



WORLD TRADE
ORGANIZATION



THE REFERENCE CENTRES PROGRAMME

A NEW STRATEGY

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The main objectives of the Reference Centres (RC) Programme is to provide beneficiaries with a dedicated physical location where any relevant information on the WTO can be accessed via the WTO Internet site, on CD-ROMs, in print, as well as in electronic format. The WTO Secretariat has operated the RC Programme since 1997, with some 150 RCs having been established in over 100 countries. While the value of the Programme is unquestionable, it has become increasingly complex to manage, with a very limited staff to operate the Programme. Also, with the rapid evolution in technological developments and innovations, the requirements related to maintaining the equipment, servicing and updating it are become increasingly challenging. In addition, there continue to be demand for the establishment of new RCs, which can often not be met due to human resource constraints.

2. As part of the internal restructuring and repositioning of the Institute for Training and Technical Cooperation (ITTC), and following a series of internal consultations within the WTO Secretariat, a new strategy with regard to the installation and operation of RC was developed. This new approach attempts to take as much as possible into account the recommendations made through BTORs, as well as the outcome of evaluations conducted in the course of recent years and to tailor the RC Programme to the specific needs of the clients.

3. As part of the new strategy, it is proposed to concentrate the RC Programme, focusing more specifically on those countries that are most in need (LDCs, Sub Saharan Africa, non-residents). The ownership of the RC will be enhanced at the national level, through the appointment of a RC manager, who will receive training on the access and use of data and act as a focal point for the WTO Secretariat. The materials and services provided to the reference centres will be rethought in close collaboration with all the stakeholders.

4. In order to ease the management of the Programme, the procurement of the hardware component *per se* would be outsourced and the maintenance of the equipment would also be left under the responsibility of the local authorities, with the possible support of other agencies. Discussions with relevant agencies would be launched to agree on modalities for outsourcing. The Secretariat would then concentrate mainly on the areas where it has a comparative advantage, i.e. providing the software that gives access to the information and data.

5. The new strategy envisages to enhance the quality of information provided as well as the efficiency of the operation of the RC, and do more with less. It is expected that the modalities of the new strategy can be put in place in the second semester 2009.

6. The main elements of the new strategy are discussed below.

II. DEFINITION OF REFERENCE CENTRES

7. A WTO Reference Centre (RC) is defined as dedicated physical location open to government officials, business representatives, university professors, students and/or the general public where any relevant information on the WTO can be accessed via the WTO Internet site, on CD-ROMs, in print format, as well as electronic format. In order to establish a reference centre, the beneficiary and the Secretariat will sign an exchange of letters, based on a set of guidelines, which determine the modalities for the RC. Each RC will have a RC manager, who will be responsible for its daily operation, including dissemination of information.

III. WHO ARE THE BENEFICIARIES?

8. The main beneficiaries under this RC Programme are primarily Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Sub-Saharan African Countries, and non-resident countries. RC can also be established in regional/sub regional organizations, so as to intensify the cooperation with agencies. RC can be established at the level of the government, i.e. at a Ministry, a University for the academic community and the level of organized business (e.g. Chamber of Commerce). Requests made by other beneficiaries for the installation of RC and other aspects related to their functioning will be accommodated to the extent possible, taking into account the human resource limitations. In order to benefit from the RC Programme, a letter needs to be addressed to the Director of ITTC, following which contacts will be established to seek information on the specific needs and requirements.

IV. WHAT PRODUCTS ARE OFFERED?

9. RC are equipped with state-of-the-art IT equipment (PCs, printers, photocopiers, scanners), books, CDs, DVDs and any relevant WTO related documentation, full access to WTO databases, publications and training materials on WTO Agreements. The cost of the equipment will be covered by the WTO Secretariat for LDCs, and only for the RCs provided at the governmental and academic institutions. Normally, a RC will be equipped with three computers, but more can be installed, if the equipment is purchased by the local authorities, e.g. with the support of a (bilateral) donor. The cost will be covered from the DDAGTF.

10. Access is provided to WTO official databases, e.g. the Integrated Database (IDB), the Consolidated Tariff Schedules database (CTS), and "Documents online", taking into account the applicable Secretariat rules for providing access to such information, which, includes restrictions on what is accessible to WTO Members and what to acceding countries. The managers of the RCs will need to be adequately trained on the use of software to retrieve the required data and information for dissemination purposes. This includes training on software used by other agencies (ITC, UNCTAD, the World Bank).

11. The RC should offer the best possible selection of books, periodicals as well as any other trade related information. Lists will be developed in close consultation with colleagues from the WTO library and Economic Research and Statistics Division. The RC will also regularly receive TRTA newsletters. The cost of documentation and material will be covered by the WTO Secretariat.

V. TRAINING OF THE RC MANAGERS

12. To provide good services to end users, RC managers need to acquire relevant technical knowledge and skills, through training, including on the on-line training provided by the Secretariat and coaching. Specific training events will be organized, both in Geneva and/or in the field. A programme will be developed and training events will be covered in the next Biennial TA Plan 2010-2011. Collaboration with regional economic institutions will be encouraged.

13. E-training and e-learning should be promoted through the RC, thus enhancing the learning function of the RC. Particular emphasis will be put on the eTraining mode, as an effective means to prepare participants prior to the face to face training. Following the completion of the eTraining,

participants would qualify for the Regional Trade Policy Courses (RTPCs), after which they would be eligible for the Geneva-based TPCs. Ideally, the RC could perform a function as a training centre, whereby candidates for regional seminars, TPC and RTPCs can meet the prerequisite conditions and complete an e-training course, as required. This implies the need to have a convenient IT-environment, with a good technical set up and a reliable connection to the Internet (broadband).

VI. PROCUREMENT OF THE HARDWARE

14. From the experiences obtained, it seems preferable to ensure the local procurement of hardware, rather than having a centralized procurement policy, which requires costly and time consuming shipment of equipment from WTO headquarters to the beneficiaries. While the advantage of a centralized procurement approach is to ensure a consistent technical profile throughout all the RC, outsourcing the procurement of the hardware would strengthen ownership of the programmes, as well as eliminate a burdensome responsibility for the Secretariat. Local procurement could be undertaken in close collaboration with other agencies, e.g. UNDP country office, who could also ensure the maintenance of the equipment and intervene in case of malfunctioning. External hard disks would be provided by the WTO.

15. In order to implement this new policy, consultations will need to be initiated with partner agencies, including the UNDP at the regional level (Regional office for Africa), and perhaps other agencies, e.g. UNIDO, ITC, UNCTAD and World Bank. Some consultations have already started (January 2009) with the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) to set up and/or update RC in francophone countries. A meeting could be held in Geneva with a view of discussing all the elements of the strategy and define the optimal way to operationalize this new orientation.

VII. CREATION OF A WORLDWIDE NETWORK OF WTO REFERENCE CENTRES.

16. A webpage could be created for the RC Programme with a special link to all national RC. Links would also be provided to a selection of useful Internet resources, a communication and discussion platform be established between RC managers, but it could also be used to disseminate information on a selection of books and publications on WTO issues. It would allow for an exchange of information on the mandate, role and targets of what the RCs can offer.

VIII. MONITORING OF THE RC PROGRAMME

17. An updated list of all RC will be maintained by the WTO Secretariat, with all relevant information, including the date of creation, names and contact details, services provided, databases or web pages hosted, and other elements, which would be of direct relevance for the entire network.

IX. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REFERENCE CENTRES PROGRAMME

18. The implementation of the RC Programme will be assured through the regional desks at ITTC, with the support of the head of the RC Programme. Periodic reports will be prepared to monitor the progress and the achievements under this Programme. Various criteria can be used to monitor progress in the implementation of the Programme, e.g. the number of visitors, queries processed, information retrieved, feed back (letter of thanks), the number of visits received by the website, the number of subscribers to the newsletters.

19. As the main users of the RC come from LDCs, Africa more specifically, a close collaboration with the UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa (RBA) would be required.