

**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

Committee on Trade Policies in the States Members of the Economic  
and Social Commission for Western Asia

Second session

Online, 15-16 September 2021

Item 9 of the provisional agenda

**Global survey on trade facilitation measures****Summary**

The present document provides an overview of the outcomes of the Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation conducted by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in partnership with the other four United Nations regional commissions. The survey provides information on the level of implementation of trade facilitation measures, particularly paperless trade, in addition to best practices during times of crisis and pandemic.

The survey focuses on the following issues: overall implementation of trade facilitation measures in the Arab region; progress achieved between 2019 and 2021; implementation of different groups of trade facilitation measures; trade facilitation in times of crisis and pandemic; and conclusion and the way forward. It shows that significant progress has been achieved in the Arab region in implementing transparency measures, formalities and institutional arrangements, whereas the implementation of paperless trade and trade finance facilitation remains low, particularly measures requiring electronic application or electronic exchange of information.

The Committee on Trade Policies in the States Members of ESCWA is invited to review the results of the survey and discuss ways to further facilitate trade in the Arab region.

## Contents

|   | <i>Paragraphs</i> | <i>Page</i> |
|---|-------------------|-------------|
| Introduction .....  | 1-4               | 3           |
| <i>Chapter</i>  |                   |             |
| <b>I. Overall Implementation of trade facilitation measures in the Arab region....</b>          | 5-6               | 3           |
| <b>II. Progress in implementing trade facilitation measures<br/>between 2019 and 2021 .....</b> | 7-8               | 4           |
| <b>III. Implementation of different groups of trade facilitation measures .....</b>             | 9-12              | 5           |
| <b>IV. Trade facilitation in times of crisis and pandemic .....</b>                             | 13                | 9           |
| <b>V. Way forward.....</b>  | 14                | 9           |
| <b>VI. Conclusion.....</b>  | 15-17             | 10          |

## Introduction

1. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and the other four regional commissions of the United Nations monitor progress in the implementation of digital and sustainable trade facilitation measures, including the Trade Facilitations Agreement of the World Trade Organization (WTO TFA), by conducting a global survey using a questionnaire sent to numerous experts and officials from member States, including non-WTO members. This effort has been undertaken since 2015 and has yielded [three global reports](#) to date, with the 2021 report underway.
2. Reducing both tariffs and non-tariff costs is essential to facilitating trade. Bureaucratic procedures and documentation, and inappropriate infrastructure and logistics are cumbersome non-tariff barriers that impede trade. By mid-July 2021, 154 WTO members had ratified WTO TFA, among which were 11 Arab States.<sup>1</sup> Enforcing trade facilitation measures is essential to enhancing trading across borders, and to optimizing the benefits of trade as an engine for sustainable growth.
3. The 2021 United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation covers 58 trade facilitation measures categorized in five groups, and extends beyond the final list of commitments included in WTO TFA. The first group covers “general trade facilitation measures” and includes three subgroups focusing on: transparency measures, formalities, and institutional cooperation and arrangement. The second group comprises “digital trade facilitation” measures and includes two subgroups: paperless trade, and cross-border paperless trade. The third group consists of “sustainable trade facilitation measures” and includes four subgroups: transit facilitation measures, trade facilitation for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), agricultural trade facilitation, and women in trade facilitation. The fourth group includes “trade finance facilitation measures”, and the fifth is a newly added group covering “trade facilitation in times of crisis”.<sup>2</sup>
4. ESCWA has sent the questionnaire to over 50 experts from government agencies, the private sector and academia from the 22 Arab countries. The present document sets out the results received from 14 Arab countries<sup>3</sup> from four income groups: Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, middle-income countries (MICs), countries in conflict (CICs), and least developed countries (LDCs).<sup>4</sup> Responses were verified by ESCWA members. Whenever the respondent did not provide enough supporting evidence, ESCWA staff members were identified supporting evidence in line with the rating provided. Answers were rated as: fully implemented measure (rating 3), partially implemented measure (rating 2), pilot stage implementation (rating 1), not implemented (rating 0), don’t know (rating 0).

### I. Overall implementation of trade facilitation measures in the Arab region

5. Focusing on the core 34 measures related to general and digital trade facilitation measures, the overall implementation rate in the Arab region was 54 per cent in 2021. Saudi Arabia was the biggest performer with an overall implementation rate of 85 per cent, followed by Morocco with 83 per cent, and Bahrain and Tunisia with 72 per cent each (figure 1). These countries have embarked on a series of reforms that include upgrading their port infrastructure, (Jeddah Port in Saudi Arabia, and Tangier Port in Morocco), enhancing the work of trade single window (Bahrain and Saudi Arabia), introducing e-payment system to process port fees

---

<sup>1</sup> Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.

<sup>2</sup> The complete survey instrument is available at <https://untsurvey.org>.

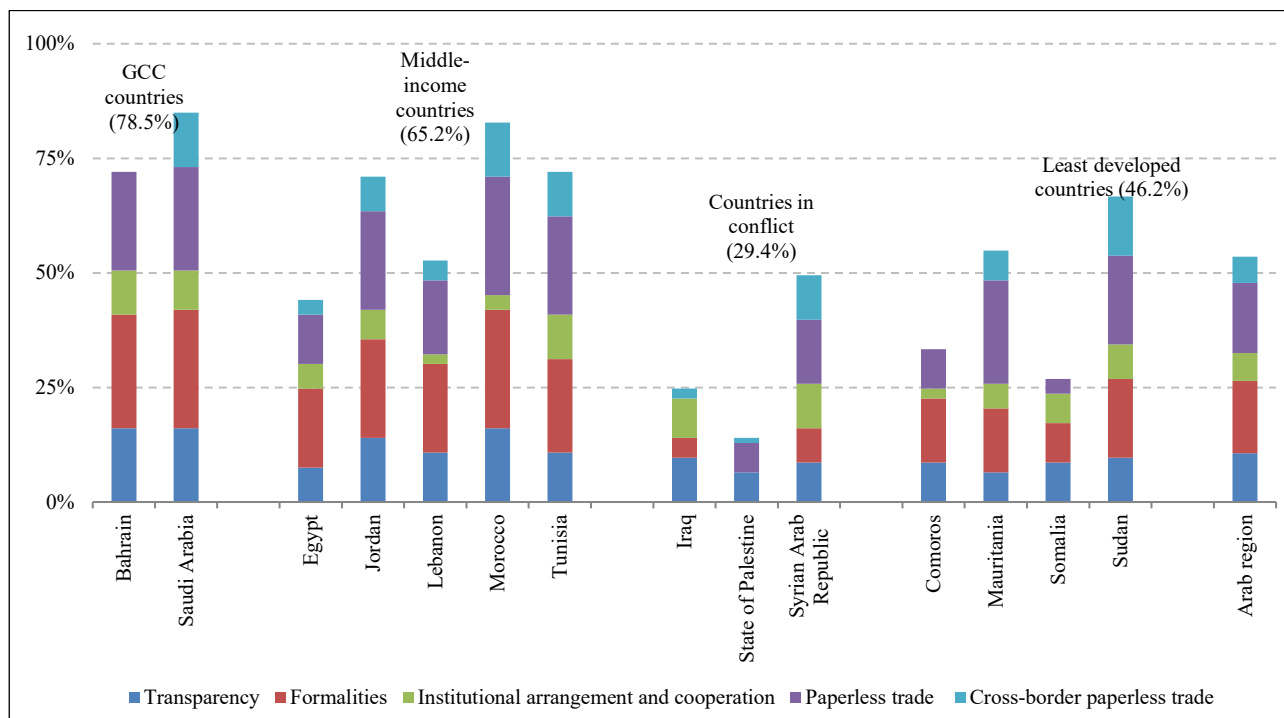
<sup>3</sup> In 2021, 10 countries responded to the survey, namely: Bahrain, the Comoros, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Somalia and the Sudan. The other four countries, namely Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia, responded in 2019 and ESCWA, based on desk research, updated their records according to new measures and trade facilitation commitments.

<sup>4</sup> GCC responding countries are Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. MICs are Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia. CICs are Iraq, the State of Palestine and the Syrian Arab Republic. LDCs are the Comoros, Mauritania, Somalia and the Sudan.

(Morocco), and deploying new scanners to expedite imports and exports (Bahrain).<sup>5</sup> Egypt is still facing challenges in dealing with complex procedures to obtain and process documents, while Tunisia suffers from inadequate terminal space.<sup>6</sup>

6. CICs and LDCs are still lagging behind in terms of implementing trade facilitation measures, except for the Sudan whose implementation rate was around 67 per cent and Mauritania at 55 per cent. These two subregions are still facing significant administrative inefficiencies that make trading across borders more difficult. Iraq and the State of Palestine and Iraq had the lowest two performances, with an implementation rate of 25 and 14 per cent, respectively.

**Figure 1. Overall implementation of trade facilitation measures in 14 Arab countries, 2021**  
(Percentage)



Source: United Nations, Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, 2021.

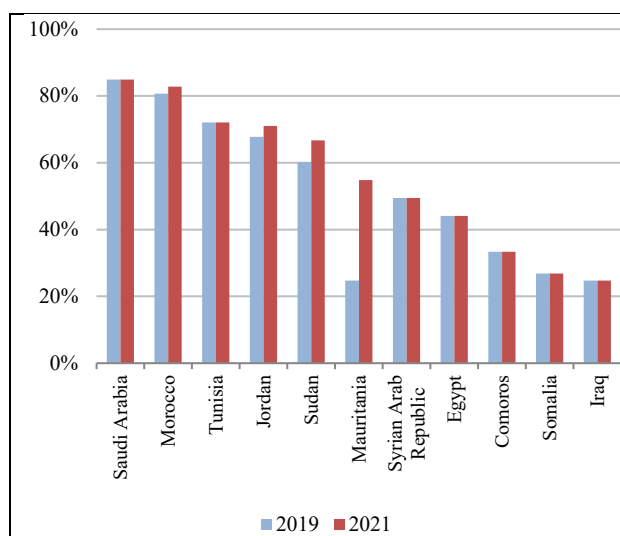
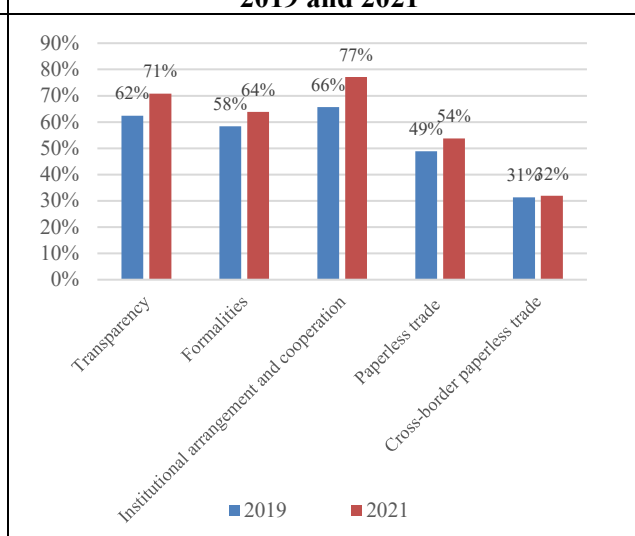
## II. Progress in implementing trade facilitation measures between 2019 and 2021

7. Focusing on the performance of 11 Arab countries<sup>7</sup> whose responses are available for both the 2019 and 2021 trade facilitation surveys, overall performance improved by four percentage points, reaching 57 per cent in 2021. This progress was mainly driven by improvements in institutional arrangement and cooperation (increased by 11 percentage points) and formalities (increased by 9 percentage points). The implementation of paperless and cross-border trade is still relatively weak and witnessed the lowest progress, particularly measures requiring the electronic application or electronic exchange of information. The greatest improvement took place in Mauritania, where overall implementation increased from 25 per cent in 2019 to 55 per cent in 2021.

<sup>5</sup> World Bank, *Doing Business 2020: Region Profile of Middle East and North Africa*, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> World Bank, *Doing Business 2019: Region Profile of the Arab World*, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Results from only 11 countries are available for both 2017 and 2019, namely the Comoros, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia.

**Figure 2. Trade facilitation implementation by Arab country, 2019 and 2021****Figure 3. Implementation of different groups of trade facilitation measures in Arab region, 2019 and 2021**

Source: United Nations, Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, 2021.

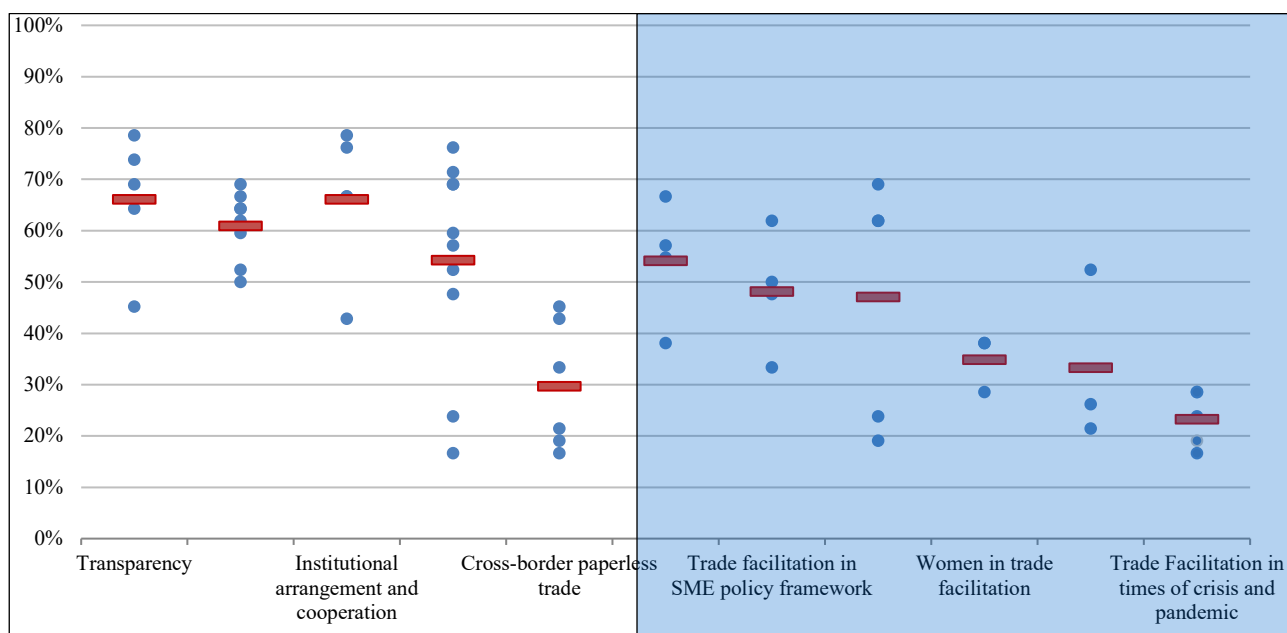
8. In terms of individual country performance, Mauritania recorded the largest progress in implementing trade facilitation measures, with its implementation rate increasing from 25 per cent in 2019 to 55 per cent in 2021. Mauritania made significant progress in all categories, notably by establishing an online portal for trade, and putting in place a barcode for products as a step forward for digitalizing procedures. In the Sudan, the implementation rate increased from 60 per cent in 2019 to 67 per cent in 2021, driven by improvements in measures related to paperless trade and cross-border paperless trade. In Jordan, the implementation rate increased from 68 per cent in 2019 to 71 per cent in 2021, driven by improvements in measures related to formalities and paperless trade, including the expansion of the national trade window which reduced costs and the time required to release goods and to accept electronic submission of customs declarations, trade permits, and trade cargo manifests.

### III. Implementation of different groups of trade facilitation measures

9. Looking at all 58 trade facilitation measures, on average, transparency measures, formalities and institutional arrangement and cooperation are the most implemented categories in the Arab region, with an average implementation rate between 61 and 66 per cent (figure 4 and the table). “Publication of existing import-export regulations on the Internet”; “stakeholders’ consultation on new draft regulations (prior to their finalization)”; and “having an Independent appeal mechanism” were the most implemented three measures, with around 93 per cent of countries implementing these measures to different extents (pilot stage to full implementation).

10. The Arab region is lagging behind in terms of cross-border paperless trade and trade facilitation in times of crisis and pandemic. The performance of Arab countries was the lowest in these two categories, with an average implementation rate between 23 and 30 per cent. Several measures need to be implemented in these two categories to ensure sustainability and to maximize the benefits of trade facilitation. All the measures related to electronic exchange of documents and certificates were not fully implemented by any country, namely electronic application for customs refunds; electronic exchange of sanitary and phyto-sanitary certificates; and electronic exchange of certificates of origin. The slow implementation of these measures adds a non-tariff burden on trade. Furthermore, the implementation of measures related to supporting women traders, SMEs and trade finance facilitation have low implementation rates. Enforcing the implementation of these measures not only contributes to trade facilitation, but also increases inclusiveness and the impact of trade on development.

**Figure 4. Implementation of different groups of trade facilitation measures:  
Arab countries average, 2021**



Source: United Nations, Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, 2021.

Note: The red lines indicate the regional average in each category, and the blue dots refer to performance in individual measures within each category.

#### Most and least implemented measures in the Arab region, 2021

| Category     | Most implemented (% of countries)   |   | Least implemented (% of countries)   |   |
|--------------|---|---|--|---|
|              | Measure   | Implemented fully, partially and on a pilot basis (%)/full implementation (%) | Measure  | Implemented fully, partially and on a pilot basis (%)/full implementation (%) |
| Transparency | Publication of existing import-export regulations on the internet                 | 92.9/35.7   | Advance publication/notification of new trade-related regulations before their implementation            | 57.1/28.6   |
|              | Stakeholders' consultation on new draft regulations (prior to their finalization) | 92.9/42.9   |  |   |
|              | Independent appeal mechanism  | 92.9/50.0   |  |   |
| Formalities  | Establishment and publication of average release times                            | 85.7/28.6   | Trade facilitation measures for authorized operators   | 71.4/42.9   |
|              | Post-clearance audits   | 85.7/35.7   | Acceptance of copies of original supporting documents required for import, export or transit formalities | 64.3/35.7   |

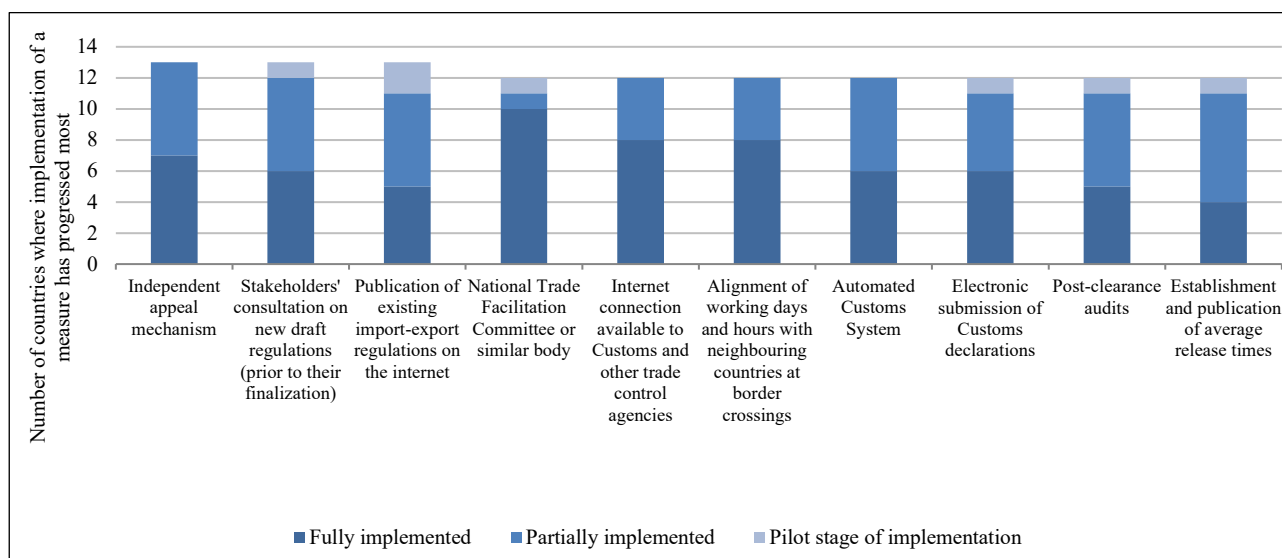
| Category                                   | Most implemented (% of countries)   |   | Least implemented (% of countries)   |   |
|--|---|---|--|---|
|  | Measure   | Implemented fully, partially and on a pilot basis (%)/full implementation (%) | Measure  | Implemented fully, partially and on a pilot basis (%)/full implementation (%) |
| Institutional arrangement and cooperation  | National trade facilitation committee or similar body                                   | 85.7/71.4   | Government agencies delegating controls to customs authorities   | 50.0/28.6   |
| Paperless trade                            | Electronic submission of customs declarations   | 85.7/42.9   | Electronic application for customs refunds   | 28.6/0.0  |
|  | Internet connection available to customs and other trade control agencies               | 85.7/57.1   |  |   |
|  | Automated customs system  | 85.7/42.9   |  |   |
| Cross-border paperless trade               | Electronic exchange of customs declarations   | 71.4/7.1  | Electronic exchange of sanitary and phyto-sanitary certificates  | 28.6/0.0  |
|  |   |   | Recognized certification authority   | 28.6/14.3   |
|  |   |   | Electronic exchange of certificates of origin  | 28.6/0.0  |
| Transit facilitation                       | Transit facilitation agreement(s)   | 71.4/57.1   | Supporting pre-arrival processing for transit facilitation   | 42.9/28.6   |
| Trade facilitation in SME policy framework | SMEs in national trade facilitation committee   | 71.4/14.3   | Other special measures for SMEs  | 35.7/7.1  |
|  | Trade-related information measures for SMEs   | 78.6/28.6   |  |   |
| Trade facilitation and agriculture trade   | Testing and laboratory facilities available to meet SPS of main trading partners        | 78.6/42.9   | Electronic application and issuance of SPS certificates  | 35.7/7.1  |
|  | Special treatment for perishable goods  | 78.6/50.0   |  |   |
| Women in trade facilitation                | Trade facilitation policy/strategy incorporates special consideration of female traders | 57.1/14.3   | Female membership in the national trade facilitation committee   | 42.9/14.3   |
|  | Trade facilitation measures aimed at female traders                                     | 50.0/14.3   |  |   |
| Trade finance facilitation                 | Variety of trade finance services available   | 64.3/28.6   | Customs and/or other regulatory authorities engaged in blockchain-based supply chain projects covering trade finance | 35.7/14.3   |

| Category   | Most implemented (% of countries)  |   | Least implemented (% of countries)                            |   |
|--|--|---|---|---|
|  | Measure  | Implemented fully, partially and on a pilot basis (%)/full implementation (%) | Measure   | Implemented fully, partially and on a pilot basis (%)/full implementation (%) |
| Trade facilitation in times of crisis and pandemic | An agency available to manage trade facilitation measures in times of crises and emergencies | 35.7/14.3   | Preparedness of trade facilitation measures for future crises | 21.4/14.3   |
|  | Publication of emergency trade facilitation measures online                                  | 35.7/21.4   |   |   |

Source: United Nations, Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, 2021.

11. Looking at the entire Arab region, the most implemented measures (figure 5) fall in the general trade facilitation category, namely transparency, formalities and institutional arrangements; and three measures fall under digital trade facilitation measures, particularly under paperless trade. The majority of the countries covered in this survey have either fully or partially implemented the measure or are at the pilot stage of implementation. Enforcing an “independent appeal mechanism” is the most implemented measure, with seven full implementations and six partial implementations. For instance, Bahrain has put in place a national suggestion and complaints system, *Tawasul*, as one of the essential e-channels that enables citizens and residents to submit their suggestions and complaints to any government entity in Bahrain. The “stakeholder consultation on new draft regulations” measure was also widely implemented. Jordan publishes all draft regulations on the websites of relevant institutions to collect feedback from the private sector before sending for approval. In Bahrain, each entity conducts stakeholder consultations through different channels, including meetings and workshops, to ensure that the concerns of the business community are reflected in the regulation. “Alignment of working hours and procedures” with neighbouring countries is also a highly implemented measure. In that regard, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia introduced a pilot scheme that used the latest smart technology to streamline procedures and process trucks between the two countries.

**Figure 5. Trade facilitation measures most fully implemented in Arab countries (14 countries)**

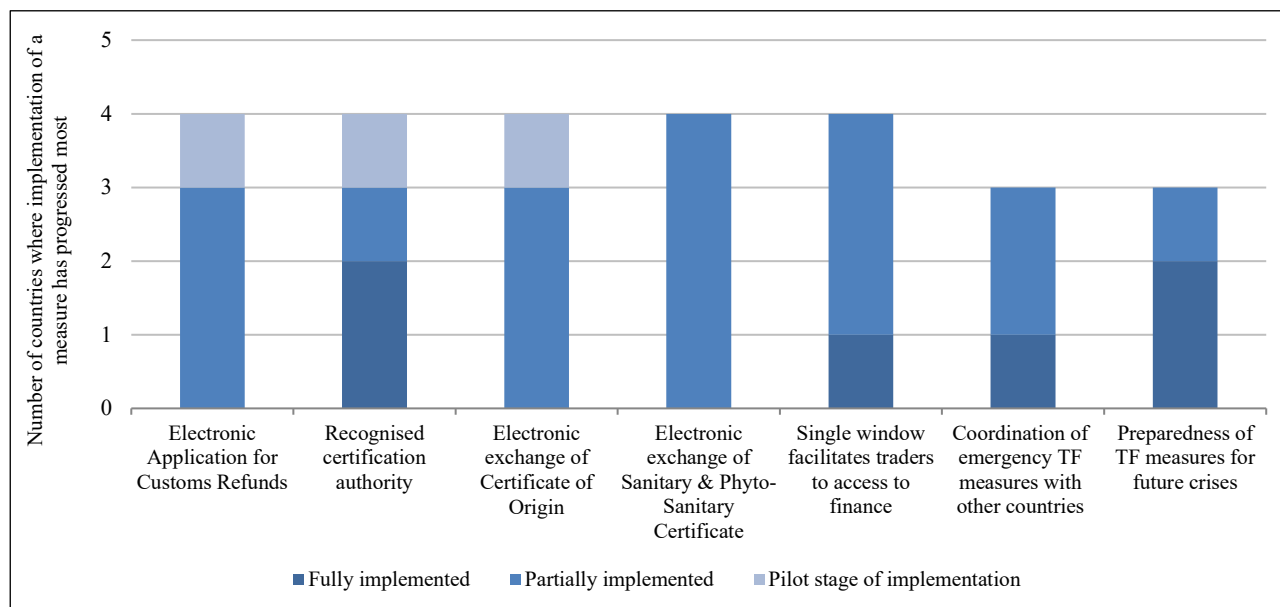


Source: UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, 2021.



12. Nonetheless, the region is lagging behind in implementing measures related to cross-border paperless trade and trade facilitation in times of crisis and pandemic, with only four countries implementing these measures. Many Arab countries have not been able to fully digitalize cross-border procedures, and to move to paperless processing or electronic exchange of documents and payments.

**Figure 6. Trade facilitation measures least implemented in Arab countries (14 countries)**



Source: United Nations, Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, 2021.

#### IV. Trade facilitation in times of crisis and pandemic

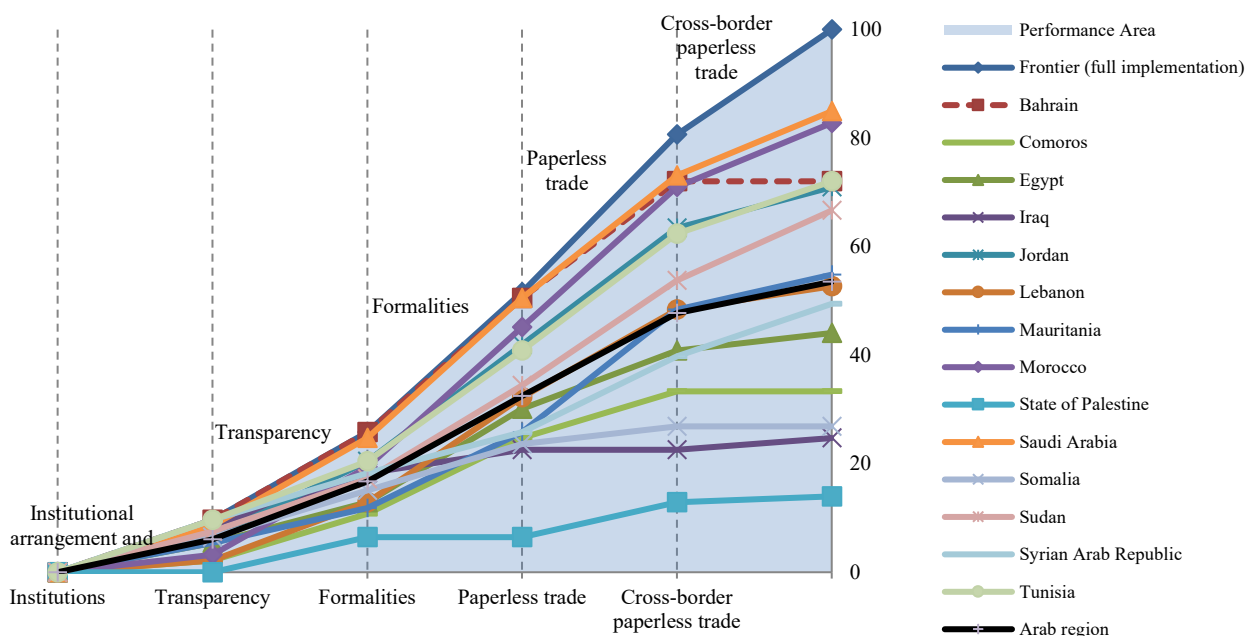
13. In terms of trade facilitation in times of crisis and pandemic, many countries have formed a committee or assigned an agency to manage trade facilitation measures in times of crisis and emergencies. In the State of Palestine, this task was assigned to the Ministry of National Economy, and the Corona Ministerial Committee was formed in Lebanon. Several countries have also put in place regulations to support trade during the pandemic. In the State of Palestine, the Government has developed draft guidelines/protocols to deal with emergency situations. In Jordan, the Government has enforced the implementation of several measures that facilitate trade and prevent the interruption of supply chains during times of crisis, such as enforcing an electronic system to minimize contact with border management to the bare minimum. Furthermore, a special lane was reserved for relief goods to speed up the clearing process, with the possibility of obtaining prior document clearance. The Government also enforced the implementation of the crisis management national plan, which facilitates trade in essential supplies during crises and pandemics. An electronic single window was operational to enforce remote working for supply chains, including electronic exit permits. This measure has been implemented since October 2019 in maritime ports, and was implemented after the outbreak of the pandemic in airports (May 2020) and land ports (June 2020). Furthermore, partial payment of duties and taxes was authorized, guarantees were released, and inspection of transit goods with electronic traceability was halted.

#### V. Way forward

14. The full implementation of trade facilitation measures necessitates a step-by-step process, which begins with establishing appropriate institutions and arrangements. The second step includes enforcing transparency in terms of introducing new laws and regulations or a change in processes. The third step comprises reviewing existing formalities and formulating new ones to enhance trade facilitation. This step is directly linked to step four, which covers paperless measures and the use of automation to speed up processes. The last step includes

the enforcement of a cross-border paperless trading system. This step includes operationalizing a single window for trade and the electronic exchange of trade documents at borders.<sup>8</sup> While several Arab countries have almost fully implemented steps one to four, the implementation of cross-border paperless trade measures is still incomplete. This step requires the digitization of many procedures. It is an important step as it decreases non-tariff costs and the time needed to process documents, which enhances competitiveness and increases international trade.

**Figure 7. Moving up the trade facilitation ladder towards seamless international supply chains**



Source: United Nations, Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, 2021.

Note: Figure 7 shows cumulative trade facilitation implementation scores of Arab countries for 34 common trade facilitation measures included in the survey. Full implementation of all measures =100.

## VI. Conclusion

15. Significant progress has been recorded in implementing trade facilitation measures in the Arab region. While Morocco and Saudi Arabia have the highest performance in the region, Arab CICs and LDCs need support to overcome administrative inefficiencies. The most serious challenges faced by Arab countries in implementing trade facilitation measures include lack of coordination between government agencies, financial constraints, and limited human resource capacity.

16. On average, transparency measures, formalities, and institutional arrangement and cooperation are the most implemented categories in the Arab region, while more efforts need to be directed towards enhancing cross-border paperless trade and facilitating trade in times of crisis and pandemic. Many countries in the region need to put in place the institutional framework and mechanisms to digitalize cross border procedures to promote trade as an engine for growth.

17. ESCWA remains committed to supporting its member States in adopting and implementing policies and measures to facilitate regional and international trade.

<sup>8</sup> This step-by-step process is inspired from and generally consistent with the United Nations/CEFACT step-by-step approach to trade facilitation towards a single window environment.