

An overview of the WTO negotiations on agriculture

Moment to Shift Up a Gear

WTO Members have increased their engagement in the Doha negotiations, and after nearly three weeks of consultations with the chair of each negotiating group, the full Membership gathered on April 7th to take stock of the past few weeks' discussions.

“While positive, the consultations have not yet produced anything very new in terms of Members' stated positions,” WTO Director General, Roberto Azevêdo, told Members in his opening remarks, pointing to the fact that Members kept on rehearsing well known positions on the status of the draft modalities texts – the so-called Rev4. He also addressed the need for a “balanced” agenda within Doha's areas or the “sequencing” in which matters are to be tackled and arguments around even the requirement for “new data” to adapt to today's reality.

In effect, divergence has emerged between developed and developing countries over what would constitute the basis for future negotiations; i.e. whether the present Rev4, should continue to be the basis of their deliberations. At the centre of the disagreement is the fact that some delegations, mostly developing ones, fear that moving away from the text will see their hard-fought flexibilities disappear. They argued that the Rev4 should remain the basis of the negotiations as it reflects the delicate balance achieved after many years of negotiations. As such, any change brought to it risks undermining the negotiations by unravelling a potential deal.

Others, mostly developed countries, insisted on the need to take into account the evolution of the global economy since 2008. There has been a shift of power in global trade which has seen an increase in subsidies levels, as well as trade barriers in various developing countries. To adjust to this new economic paradigm, new data flows are needed, they said.

Mr. Azevêdo suggested that Members move away from this sterile debate, reminding them that they could not agree on the texts back in 2008 and are unlikely to agree on them today. But while the texts will continue to serve as “useful parameters” to shape up the post-Bali work program, he added, Members should not view them as final documents.

“If any of you insists that those texts are cast in stone and unalterable, then you have made a choice; a choice that irreparably condemns our efforts to failure,” Azevêdo told the full Membership.

“In my view, we have reached the end of the first phase of this process,” he stressed, insisting on the need to move to the second phase which aims at resolving the problems by testing new ideas as potential solutions to move Doha forward.

“[W]e now need to be deepening our discussions, and engaging in a more direct, purposeful manner in order to identify the best way forward,” Mr Azevêdo said.

The chairs of the negotiating groups, particularly those of the tripod – i.e. agriculture special session chair, Ambassador John Adank (New Zealand); negotiating group on market access (NAMA) chair, Ambassador Remigi Winzap (Switzerland) and services negotiating group chairman, Ambassador Gabriel Duque of Colombia – have been tasked to move their respective consultations toward a less comfortable, but more substantive and productive environment.

“We are trying to get an automobile that has been stuck in the mud, at the bottom of a very deep lake for 6 years, up and running and back on the road. We can't just jump in and drive it away. It will take a lot of work – a lot of cleaning, a lot of oiling – but we can do it.” Azevêdo said in his concluding remarks.

Upcoming Events

- U.S.-Japan Parallel Negotiations (TPP), Week of April 7, Tokyo (Japan)
- WTO General Council, May 8-9, July 24-25, Oct.7-8, Dec. 10-12
- APEC Ministers Responsible for Trade, May 17-18, Qingdao (China)
- TPP Chief Negotiators and Negotiating Groups Meeting, TBD
- OECD Forum 2014, May 5-6, Paris (France)
- WTO Regular Agriculture Committee, June 6, November 13
- G-20 Trade Ministers Meeting, July 19, Sydney (Australia)
- WTO Public Forum, October 1-3
- G-20 Leaders Summit, November 15-16, Brisbane (Australia)

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