



General Assembly

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Thirty-second special session

Report of the Trade and Development Board on its thirty-second special session

Geneva, 6–8 and 17 September 2021



Introduction

The thirty-second special session of the Trade and Development Board was held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, from 6 to 8 and 17 September 2021. In the course of the session, the Board held three plenary meetings.

I. Action by the Trade and Development Board

Substantive preparations for the fifteenth session of the Conference

1. The Trade and Development Board approved the recommendation of the Preparatory Committee for the fifteenth session of the Conference to officially transmit the most recent version of the negotiating text, endorsed by the Preparatory Committee the afternoon of 17 September 2021, to the Conference.

II. President's summary

A. Opening plenary meeting

2. At the opening plenary meeting, on 6 September 2021, the Acting Secretary-General of UNCTAD noted that the lead up to the fifteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development had been a busy period, with negotiations, thematic Conference pre-events, launches of reports, forums of the fifteenth session of the Conference and regional meetings.

3. The activities were intended to amplify trade and development discussions ahead of the fifteenth session of the Conference and reinforce the voices of developing countries in the current particularly difficult period. The common responsibility was to propose and develop new solutions to the very complex and interconnected economic, health and climate challenges. The mistakes of the past could not be repeated. Rather, it was up to the development community to forge integrated responses that addressed the global health crisis, its asymmetries and the increased inequalities. The fifteenth session of the Conference needed to set the right tone and contribute to solutions ahead of the annual meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the Twelfth Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization, the twenty-sixth Conference of the Parties later in 2021 and the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries in early 2022. Policies and solidarity in the multilateral system had to be adequate for the world, particularly the developing world, to get back on its feet. It was important that, with the active participation of the membership, the fifteenth session of the Conference should offer a platform for solutions.

4. She noted that there would be an intense programme for the fifteenth session of the Conference, from 3 to 7 October 2021. An online platform would provide a virtual conference centre to bring together Heads of State and Government, ministers and other participants from Bridgetown, Geneva and other locations. A cultural event in Barbados on 3 October 2021 would open the Conference. Three World Leaders Summit dialogues would follow, as well as five ministerial round tables and the general debate. The pre-events and Conference events had been envisaged to support the political message, reinforce multilateral dialogue and underscore UNCTAD as a key player in trade and development. The host country was preparing a political declaration, with the involvement of the Prime Minister of Barbados. Lastly, she encouraged member States to finalize negotiations on the outcome document prior to the start of the fifteenth session of the Conference.

5. In response to questions from some delegates, she noted that the composition of panellists for the high-level events would take into account regional and gender balance. Expressions of interest in participating on panels were welcome.

B. Substantive preparations for the fifteenth session of the Conference (Agenda item 2)

Dialogue with civil society

6. The Acting Secretary-General introduced the dialogue with civil society, recalling that the Conference would feed into the narrative on the future of trade and development. Civil society should continue to play its important role, as research partners and conference participants, capacity-building partners and in ensuring their voices were heard at a critical moment in negotiations. The civil society speakers were the Chair of the Caribbean Policy Development Centre and designated host-country civil society organization for the fifteenth session of the Conference, and the Director of the Third World Network.

7. The Chair of the Caribbean Policy Development Centre expressed concern at the lack of consultation and engagement of civil society in the negotiation process, and the likelihood of the situation continuing. She would speak to debt, development and the need for reform of the international development finance system. By United Nations estimates, the impact of current public health crisis caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on the economy threatened to push close to 200 million persons back into a life of poverty. The impact on the Caribbean region, particularly small island developing States such as Barbados, was alarming. Even as public expenditures exploded from attempts to limit the social and economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic had revealed deficiencies in social protection plans, such as the limited sustainability of actions and reach of social schemes. Underlying structural challenges that developing countries faced before the pandemic, such as smallness, geographic remoteness, limited market size, economic concentrations, skills drain and underdeveloped capital markets, had been exacerbated.

8. The negotiations showed hesitancy on the role of UNCTAD in helping developing countries. Like the Prime Minister of Barbados, civil society thus called for a better deal for developing countries facing economic failure and developmental degradation due largely to unsustainable debt levels. The Prime Minister and many developing country counterparts strongly advocated for a new global, financial and development architecture that recognized the acute vulnerability of small island developing States, while demanding equitable and realistic access to concessional and grant funding for developing countries, particularly small and vulnerable States. Civil society concurred on the need for immediate global action on the reprofiling of post-COVID-19 and climate crises-related debt, based on the creation of a universally recognized and applied status of vulnerability measure that accurately and appropriately reflected the structural imbalances and differentiations between economies when determining who, when and how debt relief would be granted. Most of the current negotiating text on debt and development finance, though, seemed a meagre acceptance of the status quo rather than what was just, equitable and urgently needed by developing countries. Ensuring inclusive and sustainable development required balancing the need to reduce debt vulnerability with the need to stimulate development. Developing countries should be permitted full participation in and access to all decision-making forums on debt and development finance reform. The long-standing UNCTAD call for a stronger and reformed international monetary and financial governance system remained valid. Civil society urged UNCTAD member States to increase their ambition on debt reform and relief, starting with full adoption of General Assembly resolution [68/304](#) and support for resolution [69/319](#), and rejected the notion of some members that the United Nations was not an appropriate entity for engaging in the matter.

9. Civil society also urged members of the Board not to ignore the urgent need for a comprehensive review on upscaling of existing special and differential provisions across all regional and international trade platforms. To be true to its mandate, UNCTAD should be empowered by member States to lead within the United Nations system on the development of implementable actions to tackle the existential development crisis facing developing countries.

10. The Chair of Third World Network noted that she also spoke on behalf of Our World Is Not for Sale, an international coalition of civil society groups of networks from the South and the North. She said it was late in the process, as engagement with civil society should have begun a year earlier. In recent years at the United Nations, the practice had been encouraging for engagement, with access to documentation, while respecting different processes for United Nations negotiations. Civil society was acknowledged as a strong partner for multilateralism.

11. Her comments were based on the negotiating text first received on 3 September 2021. COVID-19 had challenged the assumptions and what was understood to be the global trading-investment-financial system. Civil society organizations had long seen the realities, inequities and imbalances on the ground. They had worked with Governments in all countries, attended different forums at the United Nations every year, including the climate change negotiations and the World Trade Organization, and tried to bring those realities to member States and engage as they set norms and action programmes. While transformation was mentioned in different parts of the negotiating text, in looking at the details, a true transformative shift was lacking. For example, inequities in relation to vaccines and the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights would be multiplied with the roll-out of possible treatments for COVID-19, including use of repurposed medicines with multiple patents. Though concerns had been voiced for two years, the situation had not changed. Other areas included economic disruptions and global value chains. One of the most concerning issues at the World Trade Organization was controversial new rules on which there was no consensus, for example, for electronic commerce and trade facilitation. In that regard, the role of UNCTAD in the two to three years before the pandemic had been particularly valuable, through its analysis, in giving the perspective from the developmental reality of developing countries and the most vulnerable.

12. The draft text also mentioned not duplicating the work of others. Covering the same topic from different perspectives was not duplication, as was the case in different United Nations agencies. In the world of trade, UNCTAD brought the important aspect of development. Research and analysis from the World Trade Organization and different think tanks, and at times different parts of UNCTAD, presented different perspectives on the same topic. Civil society saw the value of independent research and the different perspectives of UNCTAD. The Division on Globalization and Development Strategies had produced important analyses that in fact challenged some assumptions held at the World Trade Organization. For example, in the 1990s, when the World Bank was celebrating Asian economies, called the Asian Tigers, in the UNCTAD *Trade and Development Report*, the alarm was raised that the liberalization of the financial sector in Asia was to a degree that ran the risk of external shocks. Yet, more attention was paid in many policymaking spheres to the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and other parts of the United Nations. That was a hard lesson for the Asian region. Since then, civil society organizations and networks and many Governments looked forward to the report for analysis on globalization, both benefits and red flags. Thus, she cautioned that the mention of a biennial review of the publications policy in the text should ensure rigour in intellectual output, without undermining the independence of research.

13. With regard to text on regional trade agreements at the World Trade Organization, she noted the experience in Asia with regional comprehensive economic partnerships that, initially, had provisions that went against fundamental principles of the United Nations of

common but differentiated responsibilities, and of more recent examples of agreements with the controversial right given to foreign investors to directly sue a host Government for often legitimate actions of health, environment, labour protection and national development. There had been pushback on that, with significant support from civil society and domestic stakeholders. Many of those agreements were also outdated, requiring fundamental revision, including the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights. Civil society preferred language that said transformation of the current trade regime was needed towards a more universal, rules-based and equitable one.

14. She recalled that the Rio Declaration was adopted at the highest levels and contained the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, for environmental development. Over the years it had been limited to climate change, and in the current negotiating text, it had been even further reduced in places to only the Paris Agreement. UNCTAD could not be where there was dilution and denial of those fundamental multilateral development principles. There were many other parts of the comment on which civil society could provide inputs, if possible.

15. She also conveyed feedback from civil society on engagement with different UNCTAD divisions. On the Division of International Trade and Commodities, civil society organizations looked forward to a new director for the division, preferably from a developing country, probably a woman, to balance UNCTAD leadership. The technical nature of the division required particular skills and experience in relation to commodities, on which UNCTAD had done important work in early years. As many developing countries were still fundamentally dependent on commodities, civil society wanted to see a return of the key role of UNCTAD in the area. Civil society organizations had had the most engagement with the Division on Globalization and Development Strategies. She noted the development perspective in UNCTAD work, using a model developed with the World Bank, in relation to free trade agreements. The valuable methodology was user friendly and helpful for civil society and Governments in taking decisions on tariff negotiations. Analysis on work around digital rules had also been valuable. The work of the Division for Africa, Least Developed Countries and Special Programmes and the reports on the least developed countries were very important. The work of the Division on Investment and Enterprise on government revenue, trade and finance was valuable and not a duplication issue. There had not been much engagement with the Division on Technology and Logistics, as there seemed to be bottlenecks. Civil society would like to explore issues with the division; it could be more inclusive and participatory. While healthy intellectual exchange was useful, civil society had also noted some contradictions in fundamental assumptions that needed sorting out internally.

16. Some delegates confirmed the importance of the voice of civil society and appreciated the interventions made. One delegate said his delegation would take the issues raised for consideration at the level of the Board.

C. Closing plenary meeting

17. At the closing plenary meeting, the President of the Board welcomed the incoming Secretary-General of UNCTAD, who had joined the secretariat on 13 September 2021.

18. The Secretary-General of UNCTAD opened the closing plenary meeting, emphasizing that she looked forward to meeting the members individually, as well as to the commitment to revitalize UNCTAD, the intergovernmental machinery and the institution's impact on the world. At that critical time for multilateralism and for the history of the United Nations and of UNCTAD, the COVID-19 pandemic had proved to be the greatest challenge of the generation, creating immense setbacks in hard-won progress in reducing inequality and poverty and in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The crisis was not over, and many developing regions faced the prospect of another

“lost decade”. In the search for effective responses, UNCTAD was uniquely positioned to express the voice and concerns of developing countries and be part of the necessary dialogue, as international responses to the crisis were still being negotiated and agreed.

19. As underscored in the UNCTAD *Trade and Development Report 2021: From Recovery to Resilience – The Development Dimension*, the current significant economic recovery of around 5.3 per cent in world gross domestic product was misleading. That figure was an average, with developed countries growing at rates that were multiples of those of some developing regions. The recovery was leaving many people behind; it was a recovery that did not comply with the objective of achieving prosperity for all. One of the greatest lessons of the pandemic was that where there was inequality, there was fragility and, when shocks came, gaps widened and those already suffering suffered the most. It was important to fight against inequality and fragility. That was why the word “resilience” was increasingly included in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals.

20. She was proud to have joined UNCTAD at a time of unparalleled commitment by the membership to the Conference and to intergovernmental consensus-building. The heightened commitment was evident in the significant progress made in the negotiating text. The remaining issues in the text were difficult and sensitive, yet the constructive spirit and engagement made her optimistic that a consensus was within grasp. As the membership was potentially close to agreement on a transformative “Bridgetown Covenant”, attention should turn towards an equally strong political declaration, under the stewardship of the host country. It was imperative to seize the practical and symbolic importance of Barbados, as a small island developing State in the Caribbean, to have a combination of outcome documents that, as a whole, marked the commitment to a transformative Conference. That would, in turn, enhance the unique impact of UNCTAD on development and the capacity to contribute to the response to the crisis. The political importance of both documents should be fully appreciated, as they would set the stage for the irreplaceable and inalienable involvement of UNCTAD in the crucial multilateral negotiations and initiatives currently under way.

21. As she began her tenure as Secretary-General of UNCTAD, she counted on the support of the membership to ensure that the secretariat would continue its long-standing role in supporting member States to maximize the institution’s potential and to transform into action the commitments articulated, including through the Bridgetown Covenant, to revitalize the intergovernmental machinery, so that UNCTAD could play its full role in positively influencing the global development agenda.

22. That shared commitment called for focused and constructive work on key development issues, regardless of the challenges and difficulties, and on making tangible contributions to the broader work of the international community. All would need to work harder in the Board and its subsidiary bodies, a task for which there was already commitment. UNCTAD would have to work with other organizations, first within the United Nations system. The Secretary-General of the United Nations had presented his report, *Our Common Agenda*, to the General Assembly. UNCTAD had contributed to the vision outlined by the Secretary-General of the United Nations. Second, UNCTAD had to work with other international organizations to develop partnerships outside the United Nations system. Partnerships and collaborative efforts were essential to achieve those goals. Third, UNCTAD had to work with all countries, making important efforts for their participation.

23. One example was ensuring the participation of the least developed countries in the fifteenth session of the Conference. With the support of Canada, important efforts were being made for their full participation in the wide-ranging interactive debates at the Conference and overcoming connectivity challenges that panellists and participants from the least developed countries could encounter. UNCTAD had also partnered with regional coordinators in those countries, resulting in a new and fruitful collaboration.

24. Noting that it was her first week at UNCTAD, the Secretary-General of UNCTAD stated that she had much to learn. She had come with no presuppositions, no prejudices and no reservations, but with clear objectives inspired by an unflinching belief in multilateralism. UNCTAD was called to help in the current challenging times, and all were empowered to help. She would do her utmost to seize the opportunity and contribute towards the common objectives of building back better, which should also mean building back differently, for a more resilient, equal and sustainable world. Building back better should also mean doing so together. It was not possible to be successful without, as stated in *Our Common Agenda*, “recognizing that we are bound to each other and that no community or country”, however powerful, “can solve its challenges alone”.

III. Procedural and related matters

A. Adoption of the agenda

(Agenda item 1)

25. At its opening plenary meeting, on 6 September 2021, the Trade and Development Board adopted the provisional agenda, as contained in document [TD/B\(S-XXXII\)/1](#), but amended to reflect the deferral of one item, designation of non-governmental organizations for the purposes of rule 77 of the rules of procedure of the Board (see annex I).¹

26. Regarding the organization of the work, the President of the Board confirmed the distribution of consideration of agenda items as indicated in the programme made available for the session. Under agenda item 2, the Board would hold a dialogue with civil society on 8 September 2021.

27. Furthermore, the President of the Board informed the membership that, as agreed at a meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the fifteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, time permitting, discussions would shift to an informal arrangement to use the time for informal consultations on pending issues related to the pre-Conference negotiating text. There would be some informal meetings facilitated under the guidance of the Friends of the Chair and the President of the Board in her role as Chair of the Preparatory Committee. She noted that the pre-Conference negotiating text to be agreed *ad referendum* would not be formally adopted until the closing plenary meeting, on 7 October, of the fifteenth session of the Conference.

28. Also at its opening plenary meeting, on 6 September 2021, the Trade and Development Board elected Mr. Sung-hwan Lee (Republic of Korea) as Vice-President of the Board, in addition to the Bureau members elected at its sixty-eighth session.²

29. At its second plenary meeting, on 8 September 2021, the President of the Board updated the membership on progress regarding agreement on the pre-Conference negotiating text. While significant progress had been made, at her request, the closing plenary meeting of the thirty-second special session of the Board would be postponed until 17 September 2021, in the afternoon, to facilitate further negotiations.

B. Provisional agenda of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts on E-commerce and the Digital Economy

(Agenda item 3)

30. At its closing plenary meeting, on 17 September 2021, as negotiations had been the focus of member States and regional coordinators, the Board decided to postpone the

¹ The relevant agenda items have been renumbered to reflect this change.

² See [TD/B/68/3](#), chapter III, para. 100.

discussion and consideration of the provisional agenda of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts on E-commerce and the Digital Economy to the seventy-first executive session of the Trade and Development Board to allow adequate time for consultations on the topic.

C. Provisional agenda of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts on Financing for Development

(Agenda item 4)

31. Also at its closing plenary meeting, as negotiations had been the focus of member States and regional coordinators, the Board decided to postpone the discussion and consideration of the provisional agenda of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts on Financing for Development to the seventy-first executive session of the Trade and Development Board to allow adequate time for consultations on the topic.

D. Provisional agenda of the seventy-first executive session of the Trade and Development Board

32. At its closing plenary meeting, on 17 September 2021, the Board approved the provisional agenda of the seventy-first executive session of the Trade and Development Board, as contained in the non-paper dated 6 September 2021 (see annex II).

E. Institutional, organizational, administrative and related matters

(Agenda item 6)

Review of the calendar of meetings

33. At its closing plenary meeting, on 17 September 2021, the Board was informed that there were no changes to the current calendar of meetings and, thus, no action was required.³

F. Other business

(Agenda item 7)

34. At the closing plenary meeting, on 17 September 2021, there were no further issues presented for consideration by the Board.

G. Adoption of the report of the Trade and Development Board

(Agenda item 8)

35. At its closing plenary meeting, on 17 September 2021, the Trade and Development Board adopted the report on the thirty-second special session of the Board. The Board further authorized the Rapporteur, under the authority of the President of the Board, to complete the report, taking into account the proceedings of the closing plenary meeting.

³ The official calendar of meetings for 2021 is available in document [TD/B/INF.251](#).

Annex I

Agenda for the thirty-second special session of the Trade and Development Board

1. Adoption of the agenda and organization of the work of the session.
2. Substantive preparations for the fifteenth session of the Conference:
 - Report of the Preparatory Committee.
3. Provisional agenda of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts on E-commerce and the Digital Economy.
4. Provisional agenda of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts on Financing for Development.
5. Provisional agenda of the seventy-first executive session of the Trade and Development Board.
6. Institutional, organizational, administrative and related matters:
 - Review of the calendar of meetings.
7. Other business.
8. Adoption of the report of the Trade and Development Board.

Annex II

Provisional agenda of the seventy-first executive session of the Trade and Development Board

1. Adoption of the agenda and organization of the work of the session.
2. Interdependence and development strategies in a globalized world.
3. Investment for development: Investing in sustainable recovery.
4. *The Least Developed Countries Report 2021: The Least Developed Countries in the Post-COVID World – Learning from 50 Years of Experience.*
5. Report on UNCTAD assistance to the Palestinian people.
6. Report of the Working Party on the Programme Plan and Programme Performance.
7. Provisional agenda of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts on E-commerce and the Digital Economy
8. Provisional agenda of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts on Financing for Development
9. Institutional, organizational, administrative and related matters:
 - (a) Designation of non-governmental organizations for the purposes of rule 77 of the rules of procedure of the Board;
 - (b) Review of the calendar of meetings.
10. Provisional agenda of the seventy-second executive session of the Trade and Development Board.
11. Other business.
12. Adoption of the report.

Annex III

Attendance*

1. Representatives of the following members of the Trade and Development Board attended the session:

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| Afghanistan | Indonesia |
| Albania | Iran (Islamic Republic of) |
| Algeria | Iraq |
| Angola | Italy |
| Argentina | Jamaica |
| Australia | Japan |
| Austria | Jordan |
| Bahamas | Kenya |
| Bahrain | Kuwait |
| Barbados | Latvia |
| Belarus | Lebanon |
| Belgium | Lesotho |
| Bolivia (Plurinational State of) | Luxembourg |
| Botswana | Madagascar |
| Brazil | Malaysia |
| Brunei Darussalam | Mauritius |
| Bulgaria | Mexico |
| Burkina Faso | Mongolia |
| Burundi | Morocco |
| Cambodia | Mozambique |
| Canada | Myanmar |
| Central African Republic | Namibia |
| China | Nepal |
| Colombia | Netherlands |
| Congo | Nicaragua |
| Cuba | Oman |
| Cyprus | Pakistan |
| Czechia | Panama |
| Djibouti | Peru |
| Dominican Republic | Philippines |
| Ecuador | Poland |
| Egypt | Portugal |
| El Salvador | Republic of Moldova |
| Finland | Romania |
| France | Russian Federation |
| Gabon | Slovenia |
| Gambia | South Africa |
| Germany | Spain |
| Ghana | Sri Lanka |
| Guatemala | State of Palestine |
| Guyana | Sudan |
| India | Switzerland |

* For the list of participants, see [https://undocs.org/en/TD/B\(S-XXXII\)/INF.1](https://undocs.org/en/TD/B(S-XXXII)/INF.1).

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| Thailand | United Republic of Tanzania |
| Trinidad and Tobago | United States of America |
| Tunisia | Uruguay |
| Turkey | Viet Nam |
| Uganda | Yemen |
| Ukraine | Zambia |
| United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland | Zimbabwe |

2. The following members of the Conference not members of the Board attended the session:

Holy See

3. The following intergovernmental organizations were represented at the session:

European Union
Organization of Islamic Cooperation
South Centre

4. The following United Nations organs, bodies and programmes were represented at the session:

International Trade Centre

5. The following specialized agencies and related organizations were represented at the session:

United Nations Industrial Development Organization
World Trade Organization

6. The following non-governmental organizations were represented at the session:

General category

Center for Economic and Policy Research
International Network for Standardization of Higher Education Degrees
Public Services International
Society for International Development
Tax Justice Network – Africa
Third World Network
Village Suisse ONG

Special category

Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development
