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Factsheet: Negotiations on fisheries subsidies

WTO members are negotiating rules to prohibit subsidies that threaten the sustainability of fishing to help to ensure the sustainable use and conservation of marine resources. As the only organization that can set and enforce global agreements to rein in distortive subsidies, the WTO has been entrusted by world leaders with the important task of fixing rules on fisheries subsidies.

The creation of fisheries subsidies disciplines has been the subject of work in the WTO's Negotiating Group on Rules since the Doha Development Agenda was launched in 2001, with an elaboration of the negotiating mandate agreed in 2005. The adoption by world leaders in September 2015 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the negotiating mandate agreed at the 11th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC11) have given a renewed sense of urgency to the talks.

Fish stocks and subsidies

According to the latest data from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, fish stocks are at risk of collapsing in many parts of the world due to overexploitation. It is estimated that 34% of global stocks are overfished compared with 10% in 1974, meaning they are being exploited at a pace where the fish population cannot replenish itself. Declining fish stocks threaten to worsen poverty and endanger coastal communities that rely on fishing. Roughly 39 million people depend on capture fisheries for their livelihood. Healthy seas are also important for food security, with fish providing 20% of animal protein needs on average for 3.3 billion people.

In theory, fishing should be held in check by its very environment: low

fish stocks should mean fishing takes more time and costs more money. The problem, however, is that very often state funding keeps unprofitable fishing fleets at sea. Global fisheries subsidies are estimated to range from USD 14 billion to USD 54 billion per year.

Mandate and timeline

Based on the mandate from MC11 and UN SDG Target 14.6, negotiators in the WTO were given the task of securing an agreement in 2020 on disciplines to eliminate subsidies for illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and to prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, with special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries integral to the negotiations.

Ambassador Santiago Wills of Colombia was elected chair of the negotiations in November 2019, taking over from Ambassador Roberto Zapata who had returned to Mexico in August. In March 2020, while preparations for a draft consolidated text were well underway, in-person meetings in the WTO were suspended due to the pandemic and the 12th Ministerial Conference (MC12), originally scheduled for 8-11 June 2020 in Kazakhstan, had to be postponed and has not yet been rescheduled.

At that point in time, remote participation in meetings was not feasible and members used written exchanges for comments and responses to proposals. However, as new platforms for remote participation were installed and technical problems were overcome, online and hybrid meetings started and momentum began to build once again.

On 2 December 2020, Ambassador Wills said he would continue consultations ahead of the meeting of the General Council on 16-17 December and reflect on how to move negotiations forward.

Progress in the negotiations

Despite constraints, members have made much progress in the negotiations. Ambassadors in Geneva and capital-based officials are highly engaged in the negotiations. Members have been negotiating on the basis of a draft consolidated text first introduced in June 2020, with a revised version introduced in early November 2020.

The text covers all the main pillars of the negotiations: a prohibition on subsidies to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing; prohibition on subsidies for fishing overfished stocks; and prohibition on subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing (with placeholders for a

capping mechanism and a list of non-harmful subsidies); and provisions for special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries. Additional draft provisions include specific provisions for least developed countries; technical assistance and capacity building; notification and transparency; institutional arrangements; dispute

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