bills of lading, yet in most jurisdictions, they did not yet benefit from legal recognition as fully equivalent to paper-based documents. In the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, for example, a draft bill had been prepared on this issue; implementation could increase the use of electronic bills of lading, significantly reducing problems related to costly delays in the transmission of documents and at ports, which had been exacerbated during the pandemic. Transitioning from the use of paper-based documents could also contribute to environmental sustainability by reducing delays and the associated greenhouse gas emissions. The United Nations Commission on International Trade Law was working on a new legal instrument on negotiable multimodal transport documents, aimed at establishing the legal recognition of such documents, similar to marine negotiable bills of lading. It was important to ensure that a final consignee in a cargo claim against a multimodal transport operator would be protected by mandatory minimum standards of carrier liability, as currently in place for claims under negotiable bills of lading. The panellist encouraged all stakeholders to actively participate in the deliberations, and emphasized the need to

enhance systems interoperability and simplify trading processes for the ecofriendly commercialization of goods.

33. During the ensuing discussion, one expert highlighted an information exchange proposal from Colombia. One panellist highlighted the importance of exploring emerging topics, understanding their linkages with trade facilitation and recognizing the limitations of the Agreement on Trade Facilitation. A representative of the UNCTAD secretariat noted the importance of taking into account emissions associated with computing and digital processes, and the importance of ensuring the physical integrity of transport infrastructure under climate change through effective adaptation action, including funding and capacity-building. The Chair suggested creating a simple tool for countries in order to measure the tangible benefits of investments, and stressed the need for data and evidence to drive action in this area.

## **6. The way forward**

34. At the final informal meeting of the session, a representative of the UNCTAD secretariat highlighted three points linking the session to the forthcoming Global Supply Chain Forum. First, the importance of supply chain resilience, as supply chain disruptions could negatively impact the global economy, particularly among small island developing States, and it was important to learn from recent crises that the mismatch between supply and demand could lead to significant interruptions and high freight rates. Second, climate change adaptation and mitigation, as disruptions associated with climate change were greater than supply chain disruptions, and there was a need to invest in climate change mitigation and adaptation, significantly reducing emissions from shipping; UNCTAD, with the International Maritime Organization was assessing the impact of mitigation and helping countries in addressing the impacts and costs of mitigation through trade facilitation solutions and measures. Third, digital solutions, which could help countries, such as single windows, customs automation, trade information portals, digital signatures and smart ports.

35. In addition, a representative of the UNCTAD secretariat briefed participants on the Global Supply Chain Forum, which responded to the Bridgetown initiative and the need, emphasized by Barbados at the fifteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, to address the multiple disruptions to global supply chains due to recent crises and the significant impacts on developing countries, as well as the urgent need for policy actions to enhance preparedness and response in times of crisis. The three objectives of the Global Supply Chain Forum were knowledge transfer, with a focus on solutions; synergy creation, through networking and exchanges of best practices and case studies; and matchmaking for cooperation, to meet the needs of developing countries. High-level sessions would be structured under four main themes, namely, transport and logistics resilience; climate change and the energy transition; digitalization and regionalism; and national trade facilitation committees. Particular focus would be placed on small island developing States and the empowerment of women in supply chains. Outcomes of the forum would provide inputs for subsequent meetings and in creating new capacity-building programmes.

36. During the ensuing discussion, the Chair of the session highlighted that the Global Supply Chain Forum would provide an opportunity to discuss how to trade, produce and consume better and smarter, and to look at trade in a more resilient manner. A few delegates commended knowledge-sharing during the session. One delegate highlighted that Mexico aimed to detail, at the Forum, progress achieved on a supply chain study of the automobile industry, related to electric vehicles. One delegate noted the need for additional UNCTAD technical assistance in Togo on trade information portals, resource mobilization strategies for the implementation of category C measures and capacity-building for the national trade facilitation committee and, in this regard, a representative of the secretariat noted that UNCTAD was providing electronic-learning training sessions on trade facilitation in the Economic Community of West African States, including in Togo, in collaboration with the World Bank; had provided assistance in the categorization of commitments under the Agreement on Trade Facilitation; and could provide assistance in the implementation of a trade information portal. The Chair of the session highlighted that the sustainability of national trade facilitation committees was a common issue in many

countries. One delegate, noting support provided by UNCTAD in the Republic of Moldova on solutions for automation, digitalization and modernization, stated that further assistance, in enhancing digitalization, automation and modernization in the Customs Service, would be welcome. A representative of the UNCTAD secretariat stressed the significant progress made in the Republic of Moldova with regard to ASYCUDA, and that UNCTAD online tools and training followed an inter-agency coordination approach that had assisted in the successful work of national trade facilitation committees.

37. The Chair presented six key conclusions from the discussions. First, trade facilitation reforms were progressing steadily; implementation of the Agreement on Trade Facilitation had contributed to an increase in global trade flows of 1.17 per cent and gross domestic product gains of 0.12 per cent. The positive development in implementation among all country groups was shown in the overall increase in the implementation rate of general and digital trade facilitation measures, by over 6 percentage points in 2021–2023, as noted through the United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation. However, the socioeconomic benefits of trade facilitation were not being fully reaped and there was a need to further reinforce efforts to support vulnerable economies with low implementation rates. In particular, there was a need to ensure that support for regional implementation was not negatively affected by rules on access to official development assistance that might prevent countries in a region from benefiting from support. Finally, progress in trade facilitation reforms and performance had been made during the pandemic, whereby processes had slowed during the pandemic yet the benefits of implementation had also been demonstrated, particularly with regard to digitalization, in ensuring frictionless trade, and motivation for important reforms had been engendered that, in future, could benefit in particular the facilitation of humanitarian and relief consignments. Second, the private sector was a critical stakeholder and needed to be considered a key partner in implementing successful trade facilitation reforms resulting in efficient, transparent and predictable cross-border trade procedures, with the goal of reducing transaction costs and securing borders. Trade facilitation implementation needed to be focused on a win-win philosophy built on a public–private partnership approach that required active and sustained engagement by both the public and private sectors, including with regard to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Trade facilitation needed to benefit all parts of the private sector, and the Agreement on Trade Facilitation needed to work for microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises, the drivers of economic development in many economies. In addition, as small-scale cross-border traders and women traders in many developing countries and the least developed countries accounted for over 50 per cent of trade volumes in cross-border trade and for a large share of national employment, designing and implementing procedures for these traders was critical, through simplified trade regimes that facilitated their economic activities and also strengthened aspects of border control, risk management and transparency. Finally, such steps could also create opportunities at borders to further human development objectives. Third, coordination through public–private partnerships was fundamental in achieving progress in trade facilitation, to further streamline global supply and value chains and fully reap the socioeconomic benefits of international trade in all countries and among both the public and private sectors, including representatives of small cross-border traders, and should be considered a priority at all stages of cross-border trade. At the local level, coordination at clearing stations and border crossings was essential and, in this regard, the establishment of border committees and joint cross-border committees could be promoted, and capacity-building and technical assistance were essential in making border procedures more efficient. At the national level, participants had noted that for national trade facilitation committees to succeed in facilitating the coordination and implementation of trade facilitation reforms, the participation of all relevant stakeholders was required, from both the public and private sectors, and should be linked to ground-level activities at borders. Successful committees also depended on high-level political support and policy guidance and needed to be supported in efficiently implementing their mandates; in developing countries and the least developed countries, this could imply the need for assistance from the international donor and development community. At the regional level, coordination was required to assist in more efficient cross-border trade and regional integration. Several regional communities had established regional trade facilitation committees that focused on defining and implementing common approaches to trade facilitation and such committees

needed to work closely with national committees, to ensure complementary coordination efforts, and the private sector was a critical partner of such committees. At the international level, implementation of the Agreement on Trade Facilitation was critical to the growth of international trade and economic development. Participants had encouraged all World Trade Organization members to ratify the Agreement, and observers and other countries to observe the provisions to the extent possible. Countries needed to accelerate implementation of the Agreement; donors and development partners needed to accelerate assistance to vulnerable economies; and it was equally important to implement other international agreements and standards supporting international trade, with donors and development partners assisting in such efforts. With regard to corridors, transit and trans-shipment partnerships, targeted partnerships and coordination with all relevant stakeholders had proved important and efficient in terms of impact and value for money when investing in related solutions. Finally, participants had agreed that targeted efforts, capacity-building and technical assistance in such areas needed to be further encouraged and supported. Fourth, recent supply chain crises had shown that automation and digitalization were key elements in further facilitating trade and securing continuous flows along resilient global supply and value chains. Participants had underscored the importance of automated customs clearance and trade facilitation solutions such as ASYCUDA, particularly among developing countries and the least developed countries. In addition, the digitalization of trade facilitation procedures was critical, to fully reap the benefits of cross-border electronic commerce. Participants had underscored that the use of trade information portals contributed to increasing transparency and predictability for traders by making information available in accordance with requirements under the Agreement, and that insights gained through use of the portals could assist countries in the simplification of cross-border trade procedures, aimed at reducing transaction costs. Participants had noted progress made in Asia and the Pacific on establishing a legal framework for cross-border paperless trade; noted practical solutions for transit data exchange exchanges, such as the Interconnected System for the Management of Goods in Transit (SIGMAT) implemented in countries in West Africa; and encouraged efforts to be made to implement such solutions globally, with a view to eliminating repetitive data capture along a supply chain. Finally, participants had encouraged further efforts to be made to speed up the implementation of other electronic solutions to facilitate international trade, such as electronic bills of lading. Fifth, international transport was an important contributor to addressing climate change, and efficient global value chains could help achieve the efficient allocation of resources, including with regard to the minimization of emissions in globalized production processes. Participants had noted that trade facilitation, mainly through automation and digitalization, could contribute to reducing emissions. Finally, participants had noted that UNCTAD and other international partners could further pursue work on researching and implementing climate-smart trade facilitation solutions, and support developing countries and the least developed countries with capacity-building and technical assistance in monitoring and measuring, as well as in implementing solutions to meet international requirements. Sixth, issues raised during discussions had served to highlight that further exchanges and engagement were needed with regard to the trade facilitation 2.0 agenda and how trade facilitation implementation could assist in improving integrated trade logistics, exploring how global supply and value chains could become resilient and better serve the needs of, in particular, developing countries and the least developed countries, in order for these economies to further integrate into international trade and drive economic development for their populations. Having trade lead efforts towards development for all was attainable through international instruments and available tools and with the new reality that had followed the recent supply chain crisis. Finally, participants had commended the joint organization by Barbados and UNCTAD of the Global Supply Chain Forum, to be held in Bridgetown in May 2024, encouraged the international community to participate and encouraged international donors and development partners to assist in the participation of delegates from developing countries and the least developed countries.

## **II. Organizational matters**

### **A. Election of officers**

(Agenda item 1)

38. At its opening plenary meeting on 17 July 2023, the Multi-year Expert Meeting on Transport, Trade Logistics and Trade Facilitation elected Mr. Matthew Wilson (Barbados) as its Chair and Mr. Christopher O'Toole (Canada) as its Vice-Chair-cum-Rapporteur.

### **B. Adoption of the agenda and organization of work**

(Agenda item 2)

39. Also at its opening plenary meeting, the Multi-year Expert Meeting on Transport, Trade Logistics and Trade Facilitation decided to adopt the provisional agenda for the session, as contained in document TD/B/C.I/MEM.7/28. The agenda was thus as follows:

1. Election of officers.
2. Adoption of the agenda and organization of work.
3. Coordination and digitalization as a means to accelerated and climate-smart trade facilitation.
4. Adoption of the report of the meeting.

### **C. Adoption of the report of the meeting**

(Agenda item 4)

40. At its closing plenary meeting on 19 July 2023, the Multi-year Expert Meeting on Transport, Trade Logistics and Trade Facilitation authorized the Vice-Chair-cum-Rapporteur, under the authority of the Chair, to finalize the report after the conclusion of the session.

## Annex

### Attendance\*

1. Representatives of the following States members of the Conference attended the session:

Albania	Mongolia
Angola	Morocco
Armenia	Namibia
Bahamas	Nepal
Brazil	Nicaragua
Cambodia	Nigeria
Cameroon	Pakistan
Congo	Panama
Costa Rica	Peru
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Republic of Moldova
Dominican Republic	Russian Federation
Ecuador	Sierra Leone
Ethiopia	South Africa
Fiji	Sri Lanka
Haiti	Togo
India	Trinidad and Tobago
Indonesia	Türkiye
Kenya	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
Kyrgyzstan	Uruguay
Lesotho	Viet Nam
Madagascar	Zambia
Malawi	Zimbabwe
Mexico	

2. The following intergovernmental organizations were represented at the session:

Commonwealth Secretariat  
European Union  
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development  
Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat  
Union of African Shippers' Councils

3. The following United Nations organs, bodies and programmes were represented at the session:

Department of Economic and Social Affairs  
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific  
International Trade Centre  
Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries,  
Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States

4. The following specialized agencies and related organizations were represented at the session:

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations  
World Trade Organization

---

\* This attendance list contains registered participants. For the list of participants, see TD/B/C.I/MEM.7/INF.10.

5. The following non-governmental organizations were represented at the session:

*General category*

Global Express Association

International Federation of Freight Forwarders Associations

Village Suisse ONG

---