Promoting Imports from Developing Countries into Donor Markets

A review of donor import-promotion initiatives and the supporting literature

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Purpose

Most development support to trade works on the supply side: it helps firms in developing countries produce more and meet standards. A smaller, distinct family of donor instruments works on the demand side, inside the donor country itself, by actively connecting developing-country suppliers to buyers in the donor market. These import-promotion programmes represent an often-overlooked operational expression of "mutual benefit": they raise exports and jobs in partner countries while giving home-country importers new, often cheaper or more sustainable, sources of supply. This note maps some of these initiatives and summarises part of the literature says about whether they work.

The dedicated import-promotion programmes

Netherlands has practiced import promotion for a long time. The **Centre for the Promotion of Imports from developing countries (CBI)**, an agency of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs established in 1971, advises exporters and business support organisations (BSOs) in developing countries, supplies European market intelligence, and matches suppliers with buyers so that small firms can gain a foothold on the EU market. It remains the reference design that later programmes copied.

Three close peers run on the same logic. **SIPPO** (the Swiss Import Promotion Programme), a mandate of the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs implemented by Swisscontact since 2017, works through BSOs in eleven partner countries to integrate them into world trade. Germany's **Import Promotion Desk (IPD)**, run since 2012 by the BGA and sequa with BMZ funding, links SMEs in thirteen partner countries to European importers in focused sectors such as fresh produce, natural ingredients, cut flowers, technical wood and sustainable tourism. **Open Trade Gate Sweden**, hosted by the National Board of Trade, gives developing-country exporters free guidance on EU and Swedish rules and product requirements. Finland's **Finnpartnership**, managed by Finnfund, adds funding, contacts and advisory support for business between Finland and developing countries.

These agencies operate as a network rather than as rivals, cross-referring suppliers and coordinating with the multilateral International Trade Centre (ITC) in Geneva. Together they form a recognisable European "import-promotion" architecture. There is currently no Danish equivalent.

The wider Aid-for-Trade frame

Import promotion is a part of the broader Aid-for-Trade agenda, often associated with the 2005 WTO Hong Kong Ministerial, under which donors have disbursed over USD 700 billion to help developing countries overcome supply-side and infrastructure barriers and integrate into global markets, tracked through the joint OECD–WTO monitoring framework. Import-promotion programmes are the demand-side complement to this largely supply-side effort: they address the market-access and information failures that remain even after a firm is capable of producing for export.

What the evidence says

There is little evidence on import promotion agencies working for development. Partner country equivalents, export promotion agencies, have some documented evidence showing effects. Evidence is primarily econometric, and thus the causal claims should be read carefully. Yet, Lederman, Olarreaga and Payton (covering 103 countries) find that such agencies have a statistically significant effect on exports, on the order of USD 300 of additional exports per USD 1 of promotion for the median agency, working mainly by helping firms enter and survive in export markets rather than by expanding incumbents. Returns diminish sharply with budget, so small, focused agencies tend to be the most cost-effective, which fits the lean, sector-specific design of programmes like IPD and SIPPO.

As for import promotion agencies, programme-level evaluations are more mixed and more honest about attribution. The Dutch IOB evaluation of CBI (2005–2012) criticised the programme for interventions that did not always reach the intended target group and for weak transparency on results; CBI responded by overhauling its approach and building the PRIME real-time monitoring methodology with Dutch universities and PUM. SIPPO reports substantial figures for its 2017–2021 phase, around 125,000 jobs created or retained and roughly CHF 2 billion in additional export turnover, but these are largely indirect and self-reported, which is the recurring measurement problem across the field: the gap between credible micro-evidence that promotion helps firms enter markets and the harder claim of attributable, economy-wide impact.

Implications for the mutual-benefit agenda

Import promotion is the instrument where the mutual-benefit case is strongest and least contestable, because the home-country gain (new supply, sourcing diversification) and the development gain (exports, jobs, value-chain upgrading) are produced by the same activity rather than traded off against each other. This aligns with the Kiel Institute's 2025–26 work on "mutual-interest" development cooperation and the current DCED stocktake of how agencies pursue mutual benefits through private-sector development. The consistent design lesson is that they work best when small, sector-focused, demand-led and rigorously evaluated; the binding weakness is measurement, not concept.

Key sources

Lederman, D., Olarreaga, M. and Payton, L. (2010). Export Promotion Agencies: Do They Work? *Journal of Development Economics*, 91(2), 257–265.

IOB (2016). *Evaluation of CBI's contribution to Dutch private-sector development objectives, 2005–2012*. Policy and Operations Evaluation Department, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

SECO / Swisscontact. *Swiss Import Promotion Programme (SIPPO) factsheets and phase reports, 2017–2025*.

OECD / WTO (2025). *Aid for Trade at a Crossroads*; and the *Aid for Trade at a Glance* series.

Kiel Institute (2025–26). *Mutual-Interest Development Cooperation: Aligning Incentives in a Fragmenting World*.

DCED (2026). *Towards achieving mutual benefits through Private Sector Development: Review of donor approaches and experiences* (Terms of Reference).

Programmes: cbi.eu, importpromotiondesk.de, sippo.ch, kommerskollegium.se, finnpartnership.fi.

Links

Programmes

CBI – Centre for the Promotion of Imports from developing countries (Netherlands MFA). cbi.eu

SIPPO – Swiss Import Promotion Programme (SECO / Swisscontact). sippo.ch; SECO factsheet 2021–2025: factsheet-sippo.pdf

IPD – Import Promotion Desk (Germany, BGA / sequa, BMZ-funded). importpromotiondesk.de; sequa.de/projects-programmes/ipd

Open Trade Gate Sweden (National Board of Trade / Kommerskollegium). kommerskollegium.se

Finnpartnership (Finland MFA / Finnfund). finnpartnership.fi

Evaluations and evidence

Lederman, D., Olarreaga, M. and Payton, L. (2010). Export Promotion Agencies: Do They Work? *Journal of Development Economics*, 91(2), 257–265. SSRN / ScienceDirect

IOB (2016). Evaluation of CBI's contribution to Dutch private-sector development objectives, 2005–2012. Netherlands MFA. CBI summary: cbi.eu/news/changing-better

PRIME – Pioneering Real-time Impact Monitoring and Evaluation (CBI / Erasmus University). eur.nl report

Frameworks and context

OECD (Aid for Trade programme). oecd.org/aid-for-trade; OECD/WTO (2025), Aid for Trade at a Crossroads: PDF

WTO – Aid for Trade initiative. wto.org/aidfortrade

Kiel Institute (2025–26). Mutual-Interest Development Cooperation: Aligning Incentives in a Fragmenting World. Publication page / Kiel Report PDF

DCED (2026). Towards achieving mutual benefits through Private Sector Development: Review of donor approaches and experiences (Terms of Reference).

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