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GREEN CUSTOMS: ALIGNMENT WITH ENVIRONMENTAL OBJECTIVES IN THE ECO REGION

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Abstract

The article involves a detailed examination of the concept of “green customs” and their applicability to the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) region. Green customs involves the integration ot environmental values within the policies of customs to promote the legitimate trade of environmentally sensitive commodities and suppress the movement of illegal and dangerous products. The article outlines the achievements of the Republic of Azerbaijan on green customs, the signing of the Baku Declaration during COP29, and digital technology adoption. It also involves practical recommendations for cooperation based on lessons from other countries. The article uncovers green customs as an unavoidable mechanism for maintaining the balance between trade and environmental protection and can form a leading mechanism for promoting sustainable development across ECO member nations.

Keywords: green customs, sustainable aevelopment, environment, customs reforms, ECO region, trade policy

1. Introduction

Environmental damage and climate change are no longer remote risks; they are global challenges, and we must attend to them now and on an ongoing basis. With expanding trade as globalization and economic growth continue, the environmental price of expanding trade rises. As levels of trade increase on a global basis, levels of environmental footprint corresponding to the movement of goods likewise rise—the range from greenhouse gas emissions from the transportation network to illegal movements of hazardous wastes and endangered species. As a consequence, sustainability of the custom authorities becomes a front-line issue. “Green customs” became an unavoidable mechanism, particularly for Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) member countries, to integrate environmental protection and trade facilitation.

The concept of “green customs" is hence gaining ever-increasing significance. As a whole, green customs involves integrating environment-related aspects within the practices of the customs with a view to enabling the rightful trade of environment concerned commodities while not enabling illegal environmental trade and facilitating efficiency in the execution of international environmental treaties. This action heralds a shift from the

traditional “control” mandate of the customs to assuming an environmental sentinel mandate.

For ECO member nations, the transition to green customs is both a strategic necessity and a policy requirement. The region is rich with natural resources and privileged with environmental spaces key to the livelihoods of local populations. While member states share common issues to combat, and these are illegal wildlife trade, transboundary pollution, and limited environmental enforcement technical capacity, the adoption of green customs promotes not only environmental governance but also trade facilitation, economic competitiveness, and international standards compliance such as the Paris Agreement and the Basel Convention.

2. Global Green Customs

Environmental procedures are procedures of customs designed not only to prevent illegal practices potentially harmful to ecosystems but to promote respectable trade of environmentally sensitive products as part of environmental conservation. Prioritized for the first time by the World Customs Organization (WCO), environmental procedures have been intimately linked with international environmental treaties such as the Basel Convention, Montreal Protocol, CITES, and the Paris Agreement.

Green Customs, according to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), combat illicit trade in hazardous wastes, ozone-depletting substances, toxic chemicals, and endangered wildlife. Detection and prevention of environmental crime are an indispensable mandate of customs agencies, and therefore green customs constitute the cornerstone of global environmental governance.

In their book Trade and the Environment: Theory and Evidence, (2003) Brian R. Copeland and M. Scott Taylor emphasize the issue of international trade regimes needing to converge with environmental regulations to prevent ecological externalities, which hamper sustainable development.

The ECO region, consisting of Azerbaijan. Iran. Pakistan, Turkey, and the Central Asian nations, poses special environmental and development challenges. Rapid urbanization, industrialization, and increase in trade volumes put enormous pressure on natural resources. Water scarcity, environmental pollution, deforestation, and land degradation are common features of the region.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Environmental Performance Reviews refer to ECO countries' systemic weaknesses such as inefficient use of resources and ineffective enforcement of environmental protection measures. These realities emphasize further the urgency to pursue a green customs approach in the region.

In support of environmental protection, the World Customs Organization (WCO) is enhancing the Harmonized System (HS) codes to enable the appropriate classification of environmentally sensitive products. "Greening" the HS system, as the key purpose, is to enable better tracking and control of such products by customs authorities. One of the enhancements here includes the 2022 edition of the HS, whereby finer classifications have been included on environmental products and streams of wastes. Among the products included with new subheadings are electric car batteries, solar panels, wind power equipment, biodegradable plastics, and electronic wastes (e-waste).

These amendments allow for enhanced data accuracy and trade restraint enforcement among multilateral environmental agreements. They also allow for the harmonization of the

greening of the HS system to support national and regional efforts to promote green technology, monitor hazardous chemicals, and ensure material trade for sustainable development.

3. Azerbaijan, Regional Cooperation, and the Baku Declaration

Azerbaijan has established itself as a leading force in advancing green customs efforts within the region. A major step in promoting regional cooperation on this front was the high -level event, "Green Customs: Dialogue of Senior Customs Officials," hosted in Baku in November 2024 as part of the COP29 framework.

In line with the ' Year of Solidarity for a Green World" initiative declared by President Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan has introduced a range of forward-looking environmental policies, including:

- Customs and VAT exemptions for electric vehicles and renewable energy technologies to encourage clean energy adoption;
- Deployment of artificial intelligence and automated systems such as ARAS;
- Active participation in international operations like DEMETER aimed at combating the illegal trade in hazardous substances and strengthening cross-border environmental enforcement.

As noted by Barry L. Johnson in Environmental Policy and Public Health (2011), such programs play an indispensable role in reducing the unwanted impacts of the public policy on environmental quality and the health of the public, demonstrating how targeted practices and regulatory actions have broad-based societally beneficial returns.

Azerbaijan's green customs initiative is being promoted within the Customs Development Strategy for 2025-2030, with a focus on digitalization, environmental protection, and enhanced regional cooperation. Its main objective is to switch from old-style paperwork to digital, efficient, and environment-friendly procedures.

In fulfilling this objective, Azerbaijan's State Customs Committee works with environmental authorities and other international organizations. This collaboration not only assures protection of international standards but also reinforces the capacity of custom services to efficiently contribute to environmental protection and sustainable trade practices.

At the same time, technology is a key component of green customs implementation. Azerbaijan has invested in artificial intelligence-based customs infrastructure, enabling real-time monitoring and risk analysis to enhance the efficiency and responsiveness of customs operations.

The Economic Cooperation Organization has aiso intensified its efforts to strengthen regional cooperation in the field of green customs and sustainable trade practices. A major milestone in these efforts was the launch of the Regional Initiative on Resource Efficiency, Sustainability, and Circular Economy in the ECO Region (RESCUE), presented during COP29 in Baku in 2024. This initiative serves as a joint platform to promote a fair transition toward resource efficiency, circularity, and regenerative economic models across the ECO region.

Baku Declaration represented a major step forward in embedding environmental responsibility within customs administrations across the ECO region. Signed by the heads of customs authorities from several ECO member countries, the Declaration calls on its signatories to commit to environmentally responsible trade practices, adopt green technologies, and strengthen regulatory compliance in alignment with international

environmental agreements. The Declaration reflects a unified regional vision to integrate sustainability into trade and customs operations, laying the groundwork for long-term cooperation and coordinated environmental governance among ECO member states.

The countries that signed the Declaration committed to the following objectives:

• Supporting environmentally responsible trade to minimize the ecological impact of cross

border commerce;

• Harmonizing customs standards across the region to facilitate consistent and sustainable practices;

• Enhancing the knowledge and skills of customs officers through training and capacity building in environmental regulations;

• Promoting tne adoption of green technologies and reducing carbon emissions at borders to modernize infrastructure in line with climate goals.

These projects are part of a comprehensive initiative to align customs procedures with environmental issues within the ECO region. Witn the Baku Declaration and the RESCUE program, ECO member nations are taking concrete measures to increase regional cooperation and integrate environmental responsibility into trade flows. Collectively, these projects mark important milestones towards both trade liberalization and environmental protection and meeting the international sustainable development agenda.

4. The Socio-Economic Benefits of Green Customs

The benefits of green customs extend far beyond environmental protection. With more transparency, fewer trade restrictions, and sustainable development, green customs strive to build a strong and sustainable economy. Efficient and sustainable customs procedures lower transactional costs, reduce border clearing times, and increase the reliability of supply chains.

In line with an OECD study carried out in 2021, countries whose customs management is enhanced with green values have elevated trade volumes and rapid clearances. Such outcomes have a direct positive bearing on the business environment and regulatory certainty, hence why green customs remains an enabler of economic and environmental gains.

The historical contribution of paperless trade infrastructure to international trade, particularly to developing nations, has been reaffirmed with the recent developments. Digital documentation would reduce trade an estimated 75% of the cost and create an additional USD 1.2 trillion of trade potential among Commonwealth countries until 2026, according to a recent Commonwealth Secretariat report on 2024. Paperless trade infrastructure benefits developing and poor nations in a peculiar way, as past trade costs tend to far outweigh export receipts, and hence trade becomes commercially unfeasible.

Substantial strides have been noted with projects such as the “Climate-Resilient Trade Facilitation” project jointly undertaken between UNCTAD and ESCAP within the Asian-Pacific and African regions. For instance, utilization of the cargo clearance within the use of the ASYCUDA system eliminated physical documents completely and reduced utilization of papers within sanitary and phytosanitary certifications to a level above 95%. Similarly, the government ot Kenya embarked on utilization of the TradeNet System, engaging a total of 35 government agencies on a single digital platform, an endeavor which had gravely streamlined processes and reduced wastage of papers to a considerable level.

These innovations enhance not only operational effectiveness but also environmental sustainability. As one UNCTAD study revealed, digitalization of trade processes reduces greenhouse emissions per document by as much as 63%—mostly because of enhanced efficiency.

But to tap the complete strength of paperless trade, there is a need for wide-ranging legal and institutional reform. For this, national laws need to be harmonized with international instruments of law like the UNCITRAL Model Law on Electronic Transferable Records (MLETR). This reform helps to give legal validity to electronic documents and instill an environment for digital trade practices not only to be efficient but also legally enforceable.

Generally, the integration of paperless trade infrastructure presents bright opportunities for countries to increase their trade efficiency, reduce environmental impacts, and timulate economic growth. For complete utilization of these opportunities, there should be continued investments in digital infrastructure, harmonization of legislations, and human capital development.

In doing so, green traditions advocate for inclusive economic growth because they aid conservation of natural areas, which are the source of livelihood for millions. For the ECO region, where agriculture, forest, and fishing form the foundation of local livelihoods, prevention of environmental crime such as illegal logging and dumping harmful wastes helps to sustain biodiversity and increase community governance of natural resources. Illegal environmenial trade, according to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and climate change repository, 2022, annual remittance to developing nations surpasses USD 200 billion, which could have been expended on healthcare, infrastructure development, and education.

Besides, green practices are a catalyst to sustainable industry expansion. Through enabling proper trade of renewable energy products, biodegradable materials, and green products, the customs are part and parcel of enabling the green transition. This unleashes a cascade to other rising industries like solar and wind power, electric vehicle parts, and sustainable bio-based petrochemicals. Not only do the industries generate high value employment, but foreign investments on an Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) footing as well. As as the World Bank reports, green industries generate seven times as much employment as the fossil- fueled industry. Green traditions are therefore an instrument of policy to achieve both environmental sustainability and economic strength within and beyond the ECO region.

The formalization of green practices of customs has been already reshaping international trade flows and inducing measurable changes in sectoral performances both among high- and low- carbon industries. Much higher growth is registered for environmentally linked industries. For example, the international green logistics market, facilitated by government stimuli, environmental certification requirements, and carbon-aware procurement standards, increased from approximately USD 1.3 trillion in 2023 to USD 1.43 trillion in 2024, and is projected to reach more than USD 2.8 trillion by 2033.

Similarly, electric vehicle (EV) commerce increased by 25% year-on-year in the opening part of 2024. This growth has been aided by exemptions on custom duties, simplified custom clearances on low-emissions products, and rising domestic demand for green modes of transport. The green logistics segment also recorded an expansion of 8%, which was spurred by increased funding for projects on low-emissions infrastructure and the use of environmentally sustainable supply chain practices. Meanwhile, the segment on ecopackaging recorded a 12% increase, which came as a result of increased demands for

compliant packaging spearheaded by import incentives on products that are biodegradable and other environmental labeling regulations. These are advancements which not only demonstrate how green traditions are driving clean trade practices but also how they are restructuring market forces within global value chains, aiding long-term structural changes towards sustainability and innovation.

In contrast, energy-intensive industries such as steel, cement, and aluminum are becoming less trade competitive on trade routes where environmental border measures are being implemented. For instance, cement and steel trade values have decreased by 10% and 7%, respectively. This reduction is to a very large extent caused by new regulatory policies such as the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which imposes additional taxes on emissions-intensive imports. This regulatory pressure intensifies compliance costs among producers who emit a lot and are doing production in countries with weak environmental governance, thus narrowing their export possibilities. Export of aluminum lowered by 6% as well, due to rising international scrutiny of imbedded carbon emissions and energy consumption while producing. More broadly, old-line sectors that have retarded upgrading their production patterns have seen combined average trade flows decline by an average of 4%. This decline comes mainly from additional non-tariff measures related to sustainability certification and customs clearances because of insufficient environmental paperwork. Besides, old energy-consuming and environmentally harmful production-based sectors are facing expanding trade barriers. Environmental green Customs procedures are increasingly requesting sustainability paperwork such as life-cycle assessment and compliance with the green product categories adopted to the HS 2022 revision (HS 2022). Such expanding requests are part of an escalated environmental accountability trena and are redesigning terms of market access within international value chains.

This sectoral transformation is part of a general restructuring of cross-border trade, whereby value addition is increasingly tied to environmental results. Green customs do not only regulate trade: they are redesigning the very definition of comparative advantage itself. For ECO countries, the strategic challenge runs two-fold: to proactively promote the restructuring of frail industries while promoting green industrialization with special-purpose policy instruments, reform of trade facilitation, and capacity-building.

Green practices also grant access to preferential trade arrangements. All of today's next- generation FTAs now have environmental components, and adherence to such measures can grant ECO nations duty exemption, simplified procedures, and access to green financing. For instance, the impending EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) to take effect in 2026 will encourage products with low-emissions production and clear environmental tracking—making green customs both an interior reform, but a competitive one.

Besides, green customs ensure equitable sharing of environmental benefits. By banning illegal extraction of resources within ecologically sensitive areas, green customs protect environmentally vulnerable populations against environmental destruction and socio-economic marginalization. This is especially true for frontier areas where local communities are prone to bearing the biggest burden of environmental destruction. Equitable enforcement of green customs can then serve as an environmental justice mechanism, aligning trade control measures with human rights and sustainable livelihoods.

Green practices are also observed to find a strategic location among international institutions to advance international cooperation. International Trade Centre (ITC)

highlights the reality that environmentally efficient trade practices provide a nation with a better image and attract investors who care about sustainability. Green standards are usually embraced by nations who are more integrated into international green value chains, have improved climate funds access, and perform better on the sustainability indexes.

In the long term, green customs support national policy goals for climate change mitigation, sustainable development, and environmental health. By monitoring import and export of ozone- depleting substances, toxic chemicals, and electronic wastes, green customs address international agreement commitments such as the Montreal Protocol and the Basel Convention. Besides easing the enforcement burden among agencies, this harmonization signals a country's international protection credentials for the environment, an ever-determining force behind diplomatic and trade negotiations. In short, for the ECO region, a green customs investment is not only a technical reform, but an investment in the very welfare of humanity and the Earth.

5. Global Experience

A comparison of best practices of leader nations for green customs practices determines some of the most important lessons on aligning trade policy with environment and socio-economic objectives. Not only do these best practices modernize customs procedures, but they are practical templates for ECO member nations looking to promote sustainable economic development. One of the most frequently quoted international cases is Sweden. National climate policy in Sweden is closely associated with customs reform. Environmental risk assessment is included within cargo inspection practice and there are strong ties with environmental agencies to ensure transboundary pollution is closely monitored. This cross-agency initiative has strengthened detection of illegal chemicals shipments effectively and yielded better public health results.

As evaluated by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (2022), this institutional connection has reduced government annual environmental remediation costs by over 15%. The Sweden case demonstrates the practical economic benefits of linking customs operations with environmental governance and shows how environmental protection can become part of routine trade controls without adversely impacting efficiency. These lessons suggest ECO countries may reap environmental and budgetary dividends from assuming similar inter-agency coordination, linking environmental risk criteria to their customs procedures, and drawing on national climate plans. Sweden's experience is one very strong argument for why green customs can become a tool of integrated policy and long-term resilience.

Yet another global leader, Singapore, shows the vital role digital infrastructure plays to the effectiveness of green customs. Singapore's National Trade Platform checks the rovenance, transit, and sustainability credentials of products with the aid of blockchain and Al. Blockchain technology makes an enormous contribution to transparency and track-and-trace throughout the value chain.

According to the World Bank, digital customs terminals can reduce import-export clearing times by up to 50%, reduce corruption possibilities, and increase revenue collections. They do not only simplify paperwork but also support verification of environmental certifications and verification of international standards. Singapore's experience depicts digitalization as much more than an issue of effectiveness—the digitalization of Singapore Customs is a key facilitator of environmental accountability and trade transparency.

As a result, Singapore saw increased foreign investments into green businesses and rising exports of accredited products to OECD nations and the European Union. This model reveals how digital advanced tools can assist countries to be credible partners of sustainable trade worldwide.

In Costa Rica, trade policy has been closely linked with national biodiversity goals. The nation keeps strict controls to prevent smuggling of endangered species and illegal forest products. Its effort is supplemented with mobile verification units and special border authority training. These types of measures have helped to maintain ecotourism and forest-dependent livelihoods— activities intertwined comprising over 13% of Costa Rica's GDP (World Bank, 2021). The harmonization of environmental crime prevention and customs work within Costa Rica proves environmental protection isn't against economic power, but supports it. Its framework preserves the link between environmental conservation and sustainable economic development, especially for countries with high biodiversity.

The Netherlands is an interesting example of the success of strong public-private cooperation towards green customs. Dutch authorities collaborate with trade associations to establish "green corridors" for low-emitting and waste-management industries. They incentivize those industries with fast-tracking clearances and lower rates of tariffs. The model invites firms to invest in sustainability and aligns commercial interests with environmental ends. The Dutch experience illustrates how tradition can act as a bridge between regimes of regulation and regimes of market incentive and promote a transition where sustainability is an asset on the competitive stage and not a cost of regulation.

In the case of South Korea with its "Green New Deal," extensive investments have been made in green custom training. With the collaboration of research centers and universities, the Korea Customs Service developed specialized training materials on electronic wastes, hazardous chemicals, and circular economy actions for the custom agents. Such investments in human capital have enhanced institutional capacity and increased harmonization of custom procedures with international tools such as the Basel and Rotterdam Conventions.

Indeed, human capital ranks among the most vital elements of the successful implementation of green customs. Training and capacity building are among the most important features of the initiative, which allow employees to have the skills and expertise to identify environmentally sensitive products, enforce corresponding legislations, and utilize advanced technologies.

In Azerbaijan, the customs authorities are systematically trained on environmental protection legislations, detection of smuggled commodities, and the use of advanced technologies. Such programs are delivered collaboratively with educational institutions and international agencies to keep Azerbaijan's customs authorities up to date with global best practices.

Along with formal training, the State Customs Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan has also undertaken awareness programs for traders and forwarding agencies specifically to familiarize them with green obligations of the customs. These efforts increase legal compliance as well as instill environmental responsibility among members of the trade fraternity. Investing both in awareness and technical knowledge of the private and the public sectors, Azerbaijan cements the fact that green customs is not only a tool of regulation—but a group responsibility requiring collaboration, learning, and constant interaction.

The importance of environmental protection and the contribution of education is also noted by James Salzman and Barton H. Thompson Jr. in Environmental Law and Policy (2018). They note the importance of knowledge and legal literacy among government

officials to achieve successful environmental protection. These practices complement the institutional capacity of constant learning and international cooperation to enhance the professional competencies of the customs agents. In member states of ECO, capacity building and human capital investments could efficiently increase the utilization of regulatory tools against environmental degradation. This ultimately contributes to sustainable trade and environmental security in the region.

These are but a few examples to demonstrate that green practices are beyond mere regulatory compliance—sources of creativity, of competitiveness, and of social equity. For the ECO region, context-specific versions of these strategies can create an opening to building an inclusive, environmentally-friendly, and climate-resilient economy, an economy better equipped to weather market volatility and environmental unpredictability.

In short, green customs mean not only a technical change but a transformational method—one linking trade governance to sustainability, responsibility, and long-term prosperity.

Table 1.

Global Best Practices in Green Customs

Country	Practice	Socio-Economic Impact
Sweden	Environmental risk-based inspections	15% reduction in environmental restoration costs
Singapore	Blockchain technology	Increase in green exports and foreign direct investment
Costa Rica	Anti-smuggling controls for biodiversity protection	Preservation of 13% of GDP from ecotourism
Netherlands	Green lanes for low-emission trade	Stimulation of sustainable industrial practices
South Korea	Customs training under the Green New Deal	Strengthened compliance with international environmental agreements

Conclusions

The green evolution of customs within the ECO region ana beyond is today more than a symbol of inspirational special interest; it is a strategic necessity and one of the pillars of economic governance. Against the backdrop of climate change and shrinking resources, the customs authorities are turning out to be global leaders of sustainable development, responsible trade, and environmental integrity.

As this article shows, green practices are not just technical adjustments; they are an institutional renovation, one that necessarily changes countries' trade, legislations, and their resources management. From Azerbaijan's progressive measures during the "Year of Solidarity for a Green World," to the reciprocal responsibilities cemented within the Baku

Declaration, ECO countries are laying the foundation for simplified, clear, and environmentally-conscious customs regimes.

With the global economy needing to become more carbon neutral and trade regulations strengthened, there is a strategic need for the ECO region to set an example with innovation, cooperation, and an ironclad commitment to green customs. Doing this will ensure regional

economic growth is not accomplished on the backs of environmental devastation but works towards creating a long-term and sustainable future. ECO members can put customs as a key instrument of long-term prosperity—ensuring cross-country trade of goods isn't accomplished on the backs of the planet or future generations. In the long term, green traditions' prospects will depend on political will, institutional innovation, and long-term international cooperation. Where there are these guiding principles, the ECO region can not only demonstrate excellent leadership but also ensure trade arrangements are good for the environment, economy, and society at the same time.

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