

# Membership

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# Joining the WTO

- **The Working Party on the Accession of South Sudan held its first meeting in March 2019.**
- **Ethiopia reactivated its accession process after a pause of several years.**
- **The Bahamas and Belarus advanced further in their accession negotiations.**
- **The WTO Secretariat organized its first training activity to focus on WTO rules in the context of accession negotiations.**

## Background on joining the WTO

The WTO is open to states or customs territories with full autonomy over their external commercial relations. To join, a government has to bring its economic and trade policies in line with WTO rules and principles and negotiate with WTO members the guaranteed minimum levels of access to its domestic markets for goods and services. The accession process promotes the integration of new members into the global economy. An accession process begins when WTO members accept an application and establish a working party. It concludes when WTO members and the acceding government accept negotiated terms of accession.

Since the WTO was launched in 1995, 36 members have joined the organization. Currently, there are 22 working parties overseeing the accession negotiations for countries seeking to join the WTO.

## South Sudan

At the first meeting of the Working Party on the Accession of South Sudan on 21 March 2019, WTO members expressed support for working with the world's youngest nation to advance its accession negotiations. South Sudan gained independence in July 2011. In December 2017, the 11<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Conference accepted its request to begin WTO accession negotiations.

In December 2018, South Sudan took the first step in the accession process by submitting a memorandum on its foreign trade regime, a document which provides factual data on its trading rules and regulations. "This is an impressive achievement, since on average it has taken seven years to prepare the MFTR for the nine accessions of least-developed countries (LDCs) completed to date," said the Working Party Chair, Ambassador Mohammad Qurban Haqjo (Afghanistan).

**South Sudan began accession negotiations.**



**The Bahamas resumed its accession process.**



### **Ethiopia reactivates its accession**

After a near eight-year pause, Ethiopia reactivated its accession process by circulating a comprehensive set of documents to the Working Party, which met in January 2020 for the first time since March 2012. The Ethiopian delegation, headed by Mamo Mihretu, senior advisor to the Ethiopian Prime Minister and chief trade negotiator, said the country is ready to work with members to advance and hopefully conclude the accession process by the end of 2021. He called on members to accelerate negotiations given Ethiopia's status as an LDC.

### **The Bahamas**

At the fourth working party meeting in April 2019, WTO members welcomed The Bahamas' efforts to maintain momentum since the resumption of its accession process in 2018. The Bahamas concluded one bilateral market access agreement with a WTO member. The Working Party mandated the WTO Secretariat to prepare a factual summary of the discussions to date, which will form the basis for further negotiations.

When concluded, the accession of The Bahamas would send "a strong signal about the relevance of the system, including for small and vulnerable players in the global economy", said the Chair of the Working Party, Ambassador Andrew Staines (United Kingdom).

### **Belarus**

The accession of Belarus has reached an advanced stage. First Deputy Prime Minister, Alexander Turchin, led a high-level government delegation, which included several ministers, at the 12<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Working Party on the Accession of Belarus in July.

WTO members acknowledged progress in a number of areas, including government procurement, participation in the Information Technology Agreement (ITA), import licensing, customs valuation and intellectual property. But they also stressed the need for Belarus to address trade-liberalizing reforms, such as implementing market-oriented policies and increasing transparency. Belarus has concluded 16 bilateral market access agreements with WTO members.

### **Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Comoros and Uzbekistan**

Azerbaijan engaged with WTO members to advance bilateral market access negotiations and discussions on agricultural support. It submitted new negotiating documents, which will be the basis for convening the next working party meeting.

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The accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina is very advanced. It finalized its ITA schedule, which will form a part of its draft goods schedule upon its accession to the WTO. It also engaged in outstanding bilateral market access negotiations with one WTO member. The next working party meeting will be convened as soon as this negotiation is concluded.

Comoros has been working on new documentary inputs for the next working party meeting in the first half of 2020.

Uzbekistan reactivated its accession after a 14-year pause by submitting an updated memorandum on its foreign trade regime in July. Uzbekistan hopes a working party meeting will be held in the first half of 2020.

### Other accession processes

Equatorial Guinea informed the WTO Secretariat that the government aims to finalize its memorandum on its foreign trade regime in early 2020. In preparation for the resumption of Iraq's accession, the WTO Secretariat and the World Bank held a workshop for Iraqi government officials in July.

### Expression of interest for WTO membership

In October 2019, DG Azevêdo received an application from Curaçao – a constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands – to join the WTO as a separate customs territory.

### Technical assistance and outreach

The WTO Secretariat organized a range of technical assistance and capacity-building activities, including a two-week training course on WTO rules in the context of accession negotiations. It was the first Secretariat activity to focus on this specific area.

The eighth China Round Table on WTO Accessions, which aims to assist acceding governments by providing a platform for experience-sharing, took place in December in Moscow. Participants noted that accession negotiations can provide inspiration for WTO reform. They urged acceding governments to harness possible synergies between their accession negotiations and their regional integration efforts.

**Belarus made major progress in accession negotiations.**





**The newly acceding countries are now the best champions of the trading system as a support for peace.**

DDG Wolff

A series of activities took place under the “Trade for Peace” initiative, which aims to harness WTO accessions to promote sustainable peace. Speaking at a session at the Public Forum (see page 150) in October, Deputy Director-General Alan Wolff said the enthusiasm of newly acceding countries for using WTO membership as a peace-building instrument “is a reason for optimism” at a time of uncertainty for world trade.

The Secretariat increased collaboration with partners to support acceding governments’ efforts. In October 2019, a conference took place within the framework of cooperation between the WTO, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to discuss issues of common policy interest in WTO accessions and to explore the scope for heightened collaboration.

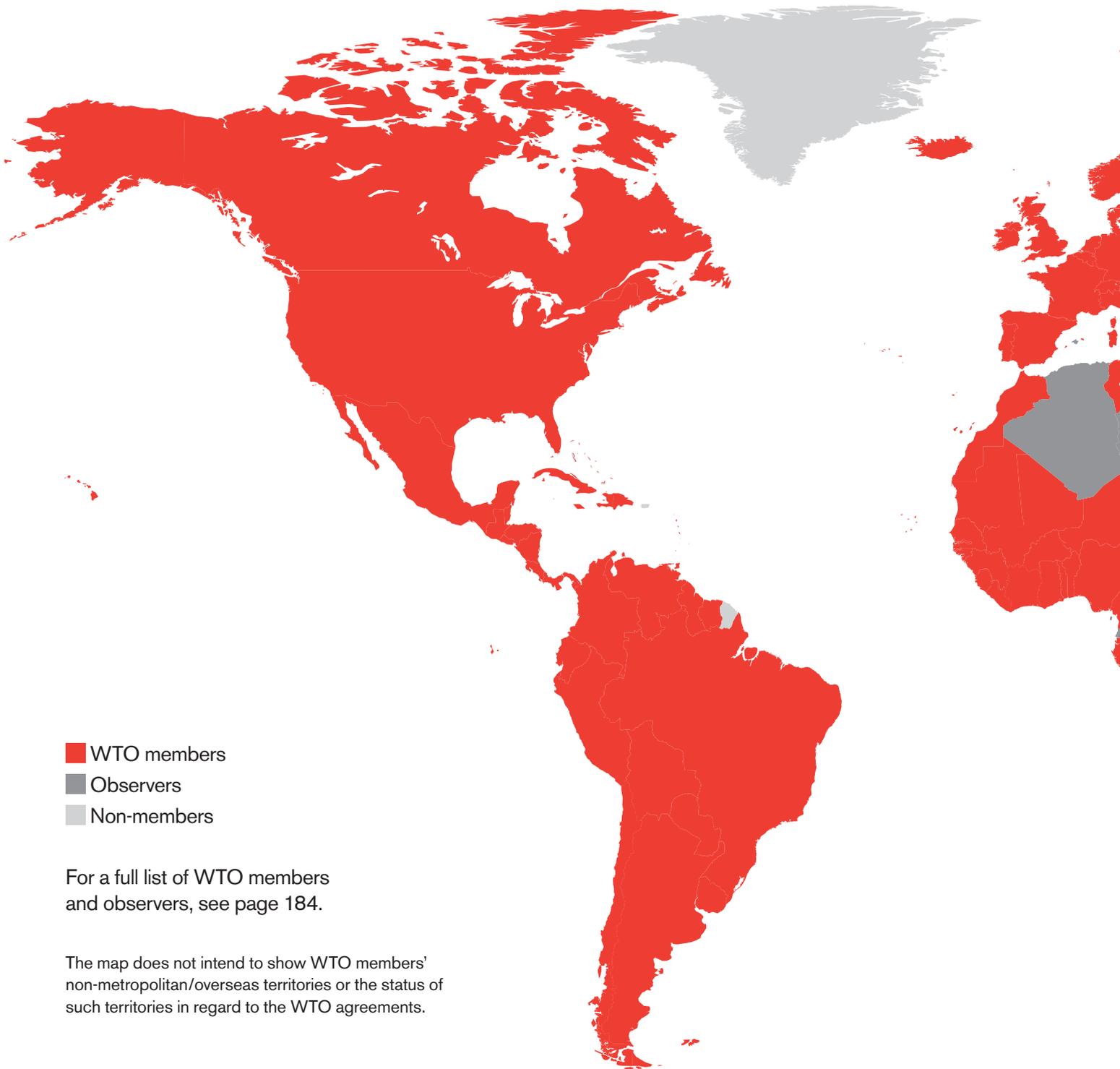
For a full list of WTO members and observers, see page 184.

The WTO organized a two-week training course on accession negotiations in November 2019.



## A global membership

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



For a full list of WTO members  
and observers, see page 184.

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.



