

Highlights of the CAREC Time Release Study Planning Workshop

29 March 2011, Tashkent

I. Introduction

1. The Time Release Study (TRS), a World Customs Organization (WCO) methodology, provides a snapshot of the effectiveness of customs administrative procedures and allows customs authorities to identify where the bottlenecks are and design reforms to address the identified constraints. In the context of Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (or CAREC) program, the conduct of TRS in selected border crossing points (BCPs) is a critical activity in implementing the Joint Transport and Trade Facilitation Strategy (TTFS) to establish competitive corridors across the CAREC region. The results of the TRS will complement the time cost distance data gathered under the CAREC corridor performance measurement and monitoring (CPMM) project. In addition, the results of the TRS will also feed into the feasibility studies that will soon commence as part of project preparation activities for the proposed Regional Improvement of Border Services (or RIBS) project. The RIBS project will improve border crossing points, help CAREC countries further develop national single window (NSW) facilities, and enhance interconnectivity and inter-operability of national single windows regionally.

2. At the 9th Customs Cooperation Committee (CCC) meeting in September 2010 in Tokyo, in collaboration with the WCO a seminar on TRS was held for the heads of CAREC customs authorities to introduce the methodology and share experiences from countries who conducted TRS. CCC meeting subsequently endorsed the decision to conduct TRS at selected BCPs in CAREC countries. The TRS Planning Workshop was specifically held to prepare relevant customs officials to conduct the TRS and analyze the data collected.

II. Discussion

3. The immediate contribution of the TRS is to support the preparation of the RIBS project. However the real impact of the TRS will cover a much wider scope. The TRS will complement the CPMM and other result measurement techniques and form an essential part of the overall CAREC results framework. Further, the TRS will also be a useful tool to measure results of customs authorities' own initiatives in streamlining their policies and procedures. The partnership between ADB and the WCO provides CAREC customs authorities with easy access to organizational and technical support in conducting the TRS.

4. Experiences of Singapore and the East Asian countries of Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines in conducting TRS were shared with workshop participants. Practical suggestions were also offered by Mongolia which had also implemented TRS in the past. Experiences showed that the TRS methodology is not difficult to implement as it is flexible and expandable enough to accommodate various customs regimes and procedures, as well as procedures performed by other government agencies (OGAs). The experiences emphasized the importance of proper coordination and adequate planning in getting started, and of using a simple survey form. The meeting agreed that the first round of TRSs should be performed at key BCPs along CAREC corridors that are likely to be included in the RIBS project.

5. Model terms of reference (TOR) for the TRS, survey questionnaire, and timetable were presented to participants to serve as a basis for crafting customized TORs, questionnaires, and timetables according to country specifics. Participants agreed the model questionnaire is useful

but indicated that it will need to be modified to fit their respective trade clearance procedures. Presentations made by delegates demonstrated specific circumstances that TRS needs to address. For example, in most central Asian countries, most cargo clearance is completed at inland customs depots (ICDs) and not at BCPs; hence the questionnaire needs to be modified further to include inland customs depot procedures.

6. Decisions whether TRS will cover some or all certification and clearance procedures by OGAs will depend on how coordinated and automated the border control functions are carried out and whether coordination/cooperation arrangement between customs and OGAs can be reached during the preparation stage. In countries where coordinated border management are implemented and border control functions of OGAs are delegated to customs, it will be easier to conduct TRS covering all border control functions.

7. It is desirable to have commonality as much as possible among countries in conducting the TRS. ADB and the WCO recommended the TRS should cover import, export and transit, both at the BCPs and ICDs. Most countries will conduct TRS both for road and rail although Uzbekistan might not do rail as customs clearance procedures for rail is quite different. In general, the TRS should capture all necessary information (with proper description) to which customs has good access.

8. A demonstration of and hands-on learning session on the WCO TRS software provided participants with an opportunity to test the flexibility and user-friendliness of the software. The participants requested ADB and WCO to assist to translate the software into Russian to facilitate its application in central Asian countries.

III. Next Step

9. CAREC customs authorities are requested to designate and appoint staff to conduct the TRS. It will be important to start the TRS immediately following the May holidays and have some results available for the use of the RIBS project preparation consultants who are expected to be fielded sometime toward the end of April or early May.

10. Based on discussions during the workshop, ADB and WCO will further improve the survey questionnaire and arrange for translating the TRS software into Russian. ADB and WCO will work closely together to provide advisory assistance, training, and improve capacities of CAREC customs to conduct TRS.

11. Once modified, ADB and WCO will send the survey questionnaire back to participants so the countries can quickly get started and preliminary sets of data can be used by the RIBS project preparation consultants to identify major investment needs for the proposed project. Participants were requested to give feedback to ADB and WCO on how better to tailor-fit the TRS to their needs.

12. The TRS exercise will be a major undertaking of the CAREC Customs Cooperation Committee. The initial batch of customs officials that will undertake the studies will be pioneers in this crucial effort. The experience and results of the TRS will be reported to the 2011 CCC meeting, CAREC Senior Officials' Meeting, and the Ministerial Conference.