

UNCTAD Trade Policy Dialogue

The multilateral trading system in the post-pandemic “new normal”

Friday, 25 September 2020 (online)

Organized by the Division on International Trade and Commodities (DITC) in cooperation with the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) Secretariat

Participation and registration

Online registration is mandatory and should be completed through the following link:
<https://unctad.org/en/pages/MeetingDetails.aspx?meetingid=2413>.

To facilitate approval of registration, Permanent Missions of States members of the Board are requested to inform the UNCTAD secretariat of the name(s) and title(s) of their representative(s). Kindly note that the letter of credentials of representatives should be uploaded to the system during the online registration process.

Other participants (i.e. representatives of members of UNCTAD that are not members of the Board and representatives of specialized agencies, non-governmental organizations and intergovernmental bodies wishing to attend as observers) are also eligible to participate in the session as observers and should register online by the same date using the link above.

Any enquiries concerning registration should be sent to the UNCTAD secretariat, Intergovernmental Support Service, Palais des Nations, CH-1211 Geneva 10; email: meetings@unctad.org.

Background

The global COVID-19 pandemic and its economic consequences present yet another daunting challenge to the multilateral trading system (MTS). The effectiveness of multilateral trade cooperation is being tested against uncoordinated crisis-mitigation measures taken by the member states with cross-border spillover effect. The crisis hit the MTS in the midst of the systemic impasse caused by continued global trade tensions and the stalemate in the appointment of WTO Appellate Body members, and a reinvigorated WTO reform agenda. Beyond the direct effect of the pandemic, the post-COVID-19 “new normal” will affect the way we trade and the way economic and social activities are conducted.

The COVID-19 emergency measures and economic lockdowns severely affected developing countries, particularly those which are dependent on imports of essential goods, those which generate much of income from services trade (e.g. tourism and remittances from migrant workers) or manufactured exports to partners in global value chains, and those countries whose export earnings fluctuate with world commodity prices. With direct adverse impacts upon employment and people's earning capacity, the pandemic is feared to undo much of the progress made towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG1 (poverty alleviation), SDG2 (food security), SDG3 (good health) and SDG8 (decent work).

Such evolutions call for new orientations and modalities of multilateral trade cooperation at a time when trade is expected to play a pivotal role in overcoming the COVID-19 economic challenges for the achievement of the SDGs.

Objective

The Trade Policy Dialogue seeks to reinforce UNCTAD's engagement with member States by providing a forum for candid and focused discussion among trade negotiators on topical issues in international trade policy from a development perspective.

This session, organized in partnership with the OACPS Secretariat, will invite the UNCTAD Member-States to discuss and delineate the implications of the COVID-19 crisis to the current MTS from the developmental perspective and elucidate the issues and possible modalities to reform trade multilateralism in a way that contributes to sustainable development and inclusive economic growth.

The outcome of the discussion is expected to help UNCTAD and OACPS better appreciate current trade policy concerns of developing countries, identify concrete steps that may be taken towards and at MC12 and UNCTAD 15, and initiate internal reflections to further strengthen its work with a view to better assisting their respective member States.

Draft programme

10h00-11h30: Session 1 – Towards a post-COVID-19 trading system in support of developing countries' exports

The global pandemic and the associated lockdown measures have exposed particular vulnerabilities of many developing countries, especially those that depend on tourism and remittances for export earnings/income. Other countries also suffered from value chain disruptions and falling commodity prices. As a result, the pandemic afflicts many developing countries with unemployment leading to high poverty incidence. The session will examine particular challenges posed to key traded sectors in developing countries – such as services, tourism, remittances and trade in value chains – and how the trading system could be made more supportive, perhaps via with special and differential treatment (SDT), of developing countries' efforts to better cope with

some of the transformative shifts triggered by the crisis. The Session will also facilitate the exchange of best practices and coping mechanisms.

- What were the major challenges faced by developing countries in putting in place effective response measures to the COVID-19 crisis?
- How can the COVID-19 challenges and lessons for developing countries be best addressed and factored into ongoing and future negotiations and WTO reform, including on SDT?

Moderated by **H.E. Ms. Cheryl K. Spencer**, Ambassador, Jamaica

Speakers

Mr. Escipión Joaquín Oliveira Gómez, Assistant Secretary-General, OACPS

H.E. Ms. Xolelwa Mlumbipeter, Ambassador of South Africa to the WTO

Mr. Carlos Correa, Executive Director, South Centre

Mr. Faizel Ismail, Director, Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance, University of Cape Town

15h00-16h30: Session 2 – Redefining the trading system in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 crisis came on the heel of the systemic challenges confronting the MTS. Rising trade tensions had affected the prospects of multilateral processes and led to the stalemate in the appointment of WTO Appellate Body members. While the WTO reform agenda was put to the forefront of debate, and open-ended plurilateral processes were launched on certain issues, there is not yet a clear understanding on how the current trading system could best be reenergized and be made more relevant and effective in addressing the diverse interests of developing countries. The session will take stock of the current state of play and discuss the possible way forward towards MC12 and UNCTAD 15 in 2021.

- How do we best address diverse interests of developing countries in the WTO reform debate on SDT and on “new pathway” for multilateral trade negotiations?

Moderated by **Ms. Pamela Coke-Hamilton**, Director, DITC

Speakers

H.E. Mr. João Aguiar Machado, Ambassador of the European Union to the WTO

Ms. Li Yihong, Minister Counsellor, Permanent Mission of China to the WTO

H.E. Ms. Merewalesi Falemaka, Ambassador, Pacific Islands Forum

Mr. Bernard Hoekman, Robert Schuman Chair, European University Institute