

MEDIA RELEASE: 30 March 2026



## Global Services and Digital Businesses are deeply concerned by the lapse in the WTO ban on tariffs on digital content

**As of Monday 30 March, as the WTO Ministerial Meeting in Cameroon closed, the WTO is left in disarray and the WTO E-Commerce Moratorium and the associated Work Programme on E-Commerce have lapsed.**

The Ministerial ended without any significant outcomes and with failure to agree by consensus on a continuation period for the long-standing WTO Moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions, which has an expiry date of 31 March. Other issues go back to Geneva for follow-up at official level in May. It is currently unclear however whether discussions can be successfully rekindled in Geneva on the Moratorium.

*“This is a very disappointing outcome”* said Jane Drake-Brockman, ASR.

*“This can only add to business uncertainty at an already very uncertain time”* said John Cooke, TheCityUK.

*“The simple fact is that this Moratorium contributed significantly to the digital transformation taking place on a global scale”* said Christine Bliss, CSI.

*“Its lapse”,* said Pascal Kerneis, ESF *“means WTO Members are free to introduce new protectionist measures in the form of customs duties on digital services; an outcome which stands in direct opposition to the stated objectives of the WTO, which aims to reduce barriers to international trade.”*

The worst-case scenario would be much more than just a setback for the tech sector. It's a very big setback for all business, especially digital start-ups and small businesses adopting new technologies and selling on-line. It's a setback for all consumers. Citizens anywhere, whether they have ever heard of the Moratorium or not, are suddenly at risk of paying a duty every time they go click and an electronic transmission inevitably crosses a border.

What is the best-case scenario? Many of our governments have worked hard at a bilateral, regional and plurilateral level to ensure that our various FTAs contain a degree of residual business comfort with many trading partners. But big gaps nevertheless exist and some FTAs and Digital Trade Agreements will need review in light of developments in the WTO. The best scenario would see WTO Members re-engage in Geneva with a view to negotiating a new arrangement to reinstate a WTO ban on customs duties on e-transmissions.

We appreciate the efforts of many governments to get the Moratorium extended, as they have done at every Ministerial since 1998. We welcome the Declaration by 66 WTO members on interim arrangements for the WTO Electronic Commerce Agreement, including a ban on customs duties on electronic transmissions among themselves. We urge all WTO members to resume discussions in Geneva as soon as possible. We hope that good sense will prevail and call on WTO Members to find a way to restore the Moratorium on a multilateral basis at the next WTO General Council in Geneva.

END

## *Background*

The Moratorium has been renewed at every ministerial since it was put in place in 1998. By making it easier to transfer digital content and supply digital services across borders, the Moratorium has facilitated knowledge sharing and access to new market opportunities, including for small businesses, and provided the regulatory predictability essential for long-term digital investment, innovation, and cross-border integration. It allowed digital flows to be more seamless, enhancing efficiency and innovation across borders. The expanded digital trade associated with the Moratorium has helped all economies diversify their export base, contributing to broader economic and job growth.

Multiple studies have concluded that the Moratorium yields net economic benefits for developing as well as developed countries, with the OECD predicting that ending the Moratorium “would hit low-income country trade the most.” Similar findings on the value of the Moratorium have been documented in reports from UNCTAD and the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF as well as by researchers in India and Indonesia, among others.

Since 2024, over 200 civil society and industry organizations from across Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, and Oceania have called on the WTO membership to support the Moratorium - the continuation of which also enabled continuation of the Work Programme on Electronic Commerce. Its loss is a massive setback for digital trade and investment.

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