

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ON THE 1ST MEETING OF THE WORKING
GROUP ON CUSTOMS FACILITATION

ASSOCIATION OF CARIBBEAN STATES (ACS)
Port of Spain, Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

Working Group on Customs Facilitation Executive Summary

Opening Ceremony

The 1st Meeting of the Working Group on Customs Facilitation was convened on 23rd January, 2013. It was opened by the Republic of Haiti, in its capacity as Chair of the Special Committee on Trade, represented by Mr. Eugene Reynald.

An introductory speech was presented by the Secretary General Ambassador Alfonso Munera, where he indicated the ACS' commitment to trade facilitation and overcoming obstacles which impede these efforts. He also noted the linkages between trade, sustainable tourism and transportation.

1. Report on Analysis of Country Questionnaires

The Director of Trade Ariadna Perez presented the findings and analysis from the responses given to the country questionnaires (Attached document ACS/2013/TRADECustomsWorkingGroup.I/WP.003)..The presentation helped to identify the current state of customs procedures within the Greater Caribbean Region. It was found that improving trade facilitation through modernization of processing systems, harmonization and simplification were viewed as most important, coupled with governmental initiatives to strengthen these efforts as per the World Customs Organization standards. Digitization was highlighted as an area of priority for all Member States, most with plans in the near future to further improve performance by incorporating an Electronic Single Window and updated technology.

Based on the findings and analysis, special attention should be paid to: the need for up-to-date information technology and enhanced physical infrastructure and better organization throughout the customs departments.

2. Presentation by the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association (TTMA): Customs Facilitation and the Panama Canal Expansion.

Presented by Dr. Trevor Townsend
(Attached Presentation)

The presentation looked at the implications of the completion of the Panama Canal and how the ACS Region may capitalize on the opportunities it presents. The importance of Automated System Customs Data (ASYCUDA) and its latest version ASYCUDA World, which allows for several benefits in conjunction with other modernized procedures, was also noted. Simultaneously, it also called for harmonized policies amongst governmental agencies to avoid bottlenecks and lags within the system. Taken altogether, these actions should lend themselves to customs and trade facilitation.

In a discussion on the consequences of the completion of the canal expansion,, an update to the information systems within ports was deemed important for trade facilitation and to accommodate the greater influx of shipping lines within the waters of the Greater Caribbean. With the increased capacity provided by the expansion, it was suggested that the ACS as a group should interface with these major shipping lines on how their work affects intra-regional trade in order to avoid incidence of unfair trading practices.

Other areas of concern which hindered trade facilitation included: the lack of continuity in governmental policy due to changes in political administration; and capacity building/training.

3. Video Presentation from the Panama Canal Authority: "Panama Expansion Programme Progress"

The video provided information regarding the progress of the Panama Canal which is expected to be completed in 2015.

Following the video, a written presentation was provided by the Panama Canal Authority. Ariadna Perez, Director of Trade, in the absence of Luis Ferreira presented on their behalf.

The presentation (see attached presentation) demonstrated potential new markets and enhanced opportunities for trade as a result of the completion of

the Panama Canal. It also illustrated the main routes utilized by the Canal and top users - the United States of America, China and Colombia.

It is hoped that with the increased capacity from the expansion of the Canal that the Region will be able to capture a larger portion of the existing international markets (notably North America and South America) for transit. Growth is expected in these markets due to increased population size in the near future. During the discussion, Members States highlighted various initiatives undertaken to adapt customs facilities, which primarily focused on modernisation of electronic systems such as the Electronic Single Window, the implementation of ASYCUDA and the simplification of customs procedures and improved customs facilities with a focus on trans-shipment hubs and logistics hub for free-zone activities. The Chair challenged the delegates to think of ways to prepare for the eventual expansion of the Canal with its increased capacity and how the ACS Region may capitalize on this unique opportunity.

4. Working Group Discussions:

On the topic of "Addressing ways of improving access to Customs procedures, regulation, and relevant documentation", it was noted that there was a need for better practices to harmonise customs procedures. Members agreed that the ACS could take an inventory as to what has been done to date, so that efforts are not duplicated, and subsequently determine the missing elements.

On the topic of "Review of capabilities, facilities and infrastructure available", a key recommendation was the use of a Memorandum of Understanding to govern the exchange of information and interface between Member States. The varying levels of technology amongst Members were acknowledged and this was highlighted as an issue to be addressed in the further development of collaborative efforts in customs facilitation.

In formulating a path forward, the potential for cooperation with other stakeholders who share the issues put forward with the Working Group on Customs Facilitation should be considered, for example the Caribbean Customs Law Enforcement Council (CCLEC) and the CARICOM Secretariat. Studies conducted could also prove to be advantageous to the outcome of the Working Group. It was recommended that a portal should be created for the uploading of pertinent information related to laws and regulations of Member States to facilitate the exchange of knowledge.

5. Conclusion

The Working Group agreed:

1. The Directorate of Trade is to consult with the Legal Advisor of the ACS about what legal instrument should be employed to facilitate the exchange of customs-related information amongst Members. This legal instrument will be reviewed at the Second Meeting for the Working Group on Customs Facilitation.
2. The Second Meeting for the Working Group on Customs Facilitation is scheduled for 11th-12th July, 2013.