

⑧ Enquiry points



KEY INSIGHTS

- Enquiry points are recognized across all trade policy areas as a core GRP supporting two-way information flows between governments and stakeholders, both domestic and foreign; they are also known to reduce search and compliance costs.
- The GATS only contains limited obligations to respond to other WTO members' enquiries and (for developed economies) to facilitate access to market information for service suppliers from developing economies.
- The SDR Disciplines – like many modern services PTAs – extend enquiry mechanisms to all service suppliers and persons seeking to supply a service. However, specificities regarding their implementation are left to the discretion of each jurisdiction, in particular based on resource constraints. In contrast, certain agreements on goods trade (notably the TBT and SPS Agreements, as well as the TFA) spell out additional GRP principles for enquiry points, including maximum time-limits for replies, access to documentation, cost-based fee rules and auxiliary functions (such as supporting public consultations).
- At the domestic level, enquiry points are widespread but heterogeneous. Their structures and functions range from sectoral help desks in individual ministries or agencies to centralized portals for enquiries.

Key features

Effective access to reliable information underpins trade, including trade in services. Although most jurisdictions now meet baseline transparency requirements by publishing their laws and regulations,¹ this does not always provide the necessary clarity for businesses about what concrete steps, requirements and documentation, fees, or timelines those rules entail. Because authorization procedures can be fragmented and complex, service suppliers – particularly small businesses – face high search and compliance costs. Well-designed enquiry points can help reduce these hurdles by contextualizing published rules and providing clear, authoritative and timely guidance. For this reason, they are widely recognized as a core GRP element.

An enquiry point is a formally designated office or mechanism responsible for receiving and responding to individual requests for information about laws, regulations, requirements and procedures. Its main purpose is to facilitate communication between the government and interested stakeholders, including foreign governments, businesses and other relevant stakeholders.

Enquiry points ensure that stakeholders receive clear, accurate, complete and up-to-date information, thereby improving transparency and regulatory compliance. Enquiry points are also instrumental in promoting legitimacy and accountability, as well as building trust among relevant parties. Furthermore, by working as an interface between various government agencies and bodies, enquiry points can promote internal coordination and regulatory consistency (Figure 1).

While there exist different possible forms of enquiry points, the practice shows two main models: a single crossgovernment referral centre, and a dedicated help desk operated by each competent authority.² While a single referral centre can better serve users' interests and

needs, it requires more significant coordination efforts and resources to address questions that may be under the purview of different government bodies.³ On the other hand, an agency-specific enquiry point can ensure faster and more accurate responses, as the staff responsible for answering are specially trained in this area.⁴

Additionally, a combination of the two models is possible to allow requests that fall outside the knowledge base of the single enquiry point to be transferred to the competent agency.⁵ In practice, the functions of an enquiry point are frequently assigned to an existing ministry or regulator.⁶ Alternatively, a new and dedicated mechanism, such as a stand-alone unit, can be entrusted with such a task. Furthermore, where a single window mechanism exists, the enquiry point can be integrated directly within it.⁷

An enquiry point's effectiveness hinges on the availability and visibility of accurate and updated contact information and the services it provides.⁸ Contact details of the enquiry point typically include the postal address, e-mail address, telephone number and operating hours. When accessing enquiry points, stakeholders also benefit from clarity regarding the scope and processing times of enquiries, the formats in which submissions may be made and the manner and timing in which responses can be expected, as well as any fees charged for processing of enquiries.

Through enquiry points, information can be provided in different ways:

- **Orally:** by visiting the enquiry point and talking directly to staff; or contacting the enquiry point by telephone.
- **Electronically:** by e-mail, through specialized online forms, through a dedicated portal, or through an online chat facility, etc.⁹

Figure 1: Enquiry points – Benefits and rationale

Feature	Description	Why it matters
 Transparency and accessibility	Access to all relevant laws, regulations, requirements and procedures	Promotes predictability, lowers search costs and enables compliance
 Legitimacy and accountability	Authoritative, documented responses to specific questions	Builds stakeholder trust and reduces regulatory uncertainty
 Coordination and consistency	Interface between various government agencies and bodies	Ensures accurate and complete responses; reduces inconsistencies between requirements and procedures

Information can be provided in the local language, in English, or in multiple languages (including the language of those making the request).

Besides answering questions, enquiry points can also serve as a repository of relevant information and documentation. In addition, they can be set up to provide an entry point for submitting comments on existing or proposed laws and regulations, thereby supporting governments in designing and implementing relevant measures.¹⁰

GATS, SDR Disciplines and other relevant trade agreements

Considering their key role in enhancing the understanding of and supporting compliance with regulatory frameworks, enquiry points are a standard feature of trade agreements, albeit generally with different scope and beneficiaries.

Article III:4 of the GATS mandates WTO members to establish (within two years from the entry into force of the agreements) enquiry points “to provide specific information to other WTO members, upon request, on (a) all measures of general application and international agreements affecting trade in services, as well as (b) the introduction of any new, or any changes to existing, laws, regulations or administrative guidelines which significantly affect trade in services covered by a member’s specific commitments under GATS and that are subject to the notification requirement.”¹¹ In the area of trade in services, enquiry points are not required to be depositories of laws and regulations. Furthermore, to enhance their visibility and effectiveness, WTO members decided that information on the establishment of enquiry points must be notified under the GATS.¹²

Moreover, GATS Article IV:2 establishes an additional requirement specifically for developed economies, and to the extent possible other WTO members. Such a requirement consists of establishing contact points to facilitate the access of service suppliers from developing economies to information, related to their respective markets, concerning (a) commercial and technical aspects of the supply of services; (b) registration, recognition and obtaining professional qualifications; and (c) the availability of services technology.

Thus, for developed WTO members, the GATS already contains a requirement for information for the benefit of service suppliers, albeit only those from developing economies. While enquiry points are clearly intended to respond to specific information requests, there remains ambiguity around what exactly constitutes facilitating access to the types of information set out in GATS Article IV:2. However, it should be noted that, out of the 150 WTO members that submitted notifications to the WTO, only two (Malawi and Sweden) provided different contact details for the enquiry point under Article III:4 and the contact point under Article IV:2. Furthermore, three WTO members notified specific enquiry points for different particular sectors (Niger, Senegal and Uganda). This suggests that WTO members tend to rely on the same mechanisms to address enquiries from other governments as those from service suppliers of developing countries.¹³

Under the SDR Disciplines, the scope of enquiry points has been expanded to provide the following:

Each Member shall maintain or establish appropriate mechanisms for responding to enquiries from service suppliers or persons seeking to supply a service regarding the measures by Members relating to licensing requirements and procedures, qualification requirements and procedures, and technical standards affecting trade in service.^{FN} A Member may choose to address such enquiries through either the enquiry and contact points established under Articles III and IV of the Agreement or any other mechanisms as appropriate.

FN: It is understood that resource constraints may be a factor in determining whether a mechanism for responding to enquiries is appropriate.¹⁴

The SDR Disciplines go beyond the GATS by requesting that enquiry points also assist service suppliers. This ensures that not only WTO members but also those affected by the laws, i.e. existing or prospective businesses, can directly engage with competent authorities, by asking questions and requesting information.

Notably, the SDR Disciplines refrain from prescribing how enquiries must be addressed. In view of this, each WTO member is allowed to adopt a mechanism within the constraints of its administrative or budgetary resources. Accordingly, a WTO member may establish an enquiry point, contact point or any other mechanism of its choosing provided the mechanism achieves the objective of responding to questions regarding the relevant measures.

For the purposes of comparison, the SPS Agreement (Article 7 and Annex B “Transparency of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Regulations”) also requires each WTO member to maintain “one enquiry point [...], responsible for the provision of answers to all reasonable questions from interested WTO members [...] as well as the provision of relevant documents” regarding a range of sanitary and phytosanitary-related requirements and procedures. In a similar way to GATS Article III:4, the scope of the enquiry point under the SPS Agreement is strictly intergovernmental and does not extend to enquiries from trade operators.

The obligation on enquiry points set out in the TBT Agreement is, however, more detailed and ambitious: Article 10 of the TBT Agreement requires that WTO members ensure that one (or more) enquiry point exists which can answer all reasonable enquiries on technical regulations, standards and conformity assessment procedures. As in the SDR Disciplines, enquiries can come from WTO members as well as from other interested parties. While the TBT Agreement does not provide further guidance with respect to modalities and functioning, it sets out that when for legal or administrative reasons more than one enquiry point is established, the WTO member is required to provide complete and unambiguous information on the scope of responsibility of each of these enquiry points. In addition, it shall ensure that any enquiries addressed to an incorrect enquiry point shall promptly be conveyed to the correct enquiry point.¹⁵

Unlike the GATS, TBT enquiry points serve as centralized hubs for laws and regulations and are required to provide access to relevant documentation.¹⁶ In particular, Article 10.5 of the TBT Agreement requires that, upon WTO members’ request, developed country WTO members shall provide translations of documents in English, French or Spanish.

Under the TFA, WTO members may decide whether to establish or maintain the operation of one or more enquiry points to handle trade-related enquiries in the framework of different border control agencies, including based on their resources and capacity.¹⁷ Furthermore, the task of enquiry points may be assigned to a private sector entity; in this case, government agencies would be required to monitor and assess the performance and the accuracy of the information provided.¹⁸

In a similar way to the TBT and SPS Agreements, the TFA limits the scope of WTO members’ obligation to responses to “reasonable enquiries”.¹⁹ In view of this, it has been argued that, under the TFA, enquiry points are about questions of a general nature and not specific to a consignment.²⁰ Upon traders’ request, enquiry points are also tasked with providing documentation and forms required to comply with the existing import, export and transit procedures.²¹

While the TFA does not require specific ways of providing information and documents (in paper or electronic form)

Figure 2: GRPs in the area of enquiry points

Functions	Models	Language of the information provision
- Responding to enquiries from governments - Responding to enquiries from interested persons - Repository of laws and documentation - Platform for public consultations - Supporting governments in designing and implementing regulations - Resolving problems encountered by users	- Single referral centre - Dedicated help desks within competent authorities - Integration in single window mechanisms - Function assigned to private sector with government supervision	- Local language(s) - English - Multiple languages (including language of users)
	Methods for providing information - Visit to office - Telephone - E-mail - Specialized online form - Online chat	Other relevant GRPs - Free of charge / fees commensurate with costs - Answers provided within reasonable time frames

Source: WTO/World Bank.

nor the language, it provides guidance on two additional GRP elements related to enquiry points:

- **Fees:** Article 1.3.3 encourages WTO members to not demand payment of a fee for answering enquiries. Should a fee be requested, the TFA requires WTO members to limit the amount and charges to the approximate cost of the service rendered. Following the principle of non-discrimination, fees should be the same for locals and foreigners.²²
- **Time frames for replies:** Article 1.3.4 provides that enquiry points shall answer enquiries “within a reasonable time” set by each WTO member. In this light, WTO members can determine a “reasonable period” at their discretion, although this can differ according to the nature or complexity of the request.

Figure 2 provides an overview of GRPs in the area of enquiry points.

PTA practice

The requirement to establish enquiry points is a standard element of modern services PTAs. In many of them, such as the GATS, the right to request information is limited to other governments. For example, Article 8.14.6 of the 2022 RCEP only requires that questions from other parties are responded to regarding any new, or modified existing laws, regulations or administrative guidelines, or international agreements, that affect or pertain to trade in services.

Other agreements, however, largely replicate the obligation contained in the SDR Disciplines by extending the right to request information to service suppliers, while providing similar flexibility for

implementation based on available resources. This is the case, for example, of Article 10.11.1 of the 2018 CPTPP and Article 9.11 of the 2020 Peru-Australia FTA. While the 2020 Hong Kong, China-Australia FTA (Article 7.10) and the 2012 United States-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (Article 11.8) both contain an obligation on the establishment of appropriate mechanisms to respond to enquiries from interested persons, they also specify requirements for resource and budget capacity – suggesting a higher level of ambition for implementation. Another interesting example is the 2024 EU-Central America Association Agreement. Article 178 mandates the establishment of enquiry points, but, unlike the SDR Disciplines, it does not provide flexibility for implementation. Furthermore, as in the GATS, it specifies that “[e]nquiry points need not be depositories of laws and regulations.”

Overall, it is worth noting that none of the PTAs examined determine further GRP principles for enquiry points, like the TBT and SPS Agreements, or the TFA.²³

Implementation at the domestic level

Looking at domestic practice, while enquiry points exist when it comes to services trade, it appears that no systematic information is available on how they function and what their main features are.

Overall, the majority of WTO members have notified an enquiry or contact point²⁴, with 136 providing basic information such as an e-mail address (Box 1). Among the latter, however, only 22 have included a reference to a website. It should be noted that in the limited instances where websites have been notified, these

Box 1: Notifications of enquiry points under the GATS

Under the GATS, WTO members have notified the following:

- Six WTO members have provided an e-mail address (either of an individual person or an office);
- 12 WTO members have provided a phone number (either of an individual person or an office);
- 110 WTO members have provided both an e-mail address and a phone number;
- 20 WTO members have provided an e-mail address, a phone number, as well as a website;
- One WTO member has provided an e-mail address and a website;
- One WTO member has provided a phone number and a website.

Source: WTO official document S/ENQ/78/Rev.25, 18 February 2025.

generally are the official websites of relevant ministries, departments, or office (for example, ministry of trade, ministry of foreign trade, ministry of commerce). This is the case also for developed economies, such as the EU which, as enquiry and contact point, notified the office of the Directorate-General for Trade in Brussels.

The EU has also provided a phone number, an e-mail address, as well as the reference to the EU Access2Markets online portal which provides general information relevant for those considering trading services.²⁵ The portal contains an online web form to contact the authorities.²⁶ The UK has followed a similar approach; under the GATS, it has notified an enquiry and contact point with an e-mail address, a phone number, and a link to the website of the Department for Business and Trade (trade policy, implementation and negotiations, trade in services).²⁷ Interestingly, the portal provides further links to dedicated webpages and contacts, particularly on (i) requiring support on setting up and doing business in the UK, as well as (ii) requesting information on export-related issues for UK-based businesses.

While the practice on enquiry points may vary among jurisdictions and different areas of trade, it is worth highlighting that citizens' right to request information from the government is at this time enshrined in the foundational regulatory instruments of certain countries. This is the case, for instance, in Colombia where Article 23 of the 1991 Constitution embodies the "right of petition". Article 23 entitles any interested person to submit a question to the government regardless of the person's nationality, i.e. including foreigners. This includes *inter alia* requesting access to documents or receiving information on laws and regulatory procedures in writing or orally, free of charge. To achieve the Constitution's objectives, Colombia emphasizes the use of any "appropriate mechanism" to submit petitions to any governmental authority or agency, any private entity exercising delegated powers and any private association.²⁸

In the specific case of trade in services through commercial presence (mode 3), the practice related to enquiry points is generally more advanced. Investment promotion agencies often function as enquiry points for interested investors. For example, the Guyana Office for Investment (Go-Invest) serves as a primary contact for investors to establish their activity in Guyana and facilitate their operations throughout the business lifecycle.²⁹ Go-Invest assists in providing information on incentives available to investors and regulations relevant to the sectors of interest. It also develops profiles on

various investment opportunities in Guyana as well as supporting investors in obtaining the necessary concessions, authorizations and permits.

Furthermore, Go-Invest works with the government with a view to designing and implementing policies that are adequate to the needs and interests of potential investors. The Go-Invest website contains an online chat facility which allows users to obtain immediate replies to specific questions. The website also contains detailed information on various investment opportunities in the services sectors (including financial, education and health services),³⁰ as well as an application form for an investment preliminary screening.³¹

In conclusion, enquiry points are now recognized in trade policy as a core GRP that lowers search costs, enables the flow of information between governments and relevant stakeholders, and facilitates access to complete information. In services, however, the binding international baseline remains modest: GATS Article III:4 confines the obligation to respond to other WTO members' requests for information and does not require enquiry points to act as depositories of laws; Article IV:2 adds an obligation for developed WTO members to facilitate access to market information for services suppliers from developing economies. In contrast, the SDR Disciplines extend to all service suppliers' access to enquiry points, but conditions their implementation based on resource constraints. Other WTO agreements offer clearer service-quality cues. The TBT Agreement requires enquiry points to answer all reasonable enquiries and provide access to relevant documents, including translations upon request; the TFA also encourages no-fee or cost-based replies. Likewise, domestic practice ranges significantly from sectoral help desks housed in individual ministries or agencies to the establishment of centralized portals that route enquiries (regardless of the sector) through a fully integrated information system. GATS enquiry-point notifications – although sporadic and often sparse in detail – suggest that enquiry points exist in most, if not all, jurisdictions, and expect competent offices to respond to enquiries. Taken together, GATS notifications confirm that enquiry points are already widespread in services, but that there may also be room to be more ambitious, notably by borrowing from the clearer service-quality benchmarks found in other trade in goods-related deals. Aligning these benchmarks – including on timeliness, cost and language – would enhance the practical value of enquiry points and further reduce compliance costs for service suppliers, especially small ones.

ENDNOTES

1 For more information, see subsection 2.3 on “Online Publication of Information”.

2 UNECE (2022), p. 15; WTO (2018), p. 12.

3 UNECE (2022), p. 15.

4 UNECE (2022), p. 15.

5 UNECE (2022), p. 15.

6 WTO (2018), p. 12.

7 For more information, see subsection 2.4 on “Single Window”.

8 UNECE (2022), p. 16.

9 UNECE (2022), p. 16.

10 WTO (2018), pp. 54-55. For more information, please see subsections 2.7 on “Stakeholder Engagement” and 2.12 on “Regulatory Impact Assessment”.

11 GATS, Article III:4, with modifications based on preceding paragraphs 1 and 3

12 WTO, Council for Trade in Services, Decision on the Notification of the Establishment of Enquiry and Contact Points, official document S/L/23, 27 June 1996.

13 The latest compilation of contact and enquiry points is contained in WTO official document S/ENQ/78/Rev.25, 18 February 2025.

14 SDR Disciplines (WTO, 2021), para. 20.

15 TBT Agreement, Article 10.2.

16 TBT Agreement, Article 10.3.

17 TFA, Article 1.3.1.

18 UNECE (2022), p. 6.

19 TFA, Article 1.3.1.

20 UNECE (2022), p. 6.

21 UNECE (2022), p. 6; TFA, Article 1.3.4.

22 UNECE (2022), p. 6.

23 It should be noted that the recent Agreement on Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD Agreement), for trade in services through commercial presence, requires the establishment or maintenance of one or more focal points

or appropriate mechanisms to respond to enquiries from (i) investors seeking to invest and (ii) existing investors, and assist them in obtaining relevant information from competent authorities (Article 22). Enquiries should be responded to “within a reasonable time” and the parties “should not require fees for answering enquiries or assisting investors in obtaining information”. Additionally, such mechanisms “may be endowed with additional functions, such as resolving problems encountered by investors or recommending measures to improve the investment.”

24 The following WTO members have not notified enquiry points: Benin, Chad, Djibouti, Eswatini, Fiji, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Papua New Guinea, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Vanuatu and Yemen. Additionally, Comoros and Timor-Leste have two years to submit their notifications following their accession to the WTO in 2024. See also WTO official document S/ENQ/78/Rev.25, 18 February 2025.

25 European Commission, Access2Markets, “Services”, <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/content/services>. See also WTO official document S/ENQ/78/Rev.25, 18 February 2025.

26 European Commission, Access2Markets, “Contact”, <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/contact-form>.

27 UK Government, “Department for Business and Trade”, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-business-and-trade>. See also WTO official document S/ENQ/78/Rev.25, 18 February 2025.

28 Note that, under the GATS, Colombia has designated the Ministerio de Comercio, Industria y Turismo, Dirección de Relaciones Comerciales as the enquiry point, and the Ministerio de Comercio, Industria y Turismo, Dirección de Inversión Extranjera, Servicios y Propiedad Intelectual as the contact point. Both ministry offices respond to the same phone number and are located at the same address in Bogotá.

29 Government of Guyana, Guyana Office for Investment (Go-Invest), “Invest & Grow in Guyana”, <https://www.guyanainvest.gov.gy/invest>.

30 Government of Guyana, Guyana Office for Investment (Go-Invest), “Services Investment Portfolio”, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hFGj0qluyy3M3ob_g0NgmkGK71R2amEn/view.

31 Government of Guyana, Guyana Office for Investment (Go-Invest), “Guyana Office for Investment Preliminary Screening Form”, https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScgpNlgpMKTxGODFeZqPQIQzACtu-zu_tDmkq77s30FihtMnA/viewform.



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