

④ Single window



KEY INSIGHTS

- Single window mechanisms constitute a core area of GRP that typically serve two functions: (i) as information gateways to facilitate access to and dissemination of information; and/or (ii) as entry points enabling users to submit applications and request different services from the government.
- While the GATS does not contain an obligation for WTO members to establish single windows, the SDR Disciplines, similar to a number of recent PTAs, include commitments aimed at ensuring that applicants are not required to engage with more than one competent authority for each authorization. Similarly, they ensure that applications are consolidated in a single online portal – reflecting recent evolutions in digital technologies.
- The highly flexible nature of international commitments in this area reflects the intention of governments to maintain autonomy in implementing single window mechanisms, ensuring they align with their regulatory systems and resources.
- There is a clear trend towards the establishment of single windows in domestic practice, but scope, functions and features vary significantly – from sector-specific portals to comprehensive entry points for all government services (including services-related authorizations) and from information-only databases to portals supporting status-tracking, secure payments, e-signatures and multilingual interfaces.
- Various available indicators (e.g. UN E-Government Development Index (EGDI), World Bank GovTech Maturity Index (GTMI)) show broad portal availability but variable ability to manage and oversee the transaction process from initiation to completion – end-to-end transaction capability – and interoperability.

Key features

Factors that increase the costs for service suppliers include the accessibility of information related to authorization and the abundance of regulatory authorities involved in the procedures required. For instance, establishing a hospital may require licensing by the health ministry, approvals from the local authority for fire and operational safety, general business licences, compliance with taxation legislation and, where applicable, investment screening authorizations.

To reduce the resulting transaction costs for business, many governments have introduced so-called “single windows” or “one-stop shops”.¹ Today, these represent an important GRP area, offering an opportunity to streamline and integrate the delivery of public services, while improving coordination across and within government levels. By facilitating easier access to requirements and procedures, single windows contribute to enhancing competitiveness and promoting overall economic welfare.²

A single window is a portal which can generally serve two key purposes: (i) as an information gateway to facilitate access to and dissemination of information, including existing requirements and procedures; and/or (ii) as an entry point enabling users to submit applications and request different services from the government.³

Single windows can be either physical or online (Figure 1). A physical single window consists of a network of offices where citizens and businesses can receive guidance and complete various transactions with the administration.⁴ In a physical single window, different government agencies can be co-located to provide their respective services or, alternatively, a single office or official may be entrusted to handle all transactions with users comprehensively.⁵ In contrast, online single windows can take diverse forms and be adapted to the existing technological infrastructure as well as the specific regulatory and administrative characteristics of a jurisdiction.⁶ Compared to physical single windows, online systems include various other features, such as the use of electronic signatures, secure data exchange and coordination of responsibilities among agencies.⁷

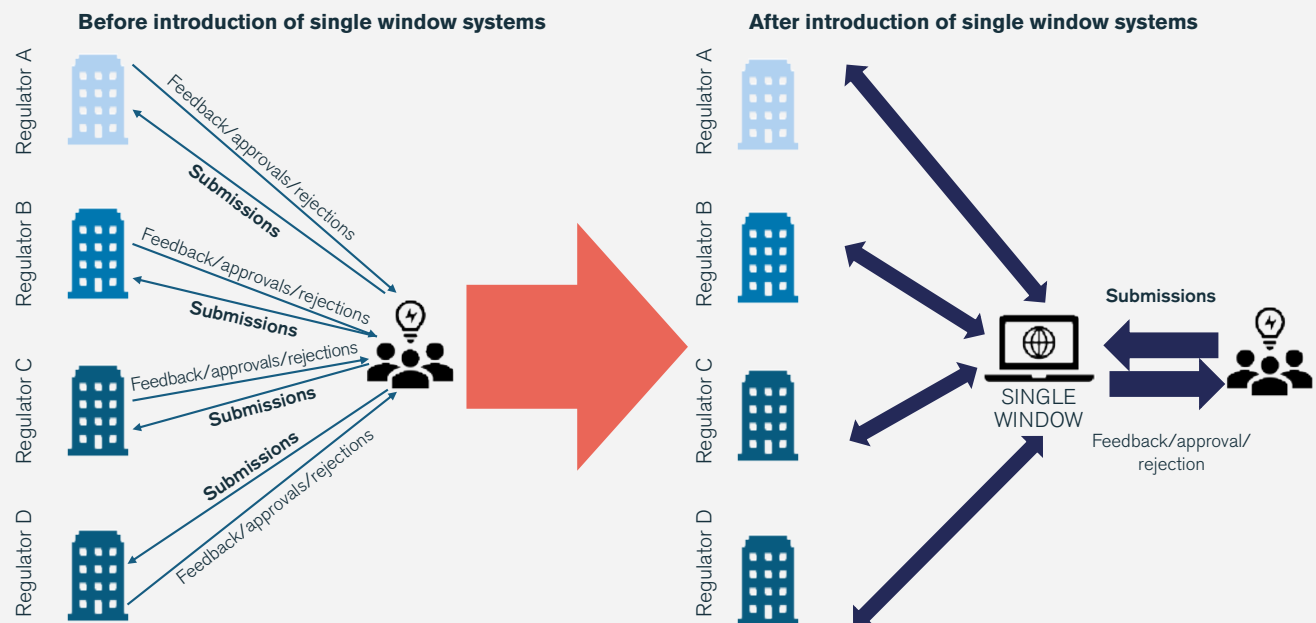
In terms of their scope, single window mechanisms can vary from general to specialized.⁸ A single window may operate economy wide and consolidate all business procedures into a unified portal. Alternatively, it may focus on a particular sector or set of procedures, such as a business start-up, financial services, or investment.

The design of single windows requires that governments undertake a comprehensive diagnostic mapping of existing requirements and procedures in relevant areas. Two overarching principles have been identified for the creation of single windows:

- i. **Single windows should form part of broader administrative simplification strategies:** While single windows constitute an important tool to improve service delivery, reduce transaction costs and enhance societal welfare, they are only one component of broader efforts to reduce administrative burdens and improve the regulatory landscape more broadly.⁹
- ii. **Single windows should be user-centered:** To ensure their effectiveness, single windows should be designed based on concrete “life events” in the business life cycle such as starting a business, obtaining permits, or expanding operations.¹⁰ In this light, gathering users’ inputs, including users’ feedback on the desirable features of the system’s functions, is critical.

There are several GRP principles which are relevant for the implementation of single windows, notably online. The OECD has developed guidance on best practices for single windows (Box 1). A single window may, for example, be leveraged to communicate to applicants information concerning their applications, including tracking the status, final decisions, missing documentation, or reasons for rejection. The single window can also be used to store documentation submitted by applicants to avoid requesting the same information from different agencies or again at a later stage. Additionally, the single window can also be used to contact the agencies responsible for the applications directly in case of questions or need for assistance. Other relevant aspects pertain to the possibility of paying applicable fees as well as the availability of the interface in multiple languages (including in English).

Figure 1: Traditional systems for submission of application v single windows



Source: WTO/World Bank.

Box 1: The 2020 OECD Best Practice Principles for One-Stop Shops for Citizens and Business

In 2020, the OECD *Best Practice Principles for Regulatory Policy: One-Stop Shops for Citizens and Business* was adopted; it sets out practical guidance in the following 10 areas:¹¹

- **Political commitment:** One-stop shops require continued support from the broader government as well as continuous communication between political and administrative levels.
- **Leadership:** Governments need to foster a culture of learning by doing.
- **Legal framework:** Establishing one-stop shops requires adjustments to the legal framework to ensure smooth collaboration among agencies and maximize benefits to users.
- **Cooperation and coordination:** One-stop shops rely on solid communication between entities involved in planning and those responsible for implementation.
- **Role clarity:** Designing one-stop shops with clearly defined goals is crucial for managing expectations (both of users and governments) and for assessing results.
- **Governance:** One-stop shops require governance structures in which all government agencies participate at executive level, with operative decisions made by a single leading entity.
- **Public consultation:** Engaging users (i.e. citizens and businesses) is essential to understanding concrete needs and concerns with respect to service delivery from government agencies and to designing adequate and practicable solutions.
- **Communication and technological considerations:** One-stop shops require communication methods that best serve users while also addressing potential accessibility and interoperability issues.
- **Human capital:** Continuous investment and training of the staff responsible for the day-to-day operations of one-stop shops is crucial.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Continued assessment of the efficacy of one-stop shops (including through quantitative and qualitative indicators as well as users' feedback) is instrumental in identifying areas for improvement and ensuring ongoing relevance.

GATS, SDR Disciplines and other relevant trade agreements

The obligation to establish a “single window”, notably online, does not appear in the GATS. However, over the past 10 to 20 years, and concurrently with the development of digital technologies and the internet, this practice has been developed substantially, and governments have started undertaking commitments in this area at the international level.

While not using the term “single window”, the SDR Disciplines contain a commitment as follows¹²:

Each Member shall, to the extent practicable, avoid requiring an applicant to approach more than one competent authority for each application for authorization. If a service is within the jurisdiction of multiple competent authorities, multiple applications for authorization may be required.¹³

The objective of this paragraph is to minimize the number of competent authorities that applicants need to approach when seeking authorization. However, it does not require authorities that are jointly responsible for granting authorizations under their shared jurisdiction, to collaborate for the purpose of submission of applications and to establish a single entry point. Furthermore, it should be noted that the SDR Disciplines allow WTO members to decide, based on resources and capacity, whether the single window should encompass the entire economy, a particular sector, or a regulatory area.

It is also worth noting that the scope of this commitment is limited to the submission of applications and does not refer specifically to the accessibility of information. With respect to the latter, the SDR Disciplines also contain an encouragement for WTO members to consolidate electronic publications into a single portal.¹⁴

The only other WTO covered agreement containing an obligation for a single window is the TFA, which has adopted a similar facilitation objective to the SDR Disciplines, but for goods trade. Recognizing the practical value of a single window, Article 10.4.1 of the TFA requires WTO members to establish or maintain a single window with a view to facilitating the expeditious movement of goods across borders.¹⁵ Similarly to the SDR Disciplines, the scope of the single window obligation under the TFA is limited to the submission of applications and does not address the publication of

information which is covered in Article 1.2 (Information available through the internet). Furthermore, the TFA requires that the single window is used to communicate final decisions on applications to applicants in a timely manner.¹⁶

It should also be noted that Article 10.4.2 of the TFA reflects an additional GRP principle, which may also be relevant for the establishment of single windows in the services context, although not reflected in the SDR Disciplines. This paragraph states that “where documentation and/or data requirements have already been received through the single window, the same documentation and/or data requirements shall not be requested” by regulatory authorities except in limited circumstances.

Finally, in the context of the TFA, WTO members are required to use information technology to support the single window.¹⁷ While the obligation is set out as “to the extent possible and practicable”, a preference is suggested for fully digitized single windows, rather than physical systems.

PTA practice

The obligation to establish single windows is still relatively rare in PTAs compared to obligations relating to transparency or legal certainty, and predictability of authorization procedures. In line with the SDR Disciplines, obligations relating to the establishment of single windows in services PTAs are mostly drafted in flexible language, which suggests a general hesitance to be fully bound in this area *vis-à-vis* other trading partners. Overall, it appears that governments have a preference to maintain significant discretion for the implementation of single windows at the domestic level.

Nevertheless, flexible obligations can still provide important guidance regarding the main GRP principles and the direction to follow to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of domestic authorization processes. For instance, the EU–Mexico Modernized Global Agreement¹⁸ and the 2020 USMCA¹⁹ mirror the SDR Disciplines by requiring adoption of single windows “to the extent practicable”. The 2020 Hong Kong, China–Australia FTA, however, merely requires the parties to endeavour to avoid requiring an applicant to approach more than one competent authority for each application for authorization.²⁰ One exception is the 2020 Peru–Australia FTA, which omits the flexibility language (“to the extent practicable”) and thus contains a mandatory obligation.²¹

Implementation at the domestic level

While single windows are certainly an important GRP dimension across the economy, their establishment entails significant investment of financial, human, institutional and infrastructure resources, at least in the initial establishment phase (for more information on technical assistance projects on the establishment of single windows, see Box 2). Nevertheless, various indicators point to the fact that, today, single windows systems have become increasingly more widespread at the domestic level.

One example of an online single window is India's National Single Window System (NSWS) – a digital platform that guides the identification and application for approvals according to different requirements applicable across India, including at the sub-national level. Introduced in September 2021, the NSWS serves as a one-stop shop for businesses, integrating services provided by various ministries, departments and state governments.²² The project was part of a broader effort to streamline compliance processes in India, under which the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade eliminated more than 22,000 compliances at both federal and state levels.²³

The NSWS goes well beyond the area of services and offers several key functionalities that benefit business operators more broadly. It provides a centralized "Know Your Approvals" feature, which helps users, through a questionnaire, to identify necessary authorizations. The system also includes a dashboard for managing approvals, allowing users to track their application status, and upload and store documents. These features significantly enhance transparency and reduce the time and effort required to obtain approvals by eliminating the need for multiple applications across various portals or physical visits to government offices.²⁴ Additionally, the NSWS integrates the possibility of asking direct questions to a technical team by connecting through video conferencing tools.

The implementation of the NSWS has been phased over the years. At its launch in 2021, it covered 18 central government departments and nine states. The platform has since expanded significantly and now hosts applications for approvals from 32 central departments and 29 state governments.²⁵ While detailed data on the number of applications received and approvals granted are limited, the NSWS website reports some significant statistics, with over 67,000 approvals being granted through the system.²⁶ The system's continued expansion and adoption across

states and union territories is expected to further enhance its effectiveness in facilitating business operations and attracting investment.

Another interesting case is Singapore.²⁷ In the late 1990s, Singapore recognized the need to streamline its business registration and licensing processes. Responding to feedback from the business community, the government initiated the Online Business Licensing Service (OBLS) project to create a one-stop solution for business registration and licensing, simplifying what was previously a complex, multi-agency process. The project was executed in three stages: conceptualization, policy review and business process re-engineering, and automation. Initially, the agency task force bundled licences based on sectors, prioritizing industries where licensing was more complex. The second step involved reviewing policies and processes for each licence. Among the 156 licences undergoing the initial comprehensive review, several opportunities for streamlining were identified. Some licences were deemed redundant and eliminated, while others were combined where overlap or duplication was found. In certain cases, licences were converted into less onerous instruments (e.g. notification instead of approval).

The OBLS was a fully-fledged one-stop shop online portal which allowed end-users to customize their searches based on their specific business activities. When the end user completed the application, the system would automatically route the request to the relevant government agencies for processing. Apart from consolidating all the information in one portal, the OBLS application also enabled businesses to track the status of their applications and receive automatic messages or email notifications as soon as their applications were processed. The OBLS also enabled successful applicants to pay fees for all required licences in a single consolidated online payment.

The success of the OBLS was evident early on, with notable improvements for both the private sector and the government. The average approval processing time was reduced by 65 per cent, with some cases showing even more dramatic improvements. A cost-benefit analysis conducted after 18 months of operation revealed that businesses benefited from an estimated cost savings of US\$ 27 million due to the OBLS project. Following this success, Singapore further modernized its business licensing system by introducing the GoBusiness portal, which offered additional features and integrated even more approvals for starting, running and growing a business.²⁸

Box 2: UNCTAD digital government programme

United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has established a programme to support governments in leveraging technology to deliver public services quickly and successfully, without requiring IT assistance (i.e. through a no-code platform that allows civil servants to configure without the need for advanced programming skills). Among others, UNCTAD supports the establishment of digital single windows which are based on its eRegistrations system²⁹ – a user-centric solution that digitizes administrative procedures.

The system can be adapted to various processes, such as company registration, construction permits, licences and authorizations. It can handle operations involving only one government agency (such as registering at the business registry) as well as simultaneous multi-agency operations based on a single form (such as registering a company at the tax office, with the municipal council, with social security, at the labour department and also at the business registry). The eRegistrations system ensures interoperability between agencies and offers access to its centralized database where agencies can automatically extract the required information. Additionally, users' data are stored on secure servers, with protected connections and support for electronic signatures, to guarantee data integrity and confidentiality.

The programme also includes digital information and trade portals, digital fiscal and social security services, digital residency and digital documents, plus advisory and training to advance implementation.

For an example of an UNCTAD project to establish a digital single window for starting a business in Benin, see the information sheet below:

CASE STUDY Starting a business in Benin	
BEFORE Before the Benin digital single window was installed	TODAY Since the instalment of Benin's digital single window (monentreprise.bj)
Queue at the APIEx development agency, fill in 5 paper forms and hand in up to 12 documents, including prior notarized copies.	✓ Use any mobile phone to fill in an online form and scan 3 to 5 documents.
Pay fee in cash after queuing at the bank.	✓ Use the same mobile to pay the fee with mobile money or credit card.
Collect certificates 5 days later from APIEx.	✓ Receive certificates 2 hours later by email (fastest in the world).
28,800 companies registered in 2019.	✓ Company registration doubled in the two years following installation, one third by women, half by under 30s, half from outside the capital city. Project costs covered by additional fees.

Source: UNCTAD website.

For more information: [Digital Government World - Digital Single Windows](#)

Notably, the GoBusiness portal also offers personalized help and recommendations for business with “e-advisers” to find information about the licences required.

Mexico is an example of a jurisdiction that has introduced multiple single windows for different purposes. As part of the 2007-2012 National Development Plan, the *Ventanilla Única de Comercio Exterior Mexicana* (Mexican Foreign Trade Single Window) (VUCEM) was established in 2011 with a specific focus on foreign trade. In partnership with a number of ministries and agencies, the VUCEM digitizes customs and non-tariff measures to simplify imports and exports of goods and services and allows users to electronically submit information to comply with applicable regulations.³⁰ Subsequently, in 2016, Mexico also introduced the *Ventanilla Única Nacional* (National Single Window) (VUN) which serves as a platform for communication between government agencies and enterprises, allowing citizens to find and request government services in one place.³¹

Most recently, in 2023, Mexico created the *Ventanilla Única para Inversionistas* (One-Stop Shop for Investors) (VUI) to attract foreign and national investment by providing a simplified and centralized system.³² The VUI provides interested businesses with access to relevant information, such as contacts of competent authorities, requirements and costs, response times, and other relevant information, to invest in Mexico.

In conclusion, single windows have become a core GRP to improve the ease of doing business and reduce

compliance costs for service suppliers. However, single windows are an enabler, not a panacea. When the GATS was concluded in the 1990s, it did not include a requirement to establish single window mechanisms, as business activities mainly took place on paper and through physical interactions. In contrast, the more recent SDR Disciplines (and several services PTAs) encourage minimizing the number of competent authorities involved in authorization processes and consolidating information within a single online portal. The widespread use of flexible language reflects the intention of governments to preserve autonomy for implementation in accordance with legal systems and available resources. Domestic practice indeed varies by scope, function and depth – from sector-specific portals to economy-wide entry points that combine information and electronic submission. Various international benchmarks (e.g. UN EGDI and World Bank GTMI) suggest widespread portal availability but uneven end-to-end digital processing and interoperability. Accordingly, effective single windows are user-centred and integrated within broader administrative simplification strategies: they map procedures, eliminate duplications, enable secure identity/e-signatures and payments, avoid repeat requests for data already provided, and offer status-tracking, clear reasons for rejection and channels for assistance. Framed this way, single windows work *in tandem* with related GRPs – publication, electronic submission, enquiry points and review of decisions – to produce measurable improvements in authorization performance.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The terms are considered interchangeable. In this chapter, we will refer to the term single window for consistency purposes. OECD (2020), p. 10.
- 2 OECD (2020), p. 12.
- 3 OECD (2020), p. 12.
- 4 OECD (2020), p. 12.
- 5 OECD (2020), p. 12.
- 6 OECD (2020), p. 13.
- 7 OECD (2020), p. 27.
- 8 OECD (2020), p. 13.
- 9 OECD (2020), pp. 16-17.
- 10 OECD (2020), pp. 16-17.
- 11 OECD (2020), pp. 18-19.
- 12 SDR Disciplines (WTO, 2021), para. 4.
- 13 SDR Disciplines (WTO, 2021), para. 4.
- 14 SDR Disciplines (WTO, 2021), fn 12 to para. 13. See also subsection 2.3 on “Online publication of information”.
- 15 TFA, Article 10.4.1: “Members shall endeavor to establish or maintain a single window, enabling traders to submit documentation and/or data requirements for importation, exportation, or transit of goods through a single entry point to the participating authorities or agencies.” For further information, see ITC (2020).
- 16 TFA, Article 10.4.1.
- 17 TFA, Article 10.4.4.
- 18 EU–Mexico Modernized Global Agreement, Title on Investment and Trade in Services, Chapter V: Regulatory Framework, Section A: Domestic Regulation (as published on its political conclusion in April 2018 and updated in April 2020 and January 2025), Article 5.2, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/mexico/eu-mexico-agreement/text-agreement_en.
- 19 USMCA (2020), Chapter 15: Cross-border Trade in Services, Article 15.8: Development and Administration of Measures.
- 20 Hong Kong, China–Australia FTA (2020), Chapter 7: Cross-border Trade in Services, Article 7.8: Domestic Regulation.
- 21 Peru–Australia FTA (2020), Article 9.8.4. It should be noted that this obligation does not apply to sectors or measures listed as non-conforming measures or reserved sectors, similar to the SDR Disciplines, which only apply to sectors included in members’ GATS schedule.
- 22 Government of India, National Single Window System, “About NSWS”, <https://www.nsws.gov.in/about-us>.
- 23 Bhardwaj (2021).
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- 27 Molfetas (2019).
- 28 Government of Singapore, GoBusiness portal, “Government e-services for your business”, <https://www.gobusiness.gov.sg/>.
- 29 UNCTAD, “UNCTAD digital government platform”, <https://www.eregistrations.org/>.
- 30 Government of Mexico, “Ventanilla Única de Comercio Exterior Mexicana (VUCEM)”, <https://www.ventanillaunica.gob.mx/vucem/index.html>.
- 31 Government of Mexico, “Ventanilla Única Nacional (VUN)”, <https://www.gob.mx/gobiernoslocales?tab=VUN>.
- 32 Government of Mexico, “Ventanilla Única para Inversionistas (VUI)”, <https://www.inversiones.gob.mx/ventanilla>.

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