
Discussion paper

Monitoring the implementation of RCEP

Policy considerations ahead of the 2027 General Review

Acknowledgement

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Executive Summary

The finalisation of negotiations to establish the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement in 2020 was a landmark demonstration of ASEAN's and its key regional Dialogue Partners' **shared commitment to economic openness in East Asia amid a global context of increasing trade uncertainty**. Four years since RCEP's entry into force, its importance as an anchor of regional political consensus in favour of economic integration, rules-based trade and investment, and multilateral cooperation has grown markedly.

Yet **RCEP faces several challenges to its relevance rooted in the uneven progress on the unfinished business of its negotiation**. Many issues identified for review and reform under the RCEP agreement's built-in agenda—including tariff reduction timeframes and differentials, upgraded rules of origin, and a range of non-tariff measures (NTM) and trade facilitation initiatives—remain unresolved. Experts point to the slow implementation of these and other provisions as reasons for the uneven patterns of utilisation of RCEP by firms, and by extension for the modest overall effects RCEP has had in unlocking new trade and investment flows, especially for the less-developed ASEAN RCEP Participating Countries (RPCs).

Slow progress in implementing RCEP has costs beyond foregone opportunities for trade and investment. RCEP's strategic value within the institutional architecture of regional economic integration depends on governments giving it equal political priority alongside ASEAN's 'plus one' agreements. The more ambitious liberalisation goals embodied in many such agreements should provide impetus to upgrade RCEP so that it can match and ultimately incorporate these complementary arrangements into a more cohesive regional integration framework.

In a time of continuing and extreme international trade policy uncertainty, economic modelling makes clear that **RCEP implementation is an important instrument for securing the openness and policy certainty** that will attract international investment and promote regional development and growth. RCEP possesses unique advantages as a such an instrument. Its regular tempo of political-level dialogues, in-built economic and technical cooperation platform, and ongoing review and amendment processes make it more than just a preferential trade agreement: it is uniquely positioned to **foster cooperation between developed and less-developed economies** in driving mutually beneficial diffusion of regional production chains across its membership, ensuring that growth is not concentrated but shared.

Officials and ministers from RPCs were given the clear mandate by RCEP leaders at the October 2025 RCEP Leaders' Meeting to:

- '[e]nhance the full and effective implementation of the RCEP Agreement';
- '[a]dvance the RCEP economic cooperation agenda to narrow the gap of implementation' between RPCs;
- 'continue discussions on ways to accelerate the implementation of the RCEP Agreement within the context of the General Review';
- Engage businesses and other stakeholders in supporting implementation of the RCEP Agreement and advancing the economic cooperation agenda'.

The General Review of RCEP is an opportune moment to assess progress on implementation, gauge its relationship with utilisation patterns, and identify areas where more concerted cooperation is

needed to close implementation gaps, in line with the mandate given by leaders. The General Review is a strategic opportunity to treat monitoring implementation not as a bureaucratic exercise but as a tool to sustain the political momentum and reinforce RCEP as an anchor of regional integration and economic policy certainty. Such a stocktake will however be insufficient to ensure ongoing progress on implementation of the in-built agenda defined in 2020, as well as on new commitments that build on the findings of the General Review.

This paper seeks to initiate and inform a conversation among experts and policymakers about how the General Review may consider the institutional frameworks governing ongoing monitoring of RCEP implementation, and how the monitoring process can be leveraged to drive consistent implementation going forward. The paper shares evidence showing that concerns around implementation are justified by the slow progress on key items of the in-built agenda; draws on expert research to demonstrate how these implementation gaps have prevented RCEP from living up to its potential; and explores the experience of monitoring implementation in comparable agreements to extract lessons in how monitoring processes can be designed to generate incentives for closing implementation gaps.

In the **Appendix**, we present a potential model of a framework for monitoring implementation within RCEP that is informed by the paper's analysis of RCEP's monitoring needs, focused around a key role for Ministerial initiative in defining and reviewing policy priorities.

Key messages

This paper proposes a number of issues for consideration in the General Review:

- First, the General Review could explore options for a monitoring framework that creates a feedback loop between officials and the political-level agenda within RCEP. Political leaders must be given clear, transparent, and accessible reporting on implementation progress and use that reporting to set priorities for the official-level work program. The monitoring could also incorporate the 'commitment gap', i.e., how members prioritise of RCEP relative to other agreements.
- Second, the Review would ideally define the RSU/Secretariat's precise responsibilities within any monitoring framework, and its corresponding resourcing needs. The Review could also address questions of information flow and accountability: who defines actionable commitments for RPCs arising from political leaders' tasking, how progress is reported transparently, and how that reporting feeds back into strategic-level dialogue to generate further tasking for the RJC, Secretariat and RPCs.
- Noting that the October 2025 Leaders' Statement mandates that officials and ministers [e]ngage businesses and other stakeholders in supporting implementation of the RCEP Agreement and advancing the economic cooperation agenda', the Review should formalise role for private sector stakeholders—potentially through the RCEP Business Advisory Council—to ensure that implementation remains aligned with private sector needs. Accessible online dashboards, even if not fully public-facing, would be essential to underpin meaningful stakeholder engagement within the monitoring process.
- Finally, it explains how monitoring could be integrated with RCEP's economic and technical cooperation pillar, so that identified capacity gaps are systematically matched with technical assistance and capacity-building support.

Introduction: Future-proofing RCEP

Four years after its entry into force, the importance of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to Asia's economic security has grown substantially. Recall the context: the negotiations were finalised amid the shock of the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the first salvos in the US–China trade war under Trump 1.0. The conclusion of the negotiations in 2020 demonstrated East Asian political commitment to open, rules-based trade and continued regional integration—and of ASEAN's ability to anchor and coordinate such efforts. With its 15 member economies comprising 30 per cent of global GDP and 28 per cent of world trade, RCEP has global significance. It now provides a platform for the consolidation and extension of regional integration at a time of deep uncertainty in international trade policy and about the health of the WTO-based multilateral trading system.

If used as designed, RCEP addresses the core challenges to regional prosperity: defending open, rules-based trade, driving industrial transformation through participation in regional and global value chains, and consolidating the East Asian economy as a source of global demand. Despite India's late-stage exit, RCEP remains an ASEAN-driven achievement—one that widens opportunities for industrial transformation as a pathway for economic development among its members. With its built-in agenda, review provisions, economic and technical cooperation pillar, and regular official and ministerial meetings, and its special leader-level meetings, as required, RCEP offers a flexible and inclusive platform for rule-making and consolidating the political consensus in support of continued economic integration across the region.

The challenge of implementation

The agreement that RCEP Participating Countries (RPCs) signed in 2020 was notable for the number of commitments left open to review and negotiation after its entry into force. This reflected both the expedited conclusion of negotiations during a period of increasingly acute uncertainty—including India's withdrawal—and the divergent capacities and political commitments to liberalisation among RPCs.

RCEP's status as a 'living agreement', was therefore not only a design feature but a necessity. Whether this proves a strength or a weakness depends on how RPCs use that flexibility. It could become a pretext for uneven or piecemeal implementation of the agreement or it could catalyse concerted follow-through to upgrade the agreement to meet the challenges of a post-Trump world.

Credibility demands proper implementation of the 2020 commitments. Yet concerns about pace and consistency of implementation have been a recurring theme in expert and official discussions, to the point of being a key focus of the 5th RCEP Leaders' Meeting in Kuala Lumpur in October 2025. In their Joint Leaders' Statement, Leaders declared their 'firm commitment to enhancing the full and effective implementation of the RCEP Agreement as a vital step towards achieving the full potential of the region's trade and growth', and elevating accelerated implementation as a key focus of the RCEP work agenda'

Leaders 'instructed Ministers and Officials to intensify efforts to:

- i. Enhance the full and effective implementation of the RCEP Agreement;

- ii. Advance the accession process of applicants into the RCEP Agreement while ensuring that the standards of the RCEP Agreement are maintained;
- iii. Advance the RCEP economic cooperation agenda to **narrow the gap of implementation**, particularly for the less developed economies and address longer-term emerging challenges such as climate change, digital transformation and supply chain vulnerabilities;
- iv. Strengthen RCEP institutions, through the establishment of an effective RCEP Secretariat;
- v. Commence the preparation for the General Review of the RCEP Agreement, scheduled for 2027, and **continue discussions on ways to accelerate the implementation of the RCEP Agreement** to ensure a level playing field and promote strong and resilient domestic and regional growth, including by progressing the built-in agenda and expanding the benefits of RCEP by, among others, considering options to incorporate provisions on modern and emerging issues;
- vi. Engage **businesses and other stakeholders in supporting implementation of the RCEP Agreement** and advancing the economic cooperation agenda, thereby ensuring that RCEP remains inclusive.

Steps to accelerate the implementation of the Agreement have the clear imprimatur of political leaders. Their concerns were echoed by the ASEAN Geoeconomics Task Force, which in its October 2025 Geoeconomics Taskforce Report underlined that ‘[a]dvancing the full commitments under RCEP’ was among ‘necessary steps if ASEAN is to preserve economic resilience in an era of great power rivalry and systemic uncertainty’ (ASEAN Geoeconomics Task Force 2025: 15).

The opportunity of the General Review

The General Review of RCEP, mandated under the RCEP agreement to be launched five years from its entry into force (i.e., in 2027) is a key context for acceleration of the implementation of RCEP commitments. While the terms of reference have yet to be developed, the mandate for the General Review enshrined in Article 20.8 of the RCEP Agreement (see Box 1) is broad. It encourages it to canvass a range of issues relevant to assessing the progress of implementation of the Agreement’s provisions in the five years since its entry into force; examining a range of issues around utilisation rates; considering options for upgrading and reform of the agreement; and exploring pathways for accession.

A full accounting of the state of implementation of RCEP must be a major agenda item of General Review. Without it discussions about extending and deepening the agreement will lack credibility. If protracted or piecemeal implementation of legally-binding commitments is allowed to persist, the economic gains from RCEP will remain limited, utilisation will stay low, and RCEP’s the political credibility as a platform for regional integration and rule-making will be undermined.

One-off stocktakes of implementation will not be sufficient to generate the incentives or momentum needed for ongoing implementation of past or new commitments that may emerge from the General Review. What is needed is an **institutionalised process for regular and ongoing monitoring and reporting on implementation**—a process structured to generate momentum, ensure consistent and timely implementation of current and prospective RCEP commitments. Such a process must:

- feed into the RCEP ministerial work program from official or other independent processes to encourage accountability;

- consolidate strong habits and norms of implementation among RPCs; and
- help the Parties orient initiatives pursued under RCEP’s economic and technical cooperation chapter towards addressing gaps in capacity that impede participating countries' efforts to implement what they have signed up to.

What this paper does

This paper aims to serve as a jumping-off point for experts’ and policy practitioners’ deliberations on how the General Review might address the question of monitoring implementation. The paper develops the argument across three sections. First, it takes stock of existing implementation monitoring initiatives and assesses what they reveal about implementation gaps—and shortcomings in the process of tracking implementation itself. Second, it considers potential models for translating data collection on implementation progress among the parties into an institutionalised monitoring process. This could be optimised to ensure timely and even implementation of RCEP’s legally binding commitments, drawing on best practices from comparable multilateral and plurilateral economic agreements. Third, it brings these threads together to propose a set of principles for developing RCEP’s implementation tracking and accountability frameworks. These principles are explicitly framed to inform the General Review’s possible consideration of monitoring as a strategic issue.

BOX 1: The General Review’s mandate

Article 20.8: General Review

1. The Parties shall undertake a general review of this Agreement with a view to updating and enhancing this Agreement to ensure that this Agreement remains relevant to the trade and investment issues and challenges confronting the Parties, five years after the date of entry into force of this Agreement, and every five years thereafter, unless the Parties agree otherwise.
2. In conducting a review pursuant to this Article, the Parties shall:
 - a. consider ways to further enhance trade and investment among the Parties; and
 - b. take into account:
 - i. the work of all committees and subsidiary bodies established pursuant to Chapter 18 (Institutional Provisions); and
 - ii. relevant developments in international fora

1: Outlining the problem

Well-designed and well-governed implementation monitoring processes are central to driving the follow-through on binding commitments made under preferential trade agreements—and maximising their economic benefits. The logic is grounded in the dynamics of what Judith Kelley (2017) has called 'scorecard diplomacy'—the idea that clear and communicable measures of implementation create accountability among peers, provide external inducement for productive diplomacy and facilitate cooperation on shared implementation challenges.

In regional trade agreements such as RCEP, 'getting governance right' (De Lombaerde, Estevadeordal and Suominen 2008: 2) will not only 'ensure that the contractual obligations assumed by all parties will be implemented', but 'also engender positive externalities beyond the process of implementing the regional agreement' in terms of strengthening norms and habits of coordination and momentum around domestic reforms among different institutions within signatory countries. These spill-over effects are especially relevant to RCEP, where differences in the bureaucratic capacities of signatories are implicated in concerns about the pace of implementation of the built-in agenda.

The economic and political rationale for accelerating RCEP implementation has become clearer in the face of the escalation of trade and economic policy uncertainties over the past half decade, and especially over the past twelve months. As the modelling and analysis suggests, in this environment the most effective way for RCEP members to offset and overcome the costs of growing trade policy uncertainty and protectionism elsewhere is to deliver on the commitments they have already made (.

Slow implementation carries real costs. It limits utilisation, undermines confidence and delays the positive regional economic dynamics that acceleration of implementation has been shown to generate. Tracking progress across members, identifying bottlenecks and alleviating them is essential, not just to unlock economic gains but also to demonstrate RCEP's credibility as a platform for integration and resilience.

Interface with ASEAN-plus one agreements

One of RCEP's underlying strategic rationales was to consolidate the overlapping web of 'ASEAN-plus' preferential trade agreements. Yet many RCEP member governments—and ASEAN collectively—have continued to invest in negotiating and upgrading bilateral and plurilateral plus-one agreements that continue to govern preferential market access between many RCEP members (Hayakawa, Kohpaiboon and Quimba 2025). With their more targeted membership, these arrangements have allowed for deeper liberalisation commitments than within RCEP. It is little surprise, then, that their availability to firms in the region have contributed to RCEP's low utilisation rates, except among members among for whom RCEP represents their first preferential agreement (Banh, Xu and Tan 2024: 21).

The challenge for RCEP, as the General Review approaches, is to confront the 'ambition gap' between the 2020 agreement and evolving ASEAN-plus agreements. RCEP will need to reaffirm its unique strategic value-add in integration efforts even as extant plus-one arrangements continue to augment its provisions.

This challenge is an impetus for using the General Review to canvass options to upgrade RCEP to enshrine more ambitious measures on tariff reduction, NTMs, digital and services trade, and green

issues. Expediting progress on RCEP's built-in agenda is central to maintaining its value-add and relevance alongside alternative arrangements. The unfinished business of the built-in work agenda including rules of origin, tariff differentials, and other actions on NTMs and trade facilitation, are critical to unlocking the trade and investment flows RCEP was designed to deliver.

Falling short on high-value reforms

While this paper does not attempt a comprehensive stocktake of the many action items arising from the 2020 RCEP Agreement—a task more appropriate as part of the RCEP General Review—it is nonetheless worth highlighting a cluster of reforms as emblematic of the nexus between incomplete implementation and uneven utilisation. Tariff rates and rules of origin central to RCEP's goal of facilitating regional value chains, have seen little meaningful process even as mandated deadlines for their resolution grow near or have passed. These issues do not represent the whole quantum of 'unfinished business'. They are, however, emblematic of a deeper problem: when implementation falters, utilisation suffers. And when utilisation suffers RCEP's promise of driving trade and investment flows across the region remains unfulfilled.

Article 2.6—Tariff Differentials

This Article requires that RPCs, 'notwithstanding' the General Review process, shall begin a review process within two years of RCEP's entry into force and every three years thereafter to 'reduce or eliminate' the provisions of Article 2.6, allowing for 'tariff differentials', i.e., permitting parties to apply different tariff rates to the same product depending on which RCEP partner it originates from. This provision was a legacy of accommodating India's concerns during RCEP's negotiating process. It was intended as a transitional compromise measure. Today, however, it is widely seen as a stumbling block. Instead of providing firms with streamlined tariff schedules, tariff differentials perpetuate complexity, increase compliance and administrative burdens and undermine utilisation of RCEP preferences.

According to information provided by the RCEP Support Unit, while the mandated review period for this Article has commenced, there is no sign that the process has been finalised or that it is producing substantial outcomes. The persistence of tariff differentials illustrates how unfinished business in implementation continues to weigh on RCEP's credibility and effectiveness.

Article 3.4 Cumulation

One of RCEP's key legal innovations was the possibility of full cumulation in its rules of origin regime, which would be a major step forward in tailoring trade rules to the reality of complex regional supply chains. Article 3.4 of the Agreement mandates that a review of the cumulation rules established under the signed Agreement—which allow for *regional cumulation*—should begin upon entry into force and conclude five years thereafter, with a view to considering the 'application of cumulation' to 'all production undertaken and value added to a good within the Parties'.

Yet, according to information from the RCEP Support Unit, while the review period has formally commenced, some RPCs have argued as late as 2025 that the non-ratification of RCEP by all signatories precludes the substantial commencement of the review of cumulation. This has stalled momentum on what could be one of RCEP's most significant innovations. Moves toward full cumulation would simplify supply chain management, reduce compliance costs, and unlock the full potential of regional production networks. The signs of a lack of political will among members on this matter suggests that the General Review must consider options to strengthen the mandate around cumulation reform.

Schedules of Tariff Commitment

Reviews of the non-linear tariff reductions for a number of RPCs were supposed to be completed by 1 January 2025, though it is not clear that this has been followed through.

Transparency as remedy

Highlighting just a few core issues of the in-built agenda that have not been properly followed—though by the RCEP membership as a whole—even when the Agreement itself set clear timeframes for finalising reviews—provides prima facie evidence of a monitoring framework insufficient to incentivise full implementation of the commitments made in 2020.

For good reason, RCEP Leaders at the 5th RCEP Leaders' Meeting in 2025 elevated 'progressing the built-in agenda' as a priority task for ministers and officials.

Without transparency, monitoring cannot generate accountability. Without accountability, implementation falters. And without implementation, RCEP risks losing credibility as the cornerstone of Asia's integration agenda.

The challenge is not only incomplete implementation. There are also some significant transparency issues. Researchers, civil society, business and other stakeholders face significant barriers in tracking progress, whether by individual governments or by the membership collectively, towards goals set out in the in-built agenda. And the opacity is even greater when it comes to action items defined or refined after entry into force.

These issues are not academic. The handful of matters from the in-built agenda highlighted above were chosen because it is in these areas that RCEP is paying a price in terms of its relevance, and the region for lost opportunities for trade and investment.

The examples cited have been implicated by research and cited by business in limiting RCEP's relevance to many exporters and its low utilisation rates, especially among SMEs, who are sensitive to the administrative burdens entailed in strict rules of origin and convoluted tariff schedules. Recent empirical work assessing patterns and determinants of RCEP utilisation, presented at two major Track 1.5 dialogues—hosted by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Jakarta in January 2026, and the Asian Competitiveness Institute in Singapore in February 2026—highlighted that the complexity of tariff schedules across the RCEP membership and restrictive rules of origin were limiting incentives towards utilisation (authors' notes of proceedings, under Chatham House rule).

The clear policy implication of the empirical research, as the first General Review approaches, is that reforms in these areas of the in-built agenda represent the low-hanging fruit for boosting RCEP's economic benefits—echoing the findings of public-facing expert assessments that warned inaction on the core issues of tariffs and rules of origin risk limiting RCEP's utility to business (Park, Petri & Plummer 2021, Asian Development Bank 2022; Hang, Ni and Tan 2024).

Current implementation and monitoring efforts

The RCEP Support Unit (RSU), in collaboration with subsidiary committees of the RCEP Joint Committee, are currently engaged in ongoing tracking of the state of RCEP implementation. The RSU compiles reporting from RPCs in a Stocktaking Matrix of Implementation Issues, a living document that tracks progress against a set of action items derived from the built-in agenda as well as implementation commitments defined/refined post-entry-into-force.

The RSU has made commendable efforts to collect and systematise implementation data. Yet questions remain about whether it is adequately empowered and resourced to lead and enforce an effective information-sharing regime. Equally unclear is the process by which reporting on implementation progress feeds into, and is shaped by, officials-level or ministerial-level agendas. Stocktaking is a laudable and necessary development. But without a clear pathway to ensure that reporting informs strategic dialogue at the official and political-levels—and in turn feeds back into tasking for officials and governments, and into prioritisation of further monitoring activities—its utility in generating momentum towards follow-through on RCEP’s key unfinished business is problematic.

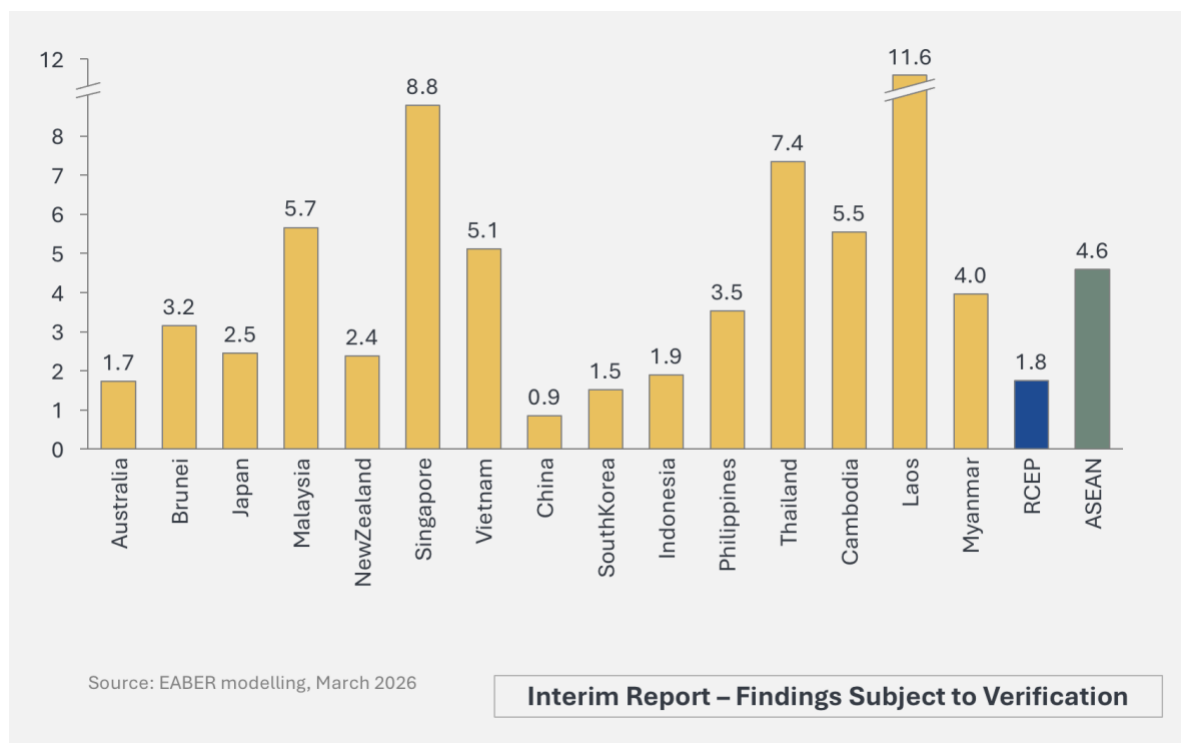
BOX 2: The economic benefits of implementation

The economic benefits of the implementation of trade commitments among RCEP members are substantial. The scale of the benefits from the reduction of tariffs on trade has been analysed in a number of modelling exercises including by the trade modelling team at EABER and CSIS Indonesia, by ERIA, and by others as presented in the *ASEAN Geoeconomics Report 2025*.

These earlier modelling exercises measure the economic benefits of reducing tariffs on goods trade; they do not measure the economic benefits from reform of non-tariff measures (NTMs) or services trade from the implementation of RCEP commitments. Modelling the impact of NTM and services trade reform is technically more difficult because of data issues and additional modelling requirements.

The economic benefits from NTM and services trade reform are potentially large. In November 2025, EABER modelled the potential GDP uplift from RCEP-driven liberalisation of NTMs which showed that **RCEP GDP could increase by 1.4%** under immediate and full goods NTM elimination. **The gains for ASEAN economies were even more striking, with around a 3.0% rise in GDP** from removing NTMs on goods alone.

Figure 1 Percentage change in RCEP countries' GDP from the elimination of NTMs



Although this represents a theoretical maximum GDP benefit, it demonstrates the **significant economic upside** available through full implementation of the RCEP Agreement. Achieving even half of the theoretical maximum would be a significant boost for wellbeing economies in the region.

EABER has now expanded its NTM model to include NTMs affecting both goods and services trade. Using this updated framework, it is estimated that immediate and complete removal of goods and services NTMs across the RCEP region could **lift GDP by an average of 1.8%** (see details in

Figure 1). Again, ASEAN members stand to benefit disproportionately, with potential gains of around 4.6% of GDP from eliminating NTMs across both goods and services.

While this modelling work is preliminary, it is grounded in best practice and has benefited from initial external review. Estimating the impact of NTMs is challenging: data is often sparse, inconsistent, or lagged. Our analysis draws on an in-house gravity model of goods and services NTMs, is built up using trusted data sources and widely accepted modelling techniques. This top-down estimation work is still in development. EABER's NTM model will be subject to additional external review and calibration against the limited existing literature. As the research progresses, EABER will refine and update its work and publish future modelling results as they evolve accordingly.

Custom country-specific estimates can be provided on request. For details, and to access model specifications pre-publication, contact the EABER trade modelling team at: Jason.Tabarias@anu.edu.au

2: Learning from other agreements

A backwards-looking snapshot of implementation progress, should it emerge as part of the General Review, will not be sufficient to drive implementation of any new initiatives emerging from the review process. RCEP must consider frameworks and processes that sustain implementation momentum post-Review. Lessons from ASEAN, the WTO and other major agreements show the importance of comprehensiveness, transparency, and the institutionalisation of mechanisms that turn reporting into action to close implementation gaps. Given the high economic benefits at stake (see the analysis in Box 2), getting the framework right is critical to ensure RCEP delivers on its promise.

Overview of experience in monitoring in other agreements

ASEAN: under-investment in monitoring

A hallmark shortcoming of ASEAN's economic integration efforts is said to have been, as one assessment notes, 'little consistency in the identity of the monitors, scope of reporting obligations or provision for considered analysis of the data so collected.' (Shipman 2015: 27). A persistent problem has been the vague provisions for monitoring, reporting, and enforcement embedded in many ASEAN agreements, compounded by the chronic under-resourcing of bodies within the ASEAN Secretariat charged with tracking implementation.

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Scorecard experience highlights some issues around optimising the granularity of reporting on integration efforts and translating them into concreated follow-up. The AEC Scorecard was launched in 2008 to track progress on the implementation of the AEC 2015 Blueprint by tracking adherence to commitments to the AEC's four pillars both at a national- and ASEAN-level, producing a scorecard every two years.

Three lessons appeared to emerge from the AEC Scorecard experience regarding scorecard design. First, because public-facing reporting did not disaggregate progress by the country level, it was not useful in identifying where progress bottlenecks existed at the country level. The 2012 Scorecard suggested that the slowdown in progress during its reporting cycle emerged from delays in the ratification of signed ASEAN-wide agreements, their incorporations into national laws and the implementation of specific measures. But it failed to specifically identify which countries were lagging.

Instead, the section of the Scorecard that compared country-by-country implementation reduced tracking to a three-grade approach of 'less than half', 'more than half' and 'all measures implemented'. Consequently, countries that were trailing had limited incentive to change their behaviour given an important channel of behavioural change—public pressure—lacked specific information to encourage action or could help ASEAN identify which countries specifically required additional help in meeting their commitments.

Second, the AEC Scorecard was limited in its role in providing information to governments to improve future implementation. While the AEC Scorecard began to identify prioritised measures under Phase III for the 2012–13 period, improving governments' ability to target the most vital areas for bottlenecks, it nevertheless lacked the required detail and analysis to efficiently target policy. Even when the AEC Blueprint did identify progress in a specific country, the simple scorecard approach did not account for, or attempt to explain, the reasons for the levels of progress observed. Without an identification of why delays are occurring, ASEAN again lacked another important signal to mobilise

technical resources where bottlenecks in implementation existed. Furthermore, concerns existed around whether ‘successful’ cases were simply products of double-counting—that is, when measures independent to the AEC were attributed to the AEC, thereby overstating progress.

Third, the AEC Scorecard lacked a strong user community which detracted from its ability to influence the behaviour of governments. The first two periods of the AEC Scorecard (2008–09 and 2010–11) were released to the public. Subsequent scorecards (2012–13 and 2014–15) were only released to the public in summary form. In particular, assessments of the AEC Scorecard stress that private business in ASEAN did not appear to engage seriously with the Scorecard. Partly, this reflects the absence of transparent information around its methodology and conclusions, which impeded the ability of business to hold governments accountable to their AEC Blueprint commitments.

Furthermore, the initial iteration of the Scorecard was believed to be ineffective in large part because its opacity contributed to a belief that the measure was primarily a public relations exercise by governments. This is reinforced by criticisms of weak methodologies, including vague reported methodologies and a lack of weighting among implementation measures, restricting the percentage summary to a rhetorical tool rather than a meaningful benchmark for progress (Shipman 2015: 29–30).

This AEC Scorecard, developed under the First Blueprint, was abandoned in favour of a new monitoring framework under the Second Blueprint (2016–2025). The Second Blueprint broadened the monitoring metrics from pure compliance-based monitoring into a holistic framework of outcome monitoring via key performance indicators and impact evaluation through cross-cutting socioeconomic indicators (Rillo, de Lobaerde & Waskitho 2025).

Yet with the introduction of this framework, which sought to improve linkages in a more comprehensive understanding of change, came constraints on interpretation of data interpretation due to attribution problems. Most critically, the simplicity of information and direct comparability under the Scorecard approach was lost, as the Scorecard was replaced by long, dense analytical reports released periodically. While such analysis might be able to improve the targeting of national policies, it constrains the rhetorical power of national interest groups by providing them with little communicable information to leverage for positive policy change. Moreover, poor direct linkage between implementation of agreements and performance indicators limit the real insight provided, as these broader indicators are not necessarily driven by ASEAN programs (Rillo & Shepard 2025).

APEC: the value in peer review

Though not an effort to monitor the implementation of a legally-binding agreement in the mode of RCEP, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation’s (APEC) experience in its implementation of its Bogor Goals provides some instructive lessons on how implementation of agreements can be achieved, in particular through the use of peer review processes. The Bogor Goals were adopted in 1994 by APEC leaders to realise free and open trade for developed countries by 2010 and for developing countries by 2020. To facilitate these goals, in 1995, the Osaka Action Agenda (OAA) was agreed to. Under the OAA, APEC economies were to develop Individual Action Plans (IAPs) to track the steps members had taken and intended to take to achieve the Bogor Goals.

Following a mid-term stocktake in 2005, a triennial peer review system was established. During the process, an independent team of experts would assess a country’s progress towards the Bogor Goal both broadly, and since the last review. Inputs were solicited from individual economies, the APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC) and a short in-country visit, meeting with government officials

and occasionally civil society, before producing a report. Peer review would follow, with the report circulated beforehand to permit senior officials and ABAC to pose questions for written reply. There would also be an in-person meeting where the review team would present the report, followed by a presentation from the country under-review, with oral questions fielded from senior officials and ABAC.

The IAP peer review was seen as not adversarial, and was framed instead as a mechanism through which mutual learning (i.e. discovering best practices) could be conducted, alongside identifying areas for capacity building. Nonetheless, design choices and the relative flexibility around what could be attributed as progress towards the Bogor Goals alongside the limited role of the APEC Secretariat's plans, which could not be easily compared, and which overstated progress towards the Bogor Goals. The IAPs permitted a positive list approach—members could highlight areas of progress rather than having to report progress across all obligations.

Furthermore, other non-Bogor Goal related measures could be attributed as evidence of progress, meaning the IAPs were able to obfuscate measurement of progress specifically on the Bogor Goals. Additionally, the prominent role of independent experts in the review process—typically different each time—meant the questions asked during visits, alongside the content and form of the reports varied. Subsequently, these design choices threatened to produce reports which risked being neither comparable nor effective at monitoring specific progress towards the Bogor Goals.

ICC G20 Business Scorecard

The International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) G20 Business Scorecard is another instructive example of scorecard-based monitoring that incorporates civil society, specifically business, as key stakeholders in economic cooperation between governments, onboarding them into the monitoring of implementation of activities.

First released in 2012, it is a publicly-released annual scorecard documenting the collective response of G20 nations in response to business recommendations across seven major policy groupings. It assesses the G20 on a scale from 0-3 based on the recognition, action and adequacy of its response to each recommendation, with one point allocated for each. The scorecard also provides average scores across each major policy grouping, as well as overall (International Chamber of Commerce 2016).

The scorecard's primary purpose is to improve feedback mechanisms between business and government by providing information to governments to encourage them to assess progress, honour commitments, define priorities and identify shortcomings, as well as allow businesses to understand progress and target future recommendations, facilitating more effective allocation of government resources and efforts (Te Velde 2012).

The Business Scorecard lends itself to support the compliance-enhancing function of independent, advocacy-oriented accountability assessment, as successive scorecards measured steady improvement in the G20's responsiveness to business concerns. In particular, its achievements have been linked to the feedback mechanism provided by the scorecard and the opening up of information channels between government and business. Year-by-year improvements in the scorecard ratings have been closely linked to the evolution of business's developing fewer and more targeted recommendations, more closely tailored for action, and the earlier release of recommendations to allow longer for government response (Hardy & Bonnier 2018). The scorecard's public release plays a vital role in this, facilitating business to view progress in real time and adjust recommendations accordingly.

However, the improvement of compliance metrics also exposes a key risk generic to the scorecard approach: it can sometimes be unclear to what extent improvements in the scorecard can be attributed to the incentivisation of G20 governments to practically implement meaningful policy, as opposed to business recommendations shifting the goalposts. While better recommendations allow more targeted policy, the decrease in the number of recommendations provided in successive rounds suggests decreased ambition (*ibid.*). Although this is somewhat mitigated in the Business Scorecard by the fact that the goals are set by business rather than governments themselves, in systems where the national governments set and assess their own targets there remains an incentive to set less ambitious targets in order to improve rankings. Incentives could also have been improved through individual comparisons between countries rather than a collective metric to strengthen national implementation incentives.

Additionally, the impact of business dialogue in reality is less clear. A 2014 survey (International Chamber of Commerce 2017) suggested that 75 per cent of survey respondents considered that the G20 had been instrumental in improving the global business environment, while only 57 per cent believed that the G20's work improved the business environment for their company. Moreover, 71 per cent of businesses were only 'somewhat confident' that B20 actions would transform into concrete G20 actions. However, this may have been impacted by the long feedback cycles for policy approval and implementation, which limit the visibility of G20 actions to the public.

WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement

The WTO's 2017 Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) offers another potentially instructive model not only for reporting, but for intertwining implementation monitoring with a program of targeted technical assistance that enmeshes members of divergent capacity to implement complex provisions of a binding agreement.

The TFA 'reflects an understanding that without external technical assistance and capacity building (TACB) support developing or least developed country members may not be able to implement some or all of the technical measures' that the TFA mandates (World Trade Organization 2015: 114). This understanding is embodied in the establishment of a tiered categorisation of obligations that differentiate implementation obligations between developed, developing and least-developed country (LDC) signatories, outlined across Section II of the Agreement. Developing and LDC members self-designate each provision of the agreement into one of three categories: Category A (for immediate implementation), Category B (implementation after a defined transitional period), and Category C (implementation only once the member has received the necessary technical assistance and capacity-building support). Category C commitments are only legally binding once the relevant technical support via the has been received.

The TFA therefore formally interlinks the obligation to implement and the obligation to provide assistance within the treaty text itself—not merely stated in accompanying political declarations as is common elsewhere. Coordinating the nexus between implementation notification and targeting of technical assistance is done by the WTO Committee on Trade Facilitation and, at the domestic level, the National Committees on Trade Facilitation (NTFCs) that the Agreement requires each member to establish. The TFA Database, maintained by the WTO Secretariat, consolidates all member notifications and tracks implementation status against declared timelines, creating a transparent, publicly accessible monitoring system.¹ Crucially, the sequencing of obligations is formally conditional on the delivery of support—creating accountability in both directions, on recipients to

¹ The public-facing implementation dashboard can be viewed at tfadatabase.org/en/implementation

implement once support is received, and implicitly on donors to make good on their commitments. The World Bank's Trade Facilitation Support Program (TFSP) and bodies including UNCTAD, the OECD, and the WCO have built their technical assistance programmes explicitly around this structure, and the OECD's Trade Facilitation Indicators provide an independent external measurement layer tracking progress against TFA provisions across more than 160 economies.

The TFA's model efficacy is grounded in the reality that trade facilitation is an area with relatively 'black and white' technical outputs, making monitoring relatively straightforward. Moreover, trade facilitation is relatively politically easy for governments to embrace, compared with provisions of trade agreements that go to politically contentious market access issues. Nevertheless, transparency around reporting on progress on implementation, and signatories' engagement with the notification and technical assistance processes is a strong point of the TFA reporting apparatus and has aided independent observers' and governments' understanding of where implementation is succeeding and where it continues to lag. The WTO hosts a well-maintained and accessible public-facing online dashboard that tracks member commitments, notifications, and implementation status in real time, providing a model of transparency that could be drawn upon.

A major advantage of the TFA dashboard is that this is easy to compute using the database. Yet, there are questions about whether the technical assistance-to-implementation link in the TFA is really working. UNCTAD notes that as of 2020 only 5 per cent of developing countries requesting capacity-building support had concluded arrangements with donor members (Ugaz 2020). The self-designation of commitments into Categories A, B, C—while it respects sovereignty and differences in capacity—can also be problematic insofar as countries inappropriately categorise obligations into those not required at entry into force (i.e. Categories B and C) to preserve policy flexibility.

Lessons from the above models

While this section does not pretend to provide an exhaustive overview of implementation monitoring within negotiated economic agreements, several core messages emerge from the examples outlined above.

The first is a general principle: monitoring frameworks must generate accountability, not cover for delays. Without fine-grained and transparent, public-facing reporting on discrete action items governments can slow-pedal implementation without political consequences. Monitoring frameworks that are designed primarily to project an appearance of progress—whether through aggregate rather than country-level reporting, opaque methodologies, or self-selected evidence risk projecting progress while serving the interests of the least committed members. Accessible reporting is essential to allow for independent experts in academia, think tanks and civil society to produce policy-relevant research on implementation.

Special mention of the scorecard-based reporting approaches is warranted in this context. Scorecards have become practical tools for monitoring the implementation of multilateral economic integration efforts, providing structured assessments of whether parties meet commitments across an agreements' obligations. By making implementation gaps visible in an objective and comparable format, they help target technical assistance and capacity building where it is most needed, while providing an evidence base for regular reviews of "living" agreements like RCEP.

Scorecards lose credibility if they are designed merely to showcase progress rather than ensure accountability; and if they are designed to avoid pinpointing laggard government performance—through aggregate rather than country-level data, vague indicators, self-reporting without verification,

or consensus-based sign-off. The solution is to treat scorecards as cooperative, capacity-focused instruments. Public-facing, country-level reporting linked to RCEP's economic and technical cooperation pillar, could create positive incentives for prompt and transparent reporting on implementation.

From this follows a second observation: ASEAN's 'light touch' implementation monitoring frameworks, while reflecting its commitment to its own centrality, are not a suitable model for RCEP. The scale and complexity of RCEP demand a stronger, rules-based accountability framework. Far from undermining ASEAN centrality such an approach would reinforce ASEAN's ambition to act as a guardian of rules-based regional and global order as articulated in *ASEAN 2025: Our Shared Future* strategy.

Third, while APEC and the G20 operate on non-binding commitments they highlight the value of engaging business and civil society as active stakeholders in implementation monitoring. For RCEP, incorporating structured roles for the private sector and independent experts within the monitoring framework would strengthen both the credibility and impact of implementation reporting. Treating monitoring as more than a purely closed governmental exercise ensures accountability and aligns reforms with practical needs.

Finally, the WTO TFA offers an instructive model for RCEP, given its binding nature and diverse membership. Its key innovation—linking implementation obligations directly to commitments on technical assistance and capacity-building within the treaty text itself rather than in accompanying political declarations—helps prevent monitoring from becoming a source of friction across members of markedly different capacity, and internal consensus around liberalisation. For RCEP, a monitoring framework tied to its economic and technical cooperation pillar could reframe country-level reporting not as 'naming and shaming' but as a mechanism for accessing targeted support.

3: Considerations for the General Review

The upcoming General Review of RCEP presents the opportunity both to deepen and upgrade RCEP to meet today's big economic challenges and to begin embedding institutional frameworks that ensure follow-through on reform commitments made under the agreement.

Issues of priority for the General Review that flow on from the analysis above are set out below. These issues include the institutional capacity of the RCEP Support Unit/Secretariat; the connection between monitoring activities and agenda-setting in RCEP political-level dialogues and the integration of monitoring RCEP's implementation with its economic and technical cooperation functions. The General Review should not treat monitoring as an exercise in bureaucratic compliance but as a strategic tool to sustain political momentum across the membership behind utilising and extending RCEP as a cornerstone of regional integration and economic cooperation in an era of heightened trade and policy uncertainty.

Designing monitoring institutions to drive accountability

The General Review should ensure that RCEP's monitoring framework induces positive accountability dynamics by strengthening the role of RCEP ministerial meetings in providing political oversight and commitment.

In practice, this will mean ensuring that the framework is designed to ensure monitoring implementation can be structurally connected to RCEP political-level dialogues so that ministers and leaders receive clear, transparent, and accessible reporting on progress and can use the reporting to define new priorities for officials.

While the precise format of reporting on implementation to ministers may appear to be outside the scope of the General Review at this stage, practical questions remain about balancing granularity with clarity, enabling ministers to identify implementation gaps and set priorities for addressing them. The framework should also account for the reality that some RPC governments may prioritise implementation of other agreements—especially 'plus-one' arrangements—while falling short on RCEP commitments and consider incorporating reporting on this 'commitment gap' into the reporting process.

Getting governance right

The General Review offers an opportunity to define the precise responsibilities of the RSU/Secretariat in any future implementation monitoring framework, and to determine the resourcing needed for it to fulfil its mandate effectively. The RSU/Secretariat will be central to coordinating reporting across the agreement's 15 members in collaboration with the RCEP Joint Committee, and coordinating input and supporting research from civil society, external donors, and other stakeholders, and maintaining and updating databases on implementation progress.

As part of its broader consideration of the form and resourcing of RCEP's institutional base, the General Review should explicitly consider the RSU/Secretariat's monitoring functions. This would encompass consultations with the present RSU's leadership and key stakeholders to ensure that it is empowered—both administratively and financially—to fulfil whatever mandate it is given with regards to implementation monitoring.

The General Review should also address how flows of information and accountability are structured: who defines actionable commitments for RPCs arising from political level tasking, how progress is reported regularly and transparently, and how reporting feeds into strategic dialogue that generates new mandates for the RJC, the Secretariat and RPCs.

Incorporating business and other stakeholders

The General Review may also wish to consider seeking structured input from the private sector and independent experts on implementation monitoring frameworks that would enable them to act as ongoing sources of accountability and policy-relevant research. Track 1.5 dialogues provide a natural venue for gathering such input and continued investment in these engagements will be important to sustain an independent voice on the quality of RCEP implementation. Drawing lessons from initiatives like the ICC's G20 scorecard, a formalised role for private sector stakeholders—potentially through the RCEP Business Advisory Council—could ensure implementation efforts align with private sector needs.

For this to be effective, however, it must be grounded in transparency and accessibility, supported by granular implementation data and online dashboards that, even if not public-facing, could be made available to interested stakeholders for research or advocacy activities.

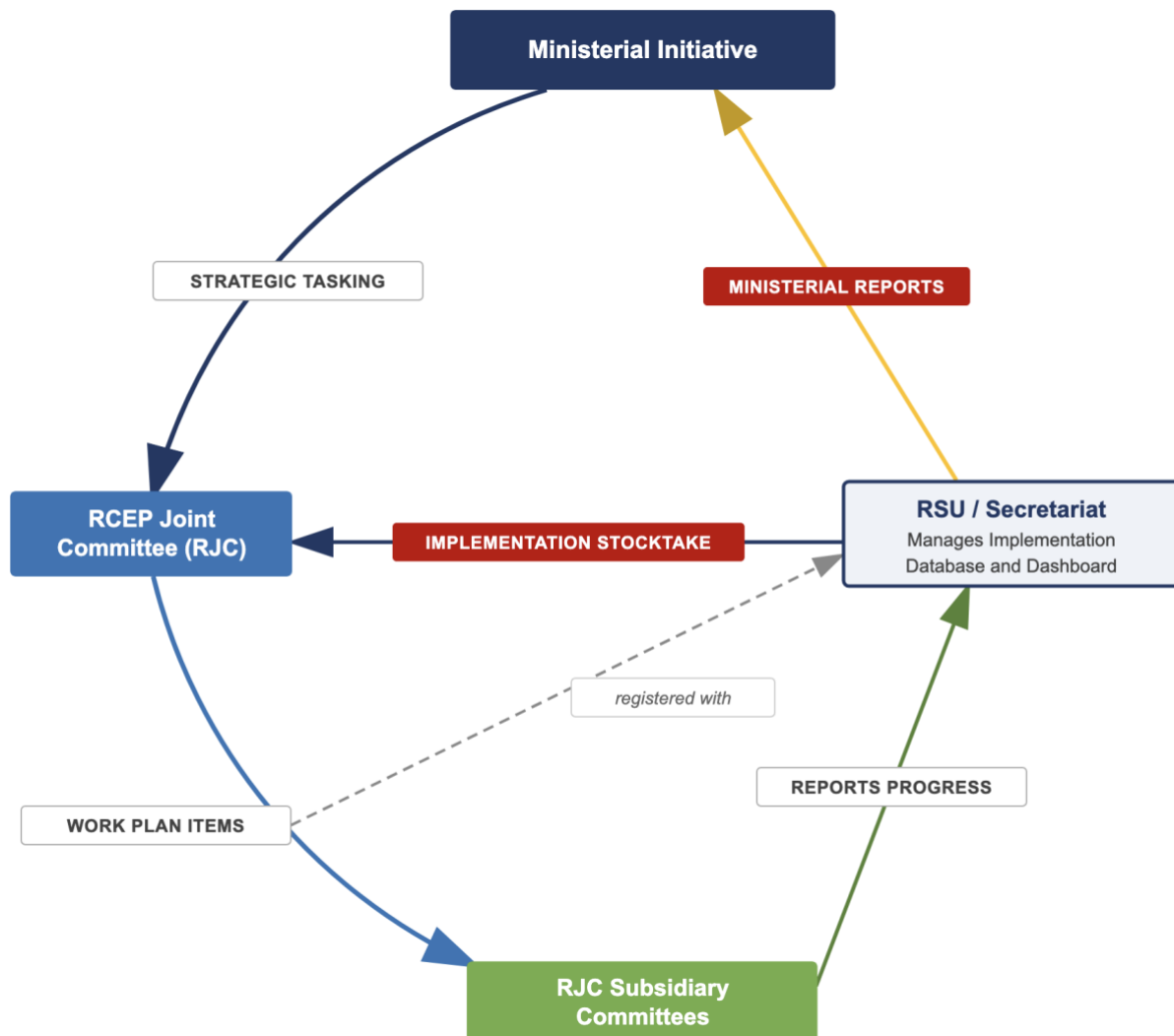
The monitoring–cooperation nexus

The General Review may also consider how to integrate monitoring implementation formally into the work agenda of RCEP's economic and technical cooperation pillar. Where capacity constraints are implicated in implementation gaps members must be systematically matched with technical assistance, capacity-building support or other cooperation initiatives. The WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement offers a useful model. It interlinks implementation obligations with support commitments within the agreement framework itself—ensuring that monitoring does not simply identify gaps but also triggers targeted assistance to close them.

For RCEP, adopting a similar approach would mean that monitoring becomes a *diagnostic* exercise. It would become a driver of cooperation, a mechanism for building capacity, and a catalyst for ensuring that commitments translate into outcomes. In this way, monitoring and cooperation are not parallel tracks, but mutually reinforcing pillars of RCEP's credibility and effectiveness.

Appendix: A Potential Model for RCEP Implementation Monitoring

Figure 1A: A potential implementation monitoring framework within RCEP



Source: Authors

Figure 1A illustrates the logic of a potential implementation monitoring framework that has as its core output **Implementation Stocktake** reports drawing on a regularly-updated **Implementation Database**.

Strategic-level tasking given to officials by RCEP ministerial meetings would be translated into detailed work plan at the official level—in this model, by the RJC, but this could potentially also take

place at the Subsidiary Committee level. The RCEP Support Unit (RSU), or a future Secretariat, could then draw on this work agenda to establish a detailed inventory of action items to be implemented, and establishing *ex ante* the criteria that must be met by an RPC in order to have its action item later assessed as ‘implemented’.

The designation of ‘implemented’ or similar term must have a clear and consistent meaning for the purposes of monitoring. Such a designation would ideally be grounded in clear benchmarks around specific legislative or regulatory changes required to give legal effect to particular commitments under RCEP. This inventory would become the basis of an underlying **Implementation Database** managed and updated by the RSU/Secretariat based upon reporting through the RJC’s subsidiary committees (as is already taking place via the RSU’s Stocktaking Matrix of Implementation Issues initiative). The database would clearly display on a party-by-party basis the RSU’s current determination of the state of implementation.

This would require careful management of the ‘grey area’ that allows an item to be counted as *in progress*. Opportunities could be built into the RSU’s coding process for individual RPCs to exercise a ‘right of reply’ where differences arise about whether a particular item has been implemented. At the same time, there would need to be clarity about which institution has the final authority to determine implementation status.

Ideally, the key outputs from the implementation database could be presented in multiple formats tailored to the priorities of different audiences. First, there should be a web-based **Implementation dashboard** to provide a fine-grained picture of progress of RPCs across the RCEP implementation agenda. This platform could present detailed information on implementation progress broken down by policy item or by country, clearly displaying the RSU’s most up-to-date determinations regarding implementation status. It would provide an important resource for business groups, researchers, and civil society organisations seeking to track and analyse implementation patterns, to inform their research, input, and advocacy within RCEP processes. The WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement’s suite of online implementation tracking tools—especially the Trade Facilitation Database website—offers a useful best-practice example that RCEP could draw upon.

Building on the data available in this database, a more concise **Implementation Stocktake** could be prepared by the RSU for consideration at RJC meetings. This scorecard would provide clear and actionable insights into which RPCs are falling behind in meeting implementation commitments and where the RJC might focus discussions on coordinating economic and technical cooperation activities among parties to close those implementation gaps.

To enable this follow-up on implementation progress, implementation tracking compiled by the RSU/Secretariat would need to go beyond current efforts in three respects: first, by more clearly identifying country-by-country progress on specific work agenda items; second, by formatting the information in a user-friendly way so that slow progress across particular policy areas or implementation items is immediately visible; and third, by giving special priority in the Implementation Stocktake document to highlighting progress on agenda items that have been designated as priorities at political-level meetings.

Consistent with the logic of maintaining a feedback loop between the RCEP ministerial oversight and officials-level implementation, the ministerial track needs to have an active role in the monitoring and accountability process. A **Ministerial Report** tailored to address matters of strategic concern could be prepared by the RSU/Secretariat for consideration at RCEP ministerial meetings. Such a report would

synthesise the insights generated by the implementation database and Implementation Stocktake document, presenting ministers with legible, actionable insights on where the most significant implementation gaps lie and where such gaps are compromising the strategic economic objectives with which ministers are most concerned. This process would provide Ministers with opportunity to speak to progress and implementation issues.

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