

Executive summary

A primary responsibility of all governments is to safeguard the health of their populations, a responsibility they cannot expect to deliver without international cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the stark reality of this interdependence. No domestic system, no matter how powerful or economically strong, could deal with the pandemic in isolation. The international trading system therefore played an indispensable role in addressing and overcoming the impact of the novel coronavirus on communities around the world.

The pandemic thus demonstrated, in the most compelling way, the integral role of global trade in responding to challenges to global health. The international response spanned the full scope of the World Trade Organization's (WTO's) responsibilities and expertise; all communities depended to some extent on trade for inputs, for finished medical products and for related services, as well as new and adapted medical technologies and regulatory data. Trade policy, and the international trading system, therefore, lay at the very heart of this complex, integrated policy mix. From the outset of the pandemic, it fell to the WTO to contribute to the universal response based on its distinct mandate and areas of expertise.

This publication reviews the multiple aspects of the contribution to the pandemic response made by the WTO, by its members and its Secretariat:

- convening, through sharing practical experience and reviewing comparative policy responses;
- clarifying, through the development of information resources and expert analysis;
- cooperating, by working to turn information and dialogue into practical action; and
- catalysing and consolidating the hard practical lessons presented by the pandemic and building future responsiveness and resilience.

Alongside the scramble for critical goods such as personal protective equipment, the early stages of the pandemic saw an urgent need for accurate and credible information, a necessity for governments across the globe confronted with an unprecedented threat, not only to human health but also to the economic and social well-being of their population. Monitoring and responding to the pandemic would have been impossible without the flow of information and without the coordination of policy responses.

As understanding of the characteristics of the novel coronavirus developed, the global response ranged from the sharing of genomic data, to enable development of new medical countermeasures, to regulatory cooperation, and dialogue to comprehend the impact of various policy responses. A WTO Secretariat task force began monitoring the impact of COVID-19 on trade flows and the overall global economy, and prepared tailored reports and data services to support policymakers around the world. The full array of WTO monitoring and transparency mechanisms that was applied to the pandemic landscape yielded unique, invaluable information resources.

The WTO's convening power assumed fresh significance amidst the pandemic, providing a sure basis for coordinated feedback necessarily involving diverse stakeholders, information and guidance from a wide range of experience and expertise, and new forms of cooperation. Leadership and engagement on the part of member governments were critical to this process. Hence, from the early stages of the pandemic, members actively took up COVID-19 issues in the core bodies of the WTO, in line with their distinct mandated policy areas. The WTO councils and committees adapted existing transparency and consultation mechanisms to the exceptional needs of the pandemic response, for instance through thematic sessions for members on specific COVID-19 issues.

This review process, led by members, yielded two contrasting insights: first, governments had to consider

exceptional measures, legitimate steps taken in the public interest in an emergency; and secondly, the pandemic also accentuated the essential common interest in and mutual benefit from the core principles of the multilateral trading system, especially the benefits of open and well-functioning international production and supply chains and non-discriminatory measures.

Dialogue between members identified the challenges faced by developing and least developed economies in addressing the pandemic due to the lack of financial and other resources, as well as the importance of international cooperation for tackling COVID-19, including through the facilitation of critical areas of trade.

Effective engagement with the multifaceted challenges of the pandemic required the WTO to undertake extensive cooperation – both with established international partners and with new partners, including the creation of new cooperative arrangements. With the critical stages of the pandemic still in progress, the WTO's 12th Ministerial Conference (2022) saw WTO members agreeing on a framework to guide and consolidate the WTO's response to the crisis, to enhance the flow of practical knowledge, and to help render the multilateral trading system more resilient and better prepared for future crises.

The burden of COVID-19 still lays heavily on many communities, even if the most severe and immediate impacts of the pandemic have passed. It falls to

policymakers to analyse and draw longer-term conclusions from the tough lessons learned during this critical situation, including concerning systemic shortcomings and the consequences of insufficient preparedness. Practical steps also need to be taken to put these insights to work as a blueprint for future international cooperation, catalysing work on developing information and policy tools, building capacity and consolidating the institutional framework for continuing cooperation on the intersection between trade and health.

This vital work continues in several ongoing parallel processes and activities, within the structure of the WTO itself and through partnerships and other forms of collaboration, touching on the full array of trade policy issues relevant to pandemic preparedness and response. The current publication focuses on the critical period of the pandemic response, from early 2020 to the 13th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC13) convened in early 2024. At MC13, members noted the work done by WTO bodies and by the Secretariat, reflected in the 2022 Pandemic Declaration on the WTO response to COVID-19, and encouraged its continuation, including the Secretariat's role in providing data, analysis and technical cooperation.

This publication illustrates the nature and scope of the WTO's response to the pandemic and serves as a practical resource for policymakers considering how to strengthen preparedness for the strong possibility of future pandemics and similar global health crises.