

WCO REGIONAL APPROACH TO CAPACITY BUILDING

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Abstract

A core aspect of the World Customs Organization (WCO) Customs Capacity Building Strategy involves the 'Regional Approach to Capacity Building'. Capacity building includes institutional development, the development of effective legal frameworks, the enhancement of staff capability, the application of modern techniques and the provision of suitable equipment. In order to implement the Strategy, the Regional Office for Capacity Building (ROCB) Asia Pacific has set four priority areas (pillars) to ensure smooth implementation of the ROCB Strategic Plan. The four pillars and their concrete actions are: to support the implementation of the WCO SAFE Framework of Standards; to further develop partnerships with donor institutions; to enhance the provision of better technical and management assistance; and to develop communication and coordination with Members including sharing regional best practices.

Introduction

In order to provide enhanced and improved capacity building activities to Members, the World Customs Organization (WCO) discussed the new 'Customs Capacity Building Strategy' at the Policy Commission in June 2003. The Strategy was subsequently approved by the 101st/102nd WCO Council Session. A core aspect of this Strategy involves the 'Regional Approach to Capacity Building', the objective of which is to provide better capacity building in the region by proper identification of regional needs through a comprehensive diagnosis process, to allocate limited capacity building resources effectively, to enhance coordination with donors, and to promote the sharing of regional countries' best practices.

One of the important components of the Regional Approach to Capacity Building is the establishment of a Regional Office for Capacity Building (ROCB) to facilitate capacity building at that level which, in turn, increases the effectiveness of the WCO's capacity building activities.

Establishment of the ROCB in the Asia Pacific Region

Following the decision of the WCO Council Session, in April 2004 the WCO Asia Pacific Region developed a Capacity Building Strategy for the Region aimed at ensuring a sustainable long-term approach. This approach included the establishment of the ROCB in Bangkok, Thailand.

The ROCB Asia Pacific was formally opened in September 2004 following the endorsement of the 103rd/104th WCO Council Session and the approval of the Thai Government. The ROCB is located at the headquarters of the Thai Customs Department in Bangkok. As of June 2008, six full-time officers from member customs administrations work at the ROCB. The officers are from China Customs, Japan Customs (two officers, including the Head of the ROCB), Korean Customs and Thai Customs (two officers). Additionally, two Customs attachés in Bangkok (from the Australian Customs Service and New Zealand Customs Service) assist the ROCB.

Activities of the ROCB in the Asia Pacific Region

Capacity building is not equivalent to technical assistance and training although both are among its most important components. Capacity building includes institutional development, the development of effective legal frameworks, the enhancement of staff capability, the application of modern techniques, and the provision of suitable equipment. In reality, capacity building is a modernisation process.

To meet this broad objective of capacity building, the ROCB Asia Pacific developed an ROCB Strategic Plan in accordance with the WCO Strategic Plan and the WCO Asia Pacific Regional Strategic Plan (RSP). The RSP was determined by the Asia Pacific Heads of Customs Administration Meeting which is the highest level decision making mechanism in the WCO Asia Pacific Region.

In order to implement the Strategy, the ROCB Asia Pacific has set four priority areas (pillars) to ensure smooth implementation of the ROCB Strategic Plan. The four pillars and their concrete actions are:

Pillar 1: To support the implementation of the WCO SAFE Framework

The WCO Council Session adopted the SAFE Framework of Standards to secure and facilitate global trade in June 2005. To implement the SAFE Framework, in January 2006 the WCO started the Columbus Programme, the largest ever WCO capacity building program. As the first step to implement the SAFE Framework, the ROCB in cooperation with the WCO Secretariat, organised four Diagnostic Framework workshops to foster diagnostic experts. More than 30 customs officials are certified by the Secretariat as diagnostic experts. Next, the ROCB sent its staff and regional experts, trained and certified by the Secretariat, to undertake diagnostic missions as experts or leaders of missions. Regional experts joined 10 of the 17 missions conducted in the Asia Pacific Region by the Secretariat under the auspices of the Columbus Programme.

As the third step, the ROCB organised six national workshops on the Columbus Programme Phase II Action Plan Development to assist Members to develop their own action plans based on the WCO diagnostic mission's recommendations. The ROCB also encouraged members to submit the SAFE Framework follow-up matrix to the Secretariat to assist with the monitoring of implementation, a Phase III activity of the Columbus Programme.

Pillar 2: To further develop partnerships with donor institutions

Recognising that many of the challenges faced by customs administrations can be met without a substantial amount of funding and that the WCO is not a donor institution, the ROCB set a pillar to enhance cooperation with donors to assist Members in the Asia Pacific Region to find funding. It was acknowledged that for some time donor countries and institutions have conducted and funded many customs-related capacity building initiatives in the region.

As the ROCB is a very new and small regional institution, its first step was to develop partnerships with donors by making the ROCB's activities visible to donors and members. In this regard, the ROCB positively participated in seminars and meetings organised by donors in order to demonstrate the existence, expertise and capability of the ROCB. Through these activities, the ROCB gained a certain level of recognition from international, regional and national donor institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Commonwealth Secretariat, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), AusAID (the Australian Government's overseas aid program), European Community (EC) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The level of partnerships between the ROCB and donors has been deepened by the positive participation of the ROCB in the donors' activities. One good example is the facilitation of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS)¹ border control supported by the ADB, which has assisted with GMS economic cooperation since 1992. One of the development areas is transport improvement including the facilitation of border control. The reform and modernisation of customs procedures at the border is an important element in the facilitation of transportation. As a consequence, the ROCB and ADB organised a GMS Heads of Customs meeting which was financed by the ADB and aimed at providing a proper consultation mechanism for the Director Generals of Customs to ensure the development of a consistent direction. The Director Generals agreed to facilitate the accession of the Revised Kyoto Convention and to the implementation of the SAFE Framework as well as implementation of the ADB Cross Border Transport Agreement, which includes a one-stop service by government agencies at the border.

The other example is the Revised Kyoto Convention seminar held in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and financed by the World Bank. Lao PDR is a new WCO member and requested that the ROCB provide support to enhance awareness and knowledge of the WCO tools, particularly the Revised Kyoto Convention. In response to the request, the ROCB asked the World Bank to provide financial support and requested Thai Customs to provide resource persons to share Thai experiences as well as provide information about the contents of the Convention. Even though it was a small event, it was a good example of capacity building coordination using regional expertise and donor funding.

Pillar 3: To enhance the provision of better technical and management assistance

Supported by the Customs Cooperation Fund (CCF)² Japan, the ROCB in cooperation with the WCO and member customs administrations organises some 10 technical assistance activities every year in the Asia Pacific region. Themes of the seminars and workshops are diverse and range from traditional core customs areas such as the Harmonized System and Valuation to recent priority areas such as the SAFE Framework and Intellectual Property Rights. To support the implementation of the SAFE Framework, the ROCB organised an 'X-ray container scanner image analysis workshop' and an 'Authorised Economic Operator (AEO) implementation workshop' in 2008 – the first regional seminars of this type in the world. Members were highly appreciative of the opportunity to discuss such new ideas and initiatives.

In order to provide further improved technical assistance and training, the ROCB has been organising a Heads of the WCO Regional Training Centres (RTC) meeting every year. Heads of the five RTCs (China, Hong Kong China, Japan, India and Malaysia) have developed a compendium of the RTCs and the best practice of customs training centres. Maximising the use of regional resources for customs training has also been discussed.

Pillar 4: To develop communication and coordination with Members including sharing regional best practices

To enhance the study and research function of the ROCB, a new initiative, the study of regional best practice was started in 2007. So far, the ROCB has distributed the following reports:

- No. 1: Time Release Study case of Japan, Korea and China
- No. 2: AEO Best Practice case of New Zealand and Korea
- No. 3: AEO Best Practice case of Australia and China
- No. 4: AEO Best Practice case of Japan.

The way forward

Following the success of the ROCB in the Asia Pacific region, four additional ROCBs were established by June 2008 and a further ROCB is under consideration to cover all six WCO regions:

- ROCB East and Southern Africa: Nairobi, Kenya
- ROCB North Africa and Middle East: Dubai, United Arab Emirates
- ROCB Americas and Caribbean: Buenos Aires, Argentina
- ROCB West and Central Africa: Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire
- ROCB Europe: under consideration.

This newly established ROCB network will become a core component of the WCO capacity building effort and will work to:

- gain more accurate diagnosis and analysis of capacity building needs in each region
- develop effective partnerships with international, regional and national donor institutions
- provide more effective technical assistance using regional and WCO resources
- develop effective capacity building plans for each region.

The ROCB Asia Pacific would like to be central to this new movement for capacity building.

Endnotes

- 1 The Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) consists of Cambodia, the People's Republic of China (PRC), Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam. GMS countries launched the GMS Economic Cooperation Program to strengthen economic linkage among them in 1992.
- 2 The Customs Cooperation Fund (CCF), established in the WCO, receives voluntary contributions from members to support technical assistance of the WCO.

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Takashi Matsumoto is Director (Head), WCO Asia Pacific Regional Office for Capacity Building (ROCB) in Bangkok, a position he has held since June 2004. He has more than 30 years experience in Customs in Japan, mainly in the areas of international affairs and capacity building. He was a member of Representatives of Japan to the APEC Subcommittee on Customs Procedures (SCCP) from 1999 to 2001, and from 1996 to 1999 was a policy adviser to Indonesian Customs.