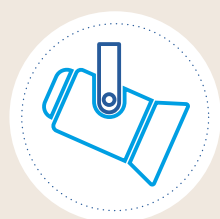


IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Trade and health

WTO members achieved a multilaterally agreed response to the COVID-19 pandemic in June 2022 when the 12th Ministerial Conference (MC12) agreed on measures to diversify global production of COVID-19 vaccines and on ways to build resilience to future pandemics. The multilateral response reflects the exceptional nature of the crisis – in terms of loss of human life and the severe disruption to the global economy and world trade.



In their “Declaration on the WTO Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and Preparedness for Future Pandemics”, trade ministers called on relevant WTO bodies to continue or initiate work on lessons learned and challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The declaration draws attention to how the world experienced medical supply constraints and lack of equitable access to vaccines. It emphasizes the need for transparency and information sharing in such circumstances and the importance of intensifying cooperation with other international organizations. Areas of focus for future work will include export restrictions, food security, intellectual property, regulatory cooperation, services, tariff classification, technology transfer, trade facilitation and transparency. A yearly stocktaking exercise will take place in the General Council up to the end of 2024.

“We affirm the need to review and build on all the lessons learned and the challenges experienced ... to build effective solutions in case of future pandemics,” ministers declared.

In parallel, a Ministerial Decision on the TRIPS Agreement (see page 61), also adopted at MC12, provides a platform for members to work together to diversify vaccine production capacity. Members will have greater scope over the next five years to override the exclusive effect of patents through a targeted waiver that addresses specific problems

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identified during the pandemic, especially facilitating and streamlining COVID-19 vaccine exports.

The outcomes “will make access to medical supplies and components more predictable in this pandemic, and in the next one,” DG Okonjo-Iweala said. The TRIPS decision “will contribute to ongoing efforts to deconcentrate and diversify vaccine manufacturing capacity so that a crisis in one region does not leave others cut off,” she added.

Members are debating whether to extend the TRIPS decision to cover the production and supply of COVID-19 diagnostics and therapeutics but no consensus has been reached (see page 62).

This decision opens the way for further multilateral technical support and cooperation between the WHO, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), the WTO and others to make full and effective use of options open to members for pandemic response, including an array of emergency use measures.

The WHO, WIPO and the WTO were already cooperating in addressing COVID-19 through a trilateral collaboration framework. Following a meeting between WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WIPO Director General Daren Tang and DG Okonjo-Iweala in February 2022, a trilateral COVID-19 technical assistance platform was launched to help members and accession candidates meet their capacity-building needs to respond to the pandemic.

The three organizations also held a technical symposium in December, which highlighted that cooperation is a key factor in fostering innovation and equitable access to health



products. The symposium followed a series of jointly hosted technical workshops to increase the flow of information on the pandemic. The WTO's annual Trade and Public Health Workshop in December, focusing on pandemic preparedness and response, was organized in close cooperation with the WHO and WIPO.

Other areas of cooperation include the Multilateral Leaders' Task Force on COVID-19, led by the heads of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank Group, the WHO and the WTO (see page 154). At a meeting in March 2022, they discussed with chief executives of leading vaccine manufacturers how to ensure the rapid delivery of vaccines where most needed.

Separately, DG Okonjo-Iweala met several times with pharmaceutical chiefs to press for better access for all to COVID-19 vaccines and medicines. In November, she met with CEOs from companies engaged in the production of key COVID-19 therapeutics to review the challenges in expanding and diversifying their production. They also explored the potential role of trade policy tools, such as an extension of the MC12 TRIPS decision on COVID-19 vaccines to cover diagnostics and therapeutics, which is being discussed in the TRIPS Council.

Recognizing the need to address the COVID-19 crisis through timely, accurate information, the WTO created a dedicated page on its website. It provides up-to-the minute trade-related information, including measures taken by WTO members, data on the impact of the virus on exports and imports, and pandemic-related WTO studies and reports.

The WTO has also been monitoring COVID-19 related trade-restricting and facilitating measures imposed by the Group of 20 leading economies and the WTO membership through its trade monitoring reports (see page 127).

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DG Okonjo-Iweala