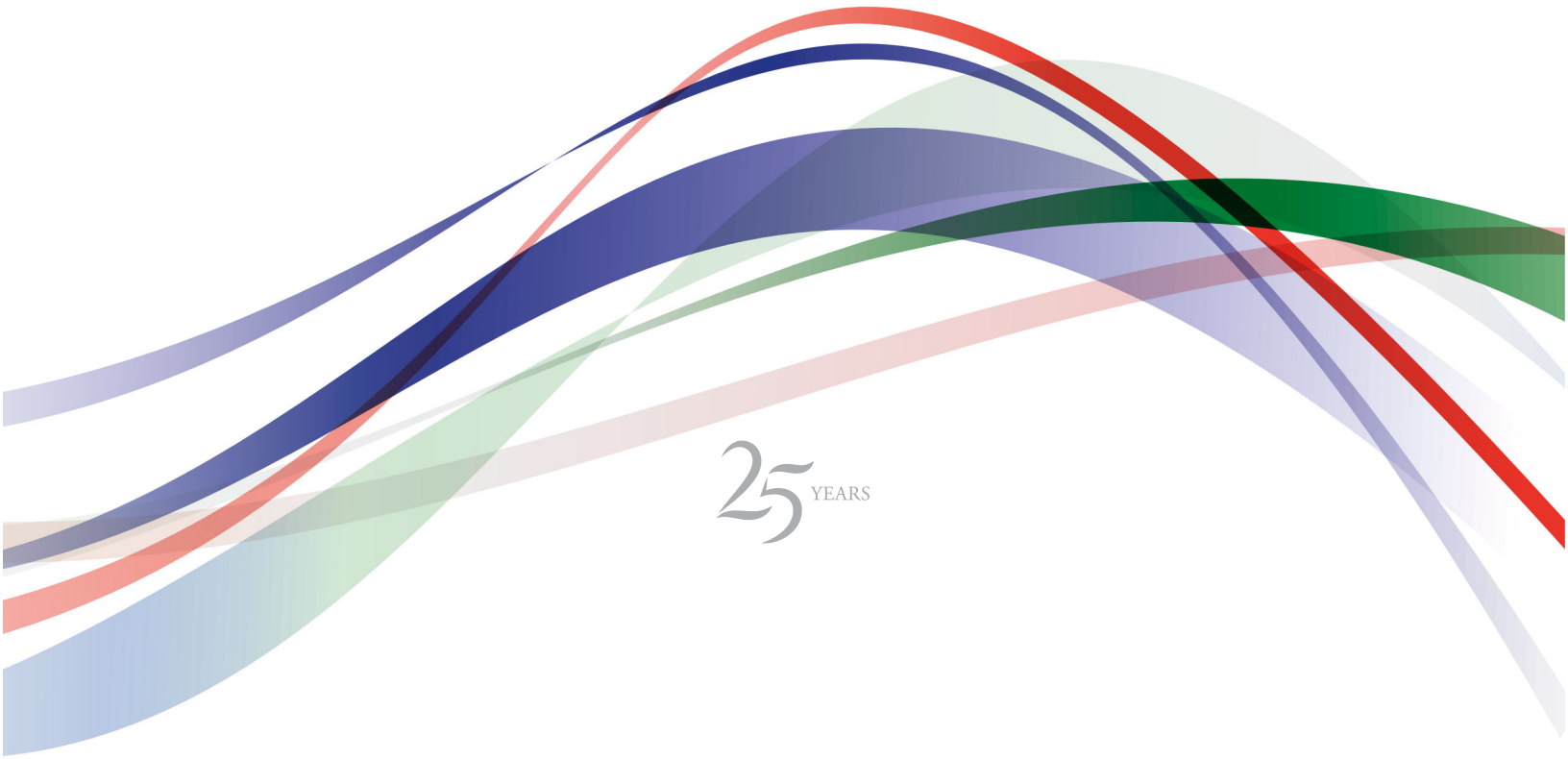
25 years of the WTO

A photographic retrospective



WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION

Introduction

25 years of challenges, successes and perseverance

In an historical context, 25 years is but a blink of an eye.

Yet, a quarter of a century in the life of an organization like the World Trade Organization is sufficient to provide a pretty fair vantage point from which to assess the WTO's impact on its 164 member governments and on the lives of the citizens they represent. Such retrospective assessment must also take into account the fact that while the WTO is only 25, its roots in shaping economic policy run far deeper because its predecessor, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, was on the scene since 1948.

The WTO is an organization that has delivered successes but it has also, in some areas, fallen short of its goals. It has proven to be an energetic and resilient place, where members and Secretariat get knocked down only to rise to their feet and try again.

In the early days, there was great excitement at the prospect of an organization (which technically the GATT was not) where negotiations would flow continuously, where trade policies would be thoughtfully gauged and where disputes could be settled efficiently and effectively. The tiresome and ponderous process of conducting "rounds" of trade negotiations would be replaced by perpetual negotiations enabling members to swiftly adjust policies and adapt to the fast-changing trading landscape. To propel governments on their way, the negotiators who concluded the Uruguay Round in 1994 even provided a "built-in agenda" which in 2000 was to have kickstarted negotiations in agriculture and services.

Things have not worked out exactly as envisaged. A successful Ministerial Conference in Singapore in 1996 paved the way for a trio of important agreements on information technology products, telecommunications and financial services. Disputes that had dragged on for years were settled in the WTO's dispute settlement system, which was quickly dubbed the "jewel in the crown" of the organization. Trade Policy Review reports were seen as vitally important tools for better understanding the plumbing of a nation's trade regime.

In 1998, some of the 20th century's most famous people – Nelson Mandela, Fidel Castro, Bill Clinton and Tony Blair among them – descended on Geneva to attend the 2nd Ministerial Conference which commemorated 50 years of the multilateral trading system. The WTO, it seemed, had the wind in its sails.

But there were fissures in the architecture that soon began to emerge. The built-in agenda foundered on the rocks as delegations worried that another round of agriculture negotiations would bring political peril. The 1997 Asian financial crisis had raised a host of questions about whether WTO trade agreements might impinge on governments' rights to regulate.

The WTO's anniversary party in 1998 revealed that not everyone was sanguine about an organization which many saw as the principle agent of globalization. From the very beginning, the organization had been controversial. In the early days, some journalists, academics and members of civil society fretted that the WTO would become an all-powerful hegemon, intruding into the lives of just about everybody. These fears were manifested in the riots in Geneva which marred the 2nd Ministerial Conference.

These riots came as a shock to many but were a harbinger of what was to come.

If there were one event that characterized the anti-globalization movement of the latter 20th century, it was quite probably the WTO's Seattle Ministerial in 1999. A surreal confab in which, as former Director-General Mike Moore put it, "the vegetarians marched arm in arm with the beef farmers" in opposition to globalization and the WTO. The meeting was chaotic and a substantive failure. But the aftershocks of Seattle also forced the organization to change and become more transparent and more open to stakeholders. The post-Seattle tremors swept away any lingering GATT-era cobwebs and made clear that while the foundations of the WTO may have rested on international law and economics, this was a far more political organization than the GATT ever was.

As the process of continuing negotiations stalled, delegations reverted to the Big Bang approach of large and complex rounds of negotiations. The first attempt at launching a round sank into Puget Sound at the Seattle Ministerial Conference. But the resilience of the WTO came into play in 2001. Following the horrific attacks on New York and Washington, WTO ministers agreed to meet in Doha – most other organizations had cancelled their meetings – and it was there they agreed to launch the Doha Development Agenda. While these negotiations have subsequently disappointed many, they have also delivered important outcomes including amending the Agreement on Trade-related Intellectual Property Rights to improve access to essential medicines, striking the Trade Facilitation Agreement and providing the platform for future reforms in agriculture and disciplines in fisheries subsidies.

Intensive efforts to conclude the Round in 2006 and 2008 collapsed and negotiations in the WTO essentially shut down for five years as the world entered the most precarious economic climate since the Great Depression.

Against a backdrop of limited success in negotiations, the dispute settlement system surged forward. Just nine years after the system began operating, it had already seen more cases initiated (300) than in the entire 47-year history of the GATT. The system was working well but some feared that it was working too well. As negotiations flagged, some believed that members sought to change rules through litigation rather than negotiation. Others said the powerful dispute settlement system made some members apprehensive of striking new deals for fear of being hauled into court by other members with far more resources.

In a way, the WTO has been a victim of both its own success and bad timing. The impressive early negotiating successes and effective dispute settlement system created anxiety in some quarters and an eventual backlash. Hugely significant events like the Asian Crisis, 9/11, the Great Recession, massive trade tensions and finally the COVID-19 pandemic created conditions in which success would always be difficult to attain.

And yet, despite such difficult terrain, the WTO has posted notable achievements in recent years: the Trade Facilitation Agreement, the elimination of all forms of agriculture subsidies, and the extension of the Information Technology Agreement to cover 201 products worth US$1.3 trillion in annual exports. In response to the financial crisis of 2008, the WTO also began to monitor trade measures to evaluate governments' trade responses. This monitoring activity was expanded in 2020 to assess government trade responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The consistently excellent work of the WTO's regular committees has ensured a more transparent trading environment. Hundreds of technical assistance programmes have revved up the capacity of developing country negotiators to participate in the global trading system. Outreach activities like the Public Forum have served to make the WTO more inclusive by bringing civil society and the business community into the conversation.

WTO delegations have begun to explore new ways of working, employing new technologies and different approaches to negotiations. New issues, pertaining to the environment, women's economic empowerment and smaller businesses, have come to the fore even as long-standing matters retain a central place on the agenda.

Over this past quarter of a century, the WTO has met with successes and suffered setbacks. It has encountered criticisms – some fair, some less so. But the one constant throughout these tumultuous years has been the commitment of dedicated and determined delegates and Secretariat staff.

The images contained on these pages capture some of this commitment and reflect the importance that all of us attach to the work of the WTO. Perhaps this explains how the WTO's membership has grown by more than 30% since 1995. These past 25 years have brought a whirlwind of events and transformations that no one could have foreseen, including the most serious global pandemic in over a century. No one can predict what the next 25 will bring, but it seems irrefutable that whatever challenges the future holds, the prospect of meeting them will be far greater if we do it collectively.