

## Digitization of Customs: Contributions of the World Customs Organization - Successful International Experiences-

رقمنة الجمارك: اسهامات المنظمة العالمية للجمارك - تجارب دولية ناجحة-

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### Abstract:

This study highlights the significant impact of digital transformation on improving customs administration. Key findings include enhanced efficiency in customs procedures, reduced administrative costs, and improved transparency in operations. The support provided by the World Customs Organization strengthens international cooperation and the ability to adapt to global changes. However, challenges such as infrastructure gaps and the need for specialized training require substantial investments for successful digital integration.

**Keywords:** Digital transformation, efficiency, transparency, support, challenges.

**JEL Classification Codes:** H83, L86

### ملخص:

تستعرض هذه الدراسة تأثير التحول الرقمي على تحسين الإدارة الجمركية، حيث تم التوصل إلى نتائج رئيسية تشمل تحسين كفاءة الإجراءات الجمركية وتقليل التكاليف الإدارية وزيادة الشفافية في العمليات. كما يعزز الدعم المقدم من منظمة الجمارك العالمية التعاون الدولي والقدرة على التكيف مع التغيرات العالمية. ومع ذلك، تم تحديد بعض التحديات مثل الفجوات في البنية التحتية وضرورة التدريب المتخصص، مما يتطلب استثمارات كبيرة لضمان نجاح التحول الرقمي.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** تحول رقمي، كفاءة، شفافية، دعم، تحديات.

تصنيفات JEL : H83, L86

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Customs administration is regarded as one of the most significant public institutions in a state, due to its multifaceted financial and economic mandates. As a fiscal authority, it is entrusted with the responsibility of collecting sovereign revenues for the state through various duties and taxes, combating customs-related crimes, safeguarding the national economy, and contributing to economic competitiveness by facilitating international trade exchanges and protecting society from illicit activities.

However, the tasks assigned to customs administrations face numerous challenges due to the phenomenon of globalization, resulting from multifaceted technological advancements and the shift towards digital transformation as a mandatory and essential choice to keep pace with economic and geopolitical fluctuations (Netariel, 2008). This global context has led customs administrations to adopt modern methodologies to modernize their operations to optimally address the needs of stakeholders, alongside the integration of advanced information systems in collaboration with the World Customs Organization (WCO), whose principal goal is to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of customs administrations. This is particularly pertinent in recent times, with the application of modern communication technologies and the shift toward electronic customs administration (Rahahla & Inas, 2012).

This study focuses on elucidating the conceptual framework of customs administration, defining digital transformation, and exploring the capabilities of customs management in this domain. Additionally, it reviews the World Customs Organization in terms of its origins, objectives, and role in the digital transformation of customs administrations as a strategic approach to modernization, aiding them in overcoming the various challenges they face. Therefore, the central issue raised is: What is the role of the World Customs Organization in the digital transformation of customs administrations?

To address this issue, the study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, examining the definition, importance, and role of customs administration, as well as providing a theoretical description of digital

transformation and exploring the WCO's role as a support entity for customs reforms, especially in the domain of digital transformation.

The study is organized into four main sections. The first section outlines the conceptual framework of customs administration, including its definition, functions, and challenges. The second section explores the concept of digitization and digital transformation in customs operations. The third section examines the support provided by the World Customs Organization in facilitating digital transformation. The final section discusses the outcomes and challenges of digitalizing customs procedures and offers recommendations for further improvement.

## **2.The Conceptual Framework of Customs Administration**

Customs administrations are pivotal public institutions entrusted with multiple functions and contemporary strategic challenges. Their roles and responsibilities have evolved in tandem with economic thought and national legislation, in light of the critical tasks they perform on one hand and the escalating challenges they face due to economic globalization and the growing prevalence of customs-related crimes, primarily in areas such as fraud, tax evasion, and other illicit activities.

### **2.1. Definition of Customs Administration:**

Customs administration is a public authority tasked with monitoring national borders, specifically overseeing the control of persons and goods entering or exiting the country, and collecting the duties and taxes imposed on these goods. While the functions of customs administrations vary from country to country, they remain an administrative and financial institution under the fiscal jurisdiction of the Ministry of Finance (wikipedia, 2024).

The Algerian customs authority was established on October 3, 1964, under the designation of the National Customs Directorate, later evolving into the General Directorate of Customs under the Ministry of Finance. The administration of customs is governed by national legislation, including the Customs Law, Penal Code, and relevant international agreements (General Directorate of Customs, 2024).

### **2.2. Functions of Customs Administration:**

The functions of customs administrations differ across countries and

legislative frameworks, and while these functions may appear similar across nations, it is erroneous to assume their uniformity, as these countries have distinct priorities and demands. The key functions include (wcoomd, 2024):

### **2.2.1. Financial Tax Function**

This function entails the establishment and collection of taxes, duties, and levies on imports and exports of goods and services, as well as monitoring the tax privileges stipulated by legislation and regulations. It also involves overseeing currency exchange controls and contributing to the formulation of customs laws and regulations, such as statutes, decrees, and decisions.

### **2.2.2 Economic Function**

This function involves assisting economic institutions by promoting fair competition through monitoring and curbing unlawful practices, encouraging both domestic and foreign investment through facilitative measures, and fostering the growth of national production and protecting domestic goods from the competition posed by imported foreign products. It also includes compiling statistics related to foreign trade.

### **2.2.3. Protection and Security Function**

This function focuses on combating the trafficking of narcotics, smuggling, human migration, money laundering, and transnational organized crime, as well as protecting consumers from non-compliant products that may pose health or safety risks. It also involves the prohibition of dangerous goods and the protection of endangered species, cultural heritage, intellectual property, and combating counterfeit products.

## **2.3. Challenges of Customs Administration:**

The challenges faced by customs administrations have evolved, especially since the twentieth century, as a result of economic globalization and its impact on customs management. These challenges concern not only the customs administrations themselves but also the nations they serve (Rahahla & Inas, 2012).

### **2.3.1. Challenges for Customs Administrations:**

- Increase in the Volume and Complexity of International Trade: Trade between 2002 and 2008 grew by 8%, accompanied by regional trade

agreements that introduced complex preferential rules.

- **Emergence of New Models and Requirements in Trade:** These include new formats for cross-border goods transport, pressures in the logistics chain, and demands for protection against unlawful practices, smuggling, fraud in origin rules, product classification, and intellectual property violations.
- **Threats to Security and Organized Crime:** International trade channels may be vulnerable to terrorist groups, halting global trade via organized crime activities, including smuggling, drug trafficking, and the trade of hazardous materials and counterfeit goods.
- **Societal Expectations:** This refers to the protection of society from smuggled dangerous materials, such as weapons and drugs, ensuring the safety of imported goods, and addressing public health challenges concerning plants, animals, and the environment. These activities pose significant threats to societal welfare.

### **2.3.2. Challenges for Nations:**

The primary challenge for nations lies in ensuring that globalization benefits all global populations. Global challenges do not recognize borders and demand responses from the international community. Countries are working to enhance regional cooperation through the establishment of customs unions, free trade zones, and economic partnership agreements.

According to the United Nations, global challenges have redefined the role of the state as follows:

- **The Need for Economic and Social Development:** Ensuring appropriate management of economic and social development through the formulation and implementation of sound economic and political policies.
- **Creating Conditions for Economic Growth:** Guaranteeing a free competitive environment and an efficient trade system, both essential for economic growth and state revenue generation.
- **Border Surveillance:** Securing borders has traditionally been one of the core duties of the state, but its significance has grown in an open world, as international trade and economic integration have led to new

global security challenges requiring joint international solutions.

- Ensuring National Security and Citizen Protection: Providing security remains a fundamental responsibility of the state. The concept of security has expanded to include economic security, protection against contaminated food, hazardous toys, counterfeit drugs, and products, thereby positioning customs administration as a public service tool.

## **2.4. Digital Transformation**

In context of rapid technological advancements, digitalization has become a necessity, no longer just an option to abandon traditional methods. As reliance on modern technologies increases, digital transformation plays a pivotal role in enhancing efficiency, simplifying processes, fostering competitiveness, and driving innovation across various sectors.

### **2.4.1. Concept of Digitization:**

Numerous definitions of digitization exist, with some researchers viewing it as a sophisticated process enabling the conversion of any type of document into a digital series. This technical work is often accompanied by intellectual and administrative work to organize post-information for indexing, scheduling, and representing it in digital content. Others define it as the central method for creating digital representations of various content types, such as images, creating electronic diagrams by digitizing traditional paper documents, graphs, or images (Fnoor & Shehib, 2023). From the above, digitization can be defined as the process by which data is converted from analog to digital form for processing, storage, and transmission via computers and digital technologies (Fnoor & Shehib, 2023).

It is also defined as the ability of a state and its citizens to utilize digital technologies for the generation, processing, and exchange of information. It can also refer to the societal, economic, and political changes driven by the widespread adoption of information and communication technologies (Rabi & Alhaj Ali, 2023).

Thus, digitization aims to bring about radical changes in processes by applying digital transformation, resulting in the comprehensive shift of transactions and services towards digital technologies (Rabi & Alhaj Ali, 2023).

### **2.4.2. Digital Transformation**

Digital transformation has become a central theme in our time, impacting both individuals and institutions. The widespread adoption of digitization has driven researchers and experts to define its concept precisely. Despite various definitions, all share the core goal: to effect a fundamental change in the way digital technology is utilized to enhance operations, improve efficiency, and foster innovation across different fields. (Shvertner, 2017).

Before discussing the concept of digital transformation, it is necessary to address the concept of digitization, which refers to the process of representing an object, image, sound, document, or signal as a series of numbers describing discrete points. It is often used as a synonym for the broader process of digital transformation (Janssens, 2019).

From a customer perspective, digital transformation is defined by Bharadwaj (2013) as the use of technology to enhance customer experience, accelerate internal processes, and redesign business models to achieve greater competitiveness and sustainable growth (Bharadwaj et al., 2013).

In another definition, digital transformation is viewed not just as the use of new technology but as a cultural and organizational process involving changes in institutional structure and increasing reliance on digital systems to improve efficiency and innovation (Castells, 2011). Digital transformation can also be described as a process where human societies and organizations transition towards new ways of working and thinking through digital and social technologies. It involves leadership changes, a shift in mindset, fostering innovation and new business models, and increasing the use of technology to enhance both internal and external customer experiences (Janssens, 2019).

### **2.5. Challenges Facing Digital Transformation:**

Many organizations face multiple challenges in the process of digital transformation, where technical, organizational, economic, and social factors intertwine. These challenges include gaps in infrastructure, lack of digital skills, and shifts in market behaviors and business relationships. These barriers hinder the optimal utilization of technology to improve performance

and enhance competitiveness in the rapidly evolving digital age. These challenges can be divided into two main categories as follows: (Heavin and Power, 2018)

### **2.5.1. Technical and Organizational Challenges**

#### **- Ecosystems:**

This challenge pertains to the obstacles faced in developing partnerships and collaborations between different entities (public and private sectors) to form effective ecosystems that contribute to digital transformation. Key barriers include: (Brunetti et al., 2020)

- **Medium and Long-Term Vision:** The lack of a shared strategic vision over the long term can lead to disjointed efforts among different stakeholders (businesses, universities, governments). This disrupts progress in digital transformation, as each party works in isolation, creating gaps in implementation and innovation.
- **Partnerships:** Weak collaboration between public and private sectors can be a significant obstacle. Without strong partnerships, the resources and knowledge necessary for digital transformation may be lacking or insufficient. Ineffective partnerships can prevent stakeholders from benefiting from successful experiences or technological opportunities.
- **Quality of Life:** If ecosystems do not focus on improving the quality of life through digital transformation (e.g., enhancing public services or education), it may lead to community opposition or delayed adoption of digital technologies, thus hindering the potential benefits for citizens' lives.

#### **- Infrastructure and Technology:**

This includes: (Brunetti et al., 2020)

- **Technological Gaps:** Some regions face significant technological gaps compared to more advanced areas in terms of the availability of modern technologies such as artificial intelligence and smart factories. These gaps hinder the region's ability to keep up with rapid technological advancements, reducing its competitiveness in global markets.

- **Lack of Appropriate Infrastructure:** The absence of suitable infrastructure, such as high-speed broadband networks, represents a major challenge. Without such networks, it becomes difficult to leverage modern technologies such as Big Data and Machine Learning, limiting the effectiveness of business innovations.
- **Limited Development Capacity:** In certain technologies like cloud computing, regions may rely on using rather than developing technologies, reducing their capacity to innovate and gain technological supremacy. These challenges are tied to the region's ability to build a strong local infrastructure capable of developing and producing advanced technologies.
- **Limited Resources:** Available resources for the development of advanced technologies may not be sufficient in some regions, making it harder to tackle these challenges. Significant investments in technology and facilities may be required to develop this infrastructure.

#### **- Culture and Skills:**

Developing digital culture and skills is a major challenge in the digital transformation process, requiring comprehensive investment in human capital to enhance its capacity to adapt to rapid technological changes. This is reflected in the need to restructure education and training to enhance the skills of the new generations, upskill current workers, and build a comprehensive digital culture that supports innovation and growth across various sectors. The strategic focus on developing the "culture and skills" pillar must be done through investments in three main areas: (Brunetti et al., 2020)

1. **Digital Education:** Improving educational curricula in line with the demands of the digital age.
2. **Talent:** Training and upskilling current and new workers to meet the demands of the digital market.
3. **Digital Culture:** Spreading comprehensive digital awareness that enhances adaptation to modern technologies across sectors.

#### **5.2.2. Market and Economic Challenges**

### **- Market Challenges:**

These challenges concern the way digitalization alters the operation of markets and businesses:

- **Integrated Services with Products:** Companies no longer just sell products but add digital services such as smart applications or remote maintenance.
- **Supply Chains and Customer Relationships:** Digitalization has made it easier to track products, improve delivery, and interact directly with customers.
- **Relocating Operations:** With the development of digitalization, companies can now move their factories to countries with higher labor costs because they rely on technology rather than labor-intensive processes (Heavin and Power, 2018).

### **- Organizational Challenges:**

These challenges focus on how to organize and manage knowledge and information within companies. With the availability of vast digital tools and data repositories, companies need to develop systems for managing this knowledge effectively to utilize it in decision-making and business development (Heavin and Power, 2018).

### **- Economic and Social Challenges:**

From an economic perspective, digitalization changes the nature of the jobs required; some jobs may disappear due to digitalization, while new jobs that require digital skills emerge. On the social side, the challenges relate to environmental impacts; while digitalization aims to improve resource efficiency and reduce energy consumption, it also raises concerns about sustainability (Heavin and Power, 2018).

## **3. Success Factors of Digital Transformation:**

### **- Organizational Factors:**

Organizational factors include a correct understanding of the needs of the organization and customers, which helps in forming correct strategies that support digital transformation and enhance future visions and capabilities. This includes the ability to create roadmaps and strategic and operational goals. Additionally, gradual implementation of digital transformation, rather

than a sudden change, contributes to reducing the likelihood of errors, making the transition smoother. Furthermore, training and preparing human resources to absorb digital transactions is a crucial part of ensuring a smooth and successful digital transformation. Administrative support (providing resources, knowledge, and time for projects), ensuring alignment between technology and tasks (usability), and building multidisciplinary teams are all essential.

**- Environmental Factors:**

These include a strong combination of issues where digital transformation requires effective communication within and between organizations, facilitating data exchange. This smooth communication demands a high level of transparency, with trust being essential for data sharing among different parties. Furthermore, several foundational factors must be integrated to ensure the success of the transformation process.

- **Collaboration Across Boundaries:** Complex tasks cannot be solved individually, thus necessitating cooperation across institutional borders, where everyone works in harmony to achieve common goals.
- **Value Creation:** Generating mixed value through innovative integration of products and services is a key factor supporting innovation and enhancing competitiveness.
- **Adherence to International Standards:** Finally, adherence to international standards set by global bodies ensures that organizations align with global requirements, boosting the effectiveness of digital transformation in the long term (Fari, 2021).

**- Technological Factors:**

For successful digital transformation, technological factors create an integrated framework built on interconnected foundations. These factors start with providing the necessary infrastructure as a platform that supports all technological processes and ensures its suitability for different needs. To enhance the efficiency of this platform, reliability plays a critical role by ensuring data accuracy and integrity, while suitability ensures that the right data reaches the correct user. Adaptability is also essential, as systems must be flexible enough to respond to evolving institutional needs and changing

information. This is complemented by security, which protects data and builds trust in its exchange. Moreover, completeness of information is a critical factor, ensuring data coverage across all aspects and providing multiple options. This is related to system availability, which facilitates access when needed. Finally, the timeliness of data is crucial for meeting the speed and accuracy requirements in decision-making (Fari, 2021).

#### **4. Causes of Failure in Digital Transformation:**

Digital transformation presents a significant opportunity for organizations to improve performance and enhance customer relationships, but it also comes with risks and challenges that may prevent its objectives from being achieved. This is because, despite the great potential of digital technologies, they may reflect flaws in organizational practices if not implemented correctly. Below are the main reasons organizations fail to smoothly apply digital transformation:

**-Resistance to Change:** Employees may feel that digital transformation threatens their jobs, leading to conscious or unconscious resistance to change. To overcome this challenge, leaders must reassure employees that digital transformation is an opportunity for skill development and enhancing their standing in the future job market.

**- Neglecting Strategy Development:** Many organizations attempt to improve performance using specific digital tools or technologies, but digital transformation requires a comprehensive vision and integrated strategy. This strategy should focus on enhancing human capital efficiency and achieving the organization's broader goals, as no single technology can drive innovation and speed by itself.

**- Lack of Flexibility and Dynamics:** Startups are characterized by flexibility and the ability to make rapid decisions, essential traits for the success of digital transformation. On the contrary, traditional organizational structures may hinder this transformation. Therefore, adopting a flexible organizational structure that allows dynamic and swift decision-making while involving all stakeholders is recommended.

**- Ignoring Internal Knowledge:** Some organizations rely on external consultants providing generic solutions without considering the specifics of

the work environment. However, the best solutions often come from within the organization, where employees with in-depth knowledge of daily operational realities are best placed to understand what works and what does not. Ignoring this knowledge can lead to the failure of new technologies in achieving the desired productivity.

- **Neglecting Customer Experience:** If the goal of digital transformation is to improve customer satisfaction, it is essential to begin by diagnosing their needs and opinions. To achieve this, small and focused changes should be made to tools and specific touchpoints within the service cycle based on detailed customer feedback (Tabrizi et al., 2019).

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Customs administrations are governmental organizations of strategic importance in managing the flow of international trade exchanges. They are witnessing efforts to develop and modernize their intervention methods, particularly in areas related to information and communication technologies, to achieve digital transformation, making them smart administrations. Furthermore, the reliance on risk management in intervention to enhance their efficiency is supported by the assistance provided by the World Customs Organization through partnership agreements and the recommendations of international bodies.

Therefore, customs administrations are striving to utilize all modern technological means to eliminate all obstacles facing international trade exchanges and to combat all forms of fraud, smuggling, and other cross-border crimes. This is part of a new approach to redefine borders and address the emerging security concerns in international trade, which has transformed the customs function into a preventive role alongside its traditional duties, turning it into a global and comprehensive phenomenon.

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