



4 GOAL 14: LIFE BELOW WATER

4.1 Trade, fisheries, and life below water

Four out of the 10 SDG targets in Goal 14, namely SDG 14.2, 14.4, 14.5 and 14.6 included 2020 as the timeline for implementation. SDG 14.1 has 2025 as the target date, and work on all these SDG targets needs to pick up quickly so that implementation of Goal 14 is not further impacted by COVID-19. The postponement of the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference due to COVID-19 was the principal reason for the failure to conclude the fisheries subsidies negotiations in the WTO in 2021.

While there have been challenges, opportunities have also arisen due to these unprecedented circumstances. The pandemic offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build back better and in the case of “life below water” a chance to build back “bluer”. On sustainability, particularly the blue or ocean economy and sustainable fish trade, many WTO members have expressed an interest in examining the trade and environment nexus with a view to exploring the “win-win” opportunities, where trade and the environment can be mutually supportive.

WTO members have stepped up work on trade and sustainability issues at the WTO Committee on Trade and Environment (CTE). In the context of Goal 14, there has been recent exchange of views on policy tools such as port state measures, subsidies, catch certification schemes, eco-labels and traceability requirements (tracing fisheries across the supply chain from “fish to plate” or from “sea to shop”). WTO members and inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) (such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and UN Environment Programme (UNEP)) have presented their activities, toolkits and experiences, for example, on the steps taken to prevent, deter and eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. In developing tools, some have highlighted

the importance of keeping in mind principles such as non-discrimination, transparency and, wherever possible, the harmonization of measures adopted. The need for awareness generation, international co-operation, technical assistance, and capacity building has also been emphasized. On the margins of the CTE, several side events have been organized, such as the high-level panel discussion on “Trade, the Environment and Sustainability: A Focus on Green Recovery in a COVID-19 Era” co-hosted by Barbados and Maldives in 2021.¹

There has also been increased transparency on trade and environmental measures affecting the fisheries sector that may be relevant to the implementation of SDG Goal 14. Between 2009 and 2020, the WTO Environmental Database² recorded 845 notified measures and 819 entries from WTO members’ trade policy review reports that were related to the fisheries sector. Moreover, over this period, there were 681 notified measures specifically with the objective of sustainable fisheries management. WTO members continue to notify and adopt trade policies to contribute to the sustainable development of their fisheries sector and more broadly the blue economy. Although there are year-on-year variations, the growing number of environment-related measures affecting the fisheries sector that are notified to the WTO is evidence of the mutual supportiveness and the intertwining of trade, fisheries, and environmental policies (see Figure 6).

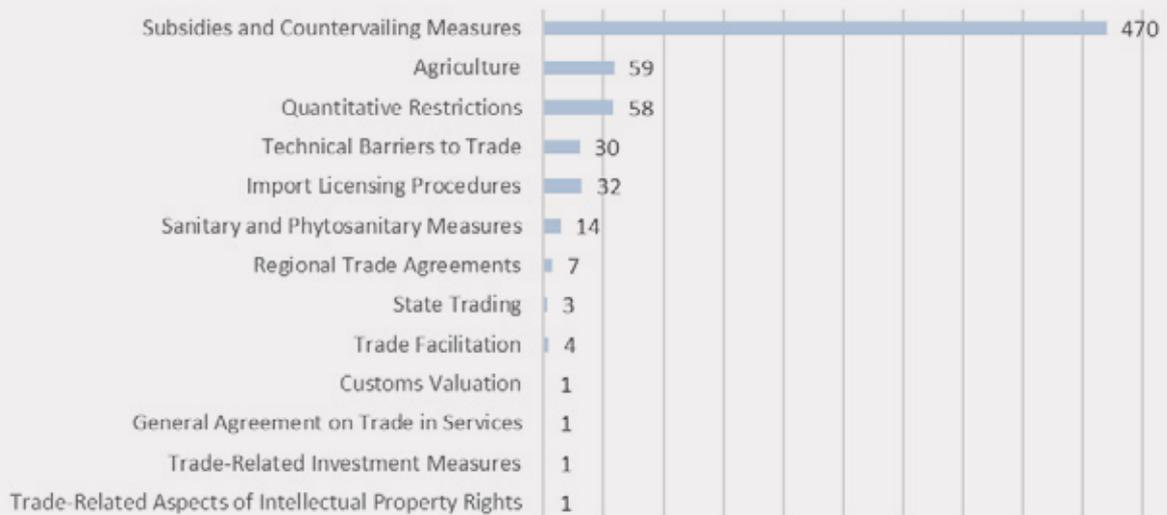
In terms of types of measures, most measures notified from 2009 onwards were support measures, usually in the form of grants and direct payments. Other support measures, such as income or price support, loans and financing, and non-monetary support were also provided to the fisheries sector for broader sustainability or environment-related purposes. Other measures in the EDB were environmental requirements in the form of licensing requirements, bans or quantitative restrictions, technical regulations, conformity assessment procedures or other regulatory requirements notified pursuant to the WTO Import Licensing Agreement, SPS or TBT Agreements among others (see Figure 7).

Figure 6. Notified measures affecting the fisheries sector (breakdown by year)



Source: WTO Environmental Database.

Figure 7. Sustainable fisheries management by WTO Agreement (2009-2020)



Source: WTO Environmental Database.

In 2020 and 2021, WTO members launched new trade and environment initiatives. This has opened up new work streams, for instance on tackling plastic pollution including marine plastic and microplastics. This initiative, the Informal Dialogue on Plastics Pollution and Environmentally Sustainable Plastics Trade (IDP),³ is open to all WTO members and its 68 co-sponsors – at end of 2021 – accounted for around 68 per cent of global trade and 75 per cent of plastics trade. The dialogue seeks to avoid duplication and support or complement the discussions in other fora, such as the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) or the Basel Convention. For instance, in September 2021, on the margins of the IDP, the WTO was the venue for an informal ministerial meeting on marine litter and microplastics.⁴ The Director-General, together with the Executive Director of UNEP, were asked by the UN Secretary-General to brief on the topics of trade and plastics for the UN System. The WTO will be working closely with UNEP and other partners.

Another new initiative is the Trade and Environmental Sustainability Structured Discussions (TESSD),⁵ that aims to advance discussions on trade and environmental sustainability at the WTO. This initiative currently includes 71 WTO members and is open to all WTO members. In addition, TESSD has involved stakeholders from the private sector, civil society, international organizations and academia. This involvement of a broad set of stakeholders has enriched the WTO discourse on the SDGs and sustainability. The TESSD has so far covered topics such as trade and climate change, trade in environmental goods and services, circular economy and sustainable supply chains.

Finally, there is also the member-driven initiative on Fossil Fuel Subsidy Reform (FFSR). The FFSR initiative is supported by 45 WTO members, and other WTO members can join as co-sponsors. Globally, fossil fuel production and consumption subsidies amount to US\$ 500 billion annually. The FFSR initiative encourages the rationalization and phase out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies that encourage wasteful consumption.

4.2 SDG: 14 Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

SDG 14.6 states that, by 2020, the certain forms of subsidies that contribute to overfishing and overcapacity should be prohibited and subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing should be eliminated while recognizing that special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part of the WTO fisheries subsidies negotiations. This language, including the deadline, was mirrored in the 2017 WTO Ministerial Decision on Fisheries Subsidies.

Although this deadline was missed, one of the main reasons has been the measures taken relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that the 12th Ministerial Conference (MC12) of the WTO, originally scheduled to take place in June 2020, has been twice postponed. Despite the restrictions on meetings, the negotiations have made significant progress over the past two years. In November 2021, a draft Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies was sent to WTO ministers in advance of MC12 which had been rescheduled to take place on 30 November to 3 December. The draft Agreement, the sixth revision of draft disciplines to fisheries subsidies first distributed to members in June 2020, was the product of several months of intensive work, including a meeting of the WTO's Trade Negotiations Committee, held on 15 July in virtual format at ministerial level.

On 22 February 2022, MC12 was rescheduled for 12 to 15 June 2022. With that target date, the fisheries subsidies work in the WTO is aiming to narrow the remaining differences among members, so that ministers can reach a final agreed outcome on fisheries subsidies disciplines.

Endnotes

- 1 See https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/events_e/wto_events_e.htm?bodyCode=ENVIR
- 2 WTO Environmental Database: <https://edb.wto.org/>.
- 3 See https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/ppesp_e/ppesp_e.htm.
- 4 See <https://conferencemarinelitterplasticpollution.org/>.
- 5 See https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/tessd_e/tessd_e.htm.