

# Understanding International Trade Statistics

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The WTO Secretariat and its predecessor – the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) Secretariat – have been providing trade statistics since 1948. These data have been regularly published in annual reports, which have changed in design and coverage over the years to keep up with the changing needs of users of the reports.

We asked Hubert Escaith, WTO Chief Statistician, to tell us about how International Trade Statistics came about and how it has changed over the years.

## When did the WTO first start to compile international trade statistics?

The WTO, originally known as the GATT, started compiling international trade statistics as early as 1948, when the GATT was founded. The organization's first annual report – published in September 1949 – was entitled "The Attack on Trade Barriers" and acted as a first progress report on the operations of the GATT. Subsequent editions were entitled "Liberating World Trade" (June 1950), and "GATT in Action" (February 1952). These reports contained statistical tables on merchandise trade, with pre-GATT data (from 1938) sourced from the League of Nations and later from the United Nations. These early reports provide

an important source of information on the changing nature of world trade. It's interesting to note, for example, that the leading exporter in 1948 was the United States while the leading importer was the United Kingdom.

## When did the first international trade statistics report come out?

The first GATT international trade statistics report was published in June 1953. It described trends and prospects for international merchandise trade and production by commodity, with data broken down by industrial and non-industrial countries and with specific data for the Eastern Trading Area, a major trading bloc of that time consisting of Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Soviet Union, China, Mongolia, North Korea and Viet Nam. The report also contained a section on data sources and methodology.

In October 1958, a special edition of the report was prepared by a panel of experts for the Thirteenth Session of the Contracting Parties to the GATT. Examining past, present and future trends in international trade, this issue became a key reference point for future editions, establishing a format that was to be followed for many years to come.

## How has the publication changed over the years?

Starting in 1988, the *International Trade Report* was published in two volumes, with one volume devoted to an analysis of developments in a particular area of world trade, such as agriculture (1988) and services (1989), while the second volume provided statistical tables and charts. Following the creation of the WTO in 1995, the special topics of the first volume included "trade and foreign direct investment" (1996) and "trade and competition policy" (1997). In 1998, the publication became one volume and was renamed "International Trade Statistics". In 2007, the report was extended to cover more detailed international trade in services data.

## What is included in this year's report?

This year's publication includes data from 2000 to 2010, showing trends over the past decade.



For comparison purposes, the benchmark year is 2005, with growth rates indicated for the 2005-2010 period.

### Why the change in design for this year's publication?

The WTO is committed to providing data that is packaged in the most useful way possible.

A particular challenge for statisticians has always been to make the numbers do the talking, for both experts and the general public. In this age of abundant and often conflicting information, the challenge no longer lies in producing data but rather in disseminating the information as effectively as possible and in enabling the user to build an informed opinion about the underlying trends and patterns. It is imperative for decision-makers, whether they be policy-makers, academics or business people, to have the information they need to make informed decisions.

A particular aim of this year's report has been to illustrate statistical trends and patterns in a much more comprehensible way through the use of charts and maps and to explain to our readers where all the data comes from.

Through the use of illustrations and cross-referencing to more detailed data and technical notes, we hope to enhance the usefulness of the report and the significance of the data it contains.

### How is the publication structured?

The publication consists of four main parts.

Chapter I focuses on world trade developments. Chapter II covers developments in merchandise trade, with data broken down by commodity. Chapter III covers trade in commercial services. Each of these chapters begins with illustrations of the main trends and some key facts and figures with links to the more detailed tables that follow. Chapter IV provides definitions of the regions and the classifications used in the publication as well as full details of the sources for the data.

“Our aim has been to produce a short, informative document easily read by anyone who is interested, either professionally or otherwise, in international trade. It has been thought that [such] a synopsis would be of interest to the general reader as a background to a description of the work of the CONTRACTING PARTIES.”

Eric Wyndham White,  
First Executive Secretary  
of the GATT.

Extract from the First GATT international trade statistics report published in 1953.

