
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This trade-monitoring report reviews trade-related developments during the period from 16 October 2014 to 15 October 2015.

The report confirms that WTO Members continue to show some restraint in taking new trade-restrictive measures with the introduction of such measures remaining relatively stable since 2012. During the period under review, 178 new trade-restrictive measures were put in place – an average of just under 15 new measures per month.

More encouragingly, WTO Members continued to adopt measures aimed at facilitating trade, both temporary and permanent in nature. Members implemented 222 new trade-facilitating measures during the period under review – an average of almost 19 measures per month, the second highest number since the beginning of the monitoring exercise.

Nevertheless, the slow pace of removal of previous restrictions means that the overall stock of restrictive measures is continuing to increase. Of the 2,557 restrictions (including trade remedies) recorded by the monitoring exercise since October 2008, only 642 have been removed. In other words, the total number of those restrictive measures still in place currently stands at 1,915 – up by almost 17% compared to the last annual overview. The addition of new restrictive measures, combined with a slow removal rate, remains a persistent concern with 75% of all restrictions measures implemented since 2008 still in place. The longer-term trend in the number of trade-restrictive measures is an area where continued vigilance remains imperative.

The downturn in world trade observed in the last monitoring report continued in the second quarter of 2015. Global economic growth was modest during the review period and continues to be unevenly distributed across countries and regions. Prices for primary commodities including oil are down sharply from last year, squeezing a number of important exporters. Exchange rates have undergone important shifts since the last report and speculation surrounding monetary policy alongside recurring bouts of volatility in financial markets has stoked uncertainty. In light of these developments, the Secretariat recently (30 September 2015) lowered its forecast for world merchandise trade volume growth in 2015 to 2.8%, and reduced its estimate for 2016 to 3.9%.

In the area of trade remedies, the decelerating trend observed in the previous report continued. This owes particularly to the decline in the number of initiations of anti-dumping investigations. Concerning anti-dumping and countervailing measures applied on the basis of investigations initiated in 2008 and 2009 (coinciding with the onset of the financial crisis), the data on extensions of measures pursuant to sunset reviews versus expired measures show no discernible change from the pattern observed in prior periods.

During the review period, the WTO's TBT and SPS Committees saw significant developments. The SPS Committee has witnessed a persistent growth in notifications from developing countries leading to the highest number of notifications to date. An increase in the number of notifications does not, however, automatically imply greater use of measures taken for protectionist purposes. Another noteworthy development was the significant increase in the number of specific trade concerns (STCs) raised in the TBT Committee.

This report shows that WTO Members introduced 128 new general economic support measures – an average of almost 11 new measures per month, and a significant increase from the previous report. The main beneficiaries were selected industries in the agricultural sector, oil and gas industries, the automotive sector and assistance schemes for exports and for SMEs.

In the area of services the period under review witnessed several important policy developments in such diverse sectors as financial services, telecommunications and ICT, audio-visual services, construction services, energy and transport services, services supplied through the movement of natural persons and a number of other sectors. The large majority of the policies adopted during the period under review reflect trade-liberalizing measures.

Several other important trade-related developments also took place during 2015. These include the adoption of the Trade Facilitation Agreement, the expansion of the Information Technology Agreement, the Global Review of Aid for Trade and new initiatives in the area of Regional Trade Agreements.

The overall assessment of this monitoring report is that the uncertain global economic outlook continues to weigh on international trade flows. It shows that the continuing increase in the stock of trade-restrictive measures recorded since 2008 remains of concern. Looking towards the 10th Ministerial Conference in Nairobi in December, WTO Members should reflect on the central role of the multilateral trading system as a predictable and transparent framework helping Members resist protectionist pressures and as a stable and inclusive platform for pursuing further multilateral trade liberalization.