



Recommendations for WTO E-Commerce Work Programme

The [WTO E-Commerce Work Programme](#) (“Work Programme”) has been a longstanding pillar of the WTO’s Development Agenda. The Work Programme – launched in 1998 – includes calls to: (1) maximize the benefit of electronic commerce to developing countries and MSMEs; (2) promote developing countries’ exportation of electronically delivered products; and (3) improve access to infrastructure and technology, including across borders.

General Recommendation

To help ensure that all communities across the globe can benefit from cross-border access to information and technology, the Work Programme should be reinvigorated with a goal of improving the coordination across international organizations and development banks of projects to narrow the digital divide broadly and advance the Work Programme’s goals.

Background

The Work Programme is more important than ever in the face of growing digital fragmentation, which is particularly harmful to developing economies. For example, as stated by [UNCTAD](#):

Divergent data nationalism...reduces market opportunities for domestic MSMEs to reach worldwide markets, [and]...reduces opportunities for digital innovation, including various missed opportunities for inclusive development that can be facilitated by engaging in data-sharing through strong international cooperation....[M]ost small, developing economies will lose opportunities for raising their digital competitiveness.

Similarly, as recently stated by the [UN High Level Advisory Board](#) on Effective Multilateralism:

[R]egulatory fragmentation in the digital landscape...is most likely to adversely impact low-income countries, less well-off individuals, and marginalized communities the world over, as well as worsen structural discrimination against women. A future of exclusionary digital development must be avoided at all costs.

In late 2023, the WTO published a seminal report on [Digital Trade for Development](#) together with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), United Nations (UN), and the World Bank Group.

We call on the WTO to build on this report with an active agenda to promote the original goals of the Work Programme through greater coordination across these organizations. As stated in that Report,

Global cooperation is needed to ensure that small businesses, women and young entrepreneurs and consumers in all economies can reap the benefits of digital trade. This is particularly challenging as the issues involved fall within the purview of multiple government ministries, which calls for a whole-of-government approach. International organizations can support these efforts by strengthening their cooperation with governments, stakeholders, and each other, and this joint report is a step in this direction.

Specific Recommendations for Enhanced WTO E-Commerce Work Programme

We urge the WTO to:

- **Convene WTO Members and Relevant International Organizations:** This could include representatives of the aforementioned international organizations, regional development banks, and WTO member representatives (both trade officials and economic development assistance officials).
- **Explore Concrete Actions to Promote Trade-Driven Digital Development:** Periodic meetings could explore areas of cooperation and concrete results-oriented projects to improve digital inclusion, cross-border communication and access to information, promote digital development through international trade.
- **Coordinate Funding and Projects for Maximal Impact:** Existing funding mechanisms already exist to advance digital development goals. However, these substantial resources are not currently coordinated across multiple organizations for maximum, targeted development impacts. Better cross-organizational communication would help WTO members and international organizations focus existing funding mechanisms to better meet shared digital development goals.
- **Promoting Transparency and Accountability and Reducing Barriers:** Building on the WTO's expertise in promoting governmental transparency and in reducing restrictions that undermine economic opportunity for MSMEs and others, the Work Programme concrete projects to identify and reduce trade barriers to digital development.