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Trade facilitation in times of pandemic: Practices from South and South West Asia

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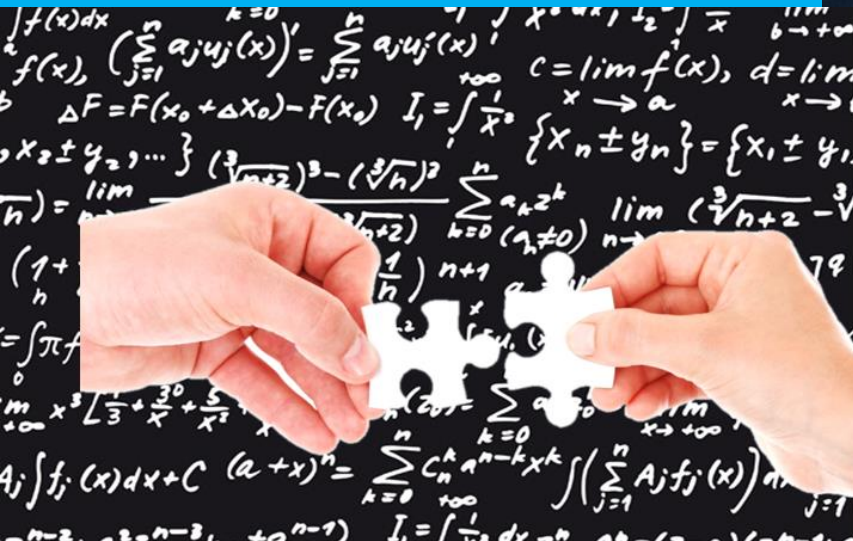
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Trade facilitation in times of pandemic: practices from South and South West Asia



Prabir De

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Trade facilitation in times of pandemic: practices from South and South West Asia

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Abstract

The world and regional economies have been hit hard by the COVID-19 crisis. The combined effects of the pandemic and global and national lockdowns have caused havoc in the countries of South and South-West Asia (SSWA), with their trade severely impacted. This paper investigates the subregion's experience implementing trade facilitation measures in the times of COVID-19. The paper indicates that the SSWA countries have achieved remarkable progress in trade facilitation, especially as the COVID-19 crisis progressed. Although the policy responses in the initial months of the outbreak appeared to be fragmented and lacked coherence, countries in SSWA have shown convergence toward simplification of trade procedures, and enhanced transport and logistics and digital trade facilitation. While these measures have helped the SSWA countries secure supply of essential goods and services, some have simultaneously enforced stringent protection measures which represent a risk. The responses to the COVID-19 crisis suggest a greater scope of regional cooperation in the subregion. A cross-border regional protocol may strengthen the preparedness for future pandemics or similar disasters in future. As the current pandemic recedes, there are other opportunities such as in trade finance, cross-border e-commerce, and innovative application of emerging technologies, among others. Digitalizing the trade processes in SSWA, including by signing on to the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific, would be the next step toward the needed paperless trade environment.

Keywords: Trade Facilitation, ESCAP, COVID-19, Paperless Trade, South Asia, SSWA, Digital Trade, Trade Finance, Customs Procedures

JEL Codes: F13, F55, I18

Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. SSWA's Trade Disruptions and Trends.....	5
3. Case Study on India on Trade Facilitation	10
3.1 Digital Trade Facilitation.....	15
3.2 Business Facilitation and Support for MSMEs	15
3.3 Trade Finance Facilitation	16
3.4 Transport, Logistics and Transit Facilitation	16
3.5 Simplification of Customs Procedures and Expedited Clearance.....	17
4. Case Study on Sri Lanka on Trade Facilitation	19
4.1 Measures Undertaken by Sri Lankan Customs	19
4.1.1 Facilitating the cross-border movement of relief and essential supplies	19
4.1.2 Supporting the Economy and Sustaining Supply Chain Continuity	20
4.1.3 Protecting Customs administrations' Staff	20
4.1.4 Measures aiming at Protecting Society	21
4.1.5 Other Measures	21
4.2 Simplification of Customs Procedures and Expedited Clearance.....	24
4.3 Digital Trade Facilitation.....	25
4.4 Transport, Logistics and Transit Facilitation	25
4.5 Trade Finance Facilitation	26
4.6 Business Facilitation and Support for MSMEs	26
5. Summary of Measures Taken in SSWA and Best Practices	28
5.1 Examples of Good Practices	39
6. Recommendations and Conclusions	41
7. References.....	45

List of Tables

Table 1. COVID-19 Cases and Deaths in SSWA	1
Table 2. Real GDP Growth in SSWA Subregion	2
Table 3. Notifications Reported to WTO: 1 January to 15 July 2020	7
Table 4. Major Trade Facilitation Initiatives by CBIC	11
Table 5. India's Policy Initiatives during COVID-19 Pandemic*	13
Table 6. Sri Lanka's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*	22
Table 7. Trade Facilitation Measures Introduced by SSWA Countries	29
Table 8. Afghanistan's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*	30
Table 9. Bangladesh's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*	30
Table 10. Bhutan's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*	32
Table 11. Islamic Republic of Iran's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*	33
Table 12. Maldives Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*	34
Table 13. Nepal's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*	34
Table 14. Pakistan's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*	35
Table 15. Turkey's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*	37
Table 16. Suggested Policy Measures	41

List of Figures

Figure 1: Trends in Trade in SSWA Countries: January 2017 to March 2020	6
Figure 2: Export-Import Index	7
Figure 3. Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation in SSWA: 2019	8
Figure 4: Sequence of India's Major Trade Facilitation Initiatives	10
Figure 5: Scatter Diagram of LPI and TFM	29

1. Introduction

The world economy has been hit hard by the Coronavirus (COVID-19)-driven global crisis. The combined effects of the pandemic and the global and national lockdowns have caused havoc in South and South-West Asian (SSWA) countries. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), many economies may face negative per capita income growth in 2020 (IMF, 2020a). Similarly in trade, the World Trade Organization (WTO) forecast a clear drop between 13 per cent and 32 per cent in 2020, perhaps the highest since the 1930s Great Depression. The rise in trade costs due to increased border controls and associated supply chain disruptions is estimated to account for up to a third of this decline (WTO, 2020a). The IMF has also slashed growth forecasts for all the SSWA economies in 2020.

Table 1. COVID-19 Cases and Deaths in SSWA

Country	Cases, as on		Deaths, as on	
	1 April 2020	1 July 2020	1 April 2020	1 July 2020
Afghanistan	192	33594	4	936
Bangladesh	54	168645	6	2151
Bhutan	4	80	0	0
India	1636	742417	38	20642
Islamic Republic of Iran	47593	245688	3036	11931
Maldives	18	2501	0	12
Nepal	5	16168	0	35
Pakistan	2039	237489	26	4922
Sri Lanka	143	2081	2	11
Turkey	13531	207897	214	5260
SSWA total	65215	1656560	3326	45900

Source: WHO, 2020

As of 1 August 2020, more than 16 million people worldwide have been infected by COVID-19. There has been an unprecedented rise in the number of Corona patients across the SSWA region. Except in Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka, COVID-19 cases in SSWA increased heavily between 1 April 2020 and 1 July 2020, with over 2 million people infected and over 45000 deaths by early August. India leads with 742,417

cases and 20,642 deaths. Bhutan is the only country to have no deaths from Coronavirus as of 1 July 2020. Many SSWA countries have announced a range of fiscal and monetary stimulus packages.²

The entire world is experiencing great uncertainty. Saving both lives and livelihoods has become the principal concern of SSWA countries. The worldwide health crisis has led to a deep global recession (World Bank, 2020a; ADB, 2020). Djankov and Ugo (2020) commented: “The global economic impact of the pandemic is due to the fact that the economic risk of COVID-19 is distinct from its health risk.” Countries are in recession – mild or serious. This includes all SSWA economies except Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Assuming that the outbreaks remain under control and activity recovers later this year, SSWA economies (barring Pakistan and Sri Lanka) may return to positive growth by 2021 (Table 2). However, with advanced economies contracting and the spread of COVID-19 and other disasters continuing, predictions of a comfortable economic rebound in SSWA are uncertain.

Table 2. Real GDP Growth in SSWA Subregion

	GDP Growth (Per cent change from previous year)					Percentage point differences from January 2020 projections	
	2017	2018	2019e	2020f	2021f	2020f	2021f
Afghanistan	2.7	1.8	2.9	-5.5	1.0	-8.5	-2.5
Bangladesh	7.3	7.9	8.2	1.6	1.0	-5.6	-6.3
Bhutan	6.3	3.8	3.9	1.5	1.8	-4.1	-5.8
India	7.0	6.1	4.2	-3.2	3.1	-9.0	-3.0
Islamic Republic of Iran	3.8	-4.7	-8.2	-5.3	2.1	-5.3	1.1
Maldives	6.8	6.9	5.2	-13.0	8.5	-18.5	2.9
Nepal	8.2	6.7	7.0	1.8	2.1	-4.6	-4.4
Pakistan	5.2	5.5	1.9	-2.6	-0.2	-5.0	-3.2
Sri Lanka	3.6	3.3	2.3	-3.2	0.0	-6.5	-3.7
Turkey	7.5	2.8	0.9	-3.8	5.0	-6.8	1.0
World	3.3	3.0	2.4	-5.2	4.2	-7.7	1.6

Notes: e = estimate; f = forecast

Source: World Bank, 2020b

² For example, India has announced fiscal and monetary stimuli totalling 10 per cent of country’s GDP (approx. US\$ 262 billion).

With the rise of uncertainties, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted normal economic activity and life in the SSWA. These include border closures, restrictions on trade and movement of goods including essentials and bans on non-essential travel. As a result, the sub-region's trade has been severely impacted. Additionally, the pandemic has fuelled the rise of protectionism such as higher documentations, export licensing, export ban, etc., which directly threatens multilateralism. These short-run economic conditions can also have long-lasting impacts, particularly in output and productivity growth.³ A comprehensive strategy addressing the impact of the current crisis may put the SSWA countries back on a sustained growth path and rebound the region's trade.⁴

The present health cum economic crisis throws up several important challenges. In response, the United Nations has recommended a series of measures (United Nations, 2020a). Improved connectivity and lower transaction and transport costs are considered important in overcoming the new barriers to trade and transportation created by COVID-19 (United Nations, 2020b). Trade facilitation has become one of the priorities to mobilize essential goods such as PPE kits, medicines, foods, etc. The OECD commented: "Rising trade costs – from transport, logistics and supply chain disruptions, as well as additional border controls and documentation requirements – act as additional brakes on both trade flows and the global economy" (OECD, 2020). Trade facilitation has always been considered as the most important element in reducing trade costs (United Nations, 2019). In this uncertain time too, improved trade facilitation is found to be critical to ensure the faster movement of goods and services. The need for paperless trade/contactless trade has gained immense importance. Kim and Duval argued: "Enabling cross-border paperless trade, or the flow and legal recognition of trade-related data and documents in electronic form across borders, has the potential to cut transaction costs by 25 per cent across Asia and the Pacific" (Kim and Duval, 2020).

In view of the above, we investigate the SSWA region's experience with trade facilitation measures in the times of COVID-19, with a view to identifying good practices. The rest of this paper is arranged as follows. Section 2 briefly discusses the

³ Read, for example, Irons (2009) for a lucid presentation on the consequences of the economic crisis. Also see World Bank (2020b), AIC-EEPC (2020), to mention a few.

⁴ This was echoed by Raihan et al. (2020).

current crisis-induced trade situation in SSWA. Sections 3 and 4 present the case studies of trade facilitation during COVID-19 in India and Sri Lanka, respectively. Section 5 summarizes the measures taken in SSWA, followed by recommendations and conclusions in Section 6.

2. SSWA's Trade Disruptions and Trends

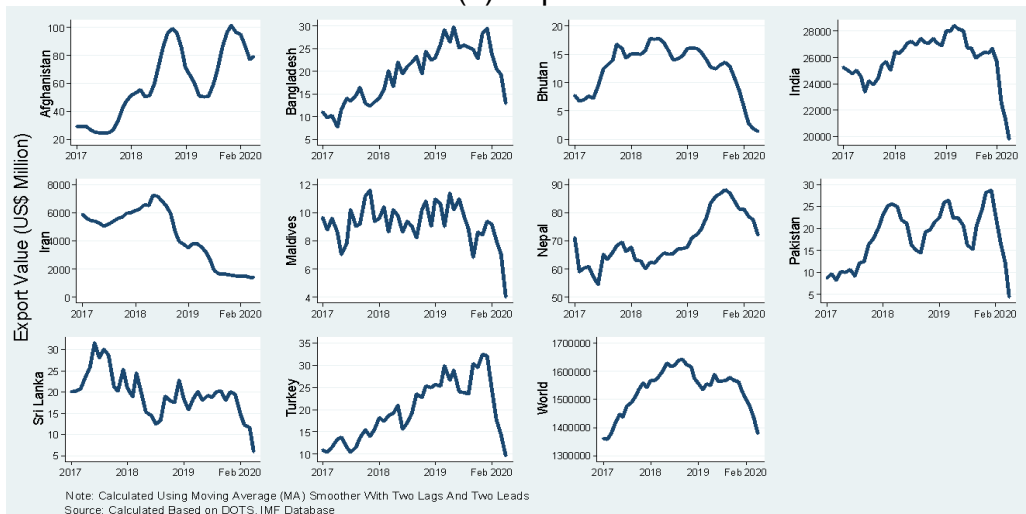
The COVID-19 pandemic has brought an unprecedented fall in global trade. According to UNCTAD: “the COVID-19 pandemic led to a 3 per cent drop in global trade values in the first quarter of 2020, and the downturn is expected to accelerate in the second quarter, expected a quarter-on-quarter decline of 27 per cent” (UNCTAD, 2020a). The SSWA sub-region too has faced severe deceleration in both export and import.

The collapse of global trade during the COVID-19 pandemic was preceded by trade tensions from new restrictions and distortions since 2016. COVID-19 has just accelerated the fall of global trade. This can be seen in the trends of seasonally adjusted monthly export and import, with SSWA countries experiencing decelerating trade long before the COVID-19 outbreak (figure 1). The export and import index (January 2017=100) indicates that (except for Bangladesh and Bhutan) the trade in SSWA countries has declined heavily over time and reached the base in March 2020 (figure 2 (a, b)). This is also true if we compare quarterly export and import between 2019 and 2020 (Appendix 1). The drop in global trade is accompanied by marked decreases in commodity prices (especially fuel prices), even higher than what was witnessed during the last global financial crisis (UNCTAD, 2020b).

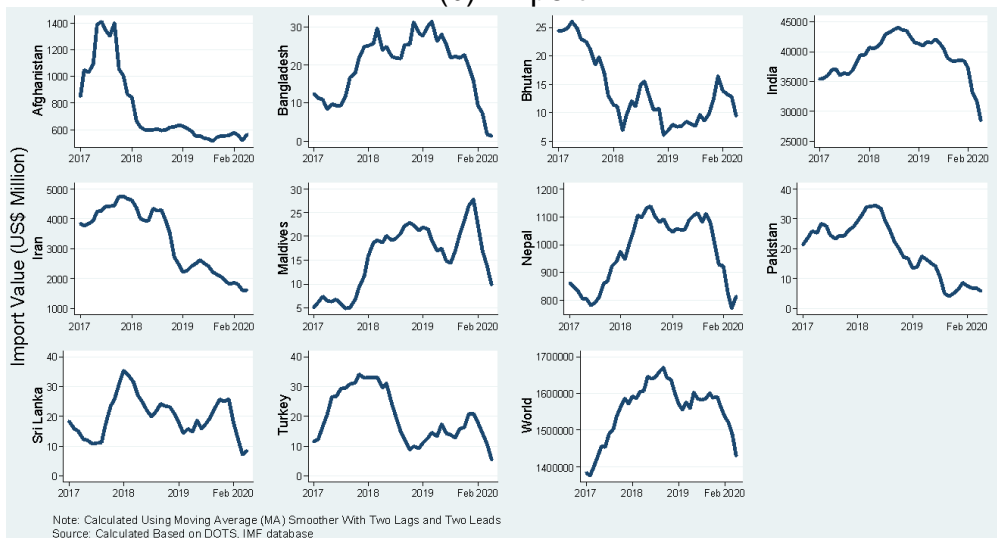
Countries have been facing several waves of COVID-19 in SSWA, with multiple types of Coronavirus, and recovery rates that vary across countries. While it is almost certain that the virus will be with us for some time, countries are uncertain about the rebound of global growth and trade. Although contraction in trade is estimated to have slowed in recent weeks for some countries, the duration and overall strength of the economic slowdown in SSWA remains uncertain and contingent on the continued containment of the virus (see, for example: Sidhartha, 2020). In this challenging and uncertain time, trade has been identified as *sine qua non* to save lives and livelihoods (OECD, 2020). According to UNCTAD (2020), “Countries can leverage trade facilitation to defeat the COVID-19 pandemic”.

Figure 1. Trends in Trade in SSWA Countries: January 2017 to March 2020

(a) Export

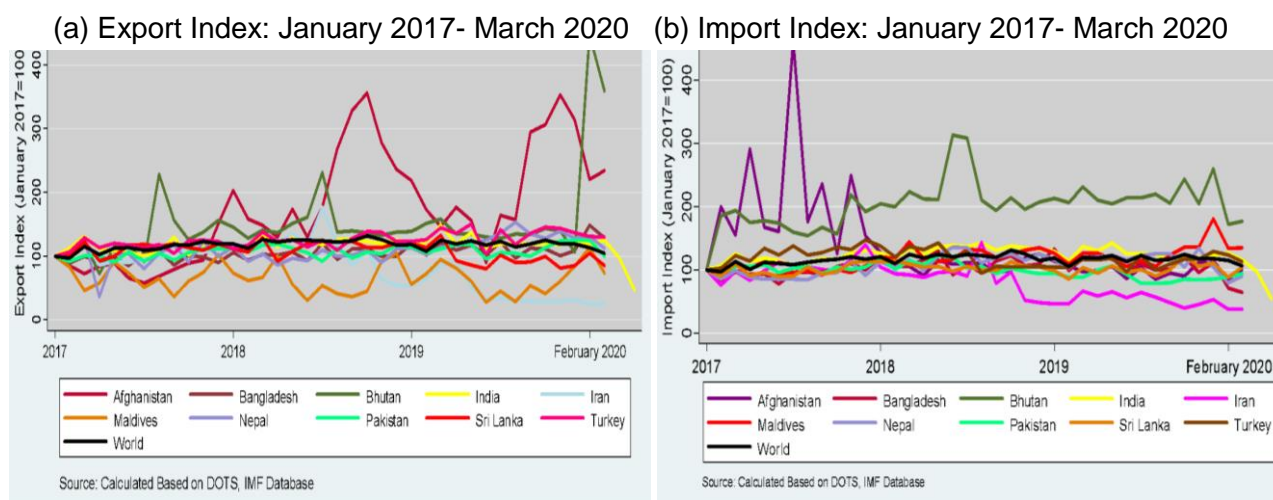


(b) Import



Source: IMF, 2020b

Figure 2. Export-Import Index



Source: IMF, 2020b

Table 3. Notifications Reported to WTO: 1 January to 15 July 2020

Country	SPS	TBT	Safeguard	Anti-dumping Practices	Subsidies and Countervailing Measures	Market Access	Trade Facilitation
Afghanistan							2
Bangladesh		2				4	3
Bhutan*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
India	3	39	5	23	6		
Islamic Republic of Iran*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Maldives							1
Nepal	1						3
Pakistan		2		4	2		1
Sri Lanka	2	1					2
Turkey	7	8	6	5	5		1

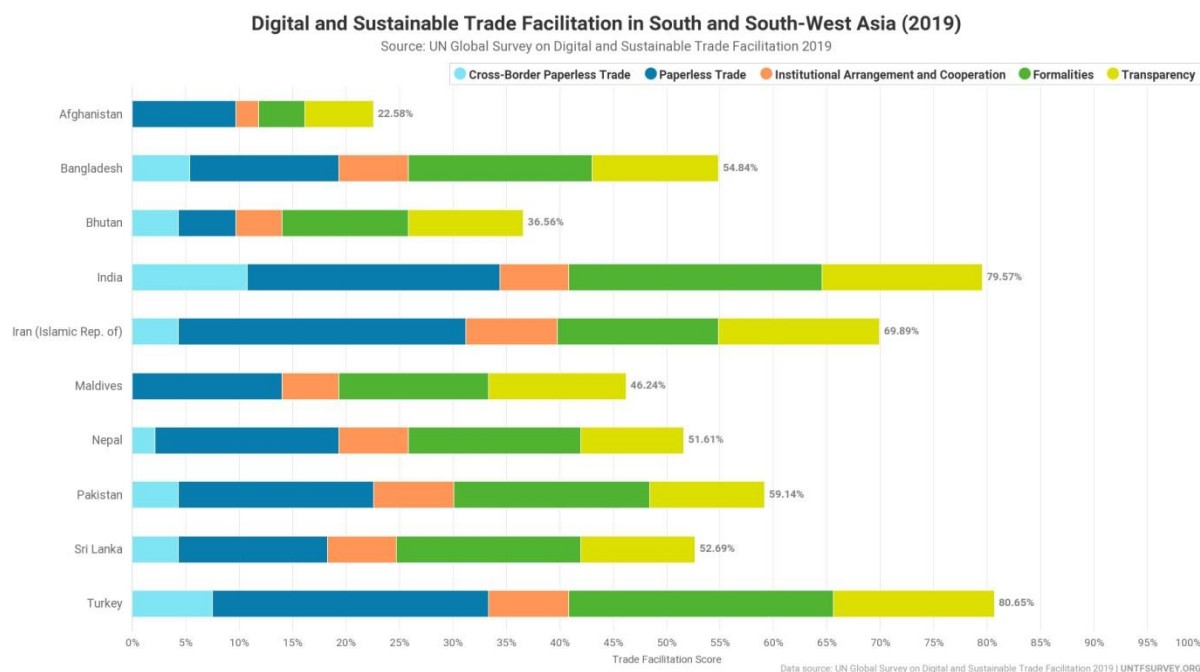
*Data not available

Source: Author's compilation based on WTO, 2020c

While facilitation measures have been implemented, the virus has also forced countries to introduce protectionist measures. As of 16 July 2020, WTO members have submitted a total of 203 notifications related to COVID-19, of which Sanitary and Phytosanitary protocols (SPS), Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and Quantitative Restrictions (QR) together represent 90 per cent (WTO, 2020c). Table 3 shows the number of notifications issued by SSWA countries between 1 January and 16 July

2020. While some of these measures may be necessary to contain COVID-19, they also add a cost in terms of facilitating trade flows.

Figure 3. Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation in SSWA: 2019



Source: UN, 2019

Digital and sustainable trade facilitation has been regarded as essential to strengthen country’s global competitiveness. Illustrated in figure 3, SSWA countries made good progress in trade facilitation, including paperless trade, formalities and transparency, especially after the entry into force of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement in February 2017 and several other regional and bilateral initiatives. SSWA countries gained a competitive edge in trade facilitation before the Coronavirus pandemic began.

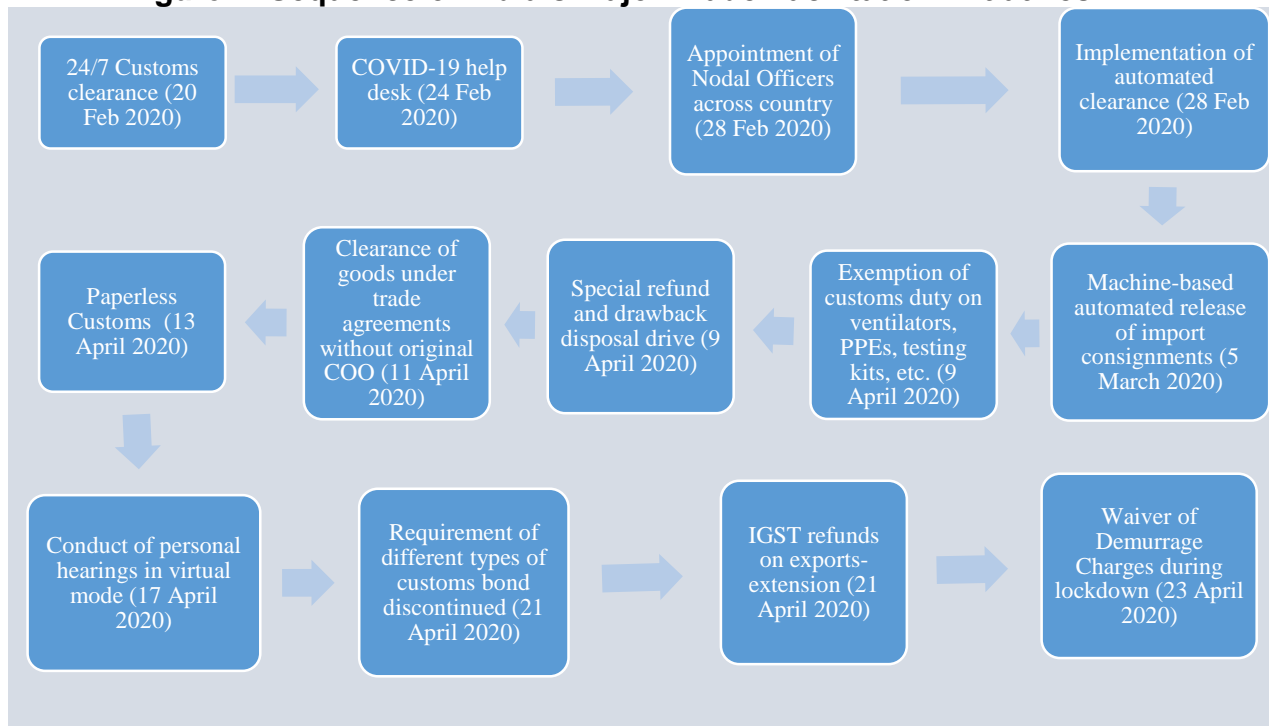
During COVID-19, transport and trade facilitation is seen by SSWA countries (and others) as a prerequisite to ease the flow of essential goods and services, such as medical supplies and major food and agricultural products. Most SSWA countries have been using transport and trade facilitation measures to strengthen their supply chains and combat the global slowdown (United Nations, 2020a; ESCAP, 2020a, SSWA, 2020b). Some common measures undertaken by SSWA countries are (i) establishment of trade information portals to add further transparency and ease trade by simplifying and explaining procedures and processes; and (ii) expedited customs

clearance and release of goods considered essential in combating the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic. We make an attempt to analyse the specifics of such trade facilitation measures with particular focus on India and Sri Lanka. India is now severely affected by COVID-19, while Sri Lanka has contained the virus and is back to normal life.

3. Case Study on India on Trade Facilitation

In India, the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) under the Indian Ministry of Finance (MOF) is responsible for trade facilitation. Wanting to avoid supply-chain disruptions from COVID, India began implementing trade facilitation measures as early as 20 February 2020 by resuming 24/7 operation at all custom checkpoints (CBIC, India, 2020b). The CBIC has continued implementing various trade facilitation measures since then, aimed at easing new trade frictions while ensuring the supply of essential goods required to fight against COVID-19 (see: Box 1).

Figure 4. Sequence of India's Major Trade Facilitation Initiatives



Source: Drawn by author based on CBIC, 2020a

Table 4. Major Trade Facilitation Initiatives by CBIC

Sr. No.	Subject	Measures Taken	Download Link
1	Exemption of customs duty on ventilators, personal protection equipment, COVID-19 testing kits and inputs for these good.	Ventilators, face masks and surgical masks, personal protection equipment, COVID-19 testing kits, and inputs for the manufacture of these items – have been fully exempted from customs duty	Notification no. 20/2020-Cus,dt. 09-04-2020
2	Measures to facilitate trade during the lockdown period under section 143AA of the Customs Act, 1962	Permitting the submission of undertakings in lieu of bonds for clearance of goods.	Circular no. 17/2020-Customs dt.03-04-2020
3	Clearance of goods under India's Trade Agreements without original Certificate of Origin.	Provisional clearance of goods while extending preferential treatment, without the submission of original signed certificates of origin.	Circular no. 18/2020-Customs dt.11-04-2020
4	Paperless Customs – Electronic Communication of PDF based Gate-pass and OOC Copy of Bill of Entry to Custom Brokers/Importers.	Enabling electronic communication of out of charge, bill of entry and gate-pass to importers/customs brokers.	Circular no. 19/2020-Customs dt.13-04-2020
5	Special refund and drawback disposal drive	Drive to expeditiously process all pending customs refund and drawback claims in order to provide immediate relief to business entities, especially Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).	Instruction no. 03/2020-Customs; dt 09-04-2020

Source: CBIC, 2020a

Box 1: Major Initiatives by CBIC: January– July 2020

Some of the initiatives taken by CBIC to combat COVID-19 are as follows:

- 24/7 customs clearance;
- Waiver of late filing fees in genuine cases;
- Dedicated single window COVID-19 help desk;
- Machine-based automated release of import consignments (major reforms);
- Shipping lines have been asked not to levy detention charges;
- Time limit for various compliances under the Customs Act or Customs Tariff Act extended up to 30 September 2020;
- Prioritised clearance of critical goods used for fighting COVID -19;
- Special fund and drawback disposal drive;
- Turant customs having three pronged pillars of faceless, paperless and contactless customs environment (major reforms).

Source: Taken from the presentation of Mr Eric C. Lallawmpia, OSD, CBIC, 2020 organized by ESCAP on 29 July 2020.

Illustrated in figure 4, from 1 January to 15 July 2020, India further facilitated the import of medical goods with measures such as exemptions of customs duties on ventilators,

personal protection equipment, COVID-19 testing kits and the inputs for these goods. Other measures include clearance of goods under India's Trade Agreements without original Certificate of Origin (COO); paperless customs – Electronic Communication of PDF based Gate-pass and OOC Copy of Bill of Entry to Custom Brokers/Importers; special refund and drawback disposal drive, etc. (Table 4). Relief materials, both inbound and outbound, are also actively facilitated by customs. CBIC has also been coordinating with the port and airport authorities and other custodians to see that ample space is available for storing export and import cargoes in the customs area. Major reforms have been undertaken through Turant customs programme, which aims to reach faceless, paperless and contactless customs environment (Box 1).

To support the work from home, particularly for the people in the software industry, customs released the consignments based on email requisitions. For example, computers and related accessories have been permitted by customs to be transferred from the bonded premises to residence of employees of Software Technology Park of India to facilitate work from home during the lockdown period. CBIC actively coordinated with other ministries for ensuring that customs operations are declared as an essential service during the lockdown period, which has allowed smooth operations at all the customs stations. In line with the aforesaid, further directives were issued permitting movement of customs brokers and transporters and allowing warehouses to operate during the lockdown.

All customs posts have been asked to show greater sensitivity in dealing with cargo from affected areas, allow for delays in import declaration filings and waive the late filing fees in genuine cases. Special care has been taken in clearance of passengers coming from affected countries. Separate channels were created at the airports, port terminals and land customs stations for such passengers. Customs officers strictly followed instructions to use masks, gloves and sanitizers. Table 5 presents major initiatives undertaken by India during the COVID-19 period.

Table 5. India's Policy Initiatives during COVID-19 Pandemic*

1	Digital Trade Facilitation
1.1	To honour its FTAs/PTAs, India has issued preferential certificates of origin through an online platform. India will also clear consignments provisionally with digitally signed certificates or physical certificate unsigned by the competent authority.
1.2	CBIC has undertaken number of measures to make the customs clearance process as contactless as possible. These measures include a contactless and paperless bill of entry amendment, accepting digital copies, clearing goods in lieu of bond on the basis of plain paper, machine-based automated release of import consignments for free movement throughout India, "Out of Charge" work replaced by e-gate pass to custom brokers/exporters for releasing consignments, etc.
1.3	India has launched new DGFT platform for issuing certificate of origin and digital delivery of IEC related services to facilitate foreign trade.
1.4	India provides a facility to upload digitally signed licenses/permits/certificates/other authorizations (LPCOs) by eight new participating Government agencies (PGAs) on e-SANCHIT (paperless processing under SWIFT) at all customs EDI systems (ICES).
2	Business Facilitation and Support for MSMEs
2.1	The MOF has sanctioned a package of relief measures in five tranches for MSMEs to help them in strengthening infrastructure, capacity and logistics.
2.2	MOF has relaxed requirements for filing income tax returns due to COVID-19.
2.3	The Government has initiated brand rate of duty drawback claims (processing and disposal of all pending refund and drawback claims) to provide immediate relief to the business entities and especially MSMEs.
2.4	CBIC has introduced several relaxations related to GST compliance and refund. The Government also created a GST helpdesk for trade facilitation and to reach out to taxpayers. The GST council announced to halve the interest rate charged on overdue filings of small businesses.
2.5	RBI has introduced regulatory measures to promote credit flows to the retail sector and MSMEs and provided regulatory forbearance on asset classification of loans to MSMEs and real estate developers (later extended to loans from NBFCs). The Government also announced a Fund of Funds for equity infusion in MSMEs.
2.6	RBI has eased regulatory measures, including an increase in the large exposure limit, relaxation of some of the norms for state government financing, credit support to the exporters and importers and extension of the tenor of the small business refinancing facilities.
3	Trade Finance Facilitation
3.1	The Government of India (GOI) has announced COVID-19 regulatory package for mitigating the burden of debt servicing and to ensure continuity of viable businesses. The package includes term loans and working capital facilities.
3.2	To support the export industry, ECGC has extended the time limit for all returns, extension request, filing claims, default notification, expiry of specific shipment etc.
3.3	The GOI and RBI have announced COVID-19 regulatory package for mitigating the burden of debt servicing and to ensure continuity of viable businesses. The package includes term loans and working capital facilities.
3.4	RBI and GOI have extended the interest equalization scheme on pre- and post-shipment export credit by fifteen months. It has also extended the realization and repatriation of export of goods and services from nine to fifteen months from the date of export.
3.5	Deferment of revision of storage tariff as part of fiscal and monetary relief to alleviate financial distress caused by COVID-19.
3.6	MOF has allowed customs to clear undertakings without a usually required bond, as measure to facilitate trade during lockdown period under section 143AA of the Customs Act, 1962. The facility was further extended with the extension of lockdown.
4	Transport, Logistics and Transit Facilitation
4.1	The Ministry of Home Affairs has issued Standard Operating Protocols (SOPs) for movement of Indian nationals stranded outside the country and transit arrangement for foreign nationals stranded in India. In addition, sign-on and sign-off of seafarers at Indian ports and their movement for the aforesaid purpose should be as per SOPs.

4.2	Air, rail and road transport was suspended. While transport services through all modes (Air, Road and Rail) were exempted from suspension to ensure smooth flow of supply chain of Essential Items during National Lockdown to fight COVID-19.
4.3	Special permission for transporting cargo (such as medical equipment, pharmaceuticals and essential goods) using passenger aircraft during the COVID-19 lockdown with stringent conditions and guidelines. Charter flights have been managed by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) for crew change in foreign ports.
4.4	Allowed movement of import/export trucks between India and Bangladesh from Benapole Land Customs Station to Pertrapole Integrated Check Post.
4.5	24/7 import/export customs clearance services at all seaport/airports, ICDs, container freight stations, railway stations. 24/7 DPD clearance facilities.
4.8	Ships/Vessels arriving from ports of infected countries within 14 days of departure from the infected port, or having seafarers embarked on the vessel who have been in infected regions within 14 days of arrival at any Indian port shall comply with additional quarantine measures.
4.9	Cargo movements through ports were operational during the national lockdown. All ports could continue regular freight traffic. Also, the Container Freight Stations Association of India (CFSAI) remained functional throughout lockdown.
5	Simplification of Customs Procedures and Expedited Clearance
5.1	Waived fees for late filing of bills of entry, shifting charges, storage charges, dwell time charges, terminal container charges, auction charges, vessel related charges, penalties, demurrage, rentals, license fee related charges by shipping lines to facilitate clearance of import/export consignments and avoid disruptions in supply chain at all major ports.
5.2	Wavier of bond on stamp paper for scanning of containers for Direct Port Delivery (DPD-DPD) mode of delivery (for importers using their own logistic/transport for evacuation of containers). The Government also reframed from levying container detention charges on all import shipments into India, Nepal and Bhutan.
5.3	No haulage charges for movement of empty containers and empty flat wagons by Indian Railways.
5.4	Relaxation in Demurrage and Wharf age rules by Indian Railways, airport and seaports.
5.5	India facilitated export of mask, alcohol-based sanitizers, Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs) and formulations made from these APIs, paracetamol, and Personal Protection Equipments (PPE) medical coverall for COVID-19.
5.6	GOI has extended foreign trade policy, AEO certificates, wavier of charges, fees, penalties at ports, import validity period, free days for export laden containers, export of goods by merchant exporters by 90 days. Extending validity of permits, license, RC etc. under the motor vehicle Act, 1988 and Central Vehicles Rules, 1989.
5.7	Coronavirus Help Desk: Nodal officers in relevant Ministry/Department/Agency have been appointed by the Government at zonal level to quickly resolve issues hampering trade and speedy clearance of goods.
5.8	A dedicated single window COVID-19 helpdesk for EXIM trade has been created on CBIC website to facilitate quick resolution of issue(s) faced by importer/exporter.
5.9	Government exempted ventilators, face masks and surgical masks, PPE and COVID-19 testing kits from customs duties.

*For the period 1 January 2020 to 30 July 2020

Source: Author, based on several notifications issued by various ministries of the GOI, and posted at Federation of India Export Organization (FIEO); Ministry of Home Affairs; Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC), MOF; Reserve Bank of India; World Trade Organization (WTO), World Customs Organization (WCO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

3.1 Digital Trade Facilitation

India has introduced several measures to expedite the paperless processing of trade procedures. Trade partners having either PTA or FTA can use online certificates of origin, and clearance of consignments will be done with digitally signed certificates or physical certificates unsigned by the competent authority. India has also launched a new DGFT platform for issuing certificates of origin and digital delivery of IEC related services.

In customs, the CBIC has introduced measures including a contactless and paperless bill of entry amendment, acceptance of digital copies, clearing of goods in lieu of bond on the basis of undertaking on plain paper, machine-based automated release of import consignments on all India basis, Out of Charge work replaced by e-gate pass to custom brokers/exporters for releasing consignments, etc. India also provides a facility to upload digitally signed licenses/permits/certificates/other authorizations (LPCOs) by eight new participating Government agencies (PGAs) on e-SANCHIT (paperless processing under SWIFT) at all customs EDI systems (ICES) across the country.

3.2 Business Facilitation and Support for MSMEs

The Indian MOF has sanctioned a package of relief measures in five tranches for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) to help them strengthen infrastructure, logistics and capacity building. Additionally, income taxes have been relaxed due to COVID-19. The Government has also decided to automatically accept all pending refund/drawback claims on customs duties at the brand rate, as a way of providing immediate relief to business entities and especially MSMEs. CBIC has also introduced several relaxations related to GST compliance and refund, and set up a GST helpdesk to reach out to taxpayers and traders.

3.3 Trade Finance Facilitation

The Government of India (GOI) and RBI have announced COVID-19 regulatory package for mitigating the burden of debt servicing and to ensure continuity of viable businesses. The package includes term loans and working capital assistance.

To support the export industry, ECGC Ltd. has extended the time limit for all return and extension requests, filing claims, default notification, expiry of specific shipment, etc. The interest equalization scheme on pre- and post- shipment export credit has been extended by 15 months. The realization and repatriation of export of goods and services has also been extended from 9 to 15 months from the date of export.

The GOI has also allowed deferment of revision of storage tariff as part of its financial relief scheme. Additionally, the MOF has allowed customs to clear an undertaking without the usual bond to facilitate trade during lockdown period under section 143AA of the Customs Act, 1962. The facility was later extended with the longer lockdown period.

3.4 Transport, Logistics and Transit Facilitation

The Indian Ministry of Home Affairs has issued Standard Operating Protocols (SOPs) for movement of Indian nationals stranded outside the country and transit arrangement for foreign nationals stranded in India. In addition, sign-on, sign-off and related movement of seafarers at Indian ports are also done as per SOPs. In general, air, rail and road transport was suspended during the lockdown period, except for transport of essential items. Special permission is given to transport cargo (such as medical equipment, drugs and essential goods) by passenger aircraft while complying with stringent conditions and guidelines. Charter flights are managed by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) for crew change in foreign ports. India has allowed the movement of import and export cargo laden trucks between India and Bangladesh through Benapole LCS to Pertrapole ICP. In India, cargo movements through ports were kept operational during the lockdown. Customs clearance has continued 24/7 at all seaport/airports, ICDs, CFSs, railway stations, etc., including 24/7 DPD clearances.

The GOI has eliminated charges for movement and handling of empty containers and flat wagons by Indian Railways. Additionally, the Government has extended relaxation in demurrage and wharf age rules by Indian Railways, airport and cargo terminals at seaports.

Ships/Vessels arriving from ports of infected countries within 14 days of departure from the infected port, or having seafarers embarked on the vessel who have been in infected regions within 14 days of arrival at any Indian port shall comply with additional quarantine measures.

CBIC and DoR have also taken initiatives to realise clearance targets as per the National Trade Facilitation Action Plan for 2017-2020:

- For imports: within 48 hours for sea cargo, ICD and LCS, and within 24 hours for air cargo;
- For exports: within 24 hours for sea cargo, ICD and LCS, and within 12 hours for air cargo.

In trying to achieve the above clearance targets, CBIC has introduced several reforms such as ICEDASH, Turant Customs, etc., all of which are showing positive results.⁵

3.5 Simplification of Customs Procedures and Expedited Clearance

The GOI's Turant Customs scheme provides initiatives for simplification of customs procedures and expedited clearance. These include the waiving of fees for late filing of bills of entry, storage charges, dwell time charges, terminal container charges, auction charges, vessel related charges, penalties, demurrage, rentals, license fee related charges by shipping lines. This is meant to facilitate clearance of import/export consignments and avoid disruptions in supply chains at all major ports. Additionally, waiver of bond on stamp paper for scanning of containers for Direct Port Delivery (DPD-DPD) mode of delivery (importers using own logistic/transport for evacuation of containers) is also extended. The Government has also provided reframed from

⁵ As can be seen from India's Trading Across Border (TAB) rank, which has improved from 80 in 2019 to 63 in 2020 as per the World Bank's Doing Business Report.

levying container detention charges on all import shipments into India, Nepal and Bhutan. Besides, India has facilitated export of mask, alcohol-based sanitizers, Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs) and formulations made from these APIs, paracetamol, and Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) medical coverall for COVID-19. The Government has exempted ventilators, face masks and surgical masks, PPE and COVID-19 testing kits from customs duties.

The GOI has extended measures like the Foreign Trade Policy, AEO certificates, waiver of charges, fees, penalties at ports, import validity period, free days for export laden containers, export of goods by merchant exporters by 90 days. At the same time, validity of permits, license, RC etc. under the Motor Vehicle Act, 1988 and Central Vehicles Rules, 1989 were extended.

Under the Coronavirus Help Desk, nodal officers in relevant Ministry / Department / Agency have been appointed by the Government at the zonal level to quickly resolve issues hampering trade and speedy clearance of import and export goods.

4. Case Study on Sri Lanka on Trade Facilitation

4.1 Measures Undertaken by Sri Lankan Customs

In Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan Customs (SLC) took the lead in guiding the country's trade when the Coronavirus pandemic broke out. The SLC has arranged several services for importers, exporters and other agencies. It intervened in both sea and air cargoes just before the Coronavirus-led global devastation started, including with strict health and safety measures (for example, see: Sri Lankan Customs, 2020a). On 20 April 2020 issued guidelines for a paperless export process, while the SLC implemented interim measures to ensure uninterrupted operations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sri Lankan Customs, 2020b):

4.1.1 Facilitating the cross-border movement of relief and essential supplies

- Routine cargo selectivity criteria were streamlined especially for medium and low risk cargo, thus limiting focus to high-risk cargo. As a result, around 70 per cent of essential items were released under Green Channel.
- With the consent of other Government agencies, an electronic procedure was introduced to receive and coordinate regulatory approvals such as standards and permits to expedite clearance and release.
- Provisional online procedures were introduced to verify certificates of origin and grant preferential tariff treatments for transactions through SAFTA. A special webinar was also organized by the SAARC Secretariat with the participation of all SAARC members to aid implementation.
- The provisional goods clearance procedure was extended, with priority for consignments of relief goods and consignments needing expedited clearance.
- Existing 24/7 services were limited to approximately 8 hours per day in view of the low volume of exports while factories were closed due to Government restrictions on human gatherings. However, facilities were made available on call as required during customs non-operating hours.
- In addition to the regular Customs Enquiry Point, a special 24/7 help desk is in

operation to attend public and stakeholder inquiries.

4.1.2 Supporting the Economy and Sustaining Supply Chain Continuity

The SLC, as the Frontline Border Agency, contributed actively to the Presidential Task Force that was established to monitor and prevent the spread of COVID-19, as well as ensured the continued operation of supply chains necessary to sustain overall community life in the country. Accordingly, the following SLC policy decisions were put into action:

- Hold meetings on a regular basis with key governmental agencies that are engaged in the essential services thus carrying forward real political will;
- Take immediate steps to maintain social distancing and to minimize human gatherings in Customs operational work areas;
- Implement concessionary tariff rates introduced to ensure constant supply of essential medicines and medical devices;
- Relax regulatory requirements such as standards approvals and licenses subject to post clearance checks;
- Introduce a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for processing of applications for Inward Processing and attending incidental operational requests and inquiries over electronic mail with templates ensuring uninterrupted execution of industry and related import and export activities during difficult periods such as epidemics and terrorism;
- Facilitate Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) to evacuate the spaces near the cargo unloading bays in order to maintain the continuity of unloading goods from the vessels keeping supply chain uninterrupted, by providing clearance for even nonessential goods from time to time.

4.1.3 Protecting Customs administrations' Staff

Following steps are taken to maintain social distancing of the staff while minimizing intervention of Customs staff.

- Number of staff deployed was kept to a minimum on a roster, divided into several

groups, where one such group consists of around 20 per cent of the normal number of staff;

- The staff continued their duties by connecting virtually from their homes;
- Sanitizing facilities and protective gear was provided to the staff where required;
- An approved disinfecting chamber was established at the entrance to the Customs premises;
- An interim paperless procedure was introduced for electronic submission and processing of CusDecs (Goods declarations) to maintain social distancing.

4.1.4 Measures aiming at Protecting Society

Expedited Customs clearance processes were provided for passengers, especially regarding the prompt return of nationals at the beginning of lockdown:

- Facilitated processing of departing foreign nationals, mostly tourists, on specially arranged flights;
- Facilitated processing of Sri Lankan nationals who were brought down by special Government-arranged flights;
- Steps were taken to refer the passengers arrived from abroad directly to the specially established quarantine centres;
- Actions were taken to temporarily shut down the unaccompanied passenger baggage clearance depots until the situation stabilizes in view of the fact that the majority of these passengers are from every corner of the island.

As mentioned previously, the SLC contributed actively to the Presidential Task Force that was established to monitor and prevent spreading COVID-19, and took steps to continue providing essential functions.

4.1.5 Other Measures

- Continuous dialog was established between relevant governmental agencies and private sector while maintaining social distancing.
- Necessary arrangements were made with Sri Lanka Police to coordinate and facilitate travel of Customs staff, transporters, and Customs House Agents who are engaged in goods clearance.
- Requests to waive demurrage charges were efficiently coordinated between the

Sri Lankan port authority, two private terminal handlers and Air Cargo Authorities by the traders, as and when required.

- Fullest cooperation was established with private stakeholders of Inland Clearance Depots (cargo examination points) to facilitate clearance while adhering to staff sanitary guidelines and the Customs House Agency (CHAs).
- Prompt actions were taken to process requests by foreign missions, especially to expedite some essential exports.

Table 6 presents a detailed account of trade policy measures introduced by Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 period. We discuss some measures pertaining to export and import next.

Table 6. Sri Lanka's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*

1	Digital Trade Facilitation
1.1	Sri Lankan Customs has adopted several simplified paperless measures which the importers and custom house agents (CHA) at the CHAQ1 office need to follow when clearing import cargo. These measures include submission of electronic Customs Declarations (e-CusDec) to the ASYCUDA System, attaching clear scan copies of the commercial invoice, delivery order and other necessary documents to e-CusDec, electronic payment of relevant levies, e-CusDec processing through SMS/Email/WhatsApp, e-Release Message to port terminal, generation of e-Gate Pass through ASYCUDA System, retaining warrant and delivery copy.
1.2	The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce has instructed plant and plant-product exporters to register in generic ePhyto National System (GeNS) to digitally exchange phytosanitary certificates between trade partners.
1.3	Government has stipulated Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for making applications for inward processing (TIEP), Textile and Apparel Sector (INFAC) and Individual Bank Guarantee facilities over emails to facilitate trade during the pandemic.
1.4	The Ministry of Roads & Highways Ports & Shipping has enforced the "DOC centre" submissions/operations being fully online at all terminal and ports.
1.5	Electronic submission of all air-to-air and air-to-sea transshipment customs declarations through ASYCUDA System.
1.6	The Board of Investment (BOI) of Sri Lanka has implemented a paperless import and export documentation process for BOI exporters as well as clearance process of import of raw materials for essential goods by BOI exporters.
1.7	SAGT has introduced an e-clearance process for CHAs to lodge import container clearance documentation and release electronic Delivery Advice (e-DA)/Gatepass. It also requires CHAs to pre-register with SAGT to enable its facilities.
1.8	Provisional online procedures were introduced to verify certificates of origin and grant preferential tariff treatments for transactions under Preferential Free Trade Agreements (PTA) under SAARC. For consistent implementation of the same a special webinar was also organized by the SAARC Secretariat with the participation of members; Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
2	Business Facilitation and Support for MSMEs
2.1	Central Bank of Sri Lanka has introduced relief measure for assisting COVID-19 affected businesses and MSMEs by offering them a six-month debt moratorium for both capital and interest of loan and providing working capital loan at an interest rate of 4 per cent per annum through licensed financial institutions.

2.2	The Central Bank has extended repayment of credit cards, validity period of cheques, removal of withholding tax, revision of income tax rates, extension of loan settlement period and discontinued charges on various banking facilities.
2.3	The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce has proposed a public-private shared economic strategy and stimulus plan targeted for accelerated post-COVID-19 recovery.
2.4	Export Development Board (EDB) has launched the EDB Help Desk for providing information on best practices, logistics and fast-evolving global markets for exporters and keeping export process active.
2.5	Sri Lanka Tea Board has also launched an online Help Desk for exporters and manufacturers of tea to uphold the supply chain of tea industry during the pandemic.
2.6	To facilitate trade, SLSI has offered certification schemes such QMS, EMS and FSMS and other Management Systems certification services to its exporters.
2.7	Sri Lanka has announced to support SME's and product development with European Union (EU) Funding.
3	Trade Finance Facilitation
3.1	The Central Bank of Sri Lanka has implemented a Sri Lankan Rupee 50 Billion, six-month re-financing facility by introducing a wide range of fiscal and financial concessions and credit facilities for COVID-19 hit business activities.
3.2	The Government has implemented regulations to re-establish Open Account payment method and Consignment Account basis payment method for export and import of goods. In addition, the customs were instructed to permit the clearance of goods on Advance Payment basis.
3.3	The Sri Lankan Government has implemented a control on non-essential import goods to alleviate the pressure on exchange rate and the stress on financial markets.
3.4	The Government has introduced an interim trade and custom based tax policy reform as a part of COVID-19 economic revival plan.
4	Transport, Logistics and Transit Facilitation
4.1	The National Carrier Sri Lankan airlines has extended support to export industries by converting passenger aircraft to full freighter/cargo aircraft.
4.2	The civil aviation sector has made proper arrangement to facilitate cargo transit and passenger transit.
4.3	The Government has intimated the exporters/importers to make payments to the freight forwarders/logistics service providers within the credit granted period.
4.4	SLPA has made proper logistics arrangements including smooth importation of essential goods during the curfew period.
5	Simplification of Customs Procedures and Expedited Clearance
5.1	To expedite the clearance of exports/imports during the curfew, Sri Lankan Customs has provided several services such as clearance of imported essential goods, clearance of urgent exports and transshipments, clearance of parcel at central mailing exchange, clearance of passenger and unaccompanied passenger baggage, issuance of special curfew passes and others.
5.2	The Government has implemented temporary suspension of import of several commodities and food additives under various Gazette Extraordinary Orders, Commodity Levy Act of 2007 and Food Act of 1980 during the curfew period.
5.3	The Government has allowed the exporters to import suspended raw materials through special approval from the Department of Imports and Exports Control.
5.4	Waiver of liner demurrage for import containers at international shipping lines during the curfew period. Relaxation from penal charges for local containers for imports. No terminal rents and charges for imported FCL, LCL, MCC and MCC/Transshipment containers and all general cargo containers discharged during the curfew period.
5.5	The Government has extended the validity of licenses of retail pharmacies, wholesale and transport for therapeutic goods.
5.6	The Government has set up Help Desk. Officials at CHAs have been appointed by the Government for clearing import cargo and help importers with queries and inquiries. The exporters were also notified about the time and operation days of the concerned ministries and offices.
5.7	JCT, UCT, SAGT and CICT have introduced several concessions for storage and occupation charges due to COVID-19 at the SLPA Terminals. The concessionary period for ports occupation charges further extended.
5.8	The Government has granted permission to import canned fish without Import Control License.
5.9	The Government has been helping the tea exporters in legalization of export documents by Turkish Embassy in Colombo to facilitate the tea shipments to Turkey.

*For the period 1 January 2020 to 30 July 2020

Source: Author based on several notifications issued by various ministries of the Sri Lanka, and posted on The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce; Sri Lanka Exports Development Board; Sri Lanka Tourism; World Trade Organization (WTO); World Customs Organization (WCO) and Market Access Map, International Trade Centre (ITC).

4.2 Simplification of Customs Procedures and Expedited Clearance

In Sri Lanka, measures were taken to facilitate the clearance of all the goods falling with the HS chapters 1 to 40 subject to the approval of “DC/DDC (Imports Declaration)” for sea cargo or “DC/DDC (Air Cargo)” for air cargo. However, priority has been given to essential goods such as food items, perishable goods, medicines, medical devices and related items. The other items that are not falling under the above mentioned HS chapters such as bulk cargo (gas, petroleum, fertilizers, cement etc.), and any raw material or commodity intended to be used for essential services or manufacturing of essential goods, shall also be facilitated subject to the approval of DC/DDC (Imports Declaration) and DC/DDC (Air Cargo). The working hours at the Sri Lankan Customs were rescheduled and nodal officers were appointed.

Sri Lankan exporters have been facing numerous issues in processing their prior committed urgent shipments. Considering the importance of keeping the export process active, The Export Development Board of Sri Lanka (EDB) has set up a Help Desk to facilitate the country's exports during COVID-19. Special arrangements have been made for the processing of all the exports at the Exports Facilitation Centre (EFC) at Trico and Air Cargo Village. Operations under Bonds Schemes, TIEP Scheme, Transshipments, MCC, Entrepôt Trade and BOI Coordination have been facilitated.

The Sri Lankan aviation authority took special measures for the clearance of passengers and unaccompanied passenger baggage (UPB). The clearance of all inward and outward passengers has been continued on a 24/7 basis at the Bandaranayake International Airport. The arrangements have been made to facilitate all the other services such as submission of cargo manifests, renewal of TIN registrations and new TIN registrations related to the clearance of imported essential goods and exports.

The Sri Lankan Government has also temporarily imposed restrictions on imports to prevent a rapid depreciation of the Sri Lankan Rupee.

4.3 Digital Trade Facilitation

Sri Lankan Customs has adopted several simplified paperless procedures for clearing imports. These measures include submission of electronic Customs Declarations (e-CusDec) to the ASYCUDA System; attaching clear scan copies of the commercial invoice, delivery order and other necessary documents to e-CusDec; electronic payment of levies; e-CusDec processing through SMS/Email/WhatsApp; e-Release Message to port terminal; generation of e-Gate Pass through ASYCUDA System; and retaining warrant and delivery copy.

Besides, the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce (CCC) has instructed plant and plant-product exporters to register in generic ePhyto National System (GeNS) for digitally exchange phytosanitary certificates between trading partners. The Sri Lankan Government has also stipulated Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for making applications for inward processing (TIEP), Textile and Apparel Sector (INFAC) and Individual Bank Guarantee facilities over emails.

The Ministry of Roads, Highways, Ports and Shipping has enforced the "DOC Centre" submissions/operations being fully online at all terminals and ports. Electronic submission of all air-to-air and air-to-sea transshipment customs declarations are now made through the ASYCUDA System. The Board of Investment (BOI) of Sri Lanka implemented a paperless import and export documentation process for BOI exporters as well as clearance process of essential imported raw materials by BOI exporters. At the same time, the SAGT introduced an e-clearance process for CHAs to lodge import container clearance documentation and release electronic Delivery Advice (e-DA)/Gatepass.

4.4 Transport, Logistics and Transit Facilitation

The Sri Lankan Civil Aviation Ministry has made proper arrangements to facilitate cargo transit and passenger transit. For example, Air Lanka is supporting export industries by converting passenger aircraft to full freighter/cargo aircrafts. The Government has requested the exporters/importers to make payments to the freight forwarders/logistics service providers within the credit granted period. On the other

hand, the Sri Lankan ports authority has made logistical arrangements for the smooth importation of essential goods during the curfew.

4.5 Trade Finance Facilitation

The Central Bank of Sri Lanka implemented a Sri Lankan Rupee 50 Billion, six-month re-financing scheme including a wide range of fiscal and financial concessions and credit facilities for COVID-19 hit business activities. Additionally, the Sri Lankan Government has extended permanent overdraft and trade finance facilities up to 30 September 2020, with interest rates capped at 13 per cent.

The Government has also implemented regulations to re-establish the Open Account payment method and Consignment Account basis payment method for export and import of goods. In addition, Customs were instructed to permit the clearance of goods on Advance Payment basis.

The Sri Lankan Government implemented a control on non-essential import goods to alleviate the pressure on the exchange rate and the stress on financial markets. The Government has introduced an interim trade and custom based tax policy reform as part of their economic revival plan.

4.6 Business Facilitation and Support for MSMEs

Export of Sri Lanka's apparel and garments sector, which used to generate about half of Sri Lanka's foreign exchange earnings, has experienced a huge deceleration.⁶ Sri Lanka's tourism sector has also almost entirely collapsed due to COVID-19. Hence, the Sri Lankan Government has enacted stringent measures to counter the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis. This includes temporary suspensions of various imports, with direct and indirect ramifications for food and agricultural commodity imports such as dairy products, fresh fruit, poultry products, other livestock products,

⁶ According to PricewaterhouseCoopers (2020), Sri Lanka might face a revenue loss of US\$ 1.5 billion between March 2020 and September 2020, which is likely to increase if the outbreak continues to spread.

oilseed products, fishery products, beverages, and more broadly food services: hotels, restaurants, food retails, snack foods, etc. The Ministry of Plantation Industries and Export Agriculture instructed the Coconut, Tea and Rubber sectors to continue their export/import operations during the lockdown period. The Government has also advised export-oriented manufacturing industries to continue their operations. To support the MSMEs, the Sri Lankan Government has provided working capital in the form of two-year loans at 4 per cent interest to higher of two months' working capital requirement of the business or those enterprises having LKR 25 million per bank per borrower.

5. Summary of Measures and Good Practices taken in SSWA

SSWA countries have introduced several trade facilitation measures to promote trade while protecting their countries from the pandemic. While some trade facilitation measures were reported to the WTO or WCO by SSWA countries, others were introduced with great urgency and have not yet been reported to the relevant multilateral bodies. Table 7 presents a summary of the trade facilitation notifications issued by the SSWA countries between 1 January and 30 July, 2020. The following observations are worth noting.

First, the largest number of notifications were introduced by India, followed by Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. On the other hand, Maldives and Afghanistan have the lowest number of notifications in SSWA.

Second, simplification of customs procedures and expedited clearances has received the most attention (215 measures), followed by digital trade facilitation (68) and transport, logistics and transit facilitation (55).

Third, India is the only country which has undertaken measures in all the six areas of trade facilitation considered in our analysis, whereas Afghanistan is the only country in SSWA which has undertaken measures in only three areas. The remaining countries fall in between.

Fourth, countries with higher logistics performance in the past have tended to undertake more trade facilitation measures (see: figure 5). In other words, it is possible that the improved logistics performance has helped countries deal with the market risks much effectively by improving their command in trade facilitation.

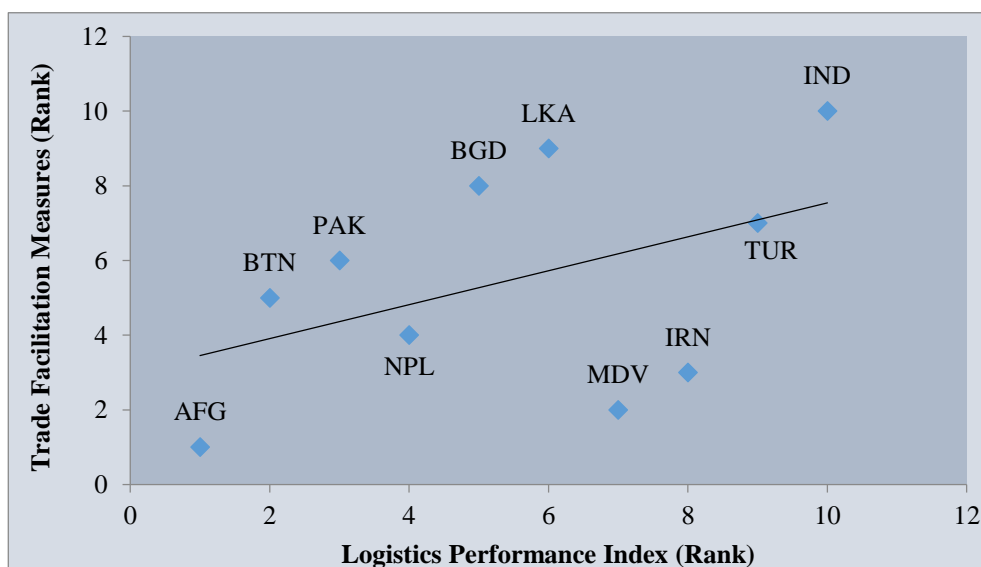
Tables 5, 6, 8 to 15 present the country-specific trade facilitation measures in SSWA sub-region. Box 2 illustrates some new measures, which have strong regional implications. The common measures between the ten countries focus on simplification of customs procedures and expedited clearance, followed by transport, logistics and transit.

Table 7. Trade Facilitation Measures Introduced by SSWA Countries

Country	Digital Trade Facilitation	Business Facilitation and Support for MSMEs	Trade Finance Facilitation	Transport, Logistics and Transit Facilitation	Simplification of Customs Procedures and Expedited Clearance	Measures in Services	Country Total
Afghanistan		4		3	2		9
Bangladesh	2	11	17	4	20		53
Bhutan	1	8	2	4	7		22
India	24	16	8	16	82	4	150
Islamic Republic of Iran	1	2		4	9		16
Maldives	1	2	3	1	6		13
Nepal	1	4	3	2	8		18
Pakistan	5	5	6	6	13		35
Sri Lanka	16	10	5	9	45		85
Turkey	4	6	7	5	23		45
SSWA	55	68	51	54	215	4	446

Source: Author based on country's notifications issued between 1 January – 30 July 2020

Figure 5. Scatter Diagram of LPI and TFM



Source: Author's own, based on data from World Bank, 2020c

Table 8. Afghanistan's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*

1	Business Facilitation and Support for MSMEs
1.1	The Afghan Government has allocated Afs 8 billion from the contingency funds for emergency pandemic response, of which Afs 1.9 billion is allocated for urgent health needs, such as i) establishing testing labs, including at border crossings; ii) setting up special wards to boost hospitalization and care capacity; and iii) procuring the most critical medical supplies.
1.2	The Afghanistan Parliament has allocated Afs 21 billion for a short-term employment programme, processing and storage facilities for agriculture commodities that producers have been unable to export, building industrial parks, purchases of additional hospital beds, and bread distribution to the vulnerable households.
1.3	The Government has extended the tax filing deadlines for the first and second quarter of the fiscal year by 45 days.
1.4	Suspension of administrative penalties and fees with no retrospective applications for breaches/noncompliance during the period of suspension by Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB).
2	Transport, Logistics and Transit Facilitation
2.1	With the start of Afghanistan's agricultural export season, Afghanistan and Pakistan decided to reopen the ports through diplomatic channels for Afghanistan's exports to Pakistan. Trade between the two countries has returned to normal, with special health measures in place to prevent the spread of Coronavirus. Bilateral Trade and Transit at all border crossings between Afghanistan and Pakistan have been restored to pre COVID-19 status.
2.2	The authorities have resumed the exports to Europe via the air corridors.
3	Simplification of Customs Procedures and Expedited Clearance
3.1	The Government has established an Emergency Committee for COVID-19 prevention which meets every two days to assess the situation and initiate relevant actions.
3.2	To ensure food security and proper functioning of supply-chains and value chains, the Government is working closely with actors in the market and neighbouring countries.

*For the period 1 January – 30 July 2020

Source: Author based on several notifications issued by various ministries of the Afghanistan, and available at Ministry of Industry and Commerce, Afghanistan; Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Official Website and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Table 9. Bangladesh's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*

1	Digital Trade Facilitation
1.1	Bangladesh issued an office order to accept documents in soft copy when assessing goods imported from China. It is under consideration for other countries as well.
2	Business Facilitation and Support for MSMEs
2.1	The Government has introduced a special loan/investment facilities policy package for the MSME sector.
2.2	The Government has announced to utilize the funds allocated by COVID-19 response projects under SAARC development fund social window for mitigating the social losses and socio-economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic.
2.3	Bangladesh Bank (BB) has taken measures to delay non-performing loan classification, waive credit card fees and interest, suspend loan interest payments, impose restrictions on bank dividend payments, extend tenures of trade instruments, and ensure access to financial services. BB announced moratorium on loan payments until 30 September 2020.
3	Trade Finance Facilitation
3.1	The Bangladeshi Ministry of Finance has announced BDT 50 billion (approx. US\$ 595 million) stimulus package for export-oriented industries channelled through a refinance scheme operated by BB.
3.2	The Export Development Fund was raised to US\$ 5 billion, with the interest rate fixed at 2 per cent and the refinancing limit was increased. International factoring was introduced to accelerate exports.
3.3	BB has created several refinancing schemes amounting to a total of Tk 380 billion and a 360-day tenor special repo facility to support exporters, farmers and to facilitate the implementation of the

	Government stimulus packages. BB also issued letter of credit (LCs) with realization clause to facilitating export trade during COVID-19 pandemic.
3.4	The Ministry of Finance has subsidized interest payments on up to Tk. 500 billion in working capital loans by scheduled banks to businesses.
3.5	Foreign exchange rules were eased by the Bangladesh Bank to allow foreign owned/controlled companies operating in Bangladesh to access short term working capital loans from their parent companies/shareholders abroad to meet actual needs for payments of 3-month wages and salary. In addition, the dealers are allowed to arrange fund for discounting usance export bills in foreign exchange through their correspondent banks, financial institutions abroad or international financing institutions.
3.6	To ensure that there is adequate liquidity in the financial system, BB announced several measures. These measures include: buying treasury bonds and bills from banks, reduced repo rate, reduced CRR for offshore banking operations, and raised the advance-deposit ratio (ADR) and investment-deposit ratio (IDR) to facilitate credit to the private sector.
4	Transport, Logistics and Transit Facilitation
4.1	Bangladesh kept all seaports, ICD and LCS open during lock down period. Transportation of cargo and shipping continued to operate with reduced working hours.
4.2	Dhaka and Chattogram: Airport terminals operated normally for cargo. Ports are operating normally but with lower efficiency due to manpower reduction. Freighters flying as normal, but capacity are constrained. Some passenger flights were restricted to affected countries.
4.3	India and Bangladesh Trade: Trade between India and Bangladesh resumed through the Petrapole-Benapole border in West Bengal on 5th July 2020 after the state opened the border for Bangladeshi lorries. Tripura also resumed border trade with Bangladesh at the Mohurighat Integrated Check Point (ICP) on 11 May 2020.
5	Simplification of Customs Procedures and Expedited Clearance
5.1	The Government has temporarily prohibited the export of surgical masks, face masks and disinfectants (hand sanitizers), hydroxychloroquine tablet, COVID-19 test kits and protective garments due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
5.2	Bangladesh has temporarily eliminated import tariffs on protective garment, disinfectant, and COVID-19 test kits. These imported products were also exempted from applied MFN tariff, VAT and other taxes.
5.3	The National Board of Revenue has waived VAT to facilitate local production of personal protective equipment and surgical face masks to fight COVID-19.
5.4	Bangladesh Bank has extended the usance period by twofold for the import of industrial raw material, agricultural implements and chemical fertilizers, power generation raw material and lifesaving drugs by importers.
5.5	Bangladesh has accepted SAFTA certificate of origin to facilitate trade during lock down. Import consignments were cleared with original shipping documents and bills of landing for temporary period.
5.6	The Government has also waived demurrage at ports due to limited operation at the ports.
5.7	The Government has issued as order to continue customs activities on a limited scale in all customs offices during the lockdown to release medicine, medical equipment, foods, etc. However, all customs officers were ordered to stay in their respective customs Stations/Houses to address any emergency situation.
5.8	All customs Stations/Houses have also taken initiatives to alert their staff to follow the guidelines of WHO, while working in the desk and/or dealing with the stakeholders at the port or/and the airport.

*For the period 1 January – 30 July 2020

Source: Author based on several notifications issued by various ministries of the Bangladesh, and available at Bangladesh Trade Portal; Ministry of Commerce, Bangladesh; National Board of Revenue, Bangladesh; Bangladesh Bank; International Monetary Fund (IMF); World Customs Organization (WCO); World Trade Organization (WTO) and Market Access Map, International Trade Centre (ITC).

Table 10. Bhutan's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*

1	Digital Trade Facilitation
1.1	To avoid contact of persons, the custom agents were allowed to use social media applications like WhatsApp group, Telegram and WeChat for coordinating and effectively communicating the movement of relief flights, exchange of passenger information and cargo.
2	Business Facilitation and Support for MSMEs
2.1	The Bhutan Government has announced fiscal measures to help the businesses in combating with COVID-19 outbreak. These include deferred filing of Business Income tax (BIT) and Corporate Income tax (CIT), deferment of sales tax on essential items; waiver of payment of rent and other charges, etc.
2.2	To support the businesses, the Government has adopted several monetary measures in response to COVID-19. These measures include: deferment of loan repayment, waiver of interest on loans, extension of gestation period for projects under construction, granting financial institutions the provision of bridging loans as concessional term-based loan, conversion of concessional working capital soft loans to term loans. These measures are further extended under Phase II.
2.3	Royal Monetary Authority (RMA) has announced to provide soft loans to cottage and small industries through the National CSI Development Bank. These are: (i) microloans at 2 per cent interest for agriculture and rural activities and (ii) working capital loans at 4 per cent interest rate. These measures were further extended in the monetary measures adopted during Phase II.
2.4	RMA has introduced term based working capital facility as part of its monetary measures to enable wholesale distributors to import essential commodities to ensure uninterrupted supply to retailers in Bhutan.
3	Trade Finance Facilitation
3.1	RMA has reduced the Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR), opened a liquidity window for FSPs (inter-bank borrowing system) and will release liquidity through reduction of CRR to facilitate the implementation of Phase I measures.
4	Transport, Logistics and Transit Facilitation
4.1	Bhutan has sealed off its land borders as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19. For non-Bhutanese, exits are allowed. Incoming non-Bhutanese are scrutinized and quarantined where applicable.
4.2	The Bhutan customs has stipulated several measures for clearance at land borders where huge volumes of consignments are brought into the country in foreign transport/carrier with foreign drivers. These measures include: zero contact customs clearance procedures, strict screening of travellers, separate entry and exit point for normal vehicles crossing borders, etc.
4.3	The Royal Government of Bhutan has stipulated the necessary health and safety measures and protocols to facilitate international freight transport. In addition, the drivers need to follow all the protocols while transiting through the borders to other countries.
4.4	To mitigate risk and prevent the spread of coronavirus, the Bhutan Government has issued e-visas/e-permits to foreign nationals from COVID affected countries, temporarily suspended visa on arrival, new work permits, facilitated renewal of work permit for foreign nationals already in the country.
5	Simplification of Customs Procedures and Expedited Clearance
5.1	The Government has issued simplified Government procurement rules to expedite procurement of works identified under Economic Contingency Plan (ECP) only for agriculture sector, tourism sector, build Bhutan project and farm road improvement project.
5.2	The Bhutan Government has banned the import of Doma (betel nut) and Pani (betel leaf), fruits, vegetables and meat in an attempt to curb the spread of coronavirus in the country. The Government also suspended the import of luxury motor vehicles and bikes.
5.3	To mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the traders and business community at large, the RGoB has deferred the payment of duty and taxes by three months (April-June, 2020) for identified importers importing essential goods categorized as basic necessity.
5.4	The customs have facilitated the cross-border movement of relief and essential supplies through coordination and cooperation with other Government agencies, clearance priority given to the essential goods, simplified import clearance procedures, etc.
5.5	To ensure uninterrupted supply chain during COVID-29 pandemic, the customs has extended the working hours, accepted the documents in copy, frequently liaison with the Indian counter parts and transit offices located outside the county in facilitating the clearance of consignment.

5.6	To expedite and simplify the custom clearance process at the international airport during COVID-19, the Bhutan Customs has provided several services such as zero physical contact for Customs clearance, fast track service delivery with reduced workforce, temporary storage of cargo for a minimum of 24 hours before clearance, minimal check and fast track clearance of passengers, assistance in clearance of relief flights and consignments, fast track clearance of all essential cargos relating to COVID-19, clearances of relief , clearance based on airway bill and invoice.
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*For the period 1 January – 30 July 2020

Source: Author based on several notifications issued by various ministries of the Bhutan, and available at Ministry of Finance, Bhutan, Royal Monetary Authority, Bhutan; Royal Government of Bhutan; Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet; ministry of health, Royal Government of Bhutan; International Monetary Fund (IMF); World Customs Organization (WCO) and Market Access Map, International Trade Centre (ITC).

Table 11. Islamic Republic of Iran's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*

1	Digital Trade Facilitation
1.1	The Government has announced to accept customs clearance documents via office e-mail to reduce visit in person.
2	Business Facilitation and Support for MSMEs
2.1	The Central Bank of The Islamic Republic of Iran has announced the deferment of loan repayment by three months, offered temporary penalty waivers for customers with non-performing loans, moratorium on tax payments due to the Government for a period of three months, subsidized loans for affected businesses, low-interest loans for businesses that have been affected and not fired any labourer.
3	Transport, Logistics and Transit Facilitation
3.1	The Government has announced that the borders with Pakistan have reopened for trade. Both countries are operating with full security of borders and have adopted health protocols while moving consignments. The Islamic Republic of Iran and Armenia discussed ways to facilitate trade between the two countries.
3.2	The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has stipulated guidelines on environmental control for combating COVID-19 that needs to be followed at all points of entry including air, maritime, land cargo and passenger terminals. To protect individuals at points of entry, individuals must undergo preliminary examination and investigation including checking the body temperature and other clinical signs and also being asked about the nationality (Iranian and non-Iranian), arrival in or departure from The Islamic Republic of Iran, transit, and previous travels to contaminated countries.
4	Simplification of Customs Procedures and Expedited Clearance
4.1	Iran Customs has prohibited the export of raw materials for the production of medical masks and domestic medical equipment required for corona crisis management and control, etc. Customs also prohibited the export of items required by the Ministry of Health to combat the spread of Coronavirus
4.2	Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade, Iran has imposed a ban on the import of the medical supplies that are produced domestically.
4.3	The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has implemented several responsive measures at the customs to expedite the clearance process of essential goods. These include: fast clearance of current shipments (especially relief supplies and medical equipment for COVID-19); releasing of essential supplies and equipment for COVID-19 with a minimum set of documents and without tracking code; extending office hours for of the customs offices and border crossing points during the holidays and weekends.
4.4	The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has reduced duties and taxes on the import of 14 items of equipment and 13 items of supplies which are necessary for combating the COVID-19 with a minimum import duty of 5 per cent (of customs value).
4.5	The Iran Customs has announced extension of all temporary entry and export licenses that are due to expire in near days, automatic renewal of license of international transportation companies for a certain period, in order to prevent the commuting of the stakeholders to Customs offices.

*For the period 1 January – 30 July 2020

Source: Author based on several notifications issued by various ministries of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and available at Trade Promotion Organization of The Islamic Republic of Iran; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Iran; Ministry of Health and Medical Education, Iran; World Customs Organization (WCO); International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Market Access Map, International Trade Centre (ITC).

Table 12. Maldives Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*

1	Digital Trade Facilitation
1.1	The Government has been encouraging customers to use the Customs online portal, enabling them to declare, pay and request for many services without visiting.
2	Business Facilitation and Support for MSMEs
2.1	The governing authority has announced an Economic Recovery Plan of 2.5 Billion rufiyaa which ensures to provide working capital to businesses through banks.
2.2	MMA has announced several measures to reduce economic disruption. These measures include: reduction of the minimum required reserves (RR), reduction of foreign currency RR, making available a short-term credit facility to financial institutions as and when required, introduced moratorium of 6 months on loan repayments.
3	Trade Finance Facilitation
3.1	The Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) has increased its foreign exchange interventions and used other available facilities to maintain the exchange rate peg against the US dollar.
3.2	The Reserve Bank of India has extended US\$ 150 million foreign currency swap support to the MMA on 28 April, under the US\$ 400 million currency swap agreement framework signed between the MMA and the Reserve Bank of India in July 2019.
4	Transport, Logistics and Transit Facilitation
4.1	Maldives Customs Services (MCS) has formed and finalized a Standard Operating Procedure with detailed step-by-step guidelines on how to move forward in different alert levels.
5	Simplification of Customs Procedures and Expedited Clearance
5.1	The Government has exempted the imposing of duties on protective masks, gloves used for medical purposes, garments used for medical purposes, protective spectacles and goggles and face shields.
5.2	Due to the Coronavirus outbreak, the service hours of customs offices and its operational sections were decreased. To expedite the clearance of goods only necessary items were examined on risk management basis.
5.3	Maldives customs has terminated the bills of landing (provides information about exporter, weight of cargo, consignee, consignor, port of landing and particulars about vessels) requirement to expedite clearance of cargo arriving at sea.
5.4	To facilitate smooth and fast release of imported medical equipment and tools into the market, hospital and clinics, all the physical examinations are based on risk management, enabling to examine only the necessary items.
5.5	The Maldives Government has temporarily reduced import tariffs on certain personal protective equipment (e.g. hand sanitizers, disinfectants, protective masks, hand wash, gloves used for medical purposes, and face shields), due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, imports are exempted from processing fees.

*For the period 1 January – 15 July 2020

Source: Author based on several notifications issued by various ministries of the Maldives, and available at Maldives Customs Service; World Customs Organization (WCO); International Monetary Fund (IMF); Market Access Map, International Trade Centre (ITC) and World Trade Organization (WTO).

Table 13. Nepal's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*

1	Digital Trade Facilitation
1.1	The Government has made easy arrangement of distributing vegetables and fruits produced by farmers through e-sales in the present crisis.
2	Business Facilitation and Support for MSMEs
2.1	The Government has introduced a lending programme for cottage, small and medium-sized enterprises and tourism sector to support businesses.

2.2	The Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB) has increased the size of the Refinance Fund to provide subsidized funding for banks that are willing to lend at a concessional rate to priority sectors including small and mid-size enterprises affected by the pandemic.
2.3	NRB has announced that banks will defer loan repayments, extended tax-filing deadlines, extended the repayment schedule for working capital loans, and directed banks to lower interest rates.
2.4	NRB has informed banks to increase their loans to priority sectors, such as agriculture, energy, tourism, and MSMEs, to 40 per cent from 25 per cent by 2024. In addition, NRB provides provisions for advancing additional working capital loans for the businesses in the affected sector of up to 10 per cent of the approved amount of their existing working capital loans.
3	Trade Finance Facilitation
3.1	NRB has lowered its cash reserve ratio from 4 to 3 per cent and reduced the interest rate on the standing liquidity facility rate from 6 to 5 per cent to provide liquidity to the financial system.
3.2	NRB has imposed a temporary ban on luxury goods imports, such as gold over 10 kg and vehicles worth over US\$50 thousand to ease the pressure on exchange rate.
3.3	NRB has lowered the policy rate from 3.5 per cent to 3 per cent and announced that additional liquidity support will be made available through longer-term repo facility as necessary.
4	Transport, Logistics and Transit Facilitation
4.1	The Nepal Government has formed a Quick Response Team (QRT) at the customs headquarter, which coordinates 24*7 with all the customs offices and concerned stakeholders to facilitate the movement of relief and essential supplies.
4.2	The Government has established a frontline health desk at customs border checkpoints, where drivers can receive health check-ups and sanitization is strictly applied. Safety procedures are being applied for disinfecting the vehicle, cargo and required measures are taken by customs officials for clearance cargo.
5	Simplification of Customs Procedures and Expedited Clearance
5.1	Customs Duty has been exempted in relief and medical items and provisions are made for waiving some of the required documents of customs clearance for the relief, other essential medical items and essential items.
5.2	The Nepal Government has banned the export of the medicines, masks and sanitizers.
5.3	The Government has adopted measures to facilitate the supply of essential goods, pharmaceutical ingredients and its raw materials.
5.4	To expedite the regular customs clearance process, the Government has adopted several measures. These are: all customs offices are operating regularly with adequate customs staffs, customs clearance of the relief goods and essential medical items within 2 hours' time, accepting copy documents and provision of attaching online, submission of original documents is not mandatory during this period.

*For the period 1 January – 30 July 2020

Source: Author based on several notifications issued by various ministries of the Nepal, and available at Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies, Nepal; World Customs organization (WCO); International Monetary Fund (IMF); and Market Access Map, International Trade Centre (ITC)

Table 14. Pakistan's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*

1	Digital Trade Facilitation
1.1	Dedicated email has been notified for single contact facility to accommodate all trade related queries/grievances for redressal by the Customs Authorities.
1.2	Pakistan Customs Service has provided web-based customs clearance services to all clients enabling them to declare pay and request for many other services without visiting Customs stations.
1.3	To facilitate trade, the customs staff have been working from home electronically through video-conferencing and other means of remote communications.
1.4	State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) has allowed banks to approve an Electronic Import Form (EIF) for the import of equipment donated by international donor agencies and foreign governments.
1.5	The Government is directing the resources towards digital adoption and connecting the SMEs to e-platforms across the globe. SBP has developed a regulatory framework for facilitation of cross border B2C e-Commerce, which will be adopted after integration with the e-Commerce module to be developed by FBR in WeBoC (web based one customs).
2	Business Facilitation and Support for MSMEs

2.1	The Federal Government has announced a fiscal stimulus package of PKR 1.2 trillion which is almost fully implemented. This package includes a whole range of measures such as tax breaks, financial support via utilities, fuel and transport subsidies, concessions and accelerated tax refunds to export industry to protect exporters and businesspersons.
2.2	The Government has announced a relief package of PKR 100 billion for extending financial support to SMEs and the agriculture sector in the form of power bill deferment, bank lending, as well as subsidies and tax incentives.
2.3	SBP has introduced several measures to support the SME's and MSME's. These include: increased the regulatory limit on extension of credit to SMEs permanently, availability of deferment of principal amount of loans facility extended till September 2020, refinance facility for modernization of SMEs, refinance Scheme for working capital financing of MSME, small enterprise (SE) financing and credit guarantee scheme for special persons, rescheduling/restructuring of financial facilities for SME financing.
3	Trade Finance Facilitation
3.1	The SBP has announced a temporary Economic Refinance Facility to fuel new investment which offers subsidized loans to the manufacturing sector and a Refinance Facility to allow banks to get loans at zero mark-up
3.2	The SBP has introduced temporary regulatory measures to maintain banking system soundness and sustain economic activity. These measures include capital conservation buffer reduction, relaxation of debt burden ratio for consumer loans, relaxing regulatory criteria for restructured loans etc.
3.3	To support the exporters and importers in these unprecedented times, SBP has announced several measures. These include: relaxation in matching amount, extension in time period to meet performance requirements, extension in time period to ship goods, relaxation in conditions for long term financing facility, extending the time period for realization of exports proceeds from existing requirement of 180 days to 270 days, allowed exporters to directly dispatch the shipping documents of their exports' consignment to their foreign buyers without any limit, increased limits on advance payments for imports.
4	Transport, Logistics and Transit Facilitation
4.1	The Pakistan Government has sealed its western border (for Afghant transit trade and bilateral trade) and restricted the days of operations and movement of cargo trucks at the borders.
4.2	Pakistan has resumed the Afghan exports to India through Attari-Wagah border to facilitate transit trade. The first consignment of goods crossed over to India in two trucks carrying licorice (mulethi) through the Integrated Check Post (ICP), Attari.
4.3	24/7 clearance of Cargo at Ports/Airports and land borders stations. Expeditious clearance of medicines, food items, and equipment pertaining to treatment of Corona Virus has been ensured. The Government has extended date of filling for goods declarations (GDs).
4.4	The Government has issued guidelines for movement of international passengers, conveyances and cargo at airports and ground crossings.
5	Simplification of Customs Procedures and Expedited Clearance
5.1	The Government has temporarily banned the export of anti-malarial drugs, certain personal protective equipments due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
5.2	The Federal Cabinet has banned the export of edible items to ensure adequate food supply in the country.
5.3	The Government has allowed the commercial importers to import controlled chemicals such as acetone, hydrochloric acid, sulphuric acid, etc.
5.4	Exemption of customs duty, additional customs duty and the regulatory duty for the import of 61 medical goods for 3 months; oxygen gas and oxygen cylinders and Remdesivir (anti-Covid pharmaceutical product). The measure to exempt custom duty on the import of 61 medical goods extended until 30, September 2020.
5.5	The Government has introduced staff rotation of customs agents and has reduced the number of customs agents at the customs field.

*For the period 1 January – 30 July 2020

Source: Author based on several notifications issued by various ministries of the Nepal, and available at Pakistan Customs, Federal Board of Revenue, Pakistan; Ministry of Interior, Pakistan; Ministry of Commerce, Pakistan; State Bank of Pakistan; Ministry of Health Services, Regulations and Coordination, Government of Pakistan; World Trade Organization (WTO); World Customs Organization (WCO); International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Market Access Map, International Trade Centre (ITC).

Table 15. Turkey's Policy Measures during COVID-19 Pandemic*

1	Digital Trade Facilitation
1.1	To minimize the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and to maintain foreign trade effective, the Government has implemented "contactless trade" practices which are followed by truck and wagon crossings at the borders.
1.2	The Turkey Government has launched the application of "Digital Agriculture Market" to provide small producers easy access to the market and raise awareness of SMEs and entrepreneurs in the field of e-commerce and digitalization.
1.3	The Government has adopted the use of digital platforms such as "Digital Customs Project", "Single Window System" and "E-commerce Customs Declaration System" for customs operations due to COVID-19 pandemic.
1.4	The "Return and Removal Application Form" included in the Customs Regulation is moved to the electronic environment. The refund process has also been simplified by making its application in electronic environment.
2	Business Facilitation and Support for MSMEs
2.1	Turkey has announced an Economic Stability Shield stimulus package worth TL100 billion (approx US\$ 15.4 billion) to tackle the coronavirus pandemic. The package includes following measures: doubling the credit guarantee fund, deferment of loan payments, tax breaks and deferrals and stock financing assistance to importers who are affected by the global pandemic, etc.
2.2	To mitigate the adverse impacts of COVID-19 pandemic in international trade on real sector firms, Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey's (CBRT) package of financial measures has introduced a new TL lending facility for SMEs in the export sector where the exporters' inventory financing is supported by extending maturities for repayments of existing and new export rediscount credits. These measures are further extended in the second and third package of CBRT measures.
2.3	CBRT has announced the reallocation of TL 20 billion of the TL 60 billion rediscount credit facility for exporters towards advance loans for investment in support strategic projects.
3	Trade Finance Facilitation
3.1	Turkish authorities have introduced flexibility in the compliance of liquidity ratio requirements until the end of 2020 due to coronavirus outbreak.
3.2	Banking Regulation and Supervision Industry (BRSA) has implemented measures to soften the expected disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic on banking activities by providing flexibility in credit provisions.
3.3	CBRT has announced three packages of financial measures to contain the possible adverse effects of COVID-19 pandemic by providing (i) flexibility in Turkish lira and foreign exchange liquidity management; (ii) offering targeted additional liquidity facilities to banks for providing credit to corporate sector (iii) boosting the liquidity of the Government Domestic Debt Securities (GDDS) market (iv) enhanced banks' flexibility and foreign exchange liquidity management (v) increasing the upper limit for CBRT's funding through Open Market Operations for strengthening the monetary policy transmission mechanism and supporting the primary dealership system.
3.4	CBRT has slashed its repo rate, reduced reserve requirements (RR) on foreign currency deposits and cut its foreign exchange reserve requirements for banks in meeting their lending growth targets.
4	Transport, Logistics and Transit Facilitation
4.1	The Ministry of Interior, Turkey has stipulated the necessary health and safety measures and protocols to facilitate international freight transport. In addition, the drivers need to follow all the protocols while transiting through the borders for maintaining the continuity of international trade.
4.2	In June 2020, Turkey has opened all of its land borders, with the exception of The Islamic Republic of Iran. All those entering Turkey will undergo medical screening upon entry into the country.
5	Simplification of Customs Procedures and Expedited Clearance
5.1	The Turkish Government has temporarily eliminated import tariffs on ethyl alcohol, disposable medical mask and medical ventilators due to the coronavirus pandemic.
5.2	Turkey controlled the exports of lemons amid a rising domestic demand due to the corona-virus pandemic.
5.3	The Government has restricted the exports of cologne, ethyl alcohol, disinfectant and hydrogen peroxide, extracorporeal membrane oxygenation, oxygen concentrator, ventilator apparatus, anaesthesia and ventilator circuit, cannula, intubation apparatus and intensive care monitors. Turkey regulates the export of masks, medical diagnostic kits and personal protective equipment.

5.4	Export restrictions on ventilators and other COVID medical equipment.
5.5	Turkey has introduced import authorization for COVID-19 testing kits.
5.6	The General Directorate of Customs has waived off penalty for all transit time limits, eased the burden of guarantees in transportation and extended the waiting period until the goods were subject to an approved procedure and use, to eliminate time obligation compliance problems.
5.7	To expedite the clearance of exports/imports during lockdown, Turkey customs has provided several services such as accepting the origin based trade policy measure instead of certificate of origin (COO), paying the other financial obligations, 6-month retrospective submission period of the COO, extending permit period, waiver/return of custom tax, etc.
5.8	Additional customs duty/custom tax has been removed for disposable medical masks, ozone therapy, oxygen therapy, aero-therapy, artificial respiration or other therapeutic respiratory Devices.
5.9	To ensure supply security and price stability in basic foods, custom tax has been reduced in crude sunflower oil and oil sunflower seeds. The surveillance value applied in crude sunflower oil imports was also reduced.
5.10	Application of customs duty at the rate of 0 per cent for the importations of molasses used in producing bread yeast, bulk ethyl alcohol used in preparing disinfectants. 0 per cent customs duty tariff quota on rice imports. The quota usage period was extended for rice imports.
5.11	The Government exempted custom duties on the goods imported by public institutions and organizations, associations working for public interest and foundations.

*For the period 1 January – 30 July 2020

Source: Author based on several notifications issued by various ministries of the Turkey, and available at Ministry of Interior Affairs, Turkey; Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey; Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Culture and Tourism; Ministry of Commerce, Turkey; Presidency of the Republic of Turkey; World Trade Organization (WTO); World Customs Organization (WCO); International Monetary Fund and Market Access Map, International Trade Centre (ITC).

First, tariffs and non-tariff barriers on the export and import of health-related products (including medicines) were relaxed. Later, restrictions were also introduced on some of the health-related items such as medicines and ventilators.

Second, futuristic trade facilitation measures were introduced by some SSWA countries, which would have been impossible in the pre-COVID-19 period. For example, Maldives' Customs terminated the bills of lading requirement to expedite clearance of cargo arriving at sea; or India accepted electronic COO for clearance of goods or reinforcing paperless trade through Electronic Communication of PDF based Gate-pass, etc. Bangladesh has also temporarily begun clearing import consignments with original shipping documents and Bills of Lading (B/L), and like India it now accepts SAFTA certificates of origin.

Box 2: Trade Facilitation - Breaking the Status Quo

- Maldives customs terminated the bills of lading requirement to expedite clearance of cargo arriving at sea;
- India accepted electronic COO for clearance of goods or reinforcing paperless trade through Electronic Communication of PDF based Gate-pass, etc.;
- Bangladesh accepted SAFTA COO electronically;
- Agreement signed between Afghanistan and Pakistan to reopen the ports for Afghanistan's exports to Pakistan and India;
- Borders between The Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan have reopened for trade, and have adopted health protocols while moving consignments at borders;
- Movement of import/export cargo laden trucks between India and Bangladesh continued.

Third, many SSWA countries have undertaken reforms and new measures in the category of transport, logistics and transit facilitation. One of the promising measures is the agreement signed between Afghanistan and Pakistan to reopen the ports for Afghanistan's exports to Pakistan, which later helped the two countries normalize their trade relations and prevent the spread of Coronavirus. Similarly, the borders between The Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan have reopened for trade and have adopted new health protocols for moving consignments. Meanwhile, India has allowed the movement of import/export cargo laden trucks to Bangladesh. Bangladesh and India have kept all seaports, ICDs and LCSs open during the lockdown period. Several SSWA countries such as Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, etc. have waived demurrage at ports given the limited traffic.

5.1 Examples of Good Practices

SSWA countries have converged on several policy responses as the COVID-19 crisis progressed. Some common measures include:

- Establishment of trade information portals to add transparency and ease trade by simplifying and explaining procedures;
- Expedited customs clearance and release of goods essential to combating the spread of the pandemic;
- Simplification of export and import procedures, leading towards paperless trade;
- Exemption of customs duties on import of essential goods;
- Other measures such as 24/7 Help desk, relaxation in demurrage, exemption of

interests, exemption in debt servicing, etc.

Protecting public health along with trade facilitation has become the top priority for SSWA countries. All have revised protocols to reduce the spread of COVID-19 while trying to facilitate continued trade with simplification and digitization. In the same vein, the cross-border paperless trade and regional transport arrangements, set out by United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), appear to be important catalysts for reducing COVID risks and aiding the post-pandemic recovery period. Futuristic programmes such as electronic tracking of goods and vehicles, digital freight corridors, electronic solutions of trade and transport facilitation measures, etc. should be promoted.

6. Recommendations and Conclusions

SSWA countries have, by unilateral action, achieved remarkable progress in trade facilitation, especially as the COVID-19 time progressed. Besides transport facilitation and logistics, this paper shows that the SSWA countries have inducted simplification of trade procedures and digital trade facilitation; all of them have introduced new/revised protocols in order to protect their countries from the spread of Coronavirus. Box 3 presents some major takeaways. Although the policy responses in the initial months of the outbreak appeared to be fragmented and lacked coherence, countries in SSWA have shown convergence toward simplification of trade procedures and digital trade facilitation.⁷ While these measures have helped SSWA countries to promote trade and secure essential goods and services, some have simultaneously raised stringent protection measures which represent a risk to this still-fragile progress.

Table 16. Suggested Policy Measures

Short Term (2020-2021)	Medium – Long Term (2021-2025)
Push for futuristic programmes - electronic tracking of goods and vehicles, digital freight corridors, electronic solutions of trade and transport facilitation measures, etc.	Cross-border regional protocol for trade and transportation
Promote trade facilitation for e-commerce	Cross-border paperless trade agreement
Undertake digitalisation of trade processes	
Need for stronger regional coordination	
Require stronger regional cooperation	

Illustrated in Table 16, followings are the major recommendations.

⁷ This in part was also noted by ESCAP. See: ESCAP (2019, 2020a, 2020b)

First, the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic suggest a greater scope of regional cooperation among the countries in the sub-region, especially in a protracted recession. Such cooperation can promote cooperation, for example in reducing overlaps of trade facilitation measures and sharing good practices. SAARC leaders have shown such regional cooperation with the formation of the SAARC COVID-19 Fund. There are important lessons from other regions which could also be applied to trade in the SSWA sub-region. For example, European countries have introduced e-transit regimes like the eTIR international system. SSWA countries should also provide material assistance, share experience and technology, and strengthen multilateralism.

Second, a cross-border regional protocol would help strengthen the preparedness for future pandemics or similar disasters. Countries have already reintroduced national protocols for trade and transport facilitation during COVID-19. However, these protocols do not cover the cross-border aspects of trade and transport facilitation. It is, therefore, recommended that ESCAP may design an ESCAP-wide protocol for trade and transport facilitation during emergencies like the Corona pandemic. This protocol could consider trade and transport-related actions, including facilitation of movement of goods and services, coordinated measures for enhanced controls of trucks and vehicles carrying goods and surveillance systems for monitoring the health of transport crew and enable contact tracing, electronic tracking of goods and vehicles, digital freight corridors, among others. Such a unique initiative, led by ESCAP, could help mitigate the impact of future pandemics on cross-border transport and trade.

Box 3: Major Takeaways

- SSWA countries have achieved remarkable progress in trade facilitation during COVID-19;
- India is the country which has introduced the highest number of measures between January and July 2020, followed by Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Maldives and Afghanistan had the lowest number of measures in SSWA;
- SSWA countries have carried out simplification of trade procedures and digital trade facilitation while introducing new/revised protocols to protect their countries from the spread of COVID-19;
- Policy responses in the initial months of the outbreak seemed fragmented and lacked coherence, but show synergy later months;
- Countries in SSWA have shown convergence toward simplification of trade procedures and digital trade facilitation;
- A cross-border regional protocol is recommended for trade, transportation and cross-border paperless trade.

Third, as the pandemic recedes, countries may agree to the ESCAP's paperless trade initiative, the need for which has been felt widely during the pandemic.⁸ In this regard, the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific serves as a unique platform for ESCAP members to accelerate their recovery. There is no doubt that digital and sustainable trade facilitation measures have the potential to significantly benefit SSWA countries. Most countries have already undertaken concrete steps in this direction. Therefore, the time is ripe to take this work to its logical conclusion.

Fourth, there are other opportunities such as in trade finance, cross-border e-commerce, and innovative application of emerging technologies, among others. In particular, trade facilitation for e-commerce, where SSWA countries have made little or no progress, should be urgently taken up. At the same time, regional coordination on issues related to trade and transport facilitation could be crucial to minimize the economic damage to the region. ESCAP and other multilateral and regional bodies can assist in this regional coordination.

⁸ See: Sixth Meeting of the Interim Intergovernmental Steering Group on Cross-Border Paperless Trade Facilitation, held on 28 – 29 September 2019, and also the Results and implications of the United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation 2019 for Asia and the Pacific. Accessed July 2020. Available at: https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/ESCAP%20PTA%20IISG%202020%201_Eng.pdf

Fifth, digitalizing the trade processes in SSWA would be the next step toward a paperless trading environment. This would reduce the vulnerability of the global and regional supply chains. ESCAP could commission a study to identify the gap in trade digitization processes in SSWA in consultation with national governments.

This paper has found that National Trade Facilitation Committees have limited roles or are inactive in SSWA countries. The WTO TFA is yet to come in effect in full-scale in SSWA sub-region. Countries have introduced national single window or Customs EDI system, which have played a striking role in facilitating cross-border trade, but interoperability is still lacking with no regional South Asian single window. During COVID-19, e-commerce has gained the most attention, but cross-country compatibility in e-commerce is lacking, particularly in the SSWA sub-region. While many measures are ad-hoc or temporary in nature, there has been a gap in information sharing, delay in reporting of measures to WTO or WCO, etc. The inter-country coordination was also very sporadic and issues-based.

Such measures may not only add to our strengths, but also fulfil national commitments to the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA), thereby upholding multilateralism. At the same time, lessons learned from Coronavirus policy responses should inform future policies on a resilient recovery and sustainable development goals.

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Appendix 1: Trends in SSWA's Export and Import, 2019 to 2020

(a) Export

	January –March 2019		January - March 2020	
	Value (US\$ billion)	Share in World (%)	Value (US\$ billion)	Share in World (%)
Afghanistan	0.183	0.004	0.204	0.005
Bangladesh	9.231	0.202	11.632	0.27
Bhutan	0.144	0.003	0.726	0.017
India	85.738	1.872	74.219	1.721
Iraq	20.338	0.444	19.323	0.448
Maldives	0.053	0.001	0.06	0.001
Nepal	0.211	0.005	0.325	0.008
Pakistan	5.893	0.129	6.062	0.141
Sri Lanka	3.089	0.067	2.412	0.056
Turkey	44.534	0.972	42.673	0.989
SSWA	169.414	3.699	157.636	3.656
World	4580.28	100	4313.76	100

(b) Import

	January-March 2019		January-March 2020	
	Value (US\$ billion)	Share in World (%)	Value (US\$ billion)	Share in World (%)
Afghanistan	1.79	0.04	1.53	0.03
Bangladesh	14.61	0.31	10.02	0.23
Bhutan	0.33	0.01	1.91	0.04
India	121.05	2.61	109.7	2.48
Iraq	8.63	0.19	8.88	0.2
Maldives	0.71	0.02	0.73	0.02
Nepal	3.04	0.07	2.91	0.07
Pakistan	12.73	0.27	12.38	0.28
Sri Lanka	5.04	0.11	6.73	0.15
Turkey	50.47	1.09	55.65	1.26
SSWA	218.4	4.72	210.44	4.76
World	4641.63	100	4422.92	100

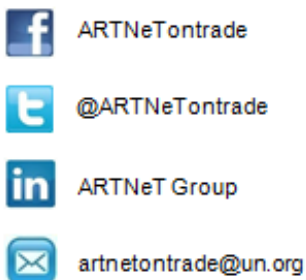
Source: Calculated based on IMF, 2020b



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