

Africa's Integration into the WTO Multilateral Trading System: Academic Support and the Role of the WTO Chairs

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The Marrakesh Agreement establishing the WTO recognized the need for positive steps to be taken to ensure that developing countries, and especially the least developed among them, secure a share in the growth of international trade that is commensurate with their economic development needs. This article discusses how the WTO helps to facilitate Africa's integration into the WTO multilateral trading system. It is argued that while African countries are actively engaged in the work of the WTO and are pursuing their economic and policy interests, some key challenges remain. These include further diversifying their production, linking to global value chains (GVCs) and developing adequate infrastructure to facilitate digital trade so that it becomes a vehicle for economic growth. The WTO, working closely with partner institutions, supports Africa in its endeavours to tackle some of these challenges, offering a range of programmes that are geared towards trade capacity-building. It is argued that the work undertaken by WTO Chairs and academic institutions under the aegis of the WTO's Chairs Programme (WCP) is of critical importance in providing the analytical underpinnings for the policy choices that will encourage fuller integration into the multilateral trading system. This programme was significantly expanded and deepened in 2021 with a view to strengthening its capacity to provide support to beneficiaries and especially least-developed countries (LDCs) (largely African countries) so that they can more fully embrace the multilateral trading system.

Keywords: trade, capacity-building, Africa, WTO, global value chains, academic support

1 INTRODUCTION

When ministers launched the Doha Development Agenda (DDA) nearly twenty years ago in 2001 in Doha, developing countries succeeded in putting 'development' at its centre. It was a sine qua non for the launch of a new round of trade negotiations, as many African countries argued that they were still struggling to implement the Uruguay Round agreements. The Uruguay Round, the last to be

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Smeets, Maarten. 'Africa's Integration into the WTO Multilateral Trading System: Academic Support and the Role of the WTO Chairs'. *Journal of World Trade* 56, no. 3 (2022): 497–522.

held under the auspices of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) which led to the establishment of the WTO in 1995, had created expectations of considerable economic benefits. Yet as far as the developing countries were concerned, these had not materialized. On the contrary, developing countries felt that they had signed off on many obligations and commitments, but without fully grasping the policy implications for their economies. In addition, they feared that a new round would eventually result in the formulation of a new set of rules and disciplines that would not necessarily serve their economic interests. If history was not to repeat itself, trade capacity-building had to be fundamentally anchored in the rules of the new system.

With the transition from the GATT to the newly created WTO, the developing country membership increased significantly, irrespective of how this group of countries is defined.¹ Hence, the concerns expressed by the developing countries, now representing nearly three-quarters of the WTO membership, could not be ignored. Moreover, the decision to act on these concerns was within the spirit of the Marrakesh Agreement (which established the WTO) as it recognized the need for positive steps to be taken to ensure that developing countries, and especially the least-developed countries (LDCs) among them, secure a share in the growth of international trade that is commensurate with their economic development needs. Making the DDA a 'development round' was also a clear acknowledgement by ministers that international trade can and should play a major role in promoting economic development and alleviating poverty.

As a result, a 'new strategy' was developed (WTO, 2001a) and the interests of developing countries were placed at the centre of the work programme adopted in the Ministerial Declaration, with ministers recognizing that:

[E]nhanced market access, balanced rules, and well-targeted, sustainably financed technical assistance and capacity-building programmes have important roles to play in securing that developing countries and especially the least-developed amongst them secure a share in the growth of world trade commensurate with the needs of their economic development (WTO, 2001b).

As a first significant step, members included explicit wording in the Declaration on how developing countries would be assisted in integrating further into the multi-lateral trading system and how the role of the Secretariat would be strengthened to offer new avenues for trade capacity-building. Given the developmental nature of the DDA and to ensure that beneficiaries were able to participate fully in the

¹ While the WTO traditionally applies the principle of self-selection, with each member determining its developing country status, this is no longer accepted by all members who argue that the more economically advanced developing countries among them should assume the same rights and obligations as developed countries and be excluded from the exceptions to the rules designed to benefit developing countries.

negotiations, a dedicated chapter on 'Technical Cooperation and Capacity Building' was inserted into the Ministerial Declaration (paragraphs 38–41) (WTO, 2001b). The language used to describe the support to be provided was stronger than it had ever been, thus representing a major departure from previous negotiations held during the GATT years when technical assistance and capacity-building provisions were mostly non-binding, 'best endeavour' undertakings by developed countries (WTO, 1994). As developing countries account for the bulk of the WTO's membership, the multilateral trading system can only function when developing countries' needs and priorities are addressed. This was the first time that a comprehensive approach to trade capacity-building had been proposed, with strong commitments expressed by the developed countries. Thus, 'Doha' provided a starting point for better and more active participation by beneficiaries in the system.

The question to be explored is how the trade capacity-building efforts have evolved with a view to supporting the fuller integration of African countries into the multilateral trading system. Linked to this is the specific contributions that the WTO Chairs have made in supporting policy decisions taken at government level. This academic support is perhaps more relevant today than ever before in the wake of the pandemic (Covid-19), which has had devastating effects on human lives and economic prospects, particularly in Africa. The pandemic has also significantly impacted the WTO's technical assistance activities, both in the field and in Geneva, which have seen a dramatic decline in the face of travel restrictions. However, academic support provided through the WCP is 'Covid proof', as it builds on home-grown human and institutional knowledge and policy-focused research and analysis. It thus holds the key to the WTO's capacity-building and sustainability commitments in the future. The work to be undertaken by Chairs in the next phase will be of critical importance.

2 AFRICA'S TRADE IN PERSPECTIVE

The world economy was in dire straits following the untimely arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in late 2019. The pandemic quickly gained momentum in Spring 2020 and developed into an unexpectedly strong and devastating second wave in Fall 2020 and a third wave in early 2021. During this period, much global economic activity came to a standstill, especially in the wake of the raft of lockdown measures imposed by countries all over the world. No continent or country has been spared, with hundreds of thousands of lives having been brutally lost to the disease.

In 2020, the world found itself in a recession the magnitude of which had not been seen for many decades – perhaps even since the Great Depression nearly a

century ago. Trade was at a low ebb, protectionism was rising rapidly and some supply chains, including those for essential foods and medicines, were severely disrupted. The WTO forecasted a decline of between 13% and 32% (WTO, 2020a). According to recent estimates by the WTO, the volume of world merchandise trade is expected to increase by 8.0% in 2021 after having fallen by 5.3% in 2020, signalling a continuation of the rebound from the pandemic-induced collapse that bottomed out in the second quarter of 2020 (WTO, 2021a). The most recent geopolitical events and military actions in Europe are expected to have significant repercussions on trade and the world economy, dampening any hopes for a quick economic recovery.

The G-20 leaders pledged collective action to address the expected repercussions of the pandemic on people around the world, the global economy and trade (G-20, 2020). Developed countries assembled unprecedented relief packages to support businesses, including micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), and their employees. In the US alone, a USD 2 trillion-dollar relief package was approved by the Senate and signed by former President Trump in late March 2020, with a second package prepared in the Fall and signed by President Biden in Spring 2021. Similar, unprecedented financial support packages were rolled out in China, Japan and various European countries. Most developing countries do not have such sizeable reserves and depend on the support provided by developed countries and international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The UN is calling for support measures on a historic scale – up to 10% of countries' (Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – and proposing special trade policy actions for African countries (UN, 2020). Irrespective of how Covid-19 plays out in the foreseeable future, the weakest countries will be the hardest hit, thus further dampening their already tenuous development prospects.

These developments come on top of the trade tensions that emerged in 2016 between key economic powers, including the US, China, the European Union, the Russian Federation and several other countries. These ructions impacted the trade climate for developed and developing countries alike, well before the pandemic took root. As the African saying goes, 'When the big elephants fight, the grass suffers'. This turn of events certainly undercut the positive growth trend that Africa had been experiencing. Africa's economic growth rate was expected to be 3.3% in 2020 and 3.4% in 2021. Africa remains heavily reliant on the agricultural sector, which accounts for 60% of the continent's employment and 25% of its GDP. The manufacturing sector is relatively small and contributes on average 10% to Africa's GDP. However, the extractive industries account for 80%–90% of exports to some oil-producing African countries. Overall, there is little economic diversification in Africa, with a continued high dependency on natural resources.

Intra-African trade remains weak compared to other regions, constituting only 15% of total trade on the continent. This is in sharp contrast to 61% in Asia, 67% in Europe and 47% in the Americas (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 2019). However, this situation is set to change with the launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which has the potential to drive deeper integration and liberalization of African markets and heightened intra-regional trade (Ismail, 2019a, 2019b). The AfCFTA (a flagship project of the AU's Agenda 2063) entered into force on 30 May 2019 and officially took effect in July 2020. The AfCFTA is expected to lead to the removal of many intra-African barriers to trade, including tariffs and non-tariff measures, and to boost intra-African trade from its current level of 15% to 25% by 2040. As will be argued further, much will depend on the lowering of transaction costs for internal (intra-African) trade and strengthening infrastructure, among other factors.

3 WTO'S TRADE CAPACITY-BUILDING SUPPORT FOR AFRICA

3.1 TRADE CAPACITY-BUILDING AS A KEY FUNCTION IN THE WTO

Trade capacity-building was almost non-existent under the GATT and was mostly an afterthought when the WTO was created. A WTO study noted that:

[B]eyond modest training and technical assistance programs, the old GATT devoted relatively little attention and few resources to assisting developing countries strengthen their technical expertise, participate in the day-to-day work of the organization and strengthen their trade institutions, legal systems and productive capacities (WTO, 2015a).

This lacuna was not corrected in the institutional set-up and design of the WTO. While the Marrakesh Agreement referred to the need to support developing countries in their efforts to integrate into the multilateral trading system, it did not specify how. Moreover, trade capacity-building was not part of the core functions of the WTO. Van den Bossche and Zdouc (2017) note that 'the functions of the WTO do not explicitly include technical assistance to developing country Members ... yet, this is an important area of activity of the WTO'.

Technically, the Marrakesh Agreement recognized the following four pillars of the WTO:

- Administering trade agreements
- Providing a forum for trade negotiations
- Handling and settling trade disputes
- Monitoring members' trade policies (transparency).

The omission of technical assistance became very apparent during the fourth Ministerial Conference (MC) held in Doha in 2001, where it was planned to

launch a new round of trade negotiations, referred to as the Doha Development Agenda (DDA). To overcome the reluctance of developing countries engaging in the negotiations – which would call for further concessions and liberalization commitments – ministers introduced a fifth pillar at the Doha Ministerial (WTO, 2001): providing technical assistance and training to developing countries and LDCs. A dedicated chapter on ‘Technical Cooperation and Capacity Building’ was inserted into the Ministerial Declaration (paragraphs 38–41) and members provided explicit wording in the text as to how developing countries would be assisted in further integrating into the multilateral trading system and how the role of the Secretariat would be strengthened to facilitate trade capacity-building.

The language used to describe the support to be provided was stronger than it had ever been, thus representing a major departure from previous negotiations held during the GATT years, when technical assistance and capacity-building provisions were mostly non-binding, ‘best-endeavour’ undertakings by developed countries (WTO, 1994). As noted in a WTO Secretariat report (WTO, 2007), trade capacity-building efforts are part of a broader programme of providing assistance to beneficiaries, as captured by the so-called Aid for Trade (AfT) initiative, which originated in the MC-VI in Hong Kong in 2005 (WTO, 2005).² The Secretariat’s role in helping beneficiaries to integrate into the multilateral trading system was considerably strengthened, with trade capacity-building becoming one of the core functions of the WTO (Smeets, 2013). Its mandate covers the running of training programmes and the provision of direct technical assistance and support, mainly but not exclusively for the benefit of government officials. Participants are trained to understand their rights and obligations under the rules of the WTO and to meet their legal commitments.

The main goal of the Secretariat is thus to assist beneficiaries in integrating into the multilateral trading system, with a specific focus on LDCs, Sub-Saharan Africa and small, vulnerable economies (SVEs). The target audience is increasingly representatives of business, civil society and academia. Under the WTO Chairs Programme (WCP), universities are specifically targeted, which adds a critically important dimension to the WTO’s capacity-building function. As the Secretariat needs to remain neutral and impartial, it cannot offer policy advice. Academia fills this lacuna, as the research and analytical work done by the Chairs mostly leads to the formulation of policy advice and recommendations.

² Compare para. 55 of the Ministerial Declaration: ‘Aid for Trade should aim to help developing countries, particularly LDCs, to build the supply-side capacity and trade-related infrastructure that they need to assist them to implement and benefit from WTO Agreements and more broadly to expand their trade. Aid for Trade cannot be a substitute for the development benefits that will result from a successful conclusion to the DDA, particularly on market access’. Aid for Trade brings together agencies, donors and beneficiaries involved in trade capacity-building.

3.2 HOW THE WTO'S TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND TRAINING ADDRESS AFRICA'S PRIORITIES?

Technical assistance and training are demand driven and based on a needs assessment undertaken by beneficiary countries. This allows the Secretariat to tailor its support and establish priorities when allocating its scarce economic resources. The beneficiaries are invited to fill out a questionnaire in which they indicate the areas where technical assistance is most needed – hence, allowing the determination of priorities. This process is followed by consultations with the membership and the outcomes reflected in the so-called biennial Technical Assistance Plan (TA Plan) (WTO, 2019), the current one covering the biennium 2022–2023. The TA Plan offers various modes of delivery, including face-to-face training, and national and regional training courses (Smeets, 2013).

Africa, which is host to the largest number of LDCs,³ is traditionally the main beneficiary of the WTO's trade capacity-building efforts (WTO, 2020b, 2021b). According to the WTO, in 2019 a total of 14,500 participants were trained, which included some 3,500 officials from Africa (WTO, 2020b). This number remained stable in 2020, with 14,795 participants trained (WTO, 2021b). While most training was already being offered online in 2019 by way of e-training, this mode of delivery grew significantly in 2020 due to the pandemic. This distance learning mode enables participants to engage in remote self-training on the WTO's agreements. However, the total number of those trained in 2019 represents a 37% drop in the total number for 2018 – in other words, prior to the pandemic. Only 1,471 participants in Africa benefited from face-to-face training in 2019, far below the average of 1,854 in 2012. While this decline can be attributed to several causes, a key factor is that many African countries are excluded from TA as they have fallen into arrears with the payment of their WTO membership fees. Another is that the demand for TA saw a sharp drop in 2020 as the pandemic gained ground. As the latest WTO TA report shows, all field-based activities had to be cancelled, both nationally and regionally. It has taken the WTO a great deal of time to introduce and apply the virtual training mode, compared to many other training institutes. After a very slow start, all continents benefited from this mode of delivery in 2020, with a total of 1,386 participants from Africa.

What is both interesting and noteworthy is that the main priorities identified by African countries relate to more traditional areas, including market access, the Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA), technical barriers to trade (TBT), sanitary and phytosanitary measures (SPS), agriculture, and development-related issues,

³ The WTO recognizes thirty-six LDC members, of which twenty-six are in Africa. Of the eight LDCs in accession, six are African.

including special and differential treatment provisions (S&D) and general capacity-building. Some African countries attach a high priority to services, but issues like e-commerce, investment facilitation, and MSMEs are often lower down on the priority list. This can in part be explained by the challenges that many countries continue to face in exercising their rights and obligations under the WTO rules. At the same time, with the rapid changes occurring in trade at the international level, including the dramatic growth in global value chains (GVCs), the emergence of digital trade and advances in e-commerce and other technologies, the interrelationships between goods, services and intellectual property rights (including patents and licences) stand to gain much from a fuller understanding of the latest developments – especially as this would lead to enhanced competitiveness in international markets. For example, lower transaction costs and trade policies aimed at promoting e-commerce, data transmission and infrastructural support for internet connectivity are enablers of stronger GVC participation. However, the demand for technical assistance in these areas will remain low in the absence of legal frameworks and obligations. The Secretariat should nevertheless be more fully prepared to assist African countries in addressing the trade policy issues that characterize today's rapidly changing trading environment. This includes providing both technical and policy advice and conducting analyses, using the WCP as a resource. In fact, in preparing the 2020–2021 TA Plan, 97% of beneficiaries ranked academic support among their top 10 priorities, 68% ranked it among their top five priorities and nearly one-third among their top three priorities.

3.3 HOW TO MEASURE RESULTS AND IMPACT?

Demonstrating the effectiveness of trade capacity-building is important for enhancing transparency and accountability. A key challenge, however, is establishing the contribution of trade capacity-building to the integration process, compared to other factors facilitating such integration. Results-based management (RBM), which lies at the heart of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, has the aim of ensuring that aid delivers specific results (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD, 2005). RBM has been incorporated into most UN development programmes, and the WTO has also incorporated RBM into the design, management and delivery of WTO trade capacity-building programmes. The RBM methodology applied by the WTO is mainly designed to measure whether the activities performed achieved their stated objectives and is not suited for measuring the contribution of TA to the objectives associated with a country's integration into the multilateral trading system. It is unrealistic to expect

the limited number of small and short WTO TA interventions to have an impact on levels of trade.

A qualitative appreciation can provide more insight into the question of how African countries engage in trade negotiations. Typical outcomes that the WTO is expected to achieve through its trade capacity-building programmes include greater and better participation of beneficiaries in the work of the WTO and its respective bodies, such as the DDA negotiations and the dispute settlement process. The WTO's ultimate goal is that members develop stronger capacity to implement WTO agreements, exercise their rights and apply the WTO's transparency mechanisms, such as through the submission of notifications (WTO, 2021b).

3.4 MAIN FINDINGS AND HOW THEY RELATE TO AFRICA

The evidence suggests that the WTO's trade capacity-building efforts are paying off – the findings and outcomes of an independent external evaluation conducted in 2016 on the WTO's efforts in this regard show that:

The widespread impact of WTO TA on the human capacities of beneficiary countries is real and tangible, and the evaluation found highly plausible evidence that WTO TA has also contributed to capacities at institutional levels in trade policy-making, legislative compliance, multilateral/regional trade negotiations and implementation of international trade agreement. Drawing on its different lines of evidence, the evaluation has been able to trace demonstrated results from the training of individuals (including interns) and groups through to strengthened contributions and rising levels of responsibility in their work, to more effective institutions in the field, and finally to collecting an unexpectedly large volume of plausibly linked, concrete examples of more effective participation in the system by countries concerned. This body of evidence meets and exceeds the conditions for a reasonable causal claim that the training interventions made substantial contributions to countries' more effective participation in the MTS (WTO, 2016).

The effects of the support naturally differ per country and region, with much depending on other factors besides just the TA provided.

3.4[a] *A Qualitative Assessment of Africa's Participation in International Trade*

The qualitative assessment entails arriving at an appreciation of the extent to which African countries are directly involved in the decision- and rule-making processes in the multilateral trading system. Specifically, to what extent do African countries provide inputs in the DDA negotiations and the future directions of the institution, thus influencing the negotiations through specific submissions and ensuring that WTO reforms take African interests into account? This is even more important given the common critique by the African constituency that previous negotiations

were mostly shaped by the interests of larger, more powerful members (Laker, 2014). Developing countries did not actively engage in earlier negotiations and were mostly 'takers' of the outcomes and decisions, with little power to influence the agenda per se and ensure that their interests were addressed. As Laker (2014) observed, many developing countries, particularly in Africa, were reluctant to launch a new round of negotiations in 2001 (the DDA) as, from Africa's perspective, there was much unfinished business, including the implementation of existing commitments, which needed to remain as the focus (Laker, 2014). The Doha Round could only be launched on condition that implementation-related issues and concerns would be dealt with, and also that the Round would focus on development. This meant that in every negotiating arena, developing countries would be looking for an outcome that was sensitive to and reflective of their development concerns.

Developing countries actively participate in the negotiations and show a strong interest in and commitment to having their economic interests served. Kenya hosted the 10th Ministerial Conference (MC-X) in Nairobi in December 2015, which is a testimony of Africa's keen interest in trade and in steering the direction of the DDA negotiations. It was the first-ever MC organized on the African continent and was chaired by an African leader. It was also seen as confirmation that Africa attaches great importance to trade as a vehicle for generating economic growth. In the lead-up to MC-X, Kenya had garnered strong support from African countries. The successful staging of the Conference was hailed by the Conference Chair, Minister Amina Mohamad, who later became a candidate for the position of Director-General of the WTO.

Since the launch of the DDA, developing countries and LDCs have (either as a group or individually) submitted a substantial number of proposals, many of which address specific (sub)regional interests or more global interests and cover most of the areas under negotiation. The WTO agreements contain a total of 155 S&D provisions for the benefit of developing countries and LDCs. LDCs submitted over fifty specific proposals, covering eight areas of negotiations (WTO, 2015b). To this should be added the more than thirty ministerial, General Council and other relevant decisions that provide for special treatment afforded to developing country and LDC members (WTO, 2018). Nearly half the decisions contained in the Ministerial Declaration that was adopted at MC-IX (Bali) address developing country issues, including specific commitments and actions (WTO, 2013a). MC-X (Nairobi) once again resulted in general and specific decisions being taken that would benefit developing countries and LDCs directly or indirectly, including the significant decision to eliminate export competition for agricultural products (WTO, 2015a).

In view of their limited capacity, developing countries increasingly engage in the negotiations through coalitions to defend their economic and trade policy interests. African countries coordinate their positions within the African group, the G-90 and the Organization of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (ACP), as well as (to some extent) through the LDC group, which mostly comprises African countries. The group proposals made by coalitions of developing countries are mostly geared towards facilitating the fuller integration of beneficiaries into the multilateral trading system. Positions are not automatically aligned, though, as countries have different policy goals and priorities. The combined influence that African countries can exercise in the negotiations is best illustrated in a small but influential group of LDCs called the Cotton-4, comprising Bénin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali (the four poorest countries in Africa). Their specific, common interest is cotton and their objective is to bring about a reduction in cotton subsidies and tariffs. The initiative driven by these four countries is broadly supported by the other African cotton-producing countries. The group has made it clear that unless a credible result is achieved in this area, African countries will not accept a broader package. The Cotton-4 have demonstrated that a small, coherent group of LDCs are in a position to influence policy and force large nations to change their subsidy practices.

Developing countries sometimes associate themselves with the positions of developed countries. Coalitions are formed to defend common economic interests, irrespective of levels of economic development. These coalitions can be small or large and are mostly topic-based, addressing specific interests of the countries concerned in a sector or policy area of economic importance. Some examples include the Cairns group, a coalition of (mostly developed) agricultural exporting nations lobbying for agricultural trade liberalization. It includes the G-20 (a coalition of countries pressing for ambitious agricultural reforms, including Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa); the G-33 (also called 'friends of special products' in agriculture, which advocate flexibility for developing countries in opening up their agricultural markets [to a limited extent] and include over a dozen African countries); and the W52 group (sponsors to a specific proposal under the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement for modalities in negotiations on geographical indicators and comprising nearly fifty countries from all continents, as well as the EU, ACP and African group). Such pragmatic and solutions-oriented approaches are a significant departure from ideologically based or North-South approaches. Increasingly, WTO members are basing their positions on economic and policy interests.

Specific text and negotiating proposals that are technically complex and often sensitive were made by developing (including African) countries in areas such as

non-agricultural market access (NAMA), agriculture, intellectual property, services, trade facilitation, S&D, dispute settlement and AfT. Africa was particularly active in these discussions and negotiations. As a result, many of the areas, including NAMA and agriculture, contain a wide range of exceptions and S&D provisions for developing countries. These were meant to ease the implementation burden associated with the two draft agreements for developing countries and LDCs, but at the same time they added to the complexity of the agreements.

In most areas, trade capacity-building for developing countries is a key issue, driven by the need to improve market access conditions. Given the weak infrastructure in developing countries, requests for capacity-building are increasingly extending beyond enhanced knowledge of the multilateral trading system. The focus is more on the implementation of the agreements and the strengthening of relevant infrastructure. This was the primary motivation for members adopting the AfT initiative at MC-V in Hong Kong (WTO, 2005). African countries are the largest beneficiary group of AfT, which is explained by the fact that the continent is home to the largest number of developing countries and LDCs (WTO, OECD, 2019). Separately, the LDCs (most of which are in Africa) benefit from the Enhanced Integrated Framework (EIF) which is generally viewed as an effective tool for assisting LDCs integrate into the multilateral trading system.⁴ These arrangements are important because, even though they do not turn the WTO into a development organization, they reflect WTO members' acknowledgement of the importance of building supply-side capacity to enable countries to use trade to drive economic development.

An important consequence of the more active engagement of developing countries in the negotiations is that the positions they have adopted can no longer be ignored, as was largely the case under the GATT. Developing countries are increasingly seeking concessions from developed countries. Africa has become a 'demandeur' in the negotiations instead of having to accept what is put on the table, acting as 'takers' of the outcome of the discussions between developed members. It was the latter experience that led to the discontent among developing countries in previous rounds. Africa was thus active in shaping the DDA negotiations and continues to look after its economic and policy interests. In this way, it contributes to developing countries integrating more fully into the multilateral trading system.

⁴ The EIF is a multilateral partnership framework, including six partner agencies, dedicated to assisting LDCs use trade as a vehicle for growth, sustainable development and poverty reduction.

3.5 ACADEMIC COOPERATION AND THE WCP

Building capacity at the academic level is another area in which the WTO Secretariat has invested considerable time and effort, and which has proved to be effective and to have had an impact. It has been particularly beneficial for Africa. The WCP was launched in 2010 with the specific aim of enhancing knowledge and understanding of the trading system among academics in developing countries by stimulating teaching, research and public debate on international trade and trade cooperation at tertiary education and research institutions. This was an innovative step in the sense that the WTO had until then mainly targeted government officials, and hence policymakers. Following an initial period of four years (Phase I of the WCP, 2010–2013), an internal assessment was conducted which led to a management decision to extend the programme for a further period of four years (Phase II, 2014–2018). In the period 2020–2021 Phase III was designed and its implementation launched in 2022, with a doubling of programme participants and the prospect of a further expansion in the years to come. Translating research into policy action is one of the stated goals of the WCP. The research and analysis conducted under the WCP have frequently led to policy recommendations and policy change, as confirmed in various testimonials supplied by Chair holders and policymakers.

The programme targets academic institutions in developing countries and LDCs that are members of the WTO. As a result, the process of becoming a Chair is highly competitive. The WCP is supported by an Advisory Board (AB) composed of academics, including university professors from prestigious institutions around the world, think tanks and leaders from partner institutions. Several Chair holders and AB members are influential personalities and directly contribute to the shaping of trade policies in their respective countries.⁵

The way the WCP operates can be summarized as follows: The WTO provides financial and substantive support to the Chairs under three main pillars of activity: research, curriculum development and outreach:

- Research: The WCP seeks to promote original research on trade and WTO matters, extend specialized knowledge and explain the policy relevance of existing research.

⁵ One AB member (a Harvard professor) was in the transition team of then President-elect Biden and became part of the Biden administration; one deputy Chairholder was appointed Commerce Secretary (Brazil); one professor is on the national Council of Economic Analysis and the Board of the Central Bank (Tunisia); and another professor is an advisor to the Trade Minister (Turkey).

- Curriculum development: The WTO seeks, through the WCP, to support the development and delivery in academic institutions of training programmes on trade policy and WTO-related matters.
- Outreach: The WCP aims to disseminate research and other information on international trade issues to policymakers, business, civil society and the general public, and to stimulate debates in relevant forums.

Building partnership and networks is one of the key features of the WCP and includes regional UN bodies (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), in Africa and United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia, and the Pacific (UNESCAP), in Asia), national and international research institutes, think tanks and training institutes on all continents. Through the WCP, platform knowledge and research are widely disseminated and publicized. Moreover, the AB members provide a mentoring role to those universities requesting support in terms of curriculum design and development, research or outreach activities.

African countries play a prominent role in the programme, with initially seven Chairs from Phases I-II, to which six were added in Phase III, thus increasing the total number of African Chairs to thirteen. This includes six African LDCs, with two hosted in French-speaking LDCs (Bénin and Sénégal). The African Chairs have actively contributed to the implementation of the WCP in their regions. They also participate in all events organized under the auspices of the WCP, including its annual conferences, lecture series, side events at the WTO's Public Forum and biennial AfT meetings, as well as the WTO MCs.⁶ In addition, they have contributed to the three books prepared by the WCP team, including the most recent book on digital trade (Smeets, 2021). As confirmed by the evaluators, much of the research conducted by the Chairs had direct policy relevance and had guided and informed decision-makers in their policy decisions. The advice of the Chairs is frequently solicited by the authorities in their respective countries, thus confirming Chairs' relevance and stature.⁷

A fully fledged, independent external evaluation was conducted in 2019 (SAANA Consulting, 2019) which included a very thorough and in-depth review of the performance of the Chairs. Not only did the evaluators confirm that the outputs produced by Chair holders were significant, but the WCP had also had an impact:

Chairs have achieved impact at the policy level, although this sometimes happens “behind the scenes”, informally and not openly. Chair-holding professors and key academic staff of many Chairs are usually influential individuals with good access to policymakers at national

⁶ These refer to side events at the university during MC-XI in Buenos Aires.

⁷ Several Chairs and AB members have posted testimonials, underscoring the relevance and value of the WCP for their countries, on the WCP's platform.

government level and in regional and international organizations. Most of the impact of the Chairs is achieved through research efforts of academic staff and students of the Chairs. (SAANA Consulting, 2019).

The evaluators strongly recommended that the programme be extended and considerably expanded, and that the number of Chairs and Chair holders should more than double. The former WTO DG, Roberto Azevêdo, formally endorsed these conclusions in Summer 2020, leading to the third phase of the WCP in 2021.

The WTO (2021b) notes that:

The evaluation was a testimony to the programme's long-lasting impact on the participating countries. The Chairs maintained an active dialogue with WTO experts, discussed their WTO-related work plans during the year, and maintained a fruitful collaboration amongst themselves that produced positive results in their respective countries. The WCP brand also boosted the reputations of the Chairs, playing a crucial role in their good positioning with senior policy makers.

Based on the recommendations, a new strategy for Phase III was developed by the Secretariat, building on the achievements of the first two phases of the programme and resulting into the significant expansion of the WCP: seventeen new Chairs were added to the 19 Chairs from Phases I and II, bringing the total number of Chairs to thirty six. Particular attention in the selection was given to LDCs, developing countries in regions that were under-represented, the so-called Article XII members (i.e., members that have recently acceded to the WTO) and countries in accession. The seventeen new Chairs were formally welcomed by WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala on 10 November 2021 at a meeting of the Committee on Trade and Development.

The cooperation with universities has been both positive and effective, with strong engagement and commitment from Africa. WCP Phase III is expected to yield even more impressive results, given the firm foundation built and the networks created in the first two phases, both within Africa and between various regions. Going forward, the WCP could include non-funded, developed country Chairs that can provide additional support and partner with universities in target countries. Given the specific focus on LDCs in Phase III of the WCP, Africa stands to gain even more from the programme in the years ahead than it has to date.

In the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, which renders field-based visits challenging and often impossible, building local capacity through the Chairs is the way of the future. Research takes place on the ground and many of the follow-up interventions can be performed virtually, as they are done at present.

3.6 SUPPORT PROVIDED THROUGH THE TFA

The TFA, which was negotiated at MC-IX (Bali) and came into force in February 2017, holds great potential and numerous benefits for African countries specifically (WTO, 2013b). A joint study undertaken by the WTO and the World Bank underscores the importance of reducing transaction costs in developing countries to stimulate trade (WTO, 2015c; World Bank/WTO, 2015d). The WTO estimates that 'the full implementation of the TFA could reduce global trade costs by an average of 14.3%'. According to the Peterson Institute, 'the implementation of the TFA could amount to over \$1 trillion in gains to the world GDP' (Hufbauer, Schott, 2013). The LDCs will benefit in particular, as the implementation of the TFA will allow significant diversification gains and facilitate LDCs' participation in GVCs. Other benefits for LDCs include improved revenue collection and greater inward Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The critical role played by the TFA in encouraging lower transaction costs in developing countries, and Africa specifically, was also evident in the views of the WTO Chairs in 2016 (Teh, Smeets, Sadni Jallab, Chauhdri, 2016). Taking advantage of the provisions of the TFA nevertheless presents some challenges, which the WTO can play a leading role in alleviating through its technical assistance and capacity-building initiatives.

Trade capacity-building was deliberately included in the design and set-up of the TFA as a critically important element that is needed to achieve the main objectives of the agreement. Also, the Trade Facilitation Agreement Facility (TFAF), which was established in Summer 2014, specifically provides for technical assistance to be extended to beneficiaries of the TFA. The assistance or support that can be provided ranges from needs identification and sharing of best practice information to infrastructural and financial support:

The TFA has three main sections including a section which is innovative in the ways it offers concrete options for developing countries to benefit from the support measures provided by the donors. To enable members to invoke the S&D provisions, the TFA establishes that each developing country and LDC member shall self-designate (on an individual basis) the provisions to include under each of the three categories – A, B and C (WTO, 2013b). The member also needs to notify other WTO members as to how they categorised the measures and what their proposed timelines are for implementation.

The innovative approach to trade capacity-building, i.e., through binding commitments, is underscored by Neufeld (2014) who explains that the S&D treatment afforded to developing countries breaks new ground and is a crucial element of the mandate given to members (Neufeld, 2014). The implementation of the technical assistance dimension not only involves the WTO as a lead agency; it also stems from the active contributions of the World Customs Organization (WCO), the World Bank, UNCTAD, the International Trade Center (ITC) and the OECD.

Separately, the UN regional commissions play an active role in the implementation of the TFA in each of the main geographical regions in the world. Furthermore, regional development banks need to provide the financial support, as implementation requires substantial funds. Furthermore, the role of the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) will be of increasing importance.

Recognizing the key role that the TFA can play in overcoming their domestic infra-structural challenges, African countries are actively implementing the agreement, with the support of the WTO. A total of thirty-eight African WTO members have ratified the TFA, while only six have not. In addition, twenty-seven LDCs have ratified the agreement and nine have not. Of the twenty-six African countries that have presented some technical assistance and capacity-building needs under the TFA's Category C provisions, many have introduced the single-window system, cargo-tracking systems and trade information portals; improved their infrastructure, logistics systems, ports and postal delivery services; and set up national trade facilitation committees. All these efforts are geared towards enhancing efficiency and facilitating better linkages with GVCs.

4 CHALLENGES THAT LIE AHEAD FOR AFRICA

Although it is clear that Africa is the continent that has benefited the most from the WTO's trade capacity-building support to further countries' integration into the multilateral trading system, challenges remain. Trade processes and dynamics are evolving rapidly, information technology (IT) is playing an increasingly prominent role in production, and shipping and transaction costs are falling. As a result, the concept of comparative advantage is changing. Countries therefore have no choice but to continuously adjust to the new competitive forces and to adapt their policies accordingly (UNECA, 2016). The world is more dynamic than ever before, with countries and regions highly interdependent. This translates into new challenges for Africa in its quest to integrate into the multilateral trading system. Yet the WTO Chairs can play an important role in this regard by analysing the key issues driving change in global trade and responding with appropriate policy recommendations. Two issues are particularly prominent: the role of GVCs in diversifying countries' economies and the emergence of digital trade as an enabler of economic growth. The two issues are closely interconnected.

4.1 GVCs: ENABLERS OF DIVERSIFICATION AND CONNECTIONS TO MARKETS

There is a general recognition that GVCs can contribute significantly to a country's and/or a region's economic welfare. Enhanced participation in GVCs, among other factors, facilitates innovation, technology transfer, upgrades to production and greater value addition (WTO, OECD, World Bank, 2019). In earlier studies, the WTO and the World Bank observed that 'the emergence of global value chains has been an important driver of developing country participation in the global economy' (World Bank, WTO, 2015d). GVCs can lead to better integration into the trading system and accelerated economic development, as countries can specialize in different tasks or stages in the value chain.

African countries are not well connected to world markets through GVCs. Among the main obstacles to Africa moving up the value chain are high trade costs, infrastructural deficiencies, tariffs and costly border procedures. The high costs faced by exporters and importers in Africa, which far exceed trade costs in other regions, serve to isolate African countries from world markets and suppress their economic growth potential. The AfDB estimates that Africa needs USD 130–USD 170 billion a year to tackle the infrastructural deficit – specifically, roads, ports, telecommunications and energy networks (AfDB, 2018). Better and fuller integration into the multilateral trading system through specialization and participation in GVCs can lead to significant value addition, reduced reliance on revenues from base or primary products, more diverse production capabilities and techniques, technology transfer, FDI and job creation. Enhanced specialization in the production of goods and services on the continent will encourage export diversification, greater GVC participation, complementarities, economies of scale and less market fragmentation. Stronger integration in Africa can pave the way for the establishment of regional production hubs, triggering further FDI, technology transfer and e-commerce activity, which in turn will lower transaction costs.

The workings of GVCs, including their upward and downward linkages, are complex. What is even more challenging is designing policies to encourage more linkages with and stronger inroads into GVCs. Countries need to meet a number of conditions, including building adequate infrastructure to support high-speed internet connectivity, having a more developed and advanced services economy, and facilitating trade through digitalization. Many of these elements are missing or are not sufficiently developed in Africa and require support, including through the TFA and the AfT initiative.

More generally, the integration of developing countries into the multilateral trading system through participation in GVCs remains a major challenge. Some of the difficulties in this regard were revealed in research and analysis conducted by the WTO Chairs, who provided examples of the challenges that developing (and

mainly African) countries are encountering in trying to access GVCs (Janssen, Sadni Jallab, Smeets, 2014). It is suggested that the WTO's technical assistance, including the AfT initiative, can support Africa's efforts to diversify and enhance its export potential. GVCs offer developing countries a vehicle for diversifying their production and export structures away from natural resources or primary agricultural commodities towards manufacturing and services, where labour productivity and wages are higher. In addition, the WTO TA report underscores the dynamic gains from increased trade integration and FDI, which often accompany GVC integration, including job creation and the transfer of technology and skills.

Given the expanding role of services in the world economy and the strong interlinkages between goods and services, several studies advocate countries giving greater attention to developing their capacity to participate in services GVCs, as this would be less costly in terms of investment in infrastructure and production facilities. The WTO emphasizes that 'more than 30% of developing countries' exports consist of services value added, with services having become an important input into the manufactured goods' (WTO, 2014). The WTO furthermore underscores the growing importance of GVCs in South–South trade, which has increased significantly: 'The share of trade in parts and components between developing countries has risen from around 6 per cent in 1988 to almost 25 per cent in 2013' (WTO, 2014). These aggregate numbers hide the fact that most of these developments have benefited Asian countries. In contrast, Africa's shares remain very low, justifying the need for extra effort. Finally, as is discussed below, the rapid evolution of digital trade and e-commerce creates many more opportunities for better connectivity with foreign markets. These in turn can facilitate stronger links with GVCs.

4.2 THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TRADE AS AN ENABLER OF ECONOMIC GROWTH

The central role of technology and digital trade in building GVCs was also emphasized in a recent study conducted by the WTO Chairs (and published as a book) which addressed more specifically the opportunities and key challenges that developing countries face in the digital trade era (Smeets, 2021). Over and above the opportunities and challenges relating to GVCs are the importance of domestic infrastructure and other enablers of growth, as well as regulatory issues. The book also discusses various policy options to encourage stronger inroads into international markets and integration into the multilateral trading system.

The book includes several contributions that address specifically African concerns in the digital trade era and how GVCs can mobilize countries' fuller engagement in world trade. Baghdadi and Guedidi (2021) observe that while

African firms already participate to some extent in GVCs, this is largely the result of supplying inputs (often raw materials) to foreign firms for further processing (referred to as forward participation) (Baghdadi, Guedidi, 2021). African firms are less active in backward participation in GVCs – as evidenced in the share of inputs of foreign origin in firms' total material inputs. The same authors find that access to the internet and internet infrastructure (represented by the availability of broadband technology) improves African countries'/firms' participation in GVCs, and that internet connectivity has a stronger influence on forward participation in GVCs than on backward participation. This implies that improvements in internet infrastructure could have a significant impact on African firms' ability to gain traction in GVCs.

Several case studies in the book demonstrate how government policies that centre on the provision of support for digitally enabled growth can be very effective. In Kenya, e-commerce has grown on the strengths of supportive government policies and new legislation. For example, laws have been passed to provide an overarching framework for the provision of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) services, e-commerce transactions, data protection and access to information. The government has also established one-stop centres for the delivery of government services to citizens and for trade logistics. This confirms that introducing domestic reforms and putting the right policies in place can bear fruit.

Addressing policy concerns at a regional or global level supplement domestic reforms. The policies outlined in Kenya's Digital Economy Blueprint provide a solid basis for the expansion of digital trade, especially through the AfCFTA (Kiriti Nganga, Mbithi, 2021). Indeed, in addition to the limitations of an often-compromised internet service, many African economies are very small and lack the legal and regulatory framework and regional cooperation needed to support a vibrant e-commerce culture (Seetanah, Padachi, Fauzel, Sannasee, Boodoo, 2021). In February 2020, the AU put e-commerce on Africa's trade agenda, while (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and Southern African Development Community (SSADC) introduced strategies relating to digitalization, e-regulation, e-logistics and e-trade. The inclusion of e-commerce in the AU's Africa agenda (and the AfCFTA in particular) has proved to be contentious, as African countries hold different positions on the legalities surrounding e-commerce (Hartzenberg, 2021).

Digital trade, in its many manifestations, has opened up scores of new opportunities to provide online services, promote export diversification, boost efficiency and growth in manufacturing, improve competition in the financial sector, increase access to market information, and improve market access for MSMEs. However, as the book shows, pursuing digital strategies means overcoming many persistent challenges, including limited access to finance, low

income levels, limited broadband and fibre coverage, inadequate transport infrastructure and serious skills gaps.

Fraud and cybercrime are also a source of significant concern for e-commerce practitioners in Africa (Igue, Alinsato, Agadjihouédé, 2021). The quickening pace of internet penetration, the development of mobile money services, the growing use of credit cards and increased access to bank accounts have greatly boosted financial inclusion and reliance on electronic payments, thus establishing a strong basis for e-commerce development on the continent. Yet legal and regulatory frameworks are generally ill-equipped to offer protection against cybercrime, ensure privacy, support the interoperability of mobile money platforms and banks, promote consumer trust in online transactions, ensure the acceptability of electronic signatures, protect intellectual property rights, and protect digital sites from liability in the face of customers' posting activities.

While the advent of digital trade could be one of the best things that ever happened to Africa, most countries have a long way to go before they will be able to benefit from the opportunities and efficiencies that it brings. In particular, policies need to be designed and/or adapted to drive rigorous and meaningful domestic reforms.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Since the launch of the DDA, the WTO has systematically endeavoured to facilitate the fuller integration of African countries into the multilateral trading system. The Secretariat's trade capacity-building programmes have made an important contribution towards enhancing knowledge and human and institutional capacity, thereby alerting more people to the rules of trade. The WTO Chairs in turn have supported their countries' liberalization and reform processes by providing the analytical underpinnings of and the rationale for economic and trade policies, while also highlighting the benefits of trade liberalization. Not only have their efforts contributed to trade policy adjustments and reforms but they have helped to ensure that African countries are in a far better position to formulate and follow through on their policy interests. The large number of proposals made by developing countries and LDCs in the WTO negotiations signals their growing confidence and mastery over often complex technical issues.

The main challenge is how to anticipate and prepare for the future. Unpredictable trade dynamics and rapid advances on the technological front demand continued effort and commitment by African countries to exploit the benefits offered by the digital trade era, including making a more value-added contribution to GVCs. The new competitive forces being witnessed today are the result of rapidly changing and more dispersed production techniques and the

breaking up of production processes, shifting comparative advantages, deepening specializations, expanding GVCs and regional production networks, and expanding digital applications and trade.

Given Africa's heavy reliance on labour and commodities as inputs in the production process, a series of questions need to be asked. What policies should be adopted to forge stronger and more sustainable links to value chains while exploiting Africa's comparative advantages? How can African countries create enabling environments, given the ever-shifting dynamics of trade? What policies should be implemented at the national and continental levels which are aligned to the mandate and objectives of the AfCFTA? The full implementation of all the different elements making up this ambitious integration project should not only lead to more policy coherence and coordination on the African continent; it should also induce economies of scale, reduce transaction costs, and prompt new trade and economic growth opportunities – in which digital trade is likely to be a key driver.

In all of this, African Chairs and other academics are well placed to use their knowledge and networks, especially through the WCP, to monitor trade developments at the regional and international levels and to share their views and research findings in the interests of more informed policymaking.

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