

Understanding the WTO

There are a number of ways of looking at the World Trade Organization. It is an organization for trade-opening. It is a forum for governments to negotiate trade agreements. It is a place for them to settle trade disputes. It operates the global system of trade rules. It helps developing countries build their trade capacity. Essentially, the WTO is a place where member governments try to sort out the trade problems they face with each other.

Who we are



The WTO was born out of negotiations aimed at progressively reducing obstacles to trade. Where countries have faced trade barriers and wanted them lowered, the negotiations have helped to open markets for trade. But the WTO is not just about opening markets, and in some circumstances its rules support maintaining trade barriers – for example, to protect consumers and the environment or prevent the spread of disease.



The system's overriding purpose is to help trade flow as freely as possible – so long as there are no undesirable side effects – because this is important for stimulating economic growth and employment and supporting the integration of developing countries into the international trading system. That partly means removing obstacles. It also means ensuring that individuals, companies and governments know what the trade rules are around the world, and giving them the confidence that there will be no sudden changes of policy. In other words, the rules have to be “transparent” and predictable.



At its heart are the WTO agreements, negotiated and signed by the bulk of the world's trading nations. These documents provide the rules for international commerce. They are essentially contracts, binding governments to keep their trade policies within agreed limits. Although negotiated and signed by governments, the goal is to help producers of goods and services, exporters, and importers conduct their business, while allowing governments to meet social and environmental objectives.



Trade relations often involve conflicting interests. Agreements, including those painstakingly negotiated in the WTO system, often need interpreting. The most harmonious way to settle these differences is through a neutral procedure based on an agreed legal foundation. That is the purpose behind the dispute settlement process written into the WTO agreements.



What we stand for

The WTO agreements are lengthy and complex because they are legal texts covering a wide range of activities. But a number of simple, fundamental principles run throughout all of these documents. These principles are the foundation of the multilateral trading system.



- 1 Non-discrimination**

A country should not discriminate between its trading partners and it should not discriminate between its own and foreign products, services or nationals.
- 2 More open**

Lowering trade barriers is one of the most obvious ways of encouraging trade; these barriers include customs duties (or tariffs) and measures such as import bans or quotas that restrict quantities selectively.
- 3 Predictable and transparent**

Foreign companies, investors and governments should be confident that trade barriers should not be raised arbitrarily. With stability and predictability, investment is encouraged, jobs are created and consumers can fully enjoy the benefits of competition – such as increased choice and lower prices.
- 4 More competitive**

Discouraging “unfair” practices, such as export subsidies and dumping products at below normal value to gain market share; the issues are complex, and the rules try to establish what is fair or unfair, and how governments can respond, in particular by charging additional import duties calculated to compensate for damage caused by unfair trade.
- 5 More beneficial for less developed countries**

Giving them more time to adjust, greater flexibility and special privileges; over three-quarters of WTO members are developing countries and countries in transition to market economies. The WTO agreements give them transition periods to adjust to WTO provisions and, in the case of the Trade Facilitation Agreement, provide for practical support for implementation of the Agreement.
- 6 Protect the environment**

The WTO’s agreements permit members to take measures to protect not only the environment but also public health, animal health and plant health. However, these measures must be applied in the same way to both national and foreign businesses. In other words, members must not use environmental protection measures as a means of introducing a trade barrier.

What we do

- **Trade negotiations**
- **Implementation and monitoring**
- **Dispute settlement**
- **Supporting development and building trade capacity**
- **Outreach**

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- **The WTO is run by its member governments. All major decisions are made by the membership as a whole, either by ministers (who usually meet at least once every two years) or by their ambassadors or delegates (who meet regularly in Geneva).**
- **While the WTO is driven by its member states, it could not function without its Secretariat to coordinate the activities.**
- **The Secretariat employs over 600 staff, and its experts – lawyers, economists, statisticians and communications experts – assist WTO members on a daily basis to ensure, among other things, that negotiations progress smoothly, and that the rules of international trade are correctly applied and enforced.**





Trade negotiations

The WTO agreements cover goods, services and intellectual property. They spell out the principles of liberalization, and the permitted exceptions. They include individual countries' commitments to lower customs tariffs and other trade barriers, and to open services markets. They set procedures for settling disputes. These agreements are not static; they are renegotiated from time to time and new agreements can be added, as was the case at the Bali and Nairobi ministerial conferences of 2013 and 2015.

Although at the end of the 2017 Ministerial Conference held in Buenos Aires the Conference Chair, Minister Susana Malcorra of Argentina, acknowledged that differences remain regarding the Doha Round and the Doha Development Agenda, she also highlighted the decisions taken by ministers and noted that "members agreed to advance negotiations on all remaining issues, including on the three pillars of agriculture – namely domestic support, market access and export competition – as well as non-agricultural market access, services, development, TRIPS, rules, and trade and environment".



Implementation and monitoring

WTO agreements require governments to make their trade policies transparent by notifying the WTO about laws in force and measures adopted. Various WTO councils and committees seek to ensure that these requirements are being followed and that WTO agreements are being properly implemented. All WTO members must undergo periodic scrutiny of their trade policies and practices, each review containing reports by the country concerned and the WTO Secretariat.



Dispute settlement

The WTO's procedure for resolving trade disputes under the Dispute Settlement Understanding is vital for enforcing the rules and therefore for ensuring that trade flows smoothly. Countries bring disputes to the WTO if they think their rights under the agreements are being infringed. Judgements by specially appointed independent experts are based on interpretations of the agreements and individual countries' commitments.



Supporting development and building trade capacity

WTO agreements contain special provision for developing countries, including longer time periods to implement agreements and commitments, measures to increase their trading opportunities, and support to help them build their trade capacity, to handle disputes and to implement technical standards. The WTO organizes hundreds of technical cooperation missions to developing countries annually. It also holds numerous courses each year in Geneva for government officials. The Aid for Trade initiative aims to help developing countries develop the skills and infrastructure needed to expand their trade.



Outreach

The WTO maintains regular dialogue with the business community, non-governmental organizations, parliamentarians, other international organizations, the media and the general public on various aspects of the WTO and its negotiations, with the aim of enhancing cooperation and increasing awareness of WTO activities.