

SPOTLIGHT

# Public Forum 2021

Under the theme “Trade beyond COVID-19: Building Resilience”, the 2021 Public Forum was held from 28 September to 1 October in hybrid format. Nearly 350 participants attended in person and over 2,600 people participated virtually via a dedicated Public Forum platform. A total of 105 sessions were organized, including three high-level sessions.



## Enhancing resilience beyond COVID-19

DG Okonjo-Iweala opened the Forum, highlighting the importance of the multilateral trading system in contributing to reducing vaccine inequity and tackling other pressing challenges, from the depletion of marine resources to climate change. “But even as we fight to end the pandemic ... we must engage in serious thinking about what it will take to build back a better world economy,” she said.

In his keynote address, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa called for global solidarity in tackling

the pandemic. He urged WTO members to take bold steps to deliver a coordinated response and to centre actions on an inclusive post-pandemic economic recovery. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus highlighted that COVID-19 restrictions, particularly travel restrictions, may have delayed spread of the virus but “they have also come at the highest social and economic costs, exacerbating pre-existing inequities”.

A panel of experts from civil society, the private sector and international organizations discussed how the multilateral trading system can help countries build resilience to

A session organized by the International Chamber of Commerce and B20 Italy, representing the global business community.



### Background

The Public Forum is the WTO’s largest annual outreach event. It provides a unique platform for heads of states, parliamentarians, business people, students, academics and civil society to come together and debate a wide range of trade and development topics.

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COVID-19 and promote an inclusive recovery. Panellists emphasized the interconnectedness of the health, social and economic aspects of the pandemic and stressed the need for a multi-stakeholder approach to expedite global access to vaccines and ensure an inclusive economic recovery.

### Strengthening the multilateral trading system

A high-level debate involving ministers and experts on “Strengthening the Multilateral Trading System” tackled WTO reform and how to make the organization fit for purpose. The priorities included not only handling new issues like climate change, pandemic response and the digital economy but ensuring the WTO can better address matters that have been on its agenda for years, such as agriculture, disciplines on fisheries subsidies (see page 56) and special and differential treatment for developing and least-developed countries (see page 59).

### MSMEs and COVID-19

A panel of entrepreneurs and policymakers discussed the impact of COVID-19 on micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). Participants noted the importance of digitization in helping small businesses navigate the crisis. Speakers highlighted the need to support MSMEs’ integration into global value chains by facilitating training, certification and access to finance. “We cannot afford to leave small businesses behind,” International Trade Centre Executive Director Pamela Coke-Hamilton told the session.

## Public Forum: SME case stories

### SMEs use trade to build resilience during COVID-19: Recycling plastic – Austria

Plasticpreneur, an Austrian company employing 11 staff, develops, produces and distributes technology, services and products for recycling plastic waste. It creates simple, user-friendly and cost-efficient plastic recycling machines, making plastic part of the circular economy and positively impacting the planet.

The company also provides entrepreneurship training to low-income communities, enabling them not only to turn plastic waste into new products but also assisting them in setting up income-generating projects and social businesses.

When COVID-19 hit, the company’s customers postponed their orders. But Plasticpreneur saw an opportunity. It quickly adapted its expertise and specialist technology to produce face shields out of recycled plastic. It produced, sold and donated thousands of face shields in Austria alone. More importantly, it distributed face shield production kits to other countries, such as Uganda, Kenya and Nigeria, helping them produce large amounts of protective equipment locally.

The advice of Sören Lex, Plasticpreneur’s CEO and co-founder, to fellow SMEs – always watch out for opportunities and needs in markets or societies.

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Sören Lex  
CEO and co-founder of Plasticpreneur



## Public Forum: SME case stories

### Eco-ethical fashion – the Philippines

Rags2Riches is a fashion and design house empowering community artisans from the Philippines. It collects overstocked fabrics and textiles from factories and, in partnership with local artisans, turns out eco-ethical fashion.

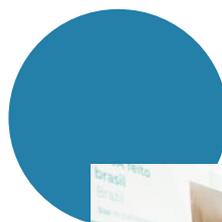
When COVID-19 hit, the company, which employs 30 staff, experienced significantly lower demand, both retail and corporate, and its supply chain and production were greatly hampered by the pandemic-provoked lockdowns.

It quickly re-instituted a decentralized supply chain, with artisans working, weaving and sewing from home. It pivoted to fully online operations, which was relatively easy because the company had existing online channels. As a result, its online sales increased by 50 per cent compared to pre-pandemic levels.

The advice of Reese Fernandez-Ruiz, Rags2Riches' president and co-founder, to fellow SMEs – make your operations as lean and agile as possible. Know your purpose!

**“Make your operations as lean and agile as possible. Know your purpose!”**

**Reese Fernandez-Ruiz**  
President and co-founder of Rags2Riches



A photo exhibition entitled “Building resilience through trade during COVID-19: SME stories” portrayed SMEs' resilience stories during the pandemic and their advice to others on how to build resilience in future crises (see side panels). A number of these stories were featured in the first season of the new WTO podcast “Let's Talk Trade” (see page 183).

### Sustainable trade

Twenty-five sessions were held under the sub-theme “Collective Action towards Sustainable Trade”, with participants underlining the important role the WTO should play in paving the way for a stronger trade and environment agenda.

A video series entitled “Fresh Takes on Green Business. Helping People and Planet” showcased the stories of three young environmental entrepreneurs from Asia, Africa and Europe/Oceania.

### Exhibitors

Six exhibitors virtually showcased their inventions and environmental solutions, including innovative recycled plastic products, sustainable waste-based biofuels and reusable packaging for online retail.

