The 12th session of the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development

Item 5 of the Provisional Agenda
Implementation of the Mandate and Programme of Work –
Focused Thematic Discussions and Interactive Dialogues
Palais des Nations, Room XVI, Geneva

Impacts of trade tariffs on the realization of the right to development

Tuesday 28 October 2025, 11:30 – 13:00

Concept Note
Presented by Mihir Kanade

Introduction

The right to development is recognized as an inalienable human right that entitles every person and all peoples to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural, and political development. The right to development aims to ensure equitable distribution of development benefits and reduce social injustices, and requires international cooperation and appropriate international conditions for sustainable development. As the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development (EMRTD) has noted previously, there is a symbiotic and mutually dependent relationship between the enhancement of the right to development and the realization of sustainable development.

It has also been long established that the realization of sustainable development and the right to development, on the one hand, and a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system, on the other, go hand-in-hand. Indeed, the Marrakesh Agreement Establishing the World Trade Organization includes sustainable development as one of its institutional objectives. Similarly, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes trade as a vital means of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs (see, in particular, SDGs 2.b, 8.a, 10.a, 14.6, 17.10, 17.11, 17.12).

The multilateral trading system is built on the principles of non-discrimination, including the Most-Favoured Nation and National Treatment principles. Additionally, the principle of special and differential treatment for developing and least-developed countries has long been established.

Recent global trade tensions and escalating and differential tariffs have, however, challenged the very fundamental principles on which the multilateral trading system is founded, thereby creating uncertainty and lack of coherence worldwide. The principle of special and differential treatment and the Aid for Trade initiative have suffered significantly. This has further resulted in disruptions of global value chains, inefficiencies, and adverse economic impacts that disproportionately affect developing and least-developed countries, hindering their ability to realize the right to development. Sudden enhancements in tariffs can create significant trade diversions and thus affect existing markets. They can also amplify economic inequality, impair access to markets, increase production costs, and slow down poverty reduction efforts, thereby obstructing the realization of the right to development and the SDGs.

Conversely, mainstreaming a right to development lens reinforces the imperative that trade must be inclusive, rights-enhancing, and environmentally sustainable to be effective.

Purpose

1. To analyze the multifaceted impacts of tariffs on the economic, social and cultural dimensions of the right to development, with a focus on developing countries.

2. To explore how tariff measures influence key sustainable development outcomes, including poverty eradication, equality, and economic growth.

3. To discuss international cooperation mechanisms and policy solutions that can mitigate the negative impact of tariffs and promote the realization of the right to development, including in the context of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs.

4. To identify the role of States, international organizations, and non-State actors in ensuring trade policies do not exacerbate inequalities and uphold the right to development.

Guiding questions

1. How do tariffs impact the ability of developing and least-developed countries to achieve the economic, social, and cultural dimensions of the right to development?

2. In what ways do tariffs hinder or support progress toward sustainable development goals such as poverty reduction, economic growth, and reduced inequalities?

3. How can the normative framework of the right to development provide guidance for addressing trade-related barriers and promoting equitable participation in global trade?

4. What are best practices or innovative policy approaches for mitigating the adverse impacts of tariffs on vulnerable populations and development outcomes?

5. How can the United Nations and its mechanisms, including the EMRTD, support States in aligning trade policies with the right to development and sustainable development objectives?

Expected Outcomes

1. Clarify the impact of tariffs on the right to development, especially in developing countries, highlighting how they affect poverty, inequality, and access to markets.

2. Identify ways of how EMRTD could contribute to the promotion of policy solutions and best practices to mitigate negative tariff effects and align trade measures with sustainable development goals.

3. Raise awareness and contribute to dialogue on strengthening international cooperation, including through UN mechanisms in supporting inclusive, and human rights-centered trade policies.

* * * * *