

Facilitation of Trade Finance for Sustainable Development

Ivana Popović Petrović¹

Irena Janković²

Mirjana Gligorić Matić³

Abstract

In this paper, the focus of the analysis is to point out many challenges and obstacles to sustainable development in contemporary period. There is an increasing number of factors that play a key role in this process, as well as a significant role in reducing the poverty. Trade also contributes to development, and in the recent period, numerous obstacles have been identified in the area of trade finance. That is the main motive for the research of numerous measures implemented to facilitate trade finance, with special attention to challenges in the implementation of these measures. Emphasizing the role of both, trade finance facilitation and Sustainable Development Goals achievement, we will underline the role of global trade finance gap, which dominantly affects SMEs in Developing countries.

This analysis identifies areas that trade and development policymakers should pay attention to, in order to encourage inclusive and sustainable trade and development. By monitoring dynamic changes in the implementation of measures in this domain, we assess the position of numerous individual countries and the regional economic integrations they belong to.

Keywords: Sustainable development goals, trade finance facilitation, trade finance gap, developing countries, single window.

1. Introduction

The Agenda 2030 is based on a three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. On the path of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), regarding the diversity of issues that have to be improved, the United Nations Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development provided a narrow classification of 17 goals to be achieved. These numerous goals with the main purpose to lead towards the overall sustainable development have recorded some progress. However, during the last five years, this progress has lain under the shadow of concern and doubts. (UNCTAD, 2025, p.vii) The position of Developing countries (DCs) and their fulfillment of SDGs is additionally vulnerable. It was noticed that FDI towards DCs were stagnating in 2024, with the drop of SDGs related investments for – 26%. (UNCTAD, 2025, p.7)

The trade was recognized as one of instruments for enabling the SDGs achievement and that fact was fostering the role of trade which needs to be supported further. It was also emphasized that trade costs reduction and closing of the trade finance gap would enable many economies to use the trade as an engine for sustainable development. It was also highlighted that trade could be supported by implementing a number of measures from the Trade Facilitation (TF) domain, following the articles of the recently adopted Agreement on TF (TFA) under the auspices of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The TF is a process of “simplification, standardization and harmonization of trading procedures” (UNCTAD, 2016). The main result expected after the implementation of numerous TFA articles would be the decrease of the cross-border trade uncertainty. That would contribute in enabling the trade to be an engine for the development.

The trade facilitation measures are widespread, although they are classified in a few different groups by the UN Global Survey. At the start of the evaluation and monitoring of the Trade Facilitation measures implementation, their correspondence with the WTO TFA articles was

¹ University of Belgrade, Faculty of Economics and Business, ivana.popovic@ekof.bg.ac.rs

² University of Belgrade, Faculty of Economics and Business, Serbia, irena.jankovic@ekof.bg.ac.rs

³ University of Belgrade – Faculty of Economics and Business, Serbia, mirjana.gligoric@ekof.bg.ac.rs

observed and found to be obvious. However, after a few years, it was noticed that there were some additional obstacles, including specific forms and subjects related to trade, which may face numerous barriers that need to be addressed.

2. Monitoring the Sustainable and Other Trade Facilitation Measures

The ten-year period since the launch of the United Nations` initiative for monitoring and evaluation of the TF measures` level of implementation, could be characterized as a period of the continuous progress, especially in the area of General and Digital TF measures. The biennial Surveys have been created and prepared from the start, for monitoring and evaluation of the implementation success. The number of measures monitored since 2015 has expanded, with each new edition.

The latest measurement for 2025 is based on 62 TF measures, researched in the case of as many as 180 countries. (UNESCAP, 2025a) The improvement in Trade Facilitation implementation globally, comparing the results for 2023 and 2025, reached 5 percentage points. The global average level for TF implementation in 2025 is approximately 70%. However, these results are very unequally distributed over regions, with the best performance of Developed economies with the level of 86%, followed by the Region of South-East and East Asia with 81%. (UNESCAP, 2025a)

The Survey has started with monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of some measures mentioned in the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement from 2013. Following contemporary challenges of world trade, during a next few years, the Survey expanded the requirements of the TFA, with its numerous indicators mostly expressed using the oldest groups as General and Digital measures. The first Surveys started with the General TF measures based on some principles and articles of the TFA: Transparency, Formalities, Institutional arrangement and cooperation and transit facilitation. The second group Digital Trade consists of Paperless trade and Cross-border paperless trade.

Over time, this way of observation has been enriched and expanded with some other aspects important for the area of trade, such as Sustainable TF measures as the third group. It was oriented towards modern issues of Sustainable Trade Facilitation which consisted of three subgroups, very heterogeneous between themselves: Trade facilitation for SMEs, Agricultural trade facilitation and Women in trade facilitation. These three groups are included as a measure of the inclusiveness of vulnerable groups and also as an indicator of the achieved level of sustainable development.

In addition to the Sustainable TF group, a new group, named the Other trade facilitation has been created, with mutually different areas, but also very important, which follow all the most modern changes in trade. In a last few Surveys, more attention has been paid to discovering and using some new indicators for the challenges that international trade was facing. These are challenges concerning the necessity for inclusion of some social groups, some specific sectors, or some specific enterprises as indicators of sustainability. It was expanded with other economic aspects which also needed some help, like times of crisis, or e-commerce, Trade Finance Facilitation (TFF), even the question of trade concerning the wildlife. The last two subgroups are the newest one, researched on a pilot basis. Within this broader group, the Trade Finance Facilitation is highlighted. Numerous aspects in the field of trade finance, if they are identified without delays and addressed properly, can improve the position of DCs in international trade and enable them to use trade as a driver of sustainable development.

Although they look independent, these categories have many elements in common, they are interconnected and influence each other. For example, the TFF has a strong impact on categories in Sustainable TF, especially on SMEs and Women in TF. On SMEs, because when

they start trading across borders, they need resources for digitalizing and new sources of finances. Their lack of financial resources necessary for their involvement in international trade flows should also be noted. They need access to finance with the aim to join global value chains and become more competitive on global market. The category of Women in TF, face the same constraints as SMEs. The subgroup of TFF enables easier access to financial sources, decreasing such a significant obstacle to trade and to sustainable development. The TFF is a field for the cooperation of trade policymakers and TF experts at one side, and representatives of financial sector, mostly banks, with the aim to enable the easiness of trade finance availability for trade stakeholders.

The subcategories Women in TF and TFF belong to the groups in which the facilitation was the least implemented. The level of their implementation in 2023 was 38% for Women in TF and 28% for TFF. (UN, 2023, p. 13)

3. The Trade Finance Gap and Trade Finance Facilitation

Trade finance gap contributes to the slowdown of sustainable development. The trade finance had the vital role for international trade and the support for many stakeholders in international trade, mostly exporters and importers. The role of trade finance sources was supportive because it would be impossible to overcome many risks in international trade provoked by the lack of finances and risks of cross-border payment transactions. That is why this broad scientific and business issue was fully integrated in further monitoring and evaluation of the Trade Finance Facilitation. The trade finance facilitation is one of many aspects to facilitate the flow of finances necessary for sustainable development.

More than 80% of trade depends on different sources of the trade financing. (Beck, S. et al. 2025, p. 1) The gap that has been widening during a few last years was a result of discrepancies of demand for trade financing and supply by banks which have rejected many applications for the financing. The connection of the TFF and trade finance gap is based on the fact that TFF can contribute significantly to the reduction of the trade finance gap which is estimated globally at the level of USD 2.5 trillion. (Picture 1)

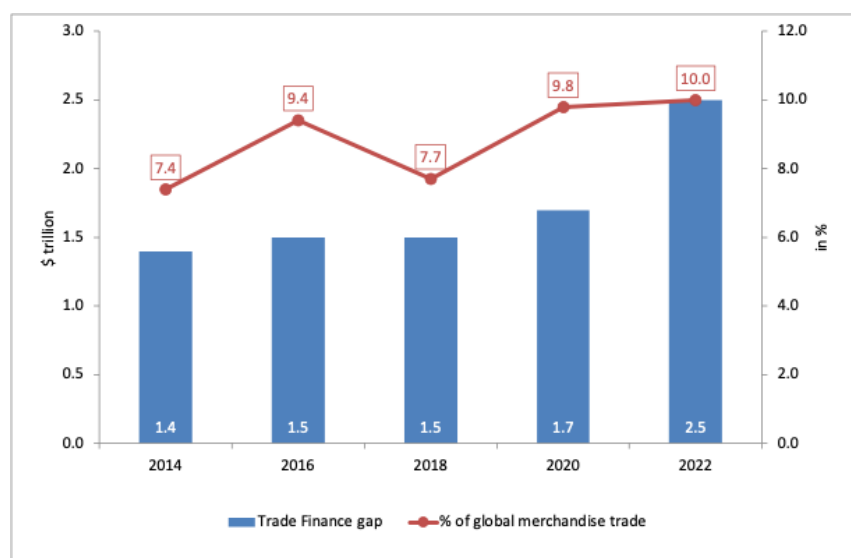


Figure 1: Global Trade Finance Gap, 2014-2022

Notes: Left scale - Trade Finance Gap in USD trillions; Right scale - % of global merchandise trade

Source: Authors, according to data: [Beck, Steven.](#), [Tayag, Mara Claire.](#), [Kim, Kijin.](#), [Latoja, Ma. Concepcion.](#), [Pandey, Ankita.](#), [Malaket, Alexander.](#) “2023 Trade Finance Gaps, Growth, and Jobs Survey”, *ADB Briefs No.256*, September 2023, p. 2.

During the period 2014-2023, the gap was widening continuously, especially after the Pandemic which has brought new risks and fostered the increase of 47%, from 1.7 trillion in 2020, to 2.5 trillion in 2022. (Beck, S. et al. 2025, p. 1) There are some indices that it stayed at the same level of USD 2.5 trillion even in 2025. (GTR, Atkins, 2025) This amount is equal to 10% of global exports, indicating numerous problems that could be provoked.

One of a few main factors, that influence trade flows, beside the demand and supply of finances, certainly are trade costs. The trade transaction costs that occur due to the financing international trade, mostly are in connection with risks of international, or cross-border trade and the payment that follows it. It means that the stakeholder in trade could avoid paying for the goods, or the other stakeholder could avoid delivering it. The other source of risks are financial costs for overcoming the gap which includes the period while the goods are shipping, or while they are in transit. Risks also exist in the correct and adequate use of payment instruments.

4. The trade finance gap and the position of SMEs as engines of sustainable development

The trade finance gap is identified as one of a few main barriers to further global development, with the accent on the specific and vulnerable group of SMEs. That is the category to which most trade enterprises are classified. The gap is an obstacle to full involvement in international trade flows, especially for SMEs in Developing Countries (DCs).

Offering and facilitating trade financing, or financing for cross-border trade is oriented dominantly on banking sector. Their purpose as suppliers is the mitigation of financial and payment risks, concerning the specificities of cross-border trade. These risks affect both sides, lenders and borrowers, in order to solve financial shortages and during the payment procedures, when the whole vulnerability of cross-border trade could be seen. The success of these processes depends on the concrete sector and the level of integration in trading, regional or international. (IFC/WTO, 2025, p. 43) In many countries, the prominent role belongs to subsidiaries of international banks, which offer financing mostly to large trading enterprises. These enterprises mostly are multinational companies. The SMEs, although the most common among registered enterprises, face the lack of sufficient financial resources. The banking sector in DCs offers different banking services, retail, commercial and investment. The existence of the regulatory frameworks, especially for financial frauds, is the main condition for international trade financing. (IFC/WTO, 2025, p. 92) Besides the regulatory frameworks, the assessments of the banking sector's performance are in connection with the level of its concentration. If the level of concentration is high, it entails insufficient market competition, with further consequences symbolized in limited access to trade financing, or extremely expensive financing. That affects the most vulnerable enterprises.

The picture 2 presents the group of enterprises with identified main barriers for their business realization during the period 2023-2024. Among them, the category — the lack of access to finance, was marked by 22% of enterprises and was identified as one of leading barriers to contemporary business. In addition to these ongoing financing challenges, the period of the Pandemic has also contributed to increased uncertainty, which has affected the period 2023-2024. It made the access to financing more restrictive and expensive and that barrier was identified by 23% of enterprises. (Picture 2)

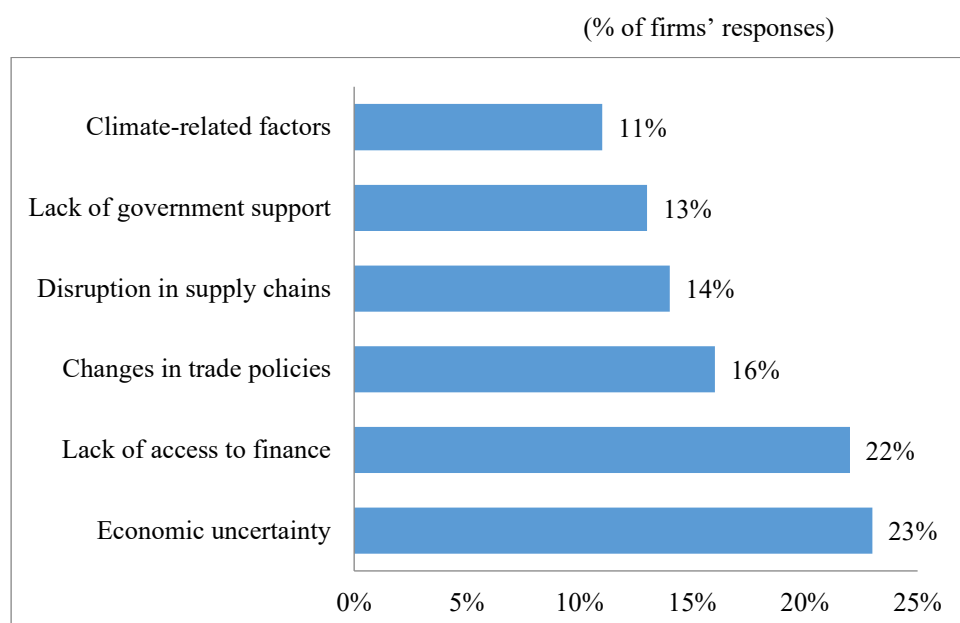


Figure 2: Firms' Barriers to Business in 2023 and 2024

Source: Authors, according to data: [Beck, Steven.](#), [Tayag, Mara Claire.](#), [Kim, Kijin.](#), [Latoja, Ma. Concepcion.](#), [Pandey, Ankita.](#), [Malaket, Alexander.](#) “2023 Trade Finance Gaps, Growth, and Jobs Survey”, *ADB Briefs No. 256*, September 2023, p. 4.

The trade finance is recognized as a facilitator of international trade transactions and that is the main reason for including the TFF in a Survey. (UN, 2023, p. 47) The trade finance gap is the major problem because of being the obstacle for full inclusion in international trade.

5. Trade Finance Facilitation – elements, implementation and expectations

The Trade Finance Facilitation as the issue is only one of many measures or, indicators of the SDGs fulfillment degree. Apart from this, the TFF is an obvious indicator and the symbol of the interdependence of the trade in goods and financial flows. Monitoring of the TFF implementation, as a subgroup in UN Survey on Digital and Sustainable TF was introduced in 2019, while it was further developed in Surveys 2021-2025.

Compared to other, mostly traditional TF implementation measures, with longer duration of the implementation periods, as General and Digital TF, even with the Sustainable TF measures, the group of Other TF measures has achieved strongly lower level of implementation, globally. It is the situation with all groups of Other TF measures, as well as, for the Trade Finance Facilitation. However, during the period from 2019-2023, the TFF implementation increased from 12% to 28%. (Picture 3)

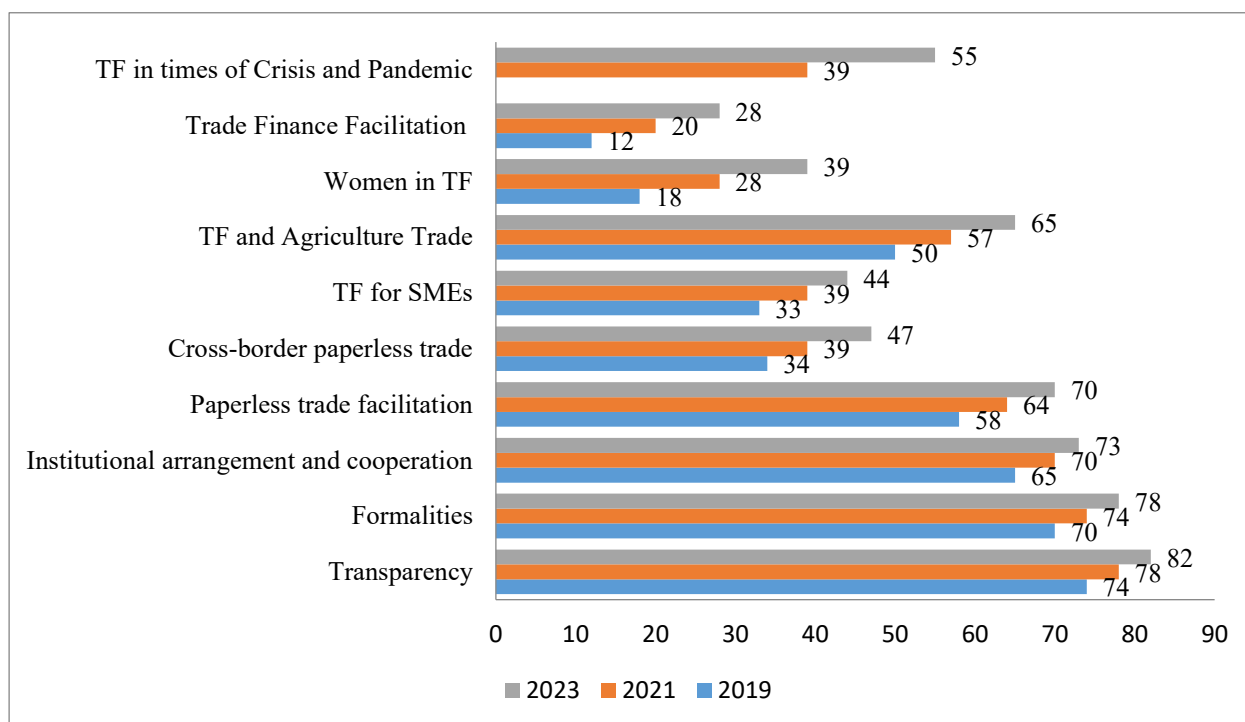


Figure 3: Progress of global implementation rates of TF measures, 2019-2023, (in %)

Source: Authors, according to data: UN, *Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation: Global Report 2023*, UN 2023, p. 18

The main approach for resolving the trade finance role as an obstacle, consists of a few main steps, mostly oriented towards closing the trade financial gap and the trade transaction costs decrease. This can be partially achieved by the establishing and developing the trade finance channels and facilitating the approach to them and with the overall fostering of the trade facilitation measures implementation and logistics efficiency improvements. These aspects and the improvements in their implementation could be evaluated by using three of TFF elements: (UN, 2024, p. 50)

- Single window facilitates traders’ access to finance (SW)
- Authorities engaged in blockchain-based supply chain - project covering trade finance
- Variety of trade finance services available

These elements are named according to their roles in TFF process: (UN, 2023, p. 47)

- noticing and the use of new sources of capital for trade financing,
- implementation of measures in the SW domain as an express of the new technology in trade financing digitalization and
- the directing of numerous financing solutions towards still underserved market segments as a part of blockchains;

Considering three possible levels of implementation, full, partial and pilot phase, for the TFF category, one measure stands out according to achieved higher level of implementation compared to other two. That is a Variety of trade finance services available.

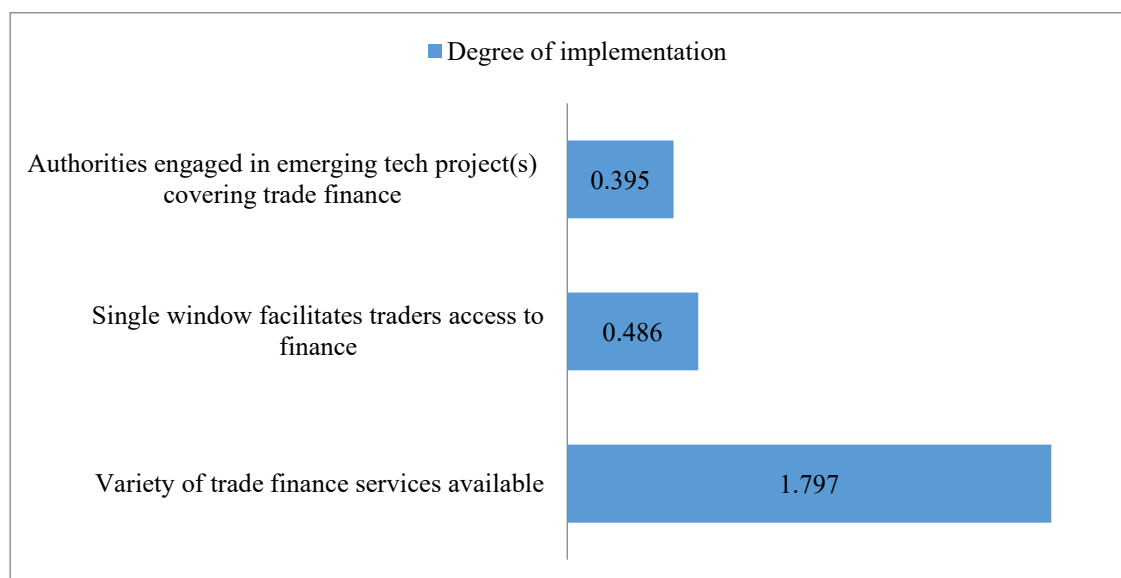


Figure 4: Trade Finance Facilitation implementation level, 2025

Notes: Based on scores for 177 economies; Degree of implementation (0 – not implemented, 1- pilot stage, 2- partially implemented, 3- fully implemented)

Source: Authors, according to Data UNTF Survey, <https://www.untfsurvey.org/> (02.11.2025.)

The Variety of trade finance services available was the most implemented measure among TFF, even in a period when the TFF was included in UN Survey, in 2019 and in the first Survey after that, in 2021. The last Survey 2025, points the same conclusion. The Single window as the instrument of Customs authorities, basically was created and used by the Customs authorities and agencies with the aim mostly to simplify trade procedures and to expedite the clearance of goods and make it more effective. Its purpose was linking of agencies as an automotive system. However, the connection between banks and the institutions necessary to complete trade transactions, especially those in relation with payments, is not as developed as the relation of Customs and other included authorities in the clearance process. That is the reason why the Single window, especially in the field of finances and payments connected with export and import, is not recognized by stakeholders in trade as it probably was expected when the TFF was included in Survey.

6. Regional Implementation of Trade Finance Facilitation

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) Regional Report covers data for achieved TF implementation results in 48 ECE member countries, further divided in seven ECE country groups. Among them, many European countries and regions are classified.

Compared to 2021, the level of the total TF implementation in ECE countries changed positively from 76% to 80%, in 2023, and was recorded as very successful in 2023, especially in some regions. (UN, 2024, p. 8) Concerning the TFF particularly, the average level of the ECE implementation of TFF was significantly lower, at 24% and two years after it, increased to 30%. (UN, 2024, p. 49)

The improvements were done in all ECE country groups except in Eastern Europe. This is also the group from ECE region with the lowest level of TFF implementation at 4%. (Picture 5)

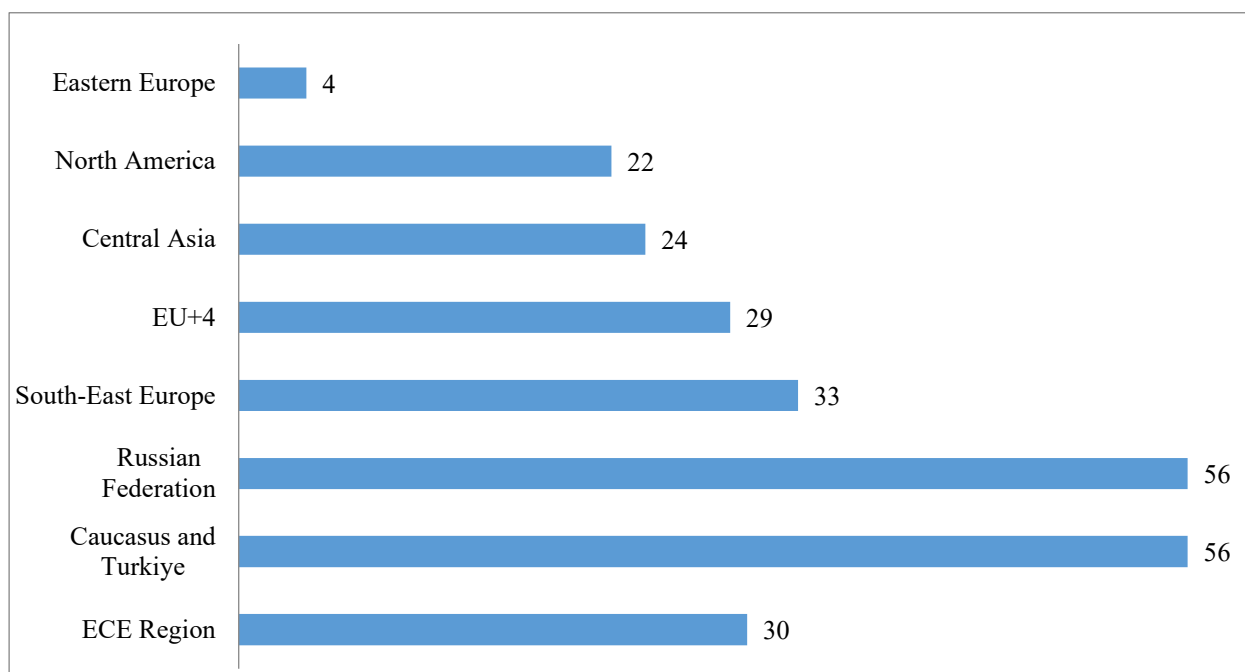


Figure 5: Implementation rate of the TFF measures, by country group, ECE, 2023, (%)

Source: Authors’ according to data: UN, *Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, UNECE Regional Report 2024*, ECE/TRADE/483, 2024, p. 49.

Region of Caucasus and Turkey, as well as Russia, realized very high level of the TFF implementation rates, 56% in 2023 which classified them as the best positioned regions in the ECE. The most obvious increase of TFF implementation was obtained in the South-East European Region, as the increase from 18% in 2021 to 33% two years later, in 2023. (UN, 2024, p. 49)

The best performance among individual measures of the TFF subgroup is the Variety of trade finance services available, with the level of implementation of 60.92% in 2025, as the global average. It is almost unexpected that regions we compared to global average, South-East Europe, and Caucasus with Central Asia have obtained higher level of implementation - 62.96%. (Table 1)

Table 1: Trade Finance Facilitation — selected group of countries, 2025 (in %)

	Global Average	South-East Europe, Caucasus, Central Asia	Serbia	(CEFTA 2006 without Serbia)	Turkey
Variety of trade finance services available	60.92	62.96	100	66.67	100
Single window facilitates traders access to finance	16.48	24.07	33.33	6.67	0
Authorities engaged in emerging tech project(s) covering trade finance	13.41	14.81	0	0	33.33

Source: UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable TF 2025, <https://www.untfsurvey.org/> (10.10.2025.)

The implementation of the remaining two measures was expectedly at a significantly lower level. That corresponds to the situation in other parts of the world, comparing to the first measure in Table 1. Serbia obtained a significantly higher level of implementation compared to other CEFTA 2006 signatories. Except for the first measure in Table 1, comparison of the position of Serbia and Turkey, points out equal efforts in implementing the TFF measures. However, the orientation towards these measures is reversed, Serbia has made efforts for SW

implementation, while Turkey has made progress in the implementation of the third measure from the Table 1.

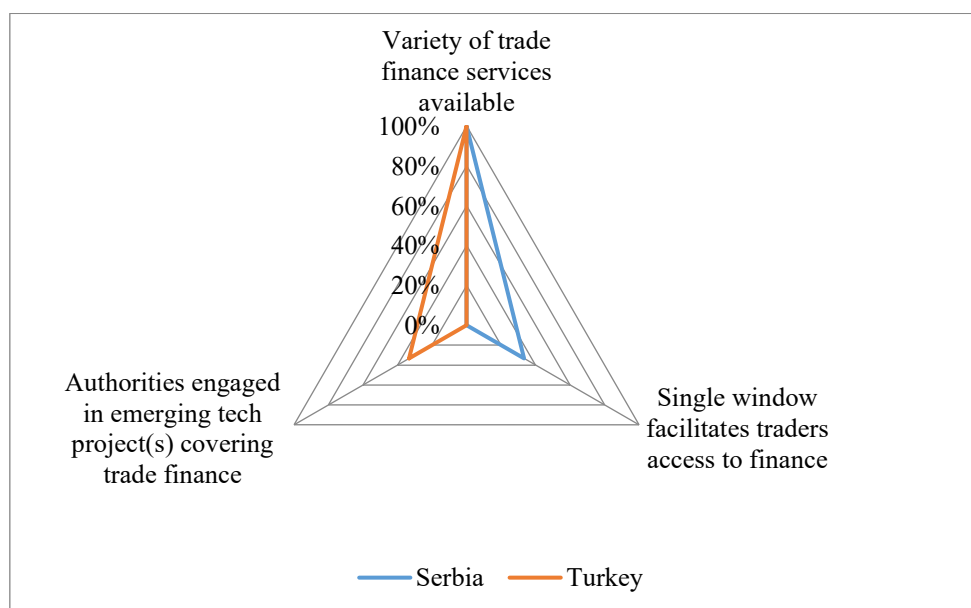


Figure 6: Serbia and Turkey concerning similarities and differences in TFF implementation

Source: Authors according to data UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable TF: www.untfsurvey.org, (10.10.2025.)

There is also one curiosity concerning some of ECE countries, especially with lower level of GDP per capita. It is expected that mostly countries with the high implementation rates are countries with a high level of GDP /p.c. However, some of ECE countries with a lower level of GDP/p.c. reached higher implementation level of General and Digital TF measures. The explanation of that could be the fact that their governments have done a lot for the intensification of TF implementation concerning real needs of the regional trade integrations. These countries are: Bulgaria, Azerbaijan, Georgia, North Macedonia, Serbia and Uzbekistan. (UN, 2024, p. 9)

Table 2: Implementation rate of TFF measures, by number of countries, ECE, 2023

	Fully implemented	Partially implemented	Pilot stage	Not implemented	Don't know	Not applicable
Variety of trade finance services available	18	14	3	6	7	-
Single window facilitates traders' access to finance	4	7	3	29	5	-
Authorities engaged in blockchain-based supply chain project covering trade finance	2	2	5	20	17	2

Source: UN, *Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, UNECE Regional Report 2024*, ECE/TRADE/483, 2024, p. 50.

The level of the SW implementation in ECE countries in 2023 was modest, with the full implementation by only 4 countries and by a significant statements that they “don't know”. At a very beginning of its implementation are Authorities engaged in blockchain-based supply chain project covering trade finance, as almost unknown by many countries. (Table 2)

One of explanations for these low results for its implementation is the fact that in many countries from the ECE group of countries, the respondents on interviews answered that they were not been informed that these measures have ever been implemented. It is particularly

pronounced for the third measure in the Table 2, the answer “don’t know” was given by respondents in even 17 countries.

Although some of institutions like Customs and Ministries for Trade point out the importance of facilitation of financing and payment procedures in international trade transactions for overall achievement of the SDGs, they still remain in the domain of facilitating the process of border crossing and customs clearance. (UNESCAP, 2025b, p. 29)

Since Variety of trade finance services available is the measure with the highest level of implementation in the aforementioned regions, the situation is the same when it comes to the implementation of this measure in the ECE region, as well as globally. In 2023 it has reached the level of 74.2% for full and partial implementation and on pilot basis. If the level of implementation is viewed only as full implementation, then the result is significantly weaker, only 28.2%, globally and 37.5% in ECE countries. (Table 3)

Table 3: The most and the least implemented TFF, total and in ECE countries, 2023

Category	Most implemented		Least implemented	
	Measure	Implemented fully, partially and on a pilot basis (%) / Full implementation (%)	Measure	Implemented fully, partially and on a pilot basis (%) / Full implementation (%)
TFF	Variety of trade finance services available	74.2 / 28.2 (total) 72.9 / 37.5 (in ECE)	Authorities engaged in blockchain-based supply chain project covering trade finance	16.6 / 3.1 (total) 18.8 / 4.2 (in ECE)

Source: UN, (2023), *Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation: Global Report 2023—Based on the United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, p.15.and for ECE countries - UN, Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, ECE Regional Report 2024, ECE/TRADE/483, Geneva, 2024, p. 21.*

The measure which is the least implemented, total and in ECE countries are Authorities engaged in blockchain-based supply chain project covering trade finance, with full implementation at only 3.1% totally and 4.2% in ECE countries. The level of implementation in ECE countries significantly exceeds the world average.

In the ASEAN region, the TFF subgroup is situated almost at the lowest level concerning the total level of implementation. Actually, it is positioned on the penultimate place according to the level of implementation. The structure of the three TFF measures implementation varies — while the Variety of trade finance services available, obtained full, or partial implementation by 100% of countries in ASEAN, the other two are very modestly implemented, as SW for example, with approximately 30% of implementation. (ESCAP, 2025, p. 29)

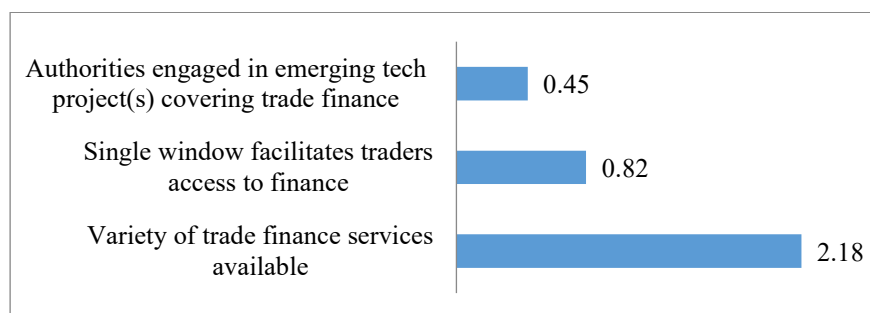


Figure 7: ASEAN average score of TFF implementation, 2025

Notes: Based on scores for 11 economies of ASEAN;

Degree of implementation (0 – not implemented, 1- pilot stage, 2- partially implemented, 3- fully implemented)

Source: Authors, according to Data UNTF Survey, <https://www.untfsurvey.org/> (11.11.2025.)

The ASEAN countries implementation of these measures is very low, but some of its members, individually, have already made a great contribution to the implementation of modern technologies to facilitate the payment process in international trade. Concerning these improvements, Singapore and Thailand are leading as symbols of best practices in this field all over the world.

With cooperation and inputs from Singapore and Japan, Thailand is developing a project of creating a platform for digitalization of trade processes with a purpose to foster and expedite imports and exports and to facilitate access to trade finance, pointing the SMEs. (UN, 2023, p. 49) The digitalization is oriented towards the digitalization for main documents, as set of documents used in trading, as purchase order, invoices and packing lists.

Singapore and UAE, with the financial impact of Development Bank of Singapore and National Bank of Dubai, started with the first digital trade financing pilot, with many purposes. (UN, 2023, p. 49) Among them, one stands out, that is the mutual recognition of digital documents between authorities of both countries, such as the electronic Bill of Lading. It has the purpose of transport documents, but also, as the document necessary for realization of the payment and as one of documents of title, meaning that the one who owns it, also has the right of ownership over the goods described in it.

The example of Bangladesh SW confirms the heterogeneous role of SW, because its SW supports both, exporters and importers as applicants for trade financing and banks, as sources of financing. This connection was based on creation of link between banks which need to get information with the aim to support financing of trade stakeholders. For that purpose, identifying exporters or importers, who apply for trade financing, Bangladesh has prepared Registration Certificates for exporters, as well as for importers. (UN, 2021, p. 37)

7. Conclusion

The achieved results in Trade Facilitation implementation are an important sign of the measures nevertheless taken and implemented after facing the numerous challenges. They also are the source of instructions for policymakers, as well as a guide for increased participation in global and regional value chains and sustainable economic growth in future.

By its impact on rising transparency and clarity of trading processes, Trade Facilitation measures have the main aim to decrease trade costs which are higher than necessary. Potentially significant improvements in trade finance access and the trade finance gap reduction, as well as trade costs decrease, could unite the trade and financial element within the TFF measure, with the purpose to create more favorable trade environment. Decreasing the trade finance gap with the reduction of costs, time and uncertainty, by implementing TFF measures have dominant role in enabling economies to participate in Global value chains.

That way, Developing countries, could gain more benefits of trading and continue using trade as an engine for the growth and sustainable development. A special contribution to the implementation of these measures was made by numerous DCs, for whom the signing of regional economic integration agreements accelerated the decision-making process on investments in improving trading conditions.

Although the implementation of TFF measures is situated at almost the lowest level compared to other measures in the TF domain, the fact that every biennial Survey shows an increase in the level of implementation is encouraging.

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