



WTO COMMITTEE ON TRADE FACILITATION

EXPERIENCE SHARING SESSION, 12-13 MARCH 2025

Report by the Chair

At a meeting held on 12-13 March 2025, the Committee on Trade Facilitation convened a session for Members to share their experiences on two topics that were agreed upon by the Committee. A total of seven presentations were delivered on the topic of digitalization (China, the Republic of Korea (2 presentations), the Kyrgyz Republic (2 presentations), Nigeria, and the United States), and seven presentations on the development of AEO programmes (Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nigeria, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom). Two presentations were also made on advance rulings (Tunisia) and customs procedures for disaster preparedness (Türkiye). As announced in my communication of 6 December 2024, this report summarizes the main themes and takeaways from this session in order to enhance the accessibility and value of the insights shared.

Digitalization

Members presented a range of initiatives they had undertaken to increase the speed, transparency, and predictability of customs processes. These included digital clearance systems, blockchain tools, AI-powered risk profiling, and automation solutions such as electronic queue systems and robotic process automation. Many projects produced measurable reductions in clearance times and costs. Members also discussed improvements to physical and legal infrastructure for transit corridors, highlighting the value of integrated approaches, and noted that the interoperability of systems and mutual recognition of digital documents were critical to effective implementation. Common lessons included the importance of strategic planning on the basis of clear diagnostics and proper identification of the opportunities and challenges presented by existing systems; strengthening stakeholder coordination, including through enhanced inter-agency coordination and private sector engagement; and targeted implementation to ensure a proper focus on existing bottlenecks and related issues such as cross-border interoperability. Additional factors include an appropriate legal framework, scalable systems with monitoring tools, and digital platforms that are accessible to a wide range of users, including SMEs.

Authorized Economic Operators (AEOs)

Members also reported on their experiences with the development of AEO programmes, designed to provide simplified procedures for operators that meet higher compliance and security standards. Members outlined eligibility criteria, application procedures, and benefits such as expedited clearance, reduced inspections, and financial facilitation. Coordination with other agencies and the private sector was also emphasized as central to improved implementation and oversight. Members reported that AEO programmes contributed to faster clearance times, enhanced trust, and improved interagency cooperation, and mutual recognition agreements were singled out as important tools for extending benefits across borders, with some focus given to certain regional initiatives. Several Members also highlighted efforts to promote SME participation included tailored requirements, gradual compliance pathways, and dedicated support teams. Common lessons included the importance of sustained leadership, interagency coordination, and consultation with traders, and Members underlined the need to align donor support with national priorities and to continuously adapt on the basis of feedback.

Other Topics

There were two additional presentations by Members not associated with the above topics. One Member shared their experience in developing a digital platform for issuing advance rulings on tariff classification and rules of origin to enhance legal certainty and efficiency, while another Member shared the manner in which customs responded to a major natural disaster, including simplified procedures, mobile clearance, and new legislation to support future preparedness.

1 DIGITALIZATION

1.1 Digitalization of border procedures

1.1.1 UNI-PASS: Digital Customs Clearance System

1.1. The Korea Customs Service (KCS) developed UNI-PASS, a fully digital customs clearance system. UNI-PASS streamlined customs procedures by eliminating paper-based processes and automating clearance operations. Since its implementation, UNI-PASS has significantly reduced import clearance times – from an average of 3.8 days in 2006 to 1.4 days in 2017 – enhancing trade efficiency, reducing delays for businesses, and supporting cross-agency coordination. The system serves as a foundation for Korea's ongoing efforts in digitalizing customs operations and integrating advanced technologies.

1.1.2 Electronic Queue Management System (eQMS)

1.2. In the Kyrgyz Republic, the introduction of an Electronic Queue Management System (eQMS) has significantly improved the efficiency of border operations. The system enables transport operators to book time slots in advance, and a central algorithm allocates slots based on real-time processing capacity at border crossings. Trucks arrive only when capacity is available, preventing unnecessary congestion and reduce logistical disruptions. The system also prioritizes sensitive goods, such as perishable and emergency cargo. As a result, average border wait times dropped from 60 hours to 90 minutes, generating estimated annual savings of over USD 4 million, reducing the risk of goods spoilage, minimizing supply chain disruptions, and contributing to lower CO₂ emissions and smoother cross-border flows.

1.1.3 Digital Certificates of Origin

1.3. ITC highlighted the success of Sri Lanka's move to a fully digital Certificate of Origin system, which resulted in significant efficiency gains, cost savings, and sustainability benefits. Within the first nine months, the system issued over 35,000 electronic certificates, cutting processing times by 93% compared to the previous manual procedure. The reform also delivered tangible environmental and economic impact: an estimated USD 3 million in annual savings for traders and avoided the use of more than 5,000 trees worth of paper. The example underscores how digital trade solutions not only streamline formalities but also support sustainable and cost-effective trade facilitation.

1.1.4 Comprehensive Customs Modernization

1.4. The Nigeria Customs Service Modernisation Project is a wide-ranging initiative focused on digitizing and streamlining border procedures through a combination of automation, infrastructure development, and advanced monitoring systems. The project is structured around eight strategic components: (i) paperless clearance process; (ii) electronic cargo tracking system; (iii) a central risk control centre equipped with predictive analytics for advanced risk management; (iv) non-intrusive inspection scanners; (v) intelligent gates and border surveillance systems; (vi) expansion of digital infrastructure through new data centres; (vii) mobile enforcement systems; and (viii) marine enforcement systems.

1.5. The impact of the project has been measurable. A Time Release Study showed that at the PTML Port, where the modernization programme is active, average clearance time was reduced to just 6 hours and 55 minutes per transaction, compared to 4 days, 21 hours, and 42 minutes at other terminals where the systems have not yet been implemented. In November 2024, customs revenue increased by 135.1% compared to the previous year, a result attributed to the effective deployment of digital scanners and other automated tools.

1.1.5 Digitalization of Compliance Certificates through eFiling

1.6. The United States Consumer Product Safety Commission's (CPSC) eFiling Program enables importers to electronically submit certificate of compliance data to US Customs and Border Protection via the US Single Window platform, known as the Automated Commercial Environment (ACE). This certificate must confirm that the imported product has been tested and that it complies with all applicable US safety regulations. The initiative aims to simplify and minimize the steps needed to import such products (Article 10.1) while enhancing CPSC's capacity to conduct automated risk management (Article 7.4.3).

1.7. The system was developed through close interagency cooperation (Article 8), with CPSC staff engaging in working groups and collaborating with US Customs and Border Protection, the agency responsible for the US Single Window, to design and test the digital architecture. Pilots were conducted with volunteer importers and customs brokers, and a public consultation was held through the Federal Register (Articles 2.1 and 2.2). The final rule was published a full 18 months ahead of its entry into force (Article 2.1.2), with a voluntary implementation period currently underway.

1.8. Under the eFiling system, importers upload seven data elements into the CPSC registry. Once uploaded for a specific product, these data do not need to be re-submitted for future imports of the same product, avoiding redundancy (Article 10.4.2). Instead, the importer includes the product's registry reference number during the import declaration. Occasional and frequent importers have different filing options, ensuring that the system is efficient and accessible to both high- and low-volume traders. The centralized certificate registry strengthens CPSC's ability to identify high-risk shipments, enabling faster release of compliant goods and reducing inspection burdens and costs (Article 7.4.3). To support adoption, CPSC provides detailed guidance through training videos, technical specifications, and a dedicated document library (Article 1.1).

1.9. A regulatory flexibility analysis conducted as part of the rulemaking process quantified the initial start-up costs at less than 1% of the annual revenue of a small US firm, or about USD 1,100 per year. This is also equivalent to 20 hours of administrative effort for setup and onboarding. Once operational, the cost of using eFiling is expected to range from just USD 1 to USD 232 per year for small importers, depending on how frequently their product lines change. Uploading a full certificate into the registry takes approximately 10 minutes; submitting the full data set during import takes about 5 minutes; and submitting only the registry reference number requires just 15 seconds. The system is expected to process approximately 215,000 certificates annually.

1.2 Artificial intelligence (AI)

1.2.1 AI for Certificate Processing

1.10. China Customs introduced the Smart Document Review system to enhance customs clearance efficiency by digitizing and automating the review of overseas inspection and quarantine certificates. The system was developed by standardizing business rules, integrating system resources, and applying advanced technologies such as Optical Character Recognition (OCR), AI, and machine learning. It was designed to perform intelligent recognition and comparison of certificate data, allowing automated validation of over 30 certificate templates from 19 countries and regions as of 2023. By 2024, its coverage expanded to 100 certificate types, processing 286,000 certificates nationwide.

1.11. The impact of automation has been substantial:

- Faster processing times: The system transformed multi-system operations into a one-screen comparison, reducing automatic document verification time to 109 seconds – approximately 10× faster than manual reviews.
- Reduced manual workload: The system performs automated data extraction and verification, allowing officers to focus only on reviewing flagged results, freeing up resources for higher-level tasks.

- Optimized regulatory processes: Officers no longer need to switch between multiple systems to verify certificates. The system displays and compares all regulatory information in one interface, improving review efficiency and accuracy.
- Lower enforcement risks: By reducing human intervention, the system eliminates inconsistencies in document review standards, ensuring uniform enforcement across customs checkpoints and minimizing the risks of errors or missed inspections.

1.2.2 AI-Powered Trade Services

1.12. The Republic of Korea's KTNET presented a set of AI-powered trade services designed to support exporters in identifying reliable suppliers and classifying goods for tariff benefits:

- AI Supplier Matching Service: Korea's Purchase Certificate System, managed by KTNET, is designed to help exporters find reliable suppliers by leveraging data from indirect exporters. KTNET issues purchase certificates to suppliers, granting them access to the system's benefits, and maintains a database of these companies and the goods they provide. Using this data, KTNET has developed an AI-powered service that analyses product and trade information to recommend suitable suppliers to businesses seeking new trade partners. This system supports trusted relationships in the supply chain by offering verified supplier options and finding secure, efficient business connections.
- Global HS Advisory Service: Many exporters face challenges in correctly classifying products under Harmonized System (HS) codes, which determine tariff rates and trade agreement benefits. The AI-driven Global HS Advisory Service assists companies in accurately identifying HS tariff classification codes for various markets. By ensuring proper classification, the service maximizes tariff benefits under various free trade agreements, reducing trade compliance errors. Global HS Advisory Service has increased correct tariff classifications, allowing exporters to fully utilize preferential tariffs under trade agreements.

1.2.3 AI for Supply Chain Resilience

1.13. Global supply chains face ongoing risks from disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed vulnerabilities in trade and logistics networks. To address these challenges, Korea has developed AI-powered systems that help businesses predict supply shortages, assess risks, and strengthen supply chain continuity:

- Supply Chain Early Warning System: monitors import volumes of critical raw materials and predicts potential shortages in Korea's domestic market. This system allows businesses to take early action, ensuring supply chain continuity and preventing trade disruptions.
- Supply Chain Analytics Service: this tool evaluates supplier networks, identifying potential weaknesses and assessing the impact of disruptions on indirect exports. By mapping supply chain dependencies, the system provides alternative sourcing solutions, allowing businesses to react swiftly to potential bottlenecks and maintain operational stability.

1.2.4 AI for Risk Management

1.14. The Korea Customs Service (KCS) has integrated AI-powered risk management to enhance trade security and customs efficiency. AI models analyse customs data to identify high-risk shipments, allowing for more effective targeting of inspections while facilitating the clearance of low-risk goods.

1.15. The system is trained daily on new data to improve accuracy in detecting high-risk shipments. By applying deep learning algorithms, the system assigns risk scores to shipments, allowing for expedited clearance of low-risk cargo while subjecting high-risk cargo to thorough inspection.

1.16. Korea has progressively expanded the application of AI in risk management, following a phased approach to enhance detection capabilities across different areas of customs enforcement. In 2022, AI models were first applied to risk assessment for high-risk cargo and supply chains. By 2024, AI-based screening had been extended to passenger inspections, and was then used to detect illegal goods and narcotics in personal shipments through e-commerce.

1.3 Blockchain-Powered Logistics and Finance Services

1.17. Korea has integrated blockchain technology into key trade processes that address inefficiencies in import logistics and financial reporting by reducing process times, improving traceability, and eliminating manual documentation requirements. KTNET has developed blockchain-powered systems that streamline trade operations through:

- TradeFlow (Logistics Smart Work Platform): KTNET developed a smart work platform powered by blockchain technology to enhance collaboration, traceability, and efficiency in import logistics. By integrating blockchain into TradeFlow, the system reduces process times and proactively mitigates risks in import operations. TradeFlow enables seamless management of the entire import and export process – from shipment to payment – by leveraging digitized information and blockchain-based trade handling. The system facilitates secure information sharing, which minimizes lead times and helps prevent risks such as cargo misdelivery. This is essential for Korea, where 82% of total imports consist of raw materials and capital goods, making efficient import processes crucial to trade operations.
- Foreign Currency Reporting: Under Korea's Foreign Exchange Control Act, companies must report foreign currency transfers exceeding USD 5,000 to the Bank of Korea. While this reporting was previously electronic, companies still had to submit supporting documents physically, creating additional administrative burdens. To streamline this process, KTNET integrated blockchain technology into the foreign currency reporting system, eliminating the need for physical document submissions.

1.4 Robotics

1.18. The Korea Customs Service (KCS) has introduced Robotic Process Automation (RPA) to enhance efficiency, minimize human errors, and allow customs officers to focus on higher-priority tasks. RPA refers to the use of software robots to automate rule-based tasks, reducing the need for manual data entry and administrative processing. For example, automating international postal inspections by replacing the manual input of name, address, and item descriptions with the scanning of the postal item's barcode, automatically generating an inspection report that is sent via email with the report attached. This has significantly reduced administrative workload and increased efficiency.

1.19. KCS has also invested in developing new customs inspection technologies through the 'Customs Lab' initiative. The Customs Lab aims to create site-specific customs technologies that address practical challenges in the field. Between 2021 and 2024, KCS invested USD 24 million in seven major projects to enhance customs inspection capabilities. One notable development is the creation of a detection robot for container inspection, which enables faster examinations without requiring cargo unloading.

1.5 Digitalization in Transit Corridors

1.20. The Kyrgyz Republic described efforts to digitalize transit trade corridors in landlocked and developing economies where efficient border management is crucial. A UN/CEFACT white paper titled *"Cross-Border Multimodal Digital Corridors for Regulatory-Related Movements of Consignment Data and Consignment Status Information for Trade Facilitation"* defines a digital corridor as an electronic platform that connects air, ocean, and land trade systems as well as single-window systems to share the status of business activities and relevant cargo information. Research shows that large amounts of reusable data already exist between origin and destination, and that when this data can be shared and reused, it helps eliminate non-tariff barriers and supports more efficient cross-border trade.

1.21. The Kyrgyz Republic highlighted that the backbone of a digital corridor includes both hard and soft infrastructure. Hard infrastructure includes physical components like ICT networks, ports, railways, terminals, and data storage systems, which must be modernized and interconnected. Soft infrastructure encompasses institutional frameworks, standards, policies, and legal tools that ensure interoperability, trust, security, and transparency in digital processes. As example of such a corridor was the Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) Roadmap for Digitalization, which focuses on the Trans-Caspian Corridor – a multimodal route that begins in China and passes through Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, across the Caspian Sea, into the Caucasus, and onwards to Türkiye and the European Union.

1.22. The SPECA Roadmap aims to support the exchange of multimodal data and documents using United Nations legal instruments and standards. The presenter outlined four expected benefits of digitalization along the corridor:

- **Enhanced Efficiency:** By digitalizing data and document exchange, the corridor will experience reduced delays and improved coordination among different modes of transport.
- **Real-Time Data Exchange:** This allows for better tracking and management of goods, leading to increased reliability and predictability in supply chains.
- **Economic Growth:** Improved transport efficiency can boost trade and economic activities, benefiting the economies of the participating countries.
- **Sustainability:** Digitalization can lead to more sustainable transport practices by optimizing routes and reducing unnecessary movements.

1.23. The SPECA Roadmap provides a valuable model for other regions when based on the following principles: the adoption of standards essential for building interconnected global supply chains and simplifying cross-border data flows; collaboration and investment in technology by enhancing physical capacity such as smart ports as well as implementing digital data exchange standards; and policy support to align incentives, set digital standards, and ensure data security across regions.

1.24. The Kyrgyz Republic also referred to the ongoing development of UN/CEFACT Policy Recommendation No. 50, titled "*Toolbox for Enhancing Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation along Transit Corridors*". The project aims to assist UN member States in improving digital and sustainable trade facilitation in transit contexts. It is currently in its initial phase, focused on identifying challenges in soft trade infrastructure and developing implementation guidelines for the UN/CEFACT Package of Standards for Data Exchange, which will be tested through a real-world pilot.

1.6 Improvements in infrastructure

1.25. Korea has invested in customs infrastructure to respond to changes in the trade environment, particularly the rapid rise in e-commerce and the growing volume of international shipments arriving by air and sea. KCS established two site customs management facilities: the Incheon Express Cargo Center for air cargo and the Incheon Integrated Inspection Center for courier shipments. At these facilities, all e-commerce shipments undergo X-ray screening. High-risk cargo is identified using risk management criteria while remaining shipments are directed to delivery vehicles via a high-speed conveyor system. Korea remarked on the timing in infrastructure investment, noting that while such projects require significant funding, missing the optimal investment window can reduce their impact.

1.7 International cooperation

1.26. The importance of mutual recognition agreements (MRAs) and interoperability between digital customs systems was emphasized, as harmonized data-sharing frameworks facilitate international cooperation and seamless cross-border trade. Korea noted that trade facilitation cannot be achieved in isolation but requires bilateral and multilateral collaboration among customs administrations.

1.27. To promote the efficient utilization of free trade agreements (FTAs), KCS exchanges electronic certificates of origin with multiple partner countries. This ensures the swift and accurate transmission of origin documentation, helping businesses take full advantage of preferential tariffs under FTAs.

The Kyrgyz Republic is working to achieve recognition of electronic certificates of origin across borders to more than 25 countries.

1.28. Korea also highlighted the role of AEO MRAs in enhancing security and facilitation. These agreements allow trusted traders to be recognized across jurisdictions, reducing duplication in risk controls and streamlining clearance procedures at borders. The use of interoperable systems and mutual recognition frameworks was also identified as essential to achieving seamless cross-border trade.

1.8 Lessons Learned and Success Factors for Digital Trade Reform

1.29. Presenters emphasized that effective digital trade facilitation reform requires not only the adoption of technology but also strategic planning, institutional commitment, stakeholder coordination, and targeted implementation. Drawing from practical examples and diagnostic work, the ITC outlined key lessons and success factors:

- Prioritizing efforts based on clear, data-driven diagnostics, ensuring digitalization targets real bottlenecks;
- Building on existing systems while aiming for full digitalization to achieve both quick wins and long-term transformation;
- Strengthening inter-agency coordination to avoid duplication and fragmented solutions;
- Leveraging private sector engagement to ensure reforms are practical and impactful;
- Ensuring cross-border interoperability so that digitalization extends beyond national borders;
- Establishing a supportive legal and regulatory environment for digital processes;
- Developing scalable systems that include performance metrics and feedback mechanisms for continuous improvement; and
- Ensuring accessibility of digital platforms for a wide range of users, including small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

2 AUTHORIZED ECONOMIC OPERATORS (AEOS)

2.1 Eligibility Criteria

2.1. Members shared the eligibility requirements underpinning their respective AEO schemes. While common standards such as customs compliance, financial solvency, and adequate recordkeeping are broadly observed, several Members have introduced tailored criteria or programme structures to reflect national priorities. Across Members, these eligibility frameworks reveal a shared emphasis on compliance, transparency, and internal controls, while also offering flexibility tailored to national legal and operational contexts.

2.2. Costa Rica's certification requirements align closely with the common baseline: operators must have a satisfactory compliance history with customs, tax, and judicial authorities; demonstrate financial solvency and a solid credit rating; and maintain proper commercial records. A distinctive element is the required traceability system for cargo, which forms part of its logistics oversight.

2.3. Some Members operate distinct AEO schemes with differentiated eligibility criteria. Costa Rica, Nigeria, and the United Kingdom each implement a two-tiered structure:

- AEO Customs Simplifications (AEOC) is granted to businesses meeting standards in customs compliance, financial health, recordkeeping, and professional competence. Nigeria's AEOC applicants must provide at least three years of audited financials.

- AEO Security and Safety (AEOS) builds upon AEOC requirements with additional safety and security measures. Nigeria's AEOS applicants must also submit audited financial statements for at least five years, hold a valid tax clearance certificate, and obtain ISO 28001 certification – reflecting the country's emphasis on supply chain security.

2.4. Türkiye imposes a specific requirement for applicants to have been established in the country for a minimum of three years.

2.2 Application Requirements

2.5. Across Members, the application process for AEO certification typically begins with the submission of a self-assessment questionnaire, followed by validation visits conducted by customs authorities or interagency teams. This process generally verifies internal controls, recordkeeping systems, compliance history, and supply chain security practices.

2.6. Many Members structure their application procedures into well-defined stages. For example, Türkiye follows a five-step process involving pre-application, document review by the regional directorate, a second-level review by the general directorate, on-site audits, and final certification. On-site visits assess both documentary and operational conformity. Certificates are typically valid indefinitely, contingent on continued compliance, and are monitored through periodic audits – such as Türkiye's five-year reassessment cycle and mandatory annual reporting requirements.

2.7. Colombia's AEO application process reflects its inter-institutional governance model. The programme is free of charge and coordinated by several agencies, including the Customs Authority (DIAN), the Medication and Food Authority (INVIMA), the Phytosanitary Authority (ICA), the Anti-narcotics Authority, the Maritime Directorate, and the Superintendency of Transport. The Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Tourism provides institutional support. Each authority conducts a prior analysis and issues targeted questionnaires, participates in joint validation visits, and prepares a technical concept that is consolidated and validated by DIAN.

2.8. Costa Rica requires submission of a self-assessment questionnaire, followed by a preliminary review by the customs authority. Applications are either accepted or rejected at this stage. Once accepted, Customs has 40 days to verify compliance with certification requirements; if gaps are identified, applicants are given an additional 30 days to address them. Certifications are granted for four years.

2.9. Honduras emphasized that its programme was inclusive and transparent. The application framework is governed by non-discriminatory legislation, accessible to businesses of all sizes. Detailed eligibility criteria, procedural steps, and contact information are publicly available through the national Gazette and the official customs website. A specialized AEO sub-department within the Customs Authority manages the application process, ensuring technical expertise and institutional visibility throughout.

2.3 Benefits for Certified Operators

2.10. Simplified procedures and facilitation measures were frequently cited. Costa Rica grants broader opening hours coordinated with customs authorities, reduced documentary and physical checks based on risk analysis, and the possibility for inspections and authorizations to take place at the operator's premises. Türkiye provides AEO-certified traders with access to simplified customs procedures such as incomplete declarations, reduced data requirements, and expedited processing. Honduras emphasizes simplification and the operationalization of its AEO programme through automated procedures, reduced red tape, and publication of all requirements and processes online. In the UK, AEOS-certified operators receive fewer document and goods checks due to reduced risk scores, simplifying day-to-day operations. Colombia also tailors benefits depending on the operator's profile, with each participating agency granting facilitation aligned with its mandate – such as sanitary, security, or logistics-related measures.

2.11. Priority treatment at border crossings is another shared benefit. Both Costa Rica and Türkiye afford AEO-certified traders prioritized processing at borders and during customs controls. Honduras also emphasized priority treatment for accredited operators, which includes dedicated customs personnel to ensure expedited passage.

2.12. Guarantee-related financial facilitation measures were highlighted by some Members. The United Kingdom provides AEOC-certified operators with a waiver on the requirement to provide bank guarantees for deferred customs duties, significantly improving cash flow for traders – particularly SMEs. Türkiye offers similar financial facilitation through the use of virtual guarantees and sub-guarantees, easing liquidity constraints for trusted operators.

2.13. Dedicated communication channels and service support are also an important feature. Costa Rica assigns liaison officers to AEO-certified businesses, while Honduras maintains a dedicated contact point within the Customs Authority. The UK operates a dual-track system with specialized audit teams for large and small businesses and has a central AEO team to ensure consistency and legal compliance across decisions. Regular validation and monitoring visits, as reported by Colombia and Honduras, are used to ensure consistent benefit delivery and to identify areas for improvement.

2.14. Technology-enabled verification tools were also introduced. Honduras developed a QR code verification system that provides instant confirmation of an operator's AEO status and access to a centralized database. This not only enhances trust among customs authorities and supply chain partners but also promotes transparency and ease of monitoring.

2.15. Reputational and branding advantages are also built into some programmes. In Costa Rica, AEO-certified businesses may use the "AEO Costa Rica" brand on official documents and advertising, and benefit from recognition as trusted and secure traders by other regulatory agencies.

2.4 Interagency coordination and governance models

2.16. Several Members highlighted the centrality of interagency coordination in designing and implementing effective AEO programmes. Models varied in complexity and institutionalization, but all emphasized structured collaboration across government entities and with the private sector.

2.17. Colombia's AEO programme was designed as an inter-institutional initiative from the outset. Coordination is formalized through an Intersectoral Commission, composed of ministries and oversight bodies responsible for setting policy and facilitating collaboration between public and private stakeholders. A Technical Committee – comprising four monitoring agencies – oversees validations and makes decisions on the provisional suspension or cancellation of AEO status. A non-decision-making consultative body composed of national-level professional associations provides additional feedback. The programme is supported by dedicated personnel across multiple agencies, including 45 full-time and 42 part-time staff within the customs authority (DIAN), and staff from the anti-narcotics, food safety, and phytosanitary authorities. Implementation is further reinforced by coordinated logistics, shared validation visits, joint training programmes, and the development of interagency procedures and manuals.

2.18. Honduras also institutionalized coordination through a high-level AEO Committee composed of senior officials from the customs and tax authorities. This body supports strategic decision-making, facilitates the mobilization of resources, and ensures programme visibility. A consultative group with a legal foundation links the customs authority to other control agencies and the private sector, fostering trust and joint ownership. The programme includes joint validation visits as part of annual work plans and features active outreach to border agencies such as the food quality and sanitary authorities. Coordination efforts are framed within a broader strategy driven by political and institutional commitment to trade facilitation reform.

2.19. Nigeria established an AEO Steering Committee and a Technical Working Group to drive implementation. The governance model includes a digitized AEO platform that interfaces with systems used by other government agencies, enabling real-time information exchange and operational integration. Nigeria emphasized the importance of national ownership in managing international donor support, ensuring alignment with WCO standards while avoiding fragmented or overlapping interventions. Regular stakeholder engagement and feedback loops were cited as essential tools for sustaining reform, managing interagency coordination, and refining processes.

2.20. The United Kingdom similarly reported a coordinated approach involving multiple departments within HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). A central coordination unit is responsible for maintaining consistency in decision-making, ensuring compliance with legal requirements, and integrating insights from across departments to support continuous improvement.

2.5 Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) and International Cooperation

2.21. Members reported on ongoing efforts to negotiate and implement Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs), recognizing them as key instruments to extend the benefits of AEO certification across borders and facilitate secure, efficient international trade.

2.22. Guatemala shared its leadership in a regional MRA involving 11 Latin American countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay. This multilateral MRA – launched in 2018 following WCO best practices – is the first of its kind and represents a major step forward in regional customs collaboration. Guatemala highlighted that the agreement is not merely symbolic but operationalized through joint implementation manuals, regular coordination meetings, information exchange, and measurable indicators to track outcomes. The initiative has enhanced alignment in risk management models, reinforced communication between customs authorities, and generated practical benefits for certified traders. Additional countries, including El Salvador, Panama, and Ecuador, have expressed interest in joining the arrangement.

2.23. Costa Rica has signed five MRAs – with Mexico, China, Colombia, Central America, and South America – and allows certified businesses, particularly those holding AEOS status, to access simplified procedures under these agreements. Similarly, the United Kingdom grants AEOS-certified traders access to facilitation measures in partner countries through MRAs, emphasizing the international dimension of its AEO programme.

2.24. Türkiye has an MRA in force with the Republic of Korea and ongoing negotiations with the European Union, the United Kingdom, and Kazakhstan. These efforts reflect Türkiye's broader strategy to harmonize its AEO system with international partners and improve cross-border customs cooperation.

2.25. Honduras reported that mutual recognition is embedded in the legal foundation of its AEO programme and is viewed as a strategic goal. The administration is currently developing interoperable, automated systems designed to integrate AEO services into broader customs frameworks. These systems aim to bolster transparency and verification capabilities – such as through the use of QR codes – and lay the groundwork for enhanced mutual recognition in the future by increasing trust and visibility in the programme.

2.6 Support for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs)

2.26. Several Members have adapted their AEO programmes to better accommodate small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), recognizing their vital role in economic development and international trade. These efforts reflect a broader commitment to inclusivity, flexibility, and proportionate implementation of certification requirements.

2.27. Costa Rica allows MSMEs applying for AEO certification to progressively meet requirements over a two-year period. During this time, operators may access programme benefits while submitting biannual progress reports. This phased approach provides flexibility for smaller firms that may require more time to adapt internal processes.

2.28. The United Kingdom has placed SME participation at the core of its programme design. Two-thirds of its 1,200 certified traders are SMEs. HMRC's approach includes co-designing standards with industry representatives to ensure accessibility. Specialist audit teams are divided between large and small business units, with compliance officers trained in SME-specific business models. These officers conduct both validation and follow-up visits, applying the AEO criteria in a proportionate and context-sensitive manner that reflects company size and operations.

2.29. Nigeria has also embedded SME support into its AEO rollout. An SME desk was established to provide tailored assistance, and a voluntary disclosure model was introduced to foster a culture of compliance. During the pilot phase, two SMEs – one woman-owned – were among the six selected companies. Nigeria applies simplified security requirements for SMEs, particularly those operating from a single location, balancing regulatory integrity with practical feasibility.

2.30. Honduras reported a non-discriminatory legal framework that allows businesses of all sizes to apply for AEO status. To support smaller operators, Honduras emphasizes capacity building, providing training to customs personnel, AEO staff, and private sector participants. Outreach initiatives target rapid shipment companies, which often serve SMEs, and technology tools such as QR-based verification enhance transparency and accessibility.

2.31. These tailored approaches underscore how Members are adjusting AEO frameworks to promote the participation of SMEs. By introducing flexible timelines, proportionate requirements, dedicated support structures, and targeted outreach, Members are fostering greater inclusion of smaller businesses in secure and efficient trade ecosystems.

2.7 Observed outcomes and impact

2.32. Members reported a range of positive impacts resulting from the implementation of AEO programmes, particularly in the areas of clearance times, trade security, interagency cooperation, and strengthened trust between customs authorities and operators.

2.33. In Nigeria, a time-release study during the 2024 AEO pilot programme showed a 69.9% reduction in average clearance time – from 168 hours to 43 hours – demonstrating a significant trade facilitation impact. Three pilot companies saved the equivalent of over USD 70,000 between September and December 2024. Moreover, some companies voluntarily disclosed underpaid duties post-clearance, highlighting increased trust and a strong culture of voluntary compliance.

2.34. In the United Kingdom, the programme's focus on proportionate validation contributed to outcomes particularly relevant for SMEs. One small Scottish business, operating across two sites, underwent a tailored validation visit and has since remained an active participant in the AEO programme. By 2024, it had made customs declarations worth GBP 600,000, illustrating how AEO status can support smaller businesses in expanding their international operations. The UK also emphasized that splitting compliance responsibility between specialist auditors for large firms and SMEs has enhanced both effectiveness and fairness in implementation.

2.35. Colombia reported that interagency coordination under the AEO framework has improved risk detection related to issues such as document fraud, arms trafficking, and other border threats. The programme has helped align oversight across multiple institutions, reinforcing trust and enabling each agency to work within its mandate while contributing to collective security objectives. Recognition of AEO status has also extended beyond Customs to other national institutions, integrating the programme more broadly into the country's governance infrastructure. As of the reporting period, Colombia had 782 certified operators, including 243 exporters, 485 importers, 51 customs agencies, and 3 port installations.

2.36. Türkiye reported steady growth in its AEO programme since its launch in 2013. As of 2025, 761 traders had been certified, including 69 authorized for local clearance in exports, 7 for imports, and 20 holding authorized consignee status. AEO operators were responsible for 29% of total imports and 13% of exports in 2024, indicating the increasing centrality of AEO certification to the country's trade environment.

2.37. In Honduras, institutionalized joint validation visits and structured follow-up mechanisms have reinforced consistent application of benefits and enhanced accountability. According to Honduras, authorities view the AEO programme as a cornerstone of national and international supply chain security and it has become a strategic instrument for trade facilitation and customs modernization, with broad stakeholder buy-in.

2.38. Finally, Costa Rica reported 31 certified operators across the import, export, and cargo terminal sectors. While smaller in scale, the programme's legal reforms and implementation framework are seen as critical steps toward broader adoption and recognition.

2.8 Lessons Learned for Authorized Economic Operators

2.39. Members identified a number of lessons from their implementation and expansion of AEO programmes, centering on five core themes: coordination and political support, trust-building and engagement, institutional capacity, programme responsiveness, and multilateral cooperation.

2.8.1 Interagency Coordination and Political Support

2.40. Strong institutional coordination and high-level political commitment were recognized as foundational for programme success. Countries such as Colombia, Costa Rica, and Honduras stressed the importance of engaging agencies beyond customs, ensuring all actors operate under a shared vision. Colombia described the value of inter-institutional commissions, shared manuals, joint validation visits, and regular coordination meetings to sustain alignment. However, they also noted that coordination can be challenging when agencies lack sufficient training in customs procedures – highlighting the need for cross-agency capacity building.

2.41. Honduras emphasized the role of sustained political will and strategic direction in mobilizing resources and expanding program reach. They also noted that establishing legally grounded coordination mechanisms with the private sector and other agencies has strengthened credibility and trust. Similarly, Nigeria underlined the importance of national ownership and centralized oversight in managing reforms and aligning international support with WCO standards and national priorities.

2.8.2 Engagement, Co-Design, and Trust-Building

2.42. Building trust with the private sector emerged as another critical success factor. Members noted that ongoing consultation, clear communication, and responsiveness to operator feedback were vital to strengthening partnerships. The UK described its co-design approach with industry, where even minor adjustments in guidance have had a significant impact on operator understanding and uptake. Colombia and Costa Rica likewise emphasized continuous communication with operators to build mutual confidence and ensure shared commitment to programme objectives. In Nigeria, this trust translated into voluntary compliance. Pilot companies disclosed underpaid duties without enforcement action, a result the Customs Administration linked directly to the trust-based relationship fostered under the AEO framework.

2.8.3 Capacity Building and Technical Competence

2.43. Several Members highlighted the need for robust training programmes – for both customs personnel and operators. Costa Rica and the UK underscored the importance of training validation officers in proportionate application of criteria, especially when working with SMEs. Honduras instituted a comprehensive capacity-building strategy targeting customs agents, AEO officers, and private sector participants, while Nigeria emphasized leadership development as essential for sustaining reform momentum.

2.8.4 Flexibility, Innovation, and Program Attractiveness

2.44. Making AEO programmes accessible, especially to smaller traders, requires ongoing innovation. Costa Rica and Nigeria introduced gradual compliance models and simplified expectations for SMEs. Honduras expanded the programme's scope to include rapid shipment companies and developed a QR code verification tool to enhance transparency and user confidence. Attracting operators to join the programme remains a key challenge. Costa Rica noted that creating compelling benefit packages and fostering recognition beyond Customs are vital. Similarly, Members highlighted the need to identify new incentives that reflect evolving business needs and supply chain dynamics.

2.8.5 Multilateral Cooperation and Governance

2.45. Guatemala's coordination of an 11-country multilateral mutual recognition agreement (MRA) was presented as a major institutional achievement. They attributed success to adherence to WCO best practices, structured follow-up mechanisms, quantifiable indicators, and sustained donor engagement. Their experience reinforced the message that MRAs must be supported by robust governance to move beyond symbolic commitments.

3 OTHER TOPICS

3.1 Advance Rulings

3.1. Tunisia presented its newly established advance ruling mechanism for tariff classification and origin, designed to enhance legal certainty, transparency, and predictability for traders in line with Article 3 of the TFA. The system enables economic operators to submit requests and track the status of their applications through a dedicated digital platform. Significant investments were made in capacity building, including five training cycles for customs officers in tariff and origin rulings, and national outreach efforts are underway to raise awareness among the private sector. Tunisia also emphasized the importance of ensuring a critical mass of technically trained personnel and digital readiness for effective implementation. Looking ahead, the customs administration is seeking further support to strengthen the platform, deepen staff training, and explore avenues for experience-sharing and potential mutual recognition of advance rulings among interested Members.

3.2 The Role of Customs in Disaster Relief

3.2. In the wake of the earthquakes of February 2023, Türkiye's Customs Administration played a pivotal role in facilitating the rapid clearance of nearly 8,000 aid shipments from over 100 countries. Operating under the National Disaster Response Plan coordinated by AFAD, Turkish Customs activated 24/7 operations, deployed mobile units, waived standard procedures, and implemented oral and electronic declarations for expedited clearance. Simplified procedures – such as acceptance of basic transport documents and exemptions from inspections – ensured swift processing while maintaining control over sensitive goods like food, medicine, and medical equipment. These efforts were institutionalized through a new 2025 circular and a Customs Guideline on Humanitarian Aid, which outlines customs clearance, transit, and temporary admission procedures for crisis goods. The guide codifies Türkiye's response model, balancing facilitation with regulatory oversight. Türkiye's experience illustrates how preparedness, cross-agency coordination, digital tools, and clear legal frameworks are essential to enabling timely and secure humanitarian relief.
