

Getting a patent waiver is not enough, says WTO chief to Trade Committee

Parliament's Committee on Trade debated on Thursday how to increase vaccine production effectively with WTO Director-General Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala.

In reply to trade committee MEPs' questions over what measures are needed to accelerate equitable access to vaccines, Dr Okonjo-Iweala argued in favour of expanding vaccine production and ending export restrictions.

She said: "Getting the Intellectual Property rights waiver for vaccines will not be enough". She listed three other routes: reducing export restrictions and reinforcing supply chains for vaccines, working with manufacturers to expand production, including in emerging countries with idle capacity such as Indonesia, South Africa, Thailand or Bangladesh, and transferring the necessary technology and expertise to produce the complicated vaccines.

"The IP waiver is a hot issue on which I cannot take sides. But we need more flexibility and automatic access for developing countries, and at the same time we have to protect research and development," added the head of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Carbon border adjustment and WTO compatibility

MEPs also raised questions on trade and sustainability, including the proposed carbon border-adjustment mechanism and its compatibility with WTO rules.

"I think everything is in the design; its implementation is going to be quite important. But we don't have that yet, so we cannot say [whether it is compatible], the director-general said.

MEPs asked about the ongoing WTO negotiations over fisheries subsidies that the director-general hopes will be concluded by the end of the year, and about the now defunct dispute settlement mechanism in the WTO.

Appellate Body

"We cannot make new rules at the WTO when our system of adjudication on those rules doesn't work. We need to go to the [[Twelfth Ministerial Conference](#)] with an idea for a new system," Dr Okonjo-Iweala responded to the latter issue, calling for Parliament's assistance in reaching out to the United States Congress to scout for a common understanding on the Appellate Body.

“Dr Okonjo-Iweala’s presence here on her first visit to Brussels shows her conviction that the involvement of parliaments is crucial. Her appointment has given the WTO new impetus and the discussion on vaccines provides the WTO with the opportunity to make it relevant again. Delivery is now key: we need concrete results at the Twelfth Ministerial Conference. It’s now or never: either multilateralism revives, or it will become irrelevant”, remarked Trade Committee Chair [Bernd Lange](#) (S&D, DE), who, along with most speakers, assured the recently nominated director-general of Parliament’s support for her WTO agenda.

Next steps

The Trade Committee is [set to discuss](#) calls for patent waivers for COVID-19 vaccines in the WTO [TRIPS Council](#) on 25 May.

Further information

[Watch the video recording of the meeting \(20.05.2021\)](#)

[EP Multimedia Centre: free photos on the exchange of views with Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, WTO Director-General](#)


[EP Multimedia Centre: free photos of the meeting of MEPs Simon and Lange with Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, WTO Director-General](#)


[EP Multimedia Centre: edited video footage of the meeting Committee on International Trade](#)

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