Taking the First Step to Facilitate Trade in Sudan: Setting Up a National Committee on Trade Facilitation

The Republic of Sudan’s seaports used to be known for congestion resulting from the slow processing of imported goods. In response, the government created an ad hoc National Committee on Trade Facilitation to help streamline the processing of goods coming in and to facilitate trade. This SmartLesson describes the steps taken in setting up the National Committee on Trade Facilitation and the challenges involved.

BACKGROUND

The Republic of Sudan currently ranks 184th out of 189 countries in the World Bank’s Doing Business trading across borders indicators. As far back as 2007, it was obvious that measures were needed to streamline the arrival and processing of imports into the country’s ports. At the government’s request, the World Trade Organization (WTO) supported the efforts to undertake a comprehensive trade facilitation needs assessment based on the WTO Programme of Needs Assessment (2007–2010). Subsequently, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) added its support via the UNCTAD National Trade Facilitation Implementation Plan to assist with the government’s future WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement.

Motivated by joining the WTO and UNCTAD technical assistance programs, the government established a National Committee on Trade Facilitation (NCTF) supplemented by a National Working Group on Trade Facilitation (NWGTF). Although the NCTF and NWGTF have the same objectives of implementation of trade facilitation measures, their terms of reference differ: the NCTF focuses on policy issues, and NWGTF is concerned with technical issues. The fol-
Following are some of the achievements resulting from establishment of the NCTF and NWGTF:

1. The NCTF conducted the first trade facilitation needs assessment, funded by the WTO, and presented a brief report at the Negotiating Group on Trade Facilitation (NGTF) at the WTO and submitted the report to the WTO Secretariat.

2. Mission and vision statements with strategic objectives were put within the framework of a five-year strategic plan (2012–2016), including annual action plans.

3. Many workshops and seminars took place for government and private sector participants—for example, two workshops on single window, funded by the UN Economic and Social Commission for West Asia, and a workshop on validation of the National Plan for the Implementation of the Future WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement, funded by UNCTAD.

4. Representatives from the NWGTF participated in many regional and international workshops and meetings—for example, a UN Economic Commission for Europe workshop on Trade Facilitation in Rwanda and Jordan in 2013, Authority on Development workshop on the one-stop border post in Uganda and Rwanda (2013), UNCTAD multiyear expert meetings in Geneva (2014), and NGTF meetings in Geneva.

5. Field visits to some customs border posts allowed participants to examine clearance processes to identify possible reforms and improvements.

6. With assistance from UNCTAD, the government drafted a National Plan for the Implementation of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement, presented a brief report of the results at the meetings of NGTF, and submitted the document to the WTO Secretariat. The results of the needs assessment were as follows:

   - Sudan has fully complied with 17 trade facilitation measures, including right of appeal, temporary admission of goods, electronic payment, and time-release study.
   - Sudan has partially implemented 14 measures, including enquiry points, freedom of transit, and test procedures.
   - Among 10 measures not considered implemented were authorized operators, advance rulings, single window, and detention.
   - Regarding categorization, 17 measures were classified as Category A, 8 measures as B, and 14 measures as C.

7. The NWGTF, with UNCTAD support, prepared two single-window and risk-management projects to be funded by donors. However, Customs—in collaboration with NCTF and NWGTF and supported by the World Customs Organization (WCO)—began implementing risk management at a pilot stage at Khartoum Airport.

8. Sudan Customs, together with representatives of the NWGTF, conducted a third time-release study in October 2015 with technical assistance from the WCO.
9. The NWGTF developed guidance for foreign trade procedures, including all procedures of border agencies, to be published on the website of the Ministry of Trade.

10. In 2014, Customs implemented an electronic payment system.

11. The NCTF and NWGTF were selected to join the UNCTAD Empowerment Programme, under Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC)-WCO and UNCTAD project, to support WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement implementation funded by the United Kingdom (2015–2018). Launched in early 2016, this program was divided into four modules intended to build the capacity of members of NWGTF for implementing trade facilitation measures. In Module 4, finalized in December 2016, the NCTF and NWGTF successfully drafted the Sudan trade facilitation implementation roadmap (2017–2021). Sudan is the first country in the world to draft a trade facilitation implementation roadmap.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

**Lesson 1: Committee and working-group composition should be inclusive.**

The NCTF is composed of undersecretaries of line ministries, directors general of government agencies related to foreign trade, and the president of the business federation. The NWGTF is composed of midlevel staff of line ministries and government agencies as well as representatives of the private sector. The wider the composition of the group, the more effective and efficient it may be in carrying out its functions, because the group is required to do numerous tasks concurrently and there is a need for many subgroups to do different jobs. This technique proved to be very useful. For example, we formed subcommittees that prepared annual budgets for both the NCTF and the NWGTF and another subcommittee that put together an action plan for the activities of the NCTF and NWGTF.

**Lesson 2: Having a two-tiered committee structure can help distinguish policy issues from technical implementation.**

The high-level committee (NCTF), chaired by the Ministry of Trade, led discussions on policy, and the working group (NWGTF), chaired by Customs, took care of technical matters. Our experience showed that this model fostered effective decisions on policy and implementation while reducing bureaucracy. However, Customs played a pivotal role in the success of the NCTF and NWGTF because of its responsibility for implementing most of the trade facilitation measures that are based on the revised Kyoto Convention.

It's worth mentioning that effective communication and coordination—between the Ministry of Trade and Customs and the other agencies—was crucial for the successful undertaking of the trade facilitation needs assessment. In the Republic of Sudan, strong coordination between border agencies is quite evident, as indicated in the performance and achievements noted above. However, leadership is of paramount importance. Our experience showed that the leader should be a champion who is knowledgeable about trade facilitation matters and has the ability to moderate discussions at the meetings and implement decisions of the committee. Fortunately, the chairs of both the NCTF and the NWGTF have these characteristics and led the trade facilitation efforts in Sudan successfully.

NWGTF members participate in the WCO-HMRC and UNCTAD workshop in Khartoum in March 2016.
Lesson 3: Administrative and financial resources are important for the successful functioning of the NCTF and NWGTF.

The NCTF and NWGTF should put together a work plan that allows for monitoring, following up, and reporting on the performance. This process needs a permanent secretariat to organize regular meetings and requires sufficient human resources to prepare for the meetings, produce reports, and maintain documents. We held two meetings per month, organized by a permanent secretariat. The Ministry of Finance and National Planning allocated a small budget for the committee, supplemented by contributions from all participating government and private sector agencies.

Lesson 4: It is important to have meetings with high-level officials.

To gain the commitment and support of high-level officials, it is necessary to be sure they understand the project—and to continue to keep them informed about it. This requires having meetings with them—sometimes multiple meetings. We also found such meetings useful in convincing the officials to use their political influence in favor of the work of the national committee and the working group. The NWGTF held many meetings with many ministers and permanent secretaries and directors general of different government agencies related to foreign trade. One outcome of these meetings was the approval of the action plan for implementation of trade facilitation measures.

Lesson 5: Ensure strong coordination between all the sponsoring entities.

It is crucial to keep all the key players in the loop. For our project, that involved communication between the NCTF, the NWGTF, the government, and the WTO’s Trade Facilitation Division in Geneva—during negotiations as well as implementation of trade facilitation measures. We also maintained good coordination with the Sudan Mission throughout. The Geneva delegate had direct contact with the chair of NWGTF, copying him on any correspondence related to trade facilitation between the Mission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Trade or the WTO. This practice kept the NCTF and NWGTF fully informed on any progress in trade facilitation.

Also, having a direct link with the WTO Secretariat kept the NCTF and NWGTF updated regarding trade facilitation programs in the region and internationally, particularly those relating to technical assistance and capacity building. For example, as a result of contacts with the WTO Secretariat, the NCTF and NWGTF obtained technical assistance from WTO and UNCTAD to conduct two needs assessments workshops.

CONCLUSION

Our experience showed that forming the NCTF, followed by the NWGTF, is fundamental in establishing and ensuring coordination and cooperation between border agencies for implementation of trade facilitation measures. In the Republic of Sudan, without this coordination under the umbrella of NCTF and NWGTF we couldn’t have achieved the desired results, especially the needs assessment and implementation plan—supported by WTO and UNCTAD, respectively—that formed the founda-
tion for developing an action plan for implementing trade facilitation measures. Building on that success, the NCTF and NWGTF are working on the implementation of electronic connectivity between border agencies and single window.

The experience of the NCTF—involving inclusive composition, two-tiered committee structure, careful management of administrative and financial resources, meetings with high-level officials, and coordination between the capital and Geneva—represents a first step toward implementation of trade facilitation. It may serve as a model for other countries—particularly those that are less and least developed—that plan to implement trade facilitation measures.