

Geneva Watch

An overview of the WTO negotiations on agriculture

Mid-Year's Assessment

On July 25-26, WTO Members held their last General Council Meeting prior to the organization's traditional summer break. The meeting served as a mid-year review of Members' activities since last December's 8th Ministerial Conference (MC8). WTO's Director General, Pascal Lamy, called on delegates "to re-double efforts" to reinforce the multilateral trading system.

"I expressed hope that all Members would live up to the commitment made by Ministers at MC8 to keep markets open and resist protectionism in all forms," said Mr. Lamy.

At the informal heads of delegation meeting held on July 17, some Members, particularly emerging countries, have opposed an agreement on trade facilitation (TF) on a standalone basis urging that "the Single Undertaking remains the guarantee that all mandated issues will have to be addressed."

TF should not be treated as a standalone or self-balancing issue but should be complemented with the pursuit of another Doha Development Agenda (DDA) issues that could generate developmental benefits to developing Members, Lesotho argued on behalf of the African Group. China and Mauritius agreed, claiming that the subject should not be portrayed as the lone candidate for early harvest.

In addition, they added that the pursuit of a Single Undertaking remains essential for developing countries. Thus any attempt to deviate from this objective would diminish the DDA's value.

Though Members were able to close the LDC accession guidelines, progress and activity related to DDA issues "have been mixed, to use diplomatic language," the DG said.

"[T]he harvest from the first half of this year has been meagre," he added, urging delegates to "recognise that prolonged and dogmatic discussions about whether or not to deliver on everything or a few things or nothing at all have not and will not take us very far. The only thing we know is that an 'all' or 'nothing' does not work. A 'my way or the highway' is the best way to ensure paralysis."

Members must recognize that not all elements of the DDA could be concluded simultaneously in the near future, Mr. Lamy declared. Therefore a gradual approach that features tackling areas where progress can be achieved, which includes exploring different negotiating approaches as well as serious and creative thinking about how to bridge gaps on issues where members are still far apart, remains critical.

As such, Members need to change gears, starting with Mr. Lamy himself who intends to convene a meeting of the Negotiating Group Chairs after the August break to explore specific steps forward and "look at creative ways to bridge the most difficult and intractable issues."

"[W]e must collectively and urgently agree on what can be done at a technical level, how it should be achieved and when and where it should be done."

Brazil suggested that all Members be allowed to test the strength of support for their respective proposals. This could be done within formal negotiating group sessions and therefore facilitate progress in the negotiations while avoiding the previous mistake of establishing lists of priorities.

The US for its part stressed that negotiations are at a better place than a year ago. This should encourage Members whose energy has been sapped by the deep status currently engulfing the negotiations, the US said.

“Those of you who believe that, as time passes, inexorably, the Round might lose all its remaining steam, may be right, whether we like it or not,” Mr. Lamy told the full Membership. “What is clear, in my view, is that not engaging seriously in trying to find solutions to the present impasse will increase the probability of such a disappointing outcome.”

“As we break for the summer, I would urge each of you to reflect on your individual contribution towards collectively breaking the deadlock and allowing for forward movement in our work to fully operationalize the guidance we received at MC8 from our Ministers,” the DG concluded.

Note to Readers

Geneva Watch will cease for the remainder of the summer and recommence in September.

Upcoming Events

- APEC Leaders Summit, September 2-9, 2012, Vladivostok, (Russia)
- TPP Round XIV, September 6-15, 2012, December, 2012 (TBC)
- Regular Agriculture Committee, September 20-21, November 14-15, 2012
- WTO Public Forum, September 24-26, 2012
- WTO General Council, October 3-4, December 19-20, 2012
- Trade Facilitation Negotiating Group, October 8-12, 2012

Geneva Watch is published by Dairy Farmers of Canada, Chicken Farmers of Canada, Egg Farmers of Canada, Turkey Farmers of Canada and Canadian Hatching Egg Producers to report on the various events occurring in Geneva, particularly on the WTO negotiations on agriculture.

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