

Editorial: Running Out of Time

The first General Council of the year allowed Members to collectively evaluate the progress – or the lack of it – achieved so far in the negotiations and the work necessary to meet the April/July/December targets. Members attending the General Council meeting have pushed the panic button after disappointing results from both ambassador Walker-led consultations and the Group of 11 key countries. There is clear recognition that soon delegates will run out of time if nothing changes in the pace of the negotiations. The much awaited U.S.-China bilateral meetings this week have not brought any comfort either – at least nothing has transpired that could have reassured delegates that despite the slow pace, discussions are somehow advancing. Add to this Brazil's recent position on sectorals and it appears evident that Members need to evaluate where they currently stand across the board; something they will likely do at the end of March. Perhaps, in the meantime, President Obama's visit to Brazil next month would help in that regard. Regardless, the countdown has officially started: Members have 55 days before the first deadline – Easter April 21 – arrives.

General Council

The February 22nd General Council meeting – the last under the chairmanship of Canada's Ambassador John Gero who is being replaced by Nigerian Ambassador Yonov Frederick Agah as the General Council Chairman – set the stage for the chairman of the Trade Negotiating Committee (TNC), Pascal Lamy, to warn against the continued slow pace of the current process. As he said it, the slow pace remains “too short of the kind of substantive progress” critical to meeting the objectives set within the window of opportunity identified by Ministers in Davos. The bilateral and plurilateral talks simply lack energy, and therefore risk bringing the multilateral negotiations to a “grinding halt.”

“[T]he current multilateral momentum needs fuel,” Lamy said, “and it needs it urgently.”

Lamy acknowledged that the discussions amongst G-11 senior officials have been constructive in exploring specific substantive issues and was encouraged by that and urged delegates to “dig deeper” to reach to a common solution. However, it is what he hears from the negotiating groups that worries him.

“Throughout the negotiating groups, we keep hearing that some delegations ‘have no instructions’ and that ‘we still have time’,” Lamy said, adding that these were “unhelpful” statements which “fail to respect the tremendous day-to-day efforts” by the chairs to move things forward.

“In the negotiating groups, we hear that ‘we’ll move when the plurilaterals move’, and in the plurilaterals we hear that ‘we’ll move when the bilaterals move’, and finally, in the bilaterals we hear that ‘I will move when the other does.’ Ultimately of course, this means that you are all waiting for yourselves to move,” Lamy told the full Membership. Much like a chain of dominoes, someone needs to start the ball rolling.

“I believe we will agree that this vicious circle has to be broken!” he concluded, adding that “the window of opportunity is still there, but it is narrowing every day.”

Lamy will convene an informal TNC meeting to take place on March 8th to “evaluate the state-of-play across the board”.

Reactions

Generally speaking, Members acknowledged that progress has been achieved and that the mood is more dynamic than it was – say a year ago. However, they remain concerned about the possibility of completing the Round this year. Doha needs a sense of urgency, it needs a catalyst.

The chairs are still looking for the necessary input from delegates to elaborate the revised texts so they reflect the convergence achieved up to now. There was a great deal of pressure coming from senior officials of the G-11 (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, the EU, India, Japan, Mauritius, South-Africa and the U.S.), but it failed to materialize.

Now, a number of countries outside the group claimed the onus is on the G-11 Members to come up with something. Yet, at the same time others, like Chile and Mexico want that group to be widened to include more Members as they feel excluded from the process which they claim lacks transparency.

G-11 Members defended themselves by reminding delegates that their group is only one of many included in the cocktail approach. U.S. ambassador Michael Punke said he understands Members' frustration as things are not moving fast enough. But he added that there is no incentive to institutionalise the G-11, only to use the group for the horizontal discussion. The group aims to be a catalyst for Doha, but isn't more important than any other group and is not the problem but, rather, part of the solution. That being said, the U.S. ambassador added that his country is open to other fora to bring together senior officials.

Toward Another Stocktaking Meeting

Colombia's Ambassador, Eduardo Munoz Gomez, floated a suggestion that received lots of support among Members. While reproaching the Membership for the current slow pace of the talks and warning that the Round is slipping through their fingers "like water," he suggested holding a stock-taking meeting at the senior officials' level by the end of March for a comprehensive review of Round. The idea received support from Australia, Chile, Korea, Turkey, Switzerland and even the U.S., which found it interesting enough to explore.

Australia urged Members to accelerate the horizontal process as the talks are entering a crucial period in the next coming weeks. It called for additional meetings to take place between now and then, including within the negotiating groups to narrow differences ahead of the end of March stock-taking.

Agriculture negotiations chairman, David Walker, for his part, circulated a fax informing delegates about his plans for the next agriculture consultations starting March 9th. The chair said he will undertake a series of informal consultations on modalities issues before wrapping up with an open-ended meeting the afternoon of March 18th. Senior officials from the G-11 are expected to take over the week of March 21st.

Upcoming Events

- Informal Trade Negotiations Committee, March 8, 2011
- Agriculture Negotiating Group Meeting, March 9-18, 2011 (TBC)
- NAMA Week, Mid March, 2011
- G-11 consultations, Week of March 21, 2011
- Regular Agriculture Committee, March 31, 2011; June, September and November 2011
- Revised Draft Modalities Texts, April 2011
- G-20 Summit on Agriculture, June 22-23 2011 Paris (France)
- Potential DDA Mini-Ministerial Meeting (Modalities), July 2011 (TBC)
- WTO Ministerial Conference (MC8), December 15-17, 2011

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