

The World Trade Organization (WTO) and its relation with the rules of trade between nations at a global or near-global level

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Abstract

The WTO is a place where member governments go, to try to sort out the trade problems they face with each other. At its heart are WTO agreements, negotiated and signed by the bulk of the world's trading nations. But the WTO is not just about liberalizing trade, and in some circumstances its rules support maintaining trade barriers — for example to protect consumers or prevent the spread of disease.

The WTO was born out of negotiations; everything the WTO does is the result of negotiations, this article tries to answer the question what is the World Trade Organization? Simply put: the World Trade Organization (WTO) deals with the rules of trade between nations at a global or near-global level. But there is more to it than that.

And tries to answer another question: Is it a bird, is it a plane? There are a number of ways of looking at the WTO. It's an organization for liberalizing trade. It's a forum for governments to negotiate trade agreements. It's a place for them to settle trade disputes. It operates a system of trade rules. (But it's not Superman, just in case anyone thought it could solve — or cause — all the world's problems!).

Keywords: WTO, negotiations, governments, liberalizing trade, Organization, settle disputes, GATT.

1. Introduction

What is the World Trade Organization? Simply put: the World Trade Organization (WTO) deals with the rules of trade between nations at a global or near-global level. But there is more to it than that. Is it a bird, is it a plane? There are a number of ways of looking at the WTO. It's an organization for liberalizing trade. It's a forum for governments to negotiate trade agreements. It's a place for them to settle trade disputes. It operates a system of trade rules. (But it's not Superman, just in case anyone thought it could solve — or cause — all the world's problems!).

Above all, it's a negotiating forum; essentially, the WTO is a place where member governments go, to try to sort out the trade problems they face with each other. The first step is to talk. The WTO was born out of negotiations, and everything the WTO does is the result of negotiations. The bulk of the WTO's current work comes from the 1986–94 negotiations called the Uruguay Round and earlier negotiations under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The WTO is currently the host to new negotiations, under the “Doha Development Agenda” launched in 2001.

Where countries have faced trade barriers and wanted them lowered, the negotiations have helped to liberalize trade. But the WTO is not just about liberalizing trade, and in some circumstances its rules support maintaining trade barriers — for example to protect consumers or prevent the spread of disease.

It's a set of rules, at its heart are the WTO agreements, negotiated and signed by the bulk of the world's trading nations. These documents provide the legal ground-rules for international commerce. They are essentially contracts, binding governments to keep their trade policies within agreed limits. Although negotiated and signed by governments, the goal is to help producers of goods and services, exporters, and importers conduct their business, while allowing governments to meet social and environmental objectives.

The system's overriding purpose is to help trade flow as freely as possible — so long as there are no undesirable side-effects. That partly means removing obstacles. It also means ensuring that individuals, companies and governments know what the trade rules are around the world, and giving them the confidence that there will be no sudden changes of policy. In other words, the rules have to be “transparent” and predictable.

And it helps to settle disputes; this is a third important side to the WTO's work. Trade relations often involve conflicting interests. Agreements, including those painstakingly negotiated in the WTO system, often need interpreting. The most harmonious way to settle these differences is through some neutral procedure based on an

agreed legal foundation. That is the purpose behind the dispute settlement process written into the WTO agreements.

2. When The WTO began life

The WTO began life on 1 January 1995, but its trading system is half a century older. Since 1948, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) had provided the rules for the system. (The second WTO ministerial meeting, held in Geneva in May 1998, included a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the system), It did not take long for the General Agreement to give birth to an unofficial, de facto international organization, also known informally as GATT. Over the years GATT evolved through several rounds of negotiations.

The last and largest GATT round, was the Uruguay Round which lasted from 1986 to 1994 and led to the WTO's creation. Whereas GATT had mainly dealt with trade in goods, the WTO and its agreements now cover trade in services, and in traded inventions, creations and designs (intellectual property).

3. Principles of the trading system

The WTO agreements are lengthy and complex because they are legal texts covering a wide range of activities. They deal with: agriculture, textiles and clothing, banking, telecommunications, government purchases, industrial standards and product safety, food sanitation regulations, intellectual property, and much more. But a number of simple, fundamental principles run throughout all of these documents. These principles are the foundation of the multilateral trading system.

3.1. (MFN): treating other people equally :

Under the WTO agreements, countries cannot normally discriminate between their trading partners. Grant someone a special favour (such as a lower customs duty rate for one of their products) and you have to do the same for all other WTO members.

This principle is known as most-favoured-nation (MFN) treatment (see box). It is so important that it is the first article of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which governs trade in goods. MFN is also a priority in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) (Article 2) and the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) (Article 4), although in each agreement the principle is handled slightly differently. Together, those three agreements cover all three main areas of trade handled by the WTO.

Some exceptions are allowed. For example, countries can set up a free trade agreement that applies only to goods traded within the group — discriminating against goods from outside. Or they can give developing countries special access to their markets. Or a country can raise barriers against products that are considered to be traded unfairly from specific countries. And in services, countries are allowed, in limited circumstances, to discriminate. But the agreements only permit these exceptions under strict conditions. In general, MFN means that every time a country lowers a trade barrier or opens up a market, it has to do so for the same goods or services from all its trading partners — whether rich or poor, weak or strong.

3.2. National treatment: Treating foreigners and locals equally

Imported and locally-produced goods should be treated equally — at least after the foreign goods have entered the market. The same should apply to foreign and domestic services, and to foreign and local trademarks, copyrights and patents. This principle of “national treatment” (giving others the same treatment as one's own nationals) is also found in all the three main WTO agreements (Article 3 of GATT, Article 17 of GATS and Article 3 of TRIPS), although once again the principle is handled slightly differently in each of these.

National treatment only applies once a product, service or item of intellectual property has entered the market. Therefore, charging customs duty on an import is not a violation of national treatment even if locally-produced products are not charged an equivalent tax.

3.3. Freer trade: gradually, through negotiation

Lowering trade barriers is one of the most obvious means of encouraging trade. The barriers concerned include customs duties (or tariffs) and measures such as import bans or quotas that restrict quantities selectively. From time to time other issues such as red tape and exchange rate policies have also been discussed.

Since GATT's creation in 1947–48 there have been eight rounds of trade negotiations. A ninth round, under the Doha Development Agenda, is now underway. At first these focused on lowering tariffs (customs duties) on

imported goods. As a result of the negotiations, by the mid-1990s industrial countries' tariff rates on industrial goods had fallen steadily to less than 4%.

But by the 1980s, the negotiations had expanded to cover non-tariff barriers on goods, and to the new areas such as services and intellectual property.

Opening markets can be beneficial, but it also requires adjustment. The WTO agreements allow countries to introduce changes gradually, through "progressive liberalization". Developing countries are usually given longer to fulfill their obligations.

3.4. Predictability: through binding and transparency

Sometimes, promising not to raise a trade barrier can be as important as lowering one, because the promise gives businesses a clearer view of their future opportunities. With stability and predictability, investment is encouraged, jobs are created and consumers can fully enjoy the benefits of competition — choice and lower prices. The multilateral trading system is an attempt by governments to make the business environment stable and predictable.

In the WTO, when countries agree to open their markets for goods or services, they "bind" their commitments. For goods, these bindings amount to ceilings on customs tariff rates. Sometimes countries tax imports at rates that are lower than the bound rates. Frequently this is the case in developing countries. In developed countries the rates actually charged and the bound rates tend to be the same.

A country can change its bindings, but only after negotiating with its trading partners, which could mean compensating them for loss of trade. One of the achievements of the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade talks was to increase the amount of trade under binding commitments (see table). In agriculture, 100% of products now have bound tariffs. The result of all this: a substantially higher degree of market security for traders and investors.

The system tries to improve predictability and stability in other ways as well. One way is to discourage the use of quotas and other measures used to set limits on quantities of imports — administering quotas can lead to more red-tape and accusations of unfair play. Another is to make countries' trade rules as clear and public ("transparent") as possible. Many WTO agreements require governments to disclose their policies and practices publicly within the country or by notifying the WTO. The regular surveillance of national trade policies through the Trade Policy Review Mechanism provides a further means of encouraging transparency both domestically and at the multilateral level.

3.5. Promoting fair competition

The WTO is sometimes described as a "free trade" institution, but that is not entirely accurate. The system does allow tariffs and, in limited circumstances, other forms of protection. More accurately, it is a system of rules dedicated to open, fair and undistorted competition.

The rules on non-discrimination — MFN and national treatment — are designed to secure fair conditions of trade. So too are those on dumping (exporting at below cost to gain market share) and subsidies. The issues are complex, and the rules try to establish what is fair or unfair, and how governments can respond, in particular by charging additional import duties calculated to compensate for damage caused by unfair trade.

Many of the other WTO agreements aim to support fair competition: in agriculture, intellectual property, services, for example. The agreement on government procurement (a "plurilateral" agreement because it is signed by only a few WTO members) extends competition rules to purchases by thousands of government entities in many countries. And so on.

3.6. Encouraging development and economic reform

The WTO system contributes to development. On the other hand, developing countries need flexibility in the time they take to implement the system's agreements. And the agreements themselves inherit the earlier provisions of GATT that allow for special assistance and trade concessions for developing countries.

Over three quarters of WTO members are developing countries and countries in transition to market economies. During the seven and a half years of the Uruguay Round, over 60 of these countries implemented trade liberalization programmes autonomously. At the same time, developing countries and transition economies

were much more active and influential in the Uruguay Round negotiations than in any previous round, and they are even more so in the current Doha Development Agenda.

At the end of the Uruguay Round, developing countries were prepared to take on most of the obligations that are required of developed countries. But the agreements did give them transition periods to adjust to the more unfamiliar and, perhaps, difficult WTO provisions — particularly so for the poorest, “least-developed” countries, a ministerial decision adopted at the end of the round says better-off countries should accelerate implementing market access commitments on goods exported by the least-developed countries, and it seeks increased technical assistance for them. More recently, developed countries have started to allow duty-free and quota-free imports for almost all products from least-developed countries. On all of this, the WTO and its members are still going through a learning process. The current Doha Development Agenda includes developing countries’ concerns about the difficulties they face in implementing the Uruguay Round agreements.

Figure (1): The Uruguay Round increased bindings

The Uruguay Round increased bindings		
Percentages of tariffs bound before and after the 1986–94 talks		
	Before	After
Developed countries	78	99
Developing countries	21	73
Transition economies	73	98

(These are tariff lines, so percentages are not weighted according to trade volume or value)

4. The case for open trade

The economic case for an open trading system based on multilaterally agreed rules is simple enough and rests largely on commercial common sense. But it is also supported by evidence: the experience of world trade and economic growth since the Second World War. Tariffs on industrial products have fallen steeply and now average less than 5% in industrial countries. During the first 25 years after the war, world economic growth averaged about 5% per year, a high rate that was partly the result of lower trade barriers. World trade grew even faster, averaging about 8% during the period.

The data show a definite statistical link between freer trade and economic growth. Economic theory points to strong reasons for the link. All countries, including the poorest, have assets — human, industrial, natural, financial — which they can employ to produce goods and services for their domestic markets or to compete overseas. Economics tells us that we can benefit when these goods and services are traded. Simply put, the principle of “comparative advantage” says that countries prosper first by taking advantage of their assets in order to concentrate on what they can produce best, and then by trading these products for products that other countries produce best.

In other words, liberal trade policies — policies that allow the unrestricted flow of goods and services — sharpen competition, motivate innovation and breed success. They multiply the rewards that result from producing the best products, with the best design, at the best price.

But success in trade is not static. The ability to compete well in particular products can shift from company to company when the market changes or new technologies make cheaper and better products possible. Producers are encouraged to adapt gradually and in a relatively painless way. They can focus on new products, find a new “niche” in their current area or expand into new areas.

Experience shows that competitiveness can also shift between whole countries. A country that may have enjoyed an advantage because of lower labour costs or because it had good supplies of some natural resources, could also become uncompetitive in some goods or services as its economy develops. However, with the stimulus of an open economy, the country can move on to become competitive in some other goods or services. This is normally a gradual process.

Nevertheless, the temptation to ward off the challenge of competitive imports is always present. And richer governments are more likely to yield to the siren call of protectionism, for short term political gain — through

subsidies, complicated red tape, and hiding behind legitimate policy objectives such as environmental preservation or consumer protection as an excuse to protect producers.

Protection ultimately leads to bloated, inefficient producers supplying consumers with outdated, unattractive products. In the end, factories close and jobs are lost despite the protection and subsidies. If other governments around the world pursue the same policies, markets contract and world economic activity is reduced. One of the objectives that governments bring to WTO negotiations is to prevent such a self-defeating and destructive drift into protectionism.

Figure (2): World trade and production have accelerated

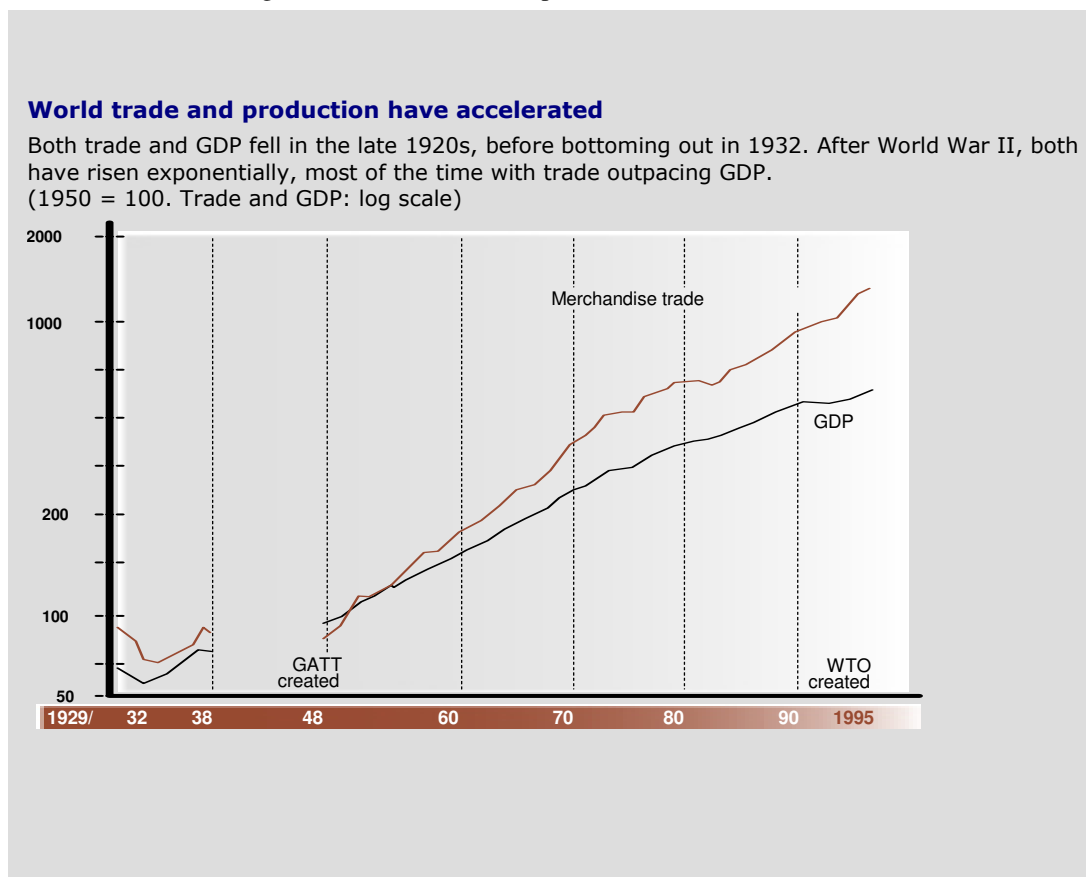


Table (1): Comparative advantage

Comparative advantage

This is arguably the single most powerful insight into economics.

Suppose country A is better than country B at making automobiles, and country B is better than country A at making bread. It is obvious (the academics would say “trivial”) that both would benefit if A specialized in automobiles, B specialized in bread and they traded their products. That is a case of **absolute advantage**.

But what if a country is bad at making everything? Will trade drive all producers out of business? The answer, according to Ricardo, is no. The reason is the principle of **comparative advantage**.

It says, countries A and B still stand to benefit from trading with each other even if A is better than B at making everything. If A is much more superior at making automobiles and only slightly

superior at making bread, then A should still invest resources in what it does best — producing automobiles — and export the product to B. B should still invest in what it does best — making bread — and export that product to A, even if it is not as efficient as A. Both would still benefit from the trade. A country does not have to be best at anything to gain from trade. That is comparative advantage.

The theory dates back to classical economist David Ricardo. It is one of the most widely accepted among economists. It is also one of the most misunderstood among non-economists because it is confused with absolute advantage.

It is often claimed, for example, that some countries have no comparative advantage in anything. That is virtually impossible.

Think about it ...

5. The GATT years: from Havana to Marrakesh

The WTO’s creation on 1 January 1995 marked the biggest reform of international trade since after the Second World War. It also brought to reality — in an updated form — the failed attempt in 1948 to create an International Trade Organization.

Much of the history of those 47 years was written in Geneva. But it also traces a journey that spanned the continents, from that hesitant start in 1948 in Havana (Cuba), via Annecy (France), Torquay (UK), Tokyo (Japan), Punta del Este (Uruguay), Montreal (Canada), Brussels (Belgium) and finally to Marrakesh (Morocco) in 1994. During that period, the trading system came under GATT, salvaged from the aborted attempt to create the ITO. GATT helped establish a strong and prosperous multilateral trading system that became more and more liberal through rounds of trade negotiations. But by the 1980s the system needed a thorough overhaul. This led to the Uruguay Round, and ultimately to the WTO.

5.1. GATT: ‘provisional’ for almost half a century

From 1948 to 1994, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) provided the rules for much of world trade and presided over periods that saw some of the highest growth rates in international commerce. It seemed well-established, but throughout those 47 years, it was a provisional agreement and organization.

The original intention was to create a third institution to handle the trade side of international economic cooperation, joining the two “Bretton Woods” institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Over 50 countries participated in negotiations to create an International Trade Organization (ITO) as a specialized agency of the United Nations. The draft ITO Charter was ambitious. It extended beyond world trade disciplines, to include rules on employment, commodity agreements, restrictive business practices, international investment, and services. The aim was to create the ITO at a UN Conference on Trade and Employment in Havana, Cuba in 1947.

Meanwhile, 15 countries had begun talks in December 1945 to reduce and bind customs tariffs. With the Second World War only recently ended, they wanted to give an early boost to trade liberalization, and to begin to correct the legacy of protectionist measures which remained in place from the early 1930s.

This first round of negotiations resulted in a package of trade rules and 45,000 tariff concessions affecting \$10 billion of trade, about one fifth of the world’s total. The group had expanded to 23 by the time the deal was signed on 30 October 1947. The tariff concessions came into effect by 30 June 1948 through a “Protocol of

Provisional Application”. And so the new General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade was born, with 23 founding members (officially “contracting parties”).

The 23 were also part of the larger group negotiating the ITO Charter. One of the provisions of GATT says that they should accept some of the trade rules of the draft. This, they believed, should be done swiftly and “provisionally” in order to protect the value of the tariff concessions they had negotiated. They spelt out how they envisaged the relationship between GATT and the ITO Charter, but they also allowed for the possibility that the ITO might not be created. They were right.

The Havana conference began on 21 November 1947, less than a month after GATT was signed. The ITO Charter was finally agreed in Havana in March 1948, but ratification in some national legislatures proved impossible. The most serious opposition was in the US Congress, even though the US government had been one of the driving forces. In 1950, the United States government announced that it would not seek Congressional ratification of the Havana Charter, and the ITO was effectively dead. So, the GATT became the only multilateral instrument governing international trade from 1948 until the WTO was established in 1995.

For almost half a century, the GATT’s basic legal principles remained much as they were in 1948. There were additions in the form of a section on development added in the 1960s and “plurilateral” agreements (i.e. with voluntary membership) in the 1970s, and efforts to reduce tariffs further continued. Much of this was achieved through a series of multilateral negotiations known as “trade rounds” — the biggest leaps forward in international trade liberalization have come through these rounds which were held under GATT’s auspices.

In the early years, the GATT trade rounds concentrated on further reducing tariffs. Then, the Kennedy Round in the mid-sixties brought about a GATT Anti-Dumping Agreement and a section on development. The Tokyo Round during the seventies was the first major attempt to tackle trade barriers that do not take the form of tariffs, and to improve the system. The eighth, the Uruguay Round of 1986–94, was the last and most extensive of all. It led to the WTO and a new set of agreements.

Table (2): The GATT trade rounds

Year	Place/ name	Subjects covered	Countries
1947	Geneva	Tariffs	23
1949	Annecy	Tariffs	13
1951	Torquay	Tariffs	38
1956	Geneva	Tariffs	26
1960–1961	Geneva (Dillon Round)	Tariffs	26
1964–1967	Geneva (Kennedy Round)	Tariffs and anti-dumping measures	62
1973–1979	Geneva (Tokyo Round)	Tariffs, non-tariff measures, “framework” agreements	102
1986–1994	Geneva (Uruguay Round)	Tariffs, non-tariff measures, rules, services, intellectual property, dispute settlement, textiles, agriculture, creation of WTO, etc	123

5.2. Did GATT succeed?

GATT was provisional with a limited field of action, but its success over 47 years in promoting and securing the liberalization of much of world trade is incontestable. Continual reductions in tariffs alone helped spur very high rates of world trade growth during the 1950s and 1960s — around 8% a year on average. And the momentum of trade liberalization helped ensure that trade growth consistently out-paced production growth throughout the GATT era, a measure of countries’ increasing ability to trade with each other and to reap the benefits of trade. The rush of new members during the Uruguay Round demonstrated that the multilateral trading system was recognized as an anchor for development and an instrument of economic and trade reform.

But all was not well. As time passed new problems arose. The Tokyo Round in the 1970s was an attempt to tackle some of these but its achievements were limited. This was a sign of difficult times to come.

GATT's success in reducing tariffs to such a low level, combined with a series of economic recessions in the 1970s and early 1980s, drove governments to devise other forms of protection for sectors facing increased foreign competition. High rates of unemployment and constant factory closures led governments in Western Europe and North America to seek bilateral market-sharing arrangements with competitors and to embark on a subsidies race to maintain their holds on agricultural trade. Both these changes undermined GATT's credibility and effectiveness.

The problem was not just a deteriorating trade policy environment. By the early 1980s the General Agreement was clearly no longer as relevant to the realities of world trade as it had been in the 1940s. For a start, world trade had become far more complex and important than 40 years before: the globalization of the world economy was underway, trade in services — not covered by GATT rules — was of major interest to more and more countries, and international investment had expanded. The expansion of services trade was also closely tied to further increases in world merchandise trade. In other respects, GATT had been found wanting. For instance, in agriculture, loopholes in the multilateral system were heavily exploited, and efforts at liberalizing agricultural trade met with little success. In the textiles and clothing sector, an exception to GATT's normal disciplines was negotiated in the 1960s and early 1970s, leading to the Multifibre Arrangement. Even GATT's institutional structure and its dispute settlement system were causing concern.

These and other factors convinced GATT members that a new effort to reinforce and extend the multilateral system should be attempted. That effort resulted in the Uruguay Round, the Marrakesh Declaration, and the creation of the WTO.

6. The agreements

The WTO is 'rules-based'; its rules are negotiated agreements

6.1. Overview: a navigational guide

The WTO agreements cover goods, services and intellectual property. They spell out the principles of liberalization, and the permitted exceptions. They include individual countries' commitments to lower customs tariffs and other trade barriers, and to open and keep open services markets. They set procedures for settling disputes. They prescribe special treatment for developing countries. They require governments to make their trade policies transparent by notifying the WTO about laws in force and measures adopted, and through regular reports by the secretariat on countries' trade policies.

These agreements are often called the WTO's trade rules, and the WTO is often described as "rules-based", a system based on rules. But it's important to remember that the rules are actually agreements that governments negotiated.

This chapter focuses on the Uruguay Round agreements, which are the basis of the present WTO system. Additional work is also now underway in the WTO. This is the result of decisions taken at Ministerial Conferences, in particular the meeting in Doha, November 2001, when new negotiations and other work were launched. (More on the Doha Agenda, later)

6.2. Six-part broad outline

The table of contents of "The Results of the Uruguay Round of Multilateral Trade Negotiations: The Legal Texts" is a daunting list of about 60 agreements, annexes, decisions and understandings in fact, the agreements fall into a simple structure with six main parts: an umbrella agreement (the Agreement Establishing the WTO); agreements for each of the three broad areas of trade that the WTO covers (goods, services and intellectual property); dispute settlement; and reviews of governments' trade policies.

The agreements for the two largest areas — goods and services — share a common three-part outline, even though the detail is sometimes quite different.

- They start with broad principles: the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) (for goods), and the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). (The third area, Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), also falls into this category although at present it has no additional parts.)

- Then come extra agreements and annexes dealing with the special requirements of specific sectors or issues.
- Finally, there are the detailed and lengthy schedules (or lists) of commitments made by individual countries allowing specific foreign products or service-providers access to their markets. For GATT, these take the form of binding commitments on tariffs for goods in general, and combinations of tariffs and quotas for some agricultural goods. For GATS, the commitments state how much access foreign service providers are allowed for specific sectors, and they include lists of types of services where individual countries say they are not applying the “most-favoured-nation” principle of non-discrimination.

Underpinning these are dispute settlement, which is based on the agreements and commitments, and trade policy reviews, an exercise in transparency.

Much of the Uruguay Round dealt with the first two parts: general principles and principles for specific sectors. At the same time, market access negotiations were possible for industrial goods. Once the principles had been worked out, negotiations could proceed on the commitments for sectors such as agriculture and services.

6.3. Additional agreements

Another group of agreements not included in the diagram is also important: the two “plurilateral” agreements not signed by all members: civil aircraft and government procurement.

Further changes on the horizon, the Doha Agenda: These agreements are not static; they are renegotiated from time to time and new agreements can be added to the package. Many are now being negotiated under the Doha Development Agenda, launched by WTO trade ministers in Doha, Qatar, in November 2001.

7. The WTO in global economic policy-making

An important aspect of the WTO’s mandate is to cooperate with the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other multilateral institutions to achieve greater coherence in global economic policy-making. A separate Ministerial Declaration was adopted at the Marrakesh Ministerial Meeting in April 1994 to underscore this objective.

The declaration envisages an increased contribution by the WTO to achieving greater coherence in global economic policy-making. It recognizes that different aspects of economic policy are linked, and it calls on the WTO to develop its cooperation with the international organizations responsible for monetary and financial matters — the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The declaration also recognizes the contribution that trade liberalization makes to the growth and development of national economies. It says this is an increasingly important component in the success of the economic adjustment programmes which many WTO members are undertaking, even though it may often involve significant social costs during the transition.

7.1. Transparency (1): keeping the WTO informed

Often the only way to monitor whether commitments are being implemented fully is by requiring countries to notify the WTO promptly when they take relevant actions. Many WTO agreements say member governments have to notify the WTO Secretariat of new or modified trade measures. For example, details of any new anti-dumping or countervailing legislation, new technical standards affecting trade, changes to regulations affecting trade in services, and laws or regulations concerning the intellectual property agreement — they all have to be notified to the appropriate body of the WTO. Special groups are also established to examine new free-trade arrangements and the trade policies of countries joining as new members.

7.2. Transparency (2): keeping the public informed

The main public access to the WTO is the website, www.wto.org. News of the latest developments are published daily. Background information and explanations of a wide range of issues — including “Understanding the WTO” — are also available. And those wanting to follow the nitty-gritty of WTO work can consult or download an ever-increasing number of official documents, now over 150,000, in Documents Online.

On 14 May 2002, the General Council decided to make more documents available to the public as soon as they are circulated. It also decided that the minority of documents that are restricted should be made public more quickly — after about two months, instead of the previous six. This was the second major decision on transparency. On 18 July 1996, the General Council had agreed to make more information about WTO activities

available publicly and decided that public information, including derestricted WTO documents, would be accessible on-line.

The objective is to make more information available to the public. An important channel is through the media, with regular briefings on all major meetings for journalists in Geneva — and increasingly by email and other means for journalists around the world.

Meanwhile, over the years, the WTO Secretariat has enhanced its dialogue with civil society — non-governmental organizations (NGOs) interested in the WTO, parliamentarians, students, academics, and other groups.

8. References:

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- 2) Agreement on Agriculture
- 3) Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures
- 4) Agreement on Textiles and Clothing
- 5) Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade
- 6) Agreement on Trade-Related Investment Measures
- 7) Agreement on Implementation of Article VI of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade 1994
- 8) Agreement on Implementation of Article VII of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade 1994
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Current WTO members

148 governments, on February 2005, with date of membership (“g” = the 51 original GATT members who joined after 1 January 1995; “n” = new members joining the WTO through a working party negotiation):

Albania 8 September 2000 (n)
Angola 1 December 1996 (g)
Antigua and Barbuda 1 January 1995
Argentina 1 January 1995
Armenia 5 February 2003 (n)
Australia 1 January 1995
Austria 1 January 1995
Bahrain 1 January 1995
Bangladesh 1 January 1995
Barbados 1 January 1995
Belgium 1 January 1995
Belize 1 January 1995
Benin 22 February 1996 (g)
Bolivia 13 September 1995 (g)
Botswana 31 May 1995 (g)
Brazil 1 January 1995
Brunei Darussalam 1 January 1995
Bulgaria 1 December 1996 (n)
Burkina Faso 3 June 1995 (g)
Burundi 23 July 1995 (g)
Cambodia 13 October 2004 (n)
Cameroon 13 December 1995 (g)
Canada 1 January 1995
Central African Republic 31 May 1995 (g)
Chad 19 October 1996 (g)
Chile 1 January 1995
China 11 December 2001 (n)
Colombia 30 April 1995 (g)
Congo 27 March 1997 (g)
Costa Rica 1 January 1995
Côte d’Ivoire 1 January 1995
Croatia 30 November 2000 (n)
Cuba 20 April 1995 (g)
Cyprus 30 July 1995 (g)
Czech Republic 1 January 1995
Democratic Republic of the Congo 1 January 1997 (g)
Denmark 1 January 1995
Djibouti 31 May 1995 (g)
Dominica 1 January 1995
Dominican Republic 9 March 1995 (g)
Ecuador 21 January 1996 (n)
Egypt 30 June 1995 (g)
El Salvador 7 May 1995 (g)
Estonia 13 November 1999 (n)
European Union 1 January 1995
Fiji 14 January 1996 (g)
Finland 1 January 1995
Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 4 April 2003 (n)
France 1 January 1995
Gabon 1 January 1995
Gambia 23 October 1996 (g)

Georgia 14 June 2000 (n)
Germany 1 January 1995
Ghana 1 January 1995
Greece 1 January 1995
Grenada 22 February 1996 (g)
Guatemala 21 July 1995 (g)
Guinea Bissau 31 May 1995 (g)
Guinea 25 October 1995 (g)
Guyana 1 January 1995
Haiti 30 January 1996 (g)
Honduras 1 January 1995
Hong Kong, China 1 January 1995
Hungary 1 January 1995
Iceland 1 January 1995
India 1 January 1995
Indonesia 1 January 1995
Ireland 1 January 1995
Israel 21 April 1995 (g)
Italy 1 January 1995
Jamaica 9 March 1995 (g)
Jordan 11 April 2000 (n)
Japan 1 January 1995
Kenya 1 January 1995
Korea 1 January 1995
Kuwait 1 January 1995
Kyrgyz Republic 20 December 1998 (n)
Latvia 10 February 1999 (n)
Lesotho 31 May 1995 (g)
Liechtenstein 1 September 1995 (g)
Lithuania 31 May 2001 (n)
Luxembourg 1 January 1995
Macao, China 1 January 1995
Madagascar 17 November 1995 (g)
Malawi 31 May 1995 (g)
Malaysia 1 January 1995
Maldives 31 May 1995 (g)
Mali 31 May 1995 (g)
Malta 1 January 1995
Mauritania 31 May 1995 (g)
Mauritius 1 January 1995
Mexico 1 January 1995
Moldova 26 July 2001 (n)
Mongolia 29 January 1997 (n)
Morocco 1 January 1995
Mozambique 26 August 1995 (g)
Myanmar 1 January 1995
Namibia 1 January 1995
Nepal 23 April 2004 (n)
Netherlands — including Netherlands Antilles 1 January 1995
New Zealand 1 January 1995
Nicaragua 3 September 1995 (g)
Niger 13 December 1996 (g)
Nigeria 1 January 1995
Norway 1 January 1995
Oman 9 November 2000 (n)
Pakistan 1 January 1995
Panama 6 September 1997 (n)
Papua New Guinea 9 June 1996 (g)
Paraguay 1 January 1995

Peru 1 January 1995
Philippines 1 January 1995
Poland 1 July 1995 (g)
Portugal 1 January 1995
Qatar 13 January 1996 (g)
Romania 1 January 1995
Rwanda 22 May 1996 (g)
Saint Kitts and Nevis 21 February 1996 (n)
Saint Lucia 1 January 1995
Saint Vincent & the Grenadines 1 January 1995
Senegal 1 January 1995
Sierra Leone 23 July 1995 (g)
Singapore 1 January 1995
Slovak Republic 1 January 1995
Slovenia 30 July 1995 (g)
Solomon Islands 26 July 1996 (g)
South Africa 1 January 1995
Spain 1 January 1995
Sri Lanka 1 January 1995
Suriname 1 January 1995
Swaziland 1 January 1995
Sweden 1 January 1995
Switzerland 1 July 1995 (g)
Chinese Taipei 1 January 2002 (n)
Tanzania 1 January 1995
Thailand 1 January 1995
Togo 31 May 1995 (g)
Trinidad and Tobago 1 March 1995 (g)
Tunisia 29 March 1995 (g)
Turkey 26 March 1995 (g)
Uganda 1 January 1995
United Arab Emirates 10 April 1996 (g)
United Kingdom 1 January 1995
United States 1 January 1995
Uruguay 1 January 1995
Venezuela 1 January 1995
Zambia 1 January 1995
Zimbabwe 3 March 1995 (g)