

Workshop on E-Commerce
17-18 June 2013
WTO, Centre William Rappard

OPENING REMARKS BY THE CHAIR OF THE WORKSHOP

H.E. Mr. Joakim Reiter, Ambassador of Sweden to the WTO

Ladies and Gentleman, Deputy-Director General, Distinguished Delegates, Speakers, and Guests from Geneva and from Capitals around the World,

Good afternoon and welcome to this Workshop on E-Commerce held today and tomorrow under the auspices of the WTO Council for Trade in Services. It is my pleasure to join you for this public event and learn more with you about the latest developments, complexities and challenges of electronic commerce.

Much can of course be said about e-commerce, digital trade and the internet. But as an introduction and to put this workshop in a longer term context, let me recapitulate one view expressed by my own Communication's minister in 1996. She stated (in my own unofficial translation): "The internet is a fad (or trend) that might fade quickly. I do not think people in the long run will want to spend as much time for surfing the web as it actually takes."

Her views may have been rather odd, including at the time, but this is not my point. My point is that we are dealing with a rather new phenomenon and that very few persons, both less than two decades ago and potentially even today, adequately could foresee the massive up-take and impact it has had and is still having.

E-commerce is nothing short of a means of trade that has reshaped the trading system and continues to do so. Just as the advent of air transport transformed global trade of its day, the invention and commercialization of Internet was and is also transformational. Of course, like in the mid-90ies, estimates vary quite dramatically about the predicted levels that e-commerce will reach in coming years. But all experts agree that it is on a growth trajectory. Experts also agree that business-to-business e-commerce far outpaces consumer, retail transactions. Some estimate that the value of B to B (B2B) transactions is as much as nine times greater than consumer transactions. I might add that companies and traders are rapidly becoming e-enabled, if they have not done so already. While we in the WTO and governments around the world have pondered how to adapt rules, regulations and policies to Internet, businesses have already adopted it and other ICT technologies as a normal feature of day-to-day business dealings.

This is one of the reasons that services assume such an important role in the growth of e-commerce and in commerce more broadly. The Internet has helped businesses to dramatically reduce the cost and increase the effectiveness of a whole host of logistics services, transport means, and back-office functions. It has also prompted procurement and marketing efforts, once local or national, to go global, reaching a far greater number of economies, large and small, both developed and developing. It has revolutionized the supply of computer software and the interface of the travel industry with its business clients and tourists. The resulting savings that Internet permits, particularly for businesses, are now seen as one of the most essential drivers of economic growth, development and recovery.

Given the importance of costs, quality and technological change to allowing the Internet to fulfil its promise as a catalyst for trade, we have before us today an agenda that not only looks at ways of doing business using the Internet, or policies and regulations for on-line activity, but also takes a close look at some developments in Internet infrastructure. We have speakers that will address, for example, recent phenomenon in the underlying communications services, such as mobile Internet, broadband adoption, and so-called cloud computing.

Our speakers at this work shop come from international organizations and associations that will give us an overview of the excellent work they undertake on the topics we will cover, from private-sector enterprises who experience first-hand the challenges of doing e-commerce, and from government agencies that must grapple with the legal, regulatory and policy questions that arise, while at the same time hoping to ensure that their businesses and consumers can obtain the greatest possible benefits.

Let me add that one of the reasons it was possible for us to broaden our perspective in this way is that our workshop today is a follow-on to a workshop held earlier this year by the WTO Committee on Trade and Development. That Workshop on E-commerce, Development and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises covered many of the fundamentals of e-commerce trends, empowerment of businesses to take advantage of e-commerce, and its role in economic development. But we will hear more about this in a moment from Ambassador Marion Williams, who is with us on the podium this afternoon.

First, I would like to turn to Dr. Harsha Singh, a Deputy Director General of the WTO who has been following e-commerce development here very closely for a number of years. I am pleased he is able to be with us today to extend words of welcome and give you a sense of the WTO in-house discussions that have touched upon e-commerce.

[DDG Singh speaks]

Thank you, Dr. Singh.

I would now like to give the floor to Her Excellency Dr. Marion Williams, Chairperson of the Committee for Trade and Development and Ambassador of Barbados to the WTO. Ambassador Williams will provide you with some of the insights gained from the CTD workshop. Ambassador, the floor is yours.

[Amb. Williams speaks]

Thank you Ambassador.

With these words as a backdrop to the presentations we will hear and the discussion we hope they will engender today and tomorrow, I declare the opening session closed and would like to ask our speakers on the first panel to come to the podium.

Thank you once again, Ambassador and Dr. Singh, for joining us.