Partnerships in action: Experiences and lessons from WTO practices

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South-South and triangular cooperation are increasingly recognized as practical approaches for strengthening trade capacity in developing economies and supporting sustainable development. This chapter looks at the tangible results achieved with the support of two multi-agency partnerships: the Enhanced Integrated Framework (EIF) and the Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF).

The EIF is a multilateral partnership dedicated exclusively to supporting least-developed countries (LDCs) and countries that have recently graduated from LDC status. It works with LDC governments, development partners and international organizations to address institutional and policy constraints, strengthen trade-related capacities and unlock export and investment opportunities. Now in its third phase, the EIF places particular emphasis on investment, partnership, peer learning and catalytic impact.

The STDF is a global partnership established by the United Nations (UN) Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Bank Group, the World Health Organization, the World Organisation for Animal Health and the WTO. This partnership has supported improvements to sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) capacity in developing economies and facilitated safe trade since its establishment in 2004 by helping LDCs and developing economies meet international food safety, animal health and plant health standards.

The six case studies presented in this chapter span a diverse range of trade-related challenges – from strengthening agricultural value chains, SPS systems and quality infrastructure to improving investment promotion and special economic zone development. Together, they show how economies have adapted successful experiences from other developing economies, while leveraging the financial, technical and institutional support of international organizations and development partners to scale up the impact of each project.

Ginger cultivation in Nepal.

EIF case studies

Nepal: building an SPS-compliant value chain with the support of Indian expertise

Before 2012, Nepal's ginger sector was characterized by strong levels of production with weak returns. High post-harvest losses, the absence of facilities meeting SPS requirements, and dependence on exporting unwashed ginger to India left farmers capturing a small share of the final value. The key constraint was the gap between production and meeting the needs of the export market. Without sufficient processing, Nepalese ginger could only be sold raw at prices set by buyers across the border.

The EIF Ginger Competitiveness Project (2012–2015) chose India as a partner because of its advanced ginger processing capacity, established SPS systems, and proven solutions that suited conditions on the ground. Nepalese officials, engineers, private-sector leaders and farmers visited leading Indian processing facilities to see these systems in operation. Indian partners, including Bajaj Processpack Ltd., provided technical guidance and training, enabling Nepal to install its first commercial, SPS-compliant ginger washing and processing plant.

Capacity building was accompanied by infrastructure development. As a key milestone, Nepal established its first SPS-compliant ginger washing and processing unit in Jhapa District, enabling the sector to add value, improve quality and meet international market requirements for the first time.

More than 2,000 farmers, 60 per cent of whom were women, received hands-on training in good agricultural practices, quality management and post-harvest handling, using materials adapted from Indian and international standards to meet local needs. The Nepal Ginger Producers and

Traders' Association was given the support needed to manage both the facility and a trust fund, ensuring that benefits would continue to flow to smallholders after the project's conclusion. In parallel, an ongoing dialogue on SPS issues was established with Indian authorities.

The results extended beyond the plant itself. Post-harvest losses fell sharply and farm-gate prices, i.e. the price farmers received for their product before processing, transportation or retail mark-up costs, rose. Women's participation across the value chain increased and the Nepal-India SPS dialogue continued, supporting smoother cross-border trade and creating conditions for future market diversification.

Malawi: peer learning on special economic zones with Egypt

As Malawi sought to operationalize its special economic zones, it faced constraints familiar across LDCs: limited practical experience in zone management, a legal framework still developing, and no established method for identifying and attracting investors. While written guidance was available, operational know-how remained scarce.

The EIF and its partners arranged an exchange of information between the Malawi Investment and Trade Centre and Egypt's General Authority for Investment and Free Zones, an institution with extensive practical experience in economic zone management. A Malawian delegation undertook a study tour in Egypt, observing governance arrangements, infrastructure-led development and digital one-stop-shop systems at first hand. Egyptian counterparts shared lessons on economic zone management, investor services and public-private collaboration that were directly relevant to Malawi's situation.

This exchange was complemented by a structured investor-targeting programme supported by the World Association of Investment Promotion Agencies and UN Trade and Development, and by the modernization of Malawi's iGuide platform to improve the transparency of investment information. Together, these efforts produced a new roadmap for special economic zones, more effective investor outreach and modernized investment information systems. The knowledge and experience learned from Egypt shaped both the design and the implementation of Malawi's zones, and the relationship between the two countries continues to provide a resource for institutional reform.

> **"The knowledge we gained from Egypt's experience with special economic zones has been transformative for Malawi. Seeing how peer countries manage investor services and zone infrastructure gave us practical solutions that we could adapt immediately. This cooperation didn't just give us ideas, it helped us turn strategy into action."**
>
> Mr Wiskes Nkombezi, Secretary for the Malawi Ministry of Industry, Business, Trade and Tourism.

Guinea: improved quality infrastructure through triangular partnership

Guinea's upgrading of its national quality infrastructure illustrates the benefits of triangular cooperation. Exporters had long faced inadequate domestic testing and quality-control capacity,

meaning products had to be sent abroad for certification. This added costs and delays to every consignment and placed market compliance beyond the reach of smaller firms.

The National Quality Control Office (Office National de Contrôle de Qualité – ONCQ) led implementation of the upgrading project, supported by the EIF, with the European Union acting as donor facilitator. Peer learning between developing economies was built into the design of the project, with ONCQ staff undertaking a benchmarking mission to Senegal's national laboratory. This launched a long-term partnership, opening regional networks and providing the basis for future mutual training.

International and bilateral partners, including the UN Industrial Development Organization and the Belgian federal development agency, Enabel, together with technical suppliers from Europe and China, provided laboratory equipment, training and advice on quality management systems aligned to ISO 17025 and ISO 17020.[1] National and regional bodies, among them the Guinean Export Promotion Agency, the Guinean Institute for Standardisation and Metrology, and the Ministry of Agriculture, were engaged throughout the project.

As a result, laboratory testing times for export products fell from 21 to five days. The volume of analyses and inspections increased significantly, and ONCQ's revenues quadrupled, giving the institution the opportunity to achieve financial sustainability. Guinean export products now meet international standards, supporting a marked increase in global exports and stronger public health protection. ONCQ has become a reference point for other West African countries seeking to reduce compliance costs and dependence on laboratories abroad.

STDF case studies

South-South and triangular cooperation have been particularly successful in addressing SPS issues, where economies across Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean experience difficulties in meeting international food safety, animal health and plant health standards. By sharing practical knowledge, technical expertise and regulatory experience, developing economies can strengthen their SPS systems, drawing on approaches developed successfully elsewhere.

The STDF provides a global platform for SPS collaboration through regional and multi-economy initiatives, fostering communities of good practice and inter- and intraregional networks that support learning and the scaling-up of successful approaches. Regional collaboration has long been a cornerstone of this approach and a practical vehicle for South-South and triangular cooperation.

Since 2004, the STDF has approved US$ 82.4 million in funding for 137 projects, 73 of which (53 per cent) have been regional. By bringing together economies facing common SPS challenges, these projects facilitate peer learning, knowledge exchange, and the uptake and scaling-up of successful SPS innovations. They also create opportunities for collaboration among public and private stakeholders in economies at different levels of development, enabling them to share expertise and solutions tailored to local contexts.

The STDF 2025-2030 strategy titled *Facilitating Safe Trade to Meet the Global Goals* places partnership, innovation, learning and scaling-up at the centre of its work, and reinforces links

Peppercorn cultivation.

with regional partners to accelerate the uptake, replication and scaling-up of SPS solutions across economies and regions.

Southeast Asia: safer pepper value chains

Pepper is an important source of income for thousands of smallholder farmers in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam. All three countries face similar food safety and market access challenges, but Viet Nam has developed extensive expertise as one of the world's leading pepper exporters. The STDF-supported Safer Spices project, implemented by CAB International (formerly Commonwealth Agricultural Bureaux), a non-profit intergovernmental organization, was designed to put Viet Nam's expertise to work across the region, with the national Western Highlands Agriculture and Forestry Science Institute sharing lessons from its long engagement with the Vietnamese pepper sector.

The project brought together government agencies, technical and private-sector partners and farmer groups from the three countries to develop solutions adapted to local conditions. Exchanges among farmers, small businesses and government authorities accelerated the adoption of good agricultural and hygiene practices. Its central output was a regional Code of Practice, grounded in the standards of Codex, the primary international standard-setting body for food safety, and Vietnamese experience, but written to take account of pepper production across the three countries.

The project produced positive results. In Cambodia, improved practices raised yields by 10 per cent and farmer incomes by 30 per cent, supporting the country's first-ever export of black pepper to China in 2024, a shipment of 30 tonnes. In Lao PDR, the project connected farmers to Vietnamese buyers and enabled

participating farmers to earn income throughout the year, with an estimated US$ 50 to US$ 70 a week in additional earnings during the harvest season. In Viet Nam, safe production models were expanded, pesticide use reduced, and production costs lowered, helping to address the informal cross-border trade in contaminated peppercorn.

> **"Thanks to the project, I gained valuable knowledge and connected with buyers like Simexco and Vietpepper in Viet Nam, creating new opportunities to supply lemongrass and other products."**
>
> Soumaly Phommahuk, Etu Green, a women-led enterprise in Lao PDR.

The Code of Practice is now being scaled-up through Cambodia's CAPSAFE programme, an initiative funded by the European Union and Germany's federal agency for development cooperation, GIZ, to boost the sustainability, safety and competitiveness of Cambodia's agricultural sector. The code is also being disseminated through government services, extending safer production practices to more and more farmers and value chains.

Southern Africa: transboundary fruit fly management

Fruit flies are among the most damaging horticultural pests in Southern Africa. They threaten fruit production, raise SPS compliance costs and can trigger trade restrictions affecting farmers, exporters and national economies. Because the pests are a cross-border problem, effective management requires cooperation between neighbours rather than action by any one economy.

South Africa and Mozambique worked together through an STDF-funded project implemented by South Africa's Agricultural Research Council, combining the expertise of government agencies, research institutions and industry partners in both countries. The project built on existing cooperation between both countries' plant protection organizations, enabling Mozambique to draw on South Africa's extensive experience in fruit fly surveillance and management under international standards for phytosanitary measures. As a result, officials and other stakeholders in Mozambique strengthened their surveillance and pest management systems through technical exchanges and joint work in the field.

The project supported the establishment of internationally recognized pest-free areas and areas of low pest prevalence, facilitating trade from Mozambique to South Africa and beyond. A shared database was established to monitor fruit fly populations in real time, generate pest reports and improve coordination between the two national plant protection organizations. At the same time, new pest identification protocols, diagnostic tools and online training resources are providing the foundation for long-term surveillance capacity.

The project also demonstrated how cooperation between developing economies can mobilize finance. South African public and private sector parties contributed substantial financial resources alongside technical expertise. The project has resulted in the introduction of financing models for the sustained maintenance of pest-free areas by governments and industry, supporting the operational and financial durability of the approach.

Cocoa leaf preparation.

"Successful partnerships enhanced capacity building. Regional cooperation adds to that. What we learned from what's happening in South Africa and Mozambique is that lessons can be rolled out in all Africa and other regions."

Jan Hendrik Venter, Director of Plant Health, Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, South Africa.

Latin America and the Caribbean: regional action on cadmium in cocoa

Cadmium contamination has become a significant challenge for cocoa-producing economies in Latin America and the Caribbean. Naturally present in some soils, cadmium accumulates in cocoa beans and products, raising food safety concerns and threatening access to key export markets. Following the introduction of stricter international requirements, cocoa-producing economies across the region faced the same problem: how to generate the scientific evidence, testing capacity and mitigation strategies needed for SPS compliance while protecting smallholder livelihoods.

The STDF supported two complementary projects led by the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture and KU Leuven, a research institution in Belgium, enabling Colombia, Ecuador and Peru to coordinate research, strengthen laboratory capacity and share practical approaches to managing cadmium risk. Trinidad and Tobago joined independently, contributing its own expertise while benefiting from the shared learning.

Participating economies pooled expertise, harmonized analytical methods and exchanged data and methodologies. Laboratories collaborated to improve testing procedures, researchers jointly assessed mitigation options and national authorities strengthened the scientific basis for their decisions. A new regional platform was launched to connect producers, laboratories, policy-makers and research institutions.

Twenty-five public and private laboratories strengthened their capacity to test cadmium in cocoa and soils, 80 technicians gained skills in standardized analytical methods, and more than 2,300 cocoa farmers received training in improved agricultural practices. Updated hotspot maps helped authorities identify priority areas, and low-cost X-ray fluorescence technology provided an affordable tool for rapid testing.

> **"Countries didn't just work in isolation. They created a community of practice, exchanging methodologies, validating laboratory results and sharing findings openly. That's real South-South collaboration in action."**
>
> Roxane Burstow, joint assessment of the projects.

Project knowledge and mitigation approaches were subsequently incorporated into national and international policy processes. Cadmium mitigation strategies were incorporated into national cocoa sector plans in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, and experts from the region contributed their new knowledge to the Codex code of practice for the prevention and reduction of cadmium contamination in cocoa beans, approved in 2022. The lasting links formed between laboratories, researchers, policy-makers and producers constitute a network of good practice capable of responding to future SPS challenges.

Strengthening trade partnerships through South-South and triangular cooperation

The six case studies demonstrate that South-South and triangular cooperation can help economies address trade-related challenges by combining practical experience, technical expertise and complementary partnerships. Although the sectors and contexts differ, all six case studies show that economies facing similar constraints can benefit from adapting solutions developed by other developing economies, while drawing on the support of international organizations, development partners and other stakeholders to strengthen implementation.

A common feature across these case studies is that cooperation extended beyond knowledge exchange. It contributed to stronger national institutions, improved regulatory and technical capacities, and practical tools that continued to generate benefits after project completion. Whether through producer organizations, quality infrastructure, national plant protection organizations, regional research networks or investment promotion agencies, the projects embedded knowledge within institutions capable of sustaining and scaling-up results.

The case studies also highlight the importance of combining financing with national ownership and regional expertise. Financial and technical support helped facilitate exchanges, strengthen institutions and scale-up successful approaches, while the economies involved in the project provided

leadership, local knowledge and implementation capacity. Together, these experiences suggest that South-South and triangular cooperation are most effective when they build on practical peer learning, foster long-term partnerships and strengthen institutions that can continue to support trade and development beyond individual projects.

References

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World Trade Organization (WTO), "LDC trade, partnerships, trade for development initiatives explored in Development Week", News item, 6 July 2026. Available at https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news26_e/devel_06jul26_453_e.htm.

Endnote

1. ISO 17025 enables laboratories to demonstrate that they operate competently and generate valid results, thereby promoting confidence in their work both nationally and around the world; ISO 17020 specifies the requirements for the competence, impartiality and consistent operation of inspection bodies.