

**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

Committee on Trade Policies in the States Members of the Economic  
and Social Commission for Western Asia

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**Arab customs union negotiations helpdesk: a demo version****Summary**

The Arab customs union (ACU) negotiations helpdesk is a platform under development by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) aimed at facilitating the ongoing negotiation process coordinated by the League of Arab States. The helpdesk will enable remote communication among negotiators, who will deliberate on all outstanding issues via the platform. The platform is designed to enable private sessions and produce meeting summaries that can help in bringing negotiating parties closer to an agreement. Access will be granted only to ACU negotiators and the League of Arab States as moderator.

The Committee on Trade Policies in the States Members of ESCWA is invited to review the demo version of the helpdesk and provide feedback for its improvement.

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## **Introduction**

1. In a rapidly evolving trade landscape, deepening regional integration is a strategic priority for many developing countries. In the Arab region, intraregional trade remains low despite its benefits for countries' much-needed structural transformation efforts. Since 2005, States in the region have operated under the Pan-Arab Free Trade Agreement (PAFTA), an important integration tool despite its limitations and barriers. Moving from it to the Arab customs union (ACU) would represent an important milestone towards a more integrated Arab region.
2. The ACU framework, adopted in Kuwait on 20 January 2009 at the inaugural Arab Economic and Social Development Summit of the League of Arab States, aimed to establish a customs union by 2015 and an Arab common market by 2020, with a view to increasing inter-Arab trade and integration. Since its adoption, Arab States have been discussing the customs union plan and its structure and reviewing all legal and regulatory aspects. Most States have agreed to put forward an implementing plan, with some asking for an independent accord to govern the customs union. The ACU has not yet been implemented.
3. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has been assisting the League of Arab States and member States in the negotiations process through various activities, including the design of scenarios on the structure of common external tariffs, ex-ante assessments of potential scenarios and analysis of the specific nature of agricultural trade and overlaps between regional trade integration schemes and the ACU. The present document provides an overview of its most recent support endeavour: a negotiations helpdesk for the ACU.

## **I. Objectives**

4. The Arab customs union helpdesk is a dedicated electronic platform under development by ESCWA aimed at facilitating the negotiation process for Arab negotiators and the League of Arab States. This novel tool will enable negotiators to discuss outstanding issues, either bi-laterally or in groups or subgroups, before meeting officially or in person, which will reduce pressure on them and on the League of Arab States, as secretariat. The tool will also enable the League to track discussions and monitor their progress, which will facilitate follow-up on specific pending issues. Finally, the tool will enable the creation of repositories of documentation for groups or subgroups.
5. The helpdesk is under development and will be finalized based on feedback from member States, Arab State negotiators and the League of Arab States. Specific training sessions will be offered later for negotiators to learn how to use the tool.

## **II. Features**

6. The ACU helpdesk will be hosted within the forthcoming Arab Trade Gateway, which will provide a wealth of information on national, regional and international trade. It is user friendly and designed in a scalable manner to facilitate easy expansion and adaptation for new data, new products, new users, etc.
7. Assigned negotiators from member States will be granted restricted access to the negotiations module, which focuses on pending critical issues, such as the structure of the common external tariff, flexibility modalities, collection and distribution modalities of tariff revenues and compensation mechanisms. The module will include recent updates on negotiations and a mechanism for communication between negotiators to exchange proposals and reach pre-agreements.
8. The helpdesk uses technology that does not impair functionality at limited bandwidth; is fully responsive to desktops, mobiles and tablets; and is compatible with most commonly used versions of web browsers.

### III. Negotiation functionality

9. A negotiator can create a negotiation session by first choosing the country that they are negotiating with (selection of multiple countries is possible for subregional negotiations). After that, a topic is chosen from the dropdown menu (with multiple selection possible as well). Thirdly, the negotiator selects the video chat software that will be used. The negotiator also has the choice to include a third-party user who will attend the session as moderator, from the secretariat of the League of Arab States. The negotiator can also specify a product code from the dropdown menu using the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System (HS code).

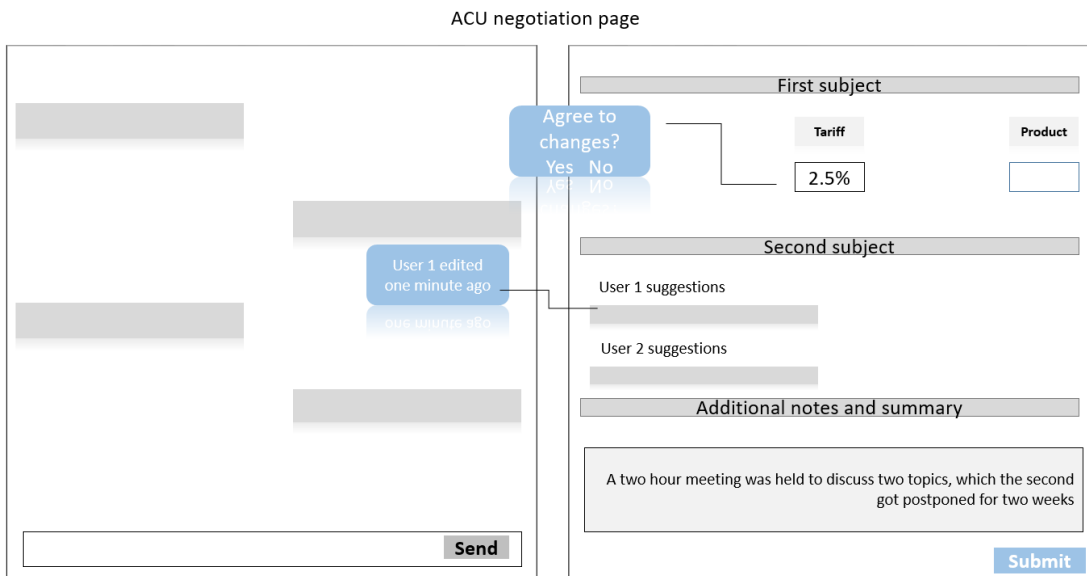
**Figure 1. Initiating a meeting**  
**Invitation sheet**

The screenshot shows a web form titled "Invitation sheet" for initiating a meeting. The form is organized into several sections:

- Subject:** A dropdown menu is open, showing options: "Product", "Sector", "New agreement", "Trade", and "Manufacturing".
- Country:** A dropdown menu is open, showing options: "Lebanon", "Qatar", and "Egypt". Below it is a "+ Add country" button.
- Product:** A dropdown menu is open, showing options: "Section 1: Live animals, animal product", "Section 2 : Vegetable products", "Section 3: animal or vegetable fats and vegetable waxes", "06: live trees and other plants; bulbs, roots and the like; cut flowers and ornamental foliage", "07 : edible vegetables and certain roots and tubers", and "08 : edible fruit and nuts; peel of citrus fruit or melons".
- Moderator (optional):** A dropdown menu is open, currently empty.
- Password:** The text "Password: 2224dds" is displayed.
- Meeting link:** A text input field with the label "Meeting link:" followed by a blank line.
- Software:** A dropdown menu is open, showing options: "Teams" and "Zoom".
- Bottom:** A "+ Add subject" button and a blue "Launch" button.

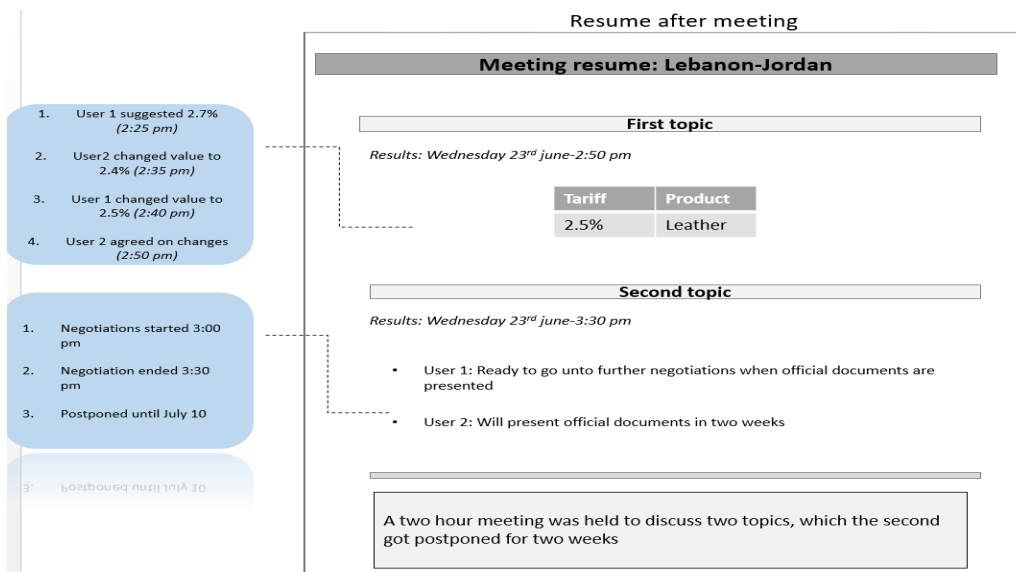
10. When parties enter the meeting, they are redirected to the selected video chat platform in the negotiation page of the helpdesk, the design of which is presented in figure 2.

**Figure 2. ACU negotiation page**



11. During the meeting, participants may use a chat box on the platform to send typed messages. Once a meeting has ended and users have made the required comments during the session, the platform produces a summary sheet of the comments and points agreed upon during the session. Access to the sheet and session recording is restricted to meeting participants and to the League of Arab States as secretariat.

**Figure 3. Summary sheet**



**IV. Conclusion**

12. It is hoped that the ACU helpdesk currently under development will facilitate access to negotiations and make them more efficacious. Other expected results include safe exchange and guarantee of confidentiality and integrity of documents; reduced time and cost of negotiations; enhanced monitoring of progress in negotiations and management of tariff revenue and the common external tariff (through alerts, notifications, scoreboards and dynamic analysis). In addition, the helpdesk will build a memory of negotiations, which will allow lessons learned to be leveraged in future processes.