



ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA (ESCWA)

**Regional Workshop on
Trade Facilitation for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)
Beirut, 6-7 November 2006**

Information Note

I. Introduction

Trade facilitation has become one of the main topics of discussion on the Agenda of the multilateral trading system, or what is known as the Doha round negotiations in the World Trade Organization (WTO). The topic was brought about in the WTO First Ministerial Conference held in Singapore in 1996. The talks that were held then focused on the simplification of trade procedures, documentation and information flows to make trade more efficient. Trade facilitation incorporates the actions of stake players involved in the supply chain. It encompasses customs administration, freight handling companies, transport services, information services, financial services and others. It also incorporates legislative, procedural, and organizational aspects.

Trade facilitation contributes to realizing trade efficiency exemplified in realizing reductions in costs and time for traders, increasing transparency and predictability, enhancing customer value, revenue collection by the governments, and security. Research has shown that the benefits reaped from trade facilitation are considerably more than those resulting from tariff reductions or removal. Engaging in measures to facilitate trade in customs, maritime, land and air transport, legislation, and infrastructure as well, were found to reflect positively on economic performance, income, growth, goods exchange and foreign direct Investments.

Prior to its inclusion in the Doha's Agenda of negotiations in 2001, the topic gained worldwide attention from numerous regional and international organizations, among which are World Customs Organization (WCO), World Trade Organization (WTO), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Regional Commissions (UNRCs), League of Arab States (LAS), and the General Union of Chambers of Commerce Industry and Agriculture for Arab Countries (GUCCIAAC). After witnessing several milestones, WTO members agreed to launch negotiations on trade facilitation in July 2004. According to the July package, member countries are directed to clarify and improve GATT Articles numbered 5, 8, and 10. These relate to Freedom of Transit, Fees and Formalities Connected with Importation and Exportation, and Publication of Administration of Trade Regulation.

According capacity building and technical assistance in trade facilitation to developing countries is expected to reflect positively on the overall economic performance of these countries and specifically, the performance of SMEs, as small businesses are the most affected by barriers to trade. Owners of SMEs are often discouraged to trade internationally due to the complications of procedures, lack in transparency of legislations and procedures, high costs and fees, and unawareness and unpredictability of changes in legislations and procedures.

Pursuant to the fact that the private sector in general and the SMEs in particular in the Arab Countries, are the most to be affected by trade facilitation, and they tend to be the most aware of the main impediments to International trade in their respective countries, especially non tariff barriers, UN-ESCWA is organizing a workshop on trade facilitation for SMEs aiming to increase

awareness in the developments that are taking place in this domain and their respective impact on the performance of SMEs. The Workshop also targets to raise discussions on the needs, priorities and roles of SMEs as regards issues pertinent to trade facilitation.

With the intention to increase the participation of the representatives of the private sector and SMEs in addressing the salient topics in trade facilitation, working sessions were slotted in the workshop to address and discuss the barriers and impediments of trade facilitation in the Arab countries and to suggest streamlining means and methods. Interested participants from the private sectors are encouraged to present working papers on topics that summarize trade barriers and impediments in their respective countries, and/or cooperation between the private sector and the public sector in trade facilitation, provided that their working papers are sent to ESCWA before 20 October 2006.

II. Basic Information

Venue:

Un-House Beirut, Riad El-Solh Square

Date: 6-7 November 2006

Organizer:

United Nations -Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA),

Invited Parties:

1. Representatives from the private sector and SMEs.
2. Selected Official representatives from Customs Departments, Ministries of Trade, Economy and Finance in the Arab countries involved in the trade facilitation.
3. High level, international and regional experts involved in trade facilitation issues.
4. Representatives from several regional international organizations are expected to participate as follows:
 - a. World Bank
 - b. World Trade Organization (WTO)
 - c. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)
 - d. World Customs Organization (WCO)
 - e. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)
 - f. League of Arab States (LAS)
 - g. International Trade Center (ITC)
 - h. General Union of Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture in Arab Countries (GUCCIAC)
 - i. Arab Economic Unity Council
 - j. Islamic Development Bank (IBD)
 - k. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)
 - l. Representatives from UN Regional Commissions

Languages:

Arabic and English (simultaneous interpretation)

Visa:

Participants are kindly requested to obtain the necessary visa from the Lebanese embassies in their respective countries.

Travel and Hotel Accommodation

Participants are kindly requested to make their own arrangements for travel and accommodation, and bear the expenses arising thereof.

Correspondence:

UN-ESCWA
Dr Nazem ABDALLA,
Chief, Globalization and Regional Integration Division (GRID)

C/o Dr. Mohamed Radwan,
Team leader, Trade and WTO issues, GRID
Tel: + 961-1-978343
Fax: +961-1-981510
E-mail: radwanm@un.org

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Provisional Agenda

- A business perspective on the impact of trade facilitation on trade performance and economic growth.
- Latest developments in the applications of trade facilitation, especially in the realms of information technology, and communication.
- Trade facilitation in the Arab countries: achievements, expectations and impediments – A round-table discussion.
- Needs and priorities of SMEs as regards capacity-building and technical assistance
- Role of the private sector in trade facilitation.
- Selected experiences: public - private cooperation in trade facilitation.
- Project on capacity-building in trade facilitation and electronic business in the Mediterranean- Launching of the Arabic version of the e- learning CD.
- Summary and conclusions.