

JOINT STATEMENT INITIATIVE ON E-COMMERCE: CO-CONVENERS' UPDATE

The importance of developing global digital trade rules has never been clearer. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation, bringing about a surge in online activities. E-commerce will be critical to the global economic recovery. The Joint Statement Initiative on E-commerce (JSI) is an opportunity for the WTO to respond to this urgent need.

There has been encouraging progress in the JSI since negotiations were launched in 2019. Despite the challenges presented by COVID-19, co-conveners Australia, Japan and Singapore have ensured that work continues in virtual and hybrid formats. The number of participants in the initiative has grown to 86 WTO Members, collectively accounting for over 90 per cent of global trade and representing all major geographical regions and levels of development.

Consolidated Negotiating Text

JSI participants have developed a consolidated negotiating text that captures progress so far and will form the basis of the next stage of negotiations. The consolidated text was circulated among participants on 7 December 2020.

The consolidated text is based on Members' proposals. These proposals cover the following themes: enabling electronic commerce; openness and e-commerce; trust and e-commerce; cross-cutting issues; telecommunications; market access; and scope and general provisions. Throughout 2020, there have been extensive and constructive discussions covering all the themes.

We have been able to advance the negotiations, guided by the objective of achieving WTO-plus outcomes that deliver meaningful benefits for businesses and consumers. Highlights include the good progress made in small groups on issues such as e-signatures and authentication, paperless trading, customs duties on electronic transmissions, open government data, open internet access, consumer protection, spam and source code, among others. Proponents of services market access commitments have also developed a possible framework for negotiations on these issues.

Provisions that enable and promote the flow of data are key to a high standard and commercially meaningful outcome. Discussions on these issues are ongoing and will intensify from early 2021. Japan and Singapore hosted an information session on data flows and localisation rules in November 2020, involving negotiators and the private sector, to build better understanding and support for strong commitments.

Openness, Transparency and Inclusiveness

Openness, transparency and inclusiveness are central to the JSI. All WTO Members have access to relevant documents through an online portal. Discussions have been conducted through a combination of plenary and informal small group meetings which are open to WTO Members. Technical discussions in plenary or small groups have been led by delegates from Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Chinese Taipei, Colombia, the European Union, Hong Kong (China), Japan, Republic of Korea, Mexico, New Zealand, Singapore and Switzerland.

Looking Forward

The JSI remains on track to deliver substantial progress by the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference. We will intensify work in the coming months to further narrow differences and find potential landing zones.

December 2020
