

Technical note on the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement

Article 1.2: Information available through internet

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Information available through internet: Article 1.2

Access to information on the internet is crucial for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to reduce the time and costs to obtain complete and updated information on export, import and transit procedural requirements. This is particularly true for rural SMEs, who often have to travel to access information.

Practical steps for export, import, transit and appeal procedures, forms and contact details of enquiry points shall be made available online and updated.

The measure

ARTICLE 1 PUBLICATION AND AVAILABILITY OF INFORMATION

2 Information Available Through Internet

2.1 Each Member shall make available, and update to the extent possible and as appropriate, the following through the internet:

- (a) a description¹ of its procedures for importation, exportation, and transit, including procedures for appeal or review, that informs governments, traders, and other interested parties of the practical steps needed for importation, exportation, and transit;
- (b) the forms and documents required for importation into, exportation from, or transit through the territory of that Member;
- (c) contact information on its enquiry point(s).

2.2 Whenever practicable, the description referred to in subparagraph 2.1(a) shall also be made available in one of the official languages of the WTO.

2.3 Members are encouraged to make available further trade-related information through the internet, including relevant trade-related legislation and other items referred to in paragraph 1.1.

Understanding the measure

What is covered?

Scope and objective

WTO Members are required to publish a step-by-step description of the procedures for importation, exportation and transit of goods on the internet. The purpose of this provision is to ensure that domestic and foreign stakeholders can easily understand how to import to, export from, or transit through that territory.

A footnote to Article 1.2.1(a) clarifies that each WTO Member has the discretion to state on its website the legal limitations of these descriptions.

Core obligation

A descriptive explanation of all practical steps underlying the procedures for importation, exportation and transit of goods must be available on the internet as well as all forms and documents required to complete these procedures. In addition, contact details of enquiry points must be provided.

¹ Each Member has the discretion to state on its own website the legal limitations of this description.

Updating information

Members are requested to keep their website(s) updated, as procedures and requirements may change over time. The use of the wording 'to the extent possible' and 'as appropriate' brings some degree of flexibility regarding when and how information is published on the internet.

Language

Members are requested to make the required information available in one of the official languages of the WTO (English, Spanish or French). The use of the term 'whenever practicable' grants some flexibility to Members to determine how this can be implemented.

Other trade-related information

Although not mandatory, Members are encouraged to make available through the internet additional trade-related information, including relevant trade-related legislation and other items referred to Article 1.1.

What is not covered?

WTO Members are not required to publish the information on a single centralized website, although Members shall ensure that the information is identical in all websites in order to facilitate a predictable trade environment.

Benefits and opportunities for stakeholders

Traders will benefit from reduced time and costs to obtain accurate information online and increase their compliance with procedural requirements. Up to date information will also help traders understand the changing trends in legal provisions and regulations.

The availability of online information will reduce the time that government agencies spend in responding to individual enquiries from traders, making their work more efficient.

Implementation

Implementation checklist

The following checklist may be used to estimate the level of compliance with the measure:

- All required information is published on the internet including practical steps needed for importation, exportation and transit of goods.
- The URL(s) of the website(s) where information is published are notified to the WTO Trade Facilitation Committee.
- Information is published within a reasonable time when changes in procedures and requirements occur.
- All required information items are in one of the three WTO official languages.
- The legal validity of information published on the internet is clear.

Preparing a national implementation plan

The following template may be used as the basis for a national implementation of this measure:

Implementation sequence	Actions suggested
	Preparatory phase
	Take legal or administrative measures to introduce and formalize the obligation.
	If needed, designate a focal ministry/department responsible for ensuring all required information is published on the internet.
	Set up an institution with appropriate membership to bring together all critical stakeholders and terms of reference. A NTFC is one option.
	Set-up phase
	Update/develop a comprehensive information and communications technology (ICT) strategy.
	Create/update the information management system for publishing information on the internet.
	Address issue of information cybersecurity.
	Address or clarify, if necessary, the legal validity of information published on the internet.
	Management and follow-up phase
Ensure NTFC or equivalent reviews progress with periodic performance reports.	
Average time for implementation	Between two to three years.
Leading implementation agency	Ministry in charge of trade is most commonly chosen as the leading implementation agency.

Key challenges

The lack of ICT capacity or dedicated webmasters to manage website(s) in government institutions are common challenges towards implementation.

Key factors for success

The use of ICT as a means of communication and operation in government agencies, supported by a legal framework, is crucial. A whole government approach to implementation is fundamental to deliver benefits. Synergies between the private sector and trade support institutions can advocate for greater use of ICT for sharing information.