WTO TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

The implementation of the planned Technical Assistance (TA) activities of the World Trade Organization (WTO) for 2020 started as usual in January and by mid-March 2020, 20 activities, two of which were eight-week long courses had been implemented. Yet, these two eight-week long courses had to be cut short by about a week due to rising number of COVID-19 cases and the implementation of measures to limit the spread of the pandemic. The Institute for Training and Technical Cooperation (ITTC) therefore had to make swiftly modifications and arrangements in order to enable participants to urgently return to their respective home countries before things got worse.

From mid-March 2020 onward, all face-to-face TA activities were progressively postponed, as the pandemic led to an unprecedented situation, with respect to measures adopted by countries to address the immediate health aspects of COVID-19, these actions have far reaching consequences for their economies. In this context, trade-related technical assistance and capacity building have a role to play in supporting efforts to gradually recover from the impact of COVID-19.

To ensure that Technical Assistance (TA) continues to be provided to beneficiaries, a number of challenges connected to travel restrictions and measures implemented by governments to control the pandemic have to be overcome. This means, in particular, exploring other ways to deliver face-to-face activities to execute the 2020 planned TA activities and have the desired impact to assist countries emerge from the COVID-19 impact.

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What is the way forward?

ITTC has thus been working on alternative ways to deliver face-to-face activities in a cost-effective manner. Two options have been identified: virtual delivery for those that can be effectively delivered immediately, and in those cases where it is not feasible to deliver by virtual means, postponement to 2021.

Moving forward on the virtual delivery option, ITTC has reviewed TA requests received and contacted recipients to identify those programmed activities that can be implemented virtually. At the same time, the ITTC has assessed the Secretariat’s preparedness and skills to deliver courses virtually in order to determine what needed to be done to implement virtual training solutions.

The main highlighted obstacles identified in the review were related to the need to, first, enhance the existing E-Learning tools to deploy virtual training activities on a large scale, and, second, to develop capacities inside the Secretariat to deliver technical assistance activities virtually.

Responding to challenges and implementing virtual training activities:

As a result of this diagnosis, a specific learning programme was thus organised in the Secretariat to train WTO staff/experts on delivering effective virtual activities using web conferencing/webinar tool. This has enabled staff to adapt current in-person training material and curricula the current virtual delivery mode, while also tailoring content to best respond to beneficiaries’ needs and new priorities.

The E-Learning environment has also been expanded to host new virtual training curricula and offer distance-learning services in virtual classrooms. In addition, the available video-conferencing tools have been enhanced to deliver virtual courses through video-conferencing during this period as there is evidence that available technology can be effective for training participants in the current situation.

The Institute is now in the process of piloting a few activities in order to have a better understanding on what can be done and is accessible to the TA recipients knowing that countries are at different stages of lockdowns and experiences of COVID-19.

At the same time, ITTC is studying the best modes for delivering to the different regions, bearing in mind the technological and logistical challenges involved. The role that the existing Reference centres, particularly in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), can play to alleviate some challenges relating to accessibility and software, is in this regard also being assessed. Secretariat still needs to find out more, once there is participation also being assessed. Secretariat still needs accessibility and software, is in this regard also being assessed. Secretariat still needs to find out more, once there is participation and experiences of Chair holder institutions (FLACSO, Argentina).
THE REGIONAL TRADE POLICY COURSE (RTPC) CONTINUES AS E-RTPC

Regional Trade Policy Courses (RTPCs)

RTPCs aim primarily at deepening participants’ knowledge of the WTO Agreements and the functioning of the WTO, its rules and procedures as well as their understanding of relevant trade policy issues in their regional context. Other objectives include increasing participants’ autonomy to work on WTO issues by enhancing their ability to access WTO resources and strengthening participants’ networks of professional contacts. This is achieved through intensive eight-weeks long face-to-face training courses in seven global regions, in partnership with universities in the regions and involving regional trade experts as co-lecturers with WTO officials.

Challenges related to switching to distance learning

The objectives and results of an RTPC cannot be fully replicated in an E-Learning course due to limitations. Challenges include the fact that live webinars are limited to a two-hour duration and to two sessions per day at most to be effective. In addition, access to fast and reliable internet connectivity and to a laptop/desktop are required for virtual training but are not guaranteed, especially in situations where government officials may be required to work from home. Furthermore, time-zone differences between the geographical location of trainers and participants may also contract the time window available for virtual training.

How the e-RTPC addresses these challenges

The pilot Online Regional Trade Policy Course (e-RTPC) for the Caribbean region seeks to address these challenges by adapting the course objectives to a distance-learning delivery and developing synergies with the existing framework of the E-Learning course on Multilateral Trade Agreements (MTA course) as the foundation for the e-RTPC while also adding a focus on the regional trade policy context through webinars and virtual coaching with guest speakers offering regional perspectives (available live and as recorded sessions).

The activity uses the E-Learning platform’s environment for monitoring and evaluation and offers a virtual classroom to actively support participants’ learning.

WHAT ABOUT E-LEARNING?

Undisrupted services but not without challenges

Contrary to face-to-face activities, the online course offer has continued undisrupted. Yet there are challenges. Given that distance learning serves both as a training tool and selection tool for more advanced TA activities (with online courses used as prerequisite for face-to-face courses), the cancellation or postponement of the face-to-face has had an impact on the number of participants who register and take online courses to advance to another learning level. Normally such participants represent around 45% of the total number of participants. In addition, some participants are reporting difficulties to access a computer or internet with the lockdown situations in their respective countries. During normal times, participants generally do the online courses at the office.

Strategic response to challenges

In view of these challenging situation, the E-Learning programme has adapted its strategy and offer to better respond to needs connected with the COVID-19 situation.

First, on the virtual environment: the homepage of the platform will need to display the E-Learning catalogue, provide detailed information of the E-Learning courses on offer without a login requirement to facilitate access to the catalogue.

In addition, the E-Learning environment is being enhanced to adapt to mobile learning (e.g. a mobile app as well as efficiently support the virtual training activities in ITTC (e.g. synchronous learning, video-conferencing, virtual classrooms, interactive tools, etc.). E-Learning material developed on various trade-related topics for the online courses are also adapted to be used in ITTC’s virtual training.

Second, on the E-Learning offer: interactive activities on E-Learning and trade-related topics will continue to be organised, while the course catalogue is enhanced to offer courses that respond to beneficiaries’ evolving needs (e.g. shorter, focused, multimedia-rich and mobile-friendly courses).

Third, on strengthening and supporting participation in the programme: participation and results are closely monitored to ensure participation is sustained and balanced despite current challenges experienced by beneficiaries. Communication with stakeholders on how to register in the platform and do an online course has also been strengthened in various formats (including through multimedia) to facilitate learners’ access to the courses.
INTERVIEW OF MS BRIDGET CHILALA, DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE FOR TRAINING AND TECHNICAL COOPERATION (ITTC) OF THE WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION ON TRAINING WTO STAFF ON DELIVERING VIRTUALLY

Ms Bridget Chilala, Director of the Institute for Training and Technical Cooperation (ITTC) in the WTO

Ms Bridget Chilala knows well the value of trade policy courses. In 1987, the current Director of the WTO Institute for Training and Technical Cooperation (ITTC) was a young officer in the government of her country, Zambia. At the time, she travelled to Geneva to participate in the sixty-fourth edition of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) Trade Policy Course.

“...I attended the GATT trade policy course in 1987, just a few years after joining Zambia’s Ministry of Commerce, Trade and Industry. Participating in this course provided me with the basic knowledge I needed to carry out my work dealing with GATT, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and other trade related issues. Whenever there were trade challenges that required the attention of the Ministry, I was asked for my advice. Having attended the GATT course, I had the necessary skills and confidence to address such issues.”

Unfortunately, we were unable to meet during that trip. I wish now that I had had more time. On successive trips to Geneva, before I joined the WTO as Director of the ITTC, I had the opportunity to meet with some of the trainers, including the person who was Director of the Training Division at the time.

“...What are some major differences between trade policy courses when you attended and now? One thing that has not changed is the dedication by GATT and now WTO staff. When I attended, the course was four months long. It has now been reduced to two months and has become more intensive. In the GATT days, we were able to visit some countries and learn from their experiences. During my course, we visited Canada as part of the training and travelled from the East to the West Coast. All expenses were paid for by the Canadian Government. We also had interesting professional visits in Switzerland.

Apart from these trips, the content of trade policy courses has also changed over time. When I attended, there was no strategy on progressive learning. Many participants were accepted into trade policy courses with little prior exposure to multilateral trade rules. Each of the courses at the time would cover material that is now addressed in three different levels of learning: basic, intermediate, and advanced. Also we did not have the option of attending online training activities. That partly explains why the duration of these courses was four months.

The WTO Secretariat started the year 2020 on a very ambitious note with respect to training. A Biennial Technical Assistance and Training Plan (TA Plan) for 2020 and 2021 was adopted by WTO Members in late 2019, and then COVID-19 struck.

At what point in the year did training activities start being affected by COVID-19? WTO training activities were affected as soon as lockdowns and border closures kicked in around mid-March. By that time, we had enrolled our first quarter training activities. When that happened, we had a couple of long trade policy courses taking place, one in Geneva, Switzerland and one in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire. Our first priority at that point became ensuring the health and safety of participants and their safe return back home, as well as the health and safety of our staff and trainers. Unfortunately, this meant we had to cut short these trade policy courses. Fortunately, this happened almost at the end of the courses. This meant we were able to cover most of the substantive content. After that, we have had to cancel or postpone several other training activities, even some where things were at an advanced stage.

What has ITTC done to ensure the continuing delivery of technical assistance? We have taken several steps.

First, we have been in contact with TA beneficiaries to ask whether their training needs have changed as a result of the COVID-19 situation. Our current biennial TA Plan was prepared on needs and preferences expressed by beneficiaries well before the global pandemic was declared. We want to make sure that our offer of training activities continues to be relevant to beneficiaries’ needs. From the responses we have received, it seems that there has not been so far a change in terms of areas of interest. The focus in those areas however may change as we go forward.

Second, we have redesigned many of our training activities, originally conceived as face-to-face, to be delivered electronically or remotely. An immediate effect of COVID-19 on our training activities is that we have had to postpone many of our face-to-face courses. At this time, it is still uncertain when the COVID-19 situation will allow us to resume these activities. The situation may also evolve differently in different regions.

In delivering these TA activities by virtual means, we have built on our considerable experience with E-Learning over recent years. We are currently running an entire training programme on COVID-19 targeted at our own staff to improve their skills for delivering training remotely. We are also reviewing the challenges faced by participants to assess remote training with a view to finding solutions to address those challenges.

“...With decline to the voluntary contributions, a blend of face-to-face and virtual content is indispensable if we are to maintain a similar level of TA delivery as in the past few years”

Ms Bridget Chilala

What are the greatest challenges for WTO trade-related technical assistance? I would say the following. First, we have a limited mandate in an environment where needs have evolved. Second, even with respect to our current mandate, we have limited resources and particularly limited financial resources. Third, the fact that the WTO has only three working languages is a challenge for those countries where none of those three languages are commonly used by their government officials. Finally, we struggle to ensure that trained government officials remain in positions where they can contribute effectively to the trade debate at a national level.

Institute for Training and Technical Cooperation (ITTC)
Do you foresee the WTO delivering more training activities in virtual format in the future, even after COVID-19?

Yes, I do. In the near future, more and more activities will be delivered remotely until such a time that travel restrictions are reduced or removed completely. That said, going by how the 2008 financial impact affected some Members’ economies and hence their financial voluntary contribution, it’s clear already that the impact of COVID-19 will lead to some Members struggling to maintain the same level of voluntary contributions that they have made to the WTO to facilitate the implementation of WTO Technical Assistance. This would have a direct impact on how much technical assistance we can offer or deliver. At present, voluntary contribution to WTO TA budget stand around 76.8%. Therefore, with decline to the voluntary contributions, a blend of face-to-face and virtual content is indispensable if we are to maintain a similar level of TA delivery as in the past few years. At the same time, some of our activities cannot be completely delivered remotely, and remote delivery cannot entirely replace our face-to-face activities.

THE REGIONAL TRADE POLICY COURSE (RTPC) FOR FRENCH-SPEAKING AFRICAN MEMBERS AND OBSERVERS OF THE WTO

The RTPC opened with an address to the participants by Côte d’Ivoire’s Minister of Planning and Development, Ms Nialle Kaba, Mr Albert Kouatelay, Deputy Director of Cabinet, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Mr Kouadio Hugues, Director of the Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Statistique et d’Economie Appliquée (ENSEA) which is hosting the event for the fourth year in a row, and Mr Roberto Fiorentino, Head of the RTPC Unit in ITTC in the WTO.

As in previous years, the WTO released its Annual Performance Report on Technical Assistance and Training to Members in May 2020. The report analysed the delivery and results of TA activities implemented in 2019 and recorded the main evolutions observed as compared to 2018.

While WTO TA in 2019 produced contrasted results in sheer numerical targets, the Secretariat confirmed its commitment towards continuous improvement of its systems, processes, and learning approaches to achieve the highest TA outcomes.

After three years of sustained efforts, the Secretariat has completed, during the year, the implementation of the 28 recommendations formulated in the external evaluation of the WTO TA conducted in 2016, which had confirmed that the WTO TA was relevant to beneficiary countries, effective, efficient and sustainable, and was having a real impact.

Strengthening Result-Based Management (RBM) of WTO TA has continued to be at the forefront of Secretariat’s focus. The deployment of the new TA management system progressed well during the year with the introduction of new functionalities that promote shared responsibility and accountability among all TA stakeholders, trainers and beneficiaries alike, including a streamlined module for the evaluation of TA activities’ immediate results in a Back-To-Office Report (BTO). The management system should soon become the single window through which Members will interact with the Secretariat on TA, whether to present their TA needs, register for a TA activity and assess it, or access TA-related data. The systematic reporting on TA activities continued in 2019, with nearly 100% of the activities reported upon during the year. Finally, the Secretariat consolidated its monitoring and evaluation work in 2019. Ten TA internal evaluations were conducted during the year to assess the results of three regional and two national activities, the various long-term internship programmes, and of the TA provided to four beneficiary countries since 2014.

2019 marks the successful launch of the new E-Learning cloud-based platform that offers enhanced capabilities and security features and contributes to a better integration of the online and face-to-face trainings. In terms of substance, transparency obligations at the WTO have received particular emphasis in TA activities, several activities addressed notification procedures when they were not entirely dedicated to them (MA for Goods, Agriculture, Standards, TRIPS, etc.).

Similarly, TA in 2019 sought to support ongoing negotiations. At Members’ request, a comprehensive programme of seven regional workshops on Fisheries Subsidies Negotiations gathered fisheries and trade experts from all regions during the first part of the year to support the work of the negotiating group on Rules in this domain.
PLANNED WTO TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE EVENTS, OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2020

WTO Virtual Workshop on Accession and Agriculture, Global
12-22 October 2020

WTO Webinar: An Integrated Health, Trade and Intellectual Property Approach to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic, Global
21 October 2020

WTO Virtual National Workshop on TBT for government officials in Colombia
October 2020

WTO Virtual Thematic Workshop on SPS, Global
3 November 2020

WTO Virtual National Workshop on Trade in Services (French) for government officials of ECOWAS Members States
5-10 and 12 November 2020

WTO Advanced Global e-Workshop on Government Procurement, Promoting Trade, Good Governance and Inclusive, Sustainable Development: The Revised WTO Agreement on GSP (GPA) as an Enabler
5, 12, 19 and 26 November and 3 December 2020

WTO/AMF Virtual Regional High-Level Regional Dialogue on WTO Accessions for the Arab Region
8-10 November 2020

WTO Virtual Regional Workshop on Agriculture for AMEC Countries
14-16 November 2020

WTO Virtual Regional Workshop on e-Commerce for AMEC Countries
23 November-3 December 2020

WTO Virtual National Workshop on Economic Analysis in the International Trade for government officials in Mauritius
November 2020

WTO Virtual National Workshop on Agriculture (English) for government officials of ECOWAS Members States
November 2020

WTO Virtual National Workshop on SPS/TBT for government officials in Brazil
November 2020

WTO Virtual National Workshop on Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) (English) for government officials of ECOWAS Members States
November 2020

WTO Virtual National Workshop on the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) for government officials in Chinese Taipei
November/December 2020

WTO Virtual National Workshop on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) for government officials in South Africa
November/December 2020

WTO Virtual Symposium on Agriculture, Global
2-3 December 2020

WTO Virtual National Workshop on the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures (SCM) for government officials in Chinese Taipei
date to be determined

Virtual National Seminar on WTO Trade Remedies for government officials in Kyrgyz Republic
date to be determined

WTO Virtual National Seminar on GATS for government officials in Oman
date to be determined

WTO Virtual National Seminar on TRIPS for government officials in Uzbekistan
date to be determined

WTO Virtual Regional Seminar on Subsidy Notifications for government officials in the Latin American region
date to be determined

E-LEARNING COURSES AVAILABLE FROM OCTOBER TO DECEMBER 2020
AT https://wtolearning.csod.com/

A short trip through TRIPS
Agriculture in the WTO
Agriculture Information Management System
CITES and the WTO - Enhancing Cooperation for Sustainable Development
Copyright in the WTO
Documents Online E-Subscriptions
Fast track to anti-dumping: Short course on anti-dumping in the WTO
Fast track to GATS: Short course on Trade in Services
Fast track to safeguard measures in the WTO
Fast track to Subsidies and Countervailing Measures in the WTO
Introduction to the WTO
Made in... Understanding Rules of Origin
Mainstreaming Trade - The Fundamentals
Market Access for goods and Non-Agricultural Market Access NAMA Negotiations
Patents in the WTO
Regional Trade Agreements and the WTO
Sanitary and Phyto sanitary Measures
Technical Barriers to Trade in the WTO
The Agriculture Xpress
The Committee on Trade and Development in the WTO
The Multilateral Trade Agreements
The WTO Dispute Settlement System
The WTO and Trade Economics: Theory and Policy
Trade and Development in the WTO
Trade and Environment and the WTO
Trade Facilitation Agreement

More information on the WTO TRTA activities can be found at
www.wto.org  Technical Assistance

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