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The World Customs Organization

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The World Customs Organization: A Short History and Its Legal Milestones

Carsten Weerth*

The World Customs Organization (Organisation Mondiale des Douanes) is an intergovernmental organization of more than 170 Member States that was founded as European Customs Cooperation Council in 1952. This paper gives a brief overview of its history and legal milestones.

I. FOUNDATION OF THE CUSTOMS COOPERATION COUNCIL (CCC) IN EUROPE¹

The history of the World Customs Organization (WCO) began in 1947 when the thirteen European governments represented in the Committee for European Economic Cooperation agreed to set up a Study Group. This group examined the possibility of establishing one or more inter-European Customs Unions based on the principles of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

In 1948, the Study Group set up two committees – an Economic Committee and a Customs Committee. The Economic Committee was the predecessor of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the Customs Committee became the CCC.

In 1952, the Convention formally establishing the CCC came into force. The Council is the governing body of the CCC, and the inaugural session of the Council was held in Brussels on 26 January 1953.

Representatives of seventeen European countries attended the first Council Session of the CCC.

2. FOUNDATION OF THE WCO

After years of membership growth, in 1994, the Council adopted the working name World Customs Organization to more clearly reflect its transition to a truly global intergovernmental institution. It is now the voice of 174 Customs administrations that operate on all continents and represent all stages of economic development (from mature economies to the least developed economies).

Today, WCO Members are responsible for processing more than 98% of all international trade.²

3. WCO HISTORICAL AND LEGAL MILESTONES³

1947 Thirteen governments represented in the Committee for European Economic Cooperation

Notes

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1 See WCO, About Us History, <http://www.wcoomd.org/home_about_us_auhistory.htm> (2008a), viewed on 24 Jan. 2009.

2 See I. Wind, 'HS 2007: What's It All About?', *Global Trade and Customs Journal* 2, no. 2 (2007): 79–86.

3 See H. Conrad, 'Vom Bülow-Zolltarif zum Deutschen Zolltarif 1961', *Die Zollpraxis* (1960): 202; WCO (2008a); WCO, About Us Legal Instruments, <http://www.wcoomd.org/home_about_us_conventionslist.htm> (2008b), viewed on 24 Jan. 2009; WCO, List of Countries, Territories, or Customs or Economic Regions Applying the HS, <http://www.wcoomd.org/files/1.%20Public%20files/PDFandDocuments/Harmonized%20System/HS-Eng_20090116.pdf> (2009), viewed on 24 Jan. 2009; C. Weerth, 'Harmonized System: Evolution of the Nomenclature at Its Twentieth Anniversary', *Global Trade and Customs Journal* 3, no. 7/8 (2008a): 275–278; C. Weerth, *Geschichte des Zolltarifs in Deutschland und der EG* (Göttingen: Sierke, 2008b), 26; and M. Lux & B. Reiser, *Das Harmonisierte System zur Bezeichnung und Codierung der Waren des internationalen Handels – Aktueller Stand der Arbeiten zur Erleichterung des internationalen Handels und zur Verbesserung internationaler Statistiken* (Köln, 1986).

- set up a Study Group to examine the possibility of establishing one or more Customs unions between the various European countries, in accordance with GATT principles.
- 1948 The Study Group decided to establish two committees: an Economic Committee which later evolved into the OECD, and a Customs Committee which later became the CCC.
- 1950 The Convention establishing the CCC was signed in Brussels on 15 December. The Convention on Nomenclature for the classification of goods in Customs tariffs (NCCC) was also signed on 15 December.
- 1952 The Convention establishing the CCC enters into force on 4 November.
- 1953 The inaugural session of the CCC Council was held in Brussels on 26 January in the presence of representatives of seventeen European countries. This date is now celebrated annually as International Customs Day. The Convention on the Valuation of Goods for Customs Purposes (Brussels Definition of Value, BDV) enters into force on 28 July.
- 1955 The Convention on NCCC enters into force on 1 July.
- AQ2 1957 The Customs Convention on ECS carnets for commercial samples enters into force on 3 October.
- 1959 The Convention on NCCC and Protocol of Amendment thereto enters into force on 11 September.
- 1962 The Customs Convention on the temporary importation of packings enters into force on 15 March. The Customs Convention on the temporary importation of professional equipment enters into force on 1 July. The Customs Convention concerning facilities for the importation of goods for display or use at exhibitions, fairs, meetings, or similar events enters into force on 13 July.
- AQ3 1963 The Customs Convention on the ATA carnet for the temporary admission of goods (ATA Convention) enters into force on 30 July.
- 1965 1965 version of NCCC enters into force on 1 January. The Customs Convention concerning welfare material for seafarers entered into force on 11 December.
- 1969 The Customs Convention on the temporary importation of scientific equipment enters into force on 5 September. The GATT Agreement on Valuation enters into force on 5 September and replaces the BDV.
- 1971 The Customs Convention on the temporary importation of pedagogic material enters into force on 10 December.
- 1972 1972 version of NCCC enters into force on 1 January.
- 1974 The International Convention on the Simplification and Harmonisation of Customs procedures (Kyoto Convention) enters into force on 25 September.
- 1975 The Customs Convention on Containers enters into force on 6 December.
- 1978 1978 version of NCCC enters into force on 1 January.
- 1980 The Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in the Prevention, Repression and Investigation of Customs Offences (Nairobi Convention) enters into force on 21 May.
- 1988 The Convention on the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System (HS Convention) enters into force on 1 January and replaces the NCCC.
- 1992 1992 version of Harmonized System enters into force on 1 January.
- 1993 The Convention on Temporary Admission (Istanbul Convention) enters into force on 27 November. The WCO Council adopts the Arusha Declaration on Customs Integrity.
- 1994 The WCO Council adopts the informal name 'World Customs Organization', in order to better reflect the worldwide nature of the Organization.
- 1996 1996 version of Harmonized System enters into force on 1 January.
- 1999 The WCO Council adopts the revised International Convention on the Simplification and Harmonisation of Customs Procedures (Revised Kyoto Convention).
- 2002 The WCO celebrates its fiftieth anniversary and is honoured with a visit by HM King Albert II of Belgium accompanied by the Hon. Didier Reynders, the Belgian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance. 2002 version of Harmonized System enters into force on 1 January.
- 2003 The WCO Council adopts the Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters (Johannesburg Convention) in July but has not yet entered into force.
- 2005 The WCO Council adopts the Framework of Standards to Secure and Facilitate Global Trade (SAFE).
- 2006 The WCO launches the Columbus Programme, the largest ever Customs Capacity Building initiative committed to support implementation of the Framework Standards to Secure and Facilitate Global Trade. The revised Kyoto Convention on the Simplification and Harmonisation of Customs Procedures enters into force on 3 February.
- 2007 2007 version of Harmonized System enters into force on 1 January.
- 2009 The WCO consists of 174 Member States and the HS Convention has 135 Member States

and is applied in more than 200 countries, economic regions, and economic unions.

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