



WCO Secretariat Note

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Current State of Play of WCO Members in the Area of National Committees on Trade Facilitation (NCTF)

I. Introduction

The World Trade Organization (WTO) Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) entered into force on 22 February 2017, once two-thirds of the WTO's Members had completed their domestic ratification processes. As of 8 August 2021, 154 out of the WTO's 164 Members (93%) had ratified the TFA.

The TFA consists of 24 articles divided into three sections. While Section I of the TFA contains technical trade facilitation measures and Section II sets out provisions relating to Special and Differential Treatment, Section III includes Articles 23 and 24 on "Institutional Arrangements and Final Provisions". Article 23.2 is about National Committees on Trade Facilitation (NCTFs).

Article 23.2 National Committee on Trade Facilitation

Each Member shall establish and/or maintain a national committee on trade facilitation or designate an existing mechanism to facilitate both domestic coordination and implementation of the provisions of this Agreement.

Effective implementation of the TFA requires a well-functioning NCTF, involving all relevant government agencies, including the full and active participation of Customs administrations given the key role that Customs plays at borders in facilitating and securing global trade. Specifically, a WCO Analysis of Section I has shown that Customs plays the most critical role in TFA implementation, with 30% of measures requiring Customs-only involvement and another 40% where Customs has a leading role; Customs involvement is also required for the implementation of all the other measures.

Through the Mercator Programme, which is the WCO's flagship initiative to support trade facilitation, the WCO supports its Members worldwide with implementing the TFA, including Article 23.2, in a uniform manner by applying WCO tools and instruments.

This Secretariat Note provides an overview of WCO Members' state-of-play in the area of NCTFs, based on the results of the WCO Annual Consolidated Survey 2021. It also includes the challenges and opportunities observed by Members during the COVID-19 pandemic.

II. Purpose of the survey

In order to reduce the burden caused by a large number of surveys and enhance the effectiveness of the survey process, the WCO has combined several surveys into one Annual Consolidated Survey.

The 2021 Annual Consolidated Survey (ACS) consists of six Chapters, including a new one (Chapter 5) on National Committees on Trade Facilitation (NTFCs). This Chapter was introduced with the objective of taking stock of the current situation in this area, six years after the previous survey on this subject. The latest survey looked, in particular, at the challenges and opportunities observed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

116 out of the WCO's 183 Members responded to at least one question in Chapter 5, which consisted of nine questions in total.

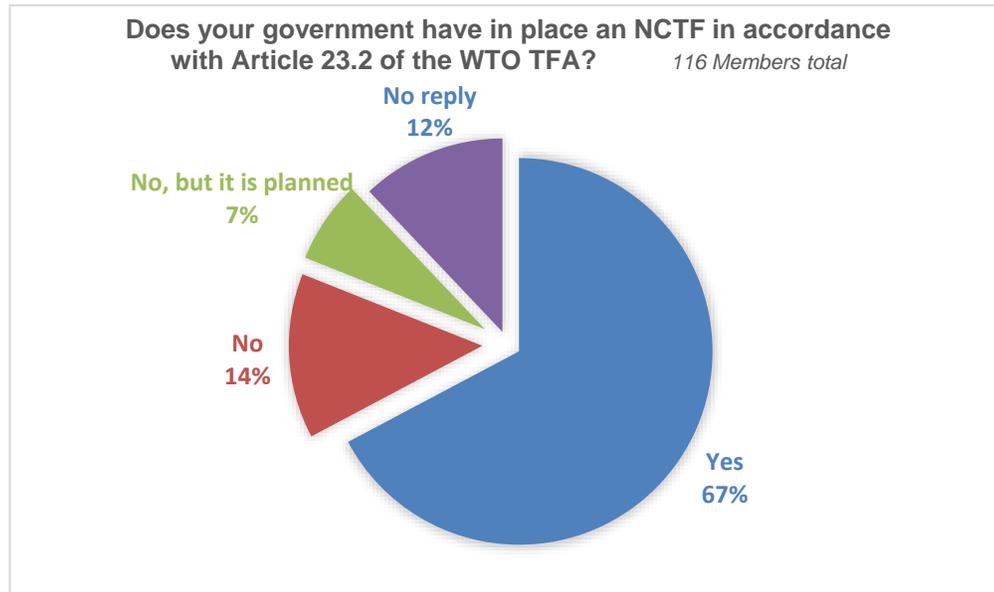
III. Results of the survey

The results of the survey have been analysed under the eight sub-titles shown below.

III.1 Implementation status of Article 23.2 on NCTFs

67% of the responding Members have in place an NCTF in accordance with Article 23.2 of the WTO TFA. However, 14% do not yet have one, and another 7% are planning to introduce one. Compared to January 2016, when 33 WCO Members reported having an NCTF in place, the number reached 78 (out of 116 respondents) in March 2021, reflecting important progress prompted by the entry into force of the Agreement four years ago.





III.2 Stakeholders

The TFA does not specify any requirement regarding a preferred number of stakeholders in an NCTF. However, the participation of both public and private sector representatives has been highly encouraged by international organizations, such as the WCO, which are actively supporting TFA implementation.

The survey results show that the number of members in each NCTF varies from 5 to 60. The full list of numbers of NCTF members reported can be found in the Annex to this Note.

- In the **Asia/Pacific (AP) region**, Japan reported the lowest number of NCTF members (5). The highest number in this region is 24 (Thailand).

In New Zealand, the NCTF is located within the Trade Negotiations Division (TND) of the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT). It draws in officials from other parts of the MFAT, including the Pacific and Development Group and the New Zealand Customs Service, as required.

- In the **East and Southern Africa (ESA) region**, the number of NCTF members is quite high, varying between 20 and 50, except in the case of one Member (Comoros, which has 9 members in its NCTF). Zimbabwe, with 50 NCTF members, has the highest number in the region.

In South Africa, the NCTF is not number-based and there are four core departments involved: South African Revenue Service (SARS), Department of Trade Industry and Competition (DTIC), International Trade Administration Commission, and Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development.

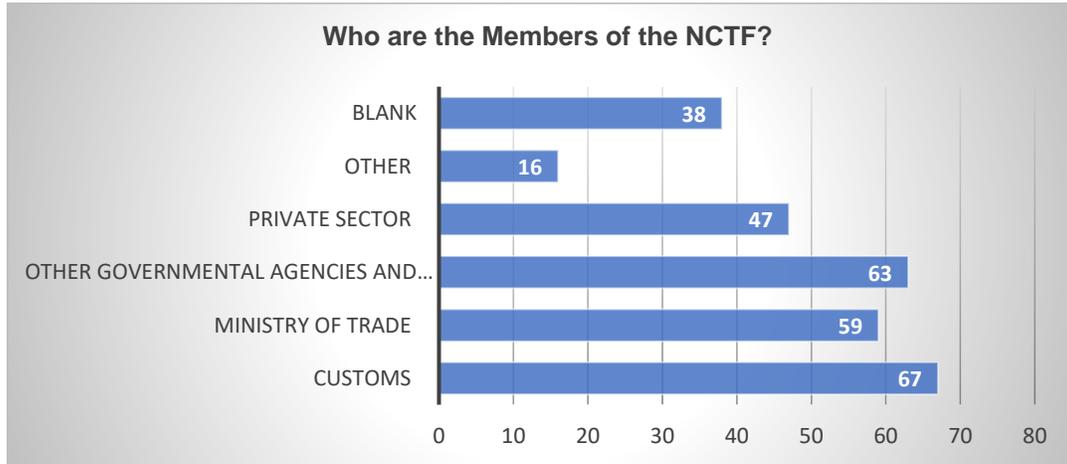
- In the **Europe region**, Sweden reported the highest number of NCTF members at 30, while Norway referred to around 30 organizations and stakeholders as being NCTF members. Greece, with 6 members, and Switzerland with 5 or more (depending on the issues), are the two countries in the region with the lowest number of NCTF members.
- In the **Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region**, Jordan reported having 9 NCTF members, while Morocco and Tunisia have 39 and 34 members respectively.
- In the **Americas and Caribbean region**, the number of NCTF members reported is 20 or less, with the exception of Paraguay which has 42 members (27 from the public sector and 15 from the private sector).

Canada did not specify a number of NCTF members, but indicated that the Government of Canada uses well-functioning interdepartmental networks already in place to undertake the necessary strategic planning and to coordinate trade facilitation domestically, between Global Affairs Canada, the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) and other departments and agencies responsible for the application of import, export and transit requirements at the border, as well as existing mechanisms for consultations with stakeholders.

- In the **West and Central Africa (WCA) region**, the numbers of NCTF members reported are quite high. Niger, with 60 members, has the highest number in the region (and, in fact, the highest number among all the countries which responded), with Burkina Faso and Gabon following with 45 members each. Gambia reported the lowest number in the region, with 10 members.

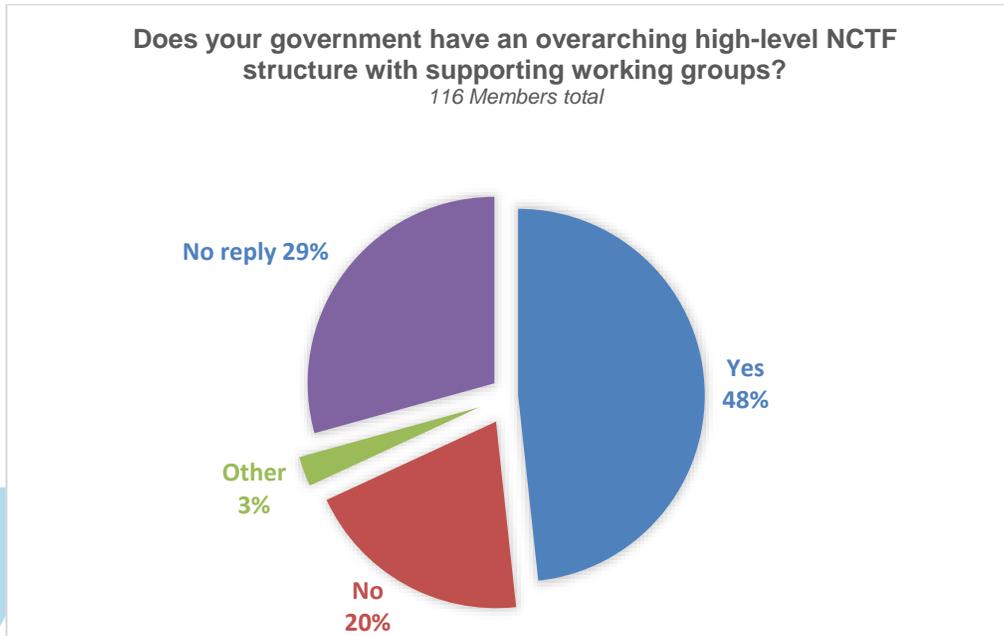
Cameroon did not report a specific number, but indicated that there are three organs in the NCTF: Strategic Orientation Committee, Technical Secretariat and Permanent Secretariat.

In terms of the membership of NCTFs, 67 of the respondents indicated that Customs was a member. The Ministry of Trade was reported as a member by 59 respondents, while other government agencies and ministries were reported as NCTF members by 63 respondents. 47 respondents highlighted the membership of the private sector.



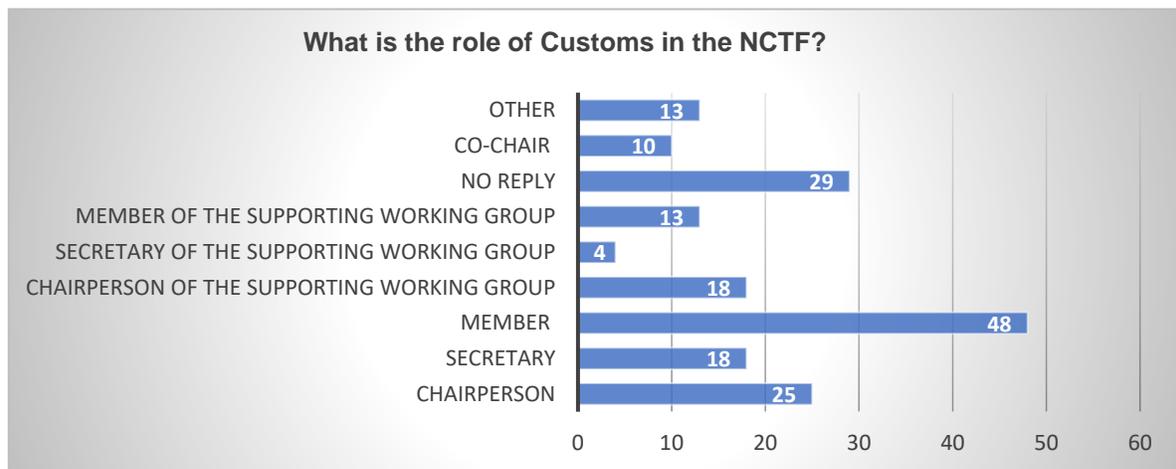
III.3 Structure of NCTFs

The commitment under Article 23.2 does not necessarily mean establishing one body for the coordination and implementation of the TFA. In practice, Members often have a more comprehensive structure in place to respond to the requirements under this provision. 48% of the ACS respondents reported that their governments have an overarching high-level NCTF structure with supporting working groups, while 20% reported that they do not have such a structure in place.



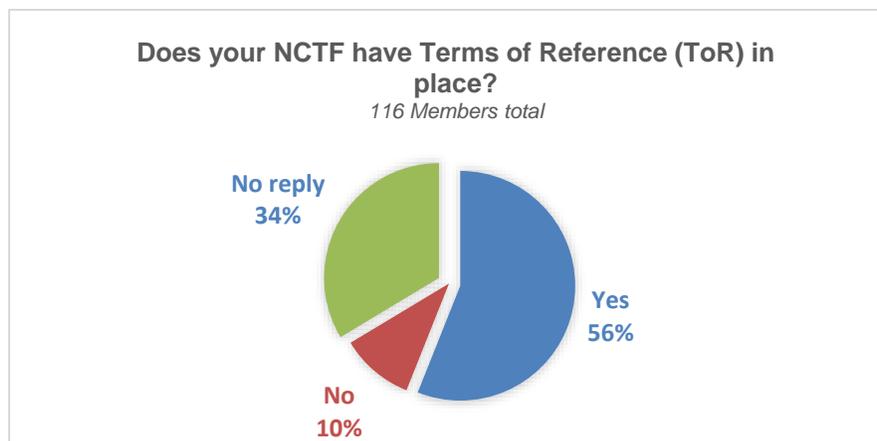
III.4 Role of Customs in the NCTFs

Considering its high level of responsibility for implementing and ensuring compliance with the TFA measures, Customs needs to have an active role in the structure of the NCTF. The survey results show that in 48 cases Customs has only the role of member of the Committee, while in 35 cases Customs is either the Chairperson or Co-Chairperson, and in 18 cases Customs is the Secretary of the NCTF. Additionally, 35 Customs administrations participate in a supporting working group as a Chairperson, Secretary or member.



III.5 Terms of Reference of NCTFs

The existence of Terms of Reference is critical for institutionalizing the work of an NCTF and for providing a clear governance framework with an indication of the Committee's roles and responsibilities. 56% of respondents reported that they have NCTF Terms of Reference (ToR) in place, while 10% do not. In 34% of cases, no response was given to this question.

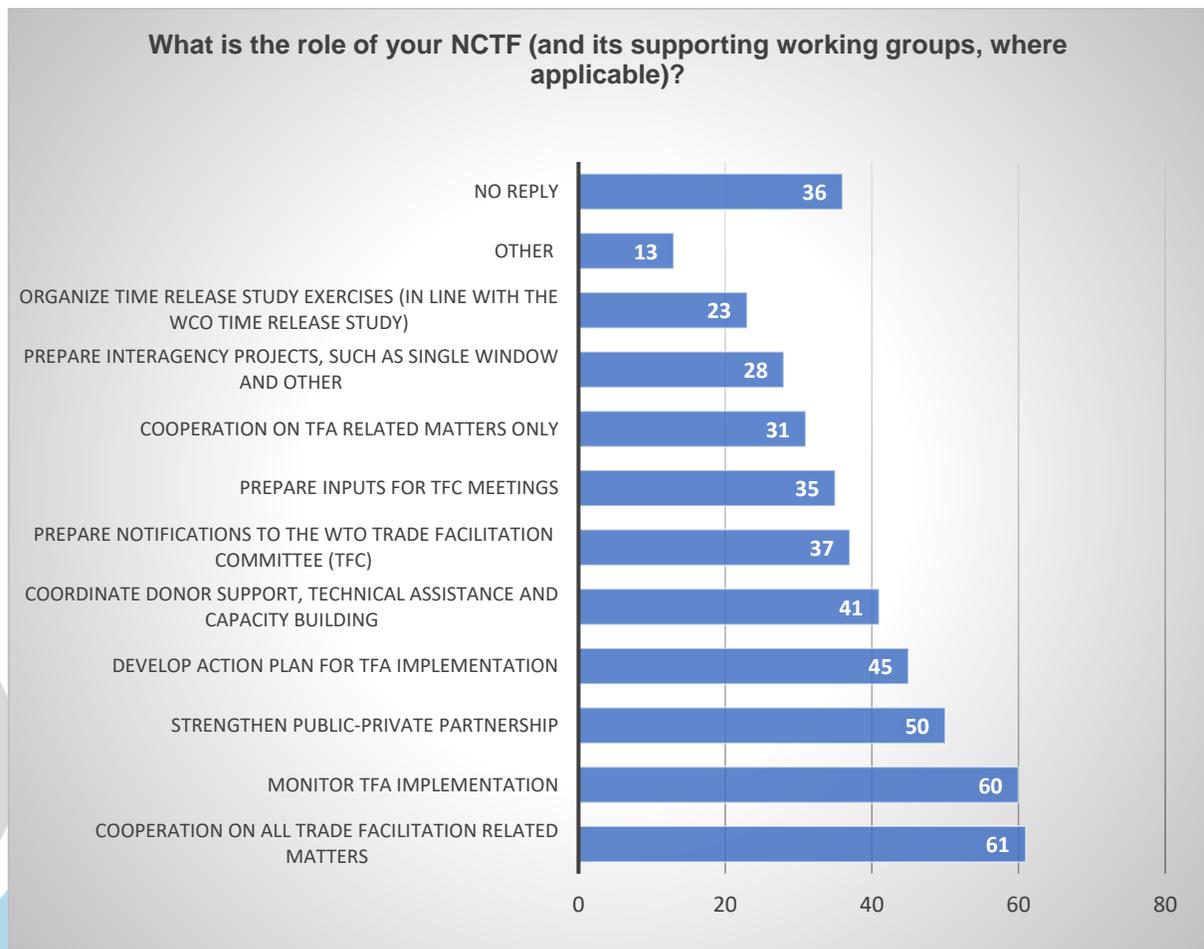




III.6 Roles and responsibilities

There is no “one-size-fits-all” when it comes to the roles and responsibilities of NCTFs. Thus, some have been established with the primary purpose of ensuring implementation of the TFA, whereas others existed long before the TFA was concluded and their role goes beyond addressing the commitments included in the Agreement. Furthermore, the focus of each Committee can vary depending on the Member’s priorities, and this is reflected in the results of the survey.

Approximately half of the respondents reported that the main role of the NCTF in their country is ensuring cooperation on all trade facilitation related matters and monitoring TFA implementation. Strengthening public-private partnership was highlighted as a role of the NCTF by 50 respondents, while 45 respondents referred to the development of a TFA implementation action plan as a role of the NCTF, and 41 indicated that the NCTF coordinates donor support, technical assistance and capacity building in their country.



72 respondents reported that the NCTF cooperates with the WTO Trade Facilitation Committee (TFC), either by preparing notifications or by preparing input for TFC meetings.

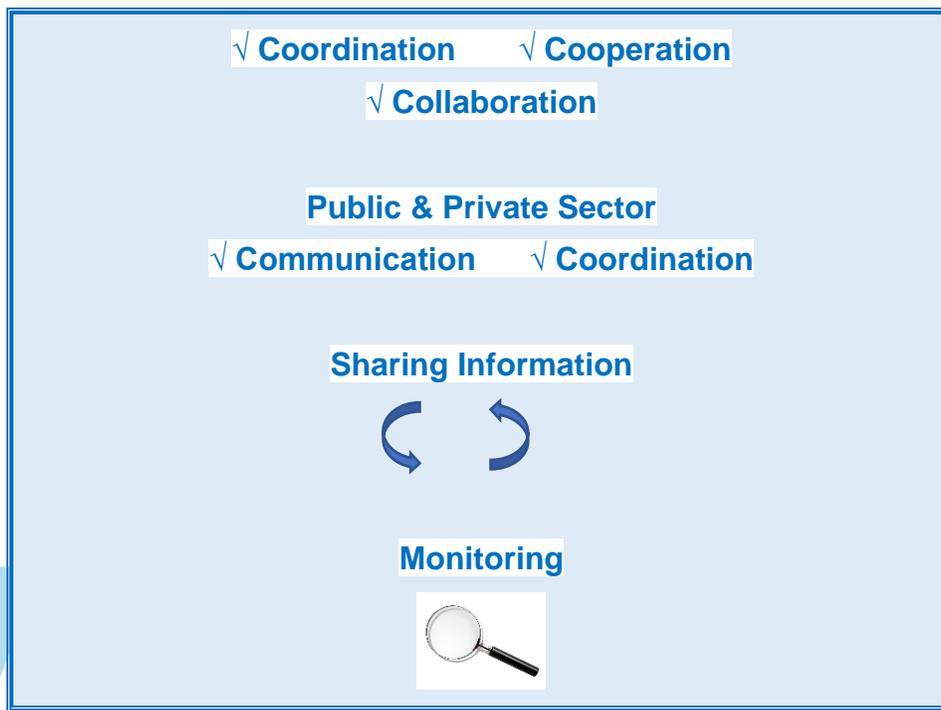
The other NCTF roles reported by respondents are as follows: cooperation on TFA-related matters only (31 Members), preparing interagency projects such as Single Window and others (28 respondents), and organizing Time Release Study exercises in line with the WCO Time Release Study (23 Members).

III.7 Main benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about severe disruption in international trade, which has had a significant impact on the trade facilitation agenda overall. The focus has been on moving essential goods as swiftly as possible across borders, and in many cases this has impacted the long-term goals. Nevertheless, in some instances NCTFs have played an important role in addressing facilitation priorities during the pandemic, and have benefited from the sense of urgency generated by the crisis.

WCO Members were asked to indicate the main benefits derived from the functioning of the NCTF, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 60 Members provided responses to this question.

Coordination, Cooperation and Collaboration (3Cs) were the most common answers to this question.





Many Members also highlighted better communication and cooperation between the public and private sectors as one of the important benefits in the functioning of NCTFs during the pandemic. A few Members reported information sharing as a benefit of the NCTF. The monitoring of TFA implementation was also highlighted as one of the main benefits of the NCTF by a number of Members. Some specific benefits were also reported by Members in relation to COVID-19, such as focusing on the facilitation of essential goods, establishment of a "green corridor" for imports of humanitarian aid, speeding up the procedures and providing the country with health, medical and food equipment expeditiously through a rapid response, use of the NCTF as a platform to raise challenges and exchange information during the pandemic, etc.

Members' responses by region

- The highest response rate for this question came from the **Asia-Pacific region**, with 16 out of 33 Members in the region providing comments.

Australia reported the establishment of a government-industry forum to discuss the strategic direction for trade facilitation and partner on trade facilitation initiatives as being the main benefit derived from the NCTF and its sub-committees. The forum has proved especially beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic as an avenue to identify issues affecting trade and communicate the Australian Government's response to the pandemic.

In China, the NCTF has played an important role in facilitating coordination among various government departments and promoting the monitoring and improvement of TFA implementation at national level. In January 2017 China announced that it had reached 100% implementation of the TFA, which was much faster than planned. As China Customs carried out institutional reforms in 2018, integrating the functions of health, animal and plant quarantine, food safety and commodity inspection with Customs, it has been able to not only ensure the effective implementation of the TFA during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to effectively prevent and control the transnational spread of the virus. This measure was also supported by the NCTF.

Indonesia reported that NCTF Indonesia (KNFP) is a single enquiry point that provides information related to trade facilitation within the scope of the TFA, which is being implemented by relevant ministries and agencies in Indonesia. This also includes trade facilitation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee's role has been to ensure the flow of information and ensure trade facilitation, business certainty and predictability.

In order to support the movement of essential goods across borders as smoothly as possible, New Zealand has looked at ways to expedite the Customs clearance process, and has implemented digital solutions to make cross-border business transactions more convenient and transparent while ensuring regulatory compliance. New Zealand has implemented a tariff concession regime for COVID-19 related goods.

In Japan, the framework of the NCTF has enabled the relevant ministries to work closely to coordinate and take proactive measures, including Customs' responses to COVID-19 for promoting trade facilitation, while maintaining a close dialogue with the private sector.

Korea reported the following three benefits derived from the functioning of the NCTF:

- advancement of national implementation of the TFA,
- expansion of international cooperation in terms of the TFA,
- improvement in utilization of the TFA.

Vietnam reported the following two benefits: overseeing the implementation of the TFA, and accelerating and monitoring the implementation of the National Single Window (NSW), the ASEAN Single Window (ASW) and the reform of specialized inspections.

Bhutan reported that it has institutionalized the NCTF. The team meetings are held on a quarterly basis.

Malaysia reported the following benefits: boost in trading activities, reduction of costs for business, and enhanced trade facilitation in the cross-border movement of goods.

Cooperation and collaboration are highlighted as the main benefits of the functioning of the NCTF by other Members in the region too, such as Singapore and Union of Myanmar.

Maldives highlighted the effective coordination taking place among stakeholders, but added that COVID-19 specific issues are not raised in the NCTF. Samoa reported that there is continuation of work, and the progress of implementation has been monitored during the COVID-19 period. Sri Lanka indicated that NTFC members agreed to accept the submission of paperless documents during the pandemic.

In Cambodia, the NCTF not only ensures effective implementation of the TFA and cooperation amongst all relevant stakeholders (OGAs, DPs and private sector), but also covers issues that go beyond the TFA, such as transportation and logistics.

- In the **ESA region**, 11 Members reported on the main benefits derived from the functioning of the NCTF, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Comoros reported that the NCTF supported the government, through Customs, in implementing a series of relief initiatives, including specific procedural measures for the removal of certain categories of goods linked to the COVID-19 pandemic (food products, drugs, medical products, hygiene) as follows:

- 30% reduction in duties and taxes payable,
- establishment of a special removal declaration (DES) in the form of a specific form for the reduction of release time,
- establishment of a "green corridor" for imports of humanitarian aid,
- availability in ASYCUDA of the IM9 module for simplified Customs clearance procedures for goods (case of provisional collections).



In Rwanda, the main benefits have been the creation of a platform for Public-Private Dialogue between trade facilitation agencies and other stakeholders and the initiation of trade facilitation reforms, leading to a conducive environment for the business community and greater ease of doing business. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the NCTF has been able to inform policy-makers of the effects of COVID-19 on cross-border trade and suggest appropriate policies and strategies that should be put in place to effectively overcome the impact of the pandemic on trade and transport facilitation across Rwanda's borders.

Mauritius reported that the NCTF brings together the right constellation of stakeholders, and this has made it possible to understand trade facilitation issues from the perspective of both the public and the private sectors. The NCTF has worked with relevant stakeholders to address trade bottlenecks during the pandemic.

In South Africa, SARS and the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (DTIC) co-chair the NCTF. The DTIC has led a proposal at the WTO on the relaxation of measures linked to COVID-19 related goods and services.

Botswana reported collaboration amongst government agencies and the private sector as the main benefit, while Eswatini indicated that taking decisions around trade facilitation during the "new normal" has been a benefit. For Madagascar, speeding up the procedures and providing the country with health, medical and food equipment rapidly is one of the key benefits. In Lesotho, one of the main benefits of the NCTF is a TFA empowerment programme for NCTF members. Other benefits include coordinated efforts in TFA implementation.

A number of Members in the region, such as Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, highlighted the coordinated approach to trade facilitation initiatives as being the main benefit of the NCTF.

- The response rate for this question was quite low in the **Europe region**: only 8 Members out of 52 reported on the main benefits of the functioning of the NCTF, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Public and private sector communication was the main focus of Members in this region.

In Ireland, the NCTF has been particularly beneficial for communications between trade and government agencies, including Customs. Initiatives have included: trader outreach initiatives for Brexit preparedness; briefing on the EU-Canada Trade Agreement – CETA- Preferential Origin; briefing on the Registered Exporters System (REX); update on training, and in particular Customs training, for Brexit; regular Brexit updates; and, support for stakeholder planning for the introduction of the new Automated Import System (AIS) launched on 23 November 2020 as part of the UCC programme of electronic integrated systems.

In the Netherlands' NCTF, the Customs administration and representatives of government agencies and the business sector hold wide-ranging discussions on issues which relate to the movement of goods across the external border of the European Union (EU). Equality and mutual transparency form the basis of the dialogue. The parties become aware of their

respective responsibilities, interests and wishes, and where possible they coordinate these. In this way, the parties together seek the best possible balance between enforcement and trade facilitation. The main benefit is that the NCTF and its structure provide direct, effective and efficient contact between the business sector and government agencies.

In Sweden the NCTF has been important for the simplification of trade procedures, and has been a source of information for the participating authorities regarding which EU legislation may constitute a problem for business, as well as enabling them to gain experience on how business works with various issues. Dialogue is considered as an outcome that has its own value. During the pandemic, the forum has been used to raise challenges and exchange information.

Georgia reported that the Committee suspended some of its functions during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, and since then the work has been centered primarily around communication with private sector representatives – making information available as well as receiving feedback on the regulatory environment and day-to-day challenges facing the trading community.

In the United Kingdom's NCTF, industry advises the government and makes important recommendations relating to the immediate priorities for maintaining resilience within supply chains. In Norway, the NCTF is a useful forum for networking and the sharing of information.

Kosovo reported the following benefits:

- strengthening of the communication between the public and private sectors; and,
- better design and implementation of border procedures, which minimizes the regular costs.

In North Macedonia, green corridors provide for the 24/7 transport of goods within CEFTA.

- In the **MENA region**, 5 Members reported on the main benefits derived from the functioning of the NCTF, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following the Joint WCO/WTO Statement on COVID-19 related trade measures, the Kingdom of Bahrain benefited from technical assistance provided by the WTO Secretariat in preparing its COVID-19 related notification on temporary trade measures implemented during the pandemic.

Morocco reported two benefits of the NCTF, namely coordination of the actions of different actors in the cross-border supply chain, and planning and monitoring the implementation of facilitation actions. For Saudi Arabia, the NCTF has brought two benefits: better cooperation between the different entities, and the fast-tracking of new initiatives and projects.

In Jordan, the benefits have included speeding up procedures and providing the country with health, medical and food equipment expeditiously, through a rapid response. For



Qatar, facilitating the entry of medical supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic and establishing new e-services have been the two main benefits.

- In the **Americas and Caribbean region**, 9 Members reported on the main benefits derived from the functioning of the NCTF, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Guyana reported benefits in the following areas:

- fulfilling all of Guyana's requisite notifications to the WTO within TFA specific timelines;
- development of a National Trade Facilitation Roadmap, 2019-2024, to ensure continuity of the work of the NCTF;
- information-sharing on best practices used during the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure that trade procedures are not disrupted; and,
- mobilization of donor support to address trade facilitation capacity building needs and resources (ongoing).

In Peru, the coordination of actions between the different public entities supporting compliance with the TFA has been achieved. Facilitation measures are an integrating element between institutions, and therefore an initiative on "Improving the efficiency of sanitary management in the framework of the implementation of the Trade Facilitation Agreement in Peru" is currently underway, supported by the SeCompetitive Program of Swiss Cooperation (SECO); this is an effort led by the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Tourism (MINCETUR), in coordination with the National Agricultural Health Service (SENASA), the General Directorate of Environmental Health and Food Safety (DIGESA), the National Fishery Health Agency (SANIPES), the National Superintendence of Customs and Tax Administration (SUNAT), the National Port Authority (APN) and private sector entities, which will contribute to increasing the competitiveness of Peruvian foreign trade by improving sanitary management and coordination among control entities.

This initiative aims to implement the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement through the development of 5 components: 1. Risk Management, 2. Authorized Economic Operator, 3. Testing procedures, 4. Cooperation between border agencies, and 5. Notification of controls or reinforced inspections; these components will contribute to strengthening the sanitary management of the authorities within the framework of their responsibilities and competences.

Antigua and Barbuda reported the following three main benefits: better coordination with private and government departments, better trade facilitation measures introduced, and better working relationship with other agencies. Three benefits reported by the Dominican Republic are communication between public and private agencies, solving problems related to cargo handling, and the development of trade facilitation initiatives, while Paraguay reported that the NCTF strengthens public-private dialogue and optimizes processes.

Costa Rica has found that the NCTF promotes the continuity of trade flows in its ports, airports and land border-crossing points, preventing trade obstacles that could be

generated by the pandemic. For Guatemala, the establishment of an annual plan which is then monitored by all members of the NCTF has been one of the benefits.

- In the **WCA region** the response rate for this question was quite high, with 11 Members out of 23 reporting on the main benefits of the functioning of the NCTF, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cameroon reported the following benefits of the NCTF:

- interconnection of technical administration on the GUCE platform;
- continuation of the dematerialization of procedures;
- permanent monitoring of bottlenecks encountered in ports and airports; and,
- proposal for specific trade facilitation measures during the COVID-19 and post COVID-19 periods.

Nigeria reported that the NCTF:

- ensures that all formalities are transparent and accessible to all traders, especially Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises;
- expedites standard formalities to leave room for necessary additional COVID-19 related controls; and,
- has enabled all possible processes to be digitalized as much as the infrastructure allows, in order to speed up processing and reduce the need for physical contact between border agencies and traders.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the NCTF has been beneficial in the following four areas:

- participation by all members;
- enhanced Customs/Business Partnership;
- interagency cooperation; and
- establishment of a roadmap for implementing the Trade Facilitation Agreement.

In Sao Tome and Principe, the main benefits of the functioning of the NCTF are:

- simplification of the process;
- facilitation of public/private dialogue;
- facilitation of payment; and,
- simplification of Customs clearance time.

The 3Cs were mentioned by a number of Members in this region also. For example, in Gambia the NCTF has promoted cooperation and collaboration between Customs and other border agencies, as well as extending trade facilitation measures providing privileges to importers. Moreover, Cape Verde reported greater interaction between the members of the NCTF, and Liberia cited interagency coordination and cooperation as benefits of the NCTF.

Togo reported two benefits, namely that the NCTF has facilitated the implementation of TFA measures at the national level, and reduced and eliminated bottlenecks in the national supply chain. Niger highlighted, as benefits of the NCTF, awareness-raising and information from economic operators on TFA-related topics.



III.8 Main challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting social distancing measures, among others, NCTFs have faced various difficulties in their functioning, and in ensuring the continuity of their activities. WCO Members were asked what have been the main challenges for the functioning of their NCTF, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 53 Members provided responses to this question.

Difficulties with conducting meetings during the COVID-19 period was the most common answer to this question. Coordination was highlighted as one of the main challenges by many Members in the different regions. A number of Members reported that prioritizing the movement of essential goods has also been a challenge. Neglecting the long-term goals and focusing on short-term and COVID-19 related goals was another challenge reported by many Members. It was also reported that some NCTFs which were at the initial formation stage when the pandemic struck have not had the opportunity to hold their first meeting.



Members' responses by region

- In the **Asia-Pacific region**: 13 Members reported on the main challenges with the functioning of the NCTF, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

China reported two main challenges: First, following the institutional reform in 2018 some members of the NCTF have changed, and the related functions need to be adjusted accordingly. Second, since the outbreak of COVID-19, the State has identified the prevention and control of the cross-border spread of COVID-19 as the primary task, and implementation of the TFA has had to be placed behind this task.

Indonesia's NCTF was established in 2018, with high-level commitment from the relevant ministries and agency leaders. However, Indonesia believes that there is still room for improvement where the functioning of the NCTF is concerned, with one of the challenges being the development of a strong action plan by members for the implementation of WTO TFA commitments in the coming years.

New Zealand reported that pandemic scenarios did not play a significant role when the TFA was first negotiated. To this extent, the TFA lacks specificity to address release and clearance in a pandemic situation. Given some of the challenges that the pandemic has presented for trade facilitation around the world, New Zealand felt it would be helpful to look at ideas for re-examining/reviewing relevant TFA provisions to ensure that they are still fit for purpose.

Korea reported the following three main challenges: advancement of national implementation of the TFA, expansion of international cooperation in terms of the TFA, and improvement of the utilization of the TFA.

Sri Lanka reported two challenges, namely difficulties with organizing NCTF meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic, and difficulties with monitoring the progress of implementing agencies by conducting site visits. Maldives also reported that its main challenge has been holding face-to-face meetings.

In Australia, the main challenge has been the temporary shift of focus from advancing longer-term trade facilitation strategies to coordinating advice on immediate-term issues.

Bhutan reported that it has institutionalized its NCTF. The team meetings are held on a quarterly basis.

Coordination among various government agencies and with the private sector is the main challenge reported by Malaysia.

In Samoa, the restrictions imposed under the declared State of Emergency have limited the opportunities for the Committee to meet.

Timor-Leste reported that the executive members of the NCTF are all Ministers, and therefore it is difficult to get them together.



In Vietnam, the main challenges are the lack of an effective public-private sector relationship, and of a long-term vision.

- The highest response rate for this question came from the **ESA region**, with 11 out of 24 Members in the region providing comments.

In Rwanda, the following challenges have been identified as capable of hampering the smooth implementation of the TFA:

- lack of adequate funding to support NCTF activities (capacity building, sensitization, communication, advocacy, research, negotiations, etc.);
- inadequate awareness of the TFA among TFA implementing institutions and the private sector;
- inadequate technical capacity to implement some TFA provisions;
- inadequate infrastructure, equipment and facilities to comply fully with TFA provisions;
- and,
- insufficient human resources for the NCTF Secretariat to coordinate the implementation of the TFA.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges encountered by the business community in Rwanda have mostly been related to freedom of transit, restrictions in the movement of people, and tests and inspections of imports and exports which have been identified as being more cumbersome and/or more time-consuming during the pandemic. It was also noted that the process of switching goods from one truck to another at Kiyanzi Dry Port, as well as the limited number of border agents available to serve clients due to social distancing measures, have added additional days to the already long time needed to move goods from the Port to Kigali.

Comoros reported that the main challenges have been a lack of predictability in the import flow of humanitarian aid at the donor level, and difficulties with coordination between the actors concerned at the start of the pandemic.

In Lesotho, the main challenges relate to the understanding of what an NTFC is, the understanding of trade facilitation, as well as political will and buy in, commitment and resources.

Madagascar reported the main challenge as speeding up the procedures and providing the country with health, medical and food equipment expeditiously, through a rapid response.

Botswana reported the existence of other committees consisting of the same membership and operating in parallel to the NCTF as being the main challenge.

In Malawi, the holding of meetings has been the main challenge, with virtual meetings proving difficult due to network and operating equipment issues for some organizations. Likewise, Eswatini highlighted meetings as being the main challenge, while Zimbabwe reported that lack of computer hardware and software in some organizations hindered the launch of online meetings.

Unlike many countries, Mauritius - being a small island state – has never had difficulties with coordination, but during the pandemic very few NCFT coordination activities were organized.

In South Africa, securing the attendance of all partner departments has proved to be a challenge, while Zambia reported the harmonization of procedures as being the main challenge.

- The response rate for this question was quite low in the **Europe region**, with only 8 Members out of 52 reporting on the main challenges with the functioning of the NCTF, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Georgia, the main challenge currently facing the NCTF is the lack of high-level ownership on the part of the private sector – most of the initiatives and dialogue are initiated by the government sector, with the private sector taking on a more passive role, and this has created a situation where the government agencies and the NCTF Secretariat need to identify additional resources in order to increase the engagement required from other Committee members.

The NCTF in the Netherlands has already been in existence for more than 10 years; it has a well-balanced structure and consists of relevant members. The main challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic was the need for more frequent meetings, and also for video meetings instead of live meetings. Due to the structure of the NCTF and the technical support available, it was possible to adapt to these needs.

Sweden reported the difficulty of solving issues at the regional (EU) level as being a challenge. There are many forums for dialogue between public agencies and the private sector in Sweden; this, however, means that the NCTF does not always play the key role in trade-related issues.

In the United Kingdom, maintaining the engagement and motivation of participants who have different priorities is the main challenge. Often, decisions need to be taken at the last moment so consultation is difficult.

Kosovo reported the following two main challenges: achieving better coordination between national border agencies and, due to the pandemic, organizing meetings (compared to regular, face-to-face meetings). Norway also reported that it has not been possible to arrange physical meetings since the Summer of 2020.

In Ireland the main challenge was having to move to electronic platforms when government restrictions prevented physical meetings, while Kyrgyzstan reported that the NCTF Secretariat needs technical support.

- In the **MENA region**, 4 Members out of 18 reported on the main challenges with the functioning of the NCTF, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.



The Kingdom of Bahrain announced the temporary measures that have been introduced as a response to COVID-19. With a view to providing maximum transparency, measures that have been withdrawn and terminated have been announced as well. All these temporary measures have been evaluated frequently to account for the availability of supply in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Measures have been modified over time to be the least restrictive to trade as possible.

Morocco reported the reduction of the time and costs associated with cross-border trade operations as being the main challenge. Saudi Arabia reported that many projects with a multi-sector presence constitute a challenge. For Jordan, like many other Members, coordination between different parties has been the main challenge.

- In the **Americas and Caribbean region**, 8 Members responded to the question on the main challenges with the functioning of the NCTF, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Antigua and Barbuda reported the following two challenges:

- infrequent meeting times;
- key representatives (i.e., Ministries of Health and Agriculture) have been inundated with COVID-19 measures; and,
- Customs and the Port Authority have been inundated with pandemic protocols and are working reduced hours to facilitate the safety of staff and the general public.

Guyana reported that the Committee meets quarterly to discuss implementation of the TFA, as well as reform efforts beyond the TFA; the latter forms part of Guyana National Trade Facilitation 2019-2024. The main challenge is monitoring activities under the Roadmap. A mid-term review of the Roadmap to monitor the progress made concerning the achievement of the Roadmap goals is a step that the Committee intends to undertake.

In Costa Rica, the challenges are promoting the facilitation of foreign trade operations and guaranteeing the transit of goods, while maintaining a balance in terms of protecting the health of the population and transporters.

Columbia reported that the main challenge has been the holding of face-to-face meetings, although through virtual meetings the work of the Committee has, in fact, been enhanced.

In Guatemala, the challenges relate to the follow-up to the annual plan, the holding of virtual meetings, and continuing to advance towards the goals which have been set.

Paraguay reported two main challenges, namely difficulties in complying with the definitive terms of the measures due to the health situation, and its impact on cooperation projects.

- In the **WCA region**, 9 out of 23 Members responded to the question about the main challenges with the functioning of the NCTF, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Cameroon the challenges are:

- resistance to change on the part of certain agencies; and,
- reimbursement for technical meetings held to examine the concerns of stakeholders in the logistics chain.

Liberia reported that the main challenges confronting the NCTF include, but are not limited to:

- little or no involvement of the NCTF in the National COVID Emergency Task Force;
- absence of a common IT platform (Single Window); and,
- absence of a national enquiry point.

The main challenges for Togo are:

- finding appropriate solutions to the difficulties encountered by the various players in the area of trade; and,
- making the national logistics chain competitive at the sub-regional level.

Burkina Faso referred to the importance of the informal sector in the economic structure of the country as being the main challenge. In Cape Verde, the challenge is seeking consensus on the simplification and dematerialization of Customs processes.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the problem of financing activities remains a major challenge. Likewise, coordination and financing are the main challenges for Sao Tome and Principe also.

In Gambia the monthly meetings on COVID-19 enforcement matters are a challenge. Nigeria also reported the difficulties of holding meetings of NCTF members as the main challenge.

IV. Conclusion

The results of the Annual Consolidated Survey 2021 highlighted, once again, the important role that Customs administrations play in National Trade Facilitation Committees.

Since its outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruptions to cross-border trade movements. It has also negatively affected the operation of NCTFs in many countries, shifting the focus from the long-term goals to immediate and short-term actions, and in some cases halting the work of the Committees altogether.

Nevertheless, there have been some important benefits prompted by the sense of urgency caused by the pandemic. These include focusing on facilitation for essential goods, using the NCTFs as a platform for raising challenges and sharing information, focusing on automation, etc.



World Customs Organization

Furthermore, although 67% of the responding Members reported that they have an NCTF in place in accordance with Article 23.2 of the WTO TFA, there is still a strong need to support Members both in launching their NCTFs and in increasing their efficiency.

The WCO will continue to support its Members in implementing the TFA, including Article 23.2 on NCTFs, through the Mercator Programme.



ANNEX: Number of NCTF members by regions and countries

Asia-Pacific Region	
Australia	22
Bangladesh	13
Bhutan	8
Cambodia	14
China	16
Hong Kong, China	18
Indonesia	13
Japan	5
Korea	16
Malaysia	19
Maldives	13
Mongolia	19
Samoa	12
Singapore	6
Sri Lanka	23
Thailand	24
Timor-Leste	21
Union of Myanmar	16
Vietnam	15

ESA Region	
Angola	21
Comoros	9
Lesotho	20
Madagascar	44
Mauritius	21
Rwanda	32
Zambia	37
Zimbabwe	50

Europe Region	
Georgia	20
Greece	6
Ireland	16
Kosovo	12
Kyrgyzstan	24
Netherlands	17
North Macedonia	22
Norway	approx. 30
Serbia	26
Sweden	30
Switzerland	5 or more
UK	19





WCA Region	
Burkina Faso	45
Cape Verde	12
Côte d'Ivoire	30
Gabon	45
Gambia	10
Niger	60
Nigeria	21
Sao Tome and Principe	16
Togo	25

MENA Region	
Bahrain	16
Jordan	9
Morocco	39
Qatar	12
Saudi Arabia	12
Tunisia	34

Americas and the Caribbean Region	
Antigua and Barbuda	20
Argentina	11 with the option to expand
Columbia	14
Costa Rica	11
Dominican Republic	18
Guatemala	19
Guyana	10
Paraguay	42
Peru	10
Uruguay	12 at least

