

Introduction

The 2025 High-Level Political Forum and the WTO

The United Nations High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) continues to serve as a central platform for reviewing the progress of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It provides an important opportunity for the WTO to assess how international trade and the multilateral trading system can advance sustainable development, foster inclusion and contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The 2025 HLPF is focusing on SDG 3 (“Good health and well-being”), SDG 5 (“Gender equality”), SDG 8 (“Decent work and economic growth”), SDG 14 (“Life below water”) and SDG 17 (“Partnerships for the goals”). These goals align closely with WTO workstreams on trade and health, inclusive trade, sustainable fisheries, trade and artificial intelligence (AI), and innovative partnerships.

The 2025 HLPF theme, “Advancing sustainable, inclusive, science- and evidence-based solutions for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals for leaving no one behind,” reflects the need to ground development action in data, partnerships and inclusive governance – principles that also underpin the WTO’s approach to trade policy.

Evolving trade dynamics in 2025

The multilateral trading system is faced with growing economic uncertainty. Policy announcements by major economies have contributed to heightened trade tensions, with implications for global trade volumes, market stability and development prospects. The WTO Secretariat’s latest global trade forecast for 2025/2026 indicates that global merchandise trade volume is projected to decrease by 0.2 per cent in 2025, significantly lower than projections made under a “low tariff” scenario and could decline further to -1.5 per cent if conditions worsen (WTO, 2025). Additionally, while services trade is not directly impacted by tariffs, the growth rate for global commercial services trade is expected to slow, with a forecasted growth of 4.0 per cent.

Some of the world’s largest bilateral trade flows are expected to contract significantly. These changes, while concentrated in specific trade corridors, may have broader spillover effects, including through trade diversion, uncertainty for producers and consumers, and reduced integration for smaller economies.

The outlook is further shaped by structural risks, including the possible fragmentation of global trade along geopolitical lines.

Projections indicate that the emergence of separate economic blocs could reduce global real GDP by nearly 7 per cent over the long term. These risks are particularly acute for least developed countries (LDCs), which may face increased volatility and more limited access to key markets.

Despite this challenging context, multilateral frameworks continue to provide a foundation for stability. WTO estimates show that approximately 74 per cent of global goods trade still takes place under most-favoured-nation terms.¹ This reflects the continued relevance of the WTO’s core rules in providing predictability and transparency across the trading system.

In parallel to managing short-term risks, WTO members are engaged in discussions on institutional reform. Several areas of focus have emerged, including strengthening transparency and monitoring, advancing negotiations and restoring a fully operational dispute settlement function. These efforts are directly relevant to SDG 17, which calls for effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, as well as for enhanced global partnerships to support sustainable development. The ongoing reform discussions reflect a broad-based interest in ensuring that the WTO remains effective, inclusive and responsive to contemporary global challenges.

The themes and focus areas of the 2025 HLPF are closely linked to the current global trade context. Shifts in trade flows and policy uncertainty can directly influence access to health-related goods (SDG 3), employment and economic opportunity (SDG 8), and cooperation in critical sectors such as digital services and sustainable fisheries (SDGs 5 and 14). In this context, SDG 17 on partnerships remains essential for enabling joint responses and policy coherence.

Trade continues to be a critical enabler of sustainable development. To fulfill its full potential, however, trade must be anchored in inclusive, science- and evidence-based policies. As the 2025 HLPF underscores, only by ensuring that no one is left behind – including women, small-scale producers and vulnerable economies – can the global community make meaningful progress towards achieving the SDGs.

The following chapters explore how WTO activities and trade policy tools are contributing to the advancement of Goals 3, 5, 8, 14 and 17. By assessing current trade dynamics and their implications for sustainable development, the WTO seeks to support evidence-based solutions that can help deliver a more inclusive, resilient and sustainable global economy.

