

# Chapter 1

## Emerging Trade Issues for Small and Least Developed Countries – Scrutinising the Horizon

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The aim of this publication is to explore emerging trade issues for small developing countries. The world economy has undergone tremendous changes during the past decade, and a host of emerging issues are now influencing global trade, some of which are surrounded by uncertainty. These issues include the fragmentation of global value chains (GVCs), the digitisation of trade, climate change, growing prominence of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) and geopolitical changes such as Brexit. Many of these issues have been researched extensively; policy-makers and World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiators have even informally discussed some of them. This publication's perspective is nonetheless unique, given its focus on a specific group of countries with distinct characteristics and its adoption of a pro-developmental approach.

Whether these issues should and will be addressed within the WTO context is debatable, and a matter for sovereign nation states to decide. The aim of this publication is not to promote or demote a particular stand. Rather, it examines the issues objectively, from a purely policy angle, including potential challenges and opportunities, and at times proposes policy options.

### 1.1 Multilateral trade context

Emerging trade issues and their linkages to other subject areas are being discussed in a number of regional and international fora—such as trade and climate change as part of the UN Conference on Climate Change, e-commerce as part of the UN Conference on Trade and Development's (UNCTAD's) ongoing work programme or trade as a means of implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Some of these issues have even been on the WTO agenda for a number of years, hence the difficulty involved in seeing them as 'new issues'.

The novelty of the situation now is that some of these issues could find their way onto the WTO negotiations agenda. In fact, the WTO Nairobi Ministerial Declaration mentions that some members 'wish to identify and discuss other issues for negotiation', although it makes it clear that 'any decision to launch negotiations multilaterally on such issues would need to be agreed by all members'.

Broadening the WTO negotiations agenda raises both opportunities and challenges for small developing countries, related not only to participating effectively in discussions

on emerging issues in the lead-up to the 11th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC 11) and beyond but also to ensuring these discussions reflect their national priorities and address their development aspirations. Rashid Kaukab in Chapter 2 of this publication discusses perspectives of the potential ‘new’ issues in the WTO. Meanwhile, some WTO members have called for an exploration of new approaches to conducting negotiations at the level of the WTO. Lorand Bartels shares some views on these new approaches in Chapter 9.

In terms of the broader multilateral trade context, there have been some significant changes in the global trading landscape over the past decade, including the fragmentation of GVCs, the rise of servicification and e-commerce and the heightened role of regional and plurilateral agreements. Chapter 6 discusses e-commerce from the perspective of small developing countries: Soobramanien, Preville and Ming discuss various policy options and frameworks that should be in place for its development.

Trade interests at the international level are generally pursued through multilateral negotiations under the WTO and plurilateral processes such as the Environmental Goods Agreement (EGA) and the Trade in Services Agreement (TiSA), as well as regional and bilateral trade agreements. Developing countries’ and least developed countries’ (LDCs’) trade relations are also largely governed by preferential trade schemes such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act, the EU’s Everything But Arms initiative, the General System of Preferences and so on. Given slow progress on the Doha Development Agenda negotiations, alternative, and at times parallel, negotiation processes are allowing WTO Member States to pursue mutual domestic interests that might otherwise fail to reach consensus in the WTO multilateral context. For example, under the EGA, 17 WTO members are negotiating to facilitate trade in environmental goods and services, which also demonstrates the role of trade in climate change mitigation and adaptation. Chapter 5 by Leah Worrall gives further discussion on this. The TISA, which was being negotiated by 23 WTO members, is grounded in the General Agreement on Trade in Services and aims to promote the further opening of markets through improving the rules for services across various sub-sectors, from e-commerce to maritime transport (EC, 2016).

Meanwhile, the emergence of mega-regional agreements—the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and the Trans-Pacific Partnership—have also generated significant interest and will have implications for the multilateral trade environment. These mega-regional agreements have chapters that address the spheres of e-commerce, small and medium-sized enterprises and environment (or sanitary and phytosanitary measures), and some argue that the text is more progressive than the WTO Nairobi package and negotiations process.

Despite this, the Bali Package, which includes the Trade Facilitation Agreement, and the Nairobi Package have contributed to a gradual regain in confidence in the WTO multilateral process, thanks to some notable achievements: agriculture decisions on a special safeguard mechanism for developing countries; a decision on export subsidies and other export competition elements; a decision on cotton and public stock-holding for food security purposes; and decisions on the LDC services waiver and duty-free

quota-free market access. The effective implementation of these decisions will be crucial to strengthening the system and paving the way for successful conclusion of the remaining issues under negotiation.

The role of services in development, or the ‘servicification agenda’, has received renewed attention for its role in promoting the economic transformation of developing economies through services, alongside its role in the modernisation of agriculture and manufacturing sectors. This is particularly important, as for example African countries begin to question the transformational impact of agriculture-led development and also increasingly the employment productivity gains from manufacturing-led transformation. The process requires simultaneous investment and policy development in human skills and technological capacity to be transformational towards improvements in domestic sector competitiveness; the creation of higher value-added employment; and moving up the value chain. Countries also need to ensure equity in the distribution of economic gains. In Chapter 8, Bajaj and Selvakumar discuss the role of MSMEs in services for inclusive development.

National political agendas are increasingly focused on ensuring that the domestic economy benefits from globalisation, while the developing South negotiation processes are also focusing on ensuring that ‘opening up’ to trade will increase the development benefits for their populations and domestic private sectors rather than occurring ‘at any cost’. For example, the Economic Partnership Agreement negotiations between the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries have focused on ensuring developing countries benefit from trade liberalisation efforts. Meanwhile, ACP countries have raised concerns related to the Brexit vote. The Brexit referendum signals the presence of an electorate that is increasingly concerned about the domestic benefits of globalisation and ensuring their equitable distribution across countries, something that has been echoed by political discussion in other EU Member States and the USA. In Chapter 7, Vickers discuss the potential impacts of Brexit on Commonwealth countries.

## 1.2 Widening the global context

Multilateral trade processes are largely confined to the WTO context, with the exception of emerging regional and plurilateral trade processes based on shared regional geography or shared interests. Despite this siloed approach, there has been growing recognition of the impact of the multilateral trade agenda on the ability to deliver development and climate change goals in other spheres and vice versa. This section summarises the two key international agendas recently agreed that have implications for the multilateral trade context: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement.

The UN General Assembly agreed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015 to build on the progress of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) agenda. The newly agreed 17 SDGs and 169 sub-targets cover a broad range of social, environment and economic objectives. The sub-targets related to the WTO context focus on lowering tariff and non-tariff barriers in social or health-related

goods and services, as well as growing the contribution of LDCs to global trade (see Box 1). Other trade-related sub-targets address the need to tackle inefficient fossil fuel and fisheries subsidies that promote unsustainable environmental practices. Beyond the trade-related targets, other targets include access to enablers of trade, such as equal rights to access ‘new technology and financial services’ (sub-target 1.5) and ‘markets and opportunities for value addition’ (sub-target 2.3), for example (UN, 2015a).

The means of implementation (MOI) to achieve the SDGs are included in SDG 17 as well as the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the implementation agenda of the SDGs. Trade is included as an important MOI for the delivery of the SDGs in general (see sub-targets in Box 1.1), echoed within the Addis Ababa Action Agenda document. SDG 17 outlines the avenues through which global partnership towards sustainable development can be revitalised; the terminology is significant given that the global partnership provisions of the MDGs implementation agenda—the 2002 Monterrey Consensus—were argued to be largely undelivered during the UN General Assembly negotiations. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda recognises the precedence of the WTO in trade-related negotiations. Trade-related provisions included within the agenda focus on lowering trade barriers, particularly for LDCs, including through the conclusion of the Doha Development Agenda and increasing Aid for Trade allocations. Poorvi Goel discusses the 2030 Agenda further in Chapter 3.

International trade is an engine for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction, and contributes to the promotion of sustainable development. We will continue to promote a universal, rules-based, open, transparent, predictable, inclusive, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system under the World Trade Organization (WTO), as well as meaningful trade liberalization. Such a trading system encourages long-term investment in productive capacities. With appropriate supporting policies, infrastructure and an educated work force, trade can also help to promote productive employment and decent work, women’s empowerment and food security, as well as a reduction in inequality, and contribute to achieving the sustainable development goals (UN, 2015b).

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) 21st Conference of the Parties in December 2015, which had WTO representation, agreed the Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement comes into effect in 2020 and has major implications for the multilateral trade environment in capping global emissions at 2°C, with text to increase ambition to 1.5°C. The agreement is unique in being bottom-up in nature and built on Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to reach the set target. However, current NDCs are insufficient to reach the 2°C target. In order to meet the NDCs, UNFCCC members will need to instil sectoral economic policies to reduce incentives for polluting livelihoods, processes and sectors, with trade-distorting implications. Article 6 also refers to the market mechanisms in ‘cooperative approaches that involve the use of internationally transferred mitigation outcomes’ across Member States and the need to ‘enable opportunities for coordination across [climate mitigation] instruments and relevant institutional arrangements’ across borders (UN, 2015c). Beyond the policy implications of the Paris Agreement, climate

**Box 1.1 SDG sub-targets relating to the WTO**

2.b Correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural markets, including through the parallel elimination of all forms of agricultural export subsidies and all export measures with equivalent effect, in accordance with the mandate of the Doha Development Round

3.b Support the research and development of vaccines and medicines for the communicable and non-communicable diseases that primarily affect developing countries, provide access to affordable essential medicines and vaccines, in accordance with the Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health, which affirms the right of developing countries to use to the full the provisions in the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights regarding flexibilities to protect public health, and, in particular, provide access to medicines for all

8.a Increase Aid for Trade support for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, including through the Enhanced Integrated Framework for Trade-related Technical Assistance to Least Developed Countries

10.a Implement the principle of special and differential treatment for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, in accordance with World Trade Organization agreements

14.6 By 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and refrain from introducing new such subsidies, recognizing that appropriate and effective special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part of the World Trade Organization fisheries subsidies negotiation

17.10 Promote a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system under the World Trade Organization, including through the conclusion of negotiations under its Doha Development Agenda

17.11 Significantly increase the exports of developing countries, in particular with a view to doubling the least developed countries' share of global exports by 2020

17.12 Realize timely implementation of duty-free and quota-free market access on a lasting basis for all least developed countries, consistent with World Trade Organization decisions, including by ensuring that preferential rules of origin applicable to imports from least developed countries are transparent and simple, and contribute to facilitating market access

change will have significant global impacts, affecting the comparative advantage of countries in trade and resulting in an increase in the prevalence of environmental shocks.

Given the major changes in the WTO over the past decade and the more recent changes in the wider policy context, the global landscape for trade is changing significantly. This has important implications for WTO Member States, but in particular for small developing countries that are still struggling to come to terms with existing challenges in participating effectively in the multilateral trade context. Emerging issues within the WTO and the wider policy context will create additional challenges for these Member States, and this publication explores these in further detail. In light of the changing landscape, there is a need for renewed recognition of special and differentiated treatment for developing countries. In particular, it is critical to enable small and vulnerable economies (SVEs), small island developing states (SIDS), landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) and LDCs to access financing for development, technology transfer and knowledge so they can meet the targets set out in the various agreements and/or effectively take part in the ongoing negotiations of the various relevant international bodies, including within the WTO.

### 1.3 A case for small states

While this publication is essentially about small developing countries and LDCs, this section looks specifically at small states as defined by the Commonwealth. A previous publication (Soobramanien and Gosset, 2015) outlines challenges for Commonwealth small states in the multilateral trade context. This publication focuses specifically on the emerging issues within the multilateral trade context and wider international policy context, with implications for the small developing countries.

A key priority for these small states is ensuring trade is used as a tool for development and benefits the livelihoods of their populations as well as the domestic private sector. MSMEs are particularly important in this context, given their difficulties in accessing enablers of trade (such as finance, technology and services) to access GVCs, but also their role in contributing to development through employment generation and poverty reduction.

Soobramanien and Gosset (2015) discuss the issue of definition of small states: 'When compared with developing countries in general, small states have been found to face higher export-related costs owing to their geographic remoteness (many are islands or landlocked countries) and other factors that can undermine their economic competitiveness.' Despite widespread academic discourse on small states, though, there is disagreement in terminology across international organisations. Table 1.1 provides a brief overview of the key terms relating to small states. Despite this disagreement between definitions, these widely cover inherent disadvantages in geography, population, size or economic characteristics that hinder countries from effectively participating in the multilateral trading system.

From a policy perspective, small states may lack the technical capacity and political clout to participate effectively in multilateral trade negotiations under the WTO as

**Table 1.1 Key definitions of selected country classifications**

International organisation	Term	Definition	List of countries
Commonwealth Secretariat	Small states	Sovereign states with a population size of 1.5 million people or less. Larger members—Botswana, Jamaica, Lesotho, Namibia and Papua New Guinea—are designated as small states because they share many characteristics of small states.	30: Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Botswana, Brunei Darussalam, Republic of Cyprus, Dominica, Fiji, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Kiribati, Lesotho, Malta, Mauritius, Namibia, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, St Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Samoa, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Swaziland, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu, Vanuatu.
UN	Landlocked developing states	Countries with a lack of territorial access to the sea posing persistent challenges to growth and development as the main factor hindering their ability to better integrate in the global trading system. Transit of export and import goods through the territory of at least one neighbouring country and frequent changes of mode of transport result in high transaction costs and reduced international competitiveness.	31: Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Bolivia, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lesotho, Macedonia, Malawi, Mali, Moldova, Mongolia, Nepal, Niger, Paraguay, Rwanda, Swaziland, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Uzbekistan, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

*(continued)*

**Table 1.1 Key definitions of selected country classifications (continued)**

International organisation	Term	Definition	List of countries
UN	Least developed countries	Low-income countries confronting severe structural impediments to sustainable development. They are identified using gross national income per capita, the Human Asset Index and the Economic Vulnerability Index.	49; Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Benin, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Kiribati, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Niger, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Timor-Leste, Togo, Tuvalu, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Vanuatu, Yemen, Zambia.
UN	Small island developing states	Ecologically fragile and vulnerable. Their small size, limited resources, geographic dispersion and isolation from markets place them at a disadvantage economically and prevent economies of scale. For small island developing states, the ocean and coastal environment is of strategic importance and constitutes a valuable development resource.	There is no official list of SIDS. The following list is taken from the unofficial 2014 Year of the SIDS website, totalling 39: Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cape Verde, Comoros, Cook Islands, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Fiji, Grenada, Guinea Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Kiribati, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Mauritius, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, St Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Samoa, São Tomé and Príncipe, Seychelles, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Suriname, Timor-Leste, Trinidad and Tobago, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu.

WTO	Small and vulnerable economies	A group of developing countries seeking flexibilities and enhanced special and differential treatment for small, vulnerable economies in the negotiations. Defined as countries whose average share for 1999–2004 of world merchandise trade does not exceed 0.16 per cent, world non-agricultural market access does not exceed 0.10 per cent and world agricultural trade does not exceed 0.40 per cent.	26: Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Ecuador, Fiji, Grenada, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Mauritius, Nicaragua, Panama, Papua New Guinea, St Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Samoa, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago. (In addition, the WTO observer member, The Bahamas.)
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**Source:** UN (1992, 2014, 2016), Soobramanian and Gosset (2015), Commonwealth Secretariat (2016), UNCTAD (2016a, 2016b), UNDESA (2016), WTO (2016)

individual countries. Instead, they often form coalitions to advance their interests, such as through the ACP, the Africa Group, the SVE informal group and the G90, and as LDCs; however, given the large number of countries participating, individual country interests may be severely diluted (Soobramanien and Gosset, 2015). Given inherent disadvantages in participating in the multilateral trading system, small states must also be wary of ambitious liberalisation agendas, often pursuing exemptions or incremental obligations under WTO agreements.

The challenges small states already face in the multilateral trade context are likely to be further exacerbated by emerging issues within the WTO context and arising out of the wider global context. The authors of the following chapters discuss some of the key challenges. Small states will need to proactively engage with these agendas in order not only to effectively participate in the 'new' negotiations but also to ensure their trade and development interests are adequately represented at the table. Given the technical capacity constraints these countries face, the development of domestic technical capacity will be vital, alongside leveraging international cooperation and support in trade capacity-building efforts.

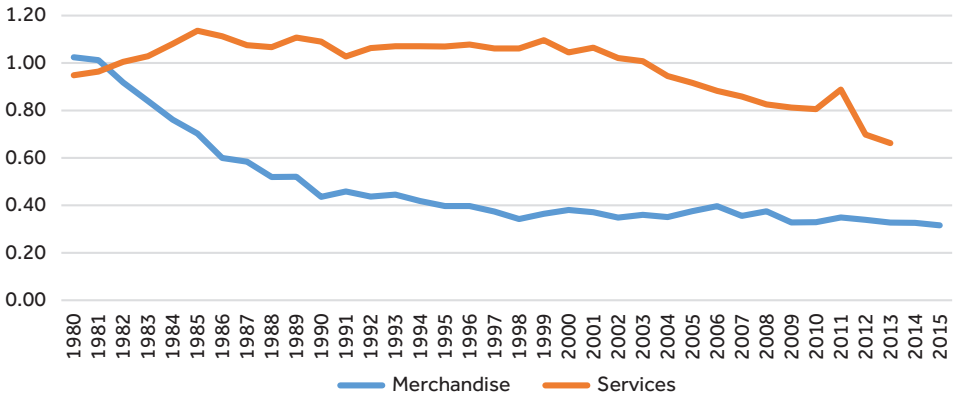
## 1.4 Commonwealth small states trade pattern

This following analyses trade data for the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth small states. The Commonwealth Secretariat's 2015 Trade Review provided an overview of the data for the 53 Commonwealth Member Countries. Their combined exports of goods and services were valued at \$3.4 trillion in 2013. In addition, there is increasing evidence of exports to developing countries, accounting for 29 per cent of Commonwealth total exports (*ibid.*). The 2015 Trade Review also outlines a 'Commonwealth effect'. Trade among Commonwealth countries is on average 20 per cent higher, generates on average 10 per cent more foreign direct investment and costs on average 19 per cent less than bilateral trade with non-Commonwealth countries. This is arguably because of the intrinsic advantages of being in the Commonwealth, including common (international) language, institutions, legal systems, etc. (*ibid.*).

Commonwealth small states have historically been marginalised in world trade, with a declining share of global exports on average from 1980 to the present, as shown in Figure 1.1 (Soobramanien and Gosset, 2015). Figure 1.2 shows trends in merchandise and services trade from 1980 to the present, demonstrating a clear negative shock following the global financial crisis in 2008, especially with regard to services. The annual percentage growth of merchandise trade in Commonwealth small states in the period 1995–2013, however, averaged 10.82 per cent, compared with 8.57 per cent growth for services. Recent trends in Commonwealth small states merchandise trade show annual percentages of negative growth in the period 2013–2015, reaching -7.9 per cent in 2015, with positive trends in services (UNCTAD, 2016c). The UNCTAD Statistics Diversification Index has remained relatively stable in Commonwealth Small States from 1995 to the present, fluctuating between 0.71 and 0.75 (*ibid.*).

As Soobramanien and Gosset (2015) outline, the majority of Commonwealth small states exports are goods (approximately 60 per cent). Total merchandise exports increased from US\$20.5 billion in 1995 to \$52.2 billion in 2015 (UNCTAD, 2016c).

**Figure 1.1 Commonwealth small states’ percentage global shares of merchandise and services trade (1980–present)**



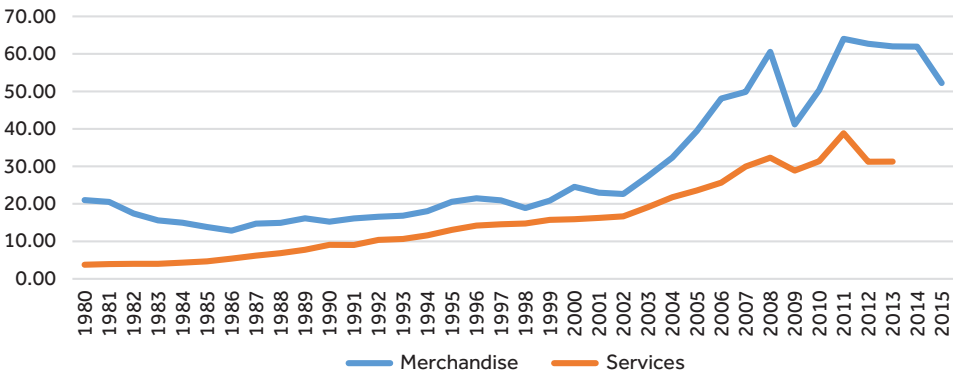
**Note:** Merchandise data show merchandise total trade share, annual data for 1980–2015. Services (BPM5) show exports and imports of total services share, annual data for 1980–2013

**Source:** UNCTAD (2016c)

The 2012 data reveal that approximately 35 per cent merchandise exports went to developing countries and the remainder to developed countries (author calculations from Soobramanien and Gosset, 2015).

Figure 1.2 shows the composition of Commonwealth small states’ imports and exports. Commonwealth small states have experienced a notable increase in exports to the emerging economies of India and China, from 2 per cent in 1995 to 5 per cent in 2012 (Soobramanien and Gosset, 2015). A small minority of ‘oil-rich’ countries, however, dominate these exports of Commonwealth small states, with for example Trinidad and Tobago and Brunei Darussalam representing over 40 per cent of total

**Figure 1.2 Commonwealth small states’ value of merchandise and services trade (US\$ billions, 1980–present)**



**Note:** Merchandise data show total merchandise trade, annual data 1980–2015. Services data (BPM5) show total services value, annual 1980–2013

**Source:** UNCTAD (2016c)

exports in 2012 where over 65 per cent of these exports were fuel (ibid.). Services trade is increasingly important in Commonwealth small states' exports, with exports and imports of total services reaching US\$13.1 billion in 1995 and more than doubling to \$31.3 billion in 2013 (UNCTAD, 2016c). The majority of the increase is explained by travel services, although Commonwealth small states are experiencing slower growth than developing countries as a whole (Soobramanien and Gosset, 2015).

## 1.5 Chapters overview

Chapter 2 provides an overview of emerging issues after the WTO Nairobi 10th Ministerial Conference. To put the issues into a wider perspective, Chapter 3 discusses the role of trade in realising the SDGs in the context of small states. Chapter 4 specifically provides an overview of SDG 14 on value chain governance for oceans and fisheries. Chapter 5 discusses trade sustainability and the inter-linkages of climate change and the environment with trade. The following chapter, Chapter 6, discusses the emerging issue of e-commerce and digital trade. Chapter 7 includes a discussion on Brexit and the Commonwealth and is followed in Chapter 8 by an analysis of the role of MSMEs in trade and development. The final chapter provides an overview of new approaches and architectures in the WTO context.

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