



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE TFAWG

#### ITEM I - Opening and adoption of the Agenda

1. The Chairperson of the WCO Working Group on the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFAWG), Ms. Ira Tan (Netherlands), opened the meeting by wishing everyone successful discussions despite the challenging virtual meeting environment.
2. In his opening speech, the Director of Compliance and Facilitation, Mr. Pranab Kumar Das, started by wishing all female delegates, the Chairperson (Ms. Tan) and all female colleagues within the WCO a happy International Women's Day. He recalled that "Facilitation" was one of the three Strategic Objectives of the WCO indicated in the Strategic Plan 2019/2022. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the WCO had been supporting Members' efforts to mitigate the effects of the pandemic in terms of trade facilitation and supply chain continuity. He also summarized the important items on the TFAWG Agenda.
3. The Chairperson explained the editorial amendments to version (b) of the draft Agenda and also indicated that there had been no comments from Members on the draft Agenda prior to the meeting.
4. The list of participants is set out at Annex I hereto.
5. **In conclusion, the TFAWG:**
  - took note of the Director's introductory remarks; and
  - adopted the draft Agenda set out in Doc. PT0106(b).

#### ITEM II - Addresses by the Chairperson of the WTO Trade Facilitation Committee (TFC) and Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Canada to the WTO, Mr. Christopher O'Toole, and by the WCO Secretary General, Dr. Junio Mikuriya

6. Ms. Tan invited the Chairperson of the WTO Trade Facilitation Committee (TFC), Mr. Christopher O'Toole (Canada), to address developments taking place in the TFC and how these related to the WCO. He also invited the WCO Secretary

General, Dr. Kunio Mikuriya, to highlight the WCO's response to developments in the area of Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) implementation, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic.

7. Mr. O'Toole, addressed developments taking place in the WTO TFC, how they related to the WCO and how the WCO could further assist in the TFC's work. He stressed that the WCO had played an important role in providing valuable insights to the Committee. He gave an overview of the notifications, the way in which the TFC had responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and the review of TFA implementation required to take place four years from its entry into force, as stipulated in the Agreement. He concluded his address by stressing that as the WCO was an organization offering Customs expertise, and bearing in mind its close working relationship with the private sector and, more recently, its important work in relation to Customs' role in mitigating the COVID-19 crisis, it continued to offer important support to and complement the work of the TFC.
8. Dr. Mikuriya expressed his appreciation for the keynote remarks by the Chairperson of the TFC and underlined the longstanding cooperation between the WCO and the WTO, including through the following two bodies: the WTO TFC and the WCO TFAWG. He stressed the WCO's continued commitment to and support for TFA implementation through the Mercator Programme, launched in the presence of the former WTO Director-General, Mr. Roberto Azevêdo, in 2014. Over the past year, the WCO had focused on supporting Members in mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, both in terms of identifying and facilitating essential goods such as medicines and medical goods, and in terms of supporting supply chain continuity. He reiterated the WCO's readiness to share its experience with the TFC and brought his address to a close by emphasizing the critical role played by cooperation during the crisis.
9. **In conclusion, the TFAWG;**
  - took note of the speeches by the Chairperson of the WTO Trade Facilitation Committee, Mr. Christopher O'Toole, and the WCO Secretary General, Dr. Kunio Mikuriya.

### **ITEM III - WTO TFA developments during the COVID-19 pandemic**

#### **(a) WTO Secretariat update on TFA implementation**

#### **(b) WCO Secretariat - oral report from the December 2020 Policy Commission and Council and other updates**

#### **(c) Members - opportunity for Members to share their national experiences regarding ratification, categorization, implementation**

10. The item was intended to inform the TFAWG of all relevant developments regarding the TFA from both the WTO and WCO perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to provide an opportunity for Members to inform the TFAWG about national developments related to TFA acceptance and implementation.
11. The WTO Representative provided an update on the state of play regarding TFA implementation, stressing that to date some 153 WTO Members (equating to 93.3%

of WTO membership) had ratified the TFA. The rate of TFA implementation commitments for the entire membership stood at 69.7%, while the figures for the developing countries and least developed countries (LDCs) stood at 60.4%. Overall implementation was expected to reach 83% by 2023 and 96% by 2028 onwards. The WTO Representative also provided information on the transparency notifications, explaining that 98 Members had provided notifications on trade-related information (Article 1.4), 83 Members had notified information on a single window (Article 10.4.3), 110 Members had provided information on Customs brokers (Article 10.6.2), and 101 Members had notified their contact points for exchange of information (Article 12.2.2). The delegate from the EU noted that several Members, including the EU and its Member States, recognised the need for acceleration of TFA implementation, in the context of COVID 19. He referred to the exchange of views in the WTO TFC on the four years review of the TFA and noted that one risk is that a large number of LDCs and a smaller number of DCs have not made fully identified of support needed to address their Category C commitments or have not received the support requested. To this end, he informed the WG that it would be very useful for donor countries to have a table indicating the technical assistance needs as regards category C commitments that still have no donors.

12. The WCO Deputy Director of Procedures and Facilitation, Mr. Brendan O’Hearn, informed delegates about the key outcomes of the WCO Policy Commission and Council, held in December 2020, which were of relevance to the TFAWG. He stressed the completion of the E-Commerce Package and Compendium, the Guidance for Customs Administrations of Small Island Economies and the Secretariat’s ongoing work on dangerous goods. He further informed the Working Group about the Guidance on Free Zones and the need for Members to make staff available to become WCO accredited experts in fields where delivery of technical assistance and capacity building was critical. He went on to give a preview of some of the items that would feature on the Agenda for the Permanent Technical Committee (PTC) in May 2021, including discussions on the COVID-19 Guidelines and Action Plan, on E-Commerce and on the SAFE Framework of Standards 2021; the Time Release Study software update; and the draft Guidelines on Railways. He concluded by announcing two relevant upcoming events, namely the 5<sup>th</sup> Global AEO Conference (25 to 27 May 2021) and the E-Commerce Conference (28 and 29 May 2021).
13. There were no interventions by Members under sub-item (c) of this Agenda item.
14. **In conclusion, the TFAWG:**
  - took note of the presentations by the WTO and WCO Secretariats about the state of play regarding TFA implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## ITEM 15 - Mercator Programme

(a) WCO Secretariat written update on the Mercator Programme achievements - overall and tailor-made track and 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Mercator Programme Report

**(b) Redesigning the technical assistance and capacity building support during the COVID-19**

15. The Chairperson introduced the item by recalling that the WCO Mercator Programme was aimed at assisting governments worldwide to implement trade facilitation measures under the WTO TFA expeditiously and in a uniform manner, using WCO instruments and tools and applying the WCO's strategic approach to sustainable capacity building. One of the key deliverables of the TFAWG was to monitor the progress of implementation of WCO instruments and tools that supported members in applying the TFA, including through comprehensive reporting of WCO Mercator Programme missions.
16. The Secretariat introduced Doc. PT0107, providing highlights of developments under the Mercator Programme since the last TFAWG meeting. Under its overall and tailor-made tracks, the Secretariat had adjusted to the COVID-19 pandemic by moving to the virtual environment to conduct its work.
17. The WCO had continued developing tools and instruments through the document-based and blended format of its working bodies' meetings. A large portion of the actions under the Economic Competitiveness Package had been successfully delivered. Furthermore, the Secretariat was in the process of launching a new round of regional workshops on the TFA, with the first one scheduled in the Asia/Pacific (A/P) region from 19 to 21 April and supported by the Asia/Pacific Regional Office for Capacity Building (ROCB A/P) and the Customs Cooperation Fund (CCF) Japan.
18. Under the tailor-made track, delegates were informed that since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic over 80 virtual support activities had been delivered under both the multi-year (MY) Mercator and individual (ad-hoc) operating models, and that many additional activities were planned.
19. The Secretariat was finalizing a mapping exercise for each of the 50-plus MY Mercator administrations, was in the process of refreshing some of the original Mercator diagnostic assessments and related Implementation Plans and would also be conducting "baseline" TFA Maturity Model assessments. Much of this work would require support from the WCO pool of experts, and particularly from the Mercator Programme Advisors (MPAs).
20. A couple of Members took the floor to thank the Secretariat for the support through the Mercator Programme, which had been provided in a virtual manner since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. A further two Members expressed their support for the Programme through their experts and funds, respectively.
21. The objective of Agenda sub-item (b) was to exchange experiences and insights from both a donor's and a beneficiary country's perspective, not only on new challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic but also on steps taken and lessons learned.
22. The SECO-WCO Global Trade Facilitation Programme (GTFP) presented the progress made in redesigning technical assistance and capacity building support during the pandemic. The lessons learned were shared, stressing the importance of ensuring national implementation continuity through a COVID-19 Action Plan, which included a blended approach and new methodologies for implementing the Programme by means of remote assistance and virtual activities. The GTFP had

also prepared a Risk Management Assessment and Guidelines on Project Continuity and Customs Support in the aftermath of the pandemic, aimed at ensuring the Programme's continuity and support by Customs over the next three years.

23. Ms. Marilu Llerena Aybar, Deputy Superintendent of Peruvian Customs (SUNAT), shared her experience from a beneficiary country's perspective, describing the steps taken by her Administration during the pandemic, as well as the milestones reached in spite of the difficult conditions posed by the global health crisis. These milestones included 97% progress in TFA implementation, 87% of which was in full compliance with the provisions of the Agreement, thus placing SUNAT in a better position to face new challenges. During the pandemic, SUNAT had adapted quickly to the new reality using virtual platforms, obtaining WCO support on Risk Management and Data Analytics and participating in regional virtual workshops on Advance Rulings and Customs Management.
24. The Secretariat presented the EU-WCO Programme for the Harmonized System in Africa (HS-Africa Programme), highlighting the specific challenges faced since the onset of the pandemic and the new working methods that had been introduced. During the presentation, attention was placed on the complexities inherent to the process of HS implementation, as well as to the strict time limits for the date of entry into force of HS amendments. To attain its objectives, the Programme was putting special emphasis on actively tapping into the expertise available at both regional and national levels, combining capacity building delivery methods in a range of bespoke hybrid formats, and on using digital technologies.
25. The Delegate of Eswatini shared her country's experience of cooperating with the HS-Africa Programme to establish electronic tariff tools and of the practicality of new working methods. The presenter explained that a digital transformation roadmap had already been part of her Administration's strategic plan before the pandemic, and that the COVID-19 crisis had provided further impetus for the ongoing digitalization endeavour. Her Administration had successfully implemented an electronic tariff platform and a trade information portal in 2020, with support from the HS-Africa Programme. The two electronic tools were contributing towards implementation of Article 1 of the WTO TFA as they were making trade-related information easily available and were also streamlining the management of the national tariff in general.
26. The Delegates of Peru and Guatemala commented on the presentations. The Delegate of Guatemala also thanked the WCO and the GTFP for the support received on the Revised Kyoto Convention (RKC). The delegate from the EU referred to the EU funded project implemented by the WCO to assist African Customs authorities to implement global rules, such as the WCO Harmonised System, and noted that the EU was pleased by the results that the WCO is achieving. He also informed the WG that the EU is considering launching an EU project to support the design and implementation of preferential rules of origin of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

27. **In conclusion, the TFAWG:**

- took note of the achievements of the Mercator Programme as well as the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Mercator Programme Report; and
- noted the presentations on the different forms of technical assistance and capacity building support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## ITEM V - TFAWG Work Programme and Annual Work Plan

- 28.** The TFAWG Work Programme and Annual Work Plan were the instruments driving the work of the TFAWG and determining its Agenda. The Chairperson introduced the item by providing information on intersessional work in this area. In its invitation letter to the current meeting sent on 8 December 2020 and referring to the limited time available for the KUDO sessions, the Secretariat had strongly encouraged Members to flag their specific comments, concerns and remarks about the meeting documents, especially for the TFAWG Work Programme and Annual Work Plan, by Friday 26 February 2021 at the latest. This deadline was to allow any comments, concerns and remarks to be fully reflected in the draft Work Programme and Annual Work Plan for adoption during the KUDO sessions. A related reminder to Members had also been sent on 1 February 2021. In addition, the Secretariat had sent an e-mail to all Brussels-based Attachés on 5 February 2021, asking them to provide any input on the TFAWG Work Programme and Annual Work Plan by 26 February 2021. A reminder had also been sent on this matter on 19 February 2021. Apart from one Member which had raised a specific question on two sub-tasks, there had been no other comments from Members or the Brussels-based Attachés on the TFAWG Work Programme and Annual Work Plan.
- 29.** The Secretariat introduced Doc. PT0108 by highlighting the twin purposes of the document, namely to report on progress made under the TFAWG Annual Work Plan for the current financial year and to present the draft Work Programme and Annual Work Plan for the next financial year. A progress report on eight actions of the ongoing Annual Work Plan under the responsibility of the TFAWG, Chairperson and Secretariat had also been provided in Doc. PT0108. Additionally, Members and beneficiaries had been invited to share their achievements with respect to the activities under their responsibility.
- 30.** In order to clarify the scope of the Work Programme and Annual Work Plan, the Secretariat provided further information on both. The Work Programme was a multi-year strategic document and provided policy orientation for the work of the TFAWG. It also included, for each sub-task, concrete indications of how the sub-task was aligned with the WCO Strategic Plan. Since the Work Programme's development in 2014, the TFAWG had been reviewing and revising it in order to respond more effectively to developments and needs in the context of TFA implementation. The Work Programme defined tasks and sub-tasks for each of four Key Deliverables indicated in the Terms of Reference (ToR) of the TFAWG. As it was a strategic multi-year document, these tasks and sub-tasks were mainly general in nature. In contrast, the Annual Work Plan identified the specific actions that needed to be taken during the relevant financial year to fulfil these tasks and sub-tasks.
- 31.** The TFAWG was then informed about the new format and content of the Work Programme and Annual Work Plan for financial year 2021/2022.

32. Following the presentation of the working document, the Delegate of the EU took the floor and underlined that he wished to make a general comment rather than a specific one on the Work Programme and Annual Work Plan. He began by saying that the TFAWG had been established in 2014, shortly after the Bali Ministerial Conference. The focus of the TFAWG had shifted more towards capacity building after 2017. Referring to the ToR for the TFAWG, he said that, in the opinion of the EU, the TFA-related work could be carried out, equally effective and efficient by the PTC, Capacity Building Committee (CBC) and Policy Commission (PC). This was important chiefly to ensure greater efficiency in WCO activities, to allocate resources more effectively and to prevent duplication of work carried out by different WCO working bodies. This matter had already been discussed by the PC in December 2018, at which it had been decided to decrease the number of TFAWG meetings to one per year. The delegate stated that the draft Action Plan for 2021/2022 reflected very limited actions for the TFA, but focussed more on those of the Secretariat and Members. The Delegate of the EU further stressed it acknowledge the significant political role the WG played, as it sends a clear message to the international community and trade, but it is the concrete deliverables on which the WCO is judge on rather than having a special working group dedicated to TFA. The EU concluded it was timely to reconsider how most effectively and efficiently TFA related matters can be addressed within the WCO.
33. The Delegate of Australia supported the Delegate of the EU and suggested engaging with the Chairpersons of the PTC and CBC on this suggestion by the EU. The delegates from Norway and Ireland also supported the delegate of the EU.
34. The Secretariat pointed out that as the WCO was a Member-driven organization, it would be better to hear the thoughts of more Members in this regard. In that case, the Chairpersons of the PTC and CBC could hold talks to prepare the basis for discussions within the PC.
35. The Delegate of Guatemala supported the Secretariat's suggestion, while underscoring the importance of TFA implementation support for WCO Members.
36. The Delegate of Norway, making a reference to the overlapping discussions in both the PTC and CBC, supported the previous suggestions.
37. A number of delegates supported the EU's suggestions on the future of the TFAWG and, in the meantime, noted the importance of the work undertaken by the Secretariat in terms of supporting WCO Members with TFA implementation.
38. The Secretariat's suggested conclusion concerning this discussion was strongly supported by delegates.
39. **In conclusion, the TFAWG:**
- took note of the progress made under the Annual Work Plan for financial year 2020/2021;
  - discussed and endorsed the Work Programme and Annual Work Plan for financial year 2021/2022 (Annex II); and
  - agreed, in response to a suggestion that the future of the TFAWG be considered, that the Chairpersons of the TFAWG, PTC and CBC put together a recommendation to the PC on how the relevant work would continue within the Organization.

## **ITEM VI - Customs response to COVID-19 in terms of TFA implementation: Facilitating the cross-border movement of relief and essential supplies**

### **(a) Presentation of national experience**

### **(b) Presentation of regional experience**

- 40.** The Secretariat presented Doc. PT0109 by underlining that in the event of a natural disaster and similar catastrophes, as well as sustained emergencies such as famine or disease, measures implemented by Customs to facilitate the cross-border movement of relief and essential supplies were of key importance in mitigating the impact of the crisis. The objective of the document was to highlight such measures, outline the provisions of the WTO TFA and the WCO RKC on which they were based, and provide information on other WCO tools and guidance material that could support implementation of the TFA and RKC. The Secretariat went on to present seven measures that had been formulated after studying the information submitted by 115 WCO Member Customs administrations on their respective practices and measures implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 41.** The seven measures presented by the Secretariat together with information on the underlying provisions of the TFA and the RKC were as follows: (i) coordinate and cooperate with other government agencies with the objective of speeding up the clearance of relief goods; (ii) prioritize the clearance of relief consignments on the basis of a list of essential items; (iii) perform the Customs clearance of relief consignments as a matter of priority; (iv) provide for the lodging of a simplified Goods declaration or of a provisional or incomplete Goods declaration; (v) provide for pre-arrival processing of the Goods declaration and release of the goods upon arrival; (vi) apply risk management and perform inspections on relief goods only if deemed high risk; and (vii) advocate for or support the waiving or suspension of import duties and taxes for relief items. The importance of transparency and predictability was also stressed by the Secretariat. These measures were relevant not only for the cross-border movement of medical supplies and equipment in the immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also for the ongoing cross-border movement of COVID-19 vaccines and related medical supplies.
- 42.** Following the presentation of the working document by the Secretariat, the Delegate of Cameroon described the measures implemented by his Administration with the objective of facilitating the cross-border movement of relief and essential supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic response phase, as well as the measures implemented in anticipation of the first import shipments of COVID-19 vaccines and related supplies. The delegate presented the legislative framework enabling exemption from Customs duties and taxes on imports of medical supplies and medicines, which had been applied since the beginning of the health crisis. It was emphasized that relief consignments and essential supplies benefitted from streamlined and simplified Customs procedures, such as immediate release subject to the lodging of a provisional declaration and security as well as pre-arrival

completion of Customs formalities, with inspection on the quayside/runway followed by immediate release of the goods.

- 43.** During the pandemic response phase, the list of goods and medical supplies contained in the HS classification reference for COVID-19 medical supplies prepared jointly by the WCO and the World Health Organization (WHO) had been widely circulated within Cameroon Customs. There had been continuous awareness-raising with regard to the Customs facilities applicable to the import of these materials and equipment. The presentation by Cameroon also included information on the Customs treatment of relief consignments bound for the landlocked countries of Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR), to which Cameroon was a transit country. The deployment of the new Customs IT system, CAMCIS, had resulted in accelerated Customs clearance in a paperless environment and had substantially reduced the transit time for consignments bound for Chad and the CAR. Cameroon Customs had suspended the installation of global positioning system (GPS) tracking devices on shipments whose consignees were government authorities or public bodies. A new transit corridor was operational for the transport of goods to the CAR, due to security problems leading to congestion on the conventional corridor. Customs facilitation measures relating to the importation of vaccines were also presented, as well as measures to ensure appropriate cold chain storage facilities.
- 44.** The second presentation under Agenda item VI was delivered by a Representative from the East African Community (EAC) Secretariat who described the measures implemented at regional level by EAC Members (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda). An EAC Regional COVID-19 Coordination Committee had been established, comprising representatives from the Ministries of Health of EAC Members and holding weekly meetings. In addition, the EAC Secretariat had collaborated with development partners to procure and supply COVID-19 medical supplies and equipment as well as to develop tools for training and sensitization on COVID-19. The sensitization activities had targeted local communities, border agencies and truck drivers.
- 45.** The measures implemented at EAC level included the development and deployment of a digital surveillance and tracking system that provided a regional mechanism for COVID-19 testing, certification and monitoring of truck drivers. Other measures were the development and implementation of trade facilitation guidelines and guidelines for truck drivers, with the latter being made available in several EAC languages (English, French and Swahili). An EAC COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Training of Trainers Programme had been developed. Training had been conducted at 12 major internal borders and was currently being dispensed at all major ports in the region. Policy measures on duty exemptions had been approved at regional level.
- 46.** The challenges in the response phase included different conditions and requirements for COVID-19 testing; lack of awareness about COVID-19 leading to stigmatization; unprecedented delays facing cargo trucks at internal borders (queues stretching for over 50 km); and implementation of different and conflicting national measures relating to COVID-19. The EAC had developed a Recovery Plan that included, inter alia, Customs-specific interventions such as transforming One-Stop Border Posts to SMART (NO-STOP) Border Post operations through

digitalization of the whole transit process and use of SMART gates at internal borders; strengthening the Regional AEO Programme; and building capacity to enhance trade facilitation.

47. In the ensuing discussions, a delegate informed the TFAWG that the Member he represented (EU) had shared, as well as regularly updated, information with the WCO membership on the different measures adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including with regard to the cross-border movement of COVID-19 vaccines. The delegate welcomed the December 2020 Council Resolution on the Role of Customs in Facilitating the Cross-Border Movement of Situationally Critical Medicines and Vaccines as well as the reference to the COVAX global vaccine-sharing initiative, to which the EU was a major contributor in the amount of 500 million euro, aimed at ensuring equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. The delegate informed the meeting of a specific facilitation measure applied in the EU, namely the introduction in the Combined Nomenclature of a specific code for vaccines against severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)-associated coronavirus. Another delegate stressed the importance of coordination and cooperation, especially with a view to facilitation of trade and transit in landlocked developing countries.

48. **In conclusion, the TFAWG;**

- took note of the presentations and provided further guidance on measures and implementation methods thereof that could support efforts to facilitate the cross-border movement of relief and essential supplies.

## **ITEM VII - Technology: Helping Customs in supporting the economy and sustaining supply chain continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic and any similar crisis**

### **(a) Presentation of national experience**

### **(b) Presentation by private sector**

49. The Chairperson introduced the item by stressing that the COVID-19 pandemic had unleashed the power of technology, enabling stakeholders to stay connected and ensuring that Customs work continued in a safe and reliable manner. Social distancing requirements had prompted Customs and businesses to rely more heavily on available solutions as well as introducing innovative technological solutions, thus providing new opportunities for facilitating trade.
50. The Secretariat introduced Doc. PT0110 and the summary of discussions and themes which had come out of the 2020 WCO TECH-CON (11 to 13 November 2020) having brought together over 1,300 delegates from 142 countries. Speakers at TECH-CON had shared experiences of how they had accelerated the use of technological solutions such as single window services, electronic payment options and non-intrusive inspection equipment, and had explored the impact of technology and lessons learned in moving forward after the current health crisis. The response to the pandemic had sped up the adoption of digital technology by several years.

However, the need to comply with international rules and standards, such as those contained in the WTO TFA and WCO RKC, as well as the need to make available quality data from reliable sources, were some of the challenges that had to be addressed. TECH-CON participants had also expressed broad interest in blockchain technology which they felt had the potential to become a game changer. The Secretariat went on to announce that further regional workshops on disruptive technologies would be held, with the Asia/Pacific workshop taking place from 22 to 24 March 2021, with the support of the ROCB A/P. The European workshop was planned for the second half of May 2021 and would be organized jointly with Netherlands Customs.

51. The Korea Customs Service (KCS) gave a presentation on how the Administration was using digitalization as the basis for stable operations during the crisis. Taking into consideration the fact that contactless procedures had become the new normal, technological features such as speed, reliability, automation and digital connection had brought technology to the forefront as the best solution for the crisis. A huge advantage was afforded by the operation of the UNI-PASS Single Window solution which simultaneously allowed for continued facilitation of trade and protection of borders. The KCS had also invested a tremendous amount of energy and funds into cutting-edge technology as well as research and development, and in particular into big data for fast and detailed decision making, artificial intelligence for accurate and automated processes, and blockchain technology for reliable data and business processes.
52. The Representative from Microsoft explained how the company had responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by focusing on four sets of actions for its clients: protecting and empowering staff; ensuring safe services and optimizing operations; accelerating sustainability plans; and engaging differently with customers. She described some of the solutions developed with the company's partners to implement these actions, such as using smart devices to keep staff and customers safe, using drones to monitor ports, and applying risk management capabilities based on artificial intelligence and machine learning to ensure seamless Customs operations, while optimizing the use of all available resources.
53. Speaking in his capacity as the Vice-Chair of the Americas and Caribbean (AMS) region, the Delegate of Guatemala expressed an interest in holding a WCO workshop on disruptive technologies in the AMS region. Another delegate was interested to know whether such a workshop would be held in the ESA region. The Secretariat explained that workshops on disruptive technologies were planned for all six WCO regions, with the A/P and European workshops being held during the current financial year and the others planned as of the next financial year. In response to Bangladesh's suggestion to consider having developed countries support technical assistance and capacity building in developing countries, the Secretariat was in favour of giving consideration to such a proposal, bearing in mind that this was now far more feasible through the extensive use of online meetings which allowed much greater participation by speakers from different parts of the world.
54. **In conclusion, the TFAWG:**
  - took note of the presentations by the Korea Customs Service (KCS) and Microsoft and provided guidance on this topic.

## **ITEM VIII - Partnerships: A collaborative approach to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic - Coordinated Border Management and Customs-Business Partnership**

### **(a) Presentation of national experience**

#### **(b) Presentation by PSCG**

55. The Secretariat Representative introduced Doc. PT0111, informing delegates that since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic the WCO had been urging Customs administrations to continue facilitating the cross-border movement of goods, including of relief goods, as a way of minimizing the overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on economies and societies.
56. Among other things, she indicated that to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, the WCO had encouraged Customs administrations to share their respective response to the COVID-19 pandemic, so as to promote greater Customs-Business Partnership and maintain closer dialogue with the WCO Private Sector Consultative Group (PSCG).
57. In addition, she underscored the fact that the WCO had been advocating for Customs administrations to be recognized and included in national emergency plans in their respective countries' recovery programmes, on the understanding that close cooperation and coordination with the relevant National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) as well as between cross-border regulatory agencies was fundamental in addressing challenges faced worldwide as result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
58. She underlined the importance of the WCO Coordinated Border Management (CBM) Compendium in fostering cooperation and coordination between cross-border regulatory agencies, and informed delegates that the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the WCO Secretariat Note entitled "What Customs can do to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic" contained lists of measures that Customs could implement in response to the pandemic.
59. Turning to coordination at international level, she indicated that the WCO Secretary General had issued joint statements/letters with the heads of other international organizations, including the World Trade Organization (WTO), International Maritime Organization (IMO), Intergovernmental Organisation for International Carriage by Rail (OTIF), Organization for Co-operation between Railways (OSJD), and Universal Postal Union (UPU). She further presented additional crucial work which the WCO had carried out covering aspects relating to Customs-Business Partnership and the WCO PSCG.
60. The two Delegates of Bahrain Customs gave a presentation on work done by their Administration in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the delegates provided a brief overview of Customs' internal structure and other organizational aspects, and listed crucial response measures which the Customs Administration had been implementing to safeguard the well-being of employees in terms of health

and safety; to provide excellent Customs service; and to ensure border agency cooperation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, including cooperation with express couriers.

61. One of the delegates indicated that Bahrain Customs had been encouraging employees to follow biosafety measures. For example, face masks were distributed to staff members and body temperature checks were carried out every morning. The Administration had also introduced a system of work shifts with staff divided into two groups. Virtual Private Network (VPN) access was being granted to all employees, and the Customs warehouse systems had been upgraded to allow for round-the-clock operations.
62. Turning to border agency cooperation, one of the delegates informed the meeting that the Bahrain Customs Administration had been strengthening cooperation with other border agencies to differing degrees. Due to the increase in e-commerce shipments during the pandemic, as a priority the Customs Administration had taken the opportunity to sign an instrument with express couriers to ensure smoother and more secure flows of goods into and out of Bahrain.
63. The Representative from the PSCG and the International Federation of Customs Brokers Associations (IFCBA) gave a presentation on a collaborative approach to the COVID-19 pandemic from a Customs-Business Partnership perspective. She underscored the fact that since the pandemic had been declared, the WCO had successfully put mechanisms in place to interact with the PSCG and business in general, and had acted very quickly in identifying and communicating international best practices to facilitate the movement of goods. The WCO had also collected and disseminated information on the status and response of its Member administrations and had provided tangible guidance, such as HS classification advice.
64. She pointed out that in April 2020, the PSCG had released a paper on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which she considered to be the PSCG's first effort in response to COVID-19 crisis. The paper had been drafted through a global survey of the entire supply chain and, while drafting it, the PSCG had been cognizant that it was an extraordinary time for the WCO and its Members as well as for businesses worldwide, with both workers and businesses being dislocated, trade volumes declining, companies laying-off employees and people working from home.
65. She went on to state that the paper provided a number of suggestions, with priority being given to expediting the clearance of essential goods and workers to support and maintain essential services, to applying the principles of "social distancing" to border processes, to striving for efficiencies in and simplification of all clearance processes, and to supporting business resumption and recovery.
66. She informed the meeting that the PSCG was aware of the relevant work being carried out by the WCO during the current pandemic and provided some good news about efforts made by Customs administrations with respect to the WTO TFA, which the PSCG had noted. This included news that Customs administrations in exporting countries had been working with exporters, engaging with the latter to achieve win-win solutions for trade actors who had initially faced problems related to non-facilitation of preferential trade, despite facilitation being required by the TFA trade rules.
67. **In conclusion, the TFAWG;**

- took note of the presentations by Members and the private sector and provided guidance on this topic,

## ITEM IX - Guatemala's TFA challenges and COVID-19 by H.E. Ambassador José Briz

68. The Chairperson introduced the item by saying that based on Guatemala's experience, H.E. Ambassador Briz would address the issue of TFA challenges and how different stakeholders, government and the private sector could mitigate the problems posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to international trade.
69. H.E. Ambassador Briz started his presentation by thanking the WCO Secretariat for inviting him to participate in and speak at the TFAWG meeting.
70. He referred to the 2020/2021 strategy and work plan of the Guatemala National Trade Facilitation Committee (NCTF) as well as its objectives, Guatemala's implementation notifications to the WTO (Article 10.4 and 10.6 and Article 12.2), and the implementation status of different TFA articles.
71. He stressed that in order to manage the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of TFA implementation, Guatemala's NCTF, coordinated by the Ministry of the Economy, had been continuing to hold virtual meetings. This continuous teamwork and coordination at national level, with technical support from the WTO and WCO, had helped Guatemala to manage the challenges posed by COVID-19.
72. In conclusion, the TFAWG:
  - took note of the speech by H.E. Ambassador Briz.

## ITEM X - Any Other Business

73. There were no discussions under this Agenda item.

## ITEM XI - Closing

74. Mr. Brendan O'Hearn, Deputy Director of the Procedures and Facilitation Sub-Directorate, began his closing remarks by thanking delegates both from Member administrations and Observers for their active participation in the meeting. He also expressed his gratitude to all the presenters for their informative presentations, and especially to H.E. Ambassador Briz for sharing Guatemala's experience. He said that such information-sharing opportunities had been the hallmark of the TFAWG and would continue, no matter what form the TFAWG might take in the future.
75. The Chairperson closed the meeting by thanking everyone involved.

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