

WTO's contribution to attaining UN Sustainable Development Goals:

2025 update to the High-Level
Political Forum



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This report was prepared under the overall supervision of Taufiq Rahman, Director of the Development Division Raúl Torres, Lead of the Sustainable Development Unit in the Development Division, conceptualized and directed the work, while Lucas Ricardo, also of the Unit, coordinated its implementation. The publication was edited by Jeanine Beck (Information and External Relations Division), and the Graphic and Event Design, Print and Distribution Section produced the design and layout.

Contributing authors to this publication were Lucas Ricardo, Théo Mbise, Raúl Torres, Anoush der Boghossian and Sandra Dondenne (Development Division); Joscelyn Magdeleine (Trade in Services and Investment Division); Josefita Pardo de León, Reto Malacrida (Intellectual Property, Government Procurement & Competition Division); Roberta Piermartini, Emmanuelle Ganne, Marc Bacchetta, and Ankai Xu (Economic Research and Statistics Division); and Sainabou Taal and João Nunes (Rules Division). Valuable comments were also received from Nicole Mensa and Stephen Fevrier of the Office of the Director-General.

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Abbreviations

AFS	Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies
AI	artificial intelligence
CFS	Committee on Fisheries Subsidies
FIFA	International Federation of Association Football
GATS	General Agreement on Trade in Services
GDP	gross domestic product
GPA	Agreement on Government Procurement
HLPF	High-Level Political Forum (United Nations)
IP	intellectual property
ITC	International Trade Centre
IUU	illegal, unreported and unregulated
IWG	Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender
LDC	least-developed country
MSME	micro, small- and medium-sized enterprise
R&D	research and development
RFMO/A	Regional Fisheries Management Organization/Arrangement
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
STRI	Services Trade Restrictions Index
TRIPS	Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
WEIDE	Women Exporters in the Digital Economy
WHO	World Health Organization
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization

Key Points

The following key points illustrate the ways in which the WTO contributes to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through its agreements, technical assistance, and multi-stakeholder initiatives, the WTO plays a key role in promoting inclusive economic growth, women's economic empowerment, sustainable resource management, and effective partnerships. These efforts help ensure that global trade supports sustainable development and benefits people and communities worldwide.



SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being

- The Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) provides a balanced framework that protects innovation while preserving flexibilities to support public health. Initiatives such as the 2001 Doha Declaration and the 2022 TRIPS Ministerial Decision reinforce members' ability to ensure access to medicines, including during health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
- WTO technical assistance and trilateral cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO) and World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) support members in implementing intellectual property (IP) rules that enhance access to health technologies. Strategic use of TRIPS flexibilities, voluntary licensing and technology transfer have become central to advancing health equity, particularly in low- and middle-income economies.
- Government procurement, including pooled purchasing and Agreement on Government Procurement (GPA) flexibilities, play a crucial role in improving access to affordable medical products and strengthening health systems. During COVID-19, emergency measures under GPA 2012 helped members respond swiftly while maintaining transparency and competitiveness.
- Trade in health-related services has grown significantly, particularly through commercial presence (General Agreement on Trade in Services/GATS mode 3) and cross-border telehealth (GATS mode 1). While services trade can help address healthcare needs and workforce shortages, regulatory oversight is vital to ensure quality, patient safety and data protection.
- The GATS offers a flexible framework to support trade in health-related services, while preserving governments' right to regulate. Through greater transparency, regulatory cooperation, and the mutual recognition of qualifications, especially as advanced by the recent Services Domestic Regulation disciplines, it can help improve global access to health services and enhance overall health outcomes.



SDG 5: Gender Equality

- The WTO's Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender (IWG) advances SDG 5 by promoting gender-responsive trade policies and removing barriers to women's participation in global markets. Through initiatives such as the Gender Lens Framework and the Compendium of Financial Inclusion Initiatives, the IWG fosters inclusive legal and financial ecosystems for women entrepreneurs. Its international prize and cooperation with organizations like UNCTAD and the World Bank further incentivize systemic change toward women's economic empowerment in trade.
- The WEIDE Fund and the Partenariat pour le Coton promote women's economic empowerment through trade. WEIDE supports women entrepreneurs via digital skills, finance, and tailored support, aiming to empower 400 women in its first phase. The Partenariat pour le Coton links women in African cotton-producing countries to jobs in textile value chains, addressing gender-specific barriers and fostering inclusive industrial growth.

- Structural challenges, such as unequal access to finance, discriminatory norms and unpaid care work, limit women's involvement in trade. Gender-responsive policies are needed with financial inclusion strategies, with digital solutions and literacy programmes proving particularly effective for women in rural areas. Creating equitable economic opportunities for women worldwide demands cooperation across public and private sectors to overcome persistent barriers to trade participation.
- An increasing number of regional trade agreements (RTAs) include gender-related provisions, covering areas such as employment, education, safety and economic participation. These provisions demonstrate a growing commitment to women's economic empowerment through trade, however, many of these remain non-binding and are excluded from dispute settlement mechanisms, limiting their effectiveness.



SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

- WTO-led trade liberalization supports SDG 8 by promoting productivity, economic diversification and employment, but requires complementary policies in skills development, infrastructure, and institutions to ensure trade leads to inclusive and decent work outcomes.
- WTO membership drives economic growth through comprehensive reforms that enhance governance, attract investment and expand trade, while creating sectoral disruptions and job displacements that necessitate reskilling programs and innovation support for quality employment, particularly as advanced technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) reshape the global economy.
- To ensure AI-driven growth results in decent work, governments must invest in human capital (education, reskilling, social protection), digital infrastructure and inclusive policies. International cooperation is also essential to prevent widening digital divides.
- The WTO has a role to play in facilitating AI-related trade and ensuring trustworthy AI, although the rapid evolution of AI is prompting questions about the implications of AI for international trade rules. Mechanisms such as the TRIPS Agreement and Information Technology Agreement support technology diffusion and capacity-building in developing economies.
- International cooperation is essential to maximize AI's benefits while mitigating risks in trade, with the WTO uniquely positioned to foster dialogue on regulatory coherence and digital governance. By facilitating discussions across e-commerce and services regulations, the WTO can drive collaboration that ensures all members, especially developing countries, benefit from AI-driven trade transformation.



SDG 14: Life Below Water

- In June 2022, the WTO adopted the landmark Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies (AFS), marking a significant contribution towards achieving SDG 14. This Agreement introduces binding multilateral rules designed to curb harmful fisheries subsidies, aiming to address issues such as illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and overfishing. For the AFS to enter into force, two-thirds of WTO membership (111 members) must deposit instruments of acceptance with the WTO.
- The AFS bars subsidies that (i) support vessels/operators engaged IUU fishing; (ii) target over-fished stocks (unless rebuilding measures are in place); and (iii) finance fishing in unregulated high-seas areas; members must also exercise "special care" where stock status is unknown.
- The AFS is expected to redirect resources from harmful subsidies towards sustainable fisheries management. It includes notification requirements that increase transparency about fisheries subsidies worldwide, which will help monitor and regulate their impact on global fish stocks and establishes the WTO Fish Fund to provide technical assistance to developing and least-developed country (LDC) members.

- Members also agreed at MC12 to continue negotiations on fisheries subsidies, with a view to making recommendations for additional provisions that will further build on the disciplines of the Agreement. These negotiations are ongoing.
- WTO rules support the development of sustainable ocean-based sectors by improving market access, reducing trade barriers, and fostering regulatory coherence. Agreements such as the Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA), the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT Agreement) and the GATS enable integration of eco-friendly marine products and services into global markets, supporting blue economy diversification in coastal developing economies and SIDS in line with SDG 14.



SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals

- The WTO is leveraging strategic multi-stakeholder partnerships to advance SDG 17, with strong interlinkages to SDGs 5 (Gender equality) and 8 (Decent work), focusing on inclusive economic development through trade.
- Launched in 2024 with the International Trade Centre (ITC), the Women Exporters in the Digital Economy (WEIDE) Fund supports women entrepreneurs in developing countries, through financial aid and digital skills training, to gain market access, aiming to empower 400 women in its first phase. It mobilizes public-private funding and fosters gender-inclusive trade policies.
- The “Partenariat pour le Coton” – Cotton Value Chain Transformation – is a WTO-FIFA initiative that supports African cotton-producing countries (C4+). It helps them to move up the value chain by promoting local processing and exports of textiles and apparel, with a strong focus on regional integration and gender-responsive development.
- All of these initiatives demonstrate multi-stakeholder collaboration involving international organizations, governments, financial institutions and private sector entities to address complex development challenges.

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.



SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being

The evolving global landscape of intellectual property and global health

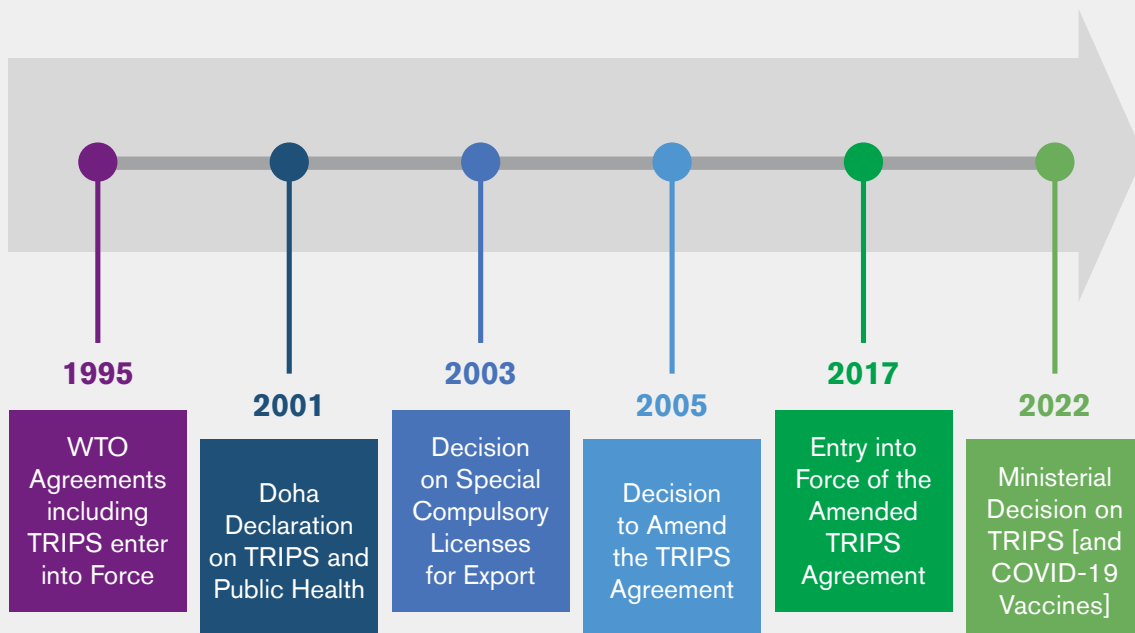
Intellectual property (IP) has profound implications for driving innovation, ensuring fair access to medical technologies and strengthening health systems – key elements for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) on good health and well-being. The WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) provides a balanced legal framework that protects and incentivizes innovation while preserving vital public policy flexibilities to respond to health and nutrition priorities.

Since its entry into force in 1995, the TRIPS Agreement has evolved to clarify and expand how governments can use IP policy to advance public health. Early concerns about the cost of HIV/AIDS medicines led to the 2001 Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and public health, which affirmed the right of WTO members to fully utilize TRIPS flexibilities – including compulsory licensing – to safeguard public health. Soon thereafter, in 2003, WTO members instituted a system enabling economies lacking pharmaceutical manufacturing capacity to import affordable generic medicines produced under compulsory licenses.

These commitments were permanently incorporated into the TRIPS Agreement in 2005 through the addition of Article 31bis, marking the first ever amendment of a WTO agreement. In 2017, following ratification by two-thirds of the membership, the amended TRIPS Agreement officially entered into force. By June 2025, 115 WTO members had accepted the amendment, underscoring a broad consensus on using trade and IP rules to promote access to medicines.

In 2022, recognizing the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, members adopted a Ministerial Decision on the TRIPS Agreement. This decision provides clarity on how governments may authorize the use of patented COVID-19 vaccine technologies under domestic legal systems to expedite production, including for export to eligible members or through humanitarian initiatives such as COVAX.² Although members did not reach consensus to extend the same measures to COVID-19 therapeutics and diagnostics, discussions underscore the continuing importance of leveraging TRIPS flexibilities to strengthen health system resilience in times of crisis.

Figure 1: Timeline of TRIPS and Public Health Decisions



Source: World Trade Organization, Trade and Public Health: Evolution of TRIPS Policy Options.

WTO members have also broadened their collaboration, including with other international organizations, to advance public health objectives:

- Ministerial Declaration on the WTO Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and Preparedness for Future Pandemics: Adopted in parallel with the 2022 TRIPS Decision, this Declaration calls for equitable access to vaccines, stronger health systems and increased transparency regarding government measures during health emergencies.³
- Paragraph 22 of the Abu Dhabi Declaration encourages the continuation of the work set out in the MC13 Ministerial Declaration, to review and build on the lessons learned and the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. It recommends that, in view of future pandemics, effective solutions are built in an expeditious manner.⁴
- WHO-WIPO-WTO trilateral cooperation: Through joint publications such as Promoting Access to Medical Technologies and Innovation and An Integrated Health, Trade and IP Approach to Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO), World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and WTO offer guidance on the interplay between IP, trade and public health, focusing on practical ways to expand access to vital health products while incentivizing continued innovation.
- Technical assistance and capacity building: Recognizing that national legal and regulatory contexts differ widely, the WTO provides capacity-building support so members can design IP rules and practices – encompassing not only TRIPS flexibilities but also aspects of market access, services and competition policies – that help achieve SDG 3.

The WHO-WIPO-WTO trilateral studies repeatedly highlight that sustainable local manufacturing, combined with strategic IP management, is crucial to expanding access to medicines and strengthening national research and development (R&D) capacity. One key policy approach involves promoting technology transfer by enabling universities, public research institutes and private firms to form partnerships that share critical know-how, such as manufacturing processes or clinical data, while respecting intellectual property rights. Structured agreements, such as those under WIPO Re:Search, illustrate how patent holders can voluntarily license or share research assets to tackle diseases that disproportionately affect low- and middle-income countries.

A second important strategy centres on boosting regulatory harmonization. Economies can streamline marketing approval processes through mutual recognition, WHO prequalification, or collaborative regulatory reviews. These measures reduce costs, accelerate time-to-market for both novel and generic drugs, and facilitate cross-border supply of essential health products, all while aligning with existing IP rules.

Additionally, managing competition and ensuring affordability is vital. Authorities can combine pro-competition IP provisions (e.g. patent oppositions or preventing anti-competitive licensing) with policy interventions such as discounted pricing, voluntary licenses, or pooled procurement. These approaches not only lower the cost of medical technologies but also reinforce competition law enforcement as a safeguard against collusion and regulatory exclusivity misuse.

INTEGRATED PATHWAYS FOR POLICY COHERENCE

Realizing the full potential of intellectual property and trade disciplines for public health goals requires a coordinated approach across government agencies and international forums. In line with the WHO Global Strategy and Plan of Action on Public Health, Innovation and Intellectual Property (GSPA-PHI), economies should ensure strong health systems, which include adequate financing, strategic procurement and a well-trained workforce, so that IP flexibilities and licensing frameworks effectively translate into accessible health technologies.

In tandem, governments can foster R&D for neglected and emerging diseases by employing incentives such as push and pull funding mechanisms, advanced market commitments, or prize funds designed to spur innovation where commercial returns might otherwise be limited. Coordinating internationally is another essential element: technical support from WHO, WIPO, and WTO – alongside philanthropic and regional institutions – can help states navigate TRIPS flexibilities, strengthen patent offices and negotiate balanced licensing deals that keep new therapies both profitable and affordable.

Finally, monitoring emerging global health threats, as well as preparing for them, demands an agile IP framework equipped with open data-sharing mechanisms and carefully structured flexibilities. Such an approach safeguards global preparedness for future pandemics, including the imperative to develop new antimicrobials, vaccines and diagnostics on a timely and equitable basis.

WTO members are continuing to refine trade-related IP rules in ways that support global health objectives. These collective efforts have helped sustain a system that maintains robust incentives for innovation while meeting urgent demands for broader and more affordable access to critical health solutions. Crucially, this work confirms that intellectual property and health policy need not stand in conflict; indeed, by leveraging TRIPS flexibilities, promoting transparent licensing and collaborative R&D, and enabling local production through partnerships, WTO members demonstrate that it is possible to trigger life-saving medical breakthroughs and ensure these advances reach the widest population in need. Ultimately, aligning IP and trade policy with the broader goal of universal access remains essential to achieving SDG 3's vision of good health and well-being for all.

Government procurement and SDG 3

Government procurement plays a central role in strengthening public healthcare systems and ensuring broader health coverage, particularly where private markets fail to meet needs affordably. Through transparent and competitive procurement processes, governments can reduce costs, secure reliable supplies of essential health products and promote higher-quality care. According to the World Bank, health expenditures in high-income economies exceed 13 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), whereas low- and middle-income economies typically spend around 5.4 per cent of GDP through government procurement.⁵ Government procurement of medicines, vaccines, diagnostics and healthcare services remains essential for bridging these gaps.

In many economies, belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development means that health-related procurement is around 30 per cent of total government procurement. This demonstrates both the substantial budgetary commitment required to deliver health services, and the potential for procurement policies to become a powerful tool in achieving SDG 3. Governments can, for example, use technical specifications to support the overall well-being of the population in a manner that helps to expand access to vital goods and services.

Pooled procurement – a strategy in which multiple economies or public entities aggregate their demand – has proven to be particularly valuable for health-related goods. By consolidating demand for pharmaceuticals, vaccines or medical devices, economies can negotiate more favourable prices, improve supply chain reliability, and maintain consistent product quality.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, some members turned to regional and international procurement mechanisms (such as the Pan American Health Organization's [PAHO's] Strategic Fund) to achieve cost savings and expedite delivery times. Colombia's experience in purchasing Hepatitis C treatments through the PAHO fund, which reportedly reduced prices by up to 90 per cent, underscores the effectiveness of pooled procurement for resource-constrained health systems. In addition to promoting affordability, pooled procurement can help streamline clinical and regulatory processes. By aligning standards across participating entities, members can move faster to approve and distribute essential products.

The WTO Agreement on Government Procurement (GPA) 2012 provides a valuable framework for fair, transparent and cost-effective health-related procurement. The GPA 2012 typically covers ministries of health and the goods and services they purchase, including medicines, vaccines and medical equipment. By promoting open competitive bidding, the GPA 2012 helps governments achieve better value for money and mitigate risks such as corruption.

Moreover, the GPA 2012 offers flexibilities enabling its parties to respond effectively in public health emergencies:

- **Reduction of deadlines** for tender submissions allow swifter purchase of medical supplies in case of urgency.
- **E-procurement** options reduce burdens for procuring entities and suppliers, can shorten the tendering process and enhance supplier participation.
- **Limited tendering** – though exceptional – can be used when strictly necessary, subject to transparency safeguards and ex post justifications.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many GPA parties resorted to limited tendering to procure essential medicines, vaccines and medical equipment quickly, illustrating both the availability of GPA flexibilities and the significance of maintaining transparency. By balancing emergency measures with transparency, GPA parties can meet urgent health needs without undermining competition and integrity in procurement markets.

Thus, government procurement, especially if aligned with international best practices and implemented through cooperative mechanisms like pooled procurement, can help to ensure that health systems are cost-effective, resilient and better equipped to serve the most vulnerable populations.

The GATS and health-related services trade

The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), which entered into force in 1995, is the multilateral framework governing international trade in services. It aims to improve transparency and predictability, ensuring fair and equitable treatment of all WTO members when trading services, and calls for its progressive liberalization to promote trade and economic development (WTO, 2017). However, it also recognizes authorities' right to regulate the supply of services to ensure that national public policy objectives are met, and takes into account the particular needs of developing economies in that respect. The GATS covers all services, including health-related services, except services supplied in the exercise of governmental authority.⁶ The latter are defined as services that are neither supplied on a commercial basis, nor in competition with one or more services suppliers. This means, for example, that services provided for a nominal fee by health service suppliers that are not actively trying to attract customers (patients) are not disciplined by the GATS (World Bank & WTO, 2022).

The GATS outlines four modes of trading services:

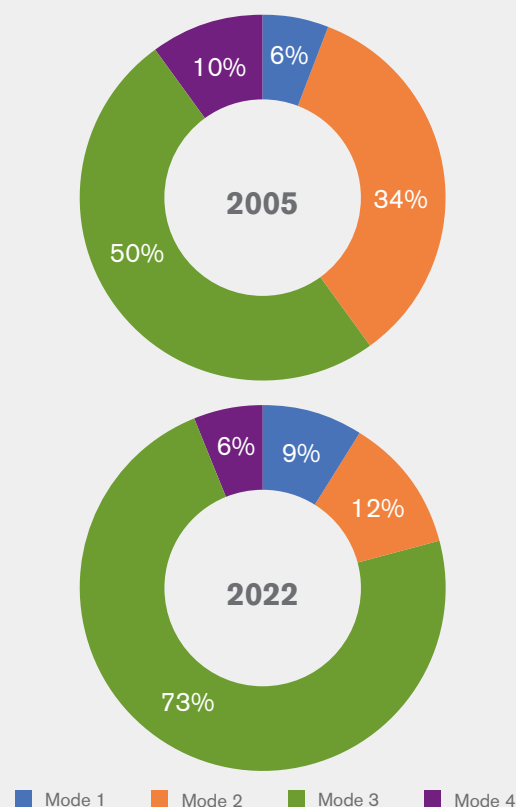
1. Cross-border supply (mode 1): Services are provided across borders while the consumer and supplier remain in their respective jurisdictions, such as through telemedicine or online consultations.
2. Consumption abroad (mode 2): Services are provided to consumers who travel outside their jurisdiction, like in the case of receiving medical treatment abroad.
3. Commercial presence (mode 3): A foreign service supplier establishes operations in the consumer's territory, such as a foreign hospital opening a local branch.
4. Presence of natural persons (mode 4): Service providers temporarily move abroad to supply their services, including health professionals working abroad independently or through their employers.

Trade in health-related services has grown significantly since 2005.⁷ Trade through all four modes of supply was estimated at approximately US\$ 95 billion in 2022 – accounting for some 0.5 per cent of global trade in services, up from 0.3 per cent in 2005. It has grown at an annual average of 9 per cent since 2005, compared with

5.5 per cent growth for total commercial services. Health-related services have been traded mainly by establishing a commercial presence in another country (mode 3), representing 73 per cent of global exports of health services in 2022 (Figure 1).

Meanwhile cross-border telehealth (mode 1) exports have gained importance over the years, experiencing a 10 per cent yearly increase on average between 2005 and 2019, and increasing by 16 per cent on average since then. It represents today 9 per cent of the value of trade in health-related services. In 2022, 6 per cent of the value of trade in health-related services was supplied through the movement of foreign health professionals (mode 4) and 12 per cent was rendered to foreign patients during a stay abroad (mode 2, "medical travel"). The latter reflects a drastic change compared to 2005, when almost a third of exports of health-related services were conducted through mode 2. However, it remains a very important way for economies to supply their services to foreign patients/consumers from economies which cannot respond to demand for such services.

Figure 2: World exports of health-related services are changing



Source: World Trade Organization, Trade in Services by Mode of Supply (TISMOS), https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statistics_e/gstdh_mode_supply_e.htm.

As mentioned above, trade in health-related services is still relatively small in value terms. One important factor is the strong government involvement in this sector, given the importance of health services for the well-being of populations, the need to ensure access to basic services for all, as well as guaranteeing data privacy and protection. This explains the many restrictive policies that may be in place. But the health sector is increasingly seeking to attract foreign suppliers to generate additional resources, reduce the burden on the public health system and encourage the transfer of know-how. This is notably achieved by attracting foreign investment in the sector, as well as relying increasingly on the cross-border supply of telehealth services.

However, there is a need for comprehensive and sound regulatory oversight of the sector to ensure equity in access, safety of patients/consumers and that ethical standards are met. This explains why mode 3 still represents the largest share of trade in health services, as oversight can be more easily achieved if health service suppliers are established in the jurisdiction where their patients/clients are located.

Trade in health-related services presents significant opportunities for ensuring good health and well-being around the globe. Certain economies with strong, well-trained healthcare workforces and associated comparative advantages have the potential to export health-related services through all modes of supply, benefitting those where supply cannot meet the local demand. However, for trade in health services to reach its full potential, a combination of supportive policies, global cooperation and investment in technological infrastructure must be implemented.⁷ Recent technological advancements, such as 5G technology, artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, are opening up new opportunities for trade in health services, particularly the dramatic development of telehealth in recent years, including from a trade perspective, whether cross-border (mode 1) or by attracting international investors (mode 3).

While cross-border telehealth has existed for many years, it has gained significant momentum in recent years due to economic growth and technological advancements, particularly in IT solutions that enable the provision of services across borders, including via online health platforms.⁸ This shift holds considerable promise for expanding global healthcare access, by reducing costs, enhancing care efficiency, improving continuity and coordination, and making healthcare more affordable and accessible to underserved and isolated populations.

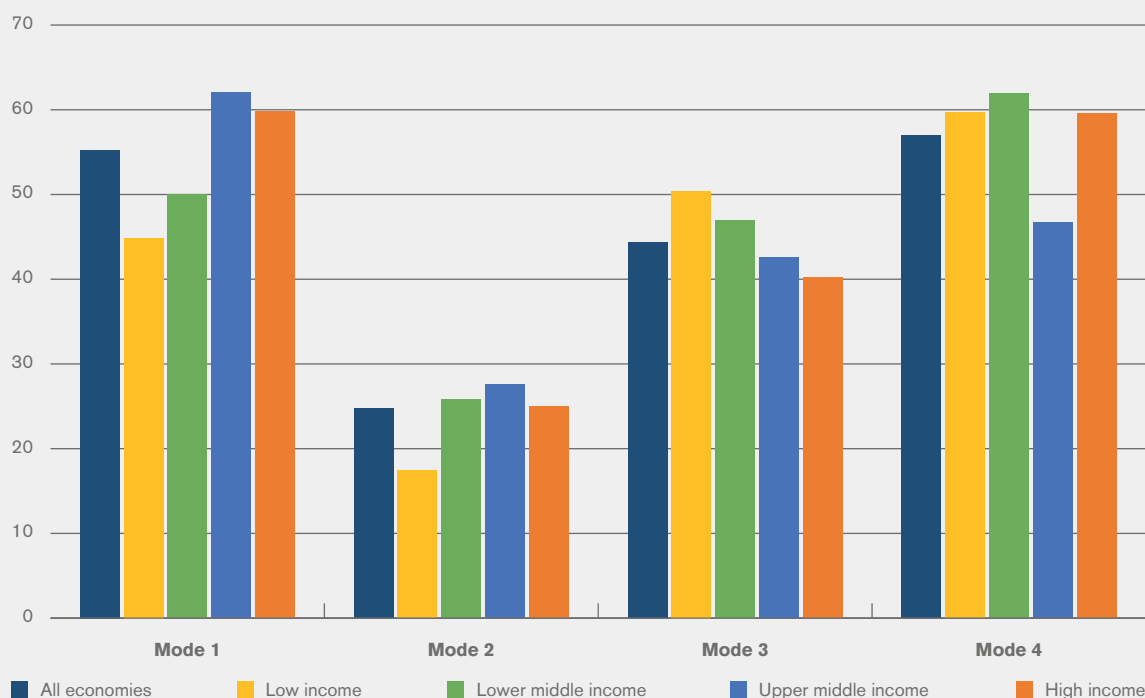
Telehealth trade can help address shortages of healthcare workers, generate revenue and improve system efficiency. The growth of cross-border telehealth services brings additional benefits, especially for developing countries, by alleviating workforce shortages, increasing productivity, reducing the need for travel, and lowering healthcare costs. However, to fully realize its potential, strong policies and regulatory frameworks need to be developed to ensure care quality, patient safety, data protection and equitable access. Additionally, investments in infrastructure are crucial.

Also, health hubs can attract international patients for specialized care (mode 2, health-related travel), thanks in particular to the appeal of a country's tourism sector, as well as the reduction in travel costs as a result of this. There are other ways in which trade in health-related services can be used to respond to demand, especially through the attraction of foreign investment in health establishments (mode 3) and the movement of health professionals (mode 4).

It is also important to consider that the global mobility of healthcare workers and the related trade in health-related services are increasingly influenced by the importing country's adherence to international governance mechanisms, such as the WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel. In this context, health-related trade in services policy and the WHO Code could be mutually reinforcing. For example, the application of health labour market analyses, in both sending and receiving economies, could further clarify the economic or labour market opportunities and support greater liberalization of trade in services by better targeting demonstrated needs (Carzaniga et al., 2019).

POLICYMAKING FOR TRADE IN HEALTH-RELATED SERVICES

Many economies worldwide are ill-equipped to meet the growing demand from their populations for health-related services. While trade in health services cannot solve all issues, it can support governments in achieving their public health policy goals. However, as indicated previously, policies in this sector are quite restrictive. Figure 2 shows the average level of trade restrictiveness for health-related services for 136 economies, as measured by the World Bank-WTO Services Trade Restrictions Index (STRI). The level of restrictiveness of such policies is relatively high when it comes to mode 1 (cross-border telehealth) and mode 4 (movement of natural persons), reflecting the high regulatory intensity involved in supplying these services to ensure the quality of services provided and the privacy of consumers.

Figure 3: Trade in health-related services policies is restricted

Source: World Trade Organization and World Bank, I-TIP Services interface, Services Trade Policy Database, 2025, <https://itip-services-worldbank.wto.org>.

Note: The figure presents the average World Bank-WTO Services Trade Restrictions Index (STRI) for the health-related services sector. The STRI measures the restrictiveness of a country's services trade policies, ranging from 0 to 100, where 0 indicates the least restrictive and 100 is the most restrictive environment for trade in services.

Low income and lower-middle income economies exhibit a mode 1 Services Trade Restrictiveness Index (STRI) which is much lower, most probably reflecting the lack of regulation relevant for telehealth, particularly when it comes to cross-border interactions. The level of restrictiveness for mode 4 is driven by stringent requirements to be allowed to supply such services (e.g. nationality or residence requirements, issues pertaining to the recognition of qualifications), as well as horizontal policies, such as labour market tests, particularly present in higher income economies. The establishment of commercial presence appears to be moderately restrictive across all economic groupings, with policies primarily driven by limitations on foreign direct investment or the number of health establishments, particularly in high-income economies. Finally, health-related travel is the least restrictive of the modes of supply, often constrained by the non-portability of health insurance policies.

Reducing or removing trade barriers that do not support public policy objectives could lead to better access to and quality of health services, as well as cost savings and efficiency improvements.

However, policymakers must strike a balance between fostering competition and ensuring that health services remain universally accessible while upholding the security and quality standards required to protect patients. Trade agreements, including the GATS, provide a platform for governments to discuss the liberalization of such services and negotiate market openings, which would increase trade, hence better meet demand, allowing governments to commit to binding policies that ensure credibility and predictability in trading conditions.

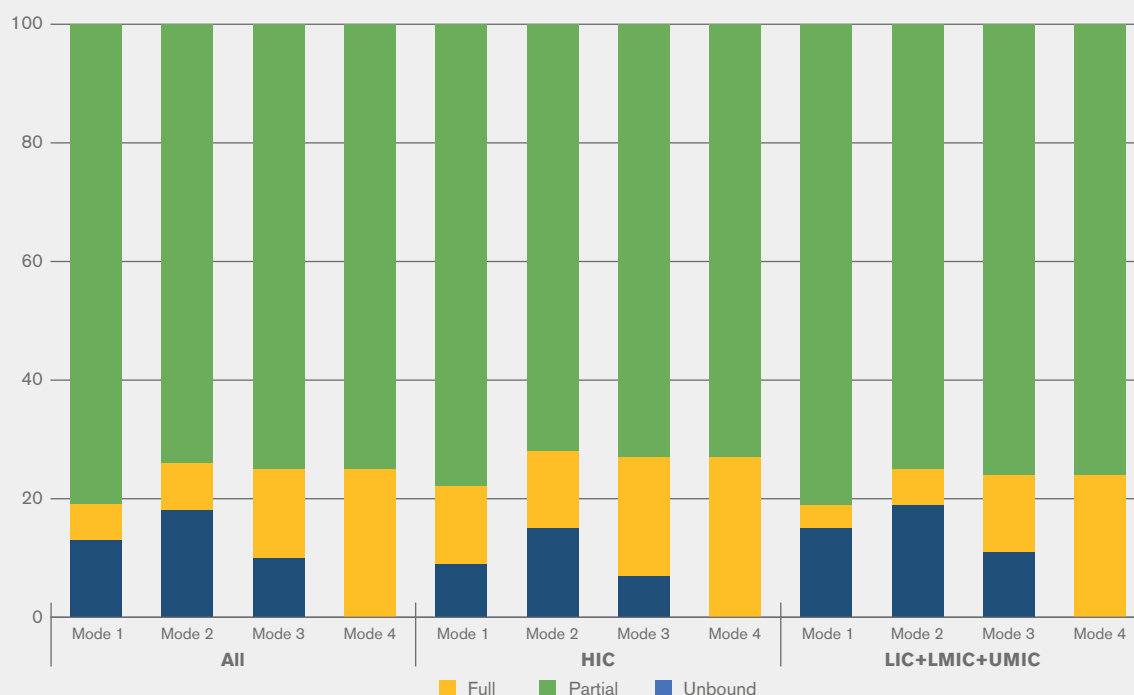
In other words, the GATS can support governments to ensure a response to health-related services demand whilst also supporting other public policy objectives such as health security. But given the specific nature of health-related services, trade-related considerations have not taken centre stage in national and international policymaking. This is reflected in the relatively low number of WTO members that have made commitments in health-related services sectors, the result of which has significant implications for transparency and predictability.

When commitments are made, they are often accompanied by multiple limitations (see the partial commitments in red in Figure 4). Mode 1 (cross-border supply) has the fewest commitments, averaging approximately 20 per cent across subsectors, with nearly a third of these being partial commitments. Mode 2 (consumption abroad) and mode 3 (commercial presence) each have commitments in around 25 per cent of schedules, though mode 2 has the fewest limitations remaining. Mode 4 (movement of natural persons) commitments are very limited in scope and are generally linked to the horizontal commitments, which apply across all

sectors in the schedule of commitments, mainly only concerning intra-corporate transferees and business visitors (i.e. negotiating contracts or the establishment of commercial presence).

The picture is very similar when contemplating the commitments broken down by income group, but low- and middle-income economies exhibit a slightly lower percentage of commitments compared to high-income ones. Also, recently acceding countries have tended to take many more commitments in health-related services sectors, albeit with many limitations.

Figure 4: Low levels of GATS commitments in health-related services trade (percentage of WTO members with commitments)



Source: World Trade Organization and World Bank I-TIP Services interface, GATS module, 2025, <https://itip-services-worldbank.wto.org>.

Note: The figure presents the average percentage of commitments of members for the following services: medical and dental services, nurses, midwives and other paramedical personnel, hospital services, and other human health services. For EU members, the EU-25 (Schengen area) schedule is used as a proxy for all 27 EU economies, including the two non-Schengen EU members (Ireland and Cyprus).

It is worth remembering that trade in health-related services could support the fulfilment of public policy objectives, while not constraining the right of governments to regulate. In this context the GATS offers many flexibilities for governments to tailor what they are willing to open to foreign competition, and how, based on their public policy objectives, for example, by maintaining certain limitations or practices deemed necessary to achieve these objectives.

Also, to promote transparent, predictable and efficient procedures in trade in health-related services, good governance practices must be endorsed. The GATS contains provisions that encourage such practices and calls for the development of disciplines ensuring that qualification requirements and procedures, technical standards and licensing requirements do not impede trade unnecessarily.

Though there has been limited progress at the multilateral level, 72 governments have committed to adopt disciplines included in the Joint Initiative on Services Domestic Regulation⁹ that were negotiated between 2017 and 2021.¹⁰ In March 2025, these disciplines were in force in 53 WTO members, enabling them to enhance transparency, predictability and efficiency in administrative procedures, benefitting inter alia from trade in health-related services, and consequently, the entire health sector. International trade agreements can also facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications for health professionals. GATS contains provisions encouraging recognition, notably when based on agreed-upon criteria. This is particularly relevant to support trade in health-related services.

OTHER SERVICES SUPPORTING THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Trade policy and the GATS play a crucial role in supporting the international supply of health-related services and medical goods, extending beyond just health services. For example, education and training are essential in addressing global health services gaps, particularly given the shortage of healthcare professionals in many jurisdictions. Increasing competition in the health training sector — supported by trade policy and GATS commitments in education services — could enhance the quality and accessibility of education, helping to alleviate shortages in key healthcare roles. Similarly, when regulated properly to ensure fairness, protect consumers and prevent cost increases, trade in health insurance services can contribute to improving access to healthcare.

When considering global value chains for medical goods, policymakers must also address the services crucial to their production and distribution, including logistics, transportation and wholesale and retail trade. These sectors often face various challenges that not only hinder trade in medical goods but also limit the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of health service delivery.

Furthermore, more open trade policies in insurance services could provide a supportive framework for medical goods trade, such as through supply chain interruption insurance. The GATS, along with trade in services agreements more broadly, could be leveraged to support domestic reforms that reduce trade barriers in these services that are essential to the health services and medical goods value chains, while also promoting greater transparency and predictability.

Trade in services, in particular health-related services, holds considerable promise to ensure better access to health services and medical goods around the globe. Specifically, cross-border trade in telehealth services has the potential to enhance the accessibility, quality and efficiency of healthcare services on a global scale. With the right mix of liberalization and regulatory reforms at the national level, technological advancements and international cooperation, the global healthcare system can be better equipped to meet the growing needs of populations.

To foster these opportunities, it is crucial to establish stronger national and international cooperation between health and trade-in-services stakeholders. A coordinated approach ensures that trade in services aligns with and supports national health policy objectives. Undertaking commitments, such as in the context of the GATS, will notably increase transparency and predictability, hence supporting more and better access to health-related services and medical goods. International collaboration can also play a vital role in improving health-related services regulatory coherence and capacity, including through targeted technical assistance, particularly in low- and middle-income economies.

SDG 5: Gender Equality

Trade, the WTO and their contribution to achieving SDG 5 and gender equality

Trade plays an integral role in driving economic growth, job creation and the reduction of poverty, as outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among these goals, SDG 5, which focuses on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, stands out as both a critical objective and a vital enabler for attaining broader development outcomes. The WTO has increasingly recognized the importance of women's economic empowerment in the context of global trade and its potential to unlock economic opportunities. Through targeted policy measures, research and global partnerships, the WTO is working to ensure that women are not left behind in the pursuit of sustainable and inclusive growth.

The relationship between trade and gender is multidimensional. Women contribute significantly to the global economy, yet persistent gender gaps in employment, income and access to economic resources continue to hinder their full participation in trade. Despite the fact that firms engaged in international trade tend to employ more women, women remain less likely than men to engage in cross-border trade or run export-focused businesses. This disparity is exacerbated by structural barriers such as limited access to finance, gender-based social norms, lack of training opportunities and unequal distribution of unpaid care work. Addressing these barriers through gender-responsive trade policies can help unlock women's full potential as key drivers of economic growth and trade expansion.

Recent analysis by the World Bank underscores the importance of closing gender gaps in employment, estimating that doing so could raise per capita GDP by as much as 20 per cent globally and even higher in regions such as the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia (World Bank, 2022). As a result, the WTO has made substantial strides in advancing its gender-inclusive agenda, particularly with the creation of initiatives aimed at fostering women's economic empowerment through trade, thus contributing to the realization of SDG 5.

Women's increased participation in export-oriented sectors and global value chains is not only a path to greater economic independence but also a means of reducing poverty and enhancing community resilience. Research shows that women in trade-related sectors often benefit from higher wages, better job security

and greater access to formal employment compared to those in non-trading sectors. Moreover, trade in services, such as tourism and digital technologies, presents significant opportunities for women, especially in developing countries, where women often lead businesses in these areas.

However, to ensure that trade can deliver on its promise, more targeted efforts are needed. This includes ensuring women's access to the benefits of international trade, promoting equal pay, enhancing access to training and skills development, and addressing the digital divide. The WTO's efforts, through the establishment of the Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender (IWG) and research initiatives, represent a critical step in ensuring that trade policy is both inclusive and supportive of women's economic empowerment.

The achievement of SDG 5 is not only about narrowing gender gaps in trade but also about ensuring that trade becomes a tool for advancing broader gender equality objectives. The WTO's efforts to mainstream gender in trade policy, enhance data collection and build capacity among governments are critical steps towards ensuring that women can fully participate in and benefit from global trade. Beyond further advancing SDG 5, it also fosters a more inclusive, sustainable and resilient global economy.

Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender (IWG)

The IWG plays a significant role in contributing to the achievement of SDG 5. The IWG's focus on creating an inclusive, gender-responsive trade system directly impacts SDG 5 by addressing barriers to women's participation in global trade, fostering policies that promote women's economic empowerment and enhances trading opportunities for them.

One of the IWG's most vital contributions to SDG 5 is through its emphasis on removing trade-related barriers to women's participation in trade. The Working Group's Work Plan is specifically designed to enhance women's engagement in global trade by identifying and overcoming obstacles such as access to finance, legal challenges and limited participation in international trade networks. Through workshops and technical work, such as those led by the IWG at the WTO Ministerial Conferences, the group actively pushes for gender-responsive trade policies, which promote equitable economic participation for women.

The IWG's efforts to apply a “gender lens” to WTO policies is another key element in its contribution to SDG 5. By integrating gender considerations into trade policy, the IWG ensures that women's needs and contributions are acknowledged in international trade agreements, laws and regulations. For example, the “Developing a gender-lens framework for the WTO” workshops, which took place in 2022 and which focused on areas such as government procurement and e-commerce, highlighted the importance of ensuring that these sectors are inclusive of women, allowing them to benefit from emerging global trade opportunities. These initiatives are not only about raising awareness but also about fostering concrete changes in trade practices that actively empower women.

Furthermore, the IWG's work on promoting financial inclusion for women entrepreneurs, particularly through tools such as the Compendium of Financial Inclusion Initiatives, directly supports SDG 5 by enhancing access to financing and market opportunities for women-led businesses. Initiatives, such as the Khadijah Women Entrepreneurship Program under Pakistan Single Window (PSW), and the She Exports to Africa (Ella Exporta a África) programme LED by the International Trade Centre (ITC) in Colombia, demonstrate the tangible impact of gender-sensitive trade policies on women's economic empowerment. The recognition of these programmes through the International Prize for Gender Equality in Trade, launched by the IWG in 2024, also incentivizes other nations to adopt similar policies, thereby creating a ripple effect that encourages broader global engagement with women's economic empowerment in trade.

Additionally, the IWG's technical work on gender-responsive trade policy has facilitated increased international cooperation and knowledge exchange. By collaborating with other international organizations such as UN Trade and Development, the World Bank, and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the IWG strengthens the global network of gender-focused initiatives and ensures that the empowerment of women is integrated into global trade strategies. Joint workshops and capacity-building efforts, including those focusing on female entrepreneurship and intellectual property rights, further promote a holistic approach to create opportunities for women and allow them to better participate in, and benefit from, the global economy.

The WEIDE Fund and Partenariat pour le Coton

The Women Exporters in the Digital Economy (WEIDE) Fund drives progress on women's economic empowerment. By supporting women entrepreneurs in international trade, the Fund promotes women's full participation and leadership in economic life, addressing persistent gender gaps in business ownership and export participation. The initiative improves women's access to grants and financial support, helping ensure their equal rights to economic resources and financial services – areas where women have historically faced significant barriers.

Through its focus on digital skills development, the WEIDE Fund enables women entrepreneurs to harness the power of technology for business growth and market expansion, directly supporting women's empowerment in the digital economy. This comprehensive approach recognizes that accomplishing desired objectives in trade requires addressing multiple, interconnected barriers simultaneously, from access to finance and markets to skills development and networking opportunities.

Strategic partnerships with local business support organizations have been initiated to implement tailored programmes that address context-specific challenges and opportunities. With an established goal to empower 400 women entrepreneurs in the first phase, the Fund's initial focus on business plan competitions demonstrates its innovative approach to identifying and supporting women with the potential to succeed in international markets.

The Fund's holistic approach, combining financial support with technical assistance and market access facilitation, creates a comprehensive support package that addresses multiple barriers simultaneously, recognizing the interconnected nature of challenges facing women entrepreneurs. Throughout implementation, collecting and analyzing data on women's participation in trade has informed more effective policy interventions and programme designs, highlighting the importance of evidence-based approaches to advancing women's participation in international trade.

Similar to the WEIDE Fund, the joint WTO-FIFA (International Federation of Association Football) “Partenariat pour le Coton” (the Cotton Partnership) initiative incorporates a strong gender dimension in its approach to value chain development in alignment with SDG 5. As highlighted at the “Making Trade Score for Women” event held at the WTO on 1 May 2024, the initiative aims to connect the economic opportunities from the global football economy to women's economic empowerment, particularly in African cotton-producing countries.

The Partenariat pour le Coton initiative makes substantial contributions across the sustainable development agenda, particularly in areas related to economic growth, industrialization and equality. With the potential to create 500,000 direct jobs, especially for women and young people, the initiative significantly contributes to employment generation and economic growth in African cotton-producing countries (SDG 8), addressing critical employment challenges in regions with high youth unemployment.¹¹ By supporting the development of textile and garment manufacturing sectors and industrial parks, the initiative promotes industrialization and infrastructure development (SDG 9), helping countries diversify their economies beyond raw material production.

By focusing on sectors within the textile and garment value chain where women traditionally have strong participation, such as garment production, the initiative creates pathways for women's increased economic participation and income generation. The initiative also addresses gender-specific barriers in accessing training, finance and market opportunities, ensuring that women can fully benefit from value chain transformation.

As WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala noted, "We can and must do more to connect women to new markets and to remunerative opportunities in high value goods and services."

Trade and gender-related provisions in regional trade agreements

The integration of gender provisions in regional trade agreements (RTAs) and free trade agreements (FTAs), which focus on eliminating systemic barriers to women's participation in trade and economic activities, plays a significant role in advancing SDG 5. The number of RTAs incorporating gender provisions has increased significantly over the past two decades, reflecting a growing recognition of the role trade policies play in women's economic empowerment.

RTAs increasingly incorporate gender-related provisions that address a wide range of issues affecting women's participation in economic, social, political and cultural spheres. Based on the WTO Database on Gender Provisions in RTAs¹², these provisions can be categorized into five main areas (as of September 2022) (WTO, 2022):

1. Gender inequality issues (83 RTAs, 214 provisions):

Gender equality and non-discrimination provisions represent the most common type of gender-related content in RTAs. While some agreements broadly promote gender equality as a core objective (notably in intra-African agreements and EU treaties), most address specific forms of discrimination against women, such as employment discrimination, wage gaps and unequal access to resources and opportunities.

2. Women's economic participation (92 RTAs, 197 provisions):

RTAs increasingly recognize and promote women's role in economic development through:

- Workforce participation (62 RTAs, 120 provisions): Addressing equal treatment in employment, tackling the gender pay gap, promoting decent work conditions, and more recently, eliminating discrimination based on pregnancy and caregiving responsibilities.
- Business participation (31 RTAs, 65 provisions): Supporting women entrepreneurs and women-owned businesses, promoting participation in specific sectors (fisheries, services), creating opportunities in digital trade, public procurement and value chains, and addressing barriers such as discriminatory laws and limited access to credit.

3. Social issues (65 RTAs, 109 provisions):

Gender provisions also address social aspects of women's lives:

- Education (41 RTAs, 52 provisions): Promoting access to education, vocational training, financial education and more recently, participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields.
- Safety (20 RTAs, 29 provisions): Addressing gender-based violence, domestic abuse, sexual harassment, human trafficking and safety in conflict zones.
- Family-related issues (29 RTAs, 36 provisions): Protecting pregnant women and supporting work-family balance.
- Social inclusion (13 RTAs, 13 provisions): Supporting vulnerable women's economic participation.
- Health and food security (8 RTAs, 10 provisions): Targeting workplace health practices and access to health services.

4. Representation in decision-making (19 RTAs, 20 provisions):

These provisions promote women's equal access to decision-making positions in both public and private sectors, as well as participation in political processes.

5. Cultural participation (9 RTAs, 10 provisions):

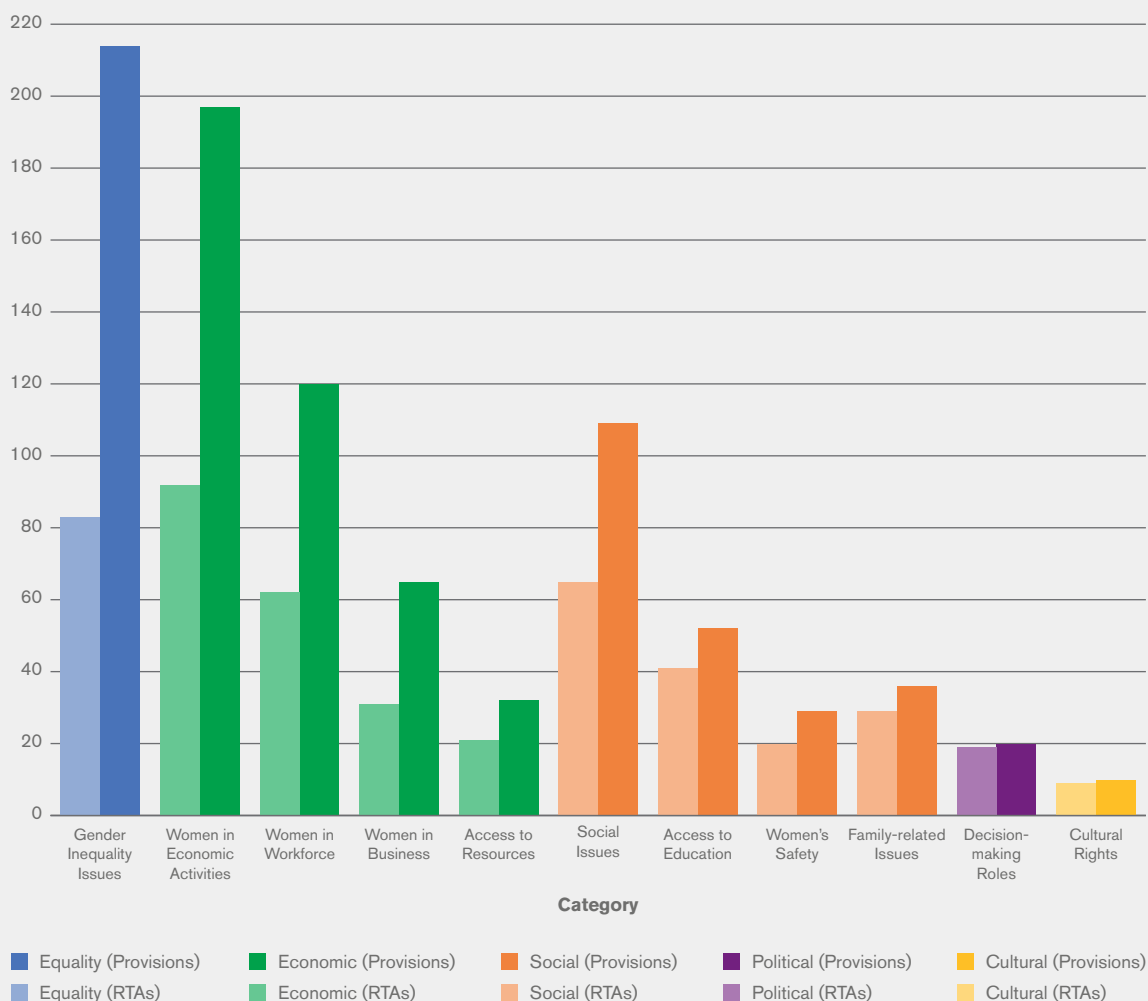
A small number of RTAs recognize women's role in cultural life and protect cultural rights, often with specific attention to indigenous women.

The evolution of gender provisions in RTAs demonstrates an increasing recognition of the diverse challenges facing women across multiple dimensions, moving beyond simple non-discrimination clauses to more comprehensive approaches that address structural barriers.

However, despite the increasing inclusion of gender provisions in RTAs, many of these provisions have certain shortcomings and limitations which may impede the full realization of their objectives:

- Non-binding language: Many gender provisions are formulated as recommendations rather than enforceable commitments.
- Exclusion from dispute settlement mechanisms: Gender-related provisions are often excluded from RTAs' dispute settlement mechanisms, limiting enforcement.
- Limited resource mobilization: Few RTAs provide concrete financial commitments to support gender equality initiatives.

Figure 5: Number of RTAs and provisions by category



Source: Source: WTO analysis from the database on gender provisions in RTAs, https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/womenandtrade_e/gender_responsive_trade_agreement_db_e.htm.

Access to finance for women-led micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs)

Financial inclusion is key to advancing progress under SDG 5. The International Finance Corporation (IFC) estimates the global financing gap for women-owned MSMEs stands at approximately US\$ 1.7 trillion, representing about one third of the total global MSME financing gap of US\$ 5.2 trillion. This striking disparity highlights why targeted financial inclusion initiatives for women entrepreneurs are crucial – they address a significant portion of the overall financing challenge while working towards desired goals. Access to finance for women-led MSMEs breaks down economic barriers and promotes women's empowerment in and through entrepreneurship.

The WTO's Compendium of Financial Inclusion Initiatives for Women Entrepreneurs serves as a resource for policymakers fostering inclusive trade. Launched at the 13th Ministerial Conference in February 2024 by the IWG and the MSMEs Working Group, this database consolidates programmes providing financial access to women-led businesses. This analysis examines financial inclusion initiatives across economies and organizations, demonstrating their contribution to the achievement of SDG 5.

One of the most direct contributions of financial inclusion initiatives to SDG 5 is their focus on SDG Target 5.a: equal rights to economic resources. Many financial programmes specifically address the unique barriers women face in accessing capital, such as limited collateral or lack of financial history. For example, Argentina's "Reciprocal Guarantee Company" (or SGR) scheme has granted guarantees to over 21,000 MSMEs, including those led by women. This initiative ensures that women entrepreneurs can access credit on favourable terms, helping them overcome traditional financial constraints. Similarly, India's "Stand-Up India" scheme offers loans to women-led businesses without the need for traditional collateral, effectively reducing barriers to finance and promoting economic equality.

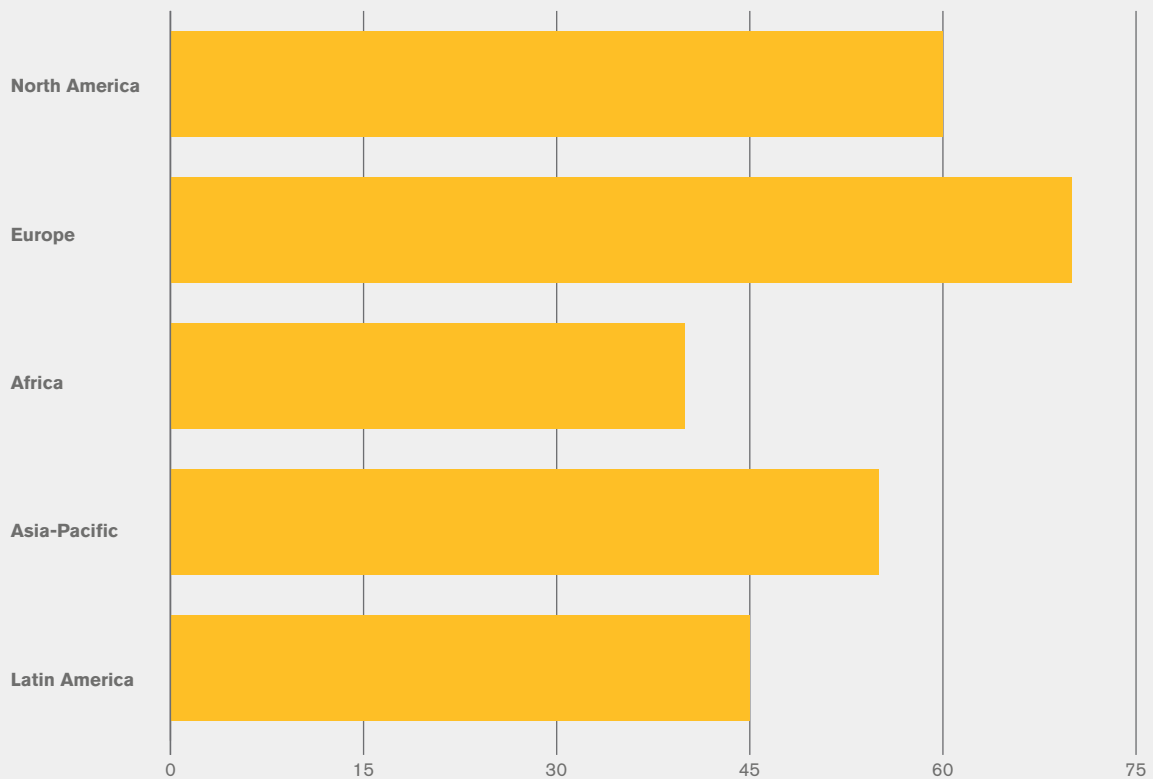
Another important area of focus is Target 5.c: policies and legislation for gender equality, where various initiatives are reshaping financial policies to be more inclusive. Australia's "Investing in Women" project, for instance, strengthens access to finance for women entrepreneurs in Indonesia, the Philippines and Viet Nam by promoting gender-responsive policies and partnerships with impact investors. Similarly, the European Investment Bank's gender smart investment policy ensures that investment projects prioritize women-led businesses and incorporate gender sensitive considerations into their design, demonstrating a strong commitment to policy reforms that promote financial inclusion for women.

SDG Target 5.5: women's leadership and decision-making, also aligns closely with the goals of many financial inclusion programmes which are designed to support women in leadership roles. Barbados's national policy framework for the development of MSMEs specifically targets the needs of women entrepreneurs in leadership roles by mitigating bureaucratic barriers to accessing finance. This initiative not only facilitates business growth but also creates opportunities for women to assume leadership positions, thereby promoting gender parity in decision-making and entrepreneurial leadership.

Innovative approaches, such as digital solutions, are also playing a critical role in overcoming barriers to financial access. Colombia's "Fondo para el financiamiento del sector agropecuario" (FINAGRO) uses digital platforms to reach rural women entrepreneurs, a group often excluded from traditional financial services. This approach reflects the growing recognition that technology can reduce the gender financing gap, particularly for women in underserved regions.

Digital financial solutions, such as mobile banking and online lending platforms, are increasingly being used to bridge financial access gaps for women entrepreneurs. The highest adoption of digital financial inclusion initiatives is observed in Europe (70 per cent), followed by North America (60 per cent) and Asia-Pacific (55 per cent).

Figure 6: Digital financial inclusion initiatives for women entrepreneurs (percentage)



Source: WTO analysis from the Compendium of Financial Inclusion Initiatives for Women Entrepreneurs, https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/womenandtrade_e/financial_inclusion_initiatives_e.htm.

Financial literacy and capacity building are essential components of many initiatives, contributing to Target 5.b: the use of enabling technology to promote women's empowerment, and Target 5.c: strengthen policies and legislation to promote gender equality. Australia's Aid for Trade programmes, for example, offer training and mentorship in financial management and business development, equipping women entrepreneurs in the Pacific region with the skills necessary to succeed in global markets. By addressing knowledge gaps, these programmes not only empower women with the tools to make informed financial decisions but also increase their competitiveness in the global economy.

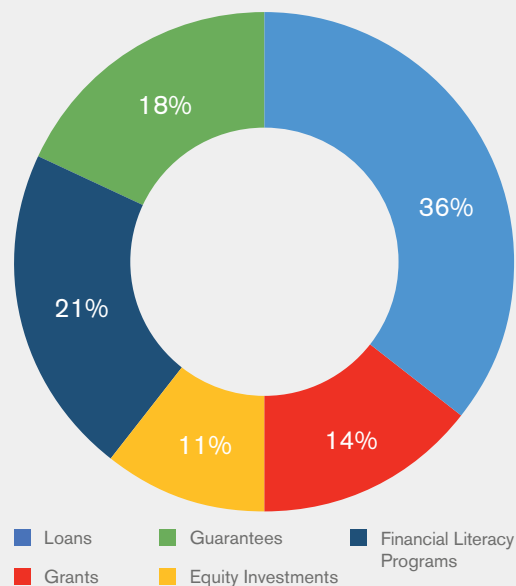
Furthermore, grants and subsidies remain pivotal in lowering the entry barriers for women-led businesses. Australia's "Boosting Female Founders" programme and Canada's "Women Entrepreneurship Strategy" (WES) provide targeted financial support to female-led startups, enabling women entrepreneurs to scale their businesses and access resources that would otherwise be out of reach. These programmes ensure that women have equitable opportunities to secure the funding needed for business expansion and innovation.

The chart below illustrates the diverse financial support mechanisms available to women entrepreneurs across various initiatives. This visualization highlights the distribution of different financial instruments and approaches used to enhance women's access to capital and financial resources.

Financial inclusion initiatives for women-led MSMEs are making significant contributions to the achievement of SDG 5 and address the unique challenges faced by women entrepreneurs, such as access to finance, policy support and leadership opportunities.

Whilst these initiatives are driving economic growth, it is essential however, that for sustained growth, governments and financial institutions must continue to refine policies, expand outreach and strengthen support mechanisms for women entrepreneurs globally. The successful integration of gender-responsive financing in trade and financial agreements will further ensure equitable growth and opportunity for women in entrepreneurship and global trade.

Figure 7: Types of financial support provided to women entrepreneurs



Source: WTO analysis from the Compendium of Financial Inclusion Initiatives for Women Entrepreneurs, https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/womenandtrade_e/financial_inclusion_initiatives_e.htm.

SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

The WTO and SDG 8 – Setting the context

SDG 8 aims to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”. This goal recognizes that economic growth alone is insufficient without ensuring that it creates quality jobs, improves working conditions and benefits all segments of society. International trade is a powerful vector for achieving these outcomes by fostering productivity gains, technological innovation and the creation of higher-value jobs. In this respect, the WTO plays a central role. Its rules-based trading system promotes a stable and predictable environment that induces investment and growth, enabling economies at various stages of development to participate in and benefit from global trade.

Moreover, as economic activities become increasingly digitalized and data-driven, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative general-purpose technology shaping the future of trade and influencing the structure of employment and the quality of work. At the same time, industrial policies have regained prominence as key tools for countries seeking to shape their economic development trajectories. The WTO's role in ensuring that such policies align with multilateral trade rules has become increasingly important.

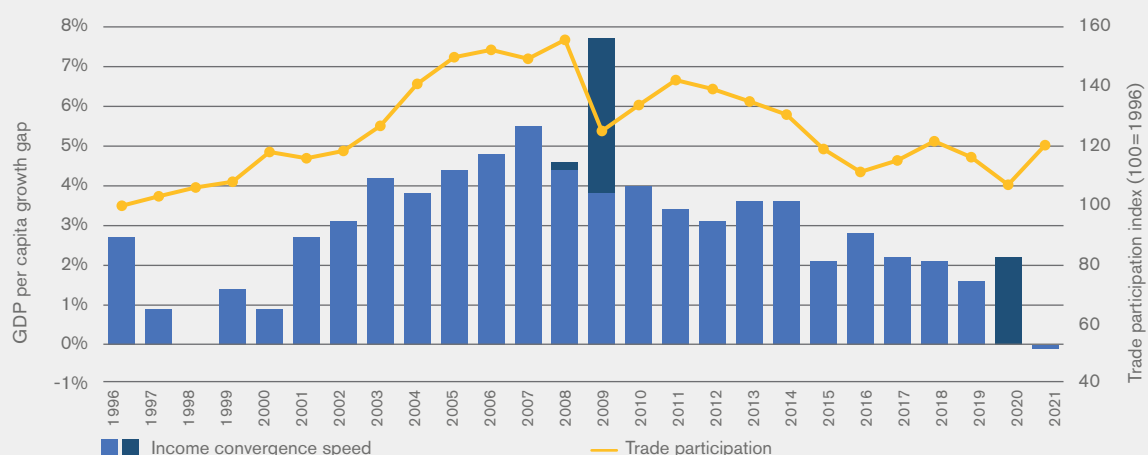
This chapter highlights how the interplay between AI, industrial policy and trade can advance SDG 8 by driving diversification, innovation, economic growth and decent work opportunities worldwide.

Trade, economic growth and decent work

Trade openness has historically been a key driver of productivity improvements and job creation. According to the World Trade Report 2023 (WTO, 2023), “re-globalization” of trade – an expansion of inclusive trade relationships rather than a retreat into fragmentation – generates positive outcomes in terms of poverty reduction, growth and resilience.

The World Trade Report 2024 states that global per capita income has increased significantly over the past few decades, with low- and middle-income economies experiencing substantial growth (see Figure 8). This growth has been driven in part by increased participation in international trade, which has contributed to poverty reduction and improved living standards. For instance, from 1995 to 2023, the per capita income of low- and middle-income economies almost tripled, highlighting the transformative impact of trade on economic development (WTO, 2024).

Figure 8: Positive correlation between low- and middle-income economies' convergence speed and trade participation (1996-2021)

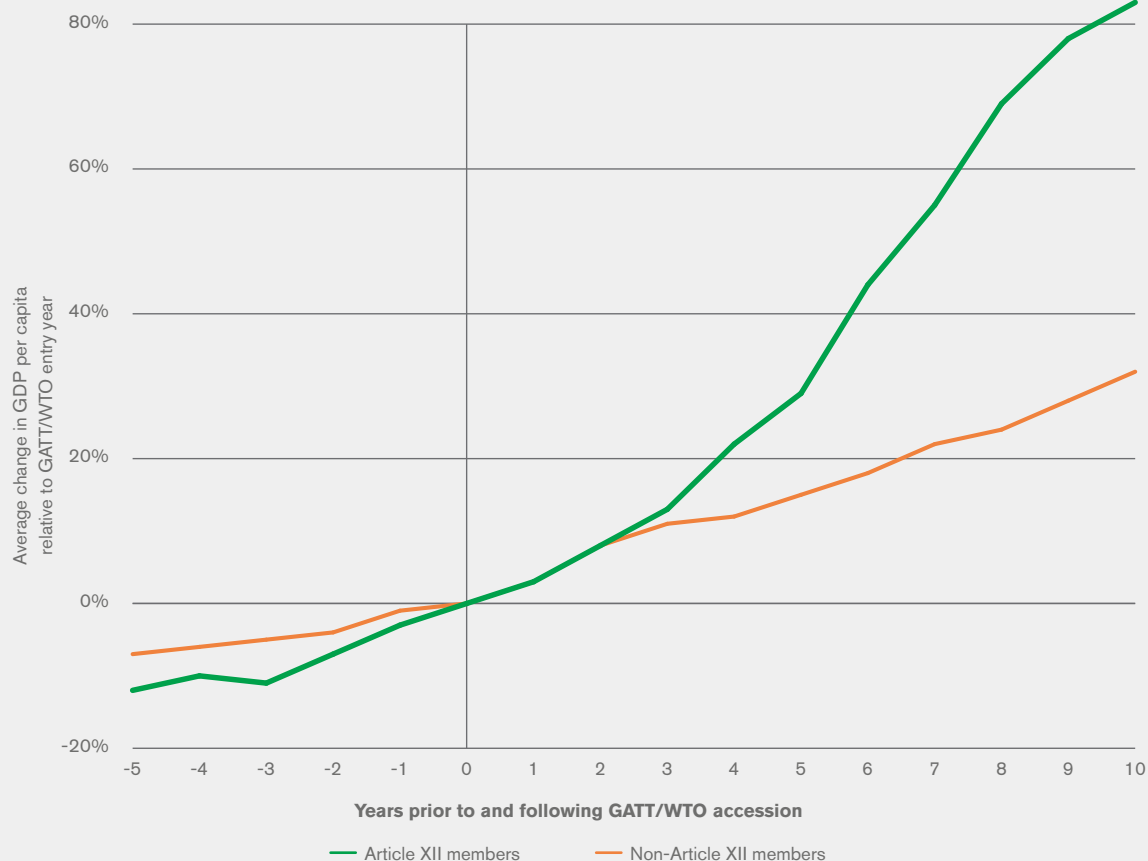


Source: WTO World Trade Report 2024,
https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/publications_e/wtr24_e.htm.

However, the gains reaped from trade are neither automatic nor uniform. Economies that invest in physical infrastructure, skills development and supportive institutions typically see greater economic diversification, higher-value exports and job creation in more sophisticated industries. In contrast, inadequate infrastructure or technology gaps can leave economies reliant on fewer, lower-value exports, restricting decent work opportunities. The 2024 World Trade Report underscores the importance of inclusive trade policies to ensure that the benefits of trade extend broadly within and across economies (WTO, 2024).

WTO membership, in particular, drives economic growth by fostering stability, transparency and predictability in trade policies, which in turn attracts foreign direct investment and facilitates trade expansion. Acceding WTO members undertake extensive reforms, including tariff and non-tariff barrier reductions, regulation of state-owned enterprises, strengthened intellectual property rights and the establishment of independent tribunals. These comprehensive reforms not only enhance domestic governance, but also generate sustained growth benefits, with WTO accession economies typically experiencing accelerated growth both during and after the accession process (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Higher economic growth in WTO members with more extensive commitments



Source: WTO World Trade Report 2024,
https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/publications_e/wtr24_e.htm.

Trade expansion has long been a powerful driver of economic growth, but it also generates shifts that can pose challenges for workers and businesses. While open markets drive innovation, competition and productivity gains, they can also lead to sectoral disruptions, particularly in industries that struggle to remain competitive or adapt to new technologies. These disruptions may result in job displacements or the decline of certain regions or occupations. To address these challenges, complementary strategies are essential. Investments in human capital – such as targeted reskilling and upskilling programmes – can equip workers with the competencies needed to transition effectively into new, high-value-added sectors.

Additionally, proactive support for innovation and technological adoption helps economies adapt to shifts in global production patterns, ensuring that trade growth translates into quality jobs and inclusive economic development. In an era increasingly shaped by advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, these strategies become even more critical for securing decent work and achieving sustainable and inclusive economic growth in alignment with SDG 8.

Recent initiatives further underscore the link between trade and development. The Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) Agreement, finalized in February 2024 by 126 WTO members, aims to make it easier for investors to operate and expand, particularly in developing and least developed countries. Shaped largely by the needs and priorities of developing economies, the IFD Agreement promotes transparent and predictable investment environments, aligned with the goal of fostering sustainable development. As a plurilateral agreement open to all WTO members, it provides new benchmarks for investment climate reform and reflects a strong commitment to inclusive global economic growth.

Similarly, the Aid for Trade initiative continues to play a vital role in supporting the integration of developing economies and LDCs into the multilateral trading system. The 2024 joint OECD–WTO Aid for Trade at a Glance report shows that cumulative disbursements since 2006 exceeded US\$ 648 billion, with renewed momentum post-pandemic. Aid for Trade is enabling economies to invest in infrastructure, boost connectivity, adopt clean energy and strengthen export sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing and digital services. With a focus on women, youth, MSMEs and climate resilience, the initiative directly contributes to poverty reduction, job creation and inclusive economic transformation. Disbursements reached an all-time high of US\$ 51.1 billion in 2022, with LDCs receiving US\$ 14 billion, although further efforts are needed to meet the objectives of the Doha Programme of Action.

Another key development is the Trade in Services for Development initiative, jointly launched by the WTO and the World Bank at the 2024 WTO Public Forum. The initiative builds on the findings of the joint WTO–World Bank publication *Trade in Services for Development: Fostering Sustainable Growth and Economic Diversification* (2023), which underscores the transformative potential of services trade in supporting productivity growth, innovation, and structural transformation in developing economies. Recognizing the growing role of services in driving employment and economic diversification, the initiative provides technical assistance, diagnostics and policy tools to help developing economies capitalize on opportunities in services trade. It supports data collection, regulatory transparency, export diversification and participation in global value chains – all critical for unlocking new development pathways.

Together, these initiatives reinforce inclusive growth and decent work by strengthening the enabling environment for trade and investment, facilitating the transition towards more resilient and diversified economies, and ensuring that the gains from trade are shared widely.

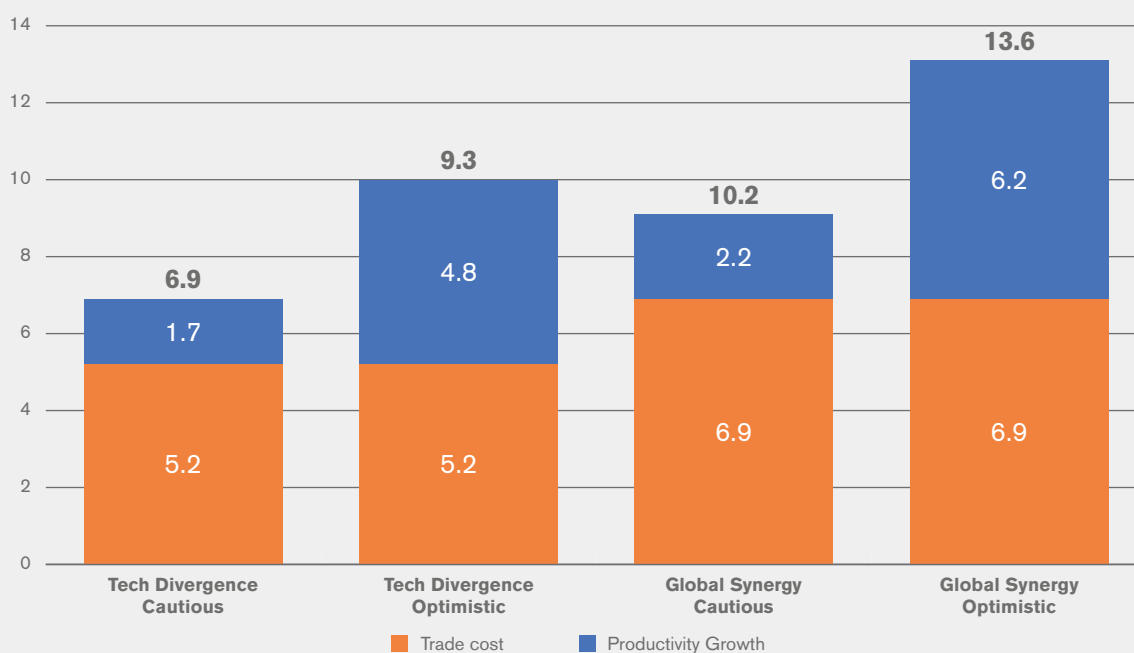
AI, digital trade and economic growth: Opportunities and challenges

The emergence of AI as a general-purpose technology is transforming economic productivity and growth prospects across sectors. According to the WTO report *Trading with Intelligence: How AI shapes and is shaped by international trade* (WTO, 2024), AI can enhance productivity in services sectors that rely on manual processes by enabling workers to leverage best practices more effectively. Research cited in the report shows that “generative AI can amplify the performance of business consultants by up to 40 per cent compared to those not using it” and that AI “increases the productivity of call centre workers by an average of 14 per cent, and by 34 per cent specifically for novice and low-skilled workers”.

These productivity gains translate into economic growth potential. WTO simulations using the Global Trade Model indicate that under an optimistic scenario of universal AI adoption and high productivity growth up until 2040, global real trade growth could increase by almost 14 percentage points (see Figure 10). Even under a more cautious scenario with uneven AI adoption and lower productivity growth, trade is projected to grow by nearly 7 percentage points.

Critically, the WTO's analysis reveals that while high-income economies may see the largest productivity gains, lower-income economies have better potential to reduce trade costs through AI adoption. This suggests that with appropriate policies and support, AI could become a powerful tool for development and convergence rather than divergence.

Figure 10: Cumulative global real trade growth rate (2023-40) – Difference to baseline, percentage points



Source: Simulation results based on the WTO Global Trade Model.

Note: This figure demonstrates the impact of policy shocks on projected cumulative global trade growth (in percentage points) over the period 2023-40 across four policy scenarios. The values represent deviations from the baseline scenario. The value above the bars indicate the total effect.

Digitally delivered services are projected to experience the highest trade growth (WTO, 2024) due to AI, with an estimated cumulative growth of nearly 18 percentage points in an optimistic scenario. Education, healthcare, recreational services, financial services and processed food manufacturing are among the sectors expected to see significant trade growth driven by AI-enabled trade cost reductions.

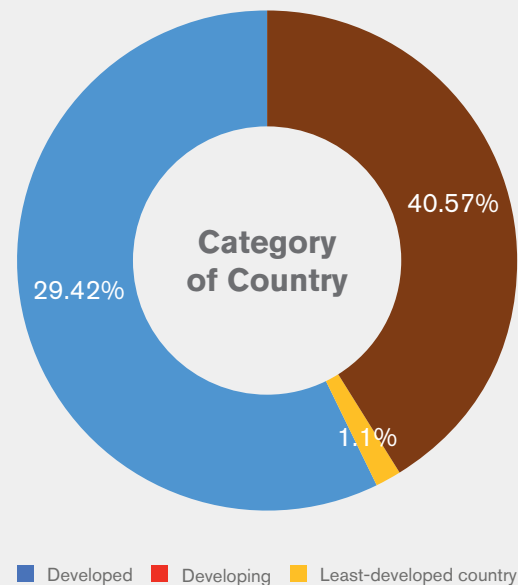
While these transformations create new economic opportunities, they also raise concerns about potential job displacement and labour market disruptions. The WTO's work in this area emphasizes that technological change typically generates both job destruction and job creation effects. Historical evidence suggests that technological innovations have generally led to net employment gains over time, though with significant transitional challenges for specific sectors and worker groups.

The WTO's analysis also indicates that complementary policies in education, skills development and social protection are essential to ensure that AI-driven trade growth translates into decent work opportunities for all. This aligns directly with SDG 8's emphasis on quality employment rather than simply economic growth.

The WTO's research shows that AI adoption rates vary significantly across economies and regions, with developing economies and particularly least developed countries (LDCs) facing substantial barriers in terms of digital infrastructure, skills, data availability and regulatory capacity (see Figure 11). According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development cited in the report, while around 30 per cent of developing economies have put AI policy measures in place, only one LDC – Uganda – has implemented them.

This divide could exacerbate existing economic inequalities, with adverse implications for SDG 8's focus on inclusive growth. The WTO's contributions to SDG 8 in the context of AI involve promoting policies that facilitate the adoption of AI technologies while mitigating their potential negative impacts on employment. This includes supporting education and training programmes to equip workers with the skills needed to thrive in an AI-driven economy, as well as fostering international cooperation to address the challenges posed by AI.

Figure 11: Share of AI policy initiatives by level of development in 2024



Source: OECD database of domestic AI policies, <https://oecd.ai>.

Technology transfer and diffusion are critical for productivity improvements and economic upgrading in developing economies.

The WTO contributes to these processes through various mechanisms, including the TRIPS Agreement, which aims to foster “a balanced IP system that incentivizes innovation through the enforcement and protection of IP rights, while promoting dissemination of and access to technology”.

The WTO's efforts to facilitate trade in digital services and information and communication technology (ICT) products are crucial for spreading technology in AI. The Information Technology Agreement “aims to increase worldwide access to high-technology goods essential to AI by eliminating tariffs on the ICT products it covers”. Trading with Intelligence reports that 84 out of 141 WTO members (60 per cent) have made specific commitments on market access and national treatment related to computer services, which are fundamental to enabling and promoting AI.

The WTO also provides a platform for addressing emerging issues in digital trade, notably through the Joint Statement Initiative (JSI) on E-commerce, which currently involves 91 members, and the Work Programme on E-Commerce, open to all WTO members. The JSI aims to establish global rules on digital trade that promote openness, trust, and inclusivity. Its focus areas include enabling cross-border data flows, ensuring non-discriminatory treatment of digital products, enhancing paperless trading, and protecting personal data. By promoting regulatory cooperation and reducing digital trade barriers, the initiative supports the participation of developing economies and small businesses in the global digital economy.

Complementing this, the Work Programme on E-Commerce provides a forum for all WTO members to discuss trade-related aspects of e-commerce across existing WTO agreements, including market access, development and consumer protection. These discussions contribute to shaping policy frameworks that facilitate technology flows, help bridge the digital divide, and address regulatory concerns such as data privacy and cybersecurity, while also enhancing the understanding of how e-commerce can support inclusive economic growth and development.

In support of Africa's digital transformation, the WTO and the World Bank launched the Digital Trade for Africa initiative in 2023 to help close gaps in connectivity, skills, and regulation. The initiative supports African countries in creating enabling environments for digital trade, including through assessments, policy diagnostics and technical assistance. It builds on the joint policy note *Turning Digital Trade into a Catalyst for African Development*, which emphasizes the potential of digital trade to promote inclusive growth, diversify exports, and empower women, youth, and small businesses. The initiative's pilot phase, conducted in five countries, has helped identify regulatory gaps and capacity needs, laying the groundwork for targeted support and scaled-up engagement. These efforts contribute to SDG 8 by fostering digital inclusion and unlocking new economic opportunities through trade.

Harnessing AI, trade and industrial policy for SDG 8

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of industrial policies as tools for achieving economic development objectives, including those related to technological innovation, structural transformation and job creation. This trend has been reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change concerns and strategic competition in emerging technologies such as AI.

Industrial policy refers to strategies that governments adopt to nurture domestic industries, promote diversification, or move up the value chain. Traditional industrial policy often focused on import substitution or export promotion whilst contemporary approaches tend to emphasize innovation, R&D support and skills development. The 2023 World Trade Report points out that, while certain forms of industrial policy can address market failures and promote innovation, poorly designed measures risk distorting competition and fragmenting global trade.

Governments are increasingly adopting AI-driven industrial policies to harness technological advancements for structural transformation and sustained economic growth. A prominent approach involves the establishment of innovation hubs and dedicated R&D incentives to foster collaboration among businesses, research institutions and academia, facilitating knowledge exchange and accelerating AI-driven innovation. Additionally, fiscal instruments such as tax credits for research and development expenditures, and targeted venture capital funding are used to help stimulate private sector investment in cutting-edge AI research and to support domestic technological advancement.

To complement this, investments in skills development and education are crucial. AI-driven economic transformation necessitates a workforce proficient in new digital tools and analytical capabilities. Governments can foster such expertise through public-private partnerships that support coding boot camps, digital literacy initiatives and university programmes tailored to AI and related technologies. Special emphasis on vocational training and lifelong learning programmes can equip workers at risk of displacement due to AI automation with new, relevant skills, thus minimizing transitional frictions and promoting inclusive labour market outcomes.

Furthermore, governments must prioritize the development of robust digital infrastructure, including universal broadband access, and expanded cloud computing capabilities, to lay a foundational backbone for AI-intensive industries. Digital infrastructure investment not only facilitates direct AI applications but also yields positive spillover effects across various sectors such as advanced manufacturing, logistics, healthcare, education and financial services. Ensuring universal digital connectivity enables firms of all sizes, particularly micro, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), to leverage AI technologies effectively, opening new avenues for productivity, diversification and high-value employment creation.

The co-ordination of efforts on AI standards and regulatory frameworks can mitigate the risks of fragmentation and help developing economies plug more effectively into AI-powered global value chains. This co-ordination can be through collaborative forums, international organizations and multi-stakeholder initiatives that provide inclusive spaces for countries, businesses, academia and civil society to discuss, negotiate and agree upon common standards, principles, or regulatory practices.

Realizing the benefits of AI-driven economic transformation also depends on effective international cooperation. Since AI-related economic activities inherently involve cross-border flows of data, digital services and technological standards, cooperation among economies is crucial. WTO members have increasingly been discussing these AI-related trade issues through various committees and initiatives, including e-commerce and investment facilitation.

Additionally, mechanisms such as raising specific trade concerns within WTO committees provide venues for members to address emerging frictions collaboratively, pre-emptively reducing tensions and facilitating dialogue on regulatory developments. By promoting regular discussions, the WTO helps foster regulatory coherence, identify areas for convergence and promote a coordinated international approach to AI governance.

Yet, harnessing the full potential of AI poses the significant challenge of balancing necessary policy space with multilateral trade disciplines. The WTO plays a central role in addressing these challenges by promoting transparency through provisions that require members to notify domestic measures in different areas such as technical barriers to trade, subsidies and trade-related investment measures. This practice allows for early discussions and adjustments to policies, mitigating potential trade frictions.



SDG 14: Life Below Water

The WTO and SDG 14

The WTO's most significant contribution to the achievement of SDG 14 during the present reporting period was the adoption of the landmark Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies (AFS) in June 2022.

While WTO members had been negotiating new rules on fisheries subsidies long before the SDGs were set, the adoption of SDG Target 14.6¹³ gave WTO members new impetus to bring those negotiations to a successful conclusion.

The origins of WTO negotiations on fisheries subsidies disciplines can be traced back to the mandate given by WTO Ministers at the Doha Ministerial Conference in 2001 "to clarify and improve WTO disciplines on fisheries subsidies, taking into account the importance of this sector to developing countries". This mandate was refined at the Hong Kong Ministerial Conference in 2005, with members agreeing to focus negotiations on strengthening "disciplines on subsidies in the fisheries sector, including through the prohibition of certain forms of fisheries subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and over-fishing". Progress under this mandate and the adoption of SDG Target 14.6 in 2015 led WTO Ministers to adopt a Decision on Fisheries Subsidies at the Buenos Aires Ministerial Conference in 2017.

Reflecting Target 14.6, the Decision mandated continued negotiations with a view to adopting an agreement by the next Ministerial Conference (then expected to take place in 2019) "on comprehensive and effective disciplines that prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, and eliminate subsidies that contribute to IUU-fishing (illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing) recognizing that appropriate and effective special and differential treatment for developing country Members and least developed country Members should be an integral part of these negotiations".

At the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference in 2022, after more than 20 years of negotiations, WTO members reached consensus on a significant part of the text that had been under discussion, focusing on subsidies to vessels and operators involved in IUU fishing, fishing of overfished stocks and fishing in the unregulated high seas. Although members did not reach a final agreement on the other part of the text being negotiated, addressing subsidies contributing to overcapacity and overfishing, they have committed to continue negotiations.

The Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies

The AFS represents a historical achievement, as it is the first WTO agreement with environmental sustainability at its core and only the second multilateral agreement reached at the WTO since its inception. It sets new, binding, multilateral rules to curb harmful subsidies, which are a key factor in the widespread depletion of the world's fish stocks.

The AFS has three main disciplines:

1. Prohibition of subsidies contributing to IUU fishing:

The AFS prohibits subsidies to vessels or operators involved in IUU fishing or fishing-related activities when a determination of IUU fishing is made by a coastal member, a flag state member, or a relevant regional fisheries management organization/arrangement (RFMO/A).

2. Prohibition of subsidies to fishing of overfished stocks:

The Agreement prohibits subsidies to fishing or fishing-related activities regarding overfished stocks, as determined by a coastal member, or RFMO/A for activities within its competence. However, such subsidies are not prohibited if they are for rebuilding the relevant stock to a biologically sustainable level, or other measures are implemented to achieve this purpose.

3. Prohibition of subsidies to fishing or fishing-related activities in the unregulated high seas:

The Agreement prohibits subsidies provided to fishing or fishing-related activities outside the jurisdiction of a coastal member or a coastal non-member, and outside the competence of a relevant RFMO/A, i.e., in areas and for species not covered by that RFMO/A.

Other disciplines require members to take "special care" and "exercise due restraint" when granting subsidies to vessels not flying that member's flag, and when granting subsidies to fishing or fishing-related activities regarding stocks of which the status is unknown.

Special and differential treatment is provided for in the AFS in various ways. For the prohibitions on subsidies contributing to IUU fishing as well as subsidies regarding overfished stocks, the subsidies of developing and LDC members

provided within their own exclusive economic zones benefit from a “peace clause”, under which formal dispute settlement proceedings cannot be initiated for two years from the date of entry into force of the Agreement. In addition, members must exercise “due restraint” in raising matters involving an LDC member, and solutions explored are to take into consideration the specific situation of the LDC member involved. Finally, developing-economy members with a share of the volume of global fish catch of not more than 0.8 per cent and LDCs may provide the required notifications of fisheries-related information (discussed below) every four years instead of every two years.

WHAT ARE THE EXPECTED BENEFITS OF THE AFS?

It is estimated that governments spend US\$ 22 billion a year in subsidies to expand fishing capacity (Sumaila et al., 2019), contributing to overcapacity and overfishing as well as practices that deplete fish stocks and undermine efforts to achieve sustainable fisheries. In addition, the total economic losses caused by IUU fishing are estimated to be as high as US\$ 50 billion (Financial Transparency Coalition, 2024).

Subsidies enable fishing fleets to operate longer and farther out at sea, to the detriment of marine life. They are often a source of inequality and can undermine the economic viability of small-scale fisheries. One of the expected benefits of eliminating harmful subsidies through the operation of the AFS is the unlocking of resources that could be redirected to promote and support sustainable fisheries management practices by all WTO members, including developing and LDC members.

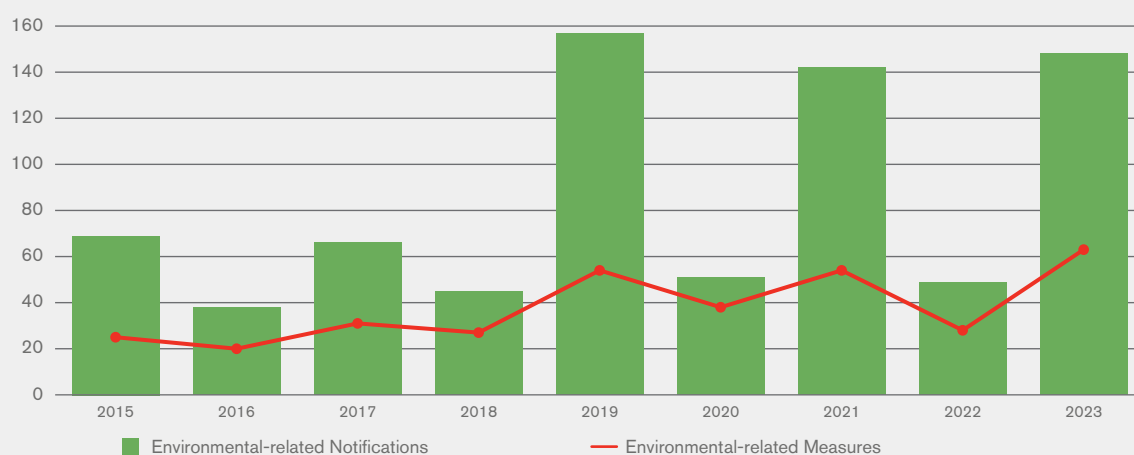
Another notable feature of the AFS is its notification obligations. WTO members are already required to notify their fisheries subsidies in accordance with their obligations under the WTO Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures. Under the AFS, members will now also have to provide fisheries-related information which is expected to significantly increase transparency regarding the scope, operation and impact of fisheries subsidies worldwide.

For each fisheries subsidy programme, members must notify the type or kind of fishing activity for which the subsidy is provided. Other information has to be provided “to the extent possible”, such as the status of stocks in subsidized fisheries; reference points used to determine this status; whether these stocks are shared with other members or managed by an RFMO/A; conservation and management measures for these stocks; fleet capacity in the relevant fisheries; the name and identification number of subsidized vessels; and catch data in these fisheries.

Furthermore, members must also notify a list of RFMO/As to which they are a party; any affirmative IUU fishing determinations; measures in existence or taken to ensure the implementation and administration of the AFS; and a description of their fisheries regime with references to laws, regulations and administrative procedures relevant to the AFS.

Since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015 and up until 2023, WTO members had notified 765 environment-related trade measures to the WTO with the environment-related objective of “sustainable fisheries management” (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Environment-related measures and notifications for sustainable fisheries management



Source: WTO based on WTO Environmental Database, <https://edb.wto.org/>.

Two-thirds of these measures (67.2 per cent) were notified under the WTO Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures. This could increase further with the entry into force of the AFS, reflecting efforts to regulate subsidies that could otherwise distort trade or harm fisheries sustainability.

Apart from subsidies, sustainable fisheries management has been the objective of notifications pursuant to the WTO Agreement on Import Licensing Procedures (8 per cent) and the Decision on Quantitative Restrictions (13.9 per cent) with regulations or restrictions seeking to conserve fish stocks or streamline imports for environmental purposes. It is encouraging that developing countries and LDCs contribute significantly to these efforts, accounting for 45.8 per cent of the notified sustainable fisheries management measures.

The AFS also provides for targeted technical assistance and capacity building to support developing and LDC members in their implementation efforts. A voluntary WTO funding mechanism – the WTO Fish Fund – has been established for this purpose. In close cooperation with its core partners – the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Bank – the aim of the Fund is to provide technical assistance to support members' efforts to bring their fisheries subsidy policies into line with the AFS, including by supporting efforts to enhance their institutional capacity to integrate sustainability considerations into subsidy policies and to make the notifications required under the AFS, as well as to strengthen fisheries management systems and the collection of relevant data.

The Fish Fund is already operational and is expected to open calls for proposals during the course of 2025. However, disbursements can only take place after entry into force of the AFS. Only developing and LDC members that have deposited their instruments of acceptance can benefit from the Fish Fund. In parallel, WTO members are continuing negotiations on a second wave of disciplines, to complement and build upon the AFS. These ongoing negotiations aim to address subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, in line with the mandate set out in the WTO Ministerial Decision on Fisheries Subsidies adopted at MC12. Advancing these negotiations is essential to fully deliver on SDG Target 14.6, which calls for the prohibition of harmful fisheries subsidies. Together, the AFS and the prospective additional provisions to further enhance the disciplines of the Agreement are intended to form a comprehensive multilateral framework to promote sustainable fishing practices and protect global marine resources.

ENTRY INTO FORCE

For the AFS to enter into force, two-thirds of the WTO membership (111 Members) must deposit their instruments of acceptance with the WTO.

Once the AFS enters into force, the Committee on Fisheries Subsidies (CFS) will be established and start its operations. The CFS will be responsible for examining all information submitted in accordance with the notification requirements and review annually the operation and implementation of the AFS, reporting to the WTO Council of Trade in Goods. It shall elect its own Chair, meet at least twice a year, and maintain close contact with relevant international fisheries management organizations. Operation of the CFS will be reviewed not later than five years after the AFS enters into force, with a view to identifying potential modifications.

Facilitating marine trade and blue economy diversification

Trade can serve as a powerful enabler of sustainable ocean-based economic activities, or “blue economy” sectors, including fisheries, aquaculture, marine biotechnology, ocean-based renewable energy and sustainable tourism. WTO agreements beyond the Fisheries Subsidies Agreement play a key role in creating the enabling environment for these activities to flourish. The Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA), for instance, streamlines customs procedures, reduces delays and promotes digitalization – factors that are essential for integrating sustainably harvested marine products and eco-friendly ocean services into global value chains. By reducing administrative burdens and transit times, the TFA enhances market access for small-scale producers and exporters, which is particularly important for coastal developing countries and small island developing states (SIDS).

The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT Agreement) also contribute by providing a framework for the trade of ocean-based goods in line with international sustainability standards. These agreements help ensure that seafood and marine products meet environmental, health and safety requirements in destination markets, supporting consumer confidence and rewarding producers who adopt responsible practices. Through notification mechanisms and regulatory cooperation, the TBT Agreement also encourages the use of science-based and non-discriminatory measures that foster sustainable production while avoiding unnecessary obstacles to trade.

Moreover, the GATS underpins the expansion of ocean-based services such as sustainable maritime transport, marine ecosystem research, renewable energy services and eco-tourism. These sectors are vital for the diversification of blue economy activities and the achievement of SDG Target 14.7,¹⁴ which calls for an increase to the economic benefits to SIDS and least developed countries from the sustainable use of marine resources. In particular, eco-tourism linked to healthy coral reefs and marine reserves generates local income while reinforcing conservation objectives. Similarly, services related to marine spatial planning and coastal resilience can be traded across borders, facilitating knowledge transfer and regional cooperation.

Taken together, WTO rules support an integrated approach to marine trade that aligns economic growth with environmental stewardship. By enabling members to tap into new ocean-based opportunities while upholding multilateral disciplines on transparency, fairness and sustainability, the WTO helps create a level playing field where the blue economy can thrive as a driver of inclusive development and ocean conservation. As members invest in the infrastructure, capacity and innovation needed to unlock this potential, trade policies will remain a critical pillar for delivering on SDG 14 and ensuring the long-term viability of marine resources.



SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals

Global partnerships for sustainable development

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes international trade as a critical engine for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction. SDG 17 specifically calls for strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the global partnerships for sustainable development. The WTO remains committed to fostering innovative partnerships that advance sustainable development across multiple dimensions, with particular emphasis on promoting women's economic empowerment.

This section highlights key examples of how the WTO is leveraging innovative partnerships to achieve the SDGs, particularly SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals): the Women Exporters in the Digital Economy (WEIDE) Fund and the "Partenariat pour le Coton" initiative with FIFA. Both partnerships demonstrate the WTO's commitment to inclusive development, with significant contributions to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) as well.

The WEIDE Fund: An innovative partnership model

Launched in February 2024 by the WTO and the International Trade Centre (ITC), the WEIDE Fund represents a multi-stakeholder partnership designed to empower women entrepreneurs through international trade and digitalization. The Fund exemplifies the transformative potential of strategic partnerships between international organizations, governments, development banks, philanthropic foundations and the private sector.

The WEIDE Fund actively engages diverse partners from both public and private sectors, creating a comprehensive ecosystem of support for women entrepreneurs. The Fund's design incorporates input from women entrepreneurs and business support organizations in developing economies, ensuring that interventions are tailored to address real-world challenges. By combining the WTO's trade policy expertise with the ITC's implementation capabilities, the Fund leverages the complementary strengths of both organizations to maximize impact.

The WEIDE Fund serves as a powerful example of how effective partnerships can drive sustainable

development. By bringing together diverse stakeholders from the public and private sectors, the Fund mobilizes significant financial resources for developing countries. This collaborative approach facilitates knowledge sharing on technology and innovation, particularly through its focus on digital skills and technology adoption that bridges critical knowledge gaps for women entrepreneurs.

The Fund enhances international support for capacity-building in developing countries through technical assistance and training programs that help women navigate complex trade regulations and access global markets. The Fund's diverse partnership structure encourages effective public, public-private and civil society collaborations that build on the experience and resourcing strategies of other successful initiatives, demonstrating how targeted partnerships can create meaningful impact across multiple development dimensions.

Beyond its direct contributions to SDGs 17 and 5 (Gender equality), the WEIDE Fund generates positive spillover effects across multiple sustainable development goals. The Fund contributes to poverty reduction (SDG 1 – No poverty) by increasing women entrepreneurs' incomes through expanded participation in international trade, creating pathways out of economic vulnerability. By supporting the growth and expansion of women-led businesses, the Fund promotes job creation and economic growth (SDG 8 – Decent work and economic growth), multiplying its impact beyond the direct beneficiaries to include employees and value chain participants. The Fund's emphasis on digital adoption fosters innovation and technological upgrading (SDG 9 – Industry, innovation and infrastructure), helping businesses modernize their operations and increase competitiveness in global markets. In addition, by addressing gender-based inequalities in trade participation, the Fund contributes to more equitable outcomes in economic opportunity and resource distribution (SDG 10 – Reduced inequalities), demonstrating how targeted interventions for marginalized groups can advance broader equality objectives.

Since its launch in February 2024, the WEIDE Fund has made significant progress in its implementation journey. The Fund has successfully selected four pilot beneficiary economies – the Dominican Republic, Jordan, Mongolia and Nigeria – through a competitive call for proposals that assessed commitment to women's economic empowerment and potential for impact.

Within these economies, the Fund has launched business plan competitions to identify women entrepreneurs with high growth potential, creating pathways for targeted support.

The WEIDE Fund's implementation has already generated valuable insights for other partnership initiatives in the sustainable development sphere. The Fund's experience demonstrates that addressing specific barriers faced by women entrepreneurs, such as limited access to finance and digital technologies, yields more effective results than general support programmes that fail to account for gender-specific challenges. Engaging local business support organizations has proven essential for ensuring that interventions are contextually appropriate and sustainable beyond the project lifecycle, creating lasting institutional capacity for women's implication in the global economy.

The “Partenariat pour le Coton” Initiative: Transforming value chains through strategic partnerships

The joint WTO-FIFA (International Federation of Association Football) Partenariat pour le Coton (Cotton Partnership) initiative stands as another exemplary model of innovative partnerships for sustainable development. Launched in February 2024 following the signing of the WTO-FIFA Memorandum of Understanding in 2022, this initiative aims to help African cotton-producing countries, particularly the Cotton-4+ (Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire) group, move up the cotton value chain and play a greater role in transforming cotton into textiles and clothing.

The Partenariat pour le Coton brings together a coalition of partners across sectors and geographies, creating a comprehensive support ecosystem for the cotton value chain in Africa. International organizations including the WTO, FIFA, ITC, United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC) contribute their specialized expertise and convening power.

The joint declaration signed by representatives from the AFC, ITFC, ITC, UNIDO and the WTO affirms their cooperation in investing in and supporting the WTO's cotton value chain development projects, exemplifying multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development (SDG 17) and demonstrating how coordinated action can accelerate progress toward shared goals.

Since its launch in February 2024 during 13th Ministerial Conference (MC13), the Partenariat pour le coton has made significant strides in advancing the cotton value chain across West and Central Africa. The following month, the “Cotton-to-Clothing” session at the Global Aid for Trade Review at the WTO showcased the progress being made in value addition and job creation, particularly for women and youth in the region. On the sidelines of the event, key financing partners – including the Islamic Trade Finance Corporation, the African Finance Corporation and Afreximbank – joined UNIDO, ITC, and the WTO in signing a joint declaration. This declaration reaffirmed their commitment to providing both financial and technical support to accelerate the sustainable transformation of the cotton sector in West Africa and beyond.

During these discussions, stakeholders from the private sector, development finance institutions and development partners explored innovative ways to mobilize finance for sustainable infrastructure and international market opportunities. Public-private partnerships – bridging governments, financial institutions and the private sector – alongside blended finance models involving impact investors, were identified as key mechanisms to unlock capital for technological upgrades and capacity expansion.

Conclusion

The WEIDE Fund and the Partenariat pour le Coton initiative exemplify how innovative partnerships can drive progress across multiple SDGs, particularly SDG 5, SDG 8 and SDG 17. By bringing together diverse stakeholders, mobilizing significant resources and implementing targeted interventions, these initiatives demonstrate the WTO's commitment to inclusive and sustainable development.

As the global community approaches the final five years of the 2030 Agenda, partnerships such as these offer promising models for accelerating progress. The WTO remains committed to expanding and deepening such partnerships, ensuring that international trade serves as a powerful engine for sustainable development that leaves no one behind.

These initiatives show that when international organizations, governments, and the private sector join forces with a clear focus on empowering marginalized groups and developing sustainable value chains, transformative change is possible. This model of innovative partnership will continue to inform the WTO's approach to contributing to the achievement of the SDGs in the years ahead.

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Available at: <https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=q:/WT/L/1129.pdf&Open=True>.
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- 13 SDG Target 14.6: By 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and refrain from introducing new such subsidies, recognizing that appropriate and effective special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part of the World Trade Organization fisheries subsidies negotiation.
- 14 SDG Target 14.7: By 2030, increase the economic benefits to Small Island developing States and least developed countries from the sustainable use of marine resources, including through sustainable management of fisheries, aquaculture and tourism.

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World Trade Organization
Centre William Rappard
Rue de Lausanne 154
CH-1211 Geneva 2
Switzerland
Tel.: +41 (0)22 739 51 11
email: enquiries@wto.org
www.wto.org

