

MSME Informal Working Group at the WTO

Status update and LDCs' interests towards MC13



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Abbreviations

AEO	Authorised Economic Operator
AFDB	African Development Bank
DEA	Digital Economy Agreements
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNI	Gross National Income
GRP	Good Regulatory Practice
GTH	Global Trade Helpdesk
GVC	Global Value Chain
IADB	Inter-American Development Bank
ITC	International Trade Centre
IDB	WTO Integrated Database
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IP	Intellectual Property
IWG	Informal Working Group
LDCs	Least Developed Countries
LEI	Legal Entity Identifier
MC	Ministerial Conference
MLEC	Model Law on Electronic Commerce
MLETR	Model Law on Electronic Transferable Records
MSMEs	Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises
NTBs	Non-tariff Barriers
NTM	Non-Tariff Measures
PPP	Public-Private Partnerships
R&D	Research and Development
RTAs	Regional Trade Agreements
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SPS	Sanitary and Phytosanitary measures
TFA	Trade Facilitation Agreement
TPR	Trade Policy Reviews
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNCITRAL	United Nations Commission on International Trade Law
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
VSS	Voluntary Sustainability Standards
WBES	World Bank Enterprise Surveys
WCO	World Customs Organization
WGTF	Working Group on Trade, Debt, and Finance
WTO	World Trade Organization

Executive Summary

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are pivotal in sustainable development, economic growth, job creation, and poverty alleviation. However, MSMEs, particularly in developing and Least Developed Countries (LDCs), grapple with multifaceted challenges when engaging in international trade. These obstacles include limited information access, financial constraints, complex regulations, and non-tariff barriers (NTBs) like quotas. Addressing these challenges is of paramount importance for the formulation of effective policies and strategies. The World Trade Organization's (WTO) Informal Working Group (IWG) on MSMEs serves as a critical platform for tackling these issues and nurturing the growth and development of MSMEs.

Current Status of the IWG

While the IWG has made significant progress, it faces the daunting task of ensuring adequate representation and inclusivity for LDCs. With fewer than 9% of the 46 LDCs participating in the IWG on MSMEs, concerns have emerged regarding the representativeness of the Group's outcomes and its capacity to address the broader spectrum of LDC needs. Nonetheless, several promising developments hint at potential opportunities, especially with MC13 on the horizon.

Key Achievements and Pillars of Discussion

The IWG has shown noteworthy achievements, including the 2020 MSME Package and the informative MC12 report. The Group's discussions pivot around five fundamental pillars:

- (i) increasing MSMEs' access to information;
- (ii) increasing capacity to promote MSME trade inclusion;
- (iii) providing policy guidance;
- (iv) implementing the December 2020 MSME package; and
- (v) strengthening engagement with the private sector and other stakeholders.

Moreover, there are several critical issues of particular interest to LDCs that warrant further development, namely:

- Promoting MSMEs' access to information and providing policy guidance
- Access to finance for capacity building
- Implementing the December 2020 MSME package
- Strengthening engagement with the private sector and other stakeholders

Recommendations for MC13

As discussions edge closer to MC13, a host of opportunities for collaboration and concrete deliverables emerge, positioned to empower LDC MSMEs. These areas encompass:

- Engaging in technical capacity building
- Promoting financial inclusivity
- Resolving standards and requirements issues

Conclusion

With MC13 approaching, implementing the 2020 MSME Package is vital in addressing the pressing challenges confronting LDC MSMEs. Encouragingly, the IWG's positive trajectory highlights substantial advancements. An ongoing outcome document serves as a strategic roadmap, outlining actionable steps to realize the Group's objectives while simultaneously enabling LDC MSMEs to progress in international trade.

Introduction

LDCs and MSMEs

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are widely recognised for their significant contributions to sustainable development, economic growth, creation of jobs, provision of public goods and services, facilitating poverty alleviation, and reducing inequality.¹ According to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), MSMEs constitute approximately 95% of all businesses worldwide and contribute to 60% of the global workforce.² However, MSMEs, particularly in developing and least developed countries (LDCs), face several obstacles when seeking to participate in international trade.³ These challenges include, but are not limited to, the lack of access to information and knowledge of international markets, non-tariff barriers (NTBs) such as general or product-specific quotas, complex regulations and border procedures, and limited access to finance.⁴

According to a recent International Labour Organisation (ILO) report, MSMEs play a critical role in economic development and employment in LDCs, accounting for 82% of total employment.⁵ For instance, surveys conducted by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) show that MSMEs account for 98% of all firms in the Asia-Pacific region, employ 50% of the workforce, contribute approximately 17% of national gross domestic product (GDP) in low-income countries, and between 40% and 50% in higher-income countries.⁶ Furthermore, vibrant, growth-oriented and productive MSMEs are crucial for LDCs to strengthen their engagement with global value chains and move away from solely relying on raw material exports.⁷

The participation of LDC MSMEs in international trade has been low. Based on data from the World Bank Enterprise Surveys (WBES), it is evident that manufacturing MSMEs in developing economies and LDCs predominantly focus on domestic sales rather than international trade.⁸ According to the WTO, the global average percentage of total MSME sales derived from direct exports was only 11.1 per cent between 2016 and 2021.⁹ When comparing manufacturing MSMEs in LDCs to those in developing economies, it becomes apparent that LDC MSMEs lag in terms of direct exports, accounting for only 7.9 per cent compared to 11.5 per cent in developing economies, suggesting that LDC MSMEs face greater limitations in their capacity to engage in direct exports.¹⁰

¹ Liu, C. K., 2020. Policy Brief: the Role of Micro-Small and Medium Enterprises in Achieving SDGs.

² WTO, 2023. Informal Working Group on Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ ILO, 2022. *Present and future of work in the Least Developed Countries*.

⁶ United Nations, 2022. *Policy Guidebook for MSME development in Asia and the Pacific*.

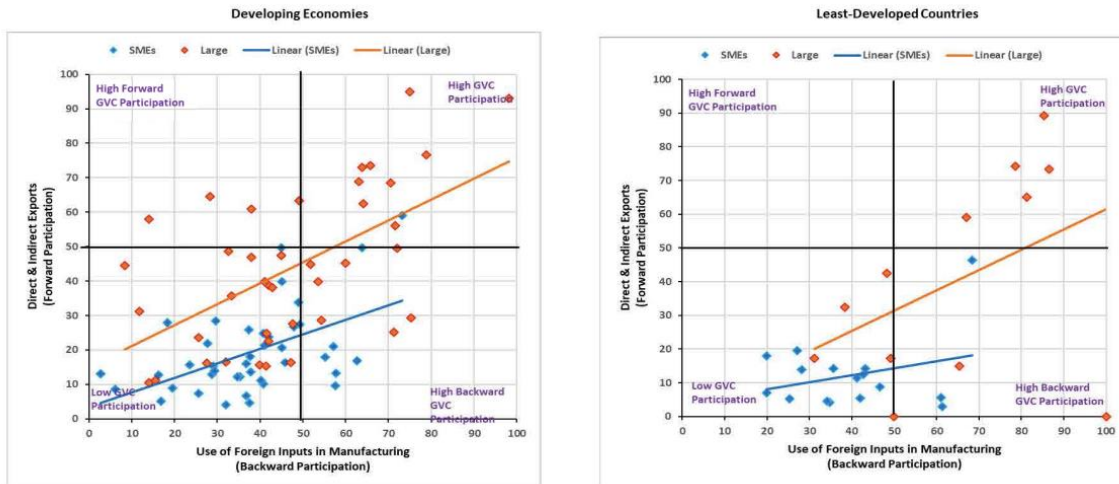
⁷ Almeghari, H. & Ojala, J., 2021. *Structural barriers to SME-ecosystem development in LDC's – Regulatory Frameworks, Technical Capacities and Access to Finance*.

⁸ WTO, 2022. *Small and Medium Manufacturing Enterprise Trade Participation on Developing Economies*.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The figure below shows that MSMEs in LDCs have limited integration into Global Value Chains (GVCs), relying more on domestic inputs and low-export demand than larger firms.¹¹ While some large firms in LDCs demonstrate high levels of GVC participation, no LDC MSMEs report significant international trade shares as part of their total sales.¹²



Note: Each square represents the average GVC participation of SMEs in each developing economy.

Source: WTO estimates based on World Bank Enterprise Surveys.

Figure 1: Small and Medium Manufacturing Enterprise Trade Participation on Developing Economies (Source: WTO, 2022)

MSMEs face numerous barriers to growth, including limited access to finance, complex regulatory frameworks, and insufficient technical capacity.¹³ For instance, according to the UNDP (2022), South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and East Asia Pacific have the highest proportions of financially constrained micro-enterprises (53%, 52%, and 41%, respectively), as well as small and medium enterprises (50%, 53%, and 44%) at the regional level.¹⁴ Notably, finance gaps relative to potential demand are highest in the Middle East and North Africa (88%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (87%).¹⁵

Moreover, MSMEs, particularly those in LDCs, face an additional obstacle *vis-à-vis* limited access to digital trade facilitation platforms. A United Nations Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation indicated a significant gap in cross-border paperless trade implementation between developed economies and LDCs. While developed economies scored 57.59%, LDCs recorded only 24.44%.¹⁶ The lack of interoperable trade facilitation platforms causes delays and congestion at border crossings, impeding MSME trade timelines.

Despite their vital role in LDCs, MSMEs confront various challenges. Understanding the particular proclivities that affect these businesses is essential for developing effective

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Almeghari, H. & Ojala, J., 2021. *Structural barriers to SME-ecosystem development in LDC's – Regulatory Frameworks, Technical Capacities and Access to Finance*.

¹⁴ UNDP, 2022. *Harnessing the Full Potential and Building the Resilience of MSMEs And The Informal Sector for an Inclusive and Sustainable Recovery In Developing Countries, LDCs and SIDS*.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gupta, S. & Mangadu, A. N., 2023. *Enhancing the Capacity of MSMEs to Participate in Global Value Chains*.

policies and strategies. The WTO Informal Working Group (IWG) on MSMEs is a key platform for addressing MSMEs' varied challenges and supporting MSMEs' growth and development in LDCs. The IWG provides an environment for WTO members to discuss and find solutions to trade-related difficulties facing MSMEs, as well as to create and promote policies and strategies that facilitate their involvement in international trade. The work of the IWG is especially significant for LDCs since it helps them achieve their economic development goals.

The Informal Working Group on MSMEs at the WTO and LDCs

In 2015, the Philippines suggested that the WTO General Council consider facilitating discussions for MSMEs.¹⁷ The following year, in July 2016, Brunei Darussalam, Lao PDR, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand underscored the significance of MSMEs in international trade during a workshop on "*Enhancing the Participation of MSMEs*".¹⁸ During the General Council meeting held in May 2017, a group of 47 members, with individual European Union member states, established an Informal Dialogue on MSMEs, forming the basis for the Informal Working Group (IWG) for MSMEs.¹⁹ Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay presented a proposal in June 2017 for developing the existing MSME discussions at the Informal Dialogue on MSMEs (Friends of MSMEs), to include issues such as addressing information and transparency, trade facilitation, e-commerce, and MSME trade finance.²⁰

Eventually, in December 2017, 88 WTO member countries, of which 3 are LDCs (Afghanistan, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar) signed a declaration at the WTO 11th Ministerial Conference (MC11) stating their intention to establish an Informal Working Group (IWG) on MSMEs.²¹ The IWG on MSMEs was established to analyse and address how WTO members can better assist MSMEs' involvement in global trade and address the challenges they face.²² As of March 2023 and until the writing of this paper, 98 WTO members have joined the MSMEs IWG and are engaging in its discussions aiming for outcomes. Among them are only four LDCs: Afghanistan, the Gambia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar.²³ With less than 9% of the 46 LDCs taking part in the IWG on MSMEs and the vast majority not participating, it is questionable whether outcomes of the MSMEs' Group will be representative of LDCs' interests and will be able to attract and cater for the needs of more of them.

This note provides an update on the MSMEs IWG discussion and progress, particularly the implementation of the 2020 package. It focuses on issues of particular interest to LDCs in the discussions to help build a better understanding of their concerns and aspirations. Furthermore, the note documents the milestones achieved at the meetings of the IWG and the discussions that have taken place concerning issues of particular interest to LDCs. Ultimately, the note concludes with recommendations for LDCs on advancing interests and positioning themselves in IWG outcomes at MC13.

¹⁷ JOB/GC/80 (RESTRICTED)

¹⁸ JOB/GC/95 (RESTRICTED)

¹⁹ WTO, 2023. Informal Working Group on Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs).

²⁰ JOB/GC/127

²¹ WTO, 2023. Informal Working Group on Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs).

²² Ibid.

²³ INF/MSME/2/Rev.11

The MSME IWG Progress and Prospects for MC13

The 2020 MSME Package and the MC12 Report

The IWG met for the first time in March 2018.²⁴ During the following two years, discussions intensified around proposals submitted by participating Members, until in December 2020, discussions arrived at a key milestone, the “MSMEs Package” and revised in 2021 and given document number (INF/MSME/4/Rev.1). The 2020 MSME Package was endorsed by 97 WTO members, which included 6 LDCs (Afghanistan, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar, Mali and Togo).²⁵ As per INF/MSME4/Rev.1, the package consisted of the following set of six recommendations and declarations targeted at resolving the challenges that smaller businesses face while trading cross-borders:

- (i) collection and maintenance of MSME-related information;
- (ii) access to information;
- (iii) trade facilitation and MSMEs;
- (iv) promoting MSMEs inclusion in regulatory development in the area of trade;
- (v) MSMEs and the WTO Integrated Database and;
- (vi) addressing the trade-related aspects of MSME's access to finance and cross-border payments.

In 2021, the Working Group held six open-ended meetings during which implementing the December 2020 Package was on top of the agenda. Discussions also tackled potential new issues to be considered and lead to the launch of the Trade4MSMEs²⁶ web platform²⁷ and a database of MSME references in Trade Policy Reviews (TPR)²⁸. In 2022, the Group convened five open-ended sessions, with topics centred on trade digitalisation, cyber readiness, Non-Tariff Measures (NTMs), access to information, access to finance, and low-value shipments. Other themes of interest included rural MSMEs, sustainability, cross-border paperless trade, low-value shipments and including gender perspectives in MSMEs trade recommendations.²⁹

It is worth noting that the MSME Group issued its draft ministerial document for MC12 in September 2021.³⁰ The draft declaration stated the Group's commitment to addressing the challenges that MSMEs face in international trade, recognised the negative impacts of COVID-19 on small businesses and highlighted the need for a globally coordinated response to help MSMEs recover from the pandemic. However, the geopolitical climate prevented the MSME Group from issuing the declaration, and instead a report was circulated on the progress the Group has achieved (WT/MIN(22)/4).³¹

²⁴ WTO, 2023. Informal Working Group on Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs).

²⁵ Not all LDCs are members of the IWG, Afghanistan, Lao PDR and Myanmar are members of the Group while Mali and Togo are not.

²⁶ For more information on the Trade4MSMEs platform check its link here: trade4msmes.org

²⁷ INF/MSME/R/35

²⁸ WTO, 2023b. *MSME references in trade policy reviews*.

²⁹ INF/MSME/W/36

³⁰ WT/MIN(21)/1/Rev.1

³¹ INF/MSME/R/35

The IWG's Five Pillars of Discussion and Progress to MC13

MC13 will take place in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE), during the week of February 26, 2024.³² On 13 March 2023, the MSME IWG had its first open-ended meeting of the year to discuss the next steps. In the March meeting, the outgoing Coordinator of the IWG, Ambassador José Luis Cancela, Ambassador to the Permanent Mission of Uruguay to the WTO, proposed to structure discussions over five pillars for the IWG's work programme. Members agreed with the Work Programme. As per the INF/MSME/R/36 report, the five pillars are:³³

- (vi) increasing MSMEs' access to information;
- (vii) increasing capacity to promote MSME trade inclusion;
- (viii) providing policy guidance;
- (ix) implementing the December 2020 MSME package; and
- (x) strengthening engagement with the private sector and other stakeholders.

Since the inception of the discussions in March, four subsequent meetings occurred on the dates of 26 April, 2023, 27 June 2023, 3 July 2023 and 9 October 2023. These meetings monitored the progress of developments and addressed matters pertinent to MC13.

The 26 April, 2023 meeting discussed various topics, including increasing MSMEs' access to information (Pillar 1), the need for more training and capacity building (Pillar 2) and increasing private sector engagement (Pillar 5).³⁴ During this meeting, discussions also focused on the benefits of digitisation for small businesses, the role of intellectual property rights in supporting small businesses' access to finance, and how MSMEs deal with sustainability standards.³⁵ It was noted that consideration should be given to developing compendiums of good practices on topics such as trade facilitation - an approach that the Group had explored at their first meeting in 2023.³⁶

On June 27, 2023, commemorating MSME Day, the IWG, under Pillar 1 of the work programme, unveiled a revamped Trade4MSMEs platform and introduced the "Trade Game."³⁷ These initiatives aim to assist MSMEs in navigating the complexities of international trade and aid policymakers in designing measures tailored to the needs of small businesses.³⁸

During the 3 July, 2023 meeting, the IWG deliberated on the outputs for MC13.³⁹ Under pillar 2 of the work programme, concrete deliverables were proposed, including the creation of Handbooks compiling the MSME and Policymaker Guides of the Trade4MSMEs platform and a compendium of good practises relating to MSME integration in national Authorised Economic Operators (AEO) programmes.⁴⁰ Moreover, it was suggested that, following the release of the revised version of the Trade4MSMEs

³² WTO, 2022b. *WTO members accept UAE, Cameroon offers to host Ministerial Conferences.*

³³ INF/MSME/R/36

³⁴ INF/MSME/R/38

³⁵ WTO, 2023. *Small business group appoints new coordinator, discusses digitalisation, finance and standards.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Trade4MSMEs, 2023. *The Trade Game /*

³⁸ WTO, 2023. *Working Group announces Small Business Champions, Trade4MSMEs update and new Trade Game.*

³⁹ INF/MSME/R/39

⁴⁰ INF/MSME/CN/22

platform, these Handbooks consolidating MSME and Policymaker Guides be prepared for publication at MC13, where they could form part of the MC13 deliverables.⁴¹ During this meeting, MSME Group members directed the Coordinator, Ambassador Matthew Wilson, to prepare a draft MC13 outcome document, underscoring the significance of enabling MSME trade and incorporating the commitments discussed within the MSME Group.⁴²

The MSME IWG held its fourth meeting of 2023 on October 9, 2023. The Group discussed preparations for MC13 and supported the draft Coordinator's Report, which summarises their work since December 2017.⁴³ The report highlights the Group's accomplishments, including: (i) the December 2020 package of six recommendations and declarations; (ii) the Trade4MSMEs website; (iii) databases of MSME provisions in regional trade agreements and trade policy reviews; (iv) the Trade4MSMEs Network; (v) The Trade Game and; (vi) the Small Business Champions initiative.⁴⁴ The report also identifies key areas for future work, such as "good practices" handbooks and MSME challenges. The Coordinator proposed potential showcases for MC13, including a ministerial-level meeting to launch resources for women-led MSMEs and AEOs.⁴⁵ Additionally, the Group discussed holding a session during the business forum in collaboration with other WTO Working Groups and the ITC.⁴⁶ The Group also reviewed a draft compendium for women-led MSMEs, and the Coordinator encouraged members to provide feedback for ongoing updates. The Group noted that a compendium on AEO programs with an MSME dimension is in preparation and will be sent to members for review.⁴⁷ Both documents are planned to be released before MC13.

Notably, these meetings did not centre on the concerns or specific needs of LDCs, and no LDC submitted a proposal for MC13.

⁴¹ INF/MSME/CN/22

⁴² INF/MSME/R/35

⁴³ INF/MSME/R/40

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Mapping issues of interest to LDCs

Promoting MSME's access to information and providing policy guidance

The vast and complex nature of the rules and standards required for the proper conduct of international trade is noteworthy. MSMEs face more difficulties navigating these regulations than larger businesses with significant resources. Barriers to acquiring relevant and timely information impede MSMEs' business growth processes and limit their efforts towards international trade integration.⁴⁸ A significant obstacle faced by small exporting enterprises aspiring to expand into developed country markets is the absence of access to information regarding market requirements in the sector.⁴⁹ Access to information is critical in promoting MSMEs' participation in international trade through market intelligence, regulatory knowledge, financing alternatives, technological insights, networking possibilities, and capacity-building assistance. Access to information enables MSMEs to make informed choices, identify market opportunities, adhere to trade standards, access capital, integrate technology, and interact with stakeholders, resulting in increased growth, competitiveness, and success in international markets.

During their discussions, members of the IWG acknowledged that obtaining complete and accurate information on legislation governing international trade transactions is a major barrier for MSMEs.⁵⁰ Several recommendations have been made in the open meetings to promote MSMEs' access to information. For instance, using artificial intelligence technology to benefit MSME access to information and trade participation has been a recent topic of discussion in the IWG.⁵¹ Artificial intelligence-powered digital logistics now enable far more precise tracking of shipments and inventories, allowing businesses to better assess their production and demand.⁵² Furthermore, it is estimated that the rise of artificial intelligence and other digital technologies will reduce trade costs by another 10.5% over the next 15 years, benefiting MSMEs and firms in developing countries, mainly if appropriate complementary policies are implemented.⁵³

Additionally, increasing support of the Global Trade Helpdesk (see box 1. below), ePing (see box 2. Below) and its MSME accessibility has also been emphasised. It is, however, worth noting that LDCs often lack the technical capacity needed to improve access to information. Focusing on capacity building ensures better access to information for LDC MSMEs. Furthermore, regarding policy guidance, the IWG noted continued research on topics of particular importance to MSME trade, intending to develop policy guidance in the form of recommendations where appropriate. Topics covered previously at MSME Group meetings included MSME provisions in RTAs, digitalisation, low-value shipping, sustainability, rural MSMEs, and informality. Additionally, a recent proposal

⁴⁸ Mukiibi, J. & Sajous, L., 2021. *Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises: Key developments and updates in the Informal Working Group discussions among World Trade Organization members.*

⁴⁹ ITC, 2023. *Improving SME access to information unlocks medicinal-plant product markets.*

⁵⁰ Mukiibi, J. & Sajous, L., 2021. *Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises: Key developments and updates in the Informal Working Group discussions among World Trade Organization members.*

⁵¹ INF/MSME/R/36

⁵² Ganne, E. & Lundquist, K., 2019. *The digital economy, GVCs and SMEs.*

⁵³ Ibid.

suggests further exploring artificial intelligence to examine how it could improve MSME access to information and trade participation.⁵⁴

Box 1. The Global Trade Helpdesk

The Global Trade Helpdesk (GTH) is a multi-agency initiative led by ITC, UNCTAD, and the WTO that aims to simplify market research for enterprises, particularly MSMEs, by integrating trade and business information into a single online platform. The initiative expands on existing ITC, UNCTAD, and WTO services, as well as partner organisations such as FAO, IADB, AFDB, WCO, and WB, to produce an integrated solution that puts a wealth of global trade information at the fingertips of entrepreneurs globally. Using GTH, firms can compare the demand for their products across markets, explore tariffs and other market access conditions, access details on buyers, navigate domestic export processes, and find business partners.

Source: globaltradehelpdesk.org

Box 2. ePing

Launched in 2016, the ITC's ePing is an online alert mechanism to help businesses stay informed about changes in sanitary and phytosanitary measures (SPS) and technical barriers to trade (TBT) in international markets. With ePing, those registered on this free online platform receive daily or weekly alerts of notifications on sectors and products relevant to their export markets. ePing also includes additional features such as the national forum, a communication platform where subscribers can discuss upcoming changes with other users and government officials.

Source : intracen.org

Access to finance for capacity building

Many LDCs lack the human, institutional, and infrastructure to participate in international trade effectively. Without this, these countries cannot increase the quantity and quality of competitively priced products and services they supply to global markets.⁵⁵ Furthermore, improving trade capacity necessitates the development of more efficient ports and road networks, providing automated equipment to customs officials, and educating entrepreneurs on capitalising on global business opportunities.⁵⁶

Access to finance is crucial for the capacity-building of LDC MSMEs. The main challenges restricting LDCs access to finance are: inadequate technical resources for project preparation, insufficient project management capacity, burdensome and fragmented financier prerequisites, inability to establish an integrated strategy across donors and financiers, fragile public financial management practises, and a lack of

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ WTO, 2023e. *Building trade capacity*.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

technical expertise.⁵⁷ Additionally, financial constraints impact MSMEs' ability to deal with fluctuations in trade costs and amplify additional challenges, such as a lack of access to technology and research and development (R&D), which impacts market competitiveness.⁵⁸

For example, in Tanzania, banks continue to incur high transaction costs for servicing the lesser loan amounts that MSMEs and smallholder farmers require.⁵⁹ Many LDC enterprises also lack the financial expertise and knowledge to access loans. Furthermore, smallholder farmers face several business hazards that limit their ability to borrow, which affects their businesses. External risks associated with agricultural lending include: (i) price volatility and climate change, which are difficult to influence; (ii) business risks, such as insufficient financial records related to farming structures and operations; and (iii) product misalignment, where typical banking financial products or practises may not align well with the realities and needs of the agricultural sector - such as the seasonal nature of cash flows.⁶⁰

The Draft Declaration on Access to Trade Finance for MSMEs⁶¹ expands on an earlier proposal (INF/MSME/W/14/Rev.2) aimed at addressing MSMEs' trade finance gaps. It encourages WTO members to participate in the Working Group on Trade, Debt, and Finance (WGTDF) and the IWG on MSMEs to "identify and implement concrete measures that can facilitate MSME access to finance, particularly through: the exchange of best practises and; information-sharing on relevant technical assistance and capacity-building."⁶² The declaration is significant as it emphasises the necessity of addressing trade-related aspects of MSMEs' access to finance in enabling MSMEs to address trade-related challenges, particularly in economic recoveries affecting developing countries and LDCs. Given the current geopolitical and economic climate, increasing access to finance for LDC MSMEs is important.

Implementing the December 2020 MSME package

In December 2020, the IWG endorsed six recommendations and declarations focused on addressing the issues that smaller businesses experience in international trade.⁶³

a) Recommendation on the collection and maintenance of MSME-related information

The first recommendation is collecting and maintaining MSME-related information, which focuses on the voluntary provision of MSME-related information during trade policy review processes following the checklist in Annex 1.⁶⁴ Transparency, knowledge sharing, policy coherence, peer review, and accountability can all be enhanced by sharing MSME-related information through voluntary provisions in TPRs. Including information concerning MSMEs in TPRs enhances transparency by facilitating a

⁵⁷ UN-OHRRLS, 2023. *Improving Access to Finance for the Least Developed Countries*.

⁵⁸ UNESCAP, 2023. *Handbook on Provisions and Options for inclusive and Sustainable Development in Trade Agreements*.

⁵⁹ Johnstone, K., Perera, N. & Garside, B., 2020. *Small business, big demand: Facilitating finance for productive uses of energy in Tanzania*.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ INF/MSME/W/25

⁶² Campos, S. L., Baliño, S. & Bartel, C., 2020. Joint Statement on Micro, Small, and Medium Sized Enterprises: History and latest developments in the Informal Working Group.

⁶³ INF/MSME/4/Rev.1

⁶⁴ INF/MSME/4

comprehensive understanding of trade policies and measures that impact MSMEs. Including MSME-related information ensures accountability and progress monitoring in supporting MSMEs, ultimately establishing an environment favourable for their growth and development.

b) Declaration on access to information

The second recommendation focuses on the declaration on access to information, which entails contributions to the operationalisation of the Global Trade Helpdesk (GTH), voluntary provision of data to the WTO Secretariat, improving the availability of trade-related information for the GTH, providing technical assistance to LDC members to implement declaration provisions and conduct a review process to assess difficulties experienced by members in submitting the requested information.⁶⁵ These activities improve MSMEs' ability to manage international trade procedures, make informed business decisions, and participate in international markets. The declaration fosters a conducive atmosphere for MSMEs by reducing information gaps.

c) Recommendation on trade facilitation and MSMEs

The third recommendation is on trade facilitation, which urges WTO members to fully implement the Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA), including transparency measures, design and provide capacity building and technical assistance which considers trade needs and challenges of MSMEs in TFA implementation, increase stakeholder engagement, promote good practices for implementation of the TFA in an MSME-friendly manner and adopt digital solutions to support the movement of goods across borders.⁶⁶ These initiatives are essential as they seek to lower barriers, improve compliance, develop collaboration, establish a favourable business environment, and streamline customs procedures, ultimately enhancing MSMEs' trading capacities, competitiveness, and prospects in the global marketplace.

d) Recommendation on promoting MSMEs inclusion in regulatory development in the area of trade

The fourth recommendation focuses on promoting MSME's inclusion in regulatory development in trade, which encourages members to promote the consideration of specific needs of MSMEs in domestic regulatory development consistent with implementation capacities, engaging MSMEs, assessing the impact of possible new regulatory measures on MSMEs, providing time for MSMEs to comment on drafts related to new regulatory measures, reduce unnecessary regulatory burdens on MSMEs and conduct training and capacity building programs to help MSMEs participate in domestic regulatory development.⁶⁷

e) Recommendation on MSMEs and the WTO Integrated Database

The fifth recommendation is on the WTO Integrated Database (IDB), which highlights the need to voluntarily provide information on the Decision on Modalities and Operation of the Integrated Database (IDB Decision)⁶⁸ and the applied preferential tariffs in

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ INF/MSME/4

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ G/MA/367

RTAs.⁶⁹ MSMEs can make informed judgements on export opportunities, discover prospective markets, and negotiate complex trade rules if they can access comprehensive and up-to-date IDB data. This encourages MSMEs to participate more in international trade and allows them to take advantage of preferential trade agreements, improving their competitiveness and growth.

f) Declaration on addressing the trade-related aspects of MSME's access to finance and cross-border payments

The sixth recommendation is on trade-related aspects of MSME's access to finance and cross-border payments, which calls on members to engage in the IWG to identify concrete measures that can facilitate addressing the challenges linked to access to finance and cross-border payments, cooperate on initiatives such as the Legal Entity Identifier (LEI), organise information sessions on topics related to trade-related aspects of MSMEs' access to finance and cross-border payments.⁷⁰ This promotes communication and collaboration among stakeholders to find solutions that enable increased access to finance, aiding MSMEs to get the funding they require for operations, expansion, and international trade. Furthermore, tackling cross-border payment issues can help enhance trade transactions, reduce costs and improve the efficiency of MSMEs.

The December 2020 MSME package is critical in the context of the MC13. The objectives of the 2020 MSME package are consistent with MC13's larger mission of supporting inclusive trade. By advancing the cause of LDC MSMEs, it is evident that supporting these businesses can accelerate job creation, poverty reduction, and inclusive development. Furthermore, the package underlines the importance of trade facilitation by advocating for streamlined trade procedures and reduced barriers for MSMEs, coinciding with the MC13's focus on enhancing efficiency and lowering barriers in customs and border operations. The package also encourages online platforms as tools for small businesses to get access to and insights into global markets, consistent with MC13 debates on e-commerce and the digital economy. Additionally, the package emphasises capacity building, which aligns with the MC13's goal of increasing trade-related technical assistance and capacity building for developing countries. As a result, the December 2020 MSME package retains relevance at MC13 and contributes considerably to the conference's larger goals of fostering a more equal and sustainable global trade landscape.

Strengthening engagement with the private sector and other stakeholders

Increased engagement with the private sector helps policymakers gain insight directly from MSMEs about the difficulties they encounter, allowing policymakers to guide policy action better and ensure that activities carried out benefit MSMEs. To combat the many challenges MSMEs confront, such as keeping up with digitalisation, access to finance, and capacity building, MSMEs need to enhance their interaction with the policymakers and other stakeholders. For instance, digital solutions are frequently intended for bigger businesses and are challenging for MSMEs to scale down. Unlike

⁶⁹ INF/MSME/4

⁷⁰ Ibid.

large businesses, many MSMEs lack the means of conducting comprehensive market research before entering new markets, instead opting to pursue opportunities and develop only minimally.⁷¹

At MC13, structured engagement with MSMEs and their representatives can help facilitate discussions and exchange best practices. Enabling MSME representatives nominated by MSME Group members to attend open-ended sessions, establishing an MSME advisory board to follow the MSME group's exchanges, and organising private sector-led workshops are all ways to strengthen stakeholder engagement at the WTO.⁷²

The MSME Group has authorised a new reporting symbol to allow the MSME Group to receive ideas from the private sector in a more formal and well-documented manner. So far, four documents have been received on:

- challenges women and youth are facing from Africa Women in Trade (INF/MSME/P/1);
- a proposal on simplified tax/duty collection on imported low-value shipments from the Global Express Association (GEA) (INF/MSME/P/2);
- simplified duty collection concept for low-value B/C2C imports, possible process aspects from the GEA (INF/MSME/P/3); and
- the role of digitalisation and e-commerce for MSMEs from the Asian Trade Centre Foundation (INF/MSME/P/4).

In February 2022, the Group met virtually with participants from the private sector. Participants from the private sector discussed cyber readiness, support for adopting the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) Model Law on Electronic Transferable Records (MLETR), and the proliferation of sustainability standards affecting MSME trade.⁷³

⁷¹ Lin, D.-Y., Rayavarapu, S. N., Tadjeddine, K. & Yeoh, R., 2022. *Beyond financials: Helping small and medium-sized enterprises thrive*.

⁷² INF/MSME/R/37

⁷³ INF/MSME/R/35

Recommendations and prospects of convergence in the run-up to MC13

As discussions move closer to MC13, it becomes imperative to explore possibilities for collaboration and convergence between countries that bridge gaps and provide a favourable climate for LDC MSMEs to thrive.

1. Engaging in technical capacity building

Regarding cooperation between developed countries and LDCs, it is essential to recognise that MSMEs in all these regions encounter similar challenges, such as lack of access to information and access to finance, among other challenges. However, the intensity of these challenges is notably higher in developing countries and LDCs. Consequently, inclusive growth initiatives must be prioritised to strengthen the competitiveness of LDC MSMEs. The growth of MSMEs can be facilitated by implementing focused capacity-building programmes, providing technical assistance, and expanding initiatives to improve access to finance. Furthermore, integrating MSMEs into regional and international trade cooperation and global value chains can potentially reduce economic disparities. Enhancing the institutional and administrative skills of LDC MSMEs requires strengthening regulatory frameworks through trade-related capacity-building programmes, institutional reform support, and knowledge sharing among stakeholders.

Additionally, the involvement of public-private partnerships (PPPs), the active participation of stakeholders, and the implementation of effective governance mechanisms can play a crucial role in facilitating the growth and advancement of MSMEs. LDCs have the opportunity to prioritize trade facilitation, regulatory development, and financial inclusion by implementing focused capacity-building efforts before MC13. As a facilitator, the WTO can arrange workshops and training sessions during ministerial conferences to address the specific capacity-building needs of LDCs and MSMEs.

2. Promoting financial inclusivity

Enhancing access to funding for MSMEs, primarily for women-owned MSMEs, is important. It is important to establish financial institutions and initiatives that cater specifically to MSME needs as recommended by the United Kingdom during the 9 June 2023 Group meeting.⁷⁴ Improving financial literacy among MSMEs and implementing innovative financing techniques, such as microfinance, can further contribute to this goal. Additionally, the transfer of technology between countries also has the potential to enhance productivity and competitiveness through the enhancement of digital literacy and the provision of technical support for adopting technology. At MC13, the WTO is strategically positioned to promote financial inclusion. It can advocate for increased funding for expanding LDC MSMEs with the help of developed countries and international agencies. This will be beneficial to specialised financial institutions that

⁷⁴ INF/MSME/W/43

serve MSMEs. Furthermore, the WTO may be able to improve financial literacy through research and training. In addition, the WTO may use its influence to promote digital literacy and provide technical assistance to LDC MSMEs. Agreements facilitated by the WTO can also expand and promote access to innovative technologies. These practical initiatives demonstrate the WTO's vital role in financial inclusion and the prospect of convergence between developed and developing countries.

3. Resolving standards and requirements issues

The adoption of voluntary sustainability standards may present difficulties for MSMEs in LDCs. Overcoming these issues necessitates capacity-building efforts, technical help, training programmes, information exchange, and assistance with complex certification processes. For instance, regulatory norms, certification procedures, and Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) present various problems for smallholder farmers. The adherence to regulatory standards, specifically those on safety and health, can pose significant challenges for small-scale farmers and have implications for their ability to trade with developed countries. Moreover, substantial barriers are presented by the expensive certification requirements mandated by the importing countries. Supply chain complexity, involving various intermediaries, exacerbates issues linked to Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) requirements. To effectively tackle these concerns, it is essential to enhance accessibility to relevant data on good agricultural practices, market dynamics, export regulations, and pricing mechanisms.

The WTO can address the challenges raised by VSS adoption for LDC MSMEs in various ways in preparation for MC13. While these requirements are intended to be beneficial, they can be significant trade barriers for MSMEs in LDCs. The WTO can initiate capacity-building programmes for LDC MSMEs by using its resources and network. Training sessions, workshops, and knowledge-sharing platforms can be included in these programmes to help these businesses understand, comply with, and adapt to VSS. Furthermore, collaboration with international organisations and donor countries ensures that technical assistance reaches LDC MSMEs, thereby overcoming information gaps. Also, the WTO can organise meetings with stakeholders from developed and developing countries to harmonise and streamline certification procedures.

4. Facilitating cross-coordination among Working Groups

Facilitating efficient cross-coordination among various WTO IWGs, particularly in the context of LDCs, is important. It promotes cross-sectoral collaboration, which is key in resolving the multifaceted difficulties that these IWGs face. By coordinating their efforts, these groups can promote the cross-pollination of ideas, fostering innovative solutions to global trade concerns. This is especially important for LDCs, given their limited resources and ability to address these issues unaided. A prime example of successful cross-coordination is the collaboration between the IWG on MSMEs and the IWG on Trade and Gender, cooperating to develop initiatives that support women-owned MSMEs, a crucial aspect for LDCs.

The IWG on MSMEs can address the needs of LDCs in several ways. First, it can continue to work with other IWGs to develop collaborative projects and programmes, ensuring that LDCs can benefit from the knowledge and resources of other WTO members. Establishing a regular coordination mechanism for this purpose is critical, which can be achieved through regular meetings, collaborative workshops, or a dedicated online platform. Second, the MSMEs IWG can focus on developing specific tools and resources for LDCs. This could include creating training materials, providing technical assistance, or creating online platforms that connect LDC MSMEs with possible partners and customers. Finally, the IWG on MSMEs can advocate for LDCs' interests within the WTO. This includes campaigning to include LDC concerns in WTO discussions and ensuring LDCs can access the financial and technical assistance needed.

5. Enhancing LDC Participation in the WTO IWG

LDCs have a compelling case for viewing the IWG within the WTO favourably and with a sense of urgency. The IWG serves as a valuable platform that offers exposure and the potential for significant benefits. Within the IWG, critical issues gain visibility, generating crucial recommendations and policy-level guidelines. Developing and implementing these recommendations is of paramount importance, with a focus on enhancing visibility to bring to light instruments that many WTO members may not be aware of. To further advance LDCs' interests within the IWG, it is imperative to facilitate increased conversations and engagement between developed countries and LDC members. Such dialogue is essential for productive collaboration.

However, logistical constraints have proven to be a significant impediment to the full involvement of LDCs in the WTO IWG. The small size of missions based in Geneva exacerbates the challenge of managing multiple parallel events and meetings. LDC missions are often understaffed, leading to the need for prioritization when multiple meetings are scheduled concurrently. To address this issue, securing funding that enables LDC representatives to participate fully in the IWG is suggested, thereby alleviating these resource limitations. Furthermore, it is vital to explore methods of strengthening and facilitating capital-based engagement. Utilizing online platforms can be a powerful tool in this endeavour, allowing LDC representatives to engage actively and contribute to IWG discussions from their home countries.

LDCs stand to gain significantly from active participation in the IWG, but they face challenges that necessitate innovative solutions. Addressing these challenges opens the door to more engagement, yielding positive results.

Conclusion

The MSME IWG represents an essential platform and an opportunity for LDCs. Sustained involvement throughout discussions is vital to achieving successful outcomes. The importance of policy recommendations cannot be overstated, particularly when engaging multiple stakeholders and implementing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress on discussions.

LDC MSMEs' participation in global value chains can be enhanced through: (i) reduced trade barriers; (ii) addressing non-tariff measures that impede exports; (iii) improved access to affordable financing and credit for LDC MSMEs; (iv) assistance in compliance with international standards; (iv) telecommunications development for connectivity and (v) promotion of sustainable and inclusive value chains in sectors relevant to LDCs.

As MC13 approaches, implementing the 2020 MSME package recommendations is critical to addressing the problems LDC MSMEs experience in international trade. In light of the geopolitical climate and the COVID-19 pandemic, the MSME Group was previously unable to issue a declaration during the second postponement of the Ministerial Conference. However, given the current positive developments by the IWG, there is now a prospect for several advancements by MC13. Notable advancements include the outcome document by the Coordinator, the draft compendium for women-led MSMEs and the compendium on AEO programs, which are to be released before MC13. These deliverables are expected to serve as a strategic roadmap, delineating actionable steps towards achieving the Group's objectives.

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