



IIA ISSUES NOTE

INTERNATIONAL INVESTMENT AGREEMENTS



UNITED NATIONS
UNCTAD

IMPROVING INVESTMENT DISPUTE SETTLEMENT: UNCTAD POLICY TOOLS

H I G H L I G H T S

- Investor-State dispute settlement (ISDS) has been the subject of an increasingly intense debate in the investment and development community and the general public at large. The mounting number of ISDS cases and systemic challenges arising from them have pushed ISDS to the forefront of the broader agenda for sustainable development-oriented reform of the international investment agreements (IIA) regime.
- Over the past five years, UNCTAD has intensified its work on IIA and investment dispute settlement reform to respond to these developments. Guided by the overall imperative to align international investment policy with today's sustainable development paradigm, the organization supports policymaking in accordance with all three of its pillars of activities: providing data and analysis, developing policy options and policy tools, and offering a platform for intergovernmental consensus-building.
- Through its IIA and ISDS Navigators, databases that are accessible through its Investment Policy Hub, UNCTAD provides a "one-stop shop" for investment policy makers and other investment and development stakeholders for comprehensive information on the latest trends in this rapidly evolving area of policymaking.
- UNCTAD's 2012 *Investment Policy Framework for Sustainable Development* (updated in 2015) presented the organization's vision on designing both national and international investment policies for sustainable development. In doing so, it set out a number of policy options to shield countries from unjustified liabilities and procedural costs arising out of ISDS.
- UNCTAD's *World Investment Report 2013* summarized the main concerns regarding the functioning of the investment dispute settlement system and sketched out five reform paths: (i) promoting alternative dispute resolution, (ii) tailoring the existing system through individual IIAs, (iii) limiting investors' access to ISDS, (iv) introducing an appeals facility, and (v) creating a standing international investment court.
- UNCTAD's *World Investment Report 2015* looked at ISDS as part of the broader *Road Map for IIA Reform*, alongside the need to: safeguard the right to regulate, while also providing protection; promote and facilitate investment; ensure responsible investment; and enhance systemic consistency. The *Road Map* categorized policy options for improving investment dispute settlement along two prongs of actions: reforming the existing ISDS system or replacing it.

- In 2016 and 2017, UNCTAD's *World Investment Reports* recorded steps taken by States and other stakeholders to improve the IIA/investment dispute settlement regime at various levels of policymaking – national, bilateral, regional, and multilateral. Among others, countries adopted new model treaties and concluded IIAs with modern, sustainable-development friendly provisions (so-called “phase 1 reform actions”).
- UNCTAD's *World Investment Report 2017* then focused on phase 2 of IIA reform, i.e. modernizing the existing stock of “old-generation” investment treaties. Among the ten policy options identified in that respect, “multilateral engagement” stands out as a particularly promising option for improving investment dispute settlement.
- The multilateral initiative on transparency in treaty-based investor-State arbitration, led by UNCITRAL and culminating with the 2014 “Mauritius Convention on Transparency”, presents a practical example of a phase 2 IIA reform action. The approach followed by UNCITRAL may offer a unique opportunity for more in-depth reform of the investment dispute settlement system, including by institutionalizing the regime through a permanent adjudicatory body.
- Reform of investment dispute settlement cannot be viewed in isolation; it needs to be synchronized with reform of the substantive investment protection rules embodied in IIAs. Without a comprehensive package that addresses both the substantive content of IIAs and ISDS, any reform attempt risks achieving only piecemeal change and potentially creating new forms of fragmentation and uncertainty.
- As the United Nations' focal point for international investment and development, UNCTAD is committed to providing a backstop to the IIA reform processes and to ensuring that the IIA regime – including the way in which investment disputes are settled – works for sustainable development.
- The 2018 World Investment Forum (WIF), scheduled for 22-26 October 2018, will provide another unique occasion for high-level, inclusive and multi-stakeholder-oriented consensus-building on IIA reform, in support of international investment for sustainable development.

1. Introduction

This Note responds to a request from the Secretariat of the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) to provide an overview of UNCTAD's work on reforming the system of investment dispute settlement under international investment agreements (IIAs).

For over ten years, investment dispute settlement-related issues have been debated with increasing intensity by the international investment and development community, and in recent years discussions have reached the highest levels of government. The mounting number of investor-State dispute settlement (ISDS) cases, as well as the systemic challenges arising from them, have pushed ISDS to the forefront of the broader agenda for the sustainable development-oriented reform of the IIA regime.

Debates about reform have been on-going in the academic literature, intergovernmental and parliamentary meetings, academic and practitioner conferences and through the advocacy work of civil society organizations. ISDS-related debates have also found reflection in the mainstream media and have raised interest among the public at large.

In the UNCTAD context, these discussions have been carried forward at UNCTAD's Annual IIA Conferences and sessions at UNCTAD's multi-stakeholder World Investment Forum (WIF), its Investment Commission and its Expert Meetings. Other relevant forums have included, for example, the OECD's Freedom of Investment Roundtables¹ and the IISD/South Centre's Annual Forums for Developing Country Investment Negotiators.²

Already at UNCTAD's 2012 IIA Conference, “[ISDS] was considered one of the most topical and most sensitive issues and participants agreed on the need to address challenges emerging from it”.³ Two years later, at a similar event, “[i]t was broadly agreed that the IIA regime and ISDS system need to be reformed in a comprehensive and gradual way, taking into account the interests of a wide range of stakeholders”.⁴

Also in 2015 and 2016, governments and other stakeholders shared their experiences on ISDS, identified best practices and considered options for the reform of the ISDS system at several UNCTAD meetings.⁵ Deliberations showed that governments worldwide were taking a variety of actions and approaches with a view toward addressing concerns about substantive treaty standards and ISDS procedures. Among other actions, governments have developed new model treaties and negotiated more modern IIAs (so-called “phase 1 reform actions”). At the High-level IIA Conference 2016, participants also requested that UNCTAD further explore options to reform investor-State arbitration.⁶

¹ See <http://www.oecd.org/investment/investment-policy/oecdroundtablesonfreedomofinvestment.htm>.

² See <http://www.iisd.org/project/annual-forum-developing-country-investment-negotiators>.

³ UNCTAD, World Investment Forum, 22 April 2012, summary available at http://unctad.org/meetings/en/SessionalDocuments/td472_en.pdf.

⁴ These include UNCTAD, IIA Conference, 16 October 2014, summary available at <http://unctad-worldinvestmentforum.org/programme2014/sessions/reforming-the-international-investment-agreements-regime/>.

⁵ UNCTAD, Report of the Expert Meeting on the Transformation of the International Investment Agreement Regime: The Path Ahead, 25 to 27 February 2015, available at http://unctad.org/meetings/en/SessionalDocuments/ciim4d3_en.pdf; UNCTAD, Report of the Multi-year Expert Meeting on Investment, Innovation and Entrepreneurship for Productive Capacity-building and Sustainable Development on its fourth session, 16 to 17 March 2016, available at http://unctad.org/meetings/en/SessionalDocuments/ciimem4d12_en.pdf.

⁶ James Zhan and Diana Rosert, “UNCTAD's International Investment Agreements Conference 2016: Taking IIA Reform to the Next Level”, *Investment Treaty News*, 12 December 2016, available at <https://www.iisd.org/itn/2016/12/12/unctads-international-investment-agreements-conference-2016-taking-ii-a-reform-to-the-next-level-james-zhan-diana-rosert/>.

As part of these developments over the past five years, UNCTAD has intensified its policy research on investment dispute settlement reform. In addition to collecting and making available comprehensive data on ISDS⁷ and reviewing treaty practice,⁸ several of the organization's publications have analysed ISDS-related concerns, provided policy options and detailed the respective pros and cons of each. In doing so, UNCTAD has been guided by an overarching imperative to align international investment policies with today's sustainable development paradigm.

2. Optimising Treaty Design Investment Policy Framework for Sustainable Development (WIR12)

The 2012 version of the *Investment Policy Framework for Sustainable Development* (launched as part of the World Investment Report 2012) presented UNCTAD's vision on designing both national and international investment policies. With respect to ISDS, it noted, in particular:

"As the number of ISDS cases increases, questions have arisen with regard to the effectiveness and the sustainable development implications of ISDS. Many ISDS procedures are very expensive and often take several years to resolve. ISDS cases increasingly challenge domestic regulatory measures implemented for public policy objectives. Almost all ISDS cases lead to the breakdown of the relationship between the investor and the host State. Due to the lack of a single, unified mechanism, different tribunals have issued divergent interpretations of similarly worded treaty provisions, resulting in contradictory outcomes of cases involving identical/similar facts and/or treaty language. Many ISDS proceedings are conducted confidentially, which has raised concerns when tribunals address matters of public policy."

The *Investment Policy Framework* suggests options to address these issues in treaty design. The second edition of the *Investment Policy Framework* (UNCTAD, 2015) updated the available policy options for various treaty elements in light of the most recent treaty practices.

3. Sketching Out Five Paths Toward Reform of Investment Dispute Settlement (WIR13)

The *World Investment Report 2013 (WIR13)* summarized main concerns about the investment dispute settlement system and proposed five reform paths: (i) promoting alternative dispute resolution, (ii) modifying the existing ISDS system through individual IIAs, (iii) limiting investors' access to ISDS, (iv) introducing an appeals facility, and (v) creating a standing international investment court.

a. The pros and cons of the ISDS mechanism

At the outset, the *WIR13* recalled the rationale for allowing investors to pursue relief directly through investor-State arbitration:

"The ISDS mechanism was designed to depoliticize investment disputes and create a forum that would offer investors a fair hearing before an independent, neutral and qualified tribunal. It was seen as a mechanism for rendering final and enforceable decisions through a swift, cheap and flexible process, over which disputing parties would have considerable control. Given that investor complaints relate to the conduct of sovereign States, taking these disputes out of the domestic sphere of the State concerned provides aggrieved investors with an important guarantee that their claims will be adjudicated in an independent and impartial manner."

⁷ See <http://investmentpolicyhub.unctad.org/ISDS>.

⁸ UNCTAD, *Investor-State Dispute Settlement: A Sequel* (New York and Geneva, 2014).

It then summarized the concerns about the actual functioning of ISDS under investment treaties that by then were already well-documented in academic and policy literature. The broad challenges addressed are as follows:

Legitimacy

It is questionable whether an *ad hoc* international tribunal is the most appropriate mechanism to assess the validity of States' acts, particularly when they involve public policy issues. The pressure on public finances and potential disincentives for public-interest regulation may pose obstacles to countries' sustainable development paths.

Transparency

Although the transparency of the ISDS system has improved since the early 2000s, proceedings can still be kept fully confidential – if both disputing parties so wish – even in cases where the dispute involves matters of public interest.

Nationality planning

Investors may gain access to ISDS procedures using corporate structuring, i.e. by channelling an investment through a company established in an intermediary country with the sole purpose of benefitting from an IIA concluded by that country with the host State.

Consistency of arbitral decisions

Recurring experiences of inconsistent findings by arbitral tribunals have resulted in divergent legal interpretations of identical or similar treaty provisions as well as differences in the assessment of the merits of cases involving the same facts. Inconsistent interpretations have led to uncertainty about the meaning of key treaty obligations and lack of predictability as to how they would be read in future cases.

Erroneous decisions

Substantive mistakes of arbitral tribunals, if they arise, cannot be corrected effectively through existing review mechanisms. In particular, ICSID annulment committees have very limited review powers. Furthermore, a committee that is individually created for a specific dispute may also disagree with committee(s) examining similar issues in other cases.

Arbitrators' independence and impartiality

The increasing number of challenges to arbitrators suggests that disputing parties perceive them as biased or predisposed. Particular concerns have arisen from a perceived tendency of disputing parties to appoint individuals sympathetic to their case. Arbitrators' interest in being re-appointed in future cases and their frequent "changing of hats" (serving as arbitrators in some cases and counsel in others) have amplified these concerns.

Financial stakes

The high cost of arbitrations is a concern for both investors (especially small and medium-size enterprises, or SMEs) and States. From a State's perspective, even if it wins the case, the tribunal may refrain from ordering claimants to pay the government's costs, rendering the average of \$8 million spent on lawyers and arbitrators a significant burden on public finances and preventing the use of those funds for other goals.

The challenges identified in the *World Investment Report 2013* largely persist today, even though improvements have been achieved in some areas, notably with regard to the transparency of ISDS proceedings.

b. Five paths for ISDS reform

In response to these challenges, UNCTAD identified in *WIR13* five broad paths for investment dispute settlement reform. They were developed further and presented, in a modified fashion, in the *World Investment Report 2015* (*WIR15*), discussed below.

Promoting alternative dispute resolution methods

This approach calls for increasing resort to so-called alternative methods of dispute resolution (ADR) and dispute prevention policies (DPPs), both of which have formed part of UNCTAD's technical assistance and advisory services on IIAs. This reform path is considered a complementary rather than stand-alone avenue for investment dispute settlement reform. ADR may be either enshrined in IIAs or implemented at the domestic level, without specific references in the IIA. In terms of implementation, the approach is relatively straightforward, and some countries have already implemented it. ADR and DPPs cannot solve key ISDS-related challenges, but they can help in reducing the number of full-fledged legal disputes.

Tailoring the existing system through individual IIAs

This option preserves the main features of the existing system and recommends that individual countries apply "tailored modifications" of selected aspects of the ISDS system in their new IIAs. A number of countries have already embarked on this course of action. Procedural innovations, many of which also appeared in UNCTAD's *Investment Policy Framework 2012*, include: setting time limits for bringing claims, increasing the contracting parties' role in interpreting the treaty, establishing a mechanism for consolidation of related claims, providing for more transparency in ISDS, and including a mechanism for an early discharge of frivolous claims. In addition, clarifying the scope and content of substantive IIA provisions is an important means to enhance the certainty of the legal norms and reducing the margin of discretion of arbitrators. The "tailored modifications" option has its advantages and limitations; in part because of its treaty-by-treaty approach, it is considered to stop short of offering a comprehensive, integrated way forward.

Limiting investors' access to ISDS

This option narrows the range of situations in which investors can resort to ISDS, by (i) reducing the subject-matter scope for ISDS claims, (ii) restricting the range of investors who qualify to benefit from the treaty, and (iii) introducing the requirement to exhaust local remedies before resorting to international arbitration. Some countries have adopted policies of this kind. A far-reaching version of this approach would be to abandon ISDS as a means of dispute resolution altogether and return to State–State arbitration proceedings, as some treaties have done. Limiting investor access to ISDS can help to slow down the proliferation of ISDS proceedings, reduce States' financial liabilities arising from ISDS awards and save resources. To some extent, however, this approach would be a return to the earlier, pre-ISDS system. Furthermore, similarly to the "tailored modification" option, it would result in a piecemeal approach towards reform.

Introducing an appeals facility

This option implies a standing body with a competence to undertake a substantive review of awards rendered by arbitral tribunals. It is viewed as a means to improve the consistency of case law, correct erroneous decisions of first-level tribunals and enhance the predictability of the law. If the facility were constituted of permanent members appointed by States from a pool of the most reputable jurists, it would have the potential to become an authoritative body capable of delivering consistent – and balanced – opinions, which could rectify some of the legitimacy concerns about the current ISDS regime. At the same time, absolute consistency and certainty would not be achievable in a legal system that consists of about 3,000 legal texts. Added to this are the significant, although not insurmountable, practical challenges of time and cost of appellate proceedings, the likelihood of support by a significant number of countries, scope of review, constitution and budget.

Creating a standing international investment court

This option implies the replacement of the current system of *ad hoc* arbitration tribunals with a standing international investment court, which could also have an appeals chamber. The court would consist of judges appointed or elected by States on a permanent basis, e.g. for a fixed term. The court would address most of the problems outlined above: it would go a long way toward ensuring the legitimacy and transparency of the

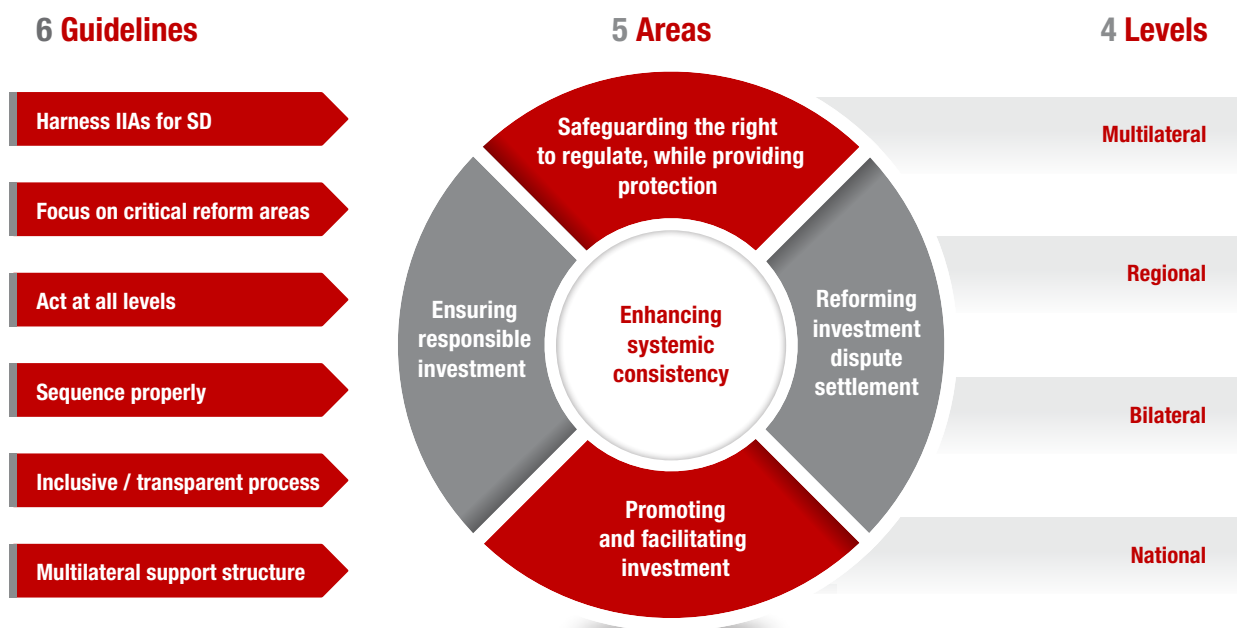
system, facilitating the consistency and accuracy of decisions and promoting the independence and impartiality of adjudicators. Yet, this option is also the most difficult one to implement as it requires a complete overhaul of the current regime through the coordinated action of a large number of States. Questions have been raised as to whether a new court would be fit for a fragmented regime that consists of a huge number of mostly bilateral IIAs.

In sum, *WIR13* made a case for ISDS reform, encouraging States to re-assess the current system, weigh options for reform and decide upon the most appropriate route.

4. Road Map for IIA Reform: Improving Investment Dispute Settlement *(WIR15)*

UNCTAD's *World Investment Report 2015 (WIR15)* took stock of sixty years of IIA rule-making and drew lessons on how IIAs worked in practice and what could be learned for future IIA rule-making. On this basis, the *WIR15* presented a comprehensive *Road Map for IIA Reform*, where investment dispute settlement featured as one of the reform areas, alongside the need to safeguard countries' right to regulate, while providing protection to investors; promote and facilitate investment; ensure responsible investment; and enhance systemic consistency of the global IIA regime (figure 1).

Figure 1. UNCTAD's Road Map for IIA Reform (2015)



Source: ©UNCTAD, *WIR15*.

a. The need to address investment dispute settlement-related concerns

The *WIR15* acknowledged once again that IIAs “bite and may have unforeseen risks”:

“IIAs are legally binding instruments and not ‘harmless’ political declarations. As shown by the surge in ISDS cases during the last 15 years, they ‘bite’. Broad and vague formulation of IIA provisions has allowed investors to challenge core domestic policy decisions, for instance in the area of environmental, energy and health policies. Whereas in the past, it was mostly developing countries that were exposed to investor claims, there are nowadays also more and more developed countries as defendants.”

The increase in the number of ISDS cases over the years, together with sometimes expansive, unexpected and inconsistent interpretations of IIA provisions by arbitral tribunals, had triggered a worldwide debate on the pros and cons of ISDS. Responding to these developments, a number of countries had reassessed their positions on ISDS and some had adopted certain reform measures.

The *WIR15* observed the emerging shared view on the need to reform the IIA regime, moving away from the question of *whether* to reform or not, to the “*what, how and extent*” of such reform. Reforming investment dispute settlement had become a core aspect of the broader IIA reform.

The *WIR15* continued exploring avenues for reform to address investment dispute settlement-related concerns. By setting out the arguments made in favour and against the current ISDS system, *WIR15* assists policy makers making strategic choices on whether to keep and reform ISDS or to abandon and/or replace it (table 1).

Table 1. Summary of arguments put forward in favour and against ISDS

Main arguments made in favour of ISDS	Main arguments made against ISDS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides an additional avenue of legal redress to covered foreign investors and enforces the substantive treaty obligations. • Allows foreign investors to avoid national courts of the host State if they have little trust in their independence, efficiency, or competence. • Avoids recourse to diplomatic protection (investors do not need to convince their home State to bring claims or exercise diplomatic protection). • Ensures adjudication of claims by a qualified and neutral tribunal. • Removes any State immunity obstacles that may complicate domestic legal claims in some States. • May be faster than domestic court procedures in some countries. • Allows recognition and enforcement of arbitral awards in many jurisdictions (under the ICSID Convention or the New York Convention). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grants foreign investors greater rights than those of domestic investors, creating unequal competitive conditions. • Exposes host States to legal and financial risks, without bringing any additional benefits, and can lead to “regulatory chill”. • Lacks sufficient legitimacy (is modelled on private commercial arbitration, lacks transparency, and raises concerns about arbitrators’ independence and impartiality). • Fails to ensure consistency between decisions adopted by different tribunals on identical or similar issues. • Does not allow for correcting erroneous decisions. • Creates incentives for “nationality planning” by investors from third countries (or from the host State itself) in order to gain access to ISDS. • Is very expensive for users. • Holds little additional value in the presence of well-established and well-functioning domestic legal systems.

Source: ©UNCTAD, *WIR15*.

b. Options for improving investment dispute settlement

Following a discussion of whether “to have or not to have” ISDS, the *Road Map for IIA Reform* categorized three sets of options for improving investment dispute settlement (table 2). The options are organized along two prongs of actions: reforming the existing ISDS system or replacing it. The options presented in the *Road Map* to a large extent repeat those found in *WIR13*, although they are “packaged” differently and include some additions. The *Road Map* analyses different options available under the reform paths, summarizes their respective pros and cons and indicates how some of them could be combined and tailored to meet several reform objectives.

Table 2. Sets of options for reforming investment dispute settlement

Reforming existing investor-State arbitration		
Fixing existing ISDS mechanisms	Adding new elements to existing ISDS mechanisms	Replacing existing investor-State arbitration
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improving the arbitral process, e.g. by making it more transparent and streamlined, discouraging submission of unfounded claims, addressing ongoing concerns about arbitrator appointments and potential conflicts 2. Limiting investors' access, e.g. by reducing the subject-matter scope, circumscribing the range of arbitrable claims, setting time limits, and preventing abuse by "mailbox" companies 3. Using filters for channelling sensitive cases to State-State dispute settlement 4. Introducing local litigation requirements as a precondition for ISDS 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Building in effective alternative dispute resolution 2. Introducing an appeals facility (whether bilateral, regional, or multilateral) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Creating a standing international investment court 2. Replacing ISDS by State-State dispute settlement 3. Replacing ISDS by domestic dispute resolution

Source: ©UNCTAD, *WIR15*.

1. Fixing the existing ISDS mechanisms

This set of options aims to reform existing ISDS mechanisms while keeping their basic structure, namely that investors can bring claims against host States before *ad hoc* arbitral tribunals. Reform elements could include, for instance, new IIA provisions designed to (i) improve the arbitral process, (ii) refine investors' access to investment arbitration, (iii) establish filters for channelling sensitive cases to State-State dispute settlement, and/or (iv) introduce local litigation requirements. These reform options can be implemented by contracting States in existing and future individual IIAs and would not require coordinated actions by a large number of countries.

2. Adding new elements to the existing ISDS mechanisms

The policy options under this heading add new elements to complement the existing investor-State arbitration mechanism. For example, an appeals facility would preserve the structure of the existing investment arbitration mechanism and add a new layer to it. Effective ADR processes could also reduce the number of disputes that result in full-scale arbitration.

3. Replacing the existing ISDS system with other dispute resolution mechanisms

The options under this reform path imply abolishing the existing system of *ad hoc* investor-State arbitration and replacing it with other mechanisms for settling investment disputes. Potential replacements of the current ISDS system include (i) the creation of a standing international investment court, (ii) State-State dispute settlement, and/or (iii) reliance on domestic judicial systems of the host State.

The *Road Map* notes, among other things, that a standing court could contribute to enhancing consistency and predictability in the interpretation of international treaties, and also strengthen the perceived and actual independence and impartiality of adjudicators. The *Road Map* also outlines key issues and challenges (i) regarding the establishment of such a court (such as the need to build consensus among a critical mass of countries around a convention establishing such a court), (ii) the organization and institutional set-up (such as the location, financing and staffing of the court), (iii) the participation of countries in the court and how to transition from a

possible bilateral or plurilateral court to a more universal structure serving the needs of developing and least developed countries, and (iv) the competence of the court (such as the type of treaties and cases that the court would be competent to address).

Under the reform path of “replacing” existing investor-State arbitration, *WIR15* also discussed the option to not have ISDS at all, and replacing it with either State-State dispute settlement or domestic dispute resolution/local litigation. For both options, the report outlines arguments made in favour and against them (tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Summary of arguments put forward in favour and against State-State arbitration

Main arguments made in favour of State-State dispute settlement	Main arguments made against State-State dispute settlement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could avoid broader legitimacy concerns that have been raised in respect of ISDS. • Could help to filter out frivolous claims. • Only States can bring claims under international law as they are the principal subjects of the system. • May help to avoid controversial legal issues related to challenges to public policies. • States would not make certain types of legal arguments that could be used against them in the future. • Does away with the privileges that ISDS bestows on foreign investors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could politicize investment disputes, and commercial dispute would become a matter of State-State diplomatic confrontation. • Investor interests could become a bargaining chip in international relationships. • May be more cumbersome and lengthy for investors due to bureaucracy in either or both disputing States. • May disadvantage SMEs <i>vis-à-vis</i> larger companies. • Raises challenges for States in terms of costs of proceedings and legal remedies. • Has implications for States in terms of administrative and institutional resources.

Source: ©UNCTAD, *WIR15*.

Table 4. Summary of arguments put forward in favour and against local litigation requirements

Main arguments made in favour of local litigation requirements	Main arguments made against local litigation requirements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puts foreign investors on equal footing with domestic investors (as well as with foreign investors from States which do not have an IIA with the host country). • Helps establish a level playing field among foreign investors (e.g. for SMEs). • Usually includes a right to appeal first-instance decisions in national jurisdictions; well-suited to interpret and apply the domestic laws of the host State. • Reflects that reliance on ISDS is less important in countries with a sound legal system, good governance, and local courts' expertise. • Brings into focus domestic reforms aimed at fostering sound and well-working legal and judicial institutions in host States. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns that some host States cannot guarantee an efficient and well-functioning domestic court system. • Local courts may lack independence and be subject to political control and abuse by the State, including delaying tactics. • Would be particularly challenging in countries with weak governance, where local court decisions could be difficult to enforce. • In some jurisdictions, exhaustion of local remedies may span a long period of time, owing to the high workload of local tribunals. • Local courts may not have the legal competence to apply international law – many jurisdictions do not allow for the direct applicability of IIAs.

Source: ©UNCTAD, based on *WIR15*.

c. A strong case for systemic reform of investment dispute settlement

Based on the analysis of the pros and cons of the reform options, the *Road Map* draws the following conclusions:

- ISDS offers benefits for foreign investors and potential benefits for home and host States, but in its present incarnation the system suffers from significant drawbacks in its substance, procedure and functioning.
- There is a strong case for systematic reform of investment dispute settlement. However, there are no quick and easy solutions, since all reform options pose their own specific challenges.
- Some reform options are less difficult to implement than others (e.g. those that can be undertaken through unilateral or bilateral actions). Although multilateral options would go furthest in systemically addressing areas of needed reform, they would also face more difficulties in implementation and require agreement between larger numbers of States on a series of important questions.
- Attention needs to be given not only to the thousands of individual investment treaties, but also to the existing multilateral ISDS-related instruments, such as the ICSID Convention and the widely used UNCITRAL Arbitration Rules.
- ISDS is an enforcement mechanism for the substantive provisions of IIAs. Hence, ISDS cannot be looked at in isolation, but only together with the substantive investment protection rules embodied in IIAs. Without a comprehensive package that addresses both the substantive content of IIAs and ISDS, any reform attempt risks achieving only piecemeal change and potentially creating new forms of fragmentation and uncertainty.

5. On-going Efforts to Address ISDS-Related Concerns (WIR16/17)

The *World Investment Reports 2016 and 2017* (WIR16 and WIR17) further documented the progress of IIA and investment dispute settlement reform. Many developed and developing countries have been pursuing different types of reform actions, including with regard to investment dispute settlement, at four levels of policymaking – national, bilateral, regional and multilateral.

National-level reform has produced modernized content in recent model investment treaties. A review of selected models shows that most of them strive to safeguard States' right to regulate while ensuring protection of investors, as well as to improve investment dispute settlement.

The most visible results of bilateral-level reform actions were the modernized treaty provisions in newly concluded IIAs. A review of 21 bilateral IIAs concluded in 2015 found that 17 of them included clauses aimed at fixing the ISDS system.⁹ Most of the IIAs signed in 2016 included at least one element limiting access to ISDS (e.g. limiting treaty provisions subject to ISDS, excluding policy areas from ISDS, limiting the time period to submit claims, or including no ISDS mechanism at all).¹⁰ A review of 70 recent BITs (concluded between 2012 and 2015) showed that 6 (or close to 12 per cent) did not include ISDS at all.¹¹

The reports also reviewed developments at the regional and multilateral levels, with the idea of a permanent investment court receiving considerable attention in respective deliberations.

⁹ UNCTAD, *World Investment Report 2016, Investor Nationality: Policy Challenges* (New York and Geneva 2016) 113.

¹⁰ UNCTAD, *World Investment Report 2017, Investment and the Digital Economy* (New York and Geneva 2017) 121.

¹¹ Based on UNCTAD's IIA Mapping database. To help policymakers and other stakeholders understand trends in IIA drafting, assess the prevalence of different policy approaches and identify treaty examples, UNCTAD launched its IIA Mapping database, available at <http://investmentpolicyhub.unctad.org/IIA>. As of mid-November 2017, more than 2,500 IIAs have been mapped, and the results can be found in this database.

6. Investment Dispute Settlement in Phase 2 of IIA Reform (WIR17)

The *WIR17* also called for a move to Phase 2 of IIA reform: modernizing the existing stock of older-generation treaties. Old treaties abound: more than 2,500 IIAs in force today (95 percent of all treaties in force) were concluded before 2010. Old treaties bite: virtually all known ISDS cases have been based on those treaties. And, old treaties perpetuate inconsistencies. In the *WIR17*, UNCTAD then presented and analysed the pros and cons of *10 Policy Options for Phase 2 of IIA reform* (figure 2).

Figure 2. Phase 2 of IIA Reform: 10 Policy Options



Source: ©UNCTAD, *WIR17*.

Among the policy options considered, option 7 “multilateral engagement” stands out as particularly promising for improving investment dispute settlement. In fact, such engagement is already taking place. For example, the Mauritius Convention on Transparency¹² fosters greater application of the UNCITRAL Transparency Rules to IIAs concluded prior to 1 April 2014. The Mauritius Convention effectively modifies a number of first-generation IIAs (of those countries that have ratified the Convention), which turns the Convention into a collective “phase 2 IIA reform” action.

Current discussions on the establishment of a multilateral investment court could result in an instrument that ultimately alters ISDS provisions included in earlier treaties. The opt-in technique of the Mauritius Convention could be explored as a potential model for reform. A reform process is currently on-going at UNCITRAL (Working Group III) that examines possible approaches to investment dispute settlement reform.

Both topics (transparency and a possible international investment court) also figured prominently during UNCTAD’s 2017 High-level IIA Conference, held on 9-11 October 2017 in Geneva, Switzerland and devoted to “Phase 2 of IIA reform”.¹³ In Break-out session 6, participants debated on the topic “Towards a global reform effort –

¹² United Nations Convention on Transparency in Treaty-based Investor-State Arbitration (the “Mauritius Convention on Transparency”), adopted on 10 December 2014, entered into force on 18 October 2017.

¹³ UNCTAD, Annual High-level IIA Conference: Phase 2 of IIA Reform, Geneva, 9-11 October 2017.

improving dispute settlement” and in a European Commission side event, stakeholders discussed “Multilateral reform of ISDS: Possible paths forward.”¹⁴

7. Conclusions

ISDS is at the heart of the IIA reform debate. Modernizing investment dispute settlement in future treaties and across the existing old-generation treaty network is a daunting challenge. UNCTAD’s *Road Map for IIA Reform* provides guidance for addressing these key areas of IIA reform (*WIR15*), as do UNCTAD’s *10 Policy Options for Phase 2 of IIA Reform* (i.e. modernizing the existing stock of old-generation IIAs), set out in the *WIR17*.

Reform of investment dispute settlement needs to be aligned with reform of substantive IIA content. As the United Nations’ focal point for international investment for sustainable development and the international forum for high-level and inclusive consensus-building on international investment issues, UNCTAD is committed to provide backstopping to the IIA reform processes and to ensure that the IIA regime – including how investment disputes are settled – works to further sustainable development.

The 2018 World Investment Forum (WIF), scheduled for the 22-26 October 2018 in Geneva, Switzerland, will provide another unique occasion for high-level, inclusive and multi-stakeholder-oriented consensus-building on IIA reform, in support of international investment for sustainable development.

UNCTAD Policy Tools for IIA Reform

Investment Policy Framework for Sustainable Development (2015 version)

http://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/diaepcb2015d5_en.pdf

Road Map for IIA Reform (World Investment Report 2015, Chapter IV)

http://unctad.org/en/PublicationChapters/wir2015ch4_en.pdf

Global Action Menu for Investment Facilitation (2016)

<http://investmentpolicyhub.unctad.org/Publications/Details/148>

Recent Policy Developments and Key Issues: International Investment Policies (World Investment Report 2017, Chapter III), which includes the “10 Options for Phase 2 of IIA Reform”

http://unctad.org/en/PublicationChapters/wir2017ch3_en.pdf

Investor-State Dispute Settlement: Review of Developments in 2016 (IIA Issues Note, No. 1, May 2017)

<http://investmentpolicyhub.unctad.org/Publications/Details/172>

Special Update on Investor-State Dispute Settlement: Facts & Figures (IIA Issues Note, No. 3, November 2017)

<http://investmentpolicyhub.unctad.org/Publications/Details/180>

UNCTAD Investment Policy Online Databases

International Investment Agreements Navigator

<http://investmentpolicyhub.unctad.org/>

IIA Mapping Project

<http://investmentpolicyhub.unctad.org/IIA/mappedContent>

Investment Dispute Settlement Navigator

<http://investmentpolicyhub.unctad.org/ISDS>

Investment Laws Navigator

<http://investmentpolicyhub.unctad.org/InvestmentLaws>

¹⁴ For details of the outcome of the Conference see <http://investmentpolicyhub.unctad.org/Pages/2017-edition-of-unctad-s-high-level-annual-iaa-conference-phase-2-of-iaa-reform>.

References

UNCITRAL (2017). Comments from the United Nations Conference Trade and Development on the Investor-State Dispute Settlement Framework, June 2017, A/CN.9/918/Add.7.

UNCTAD (2012). *Investment Policy Framework for Sustainable Development*. New York and Geneva: United Nations.

UNCTAD (2014). Investor-State Dispute Settlement: A Sequel. *UNCTAD Series on Issues in International Investment Agreements II*. New York and Geneva: United Nations.

UNCTAD (2015). *Investment Policy Framework for Sustainable Development*. New York and Geneva: United Nations.

WIR12. World Investment Report 2012: Towards a New Generation of Investment Policies. New York and Geneva: United Nations.

WIR13. World Investment Report 2013: Global Value Chains: Investment and Trade for Development. New York and Geneva: United Nations.

WIR15. World Investment Report 2015: Reforming International Investment Governance. New York and Geneva: United Nations.

WIR16. World Investment Report 2016. Investor Nationality: Policy Challenges. New York and Geneva: United Nations.

WIR17. World Investment Report 2017: Investment and the Digital Economy. New York and Geneva: United Nations.



I I A ISSUES NOTE

INTERNATIONAL INVESTMENT AGREEMENTS



For the latest investment trends and policy developments, please visit the website of the UNCTAD Investment and Enterprise Division

unctad.org/diae investmentpolicyhub.unctad.org

[@unctadwif](https://twitter.com/unctadwif)

For further information, please contact

Mr. James X. Zhan

Director

Investment and Enterprise Division UNCTAD

diaeinfo@unctad.org

+41 22 917 57 60



UNITED NATIONS
UNCTAD