

## **Prioritising Food Security**

### **Why in news?**

Recently 47th session of the Steering Committee of the Parliamentary Conference of the WTO was held.

### **What are the issues that WTO needs to address?**

- One, it needs to focus on how global trade can mitigate the impact of the pandemic.
- Two, it has to acknowledge the significance of TRIPS waiver proposal- led by India and South Africa-for augmenting the global vaccine supply and access.
- Three, 12<sup>th</sup> Ministerial conference (12<sup>th</sup> MC) should conclude on fisheries-subsidies negotiations which is underway for 20 years.
- This conclusion is important to secure livelihoods of millions of people engaged therein.
- Four, it need to address on the dysfunction of WTO Appellate Body due to non-appointment of new members.
- Five, the package on agriculture (food security/public stockholding, exempting the WFP from export restrictions, work programme on domestic support, etc) has to be addressed.
- Other issues involved are environment and sustainability, MSMEs, labour, gender and Joint Statement Initiatives (JSIs).

### **What must the focus of 12th MC?**

- The agenda of 12<sup>th</sup> MC should be on issues that are mandated in the earlier Ministerial that has remained unaddressed for a long time.
- Issues like environmental sustainability, labour, gender and trade are a camouflage for restricting the policy space available with developing countries by way of new disciplines.
- One of the mandated issues is to work towards a permanent solution on public stockholding for food security purposes.
- The current WTO rules restrict the support that could be provided by governments in food crop procurement for public stockholding.

- Though **Peace Clause** provides some flexibility from such restrictions, it requires the fulfilment of burdensome transparency and notification conditions.
- The US is the only member blocking the developing countries' demand of having a permanent solution and now non-proponents are seeking additional transparency and safeguard provisions.
- They fear that such stocks might distort international free market trade in food grains.

### **Why a permanent solution is needed?**

- India has been pursuing the demand of a permanent solution at the WTO in association with the G-33 which is critical in view of the impact of Covid-19 on food security.
- In India, when the entire country went into lockdown, public food stocks played a pivotal role in ensuring continued supply of food grains to the country's poor.
- The government could enhance supply of subsidised wheat and rice to the poor only because of the robust public stockholding mechanism it had.

### **What can be done now?**

- It is ironical that some WTO members are not realising the critical role public stocks play.
- In the ongoing pandemic where every economic activity including the supply chains got severely affected, it is only the public stocks helped the poor.
- With the MC 12 approaching, meaningful outcomes need to be arrived at forum keeping in mind the COVID crises.
- Fundamental issues like how to ensure food security through international cooperation has to be addressed.
- Any improved solution in favour of food security would go a long way in serving the humankind and reinstating the trust in multilateralism.

**Source: Financial Express**