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Recommendation [NN]: [Trade Information Portal]

Introduction

Transparency and predictability are cornerstones of international trade today. In order to trade internationally efficiently and cost effectively, it is necessary to access all of the regulatory requirements prior to the actual sale of merchandise. Having an official, single portal where all of this information can be accessed provides the necessary transparency and predictability. Such a portal also encourages cross-administration cooperation which can carry over to border control requirements or other trade facilitation mechanisms such as a Single Window.

Many countries affirm that they have such a portal; however, these can vary greatly from one country to another. This recommendation puts forward a base understanding of a Trade Information Portal as a trade facilitation mechanism.

Purpose and Scope

A Trade Information Portal is a website that aggregates and publishes all trade related regulatory information originating from the government agencies that perform a control function in relation to imports, exports, transits or trans-shipments and that allows importers, exporters or anyone involved in international trade to easily find and understand any legal requirements and procedures pertaining to specific commodities that are necessary to comply with national obligations for clearing goods at the border as well as before or after clearance.

A Trade Information Portal enables the publication and availability of information related to importation, exportation and transit regulatory requirements and procedures. By nature, it should be an electronic system which is accessible by internet. The main objective is to create a trade facilitation tool which helps the private sector to understand regulations and trade agreements and thus streamline their processes.

This recommendation establishes a base definition of Trade Information Portal, the type of information that should be included, the different types of models that exist as well as the technical requirements. It is meant to provide the base guidance to understand the portal and how it should be implemented while remaining neutral of eventual technical solutions.

Benefits

A Trade Information Portal will provide the transparency and predictable information necessary for traders to plan their processes and resources for their cross-border operations. It will allow traders to prepare all necessary documentation and authorizations for the entry or exit of goods prior to their arrival at the border, and thus contributing to compliance and streamlined border crossing.

Such a portal will also contribute to cross-agency collaboration. The exchange and preparation of data linked to the information published on the portal can also help agencies to align their requirements as well as align the standards they use to communicate such information.

Streamlining and harmonizing border processes is expected to contribute to the overall economic health of the country.

International Standards

The exchange and publication of information on a Trade Information Portal will be best optimized if the data is standardized. UN/CEFACT has developed standards for electronic information exchange to accompany this recommendation and facilitate interoperability between government agencies and between different economies.
Recommendation

UN/CEFACT, at its twenty-seventh Plenary session on XXX April 2021 in Geneva recommends that governments should:

- Establish a Trade Information Portal in order to improve the transparency of trade information;
- Establish a strategic vision for the Trade Information Portal as part of overall trade facilitation policy;
- Appoint a collaborative governance body for policy and oversight of implementation and ongoing operation comprising all key stakeholders, i.e. government entities involved in the regulatory control of imports/exports and private sector trade practitioners and put in place agreements of collaboration and mechanisms for exchanging information between stakeholders;
- Appoint Lead Agency for implementation and the entity tasked with operating and keeping the Trade Information Portal up-to-date on an ongoing basis (may be the same as Lead Agency) and ensure that operation is sustainable in the long term through adequate resourcing and financing and continuous supervision by governance body;
- Make provisions, including financing, for capacity building, i.e. awareness programmes, training, publicity, outreach, both initially and on an ongoing basis.
Guidelines for establishing a Trade Information Portal

1. Trade Information Portal Definition

A Trade Information Portal (TIP) \(^1\) is a website that aggregates and publishes all trade related regulatory information originating from the government agencies that perform a control function in relation to imports, exports, transits or trans-shipments and that allows importers, exporters or anyone involved in international trade to easily find and understand any legal requirements and procedures pertaining to specific commodities that are necessary to comply with national obligations for clearings goods at the border as well as before or after clearance.

A TIP may also provide any other pertinent information available nationally or internationally that may facilitate trade of goods or services across borders including highlighting external market access opportunities or impediments.\(^2\)

2. Information to be shared on a Trade Information Portal

Trade related regulatory information to be published on a TIP should comprise, as a minimum the following.

As related to general aspects:

- Laws, regulations, decrees, instructions, notifications and any other legal instruments relating to trade;
- Forms and/or electronic messages used to apply for permits, licenses, Customs clearance, etc.;
- Information on how to connect to governmental electronic systems related to international trade (i.e. Single Window, individual ministries...)
- Penalty provisions for breach of formalities;
- Procedures for appeal or review;
- Notifications or guidance notes;
- Lists of codes required in various documents, e.g. country codes, units of measurement, currency codes, etc.;
- Contact information for enquiry point(s).

These general aspects are useful to be known at a product level as well.

As related to commodity-specific or generic product description level:

- Procedures comprising the practical steps for discharging regulatory obligations with Customs and other agencies including those required by a Single Window, where applicable;

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\(^1\) In some economies, the term National Trade Repository or similar terms are used to refer conceptually to the same thing as what is intended by the term Trade Information Portal (TIP) in this document.

\(^2\) Though this recommendation targets international exchanges of goods, the base principles could also be applied to trade within a single economy or in a regional context.
• Commodity classification in the format in use in each country (most countries have adopted the Harmonized System\textsuperscript{3} format) and associated tariff rates;

• Fees and other charges associated with each commodity or regime;

• Preferential tariffs or special requirements for trading with countries that are parties to a Trade Agreement or Free Trade Agreement or other form of preference;

• Rules for classification of products for Customs valuation purposes;

• Special measures applicable to specific commodities or products, e.g. quotas, exemptions, prohibitions or restrictions for Sanitary/Phytosanitary (SPS) or other reasons;

• Non-tariff measures such as requirements to obtain a license, permit, certification, registration, submit to an inspection or testing, or others;

• Technical standards required for specific categories of products, either mandatory (technical regulations) or recommended;

• Information on advance rulings that may be made publicly available.

The above information is often inter-related, so it would be beneficial if the information could be cross-referenced within the TIP. For example, users may want to look up a specific commodity code or product type and discover any tariffs and duties applicable; whether any specific authorizations are required to import or export the goods; what the procedure is to obtain the authorizations; and which legal instruments provide the legal basis for these requirements.

Users should also be able to find the information they require, to the extent possible, by searching for specific text or keywords.

As well as the trade specific information above, a TIP is also likely to include many standard facilities, e.g.

• Contact Us;

• FAQ;

• Site Map;

• Share via social media, etc.

These would typically be available as standard off-the-shelf facilities of the website software.

3. Trade Information Portal Technology and Model

A TIP may be created using any industry standard technology platform that allows a website to be built and that also provides interaction through various user interfaces. It is likely that, as well as static web pages with plain text or images, the system will also need a database to store structured data and an application to look up the data and format it in response to specific user queries.\textsuperscript{4} A Content Management System (CMS) will also be required to upload and format data to the website.

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\textsuperscript{4} For example, a full stack requiring database layer, application layer, web server layer and web browser front-end is likely to be required.
The trade related information to be published on a TIP originates from different sources, typically Government agencies but also other national or international organizations. In many countries, information may be available across a number of websites maintained by each government agency responsible for a particular aspect of trade regulation. Aggregating and publishing this information so that it can be presented to users in a single website may be achieved in different ways. The following models represent an organizational model for information sharing rather than a technical solution.

Centralized Model

In the centralized model, website information is brought in from the relevant agencies or other organizations and is structured in a compatible way in a single database so that it can be easily cross-referenced and formatted to build a response to a user’s query.

The advantage is that users only need to go to one place to find out what they need and they can expect to be given the complete picture of the rules, regulations and procedures across all agencies in a consistent and predictable manner which is a key objective of trade facilitation. Another advantage is that the dissemination of information could be largely facilitated between agencies and even within a same agency through a centralized model. The disadvantage of this model is that, inevitably, there will be some duplication of information and, potentially, inconsistencies or conflicts across different government websites and that it will require a dedicated task force to keep it up-to-date by collecting the information from all the different sources. It also means that collaborative institutional arrangements must be put in place for information to flow to the TIP. Having a standardized data model for such exchanges can assist with the identification of duplications and the consolidation of information.

All in all, the advantages of this model have been found to outweigh the disadvantages and this is the model most commonly adopted by countries that have implemented a TIP.

Decentralized Model

It is conceivable that a TIP could be built by creating a platform which can provide the information required by users by directing them, through links, to the different agencies’ or organizations’ websites. An advantage of a decentralized model is that the information would not be duplicated across websites. Furthermore, the maintenance of the TIP would be less onerous. However, for this to happen, clear common data standards and operating procedures would be necessary for the various websites at a very detailed level. Otherwise, the user would very likely need to navigate between multiple websites with different interfaces in order to assemble the information required.

Hybrid Model

It is conceivable to think of a hybrid model where core structured information is maintained in a centralized TIP and supplementary information is accessible through links to other websites.

Countries wishing to implement a TIP will determine which method suits them best according to the local circumstances.

4. Legal Aspects

The requirement for accuracy and timeliness of information published on a TIP is particularly important for legal information, i.e. laws, regulations, notifications and any other instruments that carry legal weight as the public must be given confidence that by acting according the information on the TIP they will be compliant with the law.

Insofar as possible, the TIP should reflect the most up-to-date legislation which, ideally, should be legally binding. Each country must decide whether it is possible to achieve the high standard required for
information held in electronic form to be legally binding and, should this prove too onerous to achieve, should publish an appropriate disclaimer.

As well as legislation currently in force, the TIP could also publish proposed legislation with an indication of whether it has already been approved and the date it is expected to enter into force. This will assist the users with preparing in advance in order to be compliant when conducting future business.

5. Key success factors

Establishing the basis for collaboration

The trade related information described in Section 3 will need to be gathered from all the government agencies and other organizations involved in trade and, therefore, collaboration will be required between these parties. The free flow of information between government agencies may often be constrained by bureaucratic or cultural impediments. Indeed, there may be laws that prevent exchange of information between agencies although these are likely to relate to operational or private information rather than information which should be freely available in the public domain. It is therefore recommended that sharing of information for the purpose of a TIP is underpinned by a binding agreement between the parties. This type of agreement may vary according to what would be effective in each country and it could be as simple as a Memorandum of Understanding or it may need to be an instrument carrying greater legal weight. The instrument of agreement should clearly assign responsibilities and define accountability mechanisms with the aim of ensuring full and perpetual disclosure of public information and to keep information up-to-date.

The instrument should also define the governance and operational structure of the TIP and include the Terms of Reference and Service Level Agreement for the services to be provided by the operating entity. The agreement between the parties should also cover the mechanisms for exchanging information which would most likely involve formally nominating a Focal Point, i.e. a person in each of the agencies or institutions responsible for maintaining the liaison with the TIP Management Team in order to ensure that information to be published is provided in a timely manner and for continuously informing of any changes to the procedures (e.g. forms, required documents, laws, contact details, etc.).

A legal instrument would not normally be required to establish a TIP as a single, authoritative source of information unless such information has legally binding value (see Legal Aspects above).

Lead Agency / Management Team

A government agency should be appointed to lead the establishment of a TIP and its subsequent operation. The appropriate agency will vary from country to country depending on legal, political and capacity issues. The Lead Agency requires a clear government mandate, which may need to be conferred through legislation, to empower it to orchestrate the sharing of trade related regulatory information between all relevant agencies and other stakeholders. The Lead Agency must be a very strong organization with the necessary vision and commitment to implement trade facilitation policies and should be accountable to a collaborative body such as a National Trade Facilitation Committee or a dedicated TIP

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5 UNECE Recommendation 35 on Establishing a legal framework for international trade Single Window, ECE/TRADE/401, 2013, provides a complete check list of considerations to be taken when implementing a single Window.

governing body such as a Steering Committee. This body, depending on specific countries' circumstances, may also be the one tasked with the oversight of the Single Window.

The governing body must meet regularly to review progress and the availability and accuracy of trade information, monitor usage, set the priorities for data collection, the development of new modules and functionalities, the evolution of the system and the communication activities.

The Lead Agency would have the responsibility of coordinating efforts and managing the development and implementation project. The Lead Agency would normally also be expected to be responsible for operating the TIP on an ongoing basis and for ensuring that its content is kept accurate and up-to-date, reporting to and acting upon policy decisions made collectively by the governing body.

The Lead Agency would be expected to appoint an Implementation Team tasked with developing and implementing the TIP with the required technical resources and skills.

Collection and integration of data into the TIP should be done as much as possible with internal resources assigned to the Implementation Team in order to build institutional knowledge of the regulatory framework and of the system and contribute effectively to the overarching goal of simplifying the trade environment.

Once operational, a Management Team would be tasked with operating and maintaining the portal and ensuring that, after the initial implementation, relevant content continues to be provided on an ongoing basis by all the relevant government agencies in a timely manner. In order to ensure continuity, it would be beneficial if members of the implementation Team formed part of the Management Team or provided training to new members.

**Risk mitigation**

The Lead Agency should identify any potential risks and impediments that may prejudice the success of the project and evaluate the likelihood of the risk occurring together with the impact it would have on the project. The Project Team should also develop a risk management plan with appropriate mitigation strategies in the event of the risk materializing.

During the course of the implementation project the risks should be continuously monitored and the Project Team should adopt good management practice in order to manage and mitigate the risks.

To a large extent the potential risks for this kind of project will be the same as any ICT project. Other risks will be specific to the circumstances of each country. A clear strategic plan for the project should be developed at the outset and this will contribute to mitigating the risks of failure that would result from an unclear vision of the objectives, lack of ownership and direction and poor planning.

Perhaps the highest risk specific to this kind of project is the failure to collect complete and accurate quality information from all the agencies and present it in a user friendly and informative way. This would result in a poor image in the mind of the public of the usefulness of the website and lack of confidence in the government.

Information may be kept by the agencies in an organized format (e.g. databases, folders, lists, etc.) or it may be stored haphazardly or it may simply be knowledge residing with key individuals. The task of identifying and structuring this information may therefore prove to be challenging.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, agencies may be unwilling or unaccustomed to share information or they may simply find it difficult to source it. It is therefore important that the Lead Agency should have the necessary authority to collect the information and that appropriate instructions are given to all the Focal Points within the agencies who will be tasked with assisting the Implementation Team. Therefore,
it is crucial to develop processes and procedures for the ongoing inter-agency collaboration before the
operational phase of TIP to ensure the information published stays relevant and up-to-date. There is a
risk that, without proper institutional arrangements to ensure a proactive supply of information from the
agencies to the TIP Management Team, the flow of information will dry up.

Much will also depend on the skill and experience of the Implementation Team members to scout for
information and extract the required knowledge from their counterparts. Specific training may be
required to build up the team’s capacity in this respect.

The ongoing operation of TIP will incur costs for system maintenance, equipment, facilities and personnel
for the TIP Management Team. The operation and ongoing success of the TIP would be put at risk if
adequate funding arrangements are not put in place.

The sections below address the risks above and make recommendations as to how to mitigate them.

Completeness and accuracy of information

As mentioned above, one of the key success factors of a TIP is that the public must have confidence in the
fact that the information published is complete, accurate, and up-to-date. It is therefore important to
attempt to measure the degree to which this is the case whilst striving to achieve the highest possible
level of accuracy. There may be some information which will become available progressively. This should
be made as transparent as possible to the user community.

In the initial phase of its implementation, while the TIP is being populated with information from the
participating agencies and organizations, it would be very useful for all users to have an indication of which
parts are completed and available and which parts are still under construction. This could be
complemented by a general indicator which expresses the overall degree of completeness.

Throughout the operations of the TIP, the Lead Agency should continuously keep a measurement of
whether the information is up-to-date. Should issues be reported that operational practices differ from
the information provided on the TIP, this should be taken into account and either the practice is aligned
with the law and procedures, or the TIP should be updated where required. The degree of accuracy and
up-to-dateness of information should be expressed in number of cases reported and number of cases
solved within a given time period.

Other measurements of the degree of accuracy of the TIP could be:

• a measure of the degree of involvement of each of the participating government agencies and
organisations. This could use indicators such as: full and complete information published on TIP,
partial information published on TIP, contribution under preparation;

• an indicator of the degree of information fully available online, partially available online or only
available in paper format;

• an indicator of the availability and responsiveness of contact points for obtaining further
information (details, special cases, etc.).

User centric design and content

The design of a TIP should be such that information is presented from a user’s perspective. This
recommendation’s identification of best practices suggests that:

• information on procedures must be presented or segmented by type of commodity;

• information must be easy to find from various types of user’s perspective;
information on trade procedures and regulations must be presented in a language that is easy for someone engaging in trade for the first time, with no prior knowledge, to understand;

- information must be arranged in a standardized and simple way;

- information must be relevant and reduced to the minimum necessary for the trader to complete the sequence of steps in the various processes.

The TIP must be easy to manage so that all content can be easily integrated and updated through a Content Management System (CMS) without the need for IT specialists’ intervention.

The look and feel of the public interfaces should be regularly updated to remain inviting and relevant.

**Training**

Training will be required for members of the Implementation Team and, subsequently, the TIP Management Team. The Lead Agency should therefore factor into the Implementation Plan training courses targeted to the specific training needs of the personnel selected. Training should be targeted to:

- Management in charge of the operation of the TIP and with a responsibility for reporting to the governing body. Training should focus on building the skills required to provide management oversight of the implementation and operation of the TIP;

- IT technical staff, e.g. Webmaster, who will support the system. Training will involve general good practice IT management methods as well as specific training dependent on the technology model adopted;

- Content management personnel. Training should be on the policies and procedures for collecting and publishing information;

- Business analysts. A substantial part of the TIP’s content will relate to procedures which will need to be analyzed in order to be explained to the public in an easy-to-understand format. Some training in basic business process analysis skills would be desirable for personnel tasked with sourcing such information;

- Focal points and other key personnel within the agencies. Training will focus on the procedures for exchanging information and validating the accuracy of the information once it is published;

- Traders and other potential users of the TIP. Training will focus on creating awareness of the TIP’s functions and how to use them in order to find information.

**Dissemination / Publicity**

In order for a TIP to deliver its benefits at scale, it is essential for the business community to be aware of its existence and how it will help them in their trading activities. This requires implementation of an effective, multi-channel publicity plan, which identifies audience-appropriate channels of communication and activities, including dissemination efforts by participating agencies and bodies using their own habitual channels of communication. The goal of the publicity plan is to raise awareness about the benefits of the portal and encourage its usage by the business community.

Potential channels of communications may include billboards, a pre-launch website, newsletters, email campaigns, videos, online articles, branded marketing materials, fliers to be distributed to various government locations, press releases, radio or television interviews, etc. Social media, including paid digital advertising, is also an effective channel of communication.

As much as possible, different initiatives should be targeted and tailored to specific audiences, e.g. importers, exporters, SMEs, large traders, specific sectoral organizations, brokers as well as other government agencies as they will also be users of the TIP. An effective way of reaching out to targeted
segments of the trade is through workshops or seminars tailored to the needs of the specific audience especially when wanting to disseminate knowledge to remote provinces or rural areas.

Whilst the publicity effort will necessarily be more intense in the period leading up to the launch of the TIP, it is important that publicity should be sustained through periodic initiatives throughout operation of the TIP in order to keep awareness alive and attract new audiences.

Experience has shown, through website usage analytical tools, that often the majority of hits to the website derive from referrals from other websites, in other words, from clicking on links on these websites or embedding selected content from the TIP on other agencies' websites. It is therefore recommended that the Lead Agency should encourage as many other organizations as possible to include a link to their TIP on their existing websites. These could be other ministries or agencies, sectoral organizations, trade bodies, the trade pages of foreign embassies' websites or of the country’s embassies abroad, etc.

Likewise, search engine optimization techniques should be taken into consideration and appropriate tags should be used to show up in search engines.

**Financing model**

The operational costs of running a TIP will involve the cost of hosting the website, software maintenance and support, maintaining and, from time to time, renewing the necessary equipment and the cost of premises and personnel dedicated to supporting it. It is critical to the success of a TIP that these costs should be adequately funded. The Lead Agency may consider whether they should be met through their budget or whether they could be recovered by some other means.

In the spirit of transparency and trade facilitation it is the government’s obligation to make regulatory information freely available to the public. It is therefore difficult to see how a financing model, such as a subscription only service, could be built around providing information which should be freely available without discrimination in the public domain. Furthermore, the TIP, unlike the Single Window, would not provide a transactional service where a transaction fee can be justified by the added value that results from a simplified electronic process.

However, if recovering costs is imperative, the Lead Agency may wish to consider options such as levying a moderate fee for certain value-added services. These could be additional subscription only services such as providing targeted alerts by email or SMS about specific topics of interest to a subscriber or downloading publications which should otherwise have been purchased. Another possibility is to make advertising space available on the website although this would run the risk of diminishing the authoritative nature of the website as it may be seen to promote specific commercial interests.

In a situation where the TIP and the Single Window were seen to be closely integrated (e.g. sharing infrastructure, management structure, etc.) it would be conceivable to cover the operating costs of the TIP through a minor adjustment to any Single Window transaction fees.

When evaluating these options, the governing body and the Lead Agency should weigh the benefit of collecting fees against national policy decisions to facilitate trade and increase transparency, as well as the broad benefits that would derive as a result of increased use of the website, e.g. cost savings in disseminating information, increased compliance, less time spent dealing with enquiries and reduced face-to-face interaction to handle queries or resolve conflicts.

**On-going institutional arrangements and maintenance**

The long-term success of a TIP will ultimately depend on the degree of usage traders and the public make of it which will be greater if the TIP is seen to be always accurate and up-to-date with timely information.
In order for the content of the website to be kept up-to-date it will be necessary to have in place the necessary mechanisms for new information to continue flowing from all the stakeholders to the Lead Agency’s TIP Management Team and a close watch should be maintained on information which may become obsolete and that should therefore be removed or replaced.

To this end, the institutional structure put in place for the initial implementation of the TIP should continue to operate. The governing body, e.g. Steering Committee, would continue to provide regular oversight over the operation of the TIP. The Lead Agency should provide the governing body with regular updates about the usage and usefulness of the TIP so that appropriate action may be agreed if necessary (see Section 6. Measuring Results).

Typically, the Lead Agency that was in charge of implementation would continue, as part of its mandate, to take responsibility for operating the TIP on an ongoing basis. However, it is also conceivable that, depending on specific circumstances in different countries, a different organization may be better suited to take on responsibility for ongoing operations. In any case the operating entity should ensure that the operation is adequately funded to cover the operational costs (see Financing Model above) and that it has the required in-house skills and capacity.

The instruments put in place to provide a basis of agreement for exchanging information between stakeholders would continue to have effect after the initial implementation phases and the practical mechanisms for information exchange should then become part of normal day-to-day activities.

6. Measuring success

The purpose of a TIP is to provide up-to-date trade-related information as part of the efforts towards greater transparency. It would therefore be desirable to be able to measure, in some way, the degree to which transparent access to accurate and up-to-date trade-related information contributes to facilitation of trade. This, however, presents some challenges. Measuring the effectiveness of trade facilitation in terms of the direct and indirect savings to trade in transaction costs is, in itself, a notoriously complex endeavour. Transparency is only one of many aspects that could contribute to facilitation and, in any case, publishing regulations and information on a portal is itself only a part of transparency. How those regulations are interpreted or applied in practice is also a factor. It is therefore very challenging to identify any key indicators that could specifically measure the contribution that a TIP makes to trade facilitation.

Nonetheless, a judgement as to the effectiveness of a TIP could, to some extent, be formed by gauging the perception by the trade and the wider business community. Targeted surveys, using online tools or face-to-face interviews, could be carried out before the introduction of a TIP to establish a baseline in respect of the degree of difficulty traders encounter in being able to obtain accurate information and the extent to which this impacts their business. Repeating the surveys periodically after the introduction of the TIP and comparing the results with the baseline could provide a statistical model from which satisfaction trends can be identified. Based on the pre and post analysis, anecdotal cases may also be developed using key-informant interviews. Samples for such interviews may be selected from users representing different groups of users, e.g. SMEs, women traders, large enterprises and others.

Standard website analytics tools can also be used to extract statistical trends related to the usage of the TIP such as number of hits, time dwelled on specific pages, number of new or returning visitors, bounce rate, geographic spread, etc. Whilst these indicators cannot provide a direct measurement of facilitation, they can, nonetheless, point to usage trends as an indicator of the increased reliance by the public on the website as a source of information.
Through analytical tools or some specific facility, it may be possible to measure how long it takes, on average, to find the information needed and the degree of success (in percentage terms) in finding it, for example by asking a question at the end of a session.

The number of queries submitted via the website and a feedback about the usefulness of the replies could be analysed against a benchmark of the number of queries handled by an agency prior to the introduction of the website, if such information was available.

Another indicator may be the length of time it takes to complete specific transactions which normally attract enquiries or are prone to give rise to involuntary non-compliance. If this time decreases after the introduction of the TIP, it may be an indication that these transactions require less explanation or are less likely to be subject to mistakes.

 Whilst it may be difficult, if not impossible, to put a hard percentage value on the degree of facilitation directly attributable to the introduction of a TIP, ultimately, the key measure of trade facilitation is the perception of the trade. Therefore, the agency in charge of the TIP should endeavour to sound out public opinion in whichever possible way, for example, by holding regular seminars or training workshops on how to make best use of the website and use these opportunities to continuously sound out the opinion of the public.

7. Trade Information Portal and the Single Window

The concepts of TIP and Single Window are tightly connected. Both are facilities aimed at facilitating trade by providing a single access point to traders and the public. However, in the case of the TIP, the single access point is to facilitate discovery of information whereas, in the case of the Single Window, the single access point is to enable traders to carry out actual transactions electronically with government agencies, as predicated by UN/CEFACT Recommendation No. 33 which is the generally accepted definition of Single Window.

Nonetheless, both have a common basis in that the regulations, procedural instructions and compliance rules that are discoverable on a TIP are also the basis for the business rules that drive the processing of a Single Window and that must be in conformance with the law. Therefore, as a very minimum, a TIP and a Single Window should be synchronized to ensure that what the Single Window does corresponds to what is published in the TIP thus lending transparency to the operation of the Single Window.

Where possible, synchronization may be achieved through the architecture and design of the two systems.

Failing such tightly coupled integration, it will be necessary to create institutional mechanisms for ensuring that the information in the TIP is aligned with the business rules of Single Window. Both TIP and Single Window require a governance structure that allows for inter-agency collaboration and collective decision-making. It would therefore be beneficial, if possible, to appoint a single body, e.g. a Steering Committee, tasked with policy and oversight in relation to both TIP and Single Window.

In countries where the circumstances determine that a TIP is implemented before the Single Window, there will be an opportunity to establish the institutional structures and mechanisms for collaboration between agencies which can subsequently be leveraged to step up to the more challenging level of collective decision-making required by the Single Window. Furthermore, with adequate foresight and planning, much of the work required to build a TIP, such as the business process analysis and legal research, can subsequently be utilized to provide the legal basis and functional design of the Single Window.

8. Interoperability
When designing a TIP, issues of interoperability with other systems, such as a Customs tariff database or the Free Trade Agreements (FTA) or regional repositories mentioned below, should be factored into the design of the software if required. Also, other information, such as the trade statistics mentioned below or sub-sets of the TIP core information such as step-by-step procedures, may be available from existing national or international websites though APIs (Application Programming Interface) or other integration methods. An API is a published format for a request for information to be submitted to a system and for that system to respond by returning the data requested. Whilst the format of the API will necessarily vary from system to system, it is recommended that the design of TIP should include facilities for importing or exporting data via APIs using the most common messaging standards such as XML or JSON. UN/CEFACT proposes an international standard for this purpose and suggests to align or directly use this standard for such electronic data exchanges between agencies or between systems.

9. Possible evolutions of a TIP

In addition to its basic purpose of publishing trade related information, a TIP may be expanded in scope to provide various other features which may fulfil other trade policy objectives.

Additional information

Although the main purpose of a TIP is to publish trade related regulatory information, it can also be used to provide, without limitations of scope, any other information which may pertain to trade or that is deemed to be useful to the target audience. Such information may comprise:

- News or announcements related to trade;
- Useful information such as addresses and contact details of various agencies’ offices or border stations;
- Links to other national or international organizations’ websites;
- Trade statistics. These may be derived from national or international sources and may be available via APIs or may be generated via the Single Window where available;
- Information about immigration;
- General plain language pages on any topic of relevance.

It would also be desirable for a TIP to have multi-language capabilities in order to publish the content in the local language as well as one or more other languages for the benefit of international users.

Market access

A TIP may be the natural place where to provide information about trading with other countries, at least for the most common trading partners, in order to facilitate or promote exports to these countries. Such information may comprise tariffs and instructions on how to navigate the most commonly encountered regulatory requirements, especially ones which are seen as constituting a barrier to entry, when importing goods into those countries, e.g. documentation, standards, inspections, etc.

If a country is a party to one or more FTAs with other countries, the TIP could be used to provide easy to follow instructions to exporters and importers on how to take advantage of preferential tariff rates and other facilitation measures and assist them with determining whether the goods they intends to import or export qualify for preferential treatment under the FTA’s rules of origin.

Such information may be readily available through links directly to other countries’ TIP or similar websites or websites specifically dedicated to the FTA (see also Interoperability Issues above).
Trade in services

A TIP may be considered to be a suitable vehicle for publishing regulatory information not only for trade in goods but also for trade in services. When providing services across borders, provisions may apply which are stipulated in legislation and give rise to measures which may be generally applicable to all categories of services or may be specific to a particular type of service.

The TIP may be designed to allow users to discover what measures apply to each type of service and, similarly to trade in goods, what the step-by-step procedures are for complying with these regulatory requirements.

As for trade in goods, preferential treatment may be available for trade in services in countries that are party to an FTA. The TIP could provide such information through the same facilities described in Market Access above.

Regional context

Many countries belong to regional associations aimed at fostering socio-economic cooperation and integration of its members. These associations usually also embrace, to different degrees, facilitating trade and cross-border movement of goods and people as part of their mission. Some of these associations may require members to contribute trade related information to a regional TIP or Repository where the information may be intended to facilitate market access for traders in the member states but, also, could be used for analytical purposes in order to compare and, potentially, streamline or harmonize various non-tariff measures or procedures.

If there is a requirement for a country wishing to develop a TIP to also contribute to a regional repository or portal, this should be borne in mind at the design stage to ensure that the required information may be provided to the regional facility in the required format and via the required method which may be through data exchange or via a suitable link (see Interoperability Issues above).