

Committee on Trade and Development

THE USE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN DELIVERY OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Background Note by the Secretariat

I. INTRODUCTION

1. This Note has been prepared at the request of the Committee on Trade and Development and provides background information on the use of information technology (IT) in the delivery of technical assistance carried out by the Secretariat. It is meant to illustrate the present use of IT in technical cooperation activities and to identify the options available in the short and medium-term.

II. INFORMATION DISSEMINATION

2. Information dissemination is a WTO-wide activity, that is, a service provided to all Members of the Organization. However, for this activity to succeed in reaching as many Members as possible, potential recipients of information need to have the appropriate infrastructure and training for an efficient retrieval of the information available in the WTO. It is at the recipients' end where technical assistance becomes a critical activity for those Members who lack the adequate retrieval capacities.

3. Following a needs assessment carried out under the Joint Integrated Technical Assistance Programme (JITAP) in July 1996, the Secretariat incorporated, in the establishment of WTO Reference Centres on the multilateral trading system, the use of information technologies to help decision makers in developing and least-developed countries better understand and make use of the rules and mechanisms of the WTO. This was achieved through procurement of computer equipment and internet connectivity as well as training of government officials on how to access trade-related information resources on the Internet and CD-ROMs. A WTO Reference Centre is designed to serve government Ministries and Departments in a country. Associated with the Centre are resource persons trained to help users navigate the Web and in particular, WTO-related web-sites and electronic publications, download documents, send and receive electronic mail, and use search engines to look for specific information. The establishment of the WTO Reference Centres has since been expanded as part of WTO's contribution to the Integrated Framework for Trade-Related Technical Assistance to LDCs. By 31 December 1998, WTO Reference Centres had been established and training provided in all least-developed country Members.

4. Information can be classified in two broad categories: static and dynamic. Static information, that is information not subject to changes, can be disseminated on off-line supports such as diskettes, CD-ROMs and DVDs (digital video disks). In the case of dynamic or changing information, the dissemination tends to take place on-line, for instance through the use of electronic mail or downloading from internet. Moreover, when time constraints are a key factor, for instance when draft documents are to be reviewed, the delivery through electronic means reduces significantly the delays. In the next part relevant web-sites and products used by the Secretariat to disseminate information will be briefly reviewed.

5. *WTO web-site (www.wto.org)*. This is the official site of the World Trade Organization. It is a trilingual site (English, French and Spanish) that contains a wealth of information (over 11,000 pages) about the rules and mechanisms of the multilateral trading system, the latest news, WTO legal texts, developments in International Trade, schedule of meetings, and a document database, the DDF (see box 1), which provides access to over 50,000 working documents of the WTO. Access to restricted documents and confidential information is limited to Members only and is password-protected.

6. At present over 100,000 users visit the WTO site each month and download a significant volume of documents and data (the equivalent of 20 million pages of text per month). The site is used by individuals from about 140 countries, including an increasing number from least-developed and developing countries. Trade officials in each of the WTO Reference Centres have been trained on how to use the main site and the DDF to obtain WTO information and documents. The results of a survey of Reference Centres as well as statistics obtained from the Internet site server confirm the growing use being made of these on-line information sources.

7. *ITD web-site (www.itd.org)*. The Information Technologies for Development Project is a joint initiative of the WTO and the Economic Development Institute of the World Bank. In the framework of this project, a specialized web-site has been set-up that is focused specifically on social and economic development and how these are related to trade. It offers information, analysis and comments on these issues through case studies and interactive guides as well as an opportunity to exchange views through an on-line conference facility. This web-site should be of particular interest to officials of developing countries dealing with the social and economic aspects of trade policies.

Box 1: The Document Dissemination Facility (DDF)

The DDF permits the transfer of selected documents from the electronic archive of the WTO to a local workstation. Documents posted before 2 June 1998 are stored in Word Perfect 5.2 format, while more recent documents are available in WORD 97 format. When browsing the database, documents are arranged in reverse chronological order so that the most recent items appear at the head of the list. The DDF provides details of the symbol, title and date of each document distributed. The DDF is thus more than an electronic pigeonhole since it also allows searching for documents that meet criteria specified by the user such as document series, title, words that are used in the document, etc.

The document database is updated daily and can be accessed via internet 24 hours a day from anywhere on the globe.

8. *LDCs web-site (www.ldcs.org)*. As agreed during the High Level Meeting on Least-Developed Countries held in October 1997, six core organizations (IMF, ITC, UNDP, UNCTAD, World Bank, and WTO) are working together with the LDCs to coordinate their trade assistance programmes through an Integrated Framework for Trade-Related Technical Assistance to Least-Developed Countries. In order to facilitate its implementation, a specific web-site has been developed by the Integrated Framework's Administrative Unit. The aim of the site is to become both a management tool for the six agencies and a communication tool for stakeholders in the process. At the same time, it serves as a medium of communication between the agencies, the least-developed countries and their development partners, multilateral, regional and bilateral. The web-site provides also, among other things, general information on the Integrated Framework and is open to contributions from other development partners.

9. *Electronic publications.* The WTO has developed a growing series of electronic publications, normally distributed as CD-ROM products. The following products are used as support material in technical cooperation activities:

- *Results of the Uruguay Round.* This trilingual CD-ROM contains all WTO rules and commitments made by its Members and the Schedules of Concessions on goods and on services (nearly 30,000 pages of undertakings). For each Member there are product-by-product lists of bound tariff rates affecting market access for goods, including agricultural products. The Schedules of Specific Commitments on services identify the services sectors to which a country will apply the market access and national treatment obligations of the GATS and any limitations from those obligations it wishes to maintain.
- *Guide to GATT Law and Practice: Analytical Index.* This CD-ROM contains the complete text of the corresponding publication and is fully searchable with hyperlinks and on-screen help.
- *GATT Basic Instruments and Selected Documents (BISD).* This trilingual CD-ROM contains the 42 volumes of the corresponding publication and uses the same software as that for the Analytical Index. It will be updated regularly to include new WTO BISD series.
- *Trade Policy Review collection.* The first CD-ROM covers the Trade Policy Review reports for the period 1995-1997. It will be updated annually.
- *WTO Trade Statistics on CD.* This trilingual CD-ROM consists of trade statistics from Volume II of the WTO 1998 Annual Report. It will be updated annually.
- *WTO Internet site on CD.* This CD-ROM allows to browse and print the information available on the WTO web-site at a certain cut-off date off-line. Updates are pressed every six months.

10. Copies of these electronic publications have been provided to WTO Reference Centres as well as to delegations of developing and least-developed country Members. Most of these CD-ROMs are also available for sale.

III. IMPROVING COMMUNICATIONS

11. Progress in communications technologies, with its impact on reducing time and distance and the constant lowering of costs, has produced new and important tools which are increasingly being used by the WTO in its technical cooperation activities. These tools, such as e-mail, on-line fora, videoconferencing and others, have a substantive multiplier effect in terms of the number of individuals reached, both in their official and personal capacities, enabling the WTO to dramatically enhance the scope and coverage of its technical assistance.

12. *E-mail.* Communication using electronic mail (or e-mail) makes exchange of messages almost instantaneous. All staff in the Secretariat have an internet e-mail address, that is standardized in the following manner: first name.family name@wto.org. Additionally, some generic e-mail addresses have been created, for instance, in the area of notifications, that enable the semi-automatic routing of messages to the officer in charge of that specific subject-matter, and for WTO Reference Centre Helpdesk.

13. *On-line fora.* The ITD web-site is the locus for a series of on-line conferences for developing country officials on issues of trade and development. An indicator of the effectiveness of on-line fora was a conference on Intellectual Property Rights and Development organized over a period of five weeks during 1998 by the WTO and the World Bank. The conference attracted over 300 registered participants who were able to engage in discussions among themselves and with a panel composed of some of the leading world experts on the subject. There are plans to make available a full schedule of such conferences during the course of this year. The next such events include an on-line forum on Regionalism with specialists from the World Bank and the WTO, and another one on WTO and developing countries.

14. *Video-conferencing.* The Secretariat has acquired a video-conferencing system that can connect anywhere in the world to other video-conferencing equipment that recognizes the ITU standard H.320. The system uses ISDN telephone lines and the video quality is near-television at the high end. Two types of video-conferencing can be organized: point-to-point connections and multi-point links.

15. Video-conferencing can be used for different purposes (interviews, participation in conferences, lectures, etc.). In the case of lectures, for instance, presentations can easily and effectively be adapted to a video-conference format while accommodating visual tools such as overhead transparencies, charts, photographs and video sequences. While maintaining dynamic face-to-face communication, video-conferencing allows only one person to speak at any one time, forcing pauses between speakers, something that is perceived as a disadvantage by some participants.

16. From a technical cooperation perspective, video-conferencing can be an important tool for lecturing, questions and answers (Q&A) sessions as well as for technical missions. Video-conferencing has already been used on a regular basis during the Short Trade Policy Course for French-speaking Least-Developed Countries that was held at the United Nations Staff College in Turin (Italy) last October. Participants as well as WTO staff found that video-conferencing was an effective means of communication when senior WTO officials could not be on-site.

IV. IT-BASED DELIVERY OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

17. Technical assistance can be delivered through different modes. In the Implementation Modalities adopted by the Committee on Trade and Development the use of internet and interactive technology (CD-ROMs) for self-training was mentioned together with follow-up courses, seminars and workshops (national/ regional) to ensure the effective delivery of technical cooperation activities.

18. During seminars and technical missions, some WTO staff are already making use of computer-based presentations as well as overhead transparencies. Most of these transparencies have been prepared using computer-based tools and can be distributed not only on paper, but also on electronic storage media such as diskettes and CD-ROMs.

19. The Secretariat produces on a regular basis videos for the press and general public. Videos can also be used in technical cooperation activities, in particular to raise awareness. A set of two cassettes was, for instance, produced and distributed to Members in 1998 containing the proceedings of the Third Workshop on Notification Requirements held in December 1997 (over five hours of presentations).

20. Videos are normally not considered to be IT-based products although the amount of information they convey is impressive. With the use of DVDs, one of the major limitations of videos, i.e. sequential access, will be overcome. In fact, it will be possible to access any video segment directly. Moreover, DVDs will allow the integration of video sequences with text-based information in a smooth manner.

21. *The WTO: a training package.* A computer-based package on the World Trade Organization has been prepared by the Secretariat and is now accessible in the WTO web-site. It mirrors the structure of a general seminar and covers all the concepts developed in a normal 4 to 5 day seminar run by TCD. It consists of ten modules. Each of the first nine modules corresponds to a three-four hour seminar lecture, and includes a review section using the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) approach. The last module - module 10 - contains the Final Act as well as other key WTO documents.

22. This package can be seen as two inter-related components: (i) a set of over 350 "slides". Each slide has a title and contains some bullet points. Slides are grouped in units and sections, which form the structure of the modules. These slides are available in English and French on-line, while the Spanish version should soon be finalized; (ii) a "book" that contains a short explanation for each bullet point appearing on the slides. This "book" is for the moment only available in English and its translation into French and Spanish is forthcoming. Once all the material is available in the three languages, a CD-ROM will be pressed and distributed as electronic documentation during technical cooperation activities. The same material contained in the CD-ROM can be made available in printed form as well, i.e. a "book" and a set of slides.

23. Apart from its main use – computer-based self-training - this material can be used in two other ways: (i) to explain in a structured manner the work of the WTO or (2) to help trainers organize their presentations using slides. In the former case, no slides are needed while in the latter the "book" is used to highlight the key concepts that should be elaborated in each slide presented. It should also be noted that the on-line version allows users of each slide to send an e-mail to TCD related to that specific slide for further information.

24. *Computer-Based Training (CBT) series.* The objective of this initiative is to capture on CD-ROM the subject-matter presented in WTO Trade Policy Courses. The target audience are trade officials of developing countries as well as other interested persons who are not in a position to attend the residential courses. Using the CD-ROMs, they will have access to the course material developed by WTO experts. The material is presented using a multimedia approach that combines text, audio and video segments in an interactive, pedagogical manner. Each module includes a test through which the student, and instructor, can measure progress in absorbing the subject-matter. A pilot module was recently completed on the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing that incorporates three hours of course material. This first CD-ROM should be made available in the WTO three working languages in the near future.

25. To summarize, "The WTO: a training package" should be used as a comprehensive first exposure to the WTO, while the Computer-Based Training (CBT) series will be used to gain a more in-depth knowledge on an Agreement by Agreement basis.

V. OPTIONS FOR THE SHORT AND MEDIUM-TERM

26. *Use of the World Bank Learning Network.* The WTO is taking advantage of the World Bank video-conferencing network to further extend the reach of its technical cooperation activities. The World Bank Learning Network already covers over forty countries and the number of centres linked will be further expanded in the course of this year. The network can accommodate point-to-point as well as multi-point links. The first joint activity is planned for the end of February, 1999 during the fourth workshop on notification requirements. A video-conference will link WTO experts in Geneva with trade officials gathered at World Bank offices in the capitals of Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, and Zimbabwe. Trade officials in these capitals will have the opportunity to review WTO notification requirements, ask questions and exchange their experiences.

27. *Web-casting.* The WTO first used web-casting to send out on internet live images and sound from the WTO Ministerial Session in May, 1998. Other web-casting events, some using an interactive capability that permits two-way communications, are being planned for this year. These will be particularly important for officials and NGOs in developing countries since they will be able to participate in events on-line which they could not afford to attend in person. Web-casting could also be used for lectures and sharing of working documents, but, for the moment, the equipment is not available in the Secretariat.

28. *Distance learning.* The innovative use of distance education and learning methods and techniques could augment the impact of technical cooperation activities. The tools already available, described in the previous chapter, could be seen as part of a wider IT-based programme centered on capacity-building. The main beneficiaries of a programme of this kind would be junior to mid-level government officials who need to better understand WTO rules and procedures. Distance learning techniques normally rely on local tutors. These could be more senior government officials, who would definitely help increase its effectiveness. Another option would be to rely on Universities and/or regional institutions.

29. *"Virtual" meetings.* On-line fora could also be used to promote the exchange of experiences among trade officials, for instance, on the implementation of WTO commitments. In a sense, this kind of fora could evolve towards "virtual" meetings. In this context, it is proposed that some Committee meetings or Symposia (such as those on Trade and Development and on Trade and Environment to be held in March 1999) be taped. The resulting material would be divided into segments to be accessed on-line through web-casting. The documentation prepared for the meeting could also be made available and linked to each segment. Access to these on-line fora would be restricted according to the relative confidentiality of the WTO body concerned.
