

SPOTLIGHT

25th anniversary of the WTO

On 19 November, the WTO hosted a virtual event to commemorate its 25th anniversary. “WTO at 25: Past, Present & Future” looked at the organization’s achievements and current challenges. Participants underlined the importance of the multilateral trading system as well as the need for reform to strengthen the WTO to deal with global challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

25 YEARS

In his keynote address, Swiss Federal Councillor Guy Parmelin said the COVID-19 crisis has underlined the relevance of rules-based free trade, as open markets and uninterrupted global supply chains are fundamental for access to medicines and other essential products. General Council Chair David Walker said WTO members’ ability to update and adjust the WTO rulebook “is ultimately the only way to keep the WTO relevant to our economies and to foster our trade relations”. Deputy Director-General Alan Wolff called for institutional and substantive reforms to achieve the WTO’s mission.

A political perspective

A high-level panel with government officials reflected on the role of the WTO in shaping their economies (see Table 1). Speakers considered the benefits and shortcomings of the global trading system and discussed ways to make it more inclusive. Panellists agreed that WTO reform must be a priority to ensure the organization’s continued relevance. Despite differences on what the reform agenda should look like, all government representatives reiterated the need to reinvigorate the WTO’s negotiating function and deliver a meaningful outcome on fisheries subsidies (see page 53).



Vonai Muyambo of the WTO’s Information and External Relations Division moderated the panel on political perspectives.



Table 1: The political perspective – panellists

Soraya Hakuziyaremye	▶ Rwanda's Minister for Trade and Industry
Dennis Shea	▶ United States Deputy Trade Representative and Ambassador to the WTO
Wang Shouwen	▶ China's Vice Minister and Deputy International Trade Representative, Ministry of Commerce
Cheryl Spencer	▶ Jamaica's Ambassador to the WTO; Coordinator of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group
Sabine Weyand	▶ European Union Director-General, Trade
George Yeo	▶ Formerly Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs and for Trade and Industry

Bernie Kuiten of the WTO's Information and External Relations Division moderated the panel on the stakeholders' perspective.

Some panellists called for progress in negotiations on the joint initiatives, such as e-commerce (see page 57). Others said these initiatives among groups of members give developing countries limited space to shape the agenda. They encouraged progress on trade and sustainability, development and food security.

The stakeholders' perspective

A second panel, with prominent representatives from the private sector, international organizations, civil society and media, exchanged views on how the multilateral trading system has served society and how to ensure it better addresses society's needs and expectations.



Speakers stressed the need to deepen public understanding of the WTO's role and relevance by expanding its outreach activities (see Table 2). They proposed a more structured relationship with stakeholders that allowed them to give new impetus to ongoing negotiations. Several panellists underlined the increasing importance of labour and environmental standards in regional trade agreements and called on the WTO to consider these standards in its work.



Panellists agreed that WTO reform must be a priority to ensure the organization’s continued relevance.



Table 2: The stakeholders’ perspective – panellists

Joshua Bolten	▶ President and CEO, US Business Roundtable
Céline Charveriat	▶ Executive Director, Institute for European Environmental Policy
Martin Chungong	▶ Secretary-General, Inter-Parliamentary Union
Frank Heemskerck	▶ Secretary-General, European Round Table for Industry
Soumaya Keynes	▶ Trade and Globalization Editor, “The Economist” magazine
Guy Ryder	▶ Director-General, International Labour Organization

Exhibitions and quiz

Two photo exhibitions looked back at key moments in the life of the WTO. Both collections were displayed in the WTO’s headquarters and made available on the WTO website. They were also compiled in a publication entitled “25 Years of the WTO: A Photographic Retrospective”.

Another exhibition paid tribute to the women who have played a pioneering role in the activities of the WTO. The exhibition and a series of videos of these exceptional women are available on the WTO website.

A quiz aimed at deepening understanding of the WTO was developed and published on the WTO website. Participants learn more about the WTO by answering questions at six different levels of difficulty. They can share their results via Twitter and Facebook.

Messages from stakeholders

Thirty representatives of the private sector, international organizations and non-governmental organizations sent messages of congratulations to the WTO on its 25th anniversary. In short video messages they reflected on what the multilateral trading system has meant to them, what they expect from

the trading system and how to ensure trade continues to support economic growth, development and job creation.

Interviews with former WTO Directors-General

Former WTO Directors-General Supachai Panitchpakdi, Pascal Lamy and Roberto Azevêdo reflected on the WTO’s 25 years in conversations with WTO Spokesperson Keith Rockwell. The interviews are available on the WTO website.

Other 25th anniversary events

Events were also held throughout the year to mark the 25th anniversaries of the WTO Agreement on Agriculture, the Agreement on Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, the Customs Valuation Agreement, the Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures and the Agreement on Rules of Origin.



Mari Pangestu, the World Bank’s Managing Director of Development Policy and Partnerships, contributed a video message.