

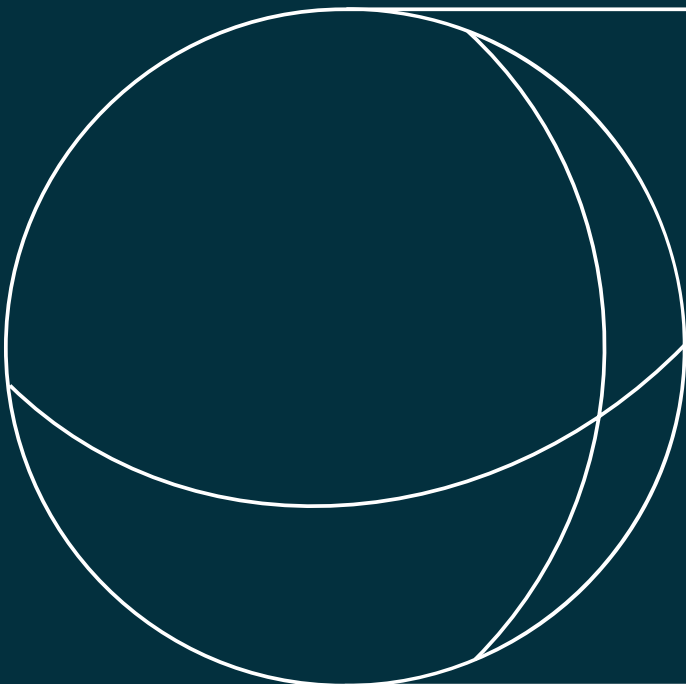
research report

# Expanding the WTO's Scope in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape:

## An Appraisal of Development, Environment, and Inclusiveness Agendas

**Lead authors:** Clara Weinhardt (Maastricht University), Michal Parizek (Charles University), and Jayati Srivastava (Jawaharlal Nehru University)

September 2025



## Abstract

Despite ongoing challenges to the World Trade Organization's (WTO) core agenda, many members are pushing for the organisation to deepen its commitments and increase its activities in support of trade-related agendas. This report looks at efforts to further expand the global trade regime to the areas of development, the environment, and inclusiveness. While some members view these issues as essential to maintaining the WTO's relevance or rebalancing its core agenda, others favour a narrower focus on trade. Drawing on 42 interviews conducted in Geneva or online (from late 2024 to early 2025) and analysis of member submissions to the WTO, this report maps key actors' positions on anchoring these trade-related issues more firmly in the global trade regime. We find that key members do not agree on which – if any – of these trade-related agendas should be prioritised. As a result, enhancing the WTO's effectiveness and relevance by expanding its scope appears viable only by means of non-binding and informal outputs – such as information sharing, best practices, or voluntary guidelines – and not through formal rule making. While many members view these trade-related agendas as supporting the WTO's relevance, recent criticism of the Secretariat's role – led by the United States – highlights emerging challenges to the organisation's robustness, which are linked, but not reducible, to such trade-related issues.

## Citation Recommendation

Weinhardt, Clara, Michal Parizek, and Jayati Srivastava. 2025. "Expanding the WTO's Scope in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape: An Appraisal of Development, Environment, and Inclusiveness Agendas." *ENSURED Research Report*, no. 15 (September): 1-38. <https://www.ensuredEurope.eu>.

*The authors are grateful to ENSURED consortium members Siqi Li (University of International Business and Economics) and Xinquan Tu (University of International Business and Economics) for their helpful comments on a draft of this report. We also acknowledge the comments made by Belén García and Daniel Esty, as well as several of our interviewees, on an earlier version of the text. All remaining errors are our own.*

# Table of Contents

- Introduction ..... 4
- Trade-Related Agendas Under Pressure ..... 7
- Key International Actors and Trade-Related Agendas ..... 12
- Trade-Related Agendas: Milestones and Challenges ..... 17
- EU Support for Trade-Related Agendas ..... 27
- Conclusion: The Future of Trade-Related  
Agendas at the WTO ..... 29
- List of Interviews ..... 31
- References ..... 33

# Introduction

While the World Trade Organization's (WTO) core focus on trade liberalisation is currently facing severe challenges (Parizek et al. 2025), questions about the potential to further expand the multilateral trade regime to cover key trade-related agendas are also looming. Trade-related agendas refer to issues that intersect with trade policy but extend beyond traditional trade concerns, such as environmental protection, economic development, and labour standards. These topics reflect the broader social, economic, and political dimensions of globalisation that increasingly affect how trade is conducted. Since its founding, WTO member states have pushed for the inclusion of trade-related agendas to preserve the organisation's relevance, either in response to novel and interlinked global governance challenges or as part of efforts to balance competing interests through concessions and adjustments. Yet some members remain firmly opposed to (some of) these agendas and advocate an exclusive focus on core trade issues. In addition to these conflicting views among members, the second Trump administration's dissatisfaction with the WTO's current state of affairs casts a long shadow over ongoing efforts to further expand the organisation's scope in order to better address trade-related agendas.

This report analyses efforts geared towards (further) extending the WTO's scope to cover non-traditional areas, with a focus on three trade-related issues: development, the environment, and inclusiveness (on efforts to integrate security concerns into the WTO's agenda, see Parizek et al. 2025; Pinchis-Paulsen 2022). These efforts aim to broaden the scope of the trade regime to account for the multifaceted nature of trade and its entanglement with other global policy issues. They may involve formally incorporating new issues into the institution's legal framework or more informal and less ambitious approaches, such as discussions, deliberations, and sharing best practices among members.

Our choice to focus on development, the environment, and inclusiveness reflects the substantive importance of these topics in current WTO debates as well as the various paths by which trade-related issues make it onto the WTO agenda. Development has been part of the multilateral trade regime since the 1960s and 1970s, and has since become an integral part of the WTO's agenda. Multilateral cooperation on environmental issues evolved independently from the global trade system between the 1980s and 1990s. Though the WTO has acknowledged environmental objectives in its agenda since its founding in 1995, their substantive integration into trade discussions has intensified since the late 2010s. Inclusiveness was placed more firmly on the agenda during Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala's first term as Director-General (DG) of the WTO (2021–2025) in an effort to address concerns that the gains made from trade are distributed too unequally. In her words, the WTO has achieved “enormous positive impacts for human well-being. At the same time, many people and places have not shared adequately in these gains” (World Trade Organization 2024a, 6).

In the context of our ENSURED research project, the question of the global trade regime's further expansion beyond core trade issues speaks to our interest in the effectiveness, robustness, and democracy of international

WTO members currently do not agree on how trade-related agendas affect the organisation.

institutions (Choi et al. 2024). Yet as we discuss in this report, WTO members currently do not agree on how trade-related agendas affect the organisation.

Opinions vary widely. Some members see these agendas as an opportunity to enhance organisational effectiveness: if the WTO is to effectively deliver on

its mandate, then it needs to be able to address various agendas with inherent links to trade: for example, by supporting developing countries' full participation in global trade. From this perspective, these agendas may also indirectly enhance the WTO's effectiveness by addressing trade-related externalities – such as the effects of trade on the environment – which, in turn, can help to sustain political support for free trade. However, other members view these additional agendas as undemocratic when their inclusion is not widely supported, while still others consider them a distraction from the WTO's core mandate. Thus, the effects of trade-related agendas on the WTO largely depend on the members' positions. If managed well and supported widely, such agendas could strengthen the WTO's long-term relevance and robustness. Yet if opposition persists, then diverting resources to contested trade-related areas may undermine the organisation's institutional stability.

Amid ongoing challenges to trade multilateralism, we find that the question of whether trade-related agendas are suited to enhancing the WTO's effectiveness – and if so, which agendas – remains contested. While many members recognise the added value of addressing these agendas within the WTO, persistent and intensifying disagreements among key actors – exacerbated by the organisation's consensus decision-making rule (Trachtman et al 2024, 142) – limit (further) rule-making relevant to these agendas. Most of the dynamism we observe has emerged in the area of trade and the environment, albeit through informal channels and with non-binding outcomes. This informal approach has its downside, as some members – particularly India – oppose the advancement of trade-related agendas in plurilateral formats for what they refer to as reasons of representation and democracy, as these formats exclude some members.

We find that the question of whether trade-related agendas are suited to enhancing the WTO's effectiveness remains contested.

This has implications for the WTO's robustness. On the one hand, addressing trade-related agendas that are highly politically salient may secure the WTO's long-term relevance. On the other hand, we have observed that opposition to these agendas has the potential to challenge the organisation's institutional robustness. One example of this is the recent intensification of US-led criticisms of the WTO Secretariat's allegedly overly proactive support for selected trade-related agendas – criticism that has coincided with the temporary suspension of US budget contributions. While previous US administrations have largely supported bringing environmental considerations into the trading system, the current administration is now eyeing this agenda with much greater scepticism. It is worth noting that related emerging challenges to the WTO's robustness are linked – but not reducible – to US efforts to refocus the organisation on core trade issues. They also reflect broader discontent on the part of the

US, which claims that the organisation has systematically acted in ways unfavourable to its interests (Parizek et al. 2025, 10).

This study combines an analysis of key primary documents – such as country submissions to relevant WTO committees and negotiation bodies<sup>1</sup> – with the results of 42 semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of both smaller member states and major powers, as well as background interviews<sup>2</sup> with WTO Secretariat staff and experts on trade, all completed in late 2024 and early 2025.

---

1 In particular, the WTO's Trade and Environment Committee, the Committee on Trade and Development, and statements made at the WTO's Ministerial Conferences.

2 Seven background interviews were conducted with diplomats and trade experts who preferred not to be referenced in pseudonymised form.

# Trade-Related Agendas Under Pressure

As global economic integration deepens and the green transition advances, trade increasingly intersects with development, the environment, and social inclusion. These interlinkages create pressure to address such issues within the multilateral trading system. While the WTO provides a potential forum to govern these nexus areas, efforts to further expand its scope into development, the environment, and inclusiveness face significant challenges.

## Trade and Development: Increasing Geopolitical Contestation

The integration of development concerns into the multilateral trade regime dates back to the late 1960s and the 1970s, when newly independent countries sought to balance reciprocal trade liberalisation with the needs of economically disadvantaged nations. This prompted the inclusion of Part IV on trade and development in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1965, as well as the adoption of the Enabling Clause in 1979, which allowed special and differential treatment (SDT) for developing-country members. Together, these two texts embed development in the regime's legal framework. This focus continued under the WTO when it was established in 1995, and the commitment to addressing developing countries' trade-related challenges was explicitly included in the 2001 Doha Development Round mandate.

Over the past decade of the WTO era, however, this integration has faced two interlinked challenges. First, both policymakers and scholars have questioned the effectiveness of SDT provisions, as their impact has arguably been limited (Trachtman et al. 2024, 20). Many development-oriented trade provisions remain non-binding, best-effort clauses (Hegde and Wouters 2021). In addition, the value of preferential market access has declined due to overall reductions in tariffs (Ukpe and Khorana 2021). These concerns have driven a reform agenda that is focused on implementation issues (WTO 2001), but the increasing geopoliticisation of development within the WTO has placed limits on the results of this agenda (Interview 24; Weinhardt and Schöfer 2022). Since 2015, the Doha Development Round negotiations and their emphasis on development-related objectives have reached a dead end (see Parizek et al. 2025).

Second, the economic rise of certain developing countries has intensified geopolitical tensions and further complicated the development agenda. The US and other developed-country members have grown wary of the abuse (in their view) of the SDT principle. The principle now also benefits large emerging economies, which developed-country members see as competitors. This scepticism – largely directed at China (Interviews 25,

The geopoliticisation of the development agenda is increasingly undermining efforts to enhance its effectiveness.

26, 28, and 29) and, to a lesser extent, at India (Interviews 2 and 33) and other countries – reflects broader concerns about countries ‘hiding behind’ their developing status. As one trade diplomat observed: “The geopolitics have changed a lot in these 30 years [of the WTO’s existence], so some countries that were clearly developing, fighting poverty, today are big economic powers competing directly with the largest economies” (Interview 24).

The geopoliticisation of the development agenda is increasingly undermining efforts to enhance its effectiveness (Hoekman and Wolfe 2021, 11). This issue is partly rooted in the absence of a clear definition of ‘developing-country’ status. Following GATT rules, the WTO allows members to self-declare as developing,<sup>3</sup> and thus the status includes emerging-economy members such as China and India.

## Trade and the Environment: On the Agenda, but Going (No)Where?

Efforts to integrate environment-related topics more systematically into the WTO’s core agenda stem from the recognition that the trade–environment nexus is critical to preventing environmental degradation (Trachtman 2017; Cima and Esty 2024). Members pushing for this agenda commonly seek to address the negative externalities of trade on the environment. In addition, regulating members’ potentially discriminatory measures in these areas may increase the WTO’s effectiveness. Nevertheless, some scholars (and indeed some WTO members) caution that efforts to expand the WTO’s scope beyond core trade functions may not succeed and may even be counterproductive, given the organisation’s existing struggles when it comes to resolving core trade issues (Charnovitz 2021, 3).

Environmental objectives are included in the WTO framework, but only at the margins.

To date, environmental objectives are included in the WTO framework, but only at the margins. The preamble to the WTO Agreement references sustainable development, and Article XX provides exceptions to GATT commitments on trade liberalisation for reasons of protecting “animal and plant life” or “relating to the conservation of exhaustible natural resources” (World

Trade Organization 2025b). Nonetheless, the WTO does not systematically address cross-border environmental externalities or environmental protection as an issue of global public goods (De Melo and Solleder 2020). Discussions on trade-related environmental objectives traditionally take place in the multilateral Committee on Trade and Environment (CTE). In recent years, however, these discussions have increasingly been complemented by informal and plurilateral formats that touch upon the ways in which climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss interact with trade.

While many members acknowledge the relevance of environmental concerns to trade (Interviews 2, 12, 24, and 29), they remain divided over

---

<sup>3</sup> Note that three-quarters of the WTO’s 166 members self-declare as ‘developing,’ and no member has graduated from that status since the organisation was established in 1995.



the issue of the WTO's role in regulating this space. Some think that the trade and environment agenda could help to make the WTO more relevant and effective. Members in favour of 'greening the WTO,' for instance, point out the need to "adapt the organisation to these [environmental] challenges that are so, so real" (Interview 24). They also observe that "this discussion is taking place everywhere already. And the WTO should move not to lose this opportunity to also update its rule book" (Interview 29). They welcome the Directorate General's efforts to help corral members, identify critical topics, and offer pathways forward. In addition, they point to the WTO's strong enforcement mechanisms and legal precision, which stand in contrast to the often-fragmented implementation of multilateral environmental agreements (Interview 2) and the limited regulatory capacity of institutions like the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (Interview 29).

For others, however, this potential power on the part of the WTO raises concerns about 'green protectionism.' On this basis, some members oppose any further expansion of the trade and environment agenda, which they reject on substance and disregard because it lacks full support. For instance, many developing countries may lack the resources to comply with new environmental trade requirements (Interviews 28, 34, and 41; see also Claussen and Vidigal 2024, 392). Such countries argue that they only stand to benefit if new environment-related regulation is accompanied by significant technology transfer and capacity-building support (Interviews 29 and 30; see Duran 2018; see also the Villars Framework developed in Trachtman et al. 2024, section 6), but many developed countries do not see this as a priority (Interview 40). A number of members are concerned that the Secretariat and its Directorate General are taking an overly active role in promoting the trade–environment agenda (Interviews 26, 28, 20, and 23).

In addition, geopolitical considerations among major players make it difficult for those who would willingly deepen the agenda to agree on rules for doing so. For instance, many members recognise the need to address the interoperability of carbon accounting systems (Interviews 29, 30, and 33), yet there is no consensus on which methodologies to adopt when calculating carbon emissions, given that different approaches favour different players (see also ENSURED Research Report no. 11, Kustova, Dietz, Van Hoof, and Karlas 2025). Similarly, members disagree on how to define green goods or green subsidies (Interview 5; see also Cima and Esty 2024; Dominioni and Esty 2023).

In sum, while the shift towards a green economy has placed environmental issues more firmly on the WTO's agenda, these divisions mean that rule-making remains a challenge.

Geopolitical considerations

among major players make it

difficult for those who would

willingly deepen the agenda to

agree on rules for doing so.

# Trade and Inclusiveness: A Nascent Yet Marginal Agenda

The most recent expansion of the trade agenda involves inclusiveness. This agenda is partly a response to growing discontent with the unequal distribution of gains made from trade at the domestic level, with large segments of society across countries feeling left out. The inclusiveness agenda revolves around the concern “that rules for open and simplified trade are not enough to support inclusiveness between and within economies – they need to be complemented with other policies at the domestic and international levels” (World Trade Organization 2024a, 7).

Little consensus exists on how inclusiveness should be defined and operationalised within the WTO’s framework.

Yet little consensus exists on how inclusiveness should be defined and operationalised within the WTO’s legal and institutional framework. The WTO’s 2024 report on trade and inclusiveness refers to factors that “have held back individuals, firms and economies from capitalizing on, and adjusting to, international trade” (World Trade Organization 2024a, 7). It encompasses member discussions on a broad range of issues, such as gender equality in trade, worker’s rights, the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and the question of equitable trade outcomes between and within countries. In addition, it also includes debates on inclusiveness among member states within the organisation, where the playing field is not level.

The inclusiveness agenda is not only broad, but also highly divisive.

The inclusiveness agenda is not only broad, but also highly divisive. Some members argue that inclusivity is a domestic issue that is not suited for WTO discussions (“The inclusivity conversation is not one that we have to have at the WTO”: Interview 25; also

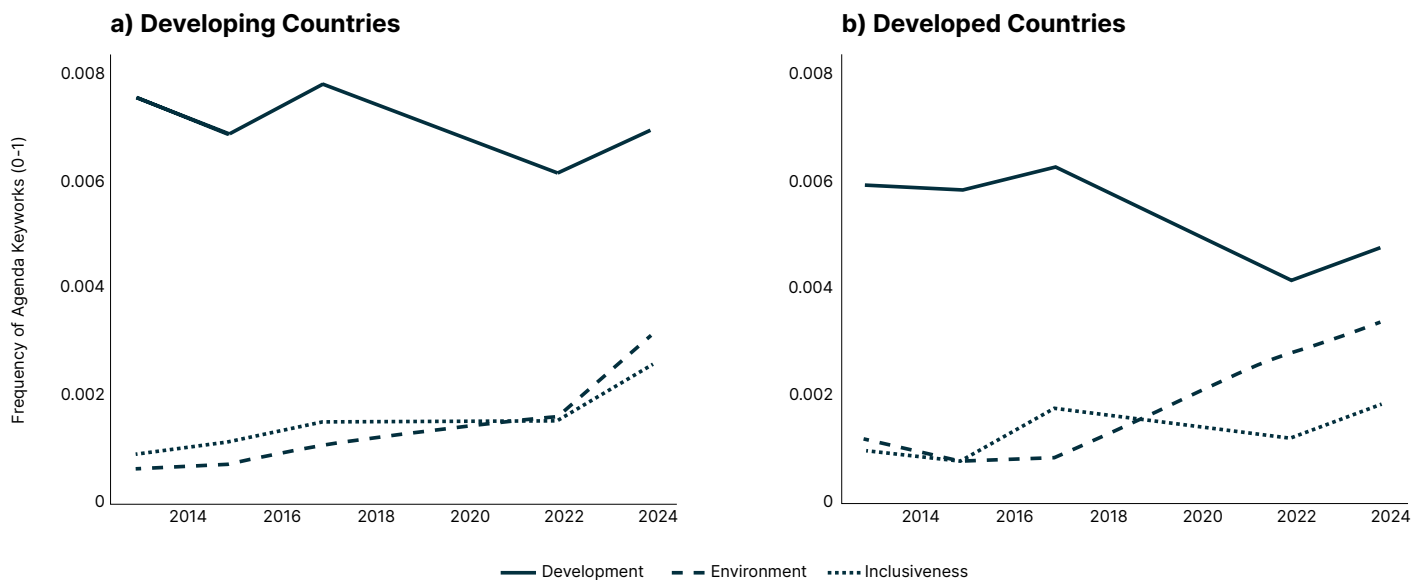
Interview 28). Others – including the EU and Latin American member countries – have actively promoted it, especially when it comes to gender (Interviews 24, 25, 26, and 34). Nevertheless, topics such as the trade and gender agenda (Hannah et al. 2022) remain highly divisive and politically sensitive, with some members preferring a reference to “women” rather than “gender” (Interview 30). Even less controversial issues such as better SME inclusion remain contested, as members question whether SMEs in the US can be compared to those in developing countries where turnover is significantly lower (Interview 15), to take just one example. The second Trump administration’s opposition to certain aspects of the inclusiveness agenda (such as gender) is also likely to further dampen related efforts (Interviews 39 and 40).

As a result, substantive policy developments in this area have been minimal. Given the increasing scrutiny of global trade’s social impacts, the challenge remains translating inclusiveness commitments into actionable policies that garner broad support among member states, and hence potentially enhance the WTO’s effectiveness.

# The Ebbs and Flows of Trade-Related Agendas

Figure 1 (below) visualises the varying salience of these three agendas by tracking references to them in all the statements delivered at the plenary sessions of the Ministerial Conferences between Bali 2013 and Abu Dhabi 2024, broken down by country status. While development is the most prominent of the three categories in terms of references to the ‘development’ agenda, this prominence has been declining – notably among developed countries (Figure 1b), and marginally among developing countries as well (Figure 1a). By contrast, among developing and developed countries alike, the salience of both environmental- and inclusiveness-related language has been increasing in speeches delivered at the highest WTO decision-making platform.

**Figure 1: The Salience of Trade-Related Agendas in Statements at Ministerial Conferences (2013–2024)**



**Source:** Authors' calculations. The categories reflect the frequency of the keywords "development," "developing" (DEV); "environment," "climate," "green" (ENV); and "inclusive," "particip\*" (INC), calculated as an unweighted average based on all WTO members' ministerial statements delivered at the plenary sessions of the respective conferences (documents WT/MIN(1)/ST/1).

# Key International Actors and Trade-Related Agendas

Our analysis focuses on four key actors who both wield significant power in the global trade system and hold distinct positions when it comes to the trade-related agendas covered in this report: the US, the EU, China, and India. We also briefly discuss other relevant actors who hold less power. Table 1 (below) summarises the central insights from this section.

## The United States

The US has not been at the forefront of pushing for trade-related agendas at the WTO.

As a key architect of the multilateral trading system, the US is a central actor within the WTO, including under the second Trump administration. The positions it takes vary – it is strongly opposed to parts of the development agenda and was moderately supportive of environment and inclusiveness agendas under the Biden administration, but much less so since 2025, under the second Trump administration. Overall, the US has not been at the forefront of pushing for trade-related agendas at the WTO. Instead, it has prioritised core trade concerns related to dispute settlement and the declared need to update the rules on subsidies and the security exception (Parizek et al. 2025).

Citing concerns about emerging economies ‘exploiting’ SDT, the US has pushed to reform the self-declaration of developing-country status. Its geopolitical rivalry with China drives this bipartisan stance. In 2023, the House of Representatives passed the “PRC [China] Is Not A Developing Country Act” (United States 2023). Under the first Trump administration, the US also repeatedly pushed to abandon the stalled Doha Development Agenda (Brandt 2015) in order to make room for newer priorities (Parizek et al. 2025). Nevertheless, under the Biden administration the US helped broker compromises, such as certain G90 proposals on development issues (Interview 39) – a stance that is likely to shift under the second Trump administration (Interview 39).

The US has shown moderate support for environment agendas. It has engaged in discussions on the interoperability of climate-related trade measures, on which it prefers informal formats below the rule-making level (Interviews 25, 32, and 40). This position aligns with Biden-era domestic green policies, including the Inflation Reduction Act and carbon tariff proposals (Saha and Kaufman 2023). The US remains sceptical of tech transfer (Interview 40) – a scepticism which is linked to its development-related reservations. US disengagement may increase under the current Trump administration, as the environment becomes a “negative priority” (Interview 40). For example, the US has openly opposed discussions on sustainable agriculture, portraying them as distractions from core trade issues (United States 2025b). Nevertheless, technical-level engagement has continued in 2025 to date, albeit cautiously (Interview 40).

When it comes to inclusiveness, the US focuses primarily on protecting American workers (Interviews 25 and 37). The Biden administration's strong focus on a "worker-centred trade policy" – which was still echoed in the January 2025 "America First Trade Policy" memorandum (United States 2025a) – may be deprioritised in future (Interview 5 and 40).

Across administrations, the US has criticised the Secretariat's proactive role in environment and inclusiveness agendas, and has been especially critical of efforts to promote initiatives without consultation. This criticism, along with concerns related to the core trade agenda (Parizek et al. 2025), contributed to the country's decision to freeze its WTO budget contributions for 2024 and 2025.

## The European Union

The EU has strongly advocated further extending the WTO's scope to agendas such as the environment and inclusiveness. This stance aligns with its broader strategic interest in updating the multilateral trading system and maintaining its relevance.

The EU supports reforming the self-declaration of developing-country status – particularly in light of China's industrial policies. In the 2010s and 2020s, the EU has been less dismissive of the Doha Development Round than the US. Its 2021 reform proposal on developing-country status (COM(2021) 66 final, Annex) is seen as a middle-ground position between the two camps (Weinhardt and Ukpe 2024). Recently the EU has acted as a co-facilitator supporting the plurilateral Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) Agreement and favours integrating this into the WTO framework (Interview 26).

The EU's support for expanding the trade–environment agenda is rooted in its own domestic transition towards a green economy, which was reinforced under the 2019 Green Deal. Between 2000 and 2024, the EU reported 641 environment-related trade measures in its trade policy review (World Trade Organization 2024b). Concerns about environmental and climate protection have become more prominent in EU trade policy discourse (Bertram 2024) and new trade-related instruments (Weinhardt and De Ville 2024). Similarly, it strongly supports the inclusiveness agenda (WT/GC/W/864), such as via the informal working group on trade and gender. This agenda broadly aligns with the EU's normative orientation and domestic political values – even though these are increasingly contested internally (see, e.g., Cullen 2021; on implementation challenges, see also Garcia 2021).

Beyond values, however, there is a strategic economic rationale: the EU has a strong interest in multilateralising its higher environmental and social standards in order to protect European producers from suffering competitive disadvantages. Brussels is thus highly supportive of moving beyond knowledge sharing and towards formal rule-making with regard to these new agendas (Interviews 24 and 26). It is also willing to pursue regulatory goals unilaterally – outside the WTO framework – when rule-

The EU has a strong interest in multilateralising its higher environmental and social standards in order to protect European producers.

making stalls, thus prioritising effectiveness (CBAM and EUDR are examples of this). Yet on some topics more recently, the EU seems caught between its strategic desire to constrain China's use of industrial policy and the need to deploy its own industrial strategies to meet green transition goals (Interview 5).

In general, the EU sees better alignment between the trade regime and trade-related agendas as a means of safeguarding the WTO's relevance and effectiveness, and it pushes for increased rule-making on trade-related agendas.

## China

China is not a primary driver of WTO agenda expansion, but it plays an active role when it comes to selected trade-related issues. It positions itself as a leader among developing countries and aims to strengthen the development agenda. China cautiously defends the WTO's 2001 Doha Development Agenda while also supporting newer initiatives, such as the plurilateral IFD. It opposes reforms to current rules on developing-country status, but it has shown some flexibility in its use of SDT provisions (see, e.g., Low 2021, 85; Schöfer and Weinhardt 2022). Some members argue that China's defence of SDT is strategic, aimed at leading the developing-country group (Interview 3), and in line with its broader foreign policy identity (Barros Leal Farias 2023).

China's stance on WTO regime expansion is pragmatic.

When it comes to the environment, China is constructively engaged in selected areas and sees reform proposals such as the Villar Framework (proposed by scholars: see Trachtman et al. 2024) as a way to update and maintain the WTO's relevance.

It takes a leadership role in the informal plurilateral Dialogue on Plastic Pollution and Environmentally Sustainable Plastics Trade (DDP), which is tied to its domestic interests following its 2018 plastic waste import ban. China also made four submissions to the WTO's CTE regarding climate-related trade measures (e.g., submission WT/CTE/W/263). As a major green trader – accounting for about 12 percent of global green-goods exports and imports – China sees opportunities in sectors such as solar panels and electric vehicles (Huiyao Wang, Geneva Trade Week 2024). Its domestic green transition is reflected in 243 environment-related trade measures it reported between 2000 and 2024 (WTO 2024b) as well as in subsidy programmes for electric vehicles and batteries, and efforts to promote a circular economy. However, China also pushes back against what it views as “politicised narratives” around its overcapacity and industrial policy in green sectors (Huiyao Wang, Geneva Trade Week 2024).

Additionally, China is cautiously supportive of the inclusiveness agenda, especially in terms of developing-country participation, while also mentioning its efforts “to ensure inclusive benefits for more businesses, especially MSMEs [Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises]” (Li 2024). It is more sceptical of inclusiveness when the topic is framed around marginalised societal groups, which it sees as a domestic matter.

Thus, China's stance on regime expansion is pragmatic: it supports selected environmental initiatives, is rather sceptical about inclusiveness, and is opposed to developing-country status reform, while it remains committed to preserving the WTO's effectiveness and robustness.

## India

India positions itself as a staunch votary of the trade and development agenda while systematically opposing efforts to expand the WTO's remit to newer issues such as the environment or inclusiveness – both in substance and in process. It emphasises the prioritisation of outstanding issues from the multilateral Doha Development Round prior to any expansion of the trade agenda (Interview 41).

On development, India seeks leadership among developing countries, though its role is increasingly contested within that group (Interviews 23, 24, 25, 31, 33, and 42). It argues that SDT provisions should be made “more effective and operational” (WTO 2023) and, along with China, rejects any effort to reform the self-declaration of developing-country status (WT/GC/W/765). India insists that core Doha issues need to be addressed multilaterally (e.g., TRIPS Agreement flexibilities at MC13, WT/MIN(24)/W/20). It blocks plurilateral initiatives such as the IFD, which it sees as “an illegal process nurtured in a rule-based multilateral system” (WT/GC/262) – one which damages the WTO consensus principle (Parizek et al. 2025). It has also criticised the Secretariat's proactive role when this is perceived to deviate from its own priorities, for instance on agriculture (Press Trust of India 2024).

India's stance is rooted in domestic economic concerns – particularly food security and public stockholding, which are key to its Public Distribution System, a measure that is hugely popular and also essential to alleviating poverty. Some observers argue that blocking agendas or creating deadlock at the WTO is framed as a domestic political win for Prime Minister Modi (Gijs 2024).

India is sceptical of WTO-based environmental agendas. It warns that green trade measures risk becoming protectionist barriers, especially for developing countries (JOB/TE/78/Rev.1), and flags systemic dangers posed by the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) (WT/CTE/M/79). Its domestic momentum on climate is limited – only 83 environment-related measures in India have been reported at the WTO (WTO database 2024) – and it has expressed frustration over failed technology-transfer talks (Interview 33). While participating rather constructively in multilateral CTE negotiations (Interview 40), it rejects plurilateral platforms such as Trade and Environmental Sustainability Structured Discussions (TESSD) as undemocratic; it sees these discussions as exceeding traditional trade-related environmental mandates (Interview 41). India insists that environmental issues should be addressed in specialised fora, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Interviews 41 and 42). Nevertheless, it has recently accepted non-binding environmental provisions in external trade deals, including the 2022 Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity and the 2024 free trade agreement with the European Free Trade Association (Interview 41).



India is opposed to those parts of the inclusiveness agenda that focus on the distribution of gains within countries, which it regards as a domestic political matter that is not related to trade. It asserts that “issues of labour, wages, worker, domestic distributional impacts etc., do not belong to the WTO and do not merit deliberation here” (WTO 2023), while it supports inclusiveness when it comes to state participation.

## Other Actors

Other members also play important roles in trade-related agendas at the WTO. South Africa, the African Group, and the G90 coalition of emerging economies and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) strongly advocate for strengthening SDT and development-related concerns within the WTO. Several countries across development levels have promoted trade and environment agendas: for instance, Brazil on “sustainable agriculture” (WT/CTE/W/262), or Costa Rica and Canada as TESSD co-convenors. In contrast, South Africa, like India, cautions against using environmental measures as a form of protectionism (JOB/TE/78/Rev.1) and has blocked related plurilateral initiatives.

The WTO Secretariat and DG Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala have also emerged as actors on trade-related agendas. As the first African DG, some see Okonjo-Iweala as supportive of Africa’s development agenda (Interview 34) and generally supportive of trade-related agendas. The Secretariat, for instance, hosts a dedicated division on the environment and has promoted discussions on inclusiveness (Interviews 20 and 23; WTO 2024a). Yet its role remains contested, and its autonomy is limited (Liang 2023).

Table 1: Actor Mapping on Effectiveness, Robustness, and Democracy in Global Governance of Trade-Related Agenda

	Effectiveness	Robustness	Democracy
United States	Focuses on core trade agenda; displays increasing scepticism towards trade-related agendas under the second Trump administration	Critical of the Secretariat’s activism on trade-related agendas; froze its 2024–2025 budget contributions	Supports plurilateral discussions, but mostly takes a back-seat role
European Union	Supports expanding the regime to maintain relevance, if necessary outside the WTO	Supports the Secretariat’s role, despite selective criticism	Supports plurilateral discussions and non-state actor inclusion to advance new agendas
China	Focuses on traditional trade; open to some extension; backs the development agenda	Generally backs the Secretariat, despite selective criticism	Multilateral initiatives where possible, plurilateral where necessary (e.g., IFD)
India	Ties effectiveness to development; opposes expanding into new areas	Strongly defends the member-driven nature of the WTO; opposes Secretariat initiatives which it perceives as off track	Only supports multilateral initiatives because these are endorsed by full state participation



# Trade-Related Agendas: Milestones and Challenges

In recent years, WTO members have engaged in a series of attempts to push for further regime expansion on trade-related agendas. In mapping these attempts and seeking to identify whether members are interested in further regime expansion, we focus on the three agendas outlined above: (1) trade and development (DEV); (2) trade and environment (ENV); and (3) trade and inclusiveness (INCL). In Table 2, we provide an overview of the challenges and milestones – with a focus on the 2010s and 2020s – to which we refer in the course of our analysis.

**Table 2: Overview of Challenges and Milestones within the WTO**

*Continued on the next page.*

Years	Trade-Related Agendas	Milestones and Challenges on Trade-Related Agendas
2001	DEV	Doha Ministerial Declaration launches work on SDT for developing countries (Paragraph 44).
2007	ENV	Director-General Lamy gives a speech on greening the WTO.
2014	ENV	Plurilateral Environmental Goods Agreement talks begin.
2015	DEV	Nairobi Ministerial Conference (MC) fails to reaffirm the ‘Doha mandate’.
2016	ENV	Environmental Goods Agreement talks are suspended; environment agenda shifts to informal tracks.
2017	DEV	MIKTA group hosts first informal WTO workshop on investment facilitation; Friends of IFD is subsequently launched.
2017	INCL DEV	Buenos Aires MC: Declaration on Trade and Women’s Economic Empowerment (118 members); informal work programme on MSMEs established (87 members); joint ministerial statement on IFD (70 members), followed by structured discussions.
2019	DEV	US challenges self-declaration of developing-country status as the basis for access to SDT and proposes reform; China, India, and others defend the current system.
2019	ENV	First Trade and Environment Week hosted by WTO Secretariat.
2020	ENV	Launch of informal talks on TESSD, DDP, and Fossil Fuel Subsidy Reform (FFSR), with broad support.
2020	INCL	Member states launch an informal working group on trade and gender.
2022	ENV DEV	Geneva MC: Fisheries deal reached; COVID TRIPS waiver enabled by China waiving SDT.

Continued from the previous page.

2023	DEV	Plurilateral IFD Agreement concluded.
2023	ENV INCL	EU reiterates calls for reform to strengthen the WTO's deliberative function on trade, environment, and inclusiveness with a proposal in the General Council.
2023	ENV	First Trade House Pavilion at the annual climate change COP gathering (COP28) in Dubai, including the WTO and the first thematic Trade Day co-hosted by the WTO.
2024	DEV INCL ENV	Abu Dhabi MC: Declaration on SDT, and on SDT in Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS); declaration on trade and environment; language on inclusiveness; no consensus on fisheries (Fish II) or IFD integration into the WTO Treaty Annex.
2024	ENV	Brazil launches informal initiative on 'sustainable agriculture'.
2024	INCL	Secretariat launches World Trade Report titled: "Trade and inclusiveness: How to make trade work for all".
2025	DEV INCL ENV	US temporarily freezes its 2024–2025 WTO budget, potentially impacting the Secretariat's work on trade-related agendas.

## Trade and Development

While trade agendas had incorporated development goals since the 1960s and 1970s, the WTO's first negotiation – known as the 'Doha Development Round' – pledged to "place developing countries' needs and interests at the heart of the Work Programme" (World Trade Organization 2025a). This promise included commitments to reduce agricultural subsidies and strengthen SDT. The Doha Declaration introduced "implementation-related issues" (Paragraph 44) to enhance SDT effectiveness.

However, shifts in global power – particularly the relative decline of the US – quickly eroded support for this agenda. The working class in the Global North has lost relative ground as a result of trade and globalisation (Milanovic 2013), thus fuelling a more nationalist economic agenda. Negotiation deadlocks between 2003 and 2007/2008 (Parizek et al. 2025) made it increasingly unlikely that the original development promises would be fulfilled. Talks on subsidies became protracted (Scott 2017; Schöfer and Weinhardt 2024). Conflict lines shifted as China and India emerged as top subsidisers amidst growing US–China tensions (Hopewell 2019). New conflict lines separated agricultural exporters such as Brazil from fellow (self-declared) developing-country members such as India and China (Schöfer and Weinhardt 2024).

As the Doha agenda stalled, developed countries – led by the US – pushed to add new agendas, such as e-commerce. Conversely, developing countries insisted on the original mandate. By the time of the 2015 Nairobi Declaration, members had failed to reach a consensus on how to move forward: "many Members reaffirm[ed] the Doha Development Agenda," while others explicitly did not (WT/MIN(15)/DEC, para. 30). Although agricultural export subsidies were eliminated and a safeguard mechanism

was introduced, the conference marked a clear turn away from full support for the development-related Doha mandate.

Despite opposing Doha's abandonment, many developing countries have joined informal plurilateral talks. In 2017, MIKTA<sup>4</sup> hosted the first WTO workshop on investment facilitation, followed by sessions in which China played a key role and the launch of the Friends of Investment Facilitation for Development group. At Buenos Aires, 70 members endorsed a Joint Ministerial Statement, which led to structured discussions and formal negotiations on investment facilitation for development from 2020 (Interview 24); the agreement was concluded in 2023.

However, this plurilateral agreement has not yet been incorporated into Annex IV of the WTO Agreement (Parizek et al. 2025). Such incorporation is required if it is to formally become part of the WTO's legal framework, which would also make it subject to WTO dispute settlement and monitoring mechanisms. Consensus is required for this, and countries such as India, South Africa, and Indonesia have withheld their consent. They argue that such informal, plurilateral outcomes on trade-related agendas undermine the multilateral Doha mandate (Interviews 24, 28, 30, and 31; India: WT/MIN(24)/29; WT/GC/262). For members opposed to plurilateral approaches, the requirement for the explicit consent of all members outweighs the desire of some members to move ahead in smaller coalitions.

Further regime expansion on trade and development has also stalled due to contestation over self-declared developing-country status within the WTO. Under President Trump's first administration, the US emerged as the most vocal critic of this practice. In 2019, it proposed reforming the self-declaration model (WT/GC/W/757, WT/GC/W/764), tentatively excluding 34 members – including China and India – from SDT flexibilities (Kwa and Lunenburg 2019, 1). In 2021, the EU proposed a differentiated approach (European Commission 2021, Annex), suggesting agreement-by-agreement decisions and singling out China: “[d]ue to its weight in the system, China should lead by example and not claim SDT in any ongoing negotiation” (Kwa and Lunenburg 2019, 6).

Yet developing-country members firmly oppose legal changes to the self-declaration approach. This makes any update of the rules on developing-country status unlikely. China, India, South Africa, and others defended self-declaration in a counter-proposal (WT/GC/W/765), citing concerns about a persistent ‘North–South’ divide and effectively blocking reform. As one trade diplomat observed: “We just didn’t modernise the rules as we went along [...]. You can’t update our thinking on a 20-year gap” (Interview 25). However, developing countries themselves are not united on this issue (Interviews 24, 28, and 29; Schöfer and Weinhardt 2022). Many acknowledge tensions in the current approach (Interviews 24, 29, and 33).

Further regime expansion on trade and development has stalled due to contestation over self-declared developing-country status within the WTO.

---

4 This group comprises Mexico, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Türkiye, and Australia.

This contestation of SDT has also complicated negotiations on new agreements (Parizek et al. 2025), and the Doha mandate now appears defunct. For instance, India's 25-year-transition demand for developing countries was one of the key obstacles in fisheries subsidies talks (Interview 33). Meanwhile, China increasingly waives SDT on a case-by-case basis. A prominent example of this is the 2022 waiver of intellectual property rights protections on COVID-19 vaccines (Interviews 7 and 33).

Incremental outcomes on improving existing SDT implementation continue via soft-law initiatives (Interviews 28 and 29). At the 2024 Ministerial Conference (MC) in Abu Dhabi, members reaffirmed SDT's importance and adopted a "Ministerial Declaration on the Precise, Effective and Operational Implementation of SDT Provisions" for the SPS (Sanitary and Phytosanitary) and TBT (Technical Barriers to Trade) agreements (WT/L/1191; WT/MIN(24)/36). These agreements address non-tariff measures, such as environmental or consumer standards (Perez 2024, 16), on which developing countries often face implementation challenges. Yet one criticism of these agreements is that the shift towards non-binding outcomes limits tangible benefits for developing members, as it hinders progress on market access rules. Other current discussion topics include LDC graduation and technology transfer.

In general, multilateral debates in the Committee on Trade and Development (CTD) remain contested – despite some improvements in openness and process streamlining linked to the reform-by-doing initiative (Interview 26; Parizek et al. 2025). In addition to the CTD, development can be seen to serve as a 'horizontal' issue in WTO negotiations, particularly in areas where significant development gaps exist. Here again, however, different understandings among members on whether and how to integrate the development-related agenda into the WTO emerge.

To sum up, members continue to affirm the importance of the development agenda, and particularly SDT ("a crucial principle of the organisation": Interview 24; see also Interviews 26, 28, 29, and 33). Yet geopolitical tensions, especially over self-declared developing-country status, mean that the questions around whether – and if so, how – to advance this agenda are contested. Prospects for the 2026 Ministerial Conference are bleak under the second Trump administration (Interview 39), which has already dismantled the US Agency for International Development. As one official put it: "This organisation is grappling with the huge question of what to do with the United States. And the question of what to do with trade and development [...] is very much linked to that" (Interview 39).

## Trade and the Environment

Efforts to integrate environment-related goals into the WTO gained traction in the 2010s, although rule-making remained difficult. In 2014, 46 members – including China, the US, and the EU – launched plurilateral talks on an environmental goods agreement. By 2016, however, these talks had failed. Chinese proposals to include solar panels and bicycles clashed with US and EU perspectives (Borderlex 2016). The prospects for reviving these talks remain slim (Interview 26) due to disagreements over defining

‘environmental goods’ and low interest among developing countries (de Melo and Solleder 2022).

Efforts to reach a multilateral agreement on fisheries subsidies have fared better. Members concluded the Fisheries Subsidies Agreement at the 2022 Geneva MC. This agreement bans subsidies for fishing in unregulated high seas and supports environmental goals (Interview 9), as overfishing can contribute to biodiversity loss, for example. Yet the agreement requires 111 ratifications to enter into force, and 10 are still pending (as of June 2025). Talks on a follow-up ‘Fish II’ agreement stalled at the 2024 Abu Dhabi MC. These negotiations intended to address the root causes of overfishing (Irschlinger 2024) and hence go further in addressing biodiversity loss (Bloom 2022). India’s opposition to the agreement due to its development concerns reportedly prohibited participants from reaching an agreement (Interviews 26, 31, and 33). Some participants also speculated about India’s interest in leveraging this issue in exchange for exemptions on public food stockholding. Additionally, some perceive this behaviour as “hostage taking” and criticise such reluctance to compromise (Interview 23; also Interviews 31 and 33).

In light of these challenges related to multilateral rule-making, informal initiatives have gained momentum. Such initiatives focus on those members who support the agenda and often invite input from non-state actors. In 2020, three informal plurilateral initiatives were launched. Since they lack a formal mandate, they focus on non-binding outputs (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Informal, Plurilateral WTO Initiatives on Trade and the Environment and their Outcomes**

<b>Initiative</b>	<b>Focus Areas</b>	<b>Main Outcomes (Non-Binding)</b>
Trade and Environmental Sustainability Structured Discussions (TESSD)	Climate measures (including border carbon adjustments); environmental goods/services; circular economy; subsidies	Practices to guide the design and implementation of trade-related climate measures; renewable energy goods and services that are key to the energy transition; trade-related action areas to support a circular economy; considerations that can guide subsidy design to benefit the environment while avoiding trade distortions
Dialogue on Plastics Pollution and Environmentally Sustainable Plastics Trade (DPP)	Trade in plastics and substitutes; support for global treaty	Ministerial statements; survey on trade-related measures addressing plastics pollution; best-practice exchanges
Fossil Fuel Subsidy Reform (FFSR)	Transparency and reform of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies	Joint statements; calls for voluntary phase-outs; alignment with climate goals

Despite strong opposition to plurilateral environmental initiatives within the WTO, particularly on the part of India and South Africa (Kleimann et al. 2024), membership in these initiatives has grown steadily (see Table 4). Even initially sceptical members like Saudi Arabia have joined TESSD (Interview 26). Participation patterns vary: TESSD is dominated by developed countries, while the dialogue on plastics pollution has stronger developing-country leadership, despite the fact that most discussions are driven by 10–20 members with greater capacity (Interview 26).

**Table 4: Membership in Informal, Plurilateral Initiatives on Trade and the Environment**

	<b>Initial Membership (2022)</b>	<b>Membership in March 2025</b>
TESSD	53	78 (including US, EU, China)
DDP (plastics)	16	83 (including US, EU, China)
FFSR (fossil fuels)	12	48 (including EU)

**Source:** Authors' data compilation based on WTO data ([www.wto.org](http://www.wto.org)).

In addition to these three initiatives, Brazil launched an informal dialogue on “sustainable agriculture” (WT/GC/W/938), which also remains below the rule-making level (Interviews 26 and 29). This initiative merges trade-related environmental objectives with the interests of net agricultural exporters such as Brazil in decreasing agricultural subsidies. Several members, including China, expressed interest in this initiative (Third World Network 2024). Others, such as the US, have recently opposed it as a distraction from core trade issues (United States 2025b). Some developing countries worry that concerns such as technology transfer or other trade-distorting subsidies might be sidelined as a result (Kleimann et al. 2024), or that countries will be overburdened with meetings on trade-related agendas (Interview 28).

In terms of results, the shift to informal, plurilateral initiatives has gone hand-in-hand with the prioritisation of ‘softer’ exchanges of knowledge or best practices on regulation over ‘hard’ rule-making (Interviews 24, 25, 26, and 30). Members value these initiatives as platforms for sharing experiences, best practices, and standards (Interviews 22, 24, 25, 27, and 30). For instance, members share information on the methodologies they use with regard to trade-related climate measures (Interview 25), which the CTE initially avoided. This could help to reduce fragmentation in environmental standards (Interview 40), while exchanges more generally could support collective strategies, for example on plastics (Interview 24). Some informal settings also provide participating developing countries with more space to share their challenges, as compared to formal, multilateral bodies.

Nevertheless, concerns about the limited impact of informal, plurilateral initiatives persist, and disagreements among key members on issues such as carbon standards make binding outcomes unlikely (Interviews 22 and 30). Some interviewees noted that plurilateral efforts have slowed or stagnated and remarked on an “overload of environmental meetings” (Interview 26); some discussions have reportedly shifted back to the CTE (Interviews 30 and 39).

Indeed, these initiatives have somewhat reinvigorated CTE discussions. Similarly to the plurilateral formats, CTE thematic sessions allow input from non-state actors. Such sessions have been held or planned on topics including the energy transition (2023 and 2024), trade-related climate measures (2024), technology transfer (2025), and sustainable agriculture. Yet no shift towards rule-making is evident. When a CTE Special Session on rule-making was briefly considered under the Zambian Chair (Interview 30), the idea was abandoned due to weak prospects of success (Interviews 30, 31, 34, and 40). One interviewee emphasised that participation remains high “because we’re not talking about taking decisions or changing the rules” (Interview 30).

Meanwhile, scrutiny of the Secretariat has intensified. Statements made by the DG in 2021 and 2024 calling for global carbon pricing (Financial Times 2021, 2024) were criticised – including by the US – as exceeding her mandate (Interviews 25, 26, and 33).<sup>5</sup> Several members have requested more transparency with regard to the Secretariat’s activities, such as externally funded climate-related reports and WTO events at COP28, the United Nations-led climate negotiations. In particular, the US demanded that any “climate endorsements” be explicitly attributed to the Secretariat, not to members (G/TBT/M/91, p. 6.22). Its decision to freeze its budget contributions for 2024 and 2025 (United States 2025b) is likely to have chilling effects on this agenda. For instance, driven by the US, the Secretariat has reportedly introduced a member-access portal to monitor its own environment-related activities.

The trade-related agenda on the environment has gained traction in the less ambitious, non-binding informal formats.

Taken together, this information suggests that the trade-related agenda on the environment has gained traction in the less ambitious, non-binding informal formats. Yet the agenda is likely to face increasing pushback, which complicates efforts to elevate it beyond this level of informal deliberations and exchanges – even as many members continue to find these exchanges valuable. At the same time, mounting criticisms of the Secretariat’s proactive role point to emerging challenges to the organisation’s robustness. These criticisms also underscore the member-driven nature of the WTO. They illustrate that understandings of democracy in terms of inclusive state participation can clash with efforts to advance trade-related agendas.

---

5 Note, however, that this view is contested. For instance, scholars advocate for the Secretariat to undertake coordination efforts geared at better aligning the trade regime with the climate change regime, without seeing this as contrary to the DG’s mandate (see, e.g., Trachtman et al. 2024).



## Trade and Inclusiveness

The WTO has seen growing – but uneven – engagement with inclusiveness-related themes, including gender, MSMEs, workers’ rights, and broader concerns about unequal member participation. Despite interest from many members, the inclusiveness agenda remains fragmented, informal, and limited to discussions, working groups, and best-endeavour declarations. There is no consensus on whether, how, or which social dimensions should be integrated into binding WTO rules, and formal negotiations have not materialised.

Plurilateral efforts have driven most of the outcomes. At the 2017 Buenos Aires MC (MC11), two notable initiatives were launched: the Joint Declaration on Trade and Women’s Economic Empowerment (signed by 118 members), and an informal working group on MSMEs (initially with 87 members, now with 103; World Trade Organization 2025c). These two tracks have developed informally since 2018, led by Latin American countries such as Ecuador, Mexico, and Chile, with support from the EU and some ASEAN members. The EU’s 2023 proposal to enhance the WTO’s deliberative function explicitly referenced inclusiveness (WT/GC/W/864). The proposal referred to the need “to spread the gains from trade more widely within societies” and called for “strengthening the inclusiveness of the trade-policy making process itself in order to incorporate all necessary perspectives” (WT/GC/W/864, 4).

The informal Working Group on Trade and Gender, launched in 2020, has explored best practices for removing trade barriers for women as well as the need for better gender-disaggregated data. This has yielded some results, such as trainings for government officials on trade and gender, or technical assistance to support women-led businesses in digital trade. Yet more concrete output has failed to materialise, as members critical of the initiative – such as Russia – have watered down these efforts (Interview 40). At the 2024 Abu Dhabi MC (MC13), members included language on MSMEs as well as women and trade in the Ministerial Declaration, but avoided references to ‘gender and trade’ due to pushback, particularly from India (Interviews 24 and 26). Those opposed to the inclusiveness

agenda view it as a diversion from core trade concerns and a shift towards social policy issues that should remain at the domestic level (Interview 28).

The WTO Secretariat’s role in promoting inclusiveness has been contentious.

Similarly, the US ‘worker-centric trade’ narrative on inclusiveness, while influential in shaping rhetoric, has not translated into concrete multilateral commitments.

This is partly due to divergent member views on the inclusion of labour (Interview 26) and fears that such framing could be used to justify protectionism (Interview 28). Even the 2022 fisheries subsidies agreement avoided references to forced labour due to resistance from members, most notably China, which felt unfairly targeted (Third World Network 2021).

The Secretariat’s role in promoting inclusiveness (Dommen 2021) – including in high-profile reports, such as the 2024 World Trade Report – has been contentious. While some members welcome its involvement, others argue that such activities exceed the Secretariat’s mandate. This is particularly the case when the agenda lacks broad consensus among



members (Interview 26). Criticism of the focus on inclusiveness in the World Trade Report illustrates the political tightrope the Secretariat has to walk between supporting member initiatives and remaining neutral. As a member of the Secretariat acknowledged: “The agenda [...] is a tricky one,” adding that if this agenda is framed in terms of changing the direction of the organisation, then “some of our traditional members will oppose it” (Interview 23).

While inclusiveness is more visible in WTO discussions, it has yielded few substantive outputs.

As a result of lingering disagreement and the politically sensitive nature of the agenda, a considerable gap remains between abstract discussions and practical implications (Interviews 31 and 39). Suggestions such as encouraging members to report on inclusiveness-related policies in their trade policy reviews or opening a new work stream on the distributional impacts of trade have not taken hold (Interview 39). Some members remain highly sceptical of the added value of this agenda within the WTO. As one interviewee noted: “the inclusivity conversation is not one that we have to have at the WTO” (Interview 25).

In sum, while inclusiveness is more visible in WTO discussions than it was before, it lacks the political consensus to become a formal negotiating issue and has yielded few substantive outputs. Political sensitivities, diverging views on the WTO’s role, and sovereignty concerns continue to limit concrete outcomes. Contestation over the lack of a clear-cut definition (Interviews 23, 24, 25, and 28) and the diffuse nature of inclusiveness as a policy domain further compounds its marginalisation, despite latent interest among some members.

## Members’ Views: Further Potential for Regime Expansion?

The previous section examined efforts to further expand the WTO’s scope on three trade-related agendas: development, the environment, and inclusiveness. Our findings reveal that while members have agreed on certain further expansions, such as the multilateral fisheries agreement, the overall result is limited formal rule-making on trade-related agendas. Deeper disagreements exist over whether to advance any of these trade-related agendas – and if so, how. We find that common ground is most easily established on agendas through which the WTO provides concrete benefits to members while costs (in terms of constraining members’ own policy space) remain low. This often limits opportunities for progress on these agendas to informal formats, such as information exchanges, best practices, and non-binding guidelines.

Bringing this analysis back to our conceptual framework on effectiveness, robustness, and democracy – and the possibility of trade-offs between them – several key findings emerge. First, many WTO members clearly recognise the links between trade and (some of) the agendas covered in this report, yet key actors diverge on which of the agendas should be prioritised in order to boost the WTO’s effectiveness. The space for effectiveness-enhancing transformation is thus severely limited due to these disagreements.

Longer-standing challenges to robustness threaten trade-related agendas if existing rules cannot be enforced.

Second, our findings also highlight that trade-offs between effectiveness and robustness can emerge. In the period up until the second Trump administration, criticisms of trade-related agendas levelled by some members were not seen as a challenge to institutional robustness. Many members did not perceive the focus on trade-related agendas as responsible for the lack of progress on the core trade agenda. A common sentiment among members was: “they are unrelated, so we might as well try to do something on [e.g.,] the environment” (Interview 26). Some even saw these trade-related initiatives as vehicles to sustain the WTO’s relevance, including in light of deadlocked core agendas. Under the second Trump administration, however, potential trade-offs between the push for trade-related agendas and the WTO’s robustness may come to the forefront. US criticisms of the Secretariat’s role – which were expressed by previous administrations – have become more substantive, and the US has frozen its budget contributions for 2024 and 2025. These steps reflect broader discontent with the WTO’s “inability to reform,” given concerns about the role of state intervention in China (United States 2025b, item 6). Yet US discontent with the Secretariat’s allegedly overly proactive role in trade-related agendas arguably fans the flames of such emerging challenges to robustness. Lastly, longer-standing challenges to robustness – such as the state of the dispute settlement mechanism, which has been dysfunctional since 2019 (Parizek et al. 2025) – potentially threaten trade-related agendas if existing rules cannot be enforced.

Third, from a conceptual perspective, the pluralisation of trade-related agendas offers both risks and opportunities when it comes to democracy. On the one hand, one side effect of these agendas is that they provide entry points for new voices, including non-state actors. On the other hand, their current trajectory – driven largely via informal, plurilateral channels – raises concerns about inclusivity and transparency.

# EU Support for Trade-Related Agendas

The EU sees itself as an advocate for trade-related agendas within the WTO – a perception shared by many WTO members, albeit with important caveats. Especially on the environment-related agenda, the EU's inclination to move ahead with unilateral instruments such as CBAM and the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) has drawn criticism (Interviews 12 and 17). Notably, members have raised concerns about double standards – the extent to which the EU's advocacy of multilateral solutions is credible – implications for developing countries, and the potential fragmentation of rule-making.

The EU is seen as an active participant in trade-related agendas, with a clear preference for rule-making.

The EU is largely seen as an active participant in trade-related agendas, with a clear preference for rule-making (Interview 25). Members recognise that the EU is very proactive on environmental objectives, and it is seen as an “environmental leader” (De Ville 2025, 3). Some members also expect – or hope – that the EU, which is perceived as a “staunch trade multilateralist” (De Ville 2025, 3), can step up and defend the multilateral system against current attacks (see Bercero 2025). This is particularly the case in light of the challenges associated with increasing geopolitical rivalry, as well as the direct challenges to the WTO posed by the US under the second Trump administration. Some members have expressed the wish that the EU would play the role of an honest broker or be more creative in terms of what support for multilateral trade-related agendas may entail. For example, this could involve promoting voluntary guidelines or pledging to move ahead on environmental issues in a multilateral way, such as by committing to lower tariffs on environmentally beneficial goods for all WTO members.

Among the three trade-related agendas, the EU has drawn some criticism with regard to its approach to development. For instance, some members perceived the stop-gap dispute settlement system it has promoted – the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement – as failing to take into account developing-country concerns about access (Interview 28). When it comes to inclusiveness, those members who view this specific trade-related agenda favourably are more likely to view the EU's role as positive (e.g., Interview 24).

The EU faces the most scrutiny when it comes to its unilateral environment-related regulations.

The EU faces the most scrutiny when it comes to its unilateral environment-related regulations (e.g., Interview 3), which it refers to as autonomous measures. CBAM imposes a carbon fee on imported

goods to match EU producers' emission costs (De Ville 2025, 7). This is often compared to a tariff – albeit a less overt one than those imposed by the US to fund industrial policy (Interview 7). Some members view this measure as justified in principle and conceptually correct, as countries should not obtain competitive advantages by paying less attention to sustainability commitments (Esty 2024). As one diplomat noted: “I do not

think they are doing that with protectionist purposes. I think that they want to raise the bar” (Interview 24). Still, many object to the ways in which CBAM is supposed to be implemented, including the details of how to measure carbon emissions (Esty 2024). Developing countries, moreover, object to the absence of SDT and anticipate implementation challenges (Weinhardt and De Ville 2024; Interviews 24, 34, and 42). Several members have mentioned the possibility of filing a case at the WTO (Interview 33). In May 2024, Russia asked for consultations on CBAM (World Trade Organization 2025d).

EUDR has faced even stronger pushback on both substance and process (Interview 12, 16, and 17). Finalised in 2022, EUDR bans imports of commodities such as timber, soy, coffee, and beef unless producers and traders can prove that they have not caused deforestation or forest degradation. This has raised some concerns over adverse impacts on smallholders (Interview 42; Weinhardt and De Ville 2024), lack of consultation, and the high technical demands of geo-localisation (Interview 30). The unilateral nature of the regulation risks alienating partners and fuels domestic opposition that weakens the EU’s broader credibility in WTO environmental discussions (Interviews 2 and 34). Some argue that the EU should temper its assertiveness and show greater sensitivity to others’ concerns (Interviews 4 and 33) while strengthening multilateral approaches (Interview 34).

At the same time, the EU has defended both measures as WTO-compatible and non-discriminatory. It aims to preserve the integrity of its own climate-related policies (Weinhardt and De Ville 2024) and to provide inspiration for others when it comes to environmental objectives. In addition, the EU arguably seeks to safeguard the competitiveness of its green industries – a dynamic shaped by the broader context of increasing geopolitical competition (Herranz-Surrallés et al. 2024). Without CBAM, for example, carbon-intensive EU sectors could risk being undercut by cheaper, high-emission imports, including aluminium, iron, and steel from China (Clingendael 2022).

In sum, while the EU is widely seen as a proponent of trade-related agendas within the WTO, tensions emerge between its unilateral and its multilateral approaches, particularly when it comes to the environment.

# Conclusion: The Future of Trade-Related Agendas at the WTO

While the WTO faces several reform challenges to its core trade mandate (Parizek et al. 2024), efforts to further expand its scope in various trade-related areas are ongoing. These include long-standing endeavours to strengthen the development-related agenda, which is already firmly established in the WTO's legal framework, as well as more recent initiatives related to environmental objectives and inclusiveness.

Members are divided over whether and how to strengthen trade-related agendas.

Based on our analysis of key actors' positions as well as negotiation processes and dynamics in recent years, we find that members are divided over whether and how to strengthen these trade-related agendas. With regard to the development agenda, the geopoliticisation of developing-country status has complicated negotiations on making SDT provisions more effective. While the environment-related agenda has gained the most traction in recent years, it is likely to remain at the level of non-binding exchanges. The inclusiveness agenda continues to be politically stalled. While some members – including the EU – invest in promoting these agendas, further pushback is likely in light of shifting US priorities under the second Trump administration.

From the perspective of the ENSURED project's conceptual lenses, current debates on strengthening trade-related agendas within the WTO closely revolve around the issue of effectiveness, but with implications for democracy and robustness as well. Members generally recognise that addressing (some of) these trade-related agendas can support the WTO's effectiveness. Yet we observe that enhancing the effectiveness of the WTO's trade-related work seems to be viable only by means of non-binding and informal outputs – such as information sharing, best practices, or voluntary guidelines – and not by means of formal rule-making. Key members do not agree on which, if any, of the trade-related agendas should be prioritised. In addition, distributional conflicts hinder rule-making efforts. This dynamic is particularly evident in environment-related discussions. Many members value initiatives that offer a space to discuss new developments in environment-related trade policies through 'low-cost, low-commitment' exchanges. Conversely, rule-making remains constrained by conflicts of interest among key members, which hinder efforts to advance regulatory harmonisation within the WTO. With a view to democracy, the pluralisation of trade agendas brings both risks and opportunities. While it opens space for non-state actors – for example, on environmental issues – its often informal, plurilateral trajectory raises concerns about transparency and inclusivity.

Lastly, we find conflicting implications for the WTO's robustness. On the one hand, expanding the WTO's scope can ensure its long-term relevance and increase political support for its core mandate. Yet this also raises challenges linked to trade-related agendas, especially if resources are

devoted to agendas that key members oppose. Such challenges surface mostly in the form of critiques of the Secretariat's proactive role and its various activities in support of trade-related agendas (particularly on environment and inclusiveness). Not only the US, but also other members increasingly request greater transparency and more consultation with members before the Secretariat promotes agendas through (external) publications or activities, while others primarily welcome such impulses and support from the Secretariat. This signals that the EU's earlier calls to

The WTO's engagement

with trade-related agendas

remains constrained by political

divisions but retains some

untapped potential.

strengthen the organisation's "deliberative function," including through background analysis and research undertaken by the WTO Secretariat (WT/GC/W/864, par. 8), are likely to face challenges in light of a greater wariness of the Secretariat's agency.

In sum, our analysis suggests that the WTO's engagement with trade-related agendas remains constrained by political divisions but retains some untapped potential – particularly at the level of informal, non-binding outcomes – to foster meaningful cooperation. Realising this potential will require a careful balancing act: advancing effectiveness without undermining robustness, and pursuing innovation without sacrificing democratic support in terms of inclusive state participation and transparency. As the multilateral system faces renewed pressures, particularly from a more assertive and less predictable US administration, understanding and navigating these trade-offs will be essential to the WTO's future.

# List of Interviews

Number	Date	Interviewee	Location
1	09/13/2024	WTO official	Geneva
2	09/17/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
3	09/19/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
4	09/19/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
5	09/19/2024	National/member diplomat(s)	Geneva
6	02/04/2025	National/member diplomat	Geneva
7	02/04/2025	National/member diplomat	Geneva
8	02/04/2025	WTO official	Geneva
9	02/04/2025	National/member diplomat	Geneva
10	02/05/2025	WTO official	Geneva
11	02/05/2025	National/member diplomat	Geneva
12	02/05/2025	National/member diplomat(s)	Geneva
13	02/05/2025	National/member diplomat	Geneva
14	02/06/2025	National/member diplomat(s)	Geneva
15	02/06/2025	National/member diplomat(s)	Geneva
16	02/06/2025	National/member diplomat(s)	Geneva
17	02/06/2025	National/member diplomat(s)	Geneva
18	02/07/2025	National/member diplomat	Geneva
19	02/07/2025	National/member diplomat	Geneva
20	10/17/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
21	11/04/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
22	11/04/2024	WTO official	Geneva
23	11/04/2024	WTO official(s)	Geneva
24	11/04/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva

25	11/05/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
26	11/05/2024	National/member diplomat(s)	Geneva
27	11/06/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
28	11/06/2024	National/member diplomat(s)	Geneva
29	11/06/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
30	11/06/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
31	11/06/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
32	11/07/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
33	11/07/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
34	11/07/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
35	11/07/2024	National/member diplomat(s)	Geneva
36	11/08/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
37	11/08/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
38	11/08/2024	National/member diplomat	Geneva
39	05/27/2025	National/member diplomat	Online
40	06/03/2025	National/member diplomat	Online
41	05/20/2025	Think tank official	Online
42	05/27/2025	Think tank official	Online



# References

- Babic, Milan, Nana de Graaff, Lukas Linsi, and Clara Weinhardt. 2024. "The Geoeconomic Turn in International Trade, Investment, and Technology." *Politics and Governance* 12: 1–10.
- Brandi, Clara. 2015. "The Doha Round Is Dead – Long Live the WTO?" *German Development Institute/IODS*. <https://www.idos-research.de/en/the-current-column/article/the-doha-round-is-dead-long-live-the-wto/>.
- Bercero, Ignacio García. 2025. "How Should the European Union Respond to Trump's 'Reciprocal Tariffs'?" *Bruegel*, February 18, 2025. <https://www.bruegel.org/first-glance/how-should-european-union-respond-trumps-reciprocal-tariffs>.
- Bertram, Caroline. 2023. "The Trade-Sustainability Nexus: The Evolution of the European Commission's Trade and Sustainable Development Discourse from 1993 to 2022." *Journal of European Public Policy* 30 (10): 2097–2122.
- Bloom. 2022. "WTO Fisheries Subsidies Deal: A Historic First Step for the Ocean, a Giant Step for Transparency." *BLOOM Association*, June 17, 2022. <https://www.bloomassociation.org/en/wto-fisheries-subsidies-deal/>.
- Charnovitz, Steve. 2021. "A Better Transatlantic Agenda on Trade and Environment." Jean Monnet Network on Transatlantic Trade Politics, Policy Brief 2, Carleton University. <https://carleton.ca/tradenetwork/wp-content/uploads/Transatlantic-Trade-Network-Policy-Brief-A-Better-Transatlantic-Agenda-on-Trade-and-Environment-by-Steve-Charnovitz-Dec-2021.pdf>.
- Claussen, Kathleen and Geraldo Vidigal. 2024. "The Road Ahead." In *The Sustainability Revolution in International Trade Agreements*, edited by Geraldo Vidigal and Kathleen Claussen, 391–396. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clingendael. 2022. "The CBAM Effect: How the World Is Responding to the EU's New Climate Stick." *Clingendael Alert*. [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Alert\\_CBAM\\_effect.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Alert_CBAM_effect.pdf).
- Cullen, Pauline. 2021. "From Neglect to Threat: Feminist Responses to Right Wing Populism in the European Union." *European Politics and Society* 22 (4): 520–537.
- De Melo, Jaime and Jean-Marc Solleder. 2020. "The EGA Negotiations: Why They Are Important, Why They Are Stalled, and Challenges Ahead." *Journal of World Trade* 54 (3): 333–348.
- De Ville, Ferdi. 2025. "The European Union's Management of the Environment-Trade Nexus at the World Trade Organization Before and After the European Green Deal." *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*: 1–13 (online first).

- Dominioni, Goran and Daniel C. Esty. 2023. "Designing Effective Border Carbon Adjustment Mechanisms: Aligning the Global Trade and Climate Change Regimes." *Arizona Law Review* 65 (1): 1–41.
- Dommen, Caroline. 2021. "WTO Advances Gender Agenda Amidst Calls for Broader Gender Lens." *IISD*, July 26, 2021. <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/wto-advances-gender-agenda-amidst-calls-for-broader-gender-lens/>.
- Duran, Gracia Marín. 2018. "Sheltering Government Support to 'Green' Electricity: The European Union and the World Trade Organization." *International & Comparative Law Quarterly* 67 (1): 129–165.
- Esty, Dan. 2024. "Sustainability policies complicate the WTO's work – and make it more indispensable than ever." *Fortune*, February 26, 2024. <https://fortune.com/2024/02/26/sustainability-policies-complicate-wto-work-trade-environment-politics/>.
- European Commission. 2021. "Annex to the Trade Policy Review – An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy." Brussels, February 18, 2021. COM(2021) 66 final.
- Farias, Deborah Barros Leal. 2023. "Country Differentiation in the Global Environmental Context: Who Is 'Developing' and According to What?" *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 23 (3): 253–269.
- Garcia, Maria (2021). "Trade Policy." In *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and EU Politics*, edited by Gabriele Abels, Andrea Krizsán, Heather MacRae, and Anna van der Vleuten, 278–289. London: Routledge.
- Geneva Trade Week. 2024. "International Cooperation on Trade, Climate & Sustainable Development at the WTO – TESS." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtzSz6RngFc>.
- Gijs, Camille. 2024. "Don't just blame the US; India is blocking WTO reform too." *Politico*, February 16, 2024. <https://www.politico.eu/article/world-trade-organization-india-united-states-protectionism-agriculture/>.
- Hall, Nina. 2016. *Displacement, Development, and Climate Change: International Organizations Moving Beyond Their Mandates*. London: Routledge.
- Hegde, Vineet and Jan Wouters. 2021. "Special and Differential Treatment under the World Trade Organization: A Legal Typology." *Journal of International Economic Law* 24 (3): 551–571.
- Hannah, Erin, Adrienne Roberts, and Silke Trommer. 2022. "Gender in Global Trade: Transforming or Reproducing Trade Orthodoxy?" *Review of International Political Economy* 29 (4): 1368–1393.
- Hoekman, Bernard and Robert Wolfe. 2021. "Reforming the World Trade Organization: Practitioner Perspectives from China, the EU, and the US." *China & World Economy* 29 (4): 1–34.

- Herranz-Surrallés, Anna, Chad Damro, and Sandra Eckert. 2024. "The Geoeconomic Turn of the Single European Market? Conceptual Challenges and Empirical Trends." *Journal of Common Market Studies* 62 (4): 919–937.
- Hopewell, Kristen. 2019. "US-China Conflict in Global Trade Governance: The New Politics of Agricultural Subsidies at the WTO." *Review of International Political Economy* 26 (2): 207–231.
- Irschlinger, Tristan. 2024. "The WTO and Fisheries Subsidies: Where are we, exactly?" *International Institute for Sustainable Development*, November 6, 2024. <https://www.iisd.org/articles/deep-dive/wto-and-fisheries-subsidies-where-are-we-exactly>.
- Kleimann, David, Jodie Keane, and Michai Robertson. 2024. "Climate and Trade Cooperation After the Thirteenth WTO Ministerial Conference: Quo Vadis?" *Expert View*, TESS, March 7, 2024. <https://tessforum.org/latest/climate-and-trade-cooperation-after-the-thirteenth-wto-ministerial-conference-quo-vadis>.
- Kwa, Aileen and Peter Lunenborg. 2019. "Why the US Proposals on Development Will Affect All Developing Countries and Undermine WTO." *South Centre Policy Brief* 58: 1–11.
- Li, Fei. 2024. "Opening Statement by Vice Minister Li Fei at the 9th Trade Policy Review of China." July 17, 2024. [https://wto.mofcom.gov.cn/meetingsandstatements/art/2024/art\\_54c07386390c45febc501786fb8c848d.html](https://wto.mofcom.gov.cn/meetingsandstatements/art/2024/art_54c07386390c45febc501786fb8c848d.html).
- Liang, Wei. 2023. "The Guardian of Global Trade Governance? Examining the Role of the WTO Secretariat." In *Global Institutions in a Time of Power Transition*, edited by Kendall Stiles and Joel E. Oestreich, 159–178. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Low, Patrick. 2021. "Special and Differential Treatment and Developing Country Status: Can the Two Be Separated?" In *Rebooting Multilateral Trade Cooperation: Perspectives from China and Europe*, edited by Bernard M. Hoekman, Xinquan Tu, and Dong Wang, 75–102. Paris/London: CEPR Press. [https://respect.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2021/07/Chapter\\_4.pdf](https://respect.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2021/07/Chapter_4.pdf).
- Milanovic, Branko. 2013. "Global Income Inequality in Numbers: In History and Now." *Global Policy* 4 (2): 198–208.
- Parizek, Michal and Clara Weinhardt. 2025. "Revitalising and Reforming the World Trade Organization in an Age of Geopolitics." *ENSURED Research Report*, no. 5 (May): 1–32. <https://www.ensuredueurope.eu/publications/wto-reform>.
- Peres, Ana. 2024. "World Trade Organization: Challenges and Opportunities." *Research Briefing – House of Commons Library*. March 25, 2024. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9942/CBP-9942.pdf>.

- Pinchis-Paulsen, Mona. 2022. "Let's Agree to Disagree: A Strategy for Trade-Security." *Journal of International Economic Law* 25 (4): 527–547.
- Press Trust of India. 2024. "India not in favour of facilitator-led process in WTO on agriculture issues." *The Business Standard*, October 21, 2024. [https://www.business-standard.com/industry/agriculture/india-not-in-favour-of-facilitator-led-process-in-wto-on-agriculture-issues-124102101293\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/industry/agriculture/india-not-in-favour-of-facilitator-led-process-in-wto-on-agriculture-issues-124102101293_1.html).
- Saha, Sagatom and Noah Kaufman. 2023. "EU and U.S. Cooperation on Climate Clubs and Related Trade Measures." *CSIS*, June 2, 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/eu-and-us-cooperation-climate-clubs-and-related-trade-measures>.
- Schöfer, Till and Clara Weinhardt. 2024. "Conflicts Over Special and Differential Treatment in Agriculture." In *The Unmaking of Special Rights: Differential Treatment of Developing Countries in Times of Global Power Shifts*, edited by Klaus Dingwerth, Clara Weinhardt, Julian Eckl, Till Schöfer, and Simon Herr, 134–166. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Scott, James. 2017. "The Future of Agricultural Trade Governance in the World Trade Organization." *International Affairs* 93 (5): 1167–1184.
- Third World Network. 2021. "Hypocritical positions, double-standards mark proposed WTO fisheries deal." *SUNS* 9362, June 9, 2021. <https://www.twn.my/title2/wto.info/2021/ti210604.htm>.
- . 2024. "WTO: South voices support for prioritizing mandated issues in agriculture." *SUNS* 10134, December 9, 2024. <https://twn.my/title2/wto.info/2024/ti241203.htm>.
- Trachtman, Joel P. 2017. "WTO Trade and Environment Jurisprudence: Avoiding Environmental Catastrophe." *Harvard International Law Journal* 58 (2): 273–309.
- Trachtman, J. P., J. Y. Remy, D. Esty, and T. Sutton. 2024. "The Villars Framework for a Sustainable Global Trade System, Version 2.0." January 2024. <https://remakingtradeproject.org/villars-framework>.
- Ukpe, Aniekana and Sangeeta Khorana. 2021. "Special and Differential Treatment in the WTO: Framing Differential Treatment to Achieve (Real) Development." *Journal of International Trade Law and Policy* 20 (2): 83–100.
- United States. 2023. "PRC Is Not a Developing Country Act." February 21, 2023. [https://docs.house.gov/billssthisweek/20230327/H1107\\_SUS\\_xml.pdf](https://docs.house.gov/billssthisweek/20230327/H1107_SUS_xml.pdf).
- . 2025a. "America First Trade Policy." January 20, 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/america-first-trade-policy/>.

- 2025b. “WTO General Council Meeting – US Intervention as Delivered.” May 21, 2025. <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2025/05/21/wto-general-council-meeting-u-s-interventions/>.
  
- Weinhardt, Clara and Aniekan Ukpe. 2024. “The EU and Developing Countries in the WTO: Reforming Special and Differential Treatment.” *Studio Europa Policy Brief*. [https://studioeuropamaastricht.nl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Policy-Brief\\_Studio-Europa\\_Weinhardt\\_Ukpe\\_2024\\_Official-Format\\_AU\\_rev.2403\\_cw.pdf](https://studioeuropamaastricht.nl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Policy-Brief_Studio-Europa_Weinhardt_Ukpe_2024_Official-Format_AU_rev.2403_cw.pdf).
  
- Weinhardt, Clara and Till Schöfer. 2022. “Differential Treatment for Developing Countries in the WTO: The Unmaking of the North–South Distinction in a Multipolar World.” *Third World Quarterly* 43 (1): 74–93.
  
- World Trade Organization. 2001. “Compilation of Outstanding Implementation Issues Raised by Members.” October 27, 2001. JOB(01)/152/Rev.1.
  
- 2023. “Statement by India on Agenda Item 18, General Council Meeting – 13–15 December 2023: Communication from India.” December 20, 2023.
  
- 2024a. “World Trade Report 2024 – Trade and Inclusiveness: How to Make Trade Work for All.” [https://www.wto.org/english/res\\_e/publications\\_e/wtr24\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/publications_e/wtr24_e.htm).
  
- 2024b. “WTO’s Environmental Database.” <https://edb.wto.org/>.
  
- 2025a. “The Doha Round.” [https://www.wto.org/english/tratop/\\_e/dda\\_e/dda\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/tratop/_e/dda_e/dda_e.htm).
  
- 2025b. “The Environment: A Specific Concern.” [https://www.wto.org/english/thewto\\_e/whatis\\_e/tif\\_e/bey2\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/bey2_e.htm).
  
- 2025c. “Informal Working Group on Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs).” [https://www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/msmes\\_e/msmes\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/msmes_e/msmes_e.htm).
  
- 2025d. “Russia Initiates WTO Dispute Regarding EU’s Carbon Border Adjustment and Emissions Trading.” May 19, 2025. [https://www.wto.org/english/news\\_e/news25\\_e/ds639rfc\\_19may25\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news25_e/ds639rfc_19may25_e.htm).

# About ENSURED

In an era marked by global challenges, international cooperation is more essential than ever. Yet multilateral initiatives too often end in gridlock, as dominant states seek to bend the global order to their own interests. Enter ENSURED, a Horizon Europe-funded research consortium studying how the EU and its member states can better defend multilateralism and make global governance more robust, effective, and democratic.

ENSURED focuses on key policy domains that by their very nature pose complex transnational challenges. Our research assesses the state of play in these different areas and investigates the EU's strengths and weaknesses as an actor working to defend and transform multilateralism. Embracing the ethos of multilateral cooperation, the ENSURED consortium comprises universities, think tanks, and civil society groups from across Europe, Brazil, India, South Africa, China, and the United States. We aim to equip policymakers in the EU with evidence-based insights, actionable recommendations, and practical tools to promote better global governance for a world in transition.

© 2025 ENSURED

ENSURED publications are available via the project website: <https://www.ensuredeurope.eu/>



Funded by  
the European Union

The ENSURED project is funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under the Call HORIZON-CL2-2022-DEMOCRACY-01 – Grant agreement n° 101092077. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (granting authority). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

This paper is reusable under a creative commons license under attribution (CC BY 4.0 DEED) details of which can be found at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

**Edited by:** Dr. Alissa Jones Nelson

**Editorial coordination:** Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi)

Reinhardtstr. 7  
10117 Berlin  
Germany  
[ensured@gppi.net](mailto:ensured@gppi.net)