
Background Note

E15 Initiative Engagement Day

Ecommerce and Digital Economy – Second meeting

15 December, 10h30 – 13h00, Graduate Institute, Geneva

The E15 Engagement Day on Ecommerce and Digital Economy will focus on making sense of the numerous initiatives and events in recent months on the topic of ecommerce and digital economy, with a view to understanding the breadth of ideas, their reception from different perspectives, and how the most relevant options might be carried forward in the run-up to the WTO's 11th Ministerial Conference in Buenos Aires (MC11) in December 2017.

The meeting will involve Geneva trade delegations and a number of E15 Initiative Experts and will focus on the practical challenges—rather than theoretical (of which there remain many)—that negotiators must grapple with in early 2017.

The meeting will be conducted under Chatham House Rule, in roundtable format, with no formal presentations.

Background

Electronic commerce and the digital economy have become a central part of the global economy, promising huge potential but also revealing significant challenges for effective inclusion and participation.

For example, the inclusion of SMEs and micro-businesses holds promise, particularly if barriers to access and complexity of regulation can be reduced and transparency and availability of information strengthened. Recent intensified dialogue among WTO members reflects the perceived value of collective efforts to lower barriers and support facilitation strategies. At the same time, this area is highly dynamic, making the challenge of achieving the potential a moving target. Rapidly evolving business models and new agreements among more developed economies are already underway and shaping markets and trade and investment governance.

WTO members have a role to play in defining this emerging system. What are the key ingredients for a WTO package in 2017 and what constitutes a realistic negotiating agenda beyond MC11?

In the first E15 Engagement Day, government representatives and E15 Experts discussed this topic and touched on a number of themes including: the importance of ecommerce and the digital economy and the rapid pace of change underway globally. Participants also discussed the importance of the enabling environment to conduct trade as well as the development challenges and opportunities. Issues both inside and outside of the WTO context were raised including regulatory cooperation, competition issues, and cooperation around taxation. Participants also discussed negotiating needs and modalities and understanding the balance needed between more facilitative and cooperative measures versus the need for new disciplines and new market access.

Since September a large number of seminars and workshops have been convened inside the WTO, in other institutions such as UNCTAD and WIPO, and informally among ad hoc groupings. In addition, a major stream of the WTO Public Forum was devoted to issues that touched on ecommerce and the digital economy.

Negotiators and other policy actors end 2016 with a surfeit of ideas, but under pressure to begin structuring work and delivering ideas for Buenos Aires. A number of proposals are already on the table that reflect both practical and aspirational objectives in terms of ecommerce, while other processes such as those in the Working Party on Domestic Regulation reflect different but relevant processes.

The dialogue will focus on extracting and reviewing ideas that have arisen over the past several months and their potential application to the WTO over the next year as members begin to focus on outcomes for MC11. The goal of the dialogue is to help delegates better inform themselves on the most salient ideas and their negotiating implications and test these in collaboration with each other and with experts in the room.