



International
Trade
Centre



Funded by
the European Union

Ready4Trade Central Asia

*Supporting inclusive development through trade
and digitalization*

Project overview 2020-2024



About the International Trade Centre

The International Trade Centre (ITC) is the joint agency of the World Trade Organization and the United Nations. ITC assists small and medium-sized enterprises in developing and transition economies to become more competitive in global markets, thereby contributing to sustainable economic development within the frameworks of the Aid-for-Trade agenda and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.



About the European Union

The European Union is an economic and political union of 27 European countries. It is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. It acts globally to promote sustainable development of societies, environment and economies, so that everyone can benefit.

About the Ready4Trade Central Asia Project

Ready4Trade Central Asia is a four-year EU-funded project promoting intra-regional and international trade in five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The project aims to enhance the transparency of cross-border requirements, remove regulatory and procedural barriers to trade, strengthen business capability to comply with trade formalities and standards, as well as to improve cross-border e-commerce. The project is implemented by the International Trade Centre in close collaboration with national partners.

This brochure presents the project's achievements and highlights in Central Asia over the past four years, showcasing positive changes and progress at national and regional levels.



Ready4Trade focus areas



- ◆ ESTABLISHING TRADE FACILITATION PORTALS
- ◆ ADDRESSING OBSTACLES TO TRADE
- ◆ TRAINING SMES TO COMPLY WITH CROSS-BORDER REQUIREMENTS
- ◆ COACHING SMES ON EXPORT MANAGEMENT
- ◆ SUPPORTING SMES' ENGAGEMENT IN E-COMMERCE
- ◆ DEVELOPING NATIONAL E-COMMERCE STRATEGIES
- ◆ FOSTERING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN TRADE
- ◆ PROVIDING ASSISTANCE TO TURKMENISTAN ON ISSUES RELATED TO WTO ACCESSION

"I am more confident in my abilities to trade internationally. I learned relevant rules and regulations, know my rights and how to act in unexpected situations at the border. The practical advice I received at the Ready4Trade training for women was especially useful."

- woman entrepreneur from Turkmenistan

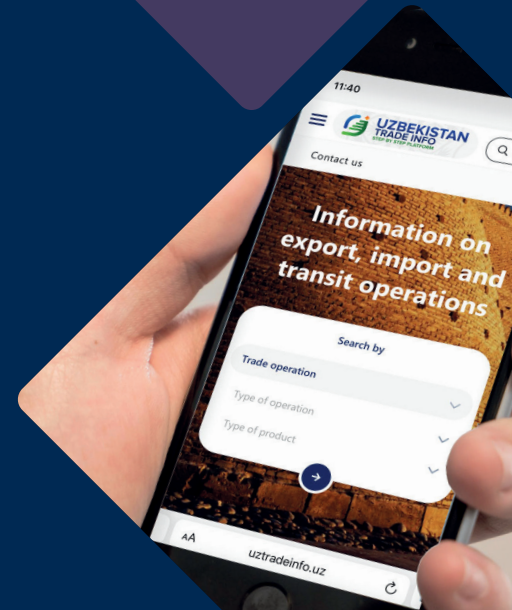


1. Establishing Trade Facilitation Portals

Lack of information on cross-border trade formalities is one of the major obstacles to trade, affecting business operations and the entire trade ecosystem.

To address this challenge, Ready4Trade Central Asia, in collaboration with national partners, launched national Trade Facilitation Portals in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan as well as improved the existing portal in Tajikistan.

Each national portal provides product-specific information on trade procedures to facilitate export, import and transit operations, and contributes to countries' compliance with Article 1.2 of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement.





The award-winning Info Trade Central Asia Gateway

Info hub connecting Central Asia to global markets

The Info Trade Central Asia Gateway - InfoTradeCentralAsia.org - aggregates information from each national Trade Facilitation Portal in Central Asia and provides direct access to step-by-step guides on licenses, pre-clearance permits and clearance formalities for most traded goods within, to and from Central Asia.

5
national
portals

220'000+
users*

277
regional trade
flows mapped

*Aggregated number of users of the five portals and the Info Trade Central Asia Gateway

2. Addressing obstacles to trade

Streamlining regulations and customs procedures can enhance trade efficiency, reduce costs, and create a more predictable trading environment, benefiting both businesses and consumers.

Ready4Trade made significant progress in helping Central Asian countries address trade obstacles. It developed roadmaps to simplify procedures and reduce trade formalities by up to 60%. The project also advised governments on implementing specific measures to cut the cost and time of cross-border trade, focusing on digitalization, connectivity, and streamlined procedures.

As an important achievement, the initiative also fostered public-private partnerships and facilitated regional dialogue among Central Asian countries in the context of trade facilitation reforms.



Trade flow analysis

		Destination countries				
		EU	TAJ	UZB	KAZ	KYR
Origin countries	KAZ	Vegetable oil	Wheat flour	Wheat flour		
	KYR	Dried beans			Dairy	
	UZB	Fresh fruits & vegetables			Fruit juice	
	TAJ	Dried fruits			Fresh fruits & vegetables	Fresh fruits & vegetables

National roadmaps with reform recommendations

Ready4Trade designed national roadmaps, which provide recommendations on specific reforms and measures to optimize cross-border trade procedures. The roadmaps are based on detailed analyses and stakeholder consultations. They include targeted action plans that aim to reduce costs and simplify operations for businesses at both national and regional levels.

4 national roadmaps delivered

reducing time and cost of trade by 60%

Strategic priorities identified

- Digitalization
- Simplifying border formalities
- Enhancing connectivity
- Fostering regional collaboration



Implementing key strategic priorities

Digitalization

Ready4Trade supported the countries in implementing several digital solutions to make the cross-border trade procedures faster, safer, and cheaper. In the Kyrgyz Republic, the project supported the Government in its efforts to digitize laboratory test protocols, establish an e-accreditation system, and to enhance digital services for the certification of origin of goods. The initiative also facilitated the accession of the Kyrgyz Republic to the UNESCAP framework convention for cross-border trade. At the regional level, the project initiated a comprehensive mapping of the IT infrastructure, platforms and information exchange processes that are used in the cross-border export/import operations with the overall objective to facilitate the development of coherent digitalization reforms (conventionally named CART.IS).



Simplifying border formalities

Ready4Trade provided support in streamlining border formalities by introducing authorized operator schemes and the EU REX system in Tajikistan, implementing new risk management regulations, and providing comprehensive Customs Code commentary. These initiatives improved risk management practices and fostered better coordination among border agencies, effectively reducing delays and increasing cross-border trade efficiency.

10+ border reforms leading to
\$1M+ in annual savings for businesses

Enhancing connectivity

The project enhanced transportation efficiency through key initiatives such as piloting an electronic queue management system at the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border, implementing cross-border transport information exchange for eQMS, and removing weekend surcharges for cross-border transport.

3 complex bilateral reforms initiated



Fostering regional collaboration

Ready4Trade fostered regional collaboration by facilitating initiatives such as exchange of e-certificates of origin, Single Windows' data exchange, and Peer Learning Initiatives. These efforts strengthened cooperation among Central Asian countries, providing opportunities for more integrated economic development.

7 regional events promoting shared knowledge and collaboration on trade facilitation

3. Training SMEs to comply with cross-border requirements

The knowledge and skills gap in cross-border trade procedures is one of the major obstacles for businesses seeking to reach international markets. Many Central Asian entrepreneurs struggle to comply with quality standards, trade regulations, and customs formalities.

To address these challenges, Ready4Trade Central Asia, in collaboration with national partners, launched the “Cross-Border Trade Management Curriculum”. This training programme, available free of charge both online and in person, caters to the specific needs of exporters in each Central Asian country.



The Cross-Border Trade Management Curriculum

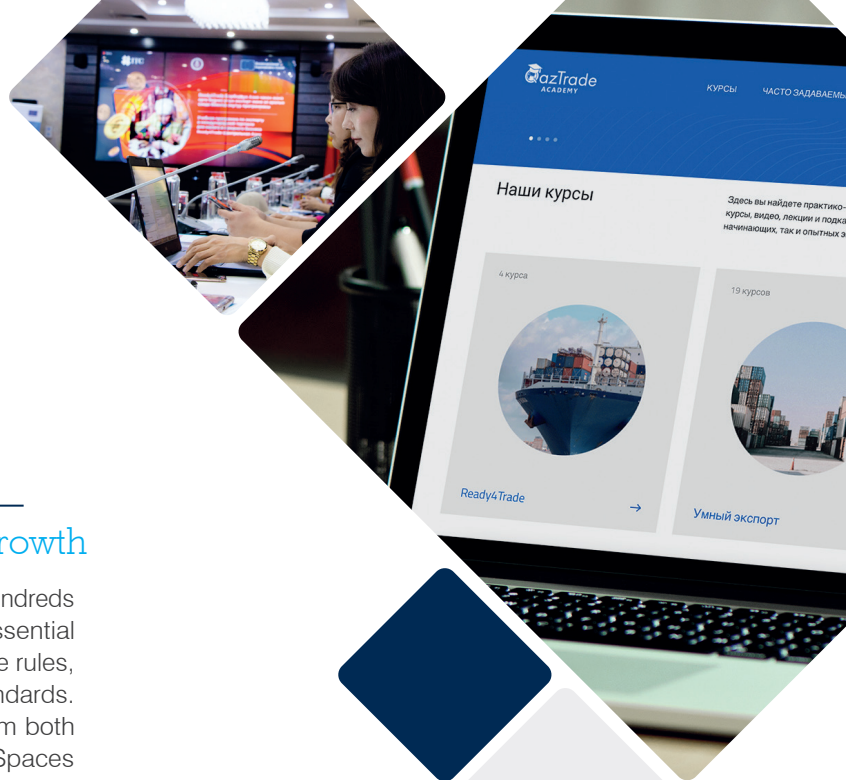
Bridging the skills gap to drive export growth

Thanks to the Cross-Border Trade Management Curriculum, hundreds of Central Asian exporters have received training on 20 essential topics related to cross-border trade, including on world trade rules, export processes, EU market requirements and quality standards. The national partners were trained to deliver the Curriculum both online, on dedicated national platforms - Virtual Learning Spaces (VLS), and at physical workshops.

5
dedicated VLS platforms
launched and hosted by
national partners

11'500
certified
participants

230+
instructor-led
workshops delivered
in 30+ cities



4. Coaching SMEs on export management

To further address the knowledge and skills gap of SMEs in Central Asia, Ready4Trade offered practical and action-oriented advisory services to businesses through its Export Management Coaching Initiative.





The Export Management Coaching Initiative (EMCI)

Providing tailored tools to exporting SMEs

The initiative offered tailored on-the-job coaching, helping business-owners to resolve daily challenges in managing their export operations. Covering five thematic areas, the coaching was led by local experts with extensive experience in the fields of import/export, freight forwarding and logistics. To ensure that the coaching efforts are coherent, sustainable and replicable, Ready4Trade designed an Export Management Coaching Manual for Central Asian exporters as part of the initiative.

200+
coaching missions
for SMEs completed

80+
women-led
SMEs supported

24
national export
management coaches
trained



5. Supporting SMEs' engagement in e-commerce

Access to international marketplaces is unequal globally. To boost SMEs' digital trade capacity and global market outreach, Ready4Trade Central Asia assisted 500+ Central Asian businesses with individual coaching and advisory support as well group training. Through partnerships with DHL, eBay and other major e-commerce players, Ready4Trade further facilitated access of Central Asian SMEs to international online markets.



Coaching for online export excellence

E-commerce foundation training

Ready4Trade supported 200+ Central Asian small businesses covering the entire e-commerce process, from market identification and value proposition development to onboarding onto online platforms, connecting with payments and logistics providers, engaging in customer support, and digital marketing.

The initiative's backbone was a network of certified national coaches trained to continue supporting Central Asian entrepreneurs and amplify digital trade knowledge beyond the pilot group.

145
e-commerce certificates
awarded

34
national coaches
trained

1200
one-to-one tailored
sessions delivered



Helping SMEs overcome e-commerce challenges

Advisory services - "eLabs"

Ready4Trade leveraged ITC ecomConnect's partnerships with eBay, Etsy, DHL, NOVICA, Alibaba and Foursource to facilitate access to international online markets, as well as boosted companies' online visibility through improving their digital marketing assets and online channels. The eLabs consisted of workshops, expert coaching, and tailored technical support, helping businesses navigate digital trade complexities and address specific challenges. Beneficiary companies gained skills in opening and managing online stores, integrating payment solutions, managing logistics and customer relations, and leveraging digital marketing through real-world applications.

8
eLabs
created

500
SMEs
supported

2.6 M USD
in online sales
achieved





Boosting online sales through strategic partnerships

The case of NOVICA

In 2022, Ready4Trade partnered with the global fair-trade marketplace NOVICA, to launch the “Silk Road” Artisan Empowerment Hub and Artisans Connect online store. The artisans benefit from product quality coaching and gain international visibility from featuring on NOVICA’s partner marketplaces such as the UNICEF USA Market, Road Scholar World Bazaar, Smithsonian Folklife Festival Marketplace, and the NOVICA store in Amazon. The initiative is set to reach \$400,000 in sales by the end of 2024.

The case of DHL

As a result of ITC’s partnership with DHL, special rates for business-to-consumer (B2C) export activities were offered to Central Asian SMEs. The partnership with DHL created the opportunity for over 150 SMEs to develop their international client base by providing efficient and affordable shipping worldwide and thus enhancing their competitiveness.



Meet the beneficiaries

Showcasing Central Asian artisans and their masterpieces

Ready4Trade created a series of photos and videos featuring captivating stories of Central Asian artisans, allowing the global audience to explore the heritage, ancient traditions, and refined crafts of the region. The videos and photos were also used to enhance each business' marketing materials.



SCAN ME





6. Developing national E-commerce strategies

Ready4Trade Central Asia supported the governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in developing national e-commerce strategies, helping them create a strategic vision to foster an enabling e-commerce environment for businesses. Additionally, Ready4Trade, in collaboration with UNCTAD, developed recommendations for the government of Kazakhstan for aligning its e-commerce legislation with international best practices.



Creating an enabling e-commerce environment

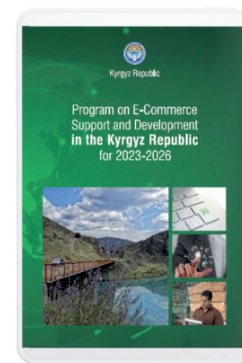
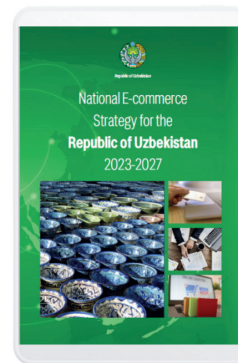
A collaborative framework for digital transformation

Each e-commerce strategy was developed through a participatory multi-stakeholder process, involving an in-depth analysis of the national e-commerce ecosystem. This collaborative effort included close cooperation with governments, the private sector, business support organizations and academia.

The strategies prioritize enhancing the legal framework for e-commerce and e-services, improving financial infrastructure and electronic payment systems, and strengthening companies' capacities to trade online.

3 strategies designed & endorsed by the governments

30 round tables & consultations organized



7. Fostering women's participation in trade

Female inclusion in the economy not only empowers women but also fosters human development, reduces poverty, and promotes sustainable, inclusive economic growth.

Ready4Trade Central Asia has united policymakers, border agencies, and businesses to create a women-inclusive business environment in the region. The project delivered a series of gender-responsive trainings, events and a publication, combining gender awareness with trade facilitation expertise to create a more inclusive and equitable business landscape in the region.



Unveiling trade barriers of women entrepreneurs: a pioneering survey

Ready4Trade produced a report on “Gender-Responsive Trade Facilitation for Women in Central Asia” based on a survey of over 1,500 women across five countries. The report identified key barriers faced by women traders, highlighted successful strategies to address them, and outlined future opportunities through digitalization and policy reform.



1500+
women entrepreneurs
surveyed

Key findings*



*Highlights from a survey of 1500 female entrepreneurs in Central Asia, focusing on challenges women face in trade.

Fostering women's confidence and knowledge in trade

Ready4Trade conducted a series of workshops for 350 women from five Central Asian countries, equipping them to actively engage in cross-border trade. The project partnered with women's business and customs broker associations to develop and deliver training programmes that address real-world challenges.

350
women traders
trained

87%
participants reported improved
business practices after the training





Fostering inclusive border environment

Ready4Trade conducted comprehensive gender-responsive training for over 650 customs officials throughout the region, aimed at fostering an inclusive and supportive border environment.

Sixty percent of trained officials now implement gender-sensitive practices in their operations, enhancing procedural transparency and reducing trade barriers.

Since the launch of the initiative, more women took up customs roles, including leadership positions, further empowering female traders and entrepreneurs across the region.



650
customs
officials
trained

60%
reported gender-
responsive
changes in border
operations

50+
women officials
trained on a
"leadership" course
to advance their
customs careers

8. Providing assistance to Turkmenistan on issues related to WTO accession

The project provided initial support on matters related to the accession of Turkmenistan to the WTO.

The support included:

- ◆ A series of training courses on the WTO legal framework and other WTO related issues.
- ◆ Participation of government officials in the trade policy courses of the World Trade Institute (WTI), Bern, Switzerland.
- ◆ Providing relevant ministries with WTO legal texts and other materials.



“Turkmenistan is committed to strengthen its cooperation with the WTO and pursue accession efforts.”

“The WTO accession process is a great learning tool for us and will provide an opportunity for trade-related reforms as well as to take measures to attract foreign direct investment. In addition, the WTO accession process is in line with both the National Foreign Trade Strategy 2021-2030 and the recently approved National Programme for Social and Economic Development of Turkmenistan 2022-2052.”

- [Maksat Chariyev](#), representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan.



Harnessing regional synergy

Ready4Trade Central Asia organized and co-hosted major regional and international events to enhance cooperation and improve connectivity in Central Asia.

These events brought together policymakers, business representatives and other stakeholders from five Central Asian countries and beyond, facilitating knowledge sharing, exploring public-private partnerships, and identifying areas for collaboration.



Selected regional events

Regional Meeting on Simplification of Trade in Central Asia

“From domestic roadmaps to regionally coordinated trade facilitation reforms”

11-13 May 2022, Astana, Kazakhstan

The three-day meeting presented an opportunity for 80 officials, technical experts, and private-sector representatives from the region, along with the EU representatives, to discuss common challenges in customs and border management. Insights from key trade flow analysis were shared through detailed roadmaps, outlining reform initiatives and solutions to enhance cross-border trade efficiency.



2022



Study tour on implementation of electronic queue management systems (e-QMS)

5-11 September 2022, Estonia and France

The project organized a study tour to Estonia and France for 20 public and private sector representatives from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to showcase best international practices in the implementation of the electronic queue management systems (e-QMS). The programme of the study tour included visits to the Narva checkpoint in Estonia, the “E-Estonia Briefing Centre” in Tallinn, logistics warehouses in France, as well as meetings with high-level officials from the Estonian Government, associations of freight forwarders and transportation companies as well as e-QMS software developers.



Study tour on risk management systems and border control practices

19-23 September 2022, Latvia and Lithuania

The project, in collaboration with GIZ, organized a study tour to Latvia and Lithuania for 20 representatives of phytosanitary and veterinary agencies from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to learn the EU risk management systems and border control practices. The delegation visited the Riga seaport, the Daugavpils railway terminal in Latvia, the Vilnius international airport checkpoint, the Medininkai border checkpoint as well as phytosanitary and veterinary laboratories and research institutes in Latvia and Lithuania.



2022



Peer Learning Initiative event on best practices in Single Window's implementation and management

12-14 October 2022, Islamabad, Pakistan

The participants shared their knowledge, experiences and regional best practices for the development and implementation of the national Single Windows.



Regional event on electronic exchange of certificates of origin in Central Asia

15-16 February 2023, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

The event, organized in partnership with the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), aimed to facilitate dialogue and exchange experiences on electronic certificates of origin among participants through thematic discussions and interactive sessions. It brought together public and private stakeholders from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Special guests included representatives from the Consumer Goods Expertise Center under the Ministry of National Economy of Azerbaijan, who shared their insights on the exchange of electronic certificates of origin within the CIS region.

2023



Regional conference and study tour: "Harnessing the potential of e-commerce in Central Asia"

9-11 March 2023, Dubai, the UAE

The event started with a one-day conference, where participants had the opportunity to share knowledge with their peers, explore potential areas of public-private collaboration, identify key national policies and regulations to be addressed, and discuss ways to further strengthen trade cooperation within Central Asia to embrace e-commerce at the regional level. The conference was followed by a two-day study tour, where participants from Central Asia visited local fulfillment centers and discovered best practices from international and the UAE players, such as DHL, Dubai CommerCity, DMCC Free Zone, and AstroLabs Business Expansion Platform.



Business Session, 2nd EU-Central Asia Economic Forum

18-19 May 2023, Almaty, Kazakhstan

As part of the 2nd EU-Central Asia Economic Forum, the Business Session united policymakers and business leaders from Central Asia and the EU to discuss trade connectivity, cross-border trade challenges, and regional e-commerce cooperation.



2023



2024



Launch of publication “Crossing Borders, Breaking Barriers: Gender-Responsive Trade Facilitation for Women in Central Asia”

1-5 April 2024, Samarkand, Uzbekistan

The project launched its publication “Crossing Borders, Breaking Barriers: Gender-Responsive Trade Facilitation for Women in Central Asia” during the Asia Pacific Trade Facilitation Forum, which was co-organized by UNESCAP and ADB in partnership with ITC.

2024

Peer Learning Initiative event on “Customs Risk Management: Implementation and Best Practices”

29 April – 1 May 2024, Baku, Azerbaijan

Customs and trade facilitation experts from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan participated in a peer learning event to address customs risk management and integrated border control challenges. The event included discussions, strategy brainstorming, and a tour of the International Port of Baku, emphasizing collaboration to enhance regional customs efficiency along the Trans-Caspian trade route.







Street address

ITC, 54-56 Rue de Montbrillant, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland

Postal address

ITC, Palais des Nations, 1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

www.intracen.org

The International Trade Centre (ITC) is the joint agency of the World Trade Organization and the United Nations.

Published: June 2024