



3

**Cooperating:
From information and
dialogue to action**



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.

The programme of technical cooperation for the benefit of developing economy and least developed country members naturally took on a strong component of COVID-19 issues across the full range of trade policy domains. Substantial benefits arose from cooperative initiatives with other international partners. A selection of these numerous and diverse interactions is set out below, albeit as an inevitably incomplete list.

Cooperation with International Organizations

At the request of the G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors, under the presidency of Indonesia, and in the framework of the Multilateral Leaders Task Force on COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics, the WTO worked with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as Gavi and the United Nations Children's Fund, to produce the report *Accelerating COVID-19 Vaccine Deployment: Removing obstacles to increase coverage levels and protect those at high risk*.⁷⁴ This report examines the key remaining obstacles to universal vaccine distribution and sets out key actions and recommendations to accelerate vaccine deployment to those economies with low vaccination rates.

The intensified programme of trilateral cooperation with the WHO and World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) yielded a series of updated publications, including *An Integrated Health, Trade and IP Approach to Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic*,⁷⁵ as a supplement to the WHO, WIPO and WTO co-publication, *Promoting Access to Medical Technologies and Innovation: Intersections between public health, intellectual property and trade* (the trilateral study).⁷⁶

This analysis mapped the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to the integrated health, trade and IP policy framework set out in the trilateral study, with the aim of serving as a background reference for policymakers in the widest sense. These policymakers comprise lawmakers, government officials, delegates to international organizations, non-governmental organizations and researchers who seek a comprehensive presentation of the full range of issues, including institutions and legal concepts with which they

may be unfamiliar. It was also designed to serve as a transparent factual resource for the three organizations' technical cooperation activities.

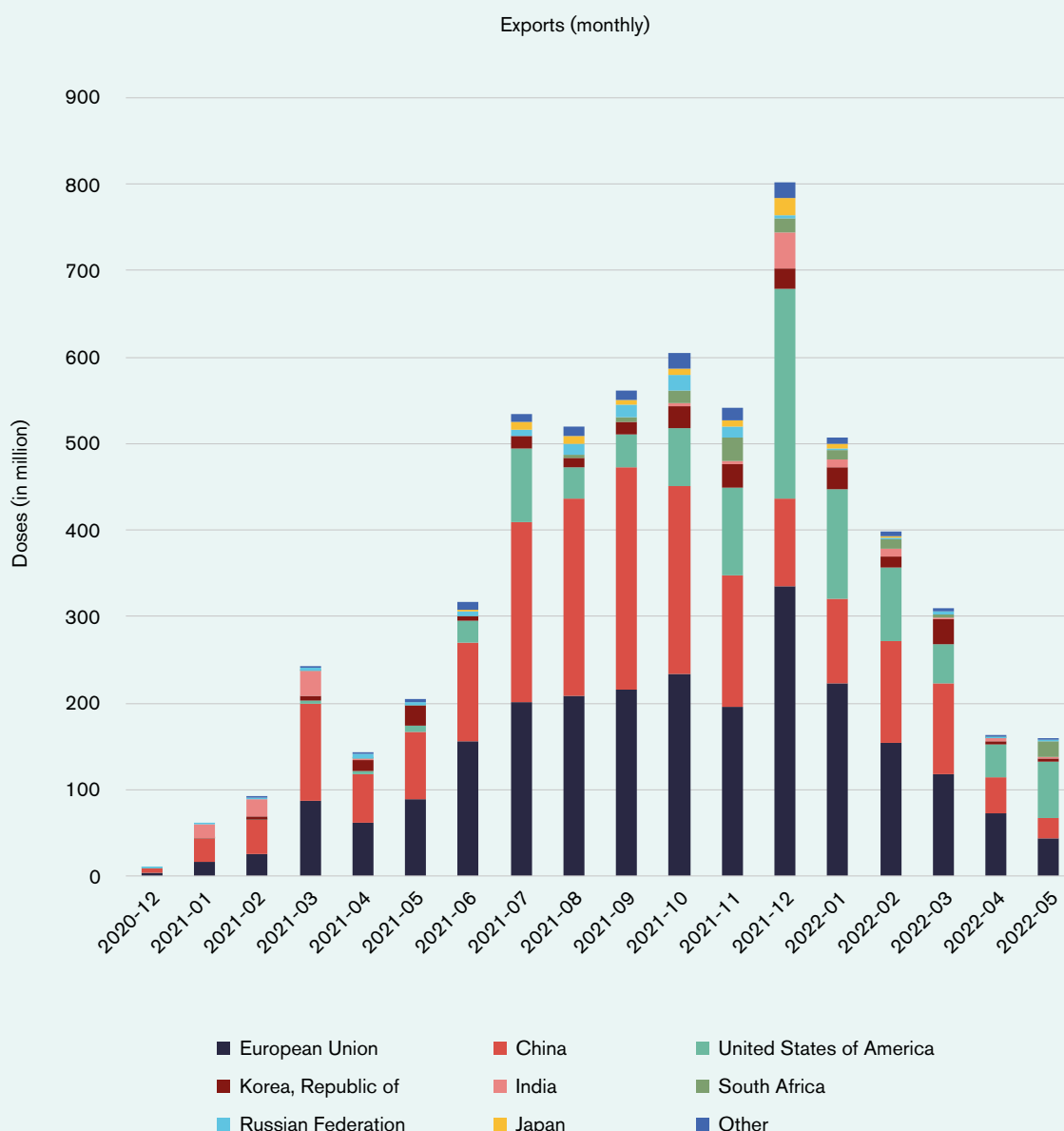
At the instigation of the three Directors-General, who met periodically⁷⁷ to review and progress trilateral cooperation, these activities were focused on COVID-19 issues, through the creation of a joint trilateral web platform.⁷⁸ The platform was established to coordinate requests for COVID-19-related technical assistance, a series of practical capacity-building workshops for members, further cooperation on targeted national and regional technical assistance relating to COVID-19, and high-level policy symposia exploring an array of issues presented by the pandemic.

The WTO's cooperation with the IMF generated the WTO-IMF Vaccine Trade Tracker (see Figure 4), providing unique data on the trade and supply of COVID-19 vaccines by product, economy and arrangement type, and building on the analytical work of the WTO Secretariat and the IMF Staff Discussion Note, *A Proposal to End the COVID-19 Pandemic*.⁷⁹ Among other things, this resource provided direct insights into the trade flows, the principal exporters and supply arrangements, the imports of vaccines according to income status, and the trends over time during the most critical period for vaccine rollout and global distribution.

Cooperation with the World Bank included the joint publication of a landmark study, *Trade Therapy: Deepening Cooperation to Strengthen Pandemic Defenses*.⁸⁰ This publication provided new data on trade in medical goods and services, surveyed the evolving policy landscape and proposed an action plan to improve trade policies and deepen international cooperation to deal with future pandemics. It focused on policy action in response to the pandemic, including actions to remove bottlenecks and provide government support to promote equitable access to vaccines.

As the emergency subsided, a shift in focus to prevention and preparedness was proposed, such as negotiating tariff reductions on medical goods and greater market access in services. Emphasis was put on measures to improve the efficiency of markets, including harmonizing

Policies in response to the pandemic included actions to remove bottlenecks and provide government support to promote equitable access to vaccines.

Figure 4. Monthly number of doses exported by producing economy, as of 31 May 2022

Source: WTO-IMF Vaccine Trade Tracker. Viewed at: https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/covid19_e/vaccine_trade_tracker_e.htm.

regulations and creating international standards for essential medical goods and production processes, as well as agreement on a crisis rulebook to provide a more solid policy foundation to address future emergencies.

As a result of discussions during the first two experience-sharing sessions convened by the Committee on Market Access (CMA), the Chairperson submitted a letter,⁸¹ on behalf of the CMA, to the Harmonized System Committee (HSC). The HSC is the body within the World Customs Organization (WCO) that is responsible, among other

things, for updating the Harmonized System (HS) classification of traded goods to reflect developments in technology and changes in trade patterns as well as other needs of HS users. The aim of this initiative was to raise awareness among WCO delegates of some of the key issues that WTO members had faced with respect to the classification of COVID-19 essential goods in the HS, and to propose practical suggestions to improve the classification of certain essential medical goods in the next version of the HS nomenclature (HS2028).

The CMA letter was included on the agenda of the 70th Session of the HSC, which took place in September 2022, together with an invitation to the CMA Chairperson and the WTO Secretariat to attend the meeting.⁸² As a result, the WCO has, to date, discussed three possible amendments to the HS2028 nomenclature, with respect to the classification of facemasks and respirators, ambulances and mobile clinics, and vaccines.⁸³

In the early stages of the pandemic, and in the framework of the Trade Facilitation Agreement Facility, the COVID-19 Trade Facilitation Repository was established to facilitate access to initiatives, guidelines, case studies and other information that was developed by various partner organizations and associations to help maintain the flow of safe cross-border trade during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 Trade Facilitation Repository facilitated access to information developed by partners to help maintain the flow of safe cross-border trade during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Partners included the Commonwealth Small States Office, the Global Alliance for Trade Facilitation, the International Air Transport Association, the International Trade Centre, United Nations Trade and Development, and the WCO. The Repository drew together a wide range of material from some 45 different organizations, ranging from United Nations agencies and programmes to international and regional organizations and industry peak bodies.

Cooperation was also integral to the development and deployment of other new information tools. Hence, the WTO Secretariat created a joint indicative list of critical inputs for COVID-19 vaccine production, initially for discussions at the WTO COVID-19 Vaccine Supply Chain and Regulatory Transparency Symposium which took place in June 2021.⁸⁴ At this event, representatives of the medical and pharmaceutical industry, international organizations and the WTO Secretariat explored ways to enhance their cooperation in bringing about practical solutions to scale up the global COVID-19 response. The list was initially produced jointly with the Asian Development Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the WCO, certain COVID-19 vaccine manufacturers, researchers Chad Bown and Chris Rogers, DHL, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, and the Life Science Manufacturers' Association.⁸⁵