



→ **2023 All DAGs meeting
Summary report**



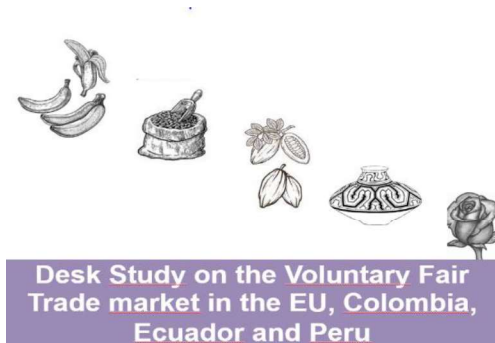
2023 All DAGs meeting summary report – Introduction

With strong participation from the Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs), the 3rd Annual All DAGs Meeting took place at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in Brussels on 17 April 2023, shortly before the end of the 2020-2023 term, providing an opportunity to take stock of the main achievements and challenges of the past 2.5 years. Held earlier than usual, the meeting aimed to capitalise on the experience and knowledge accumulated during the term and gather recommendations, reflections and good practices to inform the work of the next generation of DAGs. It also enabled the DAGs to contribute to the European Commission's 2023 implementation and enforcement report on EU trade agreements.

Discussions focused on labour and environmental priorities, partnerships, and the evolving role of DAGs beyond the Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) chapters. Participants also reviewed progress in implementing the action points of the TSD Review.

The meeting opened with presentations of the DAGs' desk studies, showcasing practical examples of TSD implementation and highlighting the contribution of the DAGs. This was followed by an exchange with MEP Saskia Bricmont on opportunities to strengthen cooperation between the DAGs and the European Parliament. After an end-of-term stocktaking exercise led by the DAG Chairs, the European Commission's Chief Trade Enforcement Officer (CTEO), Denis Redonnet, reviewed progress and the remaining challenges in the implementation and enforcement of EU trade agreements. DG TRADE Deputy Director-General Maria Martin-Prat then reflected on sustainability issues and the roll-out of the TSD Review. She welcomed the work of the DAGs, highlighting the rich expertise and extensive networks of their members and the organisations they represent, which provide practical insights and advice on implementing sustainability commitments in EU trade agreements.

Overall, the meeting provided an important forum for reflection, strategic feedback and preparation for the next term. Bringing together the EU DAG Chairs, members and key institutional stakeholders, it helped identify priorities and shape the future direction of the DAGs.



Dr Aurélie Carimentrand, certification expert, lecturer and study's author, presented the desk study of the EU-Andean DAG on "The Voluntary Fair trade market in the EU, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru", discussing the definition of fair trade in the framework of this agreement, fair trade figures and public policies in supporting fair trade. The presentation also highlighted that half of the production certified in fair trade was sold as standard quality, without the fair trade label, because buyers did not ask for the label and did not want to pay the premium. There were thus products that had been certified produced under good conditions, but that were sold without that recognition.

Recommendations:

- Small producers benefit less automatically than large ones from the positive effects of trade agreements. The revised agreement could therefore better integrate small producers by requiring the use of fair-trade schemes on several key fair-trade chains in the three countries according to a minimum quota (for coffee, cocoa but also quinoa and fresh fruits).
- Fair trade schemes for bananas, cut flowers plantations and textile factories have proven to be effective in advancing the labour rights of workers in South America. A "fair trade quota" could also be proposed in order to develop the sales in Europe.
- To support these trade measures, the European Commission should provide some financial support to fair trade initiatives through its development cooperation budget, currently insufficiently connected to the implementation of the trade agreements.
- EU delegations in Ecuador, Colombia and Peru could play a crucial role in identifying projects, in collaboration with civil society organizations and fair-trade researchers' networks and in organizing Fair and Ethical Trade Forums between the EU and the three countries, funded by the Policy Support Facility of the Partnership Instrument.
- On the consumer side, the support of the European Commission's DG TRADE for the EU Cities for Fair and Ethical Trade Award needs to continue.



⇒ Desk studies on platform work and on due diligence in supply chains



The EU-Korea DAG's desk study on ["Platform work and Institutional Protection with a specific focus on South Korea and the EU"](#), comparing the state of play of non-standard employment and platform work in South Korea and the EU. The topic had initially been put forward by the Korea labour DAG, and it would be the subject of the DAG-to-DAG meeting in September 2023. The author of the study would also present it to the Korean parliament, which showed that the work conducted in the DAG had an impact on discussions held in South Korea. On the EU-side, the desk study could also be addressed to the OECD and the Commission, and other DAGs might likewise wish to get involved in the discussion.



The EU-Vietnam DAG was in the process of elaborating a desk study on "The relationship between EU and Vietnamese businesses in global supply chains in the context of due diligence regulations". The EU DAG had set up sub-groups on common themes of concern, one of which was due diligence. Due diligence is an important topic in Vietnam, as they are trying to build capacity to implement the European rules, and the topic had been presented to the Vietnamese counterparts at the meeting between the EU and the Vietnam DAGs the previous year in Hanoi. The DAGs had then established a joint EU-Vietnam working group on due diligence and met in January this year with the researcher working on the desk study. At every point, there had been input from the Vietnamese counterparts. Now there was a draft on the table, circulated within DAG, which should be agreed in the coming weeks and would then be published on the website and circulated to all the EU DAGs.

Desk studies

Desk studies conducted by EU DAGs involve literature reviews and expert analyses on topics relevant to TSD chapters, such as trade flows, environmental, and labour issues. These studies inform DAG work programmes and interactions with counterparts, with topics selected by consensus and overseen by steering groups of DAG members. The studies do not involve new data collection but critically analyze existing information to guide strategic focus.



**Institutional channels:
potential and
expectations**

- Strengthening cooperation with the European Parliament – Saskia Bricmont MEP, standing INTA shadow for Cariforum, South Korea, Vietnam, Canada, Andean and Central America

MEP Saskia Bricmont highlighted that the involvement of civil society was key to make the trade agreements more acceptable for the European citizens, in particular with regard to the social and environmental dimensions of the agreements.

The All DAGs meeting occurred right on time, ten months after the adoption of the Commission's Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) review, and she commended the enhanced role assigned to civil society in that communication, but did not understand why the civil society experts' group on trade had not been reinstated by DG Trade, as such a group would bring a real added value by having a cross-cutting look at all trade instruments and a say on the consistency of the autonomous measures with the Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) and the new partnership agreements on raw materials. It would also make sense in the context of the transatlantic dialogue on the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the green subsidies, or beyond the plurilateral statements in relation to sustainability issues. Referring to the fact that the Commission and the Council were designing country-specific priorities to implement the TSD Review, she underlined that the latter mentioned that priorities should be developed involving civil society, and asked how much the EU DAG members had been involved so far. Besides the alignment of existing trade agreements and the uphold of new sustainability action plans in the new negotiations, she insisted on the possibility to complete the agreements with implementation roadmaps. Upon her initiative, there would be an exchange of views in the INTA committee on the TSD Review, though the discussion would unfortunately be held in camera.



She further stressed the importance of informing civil society organisations from third countries about the possibility to liaise with an EU partner to make use of the complaint mechanism through the single-entry point.

She emphasised the human rights dimension of the sustainability part of the FTAs, highlighting that sustainability was not only about social and environmental development; if human rights were not deeply entrenched no progress on the two other fronts would come to full fruition.

She also discussed how the new ramped up TSD provisions could be materialized, especially with regards to the CETA agreement, as there was a clear will from the Canadian side to progress on this.

Her final thought-sharing concerned the monitoring groups linked to the INTA Committee, and she encouraged the DAGs to take the initiative of reminding the chairs of respective INTA monitoring groups about their availability to attend those monitoring groups and share their expertise and recommendations. Considering the work of the DAGs with their counterparts in partner countries



ILO conventions. After lengthy delays, the Commission had agreed to engage the dispute settlement procedure, and he thanked the interest and support of the European Parliament in that campaign. The expert panel's outcomes had been positive and led to the ratification by Korea of three of the four fundamental conventions (29, 87 and 98) and the corresponding amending of existing labour legislation. However, there were still questions as to whether amended legislation met all the requirements of the conventions. This would be ascertained through the ILO's monitoring mechanisms over the next two years.



EU DAG chair Judith Kirton-Darling on behalf of the EU-Vietnam DAG underlined that this DAG was established under the first Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the EU and a socialist republic. In terms of labour, there was an effective state trade union confederation in Vietnam. One of the achievements during this mandate had been to keep alive the roadmap which the Vietnamese put on the table ahead of the parliament ratification. It was important to keep up the momentum, which depended on domestic politics in Vietnam and within the communist party and the way it played out in the state apparatus. There was one outstanding ILO convention (C87) to be ratified. Convention 98 was ratified in 2019 and had come through ILO process for the first monitoring reports. One of the working groups within the EU DAG was on labour law, and the DAG had engaged with the ILO local office in Vietnam. The roadmap foresaw that C87 would be ratified this year, which meant massive changes in trade union legislation in Vietnam. The DAG was only one point of contact; DAG members were working intensely with Vietnamese counterparts and also provided capacity building activities on the ground; that was part of the ecosystem of the DAG and as important as the formal discussions of the meetings.

Progressing on the environmental agenda



EU DAG vice-chair Eleonora Catella on behalf of the EU-Canada DAG highlighted that the relations with the Canadian DAGs were exceptionally good, stressing the role of the Canadian environmental DAG. Canada had created two DAGs: one for labour and one for environment, while on the other hand, not many environmental organizations were represented in the EU DAG. The EU DAG had managed to work very well with Canada on joint priorities, set out in a joint work programme. On the environmental side, the DAGs had discussed the resilience and sustainability of supply chains and possible topics for a workshop and/or a desk study (single-use plastics, circular economy, biodiversity, carbon pricing, CBAM, and the general environmental impact of CETA). On the labour side, the DAG's had discussed particularly the Rapid Response Labour Mechanism in USMCA/CUSMA. CETA could provide opportunities to increase sustainable trade of environmental goods and technologies especially for SMEs. It had been suggested to elaborate a study on the environmental impact of CETA, but instead, there had been the possibility of organizing workshops on relevant topics. This year's meeting would include a workshop with topics on forced labour and on deforestation, as Canada had expressed particular interest in the new EU legislation on this.



EU DAG chair Stefan Padure on behalf of the EU-Moldova DAG stated that there had been a rich exchange on the environmental aspects of TSD with the Moldovan counterparts despite the fact that no purely environmental organisation sat in the EU DAG. On the contrary, the environmental sector was very well represented in the partner DAG. As Moldova was very vulnerable to climate change, especially to droughts, the DAGs had called for a thorough revision of land management and the Water Directive, as well as for the stimulation of forest expansion. Regarding waste management, Moldova continued to rely largely on landfill and therefore, the DAGs had highlighted the benefits of recycling, in line with the EU directive, stressing the value of awareness-raising activities about sustainable waste management among school children, and to organise dedicated trainings. Moldova was to a large extent an agricultural country, with a big portion of its agricultural products ending on the EU market, partly due to the fact that the EU had removed quotas from a number of crucial agri-food exports from Moldova as a measure to support the economy due to the consequences of the war in Ukraine. Therefore, the DAGs discussed the effects of climate change on agriculture and on trade in food products and encouraged the use of satellite technologies and digitalisation in agriculture in order to prevent the disastrous consequences of climate change. With regards to trade, the DAGs also emphasised the importance of accelerating the reform of environment payments and taxes, which they considered as proper incentives for green economic development.



EU DAG vice chair Ellen Nygren on behalf of the EU-Singapore DAG referred to the last joint statement by the EU and Singapore DAGs and the chapter on trade and environment. Both DAGs supported initiatives by the EU and Singapore to fight and mitigate climate change and to gear energy policies towards a clean energy transition; called on the EU and Singapore authorities to comply with their obligations regarding the full and timely implementation of their commitments under the Paris Agreement; welcomed the EU's 2030 climate and energy framework, setting targets for cutting GHG emissions and increasing the share of renewable energy and improving energy efficiency, underpinned by the EU's overarching long-term climate-neutrality objective and the European Green Deal; and supported Singapore's 2030 Environment and Climate Plan, which aimed to tackle climate change through concrete and emission plans to achieve sustainable development and net zero emissions.

Engaging with partners



EU DAG chair José Manuel Roche Ramo on behalf of the EU-Central America DAG referred to the latest joint statement, which included issues such as promoting dialogue, implementation of ILO conventions, cooperation between customs agencies, cooperation between regulatory bodies to overcome technical obstacles to trade, and seminars on decent work.

In general, the communication with Central American counterparts was good, some of them were very participative. The multinational nature of the agreement carried a significant complexity which needed good coordination. The Central American group was very heterogeneous in terms of civil



society participation, with differences between the countries. Some partners conveyed the urgent need of capacity building and respect for human and labour rights. Central American counterparts stated that the main objective of the DAG had not been accomplished in spite of all the meetings and joint declarations as there was no follow-up. The support from the Central American governments was insufficient, and they were not using the DAGs and all their potential. The trade pillar was not sufficient if there was not any progress in political cooperation. According to the Central American counterparts, there had been backsteps in political cooperation. In the next mandate, there was a need to implement dialogue with these countries, preferably in person. In some cases, participation was non-existent.



EU DAG chair Erika Koller on behalf of the EU-Japan DAG referred to the last Joint Dialogue with civil society, which was the forum under the EU-Japan agreement. It had been a good, dynamic meeting with high-quality presentations from both sides. The main concern was however the lack of identified counterparts on the Japanese side, and the agreement did actually not mention meetings between so called DAG-to-DAG meetings.

To strengthen contacts with Japanese civil society, the EU DAG had sought to establish different forms of engagement, including a symposium on the *Functioning and Consultation of Civil Society* and a dedicated meeting with Japanese civil society organisations (CSOs), held separately from the meetings of the Committee on Trade and Sustainable Development and the Joint Dialogue.

Identifying the appropriate interlocutors, however, proved challenging. Rather than having a dedicated Domestic Advisory Group, Japan relied on two existing bodies – the Labour Policy Council and the Central Environmental Council – from which experts were selected on an ad hoc basis according to the relevance of the agenda items under discussion. Communication with the EU DAG secretariat was managed through a functional mailbox, meaning that the EU DAG lacked a permanent counterpart with whom it could establish a continuous dialogue and working relationship.

To foster more structured cooperation, the EU DAG planned to prepare a desk study on mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence, a topic considered to be of mutual interest and one that could provide a solid basis for future collaboration between the two sides.



EU DAG chair Józef Niemiec on behalf of the EU-Ukraine DAG announced that despite the fact that Russia was waging a fully-fledged war on Ukraine for more than 400 days now, the DAGs had continued to work and exchange on the TSD agenda. The last DAG-to-DAG meeting took place in January, during serious bombing going on Kyiv and in other major cities with electricity regularly getting cut off. In spite of that, the Ukrainian colleagues had expressed their commitment to pursue the work of DAGs and they had agreed on a set of concrete recommendations to the Parties with regard to the implementation of labour and environmental aspects of the DCFTA in times of war but also in the post-war recovery. Huge damage to environment was made due to the war and labour legislation by policymakers, in some cases violating ILO conventions.



EU DAG member Thomas Wagnsonner on behalf of the EU-Cariforum Consultative Committee, underlined that this committee was not a classic DAG but a consultative committee within the framework of an EPA, and that the dialogue in the consultative committee encompassed all economic, social and environmental aspects of the relation between the parties and not only the area of sustainable development. The last joint statement included points such as the impact of digitalisation on trade relations and intensification of exchange of services. They advocated for keeping the EPA in line with mandatory conventions on environmental, social and labour affairs and with relevant legal and political developments in these areas, for example the SDGs.

Beyond the sustainable development chapter



EU DAG chair Tanja Buzek on behalf of the EU-UK DAG highlighted the wider scope – and larger size – of this DAG, the first to go beyond the TSD chapter and to cover the entire Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). During the first year of the mandate, TCA implementation issues had been tracked sector by sector, resulting in a living document named Issue Tracker. Coming to an understanding on what constitutes an implementation issue proved to be a challenge. The good collaboration with the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly (PPA) was underlined. The two chairs of the EU and UK DAG were going to be invited to the next PPA in Brussels in July, and PPA co-chairs would be invited to the DAG-to-DAG meeting. Going beyond TSD had changed DAG dynamics, and the EU DAG still had not found the interlocutors in the UK to talk to as DAG chairs beyond the Civil Society Forum (CSF).

Food for thought

In the discussions after the presentations by the DAG chairs, the following points were highlighted:

- **Breaking down silos:** The European Commission should brief the European Parliament, the Domestic Advisory Groups and the Member States simultaneously, fostering a shared understanding of developments and enabling more coordinated discussions. Bringing all relevant stakeholders together would strengthen coherence, improve information-sharing and facilitate meaningful exchanges. When the EP goes on missions abroad and there is a DAG for that country, it was recommended that they get in touch with the DAG secretariat, with the DAG chairs, with the DAG's presidency or with the DAG as such to gather points to raise with the parliamentarians. In this context, it should be explored whether there would be the opportunity for the DAG members to ask the chair of the INTA committee to attend the INTA committee meeting on the TSD Review as DAG representatives. The same applied to the invitation of the DAG chairs to the INTA monitoring groups.
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- **Human rights in FTAs:** The Ombudsman had an active interest in the Vietnam DAG, first in relation to the impact assessment and then in relation to the scope of the human rights clauses in the FTA, with the judgement that the fundamental clauses of the agreement with Vietnam cover the entire FTA. Therefore, the TSD chapter and structures should have a voice on human rights questions, which is a very important consideration to take into account in terms of the scope of DAGs.
- **Need to focus on further development of economic partnership agreements,** particularly in Africa, where to date there was no detailed involvement by civil society.
- **Follow-up:** As a general remark, the timely follow-up of the recommendation to the TSD committee would be welcomed. The DAG's request for information on the follow-up given to the latest DAG statements and to the [*Non-paper on Strengthening and Improving the Functioning of EU Trade Domestic Advisory Groups*](#) was reiterated.
- **Possibility of issuing separate statements to the CTSD:** In the case of DAGs with several counterparts, as each DAG faces unique challenges and has different demands, which usually have no space in a consensus piece, there should be the possibility of issuing separate statements to the CTSD.
- **The composition of the DAGs:** Considering the limited representation of some subgroup members in certain DAGs, on both the EU and the counterpart side, there should be a reflection on how to encourage broader participation.
- **OSH conventions:** All the DAGs need to follow up on the decision of last year's International Labour Conference to add occupational health and safety to the fundamental conventions that FTA parties are expected to respect. It is imperative that EU member states meet those commitments to ratify at least the fundamental conventions.
- **Structures facilitating civil society cooperation:** The cooperation of the DAGs is largely facilitated if all structures are in place: DAG-to-DAG meetings (enabling cooperation on a regular basis, preparation of joint statements to the parties, and advancement on common priorities), Civil Society Fora and DAGs co-chairs' reporting to the TSD committee in a back-to-back setting.
- **Provisions on civil society involvement:** There need to be strong provisions in the agreements on civil society representation in DAGs, and the DAG-to-DAG meetings – which are now common practice under almost all FTAs – should be expressively mentioned. The support of the Commission is here key.
- **Transparency:** The process of inviting participants to the CSF should be transparent and access given to the list of participants to these meetings.



- **Cooperation:** The good cooperation with the dedicated Commission services (DG Trade, DG Employment), which regularly come to the DAG meetings and report on the implementation of the TSD provisions was underlined. The support of the EU Delegations was also highlighted as an important element to facilitate discussions and to make DAGs operational and functional; EU embassies in key countries were encouraged to follow social and environmental issues closely and maintain contacts with the local social partners and CSOs. It was also recommended to invite the country ambassador to the EU and also the EU ambassador to the country to the DAG meetings. Likewise, it could be interesting to invite organisations from the ground, such as EU business associations, trade unions, NGOs. The ILO local offices could be of good help on the labour agenda.

Assessing progress and challenges

- Denis Redonnet, Chief Trade Enforcement Officer (CTEO)
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"The annual AllDAGs meeting is a recognition of the importance the Commission attaches to the role of civil society in the implementation and enforcement of EU trade agreements."

Participating in this third edition of the AllDAGs meeting, CTEO Denis Redonnet underlined the usefulness of these meetings taking place on a yearly basis. The sharing of experiences on the ground of the different DAGs was appreciated, and he highlighted the value of the interaction of the DAGs with the parties to the agreements in the framework of the institutional structures of the agreements.

There might now be an opportunity to expand the relationship, which was evolving over time, taking into account the activities of the DAGs and adapting the interaction with the Parties accordingly. He suggested to reflect on the following questions: Where do we go next in the new mandate? What has been achieved? What kind of concrete actions have made a difference on the ground? That was what the Commission was interested in in terms of the work of the DAGs.

He also emphasised the need to find a way to better communicate with the broader public. The annual implementation and enforcement report would explain how the engagement with civil society structures and with the parties to the agreements were making a difference on the ground year after year, country by country, jurisdiction by jurisdiction. He suggested to work with the DAGs to find a way to make sure that this was better known, better understood by a broader community of stakeholders, doing something positive. This was linked to legitimacy and acceptability of EU trade agreements and of trade agreements being used to pursue a number of values and objectives.

Five points deserved to be highlighted:

1. **Monitoring:** It was essential that the DAGs continued to do the core job of monitoring the situation on the ground in the partner countries, reporting on the situation and alerting the Commission as party to the agreements about problems in legislation and practices, submitting concrete and actionable information (things the Commission could act on). As an example, he mentioned the submission by civil society representatives highlighting the problems of registration of unions in the banana sector in Ecuador. This



was an important issue: the Commission had been able to at least take up the issues with Ecuador, and they were going to continue to engage with the unions in Ecuador, notably in this sector, to support the case.

2. Compliance: In case of issues of compliance with commitments, DAGs should be reassured by the structures put in place, i.e. the single-entry point for complaints. I had been clarified in the TSD review that the DAGs could bring complaints under the SEP. Timelines had been introduced, in support of transparency and predictability of the process. The DAGs should feel empowered by these structures and processes that had been set in place.

3. DAGs research work on TSD: This work was considered as interesting and useful, with the potential of feeding into the cooperation under the structure of the agreements in a substantive way. It was underlined that the topics of the desk studies could be of cross-cutting interest.

4. Active engagement with counterparts: This was particularly important in countries where there was no traditional civil society involvement or a different form of involvement. The engagement of the DAGs on the ground was in these cases very helpful, and he mentioned in particular the case of Vietnam. It was clear that establishing the DAG with Vietnam was a difficult process, but there was a positive dynamic, with an increased membership in the Vietnam DAG. The discussions with civil society on the ground were important as they enabled to bring up issues, even when there were shortcomings in the practical set-up of the DAGs. In the situation of the non-DAG structure with Japan, it had nevertheless been possible to engage with some of the participants in the Joint Dialogue with civil society to bring up a number of issues such as responsible business conduct and due diligence.

5. DAGs organisation: The Commission was not prescriptive of the way DAGs set up their structures, processes and approaches. At the same time, certain things seemed to be working well in terms of working methods: regular meetings with the Commission were useful and DAG-to-DAG meetings helped to maintain good working relations and promote the organisation of joint events. The adoption of joint TSD work plans was helpful because it structured the work and channelled civil society on both sides towards the parties to the agreements, which was the very idea of how it should function.

The annual implementation and enforcement report could be used for further engagement with the partner countries, with the civil society structures in those countries and domestically with the communities the DAG members represent, but also to reach more people so that people understand better that this is work that is ongoing on a day-to-day, year-by-year basis and that this is work that is progressively changing the situation on the ground.

Lastly, CTEO Denis Redonnet assured the DAG members that the Commission would continue the financial support for DAGs to support civil society in the framework of trade agreements.



Role of DAGs in the roll-out of the TSD review

- Discussion on action points for the implementation of TSD commitments and suggestions for new objectives with Maria Martin-Prat, Deputy Director General DG TRADE
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"We welcome the work of the DAGs, the rich expertise and networks of their members and of the organisations they represent, bringing hands-on insight and advice to implementing sustainability in trade agreement."

Deputy Director General Maria Martin-Prat started by underlining that since the last few months there was a much deeper understanding of what could be done together and a far more structured work going forward. The Commission wanted the FTAs to be platforms for furthering sustainability and bringing change on the ground. In this context, the identification of priorities and the cooperation with the EU delegations, Member States and DAGs were essential elements.

- Cross-cutting sustainability aspects & autonomous instruments

The implementation of cross-cutting sustainability aspects in FTAs (not just the TSD chapters), and the need to engage with third countries about the autonomous instruments put in place for environment, climate and labour-related matters were underlined. There was for example a need to explain CBAM and deforestation to the partner countries. This was a challenge, and the Commission here needed the support of the DAGs, especially as these instruments sometimes were perceived as protectionist and a number of partners did not understand them well, as they were very new and are just being implemented on the ground. In addition to these two instruments, the Commission was also negotiating an instrument on due diligence and another one on the eradication of forced labour, which also required a lot of work with the partner countries. Again, she emphasised the need to explain how autonomous instruments relate to sustainability and that they were not obstacles to trade or to the functioning of the FTAs.

- Regarding the roll-out of the TSD review, the Commission was working on two fronts:

1. Implementation of the review as agreed by the member states: The Commission was implementing this approach in all ongoing negotiations. The TSD review was for instance reflected in the EU-New Zealand agreement, as well as in other ongoing negotiations (Indonesia, India, Australia). Negotiations had resumed with Thailand. These were all potential FTA partners with whom the Commission was discussing the new approach. In cases where the text on the table reflected the old approach, this was being complemented with regards to the general dispute resolution mechanism, compliance phase and sanctions in specific breaches, scope of the DAGs, ILO core conventions.

2. Discussion of the TSD review in the context of existing FTAs: In each of the TSD committees (nine had taken place so far, the one on CETA was planned to the week after and the Central America one in June), the Commission had explained the content the TSD Review and discussed how much could be done already on the grounds of the existing agreements. The aim was to have clear TSD priorities per country with regards to FTAs in force. With regards to labour, environment, climate change etc. the Commission wanted to engage with the Member States and with the DAGs to be able to bring about change and identify priorities to use resources efficiently.



Ahead of the new mandate of the DAGs, Deputy Director General Maria Martin-Prat hoped that the discussions on implementation and enforcement as well as on the TSD review would have given the DAG members a good idea on the expectations from the Commission's side. To conclude, she underlined that to get advocacy, it would be important to support EU legislation aimed to reinforce sustainability, which also required a common effort to explain to partners and help them to comply.

End of meeting discussion

In the concluding exchange between DAG members and DG TRADE, some cross-cutting issues were raised.

- **Single Entry Point (SEP) and guidelines:** DAG members noted that the published guidelines were brief and sought clarification on whether cases would continue to be handled on a case-by-case basis, as previously indicated. They also requested greater transparency on the next steps in the process. CNV Internationaal expressed the expectation of a timely response to a complaint submitted one year earlier on behalf of Colombian and Peruvian trade unions, relating in particular to raw materials (minerals).

The Commission explained that it had maintained regular contact with CNV Internationaal and the two partner countries throughout the process. While the guidelines set out the timeline for the preliminary assessment, no deadlines have been established for subsequent steps in order to allow for structured dialogue between the parties.

- **Continuity of cooperation:** Members raised concerns about disruptions in cooperation within both the DAGs and the Commission, including staff turnover, files being transferred between colleagues, and delays in responding to correspondence from the DAGs.

The Commission stated that problems with continuation were unavoidable, but the question would be looked into.

- **Fair trade and trade policy:** Members discussed the role of fair trade in EU trade policy, including the possibility of strengthening fair-trade criteria in FTAs and improving the effectiveness of existing labels and standards.

The Commission stated that it seeks to maximise the effectiveness of available resources and referred to initiatives in West Africa, including cooperation with cocoa-producing countries to promote fairness in a sector often associated with labour and sustainability challenges. It emphasised that fair trade should be integrated into the overall work on sustainability, rather than treated as a separate strand of work. If there were specific elements the DAGs thought the EU could push for within the TSD elements of the FTAs, a discussion would be welcomed. TSD was not just a chapter but should be reflected throughout the whole agreement.



- **Political contexts and Global Gateway:** Members raised concerns about difficult political and security situations in Ecuador, Peru and Colombia, particularly in relation to criminality. They also discussed the Global Gateway initiative, the role of civil society, and possible links between Global Gateway projects and DAG activities.

The Commission acknowledged that in the cases of Ecuador, Peru and Colombia, certain challenges go beyond the scope of FTAs and affect what can currently be achieved, while reaffirming continued engagement. On Global Gateway, it stressed the importance of making civil society involvement more operational. As a major donor and investor, the EU should ensure that its instruments promote its values, particularly in a context of geopolitical competition, including with China's Belt and Road Initiative. The Commission indicated that internal reflection was ongoing on how to better target these efforts and agreed that the role of civil society in this context merited further discussion.

- **Autonomous instruments:** It was underlined that it was important to be careful regarding how these instruments were designed and communicated, and also to ensure a dialogue with the partners before implementing these instruments, not to be seen as imposing our standards on others. The cooperation on due diligence with the Vietnam DAG was mentioned as a good example in this context.

The Commission stated that on forced labour and deforestation, it was essential to make fast efforts of communication, guidance and explanation. It noted that these measures are challenging for all trading partners, including highly developed economies, and even more so for countries with more limited capacities.

- **Future FTAs:** Would the template be the same for all trade partners?

Concerning the general approach with FTAs and the question of whether to apply the same model for everybody, the Commission pointed out that there might be a need for diversification and for establishing trade relations very fast because the world was changing very fast. In the negotiations of FTAs, the template was put on the table, including the TSD chapter in for example the negotiations with India. The Parliament and the Member States would have to make an assessment on how far the EU should go, what should be requested from the country, and what would be the red lines.

The Commission also highlighted the strategic importance of FTAs in securing access to critical raw materials and key technologies and reducing strategic dependencies, particularly in the context of the green transition. One example could be Chile, where there had been important discussions on access to lithium to be included in the chapter of the FTA related to energy and raw materials. Increasingly, the partners wanted to include elements which were important for them not only with



regard to sustainability but also industrial development. In the Chile discussions, sustainability and the TSD chapter had been discussed.

More broadly, the Commission stressed that FTAs remain key international treaties providing a long-term framework for cooperation, even if negotiations can take between four and ten years. At the same time, the EU is increasingly complementing FTAs with other tools, including Sustainable Investment Facilitation Agreements (SIFAs), particularly with African partners, to support investment, sustainability and enabling business environments.

- **Southern Neighbourhood** – and in particular Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, where negotiations were dragging. What efforts were made by the Commission?

The Commission replied that progress depends on the willingness of partner countries to engage and that difficulties have been encountered concerning the upgrading of existing agreements.

- **On the TSD expert group** not being re-established by DG Trade, it was reminded that on two occasions letter had been addressed to two different trade commissioners regarding the reinstatement of the expert group. It was further suggested that a joint statement of the DAGs might have some influence on this point.
- **On institutional cooperation** the need for closer cooperation between the Commission, the European Parliament and the DAGs, including more structured and interconnected exchanges and fora, was underlined.

Wrap up

- Closing remarks by Tanja Buzek

Discussions and exchanges of experiences and challenges had been rich and dynamic, offering valuable insights and shared learning among participants. As a final point, it was suggested that DAGs assist in rolling out the TSD review and in the designing of country-specific priorities. Further dialogue on the role of autonomous instruments in advancing sustainability objectives, while preserving open trade and the effective functioning of FTAs, could be fostered through a dedicated TSD conference bringing together trade partners and civil society representatives to exchange views and identify common approaches. Renewals for DAG memberships were underway, with plans for a session to support new members.

The event concluded with a reminder that effective stakeholder engagement requires sustained commitment over time: "DAGs are a marathon, not a sprint."

"DAGs are a marathon, not a sprint"