

Covid-19 boosts digitalization, Experts say it provides opportunity to expedite adoption of e-commerce

ISLAMABAD: Covid-19 has provided an opportunity to expedite the adoption of e-commerce and other electronic business and trade solutions including e-payments and e-contracts.

Corresponding measures to get aligned with these solutions will ensure a safe and enabling business environment in the post-pandemic scenario.

These remarks were made by panellists during a virtual public-private dialogue on “Expediting Trade Facilitation Reforms for Manufacturing Sector amid Covid-19” on Thursday.

Speaking on the occasion, Economic Adviser to the Commonwealth Secretariat Dr Salamat Ali elaborated on the pertinence of using digital technologies at a time of pandemic. He said the shift had become increasingly important as it helped in cutting the cost and time faced by traders.

Health and safety of customs and border officials should also be the priority and the infrastructure-related gaps that lead to delay in consignments needed to be bridged.

Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP) Director General (Trade Facilitation) Riaz Ahmed Shaikh informed dialogue participants that TDAP was helping the private sector to explore new market opportunities and new export destinations amid the coronavirus outbreak.

“Online accessibility for relevant officials is part of this facilitation.”

He said a deeper public-private dialogue could play a critical role in ascertaining the right regulatory measures during these difficult times.

Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) Joint Executive Director Dr Vaqar Ahmed said Covid-19 provided an opportunity to introduce interventions related to e-payments, e-signatures and e-contracts in the overall trade processing chain.

Likewise, greater reliance of traders during Covid-19 on internet banking and insurance could cut trade costs, he added.

“More paperless trade can also be made a norm through current and future free trade agreements,” Ahmed said and added that safety requirements and distance between both people and goods were still not properly understood by the workforce in logistics. Therefore, protection of confidential information held by exporters and importers remained a concern that needed to be addressed, he emphasised.

Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry Secretary General Faiza Zubair was of view that overall border management needed to be improved to promote bilateral and transit trade with Afghanistan.

She suggested that the government should include more feedback from the private sector in future policy measures and customs authorities of Afghanistan and Pakistan should work closely to make the best use of new facilities and routes at Gwadar.

Former ambassador to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Dr Manzoor Ahmad was of the opinion that tariffs in Pakistan were still higher compared to other regions and even after Covid-19, the government had not been able to address trade barriers within boundaries of the country.

He suggested that “we need to remove anti-export bias from the tariff structure, reduce various withholding taxes on production and trade, and expedite free trade agreements (FTAs) with partner countries besides building digitalisation as part of FTAs”.

Economist and strategic planning expert Muneeb Sikander emphasised that focus on both current and potential exporters was important while framing trade facilitation measures.

He particularly highlighted the need for supporting women-led businesses in trade. Dialogue participants shared their observation that inefficient animal and plant protection departments created difficulties in the way of meeting the standards requirement of buyers.