The ASYCUDA Programme

DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

An efficient and effective customs administration is essential to the welfare of any country. It benefits the national economy by collecting revenue. It assists the Government to implement national and international policy. It protects the country by combating fraud and the illegal trafficking of prohibited and restricted goods. It provides the statistical information on foreign trade transactions essential for economic planning and it encourages international trade. However, customs administrations in many countries often fall short of being efficient and effective.

OBJECTIVES

The ASYCUDA programme is directed at reforming the customs clearance process. It aims at speeding up customs clearance through the introduction of computerization and simplification of procedures and thus minimizing administrative costs to the business community and the economies of countries. It also aims at increasing customs revenue, which is often the major contributor to national budgets in most countries, by ensuring that all goods are declared, that duty/tax calculations are correct and that duty/exemptions, preference regimes, etc. are correctly applied and managed. Furthermore, it aims at producing reliable and timely trade and fiscal statistics to assist in the economic planning process as a by-product of the customs clearance process. An important objective of ASYCUDA projects is to implement the systems as efficiently as possible with a full transfer of know-how to national customs administrations at the lowest possible cost for countries and donors.

Projects also introduce international standards, including UN/EDIFACT, and the active cooperation among a steadily growing number of ASYCUDA user countries further increases mutual benefits.

FEATURES

ASYCUDA is a computerized customs management system which covers most foreign trade procedures. The system handles manifests and customs declarations, accounting procedures, and warehousing manifest and suspense procedures. It generates detailed information about foreign trade transactions which can be used for economic analysis and planning. Steps are now being taken to prepare the necessary software to include transit procedures.

The ASYCUDA software operates on various types of hardware in a client/server environment. Transaction and control data are stored on a relational data base management system. It takes into account all international codes and standards relevant to customs processing as established by ISO, WCO (World Customs Organization) and the United Nations. ASYCUDA can be configured to suit national characteristics such as individual customs regimes, national tariffs, customs regulations and legislation, and after the initial configuration it remains fully flexible so as to adapt to changing customs regimes, regulations and legislation, as required. It also provides for electronic data interchange between traders and customs administrations using UN/EDIFACT rules.

The ASYCUDA implementation strategy has been developed to respond to the challenge represented by such a complex reform programme. It aims to ensure the full transfer of know-how in order to make for national long-term sustainability. At the same time it requires strong national commitment at all levels and it provides for continuous progress evaluation. Project activities are carried out in the following three phases:

(1) The preparation phase proceeds with an assessment of the actual situation. The national team, together with the international advisers, identify areas requiring reform, such as the introduction of international codes, the streamlining and simplification of clearance procedures, the alignment of forms to international standards, and the modernization of the national customs law to conform the Kyoto Convention. While some of these reforms can be achieved and introduced early in the project, others need to be established
through legislation and may therefore take much more time to implement. During this phase, technical and functional ASYCUDA implementation courses are delivered to build up the national implementation team and to prepare the psychological foundation for them to develop a sense of ownership of the system.

(2) The pilot implementation phase includes the preparation of the national ASYCUDA configuration, i.e. the coding of the tariff and the related regulations and legislation, the data entry of the control tables (declarant codes and addresses, customs office codes, etc.), and the preparation of valuation and selectivity systems. Computers for the pilot offices (normally headquarters, an airport, a sea port, a land boundary and an inland clearance office) are installed and tested to confirm that the configuration of the system fully meets the requirements of the national regulations. The reform activities initiated in phase one are continued as necessary. A work plan for the implementation of the system throughout the country (phase 3) is elaborated, together with an estimate of the resources required. A large ASYCUDA familiarization training programme for customs staff and trade users is delivered during this phase.

(3) The roll-out phase can potentially be implemented by the national team with little or no assistance from international experts if the transfer of skills and know-how was successfully completed during the first two phases. This phase is much more of a logistic challenge than an intellectual problem: it requires the physical preparation of all sites to be computerized, a large amount of training based on the model training course of phase two, and the technical installation and support of computer systems in the identified sites. The configuration of the customs software will simply be copied from the appropriate pilot sites.

The first two phases have a minimum duration of 18 months and will only succeed with strong political commitment and support from the highest levels, and with the full time availability of a competent and motivated multiskilled national team of customs and technical staff. Output/results/impact. The impact of ASYCUDA projects can easily be assessed through the increase in customs revenues, the availability of reliable trade statistics and the reduction in average clearance time. In some countries the results are less impressive, mainly because of resistance to the in-depth reforms of the customs system that the implementation of the programme requires.

In Romania the ASYCUDA project has now been installed in over 95 locations

nationwide and covers 90 per cent of all trade. The increase in the availability of statistics has already greatly benefited fiscal analysis. In the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and in Romania, the systems have been integrated into the national computer network and the control of moving cargoes has been introduced through the manifest module.

With 32 active projects and expenditures exceeding $6 million in 1997, ASYCUDA is the single largest technical cooperation programme in UNCTAD. Overall, there are now more than 70 countries worldwide that have adopted the ASYCUDA programme, and 60 are utilizing it on a regular basis. In 1997, five new projects were signed, namely with Jordan, the three Baltic States and Sri Lanka, for an upgrade to the latest version of ASYCUDA.