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Conclusion

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This report highlights the widespread and transformative impact that artificial intelligence (AI) is currently having in many areas, including on international trade, and discusses the possible future impact of AI in this area. AI has the potential to reduce trade costs and enhance productivity, particularly in services sectors that rely on manual processes. However, AI also raises important trade-related policy questions, in addition to the well-known ethical, societal and security risks it generates.

One key challenge lies in addressing the so-called “AI divide”, the existing and widening inequality between economies with advanced technological infrastructures and those which are less advanced in terms of AI adoption, and between big companies and small businesses. Bridging this gap is essential to ensure that the benefits of AI are equitably distributed across all economies. Another challenge concerns the need to access large, accurate and bias-free datasets to train AI models adequately, which must be carefully weighed against the importance of protecting personal data, security and intellectual property (IP).

These questions should be addressed in a coherent way across economies, and ways must be found to balance the need to foster global consensus and coherence in AI governance, while respecting diverse cultural and societal values.

An additional concern is the issue of regulating AI to ensure that it is trustworthy and safe, but without stifling trade. This presents a significant challenge for policymakers, given the opacity and autonomous “behaviour” of AI. In addition, while governments across the globe are increasingly taking steps to promote and regulate AI through domestic, regional and international initiatives, the diversity of these initiatives risks creating a fragmented policy landscape. Given the pervasiveness of AI, a coordinated global approach involving all stakeholders and international organizations with a role to play in AI governance is essential to promote policy convergence, as well as to harness the benefits of AI and mitigate its risks effectively. It is important to ensure that differing AI policy approaches do not lead to fragmentation, as this could create obstacles

to trade and thereby limit the potential of trade to foster the deployment of trustworthy and safe AI technologies and the benefits of AI.

As the only rules-based global body dealing with trade policy, the WTO can play a crucial role in limiting regulatory fragmentation and promoting regulatory coherence. This, in turn, can contribute to the development of AI and increase access to it. WTO rules can help to ensure that AI technologies are beneficial to all economies and accessible to all by promoting trade-opening in AI-related goods and services. By reducing trade barriers, and thereby fostering a level playing field across economies in terms of trade, the WTO can encourage the dissemination of AI technologies globally, enabling economies at different stages of development to access AI innovations. WTO rules can also help to ensure that regulatory interventions are not more trade-restrictive than necessary and to address and prevent trade tensions and obstacles. However, AI may prompt questions about the application of current international trade rules.

The WTO also provides a global framework for cooperation and dialogue, within which WTO members can exchange experiences and develop ways to promote trade in AI-enabled products and balance AI risks and opportunities. AI governance requires open and inclusive dialogue involving all stakeholders, as well as close cooperation among international organizations. By offering a multilateral framework combining predictable and enforceable trade rules with the facilitation of dialogue, the WTO can meaningfully contribute to the development of a robust AI governance framework and help to create a more coherent, supportive and inclusive environment for trustworthy and safe AI.

As AI evolves, governments should continue to discuss the intersection of AI and trade and its possible implications for international trade rules. This report is a first attempt to flesh out some of the key implications of AI for trade and trade rules. It is an invitation to explore these issues with the aim of ensuring that we fully understand the opportunities and challenges ahead, and are well-prepared to address them.