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Joining the WTO

- **Members agreed to start WTO membership talks for South Sudan, taking the number of ongoing accession negotiations to 22.**
- **Accession negotiations for Belarus, Iraq and Sudan resumed after lengthy pauses. Negotiations for Bosnia and Herzegovina and for Comoros neared conclusion.**
- **Technical assistance continued to play an integral part in the accessions process, particularly for least-developed countries (LDCs).**
- **A group of post-conflict LDCs launched the g7+ WTO Accessions Group, which pledges to use the accession process as a means of fostering peace and stability.**

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A total of 22 countries are currently seeking to join the WTO.

Background on joining the WTO

The WTO is open to states or customs territories with full autonomy over their external commercial relations. To join the WTO, a government has to bring its economic and trade policies into line with WTO rules and principles and negotiate with the WTO membership on guaranteed minimum levels of access to their domestic markets for goods and services. The WTO accession process promotes the integration of new members into the global economy. In return, acceding economies undertake to liberalize their trade regimes.

An accession process begins when the WTO membership accepts an application from a government and establishes a working party. The process concludes when the WTO membership and the acceding government both accept a negotiated accession package (see background below). The length of accession processes varies depending on the negotiating commitment of the acceding economy, the degree to which its trade rules are already WTO-consistent and the complexity of the negotiations.

Since the WTO was launched in 1995, 36 members have joined the organization. Twenty-two states or separate customs territories are currently seeking to join.

South Sudan

On 13 December 2017, the 11th Ministerial Conference (MC11) in Buenos Aires approved South Sudan's request to accede to the WTO and established the Working Party on the Accession of South Sudan to examine the application.

Speaking at the close of MC11, Ambassador Akech Chol Ahou Ayok, Deputy Permanent Representative of South Sudan in Geneva, said acceptance of South Sudan's application marked a "historical moment". South Sudan is fully committed to undertaking

the reforms required by WTO accession in accordance with the principles of the rule of law, transparency, good governance and respect for human rights, he said.

South Sudan is a least-developed country (LDC) and the world's newest nation, gaining independence in 2011. It has a population of approximately 13 million, the great majority of which live in rural areas and engage in subsistence agriculture. Since independence, it has embarked on new trade, monetary and fiscal policies aimed at accelerating its economic recovery and growth after a civil war lasting almost 22 years.

The country is young, with approximately two-thirds of the population under 30. South Sudan has been a member of the East African Community since 2016.

Comoros

The accession process of the Union of the Comoros accelerated in 2017. The Indian Ocean state is now approaching the final stages prior to WTO membership. The working party met twice, with members welcoming the substantive work done. But they noted that some issues will require further work to bring the country's foreign trade regime and its legislative framework into full conformity with WTO rules and requirements.





South Sudan is the latest country to start WTO membership talks.



Only a few negotiating issues remain for Bosnia and Herzegovina's WTO membership talks.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The government of Bosnia and Herzegovina has completed outstanding accession-related legislative reforms and only a few negotiating issues remain. At a meeting of the Working Party on the Accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina, held on 7 February 2018, Chair Atanas Paporizov of Bulgaria said: "This accession has reached technical maturity and it is ready for conclusion in the coming months."

If agreement can be reached on the remaining issues, the next working party meeting could be the last one, paving the way for the adoption of the accession package by the General Council before the summer break, he said. The working party was established on 15 July 1999.

Belarus

The working party met twice in 2017, resuming formal activity after a 12-year pause. WTO members welcomed the active engagement of Belarus in its efforts to become a member of the organization and expressed readiness to maintain the positive momentum.

Iraq

Iraq held its first working party meeting since 2008 and declared its intention to resume substantive accession negotiations with members in the near term. The chair of the working party, Ambassador Omar Hilale of Morocco, said he was encouraged by the political commitment demonstrated by the Government of Iraq to resume its

accession process and the technical progress being made.

Sudan

Sudan's working party met twice during the year – its first meetings since 2004. Members commended the positive momentum for Sudan's WTO membership negotiations and reiterated their readiness to support the process. Negotiations resumed in January 2017 after 13 years of impasse. The working party has acknowledged the considerable advance in Sudan's technical work. Sudan urged members to provide the necessary technical assistance to expedite negotiations.

Somalia and Timor-Leste

Somalia and Timor-Leste activated their accession processes following the establishment of their accession working parties in December 2016. Timor-Leste circulated its first multilateral negotiating inputs to members and Somalia is expected to do so shortly.

The Lebanese Republic and Azerbaijan

The Lebanese Republic circulated a comprehensive set of multilateral documentation to its working party after eight years of inactivity. Azerbaijan was urged to step up bilateral talks with WTO members on market access commitments for goods and services to accelerate its efforts to secure membership, which it originally applied for in 1997.



China has renewed funding of the programme it has established to help the poorest countries join the WTO.

Technical assistance and outreach

Technical assistance and capacity building continue to play an integral part of any accession process, especially for LDCs which account for over one-third of the ongoing accession processes.

The China Programme (or the China LDCs and Accessions Programme) has been instrumental in responding to the specific needs of acceding governments, especially those of LDCs. On 9 December, China announced that it was renewing its funding for a further year. The programme offers a range of tools, including the China Round Table, which aims to assist acceding LDCs and strengthen LDC members' participation in the WTO.

In 2017, two China round tables were held. One focused on the example of Cambodia's accession to the WTO. The other, held on the margins of MC11, reaffirmed support for LDCs seeking to join the WTO. It also saw the establishment of the Accession Negotiators' Network. The objective is to create a platform for interaction between accession negotiators to help countries before and after WTO membership. Over 80 former negotiators and accession experts have agreed to join the network.

The Government of Kenya hosted a regional dialogue between LDC acceding governments from the Greater Horn of Africa which focused on synergies between WTO accessions and regional integration.

The WTO Secretariat organized a first specialized training course for accession negotiators focusing on bilateral market access negotiations on goods.

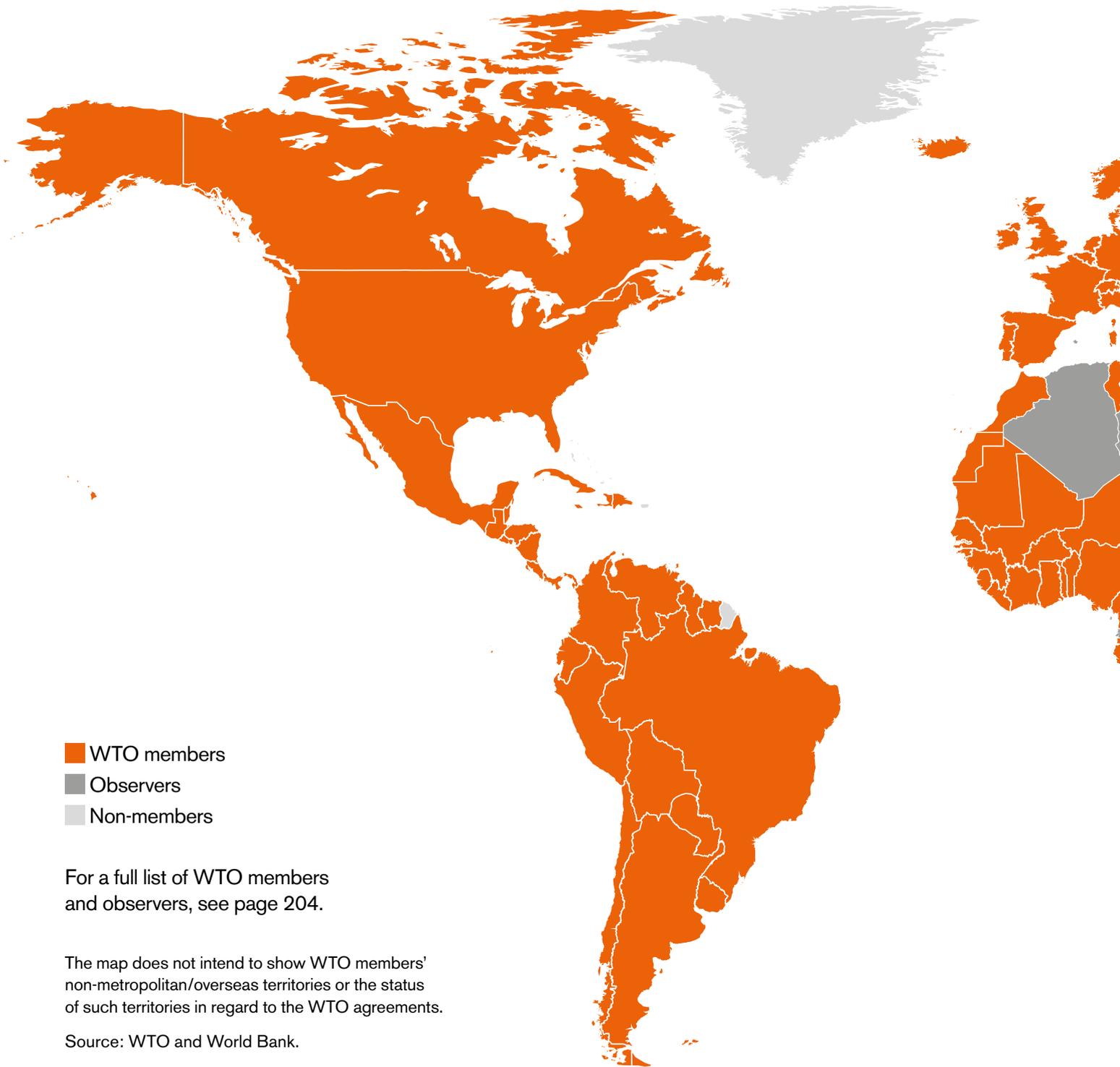
On the margins of MC11, eight post-conflict LDCs launched the g7+ WTO Accessions Group, which has pledged to use the accession process to foster peace and stability. The group comprises three recently acceded LDCs (Afghanistan, Liberia and Yemen), four acceding LDCs (Comoros, São Tomé and Príncipe, Somalia and Timor-Leste) and South Sudan.

The WTO launched a new publication entitled *Trade Multilateralism in the 21st Century: Building the Upper Floors of the Trading System through WTO Accessions* on the margins of MC11. The book draws on recent accessions experiences and examines how an updated and robust rules-based multilateral framework, anchored in the WTO, can maximize the benefits of global economic integration and help revive world trade (see page 181).



A global membership

The WTO's 164 members represent 98 per cent of world trade.



- WTO members
- Observers
- Non-members

For a full list of WTO members and observers, see page 204.

The map does not intend to show WTO members' non-metropolitan/overseas territories or the status of such territories in regard to the WTO agreements.

Source: WTO and World Bank.



