

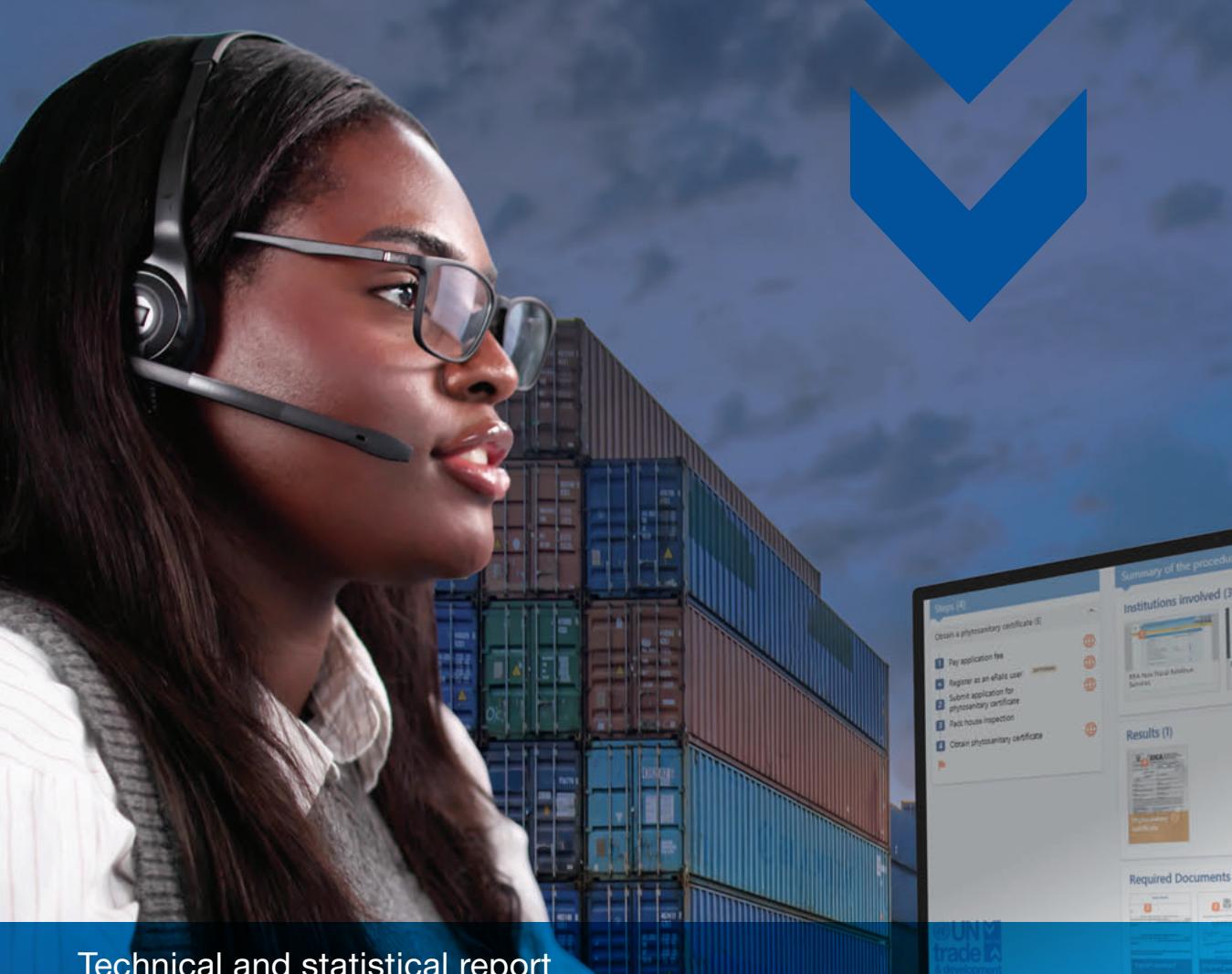


Technical and statistical report

Trade facilitation enquiry points

Analysis and best practices
for operating enquiry points





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List of Acronyms

LDC	Least Developed Country
LLDC	Landlocked Developing Country
NTFC	National Trade Facilitation Committee
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SW	Single Window
TFA	Trade Facilitation Agreement
TFAD	Trade Facilitation Agreement Database
TFAF	Trade Facilitation Agreement Facility
TIP	Trade Information Portal
UNCTAD	UNCTAD
WTO	World Trade Organization

Foreword

In today's complex global trade environment, many businesses - particularly micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) and informal traders - face persistent barriers to participating in international trade. A major challenge is the lack of accessible, clear, and up-to-date information on import, export, and transit procedures. For smaller actors, navigating trade processes can be confusing, time-consuming, and costly, limiting their competitiveness and growth potential.

The World Trade Organization's Agreement on Trade Facilitation (WTO TFA) addresses this issue by emphasizing transparency. It mandates that trade-related information be publicly available and easily accessible through national platforms. It also requires the establishment of Enquiry Points - designated contact offices to provide clarification and support. These are not mere formalities, but vital tools that bridge the gap between policy and practice, helping to unlock inclusive trade opportunities.

Effective enquiry mechanisms contribute to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including Goal 5 (Gender Equality), Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities). When MSMEs, women entrepreneurs, and informal sector participants are equipped with reliable trade information, they gain the tools to compete, formalize, and contribute to resilient local economies.

However, many countries struggle to implement and sustain enquiry points effectively. In some cases, they are underutilized, fragmented, or offer outdated information. The WTO TFA provides limited operational guidance, leaving open important questions: Should enquiry points be centralized or sector-specific? Who should manage them? What constitutes a timely response? What formats should be used? Should contact be generic or personalized?

This publication explores these questions using a "mystery client" approach, in which researchers posed as traders to assess the accessibility and responsiveness of enquiry points across various countries. The findings reveal best practices, common gaps, and practical recommendations to help governments improve their systems.

UNCTAD is proud to present this study as both a diagnostic and a practical tool. It aims to support governments, trade officials, development partners, and the broader trading community in making transparency effective and inclusive. National Trade Facilitation Committees, in particular, may find it a valuable resource.

Special thanks go to the authors and practitioners whose efforts made this publication possible. Together, we move closer to a more accessible, equitable, and transparent global trading system.

Torbjörn Fredriksson and Ángel González Sanz
Officers-in-Charge
Division on Technology and Logistics, UNCTAD



Executive summary

Transparent and good quality information is a cornerstone in ensuring efficient national, regional and international trade. Information that is clear, regularly updated, verified and originating from a reliable source has a particularly positive impact on all stakeholders involved in trade, but especially on MSMEs and small traders, because it creates predictability in the import and export procedures. Transparent information can therefore democratize businesses' access to formal trade which in turn has a positive impact on revenue collection.

The World Trade Organization's (WTO) Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) which aims to streamline foreign trade procedures for imports and exports by reducing transaction time and cost, puts transparency at its forefront with several transparency notifications that WTO Members must notify (article 1.3, article 1.4, article 10.4.3, article 12.2.2).

This study focuses on the compliance of ratifying countries with article 1.3. of the WTO TFA which requires that Members, within their available resources, establish one or more enquiry points to respond to reasonable questions about matters listed in article 1.1. (importation, exportation and transit procedures; rates of duties and taxes; fees and charges imposed by or for governmental agencies; etc.)

On 26 July 2024, UNCTAD (UNCTAD) sent out a “Mystery client” email to 124 countries having notified their enquiry points, in order to check if the contact points were operational and could indeed answer possible queries from importers and exporters. This exercise tested only the email channel notified under TFA Article 1.3 and where a single person was listed as focal point, we recognize that requests may still be compiled and team-managed. Our findings reflect the responsiveness of the notified contact, not the internal set-up.

Out of the 124 countries, 48 provided an answer to the questions posed which allowed UNCTAD to retrace these countries' common practices, limits, and regional tendencies. The reduced quantity of answers is indicative, however, that the enquiry points' functionality and accessibility are still limited for the time being.

The study focuses on providing recommendations around some of the following questions:

1

Should an enquiry point be associated with a singular person or be a common email box? Common email boxes facilitate compilation of requests and knowledge transfer that is less affected by high turnover rates.

2

Is it best to have a single enquiry point channeling the requests to the right focal points or a list of enquiry points allowing the trader to choose the best option? Although multiple enquiry points can offer more specific answers to requests, it can also lead to inefficiency if the enquiry points are not properly framed.

3

How long should it take for the importer/exporter to receive an answer to their query? Acknowledging receipt should happen immediately after the importer/exporter sent in their request. As for final responses to queries, while faster service, sometimes on the same day, is the ultimate objective, longer response times are often observed for more comprehensive and useful answers. Around 23 calendar days was found to be the maximum timeframe where quality response can be given without compromising the practical value of the information for traders

4

What is the relationship between a country's transparency levels and its WTO TFA implementation rate? Higher overall TFA implementation and especially full implementation of Article 1.3 correlates with better enquiry-point responsiveness. However, compliance alone did not guarantee functionality: many non-responding countries had also notified full Art.1.3.

5

Do countries with National official Trade Information Portals have more efficient Enquiry points? The data shows that Enquiry points in countries with a TIP or national trade repository were more efficient and precise when offering a response, in comparison to the countries not operating one¹. It is noted that in some cases enquiry points are integrated with the TIP.

The study shows that despite developed countries in the sample currently having the most efficient enquiry points, developing countries and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) are making increasing efforts to offer reliable services.

¹ In this study, regional solutions and regional platforms such as the ones offered by the European Union were perceived as offering a similar service to national trade information portals and counted as such.

Introduction

The WTO TFA is a multilateral agreement containing provisions for expediting the movement, release and clearance of goods, including goods in transit. Adopted in 2013 and entered into force in 2017, it aims to reduce trade costs, enhance transparency, and improve coordination between Customs authorities and other relevant agencies. By simplifying trade procedures and ensuring the accessibility of essential trade-related information, the agreement plays a crucial role in fostering global economic growth and integration.²

Within this agreement, Article 1.3 states that each WTO member must establish or maintain enquiry points to respond to trade-related enquiries and provide necessary forms and documents. Regionally, it is also possible for Customs unions or regional groups to create enquiry points. Members are also discouraged from charging fees for services provided in connection with enquiry points, but if they do, it should be limited to the cost of the services provided. The response to enquiries should be provided within a reasonable time, depending on the complexity of the request.

In essence, this Article talks about predictability for traders by 1) establishing and maintaining an enquiry point; 2) responding to the enquiries within a reasonable time; 3) creating a regional enquiry point; and 4) having no fees or charges for this service, and if there are, limiting it to the cost of the services.

According to the latest update of the WTO TFA Database (TFAD), 75.9 per cent of WTO Members have met the commitments under Article 1.3.³ However, implementation rates vary significantly across different regions, with African countries having the lowest implementation rate at 40.9 per cent, and European countries achieving full implementation at 100 per cent. According to the G20 policy analysis⁴, full implementation of TFA provisions, especially those under Article 1 on information availability, is not expected before 2035, in developing and least-developed countries.

Enquiry points play a crucial role in providing essential information on import, export, and transit procedures, required documentation, applicable duties and taxes, and other relevant regulations. While the requirements lack specificity regarding response times and the exact nature of enquiry points, whether centralized, decentralized, sector-specific, fully digital, physical, or hybrid, the overall goal remains to ensure that trade-related information is precise, accessible, and easily navigable.

Therefore, an assessment is needed to determine whether the notified Enquiry Points effectively facilitate trade and provide transparent, accessible information to stakeholders. By evaluating the responsiveness, accuracy, and overall performance of enquiry points notified to WTO, the aim of the present analysis is to identify best practices and possible areas of improvement to enhance trade facilitation efforts globally and to provide recommendations serving as a guide to countries striving to improve.

² World Trade Organization (WTO), Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA), available at: https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/tradfa_e/tradfa_e.htm

³ WTO, TFA Database - Progress by Measure, available at <https://www.tfadatabase.org/en/implementation/progress-by-measure> (last accessed December 2024).

⁴ Think20 (T20), Developing a Digital Trade Facilitation Framework for the G20, available at <https://t20ind.org/research/developing-a-digital-trade-facilitation-framework-for-the-g20/>



Methodology

In 2023, UNCTAD sent an email informing the WTO and its Member States that an evaluation exercise concerning enquiry points was to be conducted in 2024 by UNCTAD.⁵

On 26 July 2024, UNCTAD sent the listed enquiry points in the WTO TFAD a standardized query from a “mystery trader” identity. This involves sending the request from an anonymous, generic email address that mimics a real trader seeking assistance. The request sent to the countries includes three pieces of information for a specific product: 1) the procedure and document for importation of a commodity; 2) the duties, taxes, or any other fees applicable to the importation or transit of said commodity; and 3) an email contact and telephone for any clarifications.

At this time, around 124 countries have notified their enquiry points to the WTO TFA according to the WTO TFAD.⁶ These are the countries that provided email addresses and contact forms and not including those that provided only the phone numbers.

This information was monitored and tracked based on response time (good response time was between 0 to 8 days), quality of information (e.g. precision in the answer; additional relevant information) and overall experience (e.g. request for the client to offer feedback).

Three follow ups were afterwards conducted in August, September and October, giving countries who had not responded a chance to respond.

The quality of responses was then monitored and measured from a scale of 1 to 5:

- 1 Acknowledged the enquiry but provided no useful information or simply advised checking the website without offering a link;
- 2 Provided a link to where the answers could be found, without any explanation;
- 3 Offered a partial response, addressing one of the two questions;
- 4 Provided answers to both questions;
- 5 Delivered comprehensive answers to both questions, included contact details, and offered additional relevant information, such as how to navigate the website or related resources.

The general observation was that although developed countries had a better average grade according to their TFA implementation of article 1.3 (3.8), developing countries followed suit very closely with a 3.45 for the same number of countries. This shows that despite having fewer resources and capacity, developing countries are making considerable effort in meeting the transparency and enquiry point commitments under the WTO TFA, keeping up closely with developed countries.

⁵ UNCTAD communication to WTO and Members announcing the 2024 enquiry point evaluation exercise (2023), correspondence on file with the authors.

⁶ WTO, TFAD – *Contact Points* (Art. 1.3), Available at: <https://www.tfadatabase.org/en/information-for-traders/contact-points>

Limitation

While this paper provides a detailed analysis of enquiry points under Article 1.3 of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement, several limitations should be noted.

First, the study excluded enquiry points that were accessible only via telephone numbers and only focused on enquiry points found in the WTO TFAD. Additionally, there were two to four contact forms provided by certain countries that could not be included in the analysis because they required information that was not available to the mystery trader identity used in this study such as TIN number, passport information and other documentation similar to this.

Secondly, the number of LDCs and SIDS having answered the mystery client is not representative of the entire group of countries. For a better understanding of the way their Enquiry Points function and to perceive tendencies would require additional study.

Thirdly the evaluation relied on a standardized query that may not fully capture the complexity of trade-related questions typically submitted to enquiry points. This query was simplified as much as possible and did not include nuanced or sector-specific enquiries.

Furthermore, it is important to note that enquiry points are listed across a variety of WTO websites, and the contact points may vary.⁷ This leads to confusion as to who should be contacted. It should also be reminded that compliance rates of enquiry points is solely based on reporting by countries and are not verified, this entails that functional enquiry points in theory may not work in practice.

Another limitation is that the study could not assess how enquiries are handled internally once received. Since the methodology relied on a “mystery trader” approach, it was not possible to determine whether messages were processed through structured systems such as ticketing or case management tools or if the enquiries were simply handled as ordinary emails. This lack of visibility into back-office processes limits the ability to evaluate efficiency and sustainability.

Lastly, the current study does not address gender aspects as the survey was anonymous and did not request this information. The question of accessibility for persons with disabilities is partly addressed in the “Feedback Survey” and “Recommendations” sections.

These limitations highlight the need for ongoing, iterative evaluations and more inclusive methodologies in future studies to provide a more holistic view of enquiry point operationalization.

⁷ WTO TFA Committee Database and SPS Enquiry Points, available at: https://www.tfadatabase.org/en/information-for-traders/contact-points?measure=3&contact_type=14#anchor-table



Chapter I

Enquiry point accessibility



This section provides a comprehensive overview of the responses received from the 124 WTO member countries that had officially notified their enquiry points to the WTO TFA Committee by December 2025, as documented in the WTO TFAD.

These 124 countries represent WTO members that have established and notified

a designated contact point by email address to address trade-related enquiries.

The analysis below presents detailed insights into response rates, timelines, WTO TFA implementation levels, organizational structures, and challenges, helping to identify trends and areas for improvement in enquiry point accessibility and functionality.

A. Response rate and regional distribution

Out of the 124 countries contacted, only 48 (39 per cent) responded to the enquiry request, with only 28 responding without the need of a reminder. This low response rate underscores potential challenges in enquiry point accessibility and functionality, even among countries that have formally notified their contact points to the WTO.

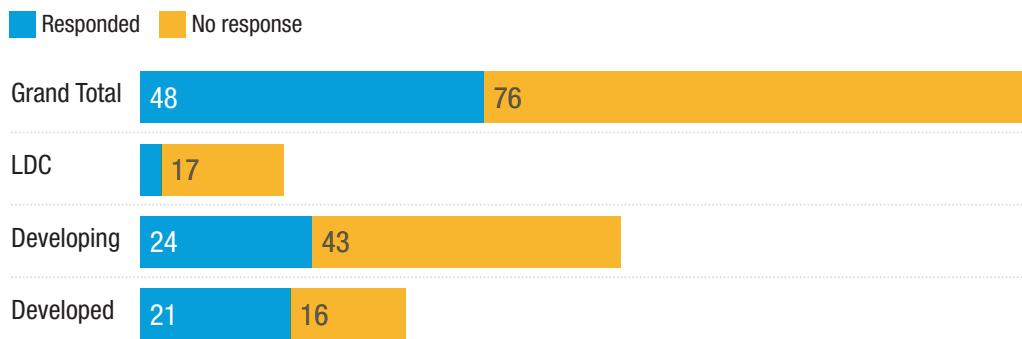
The distribution of responses highlights patterns based on developmental status, regional representation, and special classifications.

Of the responses received, 21 were from developed countries, 24 from developing countries, and 3 from least-developed countries (LDCs), specifically Gambia, Eswatini, and Lao People's Democratic Republic. Developed countries had a high share of responses relative to their representation, while developing countries had varied response rates with some regions outperforming others.



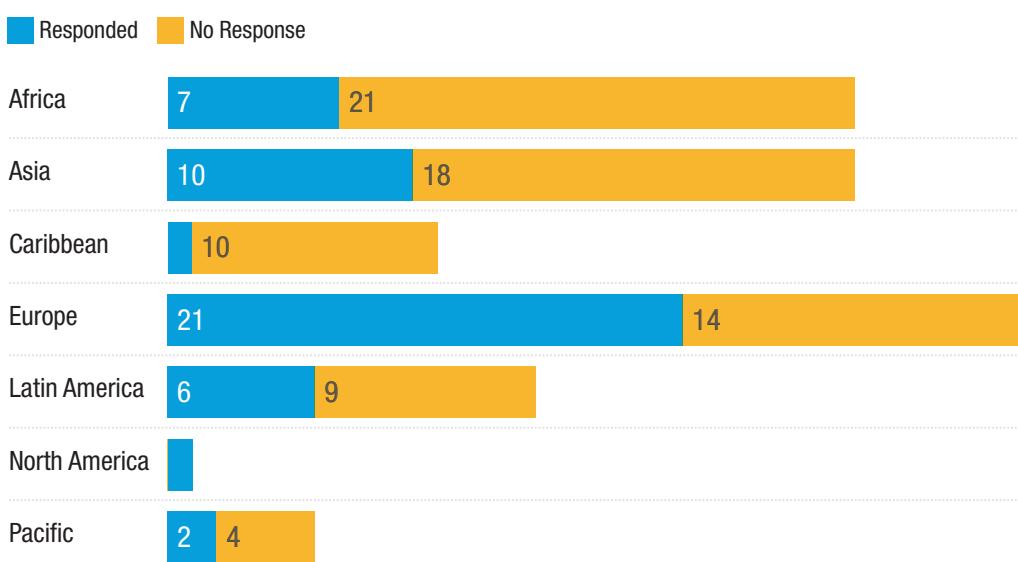
Figure 1 Responses by level of development

Number of countries



Source: UNCTAD, 2024

Figure 2
Responses by Region
Number of countries



Source: UNCTAD, 2024

Regionally, Europe had the highest performance, with 21 responses out of 35 contacted countries, with a response rate of 60 per cent. This is followed by Latin America, who had a response rate of 40 per cent, as 6 out of 15 countries provided responses.

In Asia, 10 out of 28 countries contacted responded, representing a 35.7 per cent response rate. The region showed mixed performance, with countries such as Singapore and Japan responding promptly while some exhibiting delays in responses. Africa had 7 out of 28 countries responding,

meaning only a 25 per cent response rate. This demonstrates the significant challenges faced by African countries.

The Caribbean and Pacific regions also recorded low response rates. In the Caribbean, only 1 out of 11 countries contacted responded, resulting in a response rate of 9 per cent, while in the Pacific, 2 out of 6 contacted countries responded, equating to a response rate of 33 per cent.

As for special categories of countries, out of 19 SIDS contacted, only 4 responded with a response rate of around 21 per

Figure 3
Response by Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS)
Number of countries



Source: UNCTAD, 2024

cent. These figures underscore the challenges that SIDS have in maintaining effective enquiry point systems, mainly due to limited human resources, technical constraints, and financial limitations. With limited personnel and high turnover, SIDS struggle to manage trade enquiries effectively. Outdated infrastructure, unreliable internet, and financial constraints further hinder their ability to invest in skilled staff and technology. Addressing these issues requires targeted capacity-building, financial support, and regional cooperation to strengthen trade facilitation efforts.

Also worth mentioning, out of 16 LLDCs contacted, 6 responded resulting in a response rate of around 37.5 per cent.

The data indicates a strong response rate from developed countries, particularly in Europe and Latin America, suggesting that these regions may have better enquiry point infrastructures in place. On the other hand, regions such as Africa or vulnerable countries such as SIDs in the Caribbean and the Pacific and LLDCs, where resources for trade facilitation may be more constrained, had lower response rates.

While the model wasn't statistically strong overall, it suggested that countries classified as LDC or is in the Caribbean tended to get lower performance grades. In contrast, countries in developed regions like North America showed a possible positive link. Even though the results aren't conclusive, they indicate the need for more support and capacity building in vulnerable regions

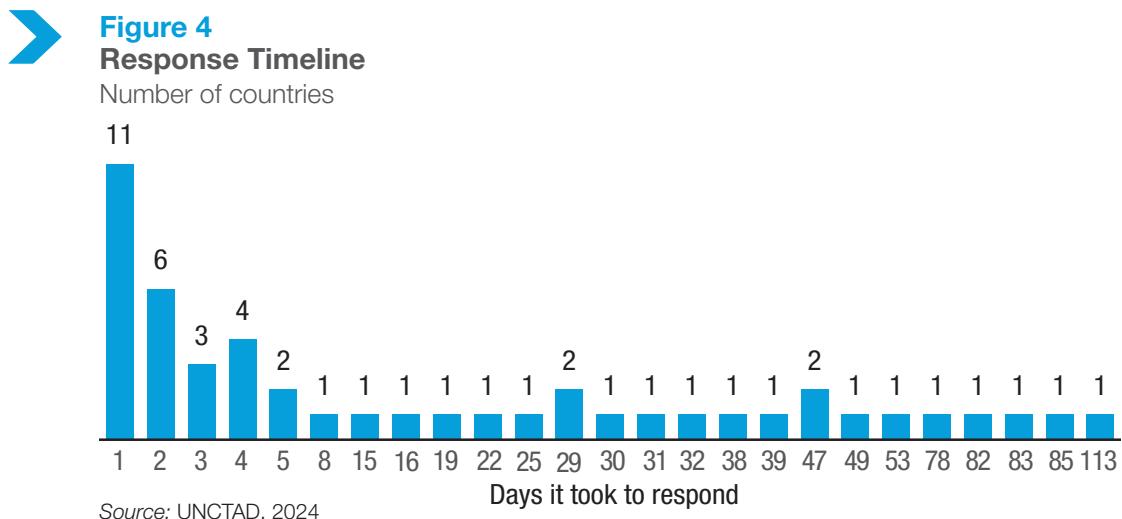
B. Response times

Article 1.3 of the WTO TFA mentions that enquiry points should respond to the enquiries within a reasonable time. However, the definition of reasonable time is not explicitly stated. This section looks at the response time of the 48 countries and analyses the average response in relation to the level of development, region,

as well as in terms of implementation of the WTO TFA in general and with specific implementation of Article 1.3.

i. Overall response times

In general, the response times for the 48 countries varied significantly.



The majority of the responses (26 countries) were received within five days, suggesting that these countries have well established systems capable of processing and responding to trade-related queries efficiently. Countries in this group are mostly developed or from regions with strong trade facilitation mechanisms such as Europe and certain parts of Asia. It is interesting to note that these countries only have one singular generic email compared to other countries that have notified several enquiry points.

An additional 9 countries responded within one month (up to 30 days), indicating some moderate delays. Another 8 countries took up to two months (up to 60 days) to respond, often requiring one or more follow-up attempts to elicit a reply.

The remaining 5 countries responded within three months (up to 90 days), after multiple follow-ups, which points to possible structural or resource constraints in handling enquiries.

Among countries who responded, 42 per cent required follow-ups.

Use of Official language in the Enquiry

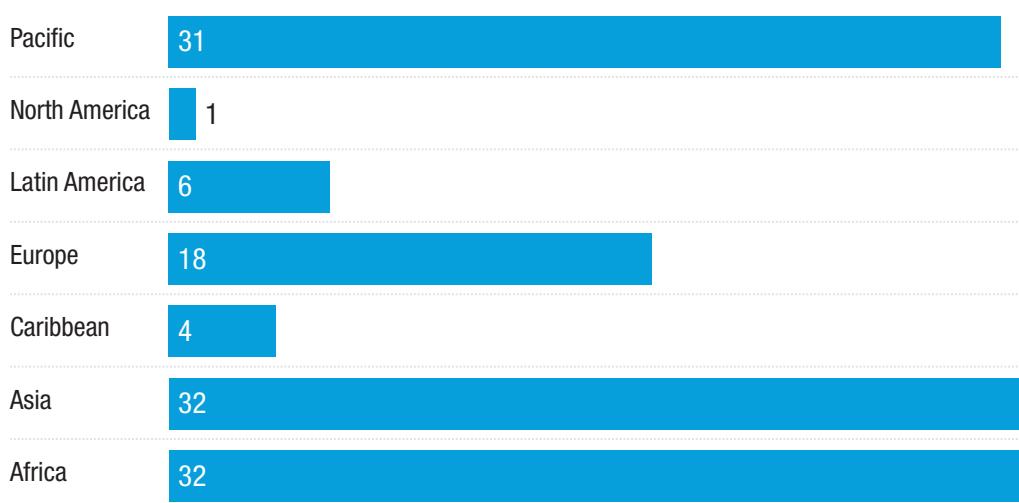
The first enquiry emails from the mystery trader were sent only in English. Due to a lack of initial responses or requests from the countries, all the follow ups were sent in the official language of the country. This triggered further responses since 6 out of 20 of those who responded to an email in their official language, replied only in their official language.

In one case in Europe, the country requested for the query to be formulated in its official language. However, soon after this country responded in English.

ii. Response times by region

Europe showed the fastest response times, with 13 out of 21 (62 per cent) responding within one week. Asia displayed mixed performance, with 4 out of 10 (40 per cent) of its responses occurring within one week and around half (50 per cent) required over a month to respond. This disparity highlights uneven capacities across the

Figure 5
Average time (days) to respond by region



Source: UNCTAD, 2024

region, with developed economies like Singapore and Japan performing better than some of their developing counterparts. Africa did well with timeliness, as 3 out of 7 (42 per cent) of responses were received within one week, while 43 per cent required over one month to respond.

Latin American countries performed very well, with 5 out of 6 (83 per cent) of responses received within one week, reflecting progress in countries like Mexico and El Salvador. SIDS provided 1 out of 5 (20 per cent) responses within one week, while 3 (60 per cent) were received after one month. Similarly, 4 out of 6 (67 per cent) of LLDC's responses were received within one week, but the last one took significantly longer at 85 days.

iii. Response times by development status

Developed countries accounted for 21 of the responses, with 13 (62 per cent) of

them occurring within one week. The rest responded within 50 days, indicating that this group generally benefits from consistent operational efficiency.

Developing countries, on the other hand, showed slower response times, with 11 out of 25 (44 per cent) responding within one week and 36 per cent requiring more than a month to reply.

LDCs accounted for only three responses, all received within one week.

Countries with advanced systems, such as Austria, Singapore, and Canada, consistently demonstrated faster response times. The analysis shows the importance of automation and centralized enquiry points in ensuring timely responses.

While one week is a reasonable target for routine queries, it is necessary to review what caused the delayed responses for countries whose response times exceeded one month.

C. The WTO TFA implementation levels of responding countries

The implementation status of the 48 responding countries shows varied readiness in meeting the broader requirements of the WTO TFA and the specific obligations of Article 1.3. Analyzing this against response times and rates reveals notable trends and potential correlations.

i. WTO TFA Commitment Status

The compliance levels of 48 responding countries, as measured by their WTO TFA Commitment Status, show that 34 countries (70.8 per cent) have achieved full compliance,

having supposedly implemented all commitments under the Agreement.

These fully compliant countries were among the most efficient responders, with 62 per cent responding within one week and 88 per cent within one month, highlighting a strong relationship between high compliance and operational readiness.

Another 6 countries (12.5 per cent) reported high compliance (90-99 per cent) with 35 per cent responding within one week and the majority responding after one month, indicating that minor gaps in compliance can impact enquiry point effectiveness.

Countries with moderate compliance levels (50-90 per cent) accounted for 5 responses (10.4 per cent). None of these countries responded within one week, and most required over a month, emphasizing the challenges associated with partial implementation.

Finally, the 3 countries (6 per cent) with the lowest compliance levels (<50 per cent) showed varied response rates. While two of these countries responded in 38 and 78 days respectively, one country, Eswatini, responded within a week, showcasing how even lower WTO TFA compliance levels do not always translate into poor response times.

ii. Article 1.3 implementation

When examining the specific implementation of Article 1.3, which mandates the establishment of accessible and responsive

enquiry points, 45 of the 48 responding countries (93.8 per cent) have fully implemented the Provision.⁸ The majority of these countries (approximately 60 per cent) responded within one week. This suggests a direct relationship between functional enquiry points under Article 1.3 and timely responses.

Among the 3 countries (6.2 per cent) that reported not yet implementing Article 1.3, response patterns were mixed. Interestingly, Eswatini, which has full implementation of Article 1.3 despite lower overall TFA compliance levels, responded efficiently within the week. This highlights that even partial implementation of broader commitments can yield functional enquiry points under Article 1.3. Furthermore, this aligns with the WTO's 2015 scenario calculations, which demonstrated that regardless of the level of trade facilitation implementation, whether total, conservative, or liberal, it would still generate a positive impact.⁹

D. Enquiry point organizational structure

An analysis of the organizational structure of enquiry points revealed that a significant majority of responses, 34 out of 48 (71 per cent), were from enquiry points managed by national Customs authorities. This highlights the important role of Customs in trade facilitation and enquiry point management, since they are directly involved in processing imports, exports, and transit procedures. Customs authorities also demonstrated prompt responses, with 20 out of the 34 responses received within one week

emphasizing their operational readiness.

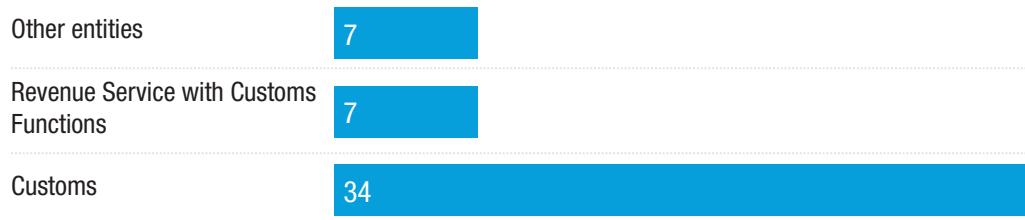
Other enquiry points were managed by Revenue Services that include Customs functions, accounting for 7 responses (15 per cent). Additionally, 7 responses (15 per cent) came from other entities, including ministries of finance, economy, and industry.

This breakdown highlights the dominance of Customs authorities as the primary managers of enquiry points. However, it also raises questions about the effectiveness of

⁸ Those whose definitive implementation dates for Art.1.3 of the WTO TFA has passed is considered as implemented even without notification from the country.

⁹ WTO World Trade Report 2015: *Speeding up trade: benefits and challenges of implementing the WTO TFA*, Chapter D: Estimating the benefits of the TFA, pp. 81-88..

➤ **Figure 6**
Entities managing the enquiry point



Source: UNCTAD, 2024

enquiry points managed by non-Customs entities and the potential need for interagency collaboration to streamline operations.

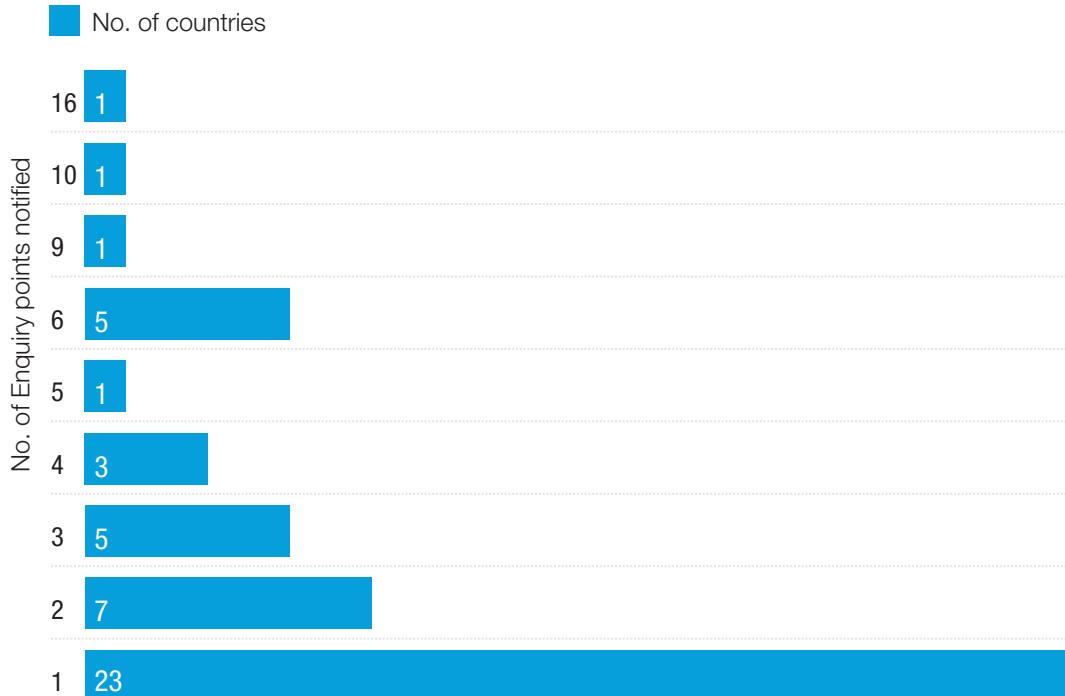
i. Impact of Organizational Structure on Response Times

Countries that responded within 5 days were mostly (81 per cent) with focal points from Customs or the Revenue Services. Together with the fact that 71 per cent of the enquiry points are from

Customs or revenue authorities, these seem to be better equipped to handle enquiries efficiently as they are closer to the source of information and operate more closely to trade procedures.

Of note is that in one country, they had two agencies as an enquiry point which were the Ministry of Industry and Trade and the National Directorate of Tax Revenue. Here, the enquiry point from the National Directorate of Tax revenue responded within one day.

➤ **Figure 7**
Number of Enquiry Points notified by countries that responded



Source: UNCTAD, 2024

ii. Enquiry point contacts notified

The number of enquiry points notified by countries varies significantly, reflecting different national approaches to trade facilitation. Among the countries notified their enquiry points, 62 countries notified only one enquiry point, 18 countries notified two, 14 countries notified three, while 27 countries notified more than four. Notably, some countries have reported as many as 32 enquiry points, indicating a highly decentralized approach.

For the 48 countries that responded, 23 countries notified only one enquiry point to the WTO. This shows the preference for a centralized system for addressing enquiries. Additionally, 13 countries notified up to 3 enquiry points, while 9 countries notified between 4 to 6 enquiry points. It is of note that three countries notified 9, 10 and 16 enquiry points respectively. When combining all countries, a negative correlation is perceived between the number of enquiry points that a country has and the grade that it has been given.

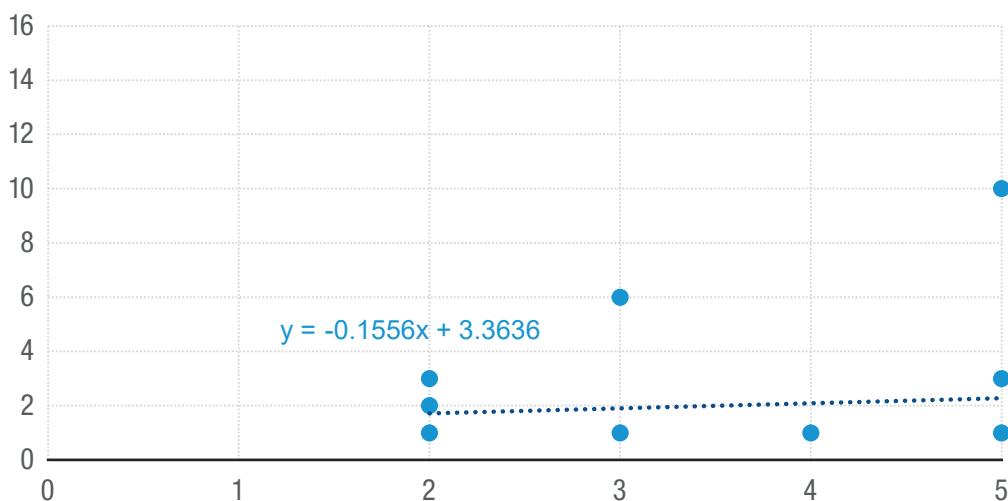
What can be perceived with this limited database is that while developed countries with several enquiry points received better grades, there seemed to be a negative correlation between the grade and the number of enquiry points for developing countries (although the graph shows an upward trend). This can show that while multiple enquiry points may be beneficial in addressing specialized trade concerns, they can also contribute to fragmentation, misdirected enquiries, and delays, particularly if coordination mechanisms are weak. It is therefore important to ensure that they are functioning properly.

The data highlights the varying national strategies in organizing enquiry points, with some favoring a single, streamlined focal point, while others adopt a multi-agency structure that may require stronger interagency collaboration to ensure efficiency.

Worth noting is that some of the enquiry points notified are the heads of the agencies.

Figure 8
Number of Enquiry Points in comparison to the grade

- Number of enquiry points linked to grade
- Linear (Number of enquiry points linked to grade)

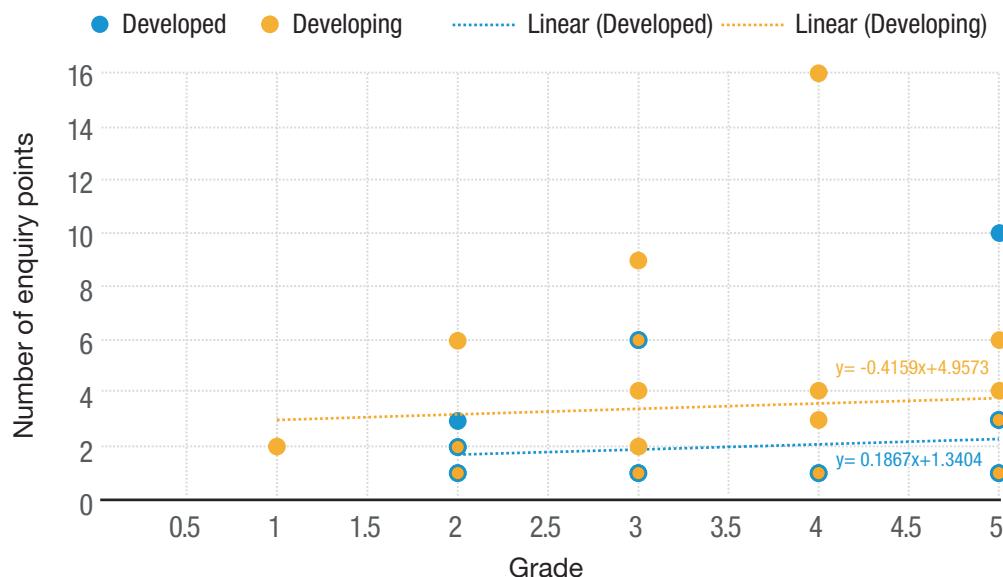


Source: UNCTAD, 2024



Figure 9

Number of Enquiry Points in comparison to grade for developed and developing countries



Source: UNCTAD, 2024

Note: LDCs were not considered in this list

iii. Email structure and its influence on response times

A closer look at the email systems used revealed that countries relying on generic email addresses, such as “info@Customs.gov” or “support@Customs.gov” had significantly better response rates and times as compared to personal emails. On average, those with generic email addresses responded within 19 days, while those with personal emails responded in 27 days. Shared generic emails can be monitored by multiple staff, increasing the probability of a request being addressed promptly and efficiently redirected to other appropriate contacts or systems.

Out of the 48 responses, 32 came from countries with generic or centralized emails, and these were more likely to respond within one week. There are exceptions since 4 out of the 27 countries that responded within a week had person specific emails as contacts.

Countries relying on individual staff email addresses faced delays, which are likely to be linked to change of staff or outdated information in which cases the notified information was not updated. This highlights the importance of institutionalized, centralized contact points to ensure timely and reliable communication as well as knowledge sharing, even amidst personnel changes.

E. Linkages between transparency levels and implementation of the WTO TFA

This study also aimed to understand how the implementation of the WTO TFA and of article 1.3. can have an impact on a country's transparency levels.

Transparency levels were analyzed as the opposite of corruption which is obtained through the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index created by Transparency International.¹⁰ This Index is composed of a variety of observations amongst which: "Excessive red tape in the public sector which may increase opportunities for corruption" and "Access to information on public affairs/government activities". A score of 0 can be interpreted as a country perceived as highly corrupt, and a 100 score represents a "clean country".

Although causality cannot be established between implementation of the WTO TFA and the levels of transparency given the limited sample size of 48 responses, some trends are worth examining.

► Developing countries have a higher likelihood of having lower transparency levels and lower WTO TFA implementation

score. However, the positive grades they have obtained for their enquiry points show that there is progression in the country's transparency efforts.

- Several developing countries show high WTO TFA implementation levels but are still perceived as less transparent. This is also reflected by a slightly lower grade in the quality of the enquiry point.
- Certain developing countries have not officially notified their enquiry points but still maintain a functioning one.
- An implementation of article 1.3 seems to be associated with a higher perception of a country's transparency.
- Even when article 1.3 is implemented, developing countries still require assistance to strengthen their functionality and improve the level of the country's transparency.

Table 1
Grade, TFA implementation level and level of transparency

Type of country	Transparency higher than 50%	Transparency less than 50%	Transparency less than 30%
Developed	16* / 3.9**	4* / 3.3**	-
Developing	9* / 3.3**	10* / 3.6**	5* / 3**

Source: UNCTAD, 2024

*First number is count of countries

**Second number is average grade

Note: LDCs were not considered in this list

¹⁰ Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index*, available at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024>

Table 2
Grade, 1.3 implementation and level of transparency

Implementation Article 1.3.	Transparency higher than 50%	Transparency less than 50%	Transparency less than 30%
100	16* / 6**	4* / 9**	0* / 5**
0	0* / 3**	0* / 1**	0* / 0**

Source: UNCTAD, 2024

*First number is count of developed countries

**Second number is count of developing countries

Note: LDCs were not considered in this list



F. Challenges in accessibility: Countries that did not respond

For the 75 countries that did not respond, an analysis of their trade facilitation structures, regional characteristics, and organizational dynamics provides insights into the challenges affecting enquiry point accessibility.

i. Level of development

The non-responding countries include 42 developing countries, accounting for 62.7 per cent of all developing countries contacted. Additionally, 17 LDCs did not respond, representing 85 per cent of the total LDCs contacted. Lastly, 16 developed countries failed to respond, accounting for 43.2 per cent of all developed countries contacted.

ii. Regional Distribution

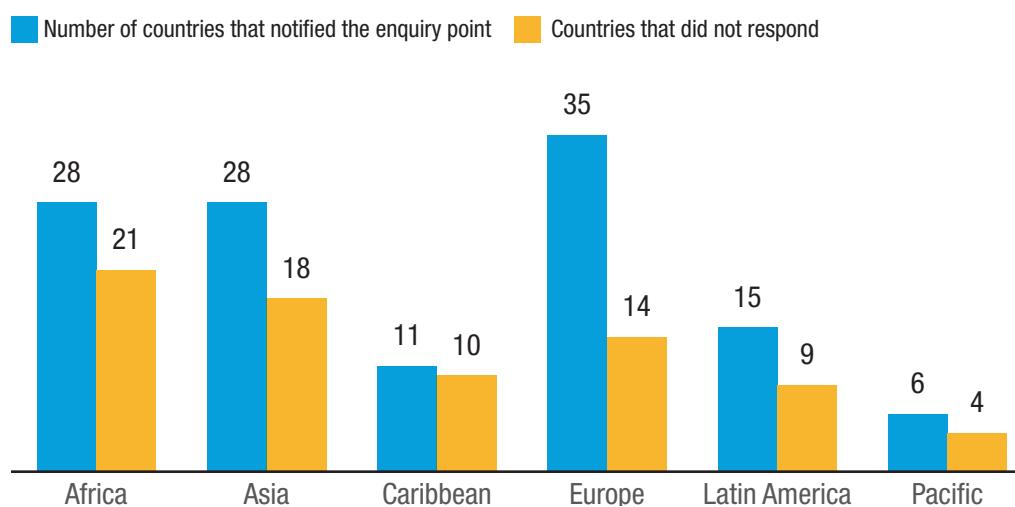
Regionally, the distribution of non-responding countries highlights significant disparities in trade facilitation capacity.

Africa had the highest proportion, with 21 out of 28 countries (75 per cent) failing to respond. Similarly, the Caribbean showed a high non-response rate, with 9 out of 11 countries (81.8 per cent) not responding,

Asia exhibited a non-response rate of 64.3 per cent, with 18 out of 28 countries failing to respond. The Pacific region also faced challenges, with 4 out of 6 countries (66.7 per cent) failing to respond, this could be attributed to unique geographic and systemic barriers faced by SIDS.

In contrast, Europe, despite being a high-compliance region, had a lower non-response rate of 40 per cent, with 14 out of 35 countries failing to respond. Latin America followed closely behind, with 9 out of 15 countries (60 per cent) not responding. This is surprising as it indicates that while these regions are generally more resourced, there are still inefficiencies in terms of implementing their enquiry point.

Figure 10
Countries that did not respond by region



Source: UNCTAD, 2024

iii. TFA commitment status

Among non-responding countries, 31 countries (41 per cent) have achieved 100 per cent TFA compliance. However, this does not necessarily reflect the on-the-ground reality of implementation, since compliance rates are based on self-evaluation by countries. A full compliance rate may therefore not guarantee that enquiry points are operationally sustainable, accessible, or truly functional. This highlights the gap between reported implementation and practical effectiveness. The remaining non-responding countries had compliance rates ranging from 26.1 per cent to 97.5 per cent, with a few showing very low levels of reported compliance.

iv. Article 1.3 Implementation

Out of the non-responding countries, 60 countries (80 per cent) had full implementation of Article 1.3, meaning they had theoretically established accessible enquiry points. Additionally, 14 countries (19 per cent) had not yet implemented Article 1.3 and 1 country had partial implementation, reflecting ongoing efforts to establish functionality.

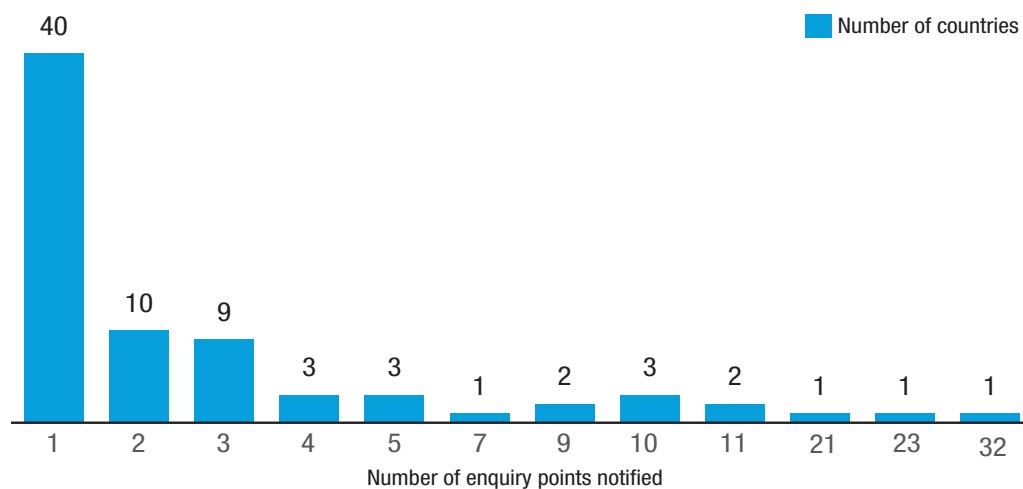
This highlights that while many non-responding countries have notified that they comply with Article 1.3, there may be operational inefficiencies or inaccuracies that may prevent effective communication.

v. Agency in charge

Among the non-responding countries, 49 countries (65 per cent) had enquiry points managed by Customs authorities, confirming their predominant role in trade facilitation. Six countries (8 per cent) did not have a customs enquiry point but have enquiry points managed by the integrated revenue authorities, while other countries had ministries of trade (4 per cent) and ministries of finance (3 per cent) managing enquiry points.

Notwithstanding, 53 per cent of these countries have notified only one enquiry point in which 28 out of 40 (70 per cent) are customs authorities, seven are from Ministry of Trade, four from the revenue authority and one from tax authority. The remaining, 13 per cent notified two enquiry points, 12 per cent notified three enquiry points, with 22 per cent notifying four and more. Of note, one country notified 32 enquiry points.

Figure 11
Number of Enquiry points notified to WTO from non-responding countries



Source: UNCTAD, 2024

vi. Key challenges identified

The analysis of non-responding countries reveals several recurring challenges that impede the accessibility of enquiry points.

One prominent issue is outdated or incorrect contact information, which was the issue in 10 countries. In these cases, initial emails were undeliverable due to inactive addresses, full inboxes, or blocked accounts. Some enquiry points required follow-up with updated or alternative email addresses, indicating that the contact details in the WTO database were in need of updates. These challenges reflect constraints in the email infrastructure of some enquiry points.

Personnel turnover, though observed in only 3 cases, could still be a potential challenge. The reliance on individual staff email addresses rather than generic accounts leaves enquiry points vulnerable to disruptions when personnel changes occur. The absence of backup or alternative contacts further compounds this issue. In two instances, a new email address was referred to, but in one case, the email was still directed to the person who was no longer in office. This emphasizes the importance of adopting stable, generic contact methods to ensure continuity in enquiry point functionality.

These operational inefficiencies highlight the need for countries to maintain up-to-date and robust systems for managing trade-related enquiries.

Worth mentioning is that some countries notified numerous enquiry points in the WTO TFAD. For instance, a country has designated 32 enquiry points. Some countries also have several enquiry points from different agencies. All this creates confusion and doubts about who is the right enquiry point to contact. This raises another question whether these enquiry points have a framework that allows for coordination in case the wrong enquiry arrives in their presence.

Addressing these challenges requires targeted measures, including regular updates to contact information, the adoption of centralized and generic email systems, and enhanced technical support to ensure enquiry points remain operational and accessible.

G. Summary

This summary highlights key findings from the evaluation of WTO enquiry points, focusing on their successes and challenges. By examining response rates, response times, and organizational structures, the analysis illustrates well where countries excel and where improvements are needed to enhance trade facilitation.

Response rate

The low response rate of 39 per cent highlights gaps in the accessibility and functionality of enquiry points, despite these being notified to the WTO TFAD. Developed countries showed higher responsiveness compared to developing and LDCs, indicating disparities in capacity and operational efficiency. Regions with stronger trade facilitation mechanisms, such as Europe and Latin America, outperformed regions with limited resources, such as Africa and the Caribbean.

Timeliness of responses

The majority of the responses were received within one week, highlighting the efficiency of well-resourced and organized systems, particularly in developed countries. Europe led in timeliness, with 62 per cent of responses occurring within one week. Latin America also performed well, with 83 per cent of responses received promptly together with Africa which had a 43 per cent response within the week. Asia showed mixed performance but also had 42 per cent responding within a week. Notably, LDCs, despite representing only a small portion of the respondents, achieved commendable timeliness, with responses received provided within one week.

Countries with 100 per cent TFA compliance had the majority of responses within one week (62 per cent). Similarly, countries with full implementation of Article 1.3 responded faster, with 60 per cent replying within a week. However, there were cases where countries with high compliance exhibited delays and cases where outliers, such as Eswatini, showed that partial implementation does not always hinder efficiency.

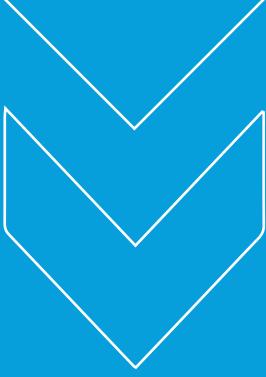
Challenges of non-responding countries

Among the 75 non-responding countries, a significant portion (80 per cent) had fully implemented Article 1.3. However, technical issues, outdated contact details, and reliance on individual staff emails hindered accessibility. These challenges were most prevalent in Africa (75 per cent non-response rate) and the Caribbean (81.8 per cent non-response rate).

Organizational Structures and Impact on Performance

Customs authorities managed 71 per cent of responding enquiry points, reflecting their central role in trade facilitation and could also indicate that Customs in general are better organized and funded.

Generic email systems, such as centralized addresses, consistently outperformed individual staff contacts, highlighting the importance of stable and scalable communication channels.



Chapter II

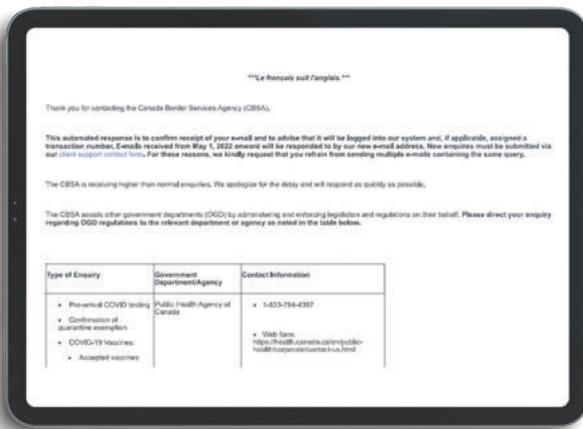
Responses: Content, format and best practice



A. Acknowledgement mechanism

Acknowledgment mechanisms played a key role in managing initial communications with enquiry points. Among the responding countries, 12 provided automated responses, confirming receipt of the enquiry and often offering additional information, such as expected response times, file number, or alternative contact details. These responses demonstrated an efficient initial organization, reassuring users that their queries were being processed.

Image 1: Excerpt of Canada's Automated Response¹¹

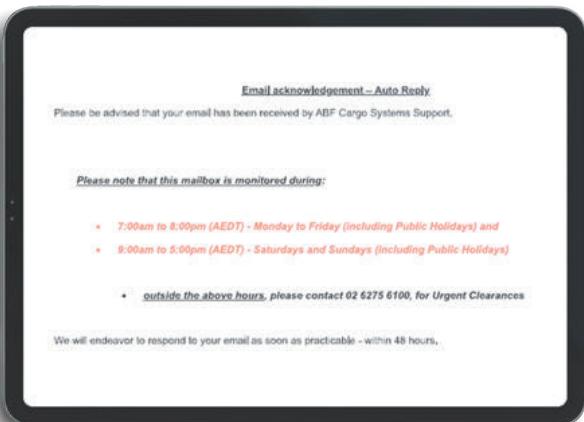


Source: Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), 2024

In one case, Canada delivered a bilingual automated response in French and English. The response not only confirmed receipt but also logged the enquiry and assigned it a transaction number for tracking. Additionally, Canada's email provided comprehensive information about how enquiries are processed, including: expected response times, a categorized list of common types of enquiries, and contact information for the relevant agencies,

including direct phone numbers and links to web forms for further inquiries.

Image 2: Excerpt of Australia's Automated Response¹²



Source: ABF Cargo Systems Support, 2024

Australia's automated response reflected similar efficiency, acknowledging receipt and specifying the operational hours during which the mailbox is monitored. It also provided guidance for urgent situations, including a dedicated phone number for immediate assistance outside of regular hours. Additionally, it set clear expectations for users by stating that they will respond within 48 hours.

Automated acknowledgments and ticketing systems instill confidence in the functionality of enquiry points and this helps manage user expectations effectively. They provide a structured framework for communication, allowing users to understand the enquiry process and access additional resources if needed. Both Canada and Australia exemplify best practices in this area, offering actionable templates for other countries to enhance their systems.

¹¹ UNCTAD Enquiry point test, response from Canada's listed Enquiry Point from 2024, July 2024 (email copy on file with the authors)

¹² UNCTAD Enquiry point test, response from Australia's listed Enquiry Point from 2024, August 2024 (email copy on file with the authors)

B. Response Format

The diversity in response formats showed significant differences in how countries engaged with queries to address them effectively.

i. Simple email responses

Many countries responded with concise email replies that directly addressed the queries asked which were: 1) procedure and documents for importing spices, 2) duties, taxes, or fees applicable to the import or transit of spices, 3) email contact and telephone for clarifications. Generic templates were employed by several countries to standardize communication and while efficient, these responses only indirectly addressed the query sent.

Around 5 countries only provided links in their responses without directly answering the questions posed in the trade enquiries. They directed the responses to the Single Window, the agency websites, or their trade information portals.

ii. Official and formal letter

Among the responses, **6 countries** opted for official letters, showing a high level of professionalism and authenticity. These were Moldova, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Romania, Kyrgyz Republic and Republic of Congo. Two responded in English with the rest in their local language. All provided electronically except one which provided a scanned physical document.

Out of the 6 countries, Republic of Congo stood out with a physically signed and scanned letter which added a layer of formality and ensured authenticity.¹³

These formal responses all featured institutional branding and official signatures and stamps, enhancing user

confidence in the information provided and demonstrating a commitment to transparent communication.

Do Official Responses Delay Response Times?

The six countries that provided formal responses through official letters or scanned documents demonstrated varying response times.

Two countries replied within five days. These examples suggest that formal responses do not inherently cause delays when paired with efficient internal systems and workflows. Of note is that these countries were fully compliant with Article 1.3 and had high or full TFA compliance.

One country using an official response format took 16 days. Three countries with formal responses experienced longer delays. Two respectively responded after 29 and 53 days. This timeline could reflect the time taken for internal approvals or cross-agency coordination. However, for the last country, it submitted a formal scanned letter after 78 days and had the lowest TFA compliance (41.2 per cent) among the group.

iii. Language response

Out of the 48 countries that responded to trade enquiries, 36 responses were exclusively in English, while 1 response included English alongside another language. English accounted for 75 per cent of all responses. In fact, 23 out of 37 of those who responded in English did not have English as their official language. The remaining responses were provided in their respective official languages. Interestingly, one country insisted on communicating only in their local language but after some time, still replied in English.

¹³ Author's enquiry point test, response from Republic of Congo, 2024 (on file with the authors).

Of note, there is no requirement in the WTO TFA to provide these services in English, however, many countries chose to respond in English, even when it's not their official language. This shows how English is often seen as the main language for trade. While this can help communication, it may also create challenges for countries that are not used to providing services in English.

While a critical tool for international trade communication, its exclusive use may not always yield timely responses from the enquiry points as it took some countries

to respond only when follow up was done in native language. Around 15 Developed countries responded in English, with developing countries showing broader language use. LDCs were only in English.

Regionally, African responses were mostly in English except for one response in French. Asia and Pacific were all in English with no local language as a response. European responses were more diverse and Latin America were split between English and Spanish.



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C. Additional content in responses

The comprehensiveness of responses varied widely, with some countries going beyond and addressing the immediate query to include additional helpful details. Three countries provided comprehensive answers, offering contextual explanations to enhance user understanding. One example is Estonia, which explained how to interpret trade-related tables.¹⁴

Other countries provided additional information that had not been solicited but was added as they deemed it relevant for the client to know. Lithuania, for example, clarified the availability of English-translated documents in the link they provided while noting that some resources were only available in Lithuanian.¹⁵ Brunei shared additional insights on advanced ruling procedures which was not asked for.¹⁶

Around 10 responses included links to relevant websites or portals. While links helped users access up-to-date information, some countries added information on how to navigate the websites. Latvia, for instance, provided a screenshot with

highlighted sections relevant to the query, while Singapore included step-by-step instructions for creating an account to access trade-related resources.¹⁷

Image 3:
Latvia's email explaining the use of their Tariff Management System¹⁸



Source: Integrated Tariff Management System Latvia, 2024

¹⁴ UNCTAD Enquiry point test, response from Estonia, 2024 (on file with the authors).

¹⁵ UNCTAD Enquiry point test, response from Lithuania, 2024 (on file with the authors).

¹⁶ UNCTAD Enquiry point test, response from Brunei, 2024 (on file with the authors).

¹⁷ UNCTAD Enquiry point test, response from Singapore, 2024 (on file with the authors).

¹⁸ UNCTAD Enquiry point test, response from Latvia's listed Enquiry Point from 2024, (email copy on file with the authors)



There were some countries which included attachments such as procedural guides or official documents, adding depth to their response.

i. Balancing between timeliness and usefulness

Article 1.3 of the WTO TFA requires that the enquiry points respond to trade-related enquiries within “a reasonable time”. However, the WTO TFA does not define what qualifies as “reasonable”, which leaves room for interpretation and therefore a variation in implementation. In practice, this raises questions on what timeframe can be considered both timely and effective.

By examining the grades assigned to the quality of the responses received, in relation to the time taken to provide them, it was observed that responses received on the same day can still provide helpful information; however, a trend emerged where responses received after longer periods often demonstrated more completeness and depth.

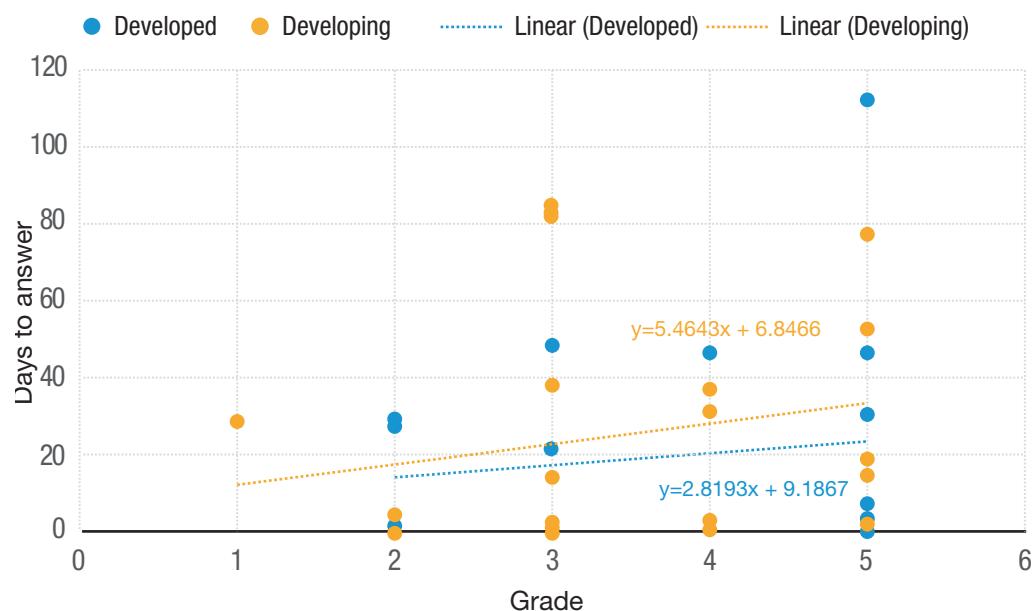
This shows that allowing additional time may allow for more accurate, tailored and comprehensive answers, as enquiry points are afforded time to consult relevant sources, verify information, and coordinate internally.

Nonetheless, the response time must remain reasonable. Excessive delays risk diminishing the practical value of the response, especially for traders who work within strict or time-sensitive timelines. A balance needs to be made. Based on the reported average response time in the study, **23 calendar days** seems to be a sound final response window which allows time for quality assurance without compromising its usefulness.

ii. Feedback survey

Feedback surveys are an essential tool for assessing user satisfaction and identifying areas for improvement. Despite their importance, only five countries in the study - Estonia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Georgia, and Bahrain – incorporated feedback

Figure 12:
Time of response and grades for developing and developed countries



Source: UNCTAD, 2024

mechanisms into their enquiry point systems. This section highlights these best practices for guidance to other countries interested in improving the support, user experiences and service quality provided.

The survey format and content vary across countries, reflecting different priorities from inclusivity and accessibility to user engagement.

While some focused on multilingual access or follow up mechanisms to boost response rates, others used interactive or visual formats.

Survey format

Estonia adopted an inclusive strategy by providing feedback forms in **three languages**: English, Russian, and Estonian. This multilingual approach ensures accessibility for diverse participants, reflecting Estonia's commitment to engaging a broad audience.

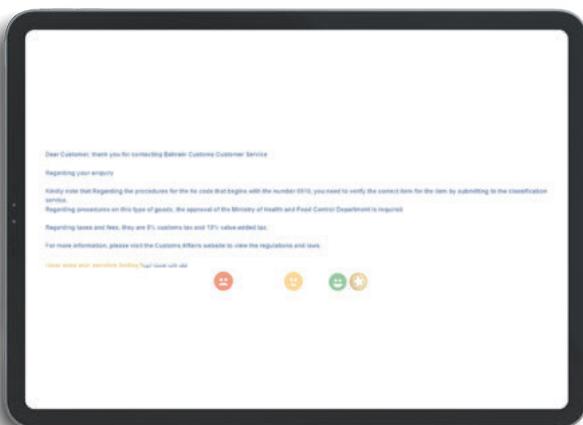
The Philippines demonstrated a proactive follow-up strategy. The survey link was embedded directly within the initial response, making it easily accessible for the inquirer. Additionally, when there was no response to the survey, a follow-up reminder was sent weeks later, emphasizing the importance of their feedback. This persistent approach is particularly effective in boosting response rates and ensuring comprehensive data collection.

Similarly, Indonesia embedded the link in its main response email. Both Indonesia and Georgia designed their surveys exclusively in their official language, which limited accessibility for non-native speakers. Despite this limitation, the surveys were well structured.

Bahrain employed an engaging and innovative approach by incorporating **interactive visuals**. Respondents clicked

on images representing their feedback, which then redirected them to a site for further comments. This gamified method added an element of fun to the process, potentially increasing engagement.

Image 4: Bahrain's customer satisfaction feedback in the end of the email¹⁹



Source: Bahrain Customs Customer Service, 2024

Survey content

Feedback surveys across the studied countries utilized several common elements, tailored to address their specific contexts and priorities. This section examines these components, highlighting variations in implementation and their effectiveness.

a. User identification

This ensures accountability and facilitates follow-up interactions. The Philippines and Georgia required respondents to provide names and identification numbers that were assigned to the enquiry, enabling targeted responses to individual feedback. Estonia, however, made user identification optional, balancing the need for traceability with privacy concerns. Indonesia requested email addresses but did not ask for additional personal details.

¹⁹ UNCTAD Enquiry point test, response from Bahrain's listed Enquiry Point from 2024, (email copy on file with the authors)

b. Service platform used

Understanding which platforms users prefer enables organizations to optimize service delivery. The Philippines collected data on the type of platform used, such as email or in-person interactions. Indonesia took a more detailed approach, listing channels like live chat, social media, and email.

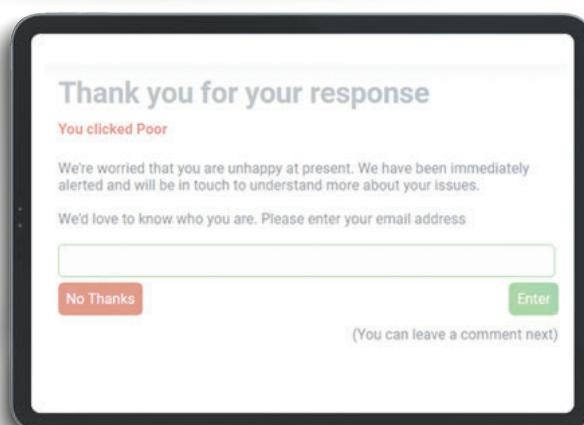
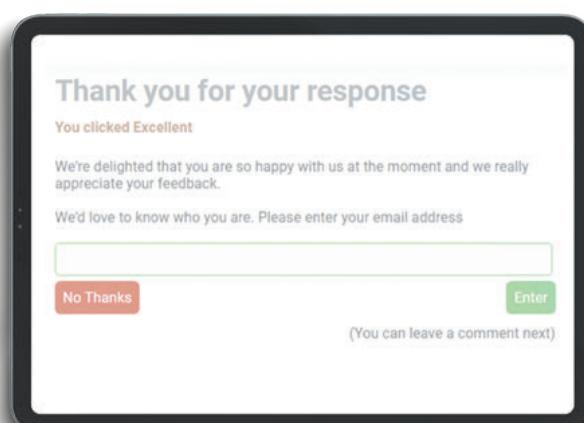
c. Satisfaction scores

Satisfaction scoring is a core component, helping quantify user experiences. The Philippines used a scale ranging from “Very Dissatisfied” to “Very Satisfied” to assess various staff performance metrics, such as friendliness, efficiency, and professionalism. Estonia adopted a 0–10 scale for satisfaction with responses and communication with 10 being “Very Satisfied”. Georgia employed a scale from “I completely agree” to “I completely disagree” for evaluating clarity, completeness, competence, and efficiency, allowing feedback on specific service aspects.

d. Open feedback

Open-ended questions encourage respondents to share qualitative insights and suggestions for improvement. Estonia invited users to explain their satisfaction scores and suggest service improvements, while Georgia included a dedicated section for recommendations on enhancing services. The Philippines allowed for overall comments, while Bahrain, once you choose the feedback in the email, redirects you to the site asking for your contact and overall comment.

Image 5: Bahrain's site once clicking feedback choice in email²⁰



Source: Bahrain Customs Customer Service, 2024

e. Specific feedback on service attributes

The Philippines assessed multiple staff performance aspects, including friendliness, timeliness, and knowledge. Estonia emphasized the overall quality of responses, the tone of communication, and resolution of inquiries. Georgia focused on the clarity and completeness of information, the competence of staff, and the efficiency of service delivery. Indonesia also covered similar metrics but added specific questions about responsiveness, attentiveness, and the quality of solutions provided.

²⁰ UNCTAD Enquiry point test, feedback survey linked from the response from Bahrain's listed Enquiry Point from 2024, (email copy on file with the authors)

Image 6:
The Philippines Feedback section on Service Attributes²¹

7. How would you rate the service and responses given by BOC-CARES staff? *Please select one answer for each characteristic.

	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Friendliness	<input type="radio"/>				
Knowledge / Mastery	<input type="radio"/>				
Timeliness	<input type="radio"/>				
Professionalism	<input type="radio"/>				
Responsiveness	<input type="radio"/>				
Efficiency	<input type="radio"/>				

Source: BOC-CARES Philippines, 2024

f. Public display of feedback

Interestingly, Estonia provided an option for respondents to have their feedback showcased in a commendation corner on the organization's website.

g. Contact information

Collecting contact details allows organizations to follow up with respondents for clarifications or further discussions. The Philippines required email addresses and proactively followed up with reminders to complete surveys. Estonia included an optional opt-in for follow-up calls, ensuring only willing participants were contacted.

Image 7:
Estonia's request for Contact information and for possible publication of feedback²²

Can we contact you by phone if necessary in order to talk about your experience with the Estonian Tax and Customs Board?

Choose:

It is OK to show my feedback in the Commendation corner.

Send reply

Source: Estonia Tax and Customs Feedback Form 2024

h. Demographic and contextual data

Collecting demographic and contextual data allows for deeper insights into feedback trends. The Philippines asked about the background of the respondent and the purpose of their transaction. Indonesia required detailed demographic data, including gender, age, education level, and field of work, offering a comprehensive view of the user base. Estonia and Georgia focused more on service-specific feedback without gathering demographic details, streamlining the survey process.

In sum, the surveys reveal diverse approaches to feedback collection, each with unique strengths. Together, these practices demonstrate how well-designed surveys can effectively capture feedback to inform service improvements.

²¹ UNCTAD Enquiry point test, feedback survey received separately after the response from Philippines' listed Enquiry Point from 2024, (email copy on file with the authors)

²² UNCTAD Enquiry point test, feedback survey received separately after the response from Estonia's listed Enquiry Point from 2024, (email copy on file with the authors)

i. Recommendations on forms

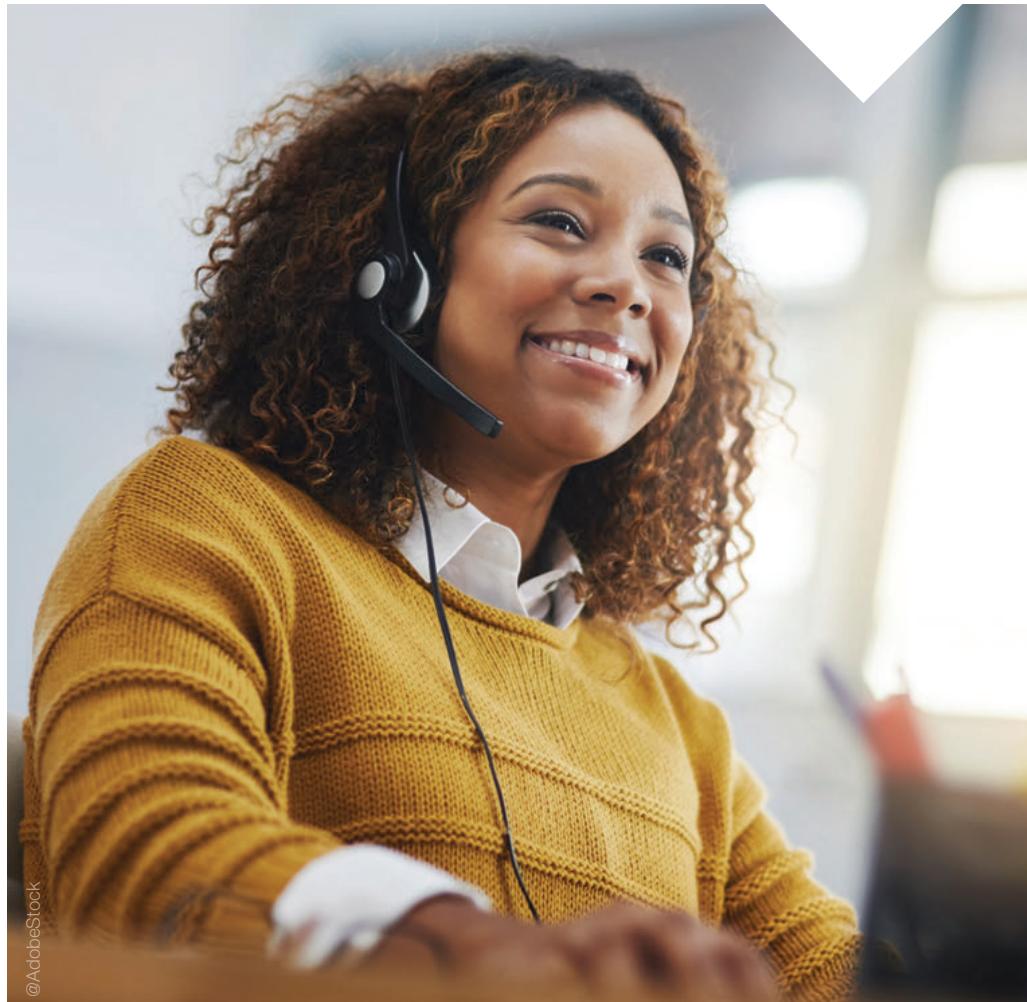
To ensure that the services offered by the enquiry points cater to the needs of peoples with disabilities, it is crucial that the feedback forms are accessible. Some ideas would be the following:

- ▶ The form is responsive on different devices (e.g. Computer, mobile phone, tablet);
- ▶ The form is easy to understand (questions and instructions are visible and not too long);
- ▶ The form is compatible with screen readers;

- ▶ The mandatory fields are marked as such;
- ▶ If the form uses colours for grading purposes (red: bad, yellow: medium, green: good) make sure that these colours also have a distinctive mark on them (e.g. smiley faces, explanatory text, etc.);

- ▶ The colours used in the form have good contrast;

These small changes can ensure that services become usable by all traders and can further democratize the proper use of enquiry points.



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D. Summary

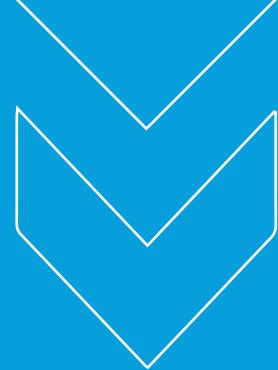
Acknowledgment mechanisms are crucial for managing initial communication with enquiry points. Among the surveyed countries, 12 provided automated responses, ensuring prompt acknowledgment and setting user expectations. Notable examples included Canada's bilingual automated response, which logged inquiries with a transaction number, and Australia's automated message specifying response times and offering alternative contacts for urgent matters. These systems instilled confidence in users, effectively managing expectations and facilitating smoother communication.

As for responses, countries employed varied response formats, reflecting differences in communication priorities. Several countries used concise replies that directly addressed queries but often relied on generic templates, which may have lacked personalization. Six countries issued formal letters, enhancing the perceived professionalism and authenticity of the response. While formal responses did not inherently delay response times, countries with efficient internal workflows replied promptly, whereas others experienced significant delays.

Some countries enhanced their responses by providing additional information, such as Estonia's explanations of trade-related

tables and Lithuania's clarification about English-translated documents. Including website links, procedural guides, or attachments added value to the user experience. Examples like Latvia's annotated screenshots and Singapore's step-by-step instructions demonstrated user-friendly enhancements. In this note, it is recommended that these additional information especially the commonly asked once be collated into a Q and A page which the enquirer can refer too.

Feedback surveys were deployed by five countries with different structure and implementation. Estonia stood out with a multilingual survey, while the Philippines, Bahrain, and Georgia integrated survey links in their responses with the former following up to improve participation. Bahrain used interactive visuals to engage respondents. Survey content ranged from demographic data collection and platform preferences to satisfaction scoring and open feedback. To encourage higher response rates, surveys should be simple and useful. It should be kept concise, ideally under 10 questions, and using mostly multiple-choice formats, while allowing space for open feedback when necessary. Clear language, mobile-friendly design, and a short completion time is recommended.



Chapter III

Enquiry points as an integral part of trade information portals or trade repositories



As previously mentioned, the TFA mandates that relevant trade regulations are publicly available through official channels, such as Trade Information Portals (TIPs) or trade repositories though not specifically mentioned in the TFA, but showcased multiple times in the WTO Trade Facilitation Committee experience sharing sessions.

The availability of comprehensive and accessible trade information is important in complementing enquiry points. While enquiry points provide direct responses to specific questions, TIPs serve as “the first level of an enquiry point” that allow traders to find trade information on their own, reducing the need for direct inquiries. This enhances transparency, reduces information asymmetry, saves time awaiting enquiries, and minimizes delays caused by traders submitting incomplete or incorrect documentation during enquiries. With high quality TIPs and AI agents properly calibrated with the TIP database, TIPs would be able to respond to numerous queries in real time.

Use of TIPs by enquiry points in the study

Out of the 48 countries that responded to the enquiry email, 31 had TIPs or trade repositories. Worth noting is that some of these 31 countries explicitly referred to their TIPs in their responses, directing users to the portals for additional details. This highlights the integration between enquiry points and TIPs, illustrating TIPs as an important complementary tool.

However, beyond simply referencing TIPs in responses, it is possible for countries to actively integrate enquiry points within their TIPs to provide a one-stop source for trade-related assistance.

Efficiency of enquiry points depending on the existence of a TIP

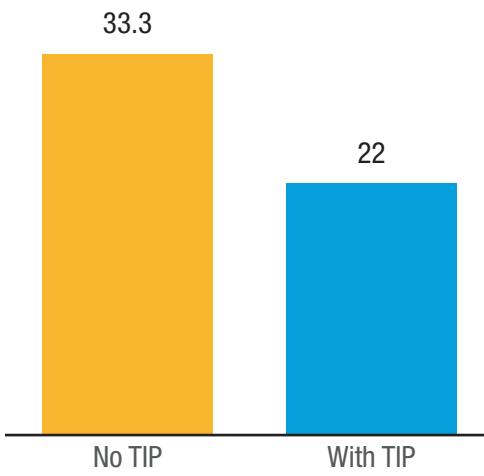
The data compiled indicate that operating a TIP or trade repository has a positive

impact on the quality of services provided by Enquiry Points. Enquiry Points linked to a TIP generally offer more efficient and precise responses.

This can be a result of TIPs compiling all the dedicated trade-related information useful to importers and exporters, which can facilitate and enable better and faster answers to possible queries.²³ In addition, enquiry points connected to a TIP are often managed by staff who have broader and in-depth knowledge of the trade environment and know which agencies or contacts to redirect enquiries to when needed. Adding Enquiry points onto the TIP can therefore further increase transparency levels and the quality of the services offered.

The graph below shows that while countries with a TIP took an average of 22 days to answer queries while still getting a 5/5 grade, countries without a TIP took on average 33.33 days to achieve the same results. Countries without a TIP are therefore less efficient and precise when offering a response, in comparison to countries with a TIP.

Figure 13:
Average time of response for countries having received a maximum grade



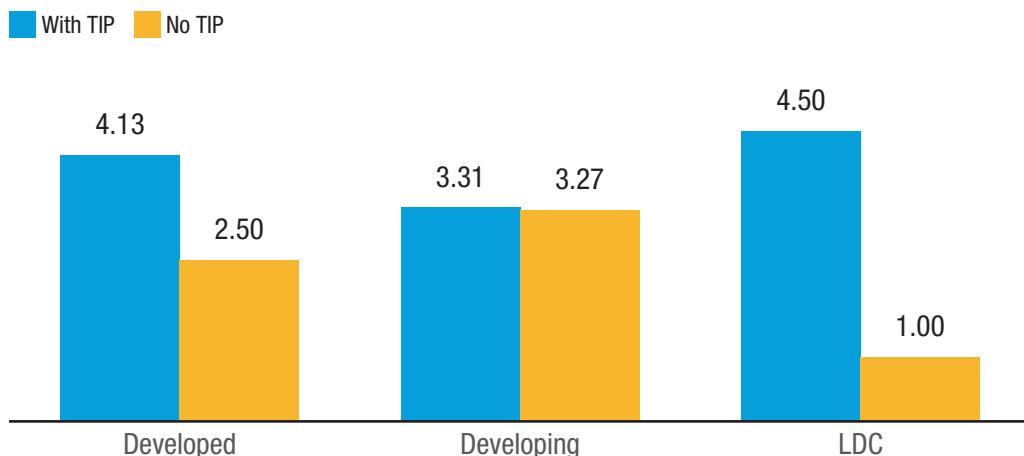
Source: UNCTAD, 2024

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²³ UNCTAD, Roadmap for building a national trade information portal, available at <https://unctad.org/publication/roadmap-building-national-trade-information-portal> (last accessed July 2025)



Figure 14:
Average grade of countries with and without TIPs



Source: UNCTAD, 2024

This relationship was further confirmed when analyzing the results according to countries' level of development. All groups of countries with a TIP received better average grades than the countries without a TIP, illustrating once again the better quality of services of their enquiry points.

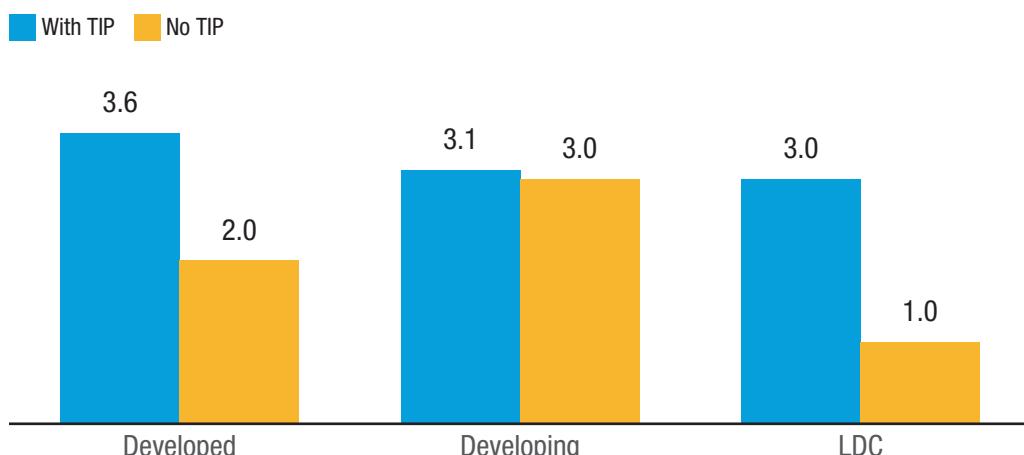
It was also observed that for all groups of countries, those countries with a TIP had better grades than countries without a TIP, when answering queries quickly (1 to 3 days), therefore allying efficiency and quality.

Recommendations to maximize TIPs for enquiry points

Given that TIPs are already a primary reference point for traders, countries, especially those who already have TIPs or trade repositories could consider the following ways to leverage them more effectively:



Figure 15:
Average grade of countries with and without TIPs having answered in 3 days or less



Source: UNCTAD, 2024



a. Embedding enquiry points within TIPs for better accessibility

With a view to establishing a one-stop-shop transparency platform, and since traders frequently visit TIPs to find trade-related information, countries are encouraged to consider placing their enquiry points within these platforms for ease of access. This ensures that users seeking clarification or additional assistance can quickly locate the correct contact point rather than searching for separate enquiry point details elsewhere.

b. Using TIP assistance as the official enquiry point for WTO notification

Countries that already provide help desks, contact forms, and/or email support

within their TIPs should consider formally notifying the WTO that these platforms serve as their enquiry points or as one of their enquiry points. If a country prefers a centralized enquiry point approach, integrating the enquiry point within the TIP ensures that responses to enquiries remain consistent, streamlined, and easy to find.

c. Exploring AI and automation for enhanced efficiency

AI-driven tools can further improve enquiry point efficiency when integrated into TIPs. Chatbots, automated email responses, and AI-powered knowledge bases can provide instant responses to frequently asked questions, allowing human staff to focus on more complex inquiries.

Summary

For countries that already have Trade Information Portals, embedding enquiry points within these platforms is a strategic and practical solution. It improves accessibility, enhances response efficiency, and aligns with WTO TFA commitments on transparency and trade facilitation. Additionally, leveraging solutions within TIP-based enquiry points presents an opportunity to modernize trade-related assistance, making it more efficient, responsive, and scalable for the future.

Equally important, enquiry points housed within TIPs benefit from the fact that TIP managers usually have the most transversal and comprehensive knowledge of trade laws, procedures, focal points, and regulatory frameworks.

This institutional positioning ensures not only quicker redirection of enquiries to the right agencies but also better quality and more reliable answers. For this reason, locating enquiry points within TIPs is not only a technical choice but a strategic one, as it situates the service where oversight, expertise, and interagency connectivity are already strongest.

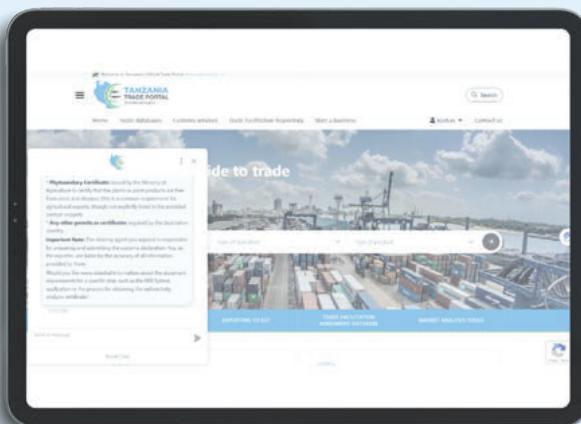
Box 1:
Tanzania and Rwanda's TIP AI agents

The UNCTAD²⁴ in collaboration with the International Trade Centre, is actively supporting countries in establishing TIPs to enhance transparency, streamline trade procedures, and facilitate cross-border trade. These portals serve as one-stop digital platforms providing businesses, traders, and policymakers with comprehensive, up-to-date, and easily accessible information on trade-related procedures, requirements, and regulations.

These portals integrate all procedural steps, involving multiple agencies, outlining the legal and regulatory requirements, and providing traders with an estimated time and cost associated with each trade transaction. By consolidating trade information into a single platform, TIPs significantly reduce information asymmetry, helping traders, especially small and medium enterprises, navigate complex trade formalities more efficiently.

One key innovation introduced in Tanzania's and Rwanda TIPs (with more to come) is the AI agents that responds to enquiries in their website. Although still at pilot stage, these portals feature interactive contact forms that draw on pre-fed trade regulations, common procedural queries, and agency-specific requirements that assist the user in formulating their enquiries effectively. This feature ensures that traders receive prompt responses to standard inquiries, minimizing delays caused by misdirected or unaddressed questions. It also reduces the administrative burden on government agencies, allowing them to focus on more complex and case-specific trade inquiries.

This highlights the importance of digital trade facilitation tools in improving enquiry point efficiency. This could serve as a model for other countries looking to enhance their trade facilitation efforts. As TIPs continue to evolve, the AI agents which already guide users to the right procedures and documents could be further developed to generate more precise, tailored answers by drawing directly on the full range of trade information available. This would make trade processes smoother, more transparent, and more predictable for businesses.



Tanzania's TIP interface²⁵

Source: UNCTAD, 2025.

²⁴ UNCTAD, Roadmap for building a national trade information portal, available at <https://unctad.org/publication/roadmap-building-national-trade-information-portal> (last accessed July 2025)

²⁵ Tanzania Trade Information Portal, AI Enquiry Chatbots (pilot). Restricted access at: <https://trade.tanzania.go.tz>, Accessed 2025.



Chapter IV

Recommendations



This analysis of enquiry points has so far highlighted good practices and areas where improvements can enhance efficiency and accessibility of TIPs. This section will present three main action areas: 1)

ensuring a timely response from enquiry points; 2) guaranteeing an efficient, comprehensive, and responsive reply to enquiries; 3) other recommendations.

A. Country response to enquiries

This section outlines practical recommendations to address the challenges identified in terms of providing responses to enquiries and in a timely manner.

1. Ensure accessibility of an enquiry point

- ▶ Constantly monitor and update enquiry point information in the WTO TFAD. It is best to have an up to date information on who to contact for enquiries irrespective of the country's implementation status of Article 1.3 of the WTO TFA.
- ▶ Adopt generic or departmental emails to reduce disruptions caused by personnel turnover or outdated information.
- ▶ Another option is for the enquiry focal point to be a link to a centralized form instead of providing an enquiry point email, it will be a link to the form. However, it needs to be simple since some forms requested a lot of information that is not necessarily needed in the enquiry nor do all traders have said information such as the TIN number, national ID etc.
- ▶ Test and provide technical support to address issues like full inboxes, restrictive spam filters, inactive accounts, broken links to ensure continuous functionality.
- ▶ Regularly review the number of enquiry points notified. Consolidate multiple enquiry points into a single and centralized contact in order to prevent confusion on the part of the enquirer on who to contact.
- ▶ Consider including a searchable Q&A or FAQ section covering the most

common enquiries. This can reduce the volume of repetitive queries and improve user experience. FAQs should be written in clear language, updated regularly, and organized by topic to allow easy navigation and searchability

2. Ensure higher response rate

- ▶ Provide targeted capacity building support for regions with low response rates, particularly Africa and the Caribbean, to strengthen infrastructure and operational capabilities.
- ▶ Encourage countries with low response rates to adopt standardized operating procedures for enquiry point management. This means that there are clear responsibilities, response times and accountability.
- ▶ Promote national awareness and training on the use of Enquiry Points. Conduct outreach campaigns and training sessions for traders, customs brokers, and other stakeholders to raise awareness of the Enquiry Point's function and how to use it effectively. This can help increase the number and quality of enquiries received and ensure that EPs are fully utilized as a trade facilitation tool.

3. Efficient enquiry point management

- ▶ Develop a framework that manages the flow of enquiry from receipt to resolution, key performance indicators for

response time, managing and ensuring assignment of staff to respond, including monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

- ▶ Introduce prioritization by urgency and complexity. This can be done by assigning tags either manually or automated as soon as the enquiry is received to help categorize and route the enquiries. This includes tags such as “urgent” for matters that require quick responses, “follow up” for those that are linked to previous enquiries, and so on.
- ▶ Encourage interagency collaboration to address multisectoral enquiries or assign an enquiry point coordinator who can redirect enquiries to the appropriate persons who can address them.
- ▶ Conduct professional training to focal points in different institutions on which the EP coordinator or similar relies. These trainings would focus on operational efficiency, communication skills and technical competence.

4. Manage user expectations

- ▶ Automate acknowledgment of enquiries, including information such as tracking number, estimated response time, alternative contacts, clarification on which enquiries this contact covers and provide list other possible enquiries with respective contact.
- ▶ Establish benchmarks for response times, targeting one week for routine queries, while providing guidelines and interim responses to manage complex inquiries.

5. Monitoring and evaluation

- ▶ Regularly assess enquiry point performance, including response times and user satisfaction rates. These features can be fully or partly automated.
- ▶ Implement feedback mechanisms, such as periodic surveys or user consultations to improve the operationalization of enquiry points.

6. Accessible services

- ▶ TIPs and Enquiry points need to consider accessibility in their way of functioning. This ensures that the service is available for all users and further empowers them in the development of their activities.
- ▶ Enquiry points should also be inclusive for persons with disabilities by ensuring compatibility with screen readers, keyboard navigation and high contrast visual options. They should also offer multiple accessible formats, for example emails, phone and live chat with staff trained in disability-inclusive communication. Where possible, video call support with sign language interpretation can further enhance accessibility. Such measures help ensure that persons with disabilities can independently access trade information and receive responsive support on trade-related enquiries.

B. Response format and content

This section further outlines recommendations on the content and format of responses to ensure they are responsive, user-friendly, and aligned with best practices. The aim is to enhance the quality of communication, improve user satisfaction, and ensure the consistency and reliability of information provided through enquiry points.

1. Manage user expectations and experience

- ▶ Use standardized automated responses that confirm receipt, provide transaction tracking numbers, and outline clear next steps and response times. Clarify that the Enquiry Point is not responsible for handling individual clearance cases or shipment-specific follow-ups, and provide contact information or links to appropriate operational channels for such matters. escalations.
- ▶ Ensure accessibility of information and feedback by providing multilingual options. This can promote inclusivity and user satisfaction.
- ▶ Embed feedback surveys in responses, allowing users to assess satisfaction with response quality and response times. Incorporate follow-up mechanisms to encourage participation in surveys.

2. Develop prepared resources

- ▶ Develop standardized response templates that include placeholders for specific personalization of details. These templates should be adaptable to different types of queries and should ensure consistency in tone and structure.
- ▶ Compile links to relevant websites, portals, and procedural guides. This can include

having annotated screenshots, step-by-step instructions or explanatory notes.

- ▶ Attach annotated screenshots, procedural guides, official documents, forms or the FAQ searchable sheet containing common enquiries, to provide comprehensive answers to trade related queries.

3. Improve the content of the response

- ▶ Ensure that responses directly address the specific queries posed. Avoid relying solely on links or only on templates unless they are accompanied by clear explanations relevant to the enquiry.
- ▶ Use plain and concise language to enhance understanding, particularly for non-native speakers. When technical terms are unavoidable, provide definitions or context to aid comprehension.
- ▶ Include additional relevant details, such as regulatory updates, procedural nuances, or examples of best practices, to provide a well-rounded response.
- ▶ Provide responses in widely understood international languages such as English, supplemented by translations if possible.
- ▶ Provide email addresses or phone numbers for follow-ups in case the user requires further clarification or assistance.

4. Format of the response

- ▶ Supplement responses with attachments such as procedural guides, application forms, or FAQs to add value and completeness to the reply.
- ▶ Incorporate visuals like annotated screenshots, flowcharts, or tables when explaining complex procedures or navigating digital portals. These can significantly improve user comprehension.

5. Establish a trade information portal or repository and integrate an enquiry point

- ▶ Develop centralized TIPs that include all relevant trade procedures, regulations, and guidelines in a single, easily accessible platform. TIPs should provide a comprehensive database of trade requirements, ensuring transparency and ease of navigation for traders.
- ▶ Integrate enquiry points within TIPs to centralize trade-related queries and direct them to the appropriate authorities. A single, well-structured contact system within TIPs can help eliminate confusion caused by multiple agencies managing separate enquiry points.
- ▶ Implement automated enquiry management systems within TIPs, allowing traders to receive instant responses to common queries through e.g. AI chatbots or automated reply mechanisms. This can reduce delays, improve response times, and lessen the administrative burden on officials.
- ▶ Ensure TIPs are constantly updated with the latest regulatory changes, procedural modifications, and agency contact details to maintain accuracy and reliability.



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C. Other recommendations

1. Use technology

Integrate of AI chatbots that can respond to generic and frequently asked questions, freeing staff to address more complex or unique enquiries.

Use a ticketing system to manage high inflows of queries efficiently, ensuring that no requests remain unattended, that enquiries are redirected to the relevant focal point and that the progress to resolution can be monitored.

Integrate automated translation tools, if possible, to facilitate communication in multiple languages and ensure that non-native speakers can access and understand information. These tools can be especially helpful in multilingual regions or when receiving enquiries from foreign traders.

2. National Trade Facilitation Committees (NTFCs) as both platform for exchange and enquiry point coordination

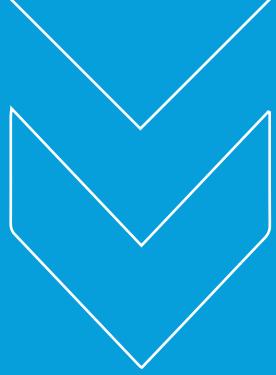
- ▶ Place enquiry point coordination explicitly under the mandate of NTFCs, making it a recurrent agenda item to ensure sustained focus on transparency and responsiveness.
- ▶ Encourage countries with high TFA compliance and Article 1.3 implementation to share best practices, focusing on the operational efficiency of enquiry points and innovative approaches.
- ▶ Utilize NTFCs and other focal points such as transit coordinators as platforms and resources for countries to exchange experiences, discuss challenges, and adopt successful models in managing enquiry points. NTFCs can facilitate learning, provide technical guidance,

and support interagency coordination to improve enquiry point responsiveness.

- ▶ Promote interagency coordination through NTFCs, ensuring that enquiry points across different government institutions are well-connected and operate seamlessly.

3. Continuous monitoring and improvement

- ▶ Establish regular assessments of enquiry point performance, addressing operational inefficiencies.
- ▶ Encourage use of feedback mechanisms to refine processes and improve user experience.
- ▶ Request technical assistance and capacity building to strengthen enquiry point operations and sustainability.



Chapter V

Way forward



This study provides valuable insights into the operationalization of enquiry points under Article 1.3 of the WTO TFA, showing in practical terms their accessibility, efficiency, and overall functionality. While compliance rates with the provision according to the WTO TFAD are relatively high, the study has identified significant disparities in how enquiry points actually function, with issues such as responses, and outdated contact information. These gaps highlight the need for continuous monitoring, improvements, and targeted interventions to ensure that enquiry points serve their intended purpose of facilitating trade through the efficient dissemination of information.

Gaps between compliance and functionality

One of the findings of this study is the disconnect between formal compliance and practical operationalization. While many countries have notified enquiry points to the WTO, this does not guarantee responsiveness, reliability, or accessibility of these enquiry points. The data illustrates that despite achieving full compliance with Article 1.3, several countries experience delayed response times or fail to respond altogether, suggesting that compliance in itself is insufficient without strong operational mechanisms. Moving forward, this study serves to share good practices and can serve as the foundation for further research into why some compliant enquiry points are ineffective in practice and what measures can be taken to address this gap. A deeper examination of capacity constraints, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and resource limitations in non-responding or slow-responding countries would be beneficial in designing tailored support mechanisms and providing technical assistance and capacity building to countries.

Need for centralization

Another finding is the importance of harmonizing enquiry point management.

The findings highlight the fragmentation caused by multiple enquiry points, where traders may struggle to identify the correct agency to contact, leading to misdirected queries and response delays. Some countries have as many as 32 notified enquiry points, which increases the risk of confusion and inefficiencies. In contrast, countries that centralized their enquiry points, particularly under Customs or a revenue authority, demonstrated faster response times and better accessibility. These findings indicate a greater need for interagency coordination, including through NTFCs, clearer mandates for enquiry points, and the consolidation of contact points into fewer, well-structured channels.

Leveraging technology and TIPs for efficiency

The study also emphasizes the potential of TIPs as a complementary tool for enquiry points. Countries that incorporated automated responses and centralized helpdesks within their TIPs demonstrated better efficiency in handling trader queries. The examples of Tanzania and Kenya, where enquiry points have been integrated into digital platforms providing automated responses, offer a model that can be replicated in other countries. Expanding the role of TIPs in trade-related inquiries could help reduce the reliance on manual responses, improving response times and minimizing the administrative burden on enquiry point staff. Further research could explore how AI, automation, and machine learning tools can be leveraged to enhance enquiry point functionality and reduce human resource limitations in developing countries. The use of AI and Machine Learning can also assist in the continued operationalization and efficiency of Enquiry Points by offering solutions such as automated ticketing systems, classification of requests, answering basic requests, translation of information into the trader's language of preference, etc.

Role of NTFCs as a platform for sharing best practices and enquiry point coordination

Furthermore, this study has highlighted the important role of NTFCs in knowledge-sharing and best practice exchange. Given that NTFCs are designed to coordinate trade facilitation efforts at the national level, they can serve as an effective platform for countries to share experiences, challenges, and successful strategies in managing enquiry points. To strengthen this function, enquiry point coordination should be explicitly placed under the mandate of NTFCs and treated as a recurrent item on their agendas. This ensures that enquiry points across different government institutions remain well-connected, responsive and consistent with their transparency obligations under Art.1.3 of the WTOTFA.

Countries with high WTO TFA compliance and efficient enquiry points should be encouraged to document and disseminate their best practices through NTFC meetings, regional workshops, and WTO discussions. This could facilitate peer learning and help countries with weaker systems adopt proven models of enquiry point management, including the use of automated responses, standardized templates, and structured response workflows.

Development towards a standardized enquiry point framework

Another finding is the potential development of a standardized Enquiry Point Framework. Currently, the WTO TFA provides general obligations under Article 1.3 but lacks specific guidelines on response times, operational standards, or quality control mechanisms for enquiry points. To address this, we propose a **Roadmap for Establishing and Strengthening Enquiry Points**, based on the study's findings.

This roadmap could outline recommended stages, from initial designation and notification, to setting service standards, implementing digital tools, and conducting regular performance evaluations. It would also include suggested key performance indicators, evaluation criteria, and procedural benchmarks. This structured approach could be integrated into capacity-building programs, enabling countries to move beyond formal compliance and build accessible, responsive, and trader-friendly enquiry systems.

Practical implications for stakeholders

In addition to its policy implications, this study provides practical insights for trade practitioners, government agencies, and private sector stakeholders. The data gathered can be used by NTFCs, Customs administrations, trade ministries, and national enquiry points to assess their own performance against global trends. The best practices identified such as using generic email addresses, automating response mechanisms, and conducting regular monitoring of response effectiveness offer actionable steps that can be implemented at the national level. This report could be referenced by trade facilitation programs, donor-funded initiatives, and technical assistance providers to design capacity-building interventions tailored to the specific needs of underperforming regions.

From compliance towards impact

Ultimately, this study serves as a foundation for future improvements in the operationalization of enquiry points. While significant progress has been made in ensuring transparency through Article 1.3 implementation, there remains a need for continuous improvements to enhance response, streamline enquiry management, and integrate technology into trade facilitation processes.

The insights generated here can inform policy makers, discussions, and country-specific initiatives, ensuring that enquiry points become a truly effective tool for trade facilitation rather than a procedural requirement.

UNCTAD's role moving forward

Based on the findings of this study, UNCTAD is seeking to support countries in strengthening the functioning of their enquiry points. This will focus on capacity building and training for enquiry points and relevant

agencies, providing guidance through tools and templates such as standard operating procedures and checklists, supporting the integration of digital solutions with the pilot of the Trade Information Portal in mind, and assisting in developing a monitoring and evaluation mechanism to ensure continued operationalization.



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Primary data collected for this study

UNCTAD Enquiry point test, response from Canada's listed Enquiry Point from 2024, July 2024 (email copy on file with the authors)

UNCTAD Enquiry point test, response from Australia's listed Enquiry Point from 2024, August 2024 (email copy on file with the authors)

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