



Geneva WATCH

An overview of the bilateral, plurilateral and multilateral trade negotiations

Charles Akande, Editor

The Case for Plurilaterals

The resumption of the World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations has been slow, and restarted with various high level discussions on how to deal with the remainder of the Doha Development Agenda (DDA) issues.

This week, several WTO key players will continue to brainstorm on the way forward at the ambassadorial level. Some, like Argentina, Japan, New Zealand, and the U.S. are set to meet in Geneva to discuss process, according to various sources.

The way forward with the remainder of the DDA remains unclear as Members continue to disagree as to whether the talks should be pursued under the Doha mandate or, as advocated by the U.S., launched under a new framework that explores new approaches, such as plurilateral deals.

Some Members are already involved in various plurilateral negotiations currently taking place in Geneva. The trade in services agreement (TiSA) and the environmental goods agreement (EGA) are two of the most prominent plurilateral negotiations taking place in Geneva which Members aim to conclude this year. Members involved in these plurilateral negotiations plan to advance the talks by involving their trade ministers to make political decisions on the sidelines of international meetings such as the OECD, G-20, and APEC ministerials.

The information technology agreement (ITA) achieved last year in Nairobi has created new momentum for plurilateral deals on which some Members like the U.S. intend to capitalise. This new framework has got the WTO re-energized and provides a pathway for future WTO negotiations, said Michael Froman, the U.S. Trade Representative.

One area that could benefit from the plurilateral approach is fisheries subsidies. In Nairobi, Members failed to reach an agreement on any of the “rules” issues, which includes – along with fisheries subsidies – anti-dumping and subsidies/countervailing disciplines and WTO provisions on regional trade agreements (RTAs).

At the March 22nd meeting of the negotiating group on rules, many delegations, including Australia, Canada, Mexico, New Zealand, and Peru, highlighted the importance of the negotiations on fisheries subsidies and their disappointment over the continued inability to secure an agreement, despite the broad support for new disciplines in the sector, an informed source said.

Some delegations reminded that the mandate for an outcome in fisheries subsidies was clearly listed among the United Nations’ new “sustainable development goals” and therefore called for an agreement to be achieved by the time of the WTO’s next Ministerial Conference (MC11) in 2017.

The majority of the Membership, including emerging economies such as China, India, and South Africa, agreed on the importance of an outcome on fisheries, though some pointed out the need to achieve results in all areas of the rules negotiations, including special and differential treatment for developing countries.

The EU called on those Members who showed a willingness to engage on rules after the Nairobi Ministerial Conference to make good on that promise.

In Nairobi, a group of countries signed a ministerial statement calling for a ban on fisheries subsidies that negatively affect stocks of overfished fishes, as well as subsidies to vessels engaged in illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing.

The U.S., meanwhile, reminded Members of the intense discussions that took place before and in Nairobi, urging delegates to avoid resuming the negotiations using the same formats that led to the stalemate.

Rules are an example of where new ideas were needed, rather than failed mandates and destructive linkages, the U.S. said at the meeting, adding that it's hard to see how any further active negotiations in the current negotiating group format could bridge the deep divisions in this area.

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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