

Trade and COVID-19 Guidance Note

Trade Facilitation Best Practices Implemented in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic¹

OVERVIEW

Maintaining trade flows as much as possible during the COVID-19 pandemic will be crucial in providing access to essential food and health supplies and in limiting the negative impacts on jobs and poverty. The implementation of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) provides governments with a sound framework for improving trade facilitation and border management. During this crisis implementing measures contained in the TFA can contribute to ensure that trade in critical supplies proceeds smoothly and safely thereby contributing to food security and the health of citizens.

This document builds on the World Bank Group's Trade and COVID Guidance Note on [Managing Risk and Facilitating Trade in the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) which provides recommendations to governments in maintaining the supply chain that are facilitating the trade of critically needed commodities during the COVID-19 pandemic and protecting workers at ports, terminals and points of entry.

Addressing the issues will require an array of actions by governments and border agencies. Some can and should be addressed quickly, such as sanitary procedures and social distancing at border posts and ports. Others will require border agencies to undertake procedural and/or amendments to legislation or regulations. The latter may be difficult to implement in the short term but should still be reviewed to address future pandemics and emergency situations.

This guidance note provides examples of good practices implemented by countries in response to COVID-19. Where possible, links have been provided for additional information. The note is not intended to identify all the countries implementing such measures, but only to provide some examples of measures that can support governments in dealing with the crisis and improving trade in critical commodities.

The examples focus on:

- [Relaxation of procedural formalities](#)
- [Risk management to prioritize clearance of imports and exports of low-risk critical supplies](#)
- [Border agency cooperation to facilitate the import of critical supplies \(including medical and food items\)](#)
- [Information technology to support trade \(e.g., single windows and trade information portals\)](#)
- [Extending border agency working hours](#)
- [Increased dialogue between industry and governments](#)
- [Increasing the available of trade-related information on websites and through inquiry points](#)
- [Protection of front-line workers](#)

IMPLEMENTATION EXAMPLES

Relaxation of procedural formalities

¹ Trade and COVID-19 Guidance Notes are prepared by the Global Trade and Regional Integration Unit of the World Bank to provide practical measures governments can implement to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 virus outbreak. This note has been prepared by Shane Sela (Senior Trade Facilitation Specialist, ssela@worldbank.org), Aileen Yang (Consultant, ayang3@worldbank.org) and Marisa Zawacki (Consultant, mzawacki@ifc.org). For further information, please contact Bill Gain (Global Lead for Trade Facilitation, wgain@ifc.org) or Antonio Nucifora (Practice Manager, Global Trade and Regional Integration Unit, anucifora@worldbank.org). A full list of Trade and Covid-19 briefs is available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/trade/brief/trade-and-covid-19>

In view of the evolving COVID-19 situation, some governments have adopted measures to help overcome challenges posed by staffing reductions. Governments have established practical solutions while remaining within their legal framework. These measures include relaxation of guarantees, extension of time limits, waivers of administrative fines, and making certain rules regarding documentation less strict.

Some countries have implemented new documentary requirements (licenses, etc.) to track the export of certain critically needed commodities. These measures only slow the export of much needed commodities and are likely to lead to equivalent counter responses and restrict the export country's recovery of trade following the crisis.

Chile

Customs issued [resolutions to simplify importation and donation of critical supplies for the attention, diagnose, and treatment of the COVID-19](#) (March 26, 2020) and to simplify and ensure business continuity at ports, airports, and border posts, with various practical measures (e.g., authorizing physical inspection of goods without the presence of brokers, usage of e-mail for presentation of documents, suspending presentation of paper copies, and extending validity of ATA Carnets for temporary imports and exports among others) – March 18, 2020.

The European Union

The EU has [relaxed requirements](#) for consignees to provide proof of empowerment of an agent to act on her/his behalf in the clearing of e-commerce shipments, to expedite customs decisions on critical commodities and to provide additional time for applicants to obtain and provide any additional information required by customs, to reduce fees and guarantees and to provide greater time for payments in certain hardship situations and other facilitation initiatives.

India

In several cases and under the existing regulations, customs field offices have been advised to [waive late fee for delayed filing of import declarations](#). The government has also approved relaxation of the requirement to submit bonds prescribed for various procedures for a limited period and under certain conditions.

Risk management to prioritize the clearance of imports and exports of low-risk critical supplies

The application of risk management to focus border interventions (documentary requirements, inspections, technical assessments, etc.) on high-risk commodities while reducing border interventions on low-risk items and allowing these to move faster across the border can expedite a country's access to critically needed commodities and reduce burdens on trade. Adjustments to actions carried out at the border must fall within legislative and regulatory frameworks. In some cases, legislation may allow for adjustment to administrative procedures or may require minor amendments to regulatory requirements. Countries can also review whether existing emergency legislation may allow for adjustments to border procedures to facilitate the movement of critical commodities.

Brazil

Customs prioritized the [clearance of 500,000 kits of rapid detection tests for COVID-19](#). The kits were released in 68 minutes following their arrival and were coordinated between customs, the Ministry of Health, the National Health Surveillance Agency, and airport officials.

Cameroon

[Relaxation of controls](#) for humanitarian assistance consignments have been established and procedures allow for:

- Immediate collection subject to lodging of a provisional declaration and security
- Pre-arrival completion of customs formalities, with inspection on quayside/runway followed by immediate removal of the goods, and
- Pre-arrival declaration procedure and allowances for duty-and tax-free admission.

Canada

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency which is responsible for plant and animal health and Canada's food safety system has [implemented a prioritized approach to its business functions](#) during the COVID-19 crisis. To support the government's objective in reducing the number of staff members having to interact with others, the agency is limiting activities:

- Food safety investigations and recalls
- Animal disease investigations
- Inspection services
- Export certification
- Import inspection services
- Emergency management
- Laboratory diagnostics in support of the above activities

The agency is temporarily suspending:

- Food inspections and investigations not related to food safety
- Low risk surveillance or sampling activities (food, plant and animal)
- Inspections of preventive control plans and plant and animal inspections in areas of low risk
- Low risk labeling and domestic facility inspections
- Low risk permissions

Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) Area

The representatives of the CEFTA, which consists of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, and Serbia, have proposed that to facilitate the movement of key health commodities and needed food supplies that the member states should establish "green lanes" which prioritize the entry of these shipments. Serbia for example, has established a specific green lane for 579 priority consignments. Border agencies including sanitary and phytosanitary authorities facilitate the entry of consignments that are moving along the green lane.

New Zealand

Where non-essential goods are blocking the movement of essential imports, customs allows the movement of non-essential cargo from the port to the receiving establishment. The non-essential cargo may not be unpacked or distributed until the shipment is released.

Republic of Korea

The customs administration has implemented [several reforms to facilitate trade](#) including the implementation of measures to facilitate the trade of critical supplies for both inbound and outbound cargoes. The Korean Customs Service (KCS) introduced a Customs Clearance Support Center for COVID-19 which facilitates the movement of critical raw materials into and from Korea. This includes critical supplies needed by China in restarting factories. KCS temporarily implemented 24/7 support teams for emergency clearance of raw materials at several customs offices including Incheon International Airport, Incheon Port and Pyeongtaek Customs to facilitate the movement of raw materials.

South African Development Community (SADC)

The SADC is encouraging its members to put in place policies and procedures at the ports of entry to identify and give [priority to the clearance and transportation of essential goods and services](#) (fuel including coal, food, medical equipment and medicines, personal protective equipment and agricultural cargo and inputs). The SADC consists of Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Border agency cooperation to facilitate the import of critical supplies (including COVID-related medical products and food)

To facilitate the movement of critical supplies, cooperation between border agencies to reduce the number of interventions required prior to clearance can substantially reduce interactions between border officials and traders or their representatives. These activities also facilitate the clearance of goods. Some countries have provided powers to the customs agency to clear low risk commodities on behalf of other agencies. Such measures reduce the resources needed at the border by border agencies; reduce the number of staff members at the border post and reduce the number of interactions between individuals. Furthermore, audits may be performed inland to validate conditions, but these can be performed in conditions of social distancing.

China

Following the outbreak, the General Administration of Customs of China (GACC) established a [working group at the ministerial level to coordinate the response to COVID-19](#), including the coordination of border agencies. The GACC Minister led the group. A sub-group coordinates the expedited clearance of medical supplies to deal with the pandemic. Customs established specific clearance operations for imported pharmaceuticals, disinfection supplies, protective suits, treatment equipment, and other supplies for both imports and exports. Similar expedited clearances were established for agricultural products.

South African Development Community (SADC)

The SADC Secretariat has proposed to act as a [platform in identifying inconsistencies in responses being applied by member states and proposing harmonized approaches](#) which could be implemented to improve health security and trade flows both in the current emergency and in the future.

Information technology to support trade (e.g., single windows and trade information portals)

Submission of documents electronically can facilitate trade and reduce contact between traders and government officials. These approaches allow traders to present documents remotely but also to provide them in a timelier fashion that allows border officials to verify validity, identify next steps and expedite clearance in a more transparent manner.

Angola

The Customs Administration has issued [a note encouraging non-face-to-face communication](#). It is encouraging use of its telephone contact center, use of an online taxpayer portal, and other options.

Cameroon

Cameroon Customs has deployed CAMCIS (Cameroon's new Customs Information System) which replaces its former customs automation system, ASYCUDA ++. [The system automates procedures to increase paperless transactions and reduce human-to-human contact.](#)

Chile

To reduce interactions between brokers and customs officers, the government introduced a resolution allowing customs brokers to submit documentation electronically in portable document format (PDF) provided originals are submitted within 30 days.

India

The Indian National Customs Portal is being used to avoid trade disruptions. The system facilitates clearances and provides key trade information. The system is available for use 24/7 for clearances. Helpdesk facilities have been ramped-up. An online form has been launched to allow traders to identify any issues. Accounting staff are now working on staggered schedules to ensure that incomes are not disrupted.

Japan

Japan Customs has [relaxed several administrative procedures](#) including allowing for the acceptance of electronic versions of documents; reducing the need for the submission of certain documents including declarations, certificates of origin, etc. in a specified time and relaxation of authentication steps. Furthermore, the declaration form for relief items has been simplified to expedite clearance of these goods.

Panama

Paperwork for the entry of goods, transshipment, transit, as well as any customs regime in ports, airports and land borders, are carried out on an electronic platform, the Customs Management Integrated System (SIGA). The documents presented through the electronic platform are valid provided originals are subsequently presented.

South African Development Community (SADC)

To reduce interactions between border officials and trader's representatives, [the SADC has proposed a number of initiatives](#) including automating of the submission and approval of trade documents through single windows, increasing the use of pre-clearance based upon electronically submitted documents and accelerating the use of online platforms for the submission of applications, renewals for licenses, etc.

St. Kitts and Nevis

To reduce contact with trade representatives, the customs agency is acquiring laptops to permit staff to clear shipments based on electronic document submission.

Extending border agency working hours

Extending hours and ensuring that hours facilitate the movement of goods is essential to the access of critical supplies during the pandemic. Reports that some borders are reducing hours, or that the operating hours of some countries are not synchronized with their neighbors, creates difficulties for shipments transiting multiple countries within a day the movement of essential and perishable food items.

Multiple countries

Several countries including China, Ecuador and [India](#) have implemented 24/7 service at ports and airports and are prioritizing clearances of essential commodities, including medical supplies.

Increased dialogue between industry and governments

Cooperation and communication between governments and industry can ensure that traders and regulated parties are aware of changes in requirements or service operations can minimize the impacts of these on trade and the those reliant on critical commodities.

Canada

The Government established an [Industry-Government COVID-19 working group](#) made up of national industry associations. The group meets by phone 3 times per week to share information and discuss issues facing the industry, including potential impacts on trade.

Increasing the available trade-related information on websites and through inquiry points

Transparency of border procedures and clarity of requirements better enables governments and traders to cooperate in the movement of critical supplies. Providing clarity allows traders to better plan and execute the movement of critical supplies as well as to comply with requirements thereby reducing the need for multiple interactions between border officials and traders and increasing the efficiency in trade.

New Zealand

The government has established [a webpage specific for export information](#). The page contains resources on how markets are responding to COVID-19, government support, etc. In response to the reduction in air travel, [a dedicated page provides information on available space on aircrafts](#).

Protection of frontline workers

It is critical that frontline border agency workers, brokerage firms, and other essential trade services continue to operate during and after the crisis to support the flow of critical supplies and the economic recovery. Therefore, establishing measures to protect front-line workers is essential. Many countries have implemented temperature screenings of passengers, truck drivers, and others that are crossing borders. Although this measure may slow clearances, in many cases the delays have been smaller when other trade facilitation measures are implemented.

Angola

The Customs Administration took measures in line with social distancing principles and restricts the number of people inside the customs posts and respective stations to the number of service counters available, while others must wait outside.

Brazil

The country [provided 1.62 million masks and gloves to its border staff](#), including customs, the federal police, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply.

Georgia

Truck drivers are screened for illness as they enter the country². If the driver appears ill, the truck and driver are removed from service, the trailer is sanitized, and a replacement driver and truck is used to complete the journey. The driver that is assessed as ill is placed under quarantine.

Madagascar

Customs agents are teleworking while still maintaining services and are only present physically when it is essential.

St. Kitts and Nevis

The Customs department has implemented several measures to protect frontline customs staff, including:

- Customs officers are screened twice a day by their supervisors. Supervisors also observe the officers to determine if they are exhibiting flu-like symptoms during the course of the day. If flu symptoms are observed, the officer is removed from service, addressed by health authorities, and placed on sick leave. The area is secured, sanitized by a competent authority, and all officers who encountered that individual are referred to the Health Department immediately.
- Workplace sanitization is being done regularly during the course of the day and officers are asked to clean their respective workspaces.
- Staff not serving the general public are working from home.
- Meetings are held online or by video conference.
- Crews working from home fill in for crews serving the general public if they are no longer able to carry out work.
- The Customs Marine Unit is supporting the police to carry out health checks.

United States

The United States has provided its field staff with the following recommendations:

- Do not shake hands. Use alternate forms of greetings such as elbow or fist bumps if necessary.
- Each employee should use a separate vehicle whenever possible. To the extent possible, do not let others ride in your vehicle. In instances where mission critical work requires more than one person

² COVID-19 symptoms vary amongst individuals and the identification of infected individuals can be very complex. The [WHO has developed specific guidance](#) for dealing with ill travelers at points of entry.

per vehicle, avoid direct contact, wash hands/use hand sanitizer, and utilize disinfecting wipes in the vehicle when work is complete.

- Maintain hand sanitizers and disinfecting wipes in vehicles and use often, especially when soap and water are not available/practical.
- Wear gloves or use paper towels when opening gates, using gas pumps, and touching doorknobs or any other surface. Use gloves for a practical amount of time to conserve resources. Remember to change gloves as appropriate and dispose of the gloves properly. When wearing gloves, be mindful to not touch your face.
- Remember to wash hands regularly. Gloves can carry the virus, so wearing them is not a failsafe. Washing hands should include 20 seconds of soap contact with skin.
- If possible, do not participate in meetings involving multiple people in person; if you must speak directly to a person, maintain the appropriate social distance (6 feet or more).
- If possible, do not go into others' homes, places of business, etc. When possible, conduct interviews or other meetings with external customers via telephone, Skype or other electronic means. When mission critical work requires you to enter a home or place of business, ensure that you are maintaining appropriate social distancing and taking appropriate safety and sanitization measures.
- Reduce, to the extent possible, any personal interaction in breakrooms, etc.

South Africa

To reduce contact between customs officials and traders and their agents the South African Revenue Service (SARS) has encouraged the use of electronic filing of all documents for clearance; established a task force consisting of occupational health and safety, governance and operational staff to oversee operations in minimizing the risk of COVID spread, it has also established an 'employee wellness toll-free line' to deal with queries from its staff related to COVID-19.

Vietnam

Most customs officers are working from home. Vietnam Customs maintains a minimum number of officers in separate working shifts at every customs office to ensure efficiency and effectiveness of clearance and control. The teams on the working shifts are set in a way that one team can be replaced by a new team, if an officer on the working shift is found to be infected. Such actions mitigate the spread to other members on the shift.

ANNEX 1: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Trade and COVID-19 Guidance Notes:

[Trade and Covid-19 Brief Page](#)

[Managing Risk and Facilitating Trade in the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

[Do's and Don'ts of Trade Policy in the Response to COVID-19](#)

[Trade in Critical COVID-19 Products](#)

[Trade Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis in Africa](#)

Forthcoming in April 2020

Trade Implications and Policy Responses

Implications for Logistics and Recommendations for Policy Actions

Health Services Trade Reform

Other resources:

Espitia, Rocha, Ruta (2020). "Database on COVID-19 trade flows and policies"