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## Research Article

### Exploring the issues and concerns in the implementation of customs trade facilitation initiatives in Central Luzon, Philippines

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#### **ABSTRACT**

towards liberalization of trade and promoting importation and exportation business. This qualitative study sought to identify the emerging issues and concerns surrounding the implementation of the customs trade facilitation initiatives on exportation and importation in Central Luzon, Philippines. The participants of this study were 300 exporters, importers, and processors of the Port of Limay (Bataan), Port of Subic (Olongapo), and Port of Clark (Pampanga). A written interview guide was used in data collection. Findings showed varied concerns in the customs trade facilitation activities encountered by the participants in the different ports of Central Luzon. Major problems include the issues on processing time, website system, absence of signatories, delayed processes, trade ruling changes, and the absence of the paperless transactions. The preliminary data obtained from this qualitative research may be a baseline for the continuous improvement of the customs trade facilitation activities in the region. A quantitative instrument may likewise be developed based on the merging themes culled from this study to validate this qualitative inquiry's results further. The current study also contributes to the shortage of literature in the Philippines regarding customs trade facilitation initiatives.

**Keywords:** *customs trade facilitation, exportation and importation, international trade, issues and concerns, Philippines*

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#### **Introduction**

The implementation of the WTO (World Trade Organization) Trade Facilitation Agreement can augment international merchandise exports by up to \$1 trillion per year, according to the WTO's flagship World Trade Report released in 2015. Significantly, the analysis found

that developing nations will reap the majority of the TFA's benefits, accounting for more than half of all profits. (World Trade Organization [WTO], 2016).

The streamlining, harmonization, standardization, and modernisation of trade procedures is known as trade facilitation (Grainger, 2012).

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It aims to lower trade transaction costs at the point where industry and government meet, but it is on the agenda for many customs-related operations. According to Macasaquit (2009), as tariff-related obstacles were reduced across the world, trade facilitation became the next significant focus of both regional and global trading agreements.

In 2019, the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement marked its second full year of implementation. TFA entered into force on 22 February 2017 after two-thirds of the WTO members completed their domestic ratification process. (WTO 2017). The Trade Facilitation Agreement Facility (TFAF) concentrated on assisting WTO developing and LDC Members with the following goals: (1) To submit their required notifications to the WTO Trade Facilitation Committee in a timely fashion; and (2) to establish and reinforce their National Trade Facilitation Committees (NTFCs); (3) to ratify the Agreement, in the case of those Members still needing to do so; and (4) to seek technical assistance and capacity building (WTO-TFAF, 2019).

Globally, trade facilitation has not been smooth for different countries in recent years. Different countries deal with different custom trade facilitation towards liberalization of trade and in the promotion of importation and exportation business. These custom trade facilitation initiatives impact exportation and importation businesses. These exportation and importation activities are valuable contributions to a country's economic state. The international is also anchored on the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17 that acknowledges trade as a tool for achieving the 2030 Agenda's goals. SDG 17 is all about forming partnerships to achieve the goals. SDG 17 is one of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which was adopted in 2015. It aims to enhance implementation mechanisms and revive the global partnership for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). And international commerce is a crucial part in achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Economic transformation, job creation, and skill development are all aided by the beneficial links between trade and investment, which support SDGs 8 (promote decent work and economic

growth), 9 (build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation), 10 (reduce inequality within and among countries), and 17 (revitalized and enhanced global partnership) (Kituyi, 2016).

In Region III (Central Luzon), Philippines, issues and concerns regarding trade facilitation initiatives are underexplored. Some issues and concerns raised by the importers, exporters and processors in Central Luzon during the pre-survey of the researcher include lack of manpower, delayed processes, and system error. Hence, this study sought to identify the emerging issues and concerns surrounding customs trade facilitation activities in the select ports of Central Luzon, Philippines.

## **Methods**

### ***Research Design***

The study utilized a descriptive qualitative research design which sought to describe qualitatively the issues and concerns encountered in customs trade facilitation activities in the three identified ports of Region III, Philippines.

### ***Study Respondents***

The study was conducted in the provinces of Bataan, Pampanga and Olongapo City.

Bataan and Pampanga are two provinces of Central Luzon while Olongapo City is a first-class highly-urbanized city in the region. Port of Limay in Bataan, Port of Subic in Olongapo, and Port of Clark in Pampanga served as the locale of the study. The participants of this study were 89 exporters, 100 importers and 111 processors of Pampanga (n=100), Bataan (n=100) and Subic Bay Freeport Zone (SBFZ) Olongapo City (n=100). The respondents were chosen through purposive sampling technique.

### ***Research Instrument***

The written interview guide was used to elicit responses on the issues and concerns observed by the respondents on the customs trade facilitation in the region. The interview guide was developed and content validated by three research experts in the field of business administration and customs administration. The respondents wrote their responses in the

written interview document provided by the researcher.

then collected the instruments for data organization.

**Data Gathering Procedure**

The researcher developed the written interview guide based on the major purpose of the study. The tool was checked by the experts in the field of business and customs.

The researcher then secured approval from the Bureau of Customs and concerned offices. Letters of permission was likewise sent to the concerned offices in Pampanga, Bataan and SBFZ Olongapo City for the administration of the written interview guide.

Afterwards, the researcher distributed the survey questionnaires to the target participants of the selected localities. A total of 10 to 15 minutes was given for each participant to answer the interview guide. The researcher

**Data Analysis**

The thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative responses. Through thematic analysis, emergent themes extracted from verbal responses were generated, and then the identified themes were further substantiated (Rogayan, 2019). A word cloud was also generated through a word cloud generator online to have a visual representation of all the qualitative responses obtained by the researcher.

**Results**

Table 1 shows the themes generated on the issues and concerns in the implementation of the customs trade facilitation initiatives on exportation and importation.

*Table 1. Issues and Concerns in Customs Trade Facilitation Implementation*

Issues/ Concerns	Sample Significant Statement	Frequency
Processing time	“There is an inconsistent processing time.” [R7]	26
Website system	“Sometimes, BOC website/system is down, processing takes time.” [R16]	24
Absence of signatories	“With processors, signatories are sometimes the problem.” [R21]	22
Delayed processes	“When it comes to actual process, delay is a fragment problem taking into consideration the number of people/officials for entries to go through and the use of the docs and paper works.” [R35]	19
Trade ruling changes	“Improvement on some rulings to prevent losses or sometimes fines.” [R55]	12
Absence of paperless transaction	“Paperless transaction should be implemented within the Bureau for faster transaction.” [R58]	11
Lack of manpower	“Bureau may add manpower so docs may be routed on time on its designated unit.” [R86]	10
System error	“Errors in the system upon submitting/ processing of documents.” [R94]	10
Routing of documents	“Routing of docs from CCO to operations sometimes slow.” [R18]	9
Imposition of penalties	“Bureau does not allow importers to self-correct errors/mistakes without penalty.” [R24]	7

Issues/ Concerns	Sample Significant Statement	Frequency
Corruption issues	“The customs office does not have window to transact and the traditional way of approaching the official on his or her table is being practiced thus prone to corruption.” [R205]	7
Rigid bureaucratic processes	“Be patient in dealing with the bureau.” [R44].	6
Lack of communication	“Implementation of changes or improvement should be properly disseminated to all involved affected parties.” [R49]	4
Inadequate facilities	“Seaport facilities need to improve to facilitate vessels.” [R174]	3
High tariff	“Some customs officials impose high tariff for some imported goods.” [R132]	3

**Theme 1. Processing Time**

As shown in the table, there are a number of issues and concerns articulated by the respondents based on their qualitative responses. The processing time was cited as the topmost concern of the respondents. Respondent 7 mentioned that there is an inconsistent processing time in the trade facilitation. Respondent 137 said that there are also inconsistent processes which delayed their transactions. Respondent 168 also shared, “excessive and inefficient import, export and transit procedures are one of the main problems.” Interestingly, respondent 186 noted that “licenses and permits from other government agencies shall need to be manually processed only at Manila or other selected major cities” which affect the processing.

Studies show that, delays in international trade may cause considerable loss for a company. Delay may increase bank interest of 12 percent, between 3-7 percent of the total value of the goods (Abdin, 2019). This is also similar to the findings of previous studies thatk inconsistent processing time oftentimes causes a delay in the trade process (Carballo et al., 2021; Hoffman et al., 2018; Ojadi, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021).

**Theme 2. Website System**

The website system also emerged as one of the issues in the trade facilitation. Respondent 16 commented that “sometimes, BOC website/system is down, processing takes time.”

Respondent 198 shared, “more on technical issues as there are times when such websites for documentary requirements are not available when you needed it during importation/exportation procedures.” Relatedly, respondent 199 mentioned that sometimes due to technical issues, the decisions, rulings and other procedures cannot be accessed on the website which cause delay at some manners.

Similarly, previous studies identified that website system causes problems in international trade (Fan, 2019; Vorotyntseva et al., 2020).

**Theme 3. Absence of signatories**

The absence of signatories was also cited as one emerging issue in the process. Respondent 21 said that with processors, signatories are sometimes the problem while respondent 290 mentioned that signatories are difficult to find. Also, some respondents reiterated that signatories should always be available (R230, R243). Respondent 246 stressed that no alternative signatory is being assigned that causes a delay in signing documents.

Several recommendations were given in previous research to address the issue of the absence of significant personnel to avoid delay in international trade (Bowering, 2018; Segers et al., 2019; Vorotyntseva et al., 2020).

**Theme 4. Delayed processes**

The delayed processes are another concerns brought about by the respondents.

Respondent clearly articulated that “when it comes to actual process, delay is a fragment problem taking into consideration the number of people/officials for entries to go through and the use of the docs and paper works.” It was seconded by respondent by respondent 46, “due to strict implementation of COVID protocols most of the procedures and processing of shipments have been greatly affected resulting to delay.” Additionally, respondent 65 suggested “reduce delays by increasing resources to improve.”

Subramanian and Arnold (2001) studied the transportation and logistics networks in South Asia and discovered that the key issues for merchants were connected to logistics services' timeliness, dependability, and safety. For most investigated routes, direct customs clearance processes amounted for less than 0.5 percent of cargo value, although border crossings remained a key driver of high TTCs and extended delivery times. Unnecessary delays and indirect expenditures were generated by customs processing processes.

According to Verma (2002), as stated in OECD (2004), shipping containers of apparel items from Mumbai/Chennai to the east coast of the United States costs Indian firms 37 percent more than identical container exports from Shanghai. This cost disadvantage is attributable to delays and inefficiencies in the manufacturing process in Indian ports.

In the same vein, various studies acknowledged that delayed processes are one of the major challenges in custom operation (Heijmann et al., 2020; Hendy & Zaki, 2021; Hoffman et al., 2018; McDaniel, & Norberg, 2019; Meral, 2018; Yeo, & Deng, 2020).

#### ***Theme 5. Changes in trade ruling***

Changes in trade ruling is another concern emerged in the qualitative responses. According to respondent 55, the improvement on some rulings to prevent losses or sometimes fines should be considered. Respondent 85 shared, “some actual implementation on procedures does not tally with the rules and regulations and are not consistent.” Respondent 89 shares the same view that “some trade ruling does not coincide with the actual process.”

TF is linked to changes in the trading environment in terms of reforms, modernization, and requirement simplification, (Otsuki et al., 2013).

Trade facilitation is a complex and hard topic having national, regional, and worldwide implications for both businesses and governments. Political, economic, corporate, administrative, technical, and technological difficulties, as well as financial issues, are all involved (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2011). Governments seek to create a transparent and predictable environment for cross-border trade transactions by implementing trade facilitation reforms that include simple, standardized Customs procedures and practices, documentation requirements, cargo and transit operations, and trade and transportation arrangements (UNCTAD, 2011).

#### ***Theme 6. Absence of paperless transaction***

Another problem encountered by the respondents is the absence of paperless transaction. “Paperless transaction should be implemented within the Bureau for faster transaction” [R58]. Due to the current situation, respondent 32 mentioned that “paperless transaction should be implemented especially amidst the pandemic to avoid contact closely and possible spread of virus.” Same view was presented by respondent 64, “further improve existing procedures to paperless transactions.”

A myriad of studies revealed the importance of paperless transactions in trade processes (Addo, 2021; Atehnjia et al., 2020; Karabulut & Civelek, 2019; Roy & Xiaoling, 2020).

#### ***Theme 7. Lack of manpower***

Lack of manpower was also cited as one of the issues being faced by the respondents in trade facilitation. “Bureau may add manpower so docs may be routed on time on its designated unit,” as mentioned by respondent 86. Respondent 88 shared the same view that there is a lack of manpower within the Bureau. Respondent 204, however, suggested to “hire more competent employees.”

Some of the issues were limited working hours at customs, a lack of customs officials, a

lack of gates for accepting goods, and the openness of inspection and valuation operations. The authors also came to the conclusion that customs efficiency varies substantially between customs sites within the same nation and that the economic effect varies depending on the kind of commodity (Subramanian & Arnold, 2001).

### **Theme 8. System error**

The system error is another issue cited by the respondents. Respondent 94 clearly articulated that there are "errors in the system upon submitting/ processing of documents." Also, a "back up process should be made in case online services are down" as mentioned by respondent 283. Respondent 42 also noted that the bureau's occasional system error and lack of notice for the issuance of IRRs and inconsistency of other issuances are rampant in the trade facilitation initiatives.

The findings are similar to the previous studies citing system error as another concern in customs trade facilitation activities (Liu & Wang, 2020; Vorotyntseva et al., 2020).

### **Theme 9. Routing of documents**

Routing of documents was also mentioned by the respondents. "Routing of docs from CCO to operations sometimes slow" (R18). Respondent 54 also reported that oftentimes, documents are lost and are not received by the addressees. Respondent 71 and 83 also noted that one of the causes of transaction delays is the routing of documents. Respondent 167 suggested that "extension period for the passing of supporting documents if necessary."

Routing of documents is another concern raised by previous studies as regards custom operations (Fedorenko, & Pokrovskaya, 2020; Hien & Hung, 2020; Matuszak, 2018).

### **Theme 10. Imposition of penalties**

The imposition of penalties was also one of the concerns faced by the respondents. According to respondent 24, the "bureau does not allow importers to self-correct errors or mistakes without penalty." The same sentiment was put forth by respondent 11, "no problem with rulings except for the penalties when error or mistake is committed."

This viewpoint is shared by Francois and Manchin (2013), who add that trade volumes, as well as low-income countries' willingness to participate in the global trading system, are dependent on the quality of regulatory institutions and access to well-developed transportation and communication infrastructures. Facilitation measures are widely acknowledged as critical in assisting nations in developing and expanding their trade (OECD, 2005; McLinden, et al., 2011; Milner, et al., 2008).

### **Theme 11. Corruption Issues**

Some of the respondents also reiterated that corruption issues are still rampant in the bureau. Respondent 205 bravely shared. "the customs office does not have a window to transact, and the traditional way of approaching the official on his or her table is being practiced thus prone to corruption." Respondent 61 also said that the "increase in revenue fraud there is an increase in threats." Some respondents also noted that corruption still thrives in the bureau (R1, R25, R237, R252).

Customs processes that are ineffective and ineffective have negative consequences at both the national and business levels. Countries may face issues such as smuggling, corruption, customs valuation, and tax collection, while businesses may face delayed and unpredictably delivered products and direct costs like rent payments and compliance with stringent customs procedures. There may also be considerable indirect expenses associated with missed business opportunities and the requirement to maintain excessive stock levels (Engman, 2005).

### **Theme 12. Rigid bureaucratic processes**

The rigid bureaucratic processes were mentioned as another concern in the trade facilitation. Respondent 44 suggested to be "patient in dealing with the bureau." Respondent 45 also said that one must know how to deal appropriately regarding the rigid processes.

Inefficient customs services add to costs and delivery times, which in turn lowers the competitiveness of a country's producers (Engman, 2005). Too many licenses, permits, registration, NoCs requirements makes business complex and discourage general people to be

entrepreneurs. Long list of license, registration, and permits requirement creates opportunities for the bureaucratic corruption. On the other hand less controlling / easy access to international trade can create multidimensional business opportunities for the citizens. Trade facilitation does not create opportunities for the importer or exporters alone. It also creates opportunities for banks, insurance companies, and freight forwarders, clearing agents, transportation companies, distributors and retailers. Thus a single international transaction creates business opportunities for the all relevant stakeholders of export or import (Abdin, 2019).

### **Theme 13. Lack of communication**

The lack of communication also happens in the trade facilitation. "Implementation of changes or improvement should be properly disseminated to all involved affected parties" (R49). Respondent 50 said that the systems to access and disseminate information is still lacking. Respondent 171 also mentioned that "most of the times, customs policies are changing and very little information reached the general public."

Similarly, several studies found out that lack of communication is considered an infrastructural barrier in trade facilitation (Albert, 2019; Irwin, 2020; Laajaj et al., 2019).

### **Theme 14. Inadequate facilities**

Inadequate facilities were also one concern articulated by the respondents. "Seaport facilities need to improve to facilitate vessels (R174) shared by one respondent. This was seconded by respondent 50 which said that still lack physical facilities.

The findings support the recent studies indicating that insufficient infrastructural facilities can cause major problems in the customs trade (Al-Maskari et al., 2019; Hussain, 2018; Mustafa, T., & Amjad, 2020; Osabohien et al., 2021; Sarker & Rahman, 2019).

### **Theme 15. High Tariff**

Lastly, high tariff was one of the many concerns shared by the respondents. Respondent 132 said that "some customs officials impose high tariff for some imported goods."

When the tariff rate is held constant at its mean, one standard deviation increase in trade facilitation measures linked to legal certainty lowers tariff evasion by about 12%, as indicated by missing imports in trade data. Even with equal baseline tariff rates, nations with better scores on facilitation measures linked to legal certainty see greater reductions in tariff evasion than countries with lower scores on these measures in a counterfactual with full trade liberalization (Beverelli & Ticku, 2020).

Quantitative studies have found that lowering trade transaction costs through trade facilitation measures can provide as much welfare benefit as tariff liberalization. Engman (2005) investigates the economic consequences of trade facilitation, particularly the relationship between trade flows, government income, and foreign direct investment.

Easier trading processes benefit everyone (OECD, 2005): trade facilitation increases government income by reducing fraud; companies become more competitive and efficient, increasing profits; and consumers save money by paying cheaper prices. Inefficient trade procedures add large expenses, which are generally paid by the taxpayer or buyer, and reduce the attractiveness of investment (Asian Development Bank, 2017).

When the quality of enforcement is poor, the company might evade detection by making side payments to customs personnel (Ferreira et al., 2007). By unifying customs processes, trade facilitation initiatives reduce customs officials' discretionary capacity to apply regulations arbitrarily. As a result, trade facilitation measures can have a bigger impact on reducing tariff evasion in nations where corruption is a problem (Beverelli & Ticku, 2020).

As the quantity of ICT items sold across the global market grows, increased usage of ICT will result in direct rise in international trade flows. Alternatively, the indirect use of ICT by the business sector might result in lower trade costs and improved trade relations among trading partners (Ismael, 2020).

Developing and least developed nations are at various levels of implementing trade facilitation measures, with costs varying depending on the measure in question and the country's



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