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MATTERS ARISING SINCE THE FOURTEENTH SESSION

UN/CEFACT Strategic Action Plan to enhance participation by countries in transition

Note by the UN/CEFACT Bureau and the secretariat¹

Summary

The UNECE Executive Committee (EXCOM) at its 29th meeting, on 27 February 2009, adopted a set of Recommendations to the United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) (see document ECE/EX/4). In its Recommendations, it requested UN/CEFACT to “develop a strategic action plan and implement specific actions, in collaboration with the secretariat, to facilitate the participation of transition economies in the work of UN/CEFACT, and especially to enable their experts to contribute substantively to the elaboration of standards”.

EXCOM invited UN/CEFACT, with the active participation of the secretariat and interested EXCOM members, to develop this particular strategic action plan no later than June 2009. During the preparation of this document, informal meetings took place with various EXCOM members for guidance. In setting the stage for going forward, the framework envisages the use of available resources, which may also be supplemented on an extrabudgetary basis. The original version of this document was presented to EXCOM at their meeting of 13 July 2009. This current version reflects the comments received from the EXCOM and the conclusions of the Chairman.

¹ This document was submitted late for document processing as clearances from relevant parties were received late.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1. The United Nations Centre for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (UN/CEFACT) facilitates national and international trade transactions through the simplification, harmonization and standardization of business processes, procedures and associated information flows. It develops and maintains a range of related recommendations, standards and technical specifications for business and trade. These instruments are used extensively throughout the world and standards such as UN/EDIFACT and the United Nations Layout Key for Documents are international standards recognised by the International Organization for Standardization.
2. In February 2009, the UNECE Executive Committee (EXCOM) requested UN/CEFACT to develop no later than June 2009, and in collaboration with the secretariat, an “integrated strategic capacity building plan on the use and implementation of UN/CEFACT instruments, and initiate supporting actions, with particular attention to the needs of transition economies. The secretariat should have the key role in implementing this plan and undertaking relevant capacity-building activities²”.
3. UN/CEFACT presented the original version of this report to the EXCOM at their meeting on 13 July.
4. Following an exchange of views, the EXCOM Chairman's conclusions were the following:
 - (a) "The EXCOM thanked the UN/CEFACT Bureau and the secretariat for the reports and statements. It welcomed the progress made in the implementation of the recommendations of EXCOM. It further underlined the importance of UN/CEFACT's cooperation with other relevant organizations and the need to avoid overlap and duplication;
 - (b) The EXCOM expressed its recognition of the distinct roles and responsibilities between UN/CEFACT and the secretariat, the former having the expertise in the development of trade facilitation and electronic business standards and the latter in designing and implementing capacity building programmes. It therefore requested that the secretariat comments be taken into account when revising the two strategic action plans for submission to the UN/CEFACT Plenary in November, including a clear distinction of roles between the ECE secretariat and UN/CEFACT".
5. This current version of the document has been prepared by the secretariat and the Bureau in response to the EXCOM Chairman's conclusions. At the time of its submission to the Plenary, efforts were also continuing between the secretariat and the Bureau regarding operational clarity of their distinct roles and responsibilities.

² ECE/EX/4.

I. STRATEGIC CHALLENGES, TARGETS AND PRIORITIES

6. Although UN/CEFACT has welcomed the opportunity to take steps to better engage experts in transition economies, the level of participation has remained relatively modest. On the other hand, the efforts of more than 300 experts around the world, nominated by the heads of delegation, have continued to focus on the development of recommendations and standards that aim to support all Member States in the field of trade facilitation and electronic business. But broadened participation in UN/CEFACT can foster benefits in many ways: in better understanding the components of trade facilitation, the good practices that can be followed through various recommendations and standards, how to use them and what might be suggested to help make them more relevant and more effective.

7. In taking steps towards fostering greater participation of experts from countries with economies in transition, the following list of possible challenges has been compiled:

- (a) Limited awareness of UNCEFACT tools and their relation to other standards;
- (b) Differing roles of voluntary and regulatory standards;
- (c) Understanding of trade facilitation, in particular, recognition of the range of entry-level to advanced stages;
- (d) Non-technical introductory information on UN/CEFACT;
- (e) Availability of documentation in Russian;
- (f) Technical expertise;
- (g) Lack of infrastructure and an installed base;
- (h) Modalities of participation, e.g. meetings and telecommunication.

8. Formulating and implementing strategic steps forward requires careful consideration of the targets and priorities to be achieved. As a starting point, UN/CEFACT needs to be sure that its evolving communications strategy is sufficiently developed to easily encourage those that may still be unfamiliar with its outputs and the way it works to understand these first at a high-level, to see demonstrations of its impact on greater efficiencies in national administrations and in cross-border trade, and to grasp the essentials of what might be done through collaboration within a transition economy and within the region. This should also set the stage for more detailed and practical technical information and guidance on how to proceed with forms of technical assistance and implementation of the lessons learned and codified in UN/CEFACT recommendations and standards. Better knowledge and experience in the hands of experts in transition economies can also contribute to improvements to UN/CEFACT instruments.

9. Sometimes there are differing perspectives about what needs might be best served through the use of international recommendations and standards. At the latest UN/CEFACT annual session (November 2008), the results of a questionnaire to Plenary delegations indicated the following requirements of countries with economies in transition (some of which were shared by developing countries and/or developed market economies):

- (a) Information for non-technical audiences;
- (b) Promotional information, including restructuring of website;
- (c) More information in Russian;
- (d) Case studies on implementation;
- (e) Assistance in implementation;
- (f) Information on the use of UN/CEFACT standards by the European Commission;
- (g) Information on cooperation with other international organizations.

10. This reflects a need for high-level implementation and is consistent with the above findings that countries with economies in transition would benefit from basic information about the efforts and instruments of UN/CEFACT and how they can support efforts in trade facilitation.

11. On a more technical level, input from the secretariat's experience in consultations with economies in transition, including the efforts of its Regional Adviser, have identified the following needs specific topics of interest:

- (a) Single Window;
- (b) Inter-agency cooperation for single window;
- (c) Inter-agency border cooperation and information exchange;
- (d) Data harmonization (Recommendation 34);
- (e) Single Window legal framework (Recommendation 35);
- (f) Single administrative document;
- (g) UN/EDIFACT;
- (h) Public-private partnerships in trade facilitation.

12. In many countries with economies in transition, progress in the above areas may require considerable preliminary work to establish the prerequisites for implementation of electronic trade facilitation measures. For example, the very interpretation of a Single Window concept can vary. While developed market economies define it as a facility to submit standardized information through one entry point (also in electronic form) and thus to meet all regulatory requirements, in the Commonwealth of Independent States it is usually seen as a “one-stop shop” when you physically submit all documents at the border and have them returned approved. On the one hand, the process involves using a single set of data that will be reused (without duplication of forms) by all administrative partners; while, on the other hand, the process involves submitting many forms that duplicate the data but at least only use one common window into which the forms flow in and out.

13. Moving, even in gradual steps, from the physical concept toward the electronic one, could significantly improve the performance of Single Windows in these countries. If experts from countries with economies in transition were working on the development of the Single-Window related e-tools, then they would better understand how to do this.

14. Only by understanding the issues at senior levels of government can dialogue be established to promote partnerships and improved arrangements within and between countries. Some of this may be best served through fostering awareness-building for those in government and in trade, e.g., through national trade and transport facilitation committees to enable countries needs could be better identified and pursued as a national agenda. There are also many forms of collaboration that are able to be driven by through customs and other agencies.

15. The need to communicate opportunities and benefits in the use of trade facilitation instruments in transition economies is clearly the priority strategic target, particularly when this can be done via documentation and consultations in Russian. But other supporting targets at a more technical level may follow and need to be addressed wherever possible, enabling experts to actually become knowledgeable about UN/CEFACT instruments and participate in the ongoing efforts to improve its recommendations and standards.

II. STRATEGIC ACTIONS TO BE UNDERTAKEN

16. In order to enhance the participation of countries with economies in transition in the work of UN/CEFACT, a multifaceted approach will be adopted, including work in the following areas:

- (a) Needs identification;
- (b) Promotion/awareness raising;
- (c) Capacity-building;
- (d) Encouraging outreach to experts in transition economies;
- (e) Reducing costs of participation.

A. Needs identification

17. The secretariat, in consultation with the UN/CEFACT Bureau, will compile a modular framework of requirements associated with trade facilitation that ranges across transition economies. This would make use of various needs assessments and complementary studies to provide a basis for developing improved materials, brochures and website tools that support outreach and capacity-building. It would involve the active support of and engagement with other secretariats and their advisers in various divisions of UNECE, other regional commissions of the United Nations and international organizations and agencies (e.g. World Customs Organization, World Bank, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the United Nations Development Programme).

18. More will also be done to explore ways of using the Trade Facilitation Implementation Guide in countries with economies in transition. This Guide is scheduled to be completed in early 2010.

19. In addition, steps will also be taken to focus on key issues, through special seminars and information sessions, at the Plenary and at Forum meetings. Questionnaires will be prepared for transition economies as a framework for formulating issues and providing information about their needs, particularly in the context of preparations for the upcoming November Plenary. It will then be possible to more clearly identify ways that may be taken to address needs of economies in transition.

20. Countries with economies in transition will also be invited to submit information/status notes on the trade facilitation situation in their countries (as official documents to the annual session) and collect information on e-related opportunities involving “other regulatory agencies” and their trade facilitation needs.

21. Following these needs analyses and outreach efforts, UN/CEFACT, with the support of the secretariat, will bring this to attention of the Plenary and integrate it into its programme of work, with special efforts identified to meet the needs of economies in transition.

B. Promotion/awareness raising

22. The UN/CEFACT Bureau, with the active support of the secretariat, will advance efforts towards completing and implementing a communications strategy that will provide a common framework of information being made available in documents, over the web and through seminars and meetings. Special attention will be given to the needs of transition economies. Although priorities will need to be set, a list of possible actions to be integrated into the programme of work includes:

- (a) Translate existing material into Russian to the greatest extent possible;
- (b) Regularly disseminate information on UN/CEFACT and its ongoing work in Russian and English to potential users, in particular through the Multiplier Point Network;
- (c) Prepare information papers on UN/CEFACT and its major tools (i.e. explanatory notes for non-technical audience);
- (d) Provide information about UN/CEFACT to UNECE meetings organized for countries with economies in transition;
- (e) Disseminate information to Commonwealth of Independent States countries on the possible role of UN/CEFACT instruments in trade facilitation proposals at the World Trade Organization;
- (f) Provide information to countries with economies in transition on the standard development processes in UN/CEFACT, in particular the Open Development Process, and indicate points of entry into this process and ways in which they can participate through electronic means, such as email and teleconferencing;

- (g) Disseminate information to governmental agencies from countries with economies in transition about UN/CEFACT instruments and the benefits of trade facilitation;
- (h) Explore possibilities for hosting a UN/CEFACT Forum and/or expert group meetings in a transition economy, with special additional seminars or meeting to foster communication and capacity building, and to help share experiences in public-private partnerships that may be provide a useful model in going forward;
- (i) In view of the key role of public-private partnerships in trade facilitation, work with Member States with economies in transition to help identify relevant private sector associations and experts who might be interested in participating in UN/CEFACT activities as well as in using its norms and standards.

C. Capacity-building

23. Efforts to organize and implement a UN/CEFACT capacity-building strategy, with a special focus on transition economies, is the subject of the UN/CEFACT Strategic Capacity-Building Plan also being submitted for consideration by the Plenary. Briefly stated, this Plan provides for enhanced communication, competency and collaboration involving UN/CEFACT's trade facilitation instruments. Capacity-building will be supported by means of common modules and packages. The major purpose of the packages is to disseminate information among governmental agencies from countries with economies in transition on how UN/CEFACT products can contribute to solving the countries' problems. Two of the envisaged core packages are noted below.

1. High-level, managerial capacity-building package

24. Targeted at decision makers from Government agencies and private-sector companies, these packages provide non-technical information on the purpose and benefits of the UN/CEFACT project deliverable. Typical content would include concise briefing papers explaining the standard or recommendation, its possible use, case scenarios, benefits, implementation requirements and possible contingencies. They will include links to more detailed information relevant to decision makers, such as implementation verification projects and lessons learned.

2. Technical capacity-building packages

25. These are targeted at technical and trade facilitation experts that will design and implement projects using trade facilitation and eBusiness standards. They provide implementation-related information on the standard, or recommendation, to subject matter experts. The material leads to a deeper understanding of the standard and enables the technical expert to manage the adaptation and implementation of the standard and to provide feedback to UN/CEFACT. The typical content of such a package could include (depending, in part on funding availability): user implementation guidelines; annotated examples; references to sample implementations, on-line training and or training videos.

D. Outreach

26. Once these packages are in hand, outreach efforts will position experts to take next steps, including possible technical assistance. It is envisaged that the secretariat would support the delivery of these packages by linking interested experts from countries with economies in transition with experts in working groups. The competency of UN/CEFACT experts would guide the preparation of the contents of these packages and the competency of UNECE would support their delivery, including possible Internet-based training.

E. Reducing costs of participation

27. The UN/CEFACT Bureau and the secretariat will explore the possibility of fostering creation of regional/national “mirror committees” (and/or for the development of concrete projects) to allow technical work to be done on national level and then to present a consolidated national position/input to UN/CEFACT. Such “mirror committees” exist, for example, at the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). At UN/CEFACT there is a positive experience of a regional UN/CEFACT body in Asia, i.e. the Asia Pacific Council for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business (AFACT).

28. UN/CEFACT will also encourage the continued use of the Internet and Skype in the participation of countries with economies in transition in the standards development work.

III. NEXT STEPS

29. In going forward, the Bureau, in close cooperation with the secretariat, will need to prepare a more detailed roadmap. Key information will be needed in order to align next steps with the programme of work, particularly with respect to existing resources and the need for extrabudgetary funding. The effective implementation of the proposed strategy will involve a certain degree of collaboration of activities and expertise from within and outside UN/CEFACT and the secretariat. Accordingly, careful planning, management and monitoring of a range of inter-related activities will be critical to the success of the proposed strategy.

30. The secretariat will play a critical role in advancing engagement of experts from transition economies, taking the lead in proposing and implementing activities in consultation with the Bureau. Moreover, in matters involving extrabudgetary funding to support UN/CEFACT-related developments, the secretariat will ensure that established United Nations rules and procedures are followed and will keep the Bureau informed.
