

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, 12th Ministerial conference (12th 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 12th 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