
How to connect the PICARD program to regional capacity building activities—from the perspective of the WCO Asia Pacific Region

Tong Hua

Abstract

There is one WCO Regional Office for Capacity Building (ROCB) and seven Regional Training Centres (RTCs) in the Asia Pacific (A/P) region. The WCO and these regional bodies have jointly organised many capacity building activities, namely regional, sub-regional and national workshops. The topics covered align closely with those addressed at WCO PICARD conferences. The difference is that the conference is more focused on academic or theoretical aspects of the topics, while the workshops are more focused on practical ones. This article discusses how to combine these academic contributions with the work of the WCO regional structures in the future in three ways, (1), with the creation of a centre of excellence, in which ROCB and RTCs can play a more important think-tank role, (2), including the outcomes of the WCO capacity building workshops in higher level research (for example, publishing PICARD conference papers via other channels), and (3), introducing useful research outcomes into future capacity building activities. The article also suggests how WCO regional structures can be more involved in the PICARD program and how such structures can play a unique role in promoting and transferring the key findings of high-quality research into practical outcomes.

1. Overview of the ROCB and RTCs in the A/P region

First of all, it is important to understand the origins and development of the WCO regional structures. It is well known that the WCO was established in 1952 in Brussels, Belgium as the only intergovernmental organisation specialising in customs matters. As of today, the WCO represents 183 customs administrations across the globe that collectively process approximately 98 per cent of world trade.¹ The WCO has devoted a lot of attention to improving the quality, relevance, and availability of its capacity building activities. A regional approach to performing effective and efficient capacity building activities, in close cooperation with regional members, is one of its priority initiatives to improve customs competences based on the needs of each region. The Asia/Pacific Regional Office for Capacity Building (known as the ROCB A/P) was officially launched on 28 September 2004 in the wake of the endorsement of the WCO Council Sessions in 2004.² The ROCB A/P was the first ROCB to be established and now other regions, namely the Americas/Caribbean (AMS), Europe (EUR), Middle East and North Africa (MENA), East and South Africa (ESA) and West and Central Africa (WCA), all have their own ROCB.

Like the ROCB, Regional Training Centres (RTC) constitute one of the key components of the regional approach. Forming virtually independent and autonomous entities, the regions are best placed to identify and respond to their members' training needs. This type of training, which is broader in scope than that offered to individual countries, makes it possible to pool and optimise resources within a single region. Such centres offer a number of advantages: they enable customs officials from neighbouring countries

to forge links with one another and they facilitate the follow-up of WCO programs in a region. To date, 29 RTCs have been established globally, with seven in the A/P region (in China, Fiji, Hong Kong China, India, Japan, Korea and Malaysia).³

What is the relationship between the ROCB and RTCs? The prime responsibility for the development and delivery of training lies with the RTCs. The ROCB, however, does play an important role, to (i) coordinate the activities of the Training Centres in the region, (ii) encourage the RTCs to develop specialist training products, for example, management training, business skills, enforcement and compliance, (iii) identify training needs at a strategic level and (iv) evaluate the impact of training at a strategic level.⁴ Moreover, there is a formal annual communication mechanism, called the A/P RTC Heads Meeting, co-organised by the ROCB A/P and the RTCs, to discuss the most important issues of the year. For instance, this year, 2020, the 18th Meeting of Heads of the WCO A/P RTCs will focus on training methodologies under COVID-19. Note that this paper does not cover the role and purpose of the Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices (RILO) and Regional Dog Training Centres (RDTC), which are usually considered to be operational areas of the WCO.

2. The link between regional capacity building activities and the PICARD program

The WCO and its Regional Structures jointly organise many regional, sub-regional and national workshops covering different, sometimes controversial, topics, such as e-commerce, environmental protection and new technologies, to meet the needs of the 33 customs member administrations in the A/P region. A review of previous WCO PICARD conferences reveals that the most important topics discussed in the PICARD conferences are also addressed by the WCO workshops. The difference is that the conference is more focused on academic or theoretical aspects of the topics, while the workshops are more focused on practical ones. Hence, there are topics in common between the PICARD program and regional capacity building activities.

As the regional capacity building hub, the ROCB A/P actively attends and participates in WCO PICARD conferences. For example, Dr Tong Hua, the representative of the ROCB A/P, was invited by the WCO Research Unit to the 12th PICARD Conference held in Hammamet, Tunisia, on 26–28 September 2017. He was one of the speakers in a roundtable discussion session, ‘Partnership between Academia and Customs’. Dr Tong presented ‘Partnership between Academia and Customs: Practices in AP Region’. He introduced ROCB A/P’s main function, as well as selected cases from China Customs and Hong Kong Customs, to highlight the progress in research of the Customs National E-Learning Platforms in the A/P Region. He shared China, Japan and Korea Customs’ best practices in their capacity building activities, which were jointly designed and organised between academics and Customs.⁵ Some RTCs in the A/P region also participate frequently in the PICARD conferences, a good example being the RTC-China, Shanghai Customs College, which has a unique dual function as both a university and training institute, and has contributed many high-quality papers to previous PICARD conferences.

ROCB A/P does not only participate in the PICARD conferences. In 2009 it established a think-tank to publish a good practices report, mainly to publicise the lessons learned, and recommendations from previous WCO workshops, and in 2016, it launched a new research initiative. In the course of the 14th Meeting of Heads of the WCO A/P RTCs held in November 2016 in Hong Kong, China, the delegates had an opportunity to visit the RTC Hong Kong, and observed a vivid demonstration of their E-Learning system, which provided the delegates with invaluable food-for-thought for their in-depth discussion on the ROCB A/P’s think-tank function. Accordingly, the delegates tasked the ROCB A/P to conduct a study on the impact and good practices of the development and use of E-Learning training modules for customs professionals. The ROCB A/P was inspired by the lively discussion, and published a research paper on this study.⁶

3. Recommendations and the way forward

3.1 ROCB and RTCs can play a more important role in utilising their think-tank function

It is considered that the ROCB A/P should closely cooperate with the WCO Secretariat's research unit to:

- conduct joint research
- act as the regional information collection platform by submitting regional best practices
- co-host regional research conferences when funded by donors, following the same model as used by the WCO ESA ROCB regional research conference.

It should also encourage more RTCs to invest resources into research to become centres of excellence. Some RTCs already have a very solid foundation and tradition in research. As mentioned earlier, RTC-China, Shanghai Customs College, is a university that offers master's and bachelor's degrees. They have a rich resource of faculty members and students, which lends itself to more, high-quality research projects. Another example is the RTC Korea Customs Border Control Training Institute (CBCTI). This institute has created positions for professors who undertake research in order to develop training subjects, and who also design the textbooks used for training.

3.2 Use the outcomes of the WCO capacity building workshops as the basis for higher level research

Currently, there are ROCB Annual Reports, Customs Good Practice Reports, ROCB E-Newsletters (Special Essays from the members) and internal mission reports prepared by the ROCB A/P. These cover all types of successful capacity building activities and best practices from members and provide a database of highly valuable capacity building resources. In the future, the ROCB A/P should capitalise on those articles and recommend selected high-quality research reports for presentation in the PICARD conference on behalf of the A/P region research series.

Another possible research approach is the WCO-ROCB-RTC cooperation model. In 2016, the ROCB A/P proposed a new initiative, the compilation of a research/study paper on the regional workshops hosted by the respective RTCs. There are four expected benefits from such an initiative:

- the further promotion of WCO tools and instruments
- better recognition of the current situation in the A/P region
- more strategic capacity building (CB) activities for members in the A/P region
- more practical networks among members in the A/P region, WCO, RTCs and ROCB.

In order to maximise the benefits of the 'WCO A/P Regional Workshop on HS 2017 Implementation', held from 18–22 April 2016 at the RTC Japan, the ROCB A/P together with the RTC Japan compiled an Asia/Pacific Regional Study Paper on preparation for HS 2017. This paper included technical advice from the WCO Secretariat with reference to the workshop materials and replies from the participants to a questionnaire distributed prior to the Regional Workshop. Such a successful cooperation model, integrating the capacity building workshop outcomes with research initiatives, would have a positive impact in delivering more strategic and practical capacity building activities for those member administrations in need of support.

3.3 Implement the key findings of high-quality research through future regional capacity building activities

Through the PICARD conference, participants can learn from different stakeholders' (academia, private sector, and other border agencies) perspectives, which may broaden their understanding of customs topics when discussed from a global perspective. As mentioned previously, most of the topics covered at these conferences have also been discussed among member administrations through workshops. Thus, the PICARD conference is an excellent opportunity to hear the latest information on these topics from different angles, viewpoints, and groups. To improve the assessment of members' needs, it would be useful if the ROCB A/P proposed to the WCO Secretariat to include them in the workshops' corporate plans. In this case, the ROCB A/P should actively participate in PICARD conferences to maintain the currency of their knowledge of emerging issues.

In this way, the ROCB can play a unique bridging role in introducing and promoting the most relevant research outcomes of PICARD conferences to regional members. This role would also further enhance customs competences via the organisation of regional capacity building activities, and by sharing the highlights of conference outcomes. In addition, key research findings, such as those relating to data analytics, cross-border e-commerce models and new technologies applied to customs, could be used as the basis for future regional capacity building workshops.

Notes

- 1 Discover the WCO, the WCO official website www.wcoomd.org/en/about-us/what-is-the-wco/discover-the-wco.aspx
- 2 History of ROCB A/P rocb-ap.org/service/44/
- 3 Regional Training Centres www.wcoomd.org/en/about-us/wco-regional-bodies/regional_training_centres.aspx
- 4 ROCB and RTC Guidelines www.wcoomd.org/-/media/wco/public/global/pdf/topics/capacity-building/overview/guidelines_rocb_rtc_en.pdf?db=web
- 5 ROCB A/P speaks at the 12th WCO Annual PICARD Conference. 28 September 2017 www.rocb-ap.org/article-detail/368/
- 6 Please refer to Dr. Tong Hua's article, *Key Findings of the ROCB A/P Study on the Impact and Good practices of the development and the Use of E-Learning Training Modules for the Customs Professionalism and human resource development. 2017.* www.rocb-ap.org/file_media/file_document/upload/ENL59.pdf

Dr Tong Hua



Dr Tong Hua is an assistant researcher at Shanghai Customs College, a member of the Research Association of China Customs, a former acting director of the Research Centre of China Customs, and since November 2016, a secondment official from China Customs to the WCO Regional Office for Capacity Building of Asia Pacific, Bangkok, Thailand. He is also a WCO-accredited Customs Modernization Advisor (Human Resource Management and Development, HRM & HRD).