

Spotlight:

Trade Policy Review Mechanism at 30

The WTO commemorated 30 years of the Trade Policy Review Mechanism (TPRM) in 2019, with DG Azevêdo calling it “a pillar of the multilateral trading system”.

A one-day conference – the TPRM@30 – highlighted the crucial role the TPRM has played in helping members to better understand each other's trade policies and measures and in providing a more predictable international trading environment.

Five themes

The commemorative event, held at WTO headquarters on 27 November, was organized around five themes: the history of the TPRM; its evolution over the years and the present; the contribution to technical assistance and capacity building; added transparency under the trade monitoring exercise; and the future.

Sharing experiences

WTO members, academics, negotiators of the mechanism, current and past chairs of the Trade Policy Review Body (TPRB) and WTO directors of the Trade Policy Review Division shared their experiences, reflecting on the lessons learned and looking at how this mechanism can evolve.

In his opening speech, DG Azevêdo said: “The conference marks 30 years of the TPRM. It is an opportunity to celebrate its success and reflect on the many lessons learned. It is also an occasion to look at how this mechanism can adapt and respond to a changing trading system.”

Thirty years of increasing significance

The TPRM was launched on a provisional basis in 1989 as an “early harvest” of the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations, which led to the creation of the WTO in 1995. Australia, Morocco and the United States were the first members reviewed. The TPRM was made permanent with the establishment of the WTO. The past 30 years have seen more than 500 TPR reports and about 390 meetings of the TPRB, at which 157 WTO members have been reviewed, most of them multiple times (see page 104).



2019 marked the 30th anniversary of the first trade policy review. By the end of 2019, the Trade Policy Review Body had conducted:



501
trade policy reviews



covering
157
WTO members.



389
TPR meetings
had been held



33
LDC members had
been reviewed



24
WTO-wide trade
monitoring reports



22
G20 trade
monitoring reports





Panellists noted that the TPRM is a huge source of information and has become one of the main channels WTO members use to promote accountability, predictability and transparency in the multilateral trading system. The Trade Policy Reviews shed light on members' trade policies and practices, providing an opportunity to clarify trade concerns, defuse potential frictions and promote good practice.

Opportunities for developing countries

For many developing countries, their TPRs can be a unique opportunity for government agencies to enhance internal coordination and discuss policies and measures, improving understanding of policies among domestic stakeholders and enhancing policy coherence. TPR follow-up workshops can be organized (at the request of members) to further share information and identify technical assistance

and capacity-building needs. This element was highly appreciated by all participants.

Monitoring trade policy across the membership

The conference was a chance to reflect on the WTO's role in monitoring trade policy trends across the WTO membership, which is also part of the TPRM mandate. Panellists and participants recognized the importance of the trade monitoring exercise and its contribution to the multilateral trading system. By being accurate and credible, the reports contribute to greater transparency.

Looking ahead

Interesting ideas were generated during the discussions. Suggestions by panellists and the audience covered all aspects of TPRM work, including the conduct of TPRB meetings, the trade monitoring exercise and the coverage and content of WTO Secretariat reports.

For trade monitoring reports, suggestions included further strengthening and developing analysis of trade in services measures, general economic support and trade concerns. This would allow the exercise to broaden the narrative, including on issues of systemic relevance. DG Azevêdo expressed the hope that the ideas generated would help the TPRM to be as effective for the next 30 years as it had been in the past.



DG Azevêdo and Willy Alfaro, Director of the Trade Policy Review Division.