



Note

The WTO Work Programme on Electronic Commerce Post Buenos Aires

Developments in the run-up to MC12

By Yasmin Ismail and Joyce Mwangi

Summary

This note gives an overview of the developments in the WTO Work Programme on Electronic Commerce since the 11th Ministerial Conference (MC11) in Buenos Aires and in the run-up to the 12th Ministerial Conference (MC12) scheduled to take place this year, 2022, during the week of June 13. It provides an overview of the proposals and discussions in the WTO bodies to reinvigorate the Work Programme on Electronic Commerce as per the mandate of the ministerial decision of December 13, 2017 (WT/L/1032) and the General Council Decision adopted on December 10, 2019 (WT/L/1079). It then gives an overall mapping of the key issues and specific topics discussed in the WTO bodies and the proposals for a reinvigorated Work Programme that focuses on development. The note finally presents the key elements of Draft Ministerial Decisions submitted by some Members on the Work Programme on Electronic Commerce for the imminent MC12.

Introduction

At the second session of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Ministerial Conference in May 1998, Members of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) adopted the “Declaration on Global Electronic Commerce” (DGEC). The Ministerial Declaration assigned the General Council (GC) the mission to “establish a comprehensive work programme whose objective was to examine all trade-related issues relating to global electronic commerce, including those issues identified by Members”.¹ The GC is also tasked to review the Declaration and “produce a report on the progress of the work programme and any recommendations for action” for the subsequent MC session. As per the same declaration, Ministers also agreed to keep the practice of not imposing customs duties on electronic transmissions. Finally, it is stated that the Declaration can be extended by consensus based on the progress achieved in the work programme.²

Later in September 1998, and based on the Declaration, the GC adopted decision WT/L/274, establishing “The WTO Work Programme on E-Commerce” (WPEC), where e-commerce means “the production, distribution, marketing, sale or delivery of goods and services by electronic means.”³ The decision mandates four relevant WTO bodies “to examine (in their respective domain and WTO agreements) all trade-related issues relating to global electronic commerce” these are the Council for Trade in Services (CTS), the Council for Trade in Goods (CTG), the Council for Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) and the Committee for Trade and Development (CTD). As per the decision, the GC has a “central role” to examine cross-cutting

issues and “keep the work programme under continuous review through a standing item on its agenda”.

For the past twenty-four years, the Members have extended the WPEC. Since its launch, the WPEC witnessed an “initial flurry of proposals and discussions” followed by “a long period of relative quiet”⁴ that lasted till the Nairobi Ministerial Conference in 2015. Discussions under WPEC during this quiet period were either absent from some of the meetings of the WTO bodies or did not lead to any progress towards revealing e-commerce trade-related issues and addressing “the economic, financial, and development needs of developing countries”^{5,6}

At MC10 at Nairobi, the “rapid growth of e-commerce and the absence of global rules to address them” became very evident, leading some Members to call for e-commerce to be a priority in the WTO⁷. Discussions picked up in the four WTO bodies⁸ and led to adopting the MC11 Ministerial Decision WT/L/1032 at Buenos Aires, where Members agreed to continue the multilateral WPEC based on the WT/L/274 mandate and to “endeavour to reinvigorate their work”⁹. On December 11, 2019, Members took a step further and adopted the GC decision WT/L/1079 “to reinvigorate the work” under WPEC and detailed that this work “will include structured discussions in early 2020 based on all trade-related topics of interest brought forward by Members, including (Least Developed Countries) LDCs”.

¹ WT/MIN (98)/DEC/2, May 25, 1998.

² The moratorium is not the subject of this note which only treats recent developments under the WPEC. However, it is worth noting that the moratorium continued to be renewed by the Member since 1998. At the same time, it increasingly became an issue of concern for developing countries and LDCs, particularly in terms of its potential revenue loss impact.

³ WT/L/274, September 30, 1998.

⁴ Garcia-Israel, K. & Grollier, J. (2019). https://www.cuts-geneva.org/pdf/1906-Note-RRN-WTO_Work_Programme.pdf

⁵ WT/MIN (98)/DEC/2

⁶ Ismail, Y. (2020). <https://www.cuts-geneva.org/Pub?id=2vVRD24>

⁷ See the [MIKTA E-commerce Workshop in 2016](#) and the [Friends of E-commerce for Development \(FED\) first Ministerial statement in 2017](#).

⁸ A brief summary of issues discussed during the period from 2015 to 2017 can be found in the note by [Garcia-Israel, K. & Grollier, J. \(2029\)](#).

⁹ WT/L/1032, December 18, 2017.

About this note

The objective of this note is to first give an overview of the level of activity on the WPEC under the four designated WTO bodies as per the mandates of the MC11 decision WT/L/1032 and the 2019 GC decision WT/L/1079. The analysis is based on examining the minutes of the formal meetings and the communications and proposals circulated under each WTO Body during the period post-Buenos Aires Ministerial in December 2017 to early 2022. The note also maps the key issues and specific topics discussed in the WTO bodies and the suggestions for a reinvigorated WPEC in the GC. It concludes with a brief discussion of the WPEC draft Ministerial Decisions for MC12 submitted by some Members.

Discussions under WPEC in WTO Bodies Post-MC11

Council for Trade in Services (CTS)

According to the GC 1998 decision WT/L/274 establishing the work programme, the CTS is tasked to examine issues such as scope (including modes of supply), classification, MFN, national treatment, competition and increasing the participation of developing countries in e-commerce, among others. For the period post-MC11, the submissions and issues discussed by Members varied.

Submissions by Members

As per Table 1, four substantive submissions were put forward by Members from post-MC11 to this writing. All four submissions were appreciated by the Members. The two submissions which generated intensive discussions and encouraged a wider engagement by various Members and groups of Members during the CTS Meetings were the ones on: “Supporting Digital Capability of Business and Consumers” (JOB/SERV/296/Rev.4) and “the Economic Benefits for Cross-Border Data Flows” (S/C/W/382).

The first focused on the impacts of COVID-19 on consumers and businesses. Members from different development levels shared their experiences¹⁰ and the measures they adopted domestically, regionally and globally to support the survival of businesses, particularly micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and the development of consumers’ capacity to cope with the rise of online shopping during the pandemic. As for the second, it was submitted by the United States (US) in both fora the WPEC and the JSI on e-commerce to enlighten both discussions on data issues from an openness perspective. During the meetings, developing countries and LDCs referred to the importance of ensuring they have the policy space to allow their digital and data industrialisation.

¹⁰ See [JOB/SERV/CTS/4](#) for Chair’s summary.

Table 1: Submissions by Members under WPEC in the CTS post-MC11

Document and Date	Title	(Co)-sponsors
JOB/SERV/296/Rev.4 December 4, 2020 (first submission dated June 19, 2020)	“Exploratory Discussions on Supporting Digital Capability of Business and Consumers – Revision”	Australia; Brazil; Canada; Colombia; Hong Kong, China; Japan; The Republic of Korea; Mexico; New Zealand; Nigeria; Norway; Singapore; Ukraine and The United Kingdom
S/C/W/382 June 14, 2019	“The Economic Benefits for Cross-Border Data Flows”	United States
JOB/SERV/277 February 15, 2018	“Removing Cyberspace Trade Barriers: Towards a Digital Trade Environment with Reciprocally Equally Equal Access”	Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu (Chinese Taipei)
JOB/SERV/278 February 15, 2018	“How Cyberspace `Intrudes` on the Physical Space? Case studies: 3D Printing and the Sharing Economy”	Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu (Chinese Taipei)

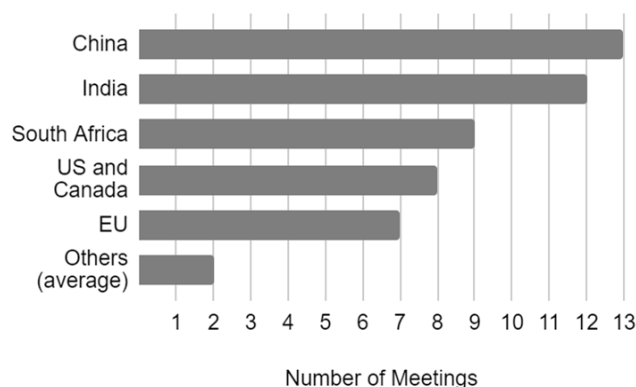
Source: Author, based on the WTO communications accessed on WTO documents online.

The submissions by Chinese Taipei were not submitted to the CTS exclusively; they were also submitted to the GC and other bodies with relevant document numbers, as shown in the next section. In the CTS, Chinese Taipei submissions triggered discussions on the technological neutrality of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS).

Members’ Engagement and Discussions

Since Buenos Aires, CTS held 13 formal meetings (excluding one dedicated meeting on Services Waivers), all of which had WPEC on their agendas. Figure 1 shows the top contributors to discussions in the CTS, based on the number of formal meetings they intervened in on WPEC. China comes in the first place as it intervened on WPEC in all the meetings. China contributed intensively to the discussions under the CTS compared to other councils. Its interventions consisted of sharing its experience in promoting e-commerce and how it contributed to development, informing about adopted e-commerce legislation and measures.

Figure 1: Top Contributors to WPEC Discussions in 13 CTS Meetings



Source: Author, based on the CTS minutes of meetings in communications: S/C/M/134-147 (except S/C/M/140 dedicated to Services Waiver).

India and South Africa came in second and third places. Together, they focused on the digital divide and the importance of reinvigorating the WPEC and including development concerns. It is worth noting that the African Group, the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP Group) and the LDC Group all intervened in various meetings to bring in development concerns on the various issues discussed in meetings, particularly data and Covid-19 impacts.

The interventions of the US in fourth place focused in big part on explaining its submission of data and answering questions by the Members. Canada, the European Union (EU) and other developed Members, like Australia, Switzerland

and the United Kingdom (UK), contributed by sharing experiences and outlining their contributions to Aid for Trade and the e-Trade for All initiatives to support developing countries and LDCs.

Council for Trade in Goods (CTG)

According to the GC 1998 decision WT/L/274, the CTG is tasked to examine issues such as: market access, customs duties, standards, and classification, among others. For the period post-MC11, the submissions and topics discussed by Members varied.

Table 2: Submissions by Members under WPEC in the CTG Post MC11

Document and Date	Title	(Co)-sponsors
JOB/CTG/12 February 15, 2018	“Removing Cyberspace Trade Barriers: Towards a Digital Trade Environment with Reciprocally Equally Equal Access”	Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu (Chinese Taipei)
JOB/CTG/13 February 15, 2018	“How Cyberspace `Intrudes` on the Physical Space? Case studies: 3D Printing and the Sharing Economy”	Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu (Chinese Taipei)

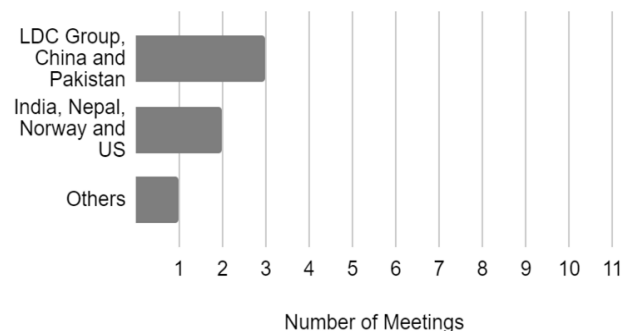
Source: Author, based on the communications accessed on WTO documents online.

As per Table 2, only two substantive submissions were put forward by Members from post-MC11 to this writing in the CTG. Both submissions JOB/CTG/12 and JOB/CTG/13, are by Chinese Taipei and are not exclusive to CTG. The discussions they triggered in CTG though focused on “cyberspace trade barriers” (CTB) and the impacts of new technologies, such as 3D printing, on trade. It notably raised concerns over the increased trade in low-value parcels and the challenges faced by SMEs.

Members’ Engagement and Discussions

Since Buenos Aires, CTG held 11 formal meetings, all of which had WPEC on their agendas. Figure 2 shows the top contributors to discussions in the CTG, based on the number of formal meetings they intervened in on WPEC. The LDC Group, China and Pakistan are in the first place as they intervened in WPEC in 3 out of the 11 meetings. India, Nepal, Norway and the US had interventions in two meetings and the rest of the Members who contributed to the discussions during that period intervened only once. It is worth noting that despite that WPEC had a dedicated item on the agendas of all meetings; Members did not make any statements on WPEC in some of them.

Figure 2: Top Contributors to WPEC Discussions in 11 CTG Meetings



Source: Author, based on the minutes of the CTG minutes of meetings C/G/M/131-141, on WTO documents online.

In the meetings where WPEC was discussed, Members exchanged on issues such as: COVID-19 implications, challenges faced by LDCs referring to LDC Group submission to the GC (WT/GC/W/787), and the critical need to support digital infrastructure development in LDCs and developing countries. The discussions also touched upon sharing domestic experiences on developing the e-commerce ecosystem, customs duties and the calls by some Members for having the WPEC a standing item on the agenda of the council to allow the CTG to meet the mandate of decisions WT/L/1032 and WT/L/1079 and report progress to the GC.

Committee for Trade and Development

According to the GC 1998 decision WT/L/274, the CTD is tasked to examine issues such as: enhancing the participation of developing countries in e-commerce, notably their SMEs, access to infrastructure, technology transfer and the financial implications on developing countries, market access, customs duties, standards, and classification, among others.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacts and its revelations of the digital divide separating developing Members from their developed counterparts have given the floor for developing Members and Groups to make a case for a reinvigorated Work Programme that focuses more on the development-related challenges and opportunities. This focus on making a case for WPEC reinvigoration is reflected in the latest submission by India and South Africa WT/COMTD/W/264 titled “Global Electronic Commerce for Inclusive Development”, as listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Submissions by Members on WPEC in the CTD Post MC11

Document and Date	Title	(Co)-sponsors
WT/COMTD/W/264 November 9, 2021	“Global Electronic Commerce for Inclusive Development”	India and South Africa
JOB/DEV/53 February 15, 2018	“Removing Cyberspace Trade Barriers: Towards a Digital Trade Environment with Reciprocally Equally Equal Access”	Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu (Chinese Taipei)
JOB/DEV/54 February 15, 2018	“How Cyberspace `Intrudes` on the Physical Space? Case studies: 3D Printing and the Sharing Economy”	Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu (Chinese Taipei)

Source: Author, based on the communications on WTO documents online.

The two submissions by Chinese Taipei JOB/DEV/54 and JOB/DEV/53 are not exclusive to CTD as previously seen, and they have stirred more discussions under other WTO bodies than the CTD. The submission WT/COMTD/W/264 by India and South Africa is very recent, dated November 9, 2021, and was presented at the November 10, 2021 meeting of the CTD. It is expected to generate more discussions in the upcoming CTD sessions after Members have the time to read and study it.

India and South Africa’s working paper is titled “Global Electronic Commerce for Inclusive Development”. It highlights the digital divide between Members and the challenges faced by developing countries and LDCs facing the COVID-19 pandemic. It pointed to the critical need to support the digital industrialisation of those Members and secure a place for their MSMEs in the rising digital economy. WT/COMTD/W/264 also suggested that Members address those development related issues by addressing a set of questions extracted in Box. 1.

Box 1: “Guiding questions” suggested by India and South Africa to discuss WPEC development issues in CTD

1. What steps can be taken to improve digital infrastructure in developing countries including least developed countries?
2. How can the digital technology transfers to developing countries including least developed countries be facilitated so as to hasten their digitalization process?
3. What steps have members taken in their domestic economies to provide easier market access for developing countries' companies in the digital economy, in keeping with part IV of The GATT [e.g. Article XXXVIII.1a on reducing barriers to products from less developed countries) and the GATS [e.g. Article IV on increasing participation of developing countries]?

4. How can the financial implications arising out of cross-border e-commerce for developing countries be addressed?
5. What has been the experience of MSMEs who have sold their products through online retail platforms over the past 4-5 years? What favourable conditions if any have members put in place to support sustainable participation of MSME in digital trade?"

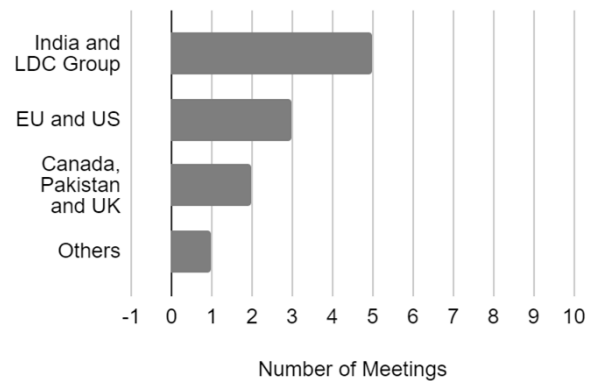
Source: Extract from WT/COMTD/W/264.

Members' Engagement and Discussions

Out of a total of 12 CTD meetings, 10 had included an agenda item for WPEC. As shown in Figure 3, India and the LDC Group took the floor to express calls to address the development dimensions of e-commerce in 5 of those meetings. The LDC Group has been particularly active in highlighting the Group's significant digital divide and requesting Members to address the significant challenges they are facing and exploring means for effective capacity building and support from the donors' community, and advancing on reinvigorating the WPEC to focus on their concerns.

Some developed countries took the floor to point to the critical role played by the Aid for Trade and e-Trade for All initiatives. Calls have also been made to investigate developing countries' and LDCs' revenue losses due to the rise of digital trade and to have the WPEC as a standing item on the CTD agenda. More generally, it is worth noting that despite the WT/L/1079 mandate "to reinvigorate the work" under WPEC and "include structured discussions in early 2020 based on all trade-related topics of interest brought forward by Members, including LDCs", the challenges outlined by the LDC Group at various stances did not lead to substantive discussions among Members in the CTD meetings.

Figure 3: Top Contributors to WPEC Discussions in 12 CTD Meetings



Source: Author, based on the minutes of the CTD minutes of meetings WT/COMTD/M/105-110 and WT/COMTD/M/113-116, from WTO documents online.

Council for TRIPS

According to the GC 1998 decision WT/L/274, the Council for TRIPS is responsible for examining e-commerce intellectual property related issues, such as the protection and enforcement of copyrights and trademarks, as well as the promotion of access to technologies. Since Buenos Aires, the relative silence on WPEC in the council persisted.

Submissions by Members

As shown in Table 4, the submission IP/C/W/665 by South Africa, dated July 17, 2020, and titled "Operationalizing Technology Transfer in the Context of Articles 7,8,40 and 66.2 of the TRIPS Agreement" broke the silence and revived substantive discussions on WPEC under the Council for TRIPS. In the submission, South Africa proposes guiding questions for Members to address when debating promoting technology transfer to close the digital gap between Members in the council; these are presented in Box 2.

Table 4: Submissions by Members on WPEC in the Council for TRIPS Post-MC11

Document and Date	Title	(Co)-sponsors
IP/C/W/665 July 17, 2020	“Operationalizing Technology Transfer in the Context of Articles 7,8,40 and 66.2 of the TRIPS Agreement”	South Africa
JOB/IP/29 February 15, 2018	“Removing Cyberspace Trade Barriers: Towards a Digital Trade Environment with Reciprocally Equally Equal Access”	Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu (Chinese Taipei)
JOB/IP/30 February 15, 2018	“How Cyberspace `Intrudes` on the Physical Space? Case studies: 3D Printing and the Sharing Economy”	Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu (Chinese Taipei)

Source: Author, based on the communications on WTO documents online.

Box 2: Guiding questions suggested by South Africa to address technology transfer under WPEC in the Council for TRIPS

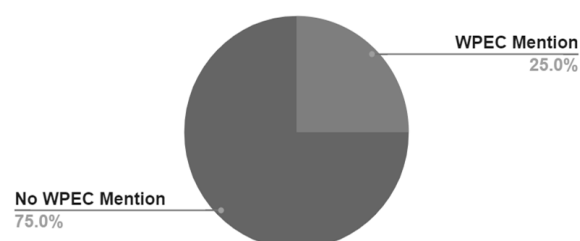
1. “How exceptions and limitations can be used as tools to ensure that the patent system contributes to the promotion of innovation in a competitive environment and to the dissemination and transfer of technology, meeting the objectives of the system and responding to the public interest at large? What are Members’ experiences in this regard?”
2. “How can more effective access to technologies especially in digital economy be secured for developing and LDCs in an inclusive way?”

Source: Extract from IP/C/W/665.

Members’ Engagement and Discussions

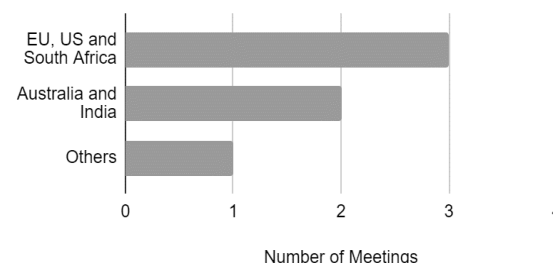
During the period from the Buenos Aires Ministerial to this writing, the council for TRIPS continued to be the WTO body to address WPEC the least among the four. Only 4 out of 16 of the Council’s meetings had WPEC on the agenda. (See figure 4). The European Union, South Africa and the US are Members who made statements in 3 out of these 4 meetings, followed by Australia and India, who contributed with statements in two meetings. (See figure 5).

Figure 4: Share of TRIPS Council Meetings with Dedicated Agenda Item



Source: Author, based on the minutes of meetings of the Council for TRIPS: IP/C/M/87-103 from WTO documents online

Figure 5: Top Contributors to WPEC Discussions in 4 TRIPS Council Meetings



Source: Author, based on the following minutes of the Council for TRIPS meetings: IP/C/M/96.Add.1, IP/C/M/95.Add.1, IP/C/M/93.Add.1 and IP/C/M/89.Add.1 from WTO documents online.

However, it is worth highlighting that aside from the meeting of July 30, 2020,¹¹ where South Africa presented the submission, other meetings included brief attempts to revive WPEC discussions under the Council for TRIPS after “19 years of silence”¹². In this regard, the Council for TRIPS also witnessed calls by some Members to include WPEC as a standing item on its agenda.

¹¹ IP/C/M/95/Add.1

¹² IP/C/M/93/Add.1

Key Issues of Interest for a Reinigorated WPEC

Overview Mapping of Issues Discussed in the Four WTO Bodies

In the previous section, the note gave an overview of the discussions under the Work Programme on Electronic Commerce under each of the four

mandated WTO bodies: CTS, CTG, CTD and the Council for TRIPS, based on the minutes of their meetings and the submissions by Members.

In this section, the note introduces a mapping of the key issues and relevant topics based considered under WPEC post-MC11. The mapping is presented in Table 5 based on the examination of Members' submissions and discussions in the four bodies.

Table 5: Mapping of Key Issues and Topics Discussed under the WPEC in the CTS, CTG, CTD and Council for TRIPS Post-MC11

Issues	Topics	CTS	CTG	CTD	TRIPS
COVID-19	Impacts and Sharing Experiences	X	X	X	X
Development	Digital Divide	X	X	X	X
	Capacity Building, Aid and Assistance	X	X	X	X
	Technology Transfer	X	X	X	X
	MSMEs/SMEs	X	X	X	X
Enabling E-commerce	Infrastructure	X	X	X	
	E-payments	X	X		
Openness	Data flow/processing/Analytics	X	X	X	X
	Access to online platforms/Competition	X	X	X	X
	Customs Duties	X	X	X	X
Trust	Consumer Protection	X			
	Data Protection/Privacy	X			
	Protection and enforcement of Copyrights and Trademarks				X
Access	Tariffs	X			
	Import licensing procedures				X
	Standards	X	X		X
Others	Domestic Regulation	X			
	Classification issues	X			
	Transparency	X			X

Source: Author, based on the minutes of meetings of the CTS, CTG, CTD and the Council for TRIPS and relevant submissions by Members post-MC11 to this writing.

Table 5 shows that development related topics were of common interest across the four bodies. This may be due to the effect of COVID-19 that brought into sharper focus the digital structural gaps between developed and developing

members and, more noticeably, the LDCs. The COVID-19 events thus gave an impetus to the decision to reinvigorate the WPEC adopted by the GC in December 2019 (WT/L/1079). Discussing the challenges faced by MSMEs during the

pandemic and supporting their inclusion in e-commerce was of primary interest to many developing Members and LDCs.

Data issues were also prominent in the four bodies. They reflected developing countries' interest in having an in-depth analysis and understanding of the implications of the rise of the data economy on their industrialisation, businesses and development. In the post-Buenos Aires period, technology transfer was also brought up in the four bodies and was subject to a dedicated submission by South Africa under the TRIPS Council. COVID-19 also brought up interest in electronic payments and e-payments infrastructures and systems. Finally, customs duties, concerns over fiscal revenue losses and

calls for in-depth study of these concerns continued to be raised across the WTO bodies.

Calls for a Reinvigorated and Development Focused WPEC in the GC

The MC11 decision WT/L/1032 and the GC decision in December 2019 (WT/L/1079), mandate the GC to report to MC12 on the progress of the WPEC and the decision to reinvigorate it and include structured discussions on issues of interest put forward by the Members "including LDCs". Hence, the two submissions under GC in Table 6 contribute to efforts to structure the discussions under a reinvigorated WPEC.

Table 6: Submissions by Members on the WPEC in the General Council Post MC11

Document and Date	Title or Topic	(Co)-sponsors
WT/GC/W/812 December 3, 2020	Title: "Reinvigorating The Work Under The 1998 Work Programme on Electronic Commerce"	South Africa and India
WT/GC/W/787 November 14, 2019	Topic: Challenges for LDCs in the utilization of e-commerce	Chad (on behalf of the LDC Group)

Source: Author, based on the communications on WTO documents online

The first submission is by South Africa and India (WT/GC/W/812), suggesting a framework for the structured discussions and the topics of interest to developing countries. The submission also calls for having the WPEC as a standing item under the four relevant bodies of the WTO. The second submission is by the LDC Group (WT/GC/W/787), enlisting the challenges and issues the Group would like to see Members engaging on and addressing under the WPEC. These include: "possible adverse effects of e-commerce and how to mitigate them", "limited existence of and affordable information technology (ICT) infrastructure", "inadequate online payment facilities", among others.

The Road to MC12 and Beyond

As of this writing, there are two draft ministerial decisions on WPEC submitted by Members for MC12 as outlined in Table 7. The draft ministerial decision WT/GC/W/831/Rev.5 is co-sponsored by 39 Members and adopts a language similar to previous ministerial decisions. On the other hand, the draft ministerial decision WT/GC/W.838/Rev.2 is co-sponsored by three members who have been at the forefront of calls for reinvigorating the Work Programme. Hence, the draft emphasises "reinvigorating" the Work Programme on Electronic Commerce and the inclusion of development-related issues.

Table 7: Draft MC12 Ministerial Decisions on WPEC submitted by Members to the GC:

Document and Date	Co-sponsors	Comments
WT/GC/W/831/Rev.5 November 26, 2021	39 Members (including Canada, Brazil, EU, Colombia, Hong Kong China, Singapore, United States, UK and others)	Similar language to previous Ministerial Declarations
WT/GC/W/838/Rev.2 November 25, 2021	3 Members (India, Indonesia and South Africa)	Emphasis on “reinvigorating” the Work Programme and the inclusion of “development-related issues under it”.

Source: Author, based on the communications on WTO documents online

It is undeniable that COVID-19 highlighted the urgency of addressing the digital divide and triggered questions about the impact of e-commerce acceleration on SMEs and the vulnerable, particularly in developing countries and LDCs. “Despite the well-known differences in Members' positions, many continue to attach importance to e-commerce, particularly in light of the current pandemic”¹³, said the chair of the GC in his report on WPEC consultations dated October 7, 2021.

The chair “acknowledged that the pandemic had highlighted e-commerce opportunities as well as its challenges – both of which should continue to be discussed within the WTO”¹⁴.



CUTS International, Geneva

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¹³ Job/GC/275

¹⁴ Ibid.