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## Technical Note on Terminology for Single Window and other electronic platforms

### *Summary*

UNECE Recommendation n°33 (ECE/TRADE/352) describes the basis for establishing a Single Window for export, import and transit clearance. Since the publication of this Recommendation in 2004, the term Single Window has, at times, been used to describe various mechanisms and computer systems, which has been the cause for confusion among stakeholders and users (notably in the business community).

This document provides the key elements for an official definition of Single Window, and proposes an alternative vocabulary for mechanisms that are similar in nature or function to Single Windows but do not satisfy all of the criteria of Recommendation n°33. The objective is to create a controlled vocabulary in order to be clear about the scope and nature of any given mechanism.

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# **I. Definition of Single Window and other collaborative mechanisms**

## **A. Preamble**

1. Since the publication of UNECE Recommendation n°33 which describes the basis for establishing a Single Window for export, import and transit clearance, the term Single Window has, at times, been used to describe various mechanisms and computer systems. This has been the cause for confusion among stakeholders and users (notably in the business community) as multiple systems in a country are labelled as a “Single Window”. Private companies describing their solutions as a “Single Window”, without endorsement from a relevant regulatory body, further contribute to the confusion.
2. Although UN/CEFACT still considers the definition within Recommendation n°33 to be the most pertinent to trade facilitation, it seems necessary to propose an alternative vocabulary for mechanisms that are similar in nature or function to Single Windows, but do not satisfy all of the criteria of Recommendation n°33. The objective of this document is to create a controlled vocabulary in order to be clear about the scope and nature of any given mechanism.
3. Governments and the business community are encouraged to use these terms in a consistent manner, compliant with the definitions given below and the suite of UNECE recommendations on Single Window.

## **B. Key elements of the official definition of a Single Window**

4. Recommendation n°33 defines a Single Window as:  
  
“...a facility that allows parties involved in trade and transport to lodge standardized information and documents with a single entry point to fulfil all import, export, and transit-related regulatory requirements. If information is electronic, then individual data elements should only be submitted once.”
5. This definition implies five key elements:
  - Parties involved in trade and transport;
  - Standardized information and documents;
  - Single entry point;
  - Fulfilling regulatory requirements; and
  - Single submission of individual data.
6. One of the key elements which stands out is the concept of a ‘single entry point’. The information for any declarative process should only be requested once and should be sent through the Single Window system which acts as the single entry point. This clearly reflects the submission of information from economic operators to the Single Window system. Of course, government agencies and economic operators will be the main beneficiaries of a Single Window, but the ‘single entry point’ designates the latter as being the reference point for the information’s source. Commercial information is the essential condition for the effective operation of a Single Window facility.
7. Another key aspect of a Single Window system is to fulfill all required regulatory functions related to a transaction. This implies that the Single Window system fulfills a

government function. As such, it should have received a mandate from the government to perform these trade and transport regulatory functions for the specific type of economic operator.

8. The ‘single submission of individual data elements’ for one transaction can span across time, depending upon the type of merchandise and its method of transport (potentially in multiple deliveries). For example, if, in a first request sent prior to import to the Single Window, the main parties and the merchandise information is submitted in order to request an import permit, then the same information should not be resubmitted again when the goods arrive - unless that information has changed.

### C. Multiple Single Window mechanisms within the same economy

9. The UNECE suite of recommendations clearly sets forth an ideal for the establishment of a National Single Window to handle all cross-border trade-related regulatory requirements. Therefore, the designation “National Single Window” (NSW) would indicate that there is only one official Single Window and all government agencies should – either at the outset or progressively – participate within this framework based upon the guidance in Recommendations n°33, n°34 and n°35 in order to streamline processes and eliminate any redundancies. In this case, no other Single Window should exist within that economy.

10. Likewise, a “Regional Single Window” (RSW) would be a mechanism that would handle trade-related regulatory requirements within a given region. This would either create a collaborative system of NSWs (a network of networks), provide additional levels of functionality (such as shared procedures between economies) or completely replace the NSWs. In these cases, no other RSW should exist for trade-related regulatory requirements.

11. However, the reality of what is emerging in some countries is the establishment of multiple systems, each claiming to be a Single Window. The principle is that a Single Window system is established with the economic operator as the main user. Consequently, more than one Single Window could in fact co-exist in a same economy each targeting a different type of economic operator as long as the five key elements of the Recommendation n°33 definition are respected (notably having a mandate from a government authority and being a single entry point for the user). The economic operator, when acting in any particular role, should not communicate with multiple Single Window systems for the same operation. The specific role of each Single Window system should be clear. This is particularly important if multiple, official Single Window systems coexist in a same economy.

12. Some examples of such role designations include:

- Single Window for importers and/or exporters;
- Single Window for maritime carriers;
- Single Window for air carriers;
- Single Window for financial institutions;
- ...

13. Notice that these designations are **not** “regulatory Single Window”, “customs Single Window” or “logistics Single Window”. This type of designation is centered not on the user of the system, but on the administration ultimately authorizing the transactions in the system. When the focus is on the administrative functions and not on the user, economic

operators may be required to communicate with multiple Single Window systems, which (in part) defeats the trade facilitation objectives.

14. Participating Government Agencies (PGAs)<sup>1</sup> offer and derive a broad range of benefits in their respective administrative responsibilities from the Single Window. Multiple government-mandated Single Window (SW) mechanisms within one economy may thus negatively affect the role of a PGA if there is a lack of convergence between the data submitted to different SW mechanisms. PGAs may discover data gaps which could seriously diminish their effectiveness. For example, risk assessment or security analysis requires a holistic approach and confidence that all available data has been compiled. Indeed, Recommendation n°35 identifies a legal liability that could lead to damages due to "the use of inaccurate, incomplete, or incorrect data by the users of the Single Window facility".

15. PGAs, therefore, have a direct interest in promoting a National Single Window instead of multiple Single Window systems which may undermine the effectiveness of the facility. PGAs should make every effort to ensure that multiple SW systems do not undermine the effectiveness of the NSW.

## D. Other collaborative systems

16. Other collaborative systems may exist to help facilitate national and cross border trade. Often these systems identify themselves as a 'Single Window' which can potentially create confusion among operators, both nationally and internationally. Many of these offer services to satisfy regulations, such as the filing of customs declarations, but may lack a clear mandate from the government. Others are pure business-to-business (B2B) platforms which self-proclaimed themselves to be a 'Single Window' even though they fulfill no regulatory function. In order to provide clarity to the user community, the following terms are suggested.

17. Alternative terms for technical solutions:

- **Single Submission Portal:** Allows traders to submit all of the information related to a specific activity in a single electronic platform. This platform then redistributes the information to all participants within that portal. A Single Submission Portal differs from a Single Window in that it may or may not handle regulatory procedures and it may or may not be the only portal within a market.
- **Single Environment:** This approach brings together Information and Computer Technology systems (ICT) systems that work collaboratively to aggregate data related to a transaction with the view to submitting information to satisfy a regulatory requirement. Usually, the systems will establish a certain level of trust and data protection between themselves in order to seamlessly share the information. This can be completely transparent to the trader. This collaboration between IT systems is, of course, only the technical side of a much larger trade facilitation process of harmonizing and streamlining procedures, business processes and data elements (as described in Recommendation n°34).

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<sup>1</sup> Participating Government Agency (PGA) is sometimes referred to as Other Government Agency (OGA). OGA does not necessarily mean that the agency is actually participating in the SW initiative.

- **Single Window Environment<sup>2</sup>** versus **Single Submission Environment**: In order for the resulting product to be considered a Single Window solution, it will need to be compliant with all five aspects of the Recommendation n°33 definition. Where this falls short of any of these aspects, the term “Single Submission Environment” would be more appropriate.

18. Summary of the above terms based on the five key elements of the Recommendation n°33 definition:

	<i>Exclusive on the market for this type of operator</i>	<i>Standardized information and documents</i>	<i>Government mandate for Single Entry Point</i>	<i>Regulatory processes</i>	<i>Single submission point for individual data elements</i>
<i>Single Window</i>	Must be	Must use	Must have	Must include	Must be
<i>Single Submission Portal</i>	Can be	Must use	Can have	Can include	Should be
<i>Single Environment</i>	Can be	Must use	Can have	Must include	May be

## II. Examples

### A. A Port Community System

19. A Port Community System (PCS) usually defines itself as a neutral and open electronic platform enabling intelligent and secure exchange of information between public and private stakeholders in order to improve the competitive position of the sea and air ports’ communities (sometimes referred to as Port User Groups).

20. A PCS is usually associated with a single port (whether sea, air, inland, or rail) or a multiple port environment within an economy. A PCS can be a public, private, or public/private model. Some governments regard the PCS as a private entity while, at the same time, considering it to be critical public infrastructure.

21. A Port Community System can be considered a Single Window system if they satisfy the five key elements of the definition of Recommendation n°33, notably:

- The PCS has received a clear mandate from the government to be the sole provider of specific regulatory functions;
- There is only one PCS in the given economy – if there are multiple PCS in a same economy, then the carrier or other economic operator trading within the given economy will need to communicate with multiple systems, therefore it is not a Single Window for all operations within that economy.

22. If these conditions are fulfilled, the type of economic operator should be identified by the system (e.g. Single Window for maritime carriers) otherwise they might be considered a Single Submission Portal or as contributing to a Single Environment for all traders.

<sup>2</sup> See WCO Compendium on Single Window, Volume 1, page 20. The World Customs Organization (WCO) definition of Single Window Environment clearly indicates that it is for regulatory services.

## **B. A Cargo Community System**

23. A Cargo Community System (CCS) is an information technology platform linked to the freight flows (import/export /transit) of any kind of cargo passing through an identified port, airport, or multimodal site(s) at a local or national level. A CCS is open to all parties involved in cargo freight and logistics including customs administrations. It handles a database in which information is collected, processed, stored and exchanged, and aims to enhance freight optimization, trade safety and security, cargo tracking and tracing, and facilitate customs and administrative procedures. These systems might be considered a Single Submission Portal or as contributing to a Single Environment.

## **III. Other types of solutions**

### **A. Information Hub**

24. Governments have obligations to provide information to the international trading community for all cross-border regulatory procedures. Even though these information hubs fulfill a very important function, such information systems cannot be considered a Single Window as they do not allow for the fulfillment of regulatory procedures.

### **B. One-Stop-Shop**

25. A One-Stop-Shop is a physical location where multiple agencies have representative offices. An economic operator can perform all of their procedures (paper or electronic) within the same physical location. A One-Stop-Shop, in this context, does not refer to the technical solution which allows one to process all information concerning a transaction; it refers to the physical location where multiple procedures can be fulfilled, allowing traders to avoid time-consuming travel from one office to another.

### **C. Coordinated Border Management**

26. The term Coordinated Border Management (CBM) refers to a cooperative approach by border control agencies (both at the national and international level) in the context of seeking greater efficiencies when managing trade flows, while maintaining a balance with compliance requirements. The term highlights the general principle of *coordination* of policies, programmes and delivery among cross-border regulatory agencies rather than favoring any single solution. CBM could be considered the basis for the establishment of a Single Window solution. An essential part of CBM involves dialogue between customs and other agencies at the border as well as between customs and the business community.<sup>3</sup>

### **D. One Stop Border Post**

27. In the concept of One Stop Border Post the traffic crossing the border need only to stop at one border post. In the One Stop Border Post the officials of neighboring countries work together in the same premises at the Border. Commonly the One Stop Border post handles incoming traffic for the regulatory exit and entry procedures. This can include:

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<sup>3</sup> [www.wcoomd.org](http://www.wcoomd.org) (as of September 2016).

- Consolidated border procedures between neighboring countries;
- Simplification of documents and border procedures;
- Less time needed for border crossing;
- Joint inspections (when needed).

## **E. Joint Border Crossing**

28. Joint Border Crossing is a concept which involves two neighboring customs administrations entering into an agreement to operate customs control jointly (i.e. to coordinate export and import controls, opening hours and competencies). Ideally, joint controls are conducted in a single customs office where physical and technical infrastructures are shared. Even further, officers from each country are authorized to exercise law enforcement measures (e.g. penalties, seizures, arrests) in the other country's territory, within the limits of the joint customs office.

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