



Geneva WATCH

An overview of the bilateral, plurilateral and multilateral trade negotiations

Charles Akande, Editor

The Search for a New Framework

The World Trade Organization's (WTO) first general council meeting of the year did not bring any particular addition to what had been reported at the February 10th informal heads of delegation meeting as Members continue to diverge on how to move forward after the successful Nairobi Ministerial Conference (MC10).

That being said, what really set them apart aren't so much the remaining negotiating topics, but rather the framework upon which the remainder of the negotiations will be based. The meeting, however, had the merit to "clarify" somewhat the current process and what will be at stake in the coming months.

In effect, the agreement reached last year in Kenya has paved the way for certain Members to transform the way future negotiations will be conducted in Geneva. Ministers' inability to decide whether to retain or abandon the current Doha Development Agenda (DDA) framework for future discussions has allowed for the possibility of moving away from the single undertaking and to explore new approaches to address Doha's issues.

The MC10 Ministerial Declaration stated that "[m]any Members want to carry out the work on the basis of the Doha structure, while some want to explore new architectures." It is on that specific point that Members disagree. On the remaining Doha issues however, they showed strong support to address them in a very pragmatic way.

"There is no consensus about how to address the DDA. Nonetheless, in Nairobi, all Members gave a 'strong commitment' to advancing negotiations on

the remaining Doha issues. It is important to underline this point, even though Members do not currently have a shared view on how it should be achieved," WTO Director General, Roberto Azevêdo stressed at the meeting. He added that he asked the negotiating group chairs to begin discussions within their respective groups, something that Ambassador Vitalis has already started in agriculture by scheduling an open-ended meeting on March 8th to share the results of the consultations he has conducted since January.

Delegates were urged to deepen their discussions on that front, and to do so they need to table concrete proposals on how they want to see the remainder of the Doha issues being addressed. Some Members said they are ready to consider new approaches, but have yet to provide any specifics on how these new avenues would work.

China, meanwhile, suggested changing the DDA's name for a "solidarity work program" where issues would be resolved in a more direct and balanced way in solidarity to developing countries. China had first floated the idea at the Davos mini-ministerial meeting where sources said it had been immediately rejected. At the General Council meeting, China insisted on the need to establish a work program that is not only doable, but one that is commercially meaningful.

Non-DDA Issues

Another challenge facing Members in the coming months is how they plan to address non-DDA issues. U.S. Ambassador Michael Punke and others have pushed for new subjects to be taken up by the WTO. However this idea has met some resistance as some delegates clearly stressed that non-DDA matters cannot

be taken up until the remainder of the DDA issues are addressed.

“It is not clear yet how that conversation would take place, but there is a clear understanding that if there’s

a desire to launch multilateral negotiations that would have to happen with the agreement of all Members,” Azevêdo said at the General Council.

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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