



2021

WTO Technical Assistance Activities and results at a glance

Optimizing digital delivery to
navigate the pandemic



Xiangcheng Zhang
Deputy Director-General, WTO

“ Like most of us, WTO was caught off-guard by the pandemic in 2020, but this report shows the swift reaction of the Secretariat.

In 2021, technical assistance operations were transformed and adapted to the new environment, while its staff acquired new skills and competences.

All in all, we were able to continue providing support to Members and Observers despite the complex circumstances.

Technical Assistance (TA) is a core function of the WTO, aiming to enhance human and institutional trade capacities in beneficiary countries.

All TA activities, courses and trainings are designed to enhance the capacity of WTO Members and Observers to take full advantage of the rules-based multilateral trading system, and to deal with the challenges and opportunities emerging from it.

This brief is a summary of the content of the WTO Technical Assistance Annual Report 2021 (WT/COMTD/W/265), and it has been produced for informative purposes only.

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WTO TA
Annual Report
2021



WTO TA 2021 - Key takeaways

1

In 2021, WTO TA was able to adapt to the pandemic-related restrictions that hindered participation, and keep overall results stable.

2

After two years of dealing with limitations, innovative efforts have made TA more flexible.

3

Although virtual activities have brought considerable advantages, in-person delivery is still valuable and necessary.

4

2021 recorded the lowest level of voluntary contributions in over 20 years, as several funding Members held back pending the resumption of normal TA expenditure.



The pandemic: Year II

In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to be the main constraint for the WTO's Technical Assistance (TA). Despite efforts to resume travelling and face-to-face activities, no window of opportunity could be opened. Even the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference had to be postponed at the last minute.

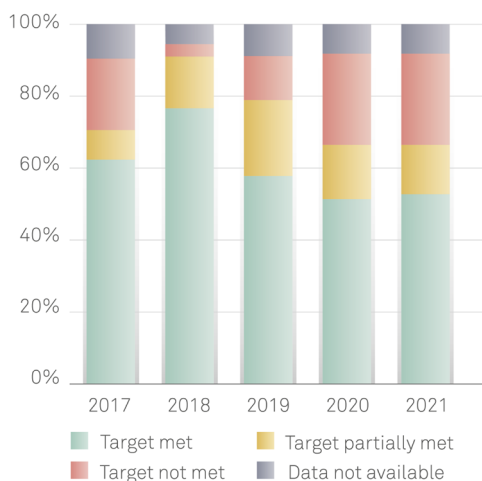
In 2020, the Secretariat could only react to the restrictions resulting from the pandemic. As restrictions persisted, in 2021 the WTO had to strengthen its adaptation efforts. These were aimed at optimising the virtual delivery of TA and developing new content.

Stable results

Overall, the TA success rate (66%), as measured under the Result-Based Management (RBM) approach approved by Members, was stable when compared to 2020. More than half of the targets were met, 14% were partially met, and a quarter were not met.

However, this stable results were overshadowed by the almost total absence of face-to-face activities and a drop in participation. The total number of learners fell by 23% compared to 2020. Moreover, requests for national activities (the best tool to tailor trainings to beneficiaries' needs) dropped to a historic low.

WTO TA success rate (2017-2021)



A few face-to-face exceptions aside, TA participation was split almost equally between virtual activities and e-Learning courses (those that learners follow on their own, designed for the Internet even before the pandemic). The virtual delivery of courses (launched in 2020 to cope with COVID-19 limitations) continued to be the norm through renewed efforts to replicate the in-person training experience in a digital space. Learning results of, for example, the (virtual) Regional Trade Policy Courses, improved when compared to 2020, suggesting a somewhat successful adaptation of content to the new mode of delivery. Advanced activities resumed through virtual means.

Digital fatigue

However, participation in virtual activities declined considerably during the year, although some reporting adjustments may have exaggerated this drop. The so-called ‘digital fatigue’, the increased global competition for e-learners’ time, and the added difficulties of remote working are possible contributors to this decrease. The virtual mode has undeniable advantages, such as greater flexibility, reduced costs, and the possibility of reaching more users at once. But it also has downsides, including less interaction, despite efforts to foster it.

All the above factors may have also affected e-Learning activities, which recorded a higher dropout rate in 2021 (+40%). Nevertheless, the number of participants who registered in these courses remained stable.

This way of learning was also adapted to the new situation, for example by producing micro-courses tailored for mobile devices, offering live sessions to help resolve e-learners’ doubts.

On-the-job training

The learning-by-doing offer (comprising internships and the Young Professionals Programme) did take place despite travel restrictions, and 56 participants joined the Secretariat or the Permanent Missions in Geneva to enhance their knowledge while working on trade-related matters. Ninety four percent of these interns met the performance expectations, with one third of them exceeding those targets.

Continued support for Members and observers

TA mainly targets developing and Least Developed Country (LDC) Member and Observer government officials, and its effectiveness and impact go beyond active participation in trainings. It is also measured by the evolution of beneficiaries' activity within the WTO.

In this respect, beneficiary Members reduced their number of outstanding notifications in 2021, while the use of online platforms to complete these procedures increased. The number of 'substantive' documents issued by these Members – a proxy indicator of their involvement in the work of the WTO bodies - also increased by 20% when compared to the previous year.

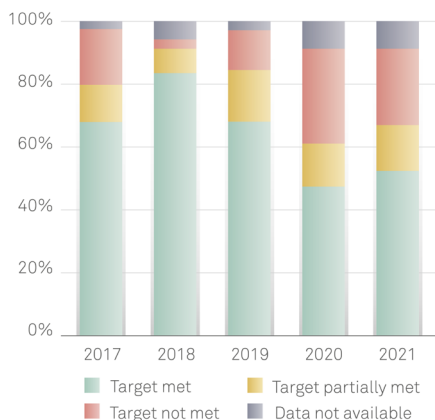
Another proxy is the ability of these Members to raise new Specific Trade Concerns (STCs). This has steadily increased in recent years. They raised the majority of the new STCs on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) over the last decade (80% of those raised in 2021). Similarly, Developing Members have also issued the majority of new SPS-related STCs in the last 14 years, submitting 85% of those submitted in 2021.

KEY RESULT

1



Implementation of WTO Agreements

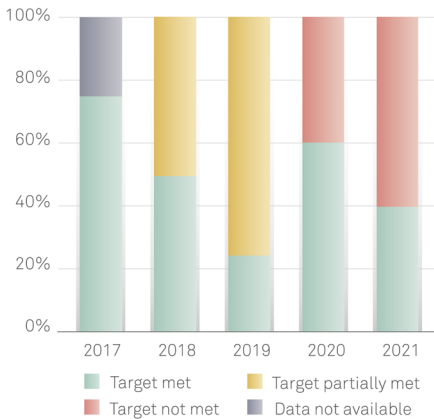


KEY RESULT

2



Acceding governments
participate in negotiations



Mixed results in accompanying new accessions

Another TA objective is to support the accession of new members to the WTO. Several LDC Observers witnessed progress in their accession processes in 2021: Comoros and Timor-Leste held formal Working Party meetings, while the Sudan held an informal meeting which led to a formal one later in the year. Six accession documents were prepared or revised (50% more than in 2020).

Regarding plurilateral agreements, the circulation of Government Procurement Agreement (GPA) accession-related documents more than doubled in comparison to 2020. Nevertheless, it still showed a significant fall from the 2016-18 average.

“

As I take part in Timor-Leste's working group for WTO accession, I will benefit from this course, which has deepened my understanding on the aspects a country should consider when preparing an initial market access offer in services.

Dávida Mesquita, Timor-Leste
Participant in the Virtual Training Course on Trade
in Services for Acceding Governments



WTO TA in 2021 at a glance

RESULTS

In a challenging year, TA overall **success rate was stable** compared to 2020



Outreach activities (which had disappeared due to the pandemic) were **progressively organised again** in 2021



TA was delivered essentially **half virtually, half through online self-paced courses**



More than three years after the end of the **WTO Chairs Programme's** grants: the Chairs' **research production remained high**, its quality increased, and results in terms of curriculum development and outreach also proved sustainable over time

On-the-job trainings were almost the only programmes delivered face-to-face; they were **practically unaffected by the pandemic** and results remained positive



Uneven engagement of Observers in their WTO **accession process** led to **mixed results** for TA in this domain



Overall **participation** in TA activities **fell by 23%**



TA contributed to **increased transparency** in the WTO and to **increasing the participation** of Members in the WTO bodies

Legend:

- Improvement
- Stability
- Setback



Digital fatigue was registered amongst TA publics

INCLUSION

LDCs participation **bounced back** slowly after the pandemic; LDC beneficiaries are overcoming connection issues and the digital gap



Language diversity in WTO TA delivery was **more balanced** than in the past



The **gender mix** amongst participants was **more balanced** in 2021; women's participation also began recovering from the pandemic shock, which affected them disproportionately



The **geographical spread** of the WTO TA **remained at its 2020 level**: lower than prior to the pandemic, although still fair

CURRICULUM

Pedagogical innovations were developed to improve participants' virtual experience through a higher level of interactivity



The beneficiaries' TA needs remained almost unchanged compared to the previous TA Plan (pre-pandemic)



Several donors **held back their voluntary contributions** since TA spending did not resume in 2021; voluntary contributions reached their lowest level in 20 years



2021 saw greater inclination of **donors to earmark their voluntary contributions**, making TA increasingly donor driven; 20% of the donors redirected their voluntary contributions towards the WCP



TA expenses were **further reduced**, as the variable costs associated with virtual activities and e-Learning are very low.

MANAGEMENT

The number of **e-Learning courses on offer increased by 23%**, stimulated by the release of short and micro courses, which are easier to complete and digest



Participation in **advanced activities bounced back** in 2021 following the resumption of such activities through virtual means



Requests for national activities received from beneficiaries **almost vanished** in 2021

A new cycle of the WTO Chairs Programme

Partnering with local universities and researchers is an effective way of expanding knowledge about trade and the WTO in developing Members and Observers. Since 2010, the WTO Chairs Programme (WCP) has been supporting influential academics and their teams to foster research, its dissemination among policy makers and the adaptation of university curricula.

The WCP completed its second cycle in early 2019, and its established network of 19 Chairs continues to produce results and benefit from direct access to the Secretariat. Overall research output hit its second highest level in 2021. Furthermore, 17 new Chairs were selected to take part in Phase III of the programme.

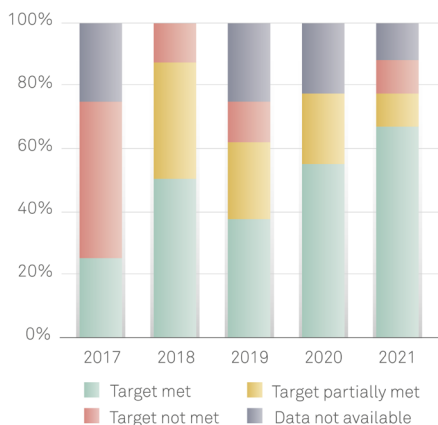


KEY RESULT

3



Academic institutions and other stakeholders analyse WTO issues



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The WCP offers the opportunity to raise awareness of international trade policies in our universities, and to build bridges with officials in charge of trade policy formulation and implementation.

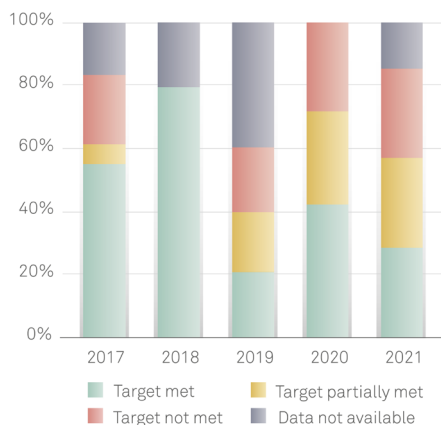
Ahmad Makaila

Ambassador of Chad,
Chair of the LDC Group.

KEY RESULT



**Non-governmental audiences
are aware of WTO issues**



Resuming outreach to non-traditional actors

WTO TA also aims at targeting other stakeholders (such as legislators, the media or civil society) through outreach activities and courses. Activities for journalists were resumed in 2021, raising the number of outreach activities to a 5-year record. However, demand for training materials by the academia or private actors was 23% lower than in 2020.

The WTO went on to strengthen its use of social media and other platforms to spread information on trade issues across diverse audiences. Its number of social media followers increased by 19% when compared to the previous year, while the number of views of TA webpages and news items was somehow lower than in 2020.

“

The rich diversity of information provided in this course allows us to explain the impact that large-scale decisions have on our country's daily life.

Anabella Aparicio, Uruguay
Journalist at Sudestada, Canal 10
and Radio Sarandí



Fostering inclusion

Efforts to make TA accessible to LDCs and inclusive in terms of gender, geography, and language continued in 2021.

Participants coming from LDCs accounted for over a quarter of all learners, coming from 42 different WTO Members and Observers, and mainly from Africa. Specifically, the number of interns coming from LDCs reached a 6-year record. WTO TA also continued to involve regional or local experts as facilitators.

The pandemic-induced turn into virtual learning posed several logistic challenges with varying impacts on participants, sometimes related to their geographical location.

Access to reliable Internet connection was one of the outstanding issues, and in 2021 the Secretariat launched a pilot initiative to assist those participants who were experiencing connectivity problems.



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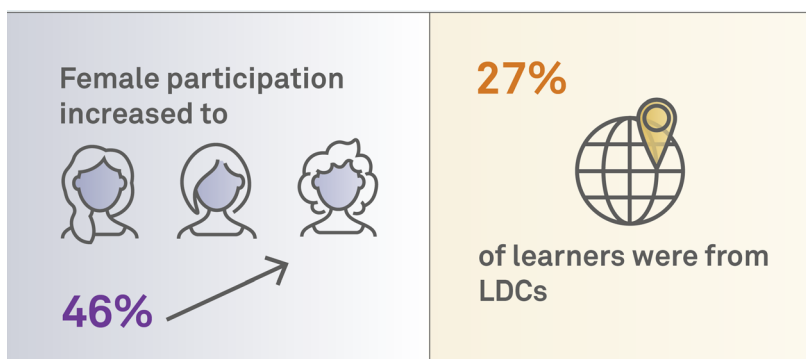
Only by empowering people from all walks of life will they be able to get a voice in negotiation and decision-making processes.

Bridget Chilala, ITTC Director, WTO



In terms of gender equality, new modules and trainings focusing on the links between Trade and Gender were developed, while WCP Chairs expanded their research and activities on gender issues. Overall female participation increased compared to 2020, up to 46% of all participants. Women accounted for the majority of participants in activities with a global reach (53%).

In 2021, almost half of all TA Activities – both e-Learning and virtual – were conducted in English (49%). In previous years, English used to be the language of use in some 60% to 70% of TA activities. While the use of French and Spanish was limited to regional or national trainings, it accounted for 23% and 25% of the activities, respectively (an increase of almost 10 percentage points for each language).



A sharp decrease in TA expenses

As in the previous year, the COVID-19 restrictions inhibited the implementation of face-to-face TA activities in 2021 and consequently minimised expenditure for the year. Virtual TA activities do not require anyone to travel, which significantly reduces direct variable costs.

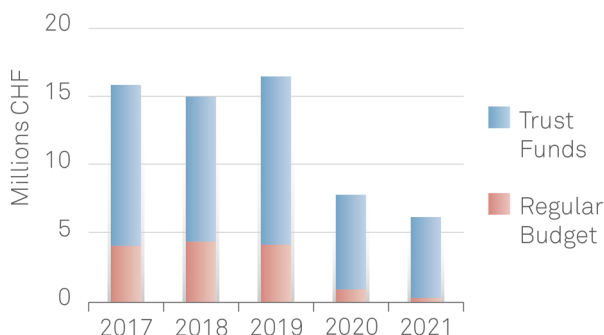
TA expenses have plummeted since the beginning of the pandemic. Comparing 2021 with 2019, the last non-pandemic year, TA expenses have decreased by 62%.

Year 2021 saw a further 20% drop relative to 2020, as travel restrictions only started in March that year.

A direct consequence of the drop in TA expenses was that the unearmarked year end balance resurged above the target amount for the following year. This guarantees full implementation of the TA Plan in 2022. Another unintended consequence of low TA expenditure was the temporary suspension of voluntary contributions by certain Members, with 2021 recording the lowest voluntary contributions in over 20 years.



WTO TA expenses (2017-2021)



“

Sweden firmly believes that through technical assistance, developing countries will participate more effectively in global trade.

Mikael Anzén

Ambassador of Sweden to the WTO

Unearmarked contributions declined

Funding Members stand ready to resume their voluntary contributions as soon as the liquidity of the trust funds justifies it. The year saw a greater inclination of the remaining funders to earmark their voluntary contributions, as 20% redirected them towards the WCP.

An online tool for improving efficiency

The WTO TA management system (TAMS) is the online tool that allows effective monitoring and evaluation and adherence to the Result-Based Management approach. TAMS is still evolving to include new functionalities and, in 2021, the initial workplan experienced some modifications and delays.

WTO TA funding

Technical Assistance is funded through the regular budget of WTO (38%) and voluntary contributions from the following Members (62%)



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