



Permanent Technical Committee

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Brussels, 30 August 2023

Technology and Fragile Borders

(Item VI b. on the Agenda)

SUMMARY

Purpose of document

The purpose of this document is to inform the PTC about how the use of technologies could support addressing the challenges stemming from fragile borders and the ongoing work on the use of technologies in fragile borders.

Action required of the Permanent Technical Committee

The Permanent Technical Committee is invited to:

- take note of the ongoing work on the use of technologies in fragile borders.

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I. Background

1. Since 2022, the World Customs Organization (WCO) has released a series of three documents addressing the role of Customs in fragile and conflict-affected situations (FCS).
2. The first document is a publicly available position paper issued by the Secretariat¹. This document serves as a comprehensive articulation of Customs' political and technical responsibilities in situations of fragility, conflict, and post-conflict. It underscores Customs' critical functions in coordinating governmental activities at national borders and managing fiscal operations.
3. The second document is a substantive study report titled "Customs and Fragility: Practices and Recommendations"². This report disseminates findings derived from field research predominantly conducted in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, supplemented by insights from the West and Central Africa (WCA) region. Access to this report is restricted to WCO Members. It delineates the intricate economic and social challenges confronting Customs in fragile and conflict-affected environments. Moreover, it expounds upon the innovative strategies adopted by select Members to adapt their organizational structures, optimize operational practices, upgrade equipment, safeguard border infrastructure, provide specialized training for personnel in hostile contexts, and harness advanced technologies and data for tactical and intelligence purposes.
4. The third document, titled the "Fragile Borders Action Plan"³, is a direct outcome of the Global Conference on Enabling Customs in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations, jointly organized by the WCO and Nigeria in Abuja (Nigeria). This action plan received formal endorsement from the WCO Council in June 2023. It comprises multiple interconnected facets, including research initiatives, global awareness campaigns, institutional enhancements, inter-agency collaboration mechanisms, personnel and infrastructure security measures, and intensified data mobilization and intelligence endeavors. The implementation of the Action Plan requires the mobilization of resources of the Secretariat, Members and donors/partner organizations. To this end, a round table with donors on FCS was organized at the Conference in Abuja in which Germany and Japan (Japan International Cooperation Agency) participated

II. Perspectives

5. Four distinct categories of technological utilization, engaging the active participation of Members (France, Niger, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine), have already been explored by the WCO for the purpose of operating in FCS:
 - protection of Customs offices in sensitive border areas against attack, through the integration of different control technologies (see chapter 2 of the WCO study report);
 - Geospatial intelligence and remote examination of border areas with satellite imagery (see chapter 4 of the WCO study report);
 - protection of patrols and mobile control teams through the use of drones;
 - remote surveillance using tactical cameras (article in preparation).

¹ https://www.wcoomd.org/-/media/wco/public/global/pdf/topics/research/report/fragility_secretariatnote_pc_council_2022_may19version_en.pdf?db=web

² https://www.wcoomd.org/-/media/wco/member/global/pdf/topics/research/wco_fragilityreport_en.pdf

³ <https://www.wcoomd.org/-/media/wco/public/global/pdf/topics/enforcement-and-compliance/tools-and-instruments/sp0823e-fragile-borders.pdf>

6. To develop the deployment of technologies in FCS contexts for Customs, the Secretariat is currently exploring supports with several donors for the implementation of the Fragile Borders action plan.
7. Firstly, the WCO will benefit from China's support in exploring the uses of different technologies in low- and middle-income Members, including in situations of fragility and conflict.
8. Secondly, the application of Geospatial Intelligence (GEOINT) has been expressly identified by both the WCO and Members as a technology meriting immediate prioritization within the framework of the action plan. Indeed, research undertaken since 2019 has substantiated the manifold advantages of GEOINT. This technology facilitates the fusion of intelligence, empowers spatial analysis for optimizing resource deployment in the field, aids in the preparation of controls in land borders, facilitates performance evaluation and analysis of control operations, and enables remote surveillance and examination of high-risk borderlands. It is noteworthy that the WCO has already initiated negotiations with several potential donors for the development of GEOINT capabilities.
9. In the year 2023, the WCO, demonstrating its commitment to fostering expertise in GEOINT, actively supported the establishment of a dedicated GEOINT module in collaboration with a French university (Clermont academic hub, Institut des Hautes Etudes du Développement Durable, IHEDD). This module, using open-source software such as QGIS (Quantum Geographic Information System), will be accessible online as a French-language version accessible from November 2023. Rigorous testing has already been conducted on two separate occasions, ensuring its readiness for widespread deployment, especially among interested Members operating within the West and Central Africa region.
10. Additionally, the WCO has embarked on a collaborative venture with one of its Members to explore the transformative potential of GEOINT in shaping anti-smuggling strategies along high-risk land borders. This strategic shift involves transitioning from a traditionally "reactive" approach reliant solely on human intelligence (HUMINT) to a more "proactive" rationale that seamlessly integrates HUMINT with GEOINT capabilities.
11. Lastly, following a high-level meeting between the WCO Secretary General and the Director General of the European Space Agency (ESA) in 2022, a promising collaboration is being forged between the WCO and ESA. Currently, both entities are in the process of drafting a Memorandum of Interest, which outlines the framework for ESA's support of the WCO in harnessing space-related technologies for its missions and initiatives.

III. Action required

12. The PTC is invited to :
 - take note of the ongoing work on the use of technologies in fragile borders.
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