

Panel discussion

Leaving nobody behind: Enhancing disability inclusion across the international trade system

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on 22 November 2023,
with physical and remote participation

Documents available at <https://unctad.org/meeting/panel-discussion-leaving-nobody-behind-enhancing-disability-inclusion-across-international>

Meeting summary

Programme

Welcoming remarks and moderation: Miho Shirotori, Acting Director, Division on International Trade and Commodities, UNCTAD

Opening statement: Rebeca Grynszpan, Secretary-General, UNCTAD

Introductory message: Ville Tapani Tavio, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development, Finland

Presentation of research paper commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, titled “Inclusive trade and persons with disabilities”: Marzia Fontana, Research Associate, Institute of Development Studies, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Panel discussion:

Heidi Schroderus-Fox, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva

Anderson Gitonga Kiraithe, Inclusive Development Director, CBM Global, Kenya

Judith Fessehaie, Head, She Trades Initiative, International Trade Centre

Question-and-answer session (closed captioning and sign language interpretation provided)

Discussion

1. In her opening statement, the Secretary-General of UNCTAD stated that the realm of trade had traditionally been viewed through the lens of economics and geopolitics, often overlooking the diverse human elements that were integral to it. Inclusivity in trade meant recognizing and harnessing the potential of the 1 billion differently abled people in the world, for the benefit of all, and ignoring their contributions did a disservice not only to them but also to the global economy, which thrived on diversity and innovation. The Secretary-General highlighted the research paper commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland and noted that the digital divide remained wide due to existing limitations in infrastructure, digital skills and the affordability of connections. She noted the ways in which UNCTAD integrated disability inclusion in the work of the organization, including through implementation of the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy, aimed at providing benchmarks to assess progress and accelerate change on disability inclusion in areas related to strategic planning, organizational culture and programming. Finally, the Secretary-General drew attention to the establishment of a technical-level working group on trade and disability inclusion with Geneva-based organizations working in trade-related areas, including UNCTAD, the International Trade Centre and the World Trade Organization.

2. In his introductory message, the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development emphasized that the Sustainable Development Goals could not be achieved without also including people with disabilities. He described the approach taken in Finland, aimed at eliminating barriers to participation, and noted that the principle of leaving no one behind was central to development policy.

3. In presenting the research paper, the Research Associate, Institute of Development Studies, noted that the paper contributed to the promotion of a disability-inclusive trade policy agenda by illustrating the multiple ways in which greater trade integration could affect persons with disabilities and by developing a definition of disability-inclusive trade that could be operationalized. The paper highlighted that international trade affected persons with disabilities through three main interrelated channels, namely, employment, consumption and public provision. She noted insights from projects on the ground and detailed the three priority areas identified by stakeholders as follows: ensure better terms of inclusion in global value chains; increase the production, trade and use of assistive technology; and reduce the disability digital divide. The paper provided eight recommendations on future work.
4. The first panellist stated that the consideration of disability and trade was new, and that an increased understanding of key issues was required. In particular, the trade community needed a better understanding of disability inclusion. She noted the narrow view of disability as a medical connection and stated that greater awareness-building was needed with regard to the importance of inclusion, along with a human rights-based approach in trade-related discussions. The panellist highlighted a case study in Finland to illustrate the benefits of disability inclusion from the perspective of both persons with disabilities and the trade community. Finally, the panellist noted that next steps included increased awareness-building among the trade community, including through the Aid for Trade initiative, and ensuring that persons with disabilities were more involved in trade-related discussions.
5. The second panellist detailed the types of policies needed for greater disability inclusion. He described the focus of CBM Global, including ensuring that the needs of persons with disabilities were addressed in projects with local organizations. The panellist noted that free trade agreements rarely had clauses promoting and protecting the interests and rights of persons with disabilities. In addition, global trade rules needed to be consistent with Government commitments to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. Finally, the panellist stressed that, with regard to trade-related policies, persons with disabilities needed to be involved at the levels of design, implementation and the monitoring of progress.
6. The third panellist noted that the trade system was not yet set up in a manner that promoted disability inclusion, and highlighted the steps taken at the International Trade Centre to ensure disability inclusion in ongoing work. For example, a disability and inclusion group had been formed in 2020, and the mentoring programme for women treated inclusion as an area of focus. In addition, since the launch of the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy, the International Trade Centre had increased the number of indicators implemented from 9 to 13. Ongoing and future projects included a plan to implement a disability marker to ensure the collection of better data, and a pilot project on capacity development in disability inclusion for entrepreneurs in the State of Palestine. Finally, the panellist emphasized that digital inclusion was a priority in this context.
7. During the question-and-answer session, a representative of a specialized agency of the United Nations noted the need to build the narrative, since consideration of the links between disability inclusion and trade was new, and detailed work at the International Labour Organization in this regard. One delegate highlighted a report prepared by Australia in 2019 and noted the need not only for access but to ensure that persons with disabilities had more of a voice. A representative of a United Nations entity highlighted work done by the Global Partnership for Assistive Technology, hosted by the United Nations Office for Project Services, including through the use of study outcomes to increase financing for assistive technologies, and noted challenges in this regard in connection with customs. One participant noted that the Universal Postal Union was conducting work in this area, such as through the posting of blindness-related equipment, and that while funds could be raised for assistive technologies, importation remained costly due to tariffs. Another participant noted that projects under the Enhanced Integrated Framework were already being amended to incorporate disability inclusion. One delegate noted that conflicts and other issues in low-income countries, such as Yemen, exacerbated issues related to inclusion and were the indirect causes of increased numbers of persons with disabilities, for example due to a lack of education and health. With regard to a query on whether policies such as quotas could be useful in increasing inclusion in trade-related policymaking, a few experts noted that quotas had both benefits and drawbacks, there was a risk that quotas might become a token and that in places with quotas related to disability inclusion, the Government needed to enforce legislation, in particular with regard to entering global value chains. Finally, one delegate emphasized the need to ensure human rights aspects in disability inclusion considerations, as carried out in Finland, for example.
8. In her concluding remarks, the Head, She Trades Initiative, International Trade Centre, highlighted that inclusive environments were needed, as well as visibility with regard to available jobs and changes in the mindsets of hiring managers. She noted that disability inclusion should not be a check-box exercise,

with the invitation of one or two organizations considered enough; rather, the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders was required in policy formation.

9. In her concluding remarks, the moderator highlighted the prevalent sense of looking forward and building the narrative. There was a need to continue addressing this issue in a systematic manner, beginning with information-sharing and the coordination of activities. She noted in this regard, with reference to the discussion on customs, the non-tariff measures database of UNCTAD.