

Foreword by the WTO Director-General



When I took office as Director-General of the World Trade Organization in March 2021, the world was still in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic. The human and economic costs were mounting, global supply chains were under strain, and while effective vaccines had been developed in record time, they were in cruelly short supply. It was a moment that laid bare the vulnerabilities that came with a lack of global resilience in the way some supply chains were configured. Above all, it exposed the costs of excessive concentration of certain activities, such as vaccine production, within a small handful of places. When some of these countries restricted exports of scarce supplies, import-dependent regions like Africa were left in the lurch.

Yet it quickly became clear that no country could face the crisis alone. Global health security demanded global cooperation, including on trade, which became an important shock absorber after the initial lockdowns and export restrictions. Cross-border supply chains ramped up production of medical supplies to meet skyrocketing global demand. COVID-19 vaccines were manufactured in supply chains cutting across as many as 19 countries, though trade restrictions continued to affect inputs and finished doses. World trade rebounded strongly from late 2020, contributing to the economic recovery. At the same time, global trade rules became a source of contention, as a large number of developing countries saw intellectual property protections as a barrier to manufacturing COVID-19 vaccines.

This publication describes how the multilateral trading system responded to this unprecedented global health and economic emergency. It reflects the work of WTO members and the Secretariat during the most acute phases of the pandemic starting in early 2020 and continuing through the 13th Ministerial Conference in early 2024. It distils practical lessons and experiences that have shaped our understanding of what trade can do in a pandemic, and what more it must do to help prevent or at least contain future health crises.

Throughout the pandemic, the WTO served as a platform where members could engage, share information, and respond to evolving challenges. In our councils and committees, governments reviewed policy measures,

exchanged ideas, and identified best practices. The Secretariat supported this work with analytical work, technical assistance, and practical tools to navigate a rapidly changing landscape. We engaged with a wide range of stakeholders to gain a more granular understanding of supply chain disruptions. In particular, we worked with the chief executives of leading vaccine manufacturers to better understand where trade-related policies were holding back production and deployment, and to encourage them to shock-proof vaccine supplies by diversifying production to more developing country regions.

In 2022, at the WTO's 12th Ministerial Conference, members reached a compromise decision on intellectual property related to COVID-19 vaccines and adopted a separate Ministerial Declaration on the WTO Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Together, these lay the groundwork for the trading system to better support global public health and pandemic preparedness, including through increased production of vaccines, treatments and other health technologies in developing countries.

Looking ahead, one key takeaway from this report is that trade and smoothly functioning value chains will be essential whenever the next crisis comes: moving medical supplies and other goods and services is vital both for the immediate health response and longer-term economic recovery. WTO rules play a vital role here, as they do in the innovation ecosystem for the research, development, manufacturing, and distribution of new health technologies. It is yet another reason why a strengthened, repositioned, and reformed WTO is in the interest of all members.

I hope this publication supports ongoing policy dialogue, inspires future cooperation, and serves as a reminder that multilateralism, rooted in shared responsibility, remains our best path through global challenges.

Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala
Director-General
World Trade Organization