

Facilitating emergency goods and helping communities affected by disasters: WCO assists its Members in enhancing their operational readiness

Foreword by the Secretary General

After more than two years tackling one of the most disruptive and unpredictable global health challenges of modern times, the international community can finally see the light at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic tunnel. The path to recovery has been a steep one that has revealed the importance of enhancing cooperation and mutual support amongst stakeholders involved in humanitarian operations and the urgent need to review and adapt the policies and processes implemented to tackle disasters at national, regional and global levels.

WCO Members have spared no effort to curb the spread of the pandemic and their commitment and constancy have been invaluable. Placing citizens' safety at the heart of their mission, they have worked restlessly to successfully address unstable trade flows, put in place timely measures to respond to the needs of a variety of operators affected by the economic crisis, and adapted Customs compliance measures to guarantee lawful supply chain continuity, with special attention given to medical goods and vaccines.

The WCO encourages its Members to make the most of the lessons learnt and to prioritize disaster preparedness planning, risk assessment and response coordination. In order to achieve this, the WCO has been supporting Members by exchanging the latest tools and technical expertise relevant to disaster relief and providing the necessary guidance to develop efficient organizational and practical mechanisms to improve disaster management readiness.

In this fourth edition of the WCO COVID-19 Project Newsletter, readers will find an overview of the WCO strategic and operational tools available to help them foster disaster preparedness and of the most effective emergency response training and exercises, alongside recommendations on how to develop robust assessment plans and disaster management operating models. The guidance given is illustrated by best practices that are adaptable and scalable to national priorities and requirements.

Overcoming the challenges brought about by the pandemic has been a complex journey, but also an instructive one. The WCO will make sure that Customs administrations can capitalize on the experience gained by equipping them with ad hoc toolkits and regularly informing them about the latest policies and procedures applicable to and replicable for responding to humanitarian crises. Through this ongoing support, the WCO once again confirms its dedication to assisting Members in facilitating trade and protecting borders by applying the highest standards in the best interest of citizens, regardless of the disruption that may affect operations.



Dr. Kunio Mikuriya

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The WCO COVID-19 Project

As part of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in June 2020 the WCO launched the COVID-19 Project with the financial support of the Government of Japan. The Project aims to support Members (especially least developed and developing countries) in dealing with the impact of natural disasters, infectious diseases and other unpredictable scenarios. The overall purpose is to ensure the security, stability and continuity of global supply chains, while facilitating and expediting the supply of emergency relief goods.

With the approval of the Government of Japan, which has agreed to grant a one-year extension, the WCO COVID-19 Project will continue until June 2023.

Additional information on the Project is available here:

<http://www.wcoomd.org/en/topics/facilitation/activities-and-programmes/natural-disaster/coronavirus.aspx>

100

Over 100 **WCO Members** have benefitted from the Project's events.

5/6

WCO regions

WCO COVID-19 Project's activities have covered **5 of the 6 WCO regions**.

19

As of November 2022 **19 workshops** of different formats have been held in the framework of the COVID-19 Project.

5

WCO COVID-19 Project's activities were held in 5 languages: English, French, Spanish, Arabic and Portuguese.



Training Customs staff in operational readiness: a critical aspect of effective humanitarian assistance

The outbreak of COVID-19 called for an immediate reaction from the WCO and a number of actions and initiatives were launched to provide a timely, decisive and constructive response to this health threat. Such responsiveness was critical to counter the pandemic and helped in more effectively tackling other types of disruption stemming from natural disasters, especially considering that climate change trends confirm that disasters are currently more and more frequent, unpredictable and impactful, affecting all regions around the world.

The COVID-19 Project, following the first months of its work prioritizing pandemic-related solutions, has been focusing its recent activities on the regions most threatened by natural disasters. These include the Caribbean and Pacific islands which are regularly affected by catastrophes and, due to their remote geographic location, are at higher risk of experiencing trade isolation, a lack of essential goods and disruption to supply chain continuity. The support provided to these beneficiaries includes the development of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the facilitation of relief goods and equipment in the event of disruptive events, the production of a reference document to be used for emergency situations (referred to below as “the Guide”) and scenario-based testing capacity in the form of simulation exercises.

The guidance offered differs from one situation to another given the unsuitability of a one-size-fits-all approach; the assistance deployed by the COVID-19 Project has been tailored to the needs and requirements of each beneficiary country and the workshops held have encouraged a bottom-up approach, fostering the inclusion of the technical expertise of Customs, border authorities and humanitarian actors with a deep knowledge of national and regional processes. The guidance produced by the Project’s beneficiaries includes, amongst other things, several thematic tables, with slightly different formats, detailing each step of the Customs clearance process and of the procedures that stakeholders should follow with when intervening in a country. The tables cover issues such as exemption from duties and taxes for international organizations and for non-governmental organizations, Customs clearance at airports and ports, temporary admission procedures, and importation of donated medicines and foodstuffs.

Other key information includes a list of ports of entry and the contacts of border staff on duty, details about the national list of relief goods requested and about the actors eligible for legal facilities, and clarification on the issuance of regulatory documents and on the responsibilities of the different authorities involved in disaster management at national level.

During the many training sessions conducted by the COVID-19 Project, both in person or online, beneficiaries also had the opportunity to test the smooth functioning of procedures during scenario-based simulation exercises (SIMEX). Virtual simulations of catastrophes were set up and participants assessed the different steps of the recently drafted SOPs, thus identifying and removing any potential bottlenecks and producing recommendations to ensure the SOPs are effective in real-life situations.



The SOPs contained in the Guide on Customs clearance and regularization of relief consignments in the event of natural disasters and other disruptive events were developed, with the assistance of WCO experts, by participants in the capacity building activities organized by the COVID-19 Project. The SOPs provide beneficiary Customs administrations with a tool to be shared with humanitarian aid stakeholders, including up-to-date, clear and official information on the procedures and contact points to facilitate the fast, smooth and lawful importation of relief goods and equipment.

When to conduct a SIMEX?

A simulation exercise is “an event that replicates selected aspects of a real emergency to provide an opportunity for testing procedures in place and raising awareness of preparedness and response requirements and actions”

- It is crucial to include lessons learned from the previous disaster/s.

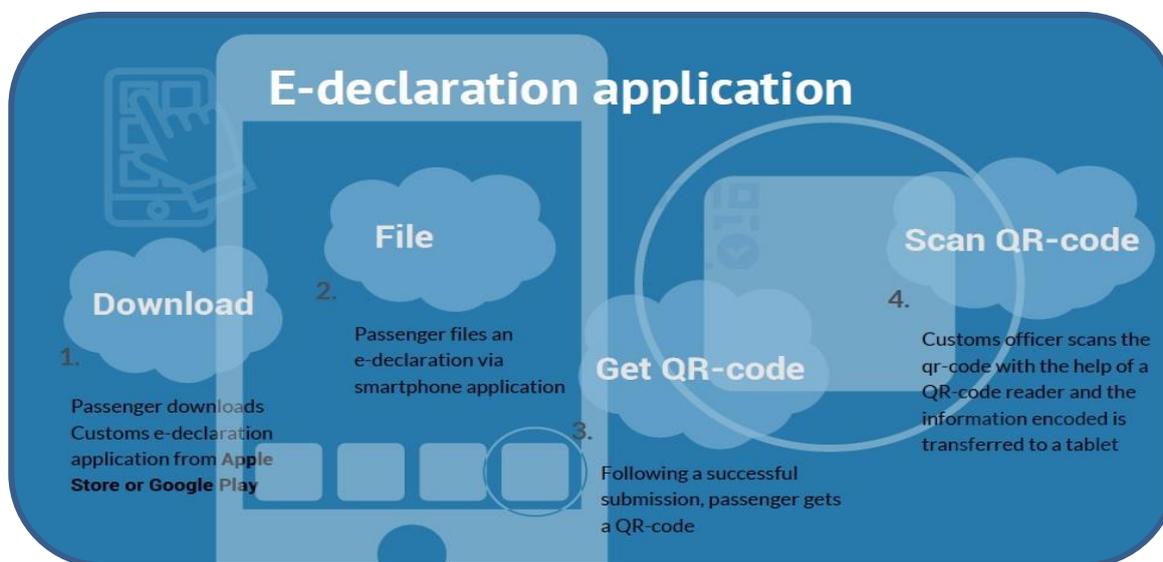
Source : E-learning course on simulation exercises in enhancing Customs’ operational readiness to respond to disruptive events

- 23-26 May 2022: In-person national workshop for Haiti Customs - “WCO national workshop to improve the ability of Haiti Customs to manage the risks stemming from natural disasters and other disruptive events”
<http://www.wcoomd.org/en/media/newsroom/2022/june/reviewing-the-2010-earthquake-disaster.aspx>
- 16-17 August 2022: Virtual national workshop for Tonga Customs - “WCO online workshop to assist Tonga Customs in improving its capacity to respond to emergency situations: Assessment of the response to recent natural disasters”
- 12-16 September 2022 : In-person national workshop for Tonga Customs - “WCO workshop to assist Tonga Customs in improving its capacity to respond to emergency situations: Drafting Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the clearance of relief consignments”
<http://www.wcoomd.org/en/media/newsroom/2022/october/successful-national-workshop-to-assist-tonga-customs-in-enhancing-its-disaster-preparedness.aspx>
- 24-28 October 2022 : Virtual national workshop for Fiji - “WCO online workshop to assist Fiji Customs in improving its preparedness to respond to emergency situations: Drafting Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the clearance of relief consignments”
<http://www.wcoomd.org/en/media/newsroom/2022/october/the-wco-covid19-project-reinforces-its-support-for-a-national-workshop-for-fiji-customs.aspx>
- 28-29 November 2022 : In-person national workshop for Angola - “WCO workshop to assist Angola Revenue Administration in improving its preparedness to face natural disasters and other disruptive events: conducting SIMEX”



Photo showing participants at the national workshop to assist Tonga Customs in enhancing its disaster preparedness, held from 12 to 16 September in Nuku'alofa (Tonga) under the auspices of Mr. Kelemete Vahe, Chief Executive Officer of Tonga Customs.

Digital transformation at the touch of a button: equipping border staff with technology to manage Customs declarations electronically



In addition to fostering the preparedness of Customs staff through capacity building activities, the COVID-19 Project has also been providing interested Members with IT tools to facilitate the movement of passengers securely and effectively. These tools include a Mobile App for the submission of Customs declarations by inbound air passengers and the related hardware, also provided by the Project. In-person IT training sessions were provided to Customs officers working at the international airports in

Cameroon, Benin and Madagascar, promoting the implementation of the recommendations stemming from the WCO's theme for 2022, namely "Scaling up Customs Digital Transformation by Embracing a Data Culture and Building a Data Ecosystem", thus improving data governance and staff data literacy and enhancing operational services during challenging situations such as those resulting from the spread of infectious diseases, as has been the case during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **6-8 June 2022: In-person follow up on the national workshop for Benin Customs and training on the use of the App and equipment provided**
- **30 May-3 June 2022: In-person national workshop for Cameroon Customs and training on the use of the App and IT equipment:**
<http://www.wcoomd.org/en/media/newsroom/2022/june/the-wco-covid-19-project-conducts-a-workshop-for-cameroon-customs.aspx>
- **13-15 June 2022: In-person follow up on the national workshop for Madagascar Customs and training on the use of the Mobile App and IT equipment**



Customs staff testing the Mobile App and hardware provided by the WCO COVID-19 Project during the training session held from 13 to 15 June 2022 in Madagascar.

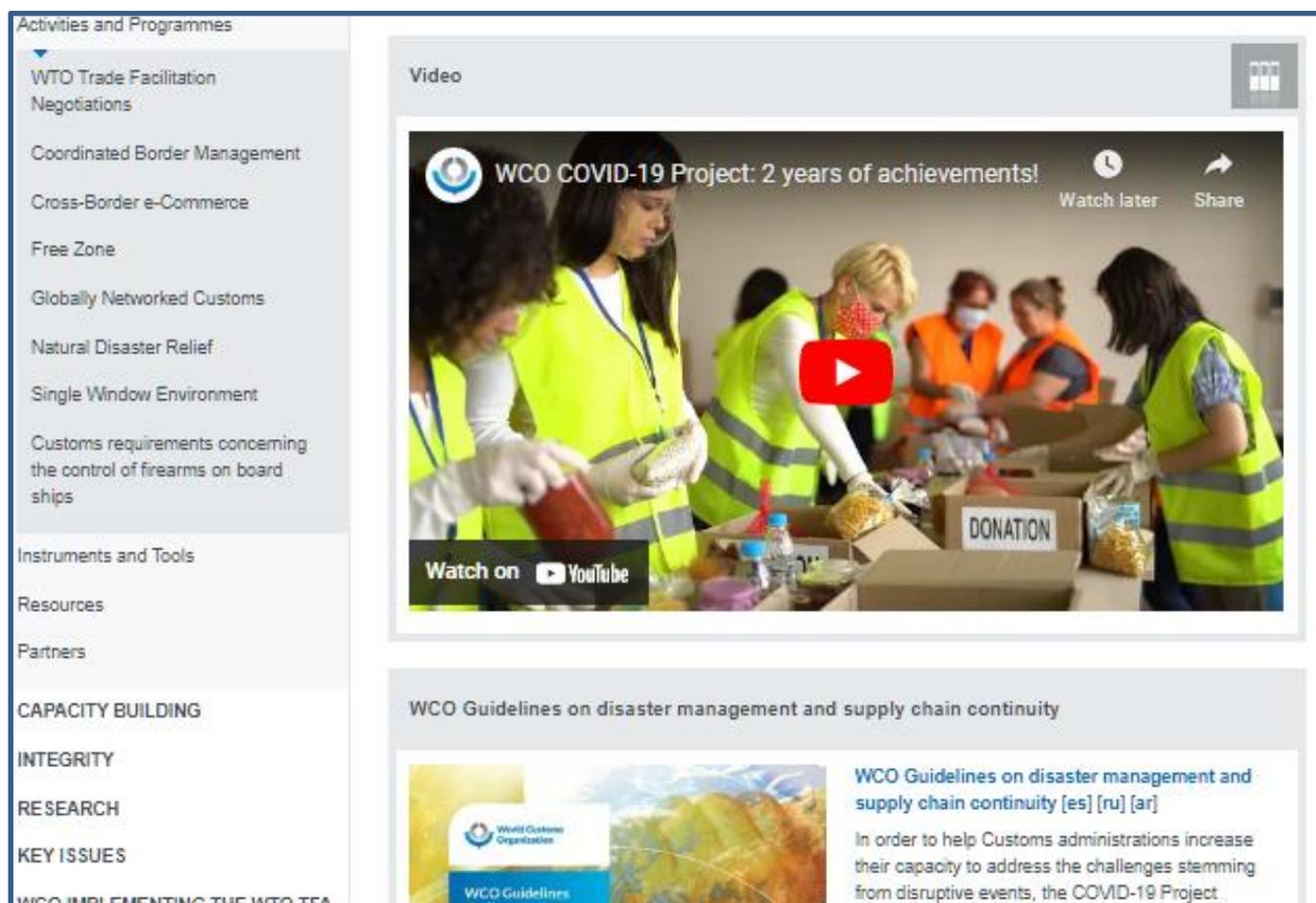
Informing the Customs community in a clear and timely way: the COVID-19 Project’s new web page

With the COVID-19 Project recently entering its third year of activity, the time was right to rethink the way information is shared, ensuring that Members and stakeholders are made aware of the latest and upcoming activities in a simple and engaging manner, in keeping with the WCO’s corporate paperless policy. To achieve this objective, the WCO COVID-19 Project has launched a brand new web page, easily accessible from the home page of the WCO website and exclusively containing material relating to the Project, showcasing the work carried out via different types of media format.

Users will find a video presenting the ethos and goals of the Project; the latest web articles and Newsletters providing information on the range of services offered to WCO Members; the WCO Guidelines on disaster management and supply chain continuity (available in various languages); and a shortcut to the recently launched “E-learning course on simulation exercises in enhancing Customs’ operational readiness to respond to disruptive events”, available on the CLiKC! platform.

Communications about the Project also included the publication of an article in the “Flash Info” section of the WCO News magazine (issue 2/2022), as part of an edition focusing on the WCO’s support for the green transition and on the importance of action by trade to foster environmental initiatives. In the feature “WCO COVID-19 Project: results and way forward”, the Project provides readers with an overview of the main achievements during the period from August 2020 to June 2022

The article “WCO COVID-19 Project: results and way forward” is available at the link below:
https://mag.wcoomd.org/uploads/2022/06/WCO-News_98EN-1.pdf



The June 2011 Council Resolution on the Role of Customs in Natural Disaster Relief: a legal framework to foster Customs readiness

The management of emergency goods flows can be demanding. Customs controls should be carried out using risk management; consignments originate from different sources and are varied in terms of the amount and nature of the goods and equipment they contain, increasing the risk of incomplete or incorrect shipping documents, unsuitable packaging of goods and consignee-related problems.

The very short time frame for their transport, facilitation and importation adds a number of operational and coordination challenges, hence the importance of applying simple and tested Customs solutions to prevent chaos and bottlenecks at the border. This requires Customs administrations to be well prepared, ready to trigger emergency response procedures at any given time, and their staff to be trained to work in difficult conditions and informed about the temporary measures to be implemented rapidly, if necessary.

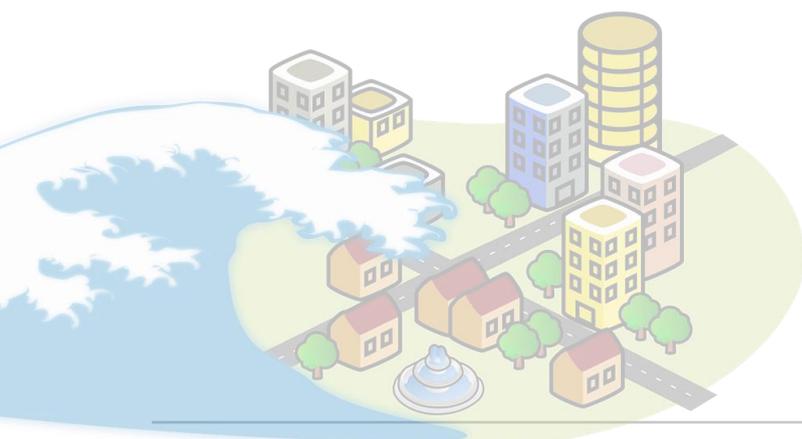
The WCO has long been committed to supporting humanitarian assistance actions, helping communities affected by different types of natural disasters and working in close contact with other government agencies, international and non-governmental organizations and private actors to make sure that, following an official request for international assistance, the goods, equipment and human resources flowing into a country are imported rapidly and legally.

The June 2011 Council Resolution on the Role of Customs in Natural Disaster Relief is a particularly relevant instrument for addressing operational readiness in the disaster relief domain. Not only does it highlight the importance of fostering disaster preparedness in Customs administrations in order to respond efficiently and effectively to emergencies, but it also provides them with guidance on expediting the clearance and release of relief consignments at borders, ensuring that aid reaches victims in need promptly, and facilitating the entry, exit and transit of disaster relief personnel and their possessions.

The Resolution's recommendations for WCO Members include:

- ✚ Providing stakeholders with all necessary information about the regulations and procedures applicable to relief consignments
- ✚ Testing the level of preparedness and capacity to manage emergency situations through diagnostics on the procedures introduced for the Customs processing of emergency humanitarian assistance and simulation exercises
- ✚ Involving all stakeholders, such as humanitarian actors, Customs brokers, carriers, etc. in the above.
- ✚ Drawing up and implementing national training plans to ensure that Customs staff are sufficiently qualified and able to manage emergencies
- ✚ Enhancing Customs administrations' preparedness by producing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

As part of the work carried out for the benefit of WCO Members and in cooperation with international experts, the COVID-19 Project has made efforts to put these recommendations into practice, encouraging beneficiaries to adopt the Resolution and other model agreements dealing with Customs formalities. The Project has promoted the use of existing tools and instruments for the clearance of relief consignments at exportation, during transit or at importation across five WCO regions, improving the capacity of WCO Members to respond to emergencies and disasters in a timely and effective manner and helping them to identify areas for improvement and best practices to be shared with the wider Customs community



WCO COVID-19 Project: designing tools to enhance Customs readiness



The Self-Assessment Checklist: an Annex to the WCO Guidelines on disaster management and supply chain continuity

In June 2022, at the 139th/140th Sessions of the WCO Council, Members approved the addition of a Self-Assessment Checklist as an Annex to the WCO Guidelines on disaster management and supply chain continuity. This new tool is intended to provide Customs administrations with an evaluation instrument that will help them in analysing the gaps to be filled between the measures already in place to face emergencies and those that could be implemented for improved disaster management.

The Checklist covers several areas of interest, including the role of Customs administrations and other national organizations; the national legal framework; available Customs resources such as a Single Window; the training of personnel; cooperation with other government agencies and stakeholders; and Customs procedures. As a result, the Checklist will also help the WCO better identify Members' needs and take additional action to support them. Since its launch in July 2020, the COVID-19 Project has already assisted several Members interested in carrying out an in-depth examination of their national preparedness, helping them analyse and review their procedures for the facilitation of relief consignments, identify potential supply chain bottlenecks and generally boost their ability to tackle natural disasters, infectious diseases and other unpredictable scenarios.

The Self-Assessment Checklist forms part of the broader WCO Guidelines on disaster management and supply chain continuity which were also produced by the WCO COVID-19 Project to help Customs administrations improve their capacity to address the challenges stemming from emergency situations. The Guidelines were built upon existing WCO instruments and tools, such as Chapter 5 of Specific Annex J to the Revised Kyoto Convention and the 2011 WCO Council Resolution, WCO initiatives in the area of natural disaster relief, other guidance material developed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and best practices collected from Members and stakeholders.

A previous version of the Guidelines was approved by the Council at its Session in 2021. The full text is available on the WCO website in English, French, Spanish, Russian and Arabic:

http://www.wcoomd.org/-/media/wco/public/global/pdf/topics/facilitation/activities-and-programmes/natural-disaster/guidelines-disaster-management_en.pdf?db=web

Designing, implementing and testing plans for business continuity and enhanced resilience with the COVID-19 Project Guide to Stress Tests

In order to respond effectively to the impact of disruptive events, Customs administrations should have preparedness and response plans in place. For these to be useful and robust, they should be tested and updated on a regular basis.

As part of its work to assist Customs administrations in enhancing their operational readiness, a “Guide to Stress Tests” has been developed by the COVID-19 Project. The Guide covers a range of techniques used to assess the vulnerability of an organization to major environmental changes, providing information about its behaviour in situations of risk.

Through this tool, the WCO Secretariat aims to assist Customs administrations in assessing their organization’s ability to withstand extreme conditions and in learning more about the development of business continuity and contingency plans. This involves testing and validating methods during ad hoc simulation exercises and ensuring that, in the event of disruptive situations, procedures, systems and staff are capable of guaranteeing the continuity of operations. If performed regularly and in good time, such checks generate a number of benefits, including safeguarding the administration’s personnel and assets, building the confidence of staff and third parties and enhancing the administration’s resilience.

There are different types of stress tests and, through this newly developed document, Customs administrations will be able to decide which format is best suited to them based on the advantages and disadvantages of each option (e.g. table top exercises, drills, desktop/functional simulations, full-scale simulations) and according to their specific objectives, resources and procedures.

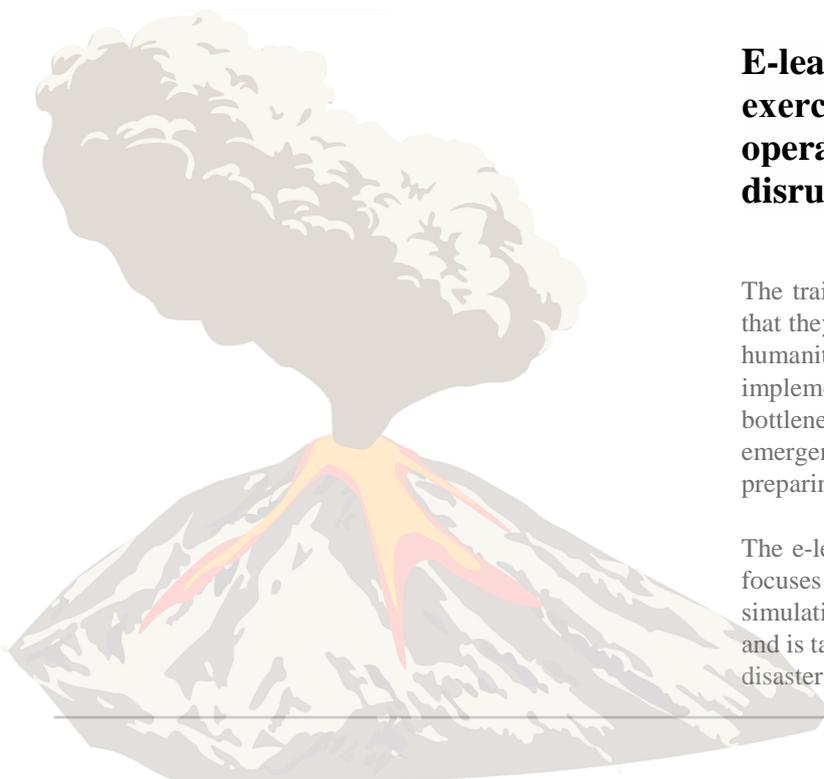
They will also receive guidance on the debriefing phase, thus making the most of the exercise and translating the experience into practical recommendations to be implemented for improved disaster preparedness. The Guide to Stress Tests was endorsed by the Permanent Technical Committee (PTC) in October 2022 and, as a living document, it will be updated by adding best practices followed Members and other partners.



E-learning tool: course on simulation exercises in enhancing Customs’ operational readiness to respond to disruptive events

The training of Customs staff is essential to make sure that they are fully informed about the functioning of the humanitarian aid supply chain as a whole, so as to implement emergency measures consistently and avoid bottlenecks. Simulation exercises are typically used by emergency managers to take proactive measures in preparing an effective response.

The e-learning tool designed by the COVID-19 Project focuses on how Customs administrations can use simulation exercises to enhance operational readiness and is targeted at different personnel profiles involved in disaster management, including managers, policymakers



and Customs staff performing operational roles at borders.

The online format of the module, available on the CLiKC! platform and taking about one hour to complete, gives an opportunity to those interested in mastering the procedures and techniques applied to this field in a standardized and cost-effective way, studying at their own pace and interactively, thanks to the variety of multimedia content included in the course.

Learners will be able to evaluate their systems and performance by analysing the use of operational tools and procedures, while reviewing emergency tasks that require decision-making and coordination. They will tackle critical questions, ranging from the set-up and running of simulation exercises up to their design and follow-up.

The results stemming from the use of this tool will be instrumental in identifying critical aspects of disaster relief management and areas of work that need to be strengthened through the updating of emergency plans and policies.



Advantages of using simulations for disaster preparedness and response include:

- ✚ Testing or evaluating preparedness or emergency plans
- ✚ Facilitating training and updating knowledge
- ✚ Evaluating the decision-making process and coordination mechanisms
- ✚ Helping to strengthen coordination within an organization and with other sectors and institutions
- ✚ Validating the instruments and processes used to collect and organize information
- ✚ Evaluating how participants react in specific situation

Scenario development



A successful exercise depends on the development of detailed, realistic and comprehensive exercise material.

The master scenario should be based on the identified risks of the target group/ organization and the plans that are meant to be tested. The scenario contains a sequence of events to lead the participants through the SIMEX.

Source: E-learning course on simulation exercises in enhancing Customs' operational readiness to respond to disruptive events

Best practices for the assessment of Customs response to disasters: challenges, constraints and solutions

Disaster risk evaluation not only helps to assess to what extent each negative event or condition can affect supply chain continuity, but also to identify the challenges and solutions to ensure the smooth running of operations. Considering that humanitarian aid logistics entail the involvement of different actors cooperating in resource- and time-constrained circumstances, when assessing an emergency response and looking into the strengths and weaknesses of the SOPs in place it is critical to apply a holistic approach, taking into consideration the standpoint of different stakeholders and beneficiaries.

As highlighted by participants in different workshops organized by the COVID-19 Project, when dealing with operational readiness for disaster relief, the absence of a solid legal framework coupled with insufficient communication between the parties involved often leads to confusion, delays and additional workload for both Customs officials at ports of entry and relief personnel. On the whole, management shortcomings increase the time and costs needed for the facilitation of goods and equipment in a context where resources are already over-stretched, thus increasing the risk of disruption to the humanitarian supply chain.

Challenges reported by¹ :

Customs administrations:

- ✚ Significant increase in the number of international responders
- ✚ Unsolicited donations (especially expired products)
- ✚ Incomplete/missing documents
- ✚ Cargo items without a designated recipient
- ✚ Document language
- ✚ Lack of understanding of the role of Customs

Humanitarian organizations:

- ✚ Goods delayed at Customs ports of entry
- ✚ Inadequate publicly available Customs procedures
- ✚ Lack of prioritization
- ✚ Increased costs due to delays and accumulated storage
- ✚ Lack of clear SOPs
- ✚ Lack of focal points
- ✚ Inconsistency in the application of procedures
- ✚ Lack of coordination between the different governmental organizations
- ✚ Lack of resources at ports of entry (mainly staff)
- ✚ Import entry being restricted to specific ports of entry

There are a number of solutions that can be adopted by Customs administrations to set up a simplified and transparent system to regulate the importation of relief

consignments, providing humanitarian actors with the information they need to operate in accordance with national requirements, thus reducing the risk of compliance and facilitation issues at borders. The assessment of a Member's preparedness should therefore also consider to what extent the existing disaster management mechanisms embed such practices, widely recognized by international experts and stakeholders as a sign of integrity and dependability.

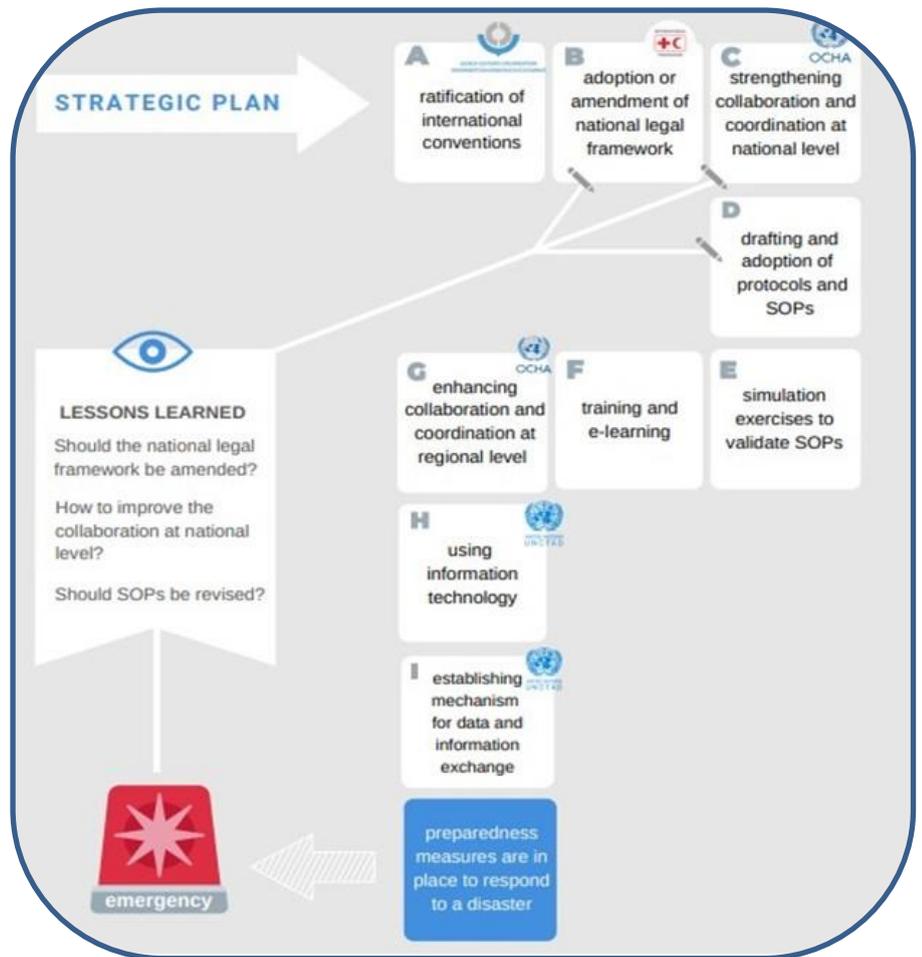
From a legal perspective, the ratification of international conventions, the adoption of a pre-established national legal framework and the drafting of SOPs offers a set of internationally recognized principles, harmonized practices and recommended facilitative measures to efficiently manage the inflow of goods in case of emergencies. Among these, the instruments and tools produced by the WCO to support its Members in tackling disaster relief serve as a compass to guide Customs administrations on how best to contribute to assisting victims of disasters, by simplifying and streamlining formalities, in accordance with the law and for those organizations that operate appropriately, in a number of key Customs areas such as risk management and clearance.

In parallel, strengthening cooperation between institutions involved in disaster management (such as competent ministries, other government agencies, National Disaster Management Authorities (NDMAs), etc.) at the national and regional level and fostering the mutual exchange of information and data, especially in digital format, is helpful to ensure that those involved work at the same pace, thus avoiding an overlap of competencies while encouraging the sharing of objectives, expertise and resources.

Additionally, as already mentioned throughout this Newsletter, the regular training of Customs staff is also key to ensuring operational readiness, giving personnel the means not only to act immediately and appropriately in the event of unpredictable disruption, but also to evaluate the functioning and efficiency of the clearance measures in place, adapting and reviewing them when required.

¹ Source: IMPACCT Group

A comprehensive assessment of Customs response to emergency situations entails a robust legal framework, up-to-date protocols, recurring training of staff and the involvement of stakeholders



Source: IMPACCT Group



Enhancing Customs technical and leadership skills in emergency settings: the COVID-19 Project takes part in a multi-stakeholders simulation exercise organized by Logistics Cluster

The WCO COVID-19 Project attended a Logistics Response Training (LRT) organized by Logistics Cluster, a coordination mechanism set up by the United Nations to ensure an effective emergency response. The network involves humanitarian actors and fosters cooperation to address logistics needs during disaster relief operations, encouraging coordination, information management and broadening humanitarian logistics knowledge and technical expertise.

The LRT consisted of a 7-day simulation in Brindisi (Italy) from 19 to 25 November 2022, involving over thirty participants dealing with emergency response, representing United Nations agencies and other international organizations. Participants were confronted with fictional disruptive events and worked together to tackle unexpected difficulties, putting their expertise at the service of the affected population and local government. They were immersed in a realistic emergency experience and operated in field-like conditions, with very little background information, learning how to organize effective teams by better understanding each other's strengths and how to cooperate in case of logistics challenges.

Bringing stakeholders together was an opportunity to enhance preparedness and improve participants' knowledge of emergency response management. The COVID-19 Project played the role of facilitator during the session on Customs procedures, explaining to stakeholders the work carried out by Customs during emergency operations.

Participants learned more about the importance of complying with administrative requirements for the clearance of different types of goods (such as foodstuffs and telecommunication equipment), the need to apply for specific authorizations issued by competent Ministries prior to import/transit, the implications for organizations benefitting from preferential status and more in general how to operate in accordance with local trade regulations and standards, thus speeding up the overall facilitation process.

By joining this initiative, the COVID-19 Project was able to raise awareness about the role of Customs in disaster management, build new synergies and strengthen its network of international humanitarian actors working in logistics. The training will also be helpful to fine-tune disaster relief capacity-building workshops and simulation exercises developed by the Project for its beneficiaries, thus capitalizing on the experience and sharing such newly acquired and relevant expertise with interested WCO Members.





Get in touch:
COVID19BCProject@wcoomd.org

Editorial note

The COVID-19 Project Newsletter is distributed free of charge in English and French and is available on the WCO website. The WCO COVID-19 Project Team wishes to express its sincere thanks to all contributors. Please note that the opinions expressed in this Newsletter are the Team's own and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Organization. The WCO Secretariat reserves the right to publish, not to publish or edit articles to ensure they conform to the Newsletter's editorial policy. Contributions are welcome in English and French.

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Rue du Marché 30
B-1210
Brussels, Belgium

#WCOOMD
wcoomd.org



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