

OECD High-Level Webinar “International Organizations and their Members Facing the Global Crisis Together” panel discussion, 3 September 2020

Statement by Secretary General of the World Customs Organization, Dr. Kunio Mikuriya

Excellences, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is timely to share experiences and to enhance the collective spirit of collaboration among International Organizations. I greatly appreciate the organizers of this event for the opportunity.

The WCO’s 183 Member Customs administrations ensure connectivity at borders in pragmatic manner. The COVID-19 pandemic situation puts enormous pressure on Customs. While the movement of people was stopped or severely restricted, Customs had to ensure the movement of goods, including medical goods and other lifeline goods by safeguarding supply chains. Usually, Customs are in good coordination at borders with other government agencies involving the private sector - we call Coordinated Border Management. However, it was revealed, especially in the initial stages, that there were often excessive restrictions, disproportionate measures, and a lack of coordination and preparedness.

Considering the above circumstances, we saw a need for the WCO to step in to enhance cooperation with other relevant international organizations to address those challenges in facilitating the movement of goods. We took a pragmatic approach by having a series of close consultations with the Private Sector Consultative Group to learn more about what was happening on the ground, to identify the bottlenecks and to jointly explore solutions involving the other appropriate international organizations.

Initially, we saw the need to come up with a list of medical goods with their corresponding Harmonized System (HS) numbers to enable Customs to identify the cargo and to clear it expeditiously. Moreover, we worked with the World Health Organization (WHO) to produce a list identifying the relevant medicines with their HS numbers. These lists have been widely used by both Customs and business for accelerated border clearance procedures. Based on a request from the private sector during our consultations, the WCO also developed guidelines on how to identify essential goods for swift release, taking into account the various national situations.

We continued our consultation with the business sector and identified several areas in trade and transport that caused gridlock in supply chains. The WCO teamed up with relevant international public and private organizations and undertook joint actions, including issuing joint statements and letters to remind Customs, other border agencies and the transport sector to enhance cooperation based on existing standards and guidelines. In this way, we could say that the pandemic crisis offered unprecedented opportunities to strengthen collaboration among relevant international organizations.

Looking to the future on how best to work with international organizations, we identified several areas. Firstly, **digitization** as a means of applying social distancing in the Customs context. We need to promote more paperless trade, which involves cooperation across the trade and business fields.

Secondly, **E-commerce** saw a further expansion during the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting the evolution of means of transport within global supply chains from containers to parcels from consumers staying home during the lockdown phase of the pandemic and beyond.

Thirdly, **disaster management**, not only limited to the pandemic. In this connection, the WCO is developing a guideline document on business continuity for different crisis focusing on the resilience and recovery of supply chains, which requires consultation with other international organizations.

Also, we are conscious of the need for enhanced communications. We created special pages on our website, accessible to Customs, but also to the public. We are reviewing our meeting procedures in a virtual mode, including decision-making and capacity building. International organizations could share their experiences and explore best practices.

Finally, another critical area for cooperation is improving the quality of data and data standardization. In the digital era, data is all the more important as Customs relies on it for risk management on borders.

I have, so far, talked mainly about the facilitation aspect of Customs. However, organized crime and terrorist groups continue to exploit supply chains before and under the pandemic situation to get illegal profits. The WCO strengthened cooperation with international organizations in charge of law enforcement by issuing alerts and coordinating operations in the relevant areas, including the smuggling of medical goods and counterfeit medicines.

In conclusion, we need to turn challenges caused by the pandemic or other crises into opportunities for collaboration with public and private international organizations.

Thank you very much.