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**Committee on Technical Barriers to Trade
Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures**

OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF THE EPING SPS&TBT PLATFORM

NOTE BY THE SECRETARIAT

The ePing SPS&TBT Platform was officially launched on the margins of the TBT Committee meeting held on 13 July 2022, with the participation of senior officials from the three partner agencies, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the International Trade Center (ITC) and the WTO. This document provides a record of the launch event.

1 WELCOMING REMARKS

1. The Chair of the TBT Committee, Mr Anwar Hussain Shaik (India) welcomed all to the official launch of the new ePing SPS&TBT Platform¹. As the ePing Platform contained regulatory information managed under both the SPS and TBT Committees, he first gave the floor to the Chair of the SPS Committee, Mr Tang-Kai Wang (Chinese Taipei), who recalled that the new platform, which went live on 28 March 2022, integrated the SPS and TBT transparency tools, as well as the former ePing alert system. By having all these functionalities in one place, the new ePing Platform was a formidable tool for improving transparency. In particular, it could be used to facilitate the work of the SPS and TBT committees, to fulfil notification obligations, and to strengthen collaboration between the public and private sectors.

2 STATEMENTS BY UNDESA, ITC AND WTO

2.1 Ms Francesca Spatolisano, Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations²

2. It is a great pleasure to participate in the launch of the new ePing global alert system for Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT). It is unfortunate that I am not able to join you in person. However, allow me to provide some remarks remotely to contribute to this important event. Since its birth in 2016, ePing has grown exponentially and has now well over 10,000 users from 185 countries. Almost half of the registered users are from the public sector, 40% from the private sector, and the remainder from NGOs and academia. This continuous growth, as well as the direct feedback that we have received from the field through our capacity development projects, is clear evidence of its success. ePing was developed initially as a pilot version by my department, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, as a result of assessments carried out in several Least Developed Countries (LDCs) that showed that public and private sector stakeholders were not accessing crucial product requirements and export markets information in a timely manner. ePing provides this information through notification alerts via email and by providing a platform which facilitates a dialogue between the private and public sector. The platform also allows users to connect with other stakeholders at the national and international level.

3. The renewed ePing platform launched today, now streamlining various important trade data sources and more user friendly, is most welcome. Also, in recognition of the developmental impact of mobile technology, an ePing smartphone app was funded by DESA and is soon ready to be used by smartphone users all over the world. We are proud that ePing is a successful joint initiative, as we in DESA partner in this endeavour with the World Trade Organization and the International

¹ <http://www.epingalert.org/en>.

² Delivered through pre-recorded video.

Trade Centre. Today, after 6 years of joint activities, our inter-agency collaboration shows the world that, by using the expertise of different development organisations, we can address real-life problems, reach more people and move from dialogue to action. Since the launch of ePing, requests for training and assistance for the implementation of ePing in LDCs and non-LDCs have greatly increased. More training workshops are planned for the coming years. For example, together with our partners, we in DESA are currently assisting countries that are graduating from the list of LDCs. It is my hope that the renewed ePing system will be increasingly recognized as a concrete example of how to foster a global partnership for sustainable development by fostering knowledge and export opportunities for developing countries. We in DESA continue to be committed to the ePing tripartite partnership and, in line with our mandate and the 2030 Agenda, look forward to continue working with you to deliver ePing to interested countries. I thank you for your attention and I wish you a very successful event.

2.2 Ms Dorothy Tembo, Deputy Executive Director, International Trade Centre

4. I am pleased to be with you today to launch this new ePing phase. It's great to be back at the WTO and on a podium with my dear friend Jean-Marie and so many distinguished colleagues. In 2016, ITC was proudly part of the collective effort with the UNDESA and the WTO to set up this online alert mechanism for Sanitary and Phytosanitary and Technical Barriers to Trade notifications. It's my great pleasure to be here on behalf of my Executive Director and the whole ITC family as we formally hand over the ePing mechanism to the WTO. It couldn't be in better hands. Some may wonder why such a technical tool matters. It's easy to forget sometimes that the lack of transparency on the updates of trade regulations has a high cost. Companies struggle to make sense of the multitude of health and safety requirements, product regulations, testing and certification procedures and other measures necessary for reach international markets. This burden is especially high for the micro and small firms in developing and least developed countries – which, after all, have been ITC's stakeholders since we were set up by the then-GATT and UN almost sixty years ago. ITC business surveys conducted in more than 70 countries reveal that half of business trade obstacles are related to SPS and TBT measures. These obstacles are challenging. That's why we set up ePing to provide up-to-date information that businesses need to stay informed and thereby reducing obstacles to trade.

5. We are also proud to see that the team has not rested on its laurels and is continually working to improve ePing's possibilities. When we launched the platform, our shared priority was to make ePing system more accessible internationally, notably through partnerships with local institutions to translate the notifications into languages beyond English, French, and Spanish. Last year, this goal came true with a pilot project in Viet Nam. The Vietnamese version of ePing helps businesses receive information in a timely manner about regulatory changes in partner countries. This innovative project also included a translation function from legal to business language. We wanted users to clearly understand what the changes concretely mean for the businesses in question, and the impact which they are likely to have. This successful experience in Viet Nam encourages us to move forward and continue working to make this a reality in other WTO Members.

6. Today, we pass on the torch of the technical maintenance of the platform to the WTO. However, we would like to emphasize this is not the end of our successful collaboration:

- We will continue investing in sharing knowledge through a network of ITC local certified trainers on market access and non-tariff measures in our target countries.
- We will continue to put our expertise at the service of the MSMEs to support local traders reach global markets.
- We will continue to foster dialogue between the business community and the public sector through our ePing dissemination activities.

7. We are confident that the new features and improvements provided by this new ePing version will pave the road for the growth: both in the number of users benefiting from the platform to stay informed, as well as anticipating and better understanding regulatory changes in export destination markets. Let me close by saying that ITC renews today its commitment to be an ePing champion. I firmly believe that with this platform, we can help small business go global, change lives and achieve the SDGs.

2.3 Mr Jean-Marie Paugam, WTO Deputy Director-General

8. It is very easy to fish with pesticides: you pour the pesticide; the fish comes belly up to the surface and you just have to collect. Now, it will not be so easy to sell a fish with pesticides. Not only because it is probably a crime in most countries but at any rate because there are some technical standards and regulations which would absolutely prohibit such a dangerous product.

9. Technical standards and regulations are the reason why we are gathering today, to celebrate the launch of the ePing SPS-TBT Platform. As suggested with my rather extreme example of fishing with pesticides, standards and regulations, the WTO rule book fully recognizes the legitimacy, use and value of these regulations, for all sorts of obvious reasons. At the same time, the WTO recognizes that they can have a significant impact on trade flows. Thus, our mission is to preserve the integrity of the world trading system by upholding the overarching principles of transparency and non-discrimination, which are cornerstones of the TBT and SPS Agreements. Transparency ensures predictability for public and private stakeholders to get information on regulatory developments, whether they are about protecting the environment, ensuring food safety, preventing the spread of pests – or even responding to COVID-19, and many other policy objectives.

10. The centrepiece of this transparency effort relies on one commitment from our Members: that is notifications. It just means that Members have to say to other Members what they do, to inform them and give them an opportunity to engage. And our Members do it quite well! Around 77,000 notifications were distributed through the TBT and SPS Committees since 1995. Last year alone, the WTO circulated almost 6,000 TBT and SPS notifications, or more than 110 per week on average. It represents close to 75% of all notifications circulated in the WTO, under all Agreements. An increasing share of these notifications are submitted by developing Members, and some of the least developed Members are among the top notifiers. I can only encourage you to maintain this level of engagement. The more notifications are shared, the more valuable the process becomes. And once you have notified, we take care of the rest. It is our job to make sure that everyone can benefit from your transparency efforts. That is precisely what the ePing platform is about.

11. The platform was created back in 2016, by UNDESA, ITC and the WTO. The idea was sparked by a recommendation in the TBT Committee and then expanded. I would like to commend and thank our partners for developing it with us. There are three key features of ePing that I want to underline:

- It is an alert service, that allows users, more than 17,000 registered today, to receive updates on product requirements.
- it is an inclusive service, that brings together all interested stakeholders - public and private, domestic and international - under one roof. It facilitates regulatory monitoring for all of them.
- it is a digital service, up to date with state-of-the-art advanced technologies. ePing is now *the* one-stop-shop for tracking notifications, specific trade concerns and related documents. I am also happy to announce that a first version of an ePing mobile App has just been released and is now available in the App stores, making it easier for users to track notifications of interest to them.

12. This is particularly relevant for the private sector and in regions where the mobile phone or tablet is more widely used than a personal computer, in particular in developing countries. The App is a novelty: not only for the ePing project – but also for the WTO. Alert, inclusive, digital. For these reasons, an increasing number of Members, developed and developing alike, are integrating ePing into their domestic transparency and outreach mechanisms. The Secretariat stands ready to provide technical assistance to that end. We look forward to expanding the use of ePing and our successful collaboration with UNDESA and ITC.

3 DISCUSSION

13. The Chair of the TBT Committee thanked the representatives of the three partner organizations as well as their staff who had worked so diligently to offer this improved service. He recalled that in November 2021, in the context of its Ninth Triennial Review, the TBT Committee had adopted a

series of recommendations related to transparency, one of which had called for the integration of TBT online tools into a more comprehensive and centralized platform. He welcomed the rapid and successful delivery of this mandate, in close consultation with delegations, stating that ePing would also be instrumental in advancing with many of the other recommendations on transparency. The Chair said that using ePing would further improve the implementation and benefits of transparency and encouraged Members to reach out to ePing partner agencies with feedback to enable further adjustments and improvements to the platform. In summing up, he said that the ePing tool could only benefit their work, and assist in facilitating reliable and safe trade for stakeholders.

14. The representative of the United States expressed her delegation's heartfelt appreciation to the WTO, especially the colleagues in the TBT Secretariat, as well as the IT colleagues, who had worked tirelessly to make the ePing SPS&TBT Platform a reality. She noted that this undertaking was a culmination of several years' worth of dedicated effort to turn a recommendation from the WTO membership into a reality. Prior to ePing, Members needed to develop individual solutions to the challenges of creating awareness of and sharing information about TBT with their stakeholders.

15. In the last several years, the WTO TBT Secretariat, in collaboration with the ITC and UNDESA, had undertaken a major project to create and upgrade the ePing system for all WTO Members. Officially available in upgraded form in March 2022 as the ePing SPS&TBT platform, this online system provided access to notifications and statements on Specific Trade Concerns (STCs) made by WTO Members under the SPS and TBT Agreements, and distributed by the WTO from 16 January 1995 to present. ePing allowed all interested stakeholders to browse notifications on past as well as new draft and updated product regulations, food safety and animal and plant health standards and regulations, to locate information on trade concerns discussed in the WTO SPS and TBT Committees and information on SPS/TBT Enquiry Points and notification authorities, and to follow and review current and past notifications on products, food safety and animal and plant health measures and/or markets of interest.

16. Anyone worldwide with internet and/or mobile (cellular) network access could register with ePing to receive customized email alerts and learn of proposed product requirements in markets of interest. National notification authorities, including the United States, also relied on ePing to submit notifications under the SPS and TBT Agreements, thereby streamlining and allowing for customization of the process national SPS and TBT Enquiry Points use to meet their obligations under those Agreements. Additionally, ePing offered powerful communication features allowing collaboration between international and national stakeholders. As of 31 December 2021, ePing had 15,443 registered users from 184 countries and territories. At last count on 7 July, the United States had over 850 national ePing subscribers, and expected registration by national stakeholders to increase in the coming weeks and months. The Notify US system, created and used by the United States since 2003 to facilitate awareness of notifications made by Members to the TBT Committee, would be discontinued later in 2022. Subscribers to that system were being directed to the ePing SPS&TBT Platform to receive notification alerts. This change was new and exciting, yet also a daunting prospect for some of the US stakeholders.

17. While the ePing SPS&TBT Platform had been built and officially launched, and Members were increasingly reliant on the system to make information accessible to stakeholders as well as meet their notification obligations, the US recognized that the ePing SPS&TBT Platform was a work in progress. Efforts and planning continued behind the scenes and within the SPS and TBT Committees to facilitate the use and adoption of the ePing platform by stakeholder groups around the world, to ensure understanding, access and use by all WTO Members, especially Least-Developed Countries (LDCs) and their constituents. Additionally, the WTO's ongoing upgrades and planned improvements to its other eTools, such as Documents Online³ and the continued improvement of the WTO's new Notifications Portal⁴, may require integration and compatibility with ePing to ensure all of the WTO e-tools functioned logically and optimally for all users, and users had the information and materials they needed to understand how to use these systems and recognize when they were not functioning as intended.

18. The ePing Platform had been remarkably useful immediately upon its release earlier in 2022, and the United States was grateful for the quick resolution of technical difficulties reported with the

³ https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/FE_Search/FE_S_S005.aspx.

⁴ <https://notifications.wto.org/en>.

system, as well as the quick responses to questions. Her delegation would welcome seeing continued enhancement of communication and administrative features in the Platform, especially concerning the provision of texts that are not provided by Members at the time notification is made, as well as (additional) tutorials and user guides to facilitate use of the system. To that end, the US looked forward to further opportunities to engage with other WTO Members and the WTO Secretariat. Learning from domestic stakeholders and from each other about the WTO's eTools had been and would continue to be invaluable to ensure optimized use and adoption by all. In summing up, the US stressed that the creation and launch of ePing and now the ePing SPS&TBT Platform had been a major development in enabling equal access to tools and information needed by all Members to meet their obligations, enhance and guide communications with their stakeholder and other national Enquiry Points, and facilitate the use and awareness of information about technical barriers to trade to all sectors and stakeholder groups. She encouraged the Committee to continue the good work and collaboration that had created such a powerful and indispensable tool.

19. The representative of Mexico thanked the secretariats of all three organizations for the efforts taken in recent years leading to the launch of this dynamic ePing update and which was extremely important for the TBT and SPS Committees, recalling that this had fulfilled an obligation to Members which was raised in the Ninth Triennial Review. The ePing platform allowed the organization to function better, improved transparency and facilitated access to crucial information to make sure WTO obligations were fulfilled, in addition to being a key tool in the oversight of how these measures impacted operators in their work. The updated platform, she said, would allow Mexican industries to have access to relevant information for the marketing of their products, as well as the possibility of enriching the work of Committees in being updated on potential trade irritants and to address them in an early manner to overcome potential barriers and unnecessary costs. ePing strengthened the message of the importance of cooperation in transparency and fulfilment of international standards. She underlined that it was a key message to be reiterated to their operators.

20. The previous day, panellists had shared the benefits of using ePing and Mexico was confident that this would be a superhighway for the organization within the work of this important Committee, underlining the importance of providing timely and accessible information in facilitating trade. ePing allowed the Committee to take a major step forward in efforts to improve the operationalization and implementation of the TBT Agreement. The TBT and SPS teams were thanked for their availability and knowledge sharing in recent capacity building events delivered to government and private sector; moreover, improvements in cooperation and coordination had been seen in their industry. Mexico stressed its availability to continue to work on improving online tools in the future and the functioning of the TBT and SPS Committees.

21. The representative of the European Union expressed appreciation for the words of the opening speakers and congratulated the TBT Secretariat for the hard work in achieving this integrated online tool, key to facilitating the work of all Members and stakeholders. The EU believed that transparency was crucial to the work of the TBT Committee and that the new ePing platform was essential to improve this. She recalled that the EU had participated in the pilot project and indeed had switched from the well-working EU system to adopt the ePing platform. The European Union would continue to engage with the WTO, with all Members and stakeholders to continue to work on this important subject to improve transparency and the work of the TBT.

22. The representative of Colombia joined others in congratulating the Secretariat for the launch of ePing and highlighted two points. Firstly, the importance of consulting SPS and TBT notifications under one roof and being able to follow up on these – single window for regulators, government entities and private sector. Secondly, ePing promoted dialogue between government agencies. In Colombia, it acted as a tool that brought together regulators and facilitated interaction and teamwork among agencies in the government. Regarding the new interface, thanks to the Secretariat's excellent work, including consultation of Geneva- and capital-based officials, the needs expressed had been responded to through many improvements in the interface and accessibility. Colombia backed the Chair's comment on the new tool and new challenges by encouraging the Secretariat to keep up the good work, updates and good implementation.

23. The representative of Viet Nam expressed thanks and congratulations to the ePing partners team as well as to ITC and WTO for successfully developing the Vietnamese version of ePing, officially launched in April 2021. It had helped enterprises, especially MSMEs, in accessing information on product requirements; as language was a huge barrier in many developing countries, the Vietnamese version benefitted their business community.

24. The representative of Canada joined other delegations in congratulating the Secretariat for the announcement of the new ePing, especially as the work had been carried out in a difficult situation where in-person meetings were not possible and in a very short timeframe. The integration of other tools resulted was an efficient instrument responding to the needs of all users.

25. The representative of Australia expressed its congratulations to the Secretariat, partner organizations, and all those who had contributed to the development of the new integrated ePing platform, in particular the TBT team. Australia found the integration of the various tools into one invaluable in supporting transparency in the area of TBT and in facilitating trade, and looked forward to using and learning ePing's various functions.

26. The representative of the United Kingdom joined others in congratulating the Secretariat on the launch of this platform, thanking the organizations that had made it possible. The platform's usefulness and relevance to policy makers and other stakeholders could not be underestimated. With transparency being one of the key elements of the TBT and SPS Agreements, the platform facilitated work in these areas by ensuring access to key regulatory information. The UK would continue to raise awareness of the importance of this platform with its stakeholders and would work together with the partners to make sure that it remained the one-stop-shop for accessing information. The UK looked forward to testing the mobile phone application.

27. The representative of the World Bank Group (International Finance Corporation) praised the launch of the ePing platform, noting its importance for regulatory and policy making areas, especially for developing countries transforming their food safety systems. In its worldwide work at business and government levels, the World Bank would bring the platform to the attention of its stakeholders.

28. The Chair concluded the launch session by thanking the representatives of partner agencies as well as the Chair of the SPS Committee for their valuable contributions.
