Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
7th meeting of the Interim Intergovernmental Steering Group
on Cross-border Paperless Trade Facilitation

Bangkok and online, 25 and 26 April 2022
Item 3 of the provisional agenda
Report on progress made in the implementation of the
Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border
Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific

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Note by the secretariat

Summary

The present document contains information on progress made in the implementation of the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific. The secretariat has continued to provide capacity-building and technical assistance support to member States that are interested in becoming parties to the Framework Agreement. With the accession of China on 22 November 2020, the Framework Agreement entered into force on 20 February 2021. Several other member States are in an advanced stage of completing their domestic procedures for becoming parties to the Agreement through accession.

The Interim Intergovernmental Steering Group on Cross-border Paperless Trade Facilitation may wish to take note of the progress made and discuss any follow-up actions that may be taken to facilitate the participation of interested member States in the Framework Agreement.

I. Progress made

1. Since the 6th meeting of the Interim Intergovernmental Steering Group on Cross-border Paperless Trade Facilitation, held in January 2021, the secretariat has provided support to States members of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) that are interested in becoming parties to the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific. That support has included advocacy, technical assistance and capacity-building.
2. The secretariat provided support to Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, the Philippines, Tonga and Viet Nam to conduct readiness assessments for cross-border paperless trade and organize national consultations on facilitating cross-border paperless trade in 2021. These efforts included completing the legal and technical readiness assessment checklists developed by the Steering Group and its Legal and Technical Working Groups and developing draft action plans during national consultations. Except for countries that had already done so, all of the national action plans include acceding to the Framework Agreement as soon as possible, as doing so will support their further progress in the area of cross-border paperless trade. The online support platform to facilitate self-assessments was used in conducting the readiness assessments. In the first quarter of 2022, the secretariat assisted additional member States in carrying out readiness assessments for cross-border paperless trade, including Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Tuvalu.

3. The secretariat has continued the Accession/Ratification Accelerator Programme for the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific. The Programme provides the developing member States with technical assistance and advisory services in the following areas: (a) translation of the treaty text and other related support materials into their domestic languages, (b) provision of a national expert, (c) tailor-made notes and/or briefs on the benefits and implications of becoming a party to the Framework Agreement, and (d) the organization of national inter-agency consultations. Mongolia and Tajikistan have benefited from the Programme. The secretariat has also provided related support to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in connection with the conduct of readiness assessments mentioned above.

4. With the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the secretariat could not organize capacity-building training on trade facilitation and trade digitalization physically in 2021. Under the circumstances, the secretariat used online training to provide capacity-building support to stakeholders. The secretariat, in cooperation with the International Chamber of Commerce and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), organized a webinar series on accelerating cross-border paperless trade facilitation in 2021. The webinar series, held every one or two months and covering different trade digitalization issues such as single window systems interoperability and blockchain, provided learning opportunities to more than 2,000 participants from the region and beyond. The webinar series is being continued in 2022. The secretariat also organized a webinar series on next generation trade facilitation on 14 December 2021 and an online course on trade facilitation for sustainable development, from 1 November to 3 December 2021, in cooperation with the Asia-Pacific Research and Training Network on Trade and the International Institute for Trade and Development.

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1 All the readiness assessment reports are available at www.unescap.org/resources/readiness-assessments-cross-border-paperless-trade.
5. As part of its advocacy work on trade facilitation and cross-border paperless trade, the secretariat gave presentations on and promoted the Framework Agreement at several global, regional and subregional events, including the following: (a) webinars on accelerating cross-border paperless trade facilitation; (b) a workshop on national single window systems in the Mekong countries, 21 January 2022; (c) the twentieth and twenty-second meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Trade Facilitation Joint Consultative Committee, 24 May 2021 and 15 February 2022; (d) a meeting of the Project Working Group on Trade of the United Nations Special Programme for Economies of Central Asia, 16 November 2021; and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development-led National Trade Facilitation Committees Global Forum, 1 and 2 February 2022.

6. The secretariat supported the implementation of the Framework Agreement and the promotion of cross-border paperless trade through the United Nations Network of Experts for Paperless Trade and Transport in Asia and the Pacific. The secretariat organized two meetings of the extended Advisory Group on Trade Process Analysis in 2021 to revise the Business Process Analysis Guide to Simplify Trade Procedures, and to review development of a checklist for the import of COVID-19 vaccines and a study on the assessment of the environmental impact of trade procedures. The secretariat also continued developing a cross-border paperless trade database, adding more cases of cross-border electronic data exchange.

7. The secretariat, together with the World Customs Organization, continued supporting the Joint Task Force on Cross-border Electronic Data Exchange. The Joint Task Force, comprising customs officials from China, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation, continued working on the harmonization of trade processes and documents for cross-border electronic data exchange. Since the 6th meeting of the Steering Group, the Joint Task Force held 10 meetings as of January 2022; these meetings were held online due to the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also assisted with the organization of the workshop on advancing electronic origin data exchange in the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement in November 2021 to help participating States to be better prepared to consider and initiate the electronic exchange of certificates of origin.

8. The secretariat continued to conduct research and analysis related to the Framework Agreement. To help countries to benchmark their trade facilitation and paperless trade efforts, the secretariat, in cooperation with other regional commissions, conducted the United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation in 2021. The survey includes both paperless trade and cross-border paperless trade measures as well as newly introduced measures on trade facilitation in times of crisis in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It covers 46 ESCAP member States. Results from the 2021 Survey and all previous Surveys, as well as reports with detailed analyses of the results can be accessed on a dedicated online platform. The summarized results of the survey are presented in document

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6 See https://unnext.unescap.org/unnext.
7 See https://unnext.unescap.org/content/business-process-analysis-simplify-trade-procedures-case-studies.
8 www.digitalizetrade.org.
9 www.unescap.org/events/2021/workshop-advancing-electronic-origin-data-exchange-apt.a
9. The secretariat continued leading the Initiative on Model Provisions for Trade in Times of Crisis and Pandemic in Regional and other Trade Agreements, in cooperation with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the World Trade Organization and other United Nations regional commissions. The *Handbook on Provisions and Options for Trade in Times of Crisis and Pandemic* was released in 2021 and included a chapter dedicated to trade facilitation, including paperless trade and the Framework Agreement. A free, self-paced online course based on the *Handbook* was also developed and has already benefited more than 400 participants.

10. With the accession of China on 22 November 2020, the Framework Agreement entered into force on 20 February 2021. Several other member States informed the secretariat that they were in an advanced stage of completing their domestic procedures for becoming parties to the Agreement through accession, including Mongolia, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation and Tajikistan.

11. Several member States provided funding to the secretariat to support the facilitation of cross-border paperless trade and the implementation of the Framework Agreement, including the Government of the Republic of Korea and the Government of China. The dedicated ESCAP trust fund from the Government of the Republic of Korea was used to support readiness assessments on cross-border paperless trade and accession to the Framework Agreement for selected developing countries. The project funded by the Government of China continued to support the development of national policy frameworks for cross-border paperless trade as well as a feasibility and scoping study on the electronic exchange of trade-related data and documents in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand and other South Asian economies between 2021 and 2022. The Enhanced Integrated Framework also provided funding for a new project to conduct a feasibility study and capacity-building training on cross-border paperless trade, including the potential application of emerging technologies, in selected least developed countries, namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Timor-Leste.

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13 ESCAP (Bangkok, 2021).

14 See www.unescap.org/training/rta-ttcp.

II. Issues for consideration by the Steering Group

12. The Steering Group may wish to consider the following recommendations:

(a) To note the progress made since its 6th meeting and encourage its members to proactively support their Governments in becoming parties to the Framework Agreement as soon as possible;

(b) To express its appreciation for the trust fund and projects on the facilitation of cross-border paperless trade supported by the Governments of China and the Republic of Korea, and call upon other member States to make their own financial or in-kind contributions to the implementation of the Agreement;

(c) To discuss ways to accelerate and promote accession to and ratification of the Agreement by as many countries as possible, so as to maximize its benefits and impact.