

Digitalization of Trade Facilitation Process as the Foundation for Sustainable Agricultural Trade Facilitation*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is pointing out the connection between three main pillars of Trade Facilitation, General, Digital and Sustainable, with a special focus on Agricultural Trade Facilitation as one of three elements of the Sustainable pillar as its sub-group. Data used in this paper confirm improvements in these new issues of the Trade Facilitation during the last few years, highlighting improvements which made Trade Facilitation more sustainable and inclusive. They also confirm the relation between both, Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation. Digitalization could bring Sustainable groups towards facilitating their market access and their inclusion into global supply chains, whether they're about Agricultural products, SMEs, or, Women in trade.

The movement of Agricultural products, especially perishable ones is more important in comparison with products of other two sub-groups from Sustainable pillar. The main elements for the Agricultural Trade Facilitation are perishable goods and the Sanitary and Phytosanitary certification. In parallel, digitalization in Agricultural Trade Facilitation implies trade procedures, connected with the Single Window concept. Therefore, Digitalization is constantly enhancing transparency and facilitating trade in agriculture products.

Keywords: Trade facilitation, sustainable trade facilitation, agricultural trade facilitation, digitalization.

1. Introduction - Trade Facilitation

The Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) was adopted in 2013 and its implementation started in 2017, after the ratification of the Agreement in member countries. This is the most obvious result of the World Trade Organization` (WTO) activities regarding the numerous questions raised since its establishing in 1995.

The TF is one long-term process, mostly oriented towards: “simplification, standardization and harmonization of trading procedures” (UNCTAD, 2016). It also could be observed as “transparent, predictable and straightforward border procedures that expedite the movement of goods” (OECD, 2018).

Many analysis, before the start of its implementation and even more after, proved that significant impact could be expected in the reduction of time necessary for the realization of the trading cross-border process and in reduction of trade costs. Both of them, after decrease, could have positive impact on trade volume increase, encouraging foreign trade enterprises to participate in trade more intensively. All these contributions of the TFA implementation are intended to reduce the uncertainty of the cross-border trade.

Reduction of costs, time and uncertainty by implementing TF measures has 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.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, it was obvious that TF has supported supply chains especially for Essential products as Medicals and Food. The elements of the TF were realized that time, as the acceleration of border clearance procedures, using specific “green corridors” as a measure to prevent shortages of Medicals and Food in many countries and among signatories of Regional

* The paper is a result of the project No. 179062, Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

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Free Trade Agreements, like CEFTA 2006 (CEFTA, Internet). Green corridors were established in European Union, too (OECD, 2020).

The reduction of trade costs is very important for all countries and their sectors, but, the sector of agriculture, as the backbone for many Developing countries and many regions in a world, certainly highlights specificities of agriculture products trade and its relation with trade costs. It was noticed that trade costs in agricultural sector are as twice as industrial in Asia-Pacific region. It has been proven that direct tariff costs are only one small part of the overall agricultural trade costs in the region, with the share between 0-20% (Duval et al., 2012). The other, dominant part of their agricultural trade costs are non-tariff barriers, as the heterogeneous group of border and behind-the-border procedures (Duval et al., 2012).

The TFA gathers many problems and challenges, as a long-term process which cannot be ended overnight. During last few years, the dynamics of the TFA implementation was different and tackled different parts of this Agreement. The most obvious improvements in its implementation were achieved during the period 2019-2022, in all income groups of countries, in the fields as: Information availability, Simplifying and harmonizing documents, Automating and Procedures (Sorescu & Bollig, 2022). It was the result of one OECD research.

Many methods for evaluation and measuring the level of the TF implementation and its contributions to increase trade are developed by many institutions. They measure increase of cross-border trade, the level of the TF implementation, improvements done in specific issues as fragments of TF process, focusing on regions in world, different income group of countries, or countries individually.

2. Sustainable Trade Facilitation

One of many researches focusing on overall level of the TF implementation in contemporary times and on some specific groups, also, was prepared by the UN and edited as the UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation. The UN Survey was monitoring many economies in a world, starting in 2015 and expanding their number. In 2021, research focused on 144 economies, raising their number at 163 in 2023. That monitoring and evaluation of the TF implementation resulted with the estimation of stages reached in the process of the TF implementation. They are expressed as: fully implemented, partially implemented, pilot stage of implementation and not implemented and marked with different numbers as symbols, 3, 2, 1, 0, respectively (UN, 2023). The evaluations of these measures implementation success vary greatly, depending of the measure taken into the consideration. The list of criteria has been gradually expanded since 2015 when the first UN research started with only one level of criteria.

The Trade facilitation implementation estimation is based on the four pillars, General, Digital, Sustainable and Other. When the process of TFA implementation started, after the ratification of the TFA, even before, contemporary TF as General TF was the main and only issue. However, over time, other pillars are developed until today, as related aspects.

The first level for the evaluation was expressed through General TF measures, mostly known after the adoption of the TF Agreement: Transparency, Formalities, Institutional arrangement and cooperation and Transit facilitation. These measures are expanded by the group of Digital measures: Paperless trade measures and Cross-border paperless trade measures.

The third level, Sustainable Trade Facilitation is closely oriented towards position, obstacles and progress in the implementation of TF measures from the aspect of SMEs, Agriculture and Women. In UN Global Survey, Sustainable TF is incorporated since 2017 (UN, 2021). The recent inclusion of Sustainable TF criteria for SMEs especially is very important for the business sector`s TF analysis and Agriculture TF for such an important sector. The meaning of

that “sustainable” is connected with the inclusion, because for the sustainable trade, and especially sustainable TF, the inclusion of these vulnerable categories is the main purpose.

The second and the third level are interconnected. That means that Digital trade, especially, digitally facilitated trade, could be a good basement for the some specific groups, like SMEs, Agriculture and Women, although, from the first point of view, it was hard to see a common denominator for these three categories. Digital trade could bring these three categories towards facilitating their access to markets and their inclusion into global supply chains. But, if the appropriate level of development of digital trade is missing, the opposite trend would become obvious, by increasing inequalities between stakeholders in the realization of these three processes. The lack of the digital aspect could provoke SMEs problems with the use of the digital instruments, barriers for the women entrepreneurship and their integration to the international trade flows and the possibility to facilitate trade of agricultural products. This treatment is necessary, especially for perishable agricultural products, which could be provided by the priority treatment approval for these products and with fostering testing and laboratory methods to obtain appropriate certificates. That is the field for the digital trade.

The latest group of criteria is Other Trade Facilitation as the heterogeneous group which brings together some of the most modern areas where the TF is very important as: Trade Finance Facilitation, TF in times of crisis-emergency, TF for e-commerce and Wildlife TF.

The Sustainable Trade Facilitation, as the sub-group for monitoring the TF implementation, was arranged as the sub-group for specific groups of society, or sectors with special position. Agriculture, SMEs and Women are the part of the sustainable development goals which are pointing inclusive economic goals. Among these three groups, in 2023, the Agriculture reached the best results in implementation of 63.91%, comparing to 43.44 % for SMEs, or 38.17% for Women.

However, comparing these results with the total score for General and Digital TF in 2023 with the 69% of implementation, Sustainable TF sub-groups still are in a worse position. The main reason of these results is the fact that these sub-groups were later noticed as important for the TF evaluation comparing to main groups of General and Digital TF. They still need more initiatives and policies for its improvements (UN, 2023).

Table 1. General, digital and sustainable TF implementation rates, 2023 (in %)

Economies	Total Score General and Digital TF	Agricult. TF	TF for SMEs	Women in TF	General, Digital + Agricul.	General, Digital + SMEs	General, Digital + Women	Total Score: General, Digital and Sustainable
Developed economies	85.27	75.76	46.67	28.28	84.18	79.91	80.24	75.92
Latin America and Carribean	71.34	73.08	38.97	38.46	71.54	66.84	68.44	65.44
Middle East and North Africa	65.88	70	56.44	42.96	66.35	64.57	63.86	63.57
Pacific Islands	42.33	33.33	12.12	24.24	41.30	38.13	40.73	36.72
South and East Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia	73.12	69.91	54.44	54.94	72.75	70.52	71.51	69.38
South Asia	60.89	61.46	40	47.22	60.95	57.99	59.68	57.56

Economies	Total Score General and Digital TF	Agricult. TF	TF for SMEs	Women in TF	General, Digital + Agricul.	General, Digital + SMEs	General, Digital + Women	Total Score: General, Digital and Sustainable
South-East and East Asia	76.65	64.88	51.43	34.92	75.31	73.15	72.97	69.71
Sub-Saharan Africa	57.44	51.10	40.18	40.06	56.72	55.04	55.91	53.63
LDCs	55.05	47.92	36.85	43.52	54.23	52.52	54.03	51.46
LLDCs	61.01	56.48	43.21	48.56	60.49	58.54	59.91	57.65
SIDS	52.76	50.60	25.95	30.56	52.52	49.04	50.81	47.90
Global Average	68.60	63.91	43.44	38.17	68.06	65.10	65.91	63.11

Source: UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation 2023, *Database*, Internet, <https://www.untfsurvey.org/world>, (10.10.2024.).

Comparing results of the average implementation rates for the TF measures by regions, according to General and Digital TF aspect, we can conclude that some improvements are done in a very short period 2021-2023.

As expected, the best results were achieved by Developed countries, in 2021, as well as in 2023. All country groups achieved improvement in the implementation of TF measures in mentioned short period. Differences among them existed in earlier periods, too. The slowest implementation was recorded in Pacific Islands, Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Although progress has been made in 2023, concerning the level of General and Digital TF implementation, regions still differ significantly mutually, with the obvious differences between Pacific islands with the level of 42.33% and Developed countries with the 85.27%.

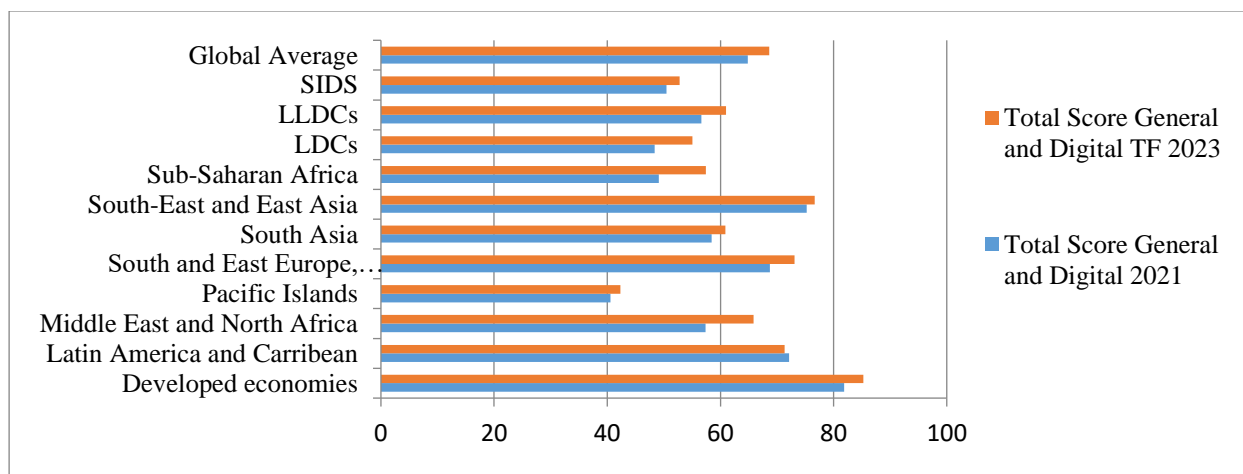


Figure 1. Total score: General and digital TF, 2021 and 2023, (%)

Source: Author, based on data: <https://www.untfsurvey.org/world>, (10.10.2024.).

Among Developed countries, as the group best performing with the implementation, some countries stand out. The example of Netherlands points out almost the perfect level of the implementation with 98%, followed by Australia, New Zealand and Singapore with 97% and Belgium with 96%. The best performing region among Developing countries is the region

South-East and East Asia with the 77% of average implementation rate, with excellent individual results of Singapore`s 97% and Republic of Korea`s 95% (UN, 2023).

When General and Digital TF implementation results are expanded with the third, new-added group, Sustainable TF, average TF implementation result becomes diminished, by regions and globally. The Global average decreased from 68.60% to 63.11%. This is provoked by the relatively lower level of Sustainable TF implementation.

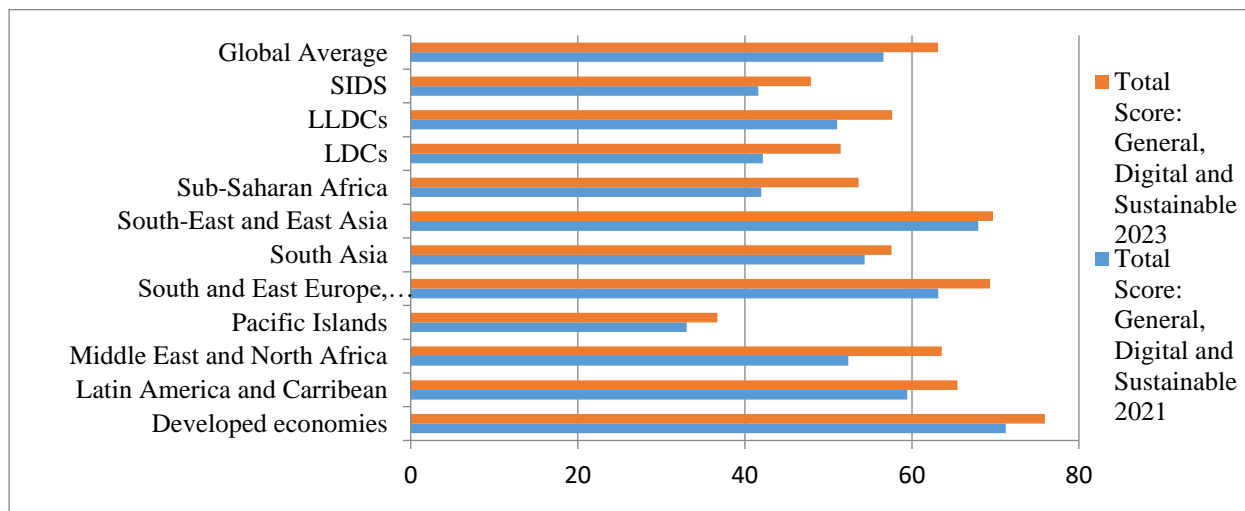


Figure 2. Total score: General, digital and sustainable TF, 2021and 2023, (%)

Source: Author, based on data: <https://www.untfsurvey.org/world>, (10.10.2024.).

The UN Report has brought a new approach to measurement of the improvements made in TF implementation. The interest for the TF implementation and the monitoring with the evaluation of its success has increased intensively after the ratification of the TF Agreement in 2017. Every second year the new UN Report brings data of the improvements made individually, by TF sub-groups, regions and countries.

3. Agricultural TF and the role of Trade costs in Agricultural Sector

Agricultural products stand out as a special group, precisely due to the fact that they are actually the oldest products that have been the subject of exchange at all. Their role in meeting basic, existential needs is unchangeable and their strategic and security importance is growing. With the growth of the world's population, the importance of ensuring sufficient quantities of safe agricultural products is also increasing. This is supported by constant growth of trade volumes.

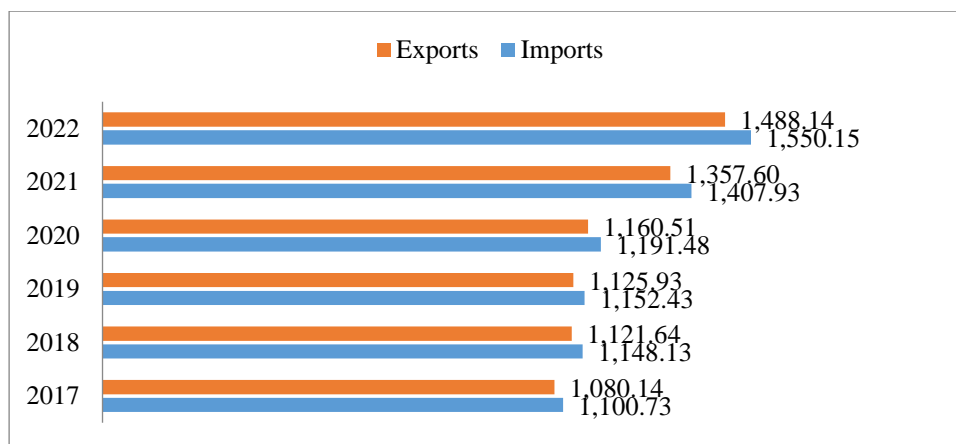


Figure 3. World trade of agricultural products, 2017-2022, (USD Billion)

Source: Author based on WTO Data, Internet, <https://www.wto.org>, (12.10.2024.)

According to data for the period 2017-2022, although the Pandemic crisis, trade in Agricultural products was rising, constantly. It is phenomenon that, even in the hardest year of the Pandemic in 2020, Agricultural products were the subject of the increased trade, mostly grace to the fact that Food, along with the Medicals, was classified as Essentials.

The Agricultural TF measures are not lagging behind the General and Digital TF very much, but other two sub-groups in Sustainable TF certainly are. That way they contribute to the lower implementation rate of the entire Sustainable TF group. Global Average for Agricultural TF (ATF) in 2023 was 63.91, with many examples of better individual implementation, as the example of Developed countries with the level of 75.76%. They are followed by the Latin America and Carribean with the 73.08%, Middle East and North Africa with 70%, South and East Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, with 69.91%. Differences are obvious analyzing the implementation from the geographical aspect. As the best performers, Developed countries stand out, but going further leads to the conclusion that the success of the implementation decreases until it comes to 33.33% for Pacific Islands as the weakest performer.

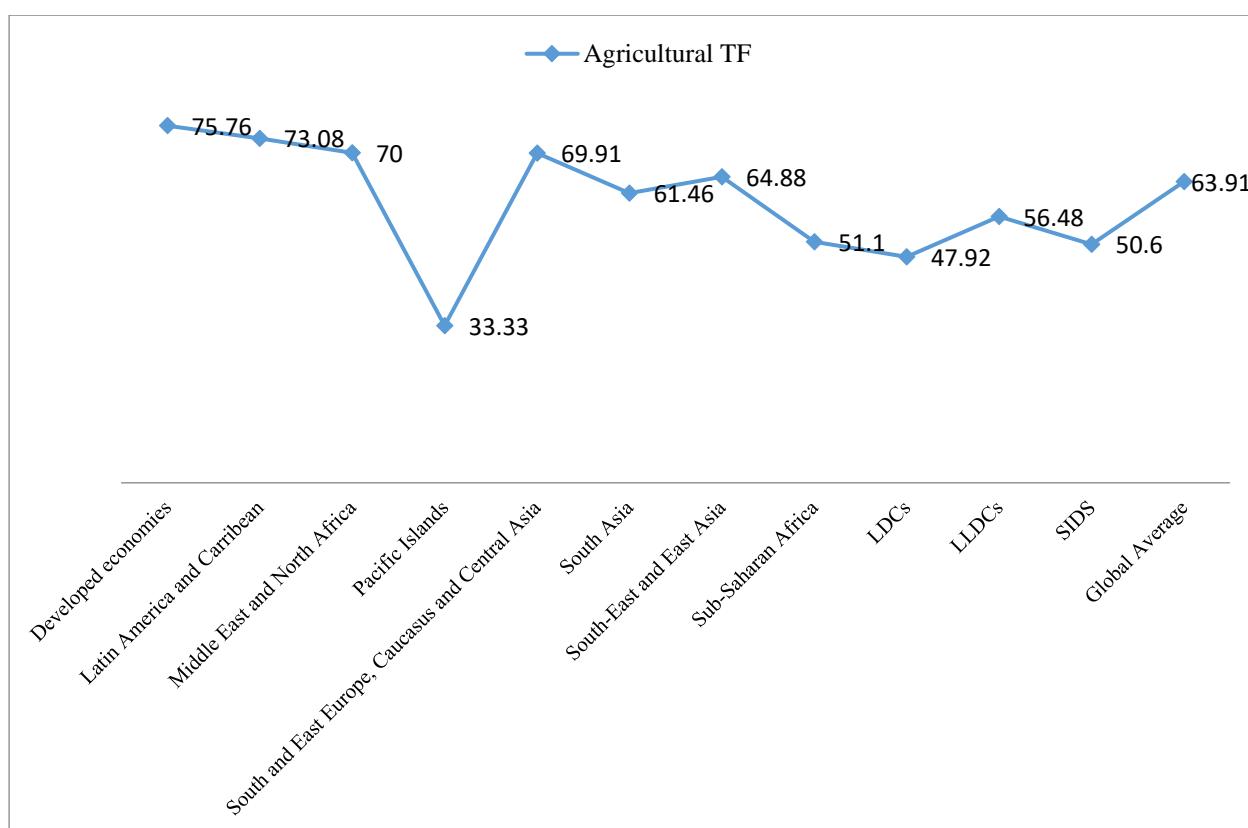


Figure 4. Agricultural trade facilitation implementation rates, 2023, (%)

Source: Author using data: <https://www.untfsurvey.org/world>, (10.10.2024.).

The Agricultural TF was measured in four fields:

- Special treatment for perishable goods
- Testing and laboratory facilities available to meet SPS of main trading partners
- National standards and accreditation bodies to facilitate compliance with SPS
- Electronic application and issuance of SPS certificates;

Among these four measures in the group of Agricultural TF, the Report has found the measure which is the most implemented, with high percentage. That was the measure Special treatment for perishable goods at border crossings. Measure which had the lowest implementation level was Electronic application and issuance of SPS certificates (UN, 2023).

Table 2. The agricultural trade facilitation implementation measures according to four degrees of implementation, 2021 and 2023

Agricultural Trade Facilitation	Survey 2021	Survey 2023
Special treatment for perishable goods	2.035	2.227
Testing and laboratory facilities available to meet SPS of main trading partners	1.806	2.025
National standards and accreditation bodies to facilitate compliance with SPS	1.771	1.908
Electronic application and issuance of SPS certificates	1.063	1.509

Note 1: Data in table are average scores for 144 countries in 2021 and for 163 countries in 2023.

Note 2: Degree of implementation: 0- Not implemented, 1-Pilot stage of implementation, 2-Partially implemented, 3- Fully implemented;

Source: Author, using Data: <https://www.untfsurvey.org/> (09.10.2024.)

It is estimated that the full implementation of the WTO TFA could decrease trade costs (TCs) significantly, approximately 14.3% (WTO, Internet). It is also expected that the most obvious gains would be oriented towards the LDCs. Trade costs differ depending on whether the countries are high, or low-income, but also depending on the sector of the products` origin.

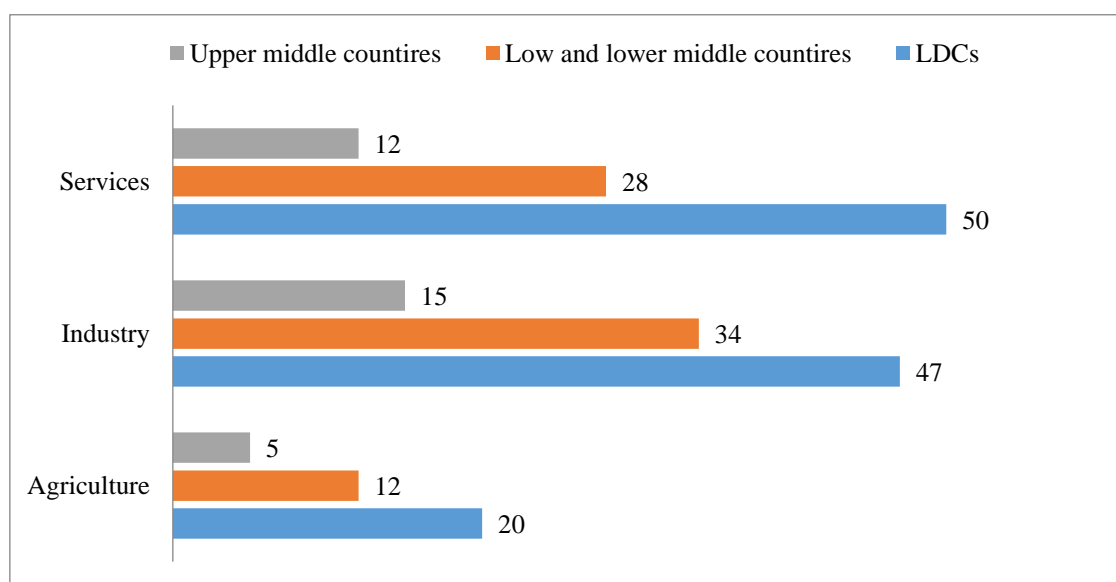


Figure 5. Higher trade costs in lower-income economies relative to high-income economies, 2020

Source: WTO, *World Trade Report 2024 — Trade and Inclusiveness: How to make trade work for all*, Geneva, 2024, p. 41.

As the result of transportation, transaction costs and trade policy barriers decrease, especially during the last decade in the 20th century and at the beginning of the new one, the fast growing of global trade was obvious. However, further decrease of these costs was slowed down after 2012. The most affected by this phenomenon were precisely middle and low income countries (WTO, 2024). Differences of trade costs share in the global structure of costs are spreading and currently are very obvious between income categories and sectors. They are especially large between high income countries at one side and LDCs and middle income countries, at the other. Comparing to high income countries, concerning the sector of Agriculture, trade costs in LDCs are 20% higher, 12% in low and lower-middle income countries and 5% in upper middle income countries.

One analysis for Asia has shown that TCs in agricultural sector are twice as high as those for manufacturing products. Tariffs for importing agricultural goods intra-region, mostly are being

below 5% in most subregions, although they are not unique around the Asia (UNESCAP, Internet). Agricultural trade costs (ATCs) were lowering in Asia, during last decades, especially during the period 2003-2009, although with lower intensity comparing to Developed countries organized in regional economic integrations, as EU and NAFTA. The trade costs are caused by many factors as geographic distance in the first place, followed by maritime logistics performances, easiness of obtaining credit and the role of ICT. When tariff rates are included in TCs, they also have some important part as a cause for rising TCs in intra-region trade, as well as variations in ATCs. Comparing intra-region trade where all these barriers are important and relation ASEAN-OECD countries, trade and variation of Agricultural TCs, are more determined by maritime logistics services and NTBs. In this case, among the heterogeneous group of NTBs, Sanitary and phytosanitary measures are targeted especially (UNESCAP, Internet).

These conclusions provide the approach for the ATCs decrease in future. It is based on the SPS facilitation and special treatment for perishable goods, with the aim to put ATCs under the control. Digitalization has entered that process too, because digital technologies are important part of the SPS implementation, especially concerning: electronic certificates, remote audits, conformity assessment platforms, and traceability technologies (OECD, Internet). These aspects are the part of the overall TF process. Particularly distinguished are E-certificates, making the cross-border trade faster.

4. The Role of Digitalization, SPS and Perishable goods for Agricultural TF

Sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) certificates are necessary documents for entering the foreign markets for agricultural products as plants, animals and food. That document is a confirmation that specified export product complies with the SPS requirements determined by competent institutions in importing country. This is a cross-border documents exchange between authorities in exporting and importing countries (OECD, 2021).

The SPS certificates are marked as one of many cross-border impediments to trade, especially concerning the slow issuance of these certificates and the lack of the intentions to recognize the SPS certificates exporting country by customs administration of the importing country. The appearance of the Electronic exchange of the SPS certificates was one big step toward facilitation of trade in animal and plant-based food products. It was more observed during the COVID -19 pandemic with the aim to speed up trade flows especially for Food and Medicals. However, the adoption of e-certificates for plant-based products and plants is progressing faster, comparing to e-certificates for trade in animal food products (Ryan et al. 2023).

Table 3. Increase in export values from implementing SPS e-certificates between 2010 and 2018 (%)

	After 1 year	After 2 years
Animal products	3.8	12.7
Vegetable products	19.2	5.7
Processed food	16.0	16

Source: OECD (2021), "Digital opportunities for Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Systems and the trade facilitation effects of SPS Electronic Certification", *OECD Food, Agriculture and Fisheries Papers*, No. 152, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/cbb7d0f6-en>, p. 34

After the use of SPS e-certificates during the period 2010-2018, it was noticed that trade values for some group of products were increased notably. After two years of the implementation, export increased especially for Processed food, 32%, for Vegetable products, less, but, significantly, 25% and even for Animal products, although modestly, for 16.5%.

A digital transformation is necessary for institutions` capability to share data and expedite clearance and release of goods. In addition, the e-certification needs legislation reforms, infrastructure building, or modernization and “shifting mind-sets” important for this revolutionary change (Ryan et al. 2023). This field needs also update of national laws to ensure recognition of e-certificated by institutions and secure exchange of data. However, benefits are significant: enhanced efficiency, improved transparency, traceability and improved risk management (Ryan et al. 2023).

The implementation and use of digitalization and its digital tools, intensified after the Pandemic, has significant positive impact on the increase of efficiencies in SPS systems, enabling, that way, improvements in trade flows, especially for plant-based, vegetables and processed food products (OECD, 2021).

Challenges for the Electronic exchange of SPS certificates are based on high costs for the development and building the infrastructure, for education and trainings, constant updating, and the system refreshing. It needs investments in IT sector.

The Single Window as one system for electronic delivering of data at one place, one window, was estimated as one of the main instruments for global trade facilitation. It is mainly oriented towards facilitation of transactions at the borders, where also SPS certificate could be a burden itself. Therefore, one of many proposals was the role of the SW which can facilitate even the adoption of e-certification system despite the fact that the Single Window is a very complex and expensive investment for every country (Ryan et al. 2023). One of main recommendations for countries is connection of the SPS e-certification systems with the implementation of the TF Agreement, especially its article considering Single Window (Ryan et al. 2023).

The issue of the Perishable goods treatment is one of the most visible contributions and interconnections between this UN evaluation and monitoring of the WTO TFA implementation, concerning the sector of Agriculture. Namely, the Article 7.9 of the WTO TFA points out the obligations for all member countries to “prevent avoidable loss or deterioration of perishable goods” and to enable the rapid release of such goods under the customs procedure, even when customs administration and other border inspectorates are not working (WTO, TFA, Internet). The importers would be allowed by customs administration to storage perishable goods until the release in appropriate warehouse conditions.

The Article 7 - *Release and Clearance of Goods* and its part 7.9 is the basement for the customs treatment of perishable goods. These goods are more vulnerable to external shocks and they could be exposed to faster deterioration, caused by their natural characteristics, if they are not positioned the proper way and stored in an appropriate manner. They could change own quality and main characteristics, causing that way, losses for their owners. Mostly they belong to the group of Agricultural products.

Sections of the Harmonised System classification (HS), which mostly have registered perishable goods with high risk of spoilage are Sections I and II. The Section I (Live animals; Animal Product) is almost whole covered as the Section with perishable products with high degree of perishability with HS codes 02-05: Meat, Fish, dairy produce and Products of animal origin. The content of the Section II (Vegetable products) with Codes 06-08 should be added to this group: live trees, bulbs, cut flowers, edible fruits, nuts and vegetables. Beside them, there are other Sections and Codes with the medium and low level of perishability (Moisé & Sorescu, 2021).

In the most challenging position are exporters who organize the logistics for the realization of the foreign trade operation with perishable goods as the objects of trade and they have an important role in logistics, preserving the cold chain and ensuring that these products are

exposed to right temperature and humidity. However, the critical point and the main barrier they could be faced with, is at the borders, because of delays in clearance, caused by customs administrations or the inspectorates connected with customs administration. This is the main challenge for many Developing and the Least Developed Countries, mainly dependent on the export of Agricultural products.

5. Conclusion

The Sustainable TF group became a third pillar for evaluation of the Trade Facilitation implementation, starting from 2017 and it consists of three subgroups: TF for SMEs, Agricultural TF and Women in TF. This group connects the issue of TF with some specific aspects important for the fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals for inclusive economic growth. The Agriculture as a sector is a source of food, employment, security and has a strategic position. Trade costs in this sector are subject of many initiatives for its decrease. Agricultural Trade Facilitation is based on Trade Costs decrease.

Although digitalization was marked as the main instrument for the Trade Costs decrease, Sustainable TF pillar has incorporated Digitalization into its framework, with the same aim to decrease TCs and enable more intensive trade flows. These processes need financial resources to upgrade IT systems for expedite cross border trading procedures and trade policies adjustments and proper regulations by national laws and multilateral approach.

Among the Sustainable TF measures, issues related to perishable products and SPS certification stand out. Both categories need developed digitalization for its realization. The period of Pandemic had positive role in providing faster movement of Essential products, especially Perishable products. With the same purpose, SPS e-certification is developing and has positive effects on trade volumes increase. Data for last few years, when Sustainable TF became a part of UN evaluation, confirm important positive steps for implementation of all three subgroups, especially for Agricultural TF, as the best positioned. Positive changes have also affected all income groups of countries, although with different dynamics. The Developed countries stand out, as expected.

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