

## Understanding international trade statistics

# The ever-changing world of trade data

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This year's *International Trade Statistics* will be the last in its current format. For almost 20 years, the publication has aimed to act as a statistical compendium of merchandise trade, trade in commercial services, and more recently, trade in terms of value added to global value chains. On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the WTO, this edition looks back at how trade has changed over the past 20 years.

“Cooperation within the international statistical community, partly due to advances in information technology, has helped to improve data gathering and to lead to the availability of ever-more reliable and useful trade statistics.”

### The evolution of “International Trade Statistics”

The GATT/WTO Secretariat has a long-standing tradition of providing statistics on world trade flows by country, region and products. From its creation in January 1948, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) published annual statistical reports. However, the design and compilation of these reports have seen many changes over the years.

#### The beginning

1948-52 Between the GATT's foundation in January 1948 and 1952, three annual reports were published:

- “The Attack on Trade Barriers” - published in September 1949, this was the first progress report on the operation of the GATT
- “Liberating World Trade” (published in June 1950)
- “GATT in Action” (published in February 1952).

These reports contained statistical tables on merchandise trade, with pre-GATT data (going back to 1938) sourced from the League of Nations and the United Nations.

#### More than 30 years of stability

1952 until 1985 The annual statistical reports published over this period broadly followed the same layout and coverage in terms of statistical content.

1952 The first edition of “GATT International Trade” depicted the trends in international merchandise trade and production by commodity, broken down by industrial and non-industrial countries, with separate data for the Eastern Trading Area. The publication included tables and charts, with a section on how the data was sourced. It also covered future prospects for trade.



1958	A special issue of "GATT International Trade" was submitted in 1958 to participants at the Thirteenth Session of the Contracting Parties held in Geneva. The publication was prepared by a panel of experts at the request of the trade ministers who had met at the Twelfth Session of the Contracting Parties in 1957. The aim was to examine trends in international trade and to look ahead to future prospects. The publication acted as a template for future editions of "GATT International Trade".
<b>Introducing changes</b>	
1986	In 1986, "GATT International Trade" was given a "face lift", with changes to the format of the publication and its cover.  The most important change was the breakdown of data by seven regions (North America, Latin America, Western Europe, Eastern Europe and the USSR, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia) to replace the previous breakdown: industrial countries, developing countries, and the Eastern Trading Area. The new structure – with data broken down by region and sector – meant that the GATT data for previous years had to be adjusted and new methods used to estimate missing data. This led to some breaks in data continuity.
1988	The publication was renamed "International Trade Report" in 1988 and published in two volumes. Volume I was devoted to an analysis of developments in world trade and international commercial relations, including "trade trends in agriculture" (published in 1988) and "Services in the domestic and global economy" (published in 1989). Volume II contained the statistical tables and charts.
1994	Volume II was renamed "Statistics" in 1994 and "Trends and Statistics" in 1995.
1995-97	Following the creation of the WTO in 1995, the first volume of the "International Trade Report" featured a special topic each year – for example, "Trade and foreign direct investment" (published in 1996) and "Trade and competition policy" (published in 1997), while Volume II continued to contain the statistical tables and charts.
1998	Following the creation of the WTO's Statistics Division in 1998, Volume II was renamed "WTO, International Trade Statistics" in 1999 and published under the sole responsibility of the Statistics Division.
2007	"International Trade Statistics" was revamped in terms of content and design, introducing a more modern look. It also expanded the statistics made available on trade in services.
2011	The publication was redesigned, making greater use of infographics to illustrate the latest trends in world trade. A new section, "Understanding the ITS", was added to highlight changes to the presentation and coverage of the data and to provide insights into how the data was compiled.

### The impact of information technology

Information technology has led to fundamental changes in how this statistical publication has been produced since 1986. Calculators and electric typewriters were the first electronic tools used by statisticians to produce huge statistical tables – known as the GATT Matrix. This approach was superseded by the statistical mainframe, which played a vital role in the production of statistics, before the first personal computers started to appear in the offices of statisticians.

In the 1990s, these computers were progressively upgraded while client/server applications phased out the mainframe. Spreadsheets and online databases were introduced to speed up data processing and handling of large data sets through more effective data collection, adjustment and verification. The development of these electronic tools has made an enormous contribution to the increase in data availability across the world and to more efficient data collection. It has also greatly facilitated validation work, bringing about greater transparency and more robust statistical procedures.

The rapid development of the Internet and social media has given a further boost to the capturing of data and its presentation. National and international data providers now provide their data online, helping to improve the timeliness and quality of the trade data compiled by the WTO.



**Where to find more:**  
Composition, Definitions  
and Methodology



**Download the data:**  
[www.wto.org/statistics](http://www.wto.org/statistics)

## The changing “faces” of the GATT/WTO’s statistical reports



### Looking ahead

In 2016, this publication will be restructured. The new structure will give more prominence to the wider economic context in which trade takes place and will shed new light on both its long-term trends and its short-term evolution. The revised publication will provide users with a more comprehensive overview of global economic developments and the role played by international trade.