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Adoption of ICT is Critical in Post Covid-19 Trade Facilitation
Programmes in COMESA Region

Special Report

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The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) as a pandemic on 11 March 2020. The pandemic is now a global public health crisis and has infected people in almost every country. In response, COMESA Member States adopted various measures to curb the spread of the disease, which have precipitated massive disruptions such as delays and closure of borders to non-essential travel. These measures have generally slowed down and even threatened to reverse the gains already made in strengthening trade and economic integration in the region.

However, it has increasingly become apparent that embracing technology in various trade facilitation instruments, can unlock the situation and help accelerate the much needed cross-border trade and investment even during such difficulties. COMESA has developed procedures and standards to reduce the spread of the disease and at same time minimize disruptions in the supply chain and to facilitate movement of goods and services across the region during the pandemic. Specifically, it has issued "Guidelines for Movement of Goods and Services across the COMESA region during the COVID-19 Pandemic" which amongst a host of provisions require Member States to:

- Implement the principles of coordinated border management and ensure that efficient cargo clearing processes are in place at all designated ports of entry, facilitated by multi-agency teams such as customs, standards bodies, health, immigration, security, police, port/border control in one-stop centre to minimize the time taken to clear goods, drivers and crew expeditiously and avoid the spread of the virus due to unnecessary congestion at the entry/exit points;

- Ensure, through respective country customs Authorities, the continued availability of processing systems to avoid system failures that may arise causing long queues at the ports of entry, with backup back up measures being put in place in case of failure;

- Apply mandatory pre-clearance processing of goods to reduce congestion and dwell- time at the border;

- Physical inspections to be carried out only where it is necessary based on updated risk management parameters and principles of Authorised Economic Operator (AEOs) and post clearance auditing. Where border joint border inspection is not done, inspection at point of destination shall be conducted by relevant agencies;

• Accept electronic documents where border agencies require permits, licenses and certificates for the imported goods to avoid delays at the ports of entry;

Similarly, the World Customs Organization (WCO) and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) have also provided guidelines on responses to challenges posed by the COVID-19. Their mitigation prescriptions are that countries should:

• Apply Coordinated Border Management principles to manage border operations;

• Provide for pre-arrival processing of the goods declaration and release of goods upon arrival;

• Apply risk management to keep physical inspections to the necessary minimum and speed up customs clearance. Optimum use of non-intrusive inspections such as scanners is encouraged;

• Minimize the requirements submission of documents in hard copy. Introduce facilitative measures with regard to the requirement to submit original documents or to stamp certain documents;

• Promote use of electronic payment platforms for revenue collections and encourage the use of electronic services when conducting business with Customs;

• Designate priority lanes for low risk consignments such as goods being imported by AEOs, goods in transit and under electron cargo seals and goods designated as COVID-19 essentials; and

• Share advance passenger information with other border agencies.

So far, border authorities in most COMESA Member States have responded positively to the regional guidelines and the advisories provided by WCO and UNCTAD at the points of entry and exit.

When COVID-19 affected cross-border operations, it became apparent that agencies were working in silos without a designated lead agency to ensure a "whole of government" response. In most cases, the health authorities stepped in and ensured that agencies operated in a coherent manner. Since the advent of the crisis, Government Agencies have now wholeheartedly embraced the enhanced use of ICT tools. There has always been conflict

between facilitating trade and the overriding need for border agencies to maximize revenue collections and compliance with enforcement measures. Hence, the benefits of using ICT tools were not fully realized.

The emerging changes in perceptions of border agencies regarding trade facilitation and enhanced use of ICT creates opportunities for redesigning border processes and operations. These will build and sustain the emergency measures that were adopted to maintain supply chains under the COVID- 19 pandemic environment.

Further, the ICT systems must be upgraded with connectivity among the Government Agencies coupled with the application of the principles of risk management and reducing physical inspections. There are opportunities to utilize track and trace systems offered by Electronic Cargo Tracking Systems and Global Positioning Systems in freight vehicles units and to institute performance management systems that will ensure that operations at border crossings reduce the costs of transporting goods and contribute to the competitiveness of the products from COMESA Member States.

Currently, some of these key interventions are already being implemented through the COMESA Trade Facilitation Programme under the European Development Fund (EDF-11) at at targeted border posts in the region. Under the programme, technical and financial support has been provided to automate Government Agencies systems to support full implementation of Coordinated Border Management principles. COVID-19 has provided clear lessons on the need to ensure more sustainable systems are put in place to facilitate efficient and effective border operations. Ultimately, an expedited implementation of interventions under the COMESA Trade Facilitation Programme, in a partnership between COMESA Secretariat and Member States, will create an enhanced trading environment underpinned by upgraded border crossings and efficient cross-border goods clearance processes.

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