



# The ICC Guide to Authentic Certificates of Origin

Enabling international business to  
tackle origin irregularities and fraud

## Introduction

Origin fraud is not new to the trade world. However, since the outbreak of COVID-19, such incidents have increased – particularly in relation to medical supply shipments, essential to fighting the global pandemic.

With increasing concerns and the need to improve supply chain security, this tool offers guidance to importers, exporters, forwarding agents and customs authorities on:

- the function of a Certificate of Origin
- tools and resources to prevent falsified trade-based documentation
- how frauds normally occur
- what actions to take in the event of fraud



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## What is a Certificate of Origin?

A Certificate of Origin (CO) is an international trade document that certifies a declaration made by an exporter concerning the origin of goods being exported. CO are requested by customs, banks, private stakeholders and importers for several purposes.

There are two types of CO:

- **Non-preferential**

Certify that the goods are subject to no preferential treatment. These are the main type of CO that chambers can issue and are also known as “normal CO”.

The reasons for which the importer requests a non-preferential CO can differ from case to case. For example, authorities in a final destination may request a CO before the goods can be imported into the country to ensure product safety.

- **Preferential**

Certify that goods are subject to reduced tariffs or exemptions when they are exported to countries extending these privileges. These CO tend to be closely associated with Free Trade Agreements (FTAs).

Both preferential and non-preferential CO may also be required by an importer under the terms of a documentary letter of credit.

## Who can issue a CO?

The responsibility for issuing a CO is restricted to organisations that are classified as a reliable authority or agency duly authorised for that purpose by the country of issue. In most countries, these organisations are chambers of commerce, who issue manual and electronic CO (eCO).

### **Manual CO**

If a chamber issues a CO manually using a specific paper form, the document will bear the chamber's stamp and signature.

### **eCO**

If a CO is issued online as a pdf, the documents are generally printed and no wet stamp and signature is necessary.

## How does fraud occur with CO?

In most cases, perpetrators may be selling goods that do not exist or that they do not own. Usually such instances occur when there is a sudden and large demand for a particular product or type of product. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and its World Chambers Federation (WCF) have seen an increase in fraud relating to face masks. At other times, CO fraud has been detected in the trading of cosmetics, beverages and food items.

Typically, fraud begins with identity theft, meaning criminals use the details of an existing company to create trust. Goods are then placed on an online marketplace or a specially created, fake website to attract international buyers. When a potential buyer shows interest in the goods, a fake set of documents, including a CO, is produced. Based on these documents, the buyer believes that a shipment is ready and agrees to make payment. However, in reality there are no goods or shipment and the buyer's money is lost.

## How to spot a fraudulent CO:

- If a CO claims to be issued by ICC, its World Chambers Federation or an ICC national committee (e.g. ICC Sweden)
- If the name of the undersigned (issuing) chamber and its stamp do not match
- If the name of the undersigned (issuing) chamber and its logo do not match



## Why is eCO the way forward?

Chambers and exporters are increasingly moving towards eCO. eCO streamline processes and ensure security, but accelerating the digitalisation of this process has become essential in the age of COVID-19 given that paper documentation has the potential to spread the virus.

eCO systems can include such security features as:

- online eCO authenticity verification
- optical watermarking technology to distinguish between originals and copies of issued CO
- digital rubber stamps for chambers and signatures of authorised officials
- microprint to deter unauthorised replication of CO
- 2-D barcodes to ensure data integrity
- QR codes to verify CO details
- Public Key Infrastructure technology to ensure data security and authenticity
- Printer control language to control the printing of only one original CO

“The Paris Chamber of Commerce and Industry promotes the use of eCO as an incredibly efficient tool to fight fraudulent documents. Furthermore, when they are associated with the use of the CO Verification website, you have all the evidence you need to be sure that your certificate is an authentic one.”

**Luc Dardaud**

Foreign Trade Facilitations Department Manager  
Paris Ile-de-France Chamber of Commerce and Industry

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eCO also speed up application and issue processes by:

- eliminating travel and queueing for the submission and collection of a CO
- enabling chambers to provide efficient and speedy certification services
- reducing the burden for extensive filing and storage facilities for CO documentation

A woman with curly hair, wearing a yellow safety vest over a grey top, is looking down at a laptop in a warehouse setting. The background shows industrial shelving and other workers in safety vests.

“The issuance of a CO is 100% electronic in China. All eCO issued by CCPIT and its branches are accepted by customs agencies around the world with more than 4 million CO delivered in the country every year. CCPIT encourages all chambers to go digital for the benefit of their exporting business communities.”

**Tingting Sun**

Trade Facilitation Specialist,  
China Council for the Promotion  
of International Trade (CCPIT)



## How to verify an eCO?

Importers, customs authorities, chambers and trade stakeholders can and are encouraged to, verify the authenticity of a CO bearing an ICC CO label via the ICC WCF Certificate of Origin Verification website.

This tool is provided within the framework of the ICC WCF International CO Accreditation Chain, a network of chambers that apply globally and widely to accepting the high issuing standards and procedures of the ICC WCF International CO Guidelines.

## Why eCO are easily verifiable

Core CO data is uploaded to the ICC Verification website, a secured platform where a unique CO number and the chamber's accreditation code can be entered to authenticate an eCO.

Basic references made available to customs authorities include:

- date of issue
- name of the applicant
- issuing chamber's contact information

If a CO number is not issued by an accredited chamber, an immediate notification will be issued via the website.

Customs authorities can visit the ICC Verification website, while parties to a potentially fraudulent transaction can directly contact the chamber where the document has purportedly come from to confirm authenticity. For questions on how to use the ICC Verification website, please contact ICC's World Chambers Federation.



## About the International Chamber of Commerce

The International Chamber of Commerce is the institutional representative of more than 45 million companies in over 100 countries. ICC's core mission is to make business work for everyone, every day, everywhere. Through a unique mix of advocacy, solutions and standard setting, we promote international trade, responsible business conduct and a global approach to regulation, in addition to providing market-leading dispute resolution services. Our members include many of the world's leading companies, SMEs, business associations and local chambers of commerce.

## About ICC's World Chambers Federation

As a non-political, non-governmental body of ICC, the World Chambers Federation is the backbone of the chamber community. WCF provides a platform for chamber to communicate and collaborate on matters of mutual interest and facilitating beneficial partnerships. Its extensive membership plays a pivotal role in connecting ICC to SMEs worldwide and promoting the importance of SMEs in the global economy. Recognising this valuable role, WCF offers chambers the support they need to help SMEs face the challenges and opportunities of globalisation.

**FOR CO INQUIRIES,  
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