

EU PUSHES LINKS BETWEEN TRADE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The European Commission will organize two workshops on trade and sustainable development in San José, Costa Rica (25-26 April), and Buenos Aires (28-29 April), together with the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Each workshop will bring together about 40 trade experts from throughout Latin America representing government, business and the non-profit sector, as well as international organisations. They aim at highlighting the positive links between trade liberalisation and sustainable development, especially in combating poverty.

How can regional trade agreements contribute to sustainable development? How can trade agreements boost sustainable business? And how can they encourage the sustainable use of natural resources?

These are just three of the questions that will be raised in two European Commission workshops in San José, Costa Rica (25-26 April), and Buenos Aires (28-29 April). In organising the workshops, the European Commission has teamed up with the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

The European Commission is responsible for negotiating trade agreements between the world's largest trading bloc and its Latin America counterparts. The OAS' Office for Sustainable Development and Environment and UNEP's Economics and Trade Branch both bring considerable expertise in the area of trade and sustainable development.

Each of the two-day workshops will bring together about 40 trade experts from throughout Latin America representing government, business and the non-profit sector, as well as international organisations. The presentations and discussions will focus on how best to calibrate trade agreements so that they bring not only economic benefits but also environmental and social ones.

The workshops are part of an EU drive to highlight the positive links between trade liberalisation and sustainable development, especially in combating poverty. The EU is increasingly keen to insert sustainable development concerns into the trade agreements it negotiates with other countries. It believes trade agreements offer numerous opportunities for boosting trade in sustainably produced goods, as well in environmental goods and services.

But although the EU is keen to flag up the positive aspects of more open trade, it also accepts that liberalising trade does not automatically result in environmental or social gains. For this reason, since 1999 it has carried out systematic analyses – known as Sustainability Impact Assessments (SIAs) - of the potential effects of all its trade negotiations. These SIAs examine possible consequences not just in the EU itself but also in the trading partners concerned. The EU is also eager to use its trade negotiations to prevent a so-called race to the bottom of environmental or social standards in order to boost short term competitiveness.

The European Commission chose the Western Hemisphere for the workshops because of the numerous examples of regional integration and also because of the EU's interest in strengthening trade ties in the region. The EU already has a free trade agreement with Chile and is currently negotiating an agreement with Mercosur.

The two workshops are part of a broader effort by the European Commission to engage with its trading partners on sustainable development issues in fora other than trade negotiations and to reach out to civil society.