Briefing

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EU aid for trade: Taking stock and looking forward

SUMMARY

Representing a third of global official development aid flows annually, aid for trade (AfT) has been on the rise. AfT has a very broad scope that includes projects ranging from building roads and modernising ports, to developing the banking sector, helping local food producers to comply with phytosanitary standards and providing more specific trade-related assistance, such as technical support in trade negotiations. Today, more than a decade after the launch in 2006 of the World Trade Organization's AfT initiative, which established a common framework for action, most commentators agree that AfT investments have helped developing – especially Asian – countries, to improve and diversify their export and trade performance. However, its impact on poverty reduction has been much less clear. The evaluation of AfT is done in a fragmented manner, which makes the exercise quite tricky, leaving space for very divergent opinions.

The EU is a world leader in AfT, both in terms of volume and in policy formulation. Adopted in 2007, the EU Aid for trade strategy helped to link the Union's development and trade agendas, often perceived as incompatible, and complemented the EU's preferential trade schemes for developing countries. The 2017 strategy update, after the introduction of the new UN Sustainable Development Goals and the new European consensus on development, was an opportunity to consider the future direction of AfT and reflect on its effectiveness. The EU reaffirmed its commitments to AfT, while putting more emphasis on bridging the digital gap, empowering women and improving the situation of the least developed countries in global trade systems.

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Glossary

Commitment: A firm obligation, expressed in writing and backed by the necessary funds, undertaken by an official donor to provide specified assistance to a recipient country or a multilateral organisation.

Disbursement rate: The proportion of committed funds that have been released to the recipient or used for the purchase of goods or services for a recipient; by extension, the amount thus spent.

Least developed countries (LDCs): low-income countries confronting severe structural impediments to sustainable development. There are currently 47 countries on the LDCs list, which is reviewed every three years by the UN Committee for Development (CDP).

Official development assistance (ODA): Grants or loans to countries and territories on the DAC List of ODA recipients (developing countries) and to multilateral agencies, which are: a) undertaken by the official sector; b) with promotion of economic development and welfare as their main objective; and c) at concessional financial terms (if a loan, having a grant element of at least 25 %.)

Other official flows (OOF): Transactions by the official sector with countries on the DAC List of ODA recipients, which do not meet the conditions for eligibility as ODA, either because they are not primarily aimed at development, or because they have a grant element of less than 25 %.

Source: OECD DAC Glossary of Key Terms and Concepts; UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Issue

The idea of trade as a motor of development is not new, having originally been launched by the classical economists. For instance, Adam Smith and David Ricardo advocated free trade based on absolute and comparative advantages, and a mutually beneficial division of labour as the best way to promote the maximisation of welfare for the world as a whole and for countries as individual entities.[1] However, as trade liberalisation progressed, contributing to rising living standards in a number of countries, it became obvious that some developing countries were facing constraints, unable to fully deploy the potential offered by global markets. Some of their main problems included dependence on exports of primary products in a context of highly unstable markets, lack of economic diversification and limited market access. AfT is aimed at addressing some of these issues. Sharing the gains from trade more fairly, both internationally and internally, has become even more important today, when public support for free trade is wavering.[2] Although AfT is increasingly relevant in the framework of the global discussion on harnessing globalisation, it is just one of the numerous international and domestic instruments to achieve economic and social sustainable development. After a decade of implementation of the 2007 EU Aid for trade strategy, an update was launched at the end of 2017, offering an opportunity for deeper reflection on the overall impact and future of this specific area at the nexus of development cooperation and trade policy.

What is aid for trade?

Being part of overall ODA, AfT is provided in the form of grants and preferential loans by donor governments' structures to promote economic development and welfare in developing countries. AfT support is targeted at programmes and projects that aim to help partner countries to build the trade capacity and infrastructure they need to be able to benefit from trade liberalisation, and to promote economic growth and poverty reduction.

AfT was introduced into the multilateral trading agenda after the delivery of the 2001 Doha WTO ministerial declaration addressing development issues. The 2005 Hong Kong WTO ministerial declaration went a step further and established a task force to provide specific guidelines on how to operationalise this specific support to trade-related activities. In 2006, the WTO task force presented a set of recommendations that formed the basis of the international framework addressing aid for trade. The operational definition included in them qualifies AfT as '**trade-related programmes and projects that were prioritised in national development strategies**'. It is stressed that AfT should be based on additional, predictable and sustainable financing and should be guided by the principles of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (ownership, alignment, harmonisation, managing for results, and mutual accountability).

Based on the 2006 WTO recommendations, six categories of aid for trade are most commonly used and reported on (Table 1):

Table 1 – Categories and types of AfT

AfT category	Examples of actions covered	AfT type
Trade policy and regulation	technical assistance; support for countries in formulating trade strategies; negotiation and implementation of international trade agreements	Trade-related assistance
Trade development[3]	support services for businesses, such as investment promotion, banking or market analysis	
Trade-related infrastructure	support for building the roads, ports or telecommunication services needed for linking domestic markets to the global economy	Broader AfT
Productive capacity-building	investment in industries and sectors allowing countries to diversify exports and strengthen their business-friendly environment	
Adjustment assistance	contribution to the government's budget to help it implement its trade policy reforms and adapt to the cost related to trade liberalisation (tariff reductions, preference erosions)	
Other trade-related needs	other trade-related support not included in the above categories (trade-related activities identified as such in partner countries' national development strategies in sectors outside the above categories)	

AfT thus has a broad and flexible scope, including both aid directly helping trade policies and practice, and measures supporting wider economic development. It has proved difficult to draw a line between assistance focused on improving trade capacity in particular and support for promoting economic growth in general. However, some stakeholders, such as Germany's GIZ and the EU, differentiate between AfT in the narrow sense (trade-related assistance, including trade policy and regulation and trade development categories) and AfT in the wider sense, covering mainly trade related infrastructure, productive capacity-building, and adjustment assistance.

EU aid for trade flows in the global context

Global picture

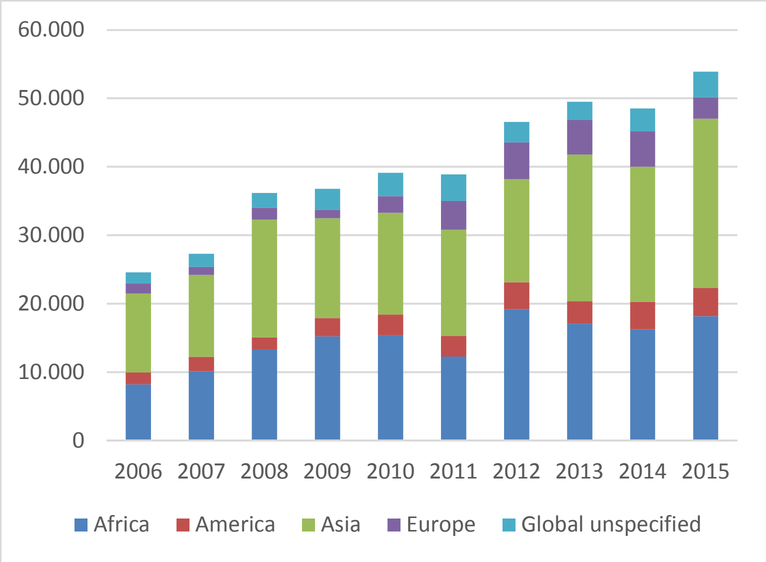
AfT is an increasingly popular form of ODA, rising from US$23 billion in 2006, the first year in which the WTO aid for trade initiative was implemented, to US$54 billion in 2015. Over the 2006-2015 period, over US$300 billion was disbursed for financing AfT programmes and projects in 146 developing countries, mainly in Asia (41 %) and Africa (38 %).[4]

During the same period, more than 75 % of AfT was concentrated in four sectors: **transport** and **storage** (29 %), **energy** (21 %), **agriculture** (18 %) and **banking** (10 %). Regionally, Asia had the lead (38 %), followed by Africa (35 %)[5]. Some 29 % of global AfT went to LDCs.

In addition, since 2006, more than US$190 billion of non-concessional (non-ODA) trade-related funding (reported as other official flows, OOF) has been disbursed, but almost exclusively in middle-income countries (97 %). Projects financed concerned economic infrastructure (47 %) and building productive capacity (52 %).

Japan, Germany and the United States are among the key bilateral providers of AfT; the **European Union** and **the World Bank** are key multilateral donors.

Figure 1 – Aid for trade global financial commitments to developing countries by continents (2006-2015) (US$ million, constant 2015 prices)



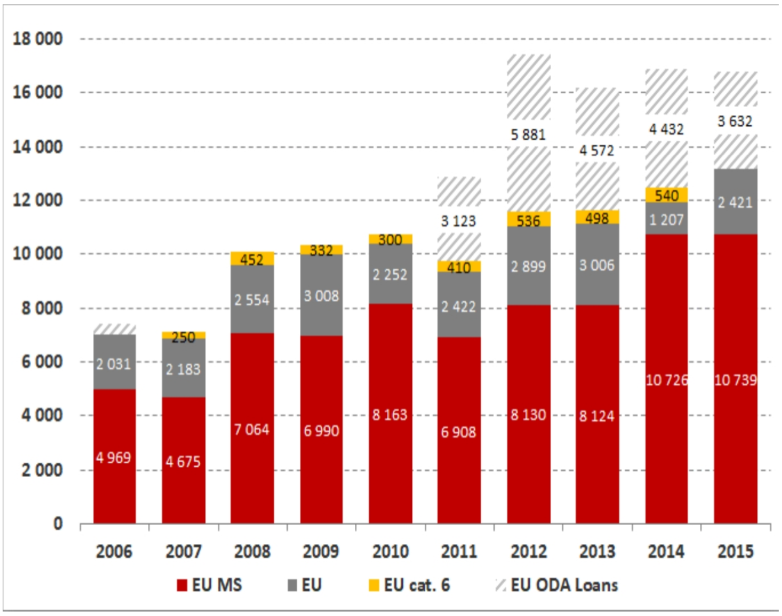
Source: World Trade Statistical Review 2017.

Collective EU AfT flows

Over the years, the EU and its Member States have steadily increased their AfT volumes, to a point where today, with their €16.7 billion committed in 2015 accounting for almost 30 % of global AfT, they are collectively among the world's leading AfT donors.[6] This sum represents a third of total EU ODA.

EU AfT is characterised by a much higher disbursement rate than that of other donors (80 % for the EU compared to 65 % for the average DAC donor) and a high (50 %) grant proportion. Three main donors are responsible for about 75 % of European AfT: Germany, France and the European Union itself.

Figure 2 – EU aid for trade (EC and EU Member States), 2006-2015



Source: EU Aid for trade report, 2017.

In 2015, **trade-related infrastructure** and **building productive capacity** constituted 97 % of European AfT. African countries remain the main beneficiaries of EU AfT, with 36 % in 2015, followed by Asia (26 %), Europe (15 %) and America (10 %).

EU trade policy and developing countries

The growing volume of EU AfT complements EU trade policy measures in favour of developing countries. These measures are part of the overall approach defined in a series of Commission communications on trade and development, in particular one from 2002 on trade and development and one from 2012 on trade, growth and development. The key points of the approach towards developing countries defined by the Commission are:

- continued commitment to a rules-based multilateral trading system;
- commitment to improved coherence between trade and development;
- recognition of the need for effective market access in favour of developing-country exports;
- recognition of the benefit of regional integration;
- commitment to trade-related development assistance to help developing countries to participate in the multilateral trading system;
- tailor-made trade and development differentiation between developing countries, to better target the poorest;
- increased use of EU instruments to promote investment in developing countries.

In its 2015 'trade for all' strategy, the Commission emphasised that EU trade policy should not only benefit the interests of its own citizens but also those of the poorest countries, and be more in tune with the EU's own values, that is, more responsible. For this reason, the EU is now focusing on supporting developing countries' integration into global value chains, in particular by providing aid for trade support and by opening its market for developing-country exports through preferential trade regimes and specifically tailored free trade and development agreements, such as European partnership agreements (EPAs).

EU trade policy measures in favour of developing countries

As stipulated in the EU's Generalised System of Preferences Regulation and based on the WTO's enabling clause, which permits developed countries to create trading preferences for all developing countries and offer special treatment to all LDCs, the EU is providing three preferential access schemes to developing countries:

- The Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) general arrangement provides for a non-reciprocal duty reduction on about 66 % of tariff lines. Most tariff lines that are subject to duty and are excluded from the GSP are products covered by the EU common agricultural policy.
- GSP+ provides a deeper tariff preference scheme to vulnerable countries if they can show that they have been effectively applying 27 international conventions on human and labour rights, and on environmental protection. Countries that have a low level of economic diversification and low incomes, are landlocked or are a small island state, and their exports to the EU under the GSP amount to less than 1 % of the EU's total imports under GPS, are considered vulnerable. Currently, nine countries benefit fully from this scheme.
- The Everything but Arms scheme grants duty-free access to the EU market to all LDC exports, except arms and ammunition, for an unlimited period of time.

A 2015 assessment confirmed the positive impact of all three schemes, both in terms of volume and diversification of exports from developing countries to the EU. On average, GSP preferences had increased exports of the products covered by 5 %. The impact was largest for LDCs: the preferences had increased exports of the products granted duty-free access by 10 %. The EU remains the biggest market for LDC exports. The second report (2018), on the effects of GSP and GSP+ over the 2016-2017 period, confirmed the above positive assessment. Between 2014 and 2016, total EU imports under GSP increased by 23 %, to €63 billion, with LDCs benefiting the most from this increase.

Economic partnership agreements with ACP countries

The unilateral trade preferences provided by the EU to the African, Caribbean and Pacific group of states (ACP) expired at the end of 2007, in particular because of their discriminatory character towards other developing countries, which is forbidden under WTO rules. As a consequence, the negotiation of economic partnership agreements (EPAs), to replace these generous non-reciprocal schemes, opened a new chapter in EU trade relations with those countries, based on progressive reciprocity. EPAs go beyond conventional free-trade agreements, taking into account the socio-economic development of the partner countries. In practice, EU markets are fully and immediately open to ACP countries; these, in turn, are allowed long transition periods and partial opening to EU imports, while providing protection for sensitive sectors such as agriculture. The agreements include provisions on cooperation and assistance to help developing countries to profit from the agreements, and to create joint EPA institutions to regularly assess the impact of EPA implementation on sustainable development. EPAs are in the process of being adopted or put in practice with seven regional groupings of ACP countries. Their potential impact on partner-country exports is expected to be important. EPAs not only give firms free (no duty or quota) access to the EU market, but they also provide a stable legal framework for economic and commercial relations, an important element for attracting investment. While AfT provisions are part of the EPA development chapters, they do not provide for any concrete financial commitment. Their aim is to help the countries concerned to increase their export supply, to be able to benefit from improved market access conditions and tackle some possible adjustment problems, such as the adverse impact of increased competition from more competitive imports on some local producers.

In its conclusions of 26-27 May 2008, the Council of the EU referred to the 2007 AfT strategy as a basis for the accompanying measures included in the regional EPAs. In this framework, the Council has supported the idea of creating regional AfT packages that would avoid gaps in AfT geographical coverage, and foster coordination among donors and partners. However, this idea has never been detailed, for the same reasons that hinder the coordination of EU and Members States' development policies in general: different institutional set-ups and operating modes, and an unwillingness to give up decision-making power over the important area of national foreign policy, as Ganzle et al., the authors of a 2012 scholarly publication, remarked.[7]

The updated EU Aid for trade strategy

Covering the areas of both trade and development policies, the EU AfT strategy responds to specific, sometimes perceived as contradictory, objectives: promoting an open, predictable, rules-based and global trading system that creates opportunities for EU companies, while supporting developing countries in their efforts to eradicate poverty, by helping them to take greater advantage of trade.

The 2007 Aid for trade strategy

The first EU joint Aid for trade strategy was presented in October 2007, in response to WTO recommendations from 2006. The main commitments it assumed, both on behalf of the EU and its Member States, included:

- **scaling up AfT**, in particular **trade-related assistance** by 2010, to at least €2 billion per year (EU and Member States contributing 50/50), while keeping it additional to other types of AfT in the context of an overall ODA increase;
- enhancing the **pro-poor focus and quality of AfT**, including its environmental and social sustainability, local ownership and better donor coordination;
- fostering ACP countries' **regional integration** (examples include eliminating inter-regional barriers to trade in goods and services, harmonising standards and technical regulations, and integrating financial and capital markets);
- **supporting monitoring and reporting** on AfT.

The authors of the above-mentioned 2012 publication[8] point out that the 2007 AfT strategy 'fell short of being a truly collaborative effort between the EU and its Member States', serving more to raise the visibility of pledge-makers as actors in the AfT domain than to shape a collective EU effort. The strategy has, however, helped to develop a common understanding of AfT within the EU, and has been a necessary step for a more streamlined EU approach over time.

Why the revision?

The revision of the EU AfT strategy responds to the new political priorities set out in the UN's Agenda 2030 at the international level, and in the 2017 European consensus on development at EU level, and draws lessons from 10 years of AfT implementation.

The UN Agenda 2030's trade-related targets include promotion of an equitable multilateral trading system (SDG 17.10); a significant increase in developing countries' exports, and especially a doubling in the share of LDCs in global trade by 2020 (SDG 17.11); implementation of duty-free and quota-free market access for all LDCs (SDG 17.12), and an explicit commitment to increase aid for trade support, especially for LDCs (SDG 8a). SDG 8.3 is aimed at helping LDCs achieve higher productivity and develop a labour-intensive sector with a higher added value, instead of exporting largely unprocessed commodities. Furthermore, to be implemented successfully, the UN Agenda 2030, built around an integrated set of 17 SDGs, requires a major shift in the way development aid is used. Its broad, ambitious scope and universal application requires mobilising financial and human resources beyond traditional development aid, while also

Examples of EU-funded initiatives

Mozambique: funded by the European Development Fund (EDF) with €97 million, the Milange–Mocuba Road (National Road 11) is the last missing section of the transport corridor linking Malawi and Zambia to Mozambique's north/south road and ports on the Indian Ocean. It will facilitate access from the fertile agriculture lands of the region to international markets.

Southern Africa Development Community (SADC): the EU supported the SADC Trade-Related Facility with €31.6 million from the EDF to strengthen the implementation of existing regional trade agreements at the national level and to support regional integration.

Armenia: In the framework of the EU's Organic Agriculture Support Initiative (OASI), 46 farmers received financial and technical support to develop competitive organic agriculture and export through participation in international trade fairs and facilitation of contacts with traders.

Botswana: the EU is supporting the development and implementation of the Botswana Private Sector Development Strategy (PSDS) and the Economic Diversification Drive (EDD), which intends to build the capacities of institutions supporting the private sector, in order to contribute to creating incentives and sustained growth.

including private-sector investment and active local and regional stakeholder participation. ODA can therefore be used as a catalyst of these changes, leveraging the implications for other actors in favour of SDGs implementation. The underlying principle of inclusion expressed in the UN Agenda 2030's central commitment of 'leaving no one behind' is translated, among other things, in a stronger than before emphasis on the need to incorporate LDCs in the global trading system.

The EU has taken on board the new context, incorporating the agreed commitments in its own policy documents. The new European consensus on development presents trade and regional integration as key drivers of growth and poverty eradication in developing countries. EU aid for trade is to be combined with private-sector resources, trade policies and economic diplomacy to support the implementation of the UN's Agenda 2030, especially regarding the trade and productive capacity development of LDCs. In its 2015 Trade for All strategy, the EU promised a more responsible trade and investment policy based on values including the development of poorer countries, high social and environmental standards, respect for human rights and measures to help developing countries integrate into regional and global value chains. It proposed, among other things, more support for fair trade and regional integration in Africa and an increase in AfT for trade-facilitation measures. Indeed, in the framework of the WTO Trade facilitation agreement (TFA) adopted in December 2013 (and in force since 22 February 2017) with a view to cutting 'red tape' and simplifying and harmonising trade processes, the EU and its Member States committed to assisting developing countries in accomplishing these goals by mobilising at least €400 million in trade facilitation assistance over five years from its entry into force.

Concerning the implementation of the first EU AfT strategy, the overall results look positive: trade-related assistance almost doubled between 2006 and 2015, exceeding the quantitative target of €2 billion set in the 2007 strategy. However, the poorest recipients remained marginalised, with only 18 % on average of EU AfT directed to LDCs from 2010 to 2015. EU aid also suffers from strong fragmentation, given the proliferation of projects and actors: in 2015, €13.5 billion in overall EU AfT was channelled through 3 000 financing decisions.

The 2017 update

The revised AfT strategy, presented in November 2017 in a Commission communication on Achieving Prosperity through Trade and Investment. Updating the 2007 Joint EU Strategy on Aid for Trade, kept the cap placed with regard to certain issues in 2007. It reiterates the need for better coordination, for scaling AfT up, for focusing on social and environmental sustainability, and for improved monitoring and reporting. The novelty in the proposal lies in the stronger narrative about involvement of the **private sector and civil society** and the **focus on increasing the leverage effect of AfT**, that is, on mixing AfT ODA with private funds to scale up investment in development. The new financial instrument – the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD), one of the pillars of the EU External Investment Plan – will deploy further innovative risk-sharing mechanisms, including the guarantee for capital mobilisation, combined with technical assistance and improved investment climate reforms.

With a view to reducing fragmentation, another axis for action is envisaged as a push for a more integrated approach and for the development of synergies between AfT, the 2017 EU External Investment Plan and the EU Global Strategy. A new emphasis is put on **closing the digital gap**, **empowering women and improving the LDCs' situation in global trade**

systems, which should reach one quarter of total EU aid for trade by 2030. As stressed in the December 2017 Council conclusions that endorsed the new strategy, in the context of AfT assistance, particular attention will also be paid to the **sustainable quality of infrastructure**; **to compliance with standards; to sanitary and phytosanitary measures; and to attracting foreign investment.**

European Parliament position

The Commission communication updating the AfT strategy was referred to the Parliament in November 2017 and assigned to the Committee on International Trade (INTA), which is expected to draft a report. A hearing on the revision of the EU Aid for trade strategy was organised jointly by the Committee on Development (DEVE) and the INTA committee on 31 August 2017.

The Parliament has touched upon this topic in several of its resolutions. In its resolution from 2015 on Financing for development, the Parliament expressed its support for revising the EU AfT strategy and introducing the principle of differentiation between developing countries, with a special treatment for LDCs and fragile states. In its resolution of 5 July 2016 on A new forward-looking and innovative future strategy for trade and investment, the Parliament recalled the crucial role of AfT in trade-related capacity-building and technical assistance to developing countries, calling upon Member States and the Commission to focus AfT on poor producers, micro- and small enterprises, cooperatives and women, so as to boost their benefits from trading in local and regional markets. Most recently, in its resolution of 12 December 2017, Towards a digital trade strategy, the Parliament added that digital issues should be better incorporated in the EU's aid for trade policy to facilitate the growth of e-commerce through increased support for innovation, infrastructure and access to financing.

Is aid for trade an effective development policy tool?

Measuring the effectiveness of AfT is complex and challenging. There are a number of interconnected factors that influence trade performance, which are particularly difficult to isolate in order to assess the impact of AfT.

Some critics, such as development expert Bob Warner, have pointed to the irrelevant or even harmful character of much of the AfT-related efforts. Warner deplores, for example, the fact that assisting developing countries to join the WTO and to develop institutional capacity to comply with its requirements, can divert much-needed human and financial resources from other real priorities.

However, the empirical literature confirms that AfT has contributed to increased export and improved investment conditions in beneficiary countries. A joint OECD and WTO 2013 study estimated that one dollar invested in AfT leads to an increase in exports from developing countries of about eight dollars, and of an average of US$20 from the poorest ones. There is evidence that AfT has helped address key bottlenecks – both institutional and physical – that inhibit trade growth in the areas of transport, communication and technology, energy and banking. Contributing to the reduction of the cost of trade, in particular through aid-facilitation measures, AfT enables developing countries to benefit more from trade.[9]

The impact of AfT on poverty reduction is even more difficult to assess. Although major donors, including the EU, identify poverty reduction as a main AfT goal, little is done in practice to track its impact. Some development NGOs note that this policy goal is not reflected in the design, implementation and evaluation of AfT programming. Additionally, more research is needed on how changes in trade affect poor households. The lack of quality data concerning the impact of AfT on poverty reduction requires that all evaluations based on case studies be treated with caution. However, commentators agree that 'broader AfT' has the potential to exert a positive impact on some poverty-related issues. For instance, a strong link appears to exist between the increase in physical connectivity (transport-related infrastructure) and poverty reduction. It has also been established that trade openness has reduced poverty the most in countries having a strong financial sector, strong institutions and high education levels.[10] Furthermore, according to the OECD, there is a strong development potential in fostering the international division of labour and in integrating those who are still marginally engaged in trade into regional and global value chains.

A WTO study comes to the conclusion that the most targeted aid flows to trade facilitation and infrastructure are also the most effective in promoting exports. Aid for infrastructure is key to unlocking the potential of the poorest countries, with sub-Saharan Africa being the region most likely to benefit from AfT. Some stakeholders, such as World Vision, advocate placing more emphasis on inclusiveness of trade as a way to improve the impact of trade openness on those living in poverty. While support for infrastructure development is not put into question, it must be done in parallel to actions aimed at increasing the productivity and the capacity of micro-enterprises, SMEs and smallholder farmers and producers, particularly women. Involvement on the part of civil society, together with the private sector, is a promising path to ensuring that AfT would also benefit marginalised groups and contribute to stopping the deepening of the inequalities that steal the benefits of trade expansion and economic growth from the majority of people in developing countries.

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3 Trade development is, in fact, according to the WTO AfT Task Force, a subcategory of the productive-capacity building category. The OECD allows components of a productive-capacity building project to be marked (using the 'trade development policy marker') as relevant to trade development. It identifies trade development activities within the broader aid-for-trade category of building productive capacity (i.e. activities marked as contributing 'principally' or 'significantly' to trade development). The trade development marker is applied to an AfT Category 4 initiative when the initiative is designed to enable the recipient country to a) formulate and implement a trade development strategy and create an enabling environment (for trade), or b) stimulate the trade of domestic firms and encourage investment in trade-oriented industries. (for more, see Aid for Trade Manual, GIZ, 2015, p. 9-15.)

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