

Charles Akande, Editor

An overview of the WTO negotiations on agriculture

First Full Meeting of WTO for 2014

The February 6th informal Trade Negotiations Committee (TNC) served as the first gathering of the full WTO Membership to kick start the year on the heels of the successful Ministerial Conference in Bali last December. Roberto Azevêdo, the organization's Director General, used the meeting to remind delegates about the two tasks they will undertake this year: (i) implement the Bali agreement and (ii) get the Doha Round back on track by defining the next work program on the remaining Doha Development Agenda (DDA) issues.

The first objective will, without a doubt, require a lot of work from Members, particularly in the areas of trade facilitation and agriculture. The latter will mobilize the WTO's Committee on Agriculture to supervise the work with respect to Members' notification in the area of export competition, but also provides recommendations for a permanent solution on the issue of public stockholding for food security purposes as well as implementing and reviewing the understanding on TRQ administration to address the issue of under-filled quotas.

However, what appears most intriguing is the selection of the next set of topics to be tackled as part of the DDA work program. This time, Azevêdo said Members cannot avoid addressing "the tripod" – agriculture, industrial goods and services – especially due to the interconnectedness existing in these three areas.

At the mini-ministerial meeting held in Davos, some trade ministers, including from the U.S., called for the next package to include some market access issues in each area of the tripod. It is undeniable that Members cannot tackle the next set of issues without addressing the central topic of the DDA; i.e. agriculture, but at the same time, all realized that a meaningful discussion on agriculture can't happen without bringing in the other two parts of the tripod (industrial products and services).

"We may even conclude that we're not yet ready to properly tackle these three areas, but we can't avoid the conversation," Azevêdo told the full Membership on Thursday.

Others like Canada, Japan and the European Union also called for new issues such as digital economy, investment, competition, environment, and energy to be addressed in the next work program, but this proposal met strong opposition from developing countries.

Another area of disagreement was related to paragraph 47 of the Doha Declaration which is related to the single undertaking and how this should be taken into account in the context of the mandate set out at the 2011 Ministerial Conference (MC8) and which called for a creative approach to be explored in moving the DDA forward.

At the MC8, Members agreed to the idea of breaking the Round into small pieces to build confidence, which was ultimately achieved in Bali. However, at Thursday's informal TNC meeting, India, Cuba, and Bolivia were adamant that the negotiations should no longer be broken down in small pieces and called for a doing everything in a single undertaking.

Azevêdo asked delegates to remain creative and open-minded when addressing this issue in order not to repeat past mistakes which led the negotiations into an impasse. This creativity, he said "has to be coherent with the DDA mandate, which is flexible enough to accommodate new paths (...). It may be that it can be done in one step – or we may need more than one step," he told the full Membership, asking them to be "realistic and focus on those things which are doable" and "find balance between ambition and realism."

It's now up to the chairs of each committee to brainstorm the next set of issues to be taken up and report their initial results to the full Membership at the General Council meeting of March 14, 2014.

Upcoming Events

- TPP Chief Negotiators Meeting, February 17–22, 2014, Singapore
- TPP Ministerial Meeting, February 22–25, 2014, Singapore
- Regular Agriculture Committee, March 14, June 6, November 13, 2014
- WTO General Council, March 14, May 8-9, July 24-25, Oct.7-8, Dec. 10–12, 2014
- OECD Forum 2014, May 5-6, 2014, Paris (France)
- G-20 Trade Ministers Meeting, July 19, 2014, Sydney (Australia)
- G-20 Leaders Summit, November 15-16, 2014, Brisbane (Australia)

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