



Geneva WATCH

An overview of the bilateral, plurilateral and multilateral trade negotiations

Charles Akande, Editor

New Doha Work Programme to Intensify

Ahead of the 2015 WTO mini-ministerial in Davos, Switzerland this past weekend, the WTO's Director General, Roberto Azevêdo, convened a meeting of the heads of delegations on January 21st to discuss a new consultative process aimed at advancing the work on the Post-Bali work programme, which in turn would set up the ambition for the Ministerial Conference in Kenya (MC-10) later this year.

This so-called "Room W" meeting is expected take place on a regular basis to ensure progress on a set of targeted issues from the Tripod – agriculture, NAMA and services – with the view to wrap up a clearly defined work plan by the end of July, as directed by the General Council last December.

It's important that Members maintains a certain sense of urgency, Azevêdo said, while prioritizing substantive issues that are doable (i.e. issues that are realistically achievable) and engaging on all of them at the same time, i.e. avoid any sequencing when tackling particular topics such as agriculture first then NAMA and services.

Obviously, agriculture will nevertheless take center stage and issues identified there will undoubtedly be central in the upcoming negotiations. However, it cannot be tackled in isolation; other parts of the Doha Development Agenda (DDA) will have to be picked up as well.

Members have to start this as soon as possible, building on the momentum regained at the end of last year, Azevêdo added. What is needed is a system of priorities that would lead to a better understanding of Members' position by using what if scenarios, the WTO chief stressed.

Divergences on how this will be done continue to persist. In effect, some Members, such as the U.S. and EU, insist on the need for a more creative way (a simplified way) to resolve the issues at stake, while sticking closely to the DDA mandate. Others (developing countries), meanwhile, continue to feel uncomfortable with the idea, insisting on using the most recent draft revised modalities (Rev4) as the starting point of the negotiations.

India and members of the G-33 insisted on the need to tackle food security quickly in order to deliver it at the MC-10. Indonesia remarked that the services signaling conference held in July 2008 would no longer work due to ongoing negotiations on TiSA (services plurilateral). Argentina reminded the audience that it doesn't like the NAMA's Swiss formula while the EU called for a balance in all areas and within areas of the talks.

Ambassador Michael Punke (U.S.) compared the meeting to a time capsule where it seemed that nothing has changed since 2008. This is a big year for trade in the U.S., he said, referring to President Barack Obama's January 20th state of the union speech where the U.S. president requested the trade promotion authority (TPA). Punke said he hopes that the WTO will be among the deliverables for this year. India retorted by insisting on the need to address the inequalities and unbalances of the multilateral trading system, many of which date back to the Uruguay Round.

"We must maximise the time we have available to us before July — and maintain the momentum that we regained at the end of 2014. We need to have a detailed, substantive discussion that includes agriculture, non-agricultural market access, services and all of the other DDA issues, including development and issues of interest to LDCs (Least-Developed Countries). Today we are restarting our conversation on all of these issues. So be ready — and get involved," Azevêdo said.

The group intends to increase the pace of the negotiations by holding meetings of various configurations every week. Already, another Room W was scheduled for January 29th, mostly to review ministers' guidelines on the way forward, one official said.

The chair of the agriculture negotiations, New Zealand Ambassador to the WTO, John Adank, also called two meetings of the agriculture negotiations on January 28th which will focus on primary domestic support and market access, on one hand, and a special meeting on food security.

Davos Mini-Ministerial

As in past years, a group of Trade Ministers gathered on the sidelines of the January 21–24 World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos-Klosters, Switzerland to brainstorm about the work plan needed to successfully highlight the WTO's 20th anniversary.

The meeting, which took place the last day of the WEF, saw the 21 trade officials (including the Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, the EU, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Russia, South Africa, Switzerland, Thailand and the U.S.) answering two main questions circulated by the host – Swiss Economics Minister Johann Schneider-Ammann – and pertaining to the issues that needed to be tackled in the post-Bali work programme as well as what to expect by the time of the 10th Ministerial Conference in Nairobi (Kenya) this December.

According to officials present at the meeting, Ministers are starting to embrace the new reality, i.e. that the world has changed since 2008 for a number of reasons, including the economic crisis. Even those who previously insisted on maintaining intact the draft modalities text (Rev4) as the sole basis for the resumption of the talks seem now ready to show flexibility and consider new alternatives.

Surprisingly enough, many trade ministers believe that achieving full modalities by July is very much a possibility, which would eventually pave the way to the finalization of the DDA at the MC-10.

For that, some say, Members need to be more specific about what they want to see being tackled as part of the

work plan, while keeping in mind that they may not get exactly what they are looking for. In short: Azevêdo has been preaching that it is paramount to keep a sense of urgency alive while dealing with the next steps. Members need to hold development, agriculture, NAMA and services at the core of the talks.

Another goal for this year is to get the Bali package completed by the MC-10; this includes ratifying the Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) and have it come into force by the time of the Ministerial Conference along with agreement on a final solution on food security. Azevêdo, for his part, urged Members to be ready to make concessions in exchange for what they are asking. The Director General recognized the challenge of the tasks ahead and pressed ministers to provide their negotiators with the necessary tools to achieve success. "Let's see how that translates into real negotiations," he was quoted as saying.

There was a sense that something concrete needed to be achieved this year as other prominent trade deals taking place outside Switzerland may well be concluded soon. Ministers noted that the TPP may be wrapped up in 2 months' time, with a possible agreement on TPA in the mix. Those making that argument said it was important that the WTO be among this year's trade success stories, otherwise it may send bad signals for the multilateral negotiations.

Azevêdo will now take the discussion back to Geneva where a Green Room with key Members is expected to take place next week, ahead of the January 29th Room W with the full Membership.

KEY UPCOMING EVENTS

- TPP Chief Negotiators Meeting, January 26 – February 1, New York City (U.S.)
- Committee on Agriculture Special Session, January 28
- WTO Room W Meeting, January 29
- U.S.-Japan Bilateral Negotiations, early February (TBC)
- TPP Ministerial meeting, early March (date and location TBC)
- APEC Ministers Responsible for Trade Meeting, May 23-24, Boracay (Philippines)
- OECD Forum (WTO mini-ministerial), June 2-3, Paris (France)
- Post-Bali Work Programme Deadline, July 31
- WTO Public Forum, September, 30 – October 2
- G-20 Summit, November 15-16 Antalya (Turkey)
- APEC Leaders' Summit, TBD, Manila (Philippines)
- WTO's 10th Ministerial Conference, December 15–18, Nairobi (Kenya)

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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