

Charles Akande, Editor

An overview of the WTO negotiations on agriculture

Time to Put Doha Back On Track

WTO Members held their first General Council meeting of the year on March 14th to review the work they will need to undertake this year, particularly in implementing the results achieved in Bali and defining the next steps with respect to the Doha Development Agenda (DDA).

Earlier this year, WTO Director General, Roberto Azevêdo, asked each negotiating group chair to start consulting Members with the view to collect their initial thinking on the way forward. On March 14th, the chairs circulated their respective report on the issues that may be tackled as the next set of deliverables.

Generally speaking, Members acknowledged that there were no more “low-hanging fruits” to be tackled as part of another “early harvest” to advance the Doha Round. There is recognition that the time has come to take on the toughest issues simultaneously and that no area of the negotiations should be discussed in isolation from the rest of the DDA issues. The need to avoid any sequencing in the negotiations was particularly highlighted when tackling elements of the “tripod” – agriculture, industrial products (NAMA) and services. In their respective reports, the negotiating group chairmen noted Members’ desire to discuss these three areas in parallel due to the interconnectivity existing between them.

Agriculture negotiations chair, New Zealand ambassador to the WTO, John Adank, stressed the need for a balanced approach within the agriculture talks when tackling market access, domestic support and export competition; with the latter seen as a priority according to a large number of Members consulted. Although delegates are not yet clear on the matters they would like to see in the work program, they told Ambassador Adank that “balance” and “appropriate ambition” are critical in addressing the next set of agriculture issues.

“Some Members suggested that the architecture of draft options considered in the past was complex in some cases, with ambition in areas like market access being undermined by the application of an extensive range of exceptions and flexibilities,” Ambassador Adank stated in his report, adding that “if success is to be achieved everyone will need to contribute rather than just expecting additional contributions from others.”

NAMA negotiations chair, Swiss Ambassador to the WTO, Remigi Winzap, reported that there were still challenges with respect to the “Swiss formula” designed to reduce the NAMA tariffs. Some Members, he said, complained that the formula – and the related coefficients and flexibilities were believed by many to have almost been agreed to in the last draft modalities – “eliminated much of the potential negotiating space and left too little scope for negotiation on products of special interest.”

“There are different views among Members concerning the value of a tariff binding, the reduction of ‘water’ or the margin between the bound and the applied tariff level, and the notion of ‘commercially meaningful access’,” Ambassador Winzap stressed. Concerns were also expressed in the services negotiations as some delegations are worried that the plurilateral discussion on services (TISA) undertaken among a smaller group of countries outside the DDA could, in the end, undermine the multilateral talks.

Rev 4 No Longer the Working Document?

One of the biggest differences existing between Members regarding Doha’s roadmap revolves around the revised draft modalities text (2008 draft modalities text or “Rev 4”), and subsequent associated documents released on April 2011, and whether Rev 4 would continue to be the basis for future talks, or just a basis for future work.

Proponents of the former – mostly developing countries – argue that the latest draft modalities text represents a delicate balance achieved in the negotiations, which has required many years of dedicated work from Members and which should be preserved as the basis for resuming the talks.

On the other hand, developed countries like Japan, the United States and the European Union, stressed the need to take into consideration the “more recent developments or trends” that occurred in the global economy.

They reiterated the importance of keeping an open mind on the next approaches to be used to tackle the remainder of the DDA. Examples of new approaches were floated in the NAMA talks where some Members suggested skipping “explicit modalities and to pursue the NAMA negotiations through a request and offer approach” or “adopting a more sectoral approach,” but these two suggestions did not obtain consensus, Winzap wrote.

A more in-depth discussion on the roadmap is expected to take place in the coming weeks. Several chairs intends to hear more from Members during open-ended meetings to take place before the end of March and they hope to provide a bit of clarity on the way forward by the time of the April 7th informal trade negotiations committee (TNC) meeting chaired by Roberto Azevêdo.

Canada’s Ambassador to Chair the General Council

The March 14th General Council also served to appoint the new chairs of WTO bodies for this year and to keep with tradition, the chair of Dispute Settlement Body (DSB), Canada’s Ambassador to the WTO, Jonathan Fried, replaced Pakistan’s Ambassador Shahid Bashiras as the new chair of the General Council, the organisation highest decision body.

Chairpersons for WTO Bodies for 2014

General Council	H.E. Mr. Jonathan FRIED (Canada)
Dispute Settlement Body	H.E. Mr. Fernando DE MATEO (Mexico)
Trade Policy Review Body	H.E. Ms. Mariam MD SALLEH (Malaysia)
Council for Trade in Goods	H.E. Mr. Joaquim REITER (Sweden)
Council for Trade in Services	H.E. Mr. CHOI Seokyoung (Rep. of Korea)
Council for TRIPS	H.E. Mr. Mothusi PALAI (Botswana)
Committee on Trade and Development	H.E. Mr. Pierre Claver NDAYIRAGIJE (Burundi)
Committee on Balance-of- Payments Restrictions	H.E. Mr. Martin EYJÓLFSSON (Iceland)
Committee on Budget, Finance and Administration	H.E. Mr. Francisco LIMA (El Salvador)
Committee on Trade and Environment	H.E. Ms. Päivi KAIRAMO (Finland)
Committee on Regional Trade Agreements	H.E. Mr. Francisco PIREZ (Uruguay)
Working Group on Trade, Debt and Finance	H.E. Mr. Bertrand de CROMBRUGGHE de PICQUENDAELE (Belgium)
Working Group on Trade and Transfer of Technology	H.E. Mr. Abdolazeez AL-OTAIBI (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia)

Upcoming Events

- WTO Regular Agriculture Committee, March 21, June 6, November 13, 2014
- TPP Chief Negotiators and Negotiating Groups Meeting, TBD
- WTO Informal TNC, April 7, 2014
- WTO General Council, May 8-9, July 24-25, Oct.7-8, Dec. 10-12, 2014
- APEC Ministers Responsible for Trade, May 17-18 in Qingdao (China)
- 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)

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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