



Mandate Spotlight: 075
Fiji, Papua New Guinea,
Samoa, Solomon Islands,
Tonga, and Vanuatu

Comprehensive Assessment of the
Implications of Implementing the WTO
Fisheries Subsidies Agreement on six
Pacific Island Countries WTO Members

Location: Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu

Beneficiaries: Permanent Delegation of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) to the United Nations, WTO and Other International Organisations in Geneva; Fisheries and Trade Ministries of Pacific Island Countries WTO Members

Start: June 2023

End: October 2023

GAC Contribution: CAD 67,000

Consultant: International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)

Context

The World Trade Organization (WTO) took a significant step towards protecting fish populations and the communities that depend on them. In June 2022, the WTO introduced a new agreement that curbs harmful fishing subsidies. These subsidies have been identified as a major contributor to the global decline of fish stocks.

The agreement focuses on eliminating funding for practices that are particularly damaging to marine ecosystems. It prohibits subsidies for illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU) activities. Additionally, it restricts subsidies for fishing in areas where fish populations are already struggling. The agreement also encourages member countries to be cautious when granting subsidies to foreign fishing vessels operating within their waters.

While this initial agreement represents a major milestone, it's not the complete picture. Negotiations are currently underway to address the issue of overcapacity and overfishing, alongside the development of support measures for developing countries.

The successful implementation of this agreement holds particular significance for Pacific Island Countries (PICs). A significant portion of the population relies on fisheries for their daily sustenance and economic well-being. Healthy fish stocks are vital for food security and livelihoods in these island nations.

To make informed decisions about joining the agreement, Pacific Island WTO members requested legal advice on its implications. A technical assistance project provided this legal advice, helping Pacific Island countries understand the potential benefits and drawbacks of accepting the agreement. This will allow them to participate in their own domestic decision processes about acceptance in a well-informed way.

The 13th Ministerial Conference in February 2024 presented a crucial opportunity to finalize these remaining measures and establish a comprehensive Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies.

Brief Description of the Mandate

This mandate was undertaken to assess the implications of accepting and implementing a new WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies (FSA) for Pacific Island countries. This mandate stemmed from a request by Pacific Island trade ministers in November 2022.

The TA's goal was to equip government officials from six Pacific Island WTO member countries with a clear understanding of the agreement's impact. This knowledge would empower them to make informed decisions about formally accepting the agreement.

The mandate's benefits were expected to reach a broad range of communities in the Pacific Islands, including fishing communities, those involved in fish processing, and the general public. Sustainable

fisheries are critical for food security and national revenue in these island nations, and the project aimed to support this long-term well-being.

The assessment itself unfolded in four distinct phases and contributed to two specific goals of a larger trade-related initiative.

Selected Key Results

- The mandate provided government officials from six Pacific Island WTO member countries with a clear understanding of the implications of accepting a new WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies (FSA). This knowledge will allow them to make informed choices about formally joining the agreement.
- By clarifying the legal and practical implications of the agreement, the mandate enhanced the ability of Pacific Island countries to plan for implementing the agreement in a way that supports their long-term economic and social goals related to fisheries, including trade and investment. This contributes to the overall goal of sustainable and inclusive growth in the Pacific Island region.
- There are positive indications that the mandate's work is having a wider impact. The assessment report contributed to a positive statement from Pacific Island Forum Leaders about acceptance of the Agreement. In the Communique of the 52nd Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting, which took place right after the workshop, Leaders “encouraged the Forum WTO members to ratify the Fisheries Subsidies Agreement.” Since the assessment report was completed and presented, Fiji has presented its instrument of acceptance of the Agreement to the WTO.

Environment & Climate Change

This mandate played a crucial role in empowering Pacific Island countries to understand and leverage a new global agreement aimed at curbing harmful fisheries subsidies. The agreement focused on three key areas to ensure the sustainability of fish populations:

- Eliminating subsidies that incentivize illegal fishing: This tackles the root cause of a destructive practice that undermines conservation efforts.
- Phasing out subsidies for critically low fish stocks: By stopping subsidies that encourage unsustainable fishing practices, the agreement allows fish populations to recover.
- Banning subsidies for fishing in unregulated high seas: This ensures responsible management of fish stocks in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

By providing clear explanations of the agreement and its implications, the mandate helped Pacific Island countries grasp the environmental benefits they can achieve. This includes understanding how to identify situations where other countries might be offering harmful subsidies and potentially acting against them.

However, the agreement's environmental impact hinges on widespread adoption. Only once a sufficient number of World Trade Organization (WTO) members formally accept it will the concrete benefits of this initiative be realized. The project's contribution to Pacific Island countries' understanding of the agreement is a positive step towards achieving this critical goal.

Gender and Social Inclusion

A key concern for this mandate was ensuring that the new global fisheries agreement considers the social and gender aspects of Pacific Island communities. Women play a critical role in all aspects of fisheries, from catching fish to processing and selling them. The agreement's impact on these women, their livelihoods, and their communities was a major focus.

The mandate addressed these concerns by promoting gender equality throughout its activities. The workshop that presented the assessment of the agreement was chaired by a woman and nearly half of the participants were women. This ensured that women's voices and perspectives were well-represented in the discussions. Furthermore, the project acknowledged the role of non-binary individuals, such as Samoan fa'afafine, in policymaking. This inclusive approach empowers all genders to participate in shaping the future of Pacific Island fisheries.

By fostering understanding and promoting gender equality, this mandate empowered Pacific Island nations to ensure a sustainable future for their fisheries and communities, considering the needs of all genders involved.