

An overview of the WTO negotiations on agriculture

Building on Bali Momentum

Coming off their first successful Ministerial Conference since 2001, WTO Members are looking to ride the wave with the hope of bringing the rest of Doha Development Agenda (DDA) back on track.

At the end of the December 3–7, 2013 Ministerial Conference in Bali (MC9), Trade Ministers instructed their negotiators to prepare a clearly-defined work program on the remaining DDA issues built on the decisions taken at the Indonesian island. The next 12 months are expected to be devoted to addressing exactly that, and Members are poised to start their discussion on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum (WEF) annual meeting scheduled to take place in the Swiss ski resort of Davos-Klosters from January 22–25, 2014.

This year's WTO mini-ministerial meeting in Davos will bring about two dozen key countries to jump-start the debate. However, not all of them will be represented at the ministerial level as sources say key players such as India and China are unlikely to send ministers to attend the event. As such, in the eyes of various trade observers, the working lunch – which is set to take place the last day of the WEF i.e. January 25 – is expected to be a low-key affair, only touching quickly on views regarding what countries expect to see coming up next with respect to the Doha Round, leaving the real discussion to take place in Geneva with the full Membership.

To start the year, WTO Director General, Roberto Azevêdo provided glimpses on how Members should use the agreement signed in Bali and an approach for the remainder of the DDA. First, he said, they need to build on the lessons from Bali and, among those, the need to be creative and develop a viable new approach to conclude the Doha Round. In Bali, a number of suggestions on how to tackle this were floated by Ministers including the need to “keep an open mind to new ideas” in exploring ways of making headway on the most difficult issues.

“We might even conclude that there are no prospects for progress in those areas, and that we need to seek other negotiating paths. But we mustn't be afraid of that discussion or shy away from it,” Azevêdo said in a speech delivered before Portuguese politicians and diplomats on January 6.

“We need to be realistic. One of the critical factors for success in Bali was respect for the limits of political viability when defining the negotiating targets,” he added.

According to observers, agriculture issues should be among the topics included in the post-Bali work program. India for instance has insisted on putting the focus on agriculture, which some say may include the need to update the 1986-88 reference prices used in the calculation of the aggregate measurement of support (AMS). The U.S. for its part has said it wants to see more market access, whether that be in agriculture, industrial products or increased liberalization in services.

Upcoming Events

- World Economic Forum, January 22–25, 2014, Davos-Klosters (Switzerland)
- Regular Agriculture Committee, January 29, 2014
- TPP Ministerial Meeting, Week of February 20, 2014, Singapore (TBC)
- WTO General Council, March 14, May 8-9, July 24-25, Oct.7-8, Dec. 10–12, 2014

