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### **Producing a multinational www-information service**

#### **The www-service project for customs administrations in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region**

The customs administrations in the Barents region adopted a common website in March 2000 at its presentation at a council ministerial meeting in Oulu. The website is aimed at supporting entrepreneurship in the SME sector and promoting smooth trade by improving the flow of information. Information has been made available in five languages (English, Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, and Russian) on the website.

#### Well functioning cooperation

The Northern Dimension, reducing impediments to trade, improving employment and various other honorable goals were the starting point as the plans for the www-service for the Barents region got started in summer 1999. The launching of the project was possible thanks to the highly functional cooperation between different organizations in the Barents region, and the funds allocated to the region, which enable the elaboration of the plans.

The Barents Euro-Arctic Council has been divided into working groups. The Customs Working Group is subordinate to the Working Group on Economic Co-operation. Sweden, Norway and Russia have taken part in the extensive cooperation project together with Finland. The Customs Working Group has led the www-information service project. An implementing group including technical experts, but before all people familiar with the methods and procedures was assembled from among those countries' customs administrations. Finnish Customs and its information service group have been responsible for advancing the project in practice. The information service prepared the initial project design, a manuscript and sought a partner to answer for the technical realization. A co-operation agreement was made with the University of Lapland and the FinBarents group of its Arctic Centre, who hired a separate project manager and a technical planner. The overall solution has been successful.

#### Activities also on the net

The working group convened for the first time in September 1999, and met five times altogether. It has been vital for setting up the project that the www-information service group has had its own website within the district at the University of Lapland. The website has contained the plans, the minutes, invitations and agendas of the meetings, contact details, and a space for comments. It has been of great importance that you could follow the project advance on the internet. Getting together has been necessary for the sake of live dialogue, exchange of ideas and reaching decisions. Mutual decisions are easier to implement.

The schedule was tight for the construction of this project. Different countries worked hard for the project. We remained on schedule quite well even though the construction really got underway only in November 1999. The customs administrations of all the countries saw, however, the value of the project. The Customs Services want to remove the obstacles to trade. We hope to reach this goal by improving access to information and by simplifying border formalities. The aim of the Information Service Group was to finish the pilot phase of the project by the ministerial meeting of the Barents Council on March 15, and we succeeded.

### Content of the pages

The project was split into phases and the implementation of the first phase called "pilot or fur cap model" began. At the initial stage the purpose was to adopt the service as soon as possible, so that it could immediately serve the needs of smaller import and export enterprises. The website offers information on customs clearance forms and procedures at commercial exportation. Furthermore, the site offers information on documents needed for release into free circulation and on taxes to be paid. Also the import restrictions, provisions regarding vehicles and customs transit proceedings are presented on the www-pages.

The website presents customs offices, maps and border crossing points with their opening hours and other details. The website is but the beginning and it is not even our intention to build an exhaustive customs data bank but to help access to key information. Every country has its own www-site that they basically maintain and develop. The Barents www-information service has links to national pages.

The most central and acute material was compiled on the pages in an intelligible form. Customs terminology, however, does not easily open to a lay person. A notable feature in the Barents www-information service is that efforts are taken to provide information in English, apart from the national languages. Each Member State produces the material for its own www-pages and sees to it that the information is monthly updated according to need.

### New development prospects

The content of the pages will be reviewed this year. Forms will be added and improvements made to the technical realization and wording. A novelty will be the opening of a news page and a questions page, where you can send questions on customs activities to the information desks of the different countries. The Barents Customs Working Group has a "100 questions and 100 answers" project, the most essential model questions of which are incorporated in the pages. The Customs Working Group has surveyed also logistical chains, e.g. Rovaniemi-Murmansk and Murmansk-Rovaniemi. Part of the chain will be opened on the website so that by following the action on the chain you can open the information and the possible document annexed to it.

The starting point for developing the services should be getting feedback from the users. Taking into account the wishes of those handling customs matters is our prime concern. It should be borne in mind, however, that this is a project the purpose of which is to distribute information, not to alter proceedings or practices. Primarily we request feedback on what information and in what form is wanted, although any feedback for improving procedures will be forwarded.

### Collaboration with other projects

The Baltic Sea region is about to start the Baltic Sea Customs www-collaboration. This project is spearheaded by Denmark. The preparations for launching the project have begun. 11 countries will take part in the co-operation, including Norway and official EU representation. The projects will be linked to each other to avoid overlapping.

The Barents www-customs information service will be incorporated in the Barents portal. The University of Lapland is developing a wider www-rainbow for Barents where the different www-services of the region will be compiled. In the near future, life will be easier for the exporters and importers when accurate and up-to-date information is made available in the right proportion - adequately, easily and flexibly, even in many languages.

We do not want a bottleneck to the flow of information, that not everyone has access to computer or browsing opportunities. In the Nordic Countries the public libraries, however, are rather well-equipped in this respect. The University of Lapland is developing a project, which is aimed at getting net connections to public libraries in Russia, so as to improve access to information in this way too. However, the libraries may not have awakened to invest in safeguarding access to information for the business community and developing information services, but have focused more on private citizens. One of the objectives of the Customs Working Groups' www-customs information service project is to expand it so that the border stations will get connections and computers for customer service.

### Lessons of the project

The countries that participated in the project differed in their readiness to produce information to a www-service such as this. The Russians distinguished themselves in this respect. They were the first to provide the material. A lot of work has been done in the Murmansk region to develop the www-services.

The internet project as a term catches the attention of IT-oriented people. The danger is to shift discussion to structures and technicalities. The most important issue, that is, what information should be provided for the website is easily overlooked. The group included both professional groups, however. In the end, the planning of the manuscript rested in Finnish hands to a large extent.

The Customs Working Group gave the schedule in ready form. The preparing, surveying and planning phase remained short. Instead, we began to implement the

project and it was accomplished in good time. Using outside translation agencies is not without problems. Customs terminology is its own special field, and not readily accessible to those unfamiliar with the contents. Developing an explanatory lexicon will be one of the information service projects of the future.

#### Important addresses

<http://www.urova.fi/barentscustoms>

www-service common to Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish and Russian Customs. The website is hosted by the University of Lapland

<http://finbarents>

site for Finbarents co-operation hosted by the Ministry of Trade and Industry