

Foreword

I am delighted to present the World Trade Organization Secretariat's first comprehensive report on artificial intelligence (AI) and international trade. This report marks a milestone in our efforts to understand the impacts AI is having, and will continue to have, on global trade. As AI continues to evolve and transform the ways we work, live and do business, the global trade community must recognize these impacts and respond to maximize the gains for people, businesses and economies, and minimize potential risks.

Declaring AI to be “the new electricity” has already become a cliché, but it may still be an understatement. AI is a general-purpose technology that has entered the public consciousness with remarkable speed and intensity. Its current and potential applications affect virtually all domains, from life-saving medical discoveries to smart agriculture. AI is challenging the ways we think about the world, and international trade is no exception, as AI promises to transform trade logistics and supply chain management and give rise to new forms of services.

As this report shows, AI has the potential to reduce trade costs, enhance productivity across sectors, and reshape traditional trade patterns. I often say, the future of trade is services; digital; and green; and that it must be inclusive. AI can accelerate trade's journey into this future.

The digital transformation driven by AI is poised not only to boost services trade; it may also create whole new categories of tradable AI-powered goods, from autonomous vehicles to robotics and beyond. If we successfully harness its potential, AI can also support greener trade by optimizing resource use and reducing the carbon footprint of supply chains.

But the inverse is also true. AI raises significant challenges, from the growing risk of an “AI divide” to questions around



data governance and privacy, how to regulate AI-enabled products and associated ethical and societal risks, as well as how to protect intellectual property in an AI-driven age. While we still need to find good answers to many of these questions, it is already clear that making the most of AI-related opportunities will require their benefits to be widely shared across different economies.

WTO economists simulated various AI uptake scenarios for this report, and the differences were substantial.

Under an optimistic scenario they dub “global synergy”, in which AI is adopted evenly across regions and contributes to strong productivity gains, cumulative real growth in global goods and services trade would increase by almost 14 percentage points through 2040, with global trade in digitally delivered services nearly 18 percentage points higher than the baseline projection. Conversely, under a cautious “tech divergence” scenario – characterized by divergences across regions in terms of productivity increases and AI adoption – the impacts of AI on trade growth would be halved, with a cumulative boost of only 7 percentage points by 2040. In other words, failing to diffuse AI technology across different economies would mean foregoing many of the potential gains.

This report aims to stimulate a discussion on how the WTO can promote the development and deployment of AI and help mitigate its associated risks and looming concerns about regulatory fragmentation. In this respect, two guiding questions the report tries to address are: how can the WTO help ensure that the benefits of AI are broadly shared? How can the challenges that AI presents be addressed in a globally coordinated manner?

The WTO matters here not just because of its rules and adjudication functions, but also its role as a global forum for discussion, coordination and cooperation. As the report notes, this latter role is particularly relevant and suitable for AI: a complex and fast-evolving technology that is inherently global in nature.

Of course, AI-related global governance cannot be reduced to trade issues. But trade rules and policy have important roles to play. The WTO, with its 166 members of all sizes and income levels, is well placed to participate in ongoing AI global governance debates. As the report notes, WTO members themselves are slowly bringing AI into the agenda of various of our deliberative bodies.

Because of the remarkable pace at which AI is evolving, we need to look beyond today and anticipate what lies on the horizon. This is why the report contains views from scholars working at the intersection of AI, trade and the multilateral trading system. I want to emphasize that these views and lines of inquiry do not reflect official positions or carry the endorsement of WTO members or the Secretariat. They are in the report because they put before us some complex issues and difficult questions that we cannot afford to sidestep, and that should be read as an invitation for reflection and further research that will help us better understand the fast-changing technological landscape in which the multilateral trading system operates. They may also serve as an inspiration for discussion on the role of the WTO in supporting international AI governance efforts.

By working together to leverage AI responsibly, we can drive sustainable economic growth, foster innovation, and ensure that the benefits of this technology are shared by all.

I invite all WTO members, stakeholders, and the broader international community to engage with the findings of this report and to contribute to the ongoing discussions on AI governance, including through the lens of trade policy. Together, we can shape a future where trade and technology work hand-in-hand to create a more prosperous, sustainable and equitable world.



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