

The reference centres of the World Trade Organization (WTO)

The purpose of this note, prepared by the Center for Strategic Analysis for Agriculture (CAESPA) of the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), is to inform Institute staff of the work carried out by the reference centres of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and explain why having one of them based at IICA is important. The WTO Regional Reference Centre began operations at the Institute on June 21, and the CAESPA is responsible for its coordination.

Origins

One of the objectives of the signing of the Marrakesh Agreement, which marked the conclusion of the Uruguay Round and the establishment of the WTO in 1994, was to reduce customs tariffs and other barriers to trade, and thereby increase the participation of the least-developed countries (LDCs) in the multilateral trading system (MTS).

The members decided that, if that objective was to be achieved, it was essential for the LDCs to receive technical assistance in the area of trade. Accordingly, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), the WTO, and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) implemented the Joint Integrated Technical Assistance Programme (JITAP) for African Countries, an initiative aimed at promoting the development of the technical and technological capabilities that the countries needed to take part in the MTS. One of the actions carried out for that purpose was the creation of *reference centres* where businesspeople, academics, and public officials

would be able to access information that would contribute to national development in that area. At the High-level Meeting on Integrated Initiatives for Least-developed Countries' Trade Development, held in 1997, the WTO Secretariat proposed the establishment of global reference centres, under the WTO's Information Technologies for Development Project and based on the experience of the JITAP.

The Reference Centres Programme now includes developing countries (DCs) and countries in economic transition. It also forms part of the Trade Related Technical Assistance (TRTA) plan established within the framework of the Doha and Hong Kong conferences. Implementation of that plan and coordination of the operation of the centres is the responsibility of the Institute for Training and Technical Cooperation (ITTC). Under the aegis of the WTO Secretariat, the Institute coordinates the provision of TRTA by means of biennial technical assistance and training plans.

Responsibilities

According to the WTO, "*A Reference Centre is the place where all WTO-related information can be found, analysed and dispatched.*"¹ The centres, therefore, facilitate the decentralization of the information that the organization generates and help to connect all the spheres of the economies of the WTO member countries.

¹ WTO (World Trade Organization, SW). Reference Centres. Geneva, SW, Institute for Training and Technical Cooperation. Document can be found at http://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/devel_e/train_e/refcen_prog_e.pdf.

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As well as being a source of information, the centres serve an educational function, since they facilitate online learning and training in specific topics, two key components of the WTO's technical assistance activities.

Objectives

The reference centres were created to help LDCs and DCs understand the rules of the MTS and adapt to them, so they can participate more actively in the system and reap its benefits. Some of the centres' main objectives are to: a) provide government officials, business, and the academic community with a specific place where any relevant information on the WTO can be accessed; b) enable beneficiaries to consult trade- and tariff-related information on the website, and the WTO databases and documents; c) facilitate access to and use of the WTO's e-training programs; and, d) promote training and progressive learning via electronic media.

Beneficiaries

The main beneficiaries are LDCs, the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, those that do not have a permanent office or resident delegation in Geneva. However, DCs and transition economies also benefit from the Programme. Additionally, the WTO has also deemed it prudent and desirable to establish reference centres at the headquarters of regional or subregional organizations, in order to strengthen cooperation ties with the regional organizations and commissions of the member countries. Reference centres may be established in a governmental, academic, or business institution.

Products and services

The basic product offered by the reference centres is information on the WTO, in physical formats (books, CDs or DVDs) and digital formats (databases, publications, and training materials).

Access to such information is the main service they offer. They provide the various stakeholders in the trade system (e.g., the governmental, academic, and private sectors) with information, consultation and training materials, and a space for the promotion of online and self-taught training in WTO issues.

The objective is to improve and expand the provision of that service, so that the centres are the go-to resource for information on the WTO's rules, as well as the promoters of training on the subject, thereby helping to invigorate the countries' participation in the MTS.

Existing reference centres

Around 154 reference centres have been created since 1997, but only 99 are currently operational, due to the lack of sufficient or trained human resources in the beneficiary countries and/or the poor infrastructure in place. Most of the centres are in Africa and Asia, but some also exist in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Ten regional reference centres currently operate worldwide: six in Africa, one in the Caribbean, one in the Pacific states, and two in South America.

In the case of LAC, in the Caribbean there are national reference centres in Barbados, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. In Latin America, reference centres were established gradually in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Peru, Uruguay, Ecuador, and Argentina, over a ten-year period. The first two, whose remit is regional, were implemented in 2002 in Peru and Uruguay, the countries where the headquarters of the General Secretariat of the Andean Community (CAN) and the Latin American Integration Association (ALADI), respectively, are located. However, both centres are now obsolete and have no contact with the

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WTO. The most recent centres to be established are those in Argentina and Honduras (2010), Ecuador and Dominican Republic (2012).

Establishment of the WTO Regional Reference Centre at IICA

Since 2010, IICA and the WTO have been working on joint cooperation plans (G/AG/GEN/92 and G/AG/GEN/95) with a view to each party meeting its respective commitments. One of those commitments was the establishment of a WTO Regional Reference Centre at the Institute's Headquarters in San Jose, Costa Rica. To that end, in 2011, officials from IICA and the ITTC held several meetings in which they laid the groundwork for the creation of the centre, whose operating principles were finally approved by both parties in November 2011.

Importance of having a regional reference centre at IICA

For more than 15 years, IICA has spearheaded the creation and development of the capabilities that the ministries of agriculture in the western hemisphere require to play an active role in the trade negotiations, and implement and provide follow-up to the bilateral and multilateral trade agreements. Thanks to the Institute's efforts, most of the ministries are now actively involved

in the negotiations and are making a major contribution to the definition of trade policies in their respective country.

The negotiations that take place within the WTO today are very different from those that took place previously, as they address many other issues, some related directly with agriculture. Therefore, if, as expected, the Doha Round is reconvened, IICA's member countries will be faced with new commitments and challenges.

On the other hand, the hemisphere's ministers of agriculture have explicitly stated on several occasions that they need the Institute to continue providing the countries with technical cooperation on the issue of the trade negotiations. The CAESPA currently coordinates the provision of such cooperation, since one of the responsibilities assigned to it in IICA's 2010-2014 Medium-term Plan (MTP) is follow-up to trade negotiations, especially those that take place under the aegis of the WTO.

Given all of the above, having the WTO Regional Reference Centre at its Headquarters gives IICA the opportunity to improve the cooperation services that it provides to its member countries in relation to the trade negotiations, and to strengthen its ties with the most important organization in the field of world trade.